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Interview with Aly Erfan

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Summary:

Aly Erfan is a former Egyptian diplomat. He served as a member of the Egyptian delegation to ACRS.

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Aly Erfan, Egypt**Oral history interview conducted by Hanna Notte on Zoom on November 4, 2020****Hanna Notte**

Alright, this is the 4 November and the ACRS oral history interview with Ambassador Aly Erfan. Thank you for doing this. Maybe we'll start with a with a rather broad question: Can you just explain in what capacity, in what role you were involved in the ACRS process, and what objectives Egypt was pursuing, going into the process?

Aly Erfan

Sure, I was, at the time, in the cabinet of the Foreign Minister of Egypt. I was in charge among other things, and as a member of the team, in charge of the issues in the multilateral track of the peace process, be it the Steering Committee or - I focused more on the arms control working group. As a member of the Egyptian delegation to the ACRS, I was, at the time officially in the cabinet, I was the direct assistant of, or on the team of Nabil Fahmy who was the head of the delegation. So, coming from the cabinet, I was the assistant to Nabil Fahmy in ACRS. As you probably know, we had a large team from different agencies, I was a member of that team. In most of the, in all of the meetings of ACRS at the level of head of delegation, which was headed by Nabil Fahmy, but in many of the workshops, intersessional activities, and so on and so forth, I sort of coordinated the team being the diplomat on the team, because it was mostly experts who joined. So, that was my capacity basically.

Hanna Notte

Great. And can I just ask a follow up question: Can you explain a little more how the Egyptian delegation to ACRS was put together? What was the domestic process guiding that?

Aly Erfan

It's not unlike the domestic process of other delegations. We had, as I said, diplomats, Nabil Fahmy and myself. We had think-tank experts who had previously been in the military - the late Major General Ahmad Fakhr is a name that comes to mind here, he was a retired officer who was in charge of the more important think tanks that were involved in arms control studies. And we had from the different relevant agencies - of course normally, mostly from the military, because that's, basically especially in the intersessional activities, we had to look at the incidents at sea agreements, we had to look at certain search and rescue agreements, so we had an expert from the Navy, and so on and so forth. So the process is not unlike any other process, we're just - at a much higher level than mine, there was a discussion at the national level, and that's how the delegation was formed. All relevant agencies were there, relevant in accordance with the substance of course, plus, as I said, think tank experts like General Ahmad Fakhr, the late general.

Hanna Notte

Great, maybe let's go a step back before ACRS and talk for a second about the Madrid peace conference and why Egypt decided to participate in the conference. And were you involved in the conference? Did you attend?

Aly Erfan

Egypt was involved because Egypt was invited. And because of - can you hear me? I think you froze?

Hanna Notte

I'm, should I, am I back now? Yes I can still hear you.

Aly Erfan

Okay, so we were invited, Egypt was invited to the conference. And naturally, so of course, if you're addressing the Middle East process, peace process, if you're addressing the Arab-Israeli conflict, naturally you would invite Egypt. So Egypt was invited, and as we say, invited at the table, as a participant. If you look at the invitation letter to the Madrid conference, which was a co-invitation from the US and, at the time, the Soviet Union, there was sort of - I don't want to say categorization - but there was an explanation of who was invited as a participant or as an observer

and Egypt was a participant. So, at the table, so to speak. So Egypt was involved because she was invited and I'm pretty sure was involved in the preparation as well.

Hanna Notte

Great. And the decision then to have these five different working groups on the multilateral track, those five themes, and also to have arms control and regional security as one specific working group - Do you recall who made that suggestion? Was there immediate uptake in the region? Everyone was onboard to do it this way? Or was it controversial?

Aly Erfan

I'll tell you what I remember. And I think you told me you're going to be meeting with Nabil [Fahmy] right after, and I think between him and me, you'll be able to...

Hanna Notte

This evening, yes.

Aly Erfan

...I think you'll be able to figure it out. It's been a long time. But let me take you back to a statement given by George Bush, President George Bush at the time in Congress, after the end of the Gulf War. I can't remember the exact date, I can find it for you and send it because I use it usually in my teaching. It was a statement to the meeting of the two houses, Senate and House of Representatives, in which he declared the end of the Gulf War, liberation of Kuwait, and then put his sort of vision for the future. And that's where he laid the vision of a track between Israel and her neighbors, and a track that would involve the regional parties to design a better future, or to design a better modus operandi in the region. And he - I don't think he mentioned many details - but he hinted at what the multilaterals would be addressing. My recollection is that there were, at the time, I think, two or three controversial subjects put on the table. I think refugees was one of them, but it was ironed out, either before Madrid or right after Madrid, or during, in Madrid. And the two controversial ones - I recall, the Palestinians wanted to set up a working group on Jerusalem. And I think we were the ones who came up with the arms control and regional. We came up with arms control. What I also remember from the issue of arms control is that we suggested the conventionally-used term 'arms control', and it was the Israelis who raised the issue of regional security, sort of connecting security to arms control, arguing that arms control doesn't go in a vacuum, we need to discuss regional security. I don't recall that we as Egyptians had issues with that. And we said it was fine for us. So that's how it was worked out. We said, if you're going to design the future, then one of the issues for the future has to be arms control. The Israelis said we need to connect it with region security. So that's how ACRS came to be. Then as I said, I think Jerusalem never really took off, not the American or Israel.

Hanna Notte

That's really useful, actually. Thank you. You mentioned at the beginning of your answer...

Aly Erfan

Nabil might remember this even better, because I think he was - at the time I was in New York. So I was connected to the delegation through New York. Nabil was in Cairo. I was stationed in New York. So I was sort of communicating. Nabil was the one in Cairo. So he's the one who did the negotiating.

Hanna Notte

I'll make sure to ask him that question as well. You mentioned Bush and his speech to Congress after the end of the first Gulf War. I want to ask you a bit more broadly, which global and regional developments did you see as supporting or furthering that process at the time?

Aly Erfan

Context, of course, is absolutely essential. And you're right, there was a context for it. The context, as you hinted is, first of all, not first of all, not in sequence. One change in context was the end of the Cold War. This was 1991. The Soviet Union, as far as I can recall, was dissolved in December of 1991. So that change in context, meaning that there was no more competition between the two superpowers and competition

that lead to paralysis, the fact that this paralysis no longer existed - and it's not a question for me, I mean, it doesn't matter whether it's a unipolar world or a bipolar, I mean, this is for the theoreticians to argue over - but the fact is, there is no paralysis, there is no one side vetoing the other on every other issue. So the fact that the two superpowers - and again, I don't want to debate whether Russia is a superpower or not, it's really splitting hairs - but the fact that the two powers were in unison, and the two powers managed to work together, issue the invitation to Madrid together, and indeed co-sponsor the arms, co-chair the ACRS process, this facilitated the... This debate was taken out of the Middle East process, this Cold War debate was no longer in the Middle East.

Secondly, of course, the invasion, the Saddam Hussein aggression against Kuwait. Unfortunately, it seems that sometimes some regions require a heavy earthquake to change things. And this was definitely an earthquake and a realization that something is critically wrong, and this should never happen again. But the good thing, in my view, is that the context was taken in its totality, that it is - and again, go back to the Bush statement, and I remember now, it was in March of 1991 - if you go back to the Bush statement, you needed to approach the Middle East in its totality, this is not simply: Now that we've managed to liberate Kuwait and repel the aggression, it's over and done with. No, we need to look at the Middle East and settle it, settle the Middle East in its totality, and realize that the Arab-Israeli conflict is still there. And we need to work on all of its files. Plus, the entire region needs to be structured in a more effective modus operandi.

I think those two, regional and global, changes facilitated Madrid in general, and not necessarily the multilaterals or the bilaterals, but facilitated everyone realizing that we need to approach the Middle East in a more comprehensive way. And let's go back to the drawing board and try to tackle the Middle East in its totality. As a footnote, I wish we can do this now. Because I think that today is a moment when we need this kind of approach.

Hanna Notte

Great, thank you. I want to come a little bit more to the structure of the process and ask you, first of all: the Steering Committee for the multilateral track - Can you talk a little bit about that? How often did it meet? What was its mandate? What was it? Did it have an important role as for the proceedings of the ACRS group?

Aly Erfan

I can't remember how often it met, but we used to meet, the five working groups used to meet in cycles. I can't remember the exact dates, quite honestly, but you can find those. If you manage to find the final statements of each meeting, you get those. So the plenaries of the five working groups would meet, say ACRS, and the steering group would meet immediately after or couple of weeks, two-three weeks after - look at the reports from the heads of the five working groups - and coordinate. Coordinate sort of issue - again, as far as I can recall - issues of general guidelines, and then agree on the future dates and agree on the future venues for the meetings. And so I can't recall that the Steering Committee had any substantive contribution that would really strike me. I mean, if it had, I would have remembered. But all I remember is that it was more or less sort of a guiding, coordinating body and issued should general statements and mostly agreed on the dates of the following meetings and that sort of thing. So I don't recall it had much impact on the work of ACRS. ACRS had its own dynamics.

Hanna Notte

And we'll come more to that, of course. I also want to ask you: In parallel to this multilateral track proceeding, you had the bilaterals that came out of the Madrid conference. What was Egypt's view on the relationship between the bilateral and multilateral track?

Aly Erfan

We were ready to proceed with the multilaterals. You would recall that the Lebanese and the Syrians decided to sit the multilaterals out. And their argument was: the multilateral is a normalization process and normalization comes after the agreements and after the resolution of the bilaterals. I remember that we cautioned the two co-sponsors, the US and the Soviet Union, later Russia: Now what you're trying to do

here is to design the future, while at the same time trying to resolve the past, the problems of the past. Now, fine, we'll go along with it, but you have to realize that it is going to be very tricky, that it will not be easy, because the problems of that track which tries to resolve the issues of the past will definitely haunt us and it has a very strong impact on the multilaterals. So not very often, but sometimes, the bilaterals would face difficulties, and that would definitely overshadow the multilaterals. People would be hesitant, the Palestinians indeed, of course, would be hesitant to move as quickly in the multilaterals, and naturally the Arab side was very receptive to the, its role in supporting the Syrians, Palestinians, Lebanese and so on.

So in the majority the Arabs did not go along with the request of the Syrians or the Lebanese to totally boycott the multilaterals, we still wanted to participate. But we were also receptive to what was happening and sometimes events on the ground, like an attack on the Palestinians, would overshadow the meeting and we'd say: you know what, we cannot come to a meeting when this incident happened. And so, that's one element. But it also - at one moment, it had a positive effect. Oslo had a very positive effect on the multilaterals.

Oslo was a breath of fresh air at the time. It was a very positive development. So it had its effect on facilitating agreements, whether in ACRS or in other working groups. One of the more important developments in ACRS is the declaration, the draft declaration, which is the most talked about from the events of ACRS. And people don't realize that the regional parties, at least those who were at the table, agreed to a text which is not unlike Helsinki 1974, which is not unlike the Decalogue of Helsinki, with the exception of three paragraphs or three articles, but actually with the exception of one paragraph or three different drafts. But the fact that we agreed to almost three pages of principles and purposes of the process is in itself a good thing. What triggered this was Oslo. What made us start on the process was Oslo, and actually it was Nabil Fahmy's idea. Nabil Fahmy had a much simpler idea, but of course, anything you give to the Americans eventually becomes a Christmas tree. What Nabil Fahmy had in mind - and I was the one, I remember it well because I was the one who made the proposal in an intersessional meeting in Vienna, it was the first intersessional meeting after Oslo, so we must be talking about the end of '93, beginning of '94 - and I think you can see from your research, ACRS proceeded on two legs. One was called the conceptual basket and the other was called the operational basket.

Hanna Notte

Vienna is October 1993.

Aly Erfan

Okay, October '93. That's right after Oslo, because Oslo was September.

Hanna Notte

Correct.

Aly Erfan

And that was one of the conceptual basket meetings. And Nabil's idea, which I transmitted to the meeting, was - you know, do something like Reykjavik, when Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev issued a two-liner, saying - I can't remember the exact text but something along the lines of: Nuclear wars should never be fought, or something.

Hanna Notte

Can never be won and should never be fought, I guess.

Aly Erfan

Something like that, it was a one-liner, but it was a very optimistic one-liner, and it was a positive sign, positive thing. And that's what Nabil had suggested. A positive paragraph coming out, Reykjavik-like, in light of Oslo, but it developed and grew and became the draft that you saw. And it proceeded well, but that's another case where the context overshadows the process. Of course, '95 and the extension conference of the NPT became a context that everybody had to deal with and it paralyzed that process. So the relationship was there between the bilateral and the multilateral, and regardless of what anyone's position is, no one could simply deny the fact that something is happening on the ground and say, okay, let's pretend that we, sitting in

this room in Vienna, are working in a vacuum and in isolation, it doesn't happen this way. Whatever happened outside the room influenced what was happening inside. But in general, I think the more important element is that all of the Arab countries who were invited, showed up, as far as I can recall. Maybe one or two didn't. All of those who were invited showed up. The Gulf states were there, Algeria was there, Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, of course, the Palestinians, Egypt. I think those were invited. And they showed up. Of course, Sudan at the time was in a different situation. Iraq and Libya, needless to say, no. And Syria and Lebanon decided to sit it out.

Hanna Notte

Just a final quick follow-up on the bilaterals, if I may: Do you recall the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty to have any immediate impact on the discussions in ACRS?

Aly Erfan

I would say it must have had a positive impact. But not as big as Oslo, because Oslo had two important developments. Number one, that it was between the Israelis and the Palestinians. And number two, that it was between the Israelis and PLO. So the fact that the PLO - as you recall from Madrid, the PLO was not invited to Madrid, and there was sort of a condition that the PLO should not be there and the Palestinians should be in a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation - Oslo was the recognition of PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and the agreement, or the DoP was signed with that party, not with the joint... So there was more to celebrate - I mean I'm not downplaying the importance of the Jordanian Agreement, but there's more to celebrate in the Oslo Accord. But I can't recall what impacted, whether the Wadi Araba agreement [name for Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty] had, but I'm sure it must have had a positive impact.

Hanna Notte

Okay, great. I want to come back to the first plenary, which was in Washington, DC in May 1992. And if I look at the records, it appears to have focused on looking at lessons on regional security from the US-Soviet theatre, the European theatre, and essentially to take a sort of educational approach. Did you find that instructive and useful, to proceed that way at the beginning? And how was it generally received by the regional delegations?

Aly Erfan

In theory, it would be useful. But in practice, it was not very useful for two reasons. Number one, it was seen - and I think rightly so - as one way by which the co-sponsors of the process would take half a step forward without really taking a step forward. Now you want to discuss arms control, fine, we'll discuss arms control but in a non-committal way, in a way that doesn't make the Israelis nervous. So it's just a lecture by a European friend who will tell you how the OSCE started and how OSCE developed and so on, so forth. Theoretically speaking, if you are serious about designing an arms control regime, of course part of it is lessons learned and you look at other regions and how they developed, but my take on it is that was not the purpose. It was doing the right thing for the wrong reason. You know, the whole issue with ACRS, the pull and push of ACRS, is: some people wanting to take action on the ground and take this process seriously. Others are very cautious and don't really want to move ahead. But so okay, let's see how we can mention the word arms control somehow. And let's go on verification visits to Finland, then go to you know, look at the op [operations] center in Washington and that sort of thing. So, in my view, it was doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. My view was simply to try and walk the thin line between the Egyptians and Jordanians on one side and the Israelis on the other side.

Hanna Notte

Okay. And can I also ask you: the fact that the seminar style approach was taken at the beginning - what impact did that have on the interaction between the regional delegations? I mean, did you still find that you had lots of direct contact with your various regional counterparts? At which point were sort of personal relations forged and real interaction happened? Given that the seminar style was chosen.

Aly Erfan

It happened, by definition, I mean, people sitting in the same room, eventually, I think there was more interaction among the permanent fixtures in the delegations, myself, General Fakhr, rest in peace, Abdullah Toukan on the Jordanian side, Eli Levite on the Israeli side. It's unfair that I can't remember all the names, but those were always there, whether in the plenary meetings or in the intersessionals, and of course, because we met more often. But in some cases, if you have a verification exercise and you bring an expert on verification. And he or she attends that one session, and then leaves and never comes back again to the process, because this is only one event, they don't have time to create that bond or that relationship. So, I would say the relationship was created more amongst those who were more permanent in participating in a majority of the meetings. Of course, I mean, in both the concept- - I attended most of the, I attended all of the conceptual baskets and most of the operational baskets, but I wasn't in every single room. So, I can't tell what the dynamic was. But my impression was, you'd find that, you know, Abdullah Toukan and myself would have a stronger bond than those who showed up for only one session or one meeting.

Hanna Notte

Okay, great. And I do want to come back to these two baskets now. So I understand that it was at the fourth plenary, which was in Moscow in November '93 - so two months after Oslo - that this decision was taken to proceed in two baskets. Do you recall who came up with that idea? Who initiated that? Was everyone happy to go along to split into the two baskets? Can you talk a little bit about that?

Aly Erfan

My recollection is - and I may be mistaken, but that's my recollection - it was Bob Einhorn who came up with it. I think Bob Einhorn was, by virtue possibly of his experience and expertise, he was more of the operator of ACRS. He had a lot of support of course from the Russian colleagues. But it was Bob who was sort of the mover and shaker of the process. And as far as I can recall, it was Bob Einhorn who came up with it. But again, we went along. However, if you ask me how I would, how I saw it, I still saw it as another way of avoiding the issue, keeping it there, but avoiding it. You know, when you come up with a proposal, anything, a nuclear weapon free zone in the Middle East, and you find it discussed as a conceptual issue - you know, for practitioners conceptual issue means it's just a theoretical academic exercise. Not that there's anything wrong with academic exercises. But it's seen as a sort of theoretical issue, not a practical operational issue. We still went along, it's not that we've objected to this, it's not that we put a wrench in the wheel, but again, in my view, looking at it now, it was doing the right thing for the wrong reasons.

Hanna Notte

How did you understand...

Aly Erfan

I see the reason why the conceptual basket was established and why it was called conceptual. It's not like it was called the long-term objectives, or the midterm objective, it wasn't even mentioned as an objective. It was mentioned as a conceptual issue. Again, I think it was one of those exercises of walking the thin line, accommodating the Egyptians and accommodating the Israelis. The Egyptians wanted to see the issues, those Egyptians and Jordanians want to see the, all the Arabs want to see those issues on the table, but the Israelis don't want to take steps or action that may appear that this is where we're going.

Hanna Notte

Right.

Aly Erfan

So, find the sort of a vague way of approaching it.

Hanna Notte

And on that point, if I may ask, how did your delegation understand the mandate of the conceptual basket? What was supposed to be the end point in that basket?

Aly Erfan

It's a good question, because I think one of the problems of the entire process is, the

endpoint was never agreed to. And that was possibly the reason - I mean, one of the purposes of that doomed declaration is to put a roadmap and to put a vision at the end of the tunnel - what we're going towards. And now that I mention the vision, one of the exercises we were supposed to work on in the conceptual is to put a vision, put visions, long term objectives of the process. So, it didn't help and again, that was one of the frustrations of ACRS. It did not put a final objective towards which we would go and I think, as far as I recall, in addition to what we said, Abdullah Toukan, as far as I remember, was always hammering on this point. I mean, what's the problem, let's develop the vision and let's develop these exercises, let's even develop these agreements. And we agreed that we can only implement them when the atmosphere is conducive. So, let's agree and I think Abdullah used to say, shelve them. And when the time is right, take them off the shelf and implement them. The Israelis were continuously dragging their feet on that. And I think that the one thing that you will most probably see in the difference between the Israeli version and the Egyptian version is, we would say that they're stalling. And they would say that we were trying to drag them too quickly into something, they quite often referred to as the slippery slope. That was a term that was constantly used by Eli Levite, you're taking us into a slippery slope. We put this on this, and eventually, we go where we are not ready to go. It was that difference in, at least, perceptions that I think had an impact on ACRS.

So the mandate of the conceptual basket - I don't recall we even had a mandate. For the conceptual and anything that's not in the operational. And the operational was verification, incidents at sea, which were quite good. I mean, there's no reason why we should look at those agreements as not having been a very positive development. And that's one issue I constantly had with our Israeli counterparts that they continuously accused us that we are fixated on their nuclear program. And I keep telling them, you think we're comfortable with your conventional capabilities? Of course not. I mean it's a question of balance. I mean, one of the things, one of the statements in the ACRS declaration is achieving equal security at lowest levels of armament, I still remember. That's basically what we're going after. Nuclear weapons is part of that formula.

Hanna Notte

So it was an Egyptian language, it was the suggestion of the Egyptians that that particular phrase was inserted?

Aly Erfan

No, I can't remember if it was us, because I mean, it's common language, it's not that we invented the wheel, it's common language in arms control, achieving equal security at the lowest levels of armament. So maybe it was in the original draft that was prepared by the Americans. But it's that objective, and it is in that context, that nuclear weapons are - but they accused us of being fixated on nothing but the nuclear weapons and the NPT, which is really not true. So the fact that many of these issues were discussed, debated, put on the table, even if they were theoretical, is already good. But you know, the problem, Hanna, I keep repeating it, don't do the right thing for the wrong reasons. And that's where my personal issue with this conceptual, operational thing is always a problem. It was not done for the right reasons, it was done for the wrong reason.

Hanna Notte

That's extremely useful. Thank you. And I do want to spend a bit of time now on the operational basket and the intersessionals. Again, if I look at my timeline, it's the first time that one of those workshop intersessionals is moved to the region is actually Cairo, I believe in July 1993. So this brings us now to two months before the Oslo declaration. Can you talk a little bit about the symbolic meaning of having this work moved into the region? Later, we have the plenary also in Doha and Tunis, maybe you can speak a little bit about that, you know, how is it to work with the Israelis and other regionals in the region? In Cairo for the intersessional.

Aly Erfan

To put it frankly, it was symbolic. I mean, a seminar on, whatever, a seminar on ABACC. Why does it have to be in the region? Meaning, why is it so significant to have a Brazilian and Argentinian expert explain to the region how ABACC works? I don't

remember what the topic of that operational basket was?

Hanna Notte

It was a verification seminar on nuclear, chemical, bio, space armaments, conventional, I suppose.

Aly Erfan

Are you sure? Because I remember, there was one session or one intersessional operational activity in which we visited the multinational force and observer in Sinai.

Hanna Notte

Okay, there were multiple ones that happened in Egypt.

Aly Erfan

But anyway, the point is, again, regardless of what the issue was, it's not that Egypt is the throbbing heart of verification of nuclear, chemical, biological. I mean, as I said, we had a visit to Helsinki, where a chemical weapons verification lab is. But as you say it's symbolic, that's the whole thing. That the process moves closer to the region means more acceptance of Israel in a way, and means one step towards normalization, that we don't need to avoid the issue and have to meet outside. And so it was mostly symbolic. As I can recall, in all of the intersessional activities, as I said, it was at the expert level, the heads of delegations didn't always show up. Sometimes Abdullah Toukan would come, but definitely it wasn't necessary. At that meeting, I remember because it was the first meeting in the regions, the head of the Israeli delegation decided to come himself, David Ivry. And, again, because it's symbolic, a suggestion of thank you, so he came personally and Nabil was there to receive him personally. So it was more of a gesture. So does it have any impact on the process, tangibly? No, that's an intangible impact. It's making the Israelis more comfortable, showing that we are moving towards some level of normalcy in the region. Of course, for Egypt it's not a big deal because we had relations with Israel since 1980-1981, but it was just a symbolic gesture, and I think it paved the way for closer and more meetings in the region, as you said.

I think Tunis, now that you mentioned Tunis, I think Tunis was the very last time we met in ACRS. Maybe there was one operational activity right after, but Tunis was the last time we met in plenary. So there were more opportunities to meet in the region after this sort of paved the way. There was another issue with ACRS, again, symbolic. It was decided that the US and the Soviet Union, later Russia, would co-chair ACRS, because it's a sensitive issue. So the co-sponsors of the peace process would be the ones to chair it. And they would, as you said, initially would meet in Washington and meet in Moscow and that sort of thing. So all of this was symbolic. All of this was to allay concerns and allay fears, which I'm not denying is important, these little gestures are important. But when the process becomes nothing but gestures, a sequence of gestures, that's when it becomes problematic.

Hanna Notte

I was actually going to ask you, how was your assessment of Russia's role in the process?

Aly Erfan

Not as active as the US, not as active maybe as some would have expected or hoped. But I have to take context into consideration. The Soviet Union was dissolved in December of '91. I don't expect Russia to be up and running by January or February in 1992, in the way we'd expect. Russia had other priorities, let's be honest. So I mean, if I take that into consideration, I would say they did a fantastic job, given the weight of what they were going through internally, domestically. You know, this was immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. So the fact that they still had enough oxygen to be involved in an international issue of this magnitude, it's not the Russia you'd expect. It's not the Russia as she would be active now. Engaged now, 2020. But put it in context. This is Russia of 1992.

Hanna Notte

That's very clear. I want to come back to the operational basket and the intersessionals. Can you talk a little bit more about the work on these technical issues? I mean, how did you find the preparedness of your counterparts on some of these more technical issues, you know, was a difficult to agree to the measures in

these different baskets that you were looking at? And how did the intersessionals relate to the plenaries, that kept happening every six months or so?

Aly Erfan

Again, from my recollection, let's say they were, I guess operational is really a very good word. They were operational baskets, and indeed, in practice, they were operational, meaning that you had experts sitting around the table. Let's take incidents at sea for instance. If you look at the draft text of the incidents at sea agreement, it's a very technical text. There's very little concepts, as Bob Einhorn would want to call it. And there's really very little politics involved. I used to attend here and there - of course, I'm not the expert, but I used to attend out of, it was my job but it's also interesting to follow - most of the agreements and disagreements were over technical issues. So, I remember one of the discussions - it still remained in my memory - it was in an intersessional meeting on the Dead Sea in Jordan. And there was a discussion of the incidents at sea agreement. It was shepherded by the Canadians, as far as I can recall. And the issue, and it was on the table, was an article that refers to if a submarine was conducting some research or whatever it is, and a support ship was there, and a ship from another country is approaching. Ship A has to indicate to Ship B, be careful, there's a submarine down there. And the discussion was, what should Ship B do? Ship B got the message. Let's stipulate what she has to do. Back off or that sort of thing. This is the level of discussion. It's completely apolitical. It is hundred percent technical, and you know, how fast should the submarine emerge, that sort of thing. So in this respect, it was very different from the conceptual basket. And in this respect, it was also different from the plenary. There was really very little politics involved. We'd finish the agreement as the agreement or the text has to be finished, from the technical professionals' point of view. What we do with it is another question that goes to the politicians and they decide when to implement it, how to implement it, so on and so forth. So, I don't know if this explains the mood in the room, but it was very technical, it was really a very technical exercise. SAR was the same, search and rescue was the same.

Hanna Notte

And in terms of the level of engagement, I mean, you had a high number of Arab delegations, I guess, you had Israel and then 13 other regional delegations. I mean, I assume they were not all equally involved and active in the conceptual basket. And in the operational basket, maybe you can talk a little bit about the level of engagement of various delegations.

Aly Erfan

Right. I mean, the level of engagement varied. The two or three most active were Jordan, Palestine, and Egypt. The Palestinians, of course, brought a different dynamic to the definition of security, thinking of their own situation. Not really involved with arms control in the traditional UN sense, but they were there and they were active. The others were not as active, as engaged as Egypt, for different reasons. Firstly, they did not have the same dynamic with Israel in the same way the three - Palestine, Egypt, and Jordan - so they were still testing or still hesitant. This normalization - Is it going too fast? This and that. So on and so forth. So they were willing to be there to support, but not really engaging as deeply.

There was also an element which was emphasized in the steering committee and the plenaries as far as I can recall it, that participating in any of this is voluntary. So for them, this was a comfortable cushion that, we'll be there, but don't push us into participation. For example, I think we were invited once to an exercise of observing maneuvers or observing something. I mean, if they don't want to come, it's fine. So they were not as dynamically involved as the Egyptians and the Jordanians and the others. The field element, which is of course natural, sometimes also depended on the expert at the table. Sometimes, in some cases, they were unable to send a delegation. So someone from the embassy would attend, he or she would not be as active. Sometimes they'd send someone from the capital, then he or she would be more active. So in terms of being constantly engaged, they were not. There was always like bickering arguments among the Egyptians, Jordanians, Palestinians, and the Israelis in most cases.

Hanna Notte

I was going to ask you a little bit more about the dynamics between, I guess, what were the core participating states on the Arab side, your own country, and then Jordan, and some of the smaller delegations from the Maghreb.

Aly Erfan

Some of the other delegations?

Hanna Notte

Yes.

Aly Erfan

You also have to that, in terms of engagement and arms control issues in general, Egypt is one of those Middle Eastern delegations who were very engaged in the issue at the UN and at UNDC and the Conference on Disarmament. So there is a, there is a team, there's a human infrastructure involved and aware of arms control issues. Not all Middle Eastern countries are interested in the issue at the same level. So for them, it was never an issue of priority. I mean, I remember from my days in the United Nations, when I was doing arms control, that this was still the case, that not everyone was engaged in debates and discussions over arms control issues. So there's a bit of a legacy there. There was a bit of culture there.

Hanna Notte

Yeah. And I do want to come back, if I may, to the dispute between Egypt and Israel, about the inclusion of arms control, the nuclear issue in the ACRS negotiations, the sequencing in that regard, and this massive discrepancy in the room. And I want to ask you, did you find that disagreement, this discrepancy to be static over time, throughout the process? Or did you ever find it to change? Were there inflection points? If you now think back to that period, were there points when you thought you could be more hopeful that, maybe, there could be some rapprochement? Can you talk a little bit about that?

Aly Erfan

No, there was never any hope for rapprochement. If your general description is static or dynamic, I would say that generally it was static. The Israelis would argue that we've made a major, major compromise and sacrifice just discussing nuclear issues. I mean, even putting the issue on the table, even doing any sort of intersessional activities on verification of nuclear capabilities, or whatever it is. But in general, no, they were highly, highly sensitive to putting the issue on the table. And, again, what the Americans in my view tried to do - and this is my reflection, I mean, I wasn't in the room when the American delegation decided how to deal with it - but from my reflections, what the Americans were trying to do is, okay, let's find a way to put the issue on the table, but not really on the table. That's why they would put it on the side table or, you know, put it on the edge of the table, or put it on a chair that's not exactly on the table, that sort of thing. So, in general, in my recollection and my reflection, we never came close.

Hanna Notte

And in that context, I also want to ask you, as you're proceeding with ACRS, there's the anticipation of the 1995 RevCon. You must have at some point been thinking about that and I want to ask you how, for the Egyptian side, the preparation for that conference played into your thinking about ACRS?

Aly Erfan

I mean, definitely that was the elephant in the room, towards the end of 1994. And at the end of the day, this is in my view what pulled the plug on the ACRS process - not on the multilateral, the multilateral had a different dynamic because the dynamic of the multilateral I think completely changed when Netanyahu took over the first time as prime minister and things began to stall on all fronts, the Syrian and the Palestinian. So in all cases, I don't think the multilateral would have survived. And indeed it didn't survive, and we tried to revive it in the year 2000, I think, when Barak took over. And we had one steering group meeting in Moscow, 2000. And there was a sort of a tacit agreement that we would resume all of the multilateral working groups with the exception of ACRS, because ACRS is so sensitive, it's so touchy, it sort of poisons the atmosphere. However, back to your question, NPT was pretty much there in the room. And this is what brought down ACRS, because I mean, our argument was

really quite simple. In my view, here we are, Arab side, Egypt including, expected to make an indefinite commitment in 1995, April 1995, an indefinite commitment. And it's a blind leap of faith, because we have absolutely zero indications from the Israelis where they intend to go. If we can manage to resolve it in ACRS, that's one thing. If we get some form of indication, hint, commitment in ACRS, that's one thing which would help us swallow that pill. And, again, back to your previous question. And that situation was so static, that there was nothing coming and when you look at the three different drafts to the last article of the ACRS declaration, there you have it. The Israelis not willing to give anything on the issue.

And I recall that - again you have to check this with Nabil Fahmy, that's my recollection - that Rabin who was Prime Minister at the time, told Amr Moussa who was the foreign minister of Egypt at the time, on the NPT thing, he said: you know, we really are not concerned with your decision on the NPT. If you want to vote in favor of it, vote. If you don't want to vote, fine. We will not take any action on our side. If you want to withdraw, withdraw. If you want to stay, stay. It's an issue that does not concern Israel. So it was very obvious that they had no intention of giving any indication of any future commitment on the nuclear issue, it's not on joining NPT, but on the nuclear issue. Of course, we will argue that joining NPT is the simplest way of doing it. But no indication on the nuclear thing. And there, again, April 1995, we're expected to make an indefinite commitment and a blind leap of faith. It simply couldn't work and did not work. And it reflected, of course, on ACRS. And in my view, that was the wrench in the wheel that ended ACRS.

Hanna Notte

That's been extremely useful and interesting. Thank you. I do just have a few questions left of slightly broader nature and the end of the process. First, I want to ask you, if you now reflect back on the whole ACRS process, the way the thing was structured in the two baskets, the seminars, the plenaries, the time periods between meetings with others, I mean, the whole structure of the process - was that the right structure? Would a different structure have made a difference? Would you today structure a process in a different way?

Aly Erfan

I don't think that the problem was with the structure. You know, you can design any process mechanically in whatever way you want. It doesn't make a difference. The difference was in political will. Surely the mechanism can facilitate work if the political will is there, but a mechanism will not create political will. I think the problem with the ACRS process remains political will. You can work it whichever way you want, an operational basket, a conceptual basket, you can even do it in a linear process where everything meets at the same time, but without political will, it doesn't make a difference.

Hanna Notte

Okay, I also want to ask you how you reflect about the more personal dimensions, the personal dynamics, relationships that were created between individuals from different delegations. How did you find the level of engagement at a personal level to be between different delegations? I should also say, I've encouraged everyone that I've interviewed to share any illuminating anecdotes, if they're willing to share them. And I will say that one senior Arab delegate from another country has encouraged me - and he said, well, if you speak with Aly Erfan, ask him about a plane trip from Rome to Tunis, and see what he has to say about that. So I'm just going to put that out there. You don't have to engage on that. But if you want to say something about personal dynamics, that would be great.

Aly Erfan

I'm intrigued that some of the ACRS process still remember my name, I'm flattered. But for the life of me, I cannot remember the story of the plane from Rome to Tunis. I am sure that we did go to Tunis via Rome, since he or she said that. But what happened, what transpired during this trip, I really cannot fathom. Maybe if he or she remembers, please do share it with me. And thank him or her for still remembering me, it's nice.

The personal - I think there was an interest on the side of the Americans and the Russians to establish and develop that personal relationship, not only among the

heads of delegations or the diplomats of the delegation, but as I said, whenever there was a meeting of Navy officers, they would go out for lunch. And I can understand the importance, I mean, I teach a course on negotiation, I understand how this is important, in building confidence, breaking the barriers, allowing people even to disagree in a conducive manner, in a manner that is conducive to an agreement. The personal relations were very civil, I have to say, I mean, we had our disagreements, there was really nothing personal. And it was a civilized, professional disagreement. And at the end of the day, those are people who met for 48 hours in a foreign country or in a hotel. So you develop the kind of relationship that would be developed in 48 hours in a foreign country in a hotel. It's not that those people see each other, families would interact - it was nothing more than that. And some have made better friendships than others. But I really cannot think of many anecdotes that I can share with you, Hanna. I'm very, very sorry. No, nothing special.

Hanna Notte

No, that's fine. That's fine. I still appreciate your characterization of the dynamics as you saw them. And I want to ask you, it seems looking back at the time that, of course, this ACRS process was an elite driven process, it must have been quite discrete. I do want to ask you whether, on the Egyptian side, there was any publicly facing public diplomacy, dimension to it, letting the wider public know that Egypt was engaged in these talks with other regional parties? And if there wasn't such a thing, whether you think that was the right approach or whether that would have made a difference if the wider public - let's not just say only in Egypt, but in other regional countries - had been more aware?

Aly Erfan

The public was informed through - I wouldn't say press statements but we would issue sort of a news item if a delegation was here in Cairo to go to Washington for a meeting, there would be a news item on it and maybe a few lines of what the process is trying to do. And when intersessionals were held in Egypt, there would be a news item. But if you're thinking of a campaign, no, there was no campaign, and if there was information in the media, nothing was specific to ACRS, it would be about the multilaterals in general and how they're proceeding and that sort of thing. So, my answer is, it was not kept secret it was made public. And as I said, news items would be issued from the relevant department in the foreign ministry, that Nabil Fahmy is traveling for this and that, and the meeting is going to look at this and that. And sometimes when we met in Washington or in Moscow, an Egyptian reporter who was accredited to Washington would come and interview Nabil. And so I mean there was relative coverage in the media. But certainly not a campaign, because there was really nothing to report. Firstly, some of it was very technical. And secondly, there was very little progress to report, but news items in general.

Hanna Notte

Okay. Well, I guess I will ask you at the end, what were the main successes of the process nonetheless, even though it eventually collapsed? What were the pluses, the successes for Egypt? And what were the biggest failures of ACRS?

Aly Erfan

Well, I start with the last point, the biggest failure of ACRS is that ACRS failed. The biggest failure of ACRS is that ACRS, or the entire multilateral process, is that it was not allowed to flourish, and indeed, implement any of the agreements. You know, don't just look at ACRS, look at the water resources or water working group, look at the environmental, there were so many projects, and many of them were really very useful. They could have been implemented back then. Even the ACRS had some issues that could have been useful, had they been implemented. This continuous refusal to take any steps in ACRS on the ground with the exception of symbolic steps.

You know, one of the projects, as I'm sure you've seen, is the regional security center that was agreed the headquarters would be in Amman and it would have two satellites. You know, the eagerness to set it up and quickly let's meet, it's basically symbolic. It was really nothing. I mean, so long as the other issues were not moving, why would we meet in a regional security center? To do what? So, I think that was the main failure of ACRS and of the multilateral process, it never achieved its objectives,

because of internal dynamics in the multilateral process itself. But mostly, of course, because of the regional context. This whole machinery was at the end of the day dependent on the bilaterals. Without a peace agreement with the Syrians and the Lebanese and the Palestinians, none of this would really come to 100% fruition. So, and this idea that the multilaterals, if they achieve progress, they would help the bilaterals reach agreements - I, you know, it's a theoretical point we can debate, we can argue, whether you can dissolve the problems of the past into a big market.

I mean, people constantly refer to the European Union, I look at what the Europeans did. You know, the Europeans cemented peace agreements. The European Union did not bring peace to Europe. There was peace in Europe that allowed the European Union to proceed. So you need a peace agreement. And then you need this support to cement the peace agreement and make sure that no one can afford to rock the boat anymore. The fact that this can't go ahead without peace, I think was on everybody's minds. And, I don't think the Israelis can deny that, I mean their idea of regional security actually confirms this. When we feel secure, we can move forward. Whether there are successes?

I'll tell you a little story. I teach a course on regional security in the Middle East, issues of regional security in the Middle East. And at one point, I show the students the different arrangements in different regions, you know, NATO, African Union, the OSCE, just by way of giving them examples of what exists out there. And when they've read material, had a debate and had their discussion, and we try and bring the issue to the Middle East, then they would say, no way, this would never work in the Middle East. This would not fit into the Middle East and so on. And when they've had everything out, completely out, I'd put out the ACRS declaration. And I'd say, you see how wrong you guys are? Because at some point in time, early 90s, mid 90s, the Middle East almost made it. And of course, I mean, this generation knew nothing - I mean, it may have heard of the multilaterals - but knew nothing of these agreements. And when I show them the full gambit of what was on the table, what we almost did, they're quite surprised, because everything they say about, OSCE, no it would never work in the Middle East, African Union, no way, it would never apply to the Middle East, the animosity, the problems, the conflicts. And then they realized that at some point, we actually sat around the table and started designing something, even if it didn't work. But the fact that this can happen is, I think, for me an important element.

Hanna Notte

Which would bring me to my last question: what lessons do we then take from ACRS, from the successes and the reasons why it failed, if we want to think about a process today for regional security? Do you even think there's appetite for that? Is the time ripe? And if so, what lessons from ACRS would we try to heed if we design a process today?

Aly Erfan

Appetite for ACRS alone? No. Appetite for multilaterals alone? No. But appetite for maybe what was designed in Madrid, or the concept behind Madrid, to address the Middle East in its entirety, with the Arab-Israeli at its heart - I mean, look, Madrid revolved around the Arab-Israeli conflict, let's not beat around the bush, it revolved around the Arab-Israeli conflict - Now, it's not the only conflict, we have to come to terms with that. But it's an essential conflict in the region. If the ACRS process would be part of a comprehensive approach to the Middle East, settle the entire region, on the basis of proper modus operandi, on the basis of proper, equal interests, equal obligations, equal rights, then you have the possibility to do it. If you work on it in isolation, I don't think it will work. I think realistically, I mean, I could tell you very easily, it's very simple, the Israelis have to adhere, to the NPT, CWC, etc. And, it's easy to say that. If I were to advise you, if this is going to work, it won't work. You have to look at in its entirety. You have to look at the region in its entirety. Settle it in its entirety. Problems of the past, including designing a structure for the future where the region can take care of itself, the region can resolve its own conflicts, can have a mechanism for prevention of conflicts, conflict management, conflict resolution, post conflict reconstruction. But in isolation, I don't think so. In my view, it won't work.

Hanna Notte

So it would have to be a comprehensive rather than a piecemeal, step by step approach?

Aly Erfan

Absolutely. And of course, political will. I mean, we can, you and I can sit and suggest alternatives, but if there is no political will, I mean, no one could force anyone to do anything. That's one lesson learned. No one forces anyone to do anything.

Hanna Notte

Great. I want to thank you very much for this.

[End of transcript]