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An Oral History of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group

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List of Abbreviations

ACDA	Arms Control and Disarmament Agency
CBM	Confidence Building Measures
CD	Conference on Disarmament
CFE	Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe
CSBM	Confidence and Security Building Measures
CSCE	Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
CTBT	Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty
CWC	Chemical Weapons Convention
DOD	US Department of Defense
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)
EU	European Union
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IDF	Israeli Defense Forces
INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NPT	Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
RSC	Regional Security Center
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction
WMDFZ	Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone

Introduction

The ACRS oral history project: genesis and objectives

The idea of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) oral history project dates back to 2013, when informal consultations in Glion and Geneva involving diplomats from Iran, Israel and Arab states evoked hopes for a formal regional arms control dialogue. While the five rounds of consultations in Switzerland foundered eventually, they still marked only the second time in the history of the Middle East that Israel and Arab states held face-to-face meetings to discuss regional arms control and non-proliferation issues.

The first time was in the early 1990s when – as an outcome of the discussions on the peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Arab conflict initiated at the 1991 Madrid Conference – a working group on arms control and regional security (ACRS) had been created. The ACRS Working Group, along with four other multilateral working groups, had been intended to complement the bilateral negotiations between Israel and its immediate neighbors. Between 1991 and 1995, thirteen Arab States, Israel, a Palestinian delegation, and a number of extra-regional states and entities participated in ACRS plenaries and intersessional meetings focusing on both conceptual and operational confidence-building and arms control measures applicable to the Middle East.

Yet, when regional states reconvened for consultations in Glion and Geneva approximately two decades later, in 2013, there was no comprehensive and first-hand record of the ACRS Working Group for them to consult or turn to for lessons learnt. While many analytical studies and articles had been written on ACRS over the years, even by individuals who had participated directly in (or had intimate knowledge of) the proceedings of the working group, no comprehensive account based on the recollections of all participating parties had ever been compiled.¹ Since—per agreement of participating states—no official records had been taken during the ACRS talks, either, the historical record of the hitherto most ambitious and comprehensive effort at tackling arms control and regional security in the Middle East remained lamentably incomplete.

With many of its architects and negotiators approaching old age, we therefore felt it to be both of historiographical interest, and a matter of timely service to policymaking, to remedy this omission and compile a comprehensive oral history of the ACRS Working Group.

Methodology and limitations

Oral History, and especially Critical Oral History, is a branch of history designed to fill the gaps in the available documentary record and add greater nuance to important historical events that might otherwise be missed. Meant to supplement and build from archival records, oral histories also provide a human voice and perspective to these historical moments and allow for the actors

¹ See for example: Emily Landau, *Egypt and Israel in ACRS: Bilateral Concerns in a Regional Arms Control Process*, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2001; Michael D. Yaffe, “Promoting arms control and regional security in the Middle East,” *Disarmament Forum*, 2001; Bruce Jentleson, “The Middle East Arms Control and Regional Security Talks: Progress, Problems, and Prospects,” *UC San Diego Policy Papers*, 1996, and Nabil Fahmy, *Egypt’s Diplomacy in War, Peace and Transition*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

themselves to revisit their own thinking at the time. While the frailties of human memory are certainly a consideration, time also often allows for a more honest engagement with the subject, as the interviewee may no longer be shackled by political or professional constraints.

Additionally, the incorporation of key documents during interviews and workshops can help spark memories or reveal new information unknown at the time and lead to vital, spontaneous revelations by the actors that might be impossible to achieve by exclusively examining the official records.

Throughout this project, the team conducted oral history interviews with 40 ACRS delegates from key parties, including Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Palestine, the United States, as well as Canada, India, the Netherlands, and Turkey. Due to the Covid pandemic, the interviews were conducted virtually between the summer of 2020 and 2021. The oral history conversations followed a semi-structured format, with central questions being posed across interviews to allow for the comparability of accounts. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, to facilitate their subsequent analysis as reflected in this study. The majority of interview transcripts were lightly edited for enhanced clarity and compiled in an oral history digital archive, which is being published alongside this analytical report.²

In addition, on the heels of the 30th anniversary of the 1991 Madrid Conference, the project team hosted a virtual roundtable in November 2021, convening around twenty of the former ACRS delegates previously interviewed in the individual oral history conversations. The roundtable participants engaged in an in-depth exchange on their personal recollections from the ACRS process. While the transcript from that exchange is published in full as part of the digital archive, main insights derived from it are also reflected in this analytical report. Finally, the interview and roundtable transcripts were augmented with hundreds of documents, collected by diplomats who served on the US delegation to ACRS. Additional archival documents from the George H. W. Bush and the William J. Clinton Presidential Libraries were added, as available and relevant. All documents can be found in the digital archive, alongside the interview and roundtable transcripts.³

Notwithstanding significant efforts to ensure the comprehensiveness of the historiographical compilation and account, there are several limitations to the ACRS oral history: First, not all key individuals involved in ACRS could be interviewed for the record. Some relevant diplomats and officials have, sadly, passed away; a few declined to participate, or their whereabouts could not be identified despite efforts undertaken by the project team (especially individuals from the Russian Federation, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Maghreb countries). Second, since individuals were asked to recount events that occurred three decades ago, there was substantial variance among different interviewees in terms of the level of detail remembered and wealth of anecdotes shared. In addition, it cannot be excluded that interviewees, reflecting on their participation in important diplomacy, tended to overemphasize their own role and sought to ensure that they are remembered positively in historical accounts; the project team attempted to

² The project team received permission to publish 33 interview transcripts. An additional 7 interviews were conducted not for publication, but they informed this analytical study.

³ The authors wish to convey their sincere gratitude to Michael Yaffe and Jennie Gromoll for their support for this study. They also wish to thank Mr. Miles Pomper, who conducted many of the oral history interviews. Other individuals who supported this study include: Ms. Bridget Leahy, Ms. Eliza Freedman, Ms. Lia Swiniarski, Ms. Mackenzie Knight, Mr. Sami Shihadeh, and Ms. Tricia White.

mitigate any distortions by corroborating accounts with other interviewees. Third, and related, since the ACRS Working Group convened over a period of several years, negotiating in multiple plenaries and intersessional meetings, it was not possible to revisit all ACRS proceedings in the interviews; instead, a focus was put on important meetings, key events, fault lines, and inflection points. Finally, it is conceivable—though the project team was highly encouraged by how forthcoming individuals were in conversation—that interviewees would have been even more outspoken, had interviews been conducted in person rather than virtually.

The ACRS oral history: outline of the analytical report

This study is grounded in, and reflects insights based on analysis of 40 oral history interviews with ACRS delegates, the oral history roundtable conducted in November 2021, as well as available primary source documents collected on ACRS. Throughout the study, the authors cite extensively from the oral history interviews, though without attributing statements to specific individuals.

The first section recounts the inception of ACRS, analyzing the international and regional conditions that enabled the crystallization of the working group. The relationship of ACRS to other working groups within the post- Madrid Conference multilateral track, as well as their relationship to the bilaterals, are being examined. The section also addresses internal preparations for the ACRS talks among key individual delegations, providing nuance omitted in studies previously published on ACRS, and details participating states' objectives going into the negotiations.

The second section turns to the format of the ACRS Working Group, shedding light on the role of its co-chairs and the Steering Group of the multilateral track. It proceeds to address specific characteristics of the working group, including its informal and voluntary nature, the agreement that all decisions be made by consensus, and that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.” Finally, two additional procedural decisions—to initially adopt a seminar-type format, and to split the substance of negotiations into a conceptual and an operational basket—is being examined.

The third section investigates key fault lines and inflection points, as they emerged in the ACRS Working Group over time. Participating states' differing views on the relationship between arms control versus regional security on the one hand, and between the multilaterals and bilaterals on the other, are being examined, and their impact on the trajectory of ACRS is being evaluated. The analysis also probes the importance of important events for the fate of ACRS—including, but not limited to: the Oslo peace process, the 1994 Israeli-Jordanian Peace Treaty, the April 1995 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review and Extension Conference (NPT RevCon), and the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995. The section also critically appraises the role of personal relationships, as shared by interviewees.

The fourth section reflects on successes and failures of the ACRS Working Group. Among its successes, the working group created a precedent, or proof of concept, for comprehensive regional negotiations, while allowing for the cultivation of relationships and building of mutual trust among key parties. ACRS also afforded regional diplomats and officials a significant learning opportunity on arms control and multilateral negotiations, and produced tangible results especially in the operational basket. The working group proceedings further had a positive

impact on other conflicts and issue areas, and contributed to an unprecedented regionalization of the conversation about arms control and security among officials and experts. The section further reflects on the inability of key parties to overcome fault lines, a lack of sufficient regional political will and high-level international involvement at a later stage in the process, the absence of several regional states, and an asymmetry in capacity among regional parties, as among the main reasons for the demise of ACRS. The report concludes with a compilation of key lessons learnt for a future arms control and regional security process.

Contributions to the existing literature on ACRS and new findings

While many analytical studies and articles have been written on ACRS, even by individuals who had participated directly in (or had intimate knowledge of) the proceedings of the working group, no comprehensive account based on the recollections of all participating parties was ever compiled. The first, central contribution of this oral history therefore rests on its reflection of a significant wealth of primary source accounts. The project also created a collection of previously-unpublished documents from the negotiations, some of which were donated by American diplomats who participated in ACRS. The documents include meetings agendas, lists of participants, national statements, draft negotiated agreements, and correspondence among the negotiating parties.

Second, the study sheds light on previously underappreciated dimensions of the ACRS Working Group, including: the genesis of different national delegations, intra-delegation dynamics (especially within the Israeli and US delegations), and the substance and nature of consultations in key capitals, conducted in between specific ACRS plenaries.

Third, the oral history is not only rich in analytical reflection, but also brings the ACRS process “to life,” since it augments scholarly analysis with a wealth of anecdotes shared by interviewees from the different regional and extra-regional delegations.

Finally, the extensive reflections shared by Egyptian, Israel and US negotiators, in particular, suggest—when taken together—just how far apart key parties in ACRS remained on the principal issues. This reality points to the limited progress achievable in a situation of irreconcilable negotiating positions.

The Inception of ACRS

There is agreement among all those who were interviewed for the project that the convergence of several developments at the international and regional levels created an opportune moment in history that allowed for the establishment of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group. As one interviewee put it, the early 1990s marked “a turning point” on a “global basis.”

International and regional conditions

At the international level, the US found itself as the only superpower after 1990. In the First Gulf War, it had just demonstrated its capacity to mobilize the world and carry out a military operation that ended hostilities within 100 hours. In addition, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the change in Russia’s relations with the West opened up new opportunities for US leadership in the world. As one American interviewee put it, “Russia at that time was not a competitor” to the United States anymore.

A preponderance of power enabled the US to promote its nonproliferation agenda globally. As such, the 1990s were, as one American interviewee argued, “in many ways the golden age of arms control, in terms of the amount and variety of arms control agreements that were secured during the Bush administration.” The US felt it could initiate and support arms control and nonproliferation measures both at bilateral and multilateral levels. Bilaterally, just a few years earlier, the US and the Soviet Union had issued the 1985 Reagan-Gorbachev statement that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” In 1987, they had concluded the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, to be followed by the 1991 conclusion of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I). Positive arms control and nonproliferation developments also took place at the international level, with the US concluding the Agreed Framework with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1994, South Africa joining the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1991 as a Non-Nuclear Weapons State, the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) being concluded in 1993, while there was also progress in the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) negotiations.

At the regional level, the collapse of the Soviet Union also had a geo-strategic impact. On the one hand, it allowed for the launch of new initiatives since “there was no paralysis, there was no one side vetoing the other on every other issue,” according to an Egyptian interviewee. On the other hand, the collapse of the Soviet Union was also significant from a regional balance-of-power perspective: many Arab states lost their main benefactor and arms supplier, beginning to look at the US as a replacement. Israel’s position in the regional balance of power was strengthened, since its rivals had lost their patron and main weapons supplier. One Israeli interviewee reflected that “...with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia became a friendly power from the point of view of Israel, and the Arab states lost their sponsor.”

The defeat of Iraq in the First Gulf War also impacted the regional balance of power in multiple ways: It eliminated a significant threat to Israel, allowing the latter to take more risks. However, this event also further fragmented the Arab world – since both Yasser Arafat and Jordan supported Iraq during the war – and as a result, they lost political and financial support from key Gulf states and were forced to turn to the US for help.

In addition, the discovery of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, coupled with Saddam Hussein’s threat to use chemical weapons during the Gulf War (after having used them against Iran and Iraqi Kurds during the Iran-Iraq War), heightened regional proliferation and security concerns. According to an Egyptian interviewee, the emerging prospect of the actual use of WMD in a regional armed conflict “was really the impetus for Egypt’s proactive position” on regulating such weapons and expanding the idea of the Middle East Nuclear Free Zone to a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone. Israel’s concerns regarding regional WMD proliferation were also influenced by the increased threats posed by chemical weapons. As one Israeli interviewee recalled, “after having 41 rockets shot against Israel,” Israelis lived “with anti-gas masks every night for several weeks. And every night we had some rockets falling on Tel Aviv and Haifa.”

These developments at the international and regional levels facilitated the emergence of an environment in which ACRS became possible. As one interviewee observed, ACRS “was never an isolated phenomenon, but part of broader international and regional developments.”

The Bush initiative

Its decisive victory in the First Gulf War was perceived in the US as “an opportunity for restructuring, transforming the region... to make progress in promoting a more stable, secure region.” The US hoped, said one interviewee, “that the combination of developments would create an opportunity for the states themselves to be involved, to break through what had been a pretty icy stalemate in terms of the security situation in the region.”

This sense that the First Gulf War marked a turning point for the region, amplifying an atmosphere of general optimism, was shared among key regional states. An Egyptian interviewee noted that “the narrative and the debate in the region started shifting, from thinking about war and conflict and violence, to thinking about what the future of the region would look like in the context of peace. So, there was a change of mindset.” Similarly, an Israeli interviewee reflected that “we believed that we could move on things that would contribute to stability in the Middle East, and that would contribute to the lessening of tensions.”

With the conclusion of the First Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush addressed the US Congress on 6 March 1991 in what was coined the “New World Order” speech, in which he promulgated his vision for a new Middle East. The US’ new strategy for the Middle East, a US interviewee recalled, attempted to remedy what was perceived as a fundamental lack of a sense of regionalization among regional parties.

Both Egyptian and Canadian interviewees recalled that a regional process, intended to operationalize Bush’s “New World Order” speech, was also based on a promise made by the US

to those Arab states which had joined the US-led coalition in the First Gulf War. According to those interviewees, the US had promised it would make “a serious push to resolve the Arab-Israeli dispute when the Kuwait war was over.” In his speech, President Bush outlined four priorities for future US policy in the Middle East, which included the creation of shared security arrangements in the region, efforts to control the proliferation of WMD and the missiles used to deliver them, the creation of new opportunities for peace and stability, and initiatives to foster economic development.

Following the speech, the US started a concerted effort to implement these ideas by launching a regional process, conducting intensive shuttle diplomacy for eight months. That shuttle diplomacy was led by then US Secretary of State James Baker’s “personal involvement, backed by President Bush and Brent Scowcroft, to get the parties to Madrid, to a peace conference,” as one US interviewee recalled. Baker visited the region multiple times in preparation for the Madrid Conference to gain backing for an agreement on the text of invitations to the Conference, the list of attendees (and especially modalities for the way in which the Palestinians would be represented), the agenda, and a follow-up process.

The Madrid Peace Conference which took place on 31 October-1 November 1991, was co-chaired by President Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. It was attended by Israeli, Egyptian, Syrian, and Lebanese delegations, as well as a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. As one extra-regional diplomat recalled, it “was unheard of as a diplomatic achievement to get them all together. So, that in itself was a source for optimism.” Another extra-regional participant reflected that “the Madrid plenary, which was the starting point of the whole Middle East peace process, represented a tectonic shift in the Middle East.”

The Madrid Peace Conference inaugurated three direct bilateral negotiation tracks: Israeli-Palestinian, -Jordanian and -Syrian, alongside multilateral Israeli-Arab negotiations. The multilateral track included five working groups: refugees, economic development, water resources and management, environment, and arms control and regional security.

“Who is in and who is out”

The decision regarding whom to invite to participate in ACRS emanated from the United States’ vision for structuring the Middle East post-Gulf War. Given the primacy that Washington accorded to the bilateral tracks, and in order to support them, the Bush administration aimed at expanding the circle of countries involved in the process beyond the immediate parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict. As an American interviewee noted, after the Gulf War “we wanted to bring in Arab states who are not Israel’s immediate neighbors, but who are part of the region and who we want to be part of this discussion.” Participating states included 13 Arab States (Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen), Israel, and a Palestinian delegation (represented, at the beginning, as part of the Jordanian delegation, and later as a separate delegation). Bringing Saudi Arabia into the process, however, proved to be a challenge and the Kingdom agreed to participate, at least initially, only as part of a joint GCC delegation.

Iran, Iraq and Libya were invited to attend neither the Madrid Conference, nor the subsequent multilaterals. Reflecting on the reasons for not inviting these states, interviewees recalled that they did not accept “the international order as legitimate,” and argued that you “could not put Saddam Hussein (...) with the Kuwaitis in the same room” at that time. Alongside Muammar Qaddafi’s Libya, which was subjected to international sanctions, post-revolutionary Iran was considered a pariah and, according to an interviewee, “would have refused to come” since they did “not see Israel as a legitimate being.”

There was agreement among those interviewed that including these three countries –Iran, Iraq and Libya – in the multilateral process would have been “a bridge too far at that point.” An Egyptian interviewee noted that, “given the regional realities at the time, (...) this was the optimum that could be achieved in terms of inclusion in the process.” At the same time, there was also a recognition, according to a US interviewee, that it was “always envisioned (that), at some point, we would broaden the participation to include them, or at least create an opening for them to see if they would join.” An Egyptian interviewee similarly agreed that “there certainly was, I think, the recognition that should the ACRS agenda gain momentum, then, of course, there would have to be some sort of forum to include these other countries.”

Syria and Lebanon, although invited, chose not to participate in the multilaterals. According to one regional interviewee, Damascus and Beirut contended that “multilateral talks mean normalization of Israel: ‘How can we have normalization of Israel when they still occupy our territory?’”

In addition, many extra-regional states and organizations were brought into the multilaterals to support the process. In ACRS, such extra-regional parties included Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, China, Finland, France, Germany, India, Japan, the Netherlands, Turkey, the United Kingdom (UK), the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), among others.

The multilateral track and its relationship to the bilaterals

The US administration pursued five objectives in the multilateral track: First, it sought “to widen the orbit of peacemaking,” by bringing the other Arabs not involved in the bilateral track into the peace process and “to find a way of engaging them and making them participants,” rather than just having them as “observers, sitting on the sidelines... butting and criticizing.”

Second, the long-term objective of the multilateral track was to identify a “vision” for a post-conflict Middle East – “not as a vehicle for producing peace, but as a vehicle for changing the context in which we might be pursuing peace.” As one US interviewee recalled, the key challenge at hand was, “how can we begin to build a set of relations between those who’ve never had relations?”

Third, some of the issues covered by the multilateral working groups were seen as cross-regional issues that could not be resolved on an exclusively bilateral basis. The multilaterals, therefore,

were aimed at jumpstarting a process which, “down the road, after the bilateral agreements (were) concluded”, could address such issues.

Fourth, the multilateral track aimed at dealing “with what were regional sources of conflict and instability”, and fifth, at “identifying and delivering the dividends of peace that might encourage all sides in the bilaterals to make concessions or be accommodative”.

Other participating states shared some of these objectives. For example, an Egyptian interviewee reflected that the objective of the multilaterals was to “solve the big problems of the region related to water, desertification, all the issues that the Middle East is suffering from”, so that one might nudge the sides in the bilateral tracks towards concessions or accommodation, because they would see the “dividends of peace.”

While pursuing these five objectives, the multilateral track enjoyed a strong and unique relationship with the bilateral tracks. It is essential to critically appraise the nature of that relationship, if one is to fully account for the trajectory of ACRS:

From the onset, the United States intended for the multilaterals to play a supportive role to the bilaterals. As several US interviewees recalled, this made the former “subordinate to making progress on the bilaterals, which meant that we (could) only go so far in what we could achieve before they (would) get paced with regard to the bilateral tracks.” One US interviewee clarified that “it wasn’t so much that we were consciously trying to prevent the multilateral from getting ahead of the bilaterals... we had expectations that there would be other Arab partners who would deliberately try to slow it down, because (of) the sensitivity of not getting ahead of the bilaterals.” Another recalled that “there was a sense (that), if we put too much focus on this, it’s going to produce some blowback” from those who were concerned that the multilaterals might distract from the bilaterals. Therefore, giving the multilateral track “a lower profile, but allowing professional people to work” could create “a set of relationships that... (would) build a network that (would) allow you to make practical progress.” At the same time, the US did not think it prudent to wait for the bilaterals to be resolved, according to one US interviewee, “given the fact that there (were) things that we could do (to) enhance stability and reduce the risk of conflict.” The US hoped to keep the bilateral and multilateral tracks “somewhat separate, so that whatever obstacles or challenges were faced in the bilateral track did not spill over into the regional multilateral track.” Managing such separation required pursuing a delicate balancing act, which was not always done successfully.

Israel and Jordan held similar perspectives regarding the relationship between the multilaterals and bilaterals. For Israel, “the priority was (given) by far to the bilaterals,” and while its objective “was to decouple these tracks... at the same time, (Israel was) cognizant of the fact that ... progress towards peace was essential for progressing on some of the ACRS agenda.”

In general, Israel was highly suspicious of any non-bilateral negotiations involving regional states and also did not trust the involvement of extra-regional actors in the process. According to one Israeli interviewee, “Israel was very hesitant to allow any international dimension to the process. Because Israel has always been afraid of being cornered in international fora, alone against a coalition of regional and international players.” Another Israeli source noted that “our

comfort zone is when you leave us alone — that’s best.” Yet, Israel agreed to participate in the multilaterals due to US pressure, since “at that stage, Israel’s dependence on the USA reached a peak. And Israel could not say no to the United States, when the United States really wished to do something.” At the same time, Israel was not entirely averse to the multilaterals, but saw them “as beneficial in creating an atmosphere which would make it easier for (Israel’s) key bilateral partners to engage with (it) directly, as well as make compromises.”

Israel aimed at balancing “the security risks associated with concessions expected from it on the bilateral fronts” with a broader regional process that would advance Israel’s security, including with other regional states. According to an Israeli interviewee, who commented on the bilateral tracks, “it was clear that such a process would involve some painful decisions on the Israeli side. Particularly on territories on the one hand, and on the Palestinian issue in particular.” Israel tried to ensure that “this process would not merely yield concessions on the Israeli side on some of those issues, but would also involve, in return, a historical process of reconciliation of the Arab world with Israel.”

Jordan, because of its political isolation following the First Gulf War, and since it was joined by the Palestinians in what became a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation, viewed the bilaterals as central. As one Jordanian interviewee recalled, “we looked around the multilaterals (to identify) what concepts and ideas (we should) start implementing that would support and strengthen any of the bilateral talks... we did not want the multilaterals to be a process on their own.” Indeed, the interviewee noted that ACRS could not have taken place as a stand-alone process, without being embedded in a broader regional process, as well as being complemented by the pursuit of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. He observed, “before, (whenever you) talked about any arms control or disarmament... not one of these ideas succeeded, simply because they were not tied to any political process. You can’t have between two archenemies arms control when there is no political understanding or political agreement.” He recalled: “I ... kept saying that Ground Zero is the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. (If) that works, we move ahead, (if) that doesn’t work, I don’t care what you say, NPT, CWC, CTBT - so let’s just talk and watch the bilaterals as we’re going along.”

The Gulf States similarly accorded priority to the bilaterals. As one interviewee noted, “for us, the question was: Israel with the Syrians, Israel with the Lebanese, but primarily (...) Israel with the Palestinians... the other issues, we thought, (were) more or less marginal compared with the objective of the bilaterals.”

There was a perception among some Palestinian interviewees, meanwhile, that the multilateral track undermined the bilateral track. The multilaterals, said one interviewee, “were really a reward to Israel, ... a forum for normalizing direct Arab talks with Israel... prior to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”

Interestingly, Egypt was perhaps the country least concerned about the relationship between the bilateral and multilateral tracks. Egypt was “quite comfortable with either ... and didn’t see them (as) sequential.” “We were happy to do them in parallel,” one Egyptian interviewee recalled. According to another Egyptian source, “Egypt had a different perspective on the relationship

between the bilaterals and multilaterals. Since it already (had) peace with Israel... (and) did not have a central role to play in the bilateral tracks, (...) the multilateral is where (it) could play a role, and ACRS was the main (group) (it was) interested in.” Another Egyptian interviewee echoed that Egypt’s “assumption was that these two tracks — the bilateral tracks and the multilateral tracks — would proceed in tandem and in parallel. But (...) the implicit assumption was that should there be a settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and in particular the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – then we would be looking at new horizons.”

The conception of the ACRS Working Group

There are conflicting accounts as to how ACRS was included as one of the five working groups of the multilateral track. According to American interviewees, even before the First Gulf War concluded, Dennis Ross – who then served as the director of the United States State Department’s Policy Planning Staff – called a meeting with US diplomats covering the Middle East and arms control issues, with the objective “to plan the period after the war.” The idea was to convene a big regional conference, followed by a “series of bilateral meetings between Israel and several of its neighbors, as well as a multilateral process.” According to one US source, “there were five multilateral working groups set up – one was the working group on arms control and regional security, (and) it became known as ACRS.”

Countering the recollections of US interviewees, a few Egyptian sources recalled that the US administration presented three working groups in Madrid: the environment, economic cooperation and water. Egypt, according to these sources, then asked for a group on arms control to be added, while the Palestinians requested to include a working group on refugees. According to one Egyptian interviewee, “some of the members of the American delegation objected. But Baker ... turned around and said: if you’re talking about the future, and the Israelis want to talk about water, environment, and economic cooperation, well, they have to also engage on the other issues raised by us. So, he agreed to these proposals in his conference room, in our meeting with him, and he overruled his own delegation.”

The discrepancy in accounts as to which party came up with the idea to include ACRS as one of the working groups, and at what point in time, might have been caused by diverging recollections as to when the above-referenced discussion took place. The general invitation to the Madrid Conference noted that “The co-sponsors believe that those negotiations should focus on region- wide issues such as arms control and regional security, water, refugee issues, the environment, economic development, and other subjects of mutual interest.” Another factor that may have influenced this discrepancy is that the Israeli invitation did not include an explicit reference to “arms control and regional security.”

The genesis of the name of the working group was also a source of disagreement among interviewees. One Egyptian interviewee recalled that, as part of the multilaterals, his country requested a working group on disarmament, “using the regular UN language.” Another Egyptian interviewee recalled that “it was the Israelis who raised the issue of regional security, sort of connecting security to arms control, arguing that arms control doesn’t go in a vacuum.” The US, so his recollection, then turned to Egypt, probing whether it would be willing to drop the

reference to disarmament in the name of the working group, and for the latter to be called “arms control and regional security” instead – “to accommodate Western concepts and Israeli concerns about this being a regional issue.” Reflecting on this issue, Israeli interviewees noted that the Israeli priority was indeed on regional security. The American diplomats interviewed, meanwhile, did not recall that any particular attention was given to the order of “arms control” versus “regional security” in the working group title. One reflected: “Sometimes, one can read too much purposefulness into these decisions....we didn’t look at these as two competing objectives... Honestly, I don’t recall spending a lot of time coming up with the title.” Another American interviewee explained that “arms control and regional security” was a phrase, a package, with no implicit prioritization. While, in the end, the name “ACRS” was used by all participants, an Egyptian interviewee reflected that “we succeeded and failed because of substantial issues, not because of what the committee was called.”

Participating states’ objectives within ACRS

With President Bush’s “New World Order” speech having promulgated a grand vision for the region, the multilaterals in general – and ACRS in particular – aimed to “focus on the many sources of instability in the region” and what could be done to minimize them, according to US sources interviewed. The US envisioned “a long-term process” which would build incrementally and mold personal relationships that would be able to transform threat perceptions in the region. The hope was that such a process would “shape different relationships over time,” while also affording an opportunity to show that cooperation was possible. It was expected that meetings and activities, such as those convened in ACRS, could create the conditions in which to develop personal dynamics among the participants, who would in turn learn to better understand the perspectives of their counterparts.

Within ACRS, the United States’ overarching political goal was for regional parties to be able to agree on “where (they) want to go,” hoping to address the Arab states’ desire to work toward a WMDFZ. It was the US’ intention to “work in phases towards it” by creating confidence building measures, “so that countries don’t feel like they have to be at a high level of (military) readiness, because that can lead to mistakes and misperceptions and war through inadvertence or miscalculation.” The objective, according to an American interviewee, was thus not necessarily to “resolve conflict” – which was being done in the bilaterals – but “to reduce the risk of that conflict (and) trying to stabilize it.” The US approach was based on the view that “the region needed to deal with confidence building measures, before it got to these large questions of nuclear and other kinds of weapons,” without taking such questions off the agenda altogether.

Egypt’s perception of its position in the region at the time informed its objectives in ACRS. The country viewed itself as a “traditionalist from the developing ... and the non-aligned world,” with a longstanding inclination to focus on disarmament. Egypt’s objectives within ACRS included gaining parity with Israel. As one interviewee explained, “the region had to have equal obligations among all our parties. So even while Egypt joined the NPT... we didn’t drop the topic. We kept raising it all the time, everywhere.” From Egypt’s point of view, gaining parity required Israel’s nuclear disarmament and equal obligations, since the regional balance of power

would otherwise favor Israel and complicate the achievement of a regional security framework. “As far as Egypt is concerned,” an Egyptian source noted, “you cannot have a regional security framework in the Middle East while Israel has nuclear capabilities.” Yet, in pursuing ACRS, Israel was not Egypt’s only concern, since it “saw a creeping proliferation trend in the region” that required a new framework for regional security.

Additional, indirect Egyptian objectives in ACRS included the country’s reintegration into the Arab world, since Egypt had been an outcast following its 1979 peace treaty with Israel. Another objective was to define and ensure Egypt’s role within the Arab-Israeli peace process. As one Egyptian interviewee reflected, “we went there enthusiastically, but also a bit hesitant” – since “the spotlight was then not on Egypt”, the question became how to continue to show Egypt’s role in this process. Finally, Egypt entered ACRS cognizant of the fact that it could leverage its experience in multilateral disarmament fora, as well as in negotiating with Israel – experience which most of the other Arab states did not have.

Israel’s decision to attend the Madrid Conference in general, and to join ACRS in particular, was driven by its dependency on the US at the time. As one Israeli interviewee recalled, “Israel could not say no to the United States,... had no choice but to jump in, but unwillingly.”

Israel’s main goal in joining the multilateral track overall was to reduce regional tensions and conflict. Its objectives in ACRS, meanwhile, were more specific: On the one hand, Israel hoped that the working group could improve regional security, *inter alia* by helping to prevent unintentional and inadvertent conflict. On the other hand, Israel hoped that such progress could be made without affording other states, chiefly Egypt, a venue for pushing for Israeli nuclear disarmament and thereby threatening core Israeli security interests. Israel’s concerns were that “once we are starting to discuss this subject (i.e., nuclear disarmament), we are getting on a slippery slope. And it will be very difficult to stop it.”

Since Israel joined ACRS with a “deep degree of suspicion that the agenda would be biased against it, and (that) the composition of the group would create automatically an Arab majority,” leaving it isolated, it coordinated with the United States to find ways to assuage some of those concerns. By affording Israel an opportunity within ACRS to normalize relations with Arab counterparts, while also focusing the substantive discussions on issues that were broader than just the Israeli nuclear capabilities or conventional capabilities – for instance promoting structures and opportunities for regional security arrangements – the US hoped to mitigate Israeli fears regarding ACRS.

From Israel’s perspective, though the working group was called “Arms Control” first and “Regional Security” second, practical work would have to proceed in the reverse order. As one Israeli interviewee recalled, “we wanted to build a firm structure of regional security before we could actually proceed to proper arms control.” On the arms control issue specifically, Israel “called for a broader agenda (to include) all types of weapons of mass destruction,” advancing “the notion that even conventional weapons often have the effect of inflicting mass casualties.” Another Israeli interviewee reflected that ACRS took place at a time when Israel started to get involved in multilateral arms control negotiations, including toward the CWC and the CTBT –

“engaging on subjects that before ‘91 were unheard of.” Israel’s participation in ACRS was therefore reflective of a broader, nascent conviction “that Israel doesn’t have to be ashamed about presenting its position in the international community.”

Jordan’s objectives in ACRS reflected the country’s unique domestic situation and regional position. Since the Hashemite kingdom viewed itself as “a frontline state with Israel, its objective was the complete delineation, demarcation of borders, establishing security ... and economic relationships with Israel and Palestine.” It supported the principles and final aim of a ME WMDFZ, though not necessarily and exclusively through the NPT review process. As one Jordanian source explained, his country viewed “the NPT and all the other treaties (as) a means to an end, and not an end in themselves,” hoping that the NPT (could) “help us establish a weapons of mass destruction free zone, not the other way around.”

The Gulf States, meanwhile, viewed ACRS narrowly, and the multilaterals broadly as politically subordinate to the bilateral track, adamant that agreements in ACRS may not be reached “in a vacuum.” Their priority objective consisted in reaching a peace settlement in the Arab/Palestinian-Israel conflict. In discussions within ACRS on, for instance, confidence building measures, the Gulf participants’ yardstick was to ask: “What does it have to do with the peace settlement?”, as one interviewee recalled.

The Palestinians initially participated in ACRS as part of a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. While arms control per se was not a priority for the Palestinians, who acceded the utmost priority to their bilateral track with Israel, they nonetheless saw ACRS as an opportunity: “If the bilateral negotiations will lead to the creation of a Palestinian state, why should we miss this opportunity... to protect our interests, and to be part of regional security arrangements, even before the creation of the Palestinian state?”, one Palestinian interviewee reflected. In addition, the Palestinians saw their involvement in ACRS as an opportunity to “be recognized and treated as an equal partner in this process, as a state, as a country.”

Internal preparations

The internal preparations for the ACRS negotiations in each participating country were characterized by unique bureaucratic structures and processes. They were also reflective of the priority given to the issue of arms control and regional security within the respective governments, as well as of which agencies had the mandate to make decisions related to such matters. Most interviewees praised the preparatory work done by their own delegations and similarly applauded the perceived professionalism of their counterparts. Interviewees from most delegations also reflected that they had relatively clear parameters within which they could operate and rarely needed to involve high level decision-makers, as the negotiations did not get to a sufficiently advanced stage.

The US delegation was led by the State Department. The head of the US delegation was the Assistant Secretary (A/S) for Political Military Affairs (originally Dick Clark, succeeded by A/S Robert Gallucci, and then Deputy Assistant Secretary Robert Einhorn). Second in command within the delegation was the Deputy Assistant Secretary from the Near Eastern Affairs Bureau

who also served as the principal person overseeing the entire multilateral process (initially Daniel Kurtzer). Further involved were a coordinator (Fred Axelgard), and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) representatives (Jennie Gromoll and Michael Yaffe). The delegation was also conjoined to the office of the Special Middle East Coordinator's office (led by Dennis Ross). Representatives from various other agencies (e.g., the Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Department of Energy) were added to the delegation, based on need and expertise.

At the time, ACDA was independent from the State Department "and there was always us and them", as one US interviewee recalled. While the State Department had experience in bilateral negotiations with regional states, ACDA was staffed with experts on multilateral negotiations. The ACRS process, according to a US source, served as a "sort of a great equalizer. You had the feeling that you needed everybody there for their particular expertise."

The DOD was not represented in the US delegation to ACRS until 1992 – only "once it became real, then they realized they needed DOD in," one source recalled. Interestingly, within DOD, ACRS was considered a "seam issue", in that Middle East arms control was perceived to "not quite fit anywhere." Since the conventional negotiations office dealt with Europe only, while the non-proliferation office did not cover conventional negotiations, ACRS "didn't really fit in anyone's portfolio." The process was also unique from a DOD perspective in that it was not perceived to directly address core DOD equities and concerns: "We were fine with it... none of our stuff was in play... it was a very positive process, because we were trying to help them [regional states] sort things out between themselves," one source recalled.

Overall, US interviewees commended the US preparatory work for ACRS as "a great example of a good interagency working group process," involving "the A team." US interviewees also recalled a change in senior leadership involvement in the process as noteworthy. While, during the presidency of George H. W. Bush, US senior leadership had exerted great efforts in bringing regional states to the negotiation table, under the Clinton administration, there was less senior US involvement and the delegation was expected to avoid asking "for major investments in political capital." At the same time, there was guidance that the delegation should avoid major steps "that would complicate things in (the US') priority of the bilaterals."

The Egyptian delegation was led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). It was headed by Nabil Fahmy, who at the time served as the political advisor to the foreign minister of Egypt. Other members from the foreign ministry, who included Aly Erfan, were joined by representatives from the military, intelligence, and think tanks, such as Major General (Ret.) Ahmad Fakhr. The MFA also led the interagency process "with a very intense internal deliberation process." As an Egyptian interviewee recalled, "we had clear macro instructions, (from) all the way up to the top, (as to) what we could do as a delegation... and we basically had a free hand to push as far as we could, within that context... If we wanted to do grand design issues, we needed to go to the president, but ACRS never got that far."

The same Egyptian interviewee commented that it was very difficult to get technical advice during the negotiations "from the intelligence and military people, when they did not have prior

instructions.” To address that challenge, between different ACRS plenaries and sessions, the delegation held training simulations, in which some participants would impersonate members of other delegations. One Egyptian source recounted the experience: “And we would put ourselves in the shoes of others. And as we did this... a lot of the questions that ultimately came up in the meetings were raised in these simulation activities. And because they were raised in these activities, my colleagues from the military intelligence had the time to get authority to answer those questions.”

Israel’s decision to participate in ACRS was considered “a sea change in Israeli thinking about arms control.” In the decades preceding, one Israeli interviewee recalled, “we were, in most cases, behaving like the three monkeys: We never hear, we never talk, we never see.” The beginning of the multilaterals and ACRS compelled Israeli officials and diplomats to step out of their comfort zone, “because the decision was then taken to engage.” An Israeli interviewee recalled that Israel was prepared bureaucratically to join ACRS, since the decision to engage in ACRS built upon internal preparations in the late 1980s, to devise and coordinate an internal policy on the CWC, which was then being negotiated. A Senior Committee on Arms Control was formed under then Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir. Members included personnel from the Prime Minister’s Office, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Atomic Energy Commission, and the intelligence community – both military intelligence and Mossad. Members were nominated based on their personal experience and expertise and were jointly approved by the Defense Minister, the Foreign Minister, and the Prime Minister. David Ivry, then the Director General of the Ministry of Defense at the time, headed the committee, becoming its “center of gravity”. Ivry brought Yossi Draznin and Yekutiel Mor from the Ministry of Defense into the committee, who played central roles in its work, while representatives from the Foreign Ministry rotated. Reflecting on the set-up, the interviewee commented that the Ministry of Defense was “the most powerful component in the committee”.

Given its perceived lack of experience in multilateral or regional negotiations, Israel’s internal process ahead of engaging in ACRS greatly benefited from this prior work conducted in the context of the CWC negotiations: Working as a whole, Israel developed both a strategy for engagement in ACRS, as well as for setting up the mechanisms for supporting Israel’s participation in the working group over time, one source recalled. The high-level coordination was led originally by Sallai Merridor, at the time the principal assistant to the Ministry of Defense, Moshe Arens.

At the beginning, that internal process involved a few, handpicked individuals from the military, the intelligence, and other parts of the security establishment. It partially relied on the above-mentioned Senior Committee that had been established a few years earlier. Once the process had produced initial recommendations, those were presented to a high-level group, chaired by the Ministry of Defense, which then passed the recommendations to the Prime Minister. This preliminary preparatory process ultimately culminated in the set-up of an Inter-ministerial Steering Committee, which was mandated with devising the parameters of how Israel would coordinate the ACRS activities, as well as the composition of the Israeli delegation. David Ivry – the Director General of the Ministry of Defense at the time – headed the Committee and was then nominated to head the delegation to ACRS. The foreign ministry, once brought into the

process, was first represented by Eytan Bensur, at the time the Deputy Director General for North America and Disarmament at the Foreign Ministry.

The Inter-ministerial Steering Committee, headed by David Ivry, initially focused on becoming familiar with relevant terms and concepts used in multilateral and regional negotiations. As one source recalled, “we tried to learn, first, the language... ACRS had a different language... it had those kinds of expressions which you have to learn to understand.”

The Israeli delegation to ACRS was co-led by General Ivry from the Ministry of Defense, and Hanan Bar-on from the foreign ministry, though the coordination work was done within the Ministry of Defense. Ivry’s “right hands,” as a number of interviewees recalled, were Eli Levite and Uzi Arad, the latter serving at the Mossad. Coordination between the relevant Israeli government agencies was “done with great effectiveness” and “really approximated the pattern of successful interagency work”, according to one Israeli interviewee. Another stated that “part of it was the internal cohesion of the team”, which “was led by very able and respectable men.” “The involvement, in the process of people who came from the mainstream – both in terms of backgrounds and seniority,” so the interviewee continued, “lent the process enough credibility and flexibility to be able to put forward not just the resources, but the flexibility of positions.”

According to an Israeli interviewee, as work in the ACRS group proceeded, arms control issues were brought to the Minister of Defense or the Prime Minister for approval, while the delegation had a “free hand” on matters of regional security.

An Israeli interviewee also recalled close coordination with the US delegation prior to every meeting, usually “one day before the meetings, to try to give them our briefing about ... limits which we can go to, restrictions, and even ... new ideas to get into the discussion.” Israel felt that if the US delegation raised ideas conceived by Israeli officials, they would be considered more seriously and with less bias or suspicion by other parties.

Interestingly, one Israeli negotiator observed that, as a member of the delegation, he had to conduct two parallel negotiations: one with the other side, and one at home: “I had less problems with the other side in these talks, in most of the cases” so the solution was to involve the relevant counterpart department in the negotiations, “and it worked like magic.” It was further considered important to keep the military in the loop, so that “they understood what we were asking, they were sympathetic, they didn’t feel that their core interests would be compromised, they were constantly kept in the loop... without that, we wouldn’t have been able to make progress.”

Being trusted by policymakers and involving the military were also key components to the successful composition and administration of the ACRS delegation in Jordan. The head of the delegation, Dr. Abdullah Toukan, had been a science advisor to the King since 1978. It was in this role that he had become introduced to the military and security apparatuses, which molded his understanding of Jordan’s political structures and security concerns. He recalled that Jordan, being a relatively small country, did not suffer from too many competing, “squabbling” elements in the government when it came to ACRS. Once a political understanding on how to approach ACRS was in place, according to Toukan, and given that the Jordanian military was “very well

structured and put together”, it became relatively easy to proceed with the technical work in ACRS.

The Palestinian delegation participated as part of a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation until 1992. One Palestinian interviewee recounted that he had to travel to Tunis to persuade Ahmed Qurei (Abu Alaa)—who headed the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) economics department and was responsible for putting together, managing and overseeing the Palestinian delegations to all multilateral tracks—of the virtue of Palestinians attending ACRS as part of a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. Abu Alaa was initially opposed to that idea. But the Palestinian interviewee convinced him that, “if our objective is the right to national self-determination, and our goal is statehood, then all the more reason for us to assert and insist on our right to be represented in the ACRS basket, precisely because it involves states, because it’s only state actors... (that) have a meaningful part here to play. And we want to demonstrate that we are responsible, that we think arms control and security are important, that we have something to say.” He went on to argue that, “as people who are most directly affected both by Israeli occupation, but also by peace and security for Israel, ... we are in a position to ... say things that, maybe, other Arab states won’t.” At the conclusion of that meeting, Abu Alaa yielded and designated Yezid Sayigh to assemble the team.⁴

While the head of the Palestinian delegation reported back to Ahmed Qurei, Yasser Arafat had asked Yezid Sayigh – at the time his adviser on international affairs – to also update him on ACRS, “which created serious... sensitivity between the head of our delegation and Ahmed Qurei, and in turn (between) Ahmed Qurei and Arafat,” one Palestinian source recalled. The same source further lamented that, within the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation, the “Palestinian group was disorganized, unprepared, (and) some members of the delegation were not willing to even share the information that they had.” Another Palestinian interviewee countered that perception, explaining that any shortcomings of the delegation emanated from the fact that the Palestinians were at a great disadvantage relative to other parties in ACRS – not having had the chance to cultivate national armed forces, defense ministries, and civilian defense experts with knowledge and experience related to arms control and nonproliferation.

⁴ Yezid Sayigh headed the Palestinian delegation to ACRS from 1992-1994. He was succeeded as head of delegation by Ziad Abuzayyad.

The Format of ACRS

The format of ACRS evolved based on three principal considerations. The first was the primacy of the bilateral over the multilateral track, the second related to Israel's concerns over finding itself isolated in the ACRS Working Group, and the third concerned the reluctance among those Arab states lacking peace agreements with Israel to engage in direct talks with the latter. In order to mitigate these various concerns, it was decided that the US and Russia would serve the co-chairs of the working group, and that all decisions be adopted by consensus, with the principle that "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed." Proceedings within ACRS ended up being largely ad hoc: "a lot of what ended up happening was – you go ahead where you can go ahead," one US source recalled. As another American interviewee observed, "we were making it up as we went along... came to what was doable and acceptable at the moment, and went from that."

Co-chairs

Given the importance and sensitivity assigned to the ACRS Working Group by regional states, it was decided that the US and the Soviet Union (later Russia) – which had co-sponsored the peace process – should also serve as the co-chairs/co-gavel holders of ACRS. The decision to proceed in this fashion was taken in Madrid. As such, the US and the Soviet Union took it upon themselves to negotiate and facilitate the rules of procedure and agendas, and to issue co-chaired summaries and decisions made by the working group. Especially at the beginning of the process, the role of the co-chairs was also that of a messenger, or intermediary, between Israel and those Arab delegations that did not have a peace agreement with the former. As one interviewee recalled, "when ACRS began, many of the delegations – when they wanted to address Israel – raised the question with its co-chairs. And (they) would then dutifully repeat the question, and would also repeat the answers, going back and forth."

Though both the United States and the Soviet Union were formally co-chairs, the former viewed itself as the main driver behind the process, guiding, facilitating, coordinating and prodding the different parties, as and when required. Russia was less actively engaged, given its domestic situation following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Still, as one US interviewee recalled, "the Russians wanted to play the role... wanted to be constructive (and) saw (ACRS) as a platform to show they were a superpower, still." That interviewee continued, "their approach to this was extremely practical, and many of people that I'd worked with in the Foreign Ministry were real professionals, and they took pride in being able to develop ideas."

Regional interviewees also held that it was important to have both the US and Russia as co-chairs in ACRS, since that demonstrated great power unity in objectives and support of the process. Specifically, an Egyptian interviewee noted that it was important to have Russia involved "because it balanced a little bit the American position... it gave room... to us to argue a lot of details that would not have been in our favor as Arabs, if it (had been) only Egypt and America, or the Arabs and America" in the room. At the same time, many interviewees

emphasized that the US-Russian co-chairmanship was not equal, since “it was quite clear that the Americans pulled more weight” and were the ones leading the process.

Performing as the main facilitator of the process, the US attempted to identify ways to address the conflicting objectives and philosophies of the participating states. “Right from the outset,” one interviewee recalled, “the role of the United States and other extra territorial parties was to try to, somehow... bridge this difference, or if it couldn’t be bridged, at least kind of set it aside.”

A few months after the Madrid Conference, in January 1992, a Multilaterals Organizing Meeting was convened in Moscow with the participation of all the multilateral working groups to discuss their working procedures. Among other issues, it was agreed that the first meetings of ACRS would be convened in a seminar-style format. It was also agreed that proceedings of group meetings would be confidential, that no official records would be kept (with each delegation keeping its own records), and that every effort would be made to obtain consensus on all issues, especially “among parties directly involved.”

Steering Group

Since ACRS was conceived as one of five working groups, and in support of the bilaterals, a Steering Group was established to oversee and coordinate all five groups within the multilaterals process and identify synergies between them. The group was mainly used for the exchange of updates by the working groups on their recent activities, the issuance of general guidelines, and agreement on the future dates and venues of meetings. An Egyptian interviewee reflected: “I can’t recall that the Steering Committee (Group) had any substantive contribution.” He also noted that it was difficult for the multilaterals to achieve their “original purpose” and support the bilaterals, because the latter entailed “confidential negotiations.” The Steering Group continued to meet several times beyond the demise of ACRS, until 2000.

According to another Egyptian interviewee, the Steering Group faced a herculean task, given the differences in membership composition and agendas of the working groups: “It was an impossible task... these working groups were humongous, ... for example, the regional economic development working group had 60 countries, ... working on 10-15 sectors, from transportation to tourism to energy, ... water and environment, and refugees. ... So (there) was some form of resemblance of coordination, but it didn’t even scratch the surface.”

A Palestinian interviewee echoed the sentiment that an organizational structure, able to oversee all tracks and entailing an “effective transmission process or mechanism” that could identify “sticking points”—or, conversely, positive achievements in the bilaterals that were pertinent to the multilateral track – did not exist in a clearly “purposeful or structured” fashion. An Egyptian interviewee implied that, had the Steering Group been effective, it would have exerted greater efforts in seeking to get Egypt and Israel to bridge their differences in the process. Meanwhile, a Turkish interviewee lamented that his country was not originally included in the Steering Group, and that the United States only approached Turkey once progress in ACRS came to a halt and the US administration was looking for external support to help revive the process.

Informal and voluntary process

According to several interviewees from extra-regional delegations, the informal nature of discussions within ACRS was highly conducive to the proceedings. As one noted, “because all these countries... were in deep crisis of confidence..., anything strictly official was making them uncomfortable, they were thinking that... anything they said or accepted or agreed on could easily work against them.” The informal nature of the ACRS process allowed people to be “more relaxed, more willing to discuss or get into a conversation or discussion with the other parties, thinking that if they say or do something, it wouldn’t come back to them as an obligation.”

Given the deep mutual mistrust and lack of confidence among regional states, it was highly important to enable them to simply talk to each other. As another extra-regional participant noted, before ACRS, “they were not talking to each other. Especially on issues like disarmament, regional security, nuclear issues, exchange of information, military information - these were things from outer space for them. These issues were all untouchables, sacred issues.” Echoing the importance of informality, an Israeli interviewee recalled: “We insisted that there would be no record, because we were expecting the whole thing to be a campaign against Israel.”

Another principle guiding the deliberations within ACRS was that participation in the talks and implementation of agreed measures were voluntary. Concretely, in specific discussions, not everyone was expected to take part, and those parties preferring to stay on the sidelines were welcomed to do so, while participation in agreed-upon activities was voluntary. Egypt supported this approach, conceding – according to one delegate – that “logically..., you can’t force arms control issues, you can’t force security issues on anyone. It has to be: those who want to participate, participate, and those who don’t want to participate, don’t.”

A process of decision-making by consensus

As noted, the negotiations in ACRS commenced with a decision that an effort would be made to adopt all decisions by consensus. To Israel, joining 13 Arab states in ACRS and fearful of finding itself isolated and in an automatic minority, the decision-making-by-consensus principle was crucial. According to an Israeli interviewee, that principle was the only one Israel insisted upon, since it feared that the Arab delegations would otherwise “gang up” on Israel and leave it “too exposed.” That said, even select Israeli sources conceded that the consensus principle held disadvantages, “because you need all the countries to agree on any paper.”

Conceptual and operational baskets

During the 4th ACRS Plenary Meeting, which took place in November 1993 in Moscow, the United States suggested to consolidate the ACRS process into two “baskets,” which was accepted by regional states. The conceptual basket would henceforth focus on creating general principles and norms to guide regional security. Topics of discussion included long-term objectives and declaratory measures, verification, the definition of the region for the purpose of arms control and regional security, the future application of insights and lessons learned from

past arms control proposals, and confidence and security building measures (CSBMs) in the Middle East.

The operational basket, meanwhile, would focus on technical CSBMs in four agreed areas: maritime issues (with discussions led by Canada), exchange of military information and pre-notification of certain military activities (led by Turkey), the establishment of a regional communication network (led by the Netherlands), and the establishment of a Regional Security Center (led by Australia).

The rationale behind having extra-regional parties lead the operational baskets was based on the idea that, according to one US source, the “middlemen, mediators in a negotiation are more likely to be trusted when they don’t have large, vested issues in the ongoing negotiation.” Indeed, there was an appreciation among regional states of the contribution made by the “mentor states.” One regional participant reflected that the external parties “cared about the multilaterals as a whole, and certainly about the details, they created an ambience to make more progress.” Another commented that “they understood what was required of them and did a brilliant job.”

Several interviewees from the region argued that the division between a conceptual and an operational basket constituted a tactical compromise, aimed at preventing any specific topic or state from blocking progress. It was also an approach aimed at enabling the parties in ACRS to work more closely between the plenaries. Another objective of separating agenda items between the two baskets, according to one interviewee, was to facilitate more timely results on easier-to-negotiate issues: “to try and create... a group that can succeed, that can begin to do things, that can begin to show some impetus, to show that... dialogue and agreements are possible,” while other issues “would take a long time.” In practice, the division between the baskets was also a functional one, since diplomats usually convened in the conceptual basket, while technical and military experts discussed measures in the operational baskets.

Israel, specifically, supported the idea of the two baskets for its own political reasons. Israeli delegates hoped that the operational basket would “generate an interest... a stake for the smaller stakeholders, in the CBMs side, the practical side of the process,” without Egypt being “in a position to trip this up.” Egypt, conversely, did not oppose the basket split in principle, guided by a willingness to be as flexible as possible “on tactics,” as long as the two baskets would “move in parallel” and as long as the conceptual basket would yield “a substantial discussion on all issues of arms control.”

“Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed”

In order to address Egypt’s fundamental concern that the operational basket might proceed ahead of the conceptual basket, as well as worries by other Arab states that the multilaterals might yield results faster than the bilaterals, parties in ACRS agreed to operate under the assumption that “nothing is agreed unless everything is agreed.” They further concurred to “put aside” issues for further reference or implementation, in order to facilitate the acceptance of texts. As such, all the measures agreed and concluded in the operational basket were “put aside” until such time when there would be a final agreement.

According to a US interviewee, the “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” approach was “the guiding principle for us in the bilateral negotiations. So, it wasn’t particularly surprising that that should also be applied to the multilaterals.” A Turkish interviewee claimed that these two principles were introduced by his country, based on its experience in the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). He considered the approach crucial to achieving those measures that were concluded because parties were cognizant of the fact that they would not be obliged to implement them before the successful conclusion of the bilaterals.

A seminar-type and educational format

In the organizing meeting for the multilaterals, convened in January 1992 in Moscow, it was furthermore agreed that the initial meetings in ACRS should follow a seminar-type format. The objective was to “enable parties to begin the process of confidence-building and mutual familiarization.” It was agreed that “presentations would be made on the concepts and methods of arms control and on the lessons to be learned from previous arms control experience in various contexts. Initial meetings would be the first step in a determined, step-by-step process which sets ambitious goals and proceeds toward them in a realistic way.”

The seminar-type format was aimed at serving several objectives. First, the focus on “listening and learning” was meant to address the concerns of those Arab states that were not comfortable to negotiate directly with Israel. According to an Egyptian interviewee, “everybody else was careful. They didn’t have peace agreements yet with Israel, weren’t comfortable. And the whole idea of arms control and confidence building measures and verification was not something that they could politically accommodate.” An American interviewee added that, since regional states “were not prepared to talk about regional security issues right away... we began with this educational process of sharing experiences that took place outside the region.”

Second, there was a significant discrepancy among regional parties regarding the level of relevant knowledge and expertise. The objective was, therefore, to establish “at least some degree of a shared foundation in terms of understanding ... of what we’re trying to do and what tools we have available to us to do that.” Another participant noted that the seminar-type approach “helped the respective representatives to gradually acquire the terminology, the concepts, the mechanisms that would make them assess if progress is something they could live with.” Relatedly, some hoped that adopting such a methodology would empower Arab countries other than Egypt to participate in the discussions: As one interviewee noted, “outside of Egypt, there weren’t real regional experts in arms control and regional security in most of the other states. And so, most of them looked to Egypt. But at the same time, we wanted to develop that expertise in other countries. And that meant starting at the basics.”

Third, the seminar-type approach allowed the conveners to start with a broad vision, “at a 50,000 foot level, to talk about what the ultimate goals (were), which included the establishment of WMDFZ...and then work from the very bottom (on) how to achieve it.”

Fourth, presentations in the initial seminars referenced the US-Soviet and European experiences with arms control. These were used as reference points, not only because the US and Russia co-chaired ACRS and might have felt a natural inclination to share their own experiences, but also to demonstrate how two sides as hostile as the US and the Soviet Union could work out issues in non-intrusive areas. Several regional interviewees, especially from Israel and Jordan, came to view the European experience as especially useful. An Israeli interviewee, for instance, recalled: “The fact that, after those terrible years, wars, you had not only a European process of reconciliation, but you had a growing process of integration, unification, coming to terms,” was a real lesson.

For these reasons, all regional interviewees concurred on the usefulness of the seminar-type approach. At the same time, there was degree of resistance from some regional states concerning the applicability of others’ experiences to the region. As one interviewee recalled, “that’s all very interesting, but the Middle East is different.” An Egyptian interviewee recounted that “what bothered us by this is, the two superpowers and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-Warsaw (Pact) were in a Cold War. We were in a real war. So, the idea that you could do visits - how can you do visits with each other, if you don’t recognize each other?” The interviewee went on to acknowledge that “we took those lessons that we felt could be applied in the Middle East, and suggested them as Middle Eastern things, but a bit more gradually.”

Another concern, related to the implications of the US-Soviet arms control model for the Middle East, was raised mostly by the Arab Gulf states and concerned the Soviet demise: “The European experience created anxiety among some of the Arab parties that their regime will fall victim to the same outcome that affected the Soviet Union,” one interviewee recalled.

Over time, the seminar-type, educational format evolved into more practical “field trips”, which were intended to help the parties understand the various options for CBMs, as well as observe facilities related to verification and monitoring. This was considered useful since, “for many of the diplomats who were there, they had never seen a bio laboratory or a nuclear power plant... It made the discussions more concrete.” Also, as regional states became more familiar with each other and with the terminology used in ACRS, according to an American interviewee “there was a transition: I call it the... regionalization of the ACRS process. And it was reflected in venues... gradually you had important meetings in Cairo and Tunis, and Oman, and in Doha, and elsewhere in the region.” Many interviewees contended that it was necessary to go through the educational phase before ACRS could reach that stage of greater regionalization, “because most members in the region did not have the background, didn’t have this toolbox of security building measures drawn.”

Emerging Fault Lines and Inflection Points

As noted in the discussion on the inception of ACRS, different parties entered the process with different objectives and different ideas regarding the relationship between arms control versus regional security (in ACRS) narrowly, as well as between the multilateral and bilateral tracks broadly. This section of the report focuses on how these areas of disagreement manifested themselves *over time* in the ACRS Working Group, and what the consequences were for the process. The analysis will also probe whether particular events or decisions had a crucial impact on the trajectory of ACRS, as well as reflect on the role of personal relationships in the process.

The relationship between arms control and regional security over time

The divergent Egyptian and Israeli expectations regarding the sequencing of discussing arms control versus regional security, as well as the overall objectives of ACRS, would increasingly become exposed in the work of the conceptual versus operational baskets.

Israel had originally viewed, and continued to view, the basket split as a means to advance its overarching objective of making progress on regional security, while stalling on arms control. Rather than going “directly from A to Z,” or starting “to build the house from the roof,” ACRS would have to go “from CBMs, to CSBMs, to conventional weapons,” and so on. Meanwhile, the Egyptian delegation went along with the basket split in the spirit of “flexibility on tactics,” as long as it would yield “a substantial discussion on all issues of arms control.” There was hope for some time, as one Egyptian put it, that moving forward and allowing progress in the operational basket would nudge Israel to, at a minimum, start serious talks on nuclear arms control.

Reflecting on the basket split with hindsight, Egyptian delegates acknowledged that it was a US attempt to “walk the thin line, accommodating the Egyptians and accommodating the Israelis”—it was “procedurally a necessary decision”, but how one would integrate their results, especially if work in the two baskets would proceed at different speeds, was a concern from the outset. In short, Egypt intended the arms control and regional security dimensions of ACRS, which came to be operationalized in two baskets, to be discussed in parallel at best, or at a minimum for progress on the latter to kick-start serious work on the former. Instead, an Egyptian perception of complete Israeli stalling on arms control set in and hardened over time. By the time of the Tunis plenary, one Egyptian delegate recalled, Egypt had concluded that Israel would never seriously discuss the issue of WMD within ACRS.

Reflecting on this discrepancy in Egyptian versus Israeli approaches, and the dilemma it created for US policy, one Israeli delegate suggested that the Americans had sought to entice Cairo to allow the operational basket to progress by suggesting the formula of “nothing will be agreed until everything is agreed.” When the disconnect between progress in the two baskets became too acute, however, Egypt “panicked, draining ACRS of energy and contributing to its demise”—according to the Israeli delegate.

The relationship between the bilaterals and multilaterals over time

As noted earlier, different parties in ACRS also differed in their assessment of the desirable relationship between the bilaterals and the multilaterals, of which ACRS was a part.

The United States had intended ACRS and the other multilateral working groups as a “complement” to the bilaterals, which meant “subordinate to” or “one step behind” them. The pace of progress on the bilaterals, so the expectation of US diplomats, would dictate the speed at which ACRS could proceed, rather than vice versa. Echoing such a view, some of the Arab states in ACRS nonetheless feared that Israel might instrumentalize ACRS narrowly, or the multilateral track broadly, as a vehicle for normalization.

As ACRS proceeded over time, such fears received renewed impetus whenever the bilaterals appeared to stall. Kuwait was especially sensitive to the trajectory of the Israeli-Syrian track, considering the pro-Kuwaiti position Damascus had taken on the occasion of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990. A reluctance to be perceived as unduly supporting ACRS in the absence of progress in the bilaterals manifested itself concretely in diplomacy toward the end of ACRS: When Qatar organized its ACRS plenary in May 1994, a Kuwaiti delegate recalls, there was an instruction from her government to “forget about attendance there,” given difficulties in the bilaterals at the time. Though Egypt was less insistent on the sequencing of the bilateral and multilateral tracks, an Egyptian diplomat similarly recalled that, occasionally, “difficulties in the bilaterals”—especially concrete adverse events on the ground—would “overshadow” the multilaterals, since ACRS delegates could not just “pretend that we, sitting in this room in Vienna, are working in a vacuum and in isolation.” Yet at the same time, that same Egyptian delegate acknowledged that the inverse logic occasionally applied, too: “Oslo had a very positive effect on the multilaterals...was a breath of fresh air at the time.”

Israel—which had entered ACRS keen to “decouple” the two tracks—grew more comfortable with the multilaterals as they proceeded and evolved. As one Israeli commented, the “multilaterals had a positive effect on the bilaterals” and Israel even agreed to include “an entire paragraph on commitments on arms control” in the Israeli-Jordanian Peace Treaty. One Israeli interviewee went as far as to argue that the agreements achieved within ACRS should have been implemented regardless of progress (or the absence thereof) in the bilaterals. Furthermore, one Israeli interviewee observed that, over time, Israel grew increasingly cognizant of the diplomatic dividends to be reaped from engaging others beyond the bilateral basis: “The breakthroughs Israel experienced were not only with Russia that established full diplomatic relations and so on ... The breakthroughs with Russia, with China, and with India. ... for us, a very significant indication that the world was very much changing.”

Important episodes and inflection points

The ACRS years were marked by important moments that delegates recalled in the oral history interviews. Some of those occurred early on, such as a first informal meeting in La Jolla, California in March 1993, at which the US hosts were persuaded to convene mixed Arab-Israeli groups rather than keeping the Israelis separate. And as one Arab delegate recalled, “my God, it

just took off.” US delegates also remembered the “remarkable spirit” at the first ACRS plenary in Washington DC in May 1992, characterizing the regional delegations’ eagerness to “lean forward” and engage as “just amazing.” But the discrepancies in objectives, discussed above, already came to light, though they would not flare up until later. One participant recalled that, at that meeting, David Ivry, head of the Israeli delegation, told the plenum in his first address that, “Yes, our prophets spoke about beating swords into plowshares, but they never mentioned nuclear weapons”. Facing that principled Israeli reluctance to discuss nuclear weapons, the Egyptian delegation arrived in Washington with a “comprehensive action plan,” so extensive that a senior US negotiator told his Egyptian counterparts: “They [the Israeli delegation] can’t swallow this. You’ll scare them.” Others, however, recalled some hope, amid the second ACRS plenary in Moscow in September 1992, that the divergences between Egyptian versus Israeli approaches could be overcome. At that plenary, the Israeli delegation, in carefully crafted language, articulated the circumstances under which it would be possible for all states in the region to accede to the NPT.

As the ACRS talks proceeded, there were important events and developments – some positive, other detrimental – that shaped the broader context for the working group and had an impact on its trajectory. Those included Israel’s signing of the CWC in 1993, the Oslo peace process, the 1994 Israeli-Jordanian Peace Treaty, the April 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference (NPT RevCon), and the November 1995 assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

The Chemical Weapons Convention

When Israel signed the CWC in January 1993, between the second and third plenaries of ACRS, its message to Egypt was “See, we take global treaties seriously,” as one Israeli diplomat recalled. It was the first time that Israel publicly articulated its vision to achieve a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone that includes nuclear disarmament.⁵ Egypt, however, was skeptical of what it perceived as the “compartmentalization of national security,” i.e., the signing of one agreement, like the CWC, while refusing to accede to the NPT. Israel was reportedly “annoyed” by the Egyptians’ dismissive attitude to its signing of the CWC, according to an Israeli source.

The Oslo Accords

The Oslo peace talks culminated in the signing of the Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles in September 13, 1993 – sometime between the third and fourth ACRS plenaries. The revelation of the Oslo talks energized the separate Israeli-Jordanian talks towards a bilateral peace treaty in 1994, according to a Jordanian source. When it came to the impact of the Oslo

⁵ Shimon Peres, “A Farewell to Chemical Arms”, Speech at Signing Ceremony of the Chemical Weapons Convention Treaty, Paris, January 13, 1993, https://unidir.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/1993.01.13_Peris-A%20Farewell%20to%20Chemical%20Arms.pdf. Emily Landau, “The Role of Public Declarations in Egyptian-Israeli Relations,” in Michael Krepon, Jenny S. Drezin, and Michael Newbill, “Declaratory Diplomacy: Rhetorical Initiatives and Confidence Building,” *Stimson Center*, April 1, 1999, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep10909.8>, and Ariel E. Levite, “Global Zero: An Israeli Vision of Realistic Idealism,” *The Washington Quarterly*, 2010, Issue 2, Volume 33, 2010 pp. 157-168, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636601003674038>.

process on the proceedings of ACRS, interviewees offered nuanced assessments, though many noted their “surprise” when news about the peace talks became public. Some recalled the “very positive effects” of the Oslo Accords on the multilateral track in general, since they provided a “breath of fresh air at the time.” One Palestinian diplomat also recalled that the work done in the economic working group of the multilateral track, prior to the Oslo Accords, greatly benefited the Palestinians and Israelis in their subsequent bilateral talks, given the “accumulation of knowledge” that the multilateral track had allowed for.

The 1994 Israeli-Jordanian Peace Treaty

The 1994 Israeli-Jordanian Peace Treaty, meanwhile, was considered “not as big as Oslo,” though it still impacted ACRS positively. One American delegate recalled that the treaty’s codification of an OSCE-type idea for the Middle East served as a “springboard” for ACRS to continue the discussion on a charter for such an organization.⁶ Another senior US diplomat situated the peace treaty in an “optimistic” period in which “a lot of the progress was made in the CBMs, working out the texts of agreements,” without stipulating a direct causal link between such progress in ACRS and the treaty. Yet another ACRS delegate recalled the second operational basket meeting in Amman, less than one month after the signing of the peace treaty, as characterized by an “incredible atmosphere,” with the Israeli delegation arriving “across the Allenby bridge, the first time, legally” onto Jordanian territory.⁷ The 17-member working-level meeting in Amman reached an expert-level agreement to establish a regional conflict prevention center. Other aspects of the operational basket were addressed, including communications, information exchange, and maritime issues.

The 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference

⁶ Under Article 4, 1.b in the Israeli-Jordanian Peace Treaty both sides “commit themselves to the creation, in the Middle East, of a Conference on Security and Co-operation in the Middle East (CSCME).” The commitment entailed the adoption of “regional models of security successfully implemented in the post-World War era (along the lines of the Helsinki Process) culminating in a regional zone of security and stability.” See “Treaty of Peace Between The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan And The State of Israel,” October 26, 1994, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IL%20JO_941026_PeaceTreatyIsraelJordan.pdf.

⁷ Another US delegate extensively reflected on the Allenby bridge episode: “The embassy convinced the Israelis to open the Allenby bridge, so that we... could cross it so we could get to this meeting in time, which was just unheard of... So we come across looking like, you know, something out of a movie..., there’s dust and everything and, and we get to the guard..., and he wants to have our business cards so that he can call and say that we’re there because our ride wasn’t there. ... And he sees my business card and it says arms control. And he’s sure that I’m an arms dealer. What else could it be? It says arms, arms control. And he says ‘No, we’re not letting you into Jordan.’ So there weren’t cell phones at the time. I just happened to have Abdullah Toukan’s personal telephone number. He calls him and Abdullah Toukan is about to have a heart attack, because he’s amazed that we’re going across the Allenby bridge, which is unheard of. And it’s very secretive. Nobody was supposed to know, this was a major deal. And... I could hear him yelling at this border guard... You’d think having an American vehicle come across the bridge would be ... enough to suggest to you this is a big deal. You know, the King is waiting for them... This guy almost peed his pants. He came back out again. He was so sorry. But we still didn’t have a ride. We’re still just standing there in the dust and it’s like an hour until the meeting. And finally you see this dust trail sort of coming down the hillside. And this young guy gets out of, sort of the stretch bulletproof limousine, belongs to the ambassador... It shows the level of interest and red carpet for us to make progress.”

Further, since an Egyptian-Israeli disagreement over nuclear arms control became a growing stumbling block in the ACRS talks, anticipation of the April/May 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference⁸ left its mark on the working group proceedings:

The Egyptian narrative on the 1995 RevCon and its relationship to ACRS betrays the “double pressure” felt by Cairo at the time – on the one hand, “Israeli intransigence on the nuclear issue in ACRS (was) increasing,” all while Egypt also came under pressure to agree to an indefinite extension of the NPT. Under those circumstances, Egypt felt it was “being taken for a ride” and threatened that “unless all five working groups [of the multilateral track] were working seriously, they would all stop.” Another Egyptian diplomat recalled that the anticipation of the 1995 RevCon had become the “elephant in the room” in ACRS by late 1994, and then became what “pulled the plug on ACRS” (rather than on the multilaterals more generally, which were sunk according to this interviewee by Netanyahu’s ascent to power and his position on the bilaterals).⁹ An expectation for Egypt to make “a blind leap of faith” – agree to an indefinite extension of the NPT – all while there was no Israeli “intention of giving any indication of any future commitment on the nuclear issue” that would help Egypt “swallow that pill,” “simply couldn’t work and did not work.” Reflecting on Egyptian attitudes in the context of the 1995 RevCon, American delegates recalled that ACRS “was already losing steam” by early 1995, as Egypt was set to push harder on regional progress in the NPT context given the prevailing “resistance to really making strong progress on the WMD issue within ACRS.”

Israel’s perspective on the events leading up to the RevCon and following it, meanwhile, differed starkly from the Egyptian account. Israeli negotiators in ACRS viewed Egypt – and its Foreign Ministry led by Amr Moussa in particular – as responsible for “derailing the entire multilateral process” in the context of the 1995 NPT RevCon, with one interviewee putting the blame for the demise of ACRS “squarely on the shoulders of the Egyptian Foreign Ministry.” Another Israeli diplomat echoed that sentiment, musing that the 1995 RevCon provided Egypt with “a kind of scapegoat, or pretext, in order to simply cut the bullshit, and then go the other way in... setting that subject (meaning: Israel’s nuclear weapons) on the international agenda.” A third Israeli negotiator commented that the 1995 conference “only reinforced the Israeli suspicion that the Egyptians would use every conduit, every platform, every opportunity to do nuclear grandstanding.” To that diplomat, it was the combination of “what was happening outside ACRS with the NPT Review Conference, what was happening within ACRS, and what was happening in the other multilaterals where the Egyptians were trying to block any normalization,” that was proving “extremely corrosive” for the overall process.

⁸ 25 years after its entry into force, the NPT was extended for an indefinite period of time at the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference. While unable to adopt a Final Declaration, the States Parties of the NPT adopted three decisions and one resolution. The Middle East Resolution called on “all states in the region to take practical steps in appropriate forums aimed at making progress towards, inter alia, the establishment of an effectively verifiable Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction, nuclear, chemical and biological, and their delivery systems.”

⁹ The sentiment that ACRS “failed a few months before the rest of the multilaterals failed” was shared by some other interviewees. For further discussion, see Section 4 on the problems and failures in ACRS.

Another series of events, occurring around the NPT Review Conference, is worth recalling, since Egyptian and Israeli diplomats similarly differ on what transpired and when. According to news articles, Israel agreed in February 1995 to some kind of timeline, which stipulated when it will consider joining the NPT. According to these accounts Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, during a visit to Cairo, proposed to Foreign Minister Amr Moussa that Israel would strive for a nuclear-free Middle East – two years after bilateral peace treaties have been signed with all countries in the region, including Iran. At that time, “when regional disarmament is introduced, Israel would consider joining international weapons supervision conventions, including the NPT,” according to the account.¹⁰

According to lead Egyptian negotiator Nabil Fahmy,¹¹ a few weeks before the NPT Review and Extension Conference, Foreign Ministers Shimon Peres and Amr Moussa reportedly met again in New York. At that meeting, Peres offered for Israel to commit to joining the NPT “one year after achieving a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace.” Fahmy claims he advised Moussa to reject the proposal at the meeting, since “Peres did not have the authority” to make such an offer. He also recalled that Peres promised that Director General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry Uri Savir would follow up with a visit and a letter to Cairo to confirm the agreement, which he never did.

According to a US source, Peres and Moussa discussed the issue several times after the NPT Review Conference. In late September 1995 the two met again in New York on the margins of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) where they agreed to hold “preliminary discussions” on the possibility of holding talks on the WMDFZ under ACRS auspices. Such discussions, it was said, would be convened among a limited group of regional parties. The initial list of parties under consideration included Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and those with emerging ties to Israel such as Morocco. Then again, on December 7, 1995 a month after the assassination of Israel’s Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, due to the anticipated imminent resumption of Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations, Mubarak assured Peres that Egypt would not press Israel on NPT adherence for one year or would revisit the issue after a Syrian-Israeli agreement had been reached – whichever came first. However, Mubarak said there was no change in Egypt’s willingness to allow ACRS to move forward unless its expectations in terms of ACRS addressing the WMDFZ issue were being met.

The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin

Moving into the fall of 1995, the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November was a watershed event regionally and internationally, with clear implications for the viability of the multilateral track broadly, and ACRS specifically. Among extra-regional delegates, there was a feeling that Rabin’s assassination and the subsequent election of Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister in 1996, were “the nail in the coffin” of ACRS, a “tragedy” that left many ACRS participants “devastated,” led “everything to stop,” and “everything formal to come to an end.” A senior Arab delegate recalled that “it was just nothing but downhill after that,” and that Rabin had rightly understood that the only way to “preserve the Jewish character of the State

¹⁰ “Peres’s NPT offer to Mubarak,” *Mideast Mirror*, February 22, 1995.

¹¹ Fahmy, *Egypt’s Diplomacy in War, Peace and Transition*, pp. 120-121.

of Israel is to withdraw to the 1967 borders, with a few adjustments on the borders.” The damage to ACRS, according to most Arab and extra-regional delegates interviewed, materialized as a by-product of the demise of the bilaterals following Rabin’s killing. Once Netanyahu was elected, “it was very difficult for the multilaterals to go ahead,” “the peace process began to decline... , (and) as a result, the multilaterals declined as well,” one recalled.

The growing regionalization of the ACRS process

Beyond such individual events and inflection points, the decision to move ACRS plenaries into the region – after holding them initially in Washington DC and Moscow – also had an important impact on the atmosphere in the working group. The fifth ACRS plenary took place in May 1994 in Doha, Qatar and was succeeded by a sixth and final plenary in Tunis, Tunisia in December of that year, all while various conceptual and operational basket meetings were convened in Egypt and Jordan, among other places. US delegates characterized the shift of ACRS into the region as “incredible,” “fascinating,” “celebratory,” a “big thing,” a “symbolic breakthrough,” with “negotiations taking place on Arab soil” implying a certain “recognition of the Israelis,” even though security had to be “incredibly tight.”

Israeli diplomats, recalling their trips to Doha and Tunis for the ACRS plenaries, shared the sense of historic importance. One recalled that, for him, as a pilot having served “during the Six Day War... flying over there to Egypt, and then on Saudi land, and so on, to land over there [Doha] was a major personal experience.” This “major progress,” he continued, came “after a major phase in which we understood that people are people, we can talk, we can talk freely.” Another Israeli diplomat characterized Qatar’s decision to host the fifth plenary as “dramatic,” as having an “unreal layer” to it, as indicative of “just how profoundly the region has changed”: “Did I ever imagine that, as a lieutenant colonel in active service in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), I would go swimming in the Persian Gulf, with some French and Russian members of the delegations?”, he mused. The impact was strong even though he and his colleagues “couldn’t roam around” and were under strict security protection while in Doha – unlike in Tunis, where the Israelis were “shocked” to be told that they could “go out of the hotel, walk in the streets, ... do whatever you want.” The travel itinerary to the fifth plenary – from Israel, to Egypt, and then to Doha via Saudi airspace – was recalled by multiple Israeli delegates as especially memorable. The Egyptian pilot, once over Saudi airspace, reportedly invited David Ivry, a pilot himself, to join him in the cockpit, according to an Israeli official who was present on the plane.

Regarding the sixth plenary in Tunis, Israeli delegates further recalled that they put forward language to close the gap between Egypt and Israel on the Declaration of Principles (DoP) in the conceptual basket, and were disappointed by Egypt’s reluctance to accept. The Egyptians at that point, according to the Israeli interviewee, were increasingly “embittered by their own isolation within the Arab side,” and Nabil Fahmy reportedly “left Tunis before the end of the conversation, leaving poor Aly Erfan to face Zvi Shtaubert, and (Eli) Levite, and (Uzi) Arad.”

Indeed, Egyptian diplomats held more subdued views on the importance of moving ACRS meetings to the region. One delegate called the decision “politically symbolic, but not security-substantial.” It did not directly “bother” Egypt, since “neither Doha nor Tunis was a main player

in arms control.” Over time, however, Egypt’s indifference changed amid a perception of “the other working groups also proliferating around the region and in large numbers,” all while Israel continued to display “intransigence on the nuclear issue in ACRS.” At that point, a senior Egyptian diplomat recalled, “we basically told the Americans directly, and I told the Israelis personally, directly... that this is not going to work.” Other Egyptian delegates acknowledged the importance of moving ACRS to the region as positive in terms of “optics” and “atmospherics,” a “symbolic gesture,” though one also critically reflected that it gave Israel an opportunity to “appear as if things are going fine.”

Intra-Arab differences

Many of the problems discussed above brought to the fore intra-Arab differences in ACRS—in expertise, capacity, preferences, and interests. Given asymmetries in capacity and expertise, Egypt led the Arab world in the working group, joining the process with the most experienced diplomats when it came to arms control. Egypt, one of its diplomats contended, still had “the most significant expertise on arms control, probably for decades to come,” and so “many other countries relied on it.” Some delegates, however, noted that such asymmetries were being narrowed over time, with other states starting “to develop their own experts on issues, and starting to think about their own kind of leadership in ACRS.” This generated some intra-Arab tensions, especially according to Israeli and extra-regional observers.

Such tension was compounded by divergences in interests and preferences in ACRS, according to various sources. Egyptian interviewees felt that smaller Arab states were largely inclined to defer to Egypt, “going along quietly” and not “breaking consensus on a proposal” in ACRS. Occasionally, however, Egypt felt the need to put its Arab counterparts in their place when perceiving them to steer too far from its course—such as at the meeting in Amman in September 1995 on a Regional Security Center (RSC).

Moreover, Egyptian interviewees acknowledged competition with Jordan, in particular, whose expertise was valued and respected, all while Amman and Cairo had some differences especially on the prioritization of the nuclear issue versus regional security. For example, at the Amman meeting—which also came on the heels of the 1995 NPT RevCon—according to various delegates, Egypt “started putting poison pills” into the draft charter of the RSC, keen to send a message that it was no longer going to accept what it perceived to be a widening gap in the progress of the conceptual and operational baskets. In fact, several Egyptian interviewees suggested that, by that time, they had become disillusioned by the prospect of ACRS serving as an avenue to advance Israel’s nuclear disarmament.¹²

US delegates, meanwhile, offered a more nuanced assessment, hinting that not all of the Arab participants were as solidly in line with Egypt as the latter hoped they would be. Some US sources suggested that the 1994 Israeli-Jordanian Peace Treaty amplified an Egyptian uneasiness with the pace at which Arab peers were “normalizing” with Israel, as well as with a “diffusion of centralization” on the arms control issues “away from Egypt to the other parties.” One argued:

¹² Fahmy, *Egypt’s Diplomacy in War, Peace and Transition*, pp. 119-120.

“At a certain point, the Egyptians began to feel that, ‘Hey, wait a minute, what’s going on here?’ The North African Arabs, some of the Gulf Arabs, they were having these cordial discussions with Israelis.”

Another US diplomat recalled that, while all Arabs cared about the Palestinian cause, not “all of the delegations cared equally about Israel and the problem that it may have represented,” and held security concerns unrelated to Israel that they were hoping to address in ACRS. This sentiment was confirmed by Israeli interviewees, who claimed that states like Morocco, Tunisia or the Arab Gulf states did not view Israel as a threat but had other security concerns. Against that backdrop of divergent priorities, the Egyptian insistence on centering the agenda in ACRS around the nuclear issue was, according to some interviewees, not only an expression of Egypt’s unwavering belief in the unacceptability of a regional strategic imbalance caused by Israel’s nuclear status. It was also a means to “rein in” the other Arabs: “Egypt knew that it could rally other Arab governments behind its lead if it focused on this concern about Israel’s nuclear program,” so one senior US diplomat.

According to another US source, Arab grievances with the Egyptian insistence on discussing nuclear arms control extended to the Syrians—not even part of ACRS—who reportedly complained to the US in 1995 on the eve of a crucial Syrian-Israeli turning point in the bilaterals that the Egyptian pressure put Israel “in a corner.” The Syrian perception was that Egypt was deliberately undermining the chances for Israeli-Syrian rapprochement. In December 1995, Mubarak assured Peres that Egypt would not press Israel on NPT adherence for one year or would revisit the issue after a Syrian-Israeli agreement, whichever came first.¹³ The US source went on to note that while Jordan and Syria usually “didn’t agree on much,” they converged in the assessment that Egypt “was always trying to put a spoke in the wheel” when it came to their respective bilateral relations with Israel. This, so the diplomat, was indicative of a certain ambivalence in the position of Egypt, which was perceived to thwart regional parties’ normalization efforts on the one hand, all while claiming “to be the bridge between Israel and everybody else in the region.” An Israeli interviewee noted the paradox inherent in this state of affairs, given that Egypt was at peace with Israel yet represented its chief adversary in ACRS.

Israeli interviewees, meanwhile, perceived frustration among the other Arab states with the Egyptian insistence on the nuclear arms control agenda over time. An Israeli interviewee claimed that the Jordanians became “sick and tired of being asked, being compelled to do things” by the Egyptians. Israeli perceptions of intra-Arab differences did not only relate to questions of substance, but also to the more mundane aspects of custom and culture. Asking the Tunisian chief of staff at the Doha plenary to explain the differences in dress code of various Arab delegations, one Israeli recalled, he got the response: “You think that because I’m an Arab and they are Arabs, I know why these guys are dressing like this? I am from the Maghreb. These guys are from the Gulf, what do I know?”

¹³ It is unclear from the available evidence whether Mubarak made this assurance due to pressure from Syria or the United States.

From Israel's point of view, manifestations of intra-Arab differences in objectives and tactics heightened the sense that Israel could accrue benefits in solidifying ties with other Arab states if it could try to "persuade the other Arab players, the Jordanians, the Gulfis, the Qataris, the UAE, to some extent the Saudis... Tunisians, Moroccans, to diverge from the Egyptian position and buy into the CBM template," one Israeli recalled. Over time, so the delegate, Israel managed to achieve progress with these other players "beyond its own expectations." The Israelis also discerned a quest by some of these smaller players for "prestige," for "playing a role." One concluded that if you could find a role for them—for instance, offering them to host hubs or centers to implement some of the CBMs agreed in the operational basket—"then you secured their cooperation with you."

Finally, the interviews suggest that intra-Arab differences were not confined to a fault line between Egypt and other Arabs, but extended to among the other Arab delegations as well. When the Qataris hosted the Doha plenary in May 1994, for instance, they reportedly sought serious progress on the DoP *inter alia* "to put their thumb in the face of the Saudis," as one US diplomat recalled. The Israelis were especially perceptive of such intra-Gulf and intra-Arab differences and explored opportunities for exploiting them. One recalled, for instance, that "it was quite easy also to turn the other Arabs against the Saudis," given their sense of superiority in the region.

The relevance of specific individuals and personal relations in ACRS

Finally, in reflecting on ACRS, the oral history interviewees shared anecdotes, insights and analysis on the role of specific individuals in the process, and commented on the dynamics and quality of personal relations more generally.

The personal dynamic between David Ivry and Nabil Fahmy, the respective heads of the Israeli and Egyptian delegations, elicited much commentary. One American delegate noted that while both were top professionals, "just as Fahmy clearly is a diplomat, David was not." Another commented that while Fahmy joined ACRS with an "if anybody can do it, I can do it" attitude, one "could not have found somebody more reticent to be part of this process than General David Ivry." Fahmy and Ivry, so that source, were opposed in "their personality, their background, their history, their goals." That divergence was also noted by others in the Israeli delegation who commented that "Nabil Fahmy was there to get Dimona, and that was his mission in life"—which resulted in a "very tense" working relationship with him.

Cognizant of the fact that all "diplomacy depends on individuals and their personalities," as a senior US delegate to ACRS put it, individuals reflected more generally on personal relationships in the interviews. In doing so, US diplomats were quite enthusiastic in characterizing dynamics developed over time between various regional delegations, with one recalling: "We'd take a coffee break and I would look over and I'd see some Saudis joking with Israelis." An impression that "official barriers" were eroding over time on the sidelines of meetings was coupled with a sense that certain regional delegates were quite forward-leaning in exploring where the process could lead. In doing so, they were "not necessarily reflecting the hesitations of their governments" and "punching way above the weight of their countries, in terms of the initiatives

that were taken.” As a result, so a US official reflected, individual diplomats were occasionally out of sync with their own “standoffish” governments and eventually had to “pull back.”

Sometimes, as indicated in the interviews, it also mattered for the success of an ACRS session whether there were diplomats, lawyers, or individuals with technical expertise in the room. One Canadian delegate, for instance, recalled a meeting on maritime CBMs that got “bogged down” due to diplomats “quibbling over every word,” and once they left the room, “the sailors then leaned back, rolled up their sleeves and got on with what sailors do.” Yet another noted that the extent to which diplomatic versus military personnel was represented on ACRS delegations differed among regional countries, as did the degree to which the military was “prepared for engaging in a multilateral format” and speak “forthrightly about what their country’s position is.”

In reflecting on specific individuals and their roles in ACRS, US diplomats would not spare praise, recalling the “prominent role” played by Abdullah Toukan as head of the Jordanian delegation, who was a “linchpin,” a “man of the world.” US officials further noted that Egypt’s delegation was composed of “accomplished diplomats,” with Nabil Fahmy playing an “outsized role,” being a “forceful head of delegation,” who made the negotiations “difficult” but also “honest,” who “sort of owned the UN space on disarmament issues”— “when he says no, it means no.” Besides Nabil Fahmy, US officials also commended Aly Erfan from the Egyptian delegation as a “brilliant mind” and a “strong interlocutor.”

According to the Americans, the Israeli delegation was composed of an “All Star team” that comprised “clearly the most experts, by far, of the delegations.” Besides David Ivry, the head of Israel’s delegation who enjoyed the “bonefide of a military hero,” US officials also commended Ariel Levite who was “the academic who was brought in,” who was “critical” to the process, capable of connecting “on a personal basis, across the divide, with a number of the people on the Arab side,” and who could “always tell you who’s the most important person in the room for any given meeting.” Other US official commented that one could not but admire David Ivry and Ariel Levite for their “self-control, for their reserve, for their articulateness,” while also remarking favorably on the roles played by Uzi Arad (Israel) and Nabeela Al Mulla (Kuwait). Overall, one US delegate reminisced on the quality of regional delegates to ACRS: “I would give almost anything if my children could see how that is possible, ...if they could just see what national leaders and representatives of nations can do in a setting like that.”

Such enthusiastic endorsement of regional ACRS delegates by US officials was echoed by other extra-regional attendees. Canadian delegates recalled the participation of “extraordinary personalities who wanted to make things work,” who were “smart operators, but (also)... intellectuals with a vision.” A delegate from India recalled how ACRS allowed him to solidify personal relations with delegates from Israel, a country with which India had entertained rocky ties until then. ACRS became an opportunity for him, “and largely for India, to make up for lost time in (the) relationship with Israel,” which would “end up over the years to become such a vital and such a robust relationship spanning a wide range of political, economic, cultural, and people to people contacts.” A Turkish official shared a similar sentiment, recounting how ACRS meetings enabled him to set the Israeli-Turkish bilateral relationship, as well as Israeli-Jordanian-Turkish strategic cooperation, onto a new trajectory.

Meanwhile, Israeli delegates characterized their counterparts in ACRS as “first rate people” with whom they developed “nice relationships,” and offered particular praise for key senior US officials—Jim Baker and Dan Kurtzer—without whom “we would not have had that process at all.” The Egyptian participants in ACRS further recalled personal relations with their Israeli counterparts to have been “very civil” and disagreements of substance to have been “civilized and professional.” One delegate from Cairo did, however, hint at perceptions of an Israeli sense of superiority in ACRS, which, he argued, came across in some of Shimon Peres’ statements in the context of the multilaterals. Those statements offended the sentiments of Egypt, a country that is “7000 years old” and “proud of itself.”¹⁴

Further, delegates did not confine their recollections to official engagements in the plenaries and intersessional meetings, but also commented on diplomacy “on the margins,” as well as social interactions. Discrete consultations on the margins of ACRS plenaries became important especially for a delegation like the Palestinians, with one Palestinian recalling that Israeli diplomats would say to them: “Look, I’m not going to be allowed to talk to you once we’re inside the State Department, but it’s good seeing you, let’s have a drink later.” The social dimension of ACRS meetings received lively treatment in the interviews, with anecdotes including a dinner at a workshop on maritime CBMs in September 1993 in Nova Scotia, at which delegates sang sailor songs together. That meeting incidentally coincided with the announcement of the Oslo Accords and concomitant Rabin-Arafat handshake on the White House lawn, which created a particularly special atmosphere during the workshop.

Finally, a few ACRS delegates also mentioned that they either had personal ties with specific counterparts that *pre*-dated ACRS, or that they built relations through ACRS which they have maintained to this day. This was the case especially between those who participated permanently and in a majority of ACRS plenaries and intersessionals. Still, an Arab delegate regularly involved in ACRS cautioned not to overstate the extent to which personal bonds were formed in ACRS, either: “At the end of the day, those are people who met for 48 hours in a foreign country, in a hotel. So, you develop the kind of relationship that would be developed in 48 hours in a foreign country in a hotel.”

Notwithstanding their overwhelmingly positive recollections on personal dynamics in ACRS, interviewees also shared some difficult moments, such as a Saudi refusal to engage the Israeli delegation directly. One Israeli delegate also remembered encountering an Egyptian general who fell ill during one of the ACRS sessions and was reluctant to accept medicine from a member of the Israeli delegation, insinuating that the latter might wish to poison him. Other interviewees recalled instances of male delegates making suggestive comments about the few female negotiators present. There was further a sense that there was “competition to be the smartest guy in the room,” as another Canadian delegate recalled, though such competition was neither unique to ACRS as a negotiation process, nor was it all negative in its implications: “It can produce creativity.”

¹⁴ According to one Egyptian source, when Shimon Peres visited Cairo to discuss the multilaterals, he reportedly talked about Israeli “skills in science and technology,” juxtaposing it to “Egyptian labor.”

Successes and Failures of the Process and Lessons Learnt

This final section summarizes the delegates' reflections on the most important successes, accomplishments, and achievements, as well as problems, shortcomings, and failures of the ACRS process. It will also address what lessons former delegates in the working group suggest for addressing arms control and regional security in the Middle East today.

Reflections on achievements and successes in ACRS

Precedent and proof of concept. Several delegates stressed upfront that the fact that ACRS—the first direct negotiation held between Israel and its neighbors on arms control and regional security issues—happened was an important achievement in and of itself. Merely “getting people in the same room” allowed for clarification of viewpoints and issues, one delegate noted. One US diplomat called ACRS a “good frontrunner,” a “proof of concept” confirming that a serious process, tackling sensitive security matters, can actually be convened in the region. Others similarly characterized ACRS as a “touchstone,” a “reference point of enduring value,” “a string on the guitar that they [regional states] can pluck, and it will resonate.” In terms of setting important precedents, one Egyptian delegate also noted that ACRS showed what can be achieved when there is an active, external player—in this instance, the United States—making a “political investment,” “pushing an agenda for regional security talks.”

While agreements on CBMs reached in ACRS were never formally adopted, working them out as a “proof of concept” was still considered valuable by interviewees especially if one takes a “long view” on what constitutes progress on regional security. As one US official summarized, nascent relationships cautiously built between adversaries “may not seem significant at the moment, but when you build on them, you say that the building couldn't have happened, or would have been that much harder, if it hadn't been for some of the... foundation-laying that happened before that.” That long-term perspective on the relevance of ACRS was also echoed by some regional delegates, with one Israeli musing: “We are here in the Middle East in a long process of reaching all sorts of agreements.” One Egyptian delegate, who now teaches in higher education, noted that he regularly uses the ACRS experience to show his students that “at some point in time, early 90s, mid 90s, the Middle East almost made it.” In that same spirit, a Jordanian interviewee suggested that the more recent regional collaboration in fighting the Islamic State indicated that the “spirit” generated by ACRS is still alive.

The cultivation of relationships and building of mutual trust. Relatedly, several diplomats raised the importance of relationship-building through ACRS, which helped to generate familiarity, and at times even mutual trust between antagonistic parties. Even those interviewees that were hard-pressed to identify any successes of the ACRS process—especially among the Egyptian delegation—acknowledged the “collegial nature and the humanizing of the other side” in the process. Another regional diplomat noted that ACRS encouraged the region to talk in a “civilized” way about cooperative security, replacing the previous “confrontational” approach. An extra-regional diplomat characterized the improving “vibe” in ACRS among negotiating

parties as an “intangible” outcome of the process, even though that could not be quantified—unlike the “tangible” CBM agreements which, however, never ended up being implemented.

Learning opportunity. Delegates also drew attention to the multi-dimensional learning opportunities afforded by the ACRS Working Group. Discussing incidents at sea agreements, communication channels or military doctrines, one interviewee recalled, “a lot of people learned behind the scenes what had happened with the Soviets, what had happened in the European arms control context.” Beyond such learning from history and other geographic regions, there was also an inter-generational dimension to acquiring knowledge in ACRS: Some delegates recalled that younger diplomats learnt from their older colleagues, and vice versa. One Canadian diplomat further emphasized the inter-agency dimension of learning in ACRS, noting the usefulness of hearing the perspectives of military personnel in the talks. Most importantly, as delegates from different regional countries acknowledged, exposure and deliberation in the working group also stimulated learning about the other side, about “what is possible and what is not possible,” which yielded a certain “demystification” of the issues at hand. Such learning—one Jordanian delegate referred to it as “maturing”—was not merely confined to the delegates participating directly in the ACRS talks. Those delegates also took the knowledge and experience accumulated back to their capitals and inter-agency systems, stimulating a wider learning process. That process further encouraged the formation, or further development, of a cadre of arms control experts and bureaucracies within regional states, albeit in some countries more than in others. Finally, one Israeli delegate indicated that his country’s participation in ACRS partially dispelled the Israeli fear of a “slippery slope”: “Even those who were more hawkish and skeptical and hostile to such a process in the Israeli leadership,” he said, “emerged from this experience convinced that those were manageable risks—that the mere participation and process didn’t necessarily mean, right away, that we would concede things that are dear to our heart, or to our security.”

Tangible results: CBMs and the operational basket. Beyond such intangible achievements as precedent-setting, trust-building, and multi-dimensional learning, there were also more tangible accomplishments in ACRS. The Israeli delegation, in particular, highlighted the growing support over time, especially from regional countries other than Egypt, for CBMs and cooperation in certain areas of common interest. Joint work on the RSC, for instance, left “the Gulfis and the Jordanians and the Tunisians... sufficiently intrigued by what this would mean, also in terms of having such centers located in their territory, and the prestige and expertise that would come with it, ... that we made very good progress in this direction,” one Israeli recalled. The concrete progress achieved on the CBMs indicated, so another Israeli diplomat, “that it is completely possible to put in place, to implement these kinds of steps, once the... political environment is right.” It also generated a “very rich body of material on these technical aspects,” as one Egyptian recalled. In total, CBMs concluded and operationally finalized (though never formally adopted) included: the RSC in Jordan and two affiliated institutions in Qatar and Tunisia; a communications network; procedures for pre-notification of certain military activities and exchange of military information; and a number of maritime CBMs, such as draft agreements on search and rescue and the prevention of incidents at sea.

Extra-regional delegates, who shepherded work in the operational basket, also commended the progress achieved. Regarding the maritime CBMs, one diplomat insinuated that agreements reached likely had a tangible impact even in the absence of their formal adoption. He recalled an Israeli admiral stating at an ACRS meeting, upon near-finalization of specific CBMs, that: “When I go home, I am going to instruct all of my commanding officers of ships and aircraft to read this thing and comply with it. I’m not saying it’s official. I’m not asking any of you to do the same thing. I’m just telling you that if one of your vessels comes across one of ours, and you choose to use these signals, our guys will know what you’re talking about.” Meanwhile, a smaller number of delegates cautioned not to underestimate the progress that was made also in the conceptual basket, with work on the Declaration of Principles (DoP) almost resulting in a finalized agreement. Some Egyptian delegates differed, cautioning not to overstate the achievements on CBMs as constituting “substantive successes,” since the Israelis ultimately “did not want to deal with arms control.” “Process” should not be conflated with “results,” a senior Egyptian diplomat noted. This assessment stands in opposition to a counter-view, offered by an Israeli, who said: “Don’t judge a process by how many papers are produced. The process itself was important; peace is made one person at a time.”

Positive spill-over to other conflicts and issue areas. Further, the cultivation of personal and political relationships in ACRS, and the joint work done on various dimensions of regional security, also generated positive spill-over to other conflicts and issue areas. In the case of Israel and Jordan, both US and Israeli delegates noted, the cultivation of relations in ACRS contributed to the agreement of a bilateral peace treaty in 1994. Another Israeli diplomat noted the positive spillover from ACRS not only to Israeli-Jordanian, but also Israeli-Turkish relations. A Turkish interviewee applauded the contribution of ACRS to the evolution of Israeli-Jordanian-Turkish strategic cooperation. Some of the relationships formed during ACRS, one US diplomat recalled, also later helped in other international fora, for instance the Conference on Disarmament (CD).

Regionalizing the conversation about arms control and security. Finally, some delegates noted that ACRS contributed to the legitimization of a regional conversation on conflict and security in the Middle East, which was very limited and mostly bilateral in nature prior to the process. In that context, one US diplomat argued that ACRS allowed for drawing Israel into a regional multilateral conversation on security issues, which afforded it an opportunity to learn that “arms control can be very helpful if you work it right.” Another source, addressing the regionalization dynamic, noted the importance for ACRS of “having complimentary bilateral negotiations and multilateral negotiations” since it “widened the negotiation dynamic.” Generating an understanding that regional security “is about so much more than the Arab-Israeli dispute” was another accomplishment of ACRS, according to a Canadian diplomat involved.

Reflections on problems and failures in ACRS

The inability to overcome fault lines. A key problem afflicting the ACRS talks over time, and principally contributing to their eventual demise, was an inability by key parties to bridge, or at least sufficiently narrow, their differences. Divergent views on the sequencing of arms control

versus regional security on the one hand, and on the relationship between the bilateral and multilateral tracks on the other, prevailed as the talks progressed.

Regarding the arms control versus regional security fault line, Israel perceived the 1993 split of the discussions into a conceptual versus operational basket to be positive, since it allowed joint work on CBMs not to be held up by a lack of progress on nuclear arms control. To Israeli delegates, the basket structure of the process represented a better reflection of an incremental, “natural” progression of arms control talks, in which smaller states would over time acquire stakes in a regional security process, without Egypt being able to block all progress over the fundamental issue of Israel’s nuclear disarmament. Meanwhile, Egypt’s conditional support of the basket split was based on the premise that neither the operational basket, nor the other working groups of the multilateral track could progress significantly beyond the conceptual basket, alongside the maxim that “nothing will be agreed until everything is agreed.” When these premises, from Egypt’s viewpoint, began to erode due to multiplying achievements in the operational basket, Egyptian diplomats started to feel “they were being taken for a ride,” according to one of them. As a result, Egypt stepped up efforts to ensure no further progress would take place in the operational basket. The September 1995 expert meeting in Amman on the RSC, was indicative of this crystallizing Egyptian stance.

Notwithstanding this frustration, the Egyptians themselves felt broadly supported and deferred to by the other Arab states in ACRS, given their experience and “natural lead” on the arms control agenda and greater familiarity with Israel. Israeli delegates, meanwhile, recalled an Egypt increasingly isolated among the Arab participants in ACRS, given its uncompromising stance on the arms control agenda. One argued that “Egypt was getting increasingly alienated because it was showing that the rest of the Arab world ... was willing to move gradually, cautiously, slowly, but nevertheless, move ahead on some of the more practical agenda, and that terrified ... the Egyptian Foreign Ministry bureaucracy.” Indeed, interviewees from some of the other Arab delegations professed sympathy for Egypt’s focus on nuclear arms control and the NPT, yet also believed at the time that “incremental policies would also help in reaching a secure environment” and that the NPT and other treaties should be viewed “as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself.”

As ACRS proceeded, the Egyptian-Israeli divergence on the arms control agenda also stymied agreement among all relevant parties on an agreed vision or final objectives of the process. As one Egyptian diplomat lamented, while particularly Jordan used to encourage agreement on an endpoint, a “vision at the end of the tunnel”—even if it was to be shelved and agreed with the caveat that its implementation will have to await a “conducive atmosphere”—the “Israelis were continuously dragging their feet.” While Egypt accused Israel of “stalling” on the formulation of a long-term vision, Israel conversely felt that Egypt was pulling it onto a “slippery slope.” A fundamental discrepancy regarding what comes first—arms control, or regional security—thus inhibited an Egyptian-Israeli convergence in defining the final destination of the overall process.

Divergences among delegations over a Declaration of Principles (DoP) crystallized over two stages: the May 1994 Doha meeting and the December 1994 Tunis plenary. At the Doha meeting, Saudi Arabia’s position, supported by the Palestinian delegation, constituted the largest

obstacle to agreement on the DoP. Saudi Arabia's primary point of objection was that the wording of the preamble and fundamental principles section placed the multilateral track before the bilateral track; for Saudi Arabia, accepting such language would have been tantamount to a premature normalization with Israel. The Saudi delegate repeatedly emphasized that progress on the bilateral front must proceed multilateral action.

By December 1994, previous objections to the Declaration of Principles by Saudi Arabia had lessened, and there was an air of optimism going into the Tunis plenary. The plenary, however, saw a revival of Egyptian demands vis-a-vis Israel to join the NPT, as Egypt sought specific language regarding the treaty in the DoP, which was also partly related to its broader strategy in preparation to the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference. The Egyptian-Israeli disagreement on this issue became apparent in the differences in the proposed language for the final paragraph of the draft section entitled "Statement of Intent on Objectives for the Arms Control and Regional Security Process." Egypt's proposal to add that "all parties of the region will adhere to the NPT in the near future" was categorically rejected by Israel, creating an insurmountable stalemate in negotiations. Another notable difference in their proposed texts revolved around their descriptions of the WMD threat. While Israel's language was more noncommittal, admitting the "potential [of WMD] to promote instability in the region," the United States and Egypt used harsher language: WMD "pose a grave threat to security" and "pose the greatest threat to security," respectively.

Similarly, the previously discussed divergence in views on how the multilateral track overall (of which ACRS was a part) should relate to the post-Madrid bilateral track—in terms of sequencing and political prioritization—could not be bridged over time. The US premise that the multilaterals should reinforce and complement the bilateral tracks, but should not move ahead of Israel's talks with Jordan, Syria, and the Palestinians given an anticipated Arab resistance to such a trajectory, remained unchanged. Interviewees from different states variably referred to the bilaterals as the "top cover," the "big deal," or the "main show" when compared to the multilaterals. As ACRS proceeded, that premise continued to be shared by the non-Egyptian Arab delegations in ACRS as well. While they willingly participated in working out agreements on CBMs in the operational basket, they felt that "implementation would really have to depend on further progress in the bilateral track," as one regional interviewee recalled. Saudi Arabia in particular—including at the bidding of Syria—was reluctant to appear to afford Israel the rewards of "normalization" in the absence of meaningful progress in the bilaterals. Several interviewees, however, noted that what precisely would constitute "meaningful progress" in the bilaterals remained vague and insufficiently defined, allowing different parties to hold their own benchmarks. In the spring of 1996, after a year of trying to convince the Egyptians to return to ACRS, and amid stagnation in the bilaterals after Prime Minister Rabin's assassination in November 1995, the US decided not to pursue further formal meetings in ACRS until such time when the political environment had changed.

As a result, in reflecting on problems and failures of ACRS over time, delegations (and within those, individuals) emerged with different narratives on the key reasons for the demise of the working group. On one hand, there are those who stressed the dependence of the multilaterals on the bilaterals. That view—held by a number of the smaller Arab and extra-regional delegations—also attributed significant causal relevance to Rabin's assassination in November 1995 and the

subsequent election of Netanyahu. Those events, so the narrative, stymied the bilaterals, which in turn brought down the multilaterals (and within that, ACRS). Larger political forces, rather than structural flaws inherent in the conception of the working group itself, are responsible for bringing down ACRS, according to this view. Netanyahu assuming power was a “dividing point,” so one senior US diplomat, since it caused Israeli talks with Syria to grind to a halt, which “affected the mood overall.” A Jordanian delegate was especially blunt in his lamentation of Netanyahu’s election, charging that it had been the latter’s “whole life’s ambition to destroy the Middle East peace process.”

One Israeli delegate offered a variation of this view, characterizing the bilaterals as problematic in bringing down the multilaterals not so much *over time*, i.e., following Rabin’s assassination, but lamenting that they imposed structural obstacles from the beginning. According to this view, the United States, as the major force behind ACRS, demonstrated “political enthusiasm and bureaucratic preparation” for getting the process off the ground, but as the latter advanced, there was “a considerable ambivalence on what the US administration wanted to get out of it or how to carry it forward,” with little direct interest by senior US administration officials at later stages, and with the United States getting increasingly distracted by priorities in other regions. In conceiving the post-Madrid process with its bilateral and multilateral components, so the argument of that individual, the US put “shackles” on ACRS, given an *a priori* and persistent desire to not let the working group “move ahead of the bilaterals.” Israeli interviewees regretted this limitation, one stating that Israel “tried to disconnect” the bilaterals from the multilaterals, keen to achieve progress in the latter (and not just ACRS). In reflecting on lessons learnt from ACRS, one Canadian source similarly regretted that, “when the multilaterals were dying, (there was an) inability to sort of say: ‘Look, these are issues that go beyond the Arab-Israeli process, they need to be discussed.’”

US interviewees themselves argued that the primacy of the bilaterals remained necessary since it was reflective of realities in the region: as one US diplomat recalled, “unless there was real progress towards peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, the numbers of steps that you could take towards establishing a nuclear weapons free zone was going to be limited.” While the US, it appears, in essence bought into the Israeli insistence on “peace first, arms control second,” it hoped that meaningful progress on regional security issues and CBMs would encourage Israel to take more steps on the arms control side—and that those could be “a gateway drug to more significant arms control,” as one US delegate put it. At the same time, the US was acutely aware of Egypt’s aversion to delaying progress on arms control measures, which Cairo perceived as delaying tactic to avoid discussions on Israel’s nuclear disarmament. But, as one US delegate recalled, the Egyptian position “that you have to resolve *that* (i.e., the nuclear issue) before anything else just wasn’t viable” from the American point of view.

A second view on the demise of ACRS characterized these “blame it on the bilaterals” or “blame it on the negotiation format” narratives as overly simplistic. Proponents of this view instead argued that ACRS was experiencing serious difficulties well before Rabin’s assassination. Indeed, according to some Egyptian interviewees, Egypt had concluded much before Rabin’s assassination that Israel would never seriously discuss the issue of WMD disarmament in ACRS.

Some Egyptian sources pinpointed the “moment of reckoning” at the Tunis plenary in December 1994, others recalled that an Egyptian sense of resignation set in in the lead-up to the NPT RevCon in early 1995.¹⁵ The US quest for an indefinite extension of the NPT by consensus at the RevCon further exacerbated an Egyptian feeling of frustration, since Cairo was being asked to “take a blind leap of faith,” without any Israeli commitment on the arms control agenda. A variation of this view, shared by select delegates, held that ACRS did indeed experience difficulties *before* the other multilaterals, given the Egyptian-Israeli dispute over the arms control agenda, but would have sooner or later failed anyway given the demise of the bilaterals.

These narratives on the key problems afflicting ACRS over time did not neatly fall along the lines of national delegations. Instead, especially US and Israeli interviewees offered nuanced variations on these two principal accounts, variably stressing certain causal factors over others. Interviewees also differed on whether they found the Egyptian-Israeli fault line on nuclear arms control to be static or dynamic over time. Reflecting on the talks with hindsight, Egyptian and other Arab delegates emphasized the immovable nature of Israel’s position, arguing that “there was never any hope for rapprochement,” since “Israel was never serious about any disarmament measure for any category of weapons at all.” That sense of entrenchment in positions held by several of the regional states was shared by some US diplomats, but not all. While some held that “it was almost as though we were starting over in each meeting” of the conceptual basket, others recalled tentative steps, such as a willingness of the parties to discuss nuclear-related verification, as indicative of progress—even though they acknowledged that steps forward were followed by steps backwards.¹⁶ On the other hand, the Israelis felt that the progress they demonstrated on arms control issues—for instance by signing the CWC, or stating their willingness to consider signing the NPT two years after a comprehensive peace—were being taken for granted and their security concerns dismissed by Egypt. Egypt, conversely, perceived such Israeli steps as too little, too late.

Lack of political will and loss of interest over time. Interviewees also identified insufficient US senior leadership involvement from the Clinton administration as a growing problem in ACRS. Some Israelis felt that the US generally lost interest in the multilaterals, with its attention partially diverted to Europe, partially to the bilaterals. Some interviewees recognized the effect of the US presidential transition on Washington’s willingness to exert political capital on ACRS, since the Clinton administration featured “new players” who had “inherited a peace process that was not theirs.” Yet other US interviewees acknowledged that “with the slowdown in the bilateral track, there was less interest on the US side (in) spending the political capital that might

¹⁵ In the lead-up to the 1995 NPT RevCon, Egypt increased its demands that Israel commit to signing the NPT. As part of this campaign, Egypt introduced a reference to the NPT in the DoP during the Tunis Plenary, which led to a deadlock in the negotiation and became one of the reasons for failure to adopt the DoP. Interviewees recalled Egyptian-Israeli disagreements at the Tunis plenary. As one Palestinian noted, “the Egyptians were asking for a declaration of the nuclear arms free Middle East, ... and the Israelis would not budge on that issue.”

¹⁶ A senior Egyptian diplomat similarly recalled: “the one time I had hope that there may be a slow, incremental process (with Israel discussing nuclear arms control), was when they agreed to the verification seminar in Cairo, which included nuclear issues. We thought, well, you know what, they may want to do this slowly. We’re happy to look into this. But we’re not going to close the door, as long as they keep it a little bit open. But I think after they held that meeting, they decided that we were pushing them down a slippery slope.”

have been necessary to resume ACRS.” While some US interviewees, intimately involved in the ACRS process, continued to exert significant efforts to keep the process alive in 1995 and 1996, looking for creative ways to ensure the continuation of meetings, they failed to muster agreement among key regional states.

Both Israeli and Egyptian interviewees criticized the US for failing to push the other side sufficiently to compromise. Israeli delegates blamed the US for failing to “prevent Egypt from derailing ACRS,” whether due to naiveté—the US “waking up to the consequences of Egyptian subversion of the multilaterals a bit too late,” as one Israeli put it—or an unwillingness to be firmer with Egypt. One US source acknowledged the validity of this charge, admitting that “we (the US) never went to Mubarak and said to him: ‘Cut out this crap’.” The Egyptian criticism of the US’ role in ACRS was at times similar to the one shared by Israelis. Egyptian delegates felt that their American counterparts did not exert sufficient political leverage to push Israel into a meaningful discussion on nuclear arms control within ACRS. The Americans put the nuclear issue “on the table, but not really on the table... on the side table, on the edge of the table, on a chair that’s not exactly on the table,” one Egyptian remembered.

The United States, however, did not stand alone in being accused of limited political will to sustain the momentum of ACRS. Some US delegates viewed Israel as insufficiently motivated “to actually do anything” on the nuclear issue, given its reluctance to compromise its military edge in the region, leading it to just “go through the motions.” Others, especially on the Israeli side, blamed Egypt for insufficient flexibility, a “failure of imagination” in adopting their “classical diplomatic position” on arms control and then stubbornly sticking with it. A Turkish diplomat similarly recalled Egypt’s attitude in ACRS as one of “blocking and preventing”, and while the Egyptians made peace with Israel, “they criticized others for trying to do the same.” Expressing a similar sentiment, one extra-regional delegate recalled Amr Moussa being referred to as “Mr. Zero-Sum” in the context of ACRS by some of his interlocutors.

This sentiment was not shared across all delegations, however. One Palestinian delegate, for instance, commended Egypt’s insistence on discussing the nuclear issue as “noble and necessary,” and defended Cairo against criticism, noting that “it’s not as if the Egyptians then said, ‘Okay, we refuse to discuss anything at all unless we discuss this’.” Egyptian interviewees similarly rejected the charge that it was they who obstructed an incremental approach in ACRS, which was purportedly embraced by Israel. One Egyptian labelled this narrative the “conventional (yet incorrect) wisdom” on ACRS, arguing that Israel’s approach in ACRS was never incremental since it “did not contemplate any disarmament measure for any category of weapons at all.” Egypt, on the other hand, practiced incrementalism, “willing to defer discussions and negotiations on WMD to a later stage, but that later stage never arrived.”

Finally, some interviewees lamented a lack of sufficient interest among Arab participants other than Egypt and Jordan, which were said to have pursued ACRS out of little more than “curiosity” and “a sense of wanting to somehow participate in the Middle East peace process.”

Absence of key regional states. A further problem in ACRS emanated from the absence of key regional states. Syria and Lebanon chose to boycott the multilaterals, pending a resolution of

their own disputes with Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while Iran, Iraq and Libya were not invited to join the process. The hope at the time, one US diplomat recalled, was that incremental progress could initially be achieved among participating states, contributing to an overall improvement in the region that could enable others to join at a later stage. In the conceptual basket, for instance, the thinking went: “Can we imagine beginning to *negotiate* something that, maybe, we say will not be *implemented* until these (other) parties are also part of it?” Such thinking, the US delegate acknowledged, left a host of important questions unanswered, including: “If you did negotiate something, and those countries then arrived to join negotiations later, would they be accepting of it? And ... would joining the group mean that it would be conditioned on them accepting those agreements? Or would we have to reopen the text, particularly for them?” Yet, most interviewees agreed that limited participation represented the only practical way to achieve any progress in ACRS, given regional realities at the time.

Asymmetry in capacity and divergences in approaches. Interviewees further recalled an asymmetry in understanding and expertise on arms control as having posed obstacles to the proceedings of the working group. Especially the delegations of Arab states other than Egypt and Jordan, it was noted, lacked adequate knowledge and accumulated experience on arms control and attendant issues, since those had not been “high on their agenda.”¹⁷ While a good number of regional countries, one US diplomat recalled, had multilateral negotiating experience from the UN, they were less experienced in regional talks. Consequently, ACRS partially fulfilled the function of an “academic seminar” of sorts, with the “learning curve” differing across regional countries. When it came to drafting papers on long-term objectives, for instance, one US delegate recalled assisting the Gulf States in writing their documents, since “they didn’t know where to start, they didn’t know really what to say, they didn’t really know what it was we were trying to do.”

Some of the Arab delegations were keenly aware of their limitations in capacity and expertise, with one Palestinian recalling: “We were never anything more than a junior party with very little institutional expertise we could offer.” He lamented that, “we couldn’t yet point to any kind of unit or department or team that had formed over 10 or 15 or 20 years that people would look at and say, ‘these people actually have cumulatively a good amount of expertise in relevant domains.’” Other regional delegates ascribed their limitations in partaking in decisions of the working group not so much to insufficient expertise, but rather to the structure of the process. One Kuwaiti diplomat, for instance, characterized the decision-making processes in ACRS as insufficiently inclusive to the smaller delegations, charging: “You cannot go to some kind of meeting and be a listener and to agree to something unless you also have a say.”

Differences in approaches in ACRS were not only rooted in capacity and expertise, but also in deep mistrust. Some delegates recalled the “secretive” culture of certain regional participating states as having stymied progress on even simple issues in the operational basket. “It turned out

¹⁷ Israel emphasized this reality in pushing back against an Egyptian insistence on discussing nuclear arms control front and center, and in advocating for joint work on CBMs. As one Israeli delegate recalled, “Weapons of mass destruction is not the major point... You’re not coming in the morning, waking up and saying, ‘I’m threatened by nuclear (weapons), but other issues are really a concern of yours. On a daily basis, we could make much more cooperation than on the strategic issues. And this made the CBMs much better.’”

to be like pulling teeth, people weren't prepared to give a phone number that you could just call," one Canadian diplomat noted on the deliberations on Search and Rescue CBMs.

Lessons learnt

Commenting on both achievements and failures of ACRS, the interviewees also reflected on lessons learnt and advice for a future process on arms control and regional security.

Process design and participation. Some delegates, in reflecting on how ACRS was put together and in what broader context it materialized, offered some specific lessons on process design. Those lessons included the notion of inclusivity in participation. Ideally, the process should be as comprehensive as possible, a few delegates said, and invited parties unwilling to attend should be encouraged to observe at a minimum, and "if they ever want to move from the back bench to the table, they're welcome to," as one US diplomat noted. A Canadian evoked the notion of enabling participants to "self-select" into the process over time, provided they are "willing to jump over a certain bar," i.e., accept some foundational principles underpinning the process. Comprehensive participation in a future process, a senior US diplomat suggested, could allow for the "region-wide" arms control negotiation of "the kinds of weapons that can be transferred, versus those that cannot," circumventing the common Iranian lamentation that it is being singled out.

At the same time, interviewees acknowledged a tension between the need for comprehensive participation and the desire for an effective negotiation strategy. While calling for comprehensive participation by all regional states, to the extent possible, some sources also suggested that the delegations should be smaller in the future, since fewer individuals around the table might be more successful in bridging conceptual differences and forging consensus.

One US delegate also stressed that ACRS proved the importance of states sending their "A-Teams" to negotiate in a regional process, since the "right combination of personalities," combined with a ripe political context and support "from above," can create a context conducive to meaningful progress.¹⁸ Other delegates equally shared the assessment that "personalities matter." A rotation of locations for convening the working group was considered important, too. As one Israeli noted, such rotation reduced the perceived "asymmetry" between relevant parties, giving them more stakes and making them more comfortable with the process. Considering process design, a Canadian further suggested that in a future ACRS process, the "broad, region-wide group" should be complemented by regional sub-groups—focused on the Gulf, Levant, and Maghreb—to discuss issues unique to those sub-regions.

Reflecting on the broader context of an arms control and regional security process, some delegates also argued it continues to be important to pursue bilaterals, in addition to a multilateral process. (In this context, it is worth noting that the oral history interviews were

¹⁸ In that context, one US diplomat lamented that while ACRS occurred during the "heyday, you had the best, and the brightest sort of Americans from the top to the bottom, who really knew what they were doing, and people trusted us," this might no longer be the case today given today's geostrategic situation in contrast to the 1990s. Another US official expanded that argument to include the region, saying: "I don't see personalities in the key countries that will be willing to do this."

conducted shortly after the conclusion of an August 2020 joint statement between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States – which became known as the Abraham Accords and eventually included Israeli normalization agreements with additional Arab states). The inverse, i.e., that bilateral talks alone are insufficient to create momentum toward regional security in the Middle East, was also offered as a lesson from the 1990s by some delegates. Regarding process design, most thus converged on the view that the combination of multilateral and bilateral tracks—“addressing the Middle East in its entirety,” as an Egyptian put it—still constitutes the right approach. Pursuing such a comprehensiveness-in-substance approach, a Canadian added, should be done without losing sight of the Palestinians’ plight,” while also taking account of Saudi-Iranian animosity.¹⁹

A different attitude toward the comprehensiveness-in-substance was a more pragmatic approach shared by several extra-regional diplomats, that one should first address “low hanging fruits,” “focusing on technical aspects of arms control cooperation rather than political conflicts (to) increase the likelihood of success of the next round of ACRS.” That sentiment—avoiding an “all or nothing” approach—was echoed by a US diplomat who argued that “arms control works when there’s a mutual stake in avoiding conflict—that doesn’t mean you’re ending what is a *political* conflict.” A Canadian diplomat similarly advanced a different idea on the principle of comprehensiveness, suggesting that, in a future ACRS process, parties might pursue “a little bit more of a mix and match (approach) to tailor it to... people’s political tolerances, without letting the whole of the process get stalled”—“like a Chinese menu: You can say, ‘I don’t want the fried rice, I want the egg rolls.’”

Among those emphasizing the virtues of a pragmatic approach as a lesson from ACRS, some specifically called for incrementalism, i.e. taking smaller steps to create a positive dynamic to bridge differences between regional parties over time. That sentiment was highlighted especially by Israeli participants, one musing that “from ACRS, the major lesson is to try to find interest, issues, any action... which can be accepted by all the partners, and to build up slowly, step by step, the confidence.” A Jordanian equally evoked the notion of incrementalism, arguing that “arms control and regional security is a never-ending process.” Some delegates also pointed to recent developments in the region to emphasize that ACRS, even in the absence of formal and tangible results, contributed to progress that became apparent only much later. Israeli diplomats, for instance, pointed to the Abraham Accords as evidence that “exchange and building understandings matters, it is the basis for ultimately bridging the gap,” since “commonalities of interest eventually trump differences.” Another Israeli delegate did acknowledge, however, that ACRS did not include “the most radical elements in the region,” with whom such bridge-building might be more difficult. A few delegates complemented their reflections on incrementalism with the specific suggestion that to overcome the differences in objectives in ACRS, any future regional process should be preceded by pre-negotiations, which would be aimed at establishing an agreed “mandate” and “reference framework” for actual negotiations.

¹⁹ Some indicated that the current regional context might not be ripe for convening these two actors in formal negotiations, but there could be dialogue at the Track 1.5 level, Track 2, or “semi-formal” meetings, instead.

One Israeli took the argument on incrementalism so far as to suggest that a similar process, designed today, should focus only on regional security and omit arms control, since arms control can only ever be “built on successes in regional security, ... is a matter of significant trust among parties and ability to verify in most intrusive ways, which means that you really need stable... and friendly relationships between countries.” This view, however, was not widely shared across delegates interviewed. Just as interviewees differed on the extent to which incrementalism, as practiced in the operational basket, reflected success or was conducive to failure in the process, they also drew different lessons on the suitability (and sufficiency) of incrementalism for future processes. Countering the notion that incrementalism is a panacea, a few delegates emphasized that unless there is an alignment of both political will and the right timing—where “a cadre of people across a number of countries would say: ‘This is the time’”—no amount of incrementalism can overcome obstacles to progress on arms control and regional security.

Trust-building, empathy, and depoliticized discussions. The importance of relationship-building was discussed extensively in the previous section outlining achievements, and interviewees returned to it in their reflections on lessons learnt. ACRS taught, so one Israeli diplomat, that “every arms control process has to start by gaining trust and confidence among all parties.” An Egyptian delegate reflected on the importance of empathy, suggesting that every future process should start with each participant putting him-/herself “in the shoes” of their counterparts: “Don’t fall into the trap of agreeing with him, but just put yourself in his shoes, so you understand what he wants.” Practicing empathy in this way, so the Egyptian, would have led the Israeli delegation to understand that Egypt can “never get into an open-ended process, if the substance is not serious.”

Expanding on the theme of relationship-building, a Canadian diplomat offered an additional lesson from ACRS on what happens “if you can just take the politics out of it, and just let people talk to each other”: Achievements can be reached when experts talk across national boundaries to address shared interests and concerns—like the sailors negotiating maritime CBMs during ACRS. Hence, a future regional security process should take account of new issues of shared concern in the region—such as resource scarcity, agriculture, or irrigation—have technical experts exchange on these issues, and build a “new, slightly restructured, different kind of ACRS that could take advantage of these kinds of modern developments.”²⁰ In a similar vein, another US diplomat concluded that one might not need a “formalized” process after all, since the ACRS experience suggests that practical benefits of cooperation might prevail and “erode barriers to formalized engagement” over time, assuming there is no “continued refreshing of the political bile and animus that drives a lot of the conflict.” That idea was echoed by a Canadian diplomat, who bemoaned that ACRS was too “obsessed with agreements and achievements,” rather than

²⁰ In that context, several interviewees suggested that, if a multilateral track was to be convened today, there should be additional working groups, including: women and equal rights; health issues, climate change, youth unemployment, extremism, terrorism, and critical nodes for energy transport – issues “just as important as how we reduce the number of tanks in the region,” as one Canadian put it. In other words, the discussion on arms control and regional security today needs to be more “multi-layered.” Other arms control issues addressed today should include ballistic missiles and missile defense systems in the region, a Jordanian argued.

just recognizing the importance of talking. A Palestinian delegate shared that sentiment, calling for a future ACRS to be more “interactive,” since “you don’t make policies by reading a speech.”

Outside support, leverage, and regional input. Further, some of the Israeli delegates concluded that more political work should have been done towards the end of ACRS, by Israel, to ensure “that the whole process would continue to be backed by a very firm American position,” especially vis-à-vis Egypt. Just as the role of the United States was instrumental for getting ACRS off the ground, so the argument, it was required to sustain the process over time. The positive ACRS experience with outside actors supporting the process with expertise, one Canadian diplomat further mused, demonstrated that the latter should be able to display some “street credibility,” i.e., have accumulated relevant experience. Overall, several delegates noted, having “third parties” responsible for shepherding discussions on specific subjects worked “very well.”

While an outside sponsor, willing and able to invest political capital in a regional process, was considered important, other regional delegates identified lessons from ACRS related to the requirement for regional buy-in and a tailored process. While the OSCE, or the treaties of Tlateloco or Pelindaba, might all be useful examples, one Arab noted, “you have to have something that is more tailored for the region and you cannot take it from abroad.” Outside expertise and precedents, in other words, are useful but insufficient to construct an arms control and regional security architecture for the Middle East. Greater regional input, a Canadian added, is also required in the convening of the process itself—the regionals themselves should take greater leadership in inviting, convening, and setting the rules, since this would heighten their stakes in the process and give them incentives to take it more seriously.

Missed opportunities. In offering lessons learnt, some also reflected on what could have been achieved, had certain things gone differently in the process. According to the Egyptians, for instance, had the Israelis made concessions on the Declaration of Principles (DoP) “and allowed for references to nuclear issues and references to self-determination for the Palestinians,” Egypt could have “moved on some of the confidence building measures that were unilateral and initially non-mandatory,” and the dynamics “would have created a much, much more equitable security discussion.” This sentiment was juxtaposed with reflections by other delegates, who saw missed opportunities largely on the Egyptian side. One noted that ACRS yielded, early on, an Israeli long-term indication that it would be willing “to take part in a nuclear weapon free zone in the region, provided (it has) diplomatic relations with all parties of this region.” A process to probe that commitment further, so the diplomat, was “blocked primarily by Egypt,” while a more “courageous and creative Egyptian diplomacy would have been possible.” Musing on missed opportunities, another extra-regional diplomat wondered whether, if “the Israelis (had) promised never to attack them (meaning: Egypt) with nuclear weapons, as long as they would not attack Israel,” the parties could have entered “a totally different sort of conversation.”²¹

²¹ Other ideas and initiatives, offered by an Egyptian delegate, in terms of what could have been floated during ACRS, or could be tried today, included: a gradual “capping” or “lowering” of the Israeli nuclear capability, in parallel to a process of “peace building” in the region.

Lessons for diplomatic strategy. Especially the Israelis took away lessons from ACRS regarding how “a well-prepared diplomatic strategy can reduce the level of anxiety as we go into complicated waters,” such as discussions on arms control. That lesson informed, according to an Israeli interviewee, Israel’s approach in later processes related to the WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East, such as the Glion/Geneva consultations in 2013-4. In that context, Israel took the decision, informed by its experience in ACRS, that “engaging in a sophisticated way is better than just saying bluntly ‘Forget about it’,” as one diplomat put it. Another Israeli offered the lesson that one should, in the future, not hold progress hostage to the “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” maxim, which enabled Egypt to prevent formalization of the CBMs agreed in the ACRS operational basket. Instead, “from the beginning, we should decide that if we agree on something, it’s mandatory,” so the Israeli interviewee.

Public diplomacy. There was no consensus view among ACRS delegates as to whether more active public diplomacy—informing regional publics on the working group proceedings and seeking to generate broad societal awareness and support—would have made a difference to the trajectory of the process, or even constituted an adequate measure. Some highlighted the difficulties in generating public interest in regional security and arms control, given the technical nature of relevant issues. In reflecting on a future process, others noted that it would likely be impossible to keep such diplomacy “under the wraps” in today’s “totally hyper-connected world” in which everything is “tweeted out.” Trying to mitigate such public attention, a Canadian diplomat offered, one could convene discrete talks in a location like Canada, “because nobody ever pays attention to what’s going on here anyway.”

Build on what was achieved. Several delegates urged that diplomats and practitioners today should “dig out” what was achieved during ACRS—for instance, look at the language worked on in the Declaration of Principles—and use it as a foundation for a process going forward. “If something was agreed upon 30 some years ago, I mean, you could start from there?” one Palestinian mused. Such building should also relate to the operational CBMs, according to the Canadians: “The search and rescue stuff could be picked up again, tomorrow.” Others were less optimistic regarding legacies of ACRS to build upon, lamenting that Track 1.5 and 2 meetings “are all that is left of the whole process” today.

The limitations of lessons learnt – Today’s Middle East in perspective. While some, mostly US and extra-regional delegates, offered lessons on process design and diplomatic choreography along the lines explicated above, others cautioned not to “be too quick in drawing analogies or lessons, because the context was so different,” as one Israeli noted. “ACRS was in a different age,” an Egyptian source similarly cautioned, and with the Arab Spring, changes in Iran, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) having happened since, “where do we go from here, now that this is the situation?” Delegates discussed a range of differences between the regional landscape today versus thirty years ago, including: the fact that many Arabs today look at Israeli military power as an asset rather than a liability, against the backdrop of perceived Iranian aggression and the US reducing its military presence in the region; heightened Iranian-Saudi animosity; an increased regional fatigue with the Palestinian issue; heightened Israeli security cooperation with several Arab states; a lack of leadership and heightened fragmentation

in the Arab world, which is juxtaposed with a more powerful Iran and Turkey; a proliferation of conflicts from Syria via Libya to Yemen; the emergence of new, powerful actors (including in the GCC), and unlikely geopolitical backing for a high-level peace process, amid growing conflict among global powers like the United States, China and Russia.²² Some also noted more broadly the reduced political will for a regional process today, asking: “If you could not pursue an ACRS process successfully when the politics were going in the right direction, then what can you possibly do today under less opportune circumstances?”

Others were more optimistic in reflecting on how lessons from ACRS could be applied to a changed Middle East today. One US diplomat noted that, even though the region is quite different today, with “many other things on the plate now,” there is still a need for a regional security process, developing CBMs and, ultimately, dealing with nuclear weapons as an immovable component of such a process. With overt and covert normalization between Israel and a number of Arab Gulf countries underway, another US source mused, “does that open the door to multilateral consideration on some of these security topics” that were worked on in ACRS? Yet another sounded similar optimism about the fact that “the region doesn’t have all the hang-ups that it did with Israel back in those days.” Somewhat unrelated to arms control, a fourth US diplomat suggested that current Gulf-Israeli normalization could spur “outside-in” progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—“relations between Israel and the Arab states improve, and the Arab states bring the Palestinians along.”

There was also some concrete reflection on what might be possible under a US administration led by President Biden, amid “a return to more normal sense of American diplomacy, and a reinvigoration of a more realistic peace process,” as one American put it. Other US diplomats were less certain regarding a US appetite to get a new regional security process underway.

²² One Egyptian nuanced that sentiment, arguing that “at the formal negotiating table in the NPT and so on, you don’t see a breaking of the Arab consensus.”

Annex: ACRS Delegates Interviewed for the ACRS Oral History Project

Australian delegation

Anna George

Canadian delegation

David Griffiths
Peter Jones
Donald Sinclair
Jill Sinclair

Egyptian delegation

Aly Erfan
Nabil Fahmy
Karim Haggag
Hesham Youssef

Indian delegation

Rakesh Sood

Israeli delegation

Shlomo Brom
Joseph Draznin
Jeremy Issacharoff
David Ivry
Eran Lerman
Ariel Levite
Sallai Meridor
Shimon Stein

Jordanian delegation

Abdullah Toukan

Kuwaiti delegation

Nabeela al-Mulla

Dutch delegation

Piet de Klerk

Palestinian delegation

Bishara Bahbah
Yezid Sayigh

Turkish delegation

Suha Umar

U.S. delegation

Fred Axelgard
David Cooper
Robert Einhorn
Robert Gallucci
Bradley Gordon
Jennie Gromoll
Edward Ifft
Bruce Jentleson
Daniel Kurtzer
Michael Moodie
Daniel Poneman
Dennis Ross
Michael Yaffe

Note: A number of additional delegates interviewed wished to stay anonymous and are therefore not listed.



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