

CONFIDENTIAL

NOTES OF AMBASSADOR BRUNNER'S MEETING WITH MR. FAROUK AL-SHARA,
MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF SYRIA

Held at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Damascus,
on 15 July 1991 at 10.30 a.m.

Present:

Ambassador Brunner	Mr. Farouk Al-Shara, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Syria
Ms. Bутtenheim	Dr. Mohammed Najdat Al-Jazzar, Director, Department of International Organizations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Mr. Briscoe	One aide

(The meeting took place one day after the announcement that Syria had submitted a reply to the letter sent by President Bush to the heads of State of the parties involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict.)

In response to a question by the Minister, Ambassador Brunner explained that this was his first visit to Syria since childhood; his father had been the first Swiss Ambassador to Syria in 1946: Switzerland had established diplomatic relations immediately after Syrian independence. Ambassador Brunner therefore had some acquaintance with the history of the region, its problems and its people; obviously, it was a new experience to meet Government representatives. During this current trip he had visited Israel, Jordan and Egypt and would travel the following day to Lebanon. Another time, perhaps, he would be able to meet the PLO. He was coming at an interesting juncture.

Mr. Al-Shara enquired about the Ambassador's impressions so far. Ambassador Brunner explained that his mission was not to interfere in the current peace process undertaken by the United States, but he hoped that the initiative would prove successful and achieve peace and stability in the region. He had been appointed in accordance with operative paragraph 3 of resolution 242. He was there to explore how the United Nations could help achieve peace under the present circumstances, i.e., the peace initiative to which Syria had now responded. What role would there be for the UN? The Organization was at the disposal of the parties because of UN resolutions which were to be implemented. Wherever one went in the region one saw 'blue helmets' and 'blue berets'. The UN had played a major role in the Middle East since 1948; it could not simply disappear.

Ambassador Brunner had the impression that after the war in the Persian Gulf, there had been a serious intention, especially on the part of the United States, to try to assemble all the parties involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict around a negotiating table -- or perhaps around separate tables for



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various rounds of bilateral negotiations. The question now was how Israel would react in the light of Syria's reply to President Bush's letter. Difficulties still remained over the composition of the Palestinian delegation and the whole objective of the negotiations.

President Bush's address to the US Congress on 6 March 1991 had addressed resolutions 242 and 338 and the principle of 'land for peace'. The Ambassador was not sure whether Israel would accept that. Furthermore, there were some unknown elements, for example, how the negotiations would be conducted. Israel did not conceal the fact that it wanted bilateral negotiations and for any ceremonial opening meeting to be kept to a minimum. There also remained the question of whether a full meeting would be held at the end of the negotiating session. Israel wished for 'one-on-one' talks with the other parties. All in all, it would prove difficult to define the objectives, procedure, place and participants.

What was Israel's opinion on the role of the United Nations? asked Mr. Al-Shara. They were against it, replied Ambassador Brunner (Mr. Al-Shara: "Totally against?"). The Israelis said that they did not need the UN. "Didn't you argue?" enquired Mr. Al-Shara. Ambassador Brunner responded that Israel produced many arguments against involvement by the United Nations: the 'Zionism-racism' resolution, the perceived double standards of the Organization, the belief that it would be 'opposed' to Israel. "We told them we can't come to a conference if we're not invited by the co-sponsors; we'll come if we are invited". Perhaps the Secretary-General would not attend if he were only to be offered a position as an observer. He had told President Bush that he was not willing to participate if he were only there as a 'photo opportunity' ("He is right," the Minister interjected). When the Ambassador returned to New York he would have to make a report to the Secretary-General, then possibly to the Security Council. What was Syria's conception of the United Nations role?

Mr. Al-Shara responded that if one had followed Syrian statements, especially since the US had begun to exert efforts for convening a conference, one would know that Syria had been and still was very enthusiastic for the United Nations to play a role in any peace process or conference. He could say without reservation that Syria had striven to the extent possible to secure for the UN a role in the peace process, a role which was to be "very effective and very significant". Indeed, his Government had wanted a peace conference to be convened under UN auspices. It had, however, become obvious that to insist on United Nations "supervision" of a conference would be considered as an obstacle to the peace process. Syria had heard this from the United States and, unfortunately and unexpectedly, from European representatives. It had decided to give the US

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initiative a chance to succeed, and had chosen to back the American proposals.

However, if the UN was not going to serve as sponsor of a conference it should at least have a significant and effective role. Syria had told Washington that the UN should be given "something between sponsorship and observership". ("You are still in contact with them, I suppose?" asked Ambassador Brunner). It had always stressed that the Organization's participation in a peace process should be for the full duration of the negotiations, not merely of a ceremonial nature. It had made this clear to the United States, the Europeans and all the foreign envoys who had come to Damascus. It had argued a great deal over this matter.

Israel had no right to reject the United Nations. Everyone knew that the existence of Israel derived from a UN resolution. So many resolutions had favoured Israel. As for the Palestinian problem, it was obvious that the Security Council had, historically, favoured Israel, not the Arabs. Even Abba Eban, in an article in the New York Times, had cited a number of examples of how the United Nations had benefitted Israel.

Ambassador Brunner was interested in the Minister's views on a continuous UN role from beginning to end of the process. This might be achieved in several ways: through the presence of a representative or by the submission to the UN of reports on the progress of the negotiations -- either the co-sponsors could report to the United Nations or whoever represented the Organization would relate the details to the Secretary-General: even in the case of bilateral negotiations, such information could be obtained 'in the corridors' while the talks were under way.

Another question pertained to the reconvening of the conference, how often this would happen and where. The location might present one opportunity to link the UN to the process, namely by holding the talks in New York or Geneva. If the Organization were able to provide logistical support, translation, security, and general Secretariat services, it would give the impression of being incorporated in the overall framework. The UN was not party to the present discussions, but was open-minded and ready to be of assistance in any way possible, as provided for in the Security Council resolutions.

In Mr. Al-Shara's view, all participants directly or indirectly involved in the conference were in favour of granting the United Nations a role in the peace process, except Israel. If Israel's views were accepted, it would mean that it was dictating to the other parties, which was neither logical nor acceptable. The United States, as President Bush had informed President Assad in his letter, was aware of the importance of the

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UN's role in the process. President Bush had spoken of a "package element", in order to allow the United Nations effective involvement and to help the parties derive the best possible contribution from the Organization. The USSR was undoubtedly in favour of UN involvement and the Europeans supported some participation by the Organization.

Ambassador Brunner noted that two members of the European Community, France and, to a lesser extent, the UK, both of which were permanent members of the Security Council, wanted to be part of the conference. It was important to take European interests into account. The Europeans had a major interest in the Middle East, indeed, it would be rather strange for Europe not to be represented. The United States had asked the EC 'troika' to become involved; 60% of Israel's trade was with Europe which therefore could exert influence over Israel. Mr. Levy had thus not been able to refuse EC participation. This was also one way of resolving the question of British and French participation. Moreover, a European presence would not be "static". The Europeans had ideas and a history of diplomatic involvement in the region. Furthermore, Greece and Italy, new members of the EC, were also part of the Mediterranean region.

As for the question of the duration of the conference, the Israelis would say that half an hour would be sufficient, after which the parties could leave. Syria's plans were more expansive and included the possibility of reconvening the talks. Such details had symbolical significance. Different views on the substance of the talks would be addressed after the procedural issues had been resolved. By contrast, from the very beginning of the negotiations which resulted in the Camp David agreements the substantive questions had been clear: the restitution of the Sinai to Egypt would be attained in exchange for normalisation of relations between Israel and Egypt. In the current debate there was no agreement: Israel did not accept the principle of 'land for peace'.

It was clear, asserted Mr. Al-Shara, that Israel did not desire peace. Israeli leaders were placing many obstacles in the way of the peace process, creating pretexts and difficulties if they felt that their views were not convincing. Israel believed "wrongly, and I underline, wrongly" that the outcome of the war in the Persian Gulf had not been a victory for international law, the United Nations, the implementation of Security Council resolutions, and the ending of occupation. Rather, Israel believed that the defeat of Iraq signified a defeat of all the Arab countries, which should therefore sign with Israel peace agreements which would be tantamount to capitulation.

This view was mistaken and rejected by all other countries. Even the United States, Israel's greatest ally, had not claimed that the Gulf war was intended to defeat the Arabs. President

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Bush had frequently repeated that he was against the occupation of Kuwait, not the Iraqi people. Other countries had maintained the same position. No-one had said that United Nations resolutions on the Iraq-Kuwait crisis had been meant as a declaration of war against the Arabs. They were meant to liberate Kuwait from an illegal occupation. Syria had stood firm against the occupation of Kuwait, it respected international legitimacy and abided by resolutions of the Security Council. Its wish, therefore, was that all parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict also respect international legitimacy, abide by Security Council resolutions and reject occupation ("No double standards", suggested Ambassador Brunner).

The Minister felt that Israel was alone in its mistaken interpretation of the situation. There existed no tacit agreement with Israeli actions among other leaders: rather, they had all made public statements against Israeli occupation of the territories. This was one instance when the international community should side with Syria.

Ambassador Brunner was uncertain how much pressure the United States would apply on Israel to accept a compromise over the question of negotiations or a conference. This would become clear in the coming weeks. Now there would be some reaction to President Assad's letter to President Bush, then some diplomatic 'shuttling' after which perhaps the whole process might get under way. The topic under discussion was the implementation of resolutions 242 and 338. It remained to be seen whether Lebanon would participate in the peace process from the beginning. It would be invited, but it was not certain whether it would engage in a separate process, since it based its position on resolution 425, rather than on 242 and 338.

Prefacing his remarks with a brief acknowledgement that Ambassador Brunner would hear the explanation of Lebanon's position from that country's leaders on his visit to Beirut, Mr. Al-Shara explained that the Lebanese held it to be in their interest not to link the broader Arab-Israeli conflict with the Lebanese issue. Syria supported this argument: resolution 425 was a very clear resolution which provided for unconditional withdrawal of Israeli troops from Southern Lebanon. The United States and the Security Council should exert pressure on Israel to implement the resolution, especially in light of the deployment of Lebanese Government troops towards the South; they would cooperate with UNIFIL forces there. There would be no pretext for Israel to retain a presence there. In the past the Israeli authorities had maintained that they would withdraw their military forces if there were to be a strong Lebanese Government able to exert its authority. Now they were creating difficulties. The Lebanese did not accept any linkage between the issues. Perhaps the Arab-Israeli peace process would

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conclude without tangible results, so why wait to discuss the implementation of resolution 425? Syria endorsed this approach.

Ambassador Brunner added that there was also a psychological element involved. It would be difficult for Lebanon to negotiate with Israel alone if the other peace talks were not taking place. (Mr. Al-Shara interjected, "They are not required to negotiate with Israel under resolution 425"). One always spoke of resolution 425 as being separate from 242 and 338. If Lebanon were to be included in the larger peace process, its discussions with Israel would be made easier. It would become difficult to separate the resolutions from each other, otherwise known as 'salami tactics'. There should be a comprehensive settlement. Discussions with the Jordanian-Palestinian delegation in the absence of Syria and Lebanon simply would not succeed.

Mr. Al-Shara agreed that there should be a comprehensive solution, but he repeated that the Lebanese question was a separate issue. Ambassador Brunner informed the Minister that when he had been in Israel, Mr. Arens had said that Israel was ready to negotiate with Lebanon.

Israeli statements, interjected Mr. Al-Shara, dealt with ends and objectives, not the means, "Israel acts as if negotiations are an end and not a means to achieve tangible results". Israel was attempting to skirt the real issue, namely withdrawal of its troops, without which the conflict would continue. (Ambassador Brunner, "The hour of truth is coming"). If Israel believed that the Arabs were weak, it was mistaken. The Arabs were sincere in their desire for peace: President Assad's response to President Bush's letter had been clear evidence of that. All of what Syria believed could be found in the response. Every envoy from the US and Europe, including President Bush, Mr. Baker and numerous American Congressmen, had told Syria that a positive response would ensure their support.

Ambassador Brunner acknowledged that the peace process now stood at a crucial point. The United Nations was prepared to remain in contact with the parties and to assist wherever possible. The Swiss had been asked by the Americans to allow peace talks to take place in Geneva, yet outside the United Nations building. Switzerland could offer logistical support, it had good communications, and every country had a mission located there. Mr. Bessmertnykh had declared himself in favour of the idea. There were many possibilities. The conference could commence in the UN building, and the bilateral negotiations could then take place elsewhere, in hotels, corridors, luncheons and dinners: there would be much 'give-and-take'. The suggestion should not present an obstacle for Israel, indeed, it would resolve, in a non-political way, the problem of UN involvement. The Ambassador had discussed this with Prince Bandar, who had lent his support. Mr. Al-Shara agreed, "It is very

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constructive." If the object was to achieve real peace, Israel should not create obstacles.

Ambassador Brunner reported that Cairo and Washington had also been under discussion as possible venues for talks. Geneva could represent a compromise to include UN involvement, to which it would be difficult to object. Mr. Al-Shara enquired whether Ambassador Brunner was based in New York or Geneva, to which the Ambassador explained that he was Switzerland's Ambassador in Washington, just as his predecessor, Ambassador Jarring had been Sweden's Ambassador in Moscow. "You'll give up your position as Ambassador?" asked Mr. Al-Shara. "If I am activated, I shall have to choose" replied Ambassador Brunner. "I think you'll be completely involved, we want you to be involved" stated the Minister. For the time being, nothing was starting, said Ambassador Brunner. The Minister should explore the idea of Geneva as a location.

Continuing, Mr. Al-Shara said that Syria appreciated the UN's role, and had always looked to the United Nations as an 'umbrella' for all mankind. Yet Switzerland was not a member of the UN. Therefore the Ambassador's status as a Swiss representative was not a persuasive factor in favour of UN participation in the peace process, he joked. Perhaps Ambassador Brunner's role as Special Representative would persuade Switzerland to join the Organization.

Geneva was a popular meeting place, noted Ambassador Brunner. He had been present when President Assad had met President Carter there in 1977. The Swiss President had offered his country as a venue. At the time, Ambassador Brunner had been in the department of the Foreign Ministry dealing with UN issues. He had been present when the President of Switzerland had met President Carter. Geneva had also been the venue when Presidents Bush and Assad had met in November 1990. The US had not been very satisfied with the treatment it had received, particularly following an incident during which a reporter had been denied access at the airport. "You are tough and the United States is tough" opined Mr. Al-Shara, "What you did was right". Ambassador Brunner elaborated that the White House press corps was granted special status and thus believed that it could do anything. (Mr. Al-Shara: "A touch of arrogance"). Indeed, the journalists were very arrogant. Mr. Al-Shara felt that Americans were "tough, and sometimes rude" and that they expected the same behaviour from other people. They were not like the Europeans.

Ambassador Brunner noted that there were always important meetings in Geneva. In fact, one month after the incident with the reporter, Mr. Baker and Mr. Aziz had met there. The Swiss kept Geneva a safe place. The General Assembly had met there twice (sic) when Mr. Arafat had been denied an entry visa by the

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United States, and had been able to organize everything at ten days' notice. In response to the Minister's joke, he offered to undertake a personal campaign for Swiss membership of the United Nations, especially if it were to host such a conference.

He recalled having met Vice President Khaddam at the first conference on Lebanon in Geneva, which Syria had co-sponsored with Saudi Arabia. The Ambassador had been accompanying the President of Switzerland. "You ended up with the Taif accords, and now you have a bilateral treaty with Lebanon, a solid basis for normalisation". Mr. Al-Shara replied, "If Israel is in the mood to make peace, the region might get stability". Ambassador Brunner felt that the recent debate over Iraq's nuclear capacity also affected stability in the region. The United Nations had been very involved with the situation between Iraq and Kuwait, it had adopted seventeen resolutions and numerous teams were now in the region. One could conclude that the UN had become what its founding fathers had intended it to be, it was no longer paralysed by the Cold War.

Mr. Al-Shara concurred. The United Nations had restored its credibility, its important status in world affairs. Syria's position was the same as that of other Third World countries, as well as countries in Europe, who believed that a new international order could not be established without relying on the United Nations as a world institution to maintain peace and security and to preserve international legitimacy. Ambassador Brunner cited the recent UN involvement in Angola and Western Sahara as evidence that the United Nations was engaged throughout the world.

Neil Briscoe .

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