



**Daniel Kurtzer, United States****Oral history interview conducted by Miles Pomper on Zoom on September 23, 2020****Miles Pomper**

So, we do have a few kind of basic introductory things that all these videos will have. So, could you give us your full name?

**Daniel Kurtzer**

My name is Daniel Kurtzer. I currently live in Washington, DC. I am a professor of Middle East Policy Studies at Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs. I have been doing that for the last 15 years.

**Miles Pomper**

Right. And can you give us a sense of the dates that you were involved in the ACRS process?

**Daniel Kurtzer**

I was involved in ACRS when I was a deputy assistant secretary in the Near East Bureau of the State Department. After the Gulf War, when Secretary Baker launched his shuttle diplomacy, I was part of his peace team that helped bring about the Madrid peace conference in 1991. That conference launched both bilateral negotiations between Israel and each of its neighbors, and a multilateral track consisting of five working groups and a steering group. I was part of the team that brought all of that about. When the multilaterals were launched in January of 1992, I was asked to be the overall coordinator of the entire process. I represented the United States on the Syrian-Israeli and on the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, and I was also the chair of the Refugee Working Group.

**Miles Pomper**

Well, it's quite interesting. Since you were involved in, you mentioned secretary Baker and kind of the overall peace process, can you give a sense of why, you know, he and the president so on, kind of launched these negotiations, what was the thinking behind it?

**Daniel Kurtzer**

President George H.W. Bush entered office with an incredible resume on foreign affairs. One of the issues that was very interesting to him was the Arab-Israeli peace process. Almost from the beginning, Secretary Baker activated a peace team composed of Dennis Ross, who was the head of policy planning; Richard Haass, who was the senior director at the National Security Council; Aaron Miller, who worked on Middle East issues in the policy planning staff; and me.

We were the core of the peace team, working literally from day one of the administration to figure out how to move forward. There were some starts and stops until the Gulf War in January and February of 1991.

In the run-up to the war, President Bush asked the State Department to develop four scenarios for post-war initiatives. We knew we were going to win the military battle. That was not a question. But the real question was, so what do you do on the day after? Not just on the ground, but would there be openings for something else? We did four papers for the President. One was on economic reform: since Kuwait had been overrun, and the Emir had been sent off into hiding in Saudi Arabia, the question was, with the return of the Emir, could we jumpstart an economic reform process which would start to reduce inequalities and maybe introduce some economic changes in the region starting in Kuwait. The second paper was on political reform, that is, instead of just returning the Emir to an autocratic monarchy, maybe return the Emir as a more figurehead king, and introduce democratic reforms. The third paper was on regional security, primarily focused on Gulf security. Our proposal was to have a forum of GCC states plus Egypt and Syria working alongside the United States to share responsibility for Gulf security. And the fourth paper was the peace process.

The President decided before his speech to Congress after the war that he wanted to focus on the peace process and on the Gulf security initiative. The Gulf security

initiative played out for a while and then it faded away. Secretary Baker picked up the gauntlet on the peace process, and launched seven or eight shuttle missions to the Middle East until the convening of the Madrid peace conference at the end of October. Baker basically did not have an idea going into his shuttles of what he wanted to come out of it. In other words, we didn't have a plan, as it were. His way of thinking was we would get as much as we could on process, procedures, and substance. And that's what he did during the shuttles; he would find out where the red lines were, for each party, how far he could push and pull, and what he needed to do to try to bridge gaps.

During one of those missions, the idea was conceived largely on the airplane that we ought to do something more than just bilateral negotiations. We knew we'd have to start with a peace conference. We knew the Israelis would not want to negotiate in a conference format, which meant that the peace conference had to result in bilateral talks. And then we added in the dimension of bringing the Arab world into this process. One way, of course, was to invite them, and expect them to show up at the Madrid conference. Remember, this is right around the time of the fall of the Soviet Union, and the United States was the sole remaining superpower. The Gulf War had demonstrated not just American military power, but it also demonstrated the degree to which we were also a convening power, having brought allied forces from Syria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia into the international coalition.

So the secretary wanted to parlay that into Arab involvement in the process, and not have them just showing up at the Madrid peace conference. We played with various structures, and emerged with a number of working groups: economic development, Arms Control and Regional Security, water because of the critical nature of the water problem in the Middle East, and the environment.

Later on, we added in the fifth group, the Refugee Working Group, largely because in the course of negotiating the terms of reference for Madrid, the Palestinians kept getting the short end of every stick. They did not get their own delegation, but they had to come in a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. They weren't allowed to have diaspora or Jerusalem Palestinians in that delegation. So the secretary felt that we needed to provide some incentive for Palestinians, and that was the Refugee Working Group.

The last idea to coalesce was the steering group, which in some ways, looking at the whole process, was by far the most important element: as opposed to the working groups where we sometimes had 40 or 50 countries represented, a bit like a UN General Assembly meeting, in the steering group, there were about 10 countries, including the United States and Russia as the co-sponsors; Canada as the head of the Refugee Working Group; Japan as the head of the environment group; the EU; Israel; Saudi Arabia; Egypt; Jordan; Palestinians; and Tunisia, representing North Africa. We sat around a single table and hammered out issues, and it was an extraordinary experience.

### **Miles Pomper**

So how did that steering committee relate to, say, the ACRS working group, in terms of issues coming up? Which way did they go and so on?

### **Daniel Kurtzer**

It was conceived as a kind of permanent secretariat for all five working groups. The steering group defined not the agenda per se, but the direction of the five groups, monitor the activities of the groups, and assess whether or not there were problems that needed to be resolved. In a sense, the working groups, in terms of an organizational chart, reported to the steering group. But in practical terms, it was much less formalized. Each of the working groups went off and did its own thing.

The point of intersection of everything was really my office as the overall coordinator of the entire process. Even though we launched the multilateral process in Moscow, in January of 1992, we did it as a courtesy. Russia was in a state of chaos. It was just weeks, literally weeks, after the fall of the Soviet Union. So we did all the work. Once or twice a week, I would call my counterpart in Moscow, Victor Gogitidze or his boss, Victor Posuvalyuk, just to keep them informed and to let them know what we were doing. If my memory is correct, they never pushed back on anything that we wanted to do, and actually never had an idea of their own. I didn't blame them. I knew them,

we had been working with them for quite some time, but they were just overwhelmed by the dissolution of their governance system, which was very challenging.

As an aside, at the time of the of the multilateral kickoff event in Moscow, Gogitidze invited four or five of us to his apartment in Moscow for drinks. Our embassy in Moscow said it was the first time in their memory that anybody had been invited to a working level, Soviet/Russian apartment for dinner or reception. This fellow, very smart, told us that he spent most of his day trying to figure out whether he would be able to keep his apartment. Was there going to be a foreign ministry? It was a really an amazing time.

So formally, the steering group was supposed to be the repository of what the working groups did. But in practical terms that information came to my office. Since ACRS, the water group, and the refugee group were all chaired or co-chaired by the United States, it was easy for me to walk down the hall and talk to Bob Einhorn, or our water experts to work out schedule and procedural issues.

### **Miles Pomper**

And you, so in this, as you said, you're kind of the fulcrum here, but you weren't in the delegation meetings of the working groups

### **Daniel Kurtzer**

I sat in on one or two meetings, but I was mostly just observing. I wanted to see how the group was going and to get a real feel for it.

### **Miles Pomper**

What was your feel for sort of the dynamics of the group? And you knew the region already quite well, by that point?

### **Daniel Kurtzer**

There was one unsurprising element - the degree to which Israel and Egypt went at each other using this forum, as they used every other arms control or security forum, to argue whether or not security, such as confidence building measures and other activities should precede arms control, or whether arms control, particularly Israel as a non-signatory of the nuclear nonproliferation treaty should precede any kind of regional security activities. In fact, the first argument they had in the working group was whether to call it ACRS or RSAC, regional security and arms control. I'm pretty sure that the Israelis always called it RSAC, but nobody else did. We all called it ACRS. It's just a better acronym, frankly.

But it was reflective of the very different concepts that these two elephants in this small room held. Egypt had played out similar arguments in meetings of the NPT review committee. In 1995, at the NPT Review Conference, Egypt demanded that Israel adhere to the NPT. Egypt was a challenging partner when it came to the regional security aspects of ACRS, such as the search and rescue or notification of military exercises, or the regional information centers. Israel was a challenging partner when it came to arms control discussions. Some of those things went forward anyway, because there was interest on the part of enough countries to start doing some of these things.

The second dynamic was the degree to which the multilateral process generally, including ACRS, never got serious high-level USG buy-in. In other words, there was no expectation that Secretary Baker was personally going to stay involved. He had a few other things to worry about, such as German reunification, and the re-election of the President. But it was very hard to get other senior people engaged and very frustrating. There was almost no interest in the multilateral process generally, including in ACRS. We understood that ACRS or the multilateral process generally was not the dawn of a new age or the beginning of peace in the Middle East. But it was different. And it was, at least in my view, my very strong view, worthy of significant investment because it was different. Saudi Arabia and Israel were talking to each other starting in '92 in a very small forum, not the UN General Assembly. In fact, we had one meeting of the Steering group in Canada during a snowstorm that snowed us in. We could not get out for a few days. The Canadian army, in fact, came to give us parkas and boots in case we had to go outside. It was freezing outside. What do you do when you're sitting in some nice lodge with nowhere to go? We sat around for three or four days, and we talked. The Israelis and Saudis would go off and talk, and

the Israelis and the Egyptians would go off and talk. That alone should have garnered more attention on the part of our senior people. The steering group and ACRS were the two groups that suffered most from the absence of senior level interest, and they weren't exploited as much as they might have been at that time.

**Miles Pomper**

You were talking about the multilaterals didn't get much attention, and obviously, there was a lot of attention in the bilaterals and peace process.

**Daniel Kurtzer**

Read my book, *The Peace Puzzle*. It was a mixed bag. We got the bilaterals started, as promised, the day after the Madrid peace conference, but not easily. Baker, in fact, had to delay his departure from Madrid because even though the Syrians and Lebanese had said they were going to start negotiations the day after the conference, once the conference took place, they said they're going home. And Baker wouldn't let them go home. They, in fact, met once, which was to break the ice, and then the talks moved to Washington.

The problem in the bilateral track for the first year was the fact that it was a US election year, and it was an Israeli election year. Yitzhak Shamir, the prime minister who went to Madrid, was defeated in June. Yitzhak Rabin became Israeli prime minister. In November, George Bush was defeated by Bill Clinton. Our job was to keep the negotiations going. One of the books written about this period said our objective was to keep the bicycle pedals moving. We made no progress during that first year, which was a lost year.

On the way home from Madrid, Baker came to our compartment in the airplane and told us that he was going to move over to the White House at some point for the re-election campaign. But he said, and I'll never forget it - he said in his Texas twang - "boys, after November, I'm coming back. And we're signing peace treaties." And all of us believed it. We thought we had unlocked this vault, and we had the key.

**Miles Pomper**

And Madrid was that breakthrough?

**Daniel Kurtzer**

It was. Losing that entire year because of elections and focusing on other issues was a setback. Second, when the Clinton administration came into office, one of our problems as a government, not just on the peace process, but generally is the "anything but my predecessor" issue. It was anything but Bush, anything but Clinton; later, anything but Bush, anything but Obama. It will soon hopefully be anything but Trump. It's a very serious problem when you have an ongoing diplomatic activity.

A new administration should have the right to declare its own policy preferences. But take the example of the peace process. When the Clinton administration entered office, some of the appointees thought that we had been much too hard on Israel in the run up to Madrid. So they changed the way we did business. We all knew, working on Madrid, that we had a special relationship with Israel. But, we also had a crisis with Israel related to loan guarantees for the resettlement of Soviet immigrants. We wanted to provide loan guarantees because we had helped bring about the Soviet emigration. But we didn't want them resettled in illegal settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. The Israelis pushed back, but the Bush administration would not yield. This willingness to push back against some aspects of Israeli policy evaporated in the Clinton administration. It was the beginning of a nearly 30 year policy of moving closer toward aligning US positions with those of whatever Israeli government is in power. Today, for example, we have become in a way more Netanyahu than Netanyahu in many respects.

In 1993, it was a particularly challenging moment, because we had the breakthrough at Madrid, lost a year because of the elections, and then the new administration came in with an attitude that what preceded it had been imbalanced. This did not have as much impact on the multilaterals, as it did on the bilaterals. The bilaterals, being held in Washington, were much more subject to these policy changes. Aaron Miller and I were assigned to follow closely the bilateral Israel-Palestinian talks. I was also asked to follow the Israeli-Syrian talks. We were not in the room, but our job was, as soon as the day ended, to grab the negotiators and try to figure out what went on in the room

and where the problems were. We would then send a memo to the Secretary and try to think of ways to resolve problems. I remember Aaron and I kept arguing that the Palestinian issue was the centerpiece of the problem. And it was probably the most ripe for resolution. But some of the Clinton appointees wanted to focus on Syria, and things didn't quite work out.

**Miles Pomper**

Really interesting. So how long were you involved? I know, at one point, you became ambassador to, was it Israel first and Egypt?

**Daniel Kurtzer**

To give you a timeline, from 1989 until the end of 1994, I was the deputy assistant secretary in the Near East Bureau. I had the best portfolio in the State Department. The deputy assistant secretary positions sit at the nexus of an interagency process. You bring the State Department views into the interagency process. What you can't resolve, you kick upstairs to the assistant secretary or the undersecretary. But the expectation is that the Deputy Assistant Secretaries were supposed to resolve most day to day issues.

I had an amazing portfolio, including US bilateral relations with Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinians, and the peace process. I was kept a little busy during that period. At the end of 1994, literally the day after the Jordan-Israel peace treaty was signed in the Middle East, I moved to the Bureau of Intelligence and Research as the principal deputy. INR, as it is called, is a very different bureau. It's the link to the intelligence community. Three years later, in 1997, I was appointed ambassador to Egypt by President Clinton, and then in 2001 to Israel by President Bush.

**Miles Pomper**

You mentioned the Jordan peace treaty. How do you think that - in terms of, you know, ACRS - how do you think that kind of fed into that process and kind of the multilateral process more generally?

**Daniel Kurtzer**

We knew for years that the Jordanians were ready to solve their problem with Israel, but were nervous about being first. Jordan faces a number of challenges. Its neighbors are Iraq and Syria as well as Israel and Saudi Arabia. They don't really have much in the way of natural resources. They have a very small outlet to the Gulf of Aqaba. They were thrilled at Madrid, but what really pushed them to act was Oslo when the PLO recognized Israel. This kind of liberated Jordan to act on its own and negotiate a peace treaty with Israel.

Recall that we had forced Jordan to accept Palestinians in a joint delegation at Madrid in 1991. After Rabin came into office in mid-1992, the Oslo process started shortly thereafter and culminated a year later in the Oslo Accords. On September 13, 1993, we hosted the signing ceremony for Oslo; on September 14, 1993, the next day, Jordan and Israel signed a one-page concept paper indicating they would negotiate a full peace treaty. They held a ceremony in Washington in the summer of 1994 to mark agreement on a framework for the treaty. And then in November, they signed the treaty on the border between Israel and Jordan in the southern desert.

**Miles Pomper**

And how do you, how do you think that? I mean, I know you weren't in the working group. But do you have a sense of how that played into sort of ACRS? Or what kind of effect it had on the multilaterals?

**Daniel Kurtzer**

Jordan was part of the steering group, as well as a participant in ACRS and all the working groups. I don't think there was a direct connection between ACRS and the Jordanian willingness to sign a treaty. But clearly, the Jordanians saw benefits to themselves of being in ACRS. They had and continue to have a shared security challenge with Israel. It wasn't so much the arms control side of ACRS as it was the regional security side. How do you control a very long border, maybe half of which fronts on the West Bank, where you have some elements who want to cause trouble, to infiltrate and carry out acts of violence? So the Jordanians didn't necessarily use ACRS to advance that interest, but ACRS certainly helped in what became an

exceedingly robust Israeli-Jordanian security arrangement along the Jordan River and along the border in the Negev. I can't say ACRS was a stimulus for this cooperation, but it was part of the coming together of a concept, which Jordanians saw to their own benefit, as did the Israelis as well.

**Miles Pomper**

Great. So I have some general questions looking at the process in hindsight, You talked a little bit about it. But, why do you think that, the ACRS talks eventually collapsed and, didn't lead to the outcomes people wanted?

**Daniel Kurtzer**

I think there are two factors involved that relate to the whole process. A few groups continued after ACRS stopped: the environment group lasted a little bit longer, mainly because Japan pressed for some progress; and the water group yielded some progress, such as an Israeli desalination project in Oman. But the multilaterals writ large basically collapsed around 1995-96. I think there were two factors at play. I left the multilateral process at the end of 1994 when I moved to the intelligence bureau. After that, there was no one really pushing the multilaterals forward.

A second factor was that the Clinton administration decided to go off in a very different direction. The administration came up with the idea of large economic summits, involving public-private partnerships. They held four summits: in Casablanca, Doha, Cairo and Amman. They were quite glitzy summits that brought together government ministers and private sector business people. This was an additional factor in losing interest in the multilaterals. Why go to working level meetings when ministers were attending summit meetings? On the one hand, the economic summits were a good idea, but at the same time, the administration gave up on the multilateral process.

**Miles Pomper**

You said dying embers. I mean, obviously, you mentioned your, your departure, but it sounds like that also kind of came as things were falling, falling apart anyway.

**Daniel Kurtzer**

I guess I contributed to pouring the ashes onto the dying embers. It was one of the highlights of my career running that process. You won't get the sense if you're only focused on ACRS, but I can tell you that in the whole multilateral process, we had something going almost every day of the year.

**Miles Pomper**

Wow.

**Daniel Kurtzer**

There was a working group meeting, or an intersessional meeting, or an exercise, or a meeting to focus on a particular issue in water or environment or economic affairs, or refugees or ACRS. There were formal meetings of the working groups and the steering group. So on most days, when we came to work, there was something to do, actually do, on the multilaterals whether it was planning, or implementing and executing. And it was exciting, a cottage industry of peacemaking that we had never done before.

We were bringing together, both in ACRS and the other groups, people who had never been involved in the peace process before, majors, captains, colonels and defense officials from the various defense ministries, or water or environment experts. And so it was really very, very exciting. That's why, when I talk about the demise of the multilaterals, it's with regret.

A lot of the things that we started ended formally, but personal relationships continued in some respects, including in ACRS, for example between Nabil Fahmy and David Ivri. I don't think they became friends, but they learned to respect each other in a way, and ACRS definitely stimulated that. Bob Einhorn was an incredibly good leader in the group, working with Mike Yaffe and Fred Axelgard.

As a student of the peace process, I would note there was a professor at Harvard in the 1970s, Herbert Kelman, who brought together Israelis and Palestinians before it was fashionable. Twenty years later, many of the same people that he brought together were in government positions, and they knew each other. And that made it

different: they weren't meeting someone for the first time. It's the same thing with ACRS or the other groups, if we could ever recapture some of that. It may be too late now.

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