



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: Lord Levy, UK Special Envoy to the Middle East

LEVY: On that unbelievable day I was actually with the FCO, having a sandwich lunch with the Foreign Secretary and we finished the lunch and came out and the television, as always, was on in the outer office. There was the first story breaking of the first plane hitting the World Trade Centre, and at first it was - wow, this is just a horrendous air crash. And then gradually everything started to unravel and it was disbelief. It was total horror and how can this be happening? And what is happening, and what does this mean and what's, going on and it was this sort of real shock reaction, almost total disbelief.

STOURTON: And what did you do once that had sunk in?

LEVY: I went up to my own office when it had sunk in. I phoned my wife, was the first thing I did and I said have you seen what's going on? And she was almost in tears. She said I'm watching it on television, I can't believe this is going on. It was just a feeling of total shock.

STOURTON: And presumably one that one imagines a fairly late night at the Foreign Office thereafter once it became apparent that this was a crisis that needed managing?

LEVY: I was actually called later that night and asked if I would make some phone calls the following day, and the main purpose of the phone calls were to speak to countries we were close to and friendly with, had very good relations with, and to say that this mustn't be treated as a war against Islam, against the Muslim religion and that we had to try and stand together. And that this mustn't be taken as a war against their religion and a war against their faith. That was the main purpose for those phone calls.

STOURTON: But even at that very early stage, people were talking about a war on terrorism and a coalition but also anxious to secure support in the Arab world?

LEVY: From our point of view, it was for Arab countries that we were close to and these were the ones I dealt with and ministers dealt with others. For them to have an appreciation of where we were coming from and that this should not provoke, the world was not going to an anti-Muslim or anti-Islamic mode and they needed to get this message very loud and clear with immediacy.

STOURTON: What sort of response did you get?

LEVY: The response was one of relief that this message was being delivered, one that they obviously wholeheartedly endorsed and appreciated the message, and frankly a message that they very much wanted to hear

because this was precisely what they wanted the world to react to. This was a terrorist organisation, this was an outrageous situation and the world wasn't saying this is the whole of Islam, this is the whole of the Muslim world, but quite the reverse, that this is not a fight against Islam, not a fight against the Muslim world but this is to really isolate terrorist organisations and what they stand for.

STOURTON: Did you find any anxiety that the Americans were going to hit back very quickly because I think quite a lot of people during that first week went to bed at night thinking they might wake up and find there had been in an American strike by the morning.

LEVY: Not really. I mean I felt that there was going to be a measured situation. I felt that there was anger, frustration, a lack of comprehension of what had happened but I felt it was very measured and calculated, and there wasn't going to be a reaction of immediacy and thoughtlessness but there was going to be real thought into a measured reaction.

STOURTON: You were in Israel I think at the beginning of October. What sort of mood did you find there?

LEVY: I found the mood there of "now perhaps the world will understand our situation", that we have to deal with terror on a continual and regular basis, and a feeling of, "I hope the world sits up and takes notice of what we in Israel and the Israeli public has to suffer". I mean don't misinterpret that in any way as some feeling of oh, you know this has happened; now everyone will look at what we suffer. Not that at all. But a feeling of my God this is just horrendous, and we have to go through this all the time. How can the world unite in order to stand up against these sorts of terror organisations?

STOURTON: You had, I think, a meeting with Yasser Arafat during that visit. Can you tell me about that?

LEVY: At that meeting Arafat very much wanted to identify with the coalition against terror, extremely critical at what had happened and wanted to separate himself from the sort of terror that had happened in New York and wanted to make sure that the world saw him as not belonging to any such terror organisation.

STOURTON: There's a story, I don't know whether you can confirm it or not, about you arranging for a telephone call at that stage between Yasser Arafat and Shimon Perez which made a bit of a difference. Can you tell me about that?

LEVY: Yes I did, it was, it was a very sensitive moment in terms of what was going on, as regrettably most moments are sensitive in this issue between the Israelis and the Palestinians. And I just said to Arafat I think it's an opportune moment for you to talk to Shimon Perez, let me try and reach him on the phone and deal with the particular issue which I really cannot go into. And he agreed and I was able to reach Shimon Perez, get him out of a meeting and they spoke and dealt with a very sensitive matter, which at that moment averted a particular problem.

STOURTON: How important do you think the Prime Minister's meeting with Arafat later that month in Downing Street was?

LEVY: Well I think it was a message from the Prime Minister to Arafat: I am receiving you in Downing Street; I want you to understand that we understand the plight of the Palestinian people. But we totally believe in the security of the state of Israel. We are against violence, we do not see terror as the way forward but we nevertheless believe that there should be and must be a Palestinian state living alongside the state of Israel, and you have to take back to your people the message that terror and violence is not going to secure that state but dialogue, working together, understanding each other's problems and issues has got to be the way forward. And the fact that we had lived with this in our Irish situation and with his own experience and commitment to that problem undoubtedly this was very much on his mind.

And from Arafat's point of view, it was the fact that he had come and been welcomed by the Prime Minister which was significant for him but then he had a message to take away that he had to take back to the authority, the Palestinian authority, and to his people that they had to find a way forward and that terror was certainly not the route.

STOURTON: At the end of the month the Prime Minister himself went to the Middle East. On his visit to Syria what role did you play in preparing for that?

LEVY: Well, my role in Syria had really been previously. My role had been with the late President Hafas Alasad where I had been to Syria on a number of occasions. I had quite a number of meetings with the late president who was, of course, the father of the current president Bashar al-Assad. And my role had been to develop the dialogue in terms of what was happening on the peace process and was very involved before the talk started with the Americans in Shepherd's Town and regrettably the fatal meeting the late President Alasad and President Clinton in Geneva. Unfortunately the whole of the potential possibility of an arrangement between Syria and Israel then fell apart. That was really much more my intense role. By this time I was much more deeply involved in the Palestinian/Israeli problem rather than on the Syrian front.

STOURTON: He went on of course to Israel and to see Yasser Arafat and Ariel Sharon immediately after that. One reads in mysterious ways that you had gone ahead and prepared the ground a bit. Can you just give us a sense of what sort of work is involved in that?

LEVY: Well the work really involved was for me to have met with Prime Minister Sharon and with General Arafat before the Prime Minister came. I had meetings with them and with their key advisers, with the leaders of the Palestinian authority, with cabinet ministers and with members of Prime Minister Sharon's team, and to try and really get a feel of exactly where the state of play was at, where their mindset was at. This was always and fully in co-ordination with our ambassador in Israel and with our consul-general in Jerusalem who were in every meeting of course that I go to and also a representative from the FCO.

And the ambassador would then on the basis of those meetings give a briefing which we would work on together for the prime minister and his party and his advisers like Sir David Manning, and the consul-general in Jerusalem likewise, so that he would have a feel before arrival and on arrival which would give a real sense to him of how the position felt so he would go into the meetings hopefully with that extra degree of preparation.

STOURTON: Can you tell me what the sort of items on the list you were underlining on that occasion were? What were the headlines?

LEVY: Well it would be very difficult for me to go into detail but the headlines always need to be an understanding of the Israeli position in terms of their security, the fact that the violence will not be the way forward, that there has to be an understanding, that there has to be a political process, there has to be a hope given to a way forward with the Palestinians. And for the Palestinians to fully understand that violence is not the route, terror is not the route and that only dialogue and working together with the Israelis will find a way forward for them to ultimately reach their aspiration of statehood and of a viable Palestinian authority with full transparency and accountability.

STOURTON: Were you still at that stage talking to some of the other Arab nations? And if you were, what sort of a sense of a mood as the moment when the campaign, the bombing campaign began, what sort of a mood were you reading?

LEVY: I was continuing to have dialogue with certainly the Egyptians and the Jordanians and also some of the Gulf states, and North African countries, and the mood was one of great fear, one of great anxiety, of a feeling on their own street of the world not turning against the whole of the Arab world because of what had happened. And an understanding and a frustration that somehow a formula and a solution had to be found to deal with the Israeli/Palestinian issue. There is absolutely no defence and there never will be a defence for terror. But somehow the route forward to give hope to people who are in desperate need of hope needs to be found.

STOURTON: It wasn't that long after that I think that Ariel Sharon made that speech in Prague where he compared the position of the Israelis to what Chamberlain did to the Czechoslovakians before the Second World War. Did you detect a sense that, they felt at about this period as sort of November went on, a sense that they felt betrayed by the way America and the rest of the world reacted?

LEVY: I think this was an emotive gut reaction, one of a sense of fear and perhaps with the benefit of hindsight which one always describes as an exact science, and with more mature reflection at that moment, I think perhaps those words wouldn't have been used.

STOURTON: Once the bombing campaign began, you talked about the sense of anxiety in the Arab world generally. Did that continue? Was there - particularly as the bombing campaign went on for quite a long time and didn't seem to be producing an impact, did you find that that continued and indeed became heightened as you talked to people in the Arab world?

LEVY: Not really. There were actually some studies done on the reactions as the bombing developed and the reactions on the street and the protest actually became markedly less than they were at the very beginning.

STOURTON: We talked to Nabil Shat at the Summit in Beirut and he detects several stages in the American approach to what was happening in Israel. He says there was a particular cooling in American enthusiasm and interest in the region after the bombing of Kabul ended which he put down partly to a sense of American power and a feeling that they didn't have to take too

much account of Arab opinion, but also of the suicide bombings which began. Do you think that's an accurate picture of the way the Americans approached that?

LEVY: I don't want to disagree with Nabil who I know very well and have a great deal of respect for. I don't think it was an issue of the Americans wanting to have a disregard for the issues. I feel that the suicide bombings, which are one of the most evil atrocities possible and the fact that a society was almost unable to go about normal life, children going to school, people just going shopping, people going to a restaurant, people going to gather for a celebration, people were just living in total fear.

And the Americans needed to come to grips with their understanding of this in order to try and find a way forward as to how they got moving into a dialogue. They took their time in evaluating the issues before they really got committed and then understood that they really had to get much more deeply involved into the real issues on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and there was a period where the EU were more involved. Then America got more involved, then it swung around again and I think the real way forward is with the quartet which is with America, with the EU, with Russia, with the UN working together in order to try and just tread step by step to really bring the parties to an understanding of how there can be a way forward. Because unless that happens we are going to go from drama to drama and loss of unnecessary life because ultimately there has to be not just management of this conflict, there has to be a real resolution of this conflict and the sooner the better we can start on that route to save innocent life is, to me, the only way forward.

STOURTON: In December when things began to get very bad in Israel, you went to see both Ariel Sharon and Yasser Arafat to try and urge them both to be a bit restrained. Can you tell me anything about that?

LEVY: Yes I did, I certainly only want to take very minimalistic, if any credit for this. I certainly saw them both and particularly emphasised to the authority that the, the suicide attacks just had to stop. This was just never a way forward and this was just creating a feeling of hatred on the Israeli street that for those that really wanted to find a way forward, this was giving them totally the wrong signals and to Prime Minister Sharon that they had to be given a chance for the authority to deal with controlling the terror and particularly the suicide attacks.

But this was helped with pressure from America and the rest of Europe and I certainly don't want to in any way upgrade my own role but at that time there was a break of about three and a half weeks where there was a relative calm in the region.

STOURTON: What is it that you can bring, that's a good example of circumstances, which more conventional ambassadors, foreign secretaries or whoever, cannot bring? What makes the envoy's, the prime ministerial envoy's role stand out and make it something worth having?

LEVY: Well I like to believe it's worth having but that is the Prime Minister's decision. I think one spends more time than perhaps one would do under conventional circumstances. One works very closely with the prime minister's team and with the foreign secretary's team totally on their instructions and with the Foreign Office and with the local posts, and I think it's a combination of having known the key players for a number of

years, trying to get an insight into their thinking. I don't think the methods are unconventional. I think it's a matter of having the ability and the facility to spend more time evaluating that issue and to be focused on a particular issue, and in many parts of the world the envoy representative of the leader of the country - in our case of course Prime Minister Blair - is a very meaningful tool that they feel they can relate to. But this is always done totally with the full support of the foreign secretary who couldn't be more helpful and supportive, and likewise the FCO and as I say all our ambassadors and staff in post.

STOURTON: It's as much about having good contacts as anything else, a bit like being a journalist if you like?

LEVY: Everything is about contacts and relationships, and continually dealing with people and building up a level of mutual trust.