

October 6, 2020

Interview with Hesham Youssef

Citation:

"Interview with Hesham Youssef", October 6, 2020, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Interview conducted by Hanna Notte with editorial assistance from and prepared for publication by Mackenzie Knight.

<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300077>

Summary:

Hesham Youssef is an Egyptian diplomat. He served on the Egyptian team, working on the Steering Committee and in three working groups (REDWG, water, and the environment).

Credits:

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

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Transcript - English

Hesham Youssef, Egypt**Oral history interview conducted by Hanna Notte on Zoom on October 6, 2020****Hanna Notte**

Great. Well, maybe we can start with a with a fairly general question. What was Egypt's interest going into the ACRS negotiations? Why did Egypt decide to participate in the process at the time?

Hesham Youssef

Well, it wasn't about ACRS. It was about resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. So, ACRS was a very small part of a very big process. This process started in Madrid in 1991. And in Madrid, it was agreed to have the bilateral tracks. And then, soon thereafter, it was agreed to have the multilateral tracks. So, it was a comprehensive approach to deal with the future of the region in the context of ending the Arab-Israeli conflict and looking to the future. The decision was not to join ACRS, the decision was to join the process. Egypt was instrumental in the whole process of Madrid, because Madrid also came as a result of the war against Iraq to liberate Kuwait. At that time, it was agreed with the US administration that, okay, we will immediately deal with the occupation of Kuwait. But then you have to promise us that as soon as this is over, we will work on an international conference to resolve the Palestinian question. It has a huge background in relation to how this started.

And Egypt was one of the strongest proponents for the convening of the Madrid Conference and the whole process after that. It wasn't about ACRS, it was about the whole process, and ACRS was part of this process. And of course, it is illogical for Egypt to be asking for the bilaterals, the multilaterals and then say, no to ACRS, I will not join you. And as a matter of fact, I think when we discussed this issue before, a few months back, I indicated why this was important, ACRS in particular, was important for Egypt. So, Egypt was looking forward to ACRS. And I think in some of your questions, we will go into some details about that. Egypt wanted ACRS to take place, because it felt that this does not only addresses issues pertaining to the narrow aspects of the Palestinian question, but it goes further to achieve a regional security framework.

Hanna Notte

Okay, great. Thank you. And can you talk a little bit more about what you were doing at the time? I mean, you indicated in your first email to me that you attended one meeting, one of the meetings that happened in Cairo. How did that kind of come about? And did you otherwise - I realize that there were many Track II activities also going on at the time, sort of in parallel to ACRS, before, and subsequently - did you attend any of those? What were you doing at the time?

Hesham Youssef

My main responsibility at the time was to address three working groups from the multilateral track, which are the Regional Economic Development Working Group, the Environment Working Group, and the Water Working Group. The one that I was focused on more was the Regional Economic Development Working Group. I attended all its meetings. And the other two, I was only supervising them. And I think I attended one of the meetings that took place in Cairo as well. And then, because I was working on these three working groups, I was also part of the team that was working on the steering committee. Because the steering committee, as some of your questions indicate, had an important role in relation to the whole multilateral process, but also to the linkage between the multilateral and bilateral negotiations. But this was not the case. But that's another story. So, I was focused more on these three working groups. And I did some work on the steering committee, and therefore I was exposed to the five working groups and developments pertaining to all of them. Because of the economic aspects that I was working on - I was also dealing with the economic assistance to the Palestinians. At that time, it was focused mainly on the AHLC, which is the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee that was responsible for coordinating assistance to the Palestinians, UNRWA and the Paris protocol between the Palestinians and the Israelis on economic issues. This was my main focus at the time.

Hanna Notte

Can we just stick with the steering committee and with these working groups for a second? So, the decision to form exactly these five working groups and not four and not six and not others - how did that decision come about?

Hesham Youssef

During negotiations, as you know, all kinds of ideas were discussed. As a matter of fact, there were two other working groups that were suggested: one on human rights that was suggested by Switzerland, I think, at the time, and another on Jerusalem I think was suggested, if I am not mistaken, by Jordan. And then there was, also, the five working groups. And there was a huge discussion, and, at the end of the day, it was decided to stick to these five, because of their vital importance. And Jerusalem was controversial, so we weren't able to have Jerusalem. And for human rights, it was said that it was more of a horizontal issue that can be discussed in all kinds of meetings and discussions. So, we ended up with the five working groups.

Hanna Notte

Who suggested to make arms control and regional security a specific working group? And was there consensus on that idea pretty quickly, or was it very controversial?

Hesham Youssef

No, it wasn't controversial, because security was important for everybody. At the time because there was hope for peace. Certainly, we were very naive at the time, we thought that we were going to succeed in bringing peace to the region. At that time, because of the importance of security, both to Israel and to the Palestinians, and to the region as a whole. And also because of the huge interest at the time for dealing with issues pertaining to weapons of mass destruction, it was felt that this was crucial. And of course, you can't achieve peace between the Arabs and Israel without looking at what kind of security framework we are going to have in the context of peace after having a long period of conflict and wars. We needed to see something different in as far as this issue is concerned. There were all kinds of discussions about establishing something along the lines of the CSCE for the Middle East. This was also part of the discussion. We were looking at the future of the region, regional economic cooperation, environmental cooperation, cooperation on water, cooperation on all kinds of things, and you just simply can't do all these things and ignore security and say, no, security is a separate issue. So no, this was accepted by everybody that these are the most important pillars, if we are to contemplate the future framework of relations in the Middle East.

Hanna Notte

You were evoking a few times now a sort of sense of optimism with which people went into this process at the time, following the Madrid conference. Can you talk a little bit more broadly about what kind of global and regional events or developments you felt enabled the process at the time and made people hopeful that something like this could be achieved, other than the Madrid conference? Is there anything else that you'd point out as being important at the time?

Hesham Youssef

Well, at that time there was a US administration that was willing to put pressure to bear to make progress. At that time, James Baker was the Secretary of State for the United States, and he was quite firm in his efforts to make this happen. I can't remember the number, but I think he made 8 trips to the region in 8 months, in order to agree on the invitation to the conference, the way in which the Palestinians would participate, the agenda of the conference, you know, it took a lot of hard work. And this could not have been possible without a determined US administration at the time. And they were determined, because, as I mentioned, they made a promise - President Bush, the father, made a promise - that he would attend to this issue once Kuwait is liberated. And he, fulfilled his promise. He was a man of his word. And he said, "Okay, I'll do that." And he did. And I think this was instrumental in having the process start, of course it's not so easy to achieve progress. But that is another story.

But you see, it is not only that, I think there is another element that is interesting, reflecting the sense of optimism. The narrative and the debate in the region started

shifting from thinking about war, conflict and violence, etc., to thinking about what the future of the region would look like in the context of peace. So, there was a change of mindset. Okay, now that we are working on negotiations, let's envisage what kind of cooperation we can have. And this was part of the thinking behind all these working groups. And also, there were additional activities, you talked about all kinds of intersessionals, and side meetings, but there was something that was even more important, which was the economic summits.

We also started a process for holding economic summits. The first one, we held in Casablanca, in Morocco. And this was organized with the World Economic Forum. And then the second was held in Jordan, and the third in Egypt, the fourth and the last one was in Doha. And this was to bring the private sector in, so that we talk about this issue, not only amongst us at the time, officials, and thinking about all kinds of projects and ideas, but to also bring the private sector to get them involved in the process so that they know what we're talking about, now that we're envisioning the future of the region.

Hanna Notte

Great. And the fact that this is all happening very shortly after the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, where then arguably, you have a very shifted geopolitical environment, a structural imbalance, if you will, between the United States and Russia, did that matter for the process at all?

Hesham Youssef

It's a very good question. It has been too long to recall the impact of the end of the cold war, but it has always been felt that the United States is the key in as far as the Arab-Israeli conflict is concerned. The fall of the Soviet Union did not come when the Berlin Wall fell. No, it was years coming, and this was only the...

Hanna Notte

Tip of the iceberg.

Hesham Youssef

Exactly. So, it was coming. And the weakening Soviet Union took place over a number of years. And I think, whether it's in relation to the peace agreement that was signed between Egypt and Israel, or later, the one with Jordan, it was always felt that the key player is the United States. Russia is important, as you know, a power to reckon with, but still, the main force that can make things happen was the United States.

And as a matter of fact, it still is, in as far as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or anything pertaining to Israel and trying to see what kind of concessions or accommodations Israel can do as far as the conflict is concerned.

Hanna Notte

Yeah, I want to come back once more to the steering group or steering committee, since you were part of that. I think you mentioned earlier that the role was broadly to deal with the relationship between the bilaterals and the multilaterals. And then also to oversee the work of the five working groups. Now this might sound like a really sort of mundane question. But in terms of the practicalities of that, how did that work of the steering committee actually look like? How often did you get together? You know, how many people were involved in it? How can we imagine the sort of day-to-day, week-to-week operation of the steering committee?

Hesham Youssef

No, it wasn't day to day, and it wasn't week to week. It was meetings every six months, I think, something like that. But it was an impossible task. For all kinds of reasons. In order to oversee the five working groups, these working groups were humongous. For example, the regional economic development working group had around 60 countries, and we were working on 10-15 sectors, from transportation to tourism to energy to, you name it, everything under the sun in that field, and then water and environment, and refugees and so on. And to oversee all that, you had to have a very huge mechanism- otherwise you don't even scratch the surface. So, it was some form of resemblance of coordination, but it didn't even scratch the surface. To say, well, we're going to have this working group in Italy, and the next meeting is going to be in Tunisia, this one in Paris, the next meeting is going to be in Cairo, we had all these intersessionals, things are working fine, etc. They took a very superficial

look, just to make sure that things are moving in the right direction in as much as they can. This is one dimension.

The second dimension is the link between the bilaterals and multilaterals. And I think this was one of the failures of this whole process, because every working group had its own dynamics, and its own pace. And the situation for the bilaterals wasn't clear. The Palestinians were always saying, there is no progress, there's no focus. And the Israelis and Americans were always saying, no, no, there is, there is progress. But it has to be much deeper, or has to go faster, but things are fine. And it was all confidential negotiations for the bilaterals. So, you know, this linkage was very difficult to achieve.

And this was one of the reasons why it all failed, because we couldn't have this linkage. Because the linkage was important in the sense that the argument was: the advancement of the working groups will depend on the advancement in the bilateral negotiations. But this was theoretical, because we didn't really know concretely whether there was real progress in the bilaterals or not. And, of course, as we also see today, there wasn't. But the US wanted them to move in somewhat in a separate manner, to try to achieve whatever we can in different multilateral groups, regardless of the bilaterals. As long as the bilaterals are ongoing, that's fine, so don't worry too much about linking the pace. In a sense, I understand, because it's very difficult. You can't adjust - this pace is not measured by something that is accurate. It's not. It's very difficult to measure. But then, at the end of the day, it fell apart rather easily as soon as we had difficult problems.

Hanna Notte

Interesting. Okay. Sorry. Just to come back to...

Hesham Youssef

By the way, this was the case for ACRS as well. So, when ACRS had difficulties, the steering committee was unable to deal with the problems that occurred in ACRS. Had the steering committee been much more effective, then they would have tried to see how this can be resolved in a manner that would allow ACRS to continue.

Hanna Notte

So, what would have made the steering committee more effective? Were decisions taken by consensus, and therefore it wasn't easy to decide something meaningful? Should they have met more frequently? What would greater effectiveness have looked like?

Hesham Youssef

Well, the test is in the pudding, as they say. Had the steering committee been able, regardless of how they meet, or when they meet or whatever it is, that's not the issue. The issue is there was a problem at their hand. And the problem was that ACRS had a difficulty, okay, and the meetings of ACRS were suspended. And then this was reported to the steering committee. Had the steering committee been effective, it would have asked the parties concerned to talk about this and see what can be done and try to resolve the issue, because this is the steering committee, you know. Yes, there is a problem in one of the working groups, so of course the steering committee should try to solve it. It didn't. They just took note of it and said, okay, we will try to see how this can be done, and nothing happened. So, it was suspended. Just to give you an example of a failure in the mechanism to deal with this issue.

Hanna Notte

I'll jump to a slightly different question, just because you had mentioned that the steering group convened vaguely every six months. If I look at the timeline of ACRS, it also seems to me that the plenaries were vaguely six months apart, at the beginning in Moscow, or Washington, and then later you had these intersessionals, which gets us to a question about the structure of the whole process. I mean, was it a smart process to have these kinds of meetings only every six months? Do you think things could have been different if there had been a more condensed way of working together? Maybe it wouldn't have been practically feasible to get people together more often. But, you know, in terms of trust building, and really working together, six months seems a fairly long time apart for these kinds of meetings. What are your thoughts on this?

Hesham Youssef

No, not really. Because this was the case for most of the working groups, I think, if not all of them, I think they all met twice a year. And then in the meantime, between these meetings, you had all kinds of other activities. No, these meetings were very cumbersome to prepare. It was a difficult process. It is not that you just gather a few people and have a meeting. No, as I mentioned, the Regional Economic Development Working Group, it had around 60 countries, so it's not easy. And I think this was the highest number of countries participating in a working group, but even if you have 40 countries, or 50 countries, it's not a simple activity to hold a meeting of that nature with all the sensitivities and all the difficulties. I don't think that it would have been possible to have meetings more frequently, I think it would have been very difficult.

Hanna Notte

I realize you can mostly speak to the working groups that you actually participated in, but these preparatory phases that you just spoke about, was there much ongoing discussion and communication with other delegations, or was it really mostly about consolidating your own delegation's position and making progress within that?

Hesham Youssef

No. This was just like any diplomatic activity. Because countries used to meet and discuss, and foreign ministers used to meet and discuss, and high officials used to meet and discuss all kinds of issues. This was part of the discourse of everybody. In all kinds of ways, whether it's in relation to the bilaterals or multilaterals, so if the Foreign Ministry of Egypt goes to Jordan, they discuss how things are developing in the peace process. And this was, at the time, the number one agenda item on the list of priorities for all the countries in the region and perhaps beyond. Why? Because it was a big thing. We were talking about peace in the Middle East. And we're talking about the whole Arab-Israeli conflict. It was huge. So, absolutely.

And there was coordination, also, between the participating Arab countries. Many Arab countries used to come and ask Egypt in particular, because they felt that Egypt was the country that had relations with Israel for quite some time. And that Egypt knows what the situation is and what can and should be done and how to negotiate and what to present and what not to present, in all kinds of areas, in all the working groups, including ACRS, because for ACRS Egypt was one, if not the most active country. The expertise of Egypt, in as far as arms control is concerned, was the most significant in the Arab world at that time, and probably for decades to come. Many other countries relied on Egypt, in all kinds of aspects pertaining to the technical issues that are being addressed on different fronts. And this applies to all the working groups, with varying degrees, but for the most part, the role of Egypt in all these working groups was quite instrumental.

Hanna Notte

Great, thank you. I do have a few questions now, which are a little more specific to the ACRS group. I'll pose them and if you feel you can't really speak to them, then we'll just move on. So, it seems that the first plenaries in the ACRS brought in these outside experts to talk about confidence building measures in either the US-Soviet theatre or how it had been done in Europe and the Helsinki process. So, it was really an educational approach. Now, hearing about it, or speaking with colleagues who were part of the working group: How was that received? I mean, was that the right approach, to go into talking about arms control and regional security in the Middle East in that way? Lessons learned from arguably very different regions of the world.

Hesham Youssef

Yes, absolutely. You know, you don't need to reinvent the wheel. As I mentioned earlier, we were talking about the CSCE in Europe: what suits us in the region in as far as this whole experiment is concerned, what are our peculiarities? And how can we benefit from this experience? What applies for us? What doesn't apply? This is what we were partly working on. This educational process was important to get people to be more or less on the same page, as far as knowledge of what can be done, what can't be done, and so on. By the way, this happened also in other working groups as well. For example, in the Economic Working Group, one of the things that we asked for at the outset is to ask the World Bank to prepare a report on the economic situation in the occupied territories. So, they came up with a six-volume report about

everything that you can think of in the Palestinian economy, as an educational process as well, for everybody to know where is the baseline? What are we talking about? So that people would not be coming from different places, saying all kinds of different things, so they have a reference point, in a sense. And so, the discussions in different working groups were also based on trying to get the facts, get the basic information about all kinds of things: refugees, also, we were talking about a database for the literature that were written about refugees for decades: numbers, the legal issues, family reunification and all kinds of issues pertaining to refugees. There was an attempt to have a basis for people to be on the same page in relation to the different working groups.

Hanna Notte

Okay, that makes sense. Though, I would imagine just listening to you, if this was the approach taken at the beginning, didn't that automatically limit direct interaction between the actual delegations? So, if I sit in a working group setting, and there's mostly outside expertise coming in at the beginning, I'll be talking less to the people I'm actually supposed to negotiate with. So, was there a limit?

Hesham Youssef

No, no. There were all kinds of discussions, discussions over tea, over dinner, over lunch, and so on. And then the meetings. And those who were coming to inform the meetings did not dominate. No, they just came to inform and help the process, but then the main discussion was between the countries concerned, so no, it wasn't important.

Hanna Notte

Let me ask you a broad question about Track II going on at the time. Now, I imagine there was Track II activity, maybe not just in support of arms control and regional security, maybe there was Track II activity related to the other working groups as well. Can you talk broadly about how the Track II activities related to the working groups, how was the flow of ideas or information? What was going on in that space?

Hesham Youssef

Well, I'm going to differ with you a little bit on that, because you see, Track II revives, when there is no Track I. When there is Track I and everybody's talking, then the need for Track II diminishes somewhat. So, everybody was talking, of course, you need research, you need input, you need ideas, that's a different story. And as a matter of fact, you know, we didn't have Track II, but we had the secret talks of the Palestinians and Israelis who went to Oslo. That's a different story. But I think that Track II became even more active when this whole process failed and fell apart. When it fell apart, you started seeing Canada, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, and others coming up with all kinds of ideas to get people back together, to start thinking about all kinds of things in order not to lose the momentum and the progress that was made. But at that time, as a result of the fact that everybody was talking to everybody, it was not felt that Track II is as crucial as it became when things fell apart.

Hanna Notte

Interesting. Yeah. Makes sense. Let me ask you a kind of important question about the ACRS group. At some point, and I believe, I'm looking at my timeline here, it's actually at the fourth plenary, which was in Moscow in November 1993. That's when the decision was taken to split the discussion into these two baskets, the operational basket for confidence building measures and the conceptual basket. Do you have any recollection regarding how that split into those baskets came about? Who pushed for it? Who suggested it? Why was it done?

Hesham Youssef

No, I don't know the details. But let me tell you the crux of the issue. The crux of the issue is that there were two views in ACRS. An Israeli view that wanted to work on confidence building measures and conventional military capabilities, and an Egyptian view that wanted to focus on the big picture, and weapons of mass destruction, and the Israeli nuclear capabilities in particular, and have the region free from all weapons of mass destruction. These were the two main themes. This is why there was this division of two baskets, so that they will move in parallel, so that you don't

have a problem where you have a difficulty saying, okay, we can't discuss this until we discuss the other and vice versa. You try to advance on both tracks, on the confidence building measures that were requested by Israel and that we do all kinds of things about information exchange, notifications about military exercises, capabilities, hotlines, and all kinds of confidence building measures, just normal confidence building measures, as it is widely known in every confidence building measure process in the world. But then Egypt would say, "You know, this is important, yes, but what is more important is that there is Israel that has nuclear capabilities, and we can't accept that. And we have to talk about this issue because this is more important". At the time, this was the debate and the argument. And this, as a matter of fact, was the main reason behind the breakdown of ACRS: that Israel was not interested in talking about this issue. And Egypt was adamant that this issue is, as far as Egypt was concerned, the crucial issue. So, this is the crux of the question that challenged ACRS, and the reason why it was unable to make progress.

Hanna Notte

I want to stick with that issue for a bit longer, for a few short questions, because it's obviously so important to understanding ACRS. At the beginning of the conversation, we talked about the optimism with which a lot of people went into this process after the Madrid Conference. So, let me then assume that the Egyptian delegation going into the process also had hope at least that Israel would be, at some point, willing to put the nuclear issue on the table and talk about it. So, when did you feel for the first time that this was not going to happen or that the process was not going to go into that direction? Do you remember, sort of, when the inflection point was, when that initial hope and optimism dissipated?

Hesham Youssef

Well, no, I don't remember. But it was obvious that this was the Egyptian position from the beginning, and this was the Israeli position from the beginning. And then, we were trying to see whether this can be bridged or not. And I think that they could not. And so, the exact point on when it broke down, probably Aly Erfan will be able to tell you much more than that on the details and what exactly happened, because he was the one who was really involved in this process on a day-to-day basis. He was our expert on this issue. But that was the big picture, as I understood it from all our discussions, because at the time, I and Aly were sharing the same office in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in the cabinet of the foreign minister, so we had long discussions about all kinds of things pertaining to these issues. I think he would be in a better place to respond to these issues.

Hanna Notte

Bridget and I have been in touch with him. And we look forward to speaking with him, I think, in two weeks or so when he's a bit less busy than he is right now. But can I just ask you again, on this, the crux issue, which has divided Israel and Egypt: Can you talk a little bit about how the other delegations, other Arab countries, the Gulf states, who were in ACRS, the Maghreb states, some of the smaller ones, related to that divisive issue?

Hesham Youssef

To be very frank, they didn't have that much expertise on these issues. Maybe, except for Jordan, that had expertise in that area. But, you know, for them, this was not a major issue of concern, in the way in which they dealt with issues pertaining to arms control in general. This was not high on their agenda. But they were supporting Egypt in that aspect to a great extent. They understood where Egypt was coming from. And they felt that this was important. And I think we discussed this in one of our previous discussions. For Egypt, this is a strategic issue. Just like the situation between India and Pakistan, between India and China; even more recently, Saudi Arabia said that if Iran possesses nuclear weapons, then it will be forced to do the same. So, it is something that goes beyond the day-to-day tactical issues. This is something pertaining to the balance of power in the region, and how countries see how a regional security framework can be achieved. And as far as Egypt is concerned, you cannot have a regional security framework in the Middle East while Israel has nuclear capabilities and the rest of the region is just sitting idly by, saying, okay, we will live with it. No, they will not live with it. From a strategic point of view, this is

something that needs to be dealt with in a manner that would be acceptable to all the countries in the region.

Hanna Notte

And so, while there was somewhat of a lack of expertise on some of these questions in some of the smaller delegations, you said, they understood Egypt's strategic concern with the issue.

Hesham Youssef

Yes.

Hanna Notte

Okay.

Hesham Youssef

And this is why nobody from the other countries had any problem in having ACRS suspended. Nobody said, no, please, we want to continue. You know, it's not working, then stop it.

Hanna Notte

Okay. Interesting. At some point, Hesham, the decision was taken to move the plenary to the region, from Moscow to Washington to Doha. Do you recall the significance that was attached to that? Was it of symbolic significance? I suppose it happened in Doha, and it was also the second time, I believe, that an Israeli delegation actually came officially to a GCC country. Was that reflected in the mood that prevailed in the process?

Hesham Youssef

At that time, Israel was very eager to go to Arab countries and to appear as if things are going fine. And it was having very large delegations at a very high level, when sometimes this was not even required for the meeting, but they were happy with the engagement with Arab countries, particularly the Gulf, similar to what's happening now. For Israel, it was a big story, but for us, it wasn't a big deal. Sometimes, in some respects, people were saying it's easier to have meetings in the region because most of the countries are from the region. And then this depends on the dynamics of the different working groups. The Economic Working Group, for example, was headed by the EU. They were the gavel holder, and they held all the meetings in Europe. One in Germany, one in Copenhagen, one in Rome, and so on. Every working group had its dynamics, but Israel was very interested in having any meeting in any Arab country, on any issue, whether intersessionals or otherwise.

Hanna Notte

Okay. Great. Thank you. So, while this ACRS working group is doing its work alongside the other working groups, you also have an event looming on the horizon. And that's the '95 NPT Review Conference. Can you talk a little bit about how that upcoming conference, or the anticipation of that event, affected the ACRS process?

Hesham Youssef

I'm not sure. I think Aly Erfan would be in a better place to respond to that. But, at that time, this was a very controversial issue, because Egypt, at the time, took a position that it would not allow the NPT to be renewed indefinitely. And there was a huge debate, and as a compromise, we had this stupid resolution on the Middle East free from weapons of mass destruction in the Review Conference. But nothing significant happened since then.

Hanna Notte

Okay, I'll take it up a little more with Aly and the details on that.

Hesham Youssef

Yeah, Aly would be better placed to respond to that.

Hanna Notte

Okay. And we're obviously in a much-changed Middle East today. At the time, we had important countries lacking in the whole process: Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon. How did that affect this whole process? Or it simply did not matter at the time?

Hesham Youssef

Not that much. Because the key positions were covered. And Iran was not Iran of today, Iran was in a totally different situation at the time. It wasn't the key player that it is today, in as far as the nuclear issue is concerned. And the discussions were more limited. Of course, Iran would have been important, had we started working on a CSCE for the region, that would have been important. But at that time, we did not reach a level whereby you required additional input from Iran. It was limited to Israel and the countries surrounding Israel and a few countries in the Gulf. So, it wasn't that big a deal. I saw in one of your questions even mention of Libya, which was not of any significance at the time for this discussion as well, although they found out some clandestine activities, but it wasn't really of any strategic significance in terms of presence or absence. Of course, Syria is a different situation. But then, also, the position of Syria would have been more than adequately covered at the time, as far as regional security is concerned, by the positions of others and particularly Egypt.

Hanna Notte

Interesting. Okay. Again, I realize you were not in the ACRS Working Group, you were more in other working groups. But can you speak a little, sort of generally, about your perception of the seriousness, the preparedness of other delegations, as you were doing this work together at the time? How you found that to be?

Hesham Youssef

This was as serious as it gets. As far as seriousness is concerned, countries and delegations were very serious. But then also, there was very little progress, so there were no major strategic decisions that were required from different countries at the time. It's not that we were doing something that would result in signing an agreement, and we need to think about it, whether they're in or out, or that there was a draft agreement. No, I don't think that we reached that level. So, as far as seriousness was concerned, absolutely.

Hanna Notte

Yeah. And expertise, I mean, preparedness, from a sort of technical standpoint?

Hesham Youssef

Well, that differed from one country to another. I think there was a learning curve for the vast majority of the countries of the region as far as these issues are concerned.

Hanna Notte

Well, then, let's go from that point to a broader assessment question. What then were, to your mind, the successes, and the failures of ACRS with hindsight? The process ultimately failed, but maybe there are some positives that we can take from it as well.

Hesham Youssef

Well, this issue will not go away. You will need to address a security framework for the region. And as a matter of fact, a year or so ago, there was a Russian proposal or an initiative, to establish a regional security framework for the Gulf, for example. There is also a Chinese initiative. This issue will not go away. And we'll have to deal with it. And, you know, it is part of having a future vision for this region. What we were facing in ACRS is very small, if it is compared to what's happening today, because today, the region has become a failed region in a sense. With the situation in Syria, the situation in Iraq, the situation with Iran, the situation in Yemen, the Palestinian question, etc. It has become much more fragmented, and much more difficult. With countries having different positions and are faced with a very complicated picture.

In the early '90s, and before that, the whole focus of the region after the war between Iraq and Iran, and after the occupation of Iraq to Kuwait, we didn't have anything other than the Palestinian question or the Arab-Israeli conflict. But today, you have Syria, Libya, Sudan, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and you have Daesh, and the role of Turkey, and the role of Iran, and the role of Israel, and militias all over the place. So, the picture today is much more complicated and much more difficult, and we will still have to tackle this issue.

I know you're working on trying to see what lessons to learn from ACRS, and this is one of the things that I hope to be working on in the coming few years - to examine this issue: Okay, now that we have this mess that we are facing, how can we deal

with issues pertaining to regional security? That is, as far as I'm concerned, the million-dollar question in relation to the role of Iran, the role of Turkey, and then what's happening also with the US and where the US is coming from, and then the new agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. All these developments, what do all these developments mean for issues pertaining to regional security? Now that this is the situation? Where do we go from here? And I think this is the question that needs a lot of work from a team like yours that is working on issues pertaining to ACRS, to also examine, perhaps while you're doing that: Well, where to go next?

Hanna Notte

Yeah, I mean, listening to you, if the region today is so infinitely more complicated, the fault lines are different from what they were 30 years ago, then isn't the logical conclusion that the legacy of ACRS is not very instructive for us today? Because we deal with such a changed region?

Hesham Youssef

I agree. But that's the whole point. The whole point is, okay, ACRS was a different era. Now, with what we have, and after the Arab Spring 1, and Arab Spring 2, and perhaps Arab Spring 3 coming up, with all these changes in Iran, and the JCPOA, and then with the new administration coming, if Biden wins, or if Trump continues: what will happen now, or what needs to take place now? And this is something that will require a lot of research, even Track II because we don't have a Track I these days, to start thinking, okay, now that the situation is, as we see it today, in the region, what can be done? Where do we start? And how, and why?

Hanna Notte

Right, right. Let me just push you with what would be my final question. Just on that point, I guess, one of the thorny issues of ACRS and the reason why it ultimately failed, namely, the question of discussing WMD in the region and Israeli nuclear disarmament, that issue is still with us today, and the position of major countries in the region, including Egypt, on that issue has not changed. It remains a strategic issue. So, can we draw any lessons from the way we dealt with the issue in ACRS, and ultimately failed to deal with the issue, for how we would approach the issue today?

Hesham Youssef

Good question, I don't know. But this is the exploratory work that needs to be done in order for us to say, okay, now that we are in the situation that we're in, let's talk about it and see: where should we start? And with whom? And on what basis? And for what objective? That is a lot of work. That needs to be done before you take the first step. So, of course, your question is legitimate, that some things have not changed. But then, does this mean that nothing can be done because the differences between Egypt and Israel on this issue remain? The answer is no. Then something can be done. Okay, what is this something? Where's the entry point? And with whom, and how?

And also, because you have all kinds of complications, there will be countries that will not be willing to sit with each other or cooperate with each other. Similar to what we had in the '90s. You have some similarities, you can't get Israel and Iran in the same room, this remains the same. But then, now you can easily have Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, Egypt and Jordan, and Palestinians in the same room, even on a Track II basis, you can have some discussion, so you can have it in different groups. Does it make sense to have a security framework for the Gulf? As far as I'm concerned, the answer is absolutely not. But when a country like Russia comes and suggests a regional security framework for the Gulf, should I dismiss this and say no, this is trivial? Of course not. But then, this is the kind of preliminary discussion that is required in order for us to try to reach some understanding as to what kind of first step, and how.

You need to do something like what you're doing now, with all those who are concerned, to say: Okay, first of all, how do you see the situation? And then, if we were to discuss regional security today, what is the best approach? Or what is a feasible approach that we can follow in order to - not even achieve progress - to understand what is happening? And what is possible? Or do we have to wait? Because you can't say, no, we have to wait until the conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Iran, and the

nuclear file, you name it are resolved- these issues will take time. No, you can't do that. So, if you intend to work on this issue, count me in.

Hanna Notte

Great, Hesham, we've taken up a lot of your time, and this has been most useful and interesting. Let me just ask you at the very end, just for our next round of interviews, is there something that's really important about ACRS that we forgot to ask about today that you would encourage us to think about, as we go through this research process in coming months, or do you think we got it right?

Hesham Youssef

Do you think that the five pages of questions that you sent me still need more questions? No, I think you're fine. You have more questions than you need, I think. But I hope you give some more thought to future steps - in addition to what you're doing about ACRS, because historically this is important - but I think future steps is, for me, intriguing in light of how things are evolving in the region today.

Hanna Notte

Great. Okay. Well, thank you so much.

[End of transcript]