

THE CONSULTATIONS IN GLION AND GENEVA:

A VIEW FROM THE NEGOTIATING TABLE

Personal Recollections and Reflections of the Informal Consultations
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.

ISRAEL'S APPROACH TO ARMS CONTROL

Before describing the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva, it is important to recall the policy context that preceded them and had an impact on the Israeli position during the talks. The consultations began in late 2011 and culminated in five sessions between October 2013 and June 2014 that were not renewed thereafter, notwithstanding Israel's willingness to do so.

The only previous consultations on these issues between Israel and Arab countries were the multilateral Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) talks that took place pursuant to the Madrid Peace Conference in the early 1990s. Those talks had also been discontinued by the Arab states.

Israel's approach to arms control developed over the years, particularly during the 1980s, with a clear emphasis on the need for

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direct negotiations between the parties in the region themselves, as opposed to international conferences or treaties such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The latter would have very little regional relevance given the absence of full diplomatic relations between the parties in the region and Israel, the non-recognition of Israel by many Arab states and the uninspiring record of compliance in the Middle East with arms control treaties (by Iraq, Libya, the Syrian Arab Republic, and the Islamic Republic of Iran).

Past experience taught Israel that it has no guarantee that such treaties would be implemented in a region rife with tensions and conflicts and no guarantee that indirect and international instruments in the realm of arms control would be respected particularly vis-à-vis Israel. There had been reports of chemical weapon use in the region during the civil war in Yemen in the 1960s, Saddam Hussein used chemical weapon against the Kurds in Halabja and against Iran in the late 1980s, and also Syria used chemical weapons in recent years against its own people. In addition, Syria (as well other Arabs states) when joining the NPT in 1969 made a formal reservation that its “acceptance . . . and ratification of the treaty does not in any way imply recognition of Israel nor does it entail entering into relations with it provided for by its provisions”.¹

In the early 1990s the primarily regional approach of Israel evolved in the context of three developments. These would have an impact on its policy regarding the potential role of international arms control and non-proliferation treaties and other non-regional measures such as international export control regimes (the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Australia Group and the Wassenaar Arrangement).

The first was the ACRS talks as part of the Madrid Peace Process. For the first time, these talks placed Israel and many Arab states in a regional forum to develop and agree by consensus on a broad-based regional security agenda dealing initially with confidence- and security-building measures, maritime cooperation and the establishment of communication networks and regional centres. Egypt’s insistence that Israel acceded to the NPT remained a strong bone of contention during the talks. The ACRS talks necessitated intense internal preparation with respect to how Israel would present its vision of regional security in all its aspects, and also bilateral

consultations with the United States (US) Administration regarding the Israeli vision. While the ACRS talks did not produce any enduring agreement between Israel and its Arab neighbours, they did in fact bring closer the US and Israeli thinking on these issues.

The second reason, not unconnected to the first, was the arms control approach adopted by the US Administration of President Bill Clinton. This emphasized not only the role of international treaties but also the need for tailor-made regional strategies. This became a distinct element in the US thinking. For its part, Israel began to consider the role of international treaties or export control regimes where possible, notwithstanding the difficulty of regional implementation. This had added significance given the exceptional relationship of trust between President Clinton and the Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin after the signing of agreements between Israel and the Palestinians and the Peace Treaty with Jordan. The US–Israeli partnership had reached an unprecedented level of intimacy and a high degree of mutual trust. One of the mutual understandings was that neither side would surprise the other with respect to its key national security interests.

The third reason related to the decision adopted by the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva to broadening its membership, including accepting Israel as a full member. In that context, Israel was involved from day one in the negotiations on the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), which it subsequently signed when opened for signature in 1996, and it also joined the ongoing negotiations on the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which it signed in January 1993. The decisions to sign the treaties were considered in depth by the Israeli Government and could be considered a measured evolution in its thinking regarding the role of international treaties. Israel, nonetheless, continued to stress the essential need for direct consultations between the parties in the region for any arms control or regional security measures contemplated, as it did for any bilateral peace initiatives.

THE ORIGINS OF THE INFORMAL CONSULTATIONS IN GLION AND GENEVA

The immediate reason that led to the consultations in Glion and Geneva, however, was to be found in the final document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference and the

¹ Syrian Arab Republic, Reservation to the Ratification of Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) (in Russian), 24 September 1969, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/unoda-web/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/The-Treaty-on-the-Non-Proliferation-of-Nuclear-Weapons-Syria.pdf>

call to convene an international conference by 2012 to establish a zone free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the Middle East.² This was also accompanied by a specific call for Israel to join the NPT, while the final document itself did not even mention one of the treaty's major non-compliant states, Iran.

It goes without saying that the language in the NPT document was seen with great concern in Jerusalem, not only as it singled out Israel but also because there was once again an attempt to impose a framework that would have an impact on Israel's national security without any attempt to consult it. In addition, the concern was compounded by the fact that the US Administration of President Barack Obama had not blocked this language or prevented its adoption. Israel responded harshly, announcing that it would not participate in the conference. "It singles out Israel, the Middle East's only true democracy and the only country threatened with annihilation", said a press statement by the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.³

It was immediately after the Review Conference in May 2010 that I was asked by the Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, to head the Strategic Affairs Division in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) once again. This position is the highest-ranking official in the MFA dealing with arms control, non-proliferation, counter-terrorism, defence exports and regional security. The issue of the "2012 Conference" would be prominent on our agenda for the next five years in parallel with Iran's nuclear efforts and Syria's use of chemical weapons in the civil war. While the issues were not directly linked, Iran and Syria were constant reminders of how seemingly remote and complicated any "2012 Conference" would be.

ISRAEL'S DILEMMA WHETHER TO JOIN THE CONSULTATIONS

Interestingly, the relevant Israeli Government bodies devoted significant time to discussing the implications of

the 2010 NPT document and particularly the US position in that respect. Suffice it to say that our concerns were fully shared in Washington at the most senior political and professional levels. Every effort was made to restore previous levels of trust with the relatively new US Administration, which had adopted an ambitious multilateral agenda that also had an impact on arms control, as demonstrated in the President Obama's Prague Speech in April 2009.⁴

The key problem for Israel was that it had to contend with a predetermined mandate for the conference contained in the final document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, which put Israel in the position of either rejecting it outright (which was admittedly quite tempting) or agreeing to a mandate that clearly contradicted our declared policy. At that time, we directed most of our efforts towards Washington and the two other designated co-conveners of the "2012 Conference", namely the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation, which were also charged with appointing a Facilitator to consult with the states of the region in preparation for the conference.

In October 2011, the United Nations Secretary-General announced that Jaakko Laajava, the Under-Secretary of State in Finland's MFA, had been appointed as the Facilitator for the United Nations-sponsored "2012 Conference" and that it would be held in Helsinki. The announcement was made in a joint press statement issued by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon along with the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States – the co-sponsors of a 1995 resolution proposing a Middle East zone free of WMD, nuclear, chemical and biological, and their delivery systems in consultation with states of the region.⁵

Israel's dilemma became more acute when we received the first request from Laajava to visit Israel and engage in consultations with the MFA with respect to his mandate. Our prior internal discussion centred around the

² 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, "Final document", vol. I, NPT/CONF.2010/50 (Vol. I), New York, 18 June 2010, [https://undocs.org/en/NPT/CONF.2010/50\(Vol.I\)](https://undocs.org/en/NPT/CONF.2010/50(Vol.I)).

³ Israeli Prime Minister's Office, "Statement by the Government of Israel on the Middle East Resolution passed at the NPT Review Conference," 29 May 2010, <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/spokemes29052010>.

⁴ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by President Barak Obama in Prague as delivered", 5 April 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>.

⁵ United Nations, "Finland Appointed as Host Government, Facilitator for 2012 Conference on Middle East as Zone Free of Nuclear, All Mass-Destruction Weapons", Press Release, SG/2180-DC/3307, 14 October 2011, <https://undir.org/node/5658>.

question of how we could receive Laajava without it implying that we agreed with his appointment as Facilitator for an NPT Conference based on a mandate we had not agreed to, or a treaty we had not acceded to. After much discussion, we decided that we would receive Laajava in his capacity as a Deputy Foreign Minister of Finland and have bilateral consultations as we had with several European countries. In the course of the meeting, we would explain, as appropriate, our overall policy on arms control and regional security and clearly prevent any implication of having accepted the NPT mandate.

As we prepared for the meeting with Laajava, we decided that our emphasis would be on the need for Israel to have direct face-to-face consultations with our Arab neighbours and not agree to a United Nations/NPT-sponsored conference, which could be used as a format for the other side to avoid any recognition of Israel. In addition, we would explain our position regarding the NPT and state that any discussion on regional security and arms control would have to cover the entire spectrum of military capabilities and threats, including not only other WMD, but also conventional weapons, missiles, terrorism, non-state actors, etc. Our final emphasis would be that, in all such regional discussions, all decisions – whether procedural or substantive – would have to be reached through consensus by all the parties. Consensus was one of the essential guiding principles of the ACRS process in the early 1990s and should remain the key factor of any discussion leading to any “2012 Conference” as well as at the conference itself.

These points were meant to convey to Laajava that Israel was open to the idea of enhancing regional security and stability, but it would have to be done taking into full consideration Israel’s conception of its national and regional security and not on the basis of a mandate that it had no part in formulating. In the internal debate, another question raised was whether Israel should seek guarantees regarding these principles in consideration for its willingness to talk to Laajava. Finally, it was decided at the most senior level that establishment of the rule of consensus as a basis for any process would be the ultimate guarantee ensuring respect for our principles.

Laajava subsequently arrived in Jerusalem towards the end of 2011 for consultations on the understanding that they did not imply agreement to his mandate. We extended to Deputy Minister Laajava all the appropriate diplomatic courtesies in the meeting in the MFA in Jerusalem with the delegation, which I headed. Laajava immediately made the impression that he was a highly

experienced interlocutor who had been careful to anticipate as much as possible the sensitivities on our side. We began the discussion by providing an overall threat assessment of the challenges that Israel faced in the region. Laajava, in turn, guided us through the mandate he had been charged with and how he would seek to implement it. We then proceeded to detail our reaction to the proposed mandate and the reasons that we could not accept the terms set out in the 2010 NPT Review Conference final document.

Laajava gave the clear impression that he would take into account our sensitivities where possible, but he did stress that the mandate he received from the Secretary-General and the co-sponsors was in fact his “bible”. This was met with the immediate reaction that in Israel we have a very different and older “bible” that was written many generations ago from which we have drawn our inspiration over the years. The message was clear.

Though the meeting did not bridge the considerable gaps between the respective positions, I think it would be fair to say that a certain middle ground was identified in which to continue the discussion thereafter. The dialogue had not reached a diplomatic dead end, which in the circumstances was probably the best result one could expect. Subsequently, I personally remained in frequent contact with Laajava through telephone conversations, emails, formal letters and meetings in different capitals or in various international conferences.

Indeed, another important factor that emerged from this first meeting was the excellent personal relationship that was established between Laajava and myself. While we both held distinct and sometimes contradictory positions, the key elements of trust, credibility and transparency were established at an early stage. Laajava was a central and hands-on figure throughout all of the consultations. Similarly, I attended all of the meetings at the various places we had the opportunity to meet, along with my highly talented colleague Noam Ophir, the representative of the Israel Atomic Energy Commission. Laajava was aware that I frequently consulted with the most senior political level in Israel regarding the issues he raised and that the answers he received from us represented the well-considered position of Israel, and not merely my own personal beliefs as to what might be agreeable to us.

It should also be stressed that we made every effort during our discussions not to answer Laajava with a flat negative answer, but rather to state what we could agree to. For example, while we could not accept a conference

based on an NPT mandate and under United Nations auspices, we were agreeable to direct face-to-face consultations with our Arab neighbours. Additionally, while we felt that the NPT mandate did not embrace the entire spectrum of threats and weapon systems in the region, we were willing to discuss all the elements of regional security that plague and are prevalent in the Middle East. We never made an offer to Laajava that we would not be able to stand by. Another key element to counter the automatic majority Arab states have in any diplomatic discussion with Israel was to insist that all decisions be reached by consensus.

In essence, there was a consistency in our dialogue with Laajava and a clear sense on his part that he was speaking to an Israeli delegation that was able to provide authoritative and constructive responses. I would venture to say that probably none of the other regional participants in the consultations consulted directly with their most senior political level on a routine basis on this issue. I led the talks during the initial contacts with the Facilitator and throughout the entire process, and this consistency of representation was an important factor in preventing any misunderstanding in the course of the consultations.

The conversations that continued between Laajava and primarily the distinguished Representative of the League of Arab States (LAS), Ambassador Wael Al Assad, some Arab delegations and myself continued into 2012. Every effort was made to find some middle ground that could enable some progress in the talks and lead to a broader meeting. During this time, we made ourselves available for meetings and discussions, but it became increasingly clear that the possibility of having any sort of conference during 2012 was, to say the least, remote. Laajava continued talks and meetings with the parties in the summer of 2012 that may have held some prospect of progress but nothing substantive emerged.

In that year, we also held parallel intensive discussions with our US counterparts because, it should be recalled, the 2010 NPT Review Conference had left a measure of apprehension on the bilateral relationship that I believe both the United States and Israel were eager to address and overcome. In that sense, these potential talks were not only about improving Israeli–Arab relations but – as was the case with the ACRS talks 20 years earlier – were also about harmonizing Israeli and US positions on key questions of regional security.

By this time, our position had become more comfortable with the discussions with Laajava and also in reaching understandings with the United States that patched over any previous lapses in coordination between us. Indeed, the US statement in November 2012 regarding the postponement of the conference was an important signal for Israel that our considerations were being taken into account, particularly when it declared that “states in the region have not reached agreement on acceptable conditions for a conference. . . . These differences can only be bridged through direct engagement and agreement among the states in the region”.⁶ Furthermore, it stated that “outside states cannot impose a process on the region” and that “the mandate for a [Middle East WMD-free zone] must come from the region itself”. These words addressed our core concerns and I believe also reflected an emerging implicit acceptance among the outside players in this process that the mandate had to be fashioned by the states in the region directly, and that consensus among those states would be the decisive factor for holding any conference.

THE INFORMAL CONSULTATIONS

As we entered 2013, Israel remained engaged with all the relevant players, including the Facilitator and our Russian, US and British counterparts. It also continued to follow closely parallel developments in the region, including the civil war in Syria and the deep concern regarding the regime’s use and stockpiles of chemical weapons and their multiple means of delivery. This was literally in our backyard and by any standard was considered a very clear and present danger to Israel’s security, particularly the prospect of any part of the 1,300 tons of chemical weapons falling into the hands of the Islamic State group (ISIS) or other non-state actors. In addition, the negotiations with Iran continued and, while the nuclear issue was the focus of these contacts, there were many other nefarious activities that Iran was pursuing in Syria and other parts of the region. We kept a firm eye on these dangers and continued the discussions with Laajava in good faith while also taking into account that our security relations on the ground with Egypt and Jordan remained firm and steady and that our discreet and mostly covert discussions were continuing with certain Gulf states.

Vienna, August 2013

In August 2013, we received a letter from Laajava that proposed a mid-month meeting in Vienna to prepare for

⁶ U.S. Department of State, “2012 Conference on a Middle East Zone Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction (MEWMDFZ)”, Press Statement by Victoria Nuland, Washington, DC, 23 November 2012, <https://unidir.org/node/5693>.

consultations that were to be held in the beginning of September in Geneva.⁷ He outlined his intentions with respect to the consultations in this letter.

We attended the meeting in Vienna along with colleagues from the United States, the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation, the co-sponsors of the NPT, and the High Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs. To the best of my recollection, there was no general meeting of all the participants together. The LAS was still unwilling to have such a meeting, which would imply direct contacts with Israel, and to be fair the Israeli delegation preferred not to meet with the Facilitator and the NPT co-sponsors in one room, lest this imply some sort of recognition of the NPT mandate. Incidentally, there was one meeting with Laajava and the US and Russian representatives, which the British representative could not attend, so that solved our problem. In truth, we met also with our Arab colleagues, informally, but not together with Laajava, primarily because of their reluctance to meet together.

While the Vienna meeting did not produce any particular breakthrough, it did inch things closer to having some sort of broader consultations. On 3 September we communicated to Laajava our positive approach to conducting informal multilateral consultations in Geneva, just as we had previously done so orally in February of that year and on other occasions. We underlined our commitment to having “consultations directly with our Arab neighbours based on the principle of consensus”.⁸ We also related to other points Laajava made in his letter regarding the need to agree to modalities for a conference in Helsinki. I believe this was the first clear-cut written acceptance of his proposals by any party from the region.

Ultimately, the consultations did not convene in Geneva in September, but rather on 21 October in Glion. We actually were happier to have the consultations in Glion rather than Geneva in order to minimize a connection between the United Nations and the meetings, which were to be informal and without flags and other national emblems. All the delegations were in the classic

Hotel Victoria overlooking Lake Geneva, which provided a pleasant and somewhat secluded setting for the first such consultations between Israel and the Arab countries since the ACRS talks in the early 1990s.

The first informal consultation (Glion, 21 October 2013)

We entered the main meeting room, which was arranged in a large square in order to accommodate all the delegations. There were no formal place assignments and each delegation chose where to sit. We sat behind plain nameplates without any flags. The meeting was held over two days, with mostly plenary meetings and other side meetings between the Facilitator, the three co-conveners, the United Nations representative and the parties themselves in different variations. After Laajava opened the meetings, the discussion continued with most of the parties from the region stating their national positions regarding the issue at hand. While the Arab countries were careful to maintain a broad measure of agreement in their statements, the LAS Representative seemed to have a central role in presenting the Arab position, which generally did not deviate from the demand to implement the NPT mandate as written in the final document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

We naturally explained at length our position regarding the possibility of having a conference in Helsinki. We stressed the need to formulate all the necessary modalities of such an event through an agreement by the parties from the region and the need to also discuss all the elements of regional security that threaten and undermine stability in the Middle East. We stated clearly that we could not agree to the NPT mandate as we had not been party to its formulation, but also noted that even the NPT mandate envisaged a zone to be “on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at by the States of the region”.⁹ The Israeli position was clearly contrary to Arab thinking. At times, we were helped from unexpected quarters when, for example, the Russian delegate stated that the Arab states could not expect Israel to be bound by an NPT mandate in view of the fact that Israel had not acceded to that treaty.

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, “Facilitator’s letter to the Israeli MFA regarding preparations” for the informal consultations on holding the postponed Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and All Other Weapons of Mass Destruction”, 3 August 2013, <https://undir.org/node/5703>.

⁸ Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Letter the Israeli MFA to the Facilitator regarding the upcoming informal consultations”, 3 September 2013, <https://undir.org/node/5704>.

⁹ 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, “Final document”, vol. I, NPT/CONF.2010/50 (Vol. I), New York, 18 June 2010, [https://undocs.org/en/NPT/CONF.2010/50\(Vol.I\)](https://undocs.org/en/NPT/CONF.2010/50(Vol.I)), p. 30, para. 7(a).

One thing that struck me was that the tone of the discussion was actually quite civil and cordial and did not bear the stamp of a hostile United Nations-type debate, with the Arab countries confronting Israel. This tone of debate persisted throughout most of the five consultations we had in Glion and Geneva. A junior representative from the local Iranian mission made one brief statement, but that did not change the atmosphere of the talks; Iran was present only at the first meeting. I would in fact say that, while the talks were at times frustrating given the serious gap between the two sides, I generally never felt isolated, pressured or outnumbered by the Arabs delegations present.

Some aspects of Israel's position in the first meeting require greater amplification. In general, Israel has unfortunately known multiple wars, military clashes and terrorist attacks in its relatively short history. These wars and terrorist attacks have claimed many Israeli lives, both soldiers and civilians, and have reflected the widest spectrum of violence, including conventional wars with neighbouring states, suicide bombers, lone-wolf attacks, ballistic missile barrages, and short-range mortar and rockets salvos from non-state actors. While Israel is very conscious of threats from WMD – such as chemical weapons that have been used in the region even in recent years or indeed Iran's efforts to be a nuclear weapon threshold state – attacks against us have employed by and large conventional weapons. Therefore, in terms of our national security and threat perception, discussing arms control only in relation to WMD and "their delivery systems" will not ensure our security or ensure regional stability. We never felt that conventional weapons should be excluded from such arrangements given the fact that they can clearly be tools of mass destruction or even genocide.

In addition, addressing the use and proliferation of missiles only through the terms of WMD and "their delivery systems" excludes the wholesale use of conventional missiles and rockets by states and non-state actors against civilian populations in neighbouring countries, as remains the case of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in Gaza against Israeli cities. I will never forget that, in one of my many telephone conversations with Laajava, I had to curtly discontinue the call as soon as the sirens were sounded in the face of a missile attack on Jerusalem from Gaza. That was a very stark demonstration of the reality of our national security.

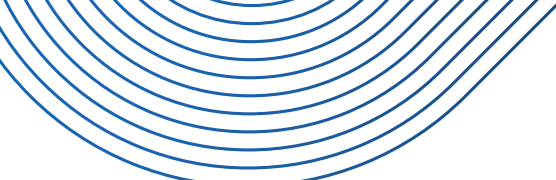
This was the primary reason we suggested in the Glion meetings that we should focus on "regional security" as a holistic concept and discuss how any arms control arrangement could address all threats that cause instability and insecurity, especially those that have been directed towards Israel over the years. The Arab delegations became somewhat agitated by our suggestion that the title of the "2012 Conference" should include reference to building regional security through trust- and confidence-building measures. The Arab participants became very adamant in their opposition to our ideas given that they were not willing to put on the table elements of their overall/combined military posture that Israel was acutely concerned about. Addressing this very complex issue only through the ambit of the NPT was a way for the Arab countries to focus on alienating and isolating Israel. We should not forget that, during this time, Israel faced hostile resolutions in the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly and the General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on this very subject.¹⁰

The second and third informal consultations (Glion, 25 November 2013 and 4 February 2014)

We proceeded to the second round of discussions in Glion in November 2013. The discussions did not bridge the differences that had become evident in the first meeting. The third round, in February 2014, was the meeting in which the talks became sharper and more tense. I had arrived in Glion on the day immediately after a family member had died, and did so out of a sense of duty since the discussions could not proceed otherwise. During this well-attended session, we submitted a paper with some informal ideas that we had already mentioned, surprising the Arab Group and even the co-conveners, who were clearly not averse to some of them. A proposal was then made that we should sit in a smaller group to try and find some middle ground between us and the Arab position. We agreed and waited in a room to begin the discussion, but the only Arab colleague in the room insisted that the LAS Representative be present. When he did not appear, the Arab colleague simply left. It was quite embarrassing for us and the Russian co-conveners that we could not even have one practical and straightforward discussion.

It became clear then which side blocked any attempt at progress in the talks, and we decided to insist on a

¹⁰ UN General Assembly Resolution 68/27 on the establishment of a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the region on the Middle East", 9 December 2013, <https://undir.org/node/5788>, and International Atomic Energy Agency, "Israeli nuclear capabilities", GOV/2013/33-GC(57)/10, 16 August 2013, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc57-10_en.pdf.



meeting with Laajava and the co-conveners to express in no uncertain terms our frustration with the rigid Arab position on the mandate. I believe this was an important point in the talks at which it became clear to all that Israel had not been the obstacle to holding a conference in Helsinki. It was also evident that the Arab intransigence towards Israel in the General Assembly and the IAEA was also a prevailing factor in Glion. While this was always very clear to us, there was still a reluctance among the participants in the consultations from outside the region to attribute the lack of progress to the Arab side.

The fourth and fifth informal consultations (Geneva, 14 May 2014 and 24 June 2014)

Israel thereafter continued to insist on avoiding a United Nations-type forum based on a predetermined mandate that did not imply direct contacts or recognition of Israel as a party to regional security arrangements. When we first arrived at the fourth round of these consultations, in May 2014 in Geneva, I saw immediately as we entered the meeting venue a United Nations flag at the entrance as well as several United Nations personnel in uniform. All the Arab delegations were already in the hall waiting to begin the discussions. The clear impression that this was now a meeting under United Nations auspices was unacceptable, and I informed the Facilitator that the Israeli delegation would not enter the hall unless the United Nations flag and the guards were removed. It was embarrassing because this had been a clear condition that, until now, had been respected fully in the negotiations. This was particularly disturbing as the Arab delegations had also not shown any willingness in Glion to hold discussions in smaller direct talks with the Israelis outside the plenary. The flag and the guards were removed, and the discussions of the fourth meeting began. I felt uncomfortable insisting on this, but until now I had been impressed by how the sensitivities had been respected and was disturbed by this attempted change and what it symbolized.

Ultimately, the discussions throughout the five rounds of consultations witnessed some positive and some bleaker moments. In the final analysis, we did not bridge the critical gap between, on the one hand, the Arab demand to implement the mandate of the 2010 NPT Review Conference without any change and, on the other, the Israeli formula that there could be a conference in Helsinki between the countries of the Middle East on the basis of an agreed agenda covering all aspects of regional security and based on consensus. In the course of the discussions, we submitted to the Facilitator a draft agenda and agreed to negotiate and conclude before the conference a joint declaration or final statement.

By the fifth meeting, in June 2014 in Geneva, it became clear that the Arab delegations would not move from their insistence. This was despite the Facilitator making another offer of compromise: to meet in a smaller forum to agree on the way forward. Israel agreed to this and also to participate in a sixth meeting, but this never came about after the LAS Representative stated clearly in the fifth meeting that the Arab Group had not changed its position; in effect, this ended any chance of further discussion.

There were no further significant developments or changes in the parties' respective positions until the approaching NPT Review Conference in 2015 in New York, at which Israel participated as an observer for the first time in 20 years. We felt it important to participate notwithstanding our policy with respect to the NPT. We even circulated a paper outlining our position during the talks in Glion and Geneva (reproduced below in an appendix) in order to ensure that our narrative of how the talks conducted by the Facilitator would be incorporated in the collective record of the United Nations.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

The period during which I dealt with the talks in Glion and Geneva was a unique and fascinating experience for me personally and professionally. It is not often in diplomacy that one accompanies a sensitive and complicated process from start to finish and is able to have a sense of accomplishing one's goals. Success, however, can be measured in different ways and not just by whether or not we were able to convene a conference.

In retrospect, this was not the highest priority for either side. From the Israeli perspective, we did not propose a conference in the first place and would not agree to a mandate that did not take into account Israel's national security interests or actual regional realities. Initially, I believe that the Arab side never thought that Israel would be willing to engage with the Arab countries on the basis of the NPT mandate that they had formulated. Had Israel not engaged, they would have had an easy diplomatic "win" because of Israel's anticipated refusal and its apparent intransigence. Once Israel did engage and proposed reasonable terms (i.e., direct talks, regional security and consensus), this presented a more difficult choice for the Arab side between adamantly opposing any change to the NPT mandate or agreeing to Israel's terms, which were actually seen as being constructive by the external participants in the process. In the final analysis, the Arab side chose the former, even at the price of not having any conference.

On a more positive note, it was not often that an Israeli delegation has sat in the same room with 17 Arab delegations and engaged with them in a reasonable and businesslike manner without feeling pressured or outnumbered. I may have been overly optimistic, but I did feel that these meetings could indicate the beginning of a new regional dynamic given the ongoing efforts in parallel to constrain Iranian nuclear activities and Syrian chemical weapons. These were just two areas in which Israeli and Arab interests converged and, as mentioned above, we had at the time ongoing discreet bilateral contacts with some Gulf countries and, of course, with Egypt and Jordan. In that sense, the talks in Glion could have become another dimension of a broader and more positive regional reality that in fact already existed and, ultimately, led to the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020.

My cardinal conclusion was that Israel's willingness to engage with the Facilitator, participate in the Glion and Geneva talks, make reasonable proposals, and be willing to stand by them was the correct way to proceed, even though there was a great deal of apprehension regarding the Arab side's motivations and intentions. There was a measure of regret on our side that the Arab position was presented in such an uncompromising way and that, despite genuine attempts to find some middle ground, none appeared to exist. To a great extent this justified our conviction that it would always be easier to engage with our Arab neighbours bilaterally and directly rather than in a broader United Nations format. It would be my hope that the Arab side will also conclude that no regional improvement in security relations with Israel can be achieved through imposition instead of direct, face-to-face dialogue.

Appendix

* The following is the paper (NPT/CONF.2015/36) submitted by Israel to the 2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, New York, on 30 April 2015, <https://unidir.org/node/5671>.



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Towards a regional dialogue in the Middle East: an Israeli perspective

Submission by Israel

1. Israel's long-held vision of a more secure and peaceful Middle East requires that all regional States engage in a process of direct and sustained dialogue to address the broad range of regional security challenges in the Middle East. Such a dialogue, based on the widely accepted principle of consensus, can only emanate from within the region and address in an inclusive manner the threat perceptions of all regional parties with a view to enhancing and improving their security. Direct contact, combined with trust and confidence-building, is an essential basis for the creation of a new security paradigm in a region that is increasingly fraught with wars, conflicts, disintegration of national territories and human suffering.

2. Accordingly, Israel agreed in 2011 to the request of the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Security Policy of Finland, Jaakko Laajava, to engage in consultations to advance a regional dialogue. Subsequently, Israel was the first country in the region to respond positively to Mr. Laajava's proposal in February 2013 to participate in multilateral consultations in Switzerland to discuss the arrangements and conditions necessary for convening a conference on establishing the Middle East as a zone free of all weapons of mass destruction and means of delivery. It took the Arab Group an additional eight months to agree to participate in the consultations.

3. Between October 2013 and June 2014, five rounds of multilateral consultations were held in Switzerland between Israel and several of its Arab neighbours. The central purpose of the meetings was to seek regional consensus on all the essential aspects of a conference in Helsinki, including the agenda, the concluding document and the necessary modalities. The consultations were conducted in a business-like manner and were the first direct engagement between Israel and its neighbours on this issue in more than 20 years, since the arms control and regional security process in the 1990s.

4. While not all regional States attended, the consultations presented an important opportunity for direct regional engagement. Indeed, Israel's participation at a senior and authoritative level in all the five meetings attested to the importance that Israel ascribed to the need to redefine a new regional security paradigm for the Middle East. During the consultations, Israel submitted, including in writing, some creative ideas and formulations that could advance consensus, as well as



understandings and trust, between the regional parties. Indeed, Israel stated unequivocally, also in public, that, if agreement were reached on the agenda, the concluding document and terms of reference of a conference in Helsinki, the regional States could proceed to set a date for such an event.

5. In June 2014, the Arab representatives at the fifth round of consultations in Geneva felt that they required new instructions and in effect discontinued the talks. Since June 2014, Mr. Laajava has been attempting to convene a sixth round of consultations in Geneva. Israel responded positively on 20 October 2014 and 7 January 2015 to formal invitations in that regard. Despite Israel's positive attitude towards continued engagement, the sixth round of consultations in Geneva was postponed several times and was not held, preventing necessary progress towards a consensual agreement on a conference in Helsinki.

6. Regrettably, in recent years the Arab countries have preferred to focus their efforts on promoting contentious resolutions in the International Atomic Energy Agency General Conference and the First Committee of the General Assembly. That negative approach has reinforced the lack of trust and confidence and prevented a meaningful dialogue between the States of the Middle East.

7. Ultimately, it is difficult to understand how any disarmament, arms control and regional security issues can be addressed without any direct dialogue between the regional States, as the Group of Arab States suggests. Such strident opposition to conducting a direct dialogue with Israel, coupled with the demand that a conference be convened by a deadline on the basis of terms of reference conceived by one side only, underlines and reinforces the mistrust and suspicion between the States in the region. If a serious regional effort has not emerged in the Middle East during the past five years it is not because of Israel.

8. It should be emphasized that notions of direct engagement and consensus are fundamental norms in international diplomacy and have been accepted in other regions. In that context, the Group of Seven recently declared that: "The regional parties must engage actively with each other in order to reach consensus on a date and an agenda for the Helsinki Conference as soon as possible. We emphasize that the Conference can only lead to a meaningful process if the interests of all participants are taken into account."

9. To promote any significant regional security architecture in the Middle East, it is imperative that the regional States do not adopt positions that prevent the other side from participating in what should be an inclusive regional process between all relevant stakeholders. Decisions that seek to circumvent and substitute direct engagement or the building of trust and agreement among regional parties will neither assist a regional process nor hasten a successful outcome.

10. A meaningful process will require:

(a) That regional States assume responsibility for the promotion of a direct regional dialogue, without external auspices that do not emanate from the region;

(b) That regional States address the broad range of security challenges facing the region;

(c) That all decisions be reached by consensus between the regional parties.

11. Israel, for its part, will continue to adopt a positive and constructive approach towards a meaningful regional discussion that could lead to a more peaceful and secure Middle East free from wars, conflicts and all weapons of mass destruction.