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VERIFICATION SOLUTIONS FOR THE MIDDLE EAST WMD FREE ZONE

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Conference on a Middle East Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Difficulties

The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, 28 May 2012.

1. Thank you Sir Jeremy. Let me first say that it is hard to follow the presentations before me, which were all excellent and informative. Thank you also to the United Nations Association for inviting me to this conference.
2. I spent some years in the service of the United Nations, working alongside soldiers of many nations. As Sir Jeremy probably can attest, the UN is a difficult place to work in, but is the best example of working multilateralism that we have – so thank you to the Association for supporting and strengthening this important institution.

The political context

3. Ladies and gentlemen:
4. The people of the Middle East are facing, and will continue to face, many difficult questions in the years ahead. We have seen good developments. Last week, we saw Presidential elections in Egypt. And whatever you may think of the candidates, whether you like them or not, I think we can all agree that Egypt represents a victory for democracy. But not all is well. We see continued unrest in Syria. According to the New York Times, up to 14,000 people may have lost their lives there since the violence and mayhem started. If true, Syria is a tragedy on an almost monumental scale, on the magnitude of the horrific crimes committed in former Yugoslavia. Let us hope that this violence does not spread to Syria's neighbors.
5. For the people of the Middle East, the world is upside down, inside out. Or is it? In the midst of this upheaval, old politics remain. The story is all too familiar. We know it by heart. We even heard it in the previous presentations. Israel is calling the Islamic Republic of Iran an existential threat. Iran is not making any effort to dispel this perception. Nuclear negotiations between Iran and the Western world are moving slowly, if at all. The verification mission in Iran is continuing, with little progress. Israel's capacity to obliterate most capitals in the region remains intact, indeed unspoken of.
6. But I believe that there is a political surge in progress. When the dust has settled, the people of the region will live in a new political reality. We cannot say today what shape the future Middle East will have. There are too many variables, too much uncertainty. But we can say that future generations will have to face the same basic questions in this new reality as they face today. One of them is: do they want to continue to live their lives under the threat of instant and brutal annihilation? Or do they want to remove the threat of weapons of mass destruction?



7. It is easy to be pessimistic. It is easy to point to the complex relationships in the region, to shrug and be complacent. It is easy to highlight the prominence of deterrence theory in the Western world and ask: 'if nuclear weapons work for the West, why wouldn't it work for the Middle East?'. Why can the West have these weapons, and not us?
8. I think this is shortsighted, and the recourse for those without ambition. These are intellectually easy questions, and they are not very helpful. However, they are real.
9. The prospects of a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East may seem remote. But I firmly believe that a zone is the logical conclusion of a broader process of democratization, strengthened individual liberties, and peace.

A Regional Group of Verification and Implementation Experts

10. Ladies and Gentlemen:
11. In my mind, science and technology is capable of breaking barriers. This is why I will propose the establishment of a Regional Group of Verification and Implementation Experts. This group would meet regularly to discuss technical issues, devoid of politics. Such a group would hopefully demonstrate that a treaty would be verifiable, when agreed, and show the way to do it.
12. One thing is certain: all parties will insist that a zone is verifiable. So far, though, we have very few ideas on how to do this. Sure, we know how to apply safeguards on nuclear material, or to verify the destruction of chemical weapons. We know much less how to verify the non-production of biological weapons, and virtually nothing about how to verify nuclear disarmament.
13. Believe it or not, I have not found a single paper that seriously thinks about how a treaty secretariat working to ban all three weapon classes should be structured.
14. A lot of work still needs to be done. We cannot afford to wait.
15. So we need to start to invest serious thought into what this proposed zone will look like. Because, frankly, if the end goal looks unachievable, many will ask themselves why we should even bother with trying to reach it. Granted, getting progress on technical issues will not solve the underlying problems, but it will give us closure on some open questions. This is a step forward.
16. And it can be a significant step forward also. Consider that the Group of Scientific Experts spent many years promoting the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. When the time was right to negotiate it, Ambassadors of all Nations then had a solid technical base on which they could rest their arguments. The people had done their homework.
17. I believe that a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East is verifiable. I think that it can be implemented in a fair and transparent fashion. I am quite confident in this. But you ought not take my word for it; you should call for the investment into a Regional Group of Verification and Implementation Experts.

18. Ladies and Gentlemen:

19. Some of you may think that what I've said represents a heavy investment. I disagree. Personally, I think that a group of verification and implementation experts can be established and run on a central budget of less than half a million US dollars per year. You know, this is not a lot of money for most governments.
20. This is considerably less than what most charitable foundations give away every year, and a small fraction of the programmatic budget of most foreign ministries. Billions are being spent in other areas, including in nuclear weapons research and development. Why not here? Money should not be an issue when it comes to security. And money should definitely not be an issue here, when considering what rewards a small investment in technical dialogue might yield in the long run.
21. But there is little political will, it seems, to invest here. Consider the Biological Weapons Convention. Last year, over 150 states argued for a long time whether to fund *one staff member* at the Implementation Support Unit. They decided not to. You know, if you added up the salaries, the travel and the conference costs spent to reach this decision, it's likely that state parties spent more money talking about it than the post would actually cost. That is not a good sign; not at all.

Having time on our side (for a change)

22. Ladies and Gentlemen:

23. Virtually everyone I talk to think that the zone is a long way off. Well, this is not a reason for complacency. Nor is it an argument against investing in verification research. Thinking about how to verify an arms control agreement, any international agreement in fact, takes a long time. It is a job that requires a lot of attention of detail, and the patience of a saint. No aspect is too small to leave aside - and there are so many aspects that need consideration. The good thing is that we will have plenty of time to work towards our goals.
24. I believe that many will participate. In fact, I have even heard positive noises from colleagues and friends in Israel about this. I asked if they would be interested in participating in practical work, similar to what we did together with the UK and Norway (on warhead dismantlement). The answer was that Israel for sure has a lot to contribute. It's encouraging. It's also an opportunity to make some cheap jokes. In my conversation with the Israelis, I like to tease them. I say 'what can you possibly contribute with? Last time I checked you only had an old research reactor in the desert somewhere. What do you possibly know about nuclear weapons?'. It's amusing to see them struggle with the fact that they can neither confirm nor deny anything. I know, it is a bit cheap, but I mean no harm.
25. Why is this work important? Well, imagine the following:
26. Imagine a time many years from now, when the troubles in Syria have abated, when Iran's nuclear programme is not met with distrust, when Israel's relations with its neighbors are based on respect rather than force, or the threat of force. Imagine that you are the ambassador for one of these regional powers, tasked to bring this zone into reality. Imagine the hopelessness you will feel when you realize that you have no expertise to support you, no ideas available to help formulate your thoughts.

27. I think that you may wonder why previous generations of arms controllers did not work enough to pave the ground for this day. I think you will wonder why we decided to treat this issue so lightly. I think you will curse our inability to plan for the future; and despise our shortsighted reluctance to invest even a modest amount of money into this. I think that you will say that we lost an opportunity.

Immediate steps that can be taken

28. I say, let's not make that happen. Let's work towards establishing this group of experts. A number of very practical things can be done, right now. Regional delegations need now to consider letting this though become part of any outcome document from planned December conference in Helsinki. A statement pledging support for this concept would go a long way. It may perhaps be easier, after that, to get projects funded. To compensate for peoples' time. To get the ball rolling.

29. Even if the December conference fails to highlight this issue, it would be worthwhile for the depositary governments to consider investing in a group anyway. I have been part of many technical exchanges over my rather brief career, and I can tell you that they are never a waste of time. The UK-Norway Initiative brought together, for the first time ever, a nuclear weapon state, a non-nuclear weapon state, and a non-governmental organization. The lesser-known Colombo Initiative brought together Indian and Pakistani official to discuss modalities on ballistic missile dismantlement verification. These groups function. They work. Why would not a Middle Eastern group work?

30. I recognize the usual arguments why it wouldn't. I just don't believe in them. Defeatism has never led to progress. Aversion leads us away from the solution. Curiosity leads us towards it.

31. I can also tell you that they are exceptionally difficult to get funded. So my overriding message would be this. Invest in the future now, or you may find that the hill will be too steep to climb when you reach it.

32. Thank you for your attention.