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Interview with Sallai Meridor

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Summary:

Sallai Meridor is a former Israeli diplomat. He served as a member of the Israeli delegation to ACRS.

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Sallai Meridor, Israel**Oral history interview conducted by Hanna Notte on Zoom on November 11, 2020****Hanna Notte**

This is the 11th of November and the ACRS oral history interview with Ambassador Meridor. Thank you for being with us.

Sallai Meridor

Thank you for having me.

Hanna Notte

I'll start with a broad question. And I also switch to speaker view. Can you just explain in what role you were involved in the ACRS process?

Sallai Meridor

I was then working with Israel's Minister of Defense, who prior to that was Minister of Foreign Affairs. So, I had a relationship with the U.S administration from the time I served as a policy advisor to the minister in the foreign ministry. And during the Gulf War, the first Gulf War, I was with this minister - he was Minister of Defense, his name was Moshe Arens. And I've been with him throughout the process of leading to Madrid, and then beyond Madrid. So I accompanied the communications that he had with James Baker, who was then secretary of state, when there were meetings at prime minister Shamir's office leading to Madrid, the Minister of Defense was part of it, and I would join in. Then at Madrid, I was representing the Ministry of Defense as part of the Israeli delegation to Madrid. And then I was in Lisbon when they were launching the multilateral track, I guess, early '92. However, in June 92, there were elections in Israel. And the Shamir government did not win the election. And there was another government, then I was out of government, because the minister I was working as the advisor for had to step down, because we lost elections. So I was really for a short period, throughout the process, more in the processes leading to the main process, but not in the process itself. As the multilaterals probably started, in the first half of 92, we were already in the midst of election campaign. And then, before the middle of the year, we were out of government. So my experience there is limited.

Hanna Notte

And that's when your involvement in ACRS ended, in mid 1992?

Sallai Meridor

That's correct.

Hanna Notte

Okay. I'll focus my questions then more on the process leading up to it. So thank you for that. Can you explain a little bit the domestic decision-making process in Israel, to put together the delegation for ACRS? How it was composed and what the process behind it was?

Sallai Meridor

First of all, I'm not sure how the entire notion of multilateral talks in five tracks came into being. I think that in one of the meetings with Secretary of State Jim Baker, probably one of the drafts that he submitted to us as a draft paper leading to Madrid, there was this notion of - in parallel to the bilateral tracks - that there would be a multilateral track with 5 sub-tracks. And I cannot tell you that I know what was behind it. Like, that was not necessarily the natural thing to expect, because the focus was making peace between Israel and its neighbors. And the focus was bilateral. Israel was very hesitant to allow any international dimension to the process. Because Israel has always been afraid of being cornered in international fora, alone against a coalition of regional and international players. So, we were always focusing on the bilateral, bilateral, bilateral. And here come the multilateral offer or suggestion.

Thinking retrospectively, not knowing the reasoning, but trying to guess, I think retrospectively, I could think of different elements. One, I guess, that in this tension between international and bilateral, the U.S. had an interest of engaging many players from the international arena and to give them room in the process. So while

Israel was very resisting any room in bilateral, it was more open to have room for international players, European countries, others in the multilateral meetings. So that could serve a purpose of U.S. foreign policy to enable other players in the international arena, to have a role in the hope for making peace in the Middle East. So this could have been one consideration. The other one, which would still be an American consideration, is that America has just moved out of a very successful coalition building exercise in the Gulf War, which basically got together many Middle Eastern countries and many international players to focus on moving Iraq, out of Kuwait, and putting the Iraqi regime under some constraints. And I think that America may have had an interest of somehow keeping those players around an American endeavor. And this could have been an opportunity to serve American foreign policy interests.

From an Israeli perspective, we have always wanted to broaden the horizon of accommodation, if not peacemaking in the Middle East beyond the frontline countries, to the larger Middle East. So it could have satisfied, or at least could have been presented to Israel as satisfying, some of its desires: "You always tell us that you want other Arab countries to engage with you here we found for you the context within which you will be able to meet with Morocco, with Gulf countries, etc". And the fourth, which may find its way only to the composition of the areas of engagement, especially arms control, is largely Egyptian, but Arabs led by Egypt's effort to push Israel in the area of NPT. So, maybe this has driven, or was part of the motivation - if not for the multilaterals, but to include within the multilateral track the specific track of arms control and regional security. So that's pretty much what I thought, what I think now may have led to having this endeavor at all. Israel agreed to it. And we came to Madrid, Madrid launched the bilateral, then we had Lisbon, which I think was supposed to launch the multilateral. And I think that, I'm not sure, that the Prime Minister may have allocated responsibility for each one of the tracks. I was there in the Ministry of Defense working for the Minister and I was, for a brief period, coordinating the Ministry of Defense participation in the different tracks, where obviously the arms control and the regional security was a track where we were expecting and expected to be leading the Israeli delegation.

So we started having meetings, at the time in my office, next to the minister's office in Tel Aviv, where the Ministry of Defense of Israel stays regardless of the fact that their capital is in Jerusalem - something very strange for me. But that's the reality of different agencies coming together and trying to think through what might be a wise approach for Israel moving into an area that may be of significant potential, but at the same time, not risk-free for Israel. So this was the context of preparation, at least for this one for the arms control and regional security. Preparation started at the Ministry of Defense. But it was not only the Ministry of Defense, it was an interagency consultation effort, trying to design the suggested approach for Israel entering those negotiations.

Hanna Notte

Thank you. This is all incredibly useful. I have one or two follow up questions on what you just said. First of all, to come back to the five working groups for the multilateral track, do you have any recollection as to whether the choice of those five in particular, and also arms control and regional security as one within that, was that contentious in any way within Israel? With other delegations? Or do you recollect that consensus on those five at Madrid - or even, as you sort of insinuated maybe prior to Madrid - was found?

Sallai Meridor

Again, my vague recollection is that it was prior to Madrid. My vague recollection is that it was, it appeared already on a draft that was submitted to us by Jim Baker. I'm not sure about it, but that's my remote recollection. I think with the other four, there was no significant anxiety or tension or sense of concern within Israel. What were they, they were water, and energy, what were the other four groups?

Hanna Notte

Refugees and environment.

Sallai Meridor

Ah sorry, refugees is a significant one, sorry.

Hanna Notte

And environment.

Sallai Meridor

With the environment, water and energy was the fifth one? I guess that there was a general concern that some of the Arab interlocutors, especially the Palestinians, might use the multilateral track in order to introduce bilateral agendas. For example, take water and the Sea of Galilee... So the Sea of Galilee, which is a major source, at least used to be the major source, of water for Israel, was claimed by Syria. It was not claimed by Jordan, but the water that goes to the sea of Galilee are influenced by what Jordan is doing, in Jordan. And the Palestinians had a claim based on a mandatory map, whatever, that they have a share in the water of the Sea of Galilee. So we were concerned that, let me just give you an example, that the multilateral platform will be used - or abused from our standpoint - by different parties, to advance their bilateral agendas. Refugees is obviously a major issue but it's so clear, I think, from the Israeli side that the idea of having '48 refugees coming back to sovereign Israel would be detrimental to the very existence of Israel. So I don't at least recall great tension around it.

And I guess the expectation was that this track would be largely rhetorical. By the time, I'm not sure that it was in connection with that, there were talks, there was talk and maybe some efforts to raise the issue of Jewish refugees from Arab countries - who had to escape the Arab countries after '48 and found refuge in Israel. So you have your refugees, we have our refugees, so we were considering building the case that both sides had refugee issues and each side should take care of their own refugees with international support. But we are not expecting the Jews of Iraq or Morocco to go back to Morocco or Iraq. And you should not expect the Palestinians of Jaffa or Haifa to go back to cities within Israel. So now, when you're talking about that time, some things come to mind, but I'm not sure how dominant they were at the time. The Israeli position has been very clear on those issues, that refugee issues should be resolved within the countries, with international support, but that return is out of the equation from an Israeli standpoint. On the issue of arms control and regional security, there were concerns. I think that at least - again I hope I'm not misleading, because you're talking to me today, after many years, most of these years I have not involved on those issues - so for us, the natural thing was regional security. Thinking about the hostile area. Hardly any, except for Egypt, there were no peace agreements. Even the peace with Egypt was very cold. There was no real reconciliation, acceptance of Israel in the region. Even in Egypt, if you're talking about the - definitely the intelligentsia in Egypt, the elites in Egypt, let alone all the other countries who did not have any kinds of peace agreements with Israel.

So for us the wise approach, the reasonable approach, the productive approach would be moving gradually, to find some structures of regional security that will be beneficial to different elements, if not all within the region. Arms control - at least to me, I don't want to say to us - seemed a very long and dangerous road, because it may raise expectations that were not realistic. It may move the discussions to where no practical fruits can come out, and only a sense of failure. It may raise expectations on the part of the Arabs, led by Egypt but not only Egypt, that Israel might do things concerning the NPT that Israel had no interest or intent to do. So I think that if we were to design the process, it would have the fifth track or first track, whatever - whichever way you count it, as regional security and without arms control. With regard to the area of arms control, I would say that - again the way I looked at it, I don't want to speak for others - was A) that this can only come built on successes in regional security, second) this is a matter of significant trust among parties and ability to verify in most intrusive ways, which means that you really need stable, with significant records of peace, and friendly relationships between countries in order to seriously move into the direction. So in terms of timeline, it looked - as I said, I would have wished not to even engage with it, but if, then it's there, it's not here. And when it's there, the thought was this must include all areas of weapons of mass destruction.

And not only, in some ways not only the three regular ones, we didn't think then cyber, but we know today that cyber could turn into a mass destruction weapon. If you turn down electricity around dams, and you close, you will start to experience the mass destruction, the potential mass destruction, by cyber. It was not then. But we as Israelis were living the fear of conventional mass destruction. Being outnumbered by airplanes, by tanks, by number of soldiers, definitely standing armies, so Israel really developed its entire defense strategy based on the notion that it might be destroyed by conventional weapons. So we would look once we get there, if we get there, once we get there, to include the limits on conventional, especially quantities of conventional weapons, as part of a regional understanding or agreement. Another element that was of concern to us, again, if I were to recall, was when it gets to arms control, what would be the reasonable — sufficient, I would say — boundaries of the areas we are talking. Iran was not part of the process — I don't think anybody wanted it to be part of the process. But for us, Iran, even then, was a potential key threat, we are talking already Iran under the mullahs, already talking Iran now out of the war with Iraq already, so how can you do arms control in the Middle East without thinking about Iran?

Today, I think nobody will question it or you could not think about Israel doing anything in arms control without having Iran somehow in the equation, or the Saudis or the Emirates. And then we had on our mind Pakistan, as somewhat in times very hostile, or a state with very hostile or somewhat hostile policy towards Israel, including some form of participation in the war in '48. Claiming to be the Muslim nuclear power. Again, maybe I'm now mixing with things that I heard of only later, but maybe not. Maybe it was then as well. Suspicions that there might be something between the Pakistani nuclear program and the Saudi funding. So how can you really deal significantly or seriously with arms control, without having Pakistan in some form, as part of that arena, or equation? So what we had in the back of our mind were these two circles. One is: what are the threat areas or weapon areas, not geographical, that should be included in such a thought process? And it was clear to us that it should include four types of weapons of mass destruction, including massive conventional weapons. And the geography must be broad enough to satisfy or address the legitimate concern of the different parties. So I think that sums up my recollection of - maybe some of it is now post factum fabricated - of what may have been there.

Hanna Notte

Of course, everyone shared their recollections of what happened 30 years ago, and that's understood. I have two quick follow-up questions on what you just said about the arms control issue, if I may. One is on the geographical, and you elaborated that Israel had at the back of its mind potential threats by Iran, by Pakistan. I want to ask you about the definition of the region for the ACRS process. I mean, we also know that Syria and Lebanon decided not to participate in the multilateral track. Other countries not involved included Iraq and Libya. Turkey was involved not as a regional but as an extra-regional player. Was the definition of the region and regional delegations for ACRS contentious in any way? And what was Israel's position on that? That's my first follow-up question. And the second follow-up question on the discussion of arms control and Israel's hesitancy in that regard, I mean, you called it a sort of long and dangerous shot potentially to go there... It must also have been understood to the Israeli side, that Egypt in particular would push quite early in the process on the question, particularly of nuclear disarmament. So what was the thinking on the Israeli side, sort of anticipating the positions of others going into the process, and how it would unfold?

Sallai Meridor

Okay, on the composition of the players in the process. We did not know at the time, when I was there, that Syria and Lebanon would not participate, again to the best of my recollection. So, but I don't think that we were, that we thought that not having all the players around the table should stop us from trying to reach some understandings with some of the players on some issues, and move toward some progress that will contribute in and of themselves, and could potentially create an environment that would open the door for wider or deeper engagement and maybe

wider participation. We were concerned that, how can you talk about, for example arms control, when key players are not part of the process. Again, I don't recall the discussions, I was just now imagining, almost, that if you have a key refugee issue in Syria and Lebanon, if they're not around the table, and they cannot agree to, with significant international support to let the refugees become their citizens, then you're basically closing the door on what, to us, seems to be the most natural and realistic outcome. So it is limiting in some areas, but not entirely limiting in other areas.

For example, if the Palestinians would not insist otherwise, could start solving the problems of refugees in other countries. Like, you have refugees in Jordan, some of them are still sitting in refugee camps. You could agree on an effort to dissolve refugee camps by an effort to help these people build themselves as contributing citizens to the Jordanian polity, society, economy, etc. So even within not only Jordan, even within the West Bank, Gaza, Judea and Samaria, Gaza, you could work arrangements that refugees will start building their lives out of refugee camps. That's from our perspective, obviously, they have kept the refugee card now for 72 years, keeping them in some ways hostages to the national frame of return. But so, we did not find that closing the door on the ability to make some progress, but at the same time inhibiting movement in other areas. So that's... but not to the point of saying, "Okay, so there is no sense of convening the tracks."

Hanna Notte

Understood, understood.

Sallai Meridor

The second question was on Egypt.

Hanna Notte

On the arms control, I mean, on discussing structural arms control, disarmament.

Sallai Meridor

If my recollection doesn't mislead me, then I think this must have been a concern. And this is why, at least I thought, that putting arms control may be counterproductive. Because it raises the expectation among some of the partners, maybe largely Egypt and the other Arab countries, that this should be the focus of negotiations. It could basically block progress on any other area, where to begin with I believed, which I still do, that you cannot really move on this front, unless you have significant trust, record of reliable trust - like you know, that this is not only wishful thinking but this is really passing the tests of pressure. And all the relevant players around the table. So I thought the process would have been served better if it was only regional security. I told you at the beginning what drove the agenda. I gave you an Israeli perspective of what could be Israel's interest in having multilateral, the U.S. perspective. I told you that maybe an Egyptian insistence on arms control was an element there in moving forward. But I cannot tell you for sure that it was a concern, but I would be very surprised if it wasn't a concern at the time.

Hanna Notte

Thank you. I have just a few questions left. I want to ask you about the beginning of the process. So if I look at the timeline, it was in January 1992 in Moscow that the arms control group was sort of formally launched. And a steering group was put together for the overall multilateral track. And it was also decided that the United States and Russia would co-chair that steering group.

Sallai Meridor

Co-Chair, yes.

Hanna Notte

So I would like to ask you two questions on that. In your recollection, what was the mandate of that steering group? What was its supposed role for the multilateral track going to be and how did you see the role of Russia in the process, as it started at least? Given that just after the end of the Cold War, arguably, a structural imbalance emerged between then the Russian Federation and the United States. But still, the initial plenaries sort of intermittently happened in Washington, DC and in Moscow. So there appears to have been an effort to give a role to both. Maybe you could speak a little bit about that?

Sallai Meridor

First of all, I don't remember. So I cannot give you any answer that is based on my memory. So I can only guess. I think that the perception, if not conviction, within Israel for decades has been that we cannot trust in any international fora. All of us in some ways are children of what we believe have been the abandonments of the Jews by the world. And this runs in our blood and genes. So there is basic lack of trust in any international fora. Then, beyond that, we are like, if you're my age, you still remember the days of '67 and '73, where our interests, many countries in the world sided with the Arab world, being willing to sell Israel just to make sure that oil prices are not going too high and hurt their economies. So there was little trust. So whenever one would come to us with an idea of a multinational conference, a Geneva conference, a multinational setup, a steering committee, there would be apprehension, to say the least. And our comfort zone is when you leave us alone — that's best. And if we have to engage (I'm talking then, things may have changed) is be together with the US in the room and try to work out something that will not hurt Israel. Any further engagement at the time must have been seen as dangerous to Israel.

Over time, and I would make the exception, I think there have been changes in that since '91. On Germany, feelings among at least policymakers in Israel vis-a-vis Germany are different today. With history of Germany dealing with the Holocaust, and then Germany standing by Israel's security, submarines, etc., etc., there has been a change in the perception of whether Germany would be automatically among the foes or maybe given the benefit of the doubt, that maybe we can trust them. It has been the case with some European countries although to a lesser extent, depending on the leadership. There were leaders who enjoy trust here, because they appeared to the Israelis as caring for Israel's interest. And it may have changed somewhat in the broader arena. But back in '91, I don't think we could feel comfortable with anything that is run, steered by anybody but the United States. And even with United States, we had several times collisions based on different positions.

So, Russia, the experience has been largely negative, I'm talking about Soviet Union after '48, not in '48, but after '48 — was very hostile toward Israel, siding with Israel's enemies, supplying them with arms, supporting them internationally. So this must have sat heavily on people's minds, the record of Russia. And the total uncertainty, talking '91, early '92, of what is Russia? Where is it going? Is it stable? Is it going to roll back? Is it going to dissolve, even within Russia? So for us then, if I recall, we never, at the time, were happy about co-chairpersonship between the U.S. and Russia, I think we acquiesced because the U.S. really wanted it. And I assume that the U.S. found ways to assure us that they will make sure that we are not hurt. Not that you can go to the bank with it, but sometimes people want to hear that their problems are not that severe. So they go to take an opinion from another experts. So I think we knew that the U.S. has other interests, and we were ready to take the risk, and Russia has the potential of becoming a friend. And we had the Jews coming out of Russia, in hundreds of thousands, after so many years of gates closed. So why now for, co-chairpersonship, we should annoy the Russians who are allowing the Jews to make a Zionist dream come true? So I assume all those considerations, which was not - we were never enthusiastic about Russian involvement - but first, not to anger the U.S., and second, not to insult Russia — short term because how they behaved with the Jews and immigration to Israel, and long term, who knows, maybe there is a potential there. So I guess that unenthusiastically we accepted, or did not object the co-chair situation.

Hanna Notte

That's very interesting. Thank you. There's a final question I want to ask you about the beginning of the process, particularly you as someone who served at the Ministry of Defense at the time. So at the first plenary of the ACRS group — which was in Washington, DC in May 1992, so just before the elections that you mentioned — at that first plenary, it appears that a decision was taken to initially take a somewhat educational approach to the working group to talk about lessons.

Sallai Meridor

When was the Lisbon Conference?

Hanna Notte

I'm not sure, I don't have it here on my timeline, the one that launched the overall multilateral track, you mean? I just have the timeline here on the ACRS group in particular. There was a plenary in Washington in May, where it was decided to focus initially on lessons from arms control and confidence building measures in the European theatre, so what was part of the Helsinki process, and then also between the Americans and the Soviets during the Cold War. Now, I'm not sure you attended the plenary.

Sallai Meridor

I don't recall attending the plenary.

Hanna Notte

Were you familiar with the fact that this was the approach initially taken in the ACRS group? And what are your thoughts on that? Or what were your thoughts on that?

Sallai Meridor

Sorry, I don't recall participating. I may have, I don't recall it. I don't think I did participate. So I don't recall my thoughts about the issue at the time. It sits well with what I do recall as the general sense of this Israeli groundbreaking, to have these setups that there is a risk here, or I should say the first aim, which is not insignificant, is having these people together in the room. The first goal should be that they don't walk out of the room. If we try to become too concrete, allow for the Arabs to raise arms control issues, or for Israel to put on the table, "let's have cooperation between our navies in the Red Sea for protecting whales or sharks or what have you", that would make one of the sides very nervous. And maybe the way to go about it is to take a step back, and taking all the players together, keep them together in the room talking about other areas, which has its merits as well, because you're leaning from other experiences, but I don't think that the learning element was the major motivation. I guess that it was a wise approach of how to keep the people together, within the process. Hoping that over time, you will be able to build some relationship, trust, being able to move in a more concrete direction that goes into the region. But if I had to make the choice today, okay, once you've had this achievement of getting everybody to the room, now jump into contentious issues, running the risk of having the party over, I think they made the right choice of basically taking a step back and having everybody sit comfortable in the seats, watching a movie about other areas in the world.

Hanna Notte

Understood. Thank you. I want to ask you, so you attended the Lisbon Conference where I assume all the regional delegations that were part of the multilateral track were represented. Was that the only meeting that you attended that brought together all the regional delegations, or were there other meetings at the beginning?

Sallai Meridor

Again, to the best of my recollection, that was the only meeting that I recall.

Hanna Notte

And I would like just to ask you, I mean, this is right at the beginning of the process. What was your first impression? If you have recollections of engaging with some of these other delegations, what were the atmospherics between the Israeli delegation and some of the other regional delegations?

Sallai Meridor

I think it was mixed, which is positive. Because our outlook has been very dark or negative, for many, many years. And I think it was mixed, it was a very strange new phenomenon that you can be in the same room, meeting with Arab delegations. At the same time, the positions the delegations had taken - speaking largely about the bilateral, but I guess this was the case with multilateral as well - were very rigid at the very beginning. So on the one hand, if you were to listen to what people said, you would get very frustrated. But if you were to open your eyes and look at who is in the room, you would say — well, something very different is probably happening here. So this is why I'm telling you, the brain must be connected both to what you hear and what you see. So it was mixed in my brain.

Hanna Notte

Very interesting. Thank you. And I have a final question for you today. And I ask it with the understood caveat that you ceased being involved in ACRS directly in December of 1992. Maybe you still followed the process somewhat from the sidelines, I want to ask you, why do you think the ACRS process eventually failed and collapsed?

Sallai Meridor

I will just make two assumptions, or two comments: One — during the '90s, there were two major bilateral efforts: one the Israel vis-a-vis the Palestinians, and one Israel vis-a-vis the Syrians. These have not been perceived as successful. And because the multilateral effort came within a context of bilateral meetings and the hope that you can have breakthrough bilaterally, and multilateral seemed more as the supporting element of the bilateral rather than the opposite, I think that once the bilateral collapsed, the pillar on which the multilateral was convened was not there anymore, or hardly there anymore. So that may be... that's an assumption, that may be what contributed to the fact that the interest ebbed. It was kept the hope for some of the parties when they entered in, that the bilateral conflicts are going to come to an end, and that they need to also be part of that and contribute to that. The hope disappeared, or largely diminished. And the cover disappeared. For some, maybe the multilateral were more important, but they needed a bilateral cover because of domestic issues. So in the absence of the cover, they could not advance the multilateral or their arms control and regional security agenda. So that's one comment. And the other comment is that: I never know, and I don't want to say you'll never know, but I never know to tell you exactly what was the influence, historically, of that event or the other event. And we're now experiencing - and basically, we've experienced over the last decade, if not more - a very significant change in the relationship between Israel and regional partners. Talking regional security. Nobody could dream in '91, '92, that the level of regional security between Israel and significant Arab states — both Egypt, Jordan, Gulf — would be as significant as has developed. Now it's partially led by commonality of interests vis-a-vis Iran, a commonality of interest vis -a-vis Islamist movements, Sunni Islamist movements, but whether the seeds were planted in the post-Madrid multilateral tracks, I don't know. It could be, so I'm not sure it has been a total failure.

Hanna Notte

Great. Understood. Well, I've taken almost an hour of your time.

Sallai Meridor

Thank you. Thank you, sorry for saying very little in so much time.

Hanna Notte

It was extremely interesting, and particularly what you added more on the start of the process was very, very useful for us. So I want to thank you, and we will certainly be in touch with the results of the study.

Sallai Meridor

Thank you. Thank you very much. Wishing you success.

Hanna Notte

Thank you very much. Have a good day.

[End of transcript]