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Interview with Edward Ifft

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Summary:

Edward Ifft is a former US diplomat. He served as a member of the US delegation to ACRS.

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Edward Ifft, United States**Oral history interview conducted by Miles Pomper on Zoom on October 27, 2020****Miles Pomper**

So we needed a couple of formalities to kind of start the interview. If you could give your full name.

Edward Ifft

Yes, Edward Ifft.

Miles Pomper

Okay, and maybe talk a little bit about the dates that you were involved with the ACRS process and what your role was, and so on.

Edward Ifft

Yes. Well, looking at your timeline, it looks like I was involved more than I realized. I believe I was involved in the December 1991 meeting in Washington, DC. I went to Moscow for the September 1992 meeting. I was in Cairo, July 1993. I was at the Israel meeting at Ginosar in January 1994. And I guess back to Cairo, January, February 1994. So if that's correct, there were five encounters with ACRS. My role, see we signed the START I treaty in July 1991. And rather quickly, within a couple of months, I went on detail to OSIA to become Deputy Director of OSIA and helped them implement START.

Miles Pomper

Maybe you can tell what OSIA stands for?

Edward Ifft

Yeah, On-site Inspection Agency.

So then I was, I was asked by the State Department to go to these ACRS meetings to explain to them how the US and the Soviet Union had managed to do a lot of good things, even though trust was low and relations were not good. And this was a model which could be used in the Middle East. So the first meeting the one in December 1991, in Washington, I guess was the very beginning of the process.

Miles Pomper

Right.

Edward Ifft

And State asked OSIA if we could host these people, and maybe explain to them just how we and the Soviets had proceeded. So OSIA did a really good job. We invited a Russian general who had been involved in START to come to Washington. We hosted them for a big lunch at the Marriott Hotel at Dulles. And the director of OSIA, and the Russian general spoke at the luncheon. It was all very cordial, very good. And I being the sort of the State Department liaison at OSIA was involved in setting this up. So that was sort of interesting, because the OSIA people were very nervous about this, they had no experience dealing with the Middle East, right. And these were pretty high-level people. So they were very worried about who's allowed to sit next to whom. And so I consulted with the experts at State and they said "no problem, just seat them any way you want." Then they were worried about the menu, what about all these dietary issues? And again, state said forget about it, it's not an issue. So we chose chicken, which, of course, was the non-controversial main dish.

Miles Pomper

Universal banquet food.

Edward Ifft

That's right. That's right. And it all went very well. It really did. And I think the US Russian cordiality at that meeting did make a good impression. But, what happened there and thereafter was usually we would describe how we did it, and why can't you guys do the same thing? And they would say all "that's all very interesting, but the Middle East is different." That was always the comeback, "the Middle East is different." And that would be sort of the end of the conversation.

Miles Pomper

How did they say it was different?

Edward Ifft

Well, there was just, it was just different: "We hate each other in a different way than you and the Russians hated each other. And we have this animosity going back decades, whereas US-Soviet problems, were, by comparison, relatively recent." And I guess, although they didn't say this, the Middle East was a multilateral problem, which is much more difficult than just bilateral. So anyway, that was my first exposure to this group. And I think it went quite well. And then I guess, according to your timeline, that was sort of the beginning of ACRS.

Miles Pomper

Right.

Edward Ifft

Up to that point. It was just, it was a follow on to the Madrid conference, I guess.

Miles Pomper

Right. Yeah, it was one of the groups that came out of Madrid.

Edward Ifft

Yeah. But then, from that time on my role was to present a talk, a paper on some specific issue, like "how would you control cruise missiles?" Things like that. And again, they would listen politely, and they seem to be impressed, but then they would always say, "yes, but the Middle East is different." We could never do that here. So, Bob Einhorn was the leader on the US side. I think he put a lot of effort into it. And I think did a good job leading. But eventually what happened, as I'm sure you know, was that the Arabs' priority was to go right to the weapons of mass destruction, in particular, the nuclear aspect. Whereas the Israeli perspective was, no, no, we need peace first. You have to stop trying to push us into the sea. We can do CBMs. And so the whole thing eventually broke down. It's very interesting that the same scenario pretty much happened in trying to establish the WMD free zone in the Middle East. It was that same clash of priorities. And I was involved in the latter much, much more so. But again, it was exactly the same problem which plagued this in ACRS. I mean, the obvious solution, one would think, would be, okay, you have one priority, we have a different, why don't we work on both simultaneously? But somehow, somehow that idea never really gained any traction. I'm not sure either side even proposed it.

Miles Pomper

I guess partly because for the Israelis, the nuclear program was, they're willing to sort of talk about at some point in the future, but not...

Edward Ifft

Yeah, it was just out of bounds. They didn't want to talk about it at all. Right.

Miles Pomper

And you were, you know, obviously, you're more of the arms control part of it than the regional security part in a certain sense. Were you involved in, were any of your papers on these kinds of CBMs? Or was it all on things like, you know, actually control?

Edward Ifft

It was, it was CBMs. And it was also hard arms control. I mean, we pointed to the Helsinki process, and in particular, as I recall, the 1986 Stockholm Accord, which was the big breakthrough on the way to OSCE and, and eventually the CFE treaty and so on. And I remember, that was a big subject at this Ginosar meeting in Israel. And there would be some follow on questions, but then it always came back to, "it's great that you guys were able to do this, but that wouldn't work in our part of the world." Without ever explaining, why not? And why don't you try?

(Recording breaks up briefly)

Edward Ifft

Sorry, well, I was just gonna say one fella that stood out in these meetings was the science adviser to the king of Jordan, I don't remember his name.

Miles Pomper

Toukan.

Edward Ifft

Yeah, that's right. That's the guy. And it always seemed like he was sort of in the middle, sort of the reasonable guy trying to find a compromise between the Israelis and the more hardline Arab states.

Miles Pomper

It was interesting what you said about the Russians, because obviously there was this model of what happened in the US-Soviet talks and later Russian. There was a sense I got from other people I've talked to that, particularly after maybe that beginning, the Russians weren't really that involved in the process, that they were too kind of preoccupied with their own problems at that point?

Edward Ifft

Yes, I don't recall any Russians being involved in any of the later meetings that I went to. It was just this big meeting at Dulles, at the Marriott Hotel. Yeah, I don't. I have no recollection of Russians showing up beyond that. Maybe there was some, but I don't think so.

Miles Pomper

And did you get any sense that - I mean, there was the multilateral process and bilateral process in terms of the, you know, Israel-Jordan talks, and with the Palestinians and so on - did you sense any, was there any more kind of momentum or impetus to the process after some of those breakthroughs? Or was it slowed down after those were held up?

Edward Ifft

No, I didn't sense any change. It was almost as though we were starting over in each meeting, like nothing had been learned from the previous meetings, and it was just sort of the same, the same kind of issues being discussed. I mean, in a polite way, there wasn't any shouting, people were civilized, and they were reasonably friendly. But just substantively, there would be maybe an agreement, let's focus on one particular issue, or let's have a little group work on this. But, you never got the feeling that things were moving steadily in the right direction. Like I say, it was just sort of starting over again, each meeting.

Miles Pomper

It's kind of at a superficial level it sounds like from what you're saying.

Edward Ifft

Well. Yeah, I wouldn't call it superficial. It's just that - it's just that neither side seemed that eager to really solve the problem. Now, there was this meeting, there was this meeting in which Nabil Fahmy and David Ivry met. It was the Israel Ginosar meeting. Now, those were high level guys, important guys. And I think there was an important American guy there, also, as I recall. I can't remember his name.

That was maybe the highest, the highest-level meeting that I saw, in which people were really sort of laying out their conditions or their bottom lines, perhaps, but again, it didn't, it didn't seem able to achieve a breakthrough.

Miles Pomper

Was your sense, I mean I've heard from other people, that there's really just a few countries, you mentioned, Egyptians, Israelis, and Jordan, that almost everyone else was kind of a bystander almost?

Edward Ifft

Yes, I think the Palestinians didn't, as far as I can recall, the Palestinians just didn't contribute. I think clearly, the Egyptians and the Israelis were the clear leaders, with Jordan, as I say, kind of in the middle, acting reasonable but never quite, never quite able to bring the two together.

Miles Pomper

And you mentioned, Ivry and Fahmy, in terms of, you know, what was the kind of dynamic like between the two of them, in your view?

Edward Ifft

I don't remember and I think some of their talks were private. It wasn't all, it wasn't

all in a plenary session. So I don't know and maybe I think Bob Einhorn would go off in a room with the two of them, so he can supply a lot more of the dynamics than I can. Now, I know you don't want to talk about the WMD free zone, but there you want to talk about that a little bit? Because of the context.

Miles Pomper

We refer to that. I mean, there's a parallel project I know that people are doing on that.

Edward Ifft

Okay, well, I would just comment that the group I was in was basically an NGO, Track 1.5 group, led by Bernd Kubbig, of the Frankfurt Peace Research Institute. And he was able to get Israelis and Iranians in the same room along with the other usual suspects. And we actually wrote papers, good papers, which got published on, specifically, how would you do this? How would you do that? And those were fed to Jaakko Laajava was the UN coordinator. So that's way beyond what the ACRS group was ever able to do.

Miles Pomper

So, obviously, the ACRS process in the end didn't succeed. And you've talked about some of the reasons why. What, if any, do you think were the successes of the process?

Edward Ifft

Just getting them in the same room, I guess, at that stage was a significant achievement. I mean, I suppose it clarified the issues. It sort of clarified it for me, maybe it didn't for people who had lived it for years and years. That's about all I can say. I wasn't close enough. And I was not involved in the US preparations in Washington, which I think it's important to get a handle on that.

Miles Pomper

So you weren't involved, you mean in the preparations because you came in late or because...?

Edward Ifft

Well, each time Bob Einhorn would call me up and say, "we're having this meeting, would you be able to give a paper on X?" And I would say "yes." And then I would fly there, give the paper, be there for the whole meeting. But I was not invited to any of the preparatory meetings in Washington, in which the US presumably was laying out their tactics for how to make this work, and who they thought the good guys and the bad guys where if they spoke in those terms. I was not part of any of that. So, I didn't have those insights. Now, whether there was contact with Egyptian, Israeli embassies here in Washington, as part of this process, I have no idea. That would be an important question to ask probably. But again, I don't think these meetings ever produced any serious reports, or papers. I mean, maybe they did. I guess I seem to recall people trying to, to produce a sort of lowest common denominator report at the end of them, at the end of one of these meetings. But it wasn't anything that moves the ball forward, seemed to me.

Miles Pomper

I guess some of these CBMs, at least seemed to be some progress. They ultimately didn't go forward, but because of the larger picture.

Edward Ifft

My impression, and I'm not an expert, is that those things were primarily bilateral, and didn't come, weren't done in the ACRS forum. I could be wrong, but that's my impression.

Miles Pomper

You know, looking back and sort of looking forward, I mean, how do you think, if you were going to try this kind of thing again, a regional arms control negotiation, will or should be different, and sort of lessons drawn from this?

Edward Ifft

Well, I mean, it's really hard to say because the Israelis now - we're in the last couple of years - are just refusing to even go to meetings. I mean, what's happened at the

UN, I think, against the wishes of the US, declared we'll just go ahead and have a meeting, have a conference on a WMD free zone. And we hope the Israelis come but if they don't, we'll go ahead and meet anyway. And that's what happened. I mean, you have to get these people to at least talk to each other. And at the moment, that's not happening. But again, I mean, US leadership is needed. I mean, the Russians could be useful. I mean, the Russians are probably the only country that has good relations with both Israel and Iran. So, they're in a unique position to play a positive role. And I think, from time to time they have, but they're just bogged down with so many other problems that I think they're basically not doing it. They've got Syria, they've got Nagorno Karabakh, they've got all kinds of, they've got Ukraine, all kinds of other problems that they're sort of trying maybe to be honest brokers, some, in some of these, they're one of the belligerents. They just don't have the will or the diplomatic power, I think, to do much on this problem at the moment.

Miles Pomper

Some people have suggested that, you know, if Biden gets elected, and fulfills his promise to bring the US back into the JCPOA or maybe something slightly beyond that, that it would make sense to have some kind of regional process along with that. What's your sense?

Edward Ifft

Yeah, I think that makes sense. Sure, that makes sense. Because the nuclear dimension is very important. But I think that's a, separable piece with different kinds of solutions. But then there's, there's all this other mischief that the Iranians are causing throughout the region, which has people upset. But that's a separate issue with different players. So yes, I mean, I would think, I would think that one of the things that Biden would do would be have a big review of all of this and try to figure out how to proceed. But I think we ought to be willing to take advice from our allies, and from the Russians, and the Turks, and the French with long experience in the region, which in the past I don't think we've done.

But I don't have high hopes, I must say. Certainly worth a try.

Miles Pomper

High hope that it succeeds?

Edward Ifft

I mean, the JCPOA, getting that back on track, that's a necessary but not sufficient condition, I would guess, for dealing with these other problems. And that should be a high priority, because things are getting worse rapidly on that front.

Miles Pomper

Do you think there's any momentum from these various peace deals that the Israelis are doing with some of the Arab states?

Edward Ifft

Well, it sounds good. I think it's - I think it's positive. And I guess the Trump administration deserves some credit for that. I mean, apparently, they have brokered some of these, so good for them. Yeah, I think I mean, that's all positive.

Miles Pomper

What do you think in terms of these kind of talks?

Edward Ifft

Well, they provide a positive background. I mean, Saudi Arabia needs to be brought along, in all of this. I mean, they clearly have a key role to play. I mean, a more liberal regime in Israel would, might be a necessary condition to really get anywhere.

Miles Pomper

I guess we'll have a new government in a couple of years.

Edward Ifft

Yeah, yes. I'm not sure we can wait that long. But yes.

So, I mean, one interesting question is, in a Biden administration, how much priority is the Middle East going to have? We're now obsessed with China, aren't we? And we've got all of these Russia issues. And the general trend in the US is to get out of the Middle East. So that doesn't point in the direction of a vigorous US diplomatic

effort.

Miles Pomper

Yeah. Good point. Okay. So, as I said we wouldn't, we'd make it fairly brief. Is there anything I haven't asked about that you think I should have?

Edward Ifft

No, I don't think so. I don't know how helpful this has been.

Miles Pomper

No, it's been helpful.

Edward Ifft

Everybody, everybody who tries in the Middle East comes away frustrated. So maybe, maybe there isn't a grand cosmic deal out there. Maybe it's going to be a series of, these little bilateral things and CBMs and so on. I don't know. But I mean, I do think we have a responsibility to try.

And I suppose having the UN involved makes sense. Although, so far, they haven't been able to make much progress either. I've pretty much told you more than I know already.

[End of transcript]