



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: Ahmed Maher, Egyptian Foreign Minister

MAHER: Yes I was here, having a lamb chop. My wife called me and told me she'd seen it on television and I thought she must be wrong. I thought it can't be, this must be a game or a movie or something. She said it was true. So I came back to my office, turned on the television and it did look like it was not real, and yet unfortunately and dramatically and tragically it was real. And I saw, when I turned on the television, I saw the second blow against the tower. I saw the tower collapse and then the other tower collapsed. Still I knew it was real, but it didn't look real, it was so unbelievable, so impossible, so unexpected, that I realised at the time that this was a unique accident or, and, it would have unique repercussions and effects. I think it has changed a lot of everybody's look at things, and particularly the Americans.

STOURTON: That night, I think the president, President Mubarak, held a meeting with his close advisors, presumably you were there? What sort of concerns did people have in Egypt at that time, and can you describe the meeting?

MAHER: I think we wanted to know what exactly had happened, and why it had happened, and whether it was something that would be emulated in other places, whether this was a sort of global plot or something that would have global repercussions. There was very little information. We knew what had happened but we did not know why, and I think we decided to be on the alert and there was also a possibility that this might be a generalised attack on American interests, so we did take precautions regarding American institutions and the American embassy. That was all, we had to wait for more information.

STOURTON: Did you get calls from the Americans and from the British? I think Lord Levy amongst others was ringing people.

MAHER: I don't think that we received anything. We, think we got in touch with the Americans to say that we had seen this, that we were very sorry and condemned what had happened, and asking for more information. At the time there was very scarce information about what had happened. There was an inquest, we heard that the American administration had gotten into secret places, that the president and the vice president had been whisked out of wherever they were. And then we heard about the attack on the Pentagon. Then there was a rumour that the state department had also been attacked, but it proved to be wrong. There was, I think, in Washington an atmosphere of panic and of expecting more of the same. So we were in touch with the Americans but not with the British that night, I don't remember.

STOURTON: What sort of conversations were happening between Egypt and America in the following days?

MAHER: I think they were too busy to have any conversation with anybody. We didn't want to bother them. But then news started to leak about the astonishing swift result of the inquest, and then came names, Arabic names and Muslim names, and we sensed that there might be a backlash. There was a backlash in fact. We did get in touch with the Americans telling them that we hoped that they would take the necessary measures not to allow any backlash against all Muslims and Arabs. I think the Americans had already realised that it was a very serious situation and they took certain steps, I think one of them was the President's statement, President Bush's statement, and then I think there was his visit to the mosque. There were many gestures that indicated they were aware of the danger and willing to contribute to alleviating that danger. Unfortunately there were many incidents regarding Arabs, one Egyptian was killed somewhere, I don't remember where, by mistake probably, so we kept prodding the Americans to be very vigilant and to take steps. Then there was news of arrests, and here I must say that the Americans arrested many people and did not inform us at all. We had no idea how many Egyptians had been caught, why, what was the accusation. It transpired later that most of them were people who had overextended their stay in the United States; this was an INS or a visa problem. But all the same, those people were not allowed to contact the embassies or the consulates, so we were in the dark. We found that there was a general atmosphere of panic; people were being arrested for reasons that we didn't know, people started going missing and we did not know anything. When we talked to the Americans at the time, we heard two things. One of them is that the inquest kept them so busy that they did not really have time for what they considered niceties like informing the embassy. And secondly they said that the people who had been arrested had not asked to contact their embassies, and in fact, that this is what the international conventions dictate that they have the right to contact their embassies, but the American authorities didn't have the right, didn't have the obligation to tell them to contact their embassies, or to tell the embassies. So we tried to correct this and we asked our American friends to inform those they arrest of their rights. One of these rights being to contact the consulate and the embassy, so we started gathering some information about our nationals. I tell you none of them was accused of terrorism, except I think one who had been on the plane. And then there was another one who was arrested later under false accusations that he had had a device to guide planes and then it appeared that it was not in his room, that they found this in another room, and the FBI apologised to him. But until now, we do not know exactly the number of Egyptians who are under arrest in the United States. I tell you most of them are people who are arrested because of visa problems, but there's no exact data that has been officially given to us by the Americans.

STOURTON: How great was your concern at the time that this could turn into an attack on Islam?

MAHER: Well, very early on there were attacks on Islam from some American sources.

STOURTON: I mean in terms of the (possibility) there could be a war against Islam in terms of the coalition. Was there ever a fear?

MAHER: Well this was clearly what some people were pushing for, and in particular I think there were some disparaging remarks coming out of Israel at the time. Comparing what had happened to the Palestinian struggle against

occupation. I think it came a little later on, but there was an early comparison between Arafat and Bin Laden and the PLO and al-Qaeda, so it was all in bad faith and it was pushing towards a confrontation between Islam and the West. We tried to counter this early on by showing that these people who had committed these terrible crimes not only did (they) not represent the societies of their countries, but also that it has nothing to do with Islam.

STOURTON: Very early on it seems that, I don't know what part Egypt played, it became clear that the Middle East had to be involved in some way and peace in the Middle East had to be on the agenda if a coalition was put together. You went out I think to see Colin Powell at the end of September. Was it before you went you talked about America's past mistakes in the Middle East? I wondered if you could say what you meant.

MAHER: Well it was clear that, although these attacks had nothing to do with the Palestinian problem or the policy of the Middle East, but it was clear that the atmosphere created by the continuation of the Israeli occupation, by the continuous mistreatment of the Palestinians by the Israelis, the fact that no solution had been found, had created an atmosphere in the Middle East that was made of frustration and of anger and of feeling that the United States and the West had really aligned themselves totally with an Israeli position that was very detrimental to our rights and our positions. So we thought that this atmosphere that was created by this situation would make it easier for those who wanted to attract young people, to use them in their criminal acts. So there was a relationship, not a direct relationship, but the whole atmosphere was facilitating the recruitment of these people by the Afghanis, al-Qaeda, the Taleban or whoever, Bin Laden in particular. So this was why we said that part of the fight against terrorism is to deprive those who would like to resort to terrorism of a cause around which they could rally young, innocent people who did not know better, who were really seeing in front of their eyes their people being subjected to the treatment that the Israeli occupation was subjecting them to, and then trying to find a way out of their frustration, out of their anger and so use them for their criminal purposes. That is why we thought that part of the solution was trying to find a settlement for the Palestinians.

STOURTON: When you talk about mistakes, what did you mean? What had America not done?

MAHER: I think what America had not done was really take a firm stand against what the Israelis had done and thus help solving the problem in a manner that is compatible with the rights of the Palestinian people and put an end to occupation. I think that was very clear to everybody at the time. What we wanted the United States and the West to realise (was) that first this should not be turned into a war against Islam or against Muslims, this should not be used by the Israelis in order to exacerbate relations between the West and the Arab world, it should not be used by the Israelis to justify the continuation of their occupation and their mistreatment. So we realised early on that it was not only war against terrorism waged by the West, but it was a war against the Palestinians and the Arab cause waged by Israel in the United States.

STOURTON: So when you met...

MAHER: May I stop a while to have some water...

STOURTON: When you went to Washington and you saw Colin Powell, one of the things you talked about was you wanted hard evidence that Bin Laden was behind the attack. What did the Americans say to you and did it convince you?

MAHER: I'll tell you something. What we thought at the time is if they wanted to use force against a certain country, Afghanistan in particular, and there were accusations about other countries, that they should move based on hard evidence, because it seemed to us that it might have been too early to draw conclusions. I mean this is an investigation that, strangely enough, yielded results very early and it was difficult to realise that in fact, having found one lead, it led them to other leads and the thing was elucidated very quickly. So we did ask for hard evidence, and we did say that any intervention should be based on international law, that it should not be something that would open the door for other interventions in other places by other people who may not be as law abiding as the United States. It worked, the truth of the matter is that we did not get hard evidence, but we did get circumstantial evidence, not only from the Americans, from the British also I think. Then it became clear that those people, Bin Laden and the others, boasted about what they had done, so it became clear that they had something to do with it. Although at the time we thought that the names, the 19 names they had given as the perpetrators of these attacks may not be the only ones involved. We thought that there may be other people involved, not necessarily Arabs, but perhaps Americans or Westerners. I think later on it appeared that they caught one American and they caught one person whose nationality is not clear, yesterday they caught somebody.

STOURTON: A British person as well, I believe.

MAHER: A British person, so it appeared clearly that it was not only an Arab or Islamic plot, but that there may be, and there still may be, at large, some people who are involved who are not necessarily Arabs or Muslims. But what we resented really, very quickly, (was) two things. First that this almost turned into war against Islam and Arabs, but also there were very strange accusations that these people were the product of societies, and they started attacking societies in Egypt, in Saudi Arabia, in the Arab world, which is very unfair because I mean when there are some British people who commit things like that or Americans, you do not blame the whole society, I mean you blame these particular people because they are criminals. If there are two Egyptian criminals or 18 Saudi criminals, (that) does not mean that all Saudis are criminal and that their society, the Egyptian society, which is 68 million, should be responsible. If you have three or four terrorists who attacked the United States, it does not mean that all Egyptians should be responsible, and you look for the answer in the Egyptian society. Maybe you should look for the answer in the American society because they lived in America. Maybe you can look for a culprit in the politics of the West towards the Arab world and towards the Islamic world. It's something that there was a lot of confusion (over) I think in the minds of many people. Fortunately I think that now this has calmed down, but it has left an effect not on the attitude of the Americans towards the Arabs and Muslims, but in the general attitude of the United States toward the world. I think they see most of the events through the prism of the war against terrorism, it became the mantra, and it became something that, in the minds of some, even in the American administration it takes precedence over anything else. This is something I

heard Zbigniew Brzezinski on television once say, and he's a wise man, that it would be wrong to see everything through the prism of anti terrorism, after all, the United States have many interests, faces many dangers, and it cannot confine itself to look at one side of the story which is important. We know how important it is to fight terrorism, we have suffered from terrorism at a time when nobody wanted to come to our help. The Americans got the whole world to support them and join the coalition and we did it wholeheartedly, except we would not participate in military action. We thought that it would be a wise thing to try to avoid military action and to avoid harming civilians, what is called collateral damage, it's a nice euphemism but it does not change the tragedy of the thing. But we know how important it is to fight terrorism, we know how essential it is, but we also know that during the time we were fighting terrorism, we were doing other things also, we were trying to reform the country, we were tackling other international problems and I mean we did not confine ourselves to one thing. At one time the Americans could only see terrorism, and everything was subject to the war against terrorism, and this created in my opinion a certain atmosphere of panic in the United States. I mean when you take a plane in the United States and as soon as you sit on your seat there you are told, you're not allowed to move, not allowed even to go to the rest rooms, it's abnormal. When you go into an American airport and you have to take off your shoes and your jacket and everything, (even) your pants, when now they have devised the thing that people coming from a certain part of the world have to have their fingerprints taken everywhere, I think, I know the danger, I understand the danger, I know that you have to defend yourself against this danger, but I also know that things can go too far, and the United States which was sometimes very critical of us, about certain actions we took to fight terrorism have now decided to have some foreigners, not Americans, judged by military courts and secret evidence, and all these things... I believe that the Americans should be very careful. I believe that there is the American spirit of fairness, of freedom in my opinion, and the Americans should be very careful not to allow this to deviate because of the fear of terrorism, which is a real, justifiable fear. But, I asked this question actually, why do you have to warn people every day that there are still other attacks an atomic bomb, a dirty bomb or some people might come by sea. Why do you have to create this atmosphere of panic? But then the answer is, we have an obligation to inform the people. I think that they have an obligation. What they mean actually is that some security organisations have been accused of laxness, so now they show that they are on the alert. So every day they come with a new alert. I don't think it's good for the morale of the people.

STOURTON: Can I take you on to when the bombing was announced, how was Egypt told that the bombing was going to start?

MAHER: I don't think we were told officially of the exact date. I mean we were told that they could not let things go, that they have to go after the people, bin Laden, and these people are under the protection of the Taleban and that they would have to settle the score. But they didn't tell us of any plans or any dates.

STOURTON: Did they not ring you up a few hours before and say we're about to start?

MAHER: I don't remember (anyone) having called me. I don't think they called anybody else. But I mean everybody saw it coming and it was very clear

that they had amassed troops and ascertained the bases. I mean they were not hiding their intentions in fact.

STOURTON: In the middle of October you said that you were confident that no Arab country would be the target of an American attack during this campaign against terrorism. Are you still confident about that? I suppose I'm really asking you to talk about Bush's "axis of evil" speech and American statements about Iraq.

MAHER: Well I tell you something, at the time in October, everybody was on the warpath, and some people in America said let's settle all the scores, I mean Iraq, Iran, everybody. We thought it would be very dangerous in the heated atmosphere in the Middle East, to just attack an Arab country and add to the feeling that Arabs and Muslims are targeted by (the) attacks, Afghanistan, Iraq or something. We did not see... In fact Iraq had never been accused of being part of a terrorist plot. Even anthrax, some people in the United States tried to implicate Iraq, and I don't think they have otherwise they would have told us. So Iraq is another problem, and that was mixing problems that don't belong together. Iraq is a problem of Security Council resolutions that have to be obeyed (and) respected, as a result of the invasion of Kuwait. It was different and it didn't relate to terrorism. So we, at the time, did get assurances that part of this war against terrorism, at the time, would not be targeting Iraq. Now we hear that some other countries are targeted, not because of terrorism so much as it is because they are accused of having weapons of mass destruction, so it's another question all the same, but some people would like to put them all (together). So I think it is now turning into other matters, not so much terrorism. But all the same, we are on record, we are against attacking Iraq. We believe that the Security Council has resolutions, there are talks between the secretary general and the Iraqis, resolutions have to be implemented and respected. We do not think that using force will solve any problem, it will add to the sufferings of the Iraqi people, and it will add to the anger of the Arab peoples, who will see that Israel is violating every rule of international law, and nobody is speaking about bombing Israel.

STOURTON: You've just come back from America, were they listening?

MAHER: They were listening, they were listening. It is clear that the Americans have realised that things cannot go on like this. There is a situation where they feel more the Palestinian people's plight. They do lean towards Israel, but there's always a caveat, when they say for instance that Israel has a right to defend itself - which I object to, because in fact it is an occupier and it is defending its occupation, it's not defending itself - but when they say that, then they say but we hope Israel will take into consideration the facts and the consequences of any measure they take. They feel that this is not absolutely right, what they are saying, but we know the relationship between the United States and Israel. But we do count on what I told you about the fairness of the American people, they want to be fair, they believe they are fair all the time. They're not fair all the time, but they want to be fair, so fairness is an important value, and I think they realise that the people are suffering, that the Israelis are intransigent - that everybody knows now. Bush came out with what is everybody's understanding, the solution is two states. I mean it has to be, the Palestinians like any other people have the right to have their state, and the Israelis have to respect that. This of course Mr. Sharon does not like, because in fact what he wants to do is to refer to a situation where there's

no Palestinian Authority, the old Israeli dream of having a land free of any alien. But I believe the Americans understand that this cannot go on, this cannot be achieved, that they have to work to help the parties reach an agreement. When President Mubarak went to the United States, I think they listened very carefully. I think they have understood many of the things, for instance, the idea of getting rid of Arafat. We explained to them that, whether they like Arafat or not, we don't like Mr. Sharon, but it doesn't mean that we should oust him or refuse to negotiate with him. Every leader has his minuses and pluses, but he is the elected leader of the Palestinian people, he is the only one who can really lead his people to an agreement with the Israelis that ensures peace, so you have to deal with him, whether you like him or not. You have to realise that the onus is not only on the Palestinians, the onus is on both sides. You have to realise that all these myths about the Palestinians having refused a wonderful agreement in Taba and in Camp David are not very accurate. There is another side to the story. I believe that the Americans are ready now to come out with an attitude that is public and balanced, and lead the way towards serious negotiations. Of course this will be resisted, and the visit of Mr. Sharon now to the United States is part of this resistance, he is really using all the powers he has. But they used to count on a monolithic Jewish society or lobby. This is not true any more; I think there are divisions in the Jewish community in the United States. Some of them understand more and more the necessity of historic reconciliation with the Arab world with the Palestinians and there is, even in Israel, there is some sort of schizophrenic sort of, full support for Sharon, full support for peace, acceptance of the two state solution and giving votes for Sharon. It is an ambivalence that shows that they are worried about the future. They start to ask themselves questions. The problem with the Israelis has always been that they never had questions to ask themselves, what in French is called "*et ta dame*" they never envisaged for a moment that they might not be always right, they're always right. I mean there's always a justification, and carved in moral terms and wonderful, and that was the danger, because if you have somebody in front of you who thinks he can do no wrong, then everything you do is wrong and he is justified to take any measure. Now the Israeli society is divided and the peace camp that had disappeared for a while is coming back to life, and the American public opinion, although still very much pro Israel is showing an understanding for the Arab's position. You can read editorials, even in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, critical of Israel. This is new, and that is why I think this administration, although it has its eyes on the elections in November, does realise that it has to move things towards a solution. We are satisfied with the fact that, not only did they listen, but I think what they heard registered in their minds and in their plans.

STOURTON: So the final question really, 11 September did change everything irrevocably, but in what way do you think?

MAHER: In many ways. I think the first way is the United States realised that it is vulnerable. You know fortress America was there and nobody could touch it, no war was ever fought on its territory. It was the magnanimous big power who came to the help of the Europeans who didn't know how to handle their own problems. So I think the vulnerability has a short term and a long term effect. The short term effect is to subject everything to their desire to defend themselves, and to fight terrorists, and they don't care what the others say. But in the long term vulnerability leads to the necessity to co-operate with others, not only to tell them what they have to do, but to co-operate with them, to create a sense of security for

everybody. This vulnerability led them to asking themselves why, I think, not now, maybe it's too early. But they will ask themselves, why did these young people come and commit this terrible crime, killing themselves? Why do suicide bombers in Israel go and commit these acts? And go deeper into matters and perhaps try to understand the others better. There was always the temptation to bring everybody to the image of America, and it's justifiable, I mean look at this, everybody wants to eat American, to hear American songs, to wear American, I mean jeans even, American flags everywhere, and the Americans were happy. But now people are starting to ask questions and I think the Americans are asking questions. The world that the Americans had created for themselves, and for the others through cinema, through television, through these modes that came, I think this will start to, not to melt, but to become not as absolute as it was. So America, in the American's eye is good, but it is also fallible, it needs the world and I think this in the long run will be very, very, very beneficial. We have to help the Americans overcome this situation where they are. I remember a very eminent British politician saying that, in these circumstances, the Americans are not ready to listen to you say no, they want to hear you say yes, but to anything they say, you just show your solidarity with them, that you are with them, but from within the system, where you get in with them, try to change their course, and I think this is a very wise proposition. When a big power is hurt, when it is angry, I don't think you should confront it. You should take it by, I don't want to say by ruse, but I think you have to be very careful in the way you handle them. But I believe that the deep sense of fairness of the Americans will prevail in the end, that all we are seeing now, and that worries us, they will come out from all this stronger and less oblivious of the world and what the world needs. So this is a case where perhaps something good may come from something bad. We hope so at least.