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Interview with Eran Lerman

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Summary:

Eran Lerman is a former Israeli intelligence officer. He served as a member of the Israeli delegation to ACRS.

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Eran Lerman, Israel**Oral history interview conducted by Hanna Notte on Zoom on October 15, 2020****Hanna Notte**

Yes, so maybe you could start by telling me a little bit about where you were at the time of the Madrid Peace Conference, and when the ACRS process started, what was your role? And how were you involved in the process?

Eran Lerman

Okay, I was an intelligence officer in those years. And an analyst in the Directorate of Military Intelligence in the division charged with analysis. At the time, I was the head of international affairs. It was a branch, I turned it into a somewhat larger function. I brought the Soviet Union to burial in '91. It was part of my commission. And as we saw the emergence of the theme of arms control in the region - and President Bush, when he spoke immediately after the victory over Iraq in '91, 7th of March, or 6th of March '91 - he mentioned this as one of the four pillars of future stability in the region. He later had a more detailed vision for arms control in the region. President Mubarak came up with a WMDfZ concept. In the background, there was Tlatelolco, there was Rarotonga, there was the emerging transformation in South Africa, it was clearly becoming an issue.

So I took the initiative to create a special section dealing with arms control issues. And then quite naturally, given that the Directorate of Military Intelligence, the DMI in Israel, is in charge of the national intelligence assessment, unlike the situation in some other countries in the West, it's soldiers who actually are responsible for the national security assessment, national intelligence assessment. And also because - as it happened, the former chief of the division went on to become the coordinator of policy in the Ministry of Defense that was in charge of preparing the position for General Ivry in the multilaterals in the ACRS negotiations - I ended up being the DMI intelligence officer for the delegation and a member of the delegation. Since I also have a quick pen, I also became the reporting officer. I could write longhand in Hebrew full summaries of the discussions as they went along, so I became sort of indispensable for General Ivry and our late friend from the Foreign Ministry, Hanan Bar-on who ran the missions, and so I went to each and every one of the ACRS meetings.

In fact, I also went to Moscow in February 1992 for the launching of the overall multilaterals but I was not yet officially confirmed. So basically, I had three days to roam around in Moscow doing nothing, which was fun. First time in my life, this is one of the memorable episodes for me as the first time in my life in Moscow. I was an Israeli military intelligence officer, I was thoroughly insulted because I was not followed. I even slipped and fell on the ice near the Aleksandrovskiy Park and nobody from the KGB emerged to pick me up. I was really roaming Moscow on my own. And the first evening I had dinner in Moscow with my father, for whom this was also the first time in his life. He came on the chemical industry business. This is immediately the post-Soviet period. There were a few Russian flags here and there, but everything else was still Soviet. They were repainting the tails on the Aeroflot planes in the airport. The whole thing was very dramatic and very special. And of course, I came to Moscow twice again, as an active participant, in the following rounds. So, this I became [connection breaks off for a few seconds]...

Eran Lerman

So, I, throughout the entire period from early '92, to the destruction of the multilaterals by the Egyptians - I'm not going to be too delicate about this, or even more specific by Amr Moussa in '95 - this was a very significant part of my life. On two occasions, by the way, my wife joined me, once in Moscow, the third Moscow round. And then in Tunis, in Tunis we were all joined by our spouses. I still remember our secretary was the only woman on our side at the time, the Secretary of the mission, and a very good-looking woman. And a representative of another delegation started making passes. And she turns to a very tall gentleman right next to her and says, "I'd like you to meet my husband." [laughs] And he said: Well, I think you're trying to tell me something. And all of this, you know, this gives you a sense of just

how relaxed our work has become for most of us, except - what can I say - the Egyptians, who were on a mission and it became increasingly difficult for them. But that's a different story.

Hanna Notte

Yeah, I'll come back to some of that a bit later in the interview. But since you've talked about Moscow, let me ask you, in terms of the broader context, how did you see the role of the United States and Russia in this process? And to what extent did this new, let's call it structural imbalance that emerged after the end of the Cold War matter, or not matter, for the process?

Eran Lerman

Well, that's a good point. Because already in Madrid - I'm going to be very blunt again: It was the Baker show, with a Russian bird on his shoulder. It was definitely no longer a meeting of equals. I remember, this was -so the Soviet Union, or the dying Soviet Union, was my responsibility. And I remember writing about the summit in Valletta of Gorbachev and Bush - for the first time, my hand was shaking as I was writing: This is not a meeting between equals.

Hanna Notte

Okay.

Eran Lerman

And that was of course increasingly clear, you couldn't put Kozyrev in the same category as Baker, in the preparatory process. But nevertheless, it was a good thing that the Russians - by the time we came to launch in multilaterals, it was no longer the Soviet Union, they died the month before - but it was a good thing that they were there as the co-gavel holders in ACRS. Because ACRS was such a delicate business, that making the American hegemony too overt and too aggressive would have been problematic.

Hanna Notte

Yes.

Eran Lerman

The Americans had other missions. And of course, the whole concept, by the way, for Baker of the multilaterals was not only to expand the peace process, which is something that Israel very much wanted, but also to bring others into the game, including the economic dimensions. The other four groups went to the Japanese, to the European Union, to the Canadians - the one delicate matter in which the Americans decided they're going to be the sole gavel holders was water. So, having the Russians there added to the stability and legitimacy of the process, we thought at the time. Of course, it gave an exotic coloring, being in Moscow for three times, being hosted for Russian receptions. I'll tell you later a poignant moment that I had in one of these evening receptions in Moscow. And of course, we tend to forget that Russia lent - I mean, the Soviet Union under Gorbachev - lent full support, politically to the American intervention on behalf of Kuwait in 1991. In '91, war was in '91. UN Security Council Resolution 678 was adopted unanimously. So we were living in a different world. This was no longer the Cold War system. We used to crack jokes about how there's war in Europe, because there was the Yugoslav war going on, whereas we are sitting in Moscow and Doha and Tunis, talking regional arms control. Having the Russians on board was useful. But clearly the burden of daily work was falling on the Americans. Let me give you a slight illustration, because this is a memento, [gets up to show something into the camera]...

Hanna Notte

Oh, wow.

Eran Lerman

...of something I bought...

Hanna Notte

Yes. Okay.

Eran Lerman

...in the street in Moscow during ACRS, you get the general idea, right? You see the

Russian hens eating American food. And I showed this to my American friends at one of the meetings, that gives you the atmosphere. The Russians were there, but the movers and shakers were the Americans. You know, after '93 it's the Clinton administration. But it was good to have the Russians along, to have the Indians hovering in the background. They were very supportive of some of our positions as Israelis. It was good to bring much of the world into this.

Hanna Notte

Okay. Were there any other global or regional developments or events at the time that furthered this process?

Eran Lerman

Oh, well, this was a time that was unique, amazing. There was a sense that history has been thrown into fast forward. We were in the unilateral moment, so to speak. The breakthroughs Israel experienced were not only with Russia, that established full diplomatic relations and so on - by the way people tend to forget, Yasser Arafat used to say that it was all because he signed Oslo. But that's nonsense. It all happened in the context of Madrid, long before, and under Yitzhak Shamir, not Yitzhak Rabin. The breakthroughs with Russia, with China, and with India. And having the Chinese and the Indians there as well was, for us, a very significant indication that the world was very much changing. I remember a situation in Moscow, second round, where I was coming to see the level of unpleasantness between the Americans and the Chinese was such that we offered our mediation. And I remember having a conversation with the head of the Chinese delegation. And at one point, he made this movement over the upper lip to indicate that the American system, their milk is still, it's not dried yet, it's a country of 200 years - I mean, who are they to speak to a nation like China? And that, of course, created a community of ancient nations, the Jews and the Chinese. It was all quite dramatically different than anything we experienced before. The fact that the European dynamics were changing, and of course, in parallel, we had the Palestinian breakthrough in September '93, which led to having a free-standing Palestinian delegation join us. I became personally acquainted, even friendly with Bishara Bahbah. It ended up with an invitation to give a lecture at his seminar in Harvard. It was never an isolated phenomenon, the multilaterals generally and ACRS specifically. It was part of a sense of revolutionary change in the region and in the world.

Hanna Notte

Great, great. And can you talk a little bit about how the decision to form these five multilateral working groups, specifically on these five issues, how that decision came about? And also the decision to pick arms control for a specific working group? Was it the Americans tabling that and everyone going along with it? Or how did it work?

Eran Lerman

No, it was largely an American initiative. If you ask me today, I would have created three more, I mean, one for women and equal rights, one for medical issues, climate change, but as it was, we did have an environment group. These were the natural issues around which you could see a need for regional cooperation. Interestingly enough, this is not the time of Shimon Peres and his visions. These are the Americans doing this in '91. This was Yitzhak Shamir as prime minister, David Levy, I think, was quite supported by some creative minds in the foreign ministry, who definitely favored expanding the bilaterals into this multilateral framework. But at the end of the day, we were quite ready to go along, we saw benefit in each and every one of these groups. By the way, the only one to survive was water. Not as a plenary, but there were follow up operations that survived the collapse in '95.

It was clear to us that arms control is going to be part of this because the Americans were very adamant and the Egyptians had a firm position. And we were in a bit of a delicate situation ourselves, because 10 years earlier, in '81, Yitzhak Shamir as foreign minister was authorized to inform the United Nations that, under the proper circumstances, Israel could envision an NWFZ, down the road under certain conditions. So we needed to structure, from our point of view, we needed to structure the ACRS process in a manner that would, let's say, protect our core vital historical interests, but would also conform with what has been our formal position on this question, which was a very dramatic exercise in creative diplomacy. And I have to

give credit where credit is due, I think, the most creative minds there were particularly Eli Levite, Uzi Arad to some extent. And some people who did not participate in the negotiations, but had their role in helping us design our policy, like Shalhevet Freier and others.

But we did come up with a conceptual framework, which was deeply influenced by the European lessons of the Helsinki process. We also read about the Indian-Pakistani CBM system and others' CBM systems. But our main template for the manner in which we decided to approach this was clearly modeled on the European Helsinki concept and process. So let's start with confidence building measures. For us, this may have been called ACRS, but for us, it was RSAC - That's to say, regional security and arms control. We wanted to build a firm structure of regional security before we could actually proceed to proper arms control as such. And this is how we went about our mission. And ultimately, I would say, this is what happened. By the time of the Tunis discussions, we have won over key Arab players to our playbook, so to speak, except one: the Egyptians. But the concept here was that, while we have a vision as to what may happen in the end of time, way down the road, that was not a practical matter for the ACRS group to discuss, for two good reasons: One is that our position has always been, including in the famous statement in '81 and later that, for us to move towards arms control in the proper sense, for us to put certain things on the table, we need to have peace in the entire region. At the time we were inching towards an interim agreement with the Palestinians. We were going back and forth with the Syrians without a breakthrough. We were nowhere near the kind of peaceful relations with our entire environment that would allow us to go further.

Moreover, at the time too, I would say by now all four of the proliferating violators of the NPT were not at the table.

Hanna Notte

Yes.

Eran Lerman

None of them. The Libyans wouldn't come. Although technically, in the multilaterals, the Arab Maghreb Union was present. And they were part of it. But this was a technicality. There was no living Libyan anywhere near the multilaterals. Syria refused to come to the multilaterals and then did not allow Lebanon to come to the multilaterals until after they get what they want on the Golan Heights, so they were not there. Iraq, under Saddam, was of course a pariah. And Iran, then as now, did not see Israel as a legitimate entity with whom they could sit in the same room. So the four [Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya], the two long proliferators at the time, Iran and Iraq, and what we know by now to have been the two other proliferators, namely Syria and Libya, who we didn't like and suspected, but we learned about certain things much later - but all four of them were not there. So there was no opportunity even to sit down and start talking about, you know, what the Egyptians wanted to talk about from day one.

Hanna Notte

So building on that, should some of those countries that were absent - with hindsight, should they have been included in the process at the time or was it right that they weren't?

Eran Lerman

Well, you could not put Saddam Hussein at the table. This was an international pariah, a criminal. Yet un-convicted, but you couldn't put him in with the Kuwaitis in the same room in the 90s. Iran, it wasn't a question of inviting them, they would have refused to come. They do not see Israel as a legitimate being. They do not see the international order as legitimate. I still remember, some years later, Ahmadinejad coming to Berlin, trying to persuade, you know, the good German people that Iran believes the wrong guys won in '45. So, there was no question. Libya, who knows? Qaddafi would have been happy to be regarded as a normal human being, but he was not. But there was no question, Syria was invited. They refused to come until they, they used the refusal as leverage in the bilaterals. So this is, this is simply, it was not a question of wrong policy. This is simply not an option, generally speaking.

Hanna Notte

And speaking of Syria and Lebanon, can you talk a little more about how you saw the relationship between the bilaterals that came out of the Madrid Peace Conference and the multilaterals? What was Israel's view on the relationship between those two tracks?

Eran Lerman

Well, we saw the multilaterals as beneficial in creating an atmosphere which would make it easier for our key bilateral partners. That's to say, certainly Syria and the Palestinians. Of course, there was also Lebanon and Jordan. It would make it easier for them to take the step and of course, the Jordanians did come forward. And by '94, in the midst of the multilaterals, we signed a peace treaty - by the way, which also includes a paragraph calling for regional cooperation and regional arms control. So, this was supportive, conducive to the general atmosphere. But there was no direct interrelationship because, well, the Syrians were not there and the Palestinians were not a player in the arms control sense. So the Jordanians, yes, there was an interrelationship between our breakthrough in the bilaterals with Jordan, the peace treaty signed in '94, and the role the Jordanians were willing to play in, as I said, what I called our playbook - that's promoting structures and opportunities for regional security arrangements. For example, a regional security node in Amman, mutual notification on exercises, all that stuff. The Jordanians were very much coordinated with us at the time. So there was an interrelationship.

However, and here I want to make a point because it is very often mis-stated in unresearched histories that I've come across: There is a facile assumption that the multilaterals fell apart because the bilaterals got stuck. Because Netanyahu was elected in '95. And then, you know, his relations with the Palestinians went bust. And he was not willing to come to promote compromise with the Syrians, and therefore the multilaterals collapse. And that's completely wrong, unfortunately. I mean, that would have been a very simple explanation. But the sad story is that the Egyptians almost single-handedly destroyed the multilateral structure in early '95 when Rabin was still prime minister, when we were negotiating very delicate steps forward with both the Palestinians and the Syrians. They did this because of Amr Moussa and the Egyptian Foreign Ministry's set of priorities. And unfortunately and sadly, because the American administration did not use its leverage firmly enough to prevent this from happening.

Hanna Notte

Okay.

Eran Lerman

They woke up to the full consequences of Egyptian behavior, only at a much later point, when the Egyptians were threatening to derail the permanent extension of the NPT, unless Israel was brought in, under Egyptian terms, at which point Clinton moved in and Mubarak was obliged to force Amr Moussa to let go of this plan to disrupt the '95 RevCon. But, they woke up, the Americans woke up to the consequences of Egyptian subversion of the multilaterals a bit too late. I would say that, in this sense, what happened to us in Tunis was a bit of a Pyrrhic victory. We were so successful, our playbook was so overwhelmingly endorsed, the Egyptians were so isolated, that Nabil Fahmy left Tunis before the end of the conversations, leaving poor Aly Erfan to face Tzvika Shtaubert, and Levite, and Arad. And I didn't envy him, quite frankly, I wasn't in the room, but there was a situation where the Egyptians found themselves embittered by their own isolation within the Arab side.

Eran Lerman And that has accelerated the move that Amr Moussa was planning anyway because he could not subvert the RevCon while the multilaterals were going on, that would have been from his point of view a contradiction in terms. And since he still thought, at the time, that he would be able to use the RevCon to coerce Israel into coming in on his terms, what he did was to basically use the leverage of Egypt and the Arab League etc., to derail the entire multilateral process. And this is all happening, the first half of '95 after the Tunis plenary of December '94, with all that happened here. And therefore, the blame is squarely, squarely on the shoulders of the Egyptian Foreign Ministry. And I'm saying Foreign Ministry, because it happens to be my opinion, from direct interactions, that the Egyptian military was, paradoxically, was much less obsessed with getting - how should I put it - with putting Dimona on

the table, than their diplomatic counterparts. The Egyptian military was realistic and clear-eyed about these matters, they understood arms control, and they understood the utility of the existing balance of deterrence. Whereas for the Egyptian diplomats who are all products of the First Committee, Nabil being his father's son, etc., they were all products of the First Committee, with a First Committee mindset. They were not even thinking arms control. They were thinking disarmament. And therefore, I would say that the derailment of the multilaterals generally, of the ACRS group specifically, was very much the result of an Egyptian attitude, Foreign Ministry attitude.

Hanna Notte

Yes. This is extremely interesting. Can I ask you a follow up question on this derailment that you just described: when did you personally sense that it was going to go this way? I mean, everyone went into ACRS with a sense of optimism and sense of opportunity that something can be achieved together. And then, a few years later, we get to the point where it appears that this divergence in conceptual approaches to regional security, arms control, and the sequencing within that was not bridgeable, particularly between your country and Egypt. With hindsight, do you think this was sort of clear throughout or were there inflection points?

Eran Lerman

The divergence was clear from day one. Nabil Fahmy was there to get Dimona and that was his mission in life. Therefore the working relationship with him was very tense, Ivry came, quite frankly, to dislike him intensely. I remember the American negotiator coming out of a meeting with Fahmy, who at the time still had control over the other Arabs. That fell apart afterwards, but this is in Moscow. And I said, how's it going? Are you having fun in there? And he said: Next time I want to have fun, I'll go to a dentist. And this is the Americans. So the Egyptian position was highly troubling in this respect.

The relationship between Ivry and Fahmy, and the relationship with the Egyptians was clear to us right from the beginning - that our roads would diverge. What became our goal, therefore, was to see if we can persuade the other Arab players, the Jordanians, the Gulfis, the Qataris, the UAE, to some extent the Saudis, with whom we had conversations, Tunisians, Moroccans, to diverge from the Egyptian position and buy into the CBM template, which we - I would say - by and large, succeeded, even beyond our expectations in doing, first in Qatar, and then even more decisively in Tunis. What we did not fully expect was that the Egyptians at this point would have it in them to destroy the process altogether, without an effective American set of countermeasures. I have to say, I was disappointed that the Clinton administration at the time was not - this is still Warren Christopher - was simply not determined enough and blunt enough to tell the Egyptians early on in '95, that this is a valuable part of the regional process. And it should be preserved despite their reservations. And they did not fully connect, until much later, the destruction of ACRS and the multilaterals to the Egyptian bid to set the agenda at the RevCon. So this disconnect in the American position came as a disappointment.

Hanna Notte

Right. Thank you. This is great. Can I come back to Israel's relationship with some of the other Arab delegations - you mentioned Jordan as a core participating state.

Eran Lerman

And then some of the smaller ones the Gulfis, the Maghreb Even Palestinians I have to say, what was happening in other respects, Bishara Bahbah as the intellectual presence in the Palestinian delegation - they understood our position. I don't want to go, you know, into delicate matters. But the fact that Israel could take risks in the peace process relied among other things on our security template, and our risk security templates include the presence - in the minds of others - of the ambiguous deterrent. So there were people in the process capable of understanding where we came from. Capable of understanding that template, that has been central to our security for the better part of 40 years, maybe at the time I would say 30 years.

The Egyptian approach was wrong, wrong-headed. And so yes, we did find common ground, particularly I would say, carefully I would say, with Abdullah Toukan, for example, with the Palestinians, to some extent, with the Gulfis and with the smaller

North African players. You could actually sense their discomfort at being dominated, or being told what to do, by big sister Cairo. That was also an element in the interaction. We were supported from the sidelines. I've already mentioned the Indians, for example, were for reasons very much of their own, very supportive of our construct. And in some cases, I think that helped convey this to others. Also, other countries like Canada went into the CBM game with some relish. I never went, but there were, I think in Halifax, there were workshops, in between plenaries, on rescue at sea, and so on, which were part of the emergent CBM system. So things began to happen, even as we were running from plenary to plenary, things were happening in between, which generated an interest for some of the small Arab players. So we could see this happening. This was all quite positive. And this is why it was a heartbreak in '95, when this was all brought down.

Hanna Notte

Can you talk a little bit more about how the agreement on the CBMs came about? And did you find that your counterparts, that you were negotiating even some of the technical aspects with, did they come with the necessary level of expertise? Or was there a certain educational element? How did that work go?

Eran Lerman

Well, clearly, none of us had any expertise from our own experience in this, so we were relying on, here and there as I said, the Indian-Pakistani CBM system, mainly Helsinki, the Canadians came, as I said there was workshops on coordinating rescue at sea, etc. I think the most significant element at the time for us in the CBM system was the creation of sub regional security coordination centers. And here the Gulfis and the Jordanians and the Tunisians were sufficiently intrigued by what this would mean also in terms of having such centers located in their territory, and the prestige and expertise that would come with it - prior notification of exercises, a mechanism for raising the alarm on security developments, etc. - that we made very good progress in this direction in Tunis. This is one of the reasons why the Egyptians ended up feeling so isolated in December '94. And why our team was, as I said, I vry was not a happy man, generally speaking, but there was a sense of - I don't want to use the term elation, but there was a sense of accomplishment. As we all went off to a concluding dinner in Tunis, with our spouses. And there was really a sense that we've achieved something. And that all, of course, within weeks, we began to realize that we gave the Egyptians too much of the medicine for their, for our own good, but that wasn't evident right then.

Hanna Notte

Right. You talked about Tunis a bit. Can we come back a little further, and you tell me the significance of moving the plenary to Qatar, to Doha, in May 1994, particularly for Israel, the symbolic significance of that decision?

Eran Lerman

Well, it was part of a broader pattern and already there were multilaterals in Oman, there were multilaterals in the region. Because of Oslo, we had at the time not embassies, but offices in Morocco, Tunisia, Qatar and Oman. At the time, the Qataris were much less of what they are now, as a disruptive player. They were a mixed bunch. In Moscow, second round, I remember an episode, again personal, of going into the plenary, simply in the corridor meeting personally with two Qataris, one a bearded character, and the other of more modern appearance. I had a beard of my own at the time. But anyway. But one of them, the second, shook my hand and was very friendly. The other looked at me as if I was thin air, and the guy's boss said to him in Arabic, which I understand, you know: Greet him. Salam alayhi [Arabic for 'greet him']. And the other one refused. And for me, that was a quick object lesson in the complexity, that later came to light, of just how deep the Qatari establishment, unlike others in the Gulf, has been penetrated by attitudes colored by the Muslim Brotherhood. Later, much later, let's say in 2011, 2012, when the Qataris were running Morsi, while their neighbors were running Sisi, all of this came back to me as an indication of what was happening on the Qatari side. So having them host us was very dramatic. It was an act of indicating just how profoundly the region has changed. It also colored this business with the Egyptians somewhat, because relations between Qatar and the Egyptian establishment under Mubarak, as it is now under Sisi, was

extremely fraught with complexities, back then and again now. So this was another reason why the Egyptians may not have been totally comfortable. But this was a time in which things were moving forward.

I was actually in, we were during ACRS in Qatar, we were sitting in the inner space of the Hyatt Doha watching Yitzhak Rabin speaking in Hebrew, at the signing ceremony of the Oslo agreements. Oslo 1. Because remember that in September '93, there was this ceremony at the White House, but this was just a Declaration of Principles. The actual signing was in Cairo, May '94. And we are in Qatar watching Rabin and Arafat, this was the famous situation in which Mubarak told Arafat: "Sign, you dog," at one point, within earshot of everyone in the room. So, all this gives you a sense of just what a different universe we were living in at the time. So having it in Qatar, the whole excitement of being there, you couldn't roam around, we were all under strict controls. But I remember saying to myself, you know, did I ever imagine that as a lieutenant colonel in active service in the IDF, I would go swimming in the Persian Gulf with some French and Russian members of the delegations, etc? The whole thing had an unreal layer to it, to some extent, but the Qataris are great hosts. And the whole thing was quite fascinating.

Hanna Notte

Great, thank you for that. I wanted to come back to a few more procedural questions. So, from the record I understand that it was at the fourth plenary, which was in November 1993 in Moscow, that a sort of formal decision was taken to split the discussion into two baskets, the operational basket that would work on the CBMs and this conceptual basket. Do you know how that came about? Who pushed for that?

Eran Lerman

Well, it was clear that, unless we moved in that direction - though the vision, the long-term vision needed to be discussed separately - if we wanted to be able to move forward on what we saw... and I think we, the Israeli delegation, in close coordination with the Americans played a role in that. And as I said, the Arab, there were enough Arabs interested for this to move forward. The notion was that if we want to generate an interest, that's to say, a stake for the smaller stakeholders, in the CBM side, the practical side of the process, we needed to find an avenue where the Egyptians will not be in a position to trip this up. So I can't say for certain that this was simply our doing. But I would say that we were in fairly good coordination with the Americans at this and of course, the Russians went along. They were not obstructive in any sense. And it wasn't easy, as I said, the Americans - for a moment, the name of the head of the American delegation in Moscow, in the fourth plenary [the second time in Moscow], eludes me. It will come back to me, an Italian name. Just a senior moment, forgive me, but it was his conversations with Fahmy which were so tough because they had to coerce the Egyptians to accept... What?

Hanna Notte

Robert Gallucci?

Eran Lerman

Gallucci, sure. It was Bob Gallucci, and Bob was basically instrumental in helping us create these parallels, so that we can move ahead effectively in generating a CBM structure. And the vision, well, since we could latch on to previous Israeli statements from NWFZ, we could actually talk - I think I remember the phrase from our own discussions - about the long corridor, there may be a door at the end of that corridor, but it's a long corridor.

Hanna Notte

Great. And can I ask you another sort of general procedural question? So, the Israeli delegation, did you regularly come with written proposals and papers that you would submit to the others for review? And so, in between plenaries and meetings, you'd go back to Israel and work out the details? How was the sort of day to day work of being in the ACRS process?

Eran Lerman

Since the leadership, formally, of ACRS was in the hands of the Ministry of Defense, under General Ivry - I mean, Hanan Bar-on was a co-chair - but the coordination work was done within the Ministry of Defense. And there were regular meetings for setting

policy. In some cases, putting forward papers that we pushed, first with the Americans and then presented on conceptual - and here really the person to speak to about how this was generated - is mainly Eli. Eli Levite, I think, deserves much of the credit for generating our policy design. And occasionally in the form of papers. As I said, I was an intelligence officer, I was basically telling the others what other people are doing. It was not so much my mission to generate operational ideas, but I was there in the discussions and they were - I think, quite frankly, leaving aside the ACRS process externally - internally, this period stands out in my mind as a model of proper, effective and harmonious interagency work in Israel. We had the Ministry of Defense, the Foreign Ministry, the various intelligence agencies, the planners, MoD planners, military planners. I think it stands out in my mind as something that was done with great effectiveness. And I think this contributed very much to our success - that our success contributed to the collapse of the entire process is an afterthought, a very sad afterthought. But if I was looking back at it, at the end of '94, there was a sense that we've done this the way we should have done, in a careful, measured way, based on deep understanding of the relevant dynamics, and very effective coordination between the relevant Israeli government agencies.

At the time, I thought, this really approximated the pattern of successful interagency work - the Bush administration, by the way, was also at the time one of the most successful in American history in terms of interagency process. I don't even want to talk about the present administration. But in others, there were often deep cleavages and tensions. But Baker and Scowcroft and the team that worked under the first Bush administration did so remarkably with Cheney, Secretary of Defense at the time, people tend to forget. But that was a template we wanted to learn from. And I think we did. If I look back at how well we've done at the time, part of it was the internal cohesion of the team. It was led by very able and respectable men. Ivry who was, you know, the Air Force Commander in Operation Opera, he practiced arms control in a certain sense, because it was under him that we took the Iraqi establishment out. And Hanan Bar-on was a very impressive leader on the Foreign Ministry side.

Hanna Notte

Right. Great, thank you for that. Colonel, I realize I've already taken up an hour of your time, if I may, I have this sort of broader concluding question, to wrap things up. I'd like to ask you what you view as the successes of ACRS. What lessons, if any, we can draw from ACRS 30 years ago for thinking about regional security today, in an arguably much changed Middle East? And if you could go back and say one thing to a fellow Israeli negotiator, with hindsight, knowing what you know now, what would that be?

Eran Lerman

Well, with hindsight, I think our main efforts should have been in Washington. We should have ensured that the whole process would continue to be backed by a very firm American position vis a vis our Egyptian peace partners, because at the end of the day, it was not even Mubarak, it was Amr Moussa. And had Mubarak been confronted at an earlier point with the kind of forceful American reaction that he ultimately faced later in '95, over the RevCon, we could have saved the multilaterals. And we should have saved the multilaterals. I always think, I keep thinking that the multilaterals were a good thing. And their loss contributed to the deterioration of the situation later on.

But if there was one thing we learned in ACRS, and is very relevant right now to what we are seeing these very days, is that, at the end of the day, the black and white, Jew-Arab, Israeli-Arab cleavages that we were used to think about in the '60s and '70s - I'm not a kid anymore, we grew up in those years - ceased to be relevant long ago. And ACRS was one of the examples in which coalitions within the process involved Israelis coming to terms with fellow Arab participants against the positions of other Arab participants, because we have a commonality of perceptions and a commonality of interest. So I could say that, what I innately understood and learned in the ACRS plenaries helps me understand what I'm seeing now with the UAE and Bahrain, for example. And others who are nibbling at the bait right now, because we have commonalities - well, I shouldn't use that verb - that "trump" our differences. And I think I saw this happening already then. As I said, there were personal experiences as I could see the internal tensions within the Egyptian system, within the Qatari

delegation. We could see that the Arab world was certainly not a monolith. And that insight definitely stayed with everyone who went there.

And also, as I said, another deep, profound insight that I took with me to my later position as Deputy National Security Adviser for Foreign Affairs and International Relations - it's a very long title for a short guy - the insight I took with me is that a well prepared diplomatic strategy can reduce the level of anxiety as we go into complicated waters, like the ACRS process. And we've done this again, as you know, very gingerly and very carefully in Glion. And again, we managed to bring this American mistake in 2010 to a decent burial. I think you know what I'm talking about?

Hanna Notte

The Glion process, yes.

Eran Lerman

The conference, the 2012 conference. We are now 2020, and it is yet to reconvene, which is clearly because we, the Israeli Government, saw with extreme concern the failure of the Americans to prevent this from happening in 2010. But then we decided that engaging in a sophisticated way is better than just saying bluntly, forget about it. And this is another lesson of the ACRS here.

Hanna Notte

Great. Thank you so much.

[End of transcript]