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Interview with Fred Axelgard

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Summary:

Fred Axelgard is a former US diplomat. He served as a member of the US delegation to ACRS.

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Fred Axelgard, United States

Oral history interview conducted by Miles Pomper on Zoom on September 13, 2020

Miles Pomper

Great. Let's start with the formalities, say your name and kind of a little bit how you got involved in ACRS.

Fred Axelgard

My name is Frederick “W” Axelgard. I was involved in the Arms Control and Regional Security Working Group under two hats. I was an office director in the State Department’s Bureau of Political Military Affairs when the process started. Subsequently, from 1993 onward, I worked on the process from the Office of Regional Affairs, in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. That's how I became involved.

Miles Pomper

And you had regional (Middle East) background before the talks, before this assignment?

Fred Axelgard

Yes, my doctorate in international relations focused on the Middle East. I also did research at the Center for Strategic and International Studies from 1982-1989, in their Middle East program. I joined the State Department in 1989, as director of a new office the Bureau of Political Military Affairs, set up to combat proliferation of chemical and biological weapons, and missile techn0logy. These issues drew me into the ambit of Middle East policy.

When the Madrid Peace Process began in 1991, I was tasked by Richard A. Clarke, Assistant Secretary of State at the time, to represent the Bureau in the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) working group. Two people from the State Department were principally involved in ACRS – Robert Einhorn, from the Policy Planning staff, and myself. Bob was senior to me, but my job was to represent the interests of the Bureau of Political Military Affairs.

Miles Pomper

And this was so as Richard Clarke and Bob Gallucci later got involved, right?

Fred Axelgard

That's right.

Miles Pomper

Since you had sort of this regional background, did you know a lot of the players before?

Fred Axelgard

No, I don't believe I knew any of the officials, the diplomats and military officers, from the regional countries.

Miles Pomper

What were some of your first impressions about them and as well as the, kind of the team you were working with, not just at State, but across the interagency?

Fred Axelgard

One fascinating aspect of the whole process was how unstructured things were. There wasn't a template, a Middle East negotiations template to follow. I’m not privy to how people were chosen from across the interagency were, but it was an interesting group. I don’t remember anyone who was very senior, but they were all interesting and committed people. Two names that pop up in my memory: Colonel Bill Bann from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a good soldier and fine gentleman, and David Cooper, a young, energetic representative from the Department of Defense. The sense I have is that everybody was feeling their way along in a process that was unprecedented, and very interesting. We sensed we were at an important turning point, historically. We were all going in with our eyes wide open.

The interagency process could be brutal, based on my nonproliferation experience.

But was not the case here. There were tensions that surfaced, inevitably, because it was a group of strong willed and interested people working on an important topic. But it was almost always constructive.

My impressions of the representatives from the other countries were also positive. Most of them were from their foreign ministries, a small handful from the military and defense ministries. Personally, and professionally, you can't help but be taken aback by the willingness of people to meet and engage face to face with those they have been in conflict with for so many years. At that point in time, of course, there had been decades of Arab-Israeli hostility, and the same hostility has prevailed for most of the years since the Madrid Process came to a halt. Looking back, it still is just amazing that people were so ready – yes, their governments sent them – but they were leaning forward and eager to engage as people, as personalities.

The first meeting of the ACRS working group was in the Loy Henderson Auditorium at the Department of State. The format we adopted was to draw in former US and Soviet officials who had been involved in the Helsinki process. The point was to demonstrate how two sides that had previously been hostile could engage in negotiation, that difficult issues could be worked. The meetings went on for several days, and on the morning of the last day, Assistant Secretary Dick Clarke came to the podium and said, in essence: "I've been disappointed that you have been sitting on your hands for three days – not much engagement, not many questions." The representative from Kuwait, a woman serving in a senior position in their UN mission in Geneva, stood up and pretty much gave it right back to him, saying in essence: Why should this be interesting to us? The Soviet-US experience is tangential, doesn't have a direct bearing on the situation in our region. (Again, I'm not quoting her.) So, he said, "Okay, what would interest you?" He put it back in her lap, and the delegates'. I don't remember her exact response, but she mentioned a number of things – and that became, if you will, the agenda for the next meeting.

Looking back, I am not sure if this was a negotiating ruse on Dick's part to develop an agenda for the next meeting and thereby ensure the process would continue, and have substance, but it worked. This was a definite turning point in my mind, and this is the perhaps the dominant impression I have from the beginning of the process.

Miles Pomper

Your comment echoed what a number of people have said to me, that all this talk of the US-Soviet experience, that's all fine and good, but none of that really matters in the Middle East. lt seemed to be a common refrain there. Was that kind of an obstacle you felt as you kind of went along?

Fred Axelgard

My sense is that it worked for initial purposes, the logic was good, but the details weren't applicable. Later on, the Turkish example became a better model to discuss. Many of the ACRS meetings were held in Antalya, and Turkey's experience as a Muslim nation but also a member of NATO and drawn into the superpower rivalry became a focus of discussion. The regional parties, the Arab side in particular, were interested in the details of Turkey's relations and negotiations with the Soviet Union. You might remember the old commercials, where suddenly the room goes quiet and everybody stops to listen for EF Hutton's investing advice. I had the sense it was that way when Turkey spoke in our meetings, there was a sense of paying close attention. The delegate from Turkey was Suha Umar. He was very effective. Again, when Turkey would talk it was relevant and people listened. That's a broad-brush statement, I don't remember the exact questions he addressed, but in that setting he definitely helped make the meetings meaningful and gave life to the ongoing process.

Miles Pomper

In addition to Turkey, who were, you know, kind of the movers and shakers in the process?

Fred Axelgard

I love the Canadians, so I'm going to mention them first. They had the lead on maritime issues, and counter-intuitively these became a traction point in ACRS. I mean this in kind of a structural sense, and in the culture of negotiation that developed. As I recall, it was Dennis Ross's idea to put maritime issues out there as a focus. One reason to do that was the navies in the region didn't have a long history of

actively participating in the conflict on the Arab and Israeli side. This proved to be quite useful because the navies in the Middle East are lower profile, much less significant than either the armies or air forces. But once they were given a place in these negotiations, they seemed keen to take advantage of it.

The Canadians had the lead on these issues and they ran with it. The continuity, the involvement of military officials, having precise issues to focus on (search and rescue, incidents-at-sea) – all this gave fuel to the fire in terms of the overall rigor, workability, and positive personal dynamics of the negotiations. So give the Canadians real credit for that.

I must also mention the Russian role. Working side-by-side with Russian officials was delightful. The senior Russian diplomat was Victor Gogitidze, although I don't recall his title or his rank. My counterpart was Valery Kuzmin, currently Russia's ambassador to Romania. He and I would co-chair working sessions at many of the meetings, and I felt those working relations were more than cordial. People enjoyed working with Gogitidze as well. He was engaging, sharp, focused. He was a good diplomat, he seemed able to make things happen in his ministry. Yes, we probably over-estimated the usefulness of US-Soviet negotiating experience to the ACRS regional parties, but I think the US-Russian co-sponsorship of the process worked out well. It was it was an important ingredient that underscored the global importance of the Madrid Process. Having the two global superpowers in the room working together, co-chairing meetings, set a tone. Moreover, there were earnest discussions on issues held that involved senior diplomats on both sides. So that was a key ingredient.

Miles Pomper

That's interesting, I'll get back to the other ones. But it's interesting you say that, because most of the people I've talked to sort of emphasize how little involved they felt the Russians were in the process, because, you know, the Soviet Union collapsed, and they were sort of busy with all their domestic issues. But you think, you seem to think otherwise?

Fred Axelgard

Certainly at the beginning it set the tone, got us going. Things became problematic as the 90s wore on. The politics in Moscow got more dicey and the distractions were there. But I think the foundation laid at the beginning remained important. Involving the Russians was a brilliant move on the part of Secretary of State James Baker and others doing the planning. A lasting image I carry in my mind. Is a picture of Victor Gogitidze walking and talking in earnest with David Ivry and others in tow. Those were good moments, real moments, strong, connecting moments as I recall them.

Miles Pomper

Sorry I interrupted you, you were about to perhaps say other....

Fred Axelgard

On the Egyptian side, two of their diplomats – remarkably sharp and effective – were Nabil Fahmy and Aly Erfan. They drove much of the discussion, much of the dynamic on the Arab side. They seemed to feel the responsibility to exercise Egypt's role as a leader in the Arab world. Also Egypt had been first to the negotiating table with the Israelis. Nabil was more senior, but Aly was also a brilliant mind and strong interlocutor.

On the Israeli side, again, General David Ivry was similarly vital. His place/role was perfectly consistent with Yitzhak Rabin's, who was the strong, iron-fisted former military hero. Drawing in Ivry, who was also a military hero, was very important. Other key players included Ariel Levite, not a military person in the first instance, but certainly with a strong intellectual and security background. In personal terms, 'Eli' was a force of nature: to watch him sit down and talk with the Arab delegates – yes, there was argumentation but not necessarily argument. His personality was right for connecting personally across the divide with a number of the people on the Arab side – and I seem to recall with the UAE in particular.

The UAE delegation came to ACRS with their own mindset. The best example of this came at the Cairo Plenary Meeting we had for ACRS. The UAE presenter there was an Air Force Colonel who later became their chief of staff. He said unabashedly that we (the UAE) have our own security issues here. Whatever security concerns might

pertain to the traditional Arab-Israel sphere, we have issues in the Gulf that need to be drawn into this discussion. It was a strong statement but not thrown out polemically or contentiously. It seemed to help develop and mature the discussion agenda, to widen it, and perhaps deepen it. Eli Levite's interaction in Cairo, the strong connection between him and the UAE delegation, that was memorable to me.

Miles Pomper

Obviously, the Israeli-Egyptian dynamic was a lot of the center of the dynamics of the ACRS process, and as I understand it Israel and Jordan. But the Israel-Egypt dynamic, its was kind of the center of the talks and a lot of people blame it for the failure of ACRS. How do you see that, how that flowed and evolved over time? Was it ultimately the cause – the Israeli nuclear program issue?

Fred Axelgard

Yes, ultimately, that was what stalled things. We had spent several meetings, lots of effort, trying to get agreement on a declaration of principles from the regional parties. We got to the end, we were hoping to issue a statement signed off on by everybody, but the holdup was the Egyptian insistence on having weapons of mass destruction, and particularly Israeli nuclear capability, drawn into the picture.

Since leaving Washington and the policy arena, I'm much more attuned to the long-term aspects of pursuing strategy and policy agendas. Looking back, the idea that over the course of four or five years we would succeed in getting agreement on how to frame the full range of security issues, let alone resolve them, was unrealistic. It now seems injudicious to be disappointed, and to say that that single issue brought things to a crashing halt.

To put it in its positive light, I think it is very real to point out that the fact that the nuclear issue was there, was on the table, was 'gone at' if you will, was evidence that we were in a good place. We were in the right room, we had the right issues, we had the right people. All this points to the value of the process, the validity and importance of the process we were engaged in. Why be surprised that there was stress involved, right? Contention, difference of opinion and resistance to hammering out such issues in detail in the regional setting/circumstances we were in, again – I guess I look at it as a primer or prelude to what could have been – and still might be – rather than 'what could or should have been.'

I don't begrudge Nabil and Aly bringing forward, I don't begrudge Ivry and Levite and others refusing at that point in time to take it up as the centerpiece of discussions, detailed discussions. How long did it take the US and Soviet Union to achieve the START agreement? Along time. To me it's no sweat off of the backs of these two parties, and the other regional parties, that they could not work through these things in a setting that lasted a little over five years. If there's going to be progress on these issues – and I believe there will be one day – the setting will have to take account of a wide range of security and other measures that will bring confidence into the negotiations.

Miles Pomper

Was all of this a kind of product of over-optimism, that we were in this unique moment, after the Iraq war and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, sort of an almost euphoria, that people thought they could do more than they could have at another time? In terms of timetable, is this what you're talking about?

Fred Axelgard

Both of those, all of those factors, were very important. It was a global, historic turning point. It was not everybody's mindset but, looking back, there were certainly members of the Egyptian delegation, including military officers, who expressed that we really have the chance to do something extraordinary, that it's important to take advantage of this moment. It was an unprecedented moment.

Did we overreach? In the sense of making a mistake? I don't think so. The greater mistake would have been to underreach, given the unprecedented global and regional settings. In my own mind, I'm still convinced of that. But I'm an optimist. I think that even in a very hostile conflict, you can identify the seeds of negotiation, the seeds of peace if you will. So, my mindset is to say no, we didn't overreach. New and important possibilities were there, and we needed to reach for them. If we hadn't,

the value of the process would have suffered, as well as its future significance – which I still believe in.

Miles Pomper

And when you're saying the value still lingers, how do you mean that?

Fred Axelgard

The demonstrated reality that regional parties were willing to sit down face-to-face and talk about real security issues, the mammoth significance of that is more clear today than ever before. As a touchstone in reality, as a valid and genuine reference point, I think it has enduring value. It's there if the parties want to access it. It's a string on the guitar that they can pluck, and it will resonate.

But it's not just the string and its existence, but the will the willingness of the parties to recognize that it's there, that the 'music' of ACRS is a real part of the region's history and background, part of the backdrop even now. Could the US role ever be the same? Good question. Would it work without other extra-regional powers? Also, a good question. The Trump administration did serious damage to the concept of alliance collaboration, and the US role in the world, broadly, has a lot of recuperating to do.

I'm not saying we would need to reconstruct every dynamic that made room for the Madrid process. But there's enough substance to Madrid and ACRS as a touchstone that it could help draw the parties back into meaningful discussions, even negotiations. The concept, brilliant in its own way, of having complementary bilateral negotiations and multilateral negotiations also works as a reference point to be borne in mind. It widens the negotiating dynamic in a way that's important.

Miles Pomper

Let me ask you a couple follow up questions on that. I mean, you know, obviously, then, clearly a priority for the administration, or the administrations, in that situation was the bilateral track. To some extent the multilateral was sort of a pay off to the Gulf states and others for getting involved in the Iraq War, a promise to try to bring the region in and supplement the process, but it wasn't seen as the main function. And do you think that would be the case now, because I sort of look at, you know, if you say, "Okay, now we've got somewhat of a different if perhaps an opportunity with the Abraham accords, and some of the changes in the region, although there's obviously changes for the worst." How would you see the bilateral and multilateral kind of playing off each other if you were going to design a system today?

Fred Axelgard

The basic premise is that the payoff for peace has serious regional dimensions. The economic benefits, the resource benefits (water and oil) that would be gained – these are benefits that would flow to the region. I think that's a reality and could still have an impact on the structure and process of negotiations.

These are very complex questions. The dynamics of designing a negotiation – each piece would depend on the agreement you're able to get at a given moment in time, shaped by the issues that are prevailing at the time. But having in the background the idea of addressing regional economic and trade, water, resource issues – and the Palestinians, that remains an issue of regional concern. It, too, is a factor in regional dynamics. That said, I'm sure you'll get some thoughtful people to address this question. It is a worthwhile one to consider.

Miles Pomper

Thanks. So, you said, you know, kind of the first year and a half, two years was kind of warm up, when would you say things got serious in the process?

Fred Axelgard

From a diplomatic perspective, the statements, the written agreements that came out of the early meetings are the telltale evidence. We were able to get an agreement on principles, a maritime incidents-at-sea agreement, and a maritime search and rescue plan. The idea was to get people focused on issues, especially people with a military background, drawn into discussions about deploying or using military assets, shaping the use of those assets for confidence-building purposes. This is not necessarily the high theoretical material that would come at the front of a textbook. You're doing this because naval issues, naval conflict is not the heart of the matter, and has not been

the heart of hostilities there. But within the process, it became a touchstone. We were able to demonstrate the people were talking and negotiating, engaging usefully and productively.

The fact that the Canadians were managing the maritime work is significant. There's a negotiating theory that mediators in a negotiation are more likely to be trusted when they themselves don't have large-vested issues, if they're almost a marginal player. There's a beautiful example of that in Madagascar and their civil war in the early 90s.The Italian Communist Party and the Sant'Egidio, a lay community in the Catholic faith, were able to draw the two sides into a negotiation that produced an agreement that is still in effect today. The Canadians were effective in a similar way in ACRS.

Then we started touring facilities in Europe. We visited the OSCE communication facility in the Hague, and we went to Helsinki in order to see what the NPT nuclear test detection infrastructure around the world looked. We were cozying up to important issues that had regional relevance. Having meetings in Turkey meant we were able to get involved in settings near the region. Later we improved on this, with meetings in Doha, Cairo, and Tunis. Those were important because they implied recognition of Israel, having negotiations take place on Arab soil. So, for different reasons those were all important. There were more ornaments on the tree, but we were lighting up the tree and displaying a sense that there was a completeness to what we were about. Again, it would have taken more years than we ended up having, but we moved at a pace that was deliberate and useful.

Miles Pomper

You mentioned places, in terms of recognizing Israel, where plenary meetings occurred. But it seems like the other things that you mentioned as achievements were in the ‘operational basket’ rather than the ‘conceptual’ basket.

Fred Axelgard

You're provoking my memory a little bit. When we made the transition from having just plenaries to adding these more specialized meetings that weren't dominated, if you will, by a political (foreign ministry) presence, but rather involved more technical and deliberately technical military personnel; this was an important step.

Miles Pomper

You make more progress getting the diplomats out of there.

Fred Axelgard

It's yin and yang, there's always two sides of the of the toast to be buttered, and we were able to get agreement from the plenary side to move into the more technical discussions. They had to prove useful and report back or at least be reflected back to the plenary in a positive light for the dynamic to continue. It was a useful evolution of the structure of the negotiation, underscoring again that there was no template to follow here. We were making this up as we went along, working with the threads that emerged.

Miles Pomper

So I guess I have one final question, and then if there's anything else you want to add feel free to do so. If Tony Blinken called you up tomorrow and said we're thinking of doing this process, somewhat similar to ACRS in the Middle East or the regional/ multilateral piece, what are the two pieces of advice that you would give him on how to do it today, from what you learned and that they could take advantage of?

Fred Axelgard

The fundamental difference between the Middle East today and the days of the Madrid Peace Process is Saudi-Iranian hostility, and the ability of Sunni-Shi’ite dynamics to fundamentally destabilize the region. That piece has to be acknowledged and drawn into any regional peace effort. It's difficult to envision today but I think there's a clear need to draw Iran into negotiations that will admittedly prove very, very difficult. But Sunni-Shiite hostility is a significant, damaging reality in the region now, much more so than back in the day. So that by itself would throw a spanner into any effort to renew something like ACRS. Things would only get more complex as negotiations move on.

Also, back in the day, Iraq was not a player, was not part of the negotiations. Saddam

was hemmed in, contained, and that dynamic in the background took care of Iraq for that whole period of time. I don't think it would be possible to ignore Iraq again. Both of those things would complicate Egypt's ability to play the role of leader on the Arab side. In fact, I think that quite a few countries have developed more mature security needs that would make a process like ACRS more difficult to manage.

And then you have severe humanitarian situations, like Yemen and Syria. They could become the focus for cooperation in the region or they could hang like a millstone around the negotiations. But they could not be ignored.

Miles Pomper

Wasn't there some contention between Egypt and Jordan over leadership in ACRS?

Fred Axelgard

Yes, there was. My memory isn't serving me well. I have failed to note how important the Jordanian role was. Their delegation leader, Abdullah Toukan, was remarkable and remarkably qualified. His intellectual strengths and negotiating skills were invaluable, plus he was closely connected to the royal family in Jordan. Abdullah helped get things going in terms of a serious policy discussion and keeping things friendly. If there was royalty in the ACRS process, it would be Abdullah. Toukan. The intellectual, political, and diplomatic rigor he brought to the negotiations was indispensable. He was just remarkable.

It is interesting to think how Tony Blinken would find a way to use Jordan. Their place in the region is pivotal, even though they aren't a strategic player on the level of these other countries. But I think King Abdullah could be counted on in the same way King Hussein was counted on for the Madrid Process. Abdullah Toukan was able to maximize in ACRS the kind of positive leverage Jordan brought to the peace process and the region as a whole. He could go toe to toe, as occasion might require, both intellectually and articulately with the Egyptian side.

But that brings us back to the question: who is now the leader in the Arab world?

Does Egypt have the stability within and the credibility needed across the region? Can they be recognized as the leader in the way they were back then? That's a tough one. Saudi Arabia was a malleable but positive influence back then, but today Mohammed bin Salman is more of a wild card. He is not an individual I admire much at all, but he appears to have definite regional aspirations. Saudi Arabia would have to be drawn in to play a positive role once again, although that particular string would have to be plucked differently than it was last time.

In summary, the greater complexity of the region now, both with the destabilizing dynamics coming out of the Gulf and a more fragmented Arab, would make a region-wide negotiation more difficult to piece together. But the difficulty of doing it only points more to the necessity of doing it.

Miles Pomper

I appreciate your saying it, saying it again.

Fred Axelgard

Overall, in conclusion, I would like to pay tribute to the leadership on the US side, to Dan Kurtzer and Bob Einhorn, to Dennis Ross and Martin Indyk. Martin came a little bit later into the process, I think. Certainly James Baker had a superb vision and skill to guide the United States as it approached its leadership role in a newly reconstructed world at that time. His was a coalition building mentality, and that was conducive – more, it was essential – to all of this.

I think of Nabil Fahmy in much the same way I characterized Abdullah Toukan's role. I think he played the best role that he could have played. It was his own vision and his national interest to have those difficult issues come out the way they did. Nabil did an outstanding job; even though he made the negotiations difficult, he made them honest.

There were many people from the Israeli side who were so impressive. I have a deep regard for David Ivry, and for Ariel Levite. There was a Israeli gentleman from the international office at the MOD – I am not remembering his name – but he made a real, positive difference at the outset.

ACRS gave me the opportunity to witness in action a large number of strong people

coming from countries with different, sharply defined and important national interests. They came together and stayed together in a close setting, and it's impossible not to admire them for their self-control, their reserve, and their articulateness. I would give almost anything if my children could see that and gain a vision of how that was possible. In the world we live in today, if they could just see what national leaders and representatives of nations can do in a setting like that. Again, I'm overwhelmingly grateful ever to have been involved.

Miles Pomper

Thanks. Sounds like a good place to end.

Fred Axelgard

It does. Take care, and thank you for your efforts.

[End of transcript]