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Interview with Bradley Gordon

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Summary:

Bradley Gordon is a former US diplomat. He served as a member of the US delegation to ACRS.

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Bradley Gordon, United States

Oral history interview conducted by Miles Pomper on Zoom on November 9, 2020

Miles Pomper

Yeah. So, as we were talking about a little bit earlier, you mentioned that your role in this process, I guess, stemmed from being part of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency?

Bradley Gordon

Right.

Miles Pomper

And maybe you could talk about the time period and a little bit how you came into that?

Bradley Gordon

So I had been, I was the Middle East staffer on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. And Dennis Ross, who had been on the National Security Council staff, during the Reagan administration called me up and asked me whether I would consider going into the Bush administration, (Bush, the father, administration). And over a period of time and after having discussed lots of jobs, he said to me, look, we have all kinds of nonproliferation problems, they are centered in the Near East and South Asia. You know that region, you know the culture of the region, you know what impels people towards that end. There is a lead bureau in the United States government, the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, which deals with nonproliferation issues. And I would like you to consider becoming the assistant director of the Arms Control Disarmament Agency for nonproliferation policy. And I thought about it for about 13 seconds and said yes, and President Bush nominated me. I went through the nomination process, which was not difficult since the committee of jurisdiction was the Foreign Relations Committee that I spent four years of my life working on. And so, I became the assistant director of the Arms Control Disarmament Agency.

Miles Pomper

When was that?

Bradley Gordon

This was 1989. And you will remember, there was a review conference for the NPT [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty] in 1990. And I was the ambassador for the United States to the review conference, and soon led the NPT efforts. And had broad experience by this point with the kinds of issues that would be discussed in ACRS. And Dick Clark, who was the assistant secretary for Pol-Mill [political-military affairs] in the State Department was one of the two co-chairs for the Arms Control and Regional Security, multilateral for the peace process. And I was the head of the US delegation. So that's how it all came. And we knew about this from about January of '92. And the first formal meeting of ACRS was in May of 1992, in Washington. It was something to behold, there was Israel, there was the Palestinians, there were 13 Arab states, there were all kinds of other states who were looking on. And we set in motion, a process that was sort of a broad agreement that we couldn't tackle, the elephant in the room, which I will get to in a minute, right away, that we need to start building up some kind of level of confidence. And that meant starting with everybody getting to know each other, getting familiar with each other and starting to talk about confidence building measures, CBMs that people could undertake, and begin the process of building confidence through that.

But we all knew two things. One, that the progress and the ability for ACRS to make progress would be defined by the bilateral process towards peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, that was going to be the governing agent. And we knew as well, that the elephant in the room was the Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone that Egypt had championed since the 1970s. And it every year had gotten the resolution through the United Nations General Assembly and would push resolutions at the IAEA Board of Governors meetings. And even though you could get Israel to say that it was in favor of a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East, only when

the conditions were ripe for that, and from their perspective that meant there had to be the establishment of a durable peace. From Egypt's perspective, peace was dependent on the establishment of a nuclear weapons free zone. And as long as you had those kinds of polar opposites, unless there was real progress towards peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, the numbers of steps that you could take towards establishing a nuclear weapons free zone was going to be limited, and ultimately, that's what caused the undoing of ACRS, somewhere in 1995, if I remember correctly.

But so, nevertheless, I remember at the opening plenary of ACRS in the State Department, David Ivry, the lead Israeli, the head of the Israeli delegation, who was the Director General of the Ministry of Defense, and the head of the intersterial, ministerial on arms control issues for Israel, getting up and in his first address to this plenum said, "Yes, our prophets spoke about beating swords into plowshares, but they never mentioned nuclear weapons." I remember laughing at the time but understood what he was saying, don't think you're going to be able to push us into this. But nevertheless, the spirit at that opening session was really remarkable, where there was a great deal of exchange of views and a great deal of people getting to know each other. And we were off to a reasonably good start.

Miles Pomper

I'll sort of walk it back a second. Were you involved at all in setting up the process, and planning this?

Bradley Gordon

Yes. So after, so the broad environment for this was, one, we were the only remaining superpower. And two, we just had this huge military success of the war with Iraq. And so American influence and American sense of its own ability to be, had never been greater. And Denis [Ross] wanted to take the opportunity to try to launch a Middle East peace process. And the Prime Minister of Israel at the time was Shamir who had grown up in the Stern Gang movement in pre-Israeli independence, which was not what one would call a liberal group. But nevertheless, we prevailed on the Israelis to agree to this and to agree to the whole concept of a renewed peace process. He had one demand, and that was that the PLO could not be represented. And so you had Palestinians from, from the West Bank and Gaza, leading the Palestinian effort.

And I remember thinking every time that they, there was a meeting between the Israelis and the Palestinians, the Palestinians would go to Tunis, talk to Arafat first, then meet with the Israelis and then go back to Tunis after they met. Which is why that fundamentally changed once Rabin became the prime minister in '92. In any event, so the notion was that there that we can re-establish a peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians. But that, given the American influence in the Middle East at the time, we ought to think broader than that, we ought to think about ways in which we could develop regional cooperation on a variety of fronts, once one of which was arms control and regional security, others would have water issues and environmental issues, etc. And, and so we began thinking about what would an arms control regional security, multilateral track look like, in a peace process? And how do you develop it? And that's where we began talking about CBMs [confidence building measures] as the most likely step, and getting people outside of Egypt, there weren't real regional experts in arms control, and regional security in most of the other states. And so most of them look to Egypt.

But at the same time, we wanted to develop that expertise in other countries. And that meant starting at the basics. And so we introduced the notion of limited confidence building measures, you know, maritime rescue, communications network, so that one wouldn't start a war through miscommunication. Those kinds of limited gestures, and in fact, actually sent up three regional centers for communications. And so we had limited horizons and I think all of the participants that came understood that that was going to have to be where we started, and that is, in fact where we started. And, so we started with at a 50,000 foot level to talk about what we would, what the ultimate game's goals were and they included the establishment of a nuclear weapons free zone, the Israelis as an ultimate game goal, we're proud, we're happy to say yes.

And so we did a lot and they had these broad parameters of what it looked like. And

then work from the very bottom. And we had training sessions, you know, where people, we talked about what arms control looks like, what regional security looks like, how you get there, what the history of arms control measures were, etc., and sort of built up and we'd have, you know, regional meetings and plenaries in Washington. And people got to know each other. And it was, it got off to a really good start. Until, by this point I had left but I was still involved in sort of Track II diplomacy with {UCLA Professor} Steve Spiegel. And my sense is that after a couple of years of this, the Egyptians in particular wanted to move on and start really getting into the nitty gritty of how to establish a nuclear weapons free zone. This was in late '94, and then throughout '95, such that by September of '95, they pushed it and that was sort of I think that's the last time that ACRS actually met was September of '95.

Miles Pomper

And, you mentioned the Egyptians pushing this. And obviously, you mentioned your past leadership in the NPT Review Conference of '90.

Bradley Gordon

Yes.

Miles Pomper

How tied do you think that '95 Review Conference was with the failure of the process?

Bradley Gordon

Well, when we got to '95, it was clear to me that the hang up that was holding up ACRS was going to be the key element to try to get the NPT extended indefinitely. And so I wasn't surprised at all that that became a huge issue at the 1995 Review Conference and it did. And, and ultimately, we paid lip service to it. And once '96 happened (*editorial note: he refers to Israeli Prime Minister Rabin's assassination*), and there was a change of government in Israel, and there was, you know, such that the renewed terrorism by Palestinian extremist groups, that everything sort of just wound down. But that was not surprising to me that it became such a key issue in the NPT Review and Extension Conference.

Miles Pomper

Just because it always, always has been such an important issue?

Bradley Gordon

Right, this was, you know, this was an issue of principle for the Egyptians. It was also something very frankly, that they were able to use to beat Israel over the head with. And they had invested a great deal of energy in it. And for them, it was huge. In the 1990 Review Conference, the two major issues were nuclear testing, and a Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban, which the Bush administration wouldn't sign up to. And negative security assurances. And which I was able to go a fair amount in putting in a lot of language about how we would look at the issue seriously. And that bought a lot of particularly the Nigerians who were lead country on negative security assurances, and, and such that they were heavily invested in it. And they got most of the Third World and non-aligned movement to be heavily invested in it. And hence, they were bitterly disappointed when Mexico refused to go along with consensus.

Even though we were prepared to come up with the same language that got us through the 1985 Review Conference, which has many countries believe that a Nuclear Test Ban is the most important item on the nuclear proliferation agenda. And some countries don't believe that. But Mexico is not prepared to go along with that. So the conference didn't wind up with a consensus document. But a lot of African countries and non-aligned countries came up to me and expressed their disappointment that Mexico refused to go along. So we more or less managed to get through it. But by '95, it was an entirely different issue. Now you're talking about the extension of the treaty indefinitely and that so these issues, but particularly how to get beyond where we were in some meaningful way, which is nuclear weapons free zones. It's not surprising to me that that became such a huge issue.

Miles Pomper

Having had this experience in the region, and then the NPT Review Conference, I mean, were you ultimately surprised at what happened to ACRS?

Bradley Gordon

I'd like to be able to say yes, but no. I saw no way that the Israelis were ever going to prematurely agree to a nuclear weapons free zone. Without look, their point, their point of view was, you've got countries who are members of the NPT, who cheat on their obligations to the NPT. And they live in this region. And now you want me to sign up to abolishing our nuclear weapons, because when we sign up for something, we actually do it. And we are not prepared to do that until we are sure that peace has come to be enduring in the Middle East. It's not an unreasonable position from their perspective. And so that meant that our ability to make huge progress in ACRS was going to be dependent on the rapid progress or lack thereof of peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

Miles Pomper

But I mean, there was, you know, obviously, there was some progress on that during this time period, at least, after you left, particularly.

Bradley Gordon

Yes. And, you know, who knows what would have happened if Rabin had not been assassinated. And if Shimon Peres hadn't waited six months to hold an election, things might have been different, but they aren't, they weren't. And we got to where we got to.

Miles Pomper

So, you know, how would you sort of assess the - you mentioned Egypt, and the issue of the nuclear weapons free zone or Israel's nuclear weapons, which is obviously a big issue. And then the, you know, you mentioned the bilateral process versus the multilateral. How would you assess the reasons for the talks collapsing - which was more important, less important, and so on?

Bradley Gordon

So there was a strong sense that ACRS had run its course, that pending a significant breakthrough in the peace discussions between Israelis and Palestinians, the ability for both the Arab states to be more forthcoming with respect to Israel, and for Israel to take the kinds of steps that the Arab states wanted, that wasn't going to happen in the absence of real progress between Israel and the Palestinians. And so the Arab states were defined by, on the one hand, their real desire to see progress on these issues. And on the other, their inability to reach out to Israel in more meaningful ways that would have, you know, been demonstrable to the Israeli public, and might have provided some level of confidence to move to bigger, bigger steps. They couldn't because they were limited by how quickly and how much progress was going on between the Israelis and the Palestinians. And, you know, at the end of the day, that's where we ended up.

Miles Pomper

And you mentioned after you left the government that you were involved in some of the Track Two meetings.

Bradley Gordon

Yes, yes. And an interesting dynamic because all the people there were people who had been senior officials in their respective governments, but no longer were. But nevertheless, you had a real sense and everybody had a real sense that they had the imprimatur of their governments to, to conduct these discussions. They were much more freewheeling than the formal governmental mechanisms. People were much more willing to explore broader options. And then to take them back to their respective governments. And that too ultimately got hobbled on the, on what happens in the peace process, they could only go as far as they could go. And so what really interests me now is we're at an entirely different juncture now. In many Arab states, they actually look at Israel's military strength, including its nuclear strength as an asset and no longer a liability. Given their concern about American staying power in the region. Israel became in many of their eyes a strategic asset.

And we will see what happens now with the Biden administration, but I suspect there will be a return to more normal sense of American diplomacy, and a reinvigoration of a more realistic peace process. And one that will include Palestinians. And that will be inclusive now of several Arab states. And that may actually lead somewhere. I may be

naively optimistic about this. And, you know, when you're talking about the Middle East, it's not always smart to be optimistic. But nevertheless, I do think we are at a point where there is a real chance for progress. I think the Palestinians have come to realize in ways that they hadn't. I mean, they always had the sense that time was on their side. And I think one they need a new generation of leadership. And that's in the process of coming. Abbas is 83 years old and not in particularly good health. And there is, I think, a growing realization amongst younger Palestinians, that time is running out, and they actually have to get serious about trying to make a reasonable deal. If they're going to get to a reasonable deal, if options are not going to be so limited by future steps. So, you know, call me a wild eyed, cockeyed optimist, but, but I think, first, the restoration of a more normal American diplomacy, and where we are might actually lead to actually getting somewhere for a change.

Miles Pomper

When you talk about where we are, that obviously includes these recent normalization agreements with Israel, and some of the [Arab] states. What if you were going to try to do this kind of process? Now, I mean, could it work? How would you do it differently? What approach would you take?

Bradley Gordon

So, there's sort of two models, one is the inside out that Israel and the Palestinians make peace, and that then goes out through the rest of the Arab world. And another way of looking at this is the outside in, that relations between Israel and the Arab states improve, and the Arab states bring the Palestinians along. And that may have real possibility, in ways that weren't possible before, as a result of the normalization process that's going on in the region. It's not just the states that have actually absolutely established diplomatic relations with Israel. There are a lot of Arab states who have incredibly close dialogue with Israel in ways that one would never have thought possible five years ago, or 10 years ago. That includes Saudi Arabia. And, you know, there is a reason that there has not been a single terrorist incident done by a terrorist coming from Jordan, crossing the Jordan River and going into Israel. And it's not because the Jordan River is mighty and wide. It's a stream. It's because of the incredible security cooperation between Israel and Jordan. And you now have Egyptian soldiers virtually on the southern border with Israel having gone all the way through Sinai, which they are supposed to not do, according to the Egyptian Israeli peace treaty, but which Israel is happy to let them do. And so the kind of coordination goes on between Israel and Egypt is also remarkable. And the other part about all of this is very frankly, most of the Arab states and frankly, never were all that concerned about the Palestinians, are increasingly tired of the problem they want this problem over with. And that may be salutary.

Miles Pomper

We were talking about, especially now that we're at the time we're speculative, but now that Biden has been elected, and, you know, talking about getting back into the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action]. And that there may be prospects, you know, to bring Iran into this kind of process, particularly to have some kind of regional corollary to whatever bilateral negotiations are going on. What do you think about that?

Bradley Gordon

I think you've reached the point where my optimism ceases. I think our ability to have that kind of eventuality has to await a new generation of Iranian leadership. So long as the first revolutionary generation of Iran is still running the show. I think it's gonna be hard to do. Maybe I'm wrong. But I think the anti-American aspect of the Iranian Revolution is so deep that you are going to need a generational change. Before you can have meaningful Iranian interaction. Look, the JCPOA the Iranians went into. Because for them, it was a reasonably good deal. It opened up the prospect of economic renewal, which they desperately needed. And at the end of the day, you know, if the JCPOA worked limited their ability to get to a nuclear weapon for 15 years. At the end of which they could legally have done whatever they wanted to, they could store as much highly enriched uranium as they wanted to, they could build as many enrichment facilities as they want to do on and on and on and on. So I think it was actually a reasonably good deal for them.

From an American perspective, it would have put a break on their nuclear program for 15 years, and hopefully allowed for the development inside Iran of a real reluctance to take steps that would reimpose all of the negative aspects of the pre-JCPOA period. So, you know, from that perspective, it made sense from their perspective and from President Obama's perspective. But we'll see about their willingness to get into that again. And for that matter, our ability to get into it again, it isn't that easy, simply to go back into this. You know, and the question is, now that we're out of it, whether you agree with getting out of it or not, we are out of it. And does that give you the ability to think about how you could come up with a better agreement and whether there would be any Iranian interest? And then, you know, that's somewhat dependent on, on how desperate they become, you know, good luck figuring that out.

Miles Pomper

To a rather retrospective question on ACRS. If you had to choose, obviously it didn't succeed in the end, but what would you think are sort of the successes and shortcomings of the process?

Bradley Gordon

So, the fact that it happened was a huge success. The fact that there was a real sense of community that developed amongst its participants, was a huge asset to develop and, and having had that experience, I think it will allow its renewal to be much easier, we have the precedent for it. And we have the experience of it. And I think it was a real tribute to American diplomatic thinking to actually launch it, and to nurture it. And we may be at the point where we can re-establish it. So, despite failures, we knew going into it what the limitations were going to be. But having had that experience, I think we're better off for having had it and I think it opens up real possibilities to land on it again.

Miles Pomper

And do you think it would get stuck on, snagged on the same [issues]?

Bradley Gordon

So that's an interesting question. One of the things that as someone who dealt with this intimately, I never had the sense we never went to Mubarak and said to him, cut out this crap. You know, the Israelis aren't going to go for it until they are reasonably secure in their own sense here in the region. And all you do is beat them on the head for no particularly good reason. And so it was always my sense that this effort stopped in the foreign ministry, and we never went to capital to say cut it out that this is important for us stop doing what you're doing. Because it's a negative influence on our ability to make progress. That never happened.

And as a result, you know, I am left with a question about what would happen if in fact, we did do that? Do you think Sisi actually even knows of this issue? He's got a whole plate of other more important issues to worry about. And, you know, so it's a question of whether it's a priority for us. It wasn't. And if in fact, we did it. And if we got the Israelis to say something positive about the concept, you might be able to shelve it for a while and see what other steps, meaningful steps you could take. Look, I am a firm believer that ultimately, you have to be able to get there. That a nuclear weapons free zone, not only in the Middle East, but everywhere ultimately has to be our strategic objective. And so, you know, I think the issue could be handled if we were serious about trying to handle it.

Miles Pomper

I guess some of the, you know, some Israelis, we've talked to have suggested that, you know, part of the Egyptian insistence on this was, had to do with sort of an internal Egyptian politics, that, you know, the military, which really was in control in Egypt wouldn't let the foreign minister or others make any progress on CBMs. Right. And, and so they, you know, they kind of gave him the nuclear issue as the one issue they could do, because they knew that they couldn't make an agreement on that.

Bradley Gordon

Right. I think there's some truth to that. Which is unfortunate. Because there were people inside the Egyptian Foreign Ministry who were actually seized with the notion of actually developing CBMs with Israel thought it was ultimately to their benefit to do

and they, you know, that very, other than very limited steps that never happened. And so they had done the nuclear shooting, and the Egyptian military actually could have cared less about it.

Miles Pomper

Great. So is there something I haven't asked about that I should have?

Bradley Gordon

That's a really good question, Miles, and I don't think so. I think we actually covered the topic.

Miles Pomper

Great.

Bradley Gordon

Thank you for allowing me to do this.

Miles Pomper

Thanks. Thanks for doing this, good to see you again.

Bradley Gordon

Good to see you again. When all of this is over, let's go get some coffee.

Miles Pomper

Yep, sounds good. Take care.

[End of transcript]