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Interview with Yezid Sayigh

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Summary:

Yezid Sayigh is a former Palestinian diplomat. He served as an advisor to the Palestinian delegation to ACRS.

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Oral history interview conducted by Hanna Notte on Zoom on November 27, 2020

Hanna Notte

This is the 27th of November and the ARCS oral history interview with Yezid Sayigh, thank you for doing this. Let me start with a rather broad question: just explain to us in what role and capacity you were involved in the ACRS process, from when to when, the kinds of meetings that you attended - just to set the scene.

Yezid Sayigh

I was at that time, when the ACRS process was launched - this was of course after the Madrid peace conference at the end of 1991, which launched both the bilateral track negotiations between the so-called joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation and the Israeli delegation - and I was a strategic analyst and advisor for the Palestinian delegation as part of that effort. In parallel, as you know, the ACRS track of multilateral talks was launched as well, with five baskets. Now, at that time, primarily due to Israeli insistence, the Palestinians were not invited specifically to the ACRS basket. I think the Israelis regarded any Palestinian participation as an implicit acknowledgement that they were somehow a state actor or had a claim to be a state actor. And of course, under the right-wing government of Yitzhak Shamir, there was, you know, determination to minimize any form of recognition of the Palestinians either as a national entity, with a right to self-determination, or as a political actor with some sort of state capacity or claim to statehood.

Now, personally, I lead the way in talking to the Palestinian leadership, arguing that they should push back against this and resist this exclusion from this one single basket out of all the others. And I also took the approach that not only should Palestinians be represented as part, again, of the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation in the ACRS basket. But moreover, that the Palestinians should make a serious effort to present themselves in a professional way, i.e. to have a delegation comprising people who knew about arms control and regional security issues, that this wasn't just an opportunity for political grandstanding, but rather to show that we had equal concerns about these issues and had something useful and intelligent to say about them. So we ended up with this somewhat strange experience - and I guess we'll talk a little bit more about that if you want. But just to wrap up the sort of introduction that we ended up inviting ourselves to every ACRS event in the initial phase prior, of course, all this was prior to the Oslo Accords, which completely changed the political picture. But prior to that, since we weren't allowed into the official room, what we did was we created a presence outside the room. We contacted all the delegations that were open to talking to us or receiving us, and that included the US State Department, we would have meetings with them, with my leading the Palestinian delegation as the head of delegation, and sitting down with State Department officials, with Russian Foreign Ministry counterparts, Algerian and Egyptian, of course, Jordanian, the Arab delegations that were taking part were all obviously on site and regarding us as an official delegation. So we sought to make our presence felt and to submit text here and there on substantive issues, to show that we were there in a serious capacity.

Hanna Notte

Right, that's very useful to set the scene. And just to follow up on what you just said, your attendance then, as a Palestinian delegation, in the form that you just described at these various meetings, was that confined to the ACRS plenaries, which happened initially in Washington and Moscow, or did it extend to the so called intersessionals where the work on the confidence building measures was done in the operational basket?

Yezid Sayigh

We tried to attend everything, at least on the margins. So mainly the plenary sessions, but also there were activities on the side, as you mentioned. It's difficult for me to remember now exactly, but I recall a meeting - this wasn't really held under the ACRS heading, the official ACRS heading - but as part of the series of, I forgot the name now that Steve Spiegel ran out of UCLA.

Hanna Notte

What became Prague meetings you mean? What became the Prague meetings at a later stage.

Yezid Sayigh

Yes exactly. This started in La Jolla in California. So, there we were in the room because this was a different setting, and there was no problem being present as Palestinians with Israeli counterparts, and the Israelis who attended those kinds of meetings didn't have an issue with us being there, and they included people who were part of the foreign ministry or people who were part of think tanks, but obviously all, you know, well plugged into their security system. But there weren't too many intersessional activities in the first year and a half or so. The intersessional activities, if I'm remembering correctly, happened more in the later sort of mid and later 1990s by which time Palestinian participation was no longer an issue. But also by which time I was no longer taking part. So most of my participation - or in fact, all of it in the ACRS process, or in what became the Prague meetings - ended after 1994.

Hanna Notte

When you say towards the later years, Palestinian participation was no longer an issue, do you mean to imply that, after the Oslo Accords, the Palestinians ceased to participate in ACRS or

Yezid Sayigh

No, no, no, I mean, that they then participated officially. And they were accepted as part - at that time still of the Joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. And I believe that the very first session in which we were present in the room, where I was heading the Palestinian part of the joint delegation, was at a meeting at the State Department in Washington, DC. And I remember actually happening to sit right between David Ivry, former chief of the Air Force, Israeli Air Force and head of their delegation on my left, and Dr. Abdullah Toukan on my immediate right as head of the Jordanian part of the joint delegation. So from there on, our participation was full and official.

Hanna Notte

Great. And can we come back for a second to the Palestinian contingent of the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation? How many Palestinian individuals are we talking about? And what was their background? Who were these individuals?

Yezid Sayigh

Yeah, it's a good question. And somewhat amusing, I guess, in that, unlike... Well, I mean, the Palestinians clearly could draw on a fair number of senior officers with combat experience, generals, some of whom had been in things like the Air Force, or, you know, I mean, were combat pilots, had been trained, even though the PLO had a very very minute Air Wing, and all the way through other fields. Most of them had received training in various advanced militaries around the world. And yet, despite that, the delegation that I was able to put together lacked any of these individuals, partly because initially, there was a sort of political difficulty with who could actually show up in Washington, DC, to attend meetings.

I was, you know, as a diaspora civilian and a national of a western country, I could travel easily. So I ended up trying to build a new delegation of younger researchers, mostly civilians, for the most part, who had to be trained and given a basic induction to defense affairs. One or two of whom had already had some involvement as researchers in looking at defense issues, arms exports and imports, and so on. One of whom was Dr. Bishara Bahbah, who had written about Israel's Latin American defense connections, and he's a US-Palestinian citizen, but because there was this difficulty with bringing in PLO generals, and because I wasn't quite sure - we did in the end, if I recall correctly, and I might be wrong here, we did bring in Brigadier General Nizar Ammar, at one stage or the other, I don't remember exactly what stage he became part of the delegation and able to travel and to get visas.

But otherwise, what we did was: we put together, partly due to Israeli restrictions at the time, you will know that as part of the Madrid peace conference formula, and at the insistence of the government of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, there was a red line, a veto on Palestinians taking part from the diaspora or from East Jerusalem, or

who were members of the PLO. Now, I'm from the diaspora and we certainly brought in others, Professor Rashid Khalidi, if I recall correctly, was present at one or so of the initial meetings, as a part of this team. But what we tried to do was to build a cadre of younger researchers who we hoped would specialize in defensive areas and become civilian defense experts from the West Bank and Gaza. And the way we did this was to put together an innovative program. I mean, when you think back on it, we were really trying to do something different and new. Most governments obviously, and most of the people represented in the ACRS process, had national armed forces, defense ministries, hundreds, if not thousands of civilian defense experts, people who've worked on arms control, nuclear proliferation, and so on. I mean, Egypt is a great example. The Jordanians on a smaller scale. And of course, the US or Russia and others. We started with almost none of these advantages.

So what I did was to reach out, and I and two other key individuals put together, I think, a highly innovative and creative program. One individual was Dr. Mahdi Abdul-Hadi, the co-founder and director of PASSIA, Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs based in Jerusalem, and Dr. Rosemary Hollis, sadly deceased in the last year, who at that time, well eventually became director of the Middle East program at Chatham House in London. These two individuals helped put together an academic program, in which we designed a two week training course, a sort of crash introduction to international affairs, and to defense affairs and security studies, out of PASSIA offices in Jerusalem, and where Rosemary Hollis helped put together a curriculum. And also we designed an open advertisement that went out in the Palestinian press in the occupied territories, because at that time, of course, they were still under direct Israeli occupation. And so we put out a call and invited Palestinians who had a minimum of an MA in a related field like international affairs or international relations, etc. to apply to attend this two week program, and I believe funding may have come from, I don't know for sure, I mean, Dr. Abdul-Hadi, or the late Dr. Hollis would have arranged this possibly with the help of the British Council, British consulate, I'm not too sure at this point. We received funding in any case, to be able to bring these people to Jerusalem and put them through a two-week course.

I attended at some point because some of this started to happen around the Oslo Accord period. Prior to that, I didn't go to the occupied territories. But after that I, and possibly Dr. Ahmed Khalidi and others took part in delivering the actual course training, as did Rosemary Hollis and Dr. Abdul-Hadi. So we, we tried to create some sort of familiarity, and some basic skills and methodology. And the other thing I also tried to do was to use the kind of network, in this case in Europe, of things like summer schools or other kinds of relevant courses that were put out by, for instance, ELIAMEP the Hellenic Foundation for Defense Policy, I think is the ELIAMEP, and also Pantheon University in Greece that had a different kind of summer course.

There was also the Pugwash community, you know, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists who had developed the whole Pugwash scheme to try and develop young leadership, and they too ran a some kind of summer course, I think it's something like a week long, in, I forget, I forget the name of it, in l'Aquila, wherever in Italy, outside Rome. And what this did was to bring young people from around the world, including at that time, post-communist East European countries, Arab countries, Israel, and so on. And it was, I thought, a means of familiarizing the young people we'd selected, who'd been through our training program, to then get them actually meeting counterparts, listening to practitioners among whom, for instance, were (Shalhevet) Freier, so called father of the Israeli atomic bomb, people like that who took part in some of these meetings and I thought this would give a chance for these young Palestinians to get used to talking to the other side in this kind of setting, about these kinds of professional issues, so all of which was, you know, quite an amateurish effort, if you like, and fairly, fairly ad hoc. But it was an attempt to put together something that I hoped, over two or three years, would create cumulative experience, and where these people would actually commit to a career in this field, maybe do graduate studies or just get into practice and become practitioners.

Hanna Notte

That's great. That's very useful and detailed recollections of what transpired at the time. I do want to come back for a second to the Madrid conference, if I may. What is

your recollection as to how the decision to have the multilateral track, and then within that precisely those five working groups, how that played out? Was it contentious? Was there consensus easily found on the nature of those five working groups?

Yezid Sayigh

Well, I mean, I didn't attend the Madrid conference, nor did I take part in any Palestinian internal debates about whether to accept or refuse the invitation. I mean, you will know and I think your viewers will know that there was a huge debate among Palestinians generally about whether to take part in a peace conference that did not specifically refer to Palestinian independence, national self-determination, and where the Palestinians couldn't even represent themselves freely, and had to be represented only in accordance with parameters set by one of the most right-wing governments in Israeli history. So there was of course a lot of Palestinian unhappiness and opposition to taking part at all. The mainstream PLO leadership under Yasser Arafat won the day and insisted on having a seat at the table. And trusting to people from the occupied territories headed by Dr. Haidar Abdel-Shafi, and with the support of people like Dr. Hanan Ashrawi and others, and the late Saeb Erekat, who just passed away recently, that these people were more than sufficient in speaking for all Palestinians. And I think that was a very correct position.

Now, in terms of accepting that not only should the peace conference be defined by Israeli red lines, which included as I mentioned already, that the Palestinians should be represented only as part of a joint delegation with the Jordanians - and this, of course, meant that the Jordanians also had to accept an Israeli restriction on how they represented themselves. I mean, Jordanians had the right to be representing only and exclusively themselves, and instead were forced into this sort of gunshot marriage with the Palestinians. And this, of course, is worrying for the Jordanians, because the Israeli right wing has always spoken of a Jordanian option, which would be to solve the Palestinian aspect of the struggle or the conflict by creating a joint Jordanian-Palestinian state on the east bank of the Jordan River. So I just want to highlight that there were several different contentious issues here.

But I think that the key thing is to say that, by splitting the whole peace process into a bilateral track, and then a multilateral track made a certain logic. I mean, there was some sense to having an Arab-Israeli dimension. But let's not be naive. What the US administration was putting together was a forum for normalizing direct Arab talks with Israel, even if this doesn't result in further official peace deals between other Arab States and Israel. So there was a normalization process, and of course, the objection to that among Palestinians and a fair number of Arabs was that the US was delivering to Israel - and to an Israel that rejected any notion of Palestinian statehood, and even was not even particularly willing to discuss autonomy, not seriously - that the US was helping deliver to an Israel run by a government of this nature, the fruits of a peace that the Israelis had paid no price for. Where they give nothing in return, in the way of either meaningful autonomy to Palestinians, or relinquishing territory taken by force and war. So all of this was born in a fundamental, I mean, this was all a political gambit, right?

And if you look at what ACRS ended up as, it ended up, as I understand it, I stopped following and so I may be wrong, and I may do injustice to someone here or there, but my understanding that there... I mean, ACRS as ACRS ended a long time ago. And all we have left is the Prague meetings, and the Prague meetings have become a mix of rest and recreation for some people who just want to holiday. And for others, it's a way in which Israelis, Arabs, and others get together and have a forum to talk together, not that they lack that ability, I mean, most of these people can nowadays, and have been able for many years, to talk to each other by phone, or to meet up in western capitals, and to have all sorts of discussions and dialogues, and maybe even trade deals and so on. I mean, it's not as if they couldn't do this anyway. But the Prague meetings shifted from talking about substantive issues of arms control and regional security to being more of a normalization process, pure and simple. And again, I'm not judging that, per se, I'm just saying that that's all that's left of that whole process. Because sadly, when it comes to talking about arms control, there is no such thing in the region. Partly because, of course, the principal actors here, in this case the United States, Israel itself, are major arms exporters, the US sells

enormous amounts of weapons to Arab states, as well as to Israel. So does Russia and France and Germany and the UK and Italy. So what arms control? What regional security? I don't think there's any substance there.

Hanna Notte

Thanks. That's very useful. And I want to come back to that fundamental notion that you express, that there was a feeling at the time that with the multilateral track, essentially, the United States created a process to deliver normalization between Arab States and Israel. Now, I've spoken with diplomats who participated in ACRS from various regional delegations, and the narrative as to what the relationship between the multilateral track and the bilateral track should be, differs. I want to hear how the Palestinians going into ACRS wanted that relationship between the bilateral track and the multilateral track proceeding to look like?

Yezid Sayigh

That's a very interesting question and a very perceptive one. Because obviously, at one level, the multilateral talks were supposed to create a supportive environment for the bilateral talks. And which included as you will know, of course, your viewers will know, Lebanese-Israeli, Syrian-Israeli, and also Jordanian-Palestinian-Israeli. Now, I don't think that there was much structured effort to link anything that was going on in substance in the multilateral talks with what was happening in substance in the bilateral talks. I'm not saying that there weren't beneficial or mutually supportive dimensions or consequences. And I'll come to that in a moment, with one or two very concrete examples. But the organizational structure that could oversee all these different tracks, and make sure that there was an effective transmission process or mechanism that would say: 'alright, we've identified certain sticking points or obstacles, bottlenecks on the Syrian-Israeli bilateral track or the Palestinian-Jordanian-Israeli bilateral track, some of these are pertinent to the multilateral track discussions of security, or, you know, refugees or environment and so on'. And, vice versa: 'we've had a very useful discussion on the multilateral level, maybe this could be fed into one of the bilateral tracks'.

I'm not aware now in hindsight that anything quite so purposeful or structured ever happened. Although there were plenary sessions of the steering group, of the multilateral steering group for the process as a whole, which I also took part in, if I recall, in Moscow and Lisbon in particular. After that, I dropped out. So these took a rather formulaic and formalistic format. It was more sort of national delegations, you know, making their statements. I don't recall there being anything more substantive, sadly. And I'm not sure, now I think back I cannot recollect, that there were, say, subcommittees, I believe there were, there might have been subcommittees for this or that. I don't recall attending any of those meetings. I recall attending meetings on the side of these plenaries with, say, our Russian hosts, or with American counterparts or this or that delegation, but I don't recall subcommittee meetings that, say, went into the substance and said: 'Some very interesting discussions were had here or there, let's see how we can relay that and get that carried over to some other subcommittee.' I just don't recollect that at all, which doesn't mean it didn't happen. I don't recollect it.

So what I'm partly saying is that, beyond the nice generalities of "oh, well, multilateral peace talks will create a conducive environment, very nice," but that's just sort of window dressing. Now, having said that, that partly underlines the argument that much of this was about normalization. It was just about seeing and having it be seen publicly that Arabs and Israelis were sitting together, routinely discussing various practical, important public policy issues that were part of resolving the conflict. And again, not a negative thing, so long as there was a genuine willingness on all sides. And here, of course, I'm thinking about an Israeli side led by a hardline, right-wing nationalist government to actually discuss substance with a view to making substantive concessions, and also an American party that was genuinely willing to level the playing field, which it never was, even though I think that the administration that set this all up was probably one of the most effective US administrations in trying to actually get the Israelis engaging meaningfully. And we all remember James Baker Sr. trying to get Yitzhak Shamir to the Madrid table, even after the Arabs and the Americans had all accepted Shamir's conditions, and Shamir still being, you know, dragged to the table kicking and screaming. And I think that

there's a lot of credit due to President Bush Senior and to James Baker and their team, the Baker Boys, for getting this put together. I don't think we've had a team that's been quite as relatively impartial and even-handed in the US administration since then, and I'll put myself out there and I'm sorry if I offend anyone. Since then, I mean, there have been very capable people since then, but nothing that's quite as non-partisan as that that team, sadly, in Washington, DC. Anyway.

So to come back, I mean, I would like also to acknowledge and to underline that the picture in the multilateral track varied from basket to basket. And I think that the ACRS basket ran into a wall rather quickly. I'll take one important example, and this is discussion of the nuclear dimension. And here, I think credit has to go to the Egyptians in particular, who for a very long time have pushed for a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East. Now, you might argue that this was never, you know, this was a non starter, the Israelis were never going to sign on, and therefore the US was never going to push the Israelis. However, I think the goal in itself was noble and necessary. We all need this. The Egyptians are the ones who have made a huge investment in this and have always maintained it and never wavered. The Egyptians were led at the time very ably and capably by Dr. Ambassador Mohammad Shaker, by Dr. Mahmoud Karem who later took over the file, who led this entire unit at the Egyptian foreign ministry and, of course, by Dr. Ambassador Nabil Fahmy, all of them extremely capable, seasoned diplomats and experts in this particular field. And the fact that they insisted on pushing this forward, I think goes to their credit, and the fact that ACRS, you know, went nowhere, is partly because the Israeli and US sides were not willing to engage on that issue.

And I think, you know, a lot more could have been done and it's not as if the Egyptians then said, 'okay, we refuse to discuss anything at all unless we discuss this', but I think that enough attention was not paid to having a serious debate about this dimension. And therefore, this meant that the Egyptians weren't quite as engaged and committed. And I think that all sides needed to invest more in that process. But as I suggested earlier, when you consider that you had some of the world's largest arms exporters in the room, talking about arms control was not very convincing. And you know, this has a history. In 1951, I think there was a tripartite agreement involving the US, UK, and France, I believe, at the time to suspend all arms exports to the region. And it was France that broke that first, in secret, by selling advanced weapon systems to Israel in 1954. So, you know, again, you bring the culprits to the room and expect them to come up with an arms control regime? Well, I think not.

But the economics basket, my father led the Palestinian delegation on the economics basket, and unlike ACRS, although he was a diaspora Palestinian and had been involved for many years as a senior PLO official, by the time the Oslo Accords came along, he, first of all, hadn't been in the PLO for many years, but also, again with the Oslo Accords, he could then become the official head of the delegation in the room. And as one of the most recognized Arab economists, and as someone who had spent the previous four years helping the PLO plan for economic development of a Palestinian state that we hoped would be established in the West Bank and Gaza, and East Jerusalem, he had already been committed specifically to preparing a plan for statehood and for economic development. Which meant that as soon as the Oslo Accords happened, and suddenly autonomy and ultimately statehood became a real possibility, and there was international commitment to making this happen financially and economically, immediately his delegation and his role in the economic basket of the multilateral talks transformed from being part of the multilateral track into being a direct Palestinian-Israeli international track, excluding I mean, no longer as part of Jordanian-Palestinian delegation, all that went by the wayside, or by the roadside, and my father, at that point, negotiated the first overall international package of \$2.4 billion of assistance to go to the Palestinian Authority that was to be set up and where the World Bank was his direct counterpart.

So I'm trying to say that the multilateral process did, in other areas, create a very important platform with an accumulation of knowledge where people like my father and his Israeli counterpart, the head of the central bank, Frankel, I forget his first name, I'm afraid, you know, were sitting over lunch in between sessions, and socializing and talking as professionals about the professional issues of, you know,

customs and trade barriers and VAT tariffs, and so on. And all this, therefore, could be shifted very easily from the multilateral track to the bilateral one to the advantage of all sides.

Hanna Notte

That's really useful. Thank you for that. I do want to come back for a moment to the beginning of the work in the ACRS basket, the ACRS group specifically. I think you said a while ago that the Palestinians decided to invite themselves and they came and they attended all the plenaries and were outside the room. What were the objectives of the Palestinians in the ACRS group specifically? What did you hope for going into that process?

Yezid Sayigh

Well, I smile because, you know, it wasn't sort of the Palestinians who had objectives or hopes - it was sort of me. I mean, I had to go lobby and persuade in particular, Ahmed Qurei, otherwise known as Abu Alaa, who was head of the PLO economics department, and who was assigned responsibility for putting together and managing and overseeing the Palestinian delegations to all the multilateral tracks. Yasser Arafat was the ultimate person in charge of the bilateral Palestinian-Jordanian-Israeli negotiation, obviously behind the scenes and unofficially until Oslo. But it was to him, of course, that the Palestinian delegation that came from inside the occupied territories answered, but his counterpart on the multilateral process, who oversaw all the five baskets, ACRS and economics and refugees and so on, that was Abu Alaa. So I went to Tunis and lobbied him and said, "Why have you accepted so easily that we should not be represented in the ACRS basket? I don't think this is right. If your whole point is to establish that we are a community with the right to national self-determination, and our goal is statehood, then all the more reason for us to assert and insist on our right to be represented in the ACRS basket precisely because it involves states, because it's only state actors, really, that can have a meaningful part here to play. And we want to demonstrate that we are responsible, that we think arms control and security are important, that we have something to say, and that we, in a way, as people who are most directly affected both by Israeli occupation, but also by peace and security for Israel, which we've accepted as a principle, that we are in a position to maybe go into areas and say things that maybe other Arab states won't.

And for instance, I will put to you right now, the possibility that when it comes to nuclear issues, Palestinians living under Israeli occupation, and, you know, cheek to jowl with Israelis inside Israel, you know 20% of the Israeli population who are Palestinians and the equal number who are non-Israeli citizens under Israeli occupation, a nuclear war would be as threatening to all of these non-Israelis or non Jewish Israelis, Palestinians, as to any Israeli, Jewish or non Jewish. And so our view on the importance of a nuclear weapons free zone or a nuclear issue should be, I think, again, one where we share an interest with the Israelis in not wanting weapons of mass destruction to be used."

And so we had a particular position I felt, we too, also in the bilateral track - and this became evident once we moved to the so called final status negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis, what ultimately became the Camp David talks in the year 2000 - the Israelis wanted a demilitarized Palestinian state. And if Palestinians were to engage in that debate, and look at various forms of partial militarization, partial demilitarization, full demilitarization, whatever, this meant Palestinians should be involved in these kinds of discussions and debates and know what they were talking about. So I was actually making this pitch, not simply to you or to Israelis or Americans, to argue why we should be in the room, I had to persuade the PLO leadership that they should actually think about this and not accept so easily their exclusion. So it was a case of 'well, okay, you know you've convinced me at least' - Abu Alaa. You know, his view was, 'alright, go ahead', you know, he sort of pinned a badge, so to speak, on my chest and said, "All right, you're head of the delegation." And I started putting together a delegation and looking for a bit of funding to do those kinds of things I described earlier, which involved people like Dr. Hollis, Dr. Abdul Hadi, finding donors, like the British and others, who would help us create a team, finding money for our hotel stay or our flights to Washington, DC, or Moscow, or Lisbon, or the other places, Vienna, Austria, I remember, where we attended either in the room or outside the room at various stages. And all this was run on a shoestring

budget. But I think that we, I think we did something useful.

If I were to think in terms of the kinds of feedback we had from people we spoke to outside the room initially, or once we were actually inside the room. I think, at the very least, most of the other delegations, if not all of them outside of the Israeli delegation, not necessarily all the Israeli delegation either - but I think almost everyone else felt that it was right and logical for us to be there in the room, quite simply, and that included the Americans. I think they had no problem, on the contrary. I think that quite a few of the people we interacted with found it healthy and constructive that we were there. I think they liked having us there. And I know, because I knew the Israelis, many of them face to face, people I'd been with in dialogue, in Track 2 work over the years. There were some of them in the delegation, and, you know they'd tell me, "look, I'm not gonna be allowed to talk to you once we're inside the State Department, but it's good seeing you let's have a drink later." And it was just so ironic that there were those Israelis in the delegation who actually had a problem talking to us at all, and those who, of course, didn't have a problem at all, either.

Hanna Notte

If I may, I want to just build on what you said - I was going to ask it later, but I'll ask it now. Can you talk a little to the atmospherics of being in ACRS between different delegations, if you wish, both outside the room, being on the margins of some of these plenaries and inside the room, to the extent that you can. And not just between yourself and the Israelis, but even as you related to some of the other Arab delegations, or how you perceived their engagement with the Israelis would also be interesting to hear.

Yezid Sayigh

Right. Well, as I've been saying, the atmospherics were, I think, uniformly good with all delegations I can think of, leaving aside the Israeli at the official level. The relations with some delegations were especially good, partly because of, for instance the Jordanian delegation, first of all, because Jordanian-Palestinian relations are very deep, they go to family, and also because, in my case, I had a prior history with some of these people. They knew me as a strategic analyst, we'd met in other forums, maybe we'd met through think tanks, and so on and so forth. And here, I mentioned, for instance, Dr. Abdullah Toukan with whom I had a very good rapport on all these levels, and maintained it afterwards. The Egyptians again, in particular, Ambassador Mohammad Skaher, Dr. Mahmoud Karem and Ambassador Nabil Fahmy, you know, we met in various forums, outside of this whole official diplomatic circle, so there's a lot of personal knowledge and trust that had already been built up. But we also had meetings with the Tunisian delegation, the Algerian delegation, we had dinner at the Algerian ambassador's residence in Washington, DC, for instance. And the American delegation, in particular, several of the people involved there in that particular basket, in ACRS, these were some of their arms control negotiators in various international negotiations, especially on nuclear issues, but not only.

And so these were people that I had already met over several years through, for instance, the Quakers meetings that have been held on Middle East arms control and nuclear security issues, Pugwash, and various other kinds of forums of that kind. So most of them were people who maybe weren't allowed to invite me into the room, into the official plenary room, but were more than happy to receive me in their offices in the State Department. And so I couldn't go into one room inside the same building, where the plenary was being held, but then I'd go back up the corridor, and meet with them individually or collectively in their offices, or outside, or we'd have a beer or a coffee or whatever, depending on where we were meeting exactly, whether La Jolla, or Vienna, or elsewhere. So in almost all these cases, there was very good rapport. I mean, I'm realistic. I don't want to pretend that we had enough expertise, or enough substance to us - for any of these delegations, however much they might have liked us or maybe been sympathetic to Palestinian rights, or endorsed our presence in the room - that we were never anything more than a junior party with very little institutional expertise we could offer. We couldn't yet point to any kind of unit or department or team that had formed over 10 or 15 or 20 years that people would look at and say, 'these people actually have cumulatively a good amount of expertise in relevant domains'.

I say this because, right now, I direct a program at the Malcolm Kerr Carnegie Middle East Centre in Beirut, where I work, where I've been for a decade now, and I've built a program called civil-military relations in Arab states, where we're specifically trying to build civilian defense expertise in order to create cumulative expertise amongst civilians, whether parliamentarians, academics, media, or also civilians working in defense ministries and so on, which the Arab world lacks. A lot of the time outside of Egypt - and the examples I've mentioned several times - most Arab countries can't be represented in these meetings by civilians because they often don't have civilians who really know these defense issues. It happened to be the case for Egypt in the nuclear domain. But when it comes to anything else, you have to have a uniformed officer or else you didn't have a debate. And that is a huge problem, I think, for Arab countries. And so I'm just trying to say that this is something that I've worked on for well over 30 years, building this kind of expertise that is institutionalized, routinized, reproduced, generation after generation, no matter which Arab country or which Arab defense ministry. I'm very committed to that, and I'm just admitting that at that time, the Palestinians, sadly, had far less than they should have. For people who had been engaged in military affairs for a long time, the level of cumulative expertise was extremely low. And unfortunately, that was also apparent when it came to negotiating the security protocol that implemented the Oslo Accords in the '93/'94 period, in which I was also a central part.

Hanna Notte

That's incredibly useful. And I want to come in on what you just said, the question of expertise. At the early plenaries in ACRS it was decided to take a somewhat educational approach to discussing arms control and regional security. I believe that it was decided in a sort of working group style to bring in outside expertise on how confidence building, deconfliction, was done in the European theatre during the Cold War, between the Americans and the Soviets during the Cold War. Now, from what you recollect, was that approach, I mean, did you think it was wise to proceed that way? Was it well received by the regional delegations?

Yezid Sayigh

That's a good question, and a difficult one for me. My memory of that is minimal. I remember some of these discussions, or being told about them, if they happened while we were still outside the room. What gave us a better window into what was going on and the chance to really engage were the parallel meetings that became the Prague meetings that initially started in La Jolla. And I recall - and I can't remember whether this was under directly under ACRS or subcontracted out through the La Jolla meeting, where we got more exposure to these kinds of experiences - I remember one presentation showing us what internet technology could do in the way of having a camera - I remember someone demonstrating this - monitoring their garage halfway across the world, saying that he or she, at the time, could actually see what was going on back home right there and then, thanks to marrying up the internet with a short circuit TV. You know, at that time, that was quite revolutionary for all of us. But beyond that, I don't really recall much about it. My sense is that I, I mean, these things are and can be useful, but there's a somewhat formulaic, didactic approach that, 'lets tell you how it's been done, have some useful experiences, and somehow, you know, with a bit of goodwill, you learn something and try and apply it'. I think bottom line in all such cases, it's always about the politics and it's always about what political leaders want and are willing to give and take. And the rest then can go to the military and say, you know, 'here's what we've agreed, you deal with the technicalities'.

And confidence building, you know, Sadat and Begin didn't do confidence building in the traditional way. It's not because of having a tripwire force in Sinai that they built confidence, it was all sorts of other things. You know, Israelis and Palestinians likewise. I'm not saying that the technicalities aren't important, but I think that the technicalities usually follow the political decision, or maybe the political confidence building, not the other way around. So the sort of educational approach, probably people regarded it as something, you know, there had to be dutiful about. But maybe I'm just projecting my own feelings. I think these things can be useful, but they're useful when people have already taken a political or even an emotional decision to do certain things. And then the confidence building measures and other technical issues

become useful because people have made that commitment, and they now say, 'okay, we need a bit of help here, we need a bit of help there. Some technical assistance on how do you do this? And how do you do that?'

Hanna Notte

That's very clear. Very useful. Thank you for that. We've mentioned a few times the Oslo Accords. Can you elaborate a little more the importance of the Oslo Accords in the context of ACRS - did they have an impact on the subsequent work in ACRS, do you believe, or were the two somewhat separated?

Yezid Sayigh

Um, I don't think there was a substantive impact in the sense of, say, substantive issues that were discussed in either track, well, in the bilateral track in the Oslo Accord, not the Oslo Accords themselves, but the negotiations that followed, which were to implement the principles and turn them into a whole range of concrete measures, the so-called framework agreement of May 1994 and then the subsequent protocols, security protocol, economic protocol, and so on. I don't think that there was a transmission of substance from that track to the ACRS process that I'm aware of. The ACRS meetings continued. I guess - I can no longer remember for sure - that the Palestinian participation in some of the multilateral meetings may have continued for a while. I think refugees continued for a bit, but I think the Oslo Accords took a lot of the heart out of those baskets where the Palestinians were involved: refugees, economics, I forget, maybe environment and water. And partly because, in many cases, at the multilateral level, these were issues that were being dealt with by national sovereign governments, with their own relationships with their donors and their development helpers, supporters.

So you know, Egypt would work with the World Bank, or Jordan would work with US or the UK, USAID, etc. And I don't think that the economics basket or the environment, water basket or etc, really offered much to these sovereign governments beyond what they already had, thanks to their bilateral government to government or government to global market relationships. And beyond a bit of marketing and touting by people like Shimon Peres who's trying to talk up the vision of a Middle East at peace and rail networks and so on, exchanging and doing, whatever. I mean, I don't think that really did much ultimately. So probably, if anything, the effect was to hollow out some of these baskets. And the Palestinian's attention became focused almost exclusively on their bilateral relationship with Israel.

I suspect that Israel, too, although it had the institutional capacities to just keep sending diplomats to these baskets, I doubt that these things gathered much more, or continued to have much more genuine Israeli political investment at leadership level. I may be totally wrong, but that would be my hunch. And looking at what happened with ACRS that's again, my assessment. The only transmission, as I said earlier, was mainly that some of the expertise and discussions that had happened in the multilateral level were fed into the bilateral Israeli-Palestinian talks. So Palestinians, who then got involved in direct, bilateral talks with the Israelis about water issues or about customs union and about economics, and about the environment - there we did benefit from the fact that we'd already built delegations to discuss these issues, mostly comprising people who actually knew about these things, along with some political apparatchiks, as always. Because the PLO leadership wanted to have its own people in some of these delegations, of course. But we also had a lot of experts in these domains, who then became people who led the subsequent bilateral effort. And I know, in my own case, that I was one of the small group of people in the subgroup working on the security protocol, following the Oslo Accords, as well as sitting in on the core steering group of the implementation negotiation - that is from, say, October 1993 until May 1994, in the steering group that led the overall Palestinian -Israeli implementation discussion within which I also looked at security. And then I pulled out.

But when I came back in, in 1999, to provide support, as part of the negotiation support unit that worked to help the Palestinians develop professional, legal and policy negotiating briefs for the final status negotiations, I lead the policy planning effort for that. And I drew, of course, on a lot of my previous, somewhat amateurish experience on security affairs, but then fed it into a far more structured process of planning for all aspects of security and defense relations between the Palestinians

and Israel. So, you know, there were benefits. But a lot of it wasn't, let's say, planned, and it wasn't routinized, institutionalized. In this case it happened, and I hope I can say that with true modesty, because I provided that continuity from having been part of a Palestinian effort as far back as 1988, in dialogue with Israelis, then in 1989, when Abu Mazen Mahmoud Abbas, then head of the PLO Foreign Affairs Department, which then became Negotiation Affairs Department, led the first Palestinian effort to start planning actively for negotiations. And then through Madrid and onwards. So, you know, my involvement spanned something like 15 years or so, more maybe, of active involvement.

So, I myself provided a lot of institutional memory, which from around 1999 onwards did genuinely become institutionalized because the PLO Negotiation Affairs Department and the Negotiation Support Unit, with a lot of support initially from the British and then from other donors, created a genuine pool of expertise of know how and knowledge of archived materials, commissioned studies, detailed expertise on water on environment on economics and customs backed by the Economics Minister of the time, Dr. Maher Masri, and supported by DFID and others from the UK, and then again myself in policy planning for the Negotiation Support Unit, bringing in expertise from Western countries and others on aerospace and defense affairs or the electromagnetic sphere, everything you can think of. So we did professionalize in an accelerated way from 1999 onwards, and in contrast to the sadly highly amateurish way the PLO approached the negotiations up till then, including the Oslo Accords.

Hanna Notte

That's great. And again, very detailed. Let me just check. Do you have another 10 minutes? I have two, three more questions. Oh you do? Well, let me just check. You might want to pause your recording or not...

[End of transcript]