

Confidential

Notes of Ambassador Brunner's meeting with the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization

Held in Tunis on 23 August 1991 at 10:45 p.m.

Present:

Ambassador Edouard Brunner	Mr. Yasser Arafat
Ms. Buttenheim	Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization
	Abu Jaffar
	Director-General of Political Department
	Abu Amar
	Mr. Zehdi Terzi
	Adviser to Mr. Arafat
	Dr. Nasser Al-Kidwa
	Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations
	Dr. Sami Al-Musalleh
	Personal Secretary to Mr. Arafat

Chairman Arafat was observing CNN on a huge television screen just prior to the meeting. With humour, he remarked that his "addiction" to CNN had become "chronic". Referring to the recent "coup d'état" which had taken place in the Soviet Union, he said that he had just heard a report that none of the Soviet tanks had been loaded with ammunition when they rolled into the streets of Moscow. Indeed, he said, it had been a very strange coup.

Ambassador Brunner remarked that the recent turmoil in the Soviet Union would have the effect of weakening the Soviet role internationally.

"No doubt," Mr. Arafat concurred, "or annihilate it altogether."

Ambassador Brunner said that the Soviet Union could no longer be considered a counterweight to the US in the Middle East. He then expressed pleasure at the opportunity of meeting Mr. Arafat. He noted that he had recently travelled to a number of countries in the Middle East, in an introductory visit in his capacity as Special Representative of the Secretary-General to the Middle East. "You have been everywhere, interjected



- 2 -

Mr. Arafat. The Ambassador recalled that he had been in Syria on the day that President Assad had conveyed his favourable reply regarding the US peace initiative. He underlined, however, that his own mission was not associated with that initiative. In fact, the Secretary-General had not yet been officially informed by the US of the details of Mr. Baker's efforts. At the same time, information had been conveyed to the United Nations through various channels, including some of the parties. Of course, the Ambassador added, the UN was very interested to see that all efforts be made to promote a just and comprehensive settlement in the region.

Mr. Arafat expressed the view that the recent developments in the Soviet Union might delay the peace process.

Ambassador Brunner remarked that a number of other elements were also not yet in place.

"One element is missing," said Mr. Arafat, smiling.

The Ambassador agreed that it was certainly an important element, if not the main one. He asked whether it would even be possible to convene an international conference without the Palestinians, to which the Chairman replied in the negative. Mr. Arafat recalled that at the recent Foreign Ministers' meeting of the Islamic Conference in Istanbul, 47 countries had adopted a Palestinian draft resolution regarding the status of Jerusalem. Even Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Turkey had voted in favour. With great pride, Mr. Arafat pointed out that Palestine held a permanent seat as vice-president of the Islamic Conference.

Ambassador Brunner wondered whether it was yet possible to formulate a joint Arab position regarding the Middle East peace process. In his view, it would strengthen the Palestinian position if -- at least within a small circle of key Arab states -- a common framework could be formulated and presented to Mr. Baker.

Mr. Arafat said that he had "no difficulty" with this suggestion. In fact, on 10 September, an Arab League meeting would be held at the ministerial level in Cairo; that should prove to be a useful opportunity. The Ambassador speculated that Mr. Baker would probably visit the region again.

"Yes, in the first week of September," said Mr. Arafat.

Ambassador Brunner pointed out that the Secretary of State was very tenacious. In the prevailing circumstances, the US was the only remaining superpower.

- 3 -

"Although I said in my telephone call to Mr. Gorbachev that he should play a role to push the peace process forward," rejoined the Chairman.

Ambassador Brunner commented on the absence from the process of two important permanent members of the Security Council, namely France and the UK. A representative of the EC would not carry the same clout; moreover, the Twelve were not in agreement among themselves about the Middle East. At the same time, the Ambassador continued, once a conference was convened, pressure against Israel would mount because only that country was in a position to give something.

Mr. Arafat stated that if a conference were to take place and an agreement were to be reached with the Arabs and the Palestinians, Israel would achieve its long-held dream of becoming a genuine part of the area. Yet, he added, the Palestinians would be the "losers" if there were no conference.

"Because Israel will settle more Soviet Jews in the occupied territories," the Ambassador observed.

"But we are not a small minority," Mr. Arafat continued. "Demographically we are increasing at a faster rate than they are."

Ambassador Brunner recalled that Israeli Labour opposition leader Peres had made precisely that point in their meeting in Jerusalem in July.

Mr. Arafat added that in his reference to the demographic increase, he had not even included the millions of Palestinians residing in the diaspora. For example, there were 500,000 in Jordan who maintained identity cards permitting them to return to the West Bank.

Mr. Brunner said that if the Palestinian response to the Baker initiative could be coordinated as part of a joint Arab/Palestinian effort, it would send the ball into the Israeli court. He noted that not all Israeli government leaders were in favour of a conference. Prime Minister Shamir had four objectives: (1) immigration, (2) settlements, (3) cohesion of his Likud government, and (4) a peace process, which was given less priority than the previous issues.

Mr. Arafat pointed out that thirty-five percent of the Soviets presently arriving in Israel were not Jewish.

Ambassador Brunner opined that the coming weeks would be decisive. Reiterating that the US had yet to officially inform the United Nations about details of its peace initiative, he added that some of the Arab parties had expressed their views

- 4 -

regarding the role of the Secretary-General's representative as a "silent observer" at the conference.

"We did not yet accept this silent observer idea," Mr. Arafat stressed.

Ambassador Brunner drew attention to the Syrian perspective of the UN role, namely that the representative would be present in all multilateral committees and possibly in bilateral committees if the parties so agreed. In any event, as Mr. Arafat knew better than he, the substantive work of international conferences took place in the corridors outside the conference rooms. "Everything is cooked away from the formalities of the conference," he said.

"Not exactly with the Israelis," Mr. Arafat replied. He recalled the Israeli siege of Beirut in 1982 when he had insisted that multinational force and UN observers be deployed in conjunction with the Palestinian withdrawal from Beirut. At that time he had received a US "guarantee". Similarly, the Palestinians today were seeking total Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories and wanted the US to guarantee President Bush's 6 March 1991 statement (in a speech to the US Congress), in which he had highlighted the land-for-peace formula, Israeli withdrawal and the political rights of the Palestinian people. In the Palestinian view, the occupied territories included East Jerusalem. A Memorandum of Understanding to this effect was essential from the US. For the PLO, that was the main substantive issue.

Ambassador Brunner wondered whether this latter request was a strictly Palestinian or a common Arab demand. Mr. Arafat replied that it had begun as a solely Palestinian position, but a wider Arab position was being sought. He regarded the Islamic Conference resolution as a beginning. Abu Amar added that it was not simply an Arab position. The entire international community, with the exception of Israel, regarded the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem as occupied. The previous week, in a meeting with the Foreign Minister of Egypt, Amre Moussa had told him that Jerusalem was "not negotiable" as far as Egypt was concerned. Mr. Arafat pointed out that a number of Arab head of States, including King Hassan and Presidents Ben Ali and Bendjedid, had reiterated this in recent meetings with Secretary Baker. He repeated that Palestinians awaited a Memorandum of Understanding from the US. "We are not asking for the moon," he said. "We need assurances regarding what President Bush told the Congress on 6 March."

Mr. Brunner wondered whether there might be contradictions between the MOUs that the US would enter into with the respective parties, to which Abu Jaffar replied that Secretary Baker had said publicly that there would be no secrets.

- 5 -

Mr. Arafat pointed out that the US was well aware that (1) no Palestinian could attend the conference without PLO permission and (2) that Palestinian representatives from the occupied territories would need more than a PLO permission slip to justify their actions in the eyes of residents of the territories. They would need the open endorsement of Chairman Arafat, making their participation acceptable to all Palestinians. "Otherwise no one would dare to attend," he said.

Ambassador Brunner believed that the US was well aware of this, to which Mr. Arafat rejoined: "They are, but they want to cover this with their fingers".

"Only the PLO can deliver," Mr. Terzi said.

"They understand, but they won't admit it," Abu Jaffar chimed in.

The Ambassador pointed out that the few Palestinians who would attend the conference would represent the entire Palestinian community. He asked where the PLO expected the conference to take place, noting that Israel was opposed to Geneva.

Dr. Al-Kidwa suggested that it might be Berne, with Ambassador Brunner adding that it would not be Basel, where the first Zionist conference had been held.

"In my opinion," said Mr. Arafat, "there would be a ceremonial session, which is badly needed by the US".

Mr. Brunner noted that the meeting might be held at a level higher than Foreign Minister because it was rumoured that Mr. Shamir did not want Mr. Levi to participate.

Mr. Arafat recalled that UN resolutions were the basis of the question of Palestine; however, maybe Syria and Israel did not need the UN.

Ambassador Brunner said that it was up to the parties to decide upon the UN role. At the outset of Mr. Baker's negotiations, Israel had been totally opposed to a UN role but now it accepted the idea. In his view, the UN presence had never been a genuine problem, rather the Palestinian delegation was the real obstacle for Israel.

Mr. Arafat suggested that the PLO would request that the International Court of Justice become involved, or that the meeting be held at The Hague, to which Abu Jaffar added that the Netherlands had agreed to this. Mr. Terzi observed that ongoing negotiations would require some kind of secretariat, if only to take records of what took place.

- 6 -

"Till now we insist in the Namibian model," said Mr. Arafat. "We refuse any form of self-government. There should be a UN special representative or high commissioner to administer the territories until elections could be held under UN supervision."

When Ambassador Brunner pointed out that the latter scenario was far from Israel's view, Mr. Arafat replied: "I know, but no one can refuse it." Abu Amar added that a referendum would be conducted in (the Ethiopian-controlled territory of) Eritrea the following year.

Ambassador Brunner wondered whether in the 8-point position paper conveyed to Secretary Baker by the Palestinians, self-determination had been listed as a factor.

"Yes, no doubt," said Mr. Arafat, "but the first point is Jerusalem. Israel says that it seeks an end to the occupation, but without withdrawal. Do you realize how mad this is? They say this before sitting at the table!"

Dr. Musallem noted that the alternative could be Israeli annexation of the territories.

Ambassador Brunner emphasized that pre-negotiations were in many ways more important than the negotiations themselves.

Mr. Arafat concurred, saying that the PLO insisted as of now on international protection. Resolution 681 was the first step in this direction. UN monitors should be deployed in the occupied territories.

Ambassador Brunner pointed out that Israel was opposed to any role from the Security Council and wanted the US to veto such a possibility.

Replied Mr. Arafat: "We totally refuse this. We insist we can always go back to the Security Council or even the General Assembly."

The Ambassador drew attention to the importance of confidence-building measures, such as the proposal that the Arab boycott would end if there was a freeze on settlement.

"We don't care about the boycott," said Mr. Arafat. "We ask not just to freeze the settlements but to take away the old ones. They are illegal." Mr. Terzi recalled that Security Council resolution 465 had specified such language. Abu Amar emphasized that it was the Palestinians who required confidence, since, after all, Israel had nuclear weapons. In his conversation with the Egyptian Foreign Minister the previous week, Abu Amar had pointed out that the Palestinians have become the new "untouchables". They had no rights, not even in Arab countries.

- 7 -

They were not permitted to be buried anywhere. Essentially, he said, they were "not considered to be human beings." In Kuwait alone, 290,000 Palestinians faced an uncertain future.

Mr. Arafat complained bitterly about the treatment of the Palestinians at the hands of the Kuwaiti authorities, noting that the UN should do something on their behalf. Some of the 170,000 remaining in Kuwait today were registered as refugees with UNRWA. But, for example, 23,000 Palestinians (who had originated from Gaza) had Egyptian identity papers and were not permitted by Egypt to return. The situation in Gaza itself was specially grim; people were starving. In Kuwait, Filipinos and Sri Lankans were being hired to replace Palestinians. Mr. Arafat recalled that on the eve of the Gulf crisis, 430,000 Palestinians had resided in that country. "So you see, Ambassador Brunner, from the beginning you are facing all these troubles!" Mr. Arafat exclaimed.

The Ambassador replied that it was his earnest hope that the Palestinians, the Israelis and the other Arab parties would sit around the negotiating table and discuss all these issues. He reiterated his earlier suggestion that the Palestinians should, together with at least Egypt, Jordan and Syria, put together a clear understanding about the terms of the negotiating process. They should produce a reasonable paper and transmit it to the US. For example, how could President Bush reject something he had said in his own speech? By producing a paper based along those lines, the Palestinians could offer a counter-pressure to that conveyed by Israel. It was important not to lose the procedural battle because, in doing so, the Palestinians would only be worse off at the negotiating table. In Ambassador Brunner's view, it would be very difficult for a peace conference to take place without Palestinian participation.



Lisa Buttenheim
6 September 1991