

November 2, 2020

Interview with Ariel Levite

Citation:

"Interview with Ariel Levite", November 2, 2020, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Interview conducted by Hanna Notte with editorial assistance from and prepared for publication by Tricia White. <https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/300078>

Summary:

Dr. Ariel Levite is a former Israeli senior official. He served as a member of the Israeli delegation to ACRS and the inter-ministerial committee on arms control.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY)

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Transcript - English

Ariel Levite, Israel**Oral history interview conducted by Hanna Notte on Zoom on November 2, 2020****Hanna Notte**

Thank you. All right, this is the 2nd of November and the ACRS oral history interview with Dr. Ariel Levite. Thank you so much for doing this. Let me start with a rather broad question, maybe you can just explain to us what your role was during the ACRS process, in what capacity you were involved in the process for your government?

Ariel Levite

So, in essence, I had three different roles and sometimes four. I was a member of the inter-ministerial steering committee on arms control and regional security. So that was, in essence, the policymaking organ. I was the coordinator of that working group that was chaired by David Ivry, so I had a fair amount of coordination effort to take in carrying out whatever it had, both to help prepare, and then subsequently to oversee the implementation. I was leading the Israeli delegation to some of the intersessional activities of the operational baskets. And, so those were three, and occasionally I also accompanied Mr. Ivry to his meetings with the Prime Minister to brief and get guidance from the political authorities. So those were, essentially, the functions I performed.

Hanna Notte

Great, thank you. And can you explain a little the domestic process to put together the Israeli delegation for the ACRS workshops and plenaries?

Ariel Levite

So, well, Israel had a long tradition of doing disarmament in the UN settings - a process that was mostly handled by the Foreign Ministry, and to a modest degree also involving, here and there, the Atomic Energy Commission - but had no experience whatsoever in arms control and regional security. And so, ahead of the convening of the multilaterals as a whole, Israel scrambled to try to develop both a strategy for engagement in that process, as well as to set up the mechanisms for supporting such an undertaking in earnest. So, there was a very high-level process that was run for about, I think, it was two months or thereabouts, that was coordinated by Sallai Merridor. Have you interviewed Sallai already?

Hanna Notte

I will, a bit later in November.

Ariel Levite

Okay. So Sallai was the principal assistant to the Minister of Defense, Moshe Arens. And so, Sallai had coordinated a process of trying to develop the hallmarks of a strategy that involved a few handpicked individuals from the military, the intelligence, and other parts of the security establishment that I was involved in. And then, once that process had produced its recommendations, those were then presented to a very high-level sort of brainstorming and decision-making process, chaired by the Ministry of Defense, which then had presented the recommendations to the Prime Minister. And that's how the process was essentially run. It was the culmination of this preliminary preparatory process that ultimately set up the inter-ministerial steering committee, working the parameters of how to coordinate the activities, the composition of the working group on the Israeli side, and so on.

Hanna Notte

Very good. Thank you, very useful. Can you talk a little bit about Israel's motivations to participate in the Madrid peace conference? And then also to join ACRS? And the objectives that the Government of Israel was hoping to achieve in ACRS?

Ariel Levite

Wow, that's complicated. And quite a bit outside my portfolio. Let me put it this way: Clearly, a process that involved peacemaking with the Arab world was always Israel's hope, wish, ambition, desire, dream, whatever you want to call it. It was also clear that an effort of this nature would clearly involve some painful decisions on the Israeli side. Particularly on territories on the one hand, and on the Palestinian issue in

particular. So, one important dimension of this was that this process would not merely yield concessions on the Israeli side on some of those issues, but would also involve, in return, a historical process of reconciliation of the Arab world with Israel. And clearly, the logic behind that process was that if one created not just the right ambience, but the right base of support from across the Arab world, it would be easier to resolve the bilateral issues where a lot of suspicion prevailed. Now, some of the multilateral working groups clearly reflected common interest. Some of them reflected areas where there was both common interest and some divergence, even outright conflict of interest. Some of them were seen as regional issues that you couldn't resolve bilaterally, regardless of where they're on the table. And some of them were clearly issues that, putting them in a broader framework was a recipe for tapping also extra-regionals to support moving forward.

So, the combination of these factors had created this arms control and regional security among the other working groups. And Israel was clearly highly ambivalent about that working group, to say the least, on the grounds that the agenda that the Arab side, led by Egypt, had put forward for this was essentially to disarm Israel. First and foremost in the nuclear realm, but also from advanced conventional capabilities. And so, Israel approached this with a deep degree of suspicion that the agenda would be biased against Israel, that the composition of the group would create automatically an Arab majority that would coalesce around the lowest common denominator, and that Israel's interest in this process would be somewhat protected by the United States, but in essence Israel would be on its own. So obviously, that created a degree of suspicion and ambivalence about all of this activity. The effort to try and assuage some of those concerns was that it would also involve some normalization, some dealings with issues that were broader than just the Israeli nuclear capabilities or conventional capabilities, and so on. And some assurances from the United States that it would ultimately not push Israel beyond its comfort zone. And that there would be ground rules for the process that would give Israel a measure of confidence that, at the end of the day, no decisions against Israel could be taken, in the extremis by having a consensus rule. So, all of these basically offset the Israeli anxiety about joining this working group. But in essence, it was a package deal, right? There were five working groups, refugees, and water, and regional economic development, and so on, and regional security was one of them.

Hanna Notte

And just to be clear, that package deal was arrived upon by mutual consultation in Madrid? Or it was an American proposal to proceed that way, or?

Ariel Levite

Well, it was fundamentally an American-cooked package. You have to bear in mind that the Soviet Union, and then Russia, was quite down, so the Americans basically could sort of produce and run with whatever package they wanted. Russia would be there, Europe would be there. A couple of others that you were not sure why they would be there, say Australia, and so on, but on the whole, that process was American-centric.

Hanna Notte

Okay, I was actually going to ask, just building on that, as the process unfolded over the years, could you talk a little bit about the role of various external players, not just the United States, but then Russia and others that came to the table in addition to the regionals? Because some of the plenaries also happened in Moscow, of course at the beginning, it was sort of split between Washington and Moscow to give an equal role to both.

Ariel Levite

Yes, to give the semblance of an equal role - not to give them an equal role, to give them a semblance of an equal role. Yeah. Well, there was a steering, obviously, there were the three bilateral tracks of the peace process. And then there was the multilateral tracks in which there were five working groups and a steering committee for the multilateral working groups. I was barely involved in the steering committee, other than to make sure that whatever transpires in the working group itself is not somehow bypassed or usurped by the steering committee. But that wasn't, at the end of the day, too hard. Because everyone understood that that working group was

typically sensitive, and so that was not too big of an issue, and so on. The bilateral tracks clearly were the preeminent American interest, in political terms, also the preeminent interest of the non-Americans. That although they played a more moderate role, they were hopeful that ultimately this process would transform the Middle East. So they were quite happy to lend their support to the American-led process. And, I was only involved in some parts of the Jordanian track, but on the other tracks I had no role whatsoever.

Hanna Notte

Okay.

Ariel Levite

Because the Jordanian track did have a little bit of arms control on the agenda. And so, essentially, we were largely on our own, I mean, as a working group. Although there were all of these coordinating mechanisms, and that process was tightly run by the Americans with some symbolic presence from Russia. And clearly, the Americans decided, for a variety of reasons, to invite other parties to play a role in that process, and some of it was quite helpful. Turkey played a helpful role, Australia played a helpful role, Canada played an extremely, extremely helpful role, and so on. The Netherlands was an important player, and France on and off. But all of that were - I am talking about our working group, but on the whole, I mean, make no mistake, it was the Americans who ran it.

Hanna Notte

Okay.

Ariel Levite

And this was also what brought about the downfall of the process, because when the Americans lost interest in the multilateral process and were no longer convinced how important it was in propelling forward the bilateral processes, the multilaterals came to a screeching halt and the arms control and regional security was part of those casualties of this decision.

Hanna Notte

Can I ask you a follow up on that? I take your point about you not being heavily involved in the bilaterals. But how did Israel see the relationship between the bilateral and multilateral tracks?

Ariel Levite

There is a question that precedes that question. Not all the bilateral tracks were treated with equal importance or with equal anticipation of progress, okay? So clearly, Jordan was much riper for progress than the others. Everyone knew that the Palestinian one would be completely charged. There wasn't much happening on the Lebanese and Syrian front to begin with. So, the bilaterals were clearly the priority. With one caveat, and the caveat was *those* multilateral tracks where Israel saw an opportunity, a favorable climate to attract extra-regionals to pour a lot of resources into improving the situation in the region, in regional economic development, and in environment, and in water. Those assumed importance, but the importance was mostly reflected in the role that the Israeli corresponding ministries were investing in trying to promote these particularistic interests. In the broader scheme of things, the priority was by far assigned to the bilaterals.

Hanna Notte

Okay, understood, thank you. I want to talk a little bit about the work in the operational basket now, in which you were heavily involved. I mean, first, I want to ask you, I understand that at the first plenary in Washington, DC in May 1992, a decision was taken to adopt a somewhat educational approach to bring in outside expertise on how confidence building measures were done in the U.S.-Soviet theatre during the Cold War, or in Europe. How helpful was that? Was that quite instructive? I mean, how do you evaluate the decision to take this approach with hindsight? And how was it received by other regional delegations?

Ariel Levite

So if we had - let's take one step backwards: The agenda of the working group was clearly quite an ambitious agenda, an agenda that in many parts of the world has

never been accomplished, let alone in a region where there were not even diplomatic relations between the parties. So, for those who wanted to turn the working group into another first UN First Committee-like exercise, they were seeing ACRS as merely an opportunity to make the agenda more poignant and more directional. So, there was clear sense that not only was the agenda unrealistically ambitious, it also was not particularly conducive to building trust between the parties. But there was also the sense that the expertise around the region for dealing, not with disarmament UN style, but with actual arms control, was nowhere to be found. None of the regional parties, with the partial exception of Turkey - that was partly regional, partly the extra regional - has ever had any arms control experience to speak of. So, that meant that if one wanted to be practical, you had to first engage in an educational process that would try to demystify what this was all about, one.

Two, that would help the respective representative from the various regional countries gradually acquire the terminology, the concepts, the mechanisms that would make them assess: progress is something they could live with. That would give a time for mutual familiarization with each other. That would identify who and whose experience could be conducive to moving the regional parties along. And so, the education process was not just on the operational basket, the educational process was also on the conceptual basket. So how do we learn from the Argentinian-Brazilian nuclear disarmament experience, for example? And for most of the countries in the region that were involved in this exercise, this was a very useful exercise. And the regional parties that were tapped to lead some of the activities were considered quite helpful. Not all and everywhere, just to give you one example. Every effort to invoke the CSCE-OSCE experience immediately began to create some anxiety among some of the Arab parties that their regime will fall victim to the same outcome that affected the Soviet Union. It will basically bring down non-democratic regimes. So, that the process which would in any way resemble the European process, Helsinki process, would be a process that would be inimical to the stability of the regimes. So, there was an effort to try and, on the one hand, draw on the practical lessons of such an experience, and at the same time assuage their concerns that it was actually a poison pill that is sugarcoated and that would ultimately be a process designed, or at least resulting in, bringing down the regimes.

And that was a very difficult exercise to engage in, to try and reassure them. And it hadn't been successful with all. So, for example, the Saudis decided that it was too risky. And they said, "we are only going to be a decoration for the process, we're not going to engage in earnest," and so on. The others felt less threatened domestically and therefore more willing to engage. There was another layer to this: the Egyptian delegation, in particular, that was nominally led by the Foreign Ministry was on a very, very short leash from the military - that, as they had repeatedly admitted, is actually the one who ran Egypt. So, they did not want the process to actually engage in activities that would ultimately accord the Foreign Ministry in Egypt much greater domestic power over the military by knowing even trivial things like: "what is the Egyptian military budget? How big is the military personnel? What is the military thinking about procurement?" The Egyptian military felt that those issues were off limits, and if ACRS would result in agreements, but those agreements would bring in the Foreign Ministry into a position of influence over these issues, this will be a killer for them. So, they were very worried that they would lose control of the domestic repercussions of such an arms control process. So again, this, what was helpful in part, was that the Russians and previously the Soviets had similar concerns in the East-West process, that this would change fundamentally civil-military relations. What was unhelpful was that for a while it did. And so, there were always mixed feelings about whether such a process that draws on other people's experiences could not endanger domestic stability either on the political level, or in the civil-military relationship.

Hanna Notte

Alright, very interesting, very useful. Now, nonetheless, the work in the operational baskets proceeded, and you said you were quite involved in the intersessionals as well. Can you talk a little bit about the work?

Ariel Levite

I was involved in all of the meetings, including heavily involved in the conceptual basket. As I said in the operational basket, I led the delegation. On the conceptual basket, I did not lead the delegation, only served as a prominent participant from the Israeli side.

Hanna Notte

Understood, yeah.

Ariel Levite

At the end of the day, the operational basket indeed produced tangible results, thanks to a large extent to the input of practical experience infused by the extra-regionals as well as practical sherpas, who could walk you through their implementation of these arrangements, and would gradually assuage your concerns about their potential ripple effects. They would typically bring an agenda that is practical, that is easily identifiable, they would infuse it with energy and resource, so if we said "let's create a telecommunication system between the regional parties, similar to the one that operated in the CSCE out of the Hague, and we'll just do an extension of the Dutch one for regional parties," so, after some indoctrination, people understood that at the end of the day, it would involve no more than one computer in each of the regional countries, and a protocol of who gets to communicate with it and how. So, with the Dutch leading that activity, it became clear that this activity did not involve such a big risk. But even so, the Saudis, for example, said we won't do it. Or the Canadians showing us that incidents at sea, of the nature that they had done between Canada and the Soviet Union and so on, and the U.S. had done with Russia, was a no-brainer, on the whole, and had enough patience to walk us through this, and let the regional parties tinker with it on the edges to feel that it's their own. Okay. So that's why, I mean, because you brought it down to earth, and they were the people who cared about it, more than the Americans cared about the multilaterals as a whole, and certainly about the details, created an ambience that facilitated making more progress on the operational basket than on the others. And it was also that the common interest was more apparent in the operational basket than it was on the conceptual basket.

Hanna Notte

And building on that straightaway, do you recall when the decision was taken to have this formal split between the operational and the conceptual basket? Who came up with that idea? And how did you understand the mandate of the conceptual basket?

Ariel Levite

If I recall correctly, and you should ask Bob Einhorn, or Bob Gallucci, if I remember correctly, the idea was the Egyptian's all along - let's walk back for a second: Israel was interested in regional security, the Egyptians were interested in arms control, or actually disarmament. So, in essence, it was very difficult to reach a compromise between those two positions. The Americans then said, "okay, regional security and arms control" to the Israelis and "arms control and regional security" to the Egyptians, but in essence, there would be a mixture of both, and everyone went along. Okay? So then, what would the agenda look like? So there had to be some issues that Israel felt more comfortable with, and some issues that Egypt would feel more comfortable with. So that's why they came up with what later evolved into conceptual and operational. The Egyptians obviously tried to hold the operational agenda captive to their conceptual agenda, progress on the conceptual agenda. Israel thought this was ill-advised. Most of the other regional parties thought that it was unnecessary. And so, the Americans tried to broker the difference by suggesting to the Egyptians that, in essence, nothing will be agreed until everything is agreed. But in the meantime, let the operational basket move forward. And so, we went through this operational basket. When it became clear to the Egyptians that the operational basket was actually moving and going forward quite far, and in their judgement, the conceptual basket, although it engaged in some salient activities, was not moving as far and as fast and so on, and that most of the other Arab parties were not siding with Egypt in holding one captive to the other - that's when the Egyptians panicked and wanted to make sure that the two are more aligned. And ultimately, this was an important factor in basically draining ACRS of energy.

Hanna Notte

Very useful. Thank you. And if I may, directly a follow up question on this: Did you find the Egyptian position, which you've just outlined, to tend to hold the operational basket or its progress captive to work in the conceptual basket or ultimately on the arms control and disarmament question - did you find that Egyptian position to be static throughout the process? Or did you ever find it to change? Or were there moments, when you were more hopeful that maybe differences with the Egyptians could be bridged?

Ariel Levite

The question you're asking is a very good one, except that there is an even deeper layer to it. And the deeper layer to it was that throughout this entire time, we were asking ourselves what was the Egyptians' ultimate goal? And the positions that Egypt had promoted or had taken in the entire working group, particularly by Nabil Fahmy, increasingly created a level of suspicion in the Israeli delegation and its superiors that Egypt would not be comfortable with giving, quote unquote, Israel entry tickets into the new Middle East, unless Israel was required to be considerably weaker, and not just more feeble, but essentially wingless. And so, the Egyptian position on the conceptual basket, and on holding back the operational basket, but in the conceptual basket, was actually quite toxic in affecting the Israeli perception of whether accommodation with Egypt was actually possible, because many practical suggestions that we have made or concessions that we've agreed to keep the process alive did not produce any goodwill from the Egyptian side. And they, in fact, only heightened our suspicion that their goals were ones that were totally incompatible with Israeli security. I'll give you an example: at one point we were discussing, again based on the European example but also the U.S.-Russian one, transparency measures. And then the Egyptian went on a feat, some of the generals in there, that we wanted to see them in their underwear. And so, everything was seen from their perspective, and so they said, "we will never let you enter the new Middle East as a superpower." And so this corrosive attitude - by the way, a position that was led by Amr Moussa, Nabil Fahmy was merely the executioner of that policy that was on record as having articulated that position, not one that was totally supported by the Egyptian President, but the Egyptian President basically gave them a free hand - so the sense was that the conceptual basket was not just an impediment to progress, it was actually something that was coloring the Israeli and the entire Israeli outlook on what such a multilateral process could actually yield.

Hanna Notte

Thank you. Extremely useful. And building on that, can I ask you how the impending 1995 NPT Review Conference and preparations for that played into the work in ACRS?

Ariel Levite

Well, it only reinforced the Israeli suspicion that the Egyptians would use every conduit, every platform, every opportunity to do nuclear grandstanding. Every time we put it to a test, saying "ok, if you're really worried about this, here is how we can make some modest progress", they said "we're not interested in modest progress, we're interested in more ambitious, concrete progress." And so, every time there was an effort to try and accommodate them, I can give you a few examples, but every time we tried to accommodate them, they always made it look like our gesture rang hollow, and only when their appetite for asking for more steps they knew we couldn't agree to. Certainly not at the outset of the process. So up to a point, we were willing to go along and say, "okay, we're willing to articulate the vision of disarmament, we're willing to think of the steps leading to it, we're willing to just look at what other people's experiences can bring in terms of insight of how to make steady progress towards it. We are willing to come to look at practical arrangements, say verification with the IAEA and so forth." But every time - and in some areas like the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty for the Middle East - every time you put forward such a concrete idea for immediate implementation, the Egyptians immediately shut it down. Ultimately, gradually, the combination of what was happening outside ACRS with the NPT Review Conference, and what was happening within ACRS, and what was happening on the other multilaterals where the Egyptians were trying to block any normalization on the other track, was proving extremely corrosive.

Hanna Notte

Okay, thank you. If I may, I want to come back to a slightly more sort of practical or operational question regarding how the whole process worked. I want to ask you what the relationship was between the intersessionals, or the Track 2 meetings, and the plenaries, and also how the interplay worked between your own domestic process and your steering group back in Israel and the process itself. So, would you always go back and consult domestically and prepare papers and proposals that you would submit in the working groups? Or how did it work?

Ariel Levite

First of all, there was a massive interagency work on the Israeli side, I mean massive. And not only was it massive, what was really striking was - and I think that's the major casualty that resulted from the termination of ACRS - we had involved in the process a lot of people who came from the mainstream of the security and foreign policy establishment, both in terms of backgrounds and seniority, that lent the process enough credibility and flexibility to be able to put forward not just the resources, but the flexibility of position. So, David Ivry was leading the process with his personal clout, with his institutional power, with a complete trust that he enjoyed with the Prime Minister and was also the Minister of Defense himself. And I was on a regular basis going to see the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs to brief him, or the commander of the Air Force, the Foreign Minister or other major players and so on.

And therefore, there was never a sense on our part that the delegation was either going, racing ahead beyond their zone of comfort, but also making them own some of the decisions we have made to propose certain things, to show flexibility on other issues and so on. Clearly, these guys did not have arms control experience beforehand, and clearly also harbored some suspicions, but this regular engagement with them, and making them a regular part of the process in the interagency, proved extremely helpful in getting them to sanction the discussions in the operational agenda in particular: when you would come to the Air Force Commander and say "I need two of your colonels to accompany with me to Turkey for something," or to the commander of the Navy, or to whatever and so on, they understood what we were asking, they were sympathetic, they didn't feel that their core interests would be compromised, they were constantly kept in the loop, and so on and so forth. So, without that, we wouldn't have been able to make progress. And then, if you compare the situation now, nobody in the senior Israeli military has even one percentage of knowledge or interest in any of those issues, compared to what it was, whatever, 25 years ago - none, zero. There is no involvement, there is no role, the elements that were set up have completely atrophied and so on. And so, the preparatory and the debrief and so on was indispensable to make the process a real one on our end.

Hanna Notte

Very interesting, thank you. I want to come a little bit to the atmospherics of the process. How did you see the relationship between the heads of different delegations, between the Israeli delegation and some of the regionals? Maybe you can talk a little bit about the significance of moving the plenary to Doha in 1994, and your experience going to Doha? And just generally how the communication and the atmosphere was with different regional delegations?

Ariel Levite

Okay, so a couple of things. First of all, to most of us the visits to Tunis and to Qatar was almost a fairy tale. On many, many levels. I mean, literally. And so, it was an exciting adventure, let's put it this way. It put us in situations that we have never believed would be possible. It put us in situations where we were confronting dilemmas that we have never thought we would confront in terms of protocol.

Hanna Notte

Okay, can you give an example?

Ariel Levite

Yes, we were the only delegation that had women as an integral part of our delegation. And the others didn't know how to treat them. We also brought along some journalists to Doha, and one of the journalists, a woman, showed up to the reception in shorts, and the Arabs were about to faint. And so, I mean, in one of the operational baskets, a Lieutenant Colonel from the Air Force - I was the head of the delegation - and the Lieutenant from the Air Force had felt that a member of an Arab

delegation had sexually harassed her. And this threatened to derail the whole process. Now, how do you, on the one hand, look after her grievance in a respectable way, to both assuage her concerns and make sure that certain types of behavior aren't acceptable, prevent a diplomatic breach - but also, the guy was denying it! Now, you're not the court of law. So you have to manage that situation where he would not admit any wrongdoing. She would insist that he did make a pass at her, and so on. So, I arranged a Sulha ("reconciliation" in Arabic) according to all the protocol. And I had to consult lots of other Arabs on how to run it properly so that nobody would get offended. Now, I never thought that in my lifetime, I would find myself in such a situation. And I should have mentioned, she was not content initially with that, she wanted everyone to know of what this guy had done, so to offend him. This guy, by the way, was later further promoted to a prominent position in his country. Those were unbelievable situations.

Another aspect was the demystification process. I mean, you go to Doha and you see some dress code that seems very strange to you. And I remember turning to the Tunisian chief of staff and asking him if he can explain to me what explains the variance in the dress codes. And he turns to me, and responds, "You think that because I'm an Arab and they are Arabs, I know why these guys are dressing like this? I am from the Maghreb. These guys are from the Gulf, what do I know?" So, on the whole, they were incredibly interesting and valuable relations that had developed with most of the other delegates, amazingly, on the social level, also with the Egyptian ones and with most of the Egyptians, but not with all of them.

For example, there was one retired Egyptian Major General, I still remember to this day, who was a leading member of their delegation, who in his earlier incarnation was head of the Egyptian chemical warfare command. And his service was not just doing chemical weapons defense, these guys were the ones who were using chemical weapons in Yemen. So, one day, in the midst of a meeting in Turkey, the guy falls ill. I mean, terribly ill. He had a serious upset stomach. Now, the way I grew up was that my father had always insisted that every time I travelled abroad, I would emulate his example and carry with me medication for every conceivable scenario. So, I had this bag against whatever, diarrhea, against upset stomach, you can imagine. So as a gesture of goodwill, upon seeing his predicament, I brought it down from my hotel room and offered it to him, because I saw the guy really suffering, and I said, "which ones do you want" and they're all in their original seals and produced by leading global pharmaceutical companies. Yet that gentleman's reaction was, "You want to poison me. You want to kill me." He was agonizing between dying out of what he was already suffering from, or dying of what he thought I was about to give him. Obviously, these were a few exceptions. On the whole, there was very nice relationships that had developed with quite a few of the original parties. Both the regional and the extra-regionals, and I think it makes it possible to make some progress on issues about which we otherwise would not have been able to.

Hanna Notte

Thank you, fascinating. I want to thank you for sharing those anecdotes with us. That was really great. And I want to pick up on this remark that you made about the Tunisian commenting on the dress code in Qatar. And I want to ask you how the Israeli delegation perceived the relations between some of the core Arab participating states, Egypt and Jordan first and foremost, and some of the smaller delegations from the Maghreb and the Gulf countries, how you saw that interplay throughout the process?

Ariel Levite

There is one phrase that, I think, captures it. When we entered the process, we had worried, in fact, more than worried, we were expecting the process to ultimately involve all the Arab delegations on one side, and Israel on the other side. And we were pretty convinced that the common denominator in the Arab world was deep suspicion towards Israel, a fairly healthy degree of hostility towards Israel, and a huge degree of Arab solidarity, and so that at the minimum, the lowest common denominator as dictated by Egypt would prevail. And over a relatively short period of time, it began to transpire that that was not the case. Now, initially, I didn't know how deep it runs, whether - when push came to shove - the other Arab delegations would

not support the Egyptian position, or would actively oppose the Egyptian position. Would they actually dare endorse an Israeli proposal? Would they be willing to go along on some activities even if Egypt elects to be out of it, and so on? And I think that what gradually emerged was that our myths about the Arab world were to a large extent misplaced. And that the common denominator was not as huge as one would have thought. There were some who told us in unambiguous terms that moving from a position of hostility to normalization will take more than a generation. So they said, "look, I can sit down with you in the room, and discuss. Don't expect me to hug you in public. That would take another generation. But I'm willing to sit with you in the room, I'm willing to sit with you to discuss practical things. But I cannot, in this generation, bury the hatchet, once and for all."

And ultimately, I think both the seeds were important, but also the limitations were profound, because every time we discussed making any of the agenda public, these guys had felt that their publics back home were not prepared for making that transition and that it would cause them a fair amount of domestic instability. There were some that even took it one step further and said, "You don't understand: our rivalry with you, our enmity towards you, is a protection the regime needs to continue to repress domestically. If this goes away, people would turn to their government and say, 'so why aren't you creating more human rights, civil rights? Why aren't you letting women play a more active role? And so on.' And so you have to understand that if we actually endorse you, we not only remove a pretext, but we actually invite pressure on us to change the nature of our governance that the current leaders thought was too risky for them to entertain."

Hanna Notte

Very, very interesting. Thank you. Can I just check with you? We've spoken for almost an hour now, is another 10 minutes okay with you?

Ariel Levite

10 minutes is fine.

Hanna Notte

Okay, sure. I just want to pick up on something you said, for clarification: You said that it was therefore difficult to have, for instance, an agenda made public, or for there to be a sort of public-facing dimension of this process. You also mentioned earlier that the Israeli delegation took journalists to some of these meetings, so: how was this public dimension handled within Israel? Was the process more public in your own country? Or was it still fairly discreet?

Ariel Levite

It wasn't uniform and there was a variation between the various working groups. And the agenda of some was more open than others. In our system, so the Arms Control Regional Security Working Group was clearly a lot more discreet, and so on. And for a while, it also served our interest because I still remember that we made a proposal, that was inspired by the Vienna Documents in Europe, to invite Arab military officers or nuclear experts and so on to some activities in Israel. And there was clearly a price to be paid, to explain why you do it, right? I mean, it would have become a political liability. So, we had to prepare, on an ad hoc basis, some of the Israeli public for some of the gestures that we have agreed. Okay? But it wasn't a big part of the agenda. So, the media coverage was mostly on the excitement over travelling to countries that we haven't been in our official capacities, not just travelling, but travelling in official capacity, and so on. But on the whole, there wasn't that much of a coverage of that activity, because initially, we were more worried about the impact of media coverage, gradually some of our tension eased because we thought that we could manage it domestically. People would see the value of doing some things. But the Arab delegations felt that it would become a bigger problem for them, putting them in great jeopardy, so we had to be respectful of their sensitivities and insecurity.

Hanna Notte

Sure, sure. Thank you. What do you see as the greatest successes of the ACRS process?

Ariel Levite

The greatest successes at the time occurred on the margins of the process, namely a

significant spillover into Jordanian-Israeli relations and Israeli-Turkish relations. Those had really blossomed under the auspices of ACRS. Some positive spillover on the countries in the Gulf, too. I think, intellectually, some of the demystification was very helpful as well. I think that another part of it that was very helpful was that even those who were more hawkish and skeptical and hostile to such a process in the Israeli leadership - eventually Mr. Netanyahu, for example - had emerged from this experience convinced that engaging in such a process involved manageable risks. That the mere participation and process didn't necessarily mean, right away, that we would concede things that are dear to our heart or to our security. So, I think those were the greatest gains, including some personal friendships. Yet, the termination of ACRS, the way it came about, and subsequently the process of forgetting what was accomplished, how it was accomplished, what it actually entailed, and no good documentation, to give you one example and so on - clearly meant that a lot of the positive progress that was made on the practical level would not be lasting.

Hanna Notte

And picking up on that: you did mention a few elements that, as you call it, had a corrosive effect on the work over time. Why did ACRS fail and collapse, in your mind? What were the primary reasons?

Ariel Levite

I would say that there were two things that came together: one was non-ACRS specific, the other one was ACRS-specific. Then non-ACRS specific was that the Americans lost interest in the multilaterals. They were no longer convinced that they had the energy to focus on a diplomatic, a mega-diplomatic effort. Part of their attention was diverted to Europe, obviously. Part of their attention was diverted to the bilaterals. They basically lost interest in the multilaterals. That was one major reason that was not ACRS-specific. Thus all of the multilaterals basically died down. The ACRS-specific one had to do with the situation where, at the end of the day, notwithstanding all the other Arab delegations' willingness to participate, support, engage, the one that was the most engaged was Egypt. And Egypt was getting increasingly alienated because it was feeling that the rest of the Arab world was not following the Egyptian line and was willing to move gradually, cautiously, slowly, but nevertheless, move ahead on some of the more practical agenda, and that terrified Egypt, and turned against it the Egyptian Foreign Ministry bureaucracy.

Hanna Notte

Great. Thank you, Dr. Levite.

[End of transcript]