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Nations at NPT session seek meeting on Middle East nuclear-free zone

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UNITED NATIONS -- Countries attending a global meeting on nuclear weapons agreed Friday to open talks on establishing a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East, but U.S. officials said the plan might go nowhere because of language singling out Israel's secret nuclear program.

U.S. officials had fought to keep Israel from being named in the final document, with Vice President Biden meeting with Arab ambassadors in Washington and calling Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in recent days.

The planned Middle East conference was the most prominent result of the meeting, held once every five years to review the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The Obama administration had hoped for a different outcome: measures to strengthen compliance with the 189-country treaty, which has been crucial in curtailing the spread of the deadly weapons but is under strain because of the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea.

Arab countries and their allies, however, threatened to block the conference unless progress was made on a 1995 resolution calling for a nuclear-free Middle East. NPT agreements require the approval of all members.

U.S. officials described the final document as making some modest progress on nonproliferation, including emphasizing the importance of pressing countries that are not fulfilling their obligations on nuclear inspections to change course. Iran tried unsuccessfully to excise that language, which clearly referred to its actions, U.S. officials said. Iran says that its nuclear program is aimed at producing peaceful energy.

U.S. officials said the meeting at least avoided the fate of the last NPT review, in 2005, which collapsed in rancor, with many countries accusing the George W. Bush administration of intransigence. This review's final document praised President Obama's nuclear achievements, including a new arms treaty with Russia, and echoed his language on seeking a world free of nuclear weapons.

The document calls for holding a conference in 2012 on the proposed Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction. The details are unclear, but it does not appear such a conference would be binding. The document urges Israel to join the NPT, which would require the Jewish state to give up its nuclear weapons, which Israel neither confirms nor denies it possesses.

Gary Samore, Obama's nuclear coordinator, said that naming only Israel in the context of the Middle East conference sent a signal that the event would be used to isolate the Jewish state.

"We will not support a meeting that puts Israel in that kind of position," he told reporters. The final document makes no explicit reference to Iran's violations of U.N. resolutions calling for the suspension of its uranium enrichment or its failure to fully cooperate with U.N. inspectors.

That was expected, because, as a member of the treaty, Iran has the power to block a final document.

"Because Iran was in the room, we were never able to get serious support to go after [it] in the non-compliance" area, said Ellen O. Tauscher, the U.S. undersecretary of state for arms control.

Israel has said it would agree to a zone free of weapons of mass destruction only after it has reached peace agreements with its neighbors, something unlikely to happen for years. A Middle East conference would also address chemical and biological weapons, which are allegedly possessed by Syria. The NPT is essentially a bargain in which the five original nuclear powers agree to gradually disarm, while nonnuclear states foreswear atomic weapons but get access to nuclear energy, subject to international monitoring.

The final agreement dropped a provision condemning North Korea in "the strongest possible terms" for conducting nuclear tests in 2006 and 2007, after it quit the treaty, merely urging it to live up to its 2005 commitment to carry out the "verifiable abandonment of all nuclear weapons" and its nuclear program.