

Jordan's Chairmanship of the Nuclear Security Contact Group *Sustaining Progress on Nuclear Security in the Context of CBRN Challenges*

PART I

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The Nuclear Security Contact Group (Contact Group or NSCG) is one of a number of tangible outcomes of the Nuclear Security Summits established for the purpose of sustaining the momentum garnered throughout the four high-level summits from 2010 to 2016. Jordan's year-long chairmanship of the Contact Group from 2017 to 2018 is a testament to the role that individual countries can play in strengthening their national nuclear security frameworks and promoting cooperation in related areas. This includes threats emanating from non-conventional or chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons/materials. Assuming the role of the Contact Group's chair is just one of the many measures the Kingdom of Jordan has taken to enhance scientific and technical cooperation with other countries, particularly in a regional context. Analyzing Jordan's role is at the center of Part I of this POLICY FORUM, while Part II, which will be published as POLICY FORUM No. 5, will deal with cooperation-related aspects, i.e. both obstacles and opportunities in this policy field. All references appear at the end of POLICY FORUM No. 5.

Background, Context, and Design of This Issue

The current state of nuclear security in the Middle East in many ways mirrors that at the global level, in the sense that it is incomplete, fragile, and facing ever-increasing and evolving threats. This becomes much more pronounced in the Middle East/Gulf, with both inter- and intra-state conflicts, deeply rooted historic rivalries and seemingly intractable tensions, and the presence of hybrid/non-state actors; they explicitly aim at acquiring and utilizing non-conventional/CBRN weapons or materials. However, compared to a decade ago, current global nuclear security is indisputably characterized by significant achievements at the national, regional, and international levels. In large part, this can be attributed to the high-level attention given to the subject as a result of the biennial Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) process from 2010 to 2016.

The primary objective of the Summits was to secure nuclear materials and strengthen the capacity of states and institutions to address and improve nuclear security. In this sense, one of the chief concerns was the potential risks that emanate from hybrid and non-state actors in the context of nuclear terrorism. It does not come as a surprise, however, that all the participating

states did not share this perception, owing largely to the fact that this was – and remains – a Western-dominated assessment of the issue.

These divergences in perception, however, did not deter the series of Summits from achieving a number of notable successes that include the recovery and elimination of over 1,500 kilograms of weapons-usable nuclear material; the national commitments of 53 countries to strengthen their nuclear security; and the establishment of Centres of Excellence (CoE) for nuclear security-related training and education by over a dozen countries (Cann/Davenport/Parker, March 2016). Despite these notable achievements, the global nuclear security framework remains a collection of various instruments, both formal and informal, that are disjointed and not unified in either scope, depth, or representation.

The Summit process, however, was never intended to provide an all-encompassing solution to the multifaceted issues related to nuclear weapons and the prospect of nuclear terrorism – far from it, in fact, with one of the most notable omissions being that it only tackled the security of *civil* nuclear material; this does not take into account over 80 percent of the material classified as *military* material owned/maintained after by nuclear-weapon states. The other often-cited criticism is the exclusivity of the NSS process. The limited

participation of member states and the imposition of a 'guest-list diplomacy' suggests that this exclusivity may have negatively impacted the envisioned outcomes of the process by outweighing its prospective benefits – “against its best intentions, it politicized what was previously a predominantly technical discussion” (Matchett, October 2018).

These issues aside, and in light of the significant achievements of the process, the four Summits were largely successful in promoting the model of avoiding consensus in order to make progress. As such, states that had interests in particular topics were able to make progress on them by either putting forward or establishing a number of flexible agreements that would not be held hostage to the requirement for complete unanimity. Many considered this approach of voluntary pledges and commitments, known as 'gift baskets', to be a welcome alternative to attempting to address the stalemate that often characterizes major challenges at the global level.

In April 2016, however, the Summit process came to a halt, leaving both its supporters and critics skeptical as to whether individual states would be able to maintain its outcomes, achievements, and recommendations without the high-level and head-of-state attention it was given at the four Summits in Washington, D.C. (2010), Seoul (2012), The Hague (2014)



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and again in the U.S. capital (2016). Five Middle East/Gulf countries participated in the Summit process: Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. While Israel is the only nuclear-weapon state, the other four countries are all either initiating or pursuing a civil nuclear program. Against this backdrop, this POLICY FORUM analyzes Jordan's chairmanship of the Contact Group and its possible impact on regional cooperation. This is done in the context of the CBRN problématique, and specifically the Jordanian government's nuclear-related threat perceptions.

According to Jordanian officials, the government has identified as threats that should be prioritized the following: the security of nuclear and radiological facilities, the smuggling of material through official crossing points and across green borders, and the use of radiological dispersal devices. Since it has identified these threats, Jordan has undertaken a series of governmental efforts in accordance with its assessment of the country's capabilities and perceived vulnerabilities. In addition to domestic legislation on counter-terrorism and nuclear safety and security, the mechanisms enacted at the national level include the establishment of a Counter Nuclear Smuggling Team, as well as a number of nuclear security and emergency response committees.

The Kingdom's selection in 2017 as the Convener chair of the NSCG is not merely coincidental, but rather the most recent occurrence in a series of measures aimed at strengthening the country's capacity to mitigate perceived threats. While the risk of nuclear terrorism espoused throughout the NSS process may not necessarily be the driver behind Jordan's measures, non-state actors and their entire range of CBRN-related activities certainly feature prominently in its calculations.

Jordan generally achieves its foreign and security objectives by pursuing policies and behaviors that demonstrate a high level of cooperation with the international community. The field of nuclear security is no exception: this is clearly seen in the country's profile and record in the area of nuclear security (The Hashemite Kingdom

of Jordan, March 31, 2016). This does not in any way exclude critical positions on relevant issues in the field of nuclear security/non-proliferation. On the contrary, Jordan's quite impressive record on norm-building can be used (and in fact is used) to counter-balance demands especially made by the U.S. (Toukan, November 2018, as summarized by Husseini, November 8, 2018).

The Role of the Nuclear Security Contact Group

The NSCG was created in the context of the Summit process. The Joint Statement on "Sustaining Action to Strengthen Global Nuclear Security Architecture" was issued at the 2016 Summit by 40 states and two international organizations. They agreed to help address continuing and evolving nuclear security challenges with two objectives in mind: first, "advancing [the] implementation of nuclear security commitments", and, second, "building a strengthened, sustainable and comprehensive global nuclear security architecture". The Contact Group, which "is not a decision making body" (NSCG, Terms of Reference), is tasked with, inter alia, meeting annually on the margins of the General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), convening other meetings as necessary, and discussing issues related to nuclear security. At its core is the mandate to follow up on nuclear security commitments that were made throughout a particular Summit by states and international organizations. Finally, these Sherpa-level meetings seek to identify measures that may be particularly suited to further promoting these objectives.

In 2016 Canada was the first country to assume leadership of the Contact Group, followed by Jordan in 2017. Jordan's chairmanship started in September 2017 in accordance with the NSCG's governance requirements based on "expressions of interest, and on a voluntary basis" (NSCG, Terms of Reference). During its position as chair of the Contact Group, Jordan was primarily concerned with taking stock of the 'gift baskets' and action plans of the Summit process. In this sense, Amman



assumed the traditional role that was expected of the Chair, particularly in that it maintained the NSS process's approach of avoiding consensus and promoted the inherent value of the Contact Group: For states to continue to make progress on nuclear security, there is no requirement for unanimous agreement on common positions.

By continuing to reject the formality of consensus, participating states were given the freedom to either collectively, individually, or in smaller groups take pragmatic steps toward contributing to the Contact Group's overall objectives, an approach that was endorsed and applied under Jordan's Chairmanship (officials interviewed primarily in Amman stressed this aspect). These informal procedures reflect the fact that the Contact Group is an assembly of the like-minded – a feature that is certainly an advantage compared to truly multilateral conferences such as those of the IAEA, whose outcomes often document the lowest common denominator.

Prior to Jordan's Chairmanship, its sponsored 'gift basket' on "Countering Nuclear Smuggling" was distributed as an IAEA Information Circular (INFCIRC/918) on April 19, 2017. While this was not unique to Jordan, with approximately ten other 'gift baskets' having also been circulated, these circulars stand out in attempting to broaden the Contact Group's membership base beyond the original participants in the Summit process. How many additional parties may sign up to the IAEA Information Circulars still remains to be seen, but they are nonetheless a step in the direction of enhancing cooperation, and can potentially be viewed as an attempt to shed the branding of exclusivity associated with the Summit process.

In contrast to the high-level participation of the Summits, the Contact Group can be viewed as successful in that it is working on a more appropriate level of cooperation among states that seek to share experiences of best practices. By continuing the bottom-up approach of building each country's individual capacities, and by emphasizing the focus on operational cooperation, the Contact Group can indeed have positive impacts on furthering

nuclear security. By way of example, the Counter Nuclear Smuggling Team in Jordan was created in 2013 as a result of the importance ascribed to it by the Council of Ministers at a strategic level.

What the Contact Group can continue to offer years later is exchanges on best practices for the operations of the team and consultations with partner countries that have made progress in the area. What the NSCG is not, however, is a forum for new ideas – innovative elements that characterized the Summit process (such as scenario-related multiple-choice exercises that triggered the interest of heads of state) are not part of the Group's agenda. Accordingly, it is not so much what the individual outcomes of the NSCG meetings are, but rather the regular collaborative exchange and cooperation that speaks to the positive impact that the Group can have in sustaining efforts toward nuclear security.

From a Jordanian perspective, it seems that the NSCG can further support the country's ongoing assessment and improvement of its nuclear security architecture. This started with the Summits, and the country highlighted its achievements and commitments wherever possible, the latter of which is particularly important to further Jordan's credibility as a key component of the global nuclear security framework. For instance, Jordan's NSS 2016 "National Progress Report" demonstrates the commitments the country has made at the national and international levels, as well as a number of bilateral and multilateral activities to further these commitments (The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, March 31, 2016). Moreover, Amman has started to establish new institutions with a considerable cooperative potential for the region (see below), which can be attributed to the catalytic effects of the Summits.

The promotion of an inclusive government approach involving a great variety of bureaucratic players has been critical to ensuring the success of many of these initiatives, because it allowed for a more comprehensive and integrated means for strategic planning and implementation. In addition to official authorities such as the nuclear operator, regulator, police,

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and military, this includes outreach to industry, academia, and other members of civil society. This continues to be critical to addressing the multifaceted challenges inherent in nuclear security and to developing a more holistic approach to tackling these issues.

Earlier plans to establish a Higher Council for Nuclear Safety and Security as an umbrella for Jordan's numerous nuclear-security-related activities were not implemented; they were replaced by the recent creation of the National Center of Nuclear and Radiological Security at the Energy and Minerals Regulatory Commission, which appears to be well-positioned to take on such a mandate. In order to further promote this holistic approach, the Contact Group meeting convened by Jordan in 2018 emphasized the role that non-governmental organizations can play in supporting a state to achieve its nuclear security-related objectives. Hence, a number of members of the expert community in Jordan, such as retired security officials and representatives of academia, were invited to share their perspectives and insights.

Jordan's constructive responses to nuclear security challenges, which have thus far culminated in its chairmanship of the NSCG, nonetheless call into question the prospects for the Group's sustainability, which remain less certain. The Joint Statement establishing the Contact Group was

issued as an IAEA Information Circular (INFCIRC/899), meaning that even states that were not part of the Summit process were able to join. Since its establishment in 2016, an additional small number of seven countries – including Qatar as the single state from the Middle East/Gulf (Bunn/Roth/Tobey, January 2019: 70) – have joined the NSCG; this applies as well to the European Union, bringing current membership to 47 countries and four international organizations.

This modest success, however, is marred by the fact that 12 of the countries that were participating members of the Summit process did not sign on to the Contact Group, further minimizing an entity that was already considered to be too small to be a truly international initiative. As a follow-on instrument of the NSS process, it has been questioned whether the Contact Group will be able to preserve the momentum of the four high-level Summits and to encourage more states to join the process (Luongo, June 2017: 12; see also Bunn/Roth/Tobey, January 2019: 70-71). In terms of its mechanism and current structure, it may be unlikely that the process will become self-sustaining; however, it could bring participating countries closer together and encourage the formation of a global architecture by continuing to promote harmonization, i.e. finding concrete ways and means for the establishment of common norms and standards in the Middle East/Gulf. ■

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