



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: Ahmed Maher, Egyptian Foreign Minister

MAHER: Yes I was here, having a lamb chop. My wife called me and told me she'd seen it on television and I thought she must be wrong. I thought it can't be, this must be a game or a movie or something. She said it was true. So I came back to my office, turned on the television and it did look like it was not real, and yet unfortunately and dramatically and tragically it was real. And I saw, when I turned on the television, I saw the second blow

MAHER:

I think they were too busy to have any conversation with anybody. We didn't want to bother them. But then news started to leak about the astonishing swift result of the inquest, and then came names, Arabic names and Muslim names, and we sensed that there might be a backlash. There was a backlash in fact. We did get in touch with the Americans telling them that we hoped that they would take the necessary measures

heard Zbigniew Brzezinski on television once say, and he's a wise man, that it would be wrong to see everything through the prism of anti terrorism, after all, the United States have many interests, faces many dangers, and it cannot confine itself to look at one side of the story which is important. We know how important it is to fight terrorism, we have suffered from terrorism at a time when nobody wanted to come to our help. The Americans got the whole world to support them and join the coalition and we did it wholeheartedly, except we would not participate in military action. We thought that it would be a wise thing to try to avoid military action and to avoid harming civilians, what is called collateral damage, it's a nice euphemism but it does not change the tragedy of the thing. But we know how important it is to fight terrorism, we know how essential it is, but we also know that during the time we were fighting terrorism, we were doing other things also, we were trying to reform the country, we were tackling other international problems and I mean we did not confine ourselves to one thing. At one time the Americans could only see terrorism, and everything was subject to the war against terrorism, and this created in my opinion a certain atmosphere of panic in the United States. I mean when you take a plane in the United States and as soon as you sit on your seat there you are told, you're not allowed to move, not allowed even to go to the rest rooms, it's abnormal. When you go into an American airport and you have to take off your shoes and your jacket and everything, (even) your pants, when now they have devised the thing that people coming from a certain part of the world have to have their fingerprints taken everywhere, I think, I know the danger, I understand the danger, I know that you have to defend yourself against this danger, but I also know that things can go too far, and the United States which was sometimes very critical of us, about certain actions we took to fight terrorism have now decided to have some foreigners, not Americans, judged by military courts and secret evidence, and all these things... I believe that the Americans should be very careful. I believe that there is the American spirit of fairness, of freedom in my opinion, and the Americans should be very careful not to allow this to deviate because of the fear of terrorism, which is a real, justifiable fear. But, I asked this question actually, why do you have to warn people every day that there are still other attacks an atomic bomb, a dirty bomb or some people might come by sea. Why do you have to create this atmosphere of panic? But then the answer is, we have an obligation to inform the people. I think that they have an obligation. What they mean actually is that some security organisations have been accused of laxness, so now they show that they are on the alert. So every day they come with a new alert. I don't think it's good for the morale of the people.

STOURTON: Can I take you on to when the bombing was announced, how was Egypt told that the bombing was going to start?

MAHER: I don't think we were told officially of the exact date. I mean we were told that they could not let things go, that they have to go after the people, bin Laden, and these people are under the protection of the Taleban and that they would have to settle the score. But they didn't tell us of any plans or any dates.

STOURTON: Did they not ring you up a few hours before and say we're about to start?

MAHER: I don't remember (anyone) having called me. I don't think they called anybody else. But I mean everybody saw it coming and it was very clear

that they had amassed troops and ascertained the bases. I mean they were not hiding their intentions in fact.

STOURTON: In the middle of October you said that you were confident that no Arab country would be the target of an American attack during this campaign against terrorism. Are you still confident about that? I suppose I'm really asking you to talk about Bush's "axis of evil" speech and American statements about Iraq.

MAHER: Well I tell you something, at the time in October, everybody was on the warpath, and some people in America said let's settle all the scores, I mean Iraq, Iran, everybody. We thought it would be very dangerous in the heated atmosphere in the Middle East, to just attack an Arab country and add to the feeling that Arabs and Muslims are targeted by (the) attacks, Afghanistan, Iraq or something. We did not see... In fact Iraq had never been accused of being part of a terrorist plot. Even anthrax, some people in the United States tried to implicate Iraq, and I don't think they have otherwise they would have told us. So Iraq is another problem, and that was mixing problems that don't belong together. Iraq is a problem of Security Council resolutions that have to be obeyed (and) respected, as a result of the invasion of Kuwait. It was different and it didn't relate to terrorism. So we, at the time, did get assurances that part of this war against terrorism, at the time, would not be targeting Iraq. Now we hear that some other countries are targeted, not because of terrorism so much

no Palestinian Authority, the old Israe

