



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: HRH King Abdullah of Jordan

STOURTON: ...the day itself, do you remember how you heard what had happened and what you did.

KING ABDULLAH: Well actually we were flying from England that day, we were somewhat close to Nova Scotia when my brother came in and woke me up and said look, we've got a problem in the States, there's been either an explosion or an aircraft has flown into a building in New York, so I said well you know that's really unfortunate but I presume we keep going, not realising, any of us, what was actually taking place, and then I actually called home to speak to the American Ambassador to find out and he didn't know what was going on. My wife called me and said turn around, and I said it's just been an accident and she said no, you don't understand, an aircraft has flown into a building, it's a tremendous tragedy and obviously on, on the phone you don't get the full depth of the catastrophe, so I walked up to the cockpit and turned on BBC World Service and they had just then announced the second aircraft, and we suddenly realised that a catastrophe was taking place so we were going to be diverted to Canada and see what was going to happen and we realised that, with the tremendous tragedy unfolding in the United States, that nobody was going to be interested in seeing us during that time, so we turned around and flew back to Brize Norton, refuelled and got back to Jordan in the early hours.

STOURTON: What was your first political calculation of what it might mean? Were you one of those who feared there might be an immediate American response?

KING ABDULLAH: No, no I didn't, I mean I, having spent a lot of time in the States, obviously such a blow would, anger any society and America was deeply hurt from what had happened, but having known the President, I'm sure that he would have taken a calculated assessment of what was the problem. There were still too many questions when it first unfolded, and then the international community was getting worried about a clash of civilisations, and luckily again, leadership in the United States and in Europe understood what Osama bin Laden was all about and actually came very strongly forward to bring common sense to people's mind, and things unfolded in a manner that I thought much better than was expected, to be quite honest.

STOURTON: On the 24th of September, I think the Senate here passed a trade agreement with Jordan, which many people interpreted as an effort to bring Jordan within the coalition.

KING ABDULLAH: Yes but you've got to remember that this thing was signed with President Clinton almost seven or eight months before and it was somewhat amusing and a bit annoying at the same time, as we came to Washington to discuss the peace process and move the Israeli Palestinian situation, reading in the newspapers that you know we're going to give the FTA to Jordan because of 11th September, it had nothing to do with it. This was something that was initiated

between President Clinton and myself and fully endorsed and supported by President Bush.

STOURTON: When the bombing began on the 7th October, firstly how were you told and secondly, what did you do because there was a lot of concern about the way that the Arab world and the Moslem world would react?

KING ABDULLAH: Well, again as a true Moslem, and the majority of us have always had this knowledge of this extremism that has unfortunately tainted the name of Islam, I think all of us were fully behind what was happening. We understood what the Taleban and Osama bin Laden stood for, so my contacts with the American government and with my old friends in the military, we knew that the strike was taking place, I thought that the operations would take a lot longer than they did, and was very pleasantly surprised that they moved as smoothly as they did, and I think we were all vindicated from those sceptics in the Middle East and the Islamic world that were saying that Osama bin Laden was right - the Talebans were good, when you saw Afghans cheering in the street literally within days, and that set the tone I think for the struggle that we have for the next 15, 20 years, and that is to eradicate extremism from our religion through education and understanding.

STOURTON: That's a very long time frame you're talking about.

KING ABDULLAH: Well it is and the reason why it'll take so long is because Osama bin Laden was not targeting the west, he was targeting the majority of Islam itself and I believe that it's going to take a generation or two to solve this problem, especially in Asia, where Arabic is not their first language and where these people have been very good as extremists. They say this is what the Koran said or this is what the prophet Mohammed said, and it's complete lies, so education is going to take a while to be able to get ourselves into Asia, to those Moslem communities and be able to explain to them what these people actually stood for. In England we have the same problem with Moslem communities from Asia that really, those that have come to Osama bin Laden's call, really don't understand what it is that they're being asked to do.

STOURTON: On 1st November, Tony Blair stopped in Jordan, between Syria and Israel. That was a period when a lot of people thought there was a window of opportunity in the Middle East. Were you one of those?

KING ABDULLAH: Well we always feel that there's a window of opportunity, as, if we get pushed back one step it just reinvigorates us to take those steps forward again and we have to keep pushing the process forward. There have been disappointments but that doesn't mean that we need to give up. I think the opportunity is still there, I think it's even more prevalent now that the American president has declared the American position once and for all, i.e., a viable Palestinian state within three years. That gives us a benchmark. The problem that we have now is that you know we have the light at the end of the tunnel, so to speak. We just don't have the tunnel at the moment. We have to create a set of mechanisms and obligations by Israelis and Palestinians to move the process forward so that we can have a Palestinian State in three years, and peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians and the Israelis and the Arabs.

STOURTON: What about what George Bush said about President Arafat then?

KING ABDULLAH: You know I understand that the Americans have reservations on the Palestinian leadership. The Palestinian leadership at the end of the day has to answer itself to its own people. But the prize is out there, a viable Palestinian state for the Palestinian people, and they're going to have to move their society along to assist us to be able to make sure that the Israelis also hold up their fair share of the

bargain and as much as there may be criticisms of Arafat in the west, there's also scepticism in the Middle East towards Prime Minister Sharon, so at the end of the day, both leaders are going to have to listen to their people. I believe their people want peace on either side, and the leaders are going to have to give up sort of old age dreams and think of new ones instead.

STOURTON: But President Bush has more or less said he won't judge the Palestinians to have moved on unless they get rid of Yasser Arafat, do you think it's right to do that?

KING ABDULLAH: Again there's always the difficulty of putting yourself in a position of choosing other people's leaders. America has made its position and its attitudes towards Arafat very clear. Now that's been done, let's move on, in other words, you still have to work with the Palestinian National Authority to be able to move society forward to achieve a state, and at the end of the day, how can you move society along as the international community if you're not allowed to talk to one side.

STOURTON: What do you make of the Israeli claim that their fight against the Palestinians is analogous to the American fight against terrorism, that they're fighting their own war against terrorism?

KING ABDULLAH: That is very unfortunate because I think the Israelis used that linkage because it's not true. I see that the 11th of September made America an innocent victim and they went in there to try and really give life to the people. The Israelis are occupying another people, these people have been occupied for 35 years and that is the core situation, it's not security, it's a political problem, the Israelis always say that security comes first, but how can you have true security if you're not going to solve the political problem, you're always going to have that tension, so it's actually completely the opposite. They're occupying a people that eventually will need their freedom and I think they're the last people under occupation and we in the international community are sometimes a bit quiet about saying that that's okay.

STOURTON: I ask you about the other front in the war on terrorism - Iraq. You saw Tony Blair on the 29th of July having said in advance of the meeting that you had grave concerns about any military action. Did he reassure you about that at all?

KING ABDULLAH: Well I, I think everybody in Europe and the rest of the world, the Chinese and the Russians that I've spoken to recently all have our concerns. The major issue that we came to at 10 Downing Street was to talk about what was actually the Israeli Palestinian process, how we can move that on, and confirm both our views that the humanitarian tragedy that's unfolding with the Palestinians on the west bank of Gaza is of tremendous danger, and what we can do to renew our efforts as Europeans and Arabs to get the quartet so to speak to move on that front.

STOURTON: But the perception is widespread that Tony Blair is very much with George Bush on Iraq, he does want to see Saddam Hussein removed, that was something you expressed grave concerns about. Did you express those concerns to the Prime Minister and what did he say?

KING ABDULLAH: Well we actually were there to talk about the Israeli Palestinian problem. It was more in passing that we have our concerns because I think that you know, we hear the same thing wherever we go that you know the potential of a military strike in Iraq with not a clear end. I think it concerns everybody, and Tony Blair, the Prime Minister actually voiced his concerns too that we're not too sure what is being talked about, and the potential of destabilising Iraq through military

action, especially in light of the Israeli Palestinian situation, is not moving as forward as we'd like. It could be tremendously damaging to the whole region.

STOURTON: So you felt, you had a sympathetic hearing there, that he understood what you were trying to say?

KING ABDULLAH: Well no I, yes, I think everybody in the world, even Americans here are, and I would even say the President is, concerned because the President understands the linkage between Iraq and the Palestinians and he understands that the potential of a destabilised Iraq could have on the region, so I think there's a lot of common sense out there.

STOURTON: What do you think that the impact could be, you talked about a Pandora's box being opened in the middle east, what did you mean, what might happen?

KING ABDULLAH: Well I mean can you imagine a very large country the size of Iraq disintegrating into, into chaos as three factions of Iraqi society have a go at each other, Shiah, Kurds and Sunis. Obviously Iran is a Shiah country and there are Shiahs in the Gulf. Kurds have their own problems with other countries on their borders, Sunis being sort of outnumbered by the other two factions, you could see this very easily spilling out of the borders of Iraq into elsewhere in the middle east, and millions of people having a go at each other inside Iraq is going to be catastrophic for the whole region.

STOURTON: Do you feel threatened by Saddam Hussein I mean do you believe he has weapons of mass destruction.

KING ABDULLAH: I don't feel threatened by anybody but we do know that he's had chemical weapons, he's used those before in his war between Iraq and Iran and on the Kurds. Nuclear capability I really don't know, I doubt it, to be quite honest at this stage.

STOURTON: People who might support military action would say that if the Americans, that's a big if, but if the Americans did it successfully, if he went, not many people would shed tears for him.

KING ABDULLAH: Again, I think part of the problem is that whenever you are in a region where a country's ostracised and is not part of the international community, it does weaken the whole region. What we're hoping for is a dialogue or process of dialogue that actually gets Iraq back into the international community and we've all, as countries, talked to the Iraqis to try and be open minded and flexible, especially in respect of allowing weapons inspectors back in, because Iraq back into the international community would be a tremendous plus for our region.

STOURTON: Lots of people have made the link between these two fronts in the war on terrorism and between what's happening in the Middle East and what's happening in Iraq and the Israelis for example say sort out Iraq first and then come here. What do you think the correct link between the two things is?

KING ABDULLAH: Well this is the problem. If the Israelis are saying start with Iraq first, that is a very good reason why we should be very suspicious. We all know that the crux of the matter is the Israeli Palestinian problem and the Israeli Arab one. Convincing people in America that Iraq should be sought first when really the core of the tragedy in the Middle East for the past 40 or 50 years has been the Israeli Arab, Israeli Palestinian problem, and so to sort of push it off onto other countries I think is very irresponsible. Israelis and Palestinians will have to sort out their problems, the international community needs to be able to put that pressure and hopefully in

three years' time, Israel has peace for the Arab world, and we have a Palestinian state, and to side track us on other issues I think is very unfortunate and very irresponsible.

STOURTON: Your Majesty, thank you very much indeed.