



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: Nabil Sha'ath, Palestinian Minister for Planning

Q What do you remember about September 11?

I was in Damascus and it was really our first official visit to Damascus. President Arafat was to visit Damascus the next morning and it was a major opening in our relations since 1982. I was waiting to do the final plans when I was struck with this horrible sight on the TV screen. I knew something major had happened and life would never be the same again. True enough President Arafat was not able to fly the next morning as the Israelis stopped all air traffic and, as usual, wouldn't let him use the automobile either to [go to] the Egyptian border or to the Jordanian border. The Syrians cancelled the whole trip. So that was my first encounter with the 11th September.

Q: And what political calculation did you make at that stage about the impact it would have on the region?

The first impact was what happened to the meeting between President Arafat and President Assad. I knew it was like seeing the cub of the lion being eaten by the hyenas and knowing that the lion is going to roar and just go mad at everything that moves in the forest. It was tragic, it was abominable, it was unbelievable, and I knew the United States was going to act in ways that will seek vengeance and security and assurance and deterrence for its own people. That might mean adopting policies that will fly against many of the principles of international law and international relations, including many of those positions practised by the US in the previous administration, let's say.

Q Tell me about the decision for Yasser Arafat to give blood which caught people's imagination?

President Arafat knew immediately the implications of that tragedy, and he felt that he couldn't possibly allow events to pass by, letting Israelis do what he predicted they will do: try to tarnish him with the brush of Bin Ladenism or terrorism - a very regular habit of the Israelis who find it very convenient to call our national struggle for liberation against their occupation, 'terrorism'. And, therefore, he rushed, seeking a sign of support for the people of United States, of condemnation of the terrorism attack and aligning himself away from the camp that would support such an act.

Q. At the beginning of October, George Bush surprised people rather by talking about Palestine having always been part of his vision. Shortly thereafter at the UN, he talked about a vision of two states occupying the land. Did those things surprise you and what was your interpretation of those statements?

Immediately after the attack, the United States had a mixed policy towards Middle East. In one way the attackers were at least supposed to be Muslims coming from Middle East. We don't know the whole truth yet, but there were accusations that they were all Arabs and therefore there was an immediate backlash against Arabs inside and outside the

United States. But at the same time, there was probably advice by Bush senior and others who fought the Gulf War in 1990, that even if there were terrorists in the Middle East you can not fight them without allies in the Middle East as well. And, to get allies in the Middle East, especially those who are against terrorism and who have suffered from terror in their own countries, you need to address the major concern, which is the Palestinian problem. This is not really something that the Americans had to divine, that's something that the Americans were told by everyone including the Saudis, the Egyptians and everybody else. Therefore, there was really, in November, a concerted attempt by Arabs, particularly the Saud Arabians and Egyptians, and by Europeans, to persuade the United States that if you want to combat the war on terror, you've got to also take a clear position on ending the conflict in the Middle East, and so really recognise the justice of the Palestinian cause. Not because what happened in New York was a result of that injustice. I think that was a totally separate matter. But because if you want to fight terror, you've got to be on the side of justice. And that means you've got to go ahead and say something about Palestine that the people of the Middle East accept as being on the side of justice and can join in your war against unjust terror like the one that happened in New York.

E In your contacts with Americans at that period, did you feel there was an open door, paradoxically a real opportunity, because of what happened on Sept 11th?

There was. I met Colin Powell in November also, just before the United Nations session in which Bush declared his support for an independent state of Palestine. I recall Prince Saud al- Faisal went to the White House just a day before the president spoke, and on that very day Mr Blair flew from London after that famous dinner he held in 10 Downing St. in which some were invited and some were not, all of whom attended or crashed the dinner, but finally the dinner produced a statement about Palestine. Mr Blair flew to Washington and we talked. He spent only two hours in Washington at the White House just addressing the president of the US with the Palestinian issue. All of this happened in November and led the president of the United States to make his address in the General Assembly and then to allow Mr Powell, a few days after, to make his address in Louisville, Kentucky in which he made a longer explanation and longer address about the position of the United States on the Middle East peace. This included not only an independent state of Palestine side by side with the state of Israel, but also a clear statement about the end of occupation and what he called a "just and practical" solution of the refugee problem.

Q Just going back a step, can you tell me any more about that meeting between Mr Blair and Mr Arafat at the beginning of November? What happened there?

All our discussions were about a permanent peace solution, about the necessity of addressing that issue with something very similar to what the Saudi plan eventually adopted. Clarity on the issue of withdrawal and an independent Palestinian state, and of a need to resolve the refugee issue in justice and in reference to Resolution 194 through a negotiated settlement, and a need to address the Israeli concerns of security, end of conflict, peace treaty and normal relations. In fact, out of this discussion came the British initiative which became the European decision in the summit in Belgium just before that dinner... and it led also to an expose by the Belgian presidency of that position in the meeting in Brussels for the Euro-Mediterranean conference attended by 26 foreign ministers from the Mediterranean. Europe then really was led by the Blair attempt at persuading the Americans to adopt a peace process that would be a major success in ending the conflict in the Middle East, bringing stability and allies in the war against terror.

Q. In the video tape that Bin Laden released right at the beginning of the bombing campaign, he made a specific link between what was happening in Israel and Palestine

and his own campaign. Did you feel vulnerable to having the Bin Laden mud stick to you, as it were?

We took a very courageous stand there which took a lot of risks, much more than giving blood to the American victims. I was in Budapest and I made what many people considered to be a devastating statement authorised by President Arafat that we do not accept to be the pretext for anybody. That the justice of the Palestine cause has its own merit, and we will not allow anyone to use this to kill innocent civilians in New York. Which was a clear rebuttal of somebody who was saying, "I did this all for you". We knew he never did it for us, and I said in that speech in Budapest airport, "Mr Bin Laden, just remember Palestine a few days ago."

Q. Shortly before November, Ariel Sharon made that speech in Prague where he said that appeasement towards the Arabs was being conducted by the Americans. That suggests that he was on the defensive or felt on the defensive. Do you think he was right to at that stage?

Mr Sharon always played a game of similes and of images that he thinks would help people in the West understand his cause and therefore take a negative attitude towards our rights. Between his Chamberlainian model of appeasement in Prague - probably he was even holding an umbrella or something like that to make his point stick - and his attempts at tarnishing us with the 'terrorist' label, was an old attempt by him and his colleagues and public relations people to try to simply make his case of devastation and occupation acceptable to the Western mind and particularly to the US.

Q. Can you identify that moment at which that mood of promise that you talked about turned sour?

No doubt it was the suicide bombings that some Palestinian organisations like Hamas started. The first was the dolphinarium in Tel Aviv - it was devastating. Yoska Fischer was in Tel Aviv when it happened and he found himself immediately embroiled in a very serious matter in which we encouraged him, like we encouraged Mr Blair before, to take the opportunity to try his hand at peace. President Arafat made his first clear acceptance of a ceasefire on that day. The suicidal bombing at the dolphinarium, and later on in Jerusalem and Haifa, just at the moment when Mr Bush was going into the White House, gave him a lot of ammunition in again saying to Mr Bush, "Look, here is a case very much similar to that in New York." Once again, what the Israeli tanks were doing in the occupied territory were forgotten, the devastation of the refugee camps, the hostage-taking of whole villages and towns by the Israeli army was forgotten, and this became the focus. Together with that was what looked like a devastating easy victory for Americans in Afghanistan. And therefore somehow the Americans felt that, here is the Israeli image-making - it was something irresistible at the time - and here was their success in Afghanistan looking like they devastated al-Qaeda. Bin Laden was nowhere to be seen, so they don't need anymore to try any harder at making peace in the Middle East or, for that matter, try harder to get allies to be on their side. Suddenly the prime minister of England, who looked like the prime minister of the anti-terrorist campaign, the soul of the fight against terrorism, was forgotten, and the Americans stopped even referring to his statements and started going the unilateral way in Afghanistan. When the Americans go unilateral it spells trouble and that means trampling over many older statements and commitments and going their own way. Going their own way meant Americans pulled literally out of their promises about peace in the Middle East at the time.

Q. How did it change the tone of your contacts with the Americans? Can you give me an example of the kind of thing that suddenly started happening in meetings with them?

Well, for a while there was no meetings, no contact whatsoever. Colin Powell stayed in touch with President Arafat once in a long while, usually making polite – he's a polite man - politely threatening statements for the need for Mr Arafat to do this or to do that. For a while the contact became merely that of the American consul general in Jerusalem with Palestinian officials. And there was almost total ostracism of President Arafat for a while. And in the meanwhile the Israelis escalated and escalated and escalated their attacks. I mean, it became such that the Israeli brutalities started taking over the sympathies of Israeli victims for suicidal bombing. And usually Sharon would do that all the time. Sharon went into Lebanon in 1982 with the acquiescence of Alexander Haig [saying] that all he wanted was a 45-kilometre zone sanitaire to somehow separate the borders of Israel with the Palestinian guns. But eventually his enthusiasm took over and he put Beirut under siege and once the Palestinians were out, he rushed to commit that horrible massacre of Sabra and Shatila and lost his job for 18 years. He again went into the over-shooting, over-brutality and escalation of violence beyond belief, and I think that caught up with him in the end.

Q. There has been again a change in the American situation - a sense of re-engagement. What brought that about, do you think?

That was brought about really by a variety of factors. Partly the global reassessments. They found out that winning in Afghanistan was not the end of the road. There are still many things that need to be done. Things that are more complicated, where victory is not so easy, is not so effective. That it needs all the tools of policy: security, politics, economic. There came the Saudi factor, the Egyptian factor here in attempting to persuade the United States. Once again has to look back to what needs to be done in the Middle East for its own global securities, as well as that of the Arabs. There was also the growing attempt by President Arafat to persuade his people to accept a ceasefire. There were 24 days of total ceasefire after the December 16 when the devastating suicidal bombs took place, and during these days the Israelis didn't stop. They continued assassinations and devastations of Palestinian territory and a humiliating and debilitating siege of the Palestinians. The Americans re-calculated: things didn't look like they did after the dolphinarium on Aug 1, 2001. Between August 1 and December 16, the Americans realised that the Israelis were not that right and the Palestinians were not that wrong. Something had to be done to play a more even-handed game to try and work out at establishing some peace in the Middle East that would bring the kind of stability they want.

Q. Final question: people say that the world changed forever on September 11 - do you think that's true?

The world changes forever every day. (laughs). The world is changing all the time, and again some obvious truths, when they are overextended, sometimes look very difficult to understand the operational consequences of. So okay, the world has changed beyond anything. So what? Now you have to be as wise, as serious and as committed to try to solve its problems – and one of them is certainly the problem of the Palestinian people and the Israeli occupation.