Weapons of mass destruction and nuclear power in the Middle East...

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This basic information is supposed to be known and sacred to any media, and yet...! A fact which led, George Jean, an Associated Press Correspondent in Vienna for 32 years now, to present this paper to a crowd of correspondents interested in nuclear issues while convening in a workshop held in Istanbul from June 23 to 25, and entitled "Weapons of Mass Destruction and Nuclear Power in the Middle East."

Hosted by the Turkish University of Okan, this workshop was organized under the aegis of the Stanley Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and CNS (James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies).

The workshop was devoted to journalists from the Middle East and correspondents in the area including the Sudan, UAE, Jordan, Yemen, Iraq Algeria, Turkey and Israel. Although there was a clear absence of Iranian journalists who were officially invited, the Iranian point of view was still present through the input of the audience and an Iranian study prepared in the United States. The study affirmed that Iran's approach to its nuclear rights is entirely different than that of North Korea, which under world pressure and accusation of non-compliance with nonproliferation conventions, preferred to expel nuclear inspectors, remove their surveillance cameras and safety seals. On January 10, 2003, the Pyongyang government declared its complete withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). On the same day, the North Korean ambassador to the United Nations had announced that his country would consider any form of sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council as a declaration of war.

Iran has been keen – since the inception of the nuclear talks with Great Britain, France, Germany – on until now establishing a framework with EU representatives to negotiate nuclear issues with UN permanent members plus Germany or 5+1 Group. Iran has, hitherto, attempted to clarify its position and stress its rights as a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) which primarily oversees the
peaceful use of the atom, with the aim of negotiating or being forced to negotiate for a diplomatic solution that would secure its rights and lift the tight sanctions imposed by the Security Council. Coupled with US and EU boycotts, the sanctions were originally imposed on Iran in 2006 due to a complaint set forth by IAEA Board of Trustees over Iran's noncompliance with Safeguard Treaties.

It is known that Iran, like other Arab countries in the Middle East, including Turkey, have all signed the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons except the State of Israel. The state is deemed by many as the only nuclear state in the region – despite lack of acknowledgement by Israeli government officials – save a sole slip of tongue by the former prime minister, Ehud Olmert, during his TV interview with the German station SAT 1 in January 2006.

It is also known that Israel adopts a policy of complete and full ambiguity about the its program and nuclear power despite hundreds of media and security reports, which emphasize the fact while Tel Aviv benefits from unfailing support from the US that never weakens.

As stated before, participants representing many entities attended the workshop throughout the three days as it encompassed an intensive program which included lectures, interventions and writings by a number of renowned experts, diplomats and media from different nationalities and disciplines concerned with the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, be it nuclear or chemical. In the same context, the United Nations focused in its participation on preventing nuclear tests.

In fact, the workshop provided the participants with extensive opportunities to intervene and focus on their experiences, positions, and questions. They also touched on the difficulties they face when delivering different viewpoints as fast as required to deal with daily news despite the procrastinations and stalling press releases issued by many of the spokespeople through their airy statements.

The workshop reflected the interest of various organizing and participating institutions concerned with the dissemination of nuclear news in the Middle East. This region, where governments underscore in their official statements their hope to make the region free of nuclear weapons while other indicators and signs have it that the Middle East, is rippled with nuclear ambitions wrapped in the need for development and utilization of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. The real intention, though, could be forming the nucleus of a nuclear armament program amid desperate attempts to achieve a balance of power which will continue, and intensify as long as Israel remains a nuclear state and Iran conducts suspicious nuclear activities. Without doubt, this is the main reason behind the obvious interest of who
confers, writes, analyzes and covers nuclear related news thanks to their wide impact on the public opinion, notably those who work in electronic media and directly address the audience in a manner governments would be challenged to control or influence.

For their part, media professionals who participated in such workshops took advantage of what the opportunities provided to interact directly and openly with decision makers and who influence them in capitals, centers and institutions in addition to fellow media experts from various competing agencies. The attendees were keen on maintaining an unbiased stand lest they become involved in an agenda while they paid attention, and bravely exchanged opinions. Being aware that each story has two versions, the piece of news is neutral, and the opinion belongs to its owner, they also asked questions and exchanged expertise and stances. In another context, in order to stress the extent of the momentum and the interest expressed by global circles and institutions, which keep up with the nuclear news, especially the developments of the "Iranian nuclear file", we concluded that more than one entity strives to connect with the media, as more than one entity also strives to provide training opportunities, arrange meetings and visits to nuclear sites in search of a more accurate understanding of the nature of the nuclear cycle and to absorb vocabulary and the nature of the high-tech mechanisms so that coverage and broadcasting to the audience becomes in a daily easy and correct language.

In this regard, efforts have emerged to organize journalists interested in nuclear issues into "groups" in order to facilitate acquaintance for better communication and further exchange of expertise and even sources.

Furthermore, a network of nuclear correspondents has been formed in Vienna, the capital of Austria, where IAEA is headquartered, and chaired by Peter Record, an astute journalist who worked for years in the IAEA media office. He worked in the media office of the Vienna-based Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization as well. Earlier next week, Record will return to the agency to continue his work in its media office which is considered one of the most important media offices among international organizations.

For its part, and in an individual effort, BBC correspondent in Vienna, Bethany Belle, has initiated regular meetings that started with a limited number of correspondents, only to expand now into nuclear experts and officials who formerly worked for IAEA and other organizations including diplomats. During such meeting, and after building trust with them, these latter are more open to express their opinions, and provide analyses in such a way that it would impossible to conduct the same interviews by a journalist while the diplomats are in their offices using all sorts of excuses such as,
"no comment", "they are not entitled to speak to the media", and in certain circumstances, it would be even difficult to interview them "off the record" or in an anonymous capacity.

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