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Interview with Süha Umar

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Summary:

Süha Umar is a Turkish Ambassador (Rtd.) He served as Head of the Turkish Delegation to ACRS.

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Oral history interview conducted by Hanna Notte on Zoom on October 22, 2020

Hanna Notte

There we go. This is the 22nd of October and I'm interviewing Ambassador Süha Umar for the ACRS oral history. Thank you so much. And maybe we can start with a very broad question, and you explain us your role at the time when the Madrid Peace Conference happened, and then the ACRS process started and how you were involved in the process throughout those years?

Süha Umar

Well, I'm afraid I was involved in the process by chance because at that time, I was Deputy Director General for Collective Security and Disarmament Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This department deals with NATO and related affairs.

When the Madrid Peace Conference started and ended up with this arrangement, I really didn't know that I was going to get involved in it. But when the "multilaterals", as we used to call them started in Moscow, we decided to be in it as Turkey was invited. Thus we participated at that meeting with a delegation of, if I'm not mistaken, four or five people. The Deputy Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who was responsible for the region was the head of delegation which was comprised of myself and three classmates of mine. That was all coincidence of course.

We held a meeting of our own in Ankara to see if we could do something in the process and for the process. I personally thought that we could and we should. I knew that we had a vast experience in collective security and disarmament matters due to our involvement in NATO first of all and then the Helsinki CSCE process and also the CFE, the Conventional Armed Forces Treaty in Europe, talks. I was personally involved in all of these processes. So I thought we had enough experience to be able to be of some assistance to the regional countries. This is how we decided to go to Moscow. If you want to ask questions while I talk, ask them please.

Hanna Notte

Yeah, I have a few follow-up questions.

Süha Umar

In Moscow, as far as I remember, there were five groups to deal with the issues related to the region. And one of them was the ACRS.

I proposed that we lead ACRS. That proposal was accepted and welcomed by the others. This is how it all started. It started in 1992, if I'm not mistaken. And the last meeting of ACRS and it was a Track II meeting which I took part, was in 2008. So it was a long, long time ago. This is how it happened.

Hanna Notte

Great. So I guess we come back to the beginning and how it all started. Turkey, if I'm not mistaken, was not at the Madrid conference itself? Correct?

Süha Umar

No.

Hanna Notte

So, who then contacted you to invite you to become part of the multilaterals? Was that the United States or was there, was a steering group already set up? Or how did it happen?

Süha Umar

If my memory doesn't fail me, we were not invited to the Madrid Peace Conference. That was not something that we liked very much. For the multilaterals, I remember that both Russia and the United States invited us because, as you know, they were the ones that were taking this issue into the future and they were members of the Steering Committee. So the invitation, as far as I remember, came from both of them.

Hanna Notte

Okay, great. And when you talked about the meeting that you had in Ankara, where

your delegation came together and debated this, you noted that there was a perception that given your, Turkey's, expertise and background, you could be of assistance to the regional countries. So that implies that you almost understood yourself in a role of helping the other regional countries in this process. But what about Turkey's own national security interests in this process? I mean, was this also an objective that you thought about?

Süha Umar

There were many objectives to be fair.

We knew that one of them was, as you said, we had enough experience that could be helpful to the regional countries because the region was in deep trouble for a long time in the past before the Madrid Peace Process and the multilaterals. And one of the reasons for that was buying armaments and getting armed every day and every second. That was very typical for the Middle East. And I am now trying to remember from my book, in which I summarize this issue, we thought that some kind of a disarmament could be considered. The reason for the countries going for arms and more arms every day was thought to be as a result of the "lack of confidence" in the region against each other. In my opinion, it was not "lack of confidence" but as I used it for the first time, there was a "crisis of confidence" in the region. And this crisis of confidence was not confined only to Israel and the Arab countries. It may come as a surprise for you but in my opinion, the crisis of confidence among Arab states was even more deep. So this was the reason why they were trying to buy more and more arms, armaments. Of course, there were other reasons, which made it easy for them to buy arms.

Hanna Notte

And you now mean conventional arms, correct?

Süha Umar

Well, of course. I'm not referring to the mass destruction weapons, nuclear or chemical and things like that, but only the conventional ones.

First of all most of the countries in the Middle East had and still have vast oil revenues. So the money was not a problem for them. They could easily spend a lot of money on armaments. Second were the political systems of these countries. The rulers were not obliged to give account of what they were doing and why they were doing it. In fact, they were able to present the situation, buying arms and armaments, as something to make the country great and powerful. So all these put together - of course, we should not forget the countries who are selling arms and armaments like the United States, Great Britain, France, and until sometime ago Russia. They were and are making huge profits so they were not caring about what were the results, or would be the results of such a huge arsenal for the regional countries. All these put together, we thought that if we could help the regional countries understand the main reason why they were buying arms and armaments that it was because they did not have confidence in each other and if we could get rid of, at least partly this crisis of confidence, the region would be better off and disarmament would work to the benefit of the region.

That was one part of the question, of course. Now, I am coming to your question. What we were expecting to gain from such a development. You can understand if you look at the map, the Middle East is a region which is vital, for many reasons for Turkey. One is the economy. In 1990s, Turkey was a country with a fast growing economy. Then we had the construction companies which were able to undertake large projects in the region which they in fact did and made a lot of money. So for us, to keep the region in peace and stability was important from the point of view first of all, the economy.

Second, as you said, security, because the region is important for our security due to multiple reasons. One is, war in the region was costly, not only for the warring parties, but also for Turkey. The First Gulf War for example, had cost billions of dollars to Turkey due to huge losses of constructors including the machine parks they had to leave behind. So, we would like to avoid such a thing. Second, as you know, there was PKK and we were fighting it since 1984. That was a very important security issue for us and at the time of the First Gulf War, for example, we had to do many excursions into Iraq to keep this threat at bay, to the extent possible. So,

destabilization of the region and any conflict could easily help these groups who are trying to destabilize Turkey, I mean the Kurdish terrorist-separatist groups. So we decided that if we could to make the region more stable and more in peace that would be in our security interest too.

Here there was a big but, because we were not a Middle East country and we did not want to be one or perceived to be one. So that was really a delicate issue because especially Israel was really keen on bringing Turkey into the region as one of the regional countries. We did not like this idea. The definition of the region by Israel from the Atlantic Ocean to Central Asia was not something that we could accept. We always had been very, very keen on that. Even when in some maps, which were printed on the, let's say file covers, very discreetly included Turkey into the region, we were always objecting it and trying to change even the file covers. That was really important for us. In my opinion there was something helpful in this attitude of Turkey for the regional countries too because if you bring in Turkey, as a regional country, into the Middle East, everything will be different. Turkey also at that time was a very powerful country and it could and it would change all the balances in the region. That simply means that then it would be whole new ball game. With these kept in mind, we decided that we should do something in the process.

Hanna Notte

Can I just ask?

Süha Umar

One more issue...

Hanna Notte

Yeah.

Süha Umar

Maybe I shouldn't say it. But we did not also want to leave the region only for the United States and the European Union.

Hanna Notte

Sure. So you've explained quite nicely a question which I would have asked, which is how did Turkey end up as an extra-regional participant in the process? Can I just ask: what was the attitude of the Arab states to Turkey wanting to take part, but as a non-regional party? Were they okay with it?

Süha Umar

Not all of them, of course. And that was expected. Most of the Arab countries were in favor of Turkish involvement in this context and within the limits as I tried to explain. But there were some unexpected developments which helped the regional countries to accept Turkey, even welcome Turkey as one of the participants in this process.

One was in Moscow. There I had some unexpected contacts with the Israeli Delegation. By the way, as we were lacking personnel in the Ministry, in most of the of ACRS meetings only myself or in some cases my limited staff were present except in Antalya because we had organized that meeting, so we had more people.

In one of those contacts with the Israeli Delegation I tried to explain them that with what we had in our bag as experience from Helsinki, from CFE and also from the nuclear issues, we could show the way, if I may put it that way, to at least for Israel and Jordan, neighboring countries, how they could proceed, as an example, for the whole of the region when it comes to confidence building measures. And that idea worked. After Moscow, a very high-level Israeli delegation came to Turkey, to Ankara on my invitation. David Ivry, maybe you heard of him, was leading the delegation. Uzi Arad was there, so were Shimon Stein, Kutli Mor, Eli Levite and others as far as I remember. Eli is now in the US and I we are still in touch. In fact I am speaking with all of them from time to time. And so in Ankara we once more explained how we saw the situation and how we perceived our contribution. Then Jordan joined us.

There was one specific reason why I decided to start with Israel and Jordan. As I said, they are neighboring countries and we had another quite unique experience within the CFE and CSBM basket with Bulgaria. We had a very special arrangement which went far beyond the Helsinki limits. So, as I told the Israelis and the Jordanians, if we were able to do it with Bulgaria - Bulgaria was still a communist country then - I'm

sure they would be able to do it between Israel and Jordan, which they did. So this is how we started with Turkey, Israel and Jordan strategic cooperation and partnership.

Hanna Notte

This was then still, just for me to understand, this was then still under the auspices of ACRS that you, after the Moscow plenary, had these bilateral contacts initially inviting the Israelis and then the Jordanians, or you took this outside the scope of ACRS?

Süha Umar

No, I may say that both is true.

Hanna Notte

Okay.

Süha Umar

The Israeli-Turkish, and Turkish-Jordanian - because we went with the Minister of Foreign Affairs Hikmet Cetin to Jordan in 1993 and I talked to Jordanian authorities also within this context, before bringing them together to the Dead Sea Meeting. Of course I knew that these separate meetings and dealings with Jordan and Israel would also help ACRS and all the regional countries which it did because that was a very good example. And it worked very well until Bibi came to power.

Hanna Notte

And I want to come back to this educational approach that was taken at the beginning of ACRS, this bringing in outside expertise on how confidence building measures were done in the European theater during the Cold War. So I assume you were then, Turkey was part of those that were bringing expertise to the table. Then there were other regional delegations who were the recipients of that expertise. How was this approach perceived by Israel and the Arab countries, both the bigger, say, Egypt and Jordan and the smaller delegations? I mean, this whole educational approach to ACRS, was it considered useful? What were the pluses and minuses of proceeding in that way?

Süha Umar

The biggest plus was, it was rather semi-official. That was really important because all those countries, as I said, were in a deep crisis of confidence against each other. So, anything strictly official was making them itchy because they were thinking most probably that, in a meeting of strictly official nature, anything they said or accepted or agreed on, could easily work against them. So that was a very important issue. This is why the seminar type approach was adopted. As long as they realized that it was not that official and whatever they said or agreed on or discussed, would not be brought before them as an official agreement, they were happy with it. They were relaxed.

In my opinion the most important issue at that time for the region and for the regional countries was to be able to talk to each other. They were not talking to each other. Especially in issues like disarmament, regional security, nuclear issues, exchange of military information. These were things from outer space for them. These were all untouchable, sacred issues. So the most important thing was to make them talk to each other and keep on talking. In my opinion, the whole multilaterals, especially ACRS, which was very delicate, because it was directly related to security, that approach was crucial. I think time proved me right. Because thanks to this approach, we were able to reach a very high level of success in ACRS, until it came to an end, due to many reasons.

Hanna Notte

And that success, I suppose, you mean, particularly on what came to be known as the operational baskets, so the working towards agreements on confidence building measures, where you had the plenaries initially addressing that, and then, of course, at some point, you had the so called intersessionals, some of which I believe, even took place in Turkey, if I'm not mistaken. But can you talk a little bit?

Süha Umar

Sorry, I missed your last part.

Hanna Notte

I said some of the intersessionals even took place in Turkey, I believe. Can you talk a

little bit more about that work in the operational basket, Turkey's role in it? And how you got to an agreement at the end? How did it all work?

Süha Umar

Yes, with pleasure. First of all, I will tell you something which might be a bit strange. In Moscow, there was a big fight between myself and the Americans on the composition of the Steering Committee.

The Americans were very, very, very jealous of their role in the multilaterals and did not want anybody except Russia, in the Steering Committee which was not right because the Steering Committee - the name tells it - will steer the whole work. And if those from the committees were not, at least to some extent, involved in the Steering Committee how they would be able to steer the work of the five committees.

Americans refused to understand. It was too early for a final fight. So I decided to wait. I waited about a year and a half when the whole ACRS process came to a halt. Then the Americans came to me. It was their turn to come to me. They asked if I could organize a meeting in Turkey, not an official meeting, to revive the process in ACRS. That was how the first Antalya meeting came into being. We organized it and it was a success. All delegations to official ACRS meetings were present there but not in their official capacity. Everybody who came there was just a person from his own country or her own country. So that was the first Antalya meeting. And with this meeting, the Americans agreed that we should take part in the Steering Committee. That was the bonus of Antalya for Turkey. In fact, that was my precondition to organize Antalya meeting.

Second Antalya meeting was held in 1994. It was again a success. In the course of all these the two Antalya meetings, the concept of talking to each other in a non-official way and preparing texts for CSBMs and the maritime CSBMs and everything and expecting that the day would come when they would be adopted officially has become kind of a rule. This was another delicate issue for ACRS. There I referred back to my NATO experience.

There is this cliché, if I may put it that way, "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed." That was really important, because then everybody was happy. If they agreed on something it would not be agreed at all until everything is agreed. So they felt confident. They felt secure about their attitudes.

The other concept was 'set aside': When a text was agreed, it was set aside. That was another NATO jargon which meant that an agreed text would be kept aside for further reference or implementation. That was another point which made everybody even more relaxed.

So, by using these tools, in the course of the meetings, the ACRS, in the operational basket, was able to agree on many issues and many texts, written texts, most of which were prepared by Turkey. And I now see in many publications that this point is just made very clear by many of the authors of these publications that the texts were prepared by Turkey. This was an outcome which I was expecting from the very start. For example, we prepared the texts of the measure for "Exchange information on military exercises", "Exchange of military documents". Not secret ones of course. "Communication channels" and "Search and Rescue Operations." As far as I remember, Canada was very active in the preparation of this last measure. The measure was agreed upon and put aside and was implemented in 1998. The U.S., Israel, Turkey, Jordan took part, "Reliant Mermaid Exercise" in the Eastern Mediterranean. Of course, there was a big fuss about it and around it, created by Egypt and Iran. Iran was not part of the process but was able to add to this fuss. This is another problem, another issue.

So, if someone asked me whether ACRS was a success, I would say "yes, ACRS was a success." Thanks to this very innovative approach, leisurely approach, we were able to agree on confidence building measures and implement them in the course of the process. Of course, there were thorny issues. I am sure you will come to them.

Hanna Notte

I will come to those, yes. This is fascinating and very useful. Thank you. And it's - I so far only interviewed Egyptian and Israeli delegation. So it's great to have a different perspective on what happened. I wanted to ask you a special question about Track II actually, at the end. On the work in the operational basket: Can I just ask you, from

the regional side of the delegations, were they all equally active in the work on the operational basket, or were some more active than others? And secondly, now I hear you talk about the kinds of things you've discussed: the search and rescue, the communication channels. This is, of course, quite technical work. And from what I understand, the different regional delegations had military and civilian or diplomatic components. Can you talk a little bit about the military versus diplomat dynamic in the operational basket? Was it mostly the military people doing this kind of work? Or was it different for each country, how the interplay between the diplomats and the military staff worked? How can I think about that?

Süha Umar

Dr. Notte, you make me remember all those days in meetings all over the Middle East and in Turkey.

First of all, all the delegations were very much prepared for such a process because it was not only one meeting or two meetings, it was a process. So they were very well prepared for it. Some delegations were not highly informed about what would happen, what was the issue and how it could proceed, what they should expect from such a negotiation, negotiating procedure. And even Israeli delegation was not very well informed in all aspects. And that was only normal because that was not something which they were in, for a long time as Turkey was. We had been in similar processes or negotiations for many, many years and in many different fields. And with a lot of different countries. For example, only NATO, all by itself, was a unique experience, a world of experience. But all these delegations were, to my recollection, quite active. And they were first of all willing to learn and they were happy to learn, to hear about what had happened, in Europe for example. How they could make use of European experience, how they could make good use of Turkish experience. And all these delegations - even to some extent the Egyptian delegation which was quite reserved for many reasons - had a large confidence in Turkey. And they were all the time asking questions and talking to us.

When it comes to whether military or the civilian part of the delegations were more active, both. I understand that - again, to my recollection - that all these delegations were working very much in harmony within themselves with their civilian and military authorities. One important development of this whole process was the military of, for example, the Israeli delegation and the Arab delegations were very much in contact with each other. They became friends and started talking to each other without any restrictions and negative feelings, in a very relaxed way. As I was repeating from the very start of our conversation that was one of the main objectives of the whole process. Let them, make them talk to each other, and keep them talking to each other.

Hanna Notte

And that 'keep them talking to each other' - so if I look at the timeline of ACRS, there were these plenaries. And then later, there were the intersessionals. And so, was there then in between - because the plenary was only every six months - how can one imagine that the working contexts that were going on in between the plenaries, if there were any?

Süha Umar

Well, as far as I remember, in between the plenaries there were meetings, not only in Turkey, but in other parts of the region. And especially I know that the Jordanians and Israelis were talking quite often with each other. And I'm sure that other countries were doing the same. So it was a kind of a continuing process and not only confined or limited to the meetings and the days of the meetings. That was another objective of the process. To make them talk to each other, also out of the process itself, which happened.

Hanna Notte

I want to ask you a broader question about the baskets. So, it's at the fourth plenary, which for your recollection happens in Moscow in November 1993, that this decision is taken to split the conversation in ACRS into two baskets, the "conceptual basket", and what would then be called the "operational basket". Do you recall how that decision came about? Why was there a need to make this formal split into two baskets, what were the developments and the discussions leading up to that?

Süha Umar

There was this reality before us: The conceptual basket had issues which were not easy to come to agreement on such as threat perceptions. These are very thorny and controversial issues. It could take months and months of discussions without reaching an end. For example, the code of conduct, the weapons of mass destruction, the nuclear issue. The operational basket was more technical, conceptual was more political. So we thought, after the first meetings and deliberations, we thought that if we could separate these two issues, there was a better chance for at least the operational basket to come up with something concrete. That was the idea. Who suggested it, I have no idea. I don't remember. Maybe, most probably it came as a result of these thoughts or expectations. And when I go back to those days and look into the matter again, I understand that it was a good idea and decision because the operational basket really came up with a lot of concrete texts and agreements.

Hanna Notte

Great, thank you. So you then had an operational basket and a conceptual basket. Moreover, at a broader level, you had the multilateral track with the five working groups of which ACRS was one. And, of course, the bilaterals, which came out of the Madrid conference. I want to ask you: how did Turkey understand the relationship between the bilaterals and the multilaterals. How did Turkey look at that?

Süha Umar

In short, Dr. Notte, I would just say that there was a very strong connection. And it proved to be the right perception. Because when the bilaterals went down, bogged down, the multilaterals did too. When the bilaterals broke down - after coming into power of Bibi Netanyahu - then it was very difficult for the multilaterals to go ahead. I'll give you one example.

I was appointed as Ambassador of Turkey to Amman, Jordan end of November 1995. Beginning of 1996, Ariel Levite called me from Tel Aviv and said: "the multilaterals came to a halt. Could you produce something, a couple of ideas that could make us to go ahead with the discussions and deliberations in the multilaterals?" One of the reasons why the multilaterals had come to a halt was - of course, he didn't say that - Bibi Netanyahu. But it was also due to mostly the Egyptian attitude vis a vis the nuclear issues. Well, I gave him a couple of ideas, how the thing - unofficially - could go ahead again, including the nuclear issues. I later learned that most of these ideas were taken up, as I suggested, within the context of NATO. So it was helpful.

Hanna Notte

Okay.

Süha Umar

So the issue was - again, I repeat - to keep them talking to each other, under all circumstances, even when they cannot talk to each other in delegations, let the military or the civilians get together over a cup of coffee or on the telephone and keep on talking on issues, without expecting much. That would help in the future and for the future. That was my personal opinion.

Hanna Notte

Great. And so, you were very involved in the operational basket and as a non-regional also to some extent responsible for keeping those talks going and getting them to some successful point. When it then became more obvious that there were problems in the conceptual basket especially between Egypt and Israel. Was there a danger or risk sometimes, that these difficulties would spill over into your operational basket discussions? And how did you deal with that problem? How did you try to insulate what you were achieving from the problems elsewhere?

Süha Umar

Let me put it that way. First of all, from the very start, we were trying to tell the Egyptians especially - because they were very keen on the nuclear issue that they were right. Now let's be frank. When Israel with all her nuclear arsenal insists to keep that issue out of deliberations this is not fair. If the Iranians were in the process, they would do the same as Egyptians as far as this issue is concerned.

The same goes, of course, for Turkey. If one country in the Middle East is nuclear, has a nuclear arsenal and if that country tries to keep all the others out of it, obtaining

such a capacity, this is not fair and not acceptable. But we tried to make them, especially the Egyptians and others to understand that it was more or less the same for Turkey and the Soviet Union, when we were discussing within the Helsinki process, the CSBMs and everything. The Soviet Union was a nuclear power and Turkey was not. But this didn't prevent us from deliberations, discussions within the Helsinki process and reaching agreement on the CSBM Stockholm Document. It didn't prevent us from agreeing on CSBM measures. And this didn't prevent us to go for inspections in Russia and the Russians coming to Turkey for inspections of our military exercises for example.

That was not easy for Turkey. I remember when the Russians wanted to come to Thrace in Turkey to inspect a military exercise the Turkish General Staff didn't like it at all. They even tried to question who agreed to that measure in Helsinki? And we proved them that we agreed on that measure together with the General Staff from the very start. Then they accepted that everything was in order. So we tried to make the sides, the parties, partners of the multilaterals to understand that nuclear is an important issue but it should not prevent bringing out results in other fields which will be important and effective when it comes to eliminating the crisis of confidence.

Hanna Notte

Yeah. Understood. Thank you, that's most useful. I want to ask you, do you recall going to the fifth plenary, which is the one that happened in Doha in Qatar in 1994?

Süha Umar

Yes.

Hanna Notte

I want to ask you: So, this is - the first four plenaries happened in Moscow and in Washington - so this is the first one where the process is really moved into the region. Do you recall how that affected the atmosphere among the different delegations? I mean, I also understand that it was just the second time that an official Israeli delegation went to a Gulf country at that time. So can you talk a bit about the atmosphere in Doha, from what you recall?

Süha Umar

The atmosphere was very friendly. I remember. I don't remember now exactly what it was, but in the course of the plenary there was an important development in the bilaterals. We all watched it on TV in the lobby of the hotel where the plenary meeting was held.

Hanna Notte

I mean, the Israeli-Jordanian treaty was signed in 1994.

Süha Umar

Yes, yes. I just said it that was really important.

The relations between the delegations were very friendly, productive. It was important that the meetings, the plenaries and other meetings, were held in the regional countries because this would be another step forward in the process. You cannot keep on going by holding meetings out of the region all the time. The important thing is that the region itself, as a whole and one by one, should feel that this is their question, their issue. This is why when we proposed a Regional Security Center in Jordan, Qatar and Tunisia and a Conflict Prevention Center in Istanbul with branches in Cairo and Amman, among others. Everything should give the impression and be seen as regional.

The center of the whole issue should be the region itself and the regional countries not us, outsiders. We could be shepherds, if you call it that way, or facilitators or whatever you call it but the real players should be regional countries. So the meetings should take place or anything that would be formed should be in the region itself.

Hanna Notte

Great. Building on that, I'd like to ask you two questions, if I may, about the regional delegations. First, I'd like to ask you: at the time, we have certain important regional countries, certainly if we talk about a regional security architecture today, certain regional countries, which were just not part of the process for different reasons. Syria

and Lebanon did not want to participate. Iraq and Iran and also Libya were outside the process. I want to ask you how you thought that affected the process, if at all? And the second question I'd like to ask you is whether you as a sort of outside observer can talk a little bit more about the dynamics between what we could call the core regional delegation - so let's say Israel, Egypt, and to some extent, Jordan - and some of the smaller delegations from the Gulf states and the Maghreb - how was the dynamic especially within the Arab camp?

Süha Umar

Your first question: Of course, nobody could make or oblige Syria and Lebanon to take part in the process. That was their own decision but it was a gap, an important gap, especially Syria, because of that famous saying, "there will be no war in the Middle East without Egypt and no peace, without Syria." So it was important. If something will be cooking for the region all the regional countries should be in it. Otherwise it will be lame.

Not inviting Iraq, Iran and Libya was a mistake, was a crucial mistake. And I personally made this very clear many times to the Americans. The Americans followed the footsteps of Israel and did not invite these countries. Without Iran, Iraq - of that time, of course, now, it's a completely different thing - and Libya (again of that time), you cannot carve out something for the Middle East which would live long. You can do but it will not live long because these are crucial countries, like Egypt. I will not say anything about Turkey because Turkey is out of the region but these, Egypt, Iran, Iraq of that time, and Libya, they are crucial countries, they are important countries. Like Israel.

Hanna Notte

Yeah. It's interesting to me that Israel, as you said at the beginning, on the one end sought quite an expansive definition of the region and wanted Turkey to be included as a regional country. But then other regional countries, it wanted so explicitly excluded from the process.

Süha Umar

There is that mistake also which I made it repeatedly clear to my Israeli friends that their fortress mentality was not helpful. In other words, Israel on the one side and 22 Arab states on the other but when it comes to timing and options, from time to time they will try to keep some Arab countries out, some in and other times, some other Arab countries in and some other countries out. This will not work. The Israelis should understand that Israel is one of the regional countries which is important, powerful and able. These are acceptable qualifications but after all, you are, in the end, one of the countries of the region. So you have to act as one of the countries of the region with all the limitations and all the rights of any one of the other countries, small or large.

Egypt, of course was important and it still is important. There is one thing which I personally believe is harmful for anything which is related to the Middle East: Egyptian attitude. This attitude is not an attitude of a powerful and important country of the region. Most of the time, they are blocking, they are preventing better and developed relations. While on the one hand they are agreeing, coming to agreement with Israel, on the other hand they criticize others for trying to do the same. On the one side, they seem to support the Palestinians. On the other hand, making life more difficult for Palestinians by, how should I say, by encouraging them to reject even the most innocent proposals for a solution in any matter. This attitude is not helpful and it should change. Egypt is an important country in the Middle East. There are three countries in the region which are in competition with each other from time immemorial: Turkey, Egypt and Iran. This is acceptable, this is understandable, but on the other hand, we have to change this and start building our relations more on cooperation than competition.

Small Arab countries, they were, in my opinion, quite eager, quite helpful. And quite good contributors to the process. In Doha meeting for example the Gulf countries even at that time were one step ahead of, for example, Saudi Arabia and other countries when it comes to dealing with Israel and relations with Israel. Nowadays, it is of course something quite different. Many things have changed. So it's not a comparison but at that time, they were forthcoming. And if Israel could change the

attitude I just described a few minutes ago towards the Arab countries, towards the Middle East, then this attitude of many smaller Arab countries would be very helpful to achieve peace and stability in the region.

Hanna Notte

Okay. Great. That's very useful. Thank you. You already mentioned earlier in our conversation Track II. So, I'm interested what Track II activities were going on whilst ACRS was still happening? How were these Track II meetings relevant for what was happening within ACRS? Maybe you can talk a little bit about that.

Süha Umar

Yes, the Track II meetings started, as I said, with Antalya meeting in 1993 when the official meetings came to a halt. And then it was repeated in 1994. So the whole ACRS process, in fact, was carried into the future by Track II meetings. The Track II meetings served as a very important tool to proceed and to continue with the process. This is why the Americans saw this very simple fact and the University of California took over this process. In my opinion - in 1995, when the whole process came to a crash, then there was only Track II left - and that was used quite well by the Americans. I took part in many of them, in Athens and in other locations. Track II exercise was very helpful and productive until the Americans and the European Union decided that it should deal with issues, which in my opinion were not suitable for Track II concept.

These issues were 9/11, Twin Towers assault and afterwards. And then, even more important, the issue of whether Islam as a political system could be accepted and/or could be a way out for the Islamic countries. I remember, I think it was in Tunisia, in the course of the meeting, where Americans and the European Union was promoting this idea that - how do you call it - the moderate Islam, and the Arab countries and Islamic countries should be and could be governed by this concept, by this approach. I remember saying that Islam or Christian religion were compatible with democracy as a religion but Islam or Christian religion as a political system is not compatible with democracy because religion is a dogmatic process. There is no discussion on whether it is right or wrong. It is there as it came and it will continue as it came without any change but democracy is not something like that. Democracy is and should be discussed and it changes nearly every day.

So when the Americans and the European Union brought in this subject it was the end of the Track II because then the other subjects came in, for example, the Kurdish issue came in, which made Turkey very annoyed and which made the deliberations were difficult. It brought countries against each other and make the participating countries clash. Unfortunately, all these came together and the process collapsed. Still, what ACRS achieved as documents and ideas will be an asset for future if and when the ACRS process or a similar process revives.

Hanna Notte Right. Great. I realized we've already spoken over an hour. I just have a few questions left, if I may.

Süha Umar Right.

Hanna Notte I want to ask you: it appears from the record of ACRS at this time that this was, of course, an elite driven process. I mean, with official delegations from these different countries coming together. But there wasn't kind of public diplomacy accompanying this process to also educate the wider public - let's say in Egypt, or in Israel, or in the Gulf states, on what was what was going on and what one was trying to achieve. So with hindsight, I'd like to ask you whether you think there should have been more of a concerted public diplomatic effort, whether that's something that should have been done differently, or was it inevitable that that it was a fairly closed and secretive process?

Süha Umar

I'll start with something that came to my memory. When we started the CFE talks, even in Europe, and even in the United States, countries who were supposed to have at least a faint idea of what was going on and why it was going on, the press was trying to find a name for the talks and one of the names was Nescafe.

So, the security and disarmament issues are not favorite subjects for public opinions. They are mostly very technical. I remember, even in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of

Turkey, ministers and the deputy undersecretaries were not very happy with me when I from time to time appeared before them because they knew that there was a problem. A problem which they did not understand at all and did not have time to try to understand. So they were always waiting for me to tell them how the problem could be solved when I came with a problem. As long as I did they were happy.

So, the nature of the subject is not very suitable for anybody, any country to make the public aware of it, and like it, or would like to talk about it or know about it. This is the difficulty of public diplomacy around regional security. Whether a better approach of a more successful public diplomacy could be utilized to make the public opinions of the countries involved to grasp the issue is open for debate, of course. On the other hand, we have to think about the public opinions of the countries we are talking about. Israel, Jordan to some extent, maybe Egypt to a lesser extent, could be made interested in the subject, but for the other countries, I'm really quite doubtful whether such a try would achieve anything.

Hanna Notte

Okay, that's very clear, very useful. Thank you. Ambassador Umar, if you had to explain to someone today why the ACRS process as a whole eventually failed, how would you explain it?

Süha Umar

The ACRS process failed for mainly two reasons.

One is change in Israel. Change of attitude towards the Peace process as a whole. Unfortunately, coming into power of Binyamin Netanyahu did a lot of harm to the process itself - not only the multilaterals but also bilaterals. Change of Israeli attitude towards the bilaterals is one of the main reasons why the ACRS process has failed.

The second reason is to some extent the Egyptian attitude on the nuclear issue. That was an issue, as I said, with justification for Egypt and for other countries like Iran, Turkey and others. In my opinion, it could not be made so big a stumbling block before the whole process. But again, going back to the time when ACRS collapsed, I see that the main reason was the collapse of the bilaterals and coming into power of Bibi Netanyahu.

One specific example: I was in Amman when Mossad tried to kill Khalid Mesha'al. This was a crucial mistake which worked totally against what we were trying to do. We were trying to bring more confidence, to make regional countries to be more confident against each other and with each other. And these acts, actions changed everything completely in the other way. They brought in more lack of confidence, a greater crisis of confidence.

And one even more specific example for nuclear issue: In 2008, I was Ambassador to Belgrade. The Canadian participant in ACRS, Peter Jones - have you heard of him? - sent me an email and invited me to Canada. Nowadays I see in some publications that Turkey lost its ability to be a moderator or negotiator for Iran, especially when it comes to nuclear issues. What I am going to say now proves that the contrary was true at least in 2008.

Peter Jones told me that for years they were trying to bring the Israeli and the Iranian experts and people who were involved in this issue, to discuss the nuclear issue between them. I knew that they were trying this for many years. It is as you may imagine a very difficult issue. A very thorny issue, especially when it comes to Iran and Israel. And he said that the Israeli and Iranian people, who were going to be involved in this discussion, asked Peter to invite me as a third party to this meeting.

That was really important. If it could be held, maybe that would be a channel, an unofficial channel where Iran and Israel will be able to start talking to each other on a very thorny major issue. It didn't happen, not because of other reasons, but because of the visa regime of Canada, which I refused to accept and did not go to Canada.

Why I told this? For one simple reason: there is nothing unsolvable and there is nothing that should prevent the countries from talking to each other no matter what their relations are at that point, at that time even under the most adverse circumstances. There is only one way out to any issue. It is that we should be talking to each other. All the countries. Now we are, for example, going through the same process with Greece. For years. It repeats itself from time to time because they refuse to talk about the issues. And if you refuse to talk about the issues you will not be able

to reach any point.

Hanna Notte

Right. And this is a nice segue into my final question, which is, I guess, what lessons can we take from ACRS for today? I mean, we both understand that the region is much changed today, compared to what it was 30 years ago. There's no need to acknowledge that, we know that. If we were to try and do some work on regional security again, I mean, first of all, do you think that there would be appetite for a similar process today? And then, what should be done similar or differently from how things were done with ACRS 30 years ago?

Süha Umar

I'm afraid I will be quite negative for our times, of course for today. Nobody knows what will happen in the future, near future or midterm future but we should not give up. For now, I personally see no opportunity for any initiative in this field, regional security, because for this, we have to go back - you may laugh to what I'm going to say - we should at least go back to 1990s, beginning of 2000s, at least. Today, the Middle East, as you said, is totally a new place. Starting from Libya, Israel, and everybody. So at least, the minimum should be established for any regional security or disarmament of a type of a European security conference or a new organization. That was an idea in mid 1990s as you may remember, for the Middle East to have a similar organization or a conference but today, it is too early.

First of all, the basics should be arranged and be settled: Syria and the Israeli attitude. The Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the regimes and everything. Everything is upside down now, unfortunately. So if somebody now comes to me and asks me to do something about this issue for the Middle East, I would say: the time is not suitable for such a thing. I hope everything will change once again and will change in the positive. Then I'm sure there will be an opportunity to revive this issue and make good use of what were achieved and set aside for future use as the starting point. This is my personal opinion but I may be wrong.

Hanna Notte

Great. Thank you. Thank you so much.

[End of transcript]