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Interview with Dennis Ross

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Summary:

Dennis Ross is a former US diplomat. He served as a member of the US delegation to ACRS.

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Dennis Ross, United States**Oral history interview conducted by Miles Pomper on Zoom on September 18, 2020****Miles Pomper**

So, let me do kind of preliminary things just for the record, if you could give your full name.

Dennis Ross

Dennis B. Ross.

Miles Pomper

And maybe you could talk a little bit about how you got involved, and what your role was in the ACRS process. So, your background that led to that.

Dennis Ross

I guess I had responsibility for really shaping the diplomacy for Secretary Baker then, in the process of getting to the Madrid conference, and developing the very concept for, one element of which was also having a multilateral process where the idea was to create working groups, Israel would widen the orbit of those with whom it had a relationship within the region, but the working groups themselves would focus on the sources of, many sources of instability in the region.

And again, you have to look at this as in the aftermath of the first Gulf War, we were looking at the kind of things that contributed to the war, or at least instability in the region, one of which was the flow of weapons in the region. And so that meant we thought about, could we create a working group that dealt with arms control within the region? And there were five working groups. You know, there were, again, one was in economics, one was a refugee working group, one was an environmental working group one was a water group. The whole idea was, let's focus on these sources of potential instability and conflict in the region. And what we can do to minimize that or manage that. Arms control itself is the concept, much more of managing conflicts, making them less prone to eruption, trying to build into or trying to build into the region, what could be different kinds of mechanisms that could reduce the risk of conflict and escalation. That was the idea behind the Arms Control Working Group, which then it lends itself very well to the others. And as I said, I had a responsibility for shaping the overall concept to begin with.

And I was particularly wedded to the idea of the multilateral working groups, because I thought this could be one of the innovations in the aftermath of the Gulf War, that could have an effect on the region long term.

As it relates to the arms control working group, it is important to understand my responsibilities for Baker were quite broad.

He looked at me principally on the Middle East, but he also looked at me principally on Soviet policy.

Miles Pomper

And your formal title is Director of Policy Planning at this point?

Dennis Ross

I was Director of Policy Planning, but, you know, he ran the department through a very small number of aides. And I was one of those; Bob Zoellick and I were the two people he depended on to do the conceptual work and to implement the policies that were most important to Baker. To begin with, he liked to have us both on the trips with him, we decided that wasn't sustainable for us. We then divided up the world and our responsibilities.

When we were traveling with him, we were expected to be helping to run the State Department from wherever we were with him. Bill Burns was my principal deputy. And he was pretty much running the staff while I was basically serving as this full-time aide to Baker in terms of whatever was hot. I would have to be addressing that.

And especially that was true on trips. I had a major role in the actual diplomacy in terms of the Madrid process. But because I had a background in arms control as well.

I decided that for the opening session, when we met for the first time, I would present basically a concept for the working group. That was really kind of my involvement ON ACRS. And I'd say, after the initial scene setting and laying out the concept, IN which I know I borrowed traditional concepts of arms control when I made the initial presentation to the group. After that initial involvement, the truth is I was not very much involved with it, because once again I was dealing with everything else.

Miles Pomper

You're at a higher level?

Dennis Ross

Unfortunately, because I had an interest in it, but I also wasn't in a position where I had the time to deal with it. But I did feel it was important for me to try to help frame the issues and to shape what the approach might be. And so that was pretty much my relationship to it, both helping to originate the very idea of it but then trying to present in the first meeting, what would be a conceptual approach to it. Bob Einhorn who worked for me on the policy planning staff then took the real responsibility for managing what we were doing it.

Miles Pomper

So maybe you could talk a little bit more about what you're saying on the conceptual approach and kind of what expectations you had, because obviously, this was a very different environment than the US-Soviet Union relationship.

Dennis Ross

Absolutely. But I understood that arms control was never a substitute for political agreements, it was always designed to, to make the world safer. And, maybe by producing agreements, you could minimize some of the political differences and maybe, you know, shape different relationships over time. And that was highly relevant for the Middle East. Because here, we needed to be able to show there were ways to cooperate. And if you began to cooperate, not only could you make the region safer, but you would begin to build a web of relationships, that was part of the concept behind all of the working groups and the multilateral approach. But that was certainly part and parcel of this.

I understood from the beginning that Egypt would at least below the level of Mubarak, in the foreign ministry, were riveted on getting Israel into the nonproliferation treaty. Well, that wasn't gonna happen. But I understood that the, you know, the kind of euphemism for that, or at least a euphemism for dealing with the Israeli nuclear program was a zone free of weapons of mass destruction. And knowing that I wanted to play with that concept, but I also had to deal with what was the Israeli concern. The Israeli concern was that, whatever they would say, of course, you know, they were dealing in a region still where outside of Egypt. They were still dealing with regimes that were closed and many of them still rejected their existence, at least in a formal way. Their inherent instinct was, last thing they could do was give up, what they saw as their ultimate deterrent, and others wouldn't be transparent. If we created transparency rules as related to conceivably their nuclear program, they'd be the only ones who'd be subject to that. I had to find a way to square the circle. How could embed the nukes in weapons of mass destruction more generally. The concept was, yes, let's accept as a broad objective, the aim of achieving a region that is free of weapons of mass destruction. But to deal with the Israeli concerns, I said, let's deal with chemical, biological and nuclear weapons in that order. Other countries had chemical weapons. This allowed for the Israelis not to feel that they're being singled out. I'm focusing on this Not because this was the overriding concept, but because I understood this was an issue that had to be dealt with upfront.

Miles Pomper

Yeah.

Dennis Ross

We would have endless debates otherwise. I had to create something that both sides could live with. And a kind of face saver for each side. And the irony here is the two poles were Egypt and Israel. Because nobody else literally nobody else was pushing this issue other than the Egyptians. I knew to manage this, I had to deal with that. Now, this was, obviously I knew this, because I was dealing with Egyptians all the

time on everything else, related to the peace issue.

That was one, you know, one element of this, the other element was okay, how do we use concepts that had been very effective in other locales, in terms of confidence building?

Let's focus on the idea that First things first, we can paint a broad objective of where we want to go, that was the virtue of the zone free of weapons of mass destruction.

On the Arab side, there's always a desire to say okay, tell us what the objective is, what the act, tell us what the outcome is supposed to be. And then we can, we can work in phases towards it. That lends itself well to this concept of chemical, biological and nuclear. We'll work through each in phases, but this was more of the overarching political goal. Under that umbrella then then I said 'okay, after that we have to figure out a way for how we can begin to reduce the risk of conflict. We have to create confidence building measures so that countries don't feel like they have to be at a high level of readiness, because that can lead to mistakes and misperceptions and war through inadvertence, or miscalculation. And let's think about what we can do in the realm of confidence building measures, to establish not just the level of cooperation, but begin to change the need for high, high levels of readiness of forces in the region.'

I then introduced the concept of, 'let's talk about different kinds of confidence building measures, can we look at certain types of exercises that would be excluded? Can we look at the possibility of certain kinds of joint exercises that could actually be carried out? Can we talk about creating hotlines to avoid again, in a crisis any misunderstanding or miscalculation? Can we talk about kinds of common concerns?' For example, certain search and rescue missions, this could be common for everyone here. Are there ways for us to build cooperation in there or even run certain kinds of exercises on that which, again, almost have a kind of neutral quality to them, we're not doing anybody a favor.

But this is a kind of collective thing. When I made the first presentation, I made the opening presentation to, to the group, the first time we convene, this is how I framed it. And I'll say I did it this way, for another reason as a negotiator, what are the things you're trying to always do as a mediator, one of the things you're always trying to do from the beginning, is show the parties who are involved, they have much more in common than they realize, they come to the table with an expectation, a very high suspicion, and very low belief that they really have anything in common.

Now, even here, I mean, you know, this was the US at the height of its power. There is no longer a Soviet Union. It's a unipolar world. There's no great power rivalry here. We have just demonstrated in the Gulf War, our capacity to mobilize the world, and then to carry out what is a very impressive military operation that ends the war within, within 100 hours.

And that's not quite right, but the ground war was over within 100 hours. We've been using an air war for six weeks. Anyway, my point was, I need I knew I needed to show everybody there, that this was not an impossible task, was they might have come in feeling like this is pie in the sky.

And I want to show No, actually, we can do things that are very practical, that are in everybody's interest. That doesn't compromise one side or the other.

But that can advance this process. And this is something that once we can begin to show the cooperation as possible, even at low levels, we can build new baselines of cooperation. And so that was very much the kind of the presentation that I made.

Miles Pomper

And how was that received?

Dennis Ross

Quite well, ironically, because again, for the Egyptians, they were satisfied that okay, our objective zone free of weapons of mass destruction will mean eventually we'll get to the Israeli nuclear issue. Okay, we understand we can't deal with it up front, but it means we're going to get to it. Israelis were fine for two reasons. One, this meant there was a very long process before the nuclear issue would ever be raised. And the kind of things that might change in the region because of what we were doing. By the time we got to that, A) there was plenty of time to wait for it but, B) the

circumstances themselves might be different by the time we got to it so they were satisfied. All the other countries that came in, it was like you know they're walking into a reality that is where they have no expectations.

I mean, there's no expectations, and we're here because of the Americans. At this point you can't resist United States and we're here because the Americans. At least those in the region know those from outside the region to take part because they're believers in this, the Europeans and Canadian. They're believers in this. And the Russians were happy because they had a co-chair status, what they wanted at that point was just to preserve some kind of status.

Miles Pomper

They weren't practically very involved?

Dennis Ross

They were not. I mean, look, they were, you have to understand many of the Russian officials who were involved were people I knew, from over several years of working with them, and in some ways it was kind of heartbreaking. Because the country had collapsed. They had no idea. They were saying, 'I don't know if I'll be here the next time we have a meeting.' And some were asking, 'could I help them in terms of possible jobs outside of Russia?' They were in a state of complete uncertainty. And it was hard to get them to make contributions, because they also didn't know what their own policy was, at this point, things were in such disarray. So no one feels they can say no to the United States at this point. But that being said, not saying no doesn't mean yes.

You know, I was speaking to a group that came in with no expectations. Who were there because, in a sense, we required them to be there. And none of them had any background in arms control.

Miles Pomper

Wow.

Dennis Ross

The idea that I could lay out, they're all sort of functional players. And they know I'm operating in a political level. That also gives them more of a reason to be kind of interested. And, when I lay out this concept, it's amazing. They find it interesting. For them it showed that maybe there's something that can be done after all.

Miles Pomper

This was at Madrid, right?

Dennis Ross

This is post Madrid. Because this is the first meeting, look at Madrid, what we do is we launch the bilateral negotiations, the invitation says, after two weeks, we will organize a meeting of the multilaterals. It was done to deal with the Syrians who didn't want multilateral talks at all because they said multilateral talks mean normalization of Israel. Assad's argument was to say, 'how can we have normalization of Israel when they still occupy our territory?' They didn't take part. And they objected to the idea that the multilaterals would start immediately, but they accepted the idea that we could organize two weeks after Madrid, we could have an organizing meeting. We have the first meeting, actually, in Moscow. We had the first meeting in Moscow, because even though the Russian are going through the throes of revolutionary change, Yeltsin insists that they will host the multilaterals. We offered to Yeltsin, look, if you've got too many other things you're doing right now, you don't need to host it. For Yeltsin, this was a sign that they were still a great power. That's just a general meeting, the first meeting of the first formal meeting of the of ACRS is in the State Department. And in early 1992.

Miles Pomper

This is where you gave this presentation?

Dennis Ross

Yes, that's where I gave the presentation. You know, the Arab countries that were there, their representatives, they were actually enthusiastic to begin with. And it's not all that surprising. I mean, first of all, this was a conceptual presentation, and nothing was required of them. The idea was, okay, here's a conceptual presentation. Now you

can begin to work and work in these areas. And I think, again, if you talked to Bob Einhorn, I think he'll tell you that initially, there's a kind of genuine interest in kind of follow up. But as I said, my involvement pretty much stops after that, other than being briefed about it.

Miles Pomper

Sure.

Dennis Ross

You know, I'm being asked to do very different things in this.

Miles Pomper

And I know especially when you got into the Clinton administration, you were very involved in the bilateral track and negotiations with Palestinians and Jordanians, and so on. What is your sense of? I mean, maybe it was hard to tell from where you are, because you're so immersed in the other stuff. But do you have any sense of the relationship between those kinds of bilateral talks and the multilaterals? Did they help the multilaterals, vice versa?

Dennis Ross

Look, the dividing point here is Netanyahu gets elected. And the whole character begins to change. Had Peres been reelected, especially given the way he viewed the region, which he saw the importance not just of ending the conflict but transforming the region. But a new Middle East. I mean, it's actually what we're now beginning to finally see, it's just it's a shame that he's no longer alive because the UAE peace with Israel is, in fact exactly what he envisioned. But it all changes with Netanyahu as the Syrian track ends and the multilateral process also ends as the absence of any movement makes it harder to rationalize taking part among the other Arabs. The Syrians are, more against this, although they weren't taking part before. They're not that much effected, but it affects the climate when there's no longer negotiations with the Syrians. Again, part of the justification, okay, you've got bilateral negotiations going on. It's okay for us to be doing this. Well, suddenly, when they no longer take place with the Syrians, it becomes a bit harder to rationalize the part of some of the Arab partners, or those included at that stage.

In answer to your question when there was hope, within the bilaterals, the multilaterals, always those operating and felt like they had much more space. Much more space meant they could try out ideas. Again, the idea of political space, creating room to be creative, to try out ideas, not to feel that you're operating within a straitjacket. And that everything has to be every move has to be very minimal. And every move, you know, has to be defined in a way that is narrowly constructed and confined. As the political space began to decline, working groups were still meeting. And, you know, some of the working groups, like in Oman, with water there, and even the refugees group that the Canadians led, they were having serious discussions. In this one, I think the discussions continued, but as the political space, I think, tightened, then the Egyptian would become more obstreperous in meetings. When Barak is elected and there is a sense of possibility with the Palestinians and the Syrians, the multilaterals resumed for a while.

Miles Pomper

But not ACRS, right?

Dennis Ross

You know, I don't recall specifically, but I know, we actually had a meeting with Putin in 2000 as a way of kind of resuming the broader multilateral working group sessions. But yeah, I mean, I think when it breaks down, they all stop and ACRS was probably the first victim.

Miles Pomper

It was interesting what you said about the Egyptians, because in the general description as well, the Egyptians were never going to basically agree to this. They played along for a little while, but ultimately, the nuclear issue would have killed it.

Dennis Ross

Yeah.

Miles Pomper

But the link you suggest is that maybe they would have been more willing to accept some of these agreements if the overall peace process had been moving forward? Is that an accurate description?

Dennis Ross

For sure. Yeah, I mean, Egypt always had this kind of strange ambivalence. They felt a unique ownership of peace, and they wanted to be the bridge to everybody else they wanted, wanted everybody else in the region to work through them with Israel, partly because it elevated Egypt's role partly because they saw it was what they felt was appropriate. In any case, it helped to rationalize why they'd been the first to make peace and for those who criticized them, this showed the kind of role that they could play to facilitate it further. But the Foreign Ministry always had this thing about nuclear weapons.

One of the interesting things in 1995 before one of the UN meetings on the nuclear issue, the Syrian ambassador who was their negotiator came to me and he was very upset. Because he saw what the Egyptians were trying to do. They're trying to introduce the nuclear issue at that time, in a way that he said is going to make it hard for the Israelis. It's the Syrian Ambassador saying, Egypt's gonna make it hard for Israel, and what was his explanation? Because they don't want a deal between us and Israel. And he was basically saying what the Egyptians are doing, is that they're trying to put Israel in the corner, literally quote him Walid Muallem who later became the foreign minister and not long ago passed away was then saying Egypt was trying to put the Israelis in the corner, so they won't be able to make concessions towards Syrians and there won't be a deal. And he's saying to me, you have to stop the Egyptians. To which I said, you know, you can go to other Arabs and make the same point and that might actually have an effect. I said, I'll do what we can. But you know this is not just you, coming to me complaining about the Egyptians saying it is up to me to stop them. But that was Egypt. When I would raise this issue with Mubarak it was clear this was less an issue for him. But it was clearly always an issue in the foreign ministry.

Miles Pomper

And you were, I think, the principal negotiator from the US on the Jordan deal?

Dennis Ross

Yeah, I was our principal negotiator for the Clinton years.

Miles Pomper

I think there also seems to be a dynamic there between Jordan and Egypt in this process, too, that there is some kind of that rivalry as well?

Dennis Ross

Oh, absolutely, the Jordanians had a long history of quiet cooperation with the Israelis, especially in the security areas. And they look at ACRS as a kind of interesting forum for them to actually expand the scope of cooperation. Now, the truth is, by 1994, when we had an agreement, a peace agreement between Israel and Jordan, that just meant that they were more open to it, but they too, looked at the Egyptians as always trying to put a spoke in the wheel. It was interesting to have both the Syrians and Jordanians who didn't agree on much this they agreed on: that the Egyptians were a problem on these issues. And it wasn't, by the way, just on these issues. There was a point when I negotiated the Hebron protocol, and a certain point, unbeknownst to me, Mubarak told Arafat not to accept a proposal I'd made to settle it. And I couldn't understand why Arafat had walked away. And I got really mad at Arafat. I won't say how but we then discovered what had happened. He maneuvered by calling King Hussein and asking King Hussein to come visit and to work with me and him. And this was his way of getting around the Egyptians. One of the things that really pissed off Mubarak is when I announced the agreement, I thank King Hussein, and I got a question 'what about Egypt?' And I said they didn't play a role.

Miles Pomper

Wow, that stung.

Dennis Ross

So just shows you a little bit of what was going on in the rivalries at the time.

Miles Pomper

You mentioned earlier, the region now is kind of what I guess, Peres wanted, ultimately, this kind of regional cooperation with at least some of it now that we have the UAE and Bahrain agreements. Do you think there's a space now for this kind of discussion again? Or what's your feeling on that?

Dennis Ross

I mean, it's an interesting question, because what we're going to see is an increasing degree of security cooperation. You know, I can see for example, look, we know there's a lot going on in terms of cyber cooperation. We know there's a lot going on in terms of intelligence. I think what we will see is increasing amounts of intelligence on early warning, ballistic missile defense, as well.

But, again, broadly defined, loosely defined, think about the following. In a, let's say, there's a change in administrations, it'll be very hard for a Biden administration to produce an agreement that is sustainable with the Iranians, if it doesn't have something on the region.

Now, one thing you could do is the idea you're gonna do a grand bargain, I think is pie in the sky-- But everybody shares the idea. Look, Hezbollah doesn't want a war with Israel, Israel doesn't want a war with Hezbollah. Iran doesn't, Iran is good at having others involved. But, it doesn't want to have a war. What it's doing in terms of weapon fabrication, trying to put precision guided capabilities on rockets given to Hezbollah and the like. It runs the risk of at some point triggering a war that won't remain localized between Israel and Hezbollah, just given the reality that Israel won't take 3000 rockets a day, and not hit Iran, not have Iran pay a price if Hezbollah is hitting Israel with thousands of rockets a day. Iran doesn't want such a war, Hezbollah doesn't want that, and Israel doesn't want that. They're not giving up their conflict. But none of them want a war that can escalate like that. I could easily envision a set of threshold understandings that don't end their conflict but establishes limits on the kinds of weapons that can be transferred versus those that cannot be. And by the way, if that can be done, that can be a regional approach. It doesn't have to be singling anybody out. What the Iranians hate is being singled out. But this could be a regional approach, the kinds of weapons that will be transferred or can't be transferred. The Gulf states would like it, because it could also apply to what the Iranians transferred to the Houthis. I mean, there is a way to get into arms control as part of a broader approach, and in a sense, taking advantage of that possibility. So yeah, in my mind, there is some application here that we should be thinking about.

Miles Pomper

Do you think it was a mistake back in the original process to not include the Iranians and some of the other countries that were not invited?

Dennis Ross

I will say this, I mean, it would have been a bridge too far to include them at that point. You have to understand, they're doing everything they can to frustrate what we're trying to do. They literally are paying Islamic Jihad to carry out acts of terror against the Israelis. And you know, the perception of them, even at that time by the Gulf states is very negative, I think, had we tried to bring them into it, we would have faced a lot of resistance. The idea that they could have been kept out of it forever, was quite possibly also wrongheaded. Because they could frustrate anything you're trying to do. Not only that, but other in the region will rightly say that they cannot accept certain limits on weapons if the limits are not going to also apply to the Iranians. I always assumed at some point, we would have an opening to see if they would join. So I don't think it was a mistake, to not include them at the outset.

Because I don't think we could have. True that everybody wasn't saying no to us at that point. But I think you know, we would have faced the kind of collective opposition to their inclusion up front. And it made sense to first establish this, and then we could talk about pulling them in and I seem to recall having discussions at the time on the issue of Iran.

Miles Pomper

You had mentioned at the beginning your kind of sequencing you'd hope to go through in terms of going from chemical and then biological and eventually getting to the nuclear issue. Were you surprised or disappointed at all that the Egyptians - you

know, cause this is also when obviously the Chemical Weapons Convention was finally being wrapped up kind of at the same time - and the Egyptians kind of balked at signing that, was that kind of a disappointment in terms of that plan of progression?

Dennis Ross

Well, it was, look, I was realistic. I was coming up with a device to sort of square the circle between the Israelis and Egyptians who were on opposite poles. How can I come up with a formula that could work for both? And I know, that I'm sure that in doing this, I worked with Bob Einhorn, I'm sure that a lot of the input for this came from him. But was I surprised? No, because the Egyptians on these issues were consistently disappointing.

But, you know, he, they were clearly always trying to, to preserve their own options. And I always think there was a little bit of, I think, concern that there would be a look at the past, Their use of chemical weapons in Yemen. I think they wanted to keep their options open to continue to be able to use it. But I think they also want to ensure there was no serious review of past action. So I wasn't totally shocked by this.

Miles Pomper

Interesting. Well, this has been really fascinating. I'm sorry, we had the technical problems at the beginning. Sorry, I know you have to go soon. There anything that I haven't included that you you'd like to talk about?

Dennis Ross

I think as I said, I'll just conclude by saying I think it is a good time to try to revisit this. And] arms control works when there's a mutual stake in avoiding conflict. That doesn't mean you're ending what is a political conflict and political conflict that may be underpinned by covert forms of conflict as well. But this notion that the Iranians and the Israelis have no interest in a direct war with each other. And the truth is right now, Lebanon being basically a failed state, Hezbollah doesn't have that interest, either. The only way Hezbollah might have an interest in a conflict is if it looks like the pressure on them to relieve their control through a reform process could threaten their hold on Lebanon then they might choose to bring the house down and divert attention away, but I think short of that Nasrallah has no such interest right now. And the Iranians understand, I believe that if a war erupted between Israel and Hezbollah, they won't escape direct involvement in it, at some high cost to them. You know, that creates, in my mind the basis for doing something or at least trying maybe you can't succeed, but it's worth a try.

Miles Pomper

We may want to continue that conversation offline.

Dennis Ross

Okay.

Miles Pomper

Hopeful, hopeful way to end for somewhat unfortunate chapter that didn't finish in terms of the '90s.

[End of transcript]