

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

Personal Recollections and Reflections of the Multilateral
Consultations at Glion and Geneva on the Middle East WMD-Free
Zone Conference, 2013–2014

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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.

I was appointed by the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, to the post of High Representative for Disarmament Affairs in March 2012. In that function, I was responsible, together with the three depositaries of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) – the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and the United States (US) – for implementing the commitment made by the NPT states parties to hold a conference on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD).¹

¹ This commitment was first made in the final document of the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference and was confirmed in the final document of the 2010 Review Conference with a commitment to hold this conference in 2012. See 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, “Final document”, Part 1, “Organization and work of the Conference”, NPT/CONF.1995/32 (Part I), [https://undocs.org/en/NPT/CONF.1995/32\(PartI\)](https://undocs.org/en/NPT/CONF.1995/32(PartI)); and 2010 NPT Review Conference, “Final document”, Volume I, Part I, “Review of the operation of the Treaty”, NPT/CONF.2010/50 (Vol. I), [https://undocs.org/en/NPT/CONF.2010/50\(Vol.I\)](https://undocs.org/en/NPT/CONF.2010/50(Vol.I)).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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THE APPOINTMENT OF A FACILITATOR

At the time of assuming the post of High Representative, a Facilitator had been chosen only a few months before. The search had proven difficult, with two or three names having been put forward, only to be rejected by one or another of the parties. The final choice was Ambassador Jaakko Laajava, Under-Secretary of State in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of Finland, who had agreed to take the post on condition that he continue in his post in the Ministry. To be able to devote the time needed, he proposed to put together a team of Finnish diplomats and experts to assist him in this endeavour. That team consisted of six (later seven) officials deputized to assist the Facilitator, some of whom had served in the Middle East.

COORDINATION EFFORTS TO HOLD THE 2012 ZONE CONFERENCE

This was the situation when I took the position as High Representative. Being co-convenor, together with the three NPT depositories, meant that our decisions were to be taken by consensus. While our objectives may not have been entirely the same, we strove to find compromise in our deliberations.

Preparations from my side focused on assembling documentation which gave the background to the decision to hold the conference on a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. The aim of this was to understand the context in which the decision was taken, both in 1995 and in 2010. Having served as Assistant Secretary-General in the UN Department of Political Affairs with a portfolio that included the Middle East and Near Asia, I was familiar with the political environment in the region and had good contacts there, which I knew would be helpful.

Laajava called an early meeting of the co-conveners in April 2012 in Miami, United States, as he was there for an unrelated reason. He was starting to assemble his team, and introduced us to two members who were already on

board. He briefed us on his bilateral consultations and the work he had done to promote regional participation in the conference. We also discussed his report to the upcoming session of the NPT Preparatory Committee, which was to take place in May 2012, and what was he going to say. Laajava then outlined next steps: determining the conference modalities, the timing, observers, civil society involvement, and the level of funding necessary. More consultations with countries in the region were needed before further steps could be taken, he concluded.

We should remember that, by that time, nearly two years had passed since the 2010 NPT Review Conference adopted the decision to hold the conference. Some work had been done prior to the appointment of Laajava, notably two conferences organized in 2011 by Annalisa Giannela, the Director for Non-Proliferation and Disarmament at the European External Action Service (EEAS).² Called by the European Union, these conferences were well-attended, with high-ranking officials from the Arab and Israeli sides, and were seen to have been helpful. Another forum in 2011 was organized by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which focused on experiences gained from other nuclear weapon-free zones.³

Other thoughtful inputs had been delivered, such as from Pugwash, which put together a four-page paper on “points for consideration” in September 2011.⁴ Clearly, there was tremendous willingness from states, international organizations and civil society to assist in this effort by contributing substance. Yet not all states from the region saw such an involvement as positive. An article published in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* by several German academics with long experience in the region backfired because it was not perceived as helpful, although it was clearly meant to make a positive contribution.⁵

The co-conveners’ interactions with Laajava started slowly, despite the commitment to convene the conference in 2012. Considerable onus was put on the Facilitator

² EU Consortium Middle East international seminars, July 2011, and Second EU Consortium Middle East Seminar, November 2012, <https://www.nonproliferation.eu/evenement/eu-consortium-middle-east-international-seminars/>.

³ “IAEA hold a forum looking at lessons learned from nuclear-weapon-free zones for establishing such a zone in the Middle East”, 21–22 November 2011, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/iaea-holds-forum-looking-lessons-learned-nuclear-weapon-free-zones-establishing-such?timeline=9>.

⁴ Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, “Towards a conference on a nuclear weapon or WMD-free Middle-East: Some points for consideration”, 26 September 2011, <https://pugwash.org/2011/09/26/considerations-on-a-middle-east-wmd-free-zone/>.

⁵ Bernd W. Kubbig, Roberta Mulas and Christian Weidlich, “States that talk don’t shoot”, *Ha’aretz*, 16 March 2012, <https://www.haaretz.com/2012-03-16/ty-article/states-that-talk-dont-shoot/0000017f-dc61-df9c-a17f-fe79f0e00000>.

to prepare for the conference primarily through bilateral consultations with each of the states of the region. Laajava and his team travelled widely throughout the region, visiting nearly all the capitals, and some more than once – but without making much headway.

This approach was consistent with the view of the United States and the United Kingdom that the arrangements for the conference could only be “freely arrived at” by the states of the region. This not only limited the role of the Facilitator but also reduced the responsibility of the co-conveners. It came up several times in subsequent discussions when the United States and the United Kingdom posited that the “states of the region” had to do more to make the conference happen.

DISAGREEMENTS OVER THE DECISION TO POSTPONE THE CONFERENCE

There were several phone calls in the months that followed the initial meeting. Yet it became evident during the summer that the United States had decided that the conference could not take place in 2012, especially as US elections were to be held in early November that year.

The matter came to a head at a meeting on 26 October at a working dinner in New York with the co-conveners. Our group consisted of Mikhail Ulyanov from the Russian Federation, Sarah MacIntosh from the United Kingdom and Tom Countryman from the United States, with Rose Gottemoeller – the US Under-Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security and Countryman’s boss – also attending this time. Laajava presented his proposal to delay the conference, a move that was opposed by Ulyanov and myself. After a heated debate, the final agreement amongst us was for Laajava to travel to the Middle East to obtain the Arab states’ buy-in: he proposed to ask whether the Arabs would want to have the conference take place in the final month of 2012 when it was clear that Israel would not attend?

We met again on 8 November 2012. Countryman was insisting to make a statement to defer the conference, even before the consultation with the Arab states had taken place. If we did not agree, the US would unilaterally issue a statement. If that happened, countered Ulyanov, the Russian Federation would issue its own statement. I said I could only agree to issuing a statement once the

consultations with the Arab states had taken place, as we could and should not determine on our own that the conference would not take place in 2012. Laajava agreed to travel to Cairo, where a meeting of Arab Foreign Ministers was to take place four days later and where he would try to obtain their buy-in to a deferral to 2013. Ulyanov and I pushed to include the deferral of the conference to 2013 – which was, however, opposed by Countryman.

On 12 November, a statement was issued – only in Arabic – by the Council of the League of Arab States (LAS) reaffirming the chief role of the UN in organizing the conference and addressing invitations. It also reaffirmed that the LAS’s Senior Official Committee (SOC) was the only entity mandated to negotiate and discuss the 2012 conference and its preparation and called on groups of Arab ambassadors to take that into account.

More phone calls and exchanges with Laajava occurred in the following days. While a text for the postponement statement was drafted by one of the co-conveners, I argued for delaying its release until the LAS had given its reaction to a deferment. A co-conveners’ video teleconference (VTC) on 16 November brought forth the same arguments and, in nearly four hours of discussion, did not settle the matter. We agreed to “think about it again” and, it being a Friday, agreed to meet after the weekend, three days later.

In the diplomatic corridors in New York and in Istanbul at the sherpa meeting for the Nuclear Security Summit, I spoke to several senior Arab delegates on this issue. They all expressed unhappiness at the idea of deferring the conference. Their counterproposal was to organize a conference at political/technical directors’ level in December in Helsinki, “to start the process”. But they also wanted us to set and announce specific dates for the conference itself, which I told them was unrealistic.

Separate statements by the co-conveners were made on 23 and 24 November. In the Secretary-General statement, he noted the intensive consultations conducted by the Facilitator “with the States of the region to prepare the convening of the conference in 2012”, and appealed to them “to seize this rare opportunity to initiate a process that entails direct engagement on security issues”, while also underlining the “importance of the conference in promoting long-term regional stability, peace and security on the basis of equality”.⁶

⁶ United Nations, “Secretary-General urges regional states to seize ‘rare opportunity’, convene conference, make Middle East zone free of all weapons of mass destruction”, C/3401 SG/SM/14671-D SG/SM/14671-DC/3401, 26 November 2012, <https://press.un.org/en/2012/sgsm14671.doc.htm>.

Following the release of the Secretary-General's statement, Mohamed Kamel Amr the Foreign Minister of Egypt delivered an "urgent message" to him via the UN Resident Coordinator in Cairo, while I was démarched in New York by the Egyptian Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador Mootaz Khalil. Egypt was unhappy with several points: (i) they complained that the timeline of 2012 was missing in the Secretary-General's statement (although the letter did include the date); (ii) they noted that the Facilitator's proposal for multilateral consultations was not consulted with the states of the region; and (iii) they noted that the conference should not address "security issues", as this was not the mandate given in the Resolution on the Middle East adopted in 1995.⁷ The letter also noted that Egypt was wary of engaging in any open-ended consultative process, as it did not see any use in consultations that did not specify a date for the conference.

During this time, Laajava and I had frequent bilateral and lengthy phone calls, often at his instigation. On 27 November, he suggested that the co-conveners meet in mid-December. This would be after the vote on the status of Palestine as a non-member observer state on 29 November and would confirm that the conference could not be held in the last days of 2012.

THE ROAD TO HOLDING MULTILATERAL CONSULTATIONS

The meeting on 14 December took place, like so many we had, by VTC usually at 8:00 or 8:30 a.m. New York time, in order to cover the time zones of all the participants. We took stock of the situation and assessed it following the responses of the Arab states to our separate statements. We recognized that the public breakdown in the unity among the co-conveners had led to a lack of confidence in our actions. We agreed that we needed to step up political momentum by deciding on a specific plan of action. We also needed to convey a positive message to the Arab states, reassuring them that the co-conveners remained fully committed to convening the conference.

We therefore agreed that, in order to move the process forwards, the Facilitator would convey a message – in his personal capacity – to the meeting of the LAS's SOC due to take place on 19 December, reaffirming his proposals for making progress as outlined in his letter of 17 November. We agreed that Laajava would: (i) affirm that the co-conveners were fully supportive of this approach,

including the convening of a multilateral consultation to be attended by all the states of the region to register their collective agreement on the modalities of the conference; (ii) identify the date 12–15 February 2013 for such a consultation to take place in Geneva; (iii) reaffirm the co-conveners' commitment to convene the conference at the earliest possible date; and (iv) convey the intention of the co-conveners to reach out to the other states of the region (the Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel) to bring them also to the meetings in Geneva in February 2013.

We met again in a VTC on 18 January 2013. Laajava briefed us on his participation in the 13 January meeting of the LAS Ministerial Council. For the co-conveners, taking stock of the situation, it was clear that no one had revised his or her position. Again, it was expressed that "the Arabs haven't reached out" to us and that engagement on their side was lacking – the only official response from the Arab states had been for the LAS to condemn the co-conveners for postponing the conference.

We agreed that a joint letter, drafted by Ulyanov and reviewed by the co-conveners, would be sent to Israel after the Israeli legislative elections on 22 January. The Arab States would get their letter of invitation according to Laajava, "in a few weeks' time", which made the timetable with a previous suggestion to hold the consultation in mid-February improbable, if not impossible.

In a series of VTCs until April, updates were given on the views of states of the region on holding the consultations. Discussion centred around the criteria of the Arab states regarding the role of the UN, and a planned trip by the Secretary-General to Doha, where this issue might be raised.

In early April 2013, prior to the next meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the 2015 NPT Review Conference, the postponement of the zone conference was discussed in the UN Disarmament Commission. The Arab states (including Palestine and the LAS) forcefully argued to insert a paragraph (drafted by Egypt) in the Chair's non-paper which referred to the need to convene the conference in 2013. This was opposed by the United States, the United Kingdom and France, which argued that the final document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference did not mention "2013" and that the Disarmament Commission could not review the implementation of an agreement that was reached in the NPT context. Essentially, the United States, the United Kingdom and France

⁷ 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, "Final document", Part 1, "Organization and work of the Conference", NPT/CONF.1995/32 (Part I), [https://undocs.org/en/NPT/CONF.1995/32\(PartI\)](https://undocs.org/en/NPT/CONF.1995/32(PartI)).

communicated the message that a minor delay to the conference would not call into question the credibility of the NPT in its entirety. The Arab states then asked if the Disarmament Commission could issue a separate recommendation or declaration on the conference, but this again encountered a hostile reception and was ultimately dropped.

Shortly thereafter, on 22 April, the NPT Preparatory Committee started in Geneva. I spoke at the second session and referred to the conference as follows:

We all know that – despite a decision made at the 2010 NPT Review Conference – it was not possible to convene an international conference in 2012 . . . Yet we also know that enormous support remains among States Parties to convene such a conference, that efforts to convene it will persist, and that progress in moving this initiative forward will also contribute to both regional and international peace and security. I know this will be a high-priority subject at this session . . . and I hope this conference can be held later this year at the soonest.⁸

In the general debate many delegations expressed regret that the conference had not been convened in 2012 and urged that it take place in 2013. The LAS's statement was particularly strong, calling the postponement a "violation" of the 2010 commitment and demanding that the conference take place in 2013.⁹ The lack of cohesion between the co-conveners was apparent in their national statements, with the Russian Federation stating that the co-sponsors did not have the authority to postpone the conference and that it did not consent to this step. The United States expressed its commitment to create the conditions for the Helsinki conference but added that success required the states of the region to engage with each other.¹⁰ The United Kingdom did not make any statement on this issue.

On 29 April, which was "Middle East day" at the NPT Preparatory Committee, the co-conveners met in the morning. The meeting laid bare the divisions among our

group: the tone had become sharper, especially between Countryman and Ulyanov.

We met with the LAS delegation later in the morning but made no headway. Laajava reported on his trip to Israel over the weekend and the news was not good: Israel was moving back from its agreement to attend the multilateral consultations among the states of the region, as they were now being called "preparatory". Laajava decided not to give his paper to the LAS, so the delegation left empty-handed. "We should not rush into things", he posited; it was not a constructive meeting.

Could it be that a result of the delay was the walk-out from the NPT Preparatory Committee that day of the Egyptian delegate, Ambassador Hisham Badr?¹¹ The general feeling was that Egypt had not briefed about its planned walk-out the other Arab states – they remained in their seats.

Two weeks later, on 14 May, the co-conveners held another VTC. We were trying to make a push for the consultations to take place before Ramadan started (7 July); Laajava updated that the Israelis were on board. The discussions in the VTCs usually focused on the same topics: the modalities for the multilateral consultations, including the participants, the chair, the duration, the role of the UN and possible dates. One issue was the participation of China: should China, as a permanent member of the Security Council, be invited? (It was always assumed that France would participate considering its proximity to and involvement in the region.)

On the evening of 14 May I was invited to a dinner of several Arab ambassadors working on disarmament issues, plus Indonesia and Cuba, which was a useful venue to advocate the idea of holding the multilateral consultations before Ramadan. I made a strong push for agreement to attend the multilateral consultations.

On a totally different issue, Laajava had raised with me a number of times the lack of financing for the work of the

⁸ United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, "High Representative Kane addresses NPT PrepCom, hopes deliberations will create climate for full implementation of all NPT commitments", 22 April 2013, <https://www.un.org/disarmament/update/20130422/>.

⁹ "Working paper submitted on behalf of the Arab Group 'Implementation of the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East'", 19 April 2013, <https://unidir.org/node/5659>.

¹⁰ "2012 ME WMDFZ conference is postponed", 23 November 2012, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010/2012-me-wmdfz-conference-postponed?timeline=12>.

¹¹ "Egyptian delegation walks out of 2013 NPT PrepCom in protest over the lack of progress on the ME WMDFZ", 29 April 2013, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/egyptian-delegation-walks-out-2013-npt-prepcom-protest-over-lack-progress-me-wmdfz?timeline=16>.

Facilitator and his team. The considerable expense had not been foreseen, and this was also true for the UN team: fortunately, our travel was financed by a voluntary contribution from Norway. Laajava noted that what had been a time-bound undertaking was now spilling over into 2013 and beyond, with no end date set. It was not only the cost of the meeting planned to take place in Helsinki, he explained; the expenses were heavy due to the frequent travel he and the team were undertaking – plus their salaries. He therefore sought financing from the UN – this had not been foreseen and hence no budget plans had been made. I offered to support his request with the other co-conveners and did so over the summer. I held many more coordination phone calls with Laajava.

Ramadan paused our activities, and August is traditionally slow at the United Nations. I missed some of the activity over the summer as I was responsible for the UN investigation into the chemical weapon attacks in the Syrian Arab Republic and was not always available.

On 16 August 2013 Laajava organized a meeting in Vienna, which I did attend, together with the co-conveners, Wael al Assad of the LAS and Jeremy Issacharoff of Israel. The two sides were in separate locations: Laajava held separate meetings with the LAS and Israeli representatives, shuttling between them and the co-conveners. We spent a lot of time waiting for updates and having coffee or tea while the consultations went on. One complaint by the LAS concerned the IAEA resolution on Israeli nuclear capabilities: in anticipation of the conference and to improve the atmosphere with Israel, the LAS had not put forward the resolution in 2011 and 2012 but threatened to reverse their position and table it again – unless progress was made in the organization of the conference. They did introduce the resolution in 2013, when it was voted down, just as it was in 2010.

The first meeting (Glion, 21–22 October 2013)

October 2013 finally brought the first “Glion consultation”, gathering the participants at the traditional Hotel Victoria. The co-conveners met for dinner prior to the opening day, but it seemed that we were going over ground amply covered in previous sessions. One of the aspects that made it difficult to agree on concrete steps was the fact that Laajava saw his role as a Facilitator as calling and chairing meetings and conveying the views of the co-conveners. His role was a go-between role, not one to take decisions or initiatives, and since the co-conveners were not united in their approach, this made everything very difficult.

The attendance from Arab states at the first meeting in Glion was good, but was mostly at the level of

Counsellors and some First Secretaries from the Permanent Missions in Geneva. Iran was represented by a Second Secretary. Most Arab delegates remained silent, letting LAS Ambassador Wael Al Assad handle most of the interventions. In my opening remarks I urged everyone

not to focus on the fact that the conference, as mandated, did not take place in 2012 but that we should focus on what is now; on the desire of all of us to make the conference a reality, to focus on what is needed to make it happen.

I continued,

all participants at this informal meeting in Glion should see this as an opportunity to share their respective visions for the way forward towards the establishment of a zone. Our time here should be used for business-like discussions on how the Helsinki Conference can contribute to a process leading to the establishment of a [zone free of WMD in the Middle East]. If we progress in our preparations, setting a date is the next step – but all of the steps are interconnected and building blocks for holding the conference.

I assured the participants that the UN Secretary-General remained fully committed to achieving this goal. Referring to the accession of Syria to the Chemical Weapons Convention and the renewed diplomatic effort to reach a political solution to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), I spoke about the strong momentum in the region that we should take advantage of as well as contribute to it.

In mid-morning, the atmosphere turned unexpectedly ugly. Issacharoff brought up the issue of regional security and suggested that this should be reflected in the title of the conference. Countryman seconded this idea and, while it was later said that neither of them had been entirely serious, I observed that the Arabs turned totally sour when this was raised. The atmosphere became hostile, and, within half an hour, all seemed lost.

The next development took everyone totally by surprise: Laajava ended the meeting, not announcing that it was a temporary break – he just closed the meeting. Ulyanov and I immediately jumped into action and agreed that we would talk to the Arab states and ask them to come back – and we did manage to keep them somewhat together. I observed that Al Assad was equally taken aback since he had put his reputation on the line and personally lobbied states to participate in Glion.

So, the meeting was recalled. Laajava spoke about the productive time spent and that we needed more consultations to find agreement. He also announced the dates 25–26 November for the second meeting in Glion. After his statement, everyone was very polite, but no headway was made. Ulyanov and I made a concerted push with regard to announcing the date of the conference itself, asking about the agenda, the participants and other details. However, the will to engage was gone, and we adjourned.

In order to give additional impetus to the consultations, I had been in touch with Jacek Bylica who served as the EEAS's Principal Adviser and Special Envoy for Non-proliferation and Disarmament, to suggest another symposium under the auspices of the European Union, like the ones that had taken place two years previously. He agreed and, in early November 2013, I received a proposal with a well-thought-out concept paper and agenda; a date in April 2014, before the next NPT Preparatory Committee session, was envisaged.

The second meeting (Glion, 25–26 November 2013)

The second consultations were held in Glion on 25–26 November, again at the Victoria Hotel. The number of Arab delegates had increased by five (from 11 to 16) compared to the first meeting, and many were at the ambassadorial level, some having come from abroad, others from Geneva. Iran was not represented; there had been mention in the press of the first meeting in Glion, and as the Iranians had considered this a "leak", they had decided to stay away.

The discussions were more cordial and productive this time. The first day showed divergences but also brought agreement, although "nothing was agreed until all was agreed". It seemed that there was willingness to bridge the differences. Issacharoff again raised the importance of having regional security on the agenda, and he reiterated that Israel did not want the UN to sponsor the meeting – which was what the Arab states wanted. But there was mutual respect for the different views that were put forward: all participants affirmed that they had come here willingly to make progress.

As the co-conveners, we realized we had to be more forward-leaning and therefore offered some preliminary ideas which could form a common basis for the modalities: (i) Finland to send the invitations to the conference (although

we still received pushback from the Arab delegations regarding the role of the UN Secretary-General); (ii) the list of participants (mainly whether Palestine was to be invited as a participant or an observer); (iii) the level of participation; (iv) Finland as host would chair the conference (but the UN Secretary-General would address the meeting); (v) what documentation should be provided ahead of and at the conference; (vi) the outcome document would need to be negotiated beforehand; (vii) three working groups would be established as a result of the conference – they should be open-ended and would include separate sessions on regional security; (viii) the languages of the conference; and (ix) identification of the first quarter of 2014 as the tentative date for the conference.

Much discussion centred on the conference mandate. The Arab states posited that it should be based on the 2010 NPT Review Conference, and it could not be changed, while Issacharoff said that Israel "had a problem" attending an NPT-mandated conference. He suggested amendment of the mandate so that it would take Israel's concerns into account. Al Assad, referring to the position paper that the LAS had put forward, held that elements in their paper met, at least partially, Israel's concerns, but asked that Israel also provide input in writing as it was better to discuss specifics.¹²

It had become clear that the lack of written material made discussion more difficult. The co-conveners had urged Laajava to share the one-page paper with the core agenda for the Helsinki conference (from which we had drawn the above "preliminary ideas" we had put forward). He and his team had prepared a short paper, but he had told us that he wanted to listen first to the views of the states from the region and then make adjustments to the paper: it was his only shot, he said; there was no Plan B if the paper were to be rejected. In the end, he decided to share his paper on 26 November 2013 before we broke for lunch. He called the paper "Sandra's list", after the name of the secretary in the Finnish MFA who had typed it.¹³ It seemed to me that he did not want to own the content.

My sense was that it was likely that Laajava did not want to announce a date or even a time frame for holding the conference, as Issacharoff had taken the position that they could not agree to a date before more pressing issues, such as the agenda, were agreed. I again pushed for announcing

¹² "Working Paper by Lebanon on Implementation of the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East", 13 April 2010, <https://undir.org/node/5966>.

¹³ "The Facilitator non-paper at the 2nd informal consultation meeting entitled 'Sandra's List'", 26 November 2013, <https://undir.org/node/5705>.

a time frame, as I did not think we could leave Glion without any indication of when the conference would take place, even if we did not set a definite date. My opinion was that the Arab delegations would not agree to endless Glion meetings without setting a date for the conference.

The second meeting in Glion was concluded by everyone agreeing that it had been productive – but it was necessary to study “Sandra’s list” and come back with reactions. Al Assad noted that the LAS SOC would have a meeting on 15 December and promised to send a written response to the Facilitator. Issacharoff welcomed the thorough discussion and said Israel would look at the paper and try to overcome problems.

Talking of “problems”, sometimes issues can arise without anticipation. At the Hotel Victoria, we used a large conference room for our proceedings and the two or three smaller adjoining rooms for smaller consultations or during coffee breaks. While the conference room was decorated in what I would call “veranda style”, with garlands of flowers, the adjoining rooms were equipped with smaller tables and a sofa, above which hung a large painting with nude women – and that caused considerable offence. We asked the hotel staff to cover it with a sheet, and so avoided further consternation.

Another Arab initiative had been launched by the Foreign Minister of Egypt, Nabil Fahmy, on 28 September 2013, when he urged all countries in the Middle East (and the five permanent members of the Security Council) to state their support for a Middle East free of nuclear and all other WMD.¹⁴ Fahmy wrote to the UN Secretary-General on 13 October to follow up and the latter responded on 11 November, underlining his commitment to fulfil the mandate to convene the conference. The Egyptian Ambassador in New York, Khalil, repeatedly followed up with me, and we met often to discuss continued engagement. In late December 2013 and early January 2014, 13 letters were sent to the Secretary-General (from Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen) to formally express support – and in identical language – for the establishment of a WMD-free zone.

The co-conveners met in a VTC on 21 January 2014 to discuss the preparation of the third meeting in Glion and the reactions by the Arab states to “Sandra’s list”.

The third meeting (Glion, 4–5 February 2014)

The third meeting in Glion took place on 4–5 February. There was restiveness among the Arab states: this was the third time they had come to a meeting in Glion, and they looked for results. They asked for concrete proposals regarding the modalities of the conference in order to move forward with the convening – otherwise the Glion meetings were futile, and they would not continue to engage. They also noted that visas had been denied to some of the participants (including Al Assad), which endangered the proceedings. This would not have happened if the meeting had been held under United Nations auspices.

Egypt noted the absence of Iran and said the process should be all-inclusive, to which Laajava responded by pointing out that he had visited Tehran after the last meeting in Glion and encouraged Iranian participation; but it seemed they had decided not to attend. I démarched the Permanent Representative of Iran in New York – which he conveyed to the UN Secretary-General later at a luncheon, saying sternly “Ms Kane has been reminding me repeatedly about participating in the (Glion) meetings”, which occasioned raised eyebrows from the Secretary-General.

Al Assad’s absence from the third meeting in Glion was regretted by many of the delegations, including Issacharoff. He commented that Al Assad was a good interlocutor and partner, but even without him, he wanted to have continuity with the Arab partners. Every Arab representative who spoke urged for a date for the conference to be set. The message was that they needed to leave the meeting with a date as they could not go back to their capitals without it. It was very clear to me that the Arab delegates were highly sceptical that a date would be set before the next meeting of the LAS SOC, set for 16–17 February 2014.

The next item on the agenda during the third meeting in Glion was the modalities for the conference. Laajava distributed a text which he called “Hannu’s paper” (named after a member of his delegation). This again elicited some murmurings among the Arab participants as they asked for each document presented to have an official author. They insisted on a date to be set, as there was no mention of a date in the modalities paper. The US view was that the date was not an issue in isolation

¹⁴ “Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy proposes an initiative to address the WMD threats in the region in a UN General Assembly speech”, 28 September 2013, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/egyptian-foreign-minister-nabil-fahmy-proposes-initiative-address-wmd-threats-region?timeline=20>.

as one did not start by setting a date. This was rejected by the Arabs, who pointed out that the date was set for 2012.

Issacharoff offered Israel's comments to the "Sandra's list" paper. It had seven items, and one of them was the date – the other six also needed to be looked at. He wanted to look at it cooperatively. The meeting concluded for the day with remarks by Laajava about how productive it had been: we would continue the next day.

The co-conveners met afterwards with the Facilitator to assess the situation. Everyone agreed that setting the date made it easier for the Arabs to continue, but there needed to be a full exchange on all topics. Ulyanov, MacIntosh and I agreed that we needed to give something to our Arab colleagues. It was the responsibility of the Facilitator to set the date and it was absolutely necessary - this was not the collective responsibility of the co-conveners. There was a risk that patience by the Arab states was running out and the Facilitator could make a personal statement regarding the date – it would not be binding; he would express his personal view.

Even though Countryman agreed with the utility of setting a date, he expressed concerns that it would reverse the positive development in the Israeli position. Others felt that setting the date would create pressure for finalizing agreements and modalities, which would be positive. This was not accepted by Countryman: the co-conveners had reached an impasse.

The next day, 5 February, brought unexpected drama: the Egyptian representative, Sameh Aboul-Enein initiated a small meeting, to which Issacharoff had agreed to come. But after Issacharoff had been spoken to brusquely he said he would leave. This caused the tone to shift and become more formal, turning to talk with titles, "Mr Ambassador" this, and "Mr Ambassador" that.

Following an intervention by the co-conveners, Issacharoff consented to stay, but it was clear to me that he was taken aback. He pointed out that he had come to Glion for the third time, was clearly more senior than most of the people in the room, had invested a tremendous amount of effort in this endeavour – only to be rebuffed in the worst way. He pondered over giving up. He also strongly urged us not to have a date set for the conference.

We drafted something that had an approximate time frame ("the Facilitator is aware that the conference facilities in Helsinki are available in mid-June, and at later dates in the year"), but it was much weaker than we had originally intended. Laajava called a plenary and read the statement we had prepared and asked for comments. The only one to speak was Issacharoff who expressed regret – everyone else kept silent.

Following the plenary, the co-conveners agreed that we would not have a negative assessment of the third meeting in Glion, but we wondered how the meeting would be portrayed by others. I asked my office to make an appointment with Ambassador Khalil of Egypt when I got back to New York to get his views.

A VTC took place on 21 February 2014 among the co-conveners and the Facilitator to reflect on the third meeting. A further VTC on 12 March brought a fuller assessment of the situation. The three Glion meetings were seen to have been positive; they were not polemic and made good progress, but we also concluded that it would be better to conduct meetings in smaller groups. Countryman reported on his meetings with Al Assad and Issacharoff. The latter was still frustrated with the outcome of the third meeting in Glion, but he said he would be prepared to go to the Helsinki conference once there was agreement on the agenda. This was a big step – which we all recognized as important. With Al Assad, Countryman had urged flexibility: he needed to do his utmost to prevent the Arab ministers reducing their cooperation.

Ulyanov briefed us on the decision taken by the LAS Council on 9 March 2014, which was not very encouraging.¹⁵ There was no agreement to discuss regional issues or to have small group meetings.

The co-conveners also discussed the next planned multi-lateral meeting. This was to take place in Geneva, not at the Palais des Nations but at a building which had United Nations offices. Laajava noted two immediate challenges: (i) the upcoming NPT Preparatory Committee planned for May 2014 and (ii) how to ensure that we really made progress at the next meeting. We agreed to defer the date of the meeting until right after the NPT Preparatory Committee.

Shortly after the co-conveners' VTC, on 31 March the Secretary-General of the LAS, Dr Nabil Elaraby, addressed a letter to the UN Secretary-General urging him

¹⁵ League of Arab States Council, Resolution 7748 on Standing Agenda Item "Establishment of zone free of nuclear weapons and other WMD in the Middle East", 14 March 2014, <https://unidir.org/node/6941>.

to engage personally in the process of creating an environment conducive to the success of the Helsinki conference. The UN Secretary-General acknowledged the letter on 7 April, assuring Dr Elaraby of his full commitment to fulfilling the mandate to convene the conference.

The fourth meeting (Geneva, 14–15 May 2014)

The fourth consultations meeting took place in Geneva on 14 May at the International Conference Centre, which housed one small UN office. We hoped that this would satisfy the demands of the Arab states for a “United Nations venue”. There was a United Nations flag hanging at the entrance and a United Nations security guard in the lobby.

Unfortunately, this was not acceptable to the Israeli delegation, which did not want to join the meeting because of the UN association. We sat for over 30 minutes in the meeting room, wondering why we were not starting – no announcement or clarification was provided by the Finnish team. Once the flag and the security guard were removed, the Israelis joined the meeting, and it all came together really well. There were substantive exchanges between Israel and the Arab states, with the co-convenors mostly silent – there was no sense in us disrupting the flow. While there were still plenty of differences of views, the exchanges filled us with new energy and optimism.

The Arabs asked for a “rolling text” on the agenda. One was offered based on a Russian proposal, with three texts produced alongside: one called “Aapo’s paper” (after one of Laajava’s team members), one from the Arab SOC and one produced by Israel.¹⁶ After the distribution, we adjourned for lunch – and when we reconvened, we learned that Israel was not available for the second day of the meeting: the delegation had to leave. This caused tremendous anger among the Arab delegates who noted that the meeting had been planned for two days and they had come in good faith.

The rest of the afternoon was dismal: no more meaningful discussion. Lots of polite phrases, but we adjourned early without making more progress.

In early June 2014, the UN Secretary-General expressed the wish to meet with the Permanent Representatives of the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States to discuss the Middle East zone. The

meeting took place on 9 June. The Secretary-General urged them to do more to bring the key parties, especially Israel and Egypt, together at a political level in order to find compromise on the scope, mandate and agenda for the conference.

At a conference of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Interlaken on 23–24 June, Laajava briefed on his efforts regarding the Middle East zone. He posited that progress had been made after four multilateral meetings but divergencies of views were still considerable. We needed discipline and determined negotiation, he said. Finland was ready to host the conference without delay: in mid-June, October or December.

The fifth meeting (Geneva, 24–25 June 2014)

This was followed by the fifth consultations in Geneva on 24–25 June 2014, which saw a repeat of previous discussions. Little progress was made on the draft agenda based on the non-paper circulated at the previous meeting. A major conceptual difference on the scope of the agenda remained, with the Arab states insisting that the 2010 mandate remain unchanged, and Israel, supported by the co-convenors, wishing to include regional security and confidence-building measures. Until this was settled, it would not be possible to finalize the other arrangements and set a date. Also, the precise role of the UN remained unresolved.

The timing of the conference was becoming a factor: if the Helsinki conference was to take place in 2014, the agenda obstacle needed to be overcome. The co-convenors and the Facilitator were to make increased efforts to consult with key states in the region and planned to organize another multilateral meeting, as an Arab Ministerial gathering was scheduled for 7–8 September. This was to be followed at the end of September by the IAEA General Conference, where the Arab Group might once again propose the resolution on “Israeli nuclear capabilities”.

On 29 August, Laajava wrote a letter to LAS Secretary-General Elaraby to propose a further round of consultations on 15–16 September, hoping that this round would narrow the differences regarding arrangements for the conference.¹⁷ Al Assad replied to the letter by email on 15 October, on behalf of the SOC, which had

¹⁶ “Israel submits a non-paper on regional dialogue in the Middle East at 2015 NPT RevCon,” 20 April 2015, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010/israel-submits-nonpaper-regional-dialogue-middle-east-2015-npt-revcon?timeline=23>.

¹⁷ “Facilitator’s letter to Arab ministers regarding future consultations”, 29 August 2014, <https://www.unidir.org/node/6095>.

concluded its work on 14 October.¹⁸ The reply was harshly critical, asking what had happened to the rolling texts with the three positions based on the discussions and outcomes of the previous meetings (that Laajava had described as “positive”). Among other things, it expressed dissatisfaction that the invitation (to the September meeting) had been issued through an informal email and requested that any further communication be via formal letters addressed to the Chair of the SOC through official channels. He also wished to remind the Facilitator of the criteria they had requested many times for a successful preparatory process such as that the conference be organized under United Nations sponsorship.

The response by Laajava, dated 20 October 2014 and prepared in consultation with the co-conveners, pushed back on the points raised by the Senior Officials.¹⁹ It noted that all discussions, papers and outcomes of previous meetings remained valid, and there had to be openness about melding them into a practical agenda that would allow the conference to take place as soon as possible. To this end, he proposed to return to the tested format of multilateral consultations, with another meeting to take place on 2–3 November in Geneva.

More exchanges followed between Laajava and the LAS. The LAS sent a new representative to the last meeting, which took place in Geneva 2-3 November 2014 who was not as senior or familiar with the process as Al Assad. It was clear to me that the LAS had lost faith in the process. With the NPT Review Conference coming up in six months, the multilateral consultations to prepare the conference had come to an end: no more meetings were held, despite several attempts by Laajava to propose dates. The “Glion multilateral consultations” were over.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Looking back, what were the lessons learned from this process? These are my thoughts, in no particular order:

1. The appointment of the Facilitator was made very late – from May 2010 to October 2011 – 18 months after the 2010 NPT Review Conference. The first meeting of the Facilitator and the co-conveners took place only one year before the stipulated date of holding the conference. Considering the political

consultations and arrangements that were necessary for setting up the conference, there was simply not enough time to realistically hold it in 2012.

2. The process for appointment of the Facilitator seems to have been handed to the UN, rather than being assumed by the NPT depositories, namely the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States. To be appointed, the Facilitator and host country had to fulfil many criteria – to have the trust of those three states, to be acceptable to the Arab states and Israel, and to be willing to assume the cost of holding the conference.
3. While the appointment process was handled by my predecessor, in my view there did not appear to be a clear outline of the responsibilities of the function or the process that would be followed. It would be standard practice to discuss the implications of assuming the function prior to the appointment, yet as the narrative here relates, the apparently rather vague agreement on the roles of and the division of labour between the Facilitator and the co-conveners led to misunderstandings and some tension later.
4. The proposed timeline for the conference (2012) was always a mystery to me. The US electoral calendar is well-known, and the presidential elections in November that year – and the traditionally strong US support to Israel – were likely to impact on the process but were not accounted for when the date was set.
5. It would seem standard practice to discuss a strategy prior to embarking on the process. How to proceed, whom to engage and on what timeline; these issues were often discussed in a piecemeal and reactive fashion. The Facilitator organized the meetings and chaired them according to the wishes of the co-conveners, but seemed reluctant to take initiatives.
6. While Israel is not a party to the NPT and hence had no say in the decision of the 2010 NPT Review Conference to hold the conference, it had been assumed that the United States would “deliver” Israel to the table. Israel did participate at a senior level, but it was difficult to cast aside the impression from the Arab states at the Glion consultations that Israel was “protected” by the United States. Some also

¹⁸ “LAS email to the Facilitator regarding progress on the consultations”, 15 October 2014, <https://unidir.org/node/6096>.

¹⁹ “Facilitator’s letter regarding the format of future consultations”, 20 October 2014, <https://unidir.org/node/6098>.

held the view that the Facilitator hewed more closely to the United States, while the Russian Federation and the United Nations were perceived to be more aligned in their views and the Arab position.

7. In hindsight, we might have given more consideration to the proposal by the senior Arab delegates to organize a conference at political/technical directors' level in December in Helsinki, "to start the process". It was unclear at the time whether this was explored with all co-conveners, but it was never discussed in our VTCs.
8. The importance of appointing the right people and keeping them in post throughout the entire negotiations was evident. For example, the LAS interlocutor, Ambassador Wael Al Assad, was a positive factor in the meetings. His seniority and authority held the Arab states together and led to them mostly speaking with one voice, and his absence was acutely felt in the last phase. Similarly, the reassignment of the British convener, Sarah MacIntosh, mid-term raised difficulty. She was replaced by a diplomatic colleague, Philip Hall, who was new to the topic. It is always desirable to continue with the same team, although her replacement immediately engaged with the issues.
9. Another difficulty was logistics. The co-conveners and the Facilitator were in different locations and time zones and our consultations were largely held via videoconferences, which in my view made them less productive. Also, each of us was a senior government official with myriad high-level responsibilities. While we tried to give the conference process priority, it was a struggle at times to allocate time for meetings and travel. Even though I know that the Facilitator travelled extensively, I believe that the co-conveners should have travelled more to the region to give heft and support to our joint efforts.
10. Another aspect that was not foreseen was the active political calendar in the region. Just to mention a few events that delayed the consultations: Israel held one round of elections during this time and Egypt held two; Iran was fully engaged in the negotiations on the JCPOA; Ramadan was a factor to be considered, as was the NPT preparatory meetings schedule. The co-conveners' calendar was also tied to the meetings of the LAS SOC, which made the finding of dates for the multilateral consultations a real challenge.



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