

Focus**Missed Opportunities to Rid the Middle East of WMD**

The UN, the Arab League, third PrepCom officials and civil society should all work proactively to convene the Middle East Conference before the end of 2013.

by [Mahmoud Karem](#)

In April 2013, Egypt withdrew from an important Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meeting of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) states parties in Geneva in protest of the lack of progress on convening the conference on ridding the Middle East of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). At the beginning of June, the Finnish facilitator, Ambassador Jaakko Laajava, visited Cairo, raising hopes that the damage could be repaired and progress made on this issue.

Regrettably, Laajava's meetings with the secretary-general of the League of Arab States, Dr. Nabil Elaraby, and other senior officials and experts were disappointing. As reported in the Arab media, the facilitator brought no fresh ideas and continued to offer unofficial consultations with no clear-cut date in 2013 for the conference. Instead, he threw the onus onto the Arabs — and Egypt in particular — to solve the problems, including Israel's refusal to participate in the planned conference in Helsinki.

A Conspiracy Theory about the Egyptian "Withdrawal"

It is important to understand the milieu surrounding the negotiating stage right now. A conspiracy theory is evolving — and alive and well in the ethos and minds of some. Let me illustrate. Some delegations in Geneva listening to the statement by Egypt last April spoke privately and publicly against use of the term "withdrawal" by the Egyptian delegation, since it uncomfortably echoed the Article X provision on withdrawal from the NPT, as evoked by North Korea when it renounced the treaty in 2003.

They appeared to accuse Egypt of threatening to withdraw from the treaty. On the contrary, Egypt had been very clear that its withdrawal was only from what was left of the PrepCom in Geneva. Indicating Egypt's *bona fide* commitment to NPT principles and provisions, as well as to the review process itself, Egypt's step was taken only after participating in the first week and delivering substantive statements on nuclear disarmament, regional issues and other important treaty issues under consideration. In

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addition, Egypt acted alone, ----- not to champion or influence an all-Arab withdrawal, even though many other Arab League members were equally dissatisfied with the failure to honor the 2012 conference commitment. Additionally, this withdrawal came toward the end of the consideration of the item on the Middle East, after the facilitator had given his grim summing up and after most other delegations had spoken on this issue.

The Russians Express Deep Concern

The full reasons were well explained in the statement by Egypt, including a clear reference to mounting frustrations over commitments made but never implemented. Those attempting to isolate Egypt for this diplomatic protest should not forget what Russia's representative said in the NPT meetings on April 29, 2013. As a principal co-convenor of the Helsinki conference (together with the United States, the United Kingdom, the United Nations secretary-general and the Finnish hosts), Russia expressed deep concern at the continuing uncertainty regarding the convening of the Middle East Conference, and called for a quick solution on the basis of the 2010 action plan, including the convening of the postponed conference in the second half of December 2013. The Russians put forward specific proposals on the modalities, rules of procedure and agenda to be elaborated by a consensus approach. Most notably, Russia disassociated itself from the decision and U.S. announcement to postpone the conference last year.

The next day, with Egypt's chair empty, the debate on the important issue of North Korea was suddenly brought forward, as it was announced that the debate and rest of the listed speakers on the Middle East would be delayed as efforts were being made to bring Egypt back into the hall. This suspension gave the ridiculous impression that the decision by Egypt was not being taken seriously, when in reality, the delegation was already booked on a 7 a.m. flight back to Cairo the next day. They had confirmed their withdrawal from the 2013 PrepCom, but out of courtesy for Ambassador Laajava, held a short meeting with him, explaining their reasons and wishing him well.

To add to the perception that Egypt's withdrawal should not be taken seriously, it was omitted from the initial draft of official report of the 2013 PrepCom. The delegation from Indonesia spoke in the absence of Egypt and set the record straight, arguing that what had transpired should be reflected fully and transparently in the PrepCom records. After several hours of discussions behind the scenes, a small note about Egypt's withdrawal was inserted through a chair's oral amendment to the PrepCom report.

A Carefully Thought-Out Diplomatic Protest

Misunderstandings, as well as reactions by some NPT representatives, including efforts to sideline or downplay the Egyptian withdrawal from the 2013 PrepCom, have left suspicions and anxieties on all sides. Yet this was not a random act, but a carefully thought-through diplomatic protest to highlight the seriousness with which Egypt and others take the postponement of the 2012 Middle East Conference. It followed an inter-

agency brainstorming process. To corroborate this point, a senior representative from the Ministry of Defense was a member of the delegation in Geneva.

The point now is to focus on what NPT states parties need to do to avoid even more serious problems occurring at the third PrepCom in 2014 and the Review Conference in 2015. In my view, unhelpful rhetoric and accusations need to stop. Solutions must be sought.

Ignoring or avoiding each other is not good diplomacy. We are all partners of the same regime, and the onus for constructing solutions is collectively shared. The U.S. delegation in Geneva was correct in saying that the responsibility to hold the conference does not fall solely on the conveners and the facilitator. The NPT is an indefinite treaty with wideranging security implications for us all and we should all work consonant with the commitments reached in 2010.

The Need to Reinvigorate the Process

Instead of once again rehashing old ideas that did not fly, such as informal consultations, what should follow is the convening of a meeting in Geneva this summer bringing the three co-conveners, the UN, the League of Arab States, the facilitator, and the chair of the third PrepCom (designated as Ambassador Enrique Roman-Morey of Peru), together with an agenda that clearly states their intention to convene the Middle East Conference before the end of this year. Such a step would reinvigorate the process, giving Laajava a clear mandate to move forward with a clear objective and a targeted timeframe.

Civil Society Has a Crucial Role

Civil society too has a crucial role to play. Before their next meeting in Jordan this fall, a track-two diplomacy delegation from the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs or the Arab NGO consortium on disarmament, comprised now of 19 reputable think tanks in the Arab world, should travel to the U.S. and engage with key parties to present fresh ideas on the modalities and agenda for the conference. As discussed during a sidebar meeting hosted by the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs and the Jordan-based Arab Institute for Security Studies (ACISIS), civil society could organize a “mockup conference” on the Middle East to serve as an operational reservoir of ideas for the conference itself.

The UN Must Be More Proactive

The UN must also become more proactive in helping to convene the conference. Since the 2010 NPT final document identified a crucial role for the UN secretary-general in Section IV Paragraph 7 a, b, c, d, the UN system has become part and parcel of the preparatory and background documentation process for the Helsinki conference, making specific requests to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), in addition to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and other relevant agencies. The office of the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) is most qualified today to assume this

important role on behalf of the region, relying on lessons learned from numerous Security Council and General Assembly resolutions on WMD in the Middle East, going back to 1974, as well as lessons from other regions.

Most importantly, diplomacy needs the personal involvement of leaders such as Dr. Nabil Elaraby, a renowned and experienced disarmament expert, as well as the secretary-general of the Arab League. Dr. Elaraby needs to initiate a high-level dialogue on these important issues with key governments and diplomats, particularly before the upcoming IAEA General Conference due to take place in Vienna. It is important for Dr. Elaraby to clearly convey to high-level colleagues, including the UN secretary-general and the U.S. secretary of state, why this issue has risen so high up on the agenda in Arab Summit meetings and why it is causing such dismay among Arab leaders, and to mobilize all possible approaches to find a constructive way forward.

Concerned by misrepresentations of Egypt's withdrawal from the recent NPT meeting in Geneva, the retired Egyptian ambassador prepared this explanation to put the record straight. It was initially published in openDemocracy (<http://www.opendemocracy.net/mahmoud-karem/missed-opportunities-to-rid-middle-east-of-wmd>).

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