

October 28, 2020

Interview with Donald Sinclair

Citation:

"Interview with Donald Sinclair", October 28, 2020, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Interview conducted by Miles Pomper with editorial assistance from and prepared for publication by Tricia White. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300074>

Summary:

Donald Sinclair is a former Canadian diplomat. He served as a member of the Canadian delegation to ACRS.

Credits:

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

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Transcript - English

Donald Sinclair, Canada**Oral history interview conducted by Miles Pomper on Zoom on October 28, 2020****Miles Pomper**

So, we have a couple of formalities at the beginning here.

Donald Sinclair

Okay.

Miles Pomper

Can you give us your full name?

Donald Sinclair

Donald Charles Sinclair.

Miles Pomper

And can you talk about sort of when you were involved in the ACRS process and what your role was?

Donald Sinclair

As I think I mentioned in my emails to you, the memory, of course, gets hazy after years. I went to the plenary sessions in Moscow and others. And we were assigned maritime confidence building measures and we decided to focus on Search and Rescue (SAR) and incidents at sea. And so we worked on both of those with small groups, those who were participants in the process.

Miles Pomper

And were you a foreign ministry person at this point?

Donald Sinclair

Yes, I was in the foreign ministry. I was in our arms control and disarmament area of the foreign ministry until 1994, when I left for a posting to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva. So, I was with the process until the summer of September 1994 when I went to Geneva.

Miles Pomper

And were you in the official negotiating team, as well as this? Including this confidence building measure session?

Donald Sinclair

Yes. We had a small team of people from our arms control area who went to these meetings and then took on this particular assignment. And once we had the assignment we, of course, augmented our team with experts, mostly the Navy, but the Canadian Coast Guard as well, who knew something about incidents at sea and search and rescue, and so on.

Miles Pomper

And when did Canada kind of join the process? And what was, the Canadian leadership, thinking about the process and what their expectations were?

Donald Sinclair

Well, we were invited from the beginning, as I said, we went to the initial plenaries. Expectations for the process, my own or others? My own were very high. I had two postings in the Middle East prior to ACRS, one in Tehran and one in Tel Aviv. And so my hopes and expectations were pretty high that we could actually make some progress, that people were actually talking to each other, a large group of Arab states were actually talking to the Israelis. And the Israelis were willing to deal. They were willing to talk. So expectations, I think, were pretty high that this process would yield some fruit.

Miles Pomper

And were there any particular positions that your government took or where did it kind of see its role in the process?

Donald Sinclair

I think as a facilitator the role is to provide a comfort level that small countries can

bring to a process like this. Countries that aren't the United States or Russia, because they're so big and because they may be seen to have more global interest if you like. Or wider interest than smaller countries, such as Norway, the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, you know, you can pick them and name them, don't have. We see things differently and we have a different kind of role. And if we work hard we can be accepted by the parties, in a way that's different from being America or Russia or even a member of the European Union. Take Britain, France, or Germany, there is a difference in the way we're perceived and how we go about our business.

Miles Pomper

In terms of just being less powerful or less dominant?

Donald Sinclair

Certainly less powerful. Less dominant. Less aggressive, more willing to listen, I think. Our politicians wouldn't have a big stake in the issue, whereas American politicians might have a bigger stake than ours. They would be kept aware of our work, of course, and were fully supportive of it, but it wouldn't affect their political futures whether ACRS succeeded or not. So, it's a more casual approach, I think, and more moderate approach. And, certainly, because we're less powerful, and we can't force anybody to do anything to mold anybody to our particular opinion or will, you have to work harder and use compromise and moderation and show your technical abilities. And, and I think there's something to that latter part showing our technical abilities. For example, we believe our Coast Guard is as good as anybody's. We have a heck of a long coastline to deal with. On three major oceans. So part of this is just showing what we can do with our experience. And certainly, when it comes to search and rescue, nobody has a longer coast line except the Russians, but most of that is in the Arctic, they don't have a southern water. We do have capabilities, but we don't usually talk much about it. It's just kind of an internal pride thing that we don't boast about. We are Canadians, after all. Modest.

Miles Pomper

Well, you obviously had quite an unusual background, certainly compared to a lot of Americans, having been in both Iran and Israel. This was kind of an unusual time, what was your sense of, particularly in the region of why, you thought this process might yield something and, that would work, lead to some real concrete outcomes?

Donald Sinclair

I remember, we were disappointed that some Middle Eastern members were not part of the process, Iraq, Iran. That was always a question, what are the limits to or what is the Middle East? I think there was some disappointment that Iran wasn't part of this process, initially, but you can live with that and get over it. I think it was just the moment in time and Oslo kind of showed how things can move forward. It was just a propitious time when there was a potential, there was willingness on both sides to actually talk about certain things. And maybe take some small practical steps. And that's why we liked our role. Oslo had to deal with the big issues: refugees; Jerusalem; settlements, and Israeli security in the Jordan Valley. These are huge issues that are all interconnected. You're not going to make progress on one alone. You can't isolate them. You're not going to make progress on refugees unless you somehow deal with Jerusalem, Israel's security, and everything else all together. But in the ACRS process, you could compartmentalize issues. You could look at them independently of each other. Each was complex. Each had its own difficulties, but you could deal with them in a compound, compartmentalized way. And so that leads to a certain degree of optimism and hope. Okay, let's do some of the simple ones. Let's start with baby steps, and let's see what we can do. And part of that process. Well, I'll let you ask more questions before going over the process.

Miles Pomper

Okay, well, I mean, you mentioned not inviting the Iranians. Do you think that was, in retrospect, that was a mistake or that hurt the process?

Donald Sinclair

Well, you can certainly see why the Iranians weren't there. Because it's complicated enough, with Egypt, Jordan, Palestinians, and Israelis. Just with those you would have a complicated mixture. And, of course, we had a lot of other players, Moroccans, and

Tunisians, Syrians and so on. So even with just the core of the problem, you would have a very difficult cauldron to deal with. Adding Iran would have been, would have added another degree of complexity and difficulty. But it's interesting to speculate, you know, what their participation might have been like and what it might have meant for them and what they might have learned or taken from it. And you would have had them talking to Israelis and Arab states.

Miles Pomper

Do you think they'd been willing to do that, to go to a meeting with Israelis?

Donald Sinclair

Hard to say. Hard to say. You know, others did. Unless you asked them, we will never know. We'll never know. But anyways, that's just an aside.

Miles Pomper

Well talk to me a little bit: You mentioned a little bit about the Canadian delegation, the Coast Guard, I guess, the Navy and Foreign Ministry. Were there other parts of the government that were involved in this?

Donald Sinclair

Well you know, part of our Westminster parliamentary system means that we have to keep the Privy Council office, which is the Prime Minister's office, aware of what's going on. They have their own sort of mini sections that mirror and monitor what the departments are doing. So through the deputy minister process, deputy ministers would want to keep the "center" as we call it, informed of what's going on. But it was mainly run by foreign affairs and national defense. And the Canadian Coast Guard, which played a big role for us, we can come back to that.

Miles Pomper

And was there, you know, in terms of the interagency or cooperation between, how did that work? Did that work well? Was there problems, or?

Donald Sinclair

Oh, it worked extremely well. Extremely well. Working with our defense department is a dream.

Miles Pomper

That's not usually what people in the State Department say about the Pentagon.

Donald Sinclair

Yes. But no, it is for us. For us, it's very easy. They're very professional. It's an extremely easy relationship. We had them on the ground, in the MFO, in the Sinai, and we used that and made a visit to the MFO. As you know, we had defense forces and people on the ground, Canadian defense attaché and peacekeepers out there. And here at home, our naval bases were wide open to us and anything we wanted to do. The Canadian Coast Guard is located in Sydney, Nova Scotia and was absolutely welcoming. They took this on as a challenge. Something that was new and different for them. They were glad to share their expertise. They welcomed these people, and they were terrific, terrific cooperation. No problem. And the process was led by foreign affairs. I mean, at least we thought so.

Miles Pomper

Who was the head of your delegation?

Donald Sinclair

Probably Mark Moher, as I recall. Mark is deceased. But it would have been, it would have been Mark, Mark Moher. Great guy, great, great individual.

Miles Pomper

What about the people, you were obviously, you know, somewhat unusual in the group in terms of that you'd actually served in the region. Did you know a lot of these people before that you were working with them in terms of regional people or people in the US and so on? Russians?

Donald Sinclair

Yes. Yes. The arms control world is a rather small world; the Middle East world is a rather small world. And when those two circles intersect, it's in a smaller world. So

yes, I knew a lot of Americans and a lot of the Israelis. Knew Nabil Fahmy, probably from the UN and, and other things. I mean, we all did some NPT review conferences and there it would bring together arms control people. And there was always a Middle East component to an NPT review conference. The extension conference, as you recall, there was always a Middle East component. So these worlds were always coming, coming together in some fashion or other. So you did run into the same people over and over.

Miles Pomper

And was there sort of an even distribution of experience?

Donald Sinclair

Was there an even distribution experience of the Middle Eastern participants?

Miles Pomper

Right.

Donald Sinclair

No, no. For many, the arcane world of arms control was new to them. I mean, we all went through these processes of NATO and the OSCE and bilateral relationships and the UN. And so we in the NATO countries at least would have an arms control and disarmament section in their foreign ministry and in their defense department that was well acquainted with things like Open Skies and arms control procedures. For example, the Defense Department would know what cameras they used for Open Skies, and what resolution was on these cameras, and all the technical details. Plus the theology of arms control was well known to the West, to those of us who are working in this process. But it was clear we were starting at the beginning, in many respects with some of the others. Not the Israelis. And it depended a bit on individuals. I mean, Nabil Fahmy, brilliant. He was absolutely familiar with all that stuff. But others weren't.

And so there was a learning process, where you needed to start with what is arms control, confidence building? What are we trying to do? You had to go right, back to the beginning. Those of us who were in the chairs had to check our own assumptions. We knew what we were talking about. But we were talking to people who didn't share the same concept of arms control. For many of them it meant giving up something, you had to yield something. And that meant perhaps a denigration of one's own sovereignty. Just the concept of giving up something meant you were losing something, and that was not good for your nation. And hence, you had to be extremely careful and critical of what you were doing. The idea that it was mutually beneficial. In particular, the concept of verification. Whenever issues of inspections, verification came up, the antennas went way up. What is this? You know, who's going to come prowling around? Where? To do what? When? So, whenever concepts like onsite inspections, or verification or these theoretical words came up it was difficult. For the west they have a certain context and a familiarity because we've experienced it and we knew what it meant. But in that region, it was trading with a high degree. --And it's an understatement to say-- a high degree of skepticism. It was thought, no, that ain't gonna happen. That's not gonna happen around here. So you were working from a different baseline and you had to work your assumptions. You had to start from a pretty basic point and you had to listen to what they were saying. And there was no comfort, no immediate comfort level with the concepts. Let's put it that way.

Miles Pomper

Well, sort of picking up on what you're saying: I was talking to one of the American members of some of the delegations and they particularly, you know, it seems that the sort of the arms control portion of the Arms Control Regional Security for the reasons you're kind of citing, was much more challenging than the sort of you know, like OSCE confidence building measures and people would go through that experience in the US-Soviet context and then it's a yeah, but that doesn't work in this region. Was that the kind of experiences you're talking about?

Donald Sinclair

Yes. And I think it was, it certainly was the case that, 'Oh, okay, that might work for you guys, but it's not gonna work for us, we're far too complicated.' And, and, of

course, the whole ACRS process was always, always dominated by the bilateral process. And the key Gordian Knot in the bilateral process was, of course, the nuclear weapons issue or the nuclear weapons free zone. The Egyptian insistence that Israel sign the NPT and a nuclear weapons free zone and then a general peace treaty of values and issues relating to peace would flow; versus the Israelis saying that you've got that upside down. We want to see credible peace efforts. Then we'll talk about nuclear weapons free zones. And that Gordian Knot was always there. It affected everything, at the end of the day, and affected why the process failed.

Miles Pomper

Right, that's your interpretation? It's basically the Israeli-Egyptian standoff that killed it?

Donald Sinclair

In my view, yes. Every plenary, and it wasn't just ACRS. In the NPT process, it always came up in the review conferences, that same, exact same issue came up. And in ACRS we could not get by that particular knot, I mean, we weren't going to get by that knot. There was no way, so you just had to leave it there. You weren't going to resolve it one way or the other, because neither side was going to back down. The Egyptians weren't going to back down on their insistence on the immediate Israeli signature of the NPT and the establishment for a nuclear weapons free zone. And the Israelis would say, you've got to be kidding. Our alleged nuclear program will remain an alleged nuclear program until peace, love and happiness breaks out in the region and we're confident and comfortable in our homes.

Miles Pomper

And so, going through the chronology a little bit you, were you involved in the Madrid conference? Or when did you first start?

Donald Sinclair

Yes. These are hard to remember, but yes. I was in Madrid.

Miles Pomper

And did you feel that in terms of, you know, how it led to ACRS, and I guess the other working groups, did that, do you think that was a good way to sort of structure things?

Donald Sinclair

We had no idea that we would be dealing with maritime issues at all. So that was the first surprise. And it was fine. Again, if that's what they want us to do. That's what we'll do. So we took it on and did it. I think the process was well thought out, well structured, and had the potential for success in small areas, as long as one's expectations weren't too high, I think it was well done. And I thought so at the time too. I remember thinking yeah, this could work, this could yield some results. All the while knowing that you had the Gordian knot that was never going to be untied. And so you weren't going to get an ultimate kind of overarching peace, if that's what you're looking for. But you could start to build towards that and that's what was necessary to build the confidence in the parties with each other. And to build some understanding, as I say, back to the arms control concepts, to help build some understanding. And lots of people picked up on the need for training. Half a dozen American universities, I think, welcomed Middle East participants to come and learn and talk about arms control and verification and so on and others as well. The Finns and the Belgians and the Austrians.

Everybody got on the bandwagon. And that was okay. This is what's needed, let's do this. Like visits by the participants to chemical factories in Finland. And I mean, there were all kinds of activities which may have seem kind of disconnected from each other in the participants view, but to practitioners of arms control they all fit a certain pattern of how you get to a negotiated result, either between or among several nations, that is mutually beneficial to both or each of them. Those are the concepts that were strange and difficult to impart. You know, the idea that you're both going to gain from this. Now on the incidents at sea and search and rescue it was pretty obvious. You know, a boat goes down off of Gaza. Okay, say it's neither Palestinian or Israeli, it's from Malta. Okay, who answers the call? Israelis? Or Palestinians and? Or both? Or is it the nearest vessel? And if it's the nearest vessel, how do you sort this

out? They didn't even have each other's telephone numbers. I remember this. They could not contact each other, nor did they think that such contact was desirable. And it's the latter that's important. And what these little ACRS seminars brought to bear was not only that, it was to know who to call. But also, that such a call will be welcome. And action would follow such a call. And this was astounding to the participants on both sides. You mean, we can call the Israelis, or the Israelis would call us and we could figure out who's going to rescue the Maltese swimming in the water? You know, very simple things were sometimes really astounding to the parties, in those days. We were talking telephone numbers.

So some very simple things started to build this confidence and this practice. I don't know how long it lasted. But they began to exchange telephone numbers. Very simple, but it's the start of this confidence building amongst or between professionals. And I think that's an important point as well. When we get to the incidents at sea, the thing you saw instantly, instantly, as an observer from a foreign ministry is how not only members of defense departments, but respected members of navies could interact and talk to each other in their own language. And on their own level. If you have two submariners together, they will talk about submarines forever, it doesn't matter what their nationality is, it does not matter. If you have a group of naval personnel from three or four or five countries, they will talk about their sea yarns and their stories and their naval escapades forever. And it's a very easy thing to do, there's instant bonding that you can take advantage of. Just put them in a room together, it's all you had to do.

So these kinds of things were simple and easy and somewhat surprising, how quickly and easily some of these technical issues were absorbed and bridged even though the overall framework of arms control was treated with intense skepticism. They could see that, okay, if two ships are coming at each other, and we know that one's gonna go left and one's gonna go right, that's a good thing. Rather than you know, trying to figure out who's gonna go left and who's gonna go right. Just wave a flag and that means I'm going left or whatever. They could see this and see it instantly. And so it really helped, and we moved along an incidents at sea agreement which is modeled on the US-Russian one, or at least the NATO-Soviet bloc models (because all Western navies used it), very very quickly. And we could look at how it needed to be modified to fit the Middle Eastern context, their own context, but it moved very quickly. And that's why I probably retain this sense of optimism even now. Because in my mind, I have this sense of holy cow, all you have to do is get people together, and have like-minded talent, and interests, and then they'll do this, they'll, they see right away. They don't need the theory, they just need to know what's practical.

Miles Pomper

And given the political space, right?

Donald Sinclair

Yes. And you take the politics out of it. Like, what colors will you fly when I'm turning left? They could talk about that, because that's the kind of thing that they knew, and they could understand. And it wasn't political.

Miles Pomper

So, I mean, talking to you a little bit more about this, you know, what was your role in this kind of maritime measures group ?

Donald Sinclair

We were the facilitators. And we had to learn how to listen. We had to learn how to facilitate. I mean, there was an active role for us as well. It wasn't just getting them in the room. We had to figure out what is the best way and what is the best, most appropriate speed if you like, to move this process forward. Utilizing the advantages we had of it being Navy to Navy or Coast Guard to Coast Guard or Coast Guard to Navy and they all spoke the same language. We used our coast guard a lot because our Coast Guard is non-military, it's search and rescue. And we had the group visit our Coast Guard College in Nova Scotia. That was remarkable. The Coast Guard, as I say, then developed a series of courses and training sessions for participants. But on that first, the very first session when we took them to Halifax, which is our East Coast naval base, and the Navy entertained them and did what navies do and then we went up to Sydney to the Coast Guard college, I think it was especially revealing, to the

participants that you could have a non-military discussion of these issues. Because they were military, these are military people. And then we took them to Louisburg, a reconstructed French fortress on the north Atlantic coast, very close to Sydney, Cape Breton. It's a beautiful place. It was the most elaborate French defense structure in North America, more so than Quebec City. And they were a little bit surprised, but they came back after the tour and rum got served around. And at the end of the night, they were singing in Hebrew and singing in Arabic and singing in English and the camaraderie amongst the group was tremendous. You would have thought they were all of the same nationalities if somebody walked into the room. So we had a very easy go of it in that sense, our issues were probably some of the easiest ones to deal with because of these kind of basic fundamental issues I've been trying to describe.

Miles Pomper

You talked about, okay, they visited this place, and you had a discussion. Were there also kind of demonstrations?

Donald Sinclair

Yes, we had that. We had search and rescue demonstrations. We did anything that they or we felt they would benefit from. The Navy would put on demonstrations in the harbor with ships, and the Coast Guard College would demonstrate rescues with helicopters and ships. And whatever they felt was necessary or useful, we would try to provide.

Miles Pomper

And what was your sense in terms of I mean, you talked about sort of camaraderie in the evenings. But in terms of engagement in these processes, was there a lot of you know, people really engaged asking questions?

Donald Sinclair

Yes, absolutely. They were fully engaged, they were interested. They were interested in each other's experiences. That was at one level. Then there was always, I guess, the feeling that every participant had to be thinking of his own space for engagement. You know, am I going too far too fast? Will my political masters be happy? I guess they all had to think about that wider set of issues, but the process itself went along very smoothly. And people were very engaged and very interested, and they brought increasing numbers of technical experts along who could benefit from these discussions, as well as people who would look at the sort of more formal side of things like what kind of words do you or can you put on a piece of paper? This was probably the remit of foreign ministries of each of the participants.

Miles Pomper

And was this pretty consistent across countries? Or was there just a few countries who really focused on it?

Donald Sinclair

Basically, it was Egypt, Israel and the Palestinians. There were others from time to time, but basically, it was those three who were most engaged and most interested. And the Egyptians kind of led the Arab side, self-appointed or otherwise. They were the leaders of the Arab side. This may have caused a little grief among some of the Palestinians from time to time. But they'd probably go off and sort it out.

Miles Pomper

It's interesting you mentioned the Palestinians. I've heard some competition between the Egyptians and Jordan, but not so much the Palestinians.

Donald Sinclair

Well, because this was Navy. Yes, the Jordanians too. They have Aqaba. They were there. The Jordanians were there but you know, the navies aren't going to win you or lose you any wars in the Middle East. It's the Air Force and your armies. So the Navy itself was - the respective navies were not that important in the grand scheme of each nation's security. That also made things a lot easier. If you're dealing with aircraft, it would have been a lot more difficult because they had a much more salient role in defense and security of Jordan, Egypt, or Israel. But because it was navies, and there weren't great naval battles, nor the prospect of any. So, yes, the Jordanians. But

I think as I recall, and again, it's personalities. It comes down to who's in the room and personalities mattered a great deal. Certainly, the Egyptians felt that they had a navy, and they had a Coast Guard and they had Red Crescent, and they had institutions and histories and traditions, and the Palestinians didn't, and I think that sort of was clear. The Palestinians didn't have a Navy. So it was a natural role for the Egyptians.

Miles Pomper

And so I mean, you mentioned, obviously, the Palestinians didn't have a Navy. But you say they were quite involved. So who was, on their part, who was kind of leading this effort? And you talked about certain personalities.

Donald Sinclair

Yes, well, they had a Red Crescent. They had search and rescue capabilities. They had resources devoted to search and rescue. They weren't so interested in incidents at sea, but they were interested in search and rescue and in cooperating with the Israelis on search and rescue because they felt that there would be times when the Israelis would be, could be called upon to help them rescue their own fishermen or something, and that would be a good thing. So they saw this in very practical terms. They didn't have the helicopters, and they didn't have the wherewithal to rescue their own people at sea, so maybe it wouldn't be too politically damaging if they were able to call upon their neighbor who had such resources. And that neighbor could be Egypt, or that neighbor could be Israel. And they tended to focus on the Israelis.

Miles Pomper

Interesting.

Donald Sinclair

Yeah.

Miles Pomper

You would've thought it was the other way around.

Donald Sinclair

Well, there's a lot of history between Gaza and Egypt. And the Egyptians tended to play a leadership role, self-ascribed or otherwise. I'm not sure about the dynamics among the Arab delegations. I mean it's up to them to decide. But it was clear that the Egyptians were leading the Arab side.

Miles Pomper

How far did you get in terms of, you were talking about, the actual drafting of measures and so on?

Donald Sinclair

Oh, we had an agreement on incidents at sea. One that all sides were comfortable with was basically the standard sort of agreement, on maritime confidence building measures. And on search and rescue and techniques, capabilities. And then training, what kind of training would come out of this? The Palestinians kept raising their need for resources. At the end of the day, as part of our work in the process, we gave them some Zodiacs, which didn't fare too well, as I recall. I'm not sure if the US gave them anything as a result of this or not. I can't recall in terms of hardware. They were always interested in help and said, well, if you want us to do search and rescue give us some boats. So we did give them some Zodiacs, four that I recall, but I think they had an inglorious end.

Miles Pomper

And so I mean, you got this agreement, but then it all kind of fell apart?

Donald Sinclair

Yeah, well, then, then it's probably about the time I left for Geneva and handed it over to Jill. So you should talk to her. And she can pick it up from here, but yes I, it must be about '94 and I went off to Geneva and that was that. Lost contact, but you know, the process kind of just stumbled along until it dwindled away. And that was most unfortunate. Interesting to think that you could ever resurrect something like this.

Miles Pomper

That's, coming back to that, which leads, obviously knowing, I guess anticipated these talks would be suspended for twenty years, cause they were.

Donald Sinclair

Yes.

Miles Pomper

Do you think there's, you know, any possibility of them being resurrected? And if so, you know, how would you do that? And what approach would you take?

Donald Sinclair

Yes. Here, I would draw on our experience, Jill and I together, we went back to the Middle East together. Jill was the coordinator for the refugee group. And you can talk to her about this as well. And I was the Canadian Ambassador to Israel. We were living in Tel Aviv. So I'd go out to Tel Aviv every day, and she would go off to Ramallah every day. And what we came to realize very quickly, and it sort of builds upon the comments about this process and ACRS and the observation I made about Naval Submariners talking to submariners. If you had Palestinian teachers, talking to Israeli teachers, they could talk to each other. If you had Palestinian doctors talking to Israeli doctors, they would talk to each other. If you had Palestinian truck drivers talking to Israeli truck drivers, they would talk to each other. Actors, photographers, it doesn't matter. People will talk to others across national boundaries when their interests and challenges and professions are much the same. And we found that to a huge extent this willingness to talk across that border if you can just take the politics out of it, and just let people talk to each other.

So with that experience, added on top of all of this, I would come back to say it would be interesting to try, now the world has changed an awful lot. You certainly wouldn't get the Iranians into the equation today. But, you know, with the opening of relations between the Emirates and Sudan, and Qatar with Israel, and you already have Egypt and Jordan in the fold. You'd have to think of how you deal with the Palestinians in this context very carefully. But it may be that with these kinds of openings, there actually needs to be some follow up to putting some meat onto these relationships, and part of this could be arms control and security. This gets difficult, but you know, I think that this, presumably this will happen, and this is happening, and people are thinking about how do you broaden these relationships. For example, agriculture and irrigation and all these issues come up instantly, when you talk about Sudan, the Emirates and Israel in the same equation. And things like technical experts and visits and exchanges. But certainly one could think of how you might build a new slightly restructured different kind of ACRS that could take advantage of these kinds of modern developments.

Miles Pomper

Do you have any sense of if you were to do that, what kind of structure would be - what are your thoughts on that?

Donald Sinclair

Yeah, I'd have to think about that. Because the ACRS process was really designed around the question: how do you bring peace between Israel and the Palestinians? And how do you get all of these issues linked up and how do you get to them all? If that's your focus, it's going to be difficult. But this new era allows you a different sort of focus. You can build these relationships without having that as your explicit goal. It's an implicit goal, obviously. I mean, that's what we're aiming for here. Because without that you'll never have quiet in the region and true peace. But, perhaps there's a way of bringing these Arab states together into a more cooperative framework to actually give more help to the Palestinians. The Palestinians are feeling forgotten in this process, they're feeling that they've been betrayed by their brothers. So perhaps a process that actually gave them some benefit with the Israelis involved in it would change their perspective. Perhaps it would make them more amenable to dealing with Israel on practical issues on a practical basis, because they would now have the backing of some pretty significant Arab states, Egypt, Jordan, and the Emirates in particular.

But, as you know, you have the complication of Middle Eastern politics. Iran and Saudi Arabia and all the rest of it, but perhaps there are opportunities and clever people

could think about how you could manage this in a way that's more from the bottom up and could lead the Palestinians to welcome cooperating and negotiating. They would get some benefit from it. Rather than the top down because here are the big four issues that are problems. We've tried to resolve them by breaking them down, which you can't, you know, we've tried. You cannot do it. You need a comprehensive agreement that brings refugees, Jerusalem, everything else all together at the same time. Nobody's going to agree to one component without knowing what other components look like. But maybe looked at differently, it could get the Israelis thinking of cooperating with the wider Arab nation, rather than just Jordan and Egypt. Of course, you have Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria and there are lots of problems in Iran. There are lots of problems with the approach. But clever people can perhaps think of how to do this in a way that would benefit the Palestinians, and they would see the benefit in cooperation. It would induce them to cooperate from smaller steps to larger ones. And perhaps that's worth a try.

Miles Pomper

I guess there's also some people have suggested that, you know, if Biden were to win the election next week, yeah. And bring the US back into the JCPOA and beyond that,

Donald Sinclair

Right.

Miles Pomper

There would be some sense and try to restructure some kind of regional security dialogue along with that. What do you think?

Donald Sinclair

Yes. Of course. There's always sense in trying to establish dialogue. The focus would be Iran, though, and not the Palestinian-Israeli set of issues. It would clearly be Iran. But I think the Israelis would welcome any sort of positive, cooperative move, they can get out of Tehran. I think they would welcome it because it affects Hezbollah and Hamas, which is on their doorstep. So anything that would lessen the threats in their immediate neighborhood would technically be welcome to them. But it's complicated, it's going to be complicated. And because you have the Arab animosity towards the Shiites in Iran and you have to deal with the Saudi-Iranian suspicions of each other. It would be a different kind of structure, different sets of issues. And, the focus would move well, to the east, I think to the Gulf. And things like, what are the Iranians are up to, and what do the Saudis have to fear, and so on. So I think it would be a different sort of conversation, but I'm sure. No, I'm never sure. But one that the Israelis might, at least, find of interest. You are not going to get them to talk to each other directly. But perhaps there are processes and structures and groups you could establish to look at how to do this.

Miles Pomper

Great.

Donald Sinclair

Yeah, it'd be interesting. Love to try it.

Miles Pomper

And what years were you ambassador there, and you two in Israel, again?

Donald Sinclair

We were there from 2003 to 2006. Amazing country. Pretty difficult years with lots of suicide bombing. But amazing place. Amazing people and amazing region.

[End of transcript]