

ACRS: what worked, what didn't, and what could be relevant for the region today

Emily B. LANDAU

The Arms Control and Regional Security Working Group (ACRS) was one of the five working groups that together comprised the multilateral track of the Madrid peace process of the early 1990s.¹ These region-wide arms control talks—active 1992–1995 and encompassing 14 regional parties—were truly a unique experience in regional security dialogue in the Middle East. In fact, looking back upon this dialogue, and even taking into account its shortcomings (which will be discussed), a certain nostalgia is aroused for this period of hope that opened up in the early 1990s. On the other hand, in today's more sombre regional situation, the severity of perceived common threats could actually provide the basis for a strong common interest that states might build upon to once again activate a much-needed regional dialogue framework.

The logic of ACRS—as set out by the conveners—was to focus primarily on the security relations among the states of the region, and to enhance their sense of mutual confidence and stability. Indeed, the seminar framework chosen for the talks was purposely designed to encourage dialogue among the participants, and an appreciation of the threat perceptions and concerns of the other. The goal was to reach agreement upon a shared understanding of arms control that made sense for the participating states and for the region as a whole.²

In the words of then US Secretary of State James Baker, the agenda of the talks would be to consider "a set of modest confidence-building or transparency measures covering notifications of selected military-related activities and crisis-prevention communications. The purpose would be to lessen the prospects for incidents and miscalculations that could lead to heightened competition or even conflict."³ This arms control logic was drawn directly from the superpower experience of the Cold War, when arms control came to be understood most significantly as a process for stabilizing the nuclear deterrence relationship that developed between the two superpowers. In the regional context, the idea was to improve understanding and mutual confidence and build stability step by step, beginning with confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs). CSBMs are virtually any militarily significant measure that is mutually agreed upon among states and viewed as contributing to their common sense of security without impinging upon their core security concerns. CSBMs are the essence of a "win-win" approach to security, and they embody the logic of a dynamic, step-by-step inter-state process.⁴ It was believed that once confidence was established—and with parallel movement on improving inter-state relations more generally through peace negotiations—states could move to the more difficult stage of arms control, when weapons of mass destruction (WMD) arsenals would be the direct focus of attention.

Emily Landau is Director of the Arms Control and Regional Security Program at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Tel Aviv University.

Indeed, a quick review of the talks reveals that while the motivating factor for convening them was no doubt the commonly perceived interest to mitigate the dangers associated with WMD in the region, the talks themselves dealt in the main with CSBMs that were not directly related to WMD. The initial successes of ACRS were achieved with these measures before the talks were put on hold indefinitely.

Achievements in the talks and tensions revealed

A brief description of the initial successes of ACRS will be followed by a more in-depth explanation of the dynamic that led to the demise of the talks. This paper devotes more attention to the explanation of why the talks broke down because it significantly expands upon the commonly cited reason for this breakdown, namely, the insolvable zero-sum positions on the nuclear issue held by Egypt and Israel. It develops an approach that places this bilateral dynamic in a broader regional framework; it evaluates the impact of region-wide dynamics, especially inter-Arab politics and Egypt's role within them.

The 14 regional participants in ACRS began the dialogue process in 1992 by participating in two plenary sessions that were conducted basically as educational seminars; they provided the setting for Russian and US representatives to present the regional participants with their own experiences with arms control in the 1970s and 1980s. Only from about the third plenary did work begin on defining an agenda for the Middle East, and intersessional discussions were initiated on conceptual and operational topics. These meetings continued until 1995, although the last plenary (which had the authority to approve decisions) took place in Tunis in December 1994.

From 1993 to 1995, discussion in the "operational basket" of ACRS focused on four categories of CSBMs, and at the sixth and final ACRS plenary significant progress was achieved with regard to all four.

- *Maritime issues*: two documents were endorsed on SAR (search and rescue) and INCSEA (incidents at sea), and Tunisia agreed in principle to host an additional exercise at sea as well as a meeting of senior naval officers from the region.
- *Prenotification and military exchange*: an agreement on prior notification of military exercises was concluded, and the parties agreed to exchange information regarding military personnel, unclassified military documents, and military training and education.
- *Regional communications network*: six parties (Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Oman, the Palestinians and Tunisia) agreed in principle to participate in a temporary network set up in The Hague, and Egypt offered to host the permanent hub in Cairo later on.
- *Establishment of three regional security centres*: a decision was taken to set up a primary centre in Jordan, with secondary ones in Qatar and Tunisia. Their objective was defined as crisis prevention, management and resolution.⁵

Although the talks were put on hold before these CSBMs could be formally adopted by states and put into practice, clear agreement on them was secured within the framework of the talks—which was no small achievement. They thus created a tangible outcome, which proved that such agreements are possible. They are sure to be an important point of reference for any future regional security dialogue in the Middle East.

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The primary success of ACRS—reflected in the discussions over, and initial agreement on CSBMs—was that it followed a logic of placing weapons in context. This means attributing importance and granting priority to the reality of security concerns among states in the region as a key to lowering tensions, rather than focusing exclusively on the elimination of weapons per se. As such, ACRS placed emphasis on states rather than treaties, and gave priority to their relations rather than solely their weapons and arsenals.

There is no doubt that from the beginning the dispute between Israel and Egypt on the nuclear question was evident in the dynamics of the talks. Egypt clearly advocated focusing discussions on eliminating WMD (first and foremost the nuclear weapons attributed to Israel), while Israel preferred to advance the goal of regional security. Israel wanted to postpone discussion of nuclear capabilities until after peace agreements had been achieved with all of its neighbours.

While there was almost across-the-board agreement on discussing CSBMs in the first stage of the talks, Egypt's opposition to continued attention to these measures without parallel discussion of the nuclear question increased. As of early 1995 Egypt resisted, and later began strongly to oppose, continuing discussion on any further regional arrangements as long as the topic of creating a WMD-free zone was not placed squarely on the agenda of ACRS. This position—and the ensuing and steadily mounting tension between Israel and Egypt—made the prospect of convening another plenary in 1995 impossible, and finally led to the United States' decision to put the talks on hold indefinitely, as of December 1995.

Explaining the demise of ACRS: focus on the regional context

On the face of things, and in light of the centrality of the overt Egyptian–Israeli tensions, the explanation of the demise of ACRS would seem to be quite straightforward, and focus primarily on the dispute over the nuclear issue.⁶ The Egyptians were willing to go along with the idea of CSBMs for a while, but finally became frustrated by the fact that discussion did not move on to the nuclear issue. In an attempt to play according to the "CSBM rules of the game", Egypt even suggested that a good CSBM could be Israel joining the NPT. This of course did not square with the conceptual logic of CSBMs, which is to focus on those areas where agreement can be more easily attained because they do not touch upon or threaten the core security interests of the parties involved. For its part, Israel was satisfied with the confidence-building process, and was not willing to discuss the nuclear issue in the way that Egypt wanted. Israel felt it had made a major concession when in late February 1995 (after coming under significant pressure to show some flexibility toward Egypt's position) it stated its willingness to open discussion of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East two years after peace agreements had been signed with all of its neighbours, including Iran and Iraq.

So what is missing from this explanation? First of all, it ignores all the other participants in the talks. It ignores the fact that other Arab states were not only willing to proceed with CSBMs, but viewed them as intriguing and important. Many participants in ACRS have described the talks as "eye-openers" as regards the views they had previously held on regional realities.⁷ So, in its opposing view, Egypt was not only opposing Israel, but the rest of the Arab participants as well. Because there was nothing in the talks that was obviously threatening Egypt in particular (indeed Egypt could have benefited from the enhanced regional security that was developing), it is difficult to limit the explanation to an Egyptian–Israeli dynamic.

Similarly, this explanation does not relate to the fact that it was Egypt alone that was emphasizing the paramount urgency of the nuclear issue. Why was Egypt—which has a peace agreement with Israel—the only state displaying such concern, to the point that toward the end it began referring to the nuclear issue as a direct and immediate threat?

These questions begin to make more sense when we probe deeper into the dynamics of the process. In fact, when attention moves away from the point of breakdown in the talks and to the process itself, one realizes that, in many ways, ACRS had the characteristics of a regional process in the making:

- ACRS was the first attempt to apply in a comprehensive manner the concept of arms control to the Middle East;

- the structure of ACRS was unique: it was a multilateral dialogue that included Israel, and it was conducted according to a seminar-like format; and
- regarding the content of the talks, there was a determined attempt to identify areas where a win-win logic could apply. Such a logic—encapsulated by the idea of CSBMs—distanced participants from the problematic zero-sum thinking that very often dominates in the Middle East.

I would argue that all these unique features of the talks were apparent to Egypt at the time. As such, Egypt recognized that these talks—together with other regional forums that were gathering momentum in the early 1990s—were creating a new dynamic in the Middle East that had important potential implications for the way regional politics would be conducted in the future. While for the organizers of ACRS this was a positive development, for Egypt—with its leadership agenda—it was a potentially threatening new reality.

Egypt entered ACRS with a clear arms control agenda that it believed would be readily accepted by the other Arab states. Egypt hoped to use this agenda—and the acceptance by the other states of its interpretation of arms control—as a means to enhance its regional leadership role in the new framework being established.⁸

Having Israel as an active participant in the talks presented a particularly difficult challenge for Egypt because Israel was not only outside Egypt's normal sphere of influence, but it was perceived to be a rival for regional leadership. The growing acceptance of the idea of CSBMs within the framework of ACRS translated for Egypt into a growing acceptance of the arms control logic advocated by the United States and Israel, rather than its own, which viewed arms control as the elimination of WMD. This caused Egypt to feel increasingly uncomfortable in the talks.

Explaining Egypt's attitude toward the talks in this manner draws on a reading of the normative framework of inter-Arab politics over the course of the twentieth century, and especially the link between Egypt's identity as regional leader and the norm of Arabism, or Arab nationalism. Over the years, rules of the game developed in the Arab Middle East political sphere that included Egyptian expectations regarding the means for establishing its leadership role among the Arab states. These norms took on relevance for Egypt in the new dialogue framework established in the 1990s as well. Basically, the expectation was that if Egypt succeeded in presenting itself as the champion of the Arab national interest, it would gain the legitimacy it needed to claim its leadership role.

According to the norm that developed, leadership was not something to be asked for or demanded, but rather to be *granted* in light of behaviour. Egypt had to make it clear that its interest was the Arab interest—and with its arms control agenda, this is exactly what Egypt was trying to do.

Of course, Egypt never mentioned its concern with leadership in relation to the ACRS talks, and insisted that it was motivated solely by the issue of controlling WMD. However, in the same period in which ACRS was active, Egypt was openly discussing its desire to reassert its leadership role with regard to other dynamics (such as through mediation in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, where it sought vindication for its decision to forge peace with Israel); there is thus no reason to believe that the situation was different with regard to ACRS. In fact, multilateral frameworks posed a particularly poignant challenge to Egypt's leadership as they were establishing new forms of regional relations in the Middle East. Thus Egypt's leadership interest with regard to these talks was very likely especially strong.

The negative impact of the regional normative framework on Egypt's attitude toward the talks, and in turn on the talks themselves, was not sufficiently taken into account at the time. As such, while a major aim of the arms control talks was to influence the broad context of security relations in the region, ACRS did not go far enough in terms of incorporating the impact of pre-existing regional norms

and realities, especially as they did not seem to be directly related to security concerns. However, in reality, key features of the prior regional setting became an important, if implicit, factor of influence because the regional dynamics that began to develop within the talks clashed with these well-established regional practices and politics. The dispute between Israel and Egypt over the nuclear issue was thus an overt manifestation of a more complex regional dynamic. Appreciating the significance of the regional framework that was established in ACRS allows us to place the difficulties that emerged between Israel and Egypt on the nuclear issue within their proper regional setting.

Applying the ACRS experience to current realities

An important question is what we can take from this regional experience of the early 1990s in dealing with security challenges in the Middle East today.⁹ It should be clear that the answer to the question of whether and how the ACRS experience can be applied to current regional realities and arms control dilemmas depends very much on one's understanding of ACRS and the reasons for its demise. Indeed, there are two types of insight that emerge from this initial round of arms control talks. The first is conceptual, and goes to the particular arms control logic that was chosen for, and implemented in, the talks: namely, step-by-step progress that focuses on shaping inter-state relations through win-win cooperative efforts. Was this the correct approach to take? According to the explanation advanced in this article, the soundness of this logic was actually underscored by both the successes and the failures of ACRS. While the achievements of the talks (CSBMs) lend direct support to the value of the arms control logic that was chosen, the failures can ironically also be explained in these terms: they reflected insufficient attention to the impact of the pre-existing regional context of inter-state relations in the Middle East.

The second and related set of lessons emanates from an examination of the way this arms control logic was actually implemented: what facilitated success and what undermined it. This is the basis upon which we can consider the concrete possibilities for applying such logic again today. Here we need to examine whether and how specific regional conditions can support the kind of regional security dialogue that was begun in ACRS.

The value of the analysis of Egypt's attitude toward ACRS presented above is primarily in sharpening our awareness of the importance of regional context when attempting to promote any kind of new regional dynamic, even if it seems there is no obvious or direct relation to the issue being discussed. As noted, it was the lack of attention to prior regional norms and politics that was primarily responsible for the demise of ACRS and its indefinite suspension. Therefore, the first lesson of ACRS is that when contemplating and discussing arms control and regional security in the Middle East, the broad underlying context of regional relationships—whatever they may be at the given moment—is a central factor to be taken into account. Insufficient attention to this factor puts at risk the gains that can be made through win-win confidence-building dialogue. The key here is to make sure that all parties have a strong common interest in participating, based on the belief that they have more to gain than to lose by taking part in a region-wide cooperative security endeavour.

The first lesson of ACRS is that the broad underlying context of regional relationships—whatever they may be at the given moment—is a central factor.

Regional realities have changed significantly since the early 1990s, so the particular constellation of factors that had an impact then may be of lesser relevance today, and other regional factors may have come to the fore. For Egypt, its regional standing is today being directly challenged by other states in the region, most prominently Iran, with its nuclear and hegemonic aspirations. When Egypt looks toward Iran, any perceived challenge to its regional position from Israel very likely pales in comparison. The perception is that Iran also has an easily mobilized constituency spread throughout

the region that it can appeal to in order to enhance its regional power and influence: namely, the Shiite population.

While Egypt's sensitivities as far as its leadership role most likely remain constant, a change in the identity of the likely challenger is significant. This is because Iran is a growing concern for many other states in the Middle East, each for its own reasons. This common fear of Iran's regional designs—bolstered by its nuclear advances—may create a common interest that states can build upon as a basis for cooperative regional security dialogue. In this regard, Egypt's leadership role would be enhanced as a by-product of the very process itself, just as in ACRS it was perceived to be weakened. Consideration of such dialogue draws on the importance of a strong common interest as a key precondition for pursuing meaningful cooperation, an insight that emerges not only from ACRS, but from other regional cooperative endeavours in the Middle East as well, both past and present.¹⁰

A related issue, raised elsewhere, concerns the importance of thinking about subregional groupings as a focus for regional security cooperation, in addition to region-wide initiatives.¹¹ This also underscores the centrality of strong common interests, because the rationale for targeting such subregional groups of states is the fact that they have common interests that are not necessarily shared by the entire region. Of course, adherence to this logic could create a much more complex regional process, with cross-cutting and overlapping dynamics, and might create new difficulties. However, the potential value of getting regional dialogue frameworks moving and active overrides any possible complexities, therefore this option should be seriously considered.

Any indication that conditions are currently ripe for regional dialogue?

In the years following ACRS, and especially after 11 September 2001, the approach to non-proliferation became very much based on individual states. Each suspected nuclear proliferator was dealt with on its own, through different modes of diplomacy or military force. While there was some success with this approach—most notably in the case of Libya—the failures are more stinging, especially the case of the Iranian nuclear file, which has been dragging on for five years, with no end in sight. This in itself gives cause to redirect at least some arms control energies back to the regional sphere, and to efforts to create new rules of the game in the security realm.

In the shadow of the Iranian nuclear threat—and in light of the common concerns that it arouses—there are two theoretical options for pursuing regional security dialogue: with or without (and most likely as a counter to) Iran. At this point dialogue with Iran in the regional sphere, which includes Israel, is not a realistic option. Dialogue among regional states without Iran is more realistic, and has a conceptual logic as mentioned above; still, it does not yet seem to be on the cards.

Nevertheless, the gathering in Annapolis that took place in November 2007 might be a step in this direction, if it maintains its implicit focus on the regional setting rather than becoming almost exclusively geared toward achieving agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.¹² Annapolis benefited from the commitment of a strong external power, which put a lot of energy into securing wide regional participation, and this is in line with another lesson of ACRS: namely, the essential role of an extra-regional convener of regional dialogue. Indeed, the common fear that a nuclear Iran will use its strategic advantage to impose its will and agenda on the Middle East seems to have been on the minds of the US architects of the meeting. According to some reports, the Bush Administration still hopes to use this meeting to launch a regional dynamic that will include and bolster the more moderate or status quo forces in the region as a means of confronting Iran,¹³ but this remains to be seen. In any case, the dynamics leading up to Annapolis are a stark reminder of the complex array of regional inter-state interests and relations that will surely have an impact on any region-wide cooperative framework envisioned for the future in the Middle East.

Notes

1. For general analyses of the multilateral talks see: Joel Peters, 1994, *Building Bridges: The Arab-Israeli Multilateral Talks*, London, Royal Institute of International Affairs; and Dalia Dassa Kaye, 2001, *Beyond the Handshake: Multilateral Cooperation in the Arab-Israeli Peace Process, 1991–1996*, New York, Columbia University Press. The ACRS Working Group in particular has been discussed and analysed in a number of studies. See especially Bruce Jentleson, 1996, *The Middle East Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Talks: Progress, Problems and Prospects*, IGCC Policy Paper no. 26; Bruce Jentleson and Dalia Dassa Kaye, 1998, "Security Status: Explaining Regional Security Cooperation and Its Limits in the Middle East", *Security Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 204–238; Shai Feldman, 1997, *Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control in the Middle East*, Center for Science and International Affairs Studies in International Security, Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press; Peter Jones, 1997, "Arms Control in the Middle East: Some Reflections on ACRS", *Security Dialogue*, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 57–70; Peter Jones, 2003, "Negotiating Regional Security and Arms Control in the Middle East: The ACRS Experience and Beyond", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3, pp. 137–154; Peter Jones, 2005, "Arms Control in the Middle East: Is It Time to Renew ACRS?" *Disarmament Forum*, no. 2, pp. 55–62; Emily Landau, 2001, *Egypt and Israel in ACRS: Bilateral Concerns in a Regional Arms Control Process*, JCSS Memorandum no. 59, Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv University and Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies; Emily B. Landau and Tamar Malz, 2003, "Assessing Regional Security Dialogue through the Agent/Structure Lens: Reflections on ACRS", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3, pp. 155–179; and Emily B. Landau, 2006, *Arms Control in the Middle East: Cooperative Security Dialogue and Regional Constraints*, Brighton, Sussex Academic Press and JCSS.
2. The analysis of the ACRS talks presented here is based on Emily B. Landau, 2006, op. cit.
3. Remarks by Secretary of State James A. Baker, III before the Organizational Meeting for Multilateral Negotiations on the Middle East, held at the House of Unions, Moscow, 28 January 1992.
4. See Ariel Levite and Emily Landau, 1997, "Confidence and Security Building Measures in the Middle East", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 143–171. For more on CBMs and CSBMs see Johan J. Holst and Karen A. Melander, 1977, "European Security and Confidence-building Measures", *Survival*, vol. 19, no. 4, July–August; J. Alford (ed.), 1979, *The Future of Arms Control: Part III: Confidence-Building Measures*, Adelphi Paper no. 149, London, International Institute for Strategic Studies; Johan H. Holst, 1983, "Confidence Building Measures: A Conceptual Framework", *Survival*, vol. 25, no. 1, January–February; Alan Platt (ed.), 1992, *Arms Control and Confidence Building in the Middle East*, Washington, DC, US Institute of Peace Press; David B. Dewitt and Gabriel Ben-Dor (eds), 1994, *Confidence Building Measures in the Middle East*, Boulder, CO, Westview; Michael Krepon (ed.), 1995, *A Handbook of Confidence-Building Measures for Regional Security*, Washington, DC, Henry L. Stimson Center, second edition; and James Macintosh, 1996, *Confidence Building in the Arms Control Process: A Transformation View*, Arms Control and Disarmament Studies no. 2, Ottawa, Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.
5. Emily B. Landau, 2006, op. cit., pp. 42–47.
6. Additional explanations are raised by other analysts, and some did have a contributing effect, for example the fact that key players in the WMD field such as Iraq and Iran were not participants in the ACRS talks. However, these were surely not the core of the problem. One explanation that is often advanced as a core factor relates to the fact that the multilateral talks in general were tied to the bilateral track of Madrid, so when the bilateral peace process faltered the multilaterals suffered too. But in this regard, two facts should be kept in mind: first, ACRS began to falter long before the peace process ran into problems, and second, at least one multilateral working group—on water—was active well into the twenty-first century, surviving even the second intifada. This means that when there is a strong mutual interest in cooperating on regional issues, activities can persist even in the face of bilateral problems. Having said this, it is also true that during ACRS, participants expressed their adherence to the centrality of the bilateral–multilateral link, and this put a strain on the talks. In this regard, Jones maintains that "a dynamic needs to be found ... in which it is more difficult to use the Arab-Israeli dispute as an excuse not to begin serious consideration of a new regional security architecture." (See Peter Jones, 2005, op. cit., p. 58).
7. Based on in-depth interviews conducted by the author with close to 25 participants in ACRS, during the years 1998–2000.
8. The explanation of Egypt's attitude toward the talks in the coming paragraphs is based on a much more developed and documented explanation in Emily B. Landau, 2006, op. cit.
9. One set of answers to this question is included in an article written by Peter Jones in 2005 (op. cit.), which formulates key insights, such as the fact that the process has value in itself; that the goal of regional security dialogue is not a new agreement per se, but rather a new *approach* to regional security; and that any such process will be complex, thus it is of central importance to be realistic about what can be achieved, especially in the short term.
10. See Emily B. Landau and Fouad Ammor, 2006, *Regional Security Dialogue and Cooperation in the South: Exploring the Neglected Dimension of Barcelona*, EuroMeSCo research paper no. 48, October, at <www.euromesco.net/images/regional%20security%20dialogue%20eng.pdf>.
11. Peter Jones, 2005, op. cit.

12. See Emily B. Landau, 2007, "Regional Security Cooperation in the Middle East: Glimmer of Hope on the Horizon?" *Conflict in Focus*, no. 21, at <www.rccp-jid.org/conflictinfocus.htm>.
13. See David Brooks, "Present at the Creation", *New York Times*, 6 November 2007, at <www.nytimes.com/2007/11/06/opinion/06brooks.html>. In this op-ed explaining that the current peace process initiated by the United States is not really about Israel and the Palestinians, but rather about confronting Iran, Brooks ends by saying: "The Bush administration is not about to bomb Iran (trust me). It's using diplomacy to build a coalition to balance it, and reverse an ugly tide."