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Interview with Bishara Bahbah

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Summary:

Bishara Bahbah is a Palestinian professor. He was the associate director of Harvard's Middle East Institute and served as a member of the Palestinian delegation to the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) talks following the Oslo Accords.

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Bishara Bahbah, Palestine

Oral history interview conducted by Hanna Notte on Zoom on February 11, 2021

Hanna Notte

Great. Well, perhaps we start with a very broad question, and you just tell us the extent of your involvement in the ACRS talks, how you got to them, to what extent you were involved, maybe starting from the Madrid peace conference and then into the ACRS working group. Or the multilateral track more broadly if you wish.

Bishara Bahbah

I was contacted by the office Yasser Arafat. During that time I was at Harvard University as the Associate Director of the Institute for Social and Economic Policy in the Middle East. Ahmad Qurei, better known as Abu Ala', was the head of the delegations to the Middle East peace talks pertaining to the multilateral track. He asked me if I would be willing to serve on one of the multilateral peace talks. I was given the option of joining the one on Economic Affairs, and the one on arms control and regional security. I opted for the one on arms control and regional security, primarily because I had written my dissertation and published a book and numerous articles on Israel's military industry, the US involvement in the development of Israel's arms industry, and its extensive base of arms clients. I felt that this background allowed me to contribute positively to the arms control and regional security working group.

I participated in four of the ACRS meetings - I believe that there were five meetings in total. I attended the two of the meetings that were in Moscow, one that was in Washington, D.C., and one that was in Tunis, Tunisia. The meeting in Tunisia was the last one.

I remember starkly the talks held in Tunisia. The main point of contention was the Egyptians' insistence that the final declaration of ARCS talks should include a call for a Middle East free of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. The Israelis were adamantly opposed to such a declaration. We all knew the "best kept secret", which is that Israel possessed nuclear weapons and such a declaration would force Israel to dismantle its arsenal of nuclear weapons or force it to be monitored by international agencies. Clearly, the Israelis would not budge on this issue. From my perspective, Israel's refusal to agree to that clause spelled the end of the ACRS talks.

Strangely, the Israelis found me somewhat approachable. On one occasion, one of the Israelis took me to the side and told me: "Tell your Egyptian friend, the head of the Egyptian delegation, that should he keep pushing on that point, we will activate our friends in Washington, and Egypt will suffer." The session in Tunisia ended without any formal agreement on a declaration and it spelled the end of the talks on "arms control and regional security." In short, the Egyptians, along with all the Arab delegations, were insistent on a nuclear free Middle East. The Israelis refused adamantly to budge on this issue. Hence, the talks collapsed. Shortly thereafter, the second Palestinian Intifada erupted. And all peace negotiations were frozen.

Hanna Notte

Sure. Thank you. That's very useful for the lay of the land. Just for my clarity, so you said you attended four plenaries within ACRS, two in Moscow, one in Washington, and the last one was in Tunis. What about the plenaries in Doha?

Bishara Bahbah

I did not go to Doha. And I don't recall why at the time I did not go to Doha.

Hanna Notte

How big was the Palestinian delegation to the ACRS group specifically? And how was it put together?

Bishara Bahbah

It was about five or six participants. That depended on the availability of the participants because many of us were volunteers and did not work for the PLO. Mr. Qurei oversaw the multilateral peace talks. Nevertheless, President Arafat had the

final say. I must be very honest, sometimes the composition of the delegation made no sense. There were some members of the delegation that hardly spoke any English, which means that they did not understand the debate that was going on. Their presence in those talks was for show.

The second meeting in Moscow, the head of our delegation was unable to attend. The Palestinian ambassador in Moscow appointed himself as the head of delegation, even though he was not privy to the details of the previous talks. As a delegation, we were disorganized, and totally unprepared. Some members of the delegation were not willing to even share the information that they had in their possession with other members of the delegation. By comparison, the Israeli delegation was both experienced and well prepared. Among the Arab delegations that attended the meetings, it was abundantly clear that the Egyptian delegation, was the most experienced and well prepared. The head of their delegation was an impressive speaker and negotiator. Few years afterward, he became the foreign minister of Egypt.

Hanna Notte

Nabil Fahmy.

Bishara Bahbah

Yes. It was to Nabil to whom I passed the Israeli message mentioned earlier. But Nabil knew what he was doing. He was an experienced hand. But we as a Palestinian delegation, we were there for show and just to prove that we had a right to a seat around the table. I did not feel that we contributed anything substantial whatsoever. We just gave the lead to Egypt to deal with most of the issues on the table. We were taking our cues from the Egyptian delegation, and there was no voting or anything of the sort. So, there were discussions about the final statements and communiqués, but the Palestinian delegation had a very minimal role to play in those talks.

Hanna Notte

Okay, that's very clear. Thank you. You've mentioned Egypt a little bit. I want to ask you for my understanding, I understand that, at the Madrid peace conference, there was a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. And at some point, there was a standalone Palestinian delegation in the ACRS group. How did that shift come about?

Bishara Bahbah

The reason why there was a joint delegation in Madrid was because the Israelis refused to sit down with the PLO at the time and refused to have an independent PLO delegation. So having a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation made it palatable for the Israelis to sit down with representatives of the PLO. For the Israelis, it was their first time sitting with Palestinians publicly representing the PLO. The Jordanians were excellent in terms of organization, people, and message. One of the few memorable moments of the Madrid Peace Conference was the entrance of Sa'eb Erekat wearing the Palestinian scarf. The Israelis viewed his entrance with the Palestinian scarf as a provocative action. From that moment, Saeb gained in popularity.

Later, we learned that there were two tracks of negotiations going on, one under the auspices of the United States and one secretly held on in Oslo. I remember the day that the Oslo Accords were secretly initialed because I had a delegation from Harvard University meeting with Yasser Arafat that very evening. During our meeting with Arafat, his chief of staff approached me quietly and asked me to end the meeting because there was an urgent matter that Arafat had to deal with. I wrapped up the meeting, only to find out, later, that during that evening Arafat gave his approval to the basic terms of the Oslo Accord. During the meeting with the Harvard delegation, Arafat was charming and very courteous.

Hanna Notte

You just mentioned Oslo, and I want to stick with this idea for a moment. So, out of the Madrid peace conference, we have the bilateral tracks, Israel negotiating with the Palestinians, the Syrians, the Lebanese, the Jordanians, and then the multilateral track. And I'll tell you that, from all my conversations about ACRS, it strikes me those different delegations had very different perceptions as to the relationship between the bilateral and the multilateral track. So how did the Palestinian delegation view

that relationship?

Bishara Bahbah

The way I see, the multilateral track was secondary to the one-on-one track. The multilateral tracks were a reward to Israel. They enabled Israel to sit at the same table with delegations from various Arab countries. That was part of the reason why the multilateral peace tracks were created.

The multilateral tracks were intended to deal with important regional issues, but more importantly, it allowed Israelis to sit down with other Arabs, some of them, for the first time. And honestly, that was the value of the multilaterals. As much as I can tell, there was nothing of substance that came out of the multilateral peace talks.

Hanna Notte

And, of course, you say this now with hindsight, but I'll still ask you: going into this process, before you attended the first plenary, what were your hopes, your objectives for the Palestinians to get out of being involved in this process?

Bishara Bahbah

We do not live in a vacuum or total isolation; we live in a multilateral world. And the hope was that we would achieve an arrangement like Europe's European Union. We hoped to arrive at a security agreement that would benefit all countries of the Middle East. Unfortunately, the dead end came in Tunisia, when the Israelis said no to a Middle East free of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. The Egyptians and the Arabs were adamant about the inclusion of this point.

In short, the Palestinian delegation had essentially very little input into the bilateral tracks. Our delegation was supposed to report back to Ahmed Qurei, who was the head of the multilateral peace tracks. At the time, I was an adviser to Yasser Arafat on international affairs. I was put in a precarious position because Arafat had requested that I report to him directly about the meetings which I attended. This put me in a collision course with the head of the delegation who reported to Mr. Qurei. Ultimately, it was one of the issues that created friction between Ahmed Qurei and Arafat. I was put in a peculiar position, but if Arafat asked me to do something, I was going to do it.

Hanna Notte

Right. Your video has stopped, but I believe that now it's working again. Yeah. It just froze for a little while. But I think you can hear me fine. I heard everything you said. Yes.

Bishara Bahbah

Yes. Prior to the second Moscow meeting, I called Mr. Qurei and said, "you know, it's Monday, and we're supposed to be meeting in Moscow at the beginning of the weekend or early in the week, where is my plane ticket? I don't have a visa to enter Russia. What are the arrangements?" And his response was, "talk to your friend," meaning Arafat. I then promptly sent Arafat a fax, which was the common means of communicating. I told him: "Mr. Qurei asked me to talk to you about the arrangements regarding the travel to Moscow." Dr. Ramzi Khoury, who was Arafat's chief-of-staff called me and said, "Go get your visa, get your ticket and get ready to go, period." When Qurei tells me to go talk to my friend, it meant that he was clearly unhappy, either with Arafat or with me or with both of us, I don't know.

Hanna Notte

Okay.

Bishara Bahbah

These were some of the internal dynamics. I understand that you must go through a channel, meaning, the head of the delegation to send reports. But Arafat's style was to get reports on a topic from multiple sources. On one hand, he was getting reports from Mr. Qurei, but he also wanted me to report to him directly, as one of his advisors. I presume that he wanted to compare both reports and, possibly, to show Qurei that he had his own sources. This whole matter, nevertheless, put me in an uncomfortable position.

Hanna Notte

You mentioned Moscow, and you mentioned Europe. Now, at this first plenary in

Moscow, looking sort of at the record, this educational approach was taken where outside experts came in to talk about confidence building measures in Europe, during the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the Americans, how the OSCE came into being. Now recalling listening to this and with your Palestinian colleagues, did you find that kind of approach to going into a discussion about arms control and regional security in the Middle East to be useful?

Bishara Bahbah

To be truthful, I recall those presentations. They were long and boring, and delegates were chatting during those presentations. I don't know to what extent they were useful to the delegates.

Hanna Notte

But bored because this was not new to you, or bored because it sort of seemed irrelevant to you?

Bishara Bahbah

Well, it probably was relevant. But that's not why we were there in Moscow. We were there to get into the meat of and the substance of things. And, you know, the overlords that thought that they were smarter than everybody else must have decided on that agenda. With time our memory diminishes. That was the case with the presentations. Unfortunately, I cannot recall much of those presentations.

Hanna Notte

Okay. That's very clear. Can you talk a little bit about the atmospherics at these big plenaries? I mean, it's sort of unprecedented at the time that you'd have 13 Arab delegations, plus the Israelis all coming together in the same space with the Russians and the Americans and some other outsiders like the Turks and the Canadians. I mean, what was the atmosphere like? And what were the personal relationships like?

Bishara Bahbah

You know, for me, meeting with the Israelis was nothing new. My first job was the editor in chief of Al-Fajr newspaper in Jerusalem, which was considered as the main pro-PLO outlet in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Also, at Harvard, we had programs that brought Israelis, Palestinians, and other Arabs together to discuss regional economic issues. And while teaching, I had Israeli students. I was therefore used to meeting with Israelis, whether at the point of a gun or in private conferences, or in my classroom. Also, when I was the editor of the newspaper, representatives of the Israeli Press Office used to bring me delegations to speak with frequently at the newspaper. Once, I had a meeting with the head of the Information Bureau of the Israeli government.

For me personally, meeting with Israelis was nothing new, but I'm sure it was a novelty for most of the Arab delegations that did not have any ties with Israel. But did I go and ask the Saudis how they felt about meeting the Israelis? I didn't because I didn't think of it that way, as something new for them. But usually, the interactions between the delegations were mostly between the host delegations, meaning the Russians, the Americans, and the EU, and among the Arabs in the region, and it was between the Israelis and the Egyptians. These were the main players, and we were there as seat warmers.

Hanna Notte

What about some of the other Arab delegations from the Maghreb? Or from the Gulf? Did they play a sort of prominent role?

Bishara Bahbah

Not really, no. People were just mostly listening to "boring" speeches.

Hanna Notte

Okay. At least it must have been interesting to be in Moscow in the early 1990s. I imagine.

Bishara Bahbah

Yes, it was very interesting. Unfortunately, I was never in the Soviet Union to enable me to make the comparison between the Soviet and the Russian eras.

Hanna Notte

Did you maintain contact with anyone that you met during this ACRS process?

Bishara Bahbah

Not really. Even though I was one of the more outgoing individuals in the Palestinian delegation because of my background in the press, arranging private conferences and teaching at Harvard. Additionally, I was not intimidated by the Israelis given that I lived under occupation following 1967 and given my various jobs after graduating. I did approach some Israelis during the meetings. However, the gist of the negotiations was between the hosts, the Egyptians, and the Israelis.

Hanna Notte

Thank you. I will just ask you sort of at the end, how you reflect on anything good that came out of ACRS? Lessons that we might draw. Was it just a failure? I mean, we also think about how to approach arms control and regional security today in the Middle East that is arguably much changed to what it was in the early 90s. And you didn't even have Iran, Syria, Libya, Lebanon, Iraq in the process, in the room at the time. So maybe you want to reflect a little bit about how you think about this 30 years later. What should be done differently?

Bishara Bahbah

Quite frankly, even though the objective of the ACRS talks was very clear from the outset, meaning the Arabs, represented by Egypt, wanted to concentrate on the issue of nuclear, biological, and chemical arms. The Israelis refused to budge on the issue. There were drafts of general agreements regarding security cooperation. Those drafts were a good beginning in discussing regional security issues. Today, if we are to take those drafts and build upon them, then that would be an excellent step forward. What was agreed upon in those drafts was an important first step and should be used in future negotiations on issues of regional security. Middle East countries should study those drafts and build upon them.

And yes, the issue of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons will continue to be a central issue particularly for the Egyptians who are not comfortable having Israel with a nuclear capability. And if you relate it to today, they're not comfortable either with Iran having nuclear capabilities.

So why does the world treat Israel in a favorable way, while it treats all other countries in the Middle East differently? I do not advocate in any way that the Iranians should have nuclear weapons, but, they have as much right to have them if the Israelis are allowed to have nuclear weapons. And that's bad for the entire world, not just the region, because the impact of a nuclear or a biological warfare goes across borders and would not simply affect the Middle East. It would impact Europe, some Asian and African countries.

In that regard, the hypocrisy of Europe and the United States in terms of allowing Israel to possess nuclear and, possibly, biological, and chemical weapons, is hypocritical and extremely dangerous.

We all know that the Israelis have these weapons. It would be better in future negotiations, for example, if Israel were to sign the IAEA treaty. Then at least somebody is monitoring what the Israelis are doing. Israel, as you know, has refused to sign the IAEA treaty.^[1] Yet, Israel and the West demand Iran's adherence to the treaty and to commit to never develop nuclear weapons.

I very much want peace with the Israelis, and I even want it more so because I'm not allowed to go back to live in Jerusalem, the city of my birth and where I grew up. I resent Israel's move to withdraw my right of residency based on a law that Israel, the occupier, had passed and which, ironically, Israel's Supreme Court found to be unconstitutional some 50 years later.

Going back to our subject at hand and the lessons that we can deduct from past negotiations, one, Israel should be held accountable for its possession of nuclear weapons. If nothing else, they should adhere to international principles, and allow inspections of its nuclear facilities. If Israel ever uses a nuclear weapon, it will kill hundreds of thousands of people including hundreds of my immediate family members. Israel-Palestine is geographically small, and Israel's use of a nuclear power

would harm Israelis as well.

The next phase of any future multilateral negotiations over regional security issues should begin with the use of what had been already agreed upon some 30 years ago. If nations were willing to sit down together then, I am confident that they would be willing to sit down together in the coming years. It is an impossibility for Israel and its neighbors to sit down together in the future and to negotiate peace terms.

With regarding to the format of any future negotiations, I think that they should be more interactive. You don't make policies by reading speeches. You make policies by sitting together and outlining each other's concerns regarding the issues that they are negotiating over. The parties should be clear about what each side hopes to achieve because of those negotiations. The more face-to-face negotiations are, the more they will tend to be fruitful.

And in negotiations, if you start with posturing, you get nowhere, because it then becomes a zero-sum exercise. Successful negotiations happen when the two sides see the benefits that each side hopes to achieve from those negotiations.

In the future, I hope that Israelis and Arabs could come together and be honest with each other. I am not being naïve in stating this goal. The Arab fears regarding Israel's possession of nuclear weapons might be reduced considerably if Israel were to allow international inspectors to monitor its nuclear facilities and its nuclear arsenal. Such an Israeli policy could assuage both Iran and Egypt regarding Israel's nuclear arsenal.

It is not reassuring for the Middle East or the international system, to have a nuclear country that is not under any type of scrutiny whatsoever, such as Israel. I'm not saying that the Israelis are trigger happy when it comes to their nuclear capabilities. Undoubtedly if they blow up anything, they will blow up themselves as well because of the proximity of countries in the region.

Despite the failure to come up with a regional security agreement in the Middle East and North Africa some 30 years ago, major international power ranging from the United States to the EU, Russia, and China should play a positive role in mediating a regional security agreement in the MENA region. Such an agreement would allow the IAEA to inspect on a continual basis Israel's nuclear arsenal and it would save the region billions of dollars in unneeded weaponry because of the fear of one country from the other.

Hopefully, the little that was achieved some 30 years ago would set the stage for a major regional security agreement in the Middle East and North Africa in the future and save the region from additional conflicts and unnecessary waste of valuable funds to purchase weapons out of fear from their neighbors.

Hanna Notte

Thank you, this has been extremely interesting. I mean, you warned me at the beginning that you don't have very much to say, and then you proved otherwise. That was my last question, so I want to thank you.

Bishara Bahbah

No problem whatsoever. I would be happy to contribute to your efforts in the hope that future generations learn from our few achievements and many mistakes.

Hanna Notte

Great. Okay. Well, thank you for that. Thank you. Thank you very much. All right. Bye.

[End of transcript]

[\[1\]](#) Editorial note: Presumably, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons is meant here.