

Finland will host 2012 conference to start talks on nuclear weapons-free Mideast

By Associated Press, Published: October 14

UNITED NATIONS — The United Nations, U.S., Russia and Britain announced the first steps Friday to convening what is certain to be a controversial conference in 2012 on turning the Middle East into a zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.

A joint statement, issued by the United Nations, said Finland will host the conference and veteran diplomat Jaakko Laajava, the undersecretary of state in its Foreign Ministry, will serve as “facilitator.” That means he will have the difficult task of consulting states in the region, including Israel and Iran, and preparing for the conference.

In May 2010, the 189 member nations of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty meeting at the U.N. called for convening a conference in 2012 on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and “all other weapons of mass destruction,” or WMDs.

The Arab proposal for a WMD-free zone in the Mideast, aimed at pressuring Israel to give up its undeclared arsenal of perhaps 80 nuclear warheads, was initially endorsed by the 1995 conference reviewing the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, but never acted on.

Israel has long said a full Arab-Israeli peace must precede such weapons bans. But at last year’s NPT review conference, the United States, Israel’s most important ally, said it welcomed “practical measures” leading toward the goal of a nuke-free zone in the Middle East.

Israel is not a party to the NPT, and it remains unclear whether the U.S. or Laajava can persuade it to attend next year’s conference.

British Foreign Secretary called a Middle East free of all WMD “an achievable goal ... which is vital to the long term peace and security of the region.”

“But it will not happen overnight nor without the commitment and support of all states in the region,” he said. “I hope that the conference will be an opportunity for the region to discuss and make progress on this.”

Besides Israel's attendance, other important details of the conference remain to be worked out, such as whether the talks are meant as the start of formal negotiations on a treaty.

Besides concerns about Israel's undeclared nuclear program, establishment of a verifiable Mideast nuclear weapons-free zone could help allay international concerns about whether Iran's ambitious nuclear program is aimed at building bombs, something Tehran denies. The Iranians have long expressed support for a nuke-free Mideast.

Anne Penketh, program director for the British American Security Information Council, a think tank that promotes a nuclear weapons free world, said the low-key announcement on a Friday which is not a working day in the Middle East, is "a case of burying good news."

"It reflects the political sensitivities in organizing this hugely important conference, which aims to bring Israel and Iran to the table for discussions on their mutual security for the first time," Penketh said.

According to the joint statement, the U.N., U.S., Russia and Britain made the announcement of the host and facilitator as cosponsors of the 1995 NPT resolution on the Middle East and as depository states for the treaty, "in consultation with the states of the region."

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon met privately Thursday with ambassadors from the Arab League, Egypt which heads the Nonaligned Movement, Syria which heads the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Qatar and Algeria to discuss the 2012 conference.

Patricia Lewis, deputy director of the nonproliferation center at the Monterey Institute of International Studies in California, said the fact that all the Arab states, Israel and Iran, Russia, Britain and the United States agreed on the facilitator and the host "shows a strong commitment to moving forward with efforts to promote peace and disarmament in the Middle East."

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