

With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: Dore Gold, Israeli Government Spokesman

STOURTON: If I could begin with the day itself and ask you to recall how you found out

what had happened and what your immediate reactions were?

GOLD: Well I was in the United States at the time, on a speaking engagement.

And my wife, who had been in a taxi cab heading from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, heard about the first tower being hit at the World Trade Center called me, and then I, it was morning in America, put on ABC television and saw the second tower being hit by the second plane. And basically from that moment onward I did not move from my television for at least

two days.

belonging to the western alliance. With respect to Israel we had been following the whole bin Laden phenomenon for a number of years. And we realised that the central focus of bin Laden's attention was first and foremost in Afghanistan, and then later in conflicts around the Afghan area. In other words, the struggle over Kashmir between India and Pakistan, the struggle in Chechnya against the Russians, and the whole question of Israel and the Palestinians was at a low place on his set of priorities.

STOURTON:

But there were people weren't there who thought that because war had been declared on terrorism Israel would therefore have a much freer hand, freer particularly of American pressure, in dealing with what it sees as terrorism from the Palestinians?

GOLD:

Well it really goes both ways. And it's important to understand that. First, for years terrorism has been a problem for the entire western alliance, but there were always other priorities. So many times many of our friends in Europe or in the United States would put up with a certain degree of terrorism in order to achieve other aims. Whether it was containment of the Soviet Union, or whether it was the peace process. Throughout the 1990s the support of the Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad for Hezbollah, Islamic jihad and for a dozen other terrorist organisations, was tolerated essentially because it was hoped that somehow also it would make peace with Israel. And now what had happened was that the war against terrorism would become the number one priority of the world. And I think that was enshrined when the UN Security Council passed a sweeping resolution under chapter seven of the UN charter against terrorism and against any country that harboured international terrorist organisations. So that would certainly indicate that the willingness of the international community to suffer, to excuse, to somehow understand terrorism by trying to look at its underlying causes would change. At the same time if the United States was going to pursue a coalition of stages against terrorism, trying to replicate the concept of the Gulf War, it could be that Israel would have to pay the price of the glue that would hold that coalition together. And that could put tremendous pressure on Israel to make concessions that it would regard as against its interests, in order that Saudi Arabia would open up its air bases to US aircraft and other Arab states would follow suit.

STOURTON:

Well as soon, I think, as 13 September Colin Powell was trying to broker a meeting with Yasser Arafat. Did you take that as a sign the second of the interpretations you've just outlined was the more realistic one?

GOLD: Well again initially it seemed that the US was simply following the pattern

STOURTON:

On 26 September Jack Straw visited Israel amid a certain amount of controversy about his newspaper article and the use of the word Palestine. Can you describe that visit as you remember it?

GOLD:

Well, I recall several things about Foreign Secretary's Straw's statements at the time. I recall references to the word Palestine which every so often you'll hear in statements made by western diplomats. But I think what was more disturbing was the statement which tried to explain away, or understand, the hatred that must have motivated that strike at New York at the World Trade Center and in the Pentagon in Washington. And as some western diplomats tried to understand the source of that hatred they tend to pin it on Israel or the support that the western alliance had provided with the state of Israel over the last number of decades. We, of course, had a different view. We analysed very carefully what was the source of the grievance of the people around bin Laden and his more passive supporters in the Arabian Peninsula. Their number one grievance was the large western presence in the Arabian Peninsula, including the US forces. Their second grievance was the whole war against Irag. And the whole Palestinian issues were a distant third if you look at the statements made by bin Laden and his followers. Nonetheless there was a temptation in the west to blame all the hatred on Israel.

STOURTON:

About a week later I think it was your prime minister made his speech in Prague, in which he more or less accused America of appeasement towards what he saw as terror, and of sacrificing Israel in the way you talked about a moment or two ago. Can I ask you what your part was in preparing that speech and why Prime Minister Sharon said what he said?

GOLD:

Well it's important to really go over the language of Prime Minister Sharon at the time. He was drawing an analogy between the situation of Israel and the situation of Czechoslovakia in 1938, and the point was would the western alliance sacrifice a small ally to buy time or to buy some kind of temporary arrangement that would perhaps create greater stability in the short-term? But that ally would be sacrificed. In doing so he had no intention of drawing any analogies between; let's say Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and President Bush, although some people took his remarks to say that he was doing so. His point was that Israel should not be sacrificed. He was not dealing with who would be sacrificed and which countries were pushing in that direction.

STOURTON:

But the fact that he said that suggests you felt that there was a real danger of that sacrifice being exacted by the United States. Is that right?

GOLD:

Well I think there was a concern that there were forces in the American establishment, but in other countries as well, that first identified the source of the hatred of bin Laden and his supporters as being western support for Israel. And secondly, saw pressure against Israel as a means to create the kind of coalition they were trying to put together. Of course both analyses were wrong and I think the Prime Minister attempted to draw attention to that with his very strong remarks.

STOURTON:

On I think it was 7th (7 October) the bombing began, on the eighth there were riots on the West Bank. The Palestinian Authority though didn't, pointedly didn't, condemn the American attack. What was your assessment at that stage of the implications of that crisis for yourselves and what was happening within Israel?

GOLD:

Well again we were a little bit far-a-field. The focus of this campaign was really the whole complex of Pakistan, Afghanistan. Central Asia became suddenly more important. I think there was also an awareness within Israel that the United States did not get the base access that it chose or hoped to achieve in the Arabian Peninsula and was now opening a new strategic centre of American influence in some of the former Muslim republics of the ex-Soviet Union. And therefore it seemed that the US was adapting itself to the new international situation. It was able to pursue a military option against al-Qaeda without having to rely too heavily on the act of support from the Arab countries.

STOURTON:

On the 15th Yasser Arafat was in Downing Street. Certainly among the Palestinians that we have talked to, there was a perception that Britain was perhaps slightly more Palestinian at that stage than the United States, and was pushing Washington to become more closely engaged in the Middle East. Do you think that's a fair assessment?

GOLD:

Well there has always been, over many years, a difference of perception about Israel and the Arab states in Europe and in Washington. Britain is probably much closer to the American position and we have appreciated the help and advice we've received from Prime Minister Blair. But I think also the British foreign policy establishment has learned that Yasser Arafat could not, and would not, move away from his dedication to arms struggle. Moreover what the Palestinians were trying to do in that period, and what they continued doing for several months afterwards, was draw a distinction between terrorism, which they like everybody else vocally condemned, and what they called 'resistance to occupation', which they thought they could gain support for in the international community. Israel's argument was that Israel had no military government over the Palestinians when they started this campaign against us called the intifada back in September 2000, that indeed we had withdrawn our military government over the Palestinians, and they weren't under military occupation. And so basically we firmly disagree with their line of argumentation. But some did accept it.

STOURTON:

On, they use that phrase difference of perception. I think that was a phrase that you yourself used about your relations with the United States at about 24 October. Did you feel under a great deal of American pressure during that period?

GOLD:

Well again it's hard to exactly recall the dateline of these developments. But again I would say there were those who, in Washington, felt that the establishment of a strong American-Arab coalition, as well as other regional states, was a prerequisite for a successful military campaign. But as the military campaign got underway the US establishment I think understood that it was able to reach a decisive outcome, even without this formal coalition existing. There was a world of difference between the Gulf War campaign that required a half a million troops in the Arabian Peninsular, and the campaign against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan that was based on special operations and air power.

STOURTON:

What was your reaction to George Bush's speech at the UN when he talked about a Palestinian state?

GOLD:

Well the Prime Minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon, had already expressed a willingness to live down the road with a Palestinian state. Our big debate with the Palestinians, and with others who might support them, would be

over the question of where the borders would be drawn. We, for example, have always followed UN Security Council resolution 242, which never spoke about a full withdrawal, but recognised that Israel was a victim of aggression since '67, and therefore was entitled to secure and recognised boundaries. So the issue of borders was still open. There were other aspects of the powers of the Palestinian state. Would it have an army, would it be demilitarised? Who would have control of the airspace in that sensitive area of the West Bank? So while Israel could acquiesce to Palestinian statehood it had its own security requirements that certainly weren't the subject of President Bush's speech, but would certainly be raised by Israel down the road.

STOURTON:

The fall of Kabul came on I think 12 November, much more quickly than other people, many people had expected. It sounds to me as if you believe that did lead to a reinterpreta

to many Arab regimes. So with a sense of perhaps a commonality of threat we could all talk about terrorism with a kind of common perception.

STOURTON: And that brought about a tangible change in American policy?

GOLD: Well I think it brought about an understanding that terrorism is

intolerable. For years when there were other priorities in American foreign policy, such as I said before, containment, such as access to oil, such as general economic development in certain Arab countries, there was a willingness to look the other way and not really care if countries like Syria or Libya hosted international terrorists, unless they actually struck

GOLD:

Well I think what happened was the Saudis initiated, for their own reasons, a kind of diplomatic activism that we hadn't seen in many years. In America the Saudis were hurting, their large involvement in these attacks on the United States in terms of Saudi nationals, the fact that a good proportion of the al-Qaeda terrorists that were imprisoned in Cuba, in Guantanamo Bay, were Saudi nationals, reinforced a negative image of Saudi Arabia in the US. There were many articles in the American press about Wahabbism as the source of this extremism, that had perhaps given birth to the Osama bin Laden world view, and so in that context the Saudis came up with a peace initiative which we were very sceptical about. And we saw this mostly as an effort to draw the stage lights away from Saudi Arabia as a state in which terrorism was growing, to Saudi Arabia as the peacemaker. Secondly, when we saw the actual initiative unfold, the centrepiece of the Saudi initiative which was really revolutionary and new, was the report that the Saudis were willing to support normalisation between Israel and the Arab world. Normalisation for us didn't just mean doing business deals in Riyadh, what it meant was an irreversible peace, the kind of intimate, interaction, or intercourse of societies that you see between France and Germany, that make a reversal to hostile relations unthinkable. The Saudis use the word in Arabic 'tatbion', which is normalisation. By the time you get to the Beirut summit

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engaging when it became apparent that they couldn't and they needed Arab support if they were going to deal with Iraq?

GOLD:

Well you know again I think the policies also respond to regional opportunities. There were many who were initially impressed with the Saudi initiative as reported in the Op-Ed column of Tom Friedman and perhaps amplified in the editorial pages of the New York Times. But then in time it was seen that there may be less there than meets the eye. If there is an opportunity to break through with Arab-Israeli diplomacy any American administration would feel that it was its responsibility to try and explore that opportunity, and try and see if there was a chance to advance. But what happens is the best of intentions in Washington bump up against the hard rocks of Middle Eastern reality. There wasn't much of a Saudi initiative there when you sifted away all the language. And you had Yasser Arafat as the primary Palestinian partner, who still believed he could get away with his ideological commitment to arms struggle in a post-11 September environment.

STOURTON:

I'll just ask you about a couple of specific meetings and events. In, I think, early April you were in Germany talking to officials about arms sales. The accounts of that meeting in the press afterwards made it sound as if it was pretty frosty. Can you tell me what happened?

GOLD:

Well I had gone to Germany when we had just uncovered documentation which tied Arafat directly to terrorism. I should say something about that documentation. We had found first of all an invoice on stationery belonging to the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade in which there was a request of payment to Fuad Shoubaki, the chief financial officer of Yasser Arafat. That request for payment included payment for explosives, detailing how many explosives they planned to use every week. So here was a terrorist organisation, the Al Aqsa Martyr Brigade, asking for payment from the chief financial officer of Yasser Arafat. But if somebody had said to us, well maybe Arafat didn't know about it, maybe this was a roque operation, we then found a document in which Arafat is asked to authorise payment of \$1000 per terrorist to three Tanzim members. Marwan Baghouti says please pay the fighters \$1000 apiece, and he writes it in Arabic, and then Yasser Arafat signs the document saying, no only \$350 apiece. So we had Arafat's signature, in Arabic, authorising payment to individuals who we knew engaged in terrorism. I brought that evidence to Germany. Initially some people were questioning whether the documents were authentic, because they were so alarming and so disturbing and the initial Palestinian response was to say fabrication. The response I made in Germany, in a press conference in Berlin, but also in meetings with members of the Bundestag and the Foreign Ministry, was that these documents were produced by Israeli military intelligence. We don't compromise or we least raised a debate in the German public about the whole question of the sincerity of Arafat and the PLO with respect to peace.

STOURTON: But they did ban arms sales to you, didn't they?

GOLD: Well there was a separate process going on in Germany, from an earlier

rise up if America changed a regime in the Arab world? But you take a much more sanguine view?

GOLD: Well I think people respond to a new reality after it occurs. I think to try

and malls to murder innocent people. If that fundamental international principle becomes accepted throughout the international community and if that fundamental international principle is defended by the countries that back freedom and democracy, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, and the rest of the European Alliance, then I believe we can move the Middle East away from the trends that it has followed over the last number of years to stability, to peace, and to greater personal freedom.