

November 20, 2020

Interview with Nabeela al-Milla

Citation:

"Interview with Nabeela al-Milla", November 20, 2020, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Interview conducted by Hanna Notte with editorial assistance from and prepared for publication by Tricia White. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300053>

Summary:

Nabeela al-Mulla is a former Kuwaiti diplomat. She served as a member of the Kuwait delegation to ACRS.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY)

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Transcript - English

Nabeela al-Mulla, Kuwait

Oral history interview conducted by Hanna Notte on Zoom on November 20, 2020

Hanna Notte

This is the 20th of November and the ACRS oral history interview with Ambassador Nabeela Al-Mulla. Thank you for doing this. And let me start with a very broad and general question. Can you just explain in what capacity you were involved in the ACRS process? From when until when? And which meetings you attended, to give us a broad sense of the nature and the degree of your involvement in the process?

Nabeela Al-Mulla

Thank you, Hanna. Thank you for this opportunity. I was at the time a Deputy Permanent Representative in our mission to the UN. That reflected the level of Kuwait's participation in ACRS. As for the frequency of my attendance, I think it was maximum three: Moscow, Washington, again Washington, and then that was it. Following that, I moved away from my station in New York, and was nominated as ambassador to Zimbabwe; I was relocated.

Most of us - the delegation of Kuwait that participated in the different working groups - we were finely attuned to what is happening on the bilateral tracks. I recall one of the meetings we had among us, with representatives from the refugees and development working groups. We had a meeting in Riyadh, with our colleagues, the other five members of the GCC, and our recommendation was that we cannot go on a faster track than what was happening on the bilateral tracks. Primarily, we were concerned about the Syrian and the Lebanese tracks. Since there was not much happening on the bilateral tracks, I for myself - I don't know about the others - but I am assuming that we went slower in our attendance and participation. I stopped going, attending any of the meetings. And the reason why I was chosen for ACRS was because of my background, following arms control issues, and my coverage of the First Committee of the United Nations, my involvement with those issues.

Hanna Notte

Great. And building on that, can you just explain a little bit, how big was the Kuwaiti delegation generally? I mean, later, within ACRS, you also had work on the operational side, on the confidence building measures. And did you have much coordination with delegations from Saudi Arabia and Qatar? Or was each delegation kind of doing its own thing?

Nabeela Al-Mulla

No, the delegation was minimal. In most of the cases, it was me and someone from the embassy in Washington. I don't even recall that they joined me - you know, it's a little bit hazy, my memory at this stage. The delegation was really minimum representation. The coordination was among the six countries but hardly restricted to that. It was like the Arab group together, and the primary force and the architecture of the whole approach to arms control, I would say very much, was Egypt, leading the talks. Jordan was very active, but at the time, you have to put it in perspective. The Madrid Conference and the multilaterals came immediately after the Gulf War. Many agree that the Gulf War was an impetus for the Madrid Conference. Our relationship with Jordan was not exactly what it turned out to be later on, because of the position that Jordan took during the war, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. So our coordination was mostly with Egypt.

Hanna Notte

Sure. And you mentioned Madrid as the starting point for the multilaterals and the bilateral tracks. And then, so Madrid happened, you were informed that this whole track was being launched, that Kuwait was invited to participate... What were the broad objectives and goals that Kuwait as a country pursued going into this work? What were your expectations, what Kuwait could get out of this process?

Nabeela Al-Mulla

The expectation was broader than the working groups. I think our sight was on getting the peace settlements - to have the talks succeed on the other tracks, with the Palestinians, with the Syrians. And so, the working groups, our view was that the multilateral working groups were like a boost for the bilaterals. The aim was more the

political process, rather than the working groups. We saw in the working groups a way of easing the entire process, bringing it under the whole umbrella. But our position was that, even if we progress fast on the multilateral talks, where would it lead? It's like a vacuum. The objective was the peace settlement. So even when we were discussing confidence building measures - and I recall one of them, we were interested in rescue at sea that Canada, I believe, was hosting, very interesting - but what does it have to do with the peace settlement?

So all the time, the objective was the peace settlement. That is why our participation was a little bit demure after the bilateral track stalled. I know that there were others that pursued that, but I believe that the reason why other countries, other participants continued to participate was because they had a vested interest in pursuing that process. Let me be a little bit franker with you on this: We always thought that Egypt was very much interested in the overall arms control issue, or when it comes to weapons of mass destruction, in particular. The NPT had always been in the psyche of the Egyptian delegation, they were trying to find ways of getting Israel to join the NPT. In our own view, we always thought that that's good, but, you know, incremental policies would also help in reaching a secure environment. And that remains our current position. Maybe a little bit more vocally now that we are coming out and talking about the value of incremental policies. But during those days, you know, we were a little bit wary of the greater influence on the strategic level, you know, the NPT as if it was almost obsessive.

We welcomed the other issues, exercises, the consultations on the confidence building measures, but even with that, it was a little bit difficult at the time to pinpoint: how did we view our participation in such activities with Israel in our midst? It was not an easy thing. Here we are after Kuwait's liberation and we could not exactly embrace anyone, whether it was Jordan or Israel. It was the members of the coalition who helped in Kuwait's liberation. So that was the mindset at the time. And Syria was one of the coalition members. Syria played a great role in the balance of demands, maybe not in terms of forces. So we were beholden to Syria in a way, for being part of that coalition. We were very sensitive to this. Any interaction with the others, the Israelis? Hardly, because we didn't think that we had an issue directly with Israel. For us the question was the bilaterals - Israel with the Syrians, Israel with the Lebanese, but primarily, it was Israel with the Palestinians. And that is where the emphasis should go, the peace talks.

Hanna Notte

May I ask one clarifying question just on this? This notion that - I think you use the words 'the multilateral should be a boost to the bilaterals' - ultimately, that was Kuwait's perspective, so quite a strong link between one track and the other. Was that shared among all the Arab delegations, or were there differences in views as to the relationship between how the bilateral tracks proceeded, and the value of the multilateral track in itself?

Nabeela Al-Mulla

I honestly cannot assume. I cannot assume that that was shared by all because there were other members, non-GCC, that were there, like Yemen, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania. What kind of view did they have on this issue? I honestly cannot judge it now, and I cannot say that... even if I read any papers after the fact, I wouldn't know.

Hanna Notte

Okay, great. I want to come maybe to the first plenary, which was in Washington, DC in May 1992. And if I look at the notes from these initial plenaries, it seems that a decision was taken to take a somewhat educational approach to discussing arms control in the region, that one would look at how confidence building measures were done in the US-Soviet context, or the European theatre, or the Helsinki process. I want to ask you, how was that approach received from the regional delegations at the time? Did you personally find it useful? Did you think it was the right approach to look at what was done in Europe or during the Cold War in order for the region to start talking about these kinds of things? Maybe you could talk a little bit about that.

Nabeela Al-Mulla

(Sighs) Let me put it this way. Don't forget the mindset that we were working from. I

will talk from my own personal experience. I was still with our mission to the UN. We were still going through the different resolutions of the Security Council that would streamline the aspects following the liberation, the demarcation commission, the compensation, follow-up to the prisoners of war etc. So, did we think that this will be a way forward? Perhaps. I can't say that it was dealt with a strong mission of involvement by us. It was an involvement because we wanted for the crisis that was with us for so many decades, the Israeli-Palestinian issue, to be resolved. But did these examples of the arms control make much of a dent in our thought? I honestly cannot say that we were ready, as Kuwait, to think of that. We thought of them as a little bit detached from our political situation – they could not exactly be wrapped in a package that will be presented to the bilaterals, and for us to say, "Here you are now, you are one step or two steps ahead." That did not happen, the connection was not made. As I mentioned, the mindset was not there, we wanted the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli question.

But the other issues we thought were more or less marginal compared with the objectives of the bilaterals. For others that were more active in the multilaterals - especially, I would say, the Jordanians and the Egyptians - they had a different mindset. They were more active than we were. I wouldn't say that we were just spectators, we did intervene, made statements, but the objective on the whole was the peace settlement, the bilateral tracks, and that is why our participation waned after a couple of these plenaries. But I understand that they did continue with other intersessional meetings and discussed additional issues. We welcomed it, but for us, again, it went back to the issue of the peace settlement.

Hanna Notte

Yeah. Great. That's very useful. And just to be clear, you just mentioned the intersessionals. So this work, and what came to be called the operational basket, on the confidence building measures in these intersessionals, was Kuwait involved in that work? And attending all the meetings, which happened, I guess, in various locations, both inside the region and outside to develop these very specific measures? Or was the involvement more limited?

Nabeela Al-Mulla

No, I don't believe... I don't want to be quoted on that, but I don't believe that we were there, or that we participated, or we were active in these intersessional meetings. If we did, I would assume that it was just presence, not taking an active part in them. Let me go back and underline our position about the participation in the working groups: because there was lack of progress in the bilaterals - there was a meeting I remember, this I recall clearly, supposedly to be hosted by Qatar. And I was told, "forget about the attendance there. We are not going to be there in full force." We did not like to have a high profile because there was no progress on the bilaterals. I believe someone from our embassy attended, I am not sure what happened after that. But we sort of withdrew from that active participation.

Hanna Notte

And just to be... a slightly specific question, if you still remember it: I mean, when you say there was a feeling that there was insufficient progress on the bilaterals, did you feel that on the Syrian and Lebanese track in particular, or the bilaterals in general? The reason I'm asking is because, arguably, there was some progress on the bilaterals. The Israelis and Jordan concluded a peace treaty in October 1994, which was towards the end of the ACRS process, but I guess there was some progress there. So are you referring specifically to more to the Syrians and the Lebanese?

Nabeela Al-Mulla

Yes, more to the Syrian track. As I mentioned earlier, one needs to keep in mind the background of our relationship with the different parties. Jordan was considered in a different way than Syria. Jordan was not sympathetic, to say the least, when it came to the invasion of Kuwait. And so, for us, we were more concerned about the Syrian track.

Hanna Notte

Okay. Understood. I want to ask you, and please, you know, tell me if you can't speak to that question, but it was at one of the later plenaries, not right at the beginning but a little bit late into the process in Moscow at a plenary, that a decision was taken to

split the work into two baskets. One was called the operational basket, and the other one was called the conceptual basket, to essentially work more on the objectives of the process and some of the conflictual issues. Do you recall how that decision came about? And were all the countries sort of on board with that, to proceed that way?

Nabeela Al-Mulla

I'm sorry to disappoint you, Hanna, but I don't recall any of these details. One thing I do recall clearly is that there was a proposal of having a statement made at the meeting in Moscow. And I recall a certain time when we were a little bit taken aback because we were not consulted in advance on the text. And we sort of deferred or said, you know, "we cannot go along with something that we didn't have time to look at," and it was decided to refer it to the capitals.

Hanna Notte

Do you recall who drafted, which party drafted that text. Do you recall that?

Nabeela Al-Mulla

I can't recall now. This was a long time ago. You're pulling ACRS from the ashes!

Hanna Notte

It's true, it's true. So I do want to ask you a broader question, which maybe you'll find easier to speak to, which is, when you came to these first plenaries, and you had all these delegations from the region, and some of the outsiders present, what was the atmosphere? What did you feel was your engagement with some of your colleagues from the region, with the Israeli delegation? What was generally the atmosphere between the delegations from the different countries? Because this was an unprecedented process.

Nabeela Al-Mulla

Again, I would stress the importance of the bilateral tracks to us, in particular the Syrian track. So we already knew that Egypt had its agreement with Israel. Jordan was more or less... we didn't know at the time, but they were left to fend for themselves. But for us, Syria was very important.

Hanna Notte

Let me ask you then, this disagreement between Israel and in particular, Egypt, on the other hand, over the sequencing of discussing structural arms control or disarmament as part of the broader ACRS process is something that has come up in many of my conversations with various participants as a major stumbling block in the process. How did Kuwait relate to that particular question?

Nabeela Al-Mulla

It was not only restricted to ACRS, it was also in other fora. I wouldn't assume that this will be Kuwait's official position, but I personally thought that this NPT and safeguards issue, the straitjacket idea of the obsession with the Israeli nuclear capability, sometimes clouds our perception of what we can do in terms of curbing the arms race and things like that, to a great extent. I am saying that because we went through a period when, at one time, when the Chemical Weapons Convention was being greeted at the UN as a milestone, we were pressured that maybe we should not be so welcoming because of the perennial problem of the nuclear issue. Okay, fine. But you know, it's multi-faceted, the whole question of arms control is not restricted only to the nuclear issue. And besides that, there is also something that I wish one of these days someone could decipher: why isn't this very question of nuclear capabilities, nuclear disarmament — why was it not addressed in depth in the Camp David agreement? In my opinion, that would have been the time to discuss the issue. Or were the question of a peace settlement and withdrawal of Israel from the Sinai the primary objective? You know, it's like taking a basket that was left unattended from the old days and brought forward to other fora. That is my own feeling. It's very frustrating, because I don't think many people agree with me on that, or if they agree, they probably will not say it out loud. But I think we should not be held hostage to this question of the nuclear issue.

Hanna Notte

That's really useful. Thank you for that. I want to shift a little bit for a second and ask you a little bit about how you viewed the role of outside powers involved in the

process. Now, of course, the United States paid an important role. Russia was the co-chair of the group and the initial plenaries happened intermittently in Washington and Moscow. And then you had some other players from the outside involved — Turkey, even, as an extra-regional power involved in the process. Can you talk a little bit about the American-Russian dynamic as you saw it? And also comment on what some of these other outside players thought of the process?

Nabeela Al-Mulla

The preeminence of the Americans was there. Definitely it was the Americans that were the prime movers. The Russians, or the Soviets at the time, were energetic, but the guiding post was definitely the Americans. The others that I recall clearly was the Canadian delegation that was so emphatic about their confidence building measures. I don't recall the Turkish attitude at the time. But even some of the participants like the Australians were there, or others of the European Union, I don't think that they were with us in the multilaterals. I don't recall them, so I don't know if they were there. Their participation in the conference itself was like a give and take of how much power will be given to them, or platform will be given to them, in the Madrid Conference. So I think the prime mover was the United States. The other movers, I would say - but behind the scenes - was Saudi Arabia.

Hanna Notte

Can you elaborate a little on that?

Nabeela Al-Mulla

I think Saudi Arabia, particularly, was really keen that we should be helping this process. And they were very much encouraging the collective participation of the six GCC countries. The GCC was there as an observer in the plenary meetings, but I believe Saudi Arabia encouraged very much that the six countries will be present. Their participation came with their own recommendation and blessing.

Hanna Notte

Great, that's very useful. Thank you. I want to ask you a question that's a little bit more on the practical side of things. So you participated for Kuwait, you led your delegation and you already made clear it was a small delegation, you went to the plenaries... did Kuwait ever submit any official papers or proposals in the process? Would you consult back at home after each plenary to kind of discuss next steps? What's the sort of domestic process that stands behind your country's involvement in the process? How can we envisage it?

Nabeela Al-Mulla

I don't recall that we presented anything in writing. The participation was not that forceful, let's put it this way. It was more like within the discussions of the group - we were doing that, but not active in terms of presenting a paper or looking at papers that were incoming. When we were in Moscow, and became aware of the statement, draft statement, we were surprised. We said we will have to look at it, capitals would have to give us the guidance. And it ended at that. I wasn't aware that there was something in the offing. Later on there was some kind of a draft statement, but there was no agreement on the text.

Hanna Notte

Okay. Great. You've mentioned a few times that maybe Kuwait wasn't such an active player in the process. Others were more active. Now, I assume it's clear that from the regional side, other than Israel, Egypt and Jordan had somewhat bigger delegations, and were quite active in the process. Other than those two, were there other countries on the regional side that you perceived to be quite active? Maybe more active than you had anticipated? Or was there more discrepancy between some of the smaller states?

Nabeela Al-Mulla

I honestly don't recall, but I know that — as is the case in some of these multilateral meetings, for example, the rush to look active, not by necessity, for example Qatar was offering to host the meeting. Why Doha? Tunisia, for example. It raised eyebrows. I wasn't convinced it was because of their active participation or because they had issues. It's because of perceptions. It happens quite a lot, if you host a meeting, there is the perception of being an active actor in the negotiations. I don't

believe it is the case, but when I go back, also Saudi Arabia, perhaps behind the scenes, at a higher level had direct contacts with the United States to discuss the negotiations. You know, a lot is not done in meetings but at a higher level. And don't forget, at the time, Prince Bandar represented Saudi Arabia in Washington. Prince Bandar had extremely good relations with the Bush Administration. So, what transpired in these meetings could be better deciphered when you can ask someone else, familiar on these issues... I don't know if I'm making myself clear?

Hanna Notte

You are clear. Yes. Thank you for that. And I have a few concluding questions, which are a bit more reflecting about the process. If you reflect on ACRS today, 30 years back, what were to you the successes and the shortcomings of the process?

Nabeela Al-Mulla

(Inaudible, voice cuts out for a few seconds) There was not enough coordination in ACRS in the decision-making process. One cannot go to such kind of a meeting and be a listener and agree to something unless one also has a say. If I'm at a table, I would like to partake in the decision-making process as well. So the lessons of ACRS is that the decision-making was not as all-inclusive as one would have liked it to be. Maybe it was done in a rushed manner. I'm not so sure whether the working groups were envisioned when the talks on the peace settlement were discussed. Was it really a prime objective to have these five working groups? Or was it brought in as some sort of a sweetener to ease the bilateral? This is something I cannot assume that I have an answer for.

I also cannot assume how these working groups were decided upon. The talk was that they were not looked at as equally important as the bilaterals. But, were they treated that way or not? Was the arms control, was ACRS itself, one of the original working groups, or was it an add-on? These are questions that I don't think I can answer now. I don't know if anyone can answer unless - perhaps in some years later - those who really took part in shaping up the mechanism of Madrid and the working groups.

You may recall that even the choice of holding the conference in Madrid was a big issue, whether it should be Madrid or some other place, and even the EU's participation in Madrid was called into question. The objective, the impetus, the force, was then to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian question. But how did all these other adjunct processes, how did they come about? This is something that we will know, perhaps, if some are willing to divulge, especially the Americans. Some of them were really great, in the American delegation, that were involved from the start in developing the details of the process; I would like to see that.

Hanna Notte

I believe we have interviewed almost all the key individuals from the American delegation. So you, you'll see the results afterwards. But can I ask you, this was now the critical side of how the process unfolded. Anything that's really positive that came out of ACRS, that we can even use as a positive lesson? If we think about working on regional security or regional arms control today, something on the positive side?

Nabeela Al-Mulla

Not ACRS, I wouldn't say ACRS as a model, Hanna. I would suggest a modern, a newer structure. And these structures are there with NATO, like the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). You know, I think these will better suited to address more, in terms of preparation for future regional processes. But don't forget that even with the ICI and Med dialogues, even these were treated as separate entities, the ICI on one side and the Mediterranean Dialogue on the other, since the latter involves Israel.

But things might change, the whole idea of Israel's participation will change if we can capitalize on the newer atmosphere of opening up. But then we have the constraints: how do you resolve regional issues when major parties are not part of the process? Syria and Lebanon were not in ACRS, Syria in particular was not there. How can you discuss ACRS without Iran being there? It is a primary party. You can't go anywhere unless you have the primary parties of the region being involved in the entire process. Even for Kuwait, having just come out from occupation post-Gulf War, and reviewed all these instruments such as the additional protocol and all of the other arms control treaties - how can we do that if Iraq is not involved in the conversation?

You cannot.

To be effective, the parties have to be there, they have to be around the table. How do you bring them to agree to the confidence building measures and measures that the parties have already accepted? We have always supported the incremental view to help the process overall - if we can reach the ultimate goal, fine, that is great. But if not, let's try the other way. One cannot force any agreement on the region, because even if it was decided by the Security Council you cannot force it on the delegates because it wouldn't work.

Hanna Notte

You know how to end an interview! A very good answer to the last question, also in terms of how we can think about a way forward for the region.

Nabeela Al-Mulla

It's very interesting because now it's being revived., The Russians find it very interesting, though their initiative does not even mention ACRS. They mention UNSC Resolution 598. But they take it also out of context — the paragraph that is calling upon countries to discuss regional security measures talks about the internationally recognized boundary, and there is no internationally recognized boundary between Iraq and Iran. You know, ask also who was responsible for the war between Iraq and Iran, all this was sort of dusted away, only that paragraph about regional security was referred to. You have to have a credible machinery to negotiate, and you have to have something that is coming from the region.

During ACRS, they have set the example of the OSCE. Even on the idea of the nuclear free zone we could not agree whether Tlatelolco or Pelindaba should be the model. You have to have something that is more tailored for the region and you cannot take it from abroad and tell the region, "Okay, now, here it is. You can use it." Similarly, you can't come and say, "Okay, Israel, where is the NPT and where are the safeguards?" There has to be some kind of innovative safeguards, something like what the Indians did with the IAEA, you know, innovative safeguards for the facilities in Israel. You know, there has to be ways that are not exactly modelled like the others, we can learn from them, but we cannot take them and adapt them as they are. It will not fit.

Hanna Notte

Very good. I think that's a great way to end this, unless you believe that there's something important about the process that I failed to ask you or anything else that you think is important to mention before we conclude.

Nabeela Al-Mulla

No, thank you very much.

Hanna Notte

Thank you.

[End of transcript]