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Interview with Joseph Draznin

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Summary:

Joseph Draznin is a former Israeli diplomat. He served as a member of the Israeli delegation to ACRS.

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Joseph Draznin, Israel**Oral history interview conducted by Hanna Notte on Zoom on December 12, 2020****Hanna Notte**

All right. It's a pleasure to conduct this interview for our ACRS oral history project. Dr. Draznin, why don't you start by telling us in what capacity you were involved and exposed to the ACRS process?

Joseph Draznin

So, at that time I was at the Ministry of Defense. I was working both for the Director General and the Minister on issues, specific issues. But, also as the director of VIP Visits and Protocol and international visits. So, my role was to enable all the extensive activity of the delegation and of course, I was part also of the actual discussions and the subject matters. I recall the first meeting, which I would be interested to know if you heard about it. But the first meeting was actually at the office of Sallai Meridor. He was the first leader of the delegation. His office, I remember vividly, was in what we call building number 22, the old building of the Minister of Defense. His office was very close to the office of the minister itself actually in the same compound. And I remember the first meeting when Sallai asked David Ivry to join him. At that meeting was also Eli Levite, my good friend, and Uzi Arad, both my very good friends, and myself. This was the first meeting ever; the foreign ministry was not there yet. And this is when Sallai announced to Ivry and Levite and Arad the decision to actually participate in this working group, which of course was one of the most sensitive working groups. And this is how it all started. Only later on, David Ivry took the leadership of the group.

Hanna Notte

You recall when that meeting was?

Joseph Draznin

What date, the date that it started?

Hanna Notte

Yeah, between the Madrid Conference and the first plenary, I suppose? Sometimes in between?

Joseph Draznin

The first plenary was later on, very close to the Madrid - I'm sure it was after Shamir came back and spoke to Arens, and Arens made the decision. And then Arens first tasked Sallai to lead it. And then after a while, it was very reasonable for David Ivry to take the lead. I believe that the first session that we had, Ivry was already the head of the delegation, I do not recall - maybe I'm wrong but I do not recall Sallai heading one of the international sessions. He did lead the local sessions first.

Hanna Notte

Great. And can you just generally explain a little bit the internal dynamics at the time, how was the Israeli delegation to ACRS put together? And how were you sort of internally looking forward or thinking about this process?

Joseph Draznin

So, we first started with the core group of the Ministry of Defense. Of course, at that time Uzi Arad was, I believe, part of the Mossad, I believe. And then we brought in some people from the Israeli atomic energy. I think, Levite at that time was, I don't recall, he was had. Later on, he joined the Ministry of Defense. So it was the Ministry of Defense and the relevant agencies. And then later on, Ivry was not that enthusiastic to bring in the foreign ministry. But he realized that he needed to bring them in. So, it was first Eytan Bentsur. And then only later joined us Shimon Stein. And at a later, even later time, Jeremy Issacharoff. So it was Eytan Bentsur at that time, we had agreed to one representative of the Foreign Ministry and of course, it was Eytan Bentsur. The number two at the Foreign Ministry at the time. And then the other two joined us. And from the military, Eran Lerman and I think there were a few others.

So, this is how the Israeli group was formed. And the discussion was very sensitive,

even before we started to move around. Later on, we started to move around and as you know, we were in Tunis, and Doha, Qatar and Amman. And several times - I think twice or three times in Moscow and in Washington D.C, and I believe in other places, too. So it was very complex, because we had to make sure every time we went overseas, we had to consult with people who stayed home, about our positions and what to say. We had to make sure that we have secure communication. And at that time, it was very, very complex. It was not easy. We had to have a secure communication and also all the assets to allow for an administrative and an office. We needed to print a lot of material, every time we agreed on something. We had two excellent English writers; Levite and Uzi Arad who always fought for the right word and the right phrase and the right sentence to be included inside. And we had to have a lot of logistics surrounding the group. Also, I remember several times going to Moscow and staying in hotels, which we all knew that they belonged to the KGB. And we were for sure - I don't know if it's right or not - but that we were listened to, every time we went, and every move that we did.

I recall one time that I went with Uzi Arad to prepare for our visit to Moscow. Usually I went alone with the expert, who is the security and the expert, but Uzi told me, "let's go to, when you are going to Moscow, I'd like to come with you and to be part of the advance team". And I recall that we went to the Bolshoi Theatre. And we were harassed by some- I don't know if you would like it to hear about it or not - but we were harassed by some Russian hookers. They told us "No, we're gonna wait for you and you cannot go and etc.". So Uzi and I, right at the end of the Swan Lake, 10 minutes when all the drama was there, we had to sneak out from the show and take, go to our cars and go back to the hotel. Also from Russia, I remember that I tried to speak to all the people who helped us, the taxi drivers and the hotels and everyone that the government, the Russian government, gave us to work with - and they didn't understand a word in English. So, finally I decided I'll talk to them in Hebrew! Why should I talk to them in English? Anyhow, they don't understand a word. Once I started to talk to them in Hebrew, I realized that they understand me much better. So, I assumed that my body language in Hebrew is much better and they understand it. You know, like "drive faster! stop!" etc. And then when I told people in Israel, they told me, "You're stupid guy. They were all KGB spies that know Hebrew". So once you started to talk to them in Hebrew, they knew exactly what... But you know, the issue of security was very vivid, very important for us. And we had to always find creative ways to make sure that nobody's listening to us or to our cables and to our material, etc.

Hanna Notte

Very interesting. Thank you for that. And I also want to ask you, at these first plenaries in Washington, D.C and in Moscow, that's also when, for the first time, all these delegations, including the many other regional delegations, came together with Israel. Can you talk a little bit about the atmosphere of that initial engagement? And also, you with the Israeli delegation, going to these first meetings, what were your expectations? What were you hoping to get out of this?

Joseph Draznin

So first of all, we had a lot of good personal relations outside of the official sessions. Mainly with the Jordanian delegation and the Egyptian delegation - of course, led by Abdullah Toukan on the Jordanian side and Nabil Fahmy on the Egyptian side. And it was very interesting to see that when we had these small talks outside of the conference, we kind of reached an agreement and we said - Eli used to come and I talked to some of my friends and Uzi Arad used to say "I spoke to some of my friends", etc. But, when we came into the session itself, obviously everything changed. So whatever you heard outside was totally different than what you heard inside. Because all the delegations, the Egyptians, the Jordanians, they felt that in public, in front of all the other Arab countries, they have to show that their position is like the most difficult one, and they didn't show any advancement. But I can tell you that outside, in small talks, there was always this dialogue on how we can move forward on an issue like this. And at the end of the day, whatever was agreed, was agreed outside of the main sessions and not in the main sessions themselves.

Hanna Notte

Okay. And did you find it important that at some point, these plenaries shifted from

outside the region into the region, places like Doha and Tunis? And how did that feel to the Israeli delegation travelling to these Arab countries to participate in a session in the Gulf, which must have been quite unprecedented. Maybe you can talk a little bit to that?

Joseph Draznin

So that was very, very important for us. We, for us, for David Ivry as the head of delegation, it was very important that it will not be like, we could stay only in Washington D.C, and have the dialogue. But we wanted to see a change. You know? Now we live in an atmosphere when the Emirates are here and I visited Abu Dhabi and I visited the Manama, Bahrain just recently as part of the new sessions, a new dialogue between the countries. But at that time, it was very significant to say, "hey, you want us to work on regional security? Let's see if you are accepting us - if you are accepting us in Tunis, if you are accepting us in Doha", or - the Russians, even going to Moscow was very unique. So this was very important for Israel, the fact that we are travelling around.

I can tell you that now, recently, when I flew to Abu Dhabi, and the Israeli flight was over Saudi Arabia, someone on the plane remembered that I was part of the first flight of Israeli over Saudi Arabia. At that time, it was not an Israeli plane. We took an Israeli plane to Cairo. And then in Cairo, we got on an Egyptian plane. It was all the Israeli delegation, and we flew via this Egyptian airplane to Doha. And I remember that the pilot, the Egyptian pilot asked David Ivry, if we would like to join him when we are over Saudi Arabia in the cockpit. And of course, Ivry went to the cockpit, and he looked on the outside from the windows. And then one of the Israeli reporters who were on the flight asked him: "David Ivry, is this your first flight over Saudi Arabia?" And David told them: "Well, you know, I cannot speak about it, but it's not my first flight over Saudi Arabia." So it was very interesting.

Of course, when we landed in Doha, two, three weeks before I had my advance team. So, when I came together with the delegation, I met my counterpart, and I told my counterpart in the advance team, "you know? All we need is a one car for David Ivry, a limo, but the rest of us could get into a minivan, you know? Two minivans or a big minivan for 29 people." He looked at me like crazy. I tried to explain to him what a minivan is. And he said to me, "I'm sorry, Joseph! we don't have minivans in Doha." So, when we landed, you won't believe it, they were waiting for us like thirty Mercedes Benz, and they put each two of us of the delegation in one, in the backseat, not even in the front seat. And they opened the road from the airport to - at that time, now there are many others, but at that time - Sheraton. Sheraton Doha was the host, and it was the most expensive one. And they took us over. You asked me, "What is the meaning of it?" It was very, very important for us. It was very important for the Israeli delegation to see that we are welcome in a place like Doha and that there is a meaning to our dialogue. And it's not just the Arab world asking from Israel and Israel from the Arab world.

Another anecdote was that, of course, we released the Egyptian aircraft, to go back to Cairo. And we told him to come back and pick us on Thursday. Because the flight was on Sunday, we were a full week in Doha. And then I received the call from our chief security Eram. I still remember him saying, "we have a big problem. We cannot go back on Thursday." And we needed to come back before Friday, before the Shabbat. And I said, "What's the problem?" He said "the Egyptian airplane just arrived. And I arranged with the Qataris to have some dogs to check that there is no explosives on the aircraft. And the Egyptian pilot said he will never ever allow Qatari dogs to sniff an Egyptian aircraft." And it was a real drama. And we couldn't leave the hotel until the security would say to us that the aircraft is safe. Can you imagine an Israeli delegation on an Egyptian aircraft? Finally, the captain was told "either you allow the security check, or you can take off." And he allowed to do it. We never published it. We never embarrassed him. But we took the flight and we went back. So, there was a lot of difficulties.

I remember that when we arrived in Doha, the security checked each and every equipment that we brought. We even brought a satellite phone at that time. Very complex, very complicated one, a big one, so we can make phone calls from - because it was not open, the telecom system between Doha and Israel. And they checked, and they wouldn't let us go only because we brought one very simple

phone, that is not complicated, is not electronic, is very simple, just in case we need to use it. And they said "no, this is too simple phone, too simple of a phone, and we need to find out and we need to open it" and until they took it to the lab, and came back. And only then they released all the equipment.

So there were a lot of difficulties for the Israeli delegation to go through this kind of places. Tunis was a big surprise for us. When we landed in Tunis, we were picked up at the airport by the government. And they told us - we reached about I guess 6 or 7pm - and they said "okay, here are the keys to your rooms. And we'll meet you tomorrow morning at 9 to pick you up to come to the conference". And we said "what?" "Yes, yes, you can go out of the hotel, you could walk in the streets and you can do whatever you want." This was a shock to all of us. And I remember vividly that we simply left the hotel and started to walk and nobody followed us. In Doha, when we walked, even when we went to the market there were always people with Gallabias and security people with guns under the Gallabias. But not in Tunis, they were so confident in their control of security, that they let us walk in the streets and it was amazing. I remember we went, all of us in small groups and we enjoyed it very much. There were a lot of incidents - not a lot, but some incidents, one incident - of course, this is not related to the subject matters but about...

Hanna Notte

It is very important to set the scene and the atmospherics. So I appreciate you sharing that!

Joseph Draznin

So I'll give you another example which I wish - we did not intended it to be, but, because of Israeli, at that time even today, but when we travelled through Europe, we tried to keep it quiet and to have security. And the Italian police, they arranged for us when we landed in Rome airport and to go to Tunis- they arranged for us to take us from the VIP room, directly to the airport and not to mingle with the other people that were on the flight. So of course, again I arranged it with them. And then we landed via El Al and went to the VIP room, from the VIP room they took us to the special bus. When we reached the plane, the plane was empty. But, I noticed that on the side there is some regular buses, that took the passengers, and they were waiting for our bus to arrive. So, we arrived, we went on the airplane, got our seats. And then started the regular buses, the passengers for the regular buses to come up to the plane. And unfortunately, that was the Jordanian delegation and the Egyptian delegation. So they said to us.

Hanna Notte

From Rome to?

Joseph Draznin

To Tunis.

Hanna Notte

Okay.

Joseph Draznin

From Rome to Tunis. Via Rome. They flew to Rome and then apparently we were all buying tickets on the same flight, not knowing, not coordinating, on the same flight. Which is like, maybe Sunday afternoon, to go to Doha. And because on Monday morning, we started the conference in Doha. So when they get on the plane, and they realize that they had to wait standing in the regular buses on the tarmac until the Israeli delegation, they were very, very upset.

Hanna Notte

Tunis not Doha, right? The flight was going to Tunis.

Joseph Draznin

To Tunis not Doha, did I say Doha? No, to Tunis.

Hanna Notte

They thought that the Israeli delegation got a special treatment?

Joseph Draznin

Exactly. Exactly. And it was not meant to be, we were very nice. We were friendly

with them. And this was not the first one, we came to a number of places. But, because of security, they had to keep them aside and let us go. And then they realized that because of us, and they were very upset. It took quite some time on Monday and Tuesday until they got off. Yes. So, very difficult coordination, that sometime upset one another. But other than that, I think that David Ivry developed a personal relationship with Nabil Fahmy. By the way, this personal relationship did not affect at all the positions, the official positions of the two of them. Which were very opposite to one another. I think, we felt that the Jordanians were a little bit more - I wouldn't say understanding, but they had a different agenda than the Egyptian delegation. And that's why we felt a little bit more close to the Jordanian delegation. Later on, I went to be the Israeli representative of the Ministry of Defense in Washington, under the ambassadorship of David Ivry. And at that time, also came Nabil Fahmy to become the Egyptian ambassador. And they became even more friendly with one another. But, I still remember how they recall not so fondly the positions during ACRS. So they understood. Nabil Fahmy never overcome, I believe, the fact that Israel was so strong-minded about its position, etc. And that he couldn't change our original view. I still owe you - and I will try to find, I think I have a copy, I don't know if it was a childish act or not, but the Israeli delegation prepared some sort of a phrase from the Bible. To pass it on - we never did it at the end of the day - but to pass it on to all the delegations, all the members of all the delegations that spoke about Middle East nuclear free zone, but mentioning one sentence from the Bible.

Hanna Notte

Okay.

Joseph Draznin

And I'll try to find it because I kept a copy. And I said to myself, maybe one day it will be valuable to someone and I kept a copy of it. I don't know. Did you hear from anyone else about this?

Hanna Notte

No. But I'm curious, why was it decided not to distribute this to the other delegations in the end?

Joseph Draznin

I think that the atmosphere... We thought, I think it was done towards one of the last meetings. Was Doha one of our last meetings? Do you recall?

Hanna Notte

It was one of the later plenaries? Yeah.

Joseph Draznin

Yes. So, I think we planned to give it in Doha, and then it was not as successful. And we felt that the atmosphere is not right for it. I think that we wanted to give it away when we were very close to reach kind of an agreement about language, certain language. And when we saw that a certain language did not go through, then we decided it's not appropriate. It was meant to be a gesture of goodwill once we reach an agreement, and I think we failed.

Hanna Notte

Understood, thank you. No, this is all very useful. I have just a few follow up questions if I may?

Joseph Draznin

Please!

Hanna Notte

To the extent that you feel comfortable speaking about it. I'd be curious how the Israeli delegation perceived the dynamic within the camp of Arab delegations between, let's say, the sort of core participating states, Egypt and Jordan, and some of the smaller delegations from the Gulf and Maghreb? How you perceived that Intra-Arab dynamic?

Joseph Draznin

Very interesting question. Because we felt that every time that we reached some sort of an understanding between us and members of the other Arab nations Egypt came

on board to destruct the arrangement that we had with other countries. Each and every session, if I recall right, started with bilaterals. So we had many bilateral meetings with all the members. And then we went, after a day, day and half, we went to the conference itself. And the bilateral meetings, we felt that we reach agreement on the language with other countries, including the Jordanians. And that the Egyptians always tried to kill each and every understanding by forcing - not forcing, but trying to influence and most of the time, we think they were successful - trying to influence the other Arab representatives to stand behind the official, very harsh Egyptian position. So, I don't know if this is what you meant. But yes, we had with very good relationship with all the members of the Arab nations, one on one, and sometimes more than one on one, one or two or in groups. But the Egyptians were trying always to not allow for reaching any understanding. But you know? I respect their position; Nabil Fahmy led a very strong position, which at the end of the day, I think was - again, I'm not the expert on it - but, my feeling, my personal feeling is that it led to some of the biggest disagreements at the end of the day.

Hanna Notte

Thank you for that. And again, since we having sort of a conversation on the atmospherics of the process, I want to ask you: Of course, ACRS was part of the Multilateral Track, and we had bilaterals, which was also an important outcome of the Madrid conference. And there was some progress on the bilateral track during those years, we had the Declaration of Principles, of course in 1993, and we had the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty in 1994. From your recollection, did these events sort of positively influence the momentum or the atmosphere at ACRS or not so much?

Joseph Draznin

I think that if there is something it should have been the other way around. I mean, the fact that there was an ACRS dialogue, and that there was a multilateral discussion, and the fact that through not only ACRS, but also the other multilaterals, the fact that there was accumulating reports about meetings between Israeli - remember, not only the civilian side, also military people participated in, so for the first time even in ACRS and others, we had military generals meeting with Saudi generals and Bahraini generals and others. So, I think that the multilaterals had a positive effect on the bilaterals. And the most, the toughest multilateral session was of course on regional security. On water we reached a lot of good activities and on others. I don't know if you know that the only surviving mechanism is MEDRC. Actually in Bahrain, that's the only that I think the Bahraini were the Sherpa. By the way, the Sherpa is a word that I think that was mostly used by the multilaterals. We, nobody ever knew what Sherpa means. I don't know why. I don't know why they checked it but.

Hanna Notte

That actually brings me to my next question, which is: how did you, I mean, there were, of course, beyond the regional delegations, quite a number of outside actors involved in trying to support this process. The Turks were there, the Canadians, others. Can you talk a little bit about how you saw that dynamic between the ones from outside the region and the regional delegations?

Joseph Draznin

So, what was so good about it, you know that Israel has a long-standing position that whatever we agree, we'll agree with our neighbors. We are not in favor of international involvement in trying to force, or... They can be facilitators, but we do not like to see international forces and multinational forces, etc, in Israel. So, what was so good about the involvement of the international communities, that they were facilitators. They did not try to impose their position on the sides, they were just hosting and arranging and in that sense, I don't think that everyone was against the international participation. On the contrary, we were very respectful. And we really appreciated the involvement of the Americans and the Russians and the Dutch and Turkey at that time and the Qatari and everyone. Oman was a big participant, I think water was in Oman, right? The water was in Oman, not in Bahrain. MEDRC is in Oman. So, I think, I think we highly appreciated them and appreciated their support. And they were trying, in our group, they were trying to assist in finding the middle road, but they never tried to impose, knowing that they cannot really impose on us a

position. So I think it was a good sample for international facilitation, rather than trying to impose on the sides.

Hanna Notte

Great! Thank you. And I want to come with one question, if I may, to what was called the operational basket. We've talked a little bit about these broader plenaries. But there were then concrete workshops to work on specific confidence building measures, where I would assume it was mostly that, maybe, the military counterparts talking to each other. Were you involved in these kinds of meetings on the confidence building measures, the more technical aspects? And how did you find that kind of work with your counterparts from the region?

Joseph Draznin

So, yes. Confidence, CBMs, the confidence building measures was a big part of it. And especially between military to military. I can tell you that again, the Egyptians to my recollection, were against confidence building measure. They said, first, let's agree on the overall issue, and then we can start building the relations. But all the other nations, including the Arab nations, were excited about the fact that Generals and Colonels from all the countries can meet. Yes, I was part of the preparation for it. It was something very significant for us, the fact that we were able to have, to put in one room, Israeli Colonels, the Generals, Lieutenant Colonels, with their counterparts from around the world, it was very important. I was trying to say, to remember something on the, you asked me two questions, one was on the...

Hanna Notte

Well, how you found the work with your counterpart on the CBMs?

Joseph Draznin

Oh, yes. I remember now. Based on my experience, from my trying to be, to do all these CBMs, confidence building measures, you know they led also to - after the collapse of the dialogues - they led to Track II. They are basically Track II. You know what I'm talking about, right? The Track II that was financed by the US government, etc. They were based on these confidence building measures. And I told everyone that the main result of the CBMs of the confidence building measures is that they moved to become confidence building measures, which means based on that, they went from one confidence building measure to another, all these Track II. Which was very nice and it was very good. But, never led to anything meaningful because if... you cannot have this confidence building measures stand alone, or Track II as a stand-alone. Even if there are government officials in some of these Track IIs, if it is not a direct dialogue, these Track IIs - they were very nice, and people participated in it all over the world. But it doesn't lead to anything meaningful. Even these days, they are trying to have some Track IIs on all the issues, you need the direct dialogue between officials in order to make things happen at the end of the day. Together with the Track IIs, but not as a stand-alone. So the confidence building measures were very important. If you will ask me, I don't think they really helped to achieve the end goal, it helped by influencing other issues like: showing to leaders in Israel and around the Arab countries that, "hey, you know? Military people can talk to military people, and it's really, really helpful." But it did not contribute, at least in our working group, it did not really contribute to the understanding, because it's not that we, these confidence building measures did not build the confidence between the officials to a point that they reach, they would reach an agreement. But still, it was very important.

Hanna Notte

So building directly on that, then what was the missing piece, why the ACRS group eventually failed? Or what would have needed to be different. Or the additional piece to the confidence building measures for this to continue or to yield more...

Joseph Draznin

First of all, I don't, I'm not trying to be diplomatic or a politician, but I don't think it failed. I think it laid the foundation for the fact that you - even if you have a very serious issue - then one can talk and one can negotiate and one can learn to understand the other side. At the end of the day, I think that Israel - and this is very personal, not as an observer - I think that Israel went a long way, to try to reach an agreement. There was really an intention on the Israeli side, to try to reach a verbal,

written agreement on the Middle East nuclear free zone. I think that it was at least one party that made the decision to go all the way and insist, to come out from this dialogue with the same position that they came into the dialogue. And when you have such a thing, then it's a non-starter. But I don't think that ACRS failed. Because we are here in the Middle East in a long process of reaching all sorts of agreements. And there were a lot of friendship, personal friendship and the ability to talk to one another. There was a great contribution to the stability and to peace in our neighborhood from that conversation. It was a very serious discussion, very serious people from the Israeli side, from all the Arab side, and the international community. So I believe it was a very powerful attempt with excellent achievements.

Hanna Notte

Very good. And just building on that, maybe a sort of final question. Are there any specific lessons from the ACRS process itself, that we should heed, as we are now thinking about regional security process or taking that kind of work going forward? I mean, the region is much changed today, a country like Iran wasn't even part of the ACRS process. So with the understanding that we are in a much changed context, can we still take some specific lessons from the ACRS process and apply them today?

Joseph Draznin

The most important lesson is that there is a very limit to what you can achieve bilaterally. And the idea - to whatever bilateral dialogue there is, there will be also a multilateral - is very important. I, for example, just ended up with three years session at the Ministry as the director general of the Ministry for Regional Cooperation. And I can tell you that many, many potential partners told me: "It's very hard for us to talk to you directly on a bilateral manner, but if you bring in another partner, if you bring in international community, etc. It's easy for us - as an environment - to work and discuss bilateral issues." So, the one thing that I take from ACRS and the other multilaterals, that it's very important to have a multilateral dialogue adjunct to a bilateral dialogue. On each on each and every issue, not only on security, but very important. The atmosphere is totally different when you have a bilateral dialogue.

Hanna Notte

That's really interesting. Thank you for that. And maybe my final question: I mean, is there anything on this process that you think I haven't asked about, that should be said, that should be part of the of the historical records?

Joseph Draznin

No, I think that you - First of all, I spoke to many important people, and I will try to help you get other views also. I think that what you're doing is very important, because we have to learn from the experience and it was quite an experience, the multilaterals, especially ACRS. So I think that what you're doing in this study is very, very important.

Hanna Notte

Great. Thank you so much.

Joseph Draznin

All right. Thank you.

[End of transcript]