

ConfidentialNOTES OF AMBASSADOR BRUNNER'S MEETING WITH MR. ELIAHU BEN-ELISSAR
CHAIRMAN OF THE KNESSET FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Held in Mr. Ben-Elissar's residence, Jerusalem,
on 7 July 1991 at 5.00 p.m.

Present:

Ambassador Brunner
Ms. Bутtenheim
Mr. Briscoe

Mr. Eliahu Ben-Elissar, Chairman of
the Knesset Foreign Affairs
Committee
Ambassador Yochanan Bein, Deputy Head,
International Organizations
Division, Ministry for Foreign
Affairs

Ambassador Brunner explained that he had come to the region to listen and not to offer advice. If the UN could be helpful in the peace process it stood at the disposal of the parties, but it did not want to impose its presence. It had not been the idea of the United Nations to attend a peace conference.

Mr. Ben-Elissar commended the Ambassador on his "good attitude": if the Secretary-General continued in this manner, Israel would consider it a "wise and constructive approach".

Mr. Ben-Elissar recalled that he had been involved at the beginning of the Israeli-Egyptian peace process. This had produced substantive results, even though the United Nations and the Secretary-General had not been present. There should be no "foreign component" to a regional conference, which, after all, was customary practice in relations "among normal nations". Israel was "both ready and ripe" to start talks without a third party. Except for this factor, Mr. Ben-Elissar had no doubt that a peace treaty would already have been signed.

The Ambassador pointed out that the problem had been easier at the time of the Camp David process. Mr. Ben-Elissar took issue with this, on the grounds that the talks in 1977 had taken place only four years after a war in the Middle East. Ambassador Brunner wondered whether an Arab leader nowadays would have the courage to engage in peace talks with Israel.

Mr. Ben-Elissar reflected that President Assad reminded him of Nasser rather than Sadat. One would have to wait for a personality like Sadat before progress could be made. The situation in Jordan was different. King Hussein was not strong enough to play an independent major role. This had not been the case in 1977. But the Jordan of today could not be compared with how Israel had perceived Egypt at that time. At that stage, when



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the Arab side had been prepared for discussions, Israel had also been ready.

Ambassador Brunner remarked that the present situation comprised many elements. It was impossible to detach the situation in the Middle East from the international context. One of the superpowers had disappeared. The Soviet Union, while still active, was no longer in a position to support Arab regimes. The war in the Persian Gulf could not have taken place without the compliance of the USSR. Today neither Syria nor any other country could count on Soviet support.

Mr. Ben-Elissar agreed, but said that the pursuit of the arms race in the Middle East did not require the USSR. Any country was able to find enough arms for a price and the Soviet Union would be willing to sell them to obtain cash.

Israel was closely watching the efforts of Damascus to continue its arms build-up and there was no sign of any slowing down. There had been at one point, when Syria had lacked funds, but it had seized the first opportunity and was now to receive \$1 billion from Saudi Arabia. Consequently, it had decided to raise the deployment of its army from 10 to 11 divisions.

Today there was also an Iranian dimension: everyone had felt easier when the Iranians and the Iraqis had been involved with each other. Ambassador Brunner suggested that both Syria and Iran had a common enemy in Iraq. Mr. Ben-Elissar added that they had a common goal in the liberation of Jerusalem, "They keep preoccupying us just as the Iraqis did a few years ago." In the past Israel had been accused of 'crying wolf' by the United States, yet the Iranians now represented a growing threat to peace in the Middle East.

"I don't think the Middle East is ripe for peace. I don't see Egypt changing its basic orientation." The Americans had been completely mistaken to believe that there had existed a "window of opportunity", although perhaps Mr. Ben-Elissar's views were influenced by his close affiliation with the military.

The situation relating to the Palestinian population was looking less pessimistic. The Palestinians had finally understood that they were paying the price for the delay in achieving peace. In fact, they had always paid the price; while Israel had scored successes, the Palestinians had gone from one failure to another. Mr. Arafat was not living under occupation or under foreign rule, "here, people are". The Palestinians had placed hope in Saddam Hussein but that was now over. Where were Arafat and Saddam Hussein today?

Any agreement which the Palestinians reached with Israel would make their condition easier. Today the Palestinians were

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more willing to have contacts with the Israelis because they were afraid of being killed. They were now giving signals suggesting that they were prepared to meet.

Ambassador Brunner agreed with the description of the 'window of opportunity'. In fact there had existed three windows, none of which had coincided with the other. The United States and its allies had fought a successful war and had believed that the countries in the region would subsequently become more flexible. The Israelis had been victorious without having to fight. However, they had passed through a traumatic experience, having been convinced not to retaliate -- at some political cost. They had felt, with justification, that the United States and other countries were indebted to them for the restraint they had shown. Finally, the Arabs had thought that the successful implementation of twelve Security Council resolutions against Iraq should facilitate the implementation of resolution 242.

The Ambassador then discussed the approach for negotiations. Would a double-track approach not complicate matters? If there were no double-track negotiations, there would be no need for the 'embarrassment' of an opening ceremony. If many states were involved in the peace process, they would feel that there should be a general meeting -- but who would sit in the opening conference?

Mr. Ben-Elissar agreed, "That is exactly why we don't want a conference". Israel was willing to talk to the Palestinians at any time as well as to the other parties if they were genuinely ready to meet.

Continuing his theme, Ambassador Brunner said that a full ceremony would attract many countries who would wish to be present. The Ambassador thought that the main problem would be the possible reconvening of the conference, which would be much more important than the opening ceremony. It would give an impression of a multilateral approach, which the Israelis opposed. It would give the negotiations an 'air of conference'.

Mr. Ben-Elissar said that the next step was simple. The moment Syria was willing to talk about peace, it and Israel and Jordan would begin negotiations. He was indeed in favour of conducting bilateral negotiations over the issue of the Palestinians, "I feel that there is some maturity on both sides." Israel had shown maturity ten years ago, but now the Arabs were ready for the opportunity. As for the other parties, the situation remained as it had in the past.

Ambassador Brunner suggested that Israel could also live without a peace process, to which Ambassador Bein objected that Israel needed "real security". Mr. Ben-Elissar reflected that

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\$50 billion was completely wasted in arms expenditures. Unfortunately, the United Nations could not do anything, as had been shown in the past. Mr. Ben-Elissar had personal respect for the Secretary-General but felt that he did not have much room to manoeuvre because of the UN's "special attitude" towards Israel.

Whenever a protagonist claimed to need a third party, it did not 'mean business' and this was the case with Syria. Neither President Bush, the Secretary-General nor King Fahd would be able to influence President Assad. As for King Fahd, he had not changed, despite Mr. Ben-Elissar's hopes.

Ms. Buttenheim asked whether Mr. Ben-Elissar could envisage a peace process without Syria, if the Palestinians and King Hussein were well disposed. Mr. Ben-Elissar replied that King Hussein's objective in life was to remain in power, rather than to engage in a peace process. In this respect he had a similar goal to that of Israel, namely to survive. But for him, this was a personal rather than a national goal and he would always seek alliances and palliatives for the sake of his survival. He was simply unable to deliver. If the Israelis could sit with King Hussein they would be able to solve even the intricate details of the Palestinian problem, but only if King Hussein were ready.

Ambassador Brunner considered that if Israel attempted to negotiate with the Palestinians, the Syrians would try to dissuade the latter from their goal. Mr. Ben-Elissar agreed that as soon as the Syrians felt that negotiations had gone too far, they would attempt to distract King Hussein. The means of pressure would be not through the Palestinians but through the PLO and Lebanon.

The Ambassador concluded that the 'key' was still Syria. He wondered what would happen if the Syrians accepted the American proposal, but asked for more than President Bush was offering. He suspected that this would throw everything 'in the air'. What would happen if the Syrians accepted all of President Bush's suggestions, a silent UN observer, and a reconvening of the conference every six months on the basis of consensus. No one party would want to be blamed for undermining the process.

Mr. Ben-Elissar suggested that the Ambassador wait for the response of President Assad, who would be able to benefit from the situation. However, Ambassador Brunner's suggestion of reconvening every six months would present a problem for Israel. It would mean that there would be "a directorate", which the Israelis did not want.

In Ambassador Brunner's view the United States saw itself as the peace-broker, even in bilateral talks. From the beginning, the agenda of the Bush Administration had been to achieve peace, with the active participation of the United States. This agenda

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had been interrupted by events in Eastern Europe, the unification of Germany and the war in the Persian Gulf. Now the Administration had taken up its agenda again.

Mr. Ben-Elissar felt that the Americans were returning to their initial agenda with more experience and more maturity. However, the Middle East was a region in which one had to live to be able to understand. The Americans did not know the region well enough, whereas the British did. The Middle East was at a different historical stage from that of Europe. One could find a precursor in Europe's Wars of Religion, with their associated bitterness and religious influence. Mr. Ben-Elissar had been told by "a very qualified Egyptian personality" who was knowledgeable in history, that the situation would be better if the Israelis "could only be like the Maronites". The Maronites were considered in the Arab world as Arabs.

The Arabs found it impossible to recognise Israel's right to sovereignty over a piece of the world because it was neither Christian nor Arab. Ambassador Bein wondered whether the "Egyptian personality" was the one currently campaigning to become UN Secretary-General.

Ambassador Brunner stressed the need for patience. Before the war in the Persian Gulf President Mitterrand had attempted to link the evacuation of Iraq with the Arab-Israeli issue. Israel had seen no reason to pay a price for evacuating Saddam Hussein from Kuwait. Yet almost the very day after the hostilities, the peace initiative had been started. This had given the impression of linkage; the Ambassador would have expected a longer interval between the two.

"We weren't surprised. We know the soul of nations," declared Mr. Ben-Elissar. Everyone had wanted to exploit the situation. Ambassador Bein asserted that the Secretary-General had announced en route to Iraq that he would nominate a new Special Representative to the Middle East. It was he who had created linkage. It was in his mind that the link was made. He had thought it would be a 'good card' for his negotiations with Saddam Hussein. Ms. Buttenheim rejected this: people had not drawn this conclusion at the time.

Ambassador Brunner recalled that he had received a letter upon his appointment from Ambassador Jarring, his 84-year-old predecessor. Mr. Ben-Elissar joked that when Ambassador Brunner reached 84, Israel would have peace with Syria, 26 years from now. Even before then there would be peace.

Ms. Buttenheim wondered whether Egypt could play a helpful role if Syria was proving to be an obstacle. Mr. Ben-Elissar replied "Unfortunately not. Either they simply don't want to play a role, or they don't know how to." Since the conclusion

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of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, Egypt had been trying to prove to the Arab world that it was still "kosher". The Egyptians considered themselves so 'stained' by the peace process that they were permanently trying to cleanse themselves. That was why "no relations" existed between the two countries.

This disappointed Israel. Mr. Ben-Elissar had had to fight for his political life during the time of the Camp David process. Nowadays, Egypt and Syria were very close and it was a question of which was exerting most influence over the other. Egypt was not about to change its policy. Perhaps there was still opposition to peace within its own system.

Ambassador Brunner suggested that Egypt might want "the best of both worlds". In many ways its policy had been successful. Would it not be to its advantage for other countries to reach peace? Mr. Ben-Elissar retorted "they want this to happen with us paying the price." This was because Egypt still feared Israel. The question of territory could be a very helpful "instrument": without the West Bank Israel would be weak and vulnerable and if the creation of a Palestinian State would weaken Israel, the Egyptians would support it.

Ambassador Brunner maintained that Egypt was still searching for ways to get a peace process started. The Egyptians would be involved as senior members, aloof from the negotiations. For them the best solution would be a conference convoked by the US and the USSR. Mr. Ben-Elissar replied that Egypt did not only want peace but also some benefits. Whenever a party wanted benefits there would be no progress. This had happened in the past with the tripartite talks and the United Nations Conciliation Commission.

An interesting debate had developed among the Israelis. Some had felt that they could use Egypt to influence Syria, others had maintained that the damage Israel would sustain would be far greater. Mr. Ben-Elissar had held the latter view. The Egyptians had been completely unable to mollify President Assad; nor had he succeeded in conveying his views to Foreign Minister Moussa, who had been unwilling to listen.

Ambassador Brunner felt that Israeli criticism of the UN should be directed at the countries who had voted for the 'Zionism-racism' resolution. He pointed out that Israel wanted the USSR to participate in Middle East peace talks, a country which had supported the resolution, but was opposed to the involvement of the French and the British, both of which had voted against it. Israel should not criticise the UN for one could not blame the messenger. Mr. Ben-Elissar protested that Israel was being requested to accept the messenger as a protagonist. Ambassador Brunner said that Israel should, similarly, blame the members of the Security Council when it

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condemned the deportation of Palestinians. What could the Secretary-General do? The Security Council would not disappear and Israel could not prevent it from meeting whenever it wanted to.

Ambassador Bein sought clarification that Ambassador Brunner was proposing that Israel accept the participation of "a neutralised UN". Ambassador Brunner responded that it would be an exaggeration for the United Nations to present a major obstacle to Israel's sitting with its neighbours. According to Mr. Ben-Elissar, Israel did not need any country except Syria and the Jordanians. Persuading Syria to participate was not the main element in the peace initiative. When Mr. Ben-Elissar studied Syrian declarations and those of other Arab leaders, he always found reference to all UN resolutions.

Ms. Buttenheim observed that the Syrians were mercurial. In 1990, the Syrian reply to the Secretary-General's Note Verbale on the Situation in the Middle East had not made specific reference to a single resolution. Indeed Syria had expressed its willingness to attend a conference in Geneva under the auspices of the US and USSR. Mr. Ben-Elissar said that Israel did not want the involvement of the United Nations or of other countries. If other parties had to be present, why not invite 160 countries?

Neil Briscoe .

Neil Briscoe
2 August 1991