**Nuke treaty session hunts for Mideast compromise**

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UNITED NATIONS — In closed-door huddles extending into Thursday night, diplomats at a nuclear treaty conference sought to break a deadlock between the Arabs and Israel's allies over a plan to turn the Middle East into a nuclear weapons-free zone.

A deal would likely clear the way for a broader consensus agreement Friday on doing more to check the spread of nuclear arms worldwide, successfully ending a monthlong, 189-nation conference to review and strengthen the 40-year-old Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).

A draft final declaration would have the twice-a-decade treaty review session call for the convening of a conference in 2012 "on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction."

This Arab idea of a WMD-free zone, meant to pressure Israel to give up its undeclared nuclear arsenal, was endorsed by the 1995 NPT conference but never acted on.

Israel has long said a full Arab-Israeli peace must precede such weapons bans. But at this conference the U.S., Israel's chief supporter, said it welcomes "practical measures" leading toward the goal of a nuke-free zone, and U.S. diplomats have discussed possibilities with Israel.

Delegates said some details of arrangements for a 2012 conference remained unresolved, such as who would convene a conference and where. But a major sticking point was said to be a passage naming Israel, reaffirming "the importance of Israel's accession to the NPT," a move that would require it to destroy its estimated 80 or so nuclear warheads.

Iran demands that this NPT session insist Israel join the treaty before a 2012 conference. Egyptian U.N. Ambassador Maged Abdelaziz told reporters the Arab position is softer — that Israel's accession to the treaty would come as "part of the process" begun in 2012.

Although the Israelis apparently have acquiesced to U.S. urging that they take part in such a 2012 discussion, they are balking at participating under terms in which they are the only nation mentioned in this way, a Western ambassador told The Associated Press.

"If Israel is mentioned, it doesn't attend. If it isn't mentioned, it attends," said this diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the continuing negotiation. Israel's Western allies want the reference removed or modified.

Establishment of a verifiable Mideast nuke-free zone should 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.

Whatever the result Friday, all-important details of a 2012 Mideast conference would remain to be worked out, such as whether the talks are meant as the start of formal negotiations on a treaty.

Under the 1970 nonproliferation treaty, nations without nuclear weapons committed not to acquire them; those with them — the United States, Russia, Britain, France and China — committed to move toward their elimination; and all endorsed everyone's right to develop peaceful nuclear energy.

As time ran short here to clear away obstacles to a 2010 conference final document, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon took the unusual step of writing an open letter urging delegates "to be pragmatic and coalesce around solutions."

"There is too much at stake for the conference to repeat the failure of 2005," he wrote.

The 2005 NPT conference failed to agree on a consensus declaration to advance the treaty's objectives, in part because of the stand of President George W. Bush's administration, which reversed U.S. support for such nonproliferation steps as ratification of the treaty banning all nuclear tests.

President Barack Obama has embraced the goal of nuclear disarmament, endorsed the test-ban treaty and taken other steps, such as concluding a nuclear arms-reduction treaty with Russia, that have improved the cooperative atmosphere at the 2010 conference.

For the first time at an NPT review, the proposed declaration offered complex action plans for all three of the treaty's "pillars" — nonproliferation, disarmament and peaceful nuclear energy. But the U.S. and other weapon states found a draft cobbled together by the conference president, Libran Cabactulan of the Philippines, to be too ambitious on disarmament.

A revised draft circulated Thursday eliminated an earlier proposal that the weapons states consult among themselves on how to disarm and report back to the 2015 conference, after which a high-level meeting would convene to negotiate a "roadmap" for abolishing nuclear weapons.

Even with such timeline, a disarmament action plan would leave a major gap, since it wouldn't obligate four nations that are not members of the treaty — India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea, all of which have or are suspected of having nuclear arsenals.