

THE CONSULTATIONS IN GLION AND GENEVA: A VIEW FROM THE NEGOTIATING TABLE

A Missed Opportunity: The Glion-Geneva Process

| By Amb. Mikhail Ulyanov



MIDDLE EAST WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION FREE ZONE SERIES

Between 2013-2014 representatives from Arab states, Iran and Israel met to discuss convening the Middle East weapons of mass destruction free zone (ME WMDFZ) Conference, which had been mandated by the 2010 Review Conference for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. It was the first time since the 1990s that states of the region discussed this issue face-to-face. The meetings took place mainly in Glion and Geneva, Switzerland and were facilitated by Ambassador Jaakko Laajava of Finland, and co-convened by the Russian Federation, United Kingdom, and United States, as well as the Secretary-General of the United Nations. This ME WMDFZ paper series presents firsthand, personal reflections and lessons learned by those that participated in the meetings.

THE IDEA OF HOLDING INFORMAL CONSULTATIONS

The idea of holding informal consultations with countries of the region regarding the preparations for the ME WMDFZ Conference was initially proposed by Russia. This suggestion was first put forward on 31 May 2012, during a meeting in Helsinki attended by the three co-conveners, the Facilitator, Ambassador Jaakko Laajava of Finland, and the United Nations representatives (together referred to as the “co-organizers”). The idea of holding informal consultations was prompted by the need to ensure involvement of all the countries of the Middle East in the

¹ 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Final document, volume I, NPT/CONF.2010/50 (Vol. I), 18 June 2010, 29–31, [https://undocs.org/en/NPT/CONF.2010/50\(Vol.I\)](https://undocs.org/en/NPT/CONF.2010/50(Vol.I)).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mikhail Ivanovich Ulyanov served in 2011-2018 as the Director of the Department for Non-proliferation and Arms Control at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of the Russian

Federation. In this capacity he represented Russia in the “troika” of the co-conveners (alongside the United Kingdom and the United States) of the Conference on the Establishment of a ME WMDFZ that was scheduled to take place in accordance with the Final Document adopted at the 2010 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).¹ He currently serves as the Permanent Representative of Russia to International Organisations in Vienna.

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preparations for the conference in order to ensure its successful conduct. It took nearly a year to finalize the arrangements for these consultations, as it was necessary to secure consent first from all co-organizers and then from all the countries of the Middle East.

When Russia introduced and promoted the initiative of informal consultations, our primary goal was to ensure a successful implementation of the task formulated in the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference. Within the framework of this strategic objective, the Russian delegation in the Glion–Geneva process had sufficient room for manoeuvre.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE INFORMAL CONSULTATIONS

Throughout the preparations and during the informal consultations, the Russian side maintained regular and close contact with the other co-organizers, as well as with countries of the region. In addition to the individual visits to several Middle Eastern countries, Russia joined the other co-organizers on trips to engage in consultations with the League of Arab States (LAS), Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Together with the US representative, Ambassador Tom Countryman, we visited Israel. Video-conferences, supported by technical assistance from the US Department of State, were regularly held among the co-organizers. Telephone conferences also took place. We also maintained regular contact with ambassadors from a number of Middle Eastern states in Moscow.

During the preparations for the Glion–Geneva consultations and throughout the consultations process itself, we frequently and whenever necessary formulated and put forward concrete proposals for approval by the leadership of the MFA. This allowed us to refine the Russian position as the situation evolved. The instructions we received concerning these proposals were then implemented during bilateral and multilateral meetings.

Following the 2010 NPT Review Conference decision, and upon a decision by the co-conveners, the role of the Facilitator was assigned to then Under-Secretary of State in the Finnish MFA, Jaakko Laajava. He played a key role in the preparations for the ME WMDFZ Conference. His functions were mostly coordinating and organizational in nature, but he could also put forward substantive proposals. I have to note that in my view, Ambassador Jaakko Laajava and his team, within the scope of what the Facilitator could objectively do, fulfilled their duties diligently. In several years they undertook over 300 trips to the countries of the Middle East.

As far as substance is concerned, the positions of Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States were crucial. Ever helpful and positive was the contribution of the United Nations High Representative for Disarmament Angela Kane and her close staff member from the Secretariat, Thomas Markram. Overall, a spirit of teamwork and cooperation prevailed among the co-organizers, at least until particularly challenging and sensitive issues arose, leading to divergent opinions.

Countries of the region often played a crucial role in achieving progress, with notable contributions from the most active – Egypt, Israel and the LAS Secretariat.

THE CONSULTATIONS

The inaugural meeting in Glion in October 2013 was rather introductory in nature, “a dry run” in a sense. While Israel, Egypt and the LAS sent senior diplomats, the rest of the Middle Eastern states were represented by the local staff of the respective Permanent Missions in Geneva. It is worth noting that an Iranian local diplomat attended the first meeting. However, after news on the meeting was leaked to the press, Tehran decided that it could no longer continue with participation in the consultations.

In subsequent meetings discussions became increasingly substantive. During the third round we almost reached a breakthrough. Jeremy Issacharoff, the representative of Israel, announced that his country would be ready to agree on the date of the ME WMDFZ Conference once its draft outcome document and all organizational modalities are agreed upon. At the same time, the consultations process in general experienced significant setbacks due to profound political disagreements between Israel and its neighbours. These disagreements, combined with the slow pace of the discussions, ultimately led to the cessation of the Glion–Geneva process halfway to the desired outcome.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Looking back on the consultations, their format broadly aligned with the objective of convening the ME WMDFZ Conference.

It is important to highlight the participation of all major stakeholders, with the exception of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It would have been desirable to have not only the majority, but all countries of the region participate in the Glion–Geneva process. However, counting on that probably would have been unrealistic.

Notably, in terms of the level of representation, all key participants of the process (i.e. Egypt, Israel and the LAS Secretariat) were represented by high-ranking and experienced diplomats. Of course, it would have been better if other participants had also been represented at the ambassadorial level.

One of the challenges encountered during the consultations was the occasional impression that we were engaging in a “process for the sake of process”. It is clear that, due to the lack of relevant experience and a “culture of dialogue”, all participants needed time to adapt to this informal joint work, which had no precedents since the Madrid Process and the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) working group of the 1990s.² However, the process became excessively protracted. Even after the first meeting, it became apparent that a more efficiently structured and businesslike discussion was needed in order to address the concrete questions that had to be addressed in order to successfully convene and conduct the ME WMDFZ Conference. However, reaching an agreement on the format among all five co-organizers proved to be impossible. The Russian suggestions on this issue were received most positively by the United Nations representatives, while others were not ready to proceed with drafting. Because of that, Russia had to present the draft outcome document and organizational modalities in its national capacity.³

Of course, assessments of the issue at hand are subjective and may not necessarily align. From our perspective, certain progress was achieved in terms of the character of the discussion, as well as on procedural and substantive issues, although it was very slow.

I do not have a complete understanding of the reasons why discussions stopped and why the Glion–Geneva process came to halt. Most likely, it was due to the lack of substantive progress that would have satisfied all participants. It appears that some participants may have believed that the dialogue in such a format lacked sufficient prospects and was merely imitating action. If this was the case, I would disagree with such an assessment. I was left with the impression that, if the informal consultations were to have continued, there was a slim but real chance of reaching understandings that would have

allowed for the convening and successful conduct of the ME WMDFZ Conference, as well as the organization of post-conference work.

LESSONS LEARNED

In hindsight, I think we should have been more persistent in proceeding with the actual drafting process to reach an agreement on the outcome document of the ME WMDFZ Conference and its organizational modalities. Despite all difficulties, there was a chance to accomplish that.

The main lesson that can and should be learned from the Glion–Geneva process is that meaningful progress on establishing a ME WMDFZ can only be achieved through direct dialogue involving all states of the region, without exception.

A potential avenue for such dialogue is provided now by the annual sessions of the United Nations Conference on the Establishment of a ME WMDFZ in New York. It is regrettable that Israel continues to ignore this process, most likely, out of inertia. Meanwhile, other countries in the region have demonstrated their readiness to take into account, to the maximum extent, the concerns and interests of each state of the region, including Israel. Such a willingness is unambiguously attested by the decision adopted by the conference that consensus shall be the only method of decision-making on procedural and substantive issues. Consequently, Israel’s initial concerns that the purpose of the conference was allegedly “to isolate” it proved to be unfounded. Other countries in the region are ready for a substantive dialogue with Israel. By refusing it, Israel essentially isolates itself.

Another lesson from the Glion–Geneva process is that, in order to ensure a balance of interests, it would be beneficial to explore the idea of complementing the ME WMD-FZ negotiations with a direct dialogue track focused on regional security issues, which has been particularly important for Israel. These two tracks could run in parallel in order to break the vicious cycle of fruitless discussions on whether the ME WMDFZ negotiations or political settlement should come first. Implementing such an idea would be challenging and would require Israel and its neighbours to be prepared for difficult compromises. Yet

² The Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) working group, which met between 1992 and 1995, was one of the five working groups that were formed within the multilateral track of the Madrid Peace Process.

³ Russian Non-Paper on “Possible Elements of the Final Document” of the ME WMDFZ Conference, 25–26 November 2013, <https://unidir.org/node/5706>.

it makes sense to look into such a possibility in the current circumstances and based on lessons learned, such as from ACRS, and without undermining the ongoing ME WMDfZ negotiations in New York. Of course, any conversation on this matter would only have prospects if all participants were ready and willing to refrain from presenting preconditions that would be inherently unacceptable to the others.



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