U.S. - ISRAEL NONPROLIFERATION TALKS:
ACRS WORKING GROUP

U.S. Objectives

-- To review the status of the ACRS working group and exchange views on prospects for future activities.

Background

The ACRS working group remains at impasse. There have been no formal meetings since September 1995, and repeated U.S. efforts in the succeeding months failed to broker a compromise between Egypt and Israel on how/when to address the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) free zone issue in ACRS. It was decided not to press the issue in the months just prior to the Israeli elections. Instead, the co-sponsors distributed a letter to all ACRS parties which noted the need for continued work before a productive ACRS plenary could be held. The letter also encouraged parties to consider low-level, low-profile work of a preparatory nature which could set the stage for renewed momentum when formal ACRS activities resume. In this context, the Canadians and Dutch have circulated papers reviewing ACRS progress to date (respectively) in maritime and communications, and noting outstanding work to be done in coming months.

The overall state of play in the multilateral track is important to bear in mind. The multilateral Steering Group has not met since May 1995 -- in part because of fears that the ACRS impasse would make a positive meeting impossible -- and will not meet until some time this fall. Preparations are continuing for the regional Cairo Economic Summit in November, but Jerusalem-related controversies resulted recently in postponement of a REDWG meeting in Bethlehem and a Regional Business Council meeting in Tel Aviv. Despite such setbacks, a permanent REDWG executive secretariat was set up in Amman in May; a successful REDWG plenary was held, and dates for a fall plenary for the environment working group are being finalized. On water, we are seeing indications that the new Israeli government may take a more confrontational approach that may spill over into the water working group.

During the recent visit of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, discussion of the multilaterals was minimal and there were no formal exchanges on ACRS. It appears that basic organizational questions governing Israeli participation in the various multilateral working groups have not yet been resolved. For this reason, now does not appear to be a good time to pursue new ACRS initiatives with the Israelis nor to conduct a fundamental reassessment of the ACRS process. Rather, we should describe the status of the "low-level" work program and solicit Israeli suggestions for other activities that might be pursued in this vein, including low-profile efforts to do "constituency-building" among ACRS parties by raising general awareness of confidence- and security-building measures (CSBM's) and arms control.

We