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Yale-UN Oral History Project

Ambassador George Tomeh
Jean Krasno, Interviewer
16 March 1998
Amman, Jordan

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Yale-UN Oral History

Ambassador George Tomeh

Interviewed by: Jean Krasno, Ph.D.

March 16, 1998

Amman, Jordan

Jean Krasno (JK): Ambassador Tomeh is Syrian, from Damascus, and was Ambassador of Syria in the United Nations. Very good. Now I am going to ask you the question. For the record, Ambassador Tomeh, would you explain something about your background, where you were born and educated, and when you first became involved in the United Nations?



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George Tomeh (GT): I was born in Damascus, Syria, in the year 1922, and from a Christian family that explains my first name, a Christian name. When I say 1922, this is the year or this is one of the years that came after World War I, and I mention this because in that year, the Middle East was actually divided and subdivided. For instance, Syria--Natural Assyria--which extends from Mount Toros in Turkey down to the desert of Arabia, and to Egypt, and from the Mediterranean to the desert of Iraq. So, this part, which actually was known as the 'countries of Damascus.' It contains now the following states: Jordan, Israel, greater Lebanon, and Syria. But the three first were all taken from Natural Assyria, which I mentioned. My very earliest memories go back to 1925. That was the year of the great Syrian revolt against the French occupation and colonialism. Some of the memories are not very pleasant, but they show the situation or the conditions

under which my generation would grow up. Damascus was being bombarded by the French, and the quarter in which I had my father's house, where I lived and grew up was called the Midan. Not only is Damascus the oldest inhabited city in the world, but the Midan in Damascus is the oldest quarter of Damascus, and my memories go back to the house in which I was born, one of those big oriental houses wherein you have waters inside the house, what is called the 'Bachma', and small gardens around it, with a large center area--you have the center like this and the rooms are scattered around it--which indicates that the life was really inside the house, because you had the waters, the trees, the flowers, the fruits, everything. So, our house, being in the Midan, was touched by the bombardment, and I had five sisters and myself, besides my mother. My father was in the region where the revolt was taking place, so my mother was running from one room to the other, one room to the other, and our neighbors, who were Muslims and one of the leaders of the great Syrian revolution, were assuring us all the time that nothing will happen, nothing will happen to us, that whatever happens to them will happen to us, and so on, and, "We will protect you"--telling my mother, because they knew my father was away--"Don't be afraid in the absence of your husband, we are your brothers." They gave the best possible assurances that neighbors can give to neighbors.

One very sad accident I remember is that my mother had at that time on her hands a baby called Michel--Michael--and, as we were running away from our house to go to another quarter which was a safer place, she forgot the baby in one of the rooms. When we went out and closed the doors and so on, and walked a few meters, my mother remembered that she forgot the baby in one of the rooms; she ran back to bring him. That

particular room, the roof of that room was touched by a bomb and parts of the roof fell on the head of the baby, so the baby was almost half dead when my mother brought him.

We took a train to Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, and at that time that route or trip, which now by taxi you can make in two hours, used to take at least 16 hours by train, and when the train was going up the mountains of Lebanon you could--I remember--you descended from the train and started walking. So, finally we reached Beirut. My father had hired a villa for us in Jounie, which is not far from Beirut, in fact a suburb of Beirut. And two days after we arrived there, my baby brother died, as a result of the bombing. And we buried him, we were all very sad about him, and so on. So, you see these are some of the memories of the days in which we were born and were growing up. I am sure we agree they are not very pleasant memories. They are rather sad, and even tragic. We stayed two years in Jounie, Lebanon, and then we went back to Damascus, Syria, to our own big house. Strangely enough, all the old trees and the plantation, the flowers, were blooming. It was springtime. And we felt very happy to be back in our own home.

My studies were at the Greek Orthodox School, a famous high school, which we called Secondary School, in which you finished up high school and you entered university. But the final exam for ending the high school and entering university were government exams, and I passed those exams, and then I entered a competition, and succeeded. I was among those who succeeded, which means that the government would take care of my university education. And the university to which I was assigned was the American University of Beirut. So, I went there. I was accepted as the junior class, but my knowledge of English was very little, so I had to take, with other special students, English classes so that we could follow the courses of the university that were all given in

English. From the university I got a BA in philosophy, and then I left the university for one year. That was 1941, during World War II, and I worked for an MA, and got my MA from the American University of Beirut, under a professor who made a great name for himself in the United States when he was Ambassador of Lebanon to the United Nations. I mean Charles Malik, a well-known personality, and he was really a philosopher. I got my MA with distinction, returned to Syria, was among the first chosen to work in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, newly founded, because by that time the French, who had fought strongly not to leave Syria, had left Syria under the pressure of the British army, which was in Lebanon.

JK: ... during the war. This is during the war?

GT: During the war. And in fact a battle took place between the French army and the Syrians, and all inhabitants of Damascus they will remember that the 26 gendarmes, which are like policemen, were killed around the parliament by the French in a brutal manner. Those days are on the whole, sadly remembered because of what France did while withdrawing from Syria.

At the American University of Beirut, I entered the department of philosophy, and my minor was in international law. And then we met Charles Malik, who was really a great professor in every turn of the word, a philosopher on his own right who was a graduate of Harvard University, and I wrote for the MA thesis a translation of the nomodology of Leibniz, from French--because in Syria, French was the second language.

My thesis was published as a book and exists now as a book, and went into a second and a third edition.

JK: And then, at some point you went to London?

GT: Yes. When I got my MA and returned to Damascus, Syria had already gained its full independence and had started establishing embassies, which at that time were called legations because embassies were only for the great powers. But afterwards, the legations were also called embassies.

JK: OK. So then you established a legation in London?

GT: In London. And I was among the first chosen to go to our London legation. At the same time, a legation was established in Washington, and a delegation to the United Nations, where you have a permanent representative. In fact, I was asked to make a choice of what place I wanted to go. I went to London. I did not regret it because I had my first contacts with actual Western civilization.

JK: Let me just ask you, because we are at this time period, were you in Damascus while the meetings in San Francisco took place?

GT: That's correct.

JK: Then I wanted to ask you this, because in my interview with Majid Khadduri he said that in San Francisco the Syrians were represented, and he was representing Iraq, and the issue came up of membership to the United Nations, and Syria wanted to become an independent country as a member of the United Nations...

GT: Of the founding members.

JK: ... one of the founding members. And the French objected...

GT: That's correct.



JK: ... and said No, that Syria was still a colony of the French.

GT: A mandate.

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JK: A mandate. Right. OK. So, they said no, it was still a mandate. Now, Majid Khadduri said at that point, even during the meetings in San Francisco, the French were bombing, they decided to bomb Damascus.

GT: Which they did.

JK: Which they did. And you were there?

GT: I was in Damascus.

JK: So, the French did bomb Damascus?

GT: Yes.

JK: How long did that go on? Was it a day?

GT: No, more. That particular episode lasted for about a week. Because the Syrian government, which is now an independent government, had a small army but nothing to compare with the French legions that were in Damascus, so they fought. There were great battles that took place inside the streets of Damascus, and lots of Syrians were killed. At that time, to be exact, I was already in our legation in London, and the first meeting of the Security Council took place in London, and one of the first cases that the Security Council took up in London was the French attack on Syria, because Syria brought its case and its complaint against France, in London at the Security Council.

JK: Now, when the conflict was going on in Damascus, my understanding is that the Americans told the French they had to stop.

GT: That's correct. The Americans and the British both intervened and told the French they had to stop, and it was only then that the French stopped their fighting in Syria.

[interrupted]

JK: OK, so: in London, this was one of the first issues that the Security Council took up.

GT: That's correct.

JK: So, what were the discussions in London at that time? This was 1946 I believe?

GT: 1946. Well, Syria asked for the complete withdrawal of the French army from Syria.

JK: Oh, so they were still there...

GT: France said, "We will withdraw provided two treaties are concluded between us and Syria, one about economic privileges for the French government, and one about cultural privileges. And we will enter into negotiations with Syria to conclude these two treaties." The Syrian delegation was headed by a very able old man of the politics of Syria, and of the Arab world, known from the days of the Ottoman empire, also a Christian Arab called Phirus Im-houly.

JK: Im-houly?

GT: Houly means priest; Phirus means the change or something like that. Because Arab names have meanings. And I remember he had a great sense of humor. So, he said to the Security Council, "Why enter into negotiations to withdraw? We will give them all facilities to go out of Syria!" And everybody started laughing. "We will give them all the facilities to withdraw and we will also praise their withdrawal--there is no need for negotiations." It is like someone who puts a great rock in the middle of the street and on the rock he puts a plaque stating "Beware, there is a rock behind." But if we remove the rock, there is no sign, for the precision. So, this is very much like the demands of France from Damascus. "We will negotiate for withdrawal." But there is no need to, just withdraw! This statesman of Syria, there are names for him, not only in Amman, but all other Arab cities. He was actually a great Arab statesman, everybody used to listen to him. But these are some of the recollections.

JK: So, what was the result of negotiating these two treaties? Did you do it?

GT: They were never negotiated, and under a decision taken by the Security Council France had to withdraw and she withdrew. And that was on the 17th of May 1946. And that day became the national day of Syria, which is celebrated every year, and in all embassies of Syria they give a big reception and so on, to remember that date. So you think if I wrote my memoirs, it would be interesting for Americans?

JK: Very. Very interesting.

GT: So, take me to Yale, I will teach there and at the same time I will work on my memoirs.

JK: That would be very interesting! So, you were in the very first meetings of the United Nations that took place in 1946?

GT: That's correct. That's correct. My recollection of the first General Assembly and those first meetings is really exciting. Just imagine a young man who had just graduated from university and finds himself taken from the limited Middle East and its life, to the greatest spectacle that existed in the world. Now, when I remember my being there... for instance, there was these statesmen who were there. All of our older statesmen that I told you about, he was almost in his 80s, Stettinius from the United States, Bevin from England. At that time, the Labour party had won the elections after the end of World War II and Churchill was out, but Churchill came and visited the United Nations and there was a great big reception for him. I remember that clearly. From France, the French foreign minister, very famous, who was one of those who fought for Syria and sent the army to Syria, namely a typical colonialist. So, the trends that were very apparent at that time, more really than really the cold war between east and west, was the third world coming into the front stage of world politics. Because all problems at the UN at that time were colonialism and how to liquidate colonialism. And also the problems of development of under-developed countries, took place. And at that time they changed the word 'under-developed' because they said under-developed means or carries with it the concept of

'backward people.' So, in order not to hurt these people upon the withdrawal of colonialism, we will call them 'developing countries.'

JK: So, that switch in language actually took place in 1946.

GT: Yes.

JK: That's very interesting. It is quite a different approach than during the League of Nations, because the language in the League of Nations really did separate these countries.



GT: 'Mandate,' and 'we will stay there until we give them direction and capabilities to learn how to take care of their problems,' and so on and so forth; namely, from above to below. But no, there was a sense of equality in 1946, even though Syria has nothing to compare to France or England, but at the United Nations, under the Charter, all states are equal. You find the Soviet Union, which is gigantic, the United States, and you find states like the Côte D'Ivoire, for instance, or Sierra Leone, or Lebanon, or Jordan, who are small states of two million, or one million. The population of Syria now is about 18 to 20 million. At that time, it was three million, the whole of Syria. Damascus, the capital, in which I was born and grew up, was a city of 500,000 people, half a million. Now the population of Damascus is five million.

JK: It had grown tremendously.

GT: Yes.

JK: Now, as long as we are talking about colonialism and the changes, what was the understanding of what the Trusteeship Council would be doing?

GT: Well, the Trusteeship Council... if you like I will bring the Charter. The main organs of the United Nations are the Security Council, the Trusteeship Council, ...

JK: and the General Assembly, and so forth.

GT: The General Assembly is like the legislative power in a democratic state.

JK: Right.

GT: But these were the International Court of Justice. And they were all attached to the General Assembly. The Trusteeship Council in particular, it's objective was how to bring countries that were under the systems of colonialism or trusteeship or mandate, and so on, from that state to the state of independence, namely how to liquidate colonialism.

JK: OK, so by 1946, the interpretation of what the Trusteeship Council would be doing is the liquidation of colonialism?

GT: Yes.

JK: Because the agreements prior to the writing of the Charter between Winston Churchill and President Roosevelt...

GT: The 'Big Four.'

JK: Right... were really that the Trusteeship Council was going to oversee lands or territories that were freed from World War II, to take over the mandates of the League of Nations, and that nothing would be brought to the Trusteeship Council without being brought by Britain or France or whatever. So, Churchill agreed to that.

GT: I have many copies of the Charter--I will give you a copy.

JK: No, no. I have them too. I understand what is written in the Charter.

GT: ... because the work of the Trusteeship Council, its work, its aims, how to go about that, is all described in the Chapter on Trusteeship.

JK: But what I was just saying was: what was the interpretation? When people arrived in 1946 and they knew that the Trusteeship Council was going to be created, basically the understanding really was that it was going to oversee the decolonization, which it did.

GT: Which it did. But the actual decolonization took place in the early 1960s.

JK: Right--it didn't take place right away.

GT: And in between came the Cold War, and the whole structure of the UN changed. In my time, the majority was called the 'mechanical majority,' and it was explained that if the delegate of the United States raised his hand to say something there will be 40 to 45 members who would raise their hands and say the same thing at that time. But as more and more third world countries came as independent states of the UN, the confrontation between the two camps became bigger and bigger, because most of those people, like myself--I told you my memories of the French days--they are nothing but to leave sadness in the mind of a person, and dislike and negative feelings. Now, the problem in essence, really, or as you say 'the bottom...'

JK: The bottom line.

GT: The bottom line of it, is how to create a new world order in which these so-called under-developed or developing states would find their way and behave or work in a constructive manner with their previous masters. That was an issue.

JK: Right, OK. Well, the other thing that went on in 1946 was the election of the first Secretary-General, Trygve Lie.

GT: Trygve Lie.

JK: Yes. How was he particularly selected?

GT: Before Trygve Lie, there was an American, who became very well known in America and in the whole world, Hiss.

JK: Alger Hiss.

GT: Right. Especially when the fight against communism became basic in the U.S., especially in the Congress at the time, and they found out there was someone named Chambers, if I remember.

JK: Right--Whittaker Chambers.

GT: Whittaker Chambers, who disclosed that Hiss was a communist. I was in the United States at the time.

JK: So, had Alger Hiss been considered to be Secretary-General?

GT: He was actually the first Secretary-General before Trygve Lie--the *acting*.

JK: Because he had been that in San Francisco.

GT: Because he had been in San Francisco. I remember him distinctly. A distinguished man, very polite, and connoisseur--being an American in that position would make a person feel a little different from the others. But he was a modest person, he was a modest person. I remember a great many members of the United Nations felt sad about Hiss, because he was an honest man.

JK: A very intelligent man.



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GT: Very intelligent man.

JK: So, how did the selection of Trygve Lie then take place?

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GT: Trygve Lie, the selection was as described in the Charter: that the Security Council chooses a member and refers the choice to the General Assembly. But once the Security Council chooses a member, it is taken for granted that he will be the Secretary-General. So, this is how Trygve Lie was the first elected Secretary-General of the UN, as prescribed in the Charter of the United Nations.

JK: So, was there any discussion at all amongst the members of the General Assembly about other candidates, or was it just felt that he was it.

GT: To the best of my recollection at that time, no. Although we Arabs, in particular, had our reservations about him because he was a first-class pro-Zionist.

JK: He was a pro-Zionist? I didn't know that.

GT: And I have collected some of his statements, someone borrowed them from me about two months ago who gave a lecture about Trygve Lie and his pro-Zionism, and he used all the statements that I had collected. If that interests you, I will look for them. If you feel interested in that.

JK: Later we can talk some more about that.



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GT: By the way, I suggest that I bring you a list of books and papers, and when I mention about statements of Trygve Lie, we will just mention them and I will take this list and try to gradually copy them and send them to you, to Yale.

JK: Well, we can discuss that after we do the interview, because I don't want to take the time during the interview to be taking notes.

GT: When we start speaking about the Palestine question, there will be lots of documents that I will mention.

JK: Well, we have a depository library of UN documents at Yale, so we have access to that. So, we don't need you to send UN documents.

[interrupted]

JK: Alright, well we were just discussing that Ambassador Tomeh had published a book called *United Nations Resolutions on Palestine*, and it is from the Center for Research and Documentation at the Institute for Palestine Studies in Beirut.

Well then, let's move ahead to the next few years in which the British had said that they would be giving up their mandate in Palestine and that they had handed over the issue to the United Nations. At that point, was Syria involved in the committee that came up with the partition plan, and what was Syria's view of the decision on partition?

GT: There was a resolution by the General Assembly establishing the members of the partition committee. Would you be interested in that?

JK: Well, I think probably it would be best if you would just tell me your interpretation of it.

GT: Well, I just wanted to make sure... "...creating a special committee on Palestine." Resolution 106. "...special committee to be created for the above mentioned purpose, of the representatives of: Australia, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Guatemala, India, Iran, Netherlands, Peru, Sweden, Uruguay, and Yugoslavia."

JK: So, those were the members on the committee?

GT: On the Special Committee, and then in my book I gave the vote on each resolution and final decision adopted at the 79th plenary meeting...

JK: So, this book is a very good reference.

GT: Those for, against, abstain and so on. But Syria was among those who voted against [in the General Assembly]. All Arab countries, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey.



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JK: ... voted against it?

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GT: Voted against it.

JK: But Jordan...

GT: At that time Jordan was not yet a member of the United Nations.

JK: Oh, Jordan wasn't a member yet, OK.

GT: It became a member in the late 1950s or the early 1960s.

JK: Oh, I see. Then, it wasn't able to vote. It wasn't there. Interesting. So, Syria voted against the partition plan. Why?

GT: In my book, I reflected the feelings of all the Arab countries at that time. They felt that a very important part of an Arab country, especially when you remember Jerusalem, which was always a very thorny and passionate issue, if I may say so. They felt that a part, a very dear part of an Arab country was taken apart from them, and because the conditions obtaining at that time were not favorable to, or could not justify, the partition of Palestine. Why? You had 1,200,000 Arabs. The number of the Jews at that time was about 400,000, a third. The one-third was given 55 percent of the land of Palestine, the best part, the plains, the agricultural plains, the waters, and so on and so forth. Here, I have a map of the partition and the map of Palestine...

JK: In the book?

GT: In the book. Whereas the Arabs, who are the majority, were given 45 percent only, and the poorest parts of Palestine. The ownership of land is flabbergasting, in spite of the twenty or thirty years of colonialism, from the time that immigration to Palestine began to the time of the vote on partition. In twenty or thirty years of Zionist colonization of Palestine--there is no other description of it, because all the Jewish immigrants came as settlers, and that was a big issue. They did not own more than five to six percent of the total area of Palestine, whereas the Arabs owned 95 percent. So, how can you tolerate or

accept that the country of which you own 95 percent, to give 55 of it to a foreign settlers?

I mean, suppose the establishment of a national home for the Jews was to take place in, say, Montana or Arizona. I once heard that in Montana or those areas, when someone settles forty miles from the house of his neighbor, the first would say, "It is getting crowded here."

JK: In Montana, right!

GT: So, I mean, justice-wise, human-wise, history-wise, it is unacceptable.

The partition of Palestine, what is not realized by the West and by the world, and its majority was very generous to the Jews, but to the detriment of the Arabs. When you want to partition my country, how can I accept that? My country is dear to me.

JK: There weren't, if I recall correctly, there weren't any Arab countries on the committee. Is that correct?

GT: No [there weren't any].

JK: Why?

GT: There were no Jews, also, on the committee, so that the committee could be impartial. Now, if I don't tell you later, ask me about the vote on partition, because that is also interesting. Now, the problem of partition led to the driving out of Palestine, one

million Arabs, who are now four million living in camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Israel. If you want a break down of the number of refugees in each Arab country, I have it. I can bring it from one of my files for you. But in connection with the problem of partition, I want to recommend these two books to you, which are written by Israelis, Simha Flatan (?) was from the Labour Party. I met him in the UN and we had spoken a long time together, the best book written on the problem of refugees is also by a Jew from Israel, Benny Morris *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*.

JK: OK, so Benny Morris and the other author is Simha Flatan (?).

GT: They are both Israelis. If you want an American point of view, this book by George Ball whom I have come to know; he was Under-Secretary of State.

JK: OK, George Ball, and the title is *The Passionate Attachment*. Later you can give me a full bibliography that we can put with this interview.

GT: Yes. And then very little is known about how Israel was able to occupy all these Arab lands. Here we come to the problem of terrorism. I will not speak anything for myself, but I have got two books to answer that: one is written by Menachim Begin himself, *The Revolt*, in which there is a chapter entitled, *We fight, therefore we are*. Descartes said *cogito ergo sum*, "We think therefore we are," here, "We fight therefore we are." To me, it is the whole chapter: we fight, therefore we are. Just read that, and see what is the philosophy and ideology of Zionism. There is a body of literature on

terrorism in Israel itself, written by Israelis, and I have a unique collection of that. *First Strike* is about how the plan was put down and implemented by bombarding and destroying what would have been the nuclear factory that produces an atom bomb in Iraq.

JK: The bombing of Osiraq.

GT: The bombing.

JK: OK, on partition.

GT: On partition: One of the causes is that there existed in Palestine a party called the Ihud-- Ihud means 'one' in English or in French--namely, the party that would unite Arabs and Jews together. This party was created by a great Jew called Magnus, Judah Magnes. He was the president of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He was an anti-Zionist, and he was calling for a unitary state, or a federal state, made of the Arabs and Jews together. And the Arabs were all for that. I myself, I would now call for a federal state of Jews and Arabs together. The personality of Judah Magnus in this whole story because very few people know about that. This is maybe the first time that they hear about it. I have books by Judah Magnus and about Judah Magnus. If when you are interested in the bibliography at the end of our talk, I will also give you books on him.

JK: Good, good.

GT: One last point about the bibliography and the sort: there is also a great movement of anti-Zionism in the United States itself. The leader was a fantastic man, as to knowledge, ethics, and he was a friend of mine, a great friend of mine. During times of crisis he would come like a bigger brother and see how things were going with me. Rabbi Elmer Berger. I would give special mention to Rabbi Elmer Berger.

JK: OK, good. So, at the time then, Syria objected to the partition plan.

GT: Yes.

JK: Then, when the mandate ran out and the British left, war broke out. So, what was Syria's role in the war at that time, then?

GT: You know, in these books that I already gave you, you will find the answer: first, about the reality about the war in 1948, how it happened and why it happened--because so far, the real history has not been known. But these Israeli writers who wrote about the birth of Israel will give you the answer, and I accept their answer.

JK: But from your experiences at the time, what was Syria's role in the 1948 war?

GT: Syria was like any other state, whose objectives at that time was not to destroy Israel, but to save Palestine, or to save Arab Palestine, because David Ben-Gurion and Weizmann and all these big Zionists made it no secret that they wanted all of Palestine,

and even Jordan, and they say, “Jordan has been taken from the Israeli state as it should be.” So, the aim was really to stop the expansionism, which exists up to this very moment, of Zionists in Palestine.

JK: OK, so the Syrians, with the Egyptians... and who were the other Arab countries that were involved?

GT: Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan. Jordan played a very important role because the Chief of Staff and top leader and General and all the Arab armies was King Abdullah.

JK: Right, right.



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GT: A Jordanian. Jordan. Now, how they were able to occupy all these parts of Palestine, which did not belong to them? When we come to the bibliography that I want to give you, but I'll mention now because the answer is there--I have already given you *The Revolt* of Menachim Begin. You will find in these books explanations of how they conquered Jerusalem, how they conquered Jaffa.

JK: Well, could you tell me what was Syria's view of the Palestinians and whether they should stay in Palestine or whether they should leave during the war? What was Syria's view on that?

GT: It is a very long... and history will prove it... and these books written by the Israelis will also confirm it... that this whole idea that the Arab leaders called on the radio, and told them, "Get out, we will bring you back when our army comes," is completely false.

JK: Oh, that's false?

GT: Yes.

JK: So, what was the view?



GT: To finish the first, this book of Menachim Begin himself details the tragedies that happened in Deir Yassin, namely how these various places ended up occupied, but ...

JK: So, from Syria's point of view, there was no communication to the Palestinians to leave for now, and that Syria would help them in the future.

GT: No, you cannot...

JK: OK, so from that point of view, it was that they should stay and stay in their villages?

GT: Yes. So, there are... look here: I have written in Arabic about the expression of the Arabs. How they themselves tell you about it.

[interrupted]

JK: So, we were talking about your involvement with the UN. When were you Ambassador to the UN?

GT: I was Ambassador to the UN in 1965 to 1972. Prior to that I was a member of the United Arab Republic, which was the union of Syria and Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser. I also was in the United Nations and re-wrote, in one night without sleeping a moment, the speech of Abdel Nasser that was delivered at the General Assembly.

JK: Which did what? What did the speech say? I'm sorry I missed that part.

GT: I wrote, or re-wrote, the speech of President Nasser to the General Assembly when all the heads of state came in 1960.

JK: In 1960?

GT: Yes. I put the whole night into it; I did not sleep, and then the next morning Gamal Abdel Nasser himself and Hammud Hussein Hakud -- I don't know if you have heard the name...

JK: Yes, yes.

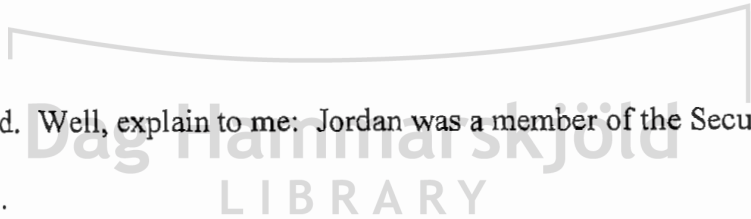
GT: A great, great writer. He came to me and thanked me. I had an American secretary, an older girl who knew Arabic, and to whom I was dictating--I dictated the speech--and she would comment now and then and read it to me. So, all these are part of my biography.

JK: Good, good. So, you were in the UN as Ambassador from Syria to the United Nations during the 1967 war?



GT: During the 1967 war, yes. UNITED NATIONS

JK: OK. Good. Well, explain to me: Jordan was a member of the Security Council in 1965 and 1966.



GT: Yes.

JK: Then there were new elections for the Security Council for 1967?

GT: No, forgive me: not for 1967. I was leading the Syrian delegation, but I was not a member of the Security Council. I became a member and the President of the Security Council in 1969-70.

JK: Exactly. And that was the point I was wanting to make. During that period of 1967-68, or at least during the year of 1967, there was no Arab country on the Security Council.

GT: That's correct.

JK: OK.

GT: And this is a point to be investigated: if you are interested I will tell you exactly, because I would suggest to the Syrian government to investigate that particular point, because the Syrian delegation, or the Syrian government or Syrian foreign ministry, was responsible for that absence.


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JK: In what way? How did it happen? How did that actually happen?

GT: You are interested in that?

JK: Yes.

GT: OK. Unfortunately, pettiness is not the property of any one people. Any people could act with pettiness, and petty members and people who destroy things. This is very personal. Do you want to put it here?

JK: Yes, because I would like to know what was going on in terms of selecting the Security Council at that time.

GT: OK. I was appointed to the United Nations in 1965. In 1966, during the General Assembly of 1966, Syria presented itself as a candidate for two important posts in two councils: for the Economic and Social Council and for the Security Council. And I received the orders to start the work, to lay the groundwork for the election. I immediately answered to the foreign ministry--this is very, very personal--that "this is absolutely wrong, I don't approve of it, and if you want to insist on it I will submit my resignation now." Because these seats are very important in the life of the United Nations, when a state wants to present its candidacy for one council, it starts preparing for that three or four years ago, to get the approval of its group, the approval of another group. You know, there is the Third World group, the Western powers, America, the Soviet Union, and so on and so forth. And no great power ever--not even the greatest--except those who are nominated to the permanent members of the Security Council, who would even think of presenting its candidacy in one year for two important seats. Because ultimately, we lost the two seats, as I warned the government. The Under-Secretary of Foreign Affairs, who was a petty individual in my country, wanted to show the government a failure by me, personally. So, he insisted on putting our candidacy for the two seats, including the Security Council. I told the government in a letter--I have a copy of it that I can show to you, and I will write it in my memoirs--that even India, for instance, which is about 1 billion people now, but less then, 650 million I think.

JK: It's close.

GT: ... who is the greatest member, would not think of presenting its candidacy to two seats in one year. This is stupid. Syria is a small country. If we get one seat, let us say the Economic and Social Council, that's enough. So, I was opposed by Japan, India, and Iraq. And in vain did I tell and write and speak on the telephone from New York, that "this is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong. We will lose two seats, and especially the Arab seat in the Security Council." And when the elections took place, it is exactly what happened. Japan succeeded by taking the seat on the Security Council, and Iraq succeeded in taking the Economic and Social Council. So, no Arab state. Later, to prove the pettiness of this colleague that I am thinking about, I wrote a special letter to the minister of foreign affairs, and to the president himself, Hafez Assad, about the grave mistake that was done, and to make an inquiry into the problem: "nominate some high official in whose integrity you believe, and let him make a report about this failure and its causes." And that did not take place.

JK: So, the result of that is that during the 1967 war, there was no representative of the Arab countries on the Security Council.

GT: Yes. What I told you, nobody knows. Muhammed el-Farra knows because we are very close, we used to work always together.

JK: So, when the Security Council convened to discuss the 1967 war, where was Syria? Where were you?

GT: I was in the UN, leading the Syrian delegation. And this petty man that I told you about, they sent him to me to be with the delegation in 1967. And I said, "Alright, come. Welcome." This point is very important for this story, because the non-existence of an Arab member in the Security Council when Resolution 242 was discussed was very, very detrimental to Syria.

JK: Now, Syria and Jordan were invited to sit in on the Security Council discussions. So, you went to the Security Council chambers, is that correct?

GT: Let me say this: in accordance with the Charter, any state that is involved in any great development, like war or so on, has the right to ask the Security Council to accept its representative, namely the representative of that state, to address the Council. So, Egypt was not a member, Jordan was not a member, I was not a member, I mean, Syria was not a member. But we were all invited to attend all the sessions of the Security Council and to give our point of view. So, this is what happened.

JK: So, you were able to speak?

GT: Yes. This is a right given by the Charter to any party to a great dispute that threatens world peace and security. You will find it in the Charter.

JK: So, you as representing Syria were in the Security Council chamber when they met.

GT: That's correct.

JK: Now, I understand that the president of the Security Council asked that the Council move to a consultation room at the side of the chamber to meet in a closed session during that time. Is that correct?

GT: Yes.



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JK: OK. So then at that point, Syria was not involved in the discussion?

GT: No.

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JK: How long did they meet in closed session?

GT: I wouldn't say a very long time, maybe the duration of a session or two but not much longer.

JK: So, a few hours?

GT: A few hours, yes.

JK: So at that point you were not able to hear what they were saying?

GT: No, but the importance really of the absence or the non-presence of a member is that when decisive resolutions like 242 are being discussed, Mohammed, for instance was very much inside those discussions, because Egypt accepted 242. Jordan accepted. Syria did not accept. Now, this is another problem or another aspect that should be investigated, because Syria only later accepted. The all-Arab group was divided into two: those who accepted 242 and those who did not accept 242. Syria was among those who did not accept. They have a point of view. And what I said on this issue, namely the non-acceptance of 242, I can show it to you in the records of the Security Council, which I have.

JK: OK, so what were the objections by your government to 242 at that time?

GT: It is difficult to say, because I used to ask for instructions from my government. I received the telegram saying, in translation from Arabic, there is an Arab idiom which says, "Send a wise man, and don't instruct him."

JK: And don't instruct him.

GT: So, they tell me to instruct them, in other words.

JK: Oh, they'd tell you to instruct them.

GT: Yes, well that is very pretentious, to say that.

JK: So, what were the aspects of 242, at the time, that were basically unacceptable?

GT: May I take this? I have to answer you by the text. I will read some of the paragraphs of 242 and show you where the...

JK: ... where you objected. OK.



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[interrupted]

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GT: There were seven Arab states that did not accept the resolution. These are: Syria, Kuwait, Yemen, Algeria, Libya, and Saudi Arabia.

JK: OK. Very good.

[interrupted]

JK: OK, so there were different aspects of the resolution 242.

GT: [reading:] “Expressing its continuing concern with the grave situation in the Middle East...” ‘The grave situation in the Middle East’ is misleading because what is the core of the problem is the Palestine problem. So, if it was as specified ‘its continuing concern’ with the grave Palestine problem, it would be more accurate to say that.

[reading:] “Emphasizing the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war, and the need to work for a just and lasting peace in which every state in the area can live in security... Affirms”--these are the operative paragraphs--“that the fulfillment of Charter principles requires the establishment of a just and lasting peace, on the following principles: the application of... withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict; termination of all claims of states... of belligerents; and respect for and acknowledgment of the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence of every state in the area, and its right to live in peace within secure...”

“... for achieving a just settlement of the refugee problem.”

“... for guaranteeing the territorial inviolability and political independence of every state in the area.”

“At the same time, while assuring and emphasizing that all member states ... the acceptance of the Charter of the UN have undertaken a commitment to act in accordance with Article 2 of the Charter, affirms that the fulfillment of Charter principles requires the establishment of a just and lasting peace, which should include the application of both the following principles:” Here we come to the first: “Withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories...” Not from *the* territories occupied--up to now we are discussing withdrawal from *all* territories, or withdrawal from territories that is indefinable.

JK: OK--so that language was...

GT: That language...

JK: ... was unacceptable.

GT: It was unacceptable. Because, if we will like, I will bring the Charter--the Charter has made the withdrawal of the occupied territories by force an *absolute* demand. Not a relative demand. 'Withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories' made it relative. And in fact, Israel has said, "I am not going to withdraw from the Golan Heights."

JK: OK, so you felt that the resolution wasn't specific enough, by naming the territories themselves?

GT: Then, to prove my point, also, usually resolutions like this, when it comes to interpretation, people go back to what every member of the Council stated in explaining his understanding. The American delegate, Arthur Goldberg, who himself was a great Zionist, and in one of the sessions of the Security Council I told him, "I am very sorry—I regret to tell you, Ambassador Goldberg, that when I listen to you, I am bewildered whether you are speaking for the great United States of America or for Israel." And he answered me, and insulted me, and later apologized, and so on and so forth. But that was a factor up to the present time.

Withdrawal is enunciated in absolute terms in the Charter, not in relative terms, namely putting conditions on withdrawal. The French representative on the Security Council explained his words by saying that, “To me, withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied implies from *all* occupied territories,” because he, when translating into French, states “*des territoires occupés*” which means *all* territoires, all territories.

JK: OK, so the French version would have been acceptable?

GT: Yes. Because...



JK: But not the English version. UNITED NATIONS

GT: But not the English version. The Soviet representative and the Chinese, they all said, “Our understanding is that withdrawal should be from ‘all occupied territories’ not from ‘occupied territories.’ From *all* the occupied territories.” And up to the present that you and I are speaking and discussing, this is the main problem in the text of 242. So, these are number two.

The Spanish and Latin Americans agreed with the French, and said also in Spanish, withdrawal means ‘de *los* territorios,’ *de toutes les territoires*, or from all territories. So, if you are interested, I have a collection of the debates of 1967 in one volume, which was given to me by the library of the UN, and you will find there my interpretation or my version, as to why we did not accept.

JK: OK, so that's there.

GT: Now, we are now in the year 1998. Between 1998 and 22 November 1967, how many years do we have?

JK: About 31 years.

GT: Meanwhile, the Israeli Knesset, Parliament, issued a law not allowing any government in Israel to return the Golan Heights to Syria. So, on what are we going to negotiate?

JK: OK, so the issue is still there, after all these years, and they didn't withdraw.

GT: Yes. And there is a law not allowing them to withdraw. So, suppose they sent me to negotiate with the Israelis? On what should I negotiate, with the existence of this law?

Resolution 191, which was voted after the assassination of Count Bernadotte, and in honor to Count Bernadotte, adopted some of his recommendations. Count Bernadotte recommended to the General Assembly that all Arabs--I will read the text if you like-- who are willing to go back to Israel or Palestine and live in peace with their neighbors, should be given the right of return, or if they don't return, to be compensated for their lost territories. Resolution 191, November 1948. Until now, how many years, 1948 to 1998?

JK: Fifty. Fifty years.

GT: What happened to this? Now, I can bring you instances and instances of... You will read yourself all these resolutions. About Jerusalem, that the attitude of asking Israelis not to change anything on the status of Jerusalem, or demolish buildings or change it. Because all of it is of historical significance. And UNESCO imposed sanctions on Israel because of what it did in Jerusalem.

[interrupted]

JK: OK--we have been talking about the events around 1967, and at the time, before the war, General Fawzi, the Egyptian general, had come to Damascus.

GT: ... to Damascus, right.

JK: ... to discuss, I believe, some information that he had received from the Soviet Union, that there were Israeli troops building up along the border with Syria. Were you aware of the discussions at that time?

GT: Yes. I was aware of the fact that coordination was taking place between the Syrian government and the Egyptian government regarding how to react or to act with Israel.

JK: Yes, right.

GT: So, in fact there was more than that: my recollection is that President Nasser was very, very careful not to be pushed or to indulge in any action against Israel which is the result of hard-headedness or a nervous reaction. That was not only the wish of Nasser but there was actually an established mechanism between the two armies or the two governments in order to avoid any hasty action. There was no doubt that in Syria there was lots of talking wildly by some members of the government, and I believe that was made for local consumption.

JK: By 'talking,' what kinds of things were they saying?

GT: Yes.

JK: Talking, making comments against Israel?

GT: Against Israel, yes.

JK: Do you know who it was who General Fawzi met with? Did he meet with the military?

GT: In his capacity as Chief of Staff of the two countries or the coordinator between the two, undoubtedly he was meeting on the highest level, with the Minister of Defence,

who at that time was Hafez al-Assad, the Chief of Staff, and so on. There was coordination going on between the two countries. What is not really well known, and which led to the catastrophe is that, although I am from Syria, the ruling party in Syria was made of men who did not have a great experience in matters of war and peace.

[end of tape 1, side 2]

[tape 2 side, 1]

GT: The problem came from Arab publishing houses, and I refrained because there is something to be said against the behavior of the Syrian government at this time.

JK: ... at that time.

GT: I regret to say that, unfortunately, but what you can conclude from that, you are free to make some conclusions. But I cannot say more than that. I mean, I myself, I was critical of some behaviors, some declarations, and I did warn the government against that, to precipitate a war, because I knew, and I was telling the government, that Israel was not only prepared, or very well prepared, and even planning, among other possibilities the possibility of war. In fact I went as far as telling them that according to my knowledge and my information, Israel is planning to take the Golan Heights and plans have already been prepared and made. But this is too much to say, to take the Golan Heights. I mean, I did warn them against that.

JK: Well, what I was wondering is that had the Soviets in New York, when you were in New York, had they come to you and told you that they thought that Israel was building up forces?

GT: No.

JK: So, you didn't have that information in New York?

GT: No. On the contrary, the Soviets were on the side of "take it easy, take it easy, take it easy." But the year 1967, was from the beginning of the year an explosive year. You know, the problem of the refugees, the occupation of the whole of Palestine, the belligerency of Israel. Now, if you want to know how the whole thing started, if you want to reach that point? Or do you have questions before asking that?

JK: No, how did the whole thing start?

GT: Well, let us say first of all, I brought one volume of the treaty series because it contains the armistice agreements. The armistice agreements that were concluded at the end of the 1948 war created two demilitarized zones between Israel and Syria, and if we had the map here, Syria had a part of the shore of Lake Tiberias, and most of the clashes that took place took place around that bit of Lake Tiberias, and what Israel did in the demilitarized zones. At that time, I remember that Dr. el-Farra of Jordan was a member of the Security Council, and through Ambassador el-Farra, I asked U-Thant to submit to

the Security Council a report about the actual situation of the demilitarized zones. Israel has violated all of the agreements on these areas, established forces there, established citadels and sorts of big defense, not only for defense but for attack also. These two, if you really note here, the two reports submitted by U-Thant to the Security Council on the actual situation of the demilitarized zones. I can't find them in my files here, I will photostat them and send them to you.

JK: OK--or if you just give me the document numbers then we could get them from our own library. We have a documents library for the UN right at Yale.

GT: Oh--well I will look, and I might find them before even you leave Amman. In that case, I will give you the numbers and that will be enough.

JK: OK. Good. So, you had asked U-Thant to make a report on this. Was this prior to the 1967 events?

GT: It was prior to the confrontation, prior to the war. But those two reports speak in no ambiguous language about the terrible violations that Israel has committed in the demilitarized zones. For instance, the demilitarized zones were on the part of Syria, and there were Syrians there who owned farms. All these were taken over by Israel. And complaint after complaint, and petition after petition, led nowhere. So, the ground was prepared, unfortunately, for an explosion. The existence of the refugees, the continuous attacks of Israel, the fortifications on the borders of Syria, the spying, et cetera. There

was a very famous case at that time of a certain spy who came from Argentina, Jorge Keohane, a very famous case. He was able to penetrate the government and become friends to all the big shots. Unfortunately I didn't have any chance to talk with him. Not even in government parties and the receptions and so on, when you see all these people. The Keohane case is a very important case at this point, because he was able to penetrate the Golan, to take pictures of the fortifications and the planning, and so on and so forth, and send them back to Israel, until he was caught in *flagrante delicto*, namely sitting on the machine and sending by symbols all the information that he collected. In fact, he was discovered by the Egyptian intelligence because he appeared in a picture taken in the Golan Heights, with Syrian officials and Generals, and Egypt warned Syria against that, "this was this man, we know him. He is a well-known Israeli spy."

So, you see, lots of these things happened, and so we go back to May 14th, 1967. On May 14, 1967, an item appeared on the front page of the New York Times, and in the center of the page--I also can provide you with that--that "Levi Eshkol, he was Prime Minister, declared today that the Syrian government or the Syrian army is preparing itself for an attack against Israel. We have decided to march on Damascus, occupy Damascus, and replace the existing government with a more moderate government." Item in the newspaper. I went to U-Thant immediately, and U-Thant, when he read the news and he couldn't believe it. Then he called some of his colleagues, Ralph Bunche, and started discussing it, and made a declaration that same day, that the news appearing that day that Israel is planning to march on Damascus and upset the government and put a new, modest government in its place, is alarming. From here on, things went up, climbing, so to say

like you are climbing a scale or stairs, until we reached the explosion, which was the attack on Syria and Egypt on the early morning of June 5th, 5:00 in the morning.

JK: Now, U-Thant received information that Nasser wanted to remove the United Nations troops--UNEF.

GT: Here is a point, also, to be very careful about. If you read what Nasser did was not... what did you say? That he remove...

JK: He requested the removal of the troops, of the peacekeeping troops.

GT: No, what he requested was that in case of an attack on Syria, which is in the treaty... which concluded a treaty with Egypt, that in case there is an Israeli attack, the Egyptian army will come to the help of Syria, in accordance with the treaty between the two countries and registered in the United Nations. So, if that such a thing happens--and it did happen--Egypt would come to the help of Syria. What he requested is that a regrouping of the United Nations forces so that if this situation arises, the Egyptian army can cross to help Syria. So, the two things are different. He did not ask their removal.

JK: He did not ask for them to be removed?

GT: No, he asked for them to be regrouped. And we have to recognize that there is a difference between the two. My own view is that Nasser was very, very careful. He

wasn't, as described by Ben Gurion or even by Hitchcock (?) at one time, an angry young man. No, he was a statesman in every sense of the word. What he was afraid of did actually happen. The sudden attack of Israel. Up until the midnight of Monday the 5th, at 2:00 to 3:00am Sunday night, he was being assured by the Soviets that Israel would not attack. And that is historical, on record.

JK: And then the attack actually took place...

GT: The attack actually took place.

JK: At around 3:00 or so.



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[interrupted]

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JK: OK, then, did U-Thant come and talk to you in New York about the withdrawal of the UN troops before he decided to do that?

GT: It was debated in the Security Council. So, the debates of the Security Council that ended ultimately by the attack by Israel, the ceasefire resolutions, and so on, started to the best of my recollection, in April of that year, and went on through May and went on through June until the war exploded. So, if you want to know that, to review the discussion of the Security Council, for clarification of that period, is a *sine qua non*.

JK: Yes. But what I was just asking was that U-Thant had gotten the message that, from what I had understood, that the troops were to be removed. That the General, actually General Fawzi sent a message to General Rikhye, the Indian who was the commander in the field, that they were requesting the withdrawal of the troops. And then it was General Rikhye who informed U-Thant.

GT: I have read and reread the text of the message of Nasser to General Fawzi to the Indian, several times, and you can find the text in the monthly report that appears from the UN--it is called *UN Monthly*--and which was reporting the events and the declarations and so on, day by day, and hour by hour.



JK: OK, so then why was it interpreted--if it was only a regrouping of the troops--why was it interpreted as removing the troops? Because then that was what was done.

GT: Because when he sent that demand, the Israeli army took steps that seemed to be initiating the war. In fact, the troops were moved to the zone of the UN troops, and 17 Indian soldiers were killed by the Israelis, and that was debated in the Security Council. The Indian Ambassador came and objected and said, "We did not send our soldiers to be killed in war. We sent them to establish peace." So, so far what I have recommended here are the two reports of U-Thant on the actual status of the DZ (demilitarized zone), the actual text of the message of Nasser, which is a historical document now and everybody should read it to form his judgment what is was that he really requested. I am

convinced, having followed the events, that he did not at all mean to remove the UN forces.

JK: OK, so then when U-Thant did remove them, why didn't he object? Because Nasser didn't object then.

GT: That is a very good question.

JK: If he didn't want them removed, why didn't he object?

GT: Why didn't he object? Well, you will have to read the records of the Security Council and all the statements that were issued at that time by Egypt, U-Thant, Syria, el Farah, Tomeh, et cetera.

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JK: So, did U-Thant come to talk to you about it at all?

GT: No.

JK: No, he didn't?

GT: Because if he wanted to talk about it, he would talk to Al-Houni. Al-Houni is dead now. You could not ask him that question. But to my knowledge, if you ask el-Farah about it--because el-Farah and Houni were very, very close together.

JK: Who is Houni?

GT: Houni was the Egyptian Ambassador to the United Nations at that time.

JK: I see--the Egyptian Ambassador. So, what was Syria's response to the removal of the UN Emergency Force?

GT: Am I speaking on a sworn statement? Unfortunately, if I were responsible at that time, I would have reacted in a completely different manner. If you consider this is a reply to your question. But, you know, it was a frontal attack on Israel, especially after what appeared in the New York Times on May 14th.

JK: So, did Syria...

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GT: ... which as I said, sincerely alarmed U-Thant. And if you want, this is on the side: if you calculate 25 years after 1967, what year would that be?

JK: Oh, I'm sorry, how many years after 1967?

GT: 25. Add 25.

JK: 1992.

GT: 1992. In 1992, the State Department convened a conference to study the 1967 war. To that conference were invited most of the people who were in 1967 in one capacity or the other with the UN or with his own government. And they invited me as an observer. The government told me. I told them, "No, I will not go as an observer and hear a rewriting of history by Israel and the U.S. I will go as a full-fledged delegate, because I was in the midst of the battle." They said, "Nothing would make us happier than to go!" So, I went. Believe it or not, the first day of the conference was spent on my reading the news that appeared in the New York Times on May 14, and how this led to war. And they made sociological and psychological and historical explanations all about this, all about me reading this article and telling U-Thant, and U-Thant making a statement to the effect that this is alarming. It was really mad. And I told them that I never thought that I could trigger history up to this degree. But that was the case. Anyhow, they were taking notes of those meetings, each one. The Israeli delegation came prepared with the largest number of their experts and historians.

JK: What I was wondering was, in 1967, what was Syria's response to the removal of the UN troops?

GT: Of course.

JK: Did they approve of it or disapprove of it?

GT: To answer, approve or disapprove, I am unable to answer. But on the whole, the most that I can say is that the Syrian government was belligerent, and sort of having seen the moment they wanted to come had come. They were very excited about war with Israel. I have an explanation for that, but I don't know whether the time is propitious in order to give my interpretation.

JK: A lot of these things were happening within a few days of each other, and as you said these were escalating. So, the next step was that Nasser closed the Strait of Tiran.

GT: They did that and Israel immediately declared this action to be *casus belli*. So the war was declared.

JK: Basically at that point?

GT: Basically at that point.

JK: In your interpretation, why would Nasser make a move like that, knowing what the reaction would be?

GT: He was challenged by... I should say, and I don't think I am mistaken, by Arab public opinion that wanted him to go to war.

JK: So there was a certain pressure?

GT: Much great pressure.

JK: Yes.

GT: And Syria, the Syrian government was leading in that direction against Nasser. They wanted Nasser to go to war. This is... I don't know... is this on record now?

JK: Yes. But I think there is a certain understanding that there was.

GT: I am telling you sort of confidentially, my own interpretation, and I might be wrong for all... Ideologically speaking, this is an interpretation, I might be wrong.

JK: Well, then, when the war was completed, and we have gone through some discussion of resolution 242. The Security Council, several years later, passed resolution 338. Now, Syria, as you have clearly stated earlier today, did not accept resolution 242. But within 338, one of the stipulations is the acceptance of 242. So, by that time, Syria had changed its mind. Why was that?

GT: You are speaking about the results of the 1973 war.

JK: Right, the 1973 war.

GT: Because 338 was the resolution adopted after the armistice or the ceasefire in 1973. Well, why the change? It is that under American pressure, they gave them the impression that once you accept resolution 242, it means the withdrawal of Israel, it means the return of the Golan, it means that we are in the best of all possible worlds. And that was not the case. Now, as we calculated, it is almost 30 years since resolution 242 was adopted, but Israel is still occupying the Golan; Israel has adopted a law not to return the Golan, has annexed the Golan. Israel is in occupation of the security zone in Lebanon. In spite of the fact that a peace was concluded between Israel and Jordan, there are Jordanian territories that are still under the domination and occupation of Israel. And especially if you come into the question of water, that will become very clear.



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JK: That is a very good point. I had actually wanted to ask you that: what is the connection to water, to the water issues?

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GT: The water issue was one of the immediate causes for the outbreak of hostilities, or that led to the hostilities.

JK: At what particular time? Which hostilities?

GT: Let us say we are speaking of between January and June 1967.

JK: OK.

GT: Israel was starting to divert the tributaries of the Jordan River, all of which have their fountainhead in the Golan. And when the Israelis would start diverting the waters of the Jordan, Syria would attack them. And vice versa: when the Syrians were doing any work on the tributaries of the Jordan, Israel would destroy whatever they had done.

JK: I see. So, the water issue is very important.

GT: I will show you an historical document that is related directly to the Golan Heights. Do you mind?



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[interrupted]

JK: We are looking at a document called 'the Zionist Organization's Memorandum to the Supreme Council at the Peace Conference' on February 3rd, 1919. It took place in Paris. So, now, there is a statement in here on the water issue.

GT: Yes, on the water issue. The boundaries of Palestine: this document contains the minimum Zionist demands for the establishment of the Jewish state in Palestine.

[reading] 'Address to the Supreme Council...'--by the way, this reminds me of a book that is not directly related to the Middle East but is very significant, like the Oslo agreements, about agreements which put an end to every possible agreement. It became a bestseller in the United States the last time I was there, namely in the early 1990s: *A Peace to End all Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*.

Where this quotation comes from, "a peace to end all peace," from a French General, after "the war to end all war." That was the title given to World War I. They seem to have been pretty successful in Paris at making a peace to end peace. Archibald Waven, later Field Marshall Earl Waven, who entered Jerusalem, an officer who served under El-Amin in the Palestine campaign, commenting on the treaties bringing the First World War to an end.

So, I will go back to water. You should stop me more in diverting myself.

JK: So, the point that you are trying to make is that very early on the water issues were key.



GT: Here are the boundaries of Palestine. This is dated 1 February 1919, when even the mandate was not yet given to Britain in order to facilitate the establishment of a Jewish state or a Jewish national realm. You know the map? You have an idea about the map?

JK: Yes.

GT: OK. [reading] 'The boundaries of Palestine shall follow the general lines set out below. Starting on the north at a point on the Mediterranean sea in the vicinity of Sidon, and following the watersheds of the foothills of the Lebanon, as far as al-Qir'awn, Jishal al-Qir'awn is in that area, following the dividing line between the two basins in Syria-- 'thence in a southerly direction, following the dividing line between the eastern and the

western slopes of the Great Plain of Hauran, which was called in history the 'granary of Rome,' when it was all planted with their wheat and Rome was to take their wheat--'to eastwards following the known watersheds to the Naher Mourainyi (?), close to and into, and west of the Hejaz Redue (?).'

If we had the map, I could show you.

JK: OK. So, in the language there, it is talking about the watersheds, so initially it was to include areas that were important to water and to agriculture?

GT: [reading] 'The details of the delimitations or any necessary adjustment of detail shall be settled by a special commission on which there shall be Jewish representation.'

So, the line I have drawn here is Sidon, from Syria, and this is the last point mentioned here. Now, this line contains the Golan Heights, if we go to a place in Jordan and stand up, we can see all that under our own eyes. That line includes the Golan; afterwards I think the Golan is mentioned by name.

JK: So, do you recommend for people doing research to read this document and study that further?

GT: Yes.

JK: OK. Well, now you mentioned to me to ask you about the role of President Johnson at the time.

GT: OK. You will mark that, because somewhere here the Golan is mentioned. I am interested because all the headwaters of the water that we need come from that area.

JK: OK. So, that would be important for someone doing research to read that document and to study that?

GT: No, but you see that as of February 1919, before even beginning the immigration to Palestine, Israel asked for the Golan Heights.

JK: So, that was part of the plan, to include the watershed area?

GT: So, it proves definitively that the conception of Zionism of their own tiny state, look how tiny it is!

JK: So, that was the general concept?

GT: Yes.

JK: OK, so can we move on, because I only have a few more minutes, but I wanted to ask you because you mentioned to me...

GT: About Johnson.

JK: ... President Johnson, right.

GT: Why secure boundaries was mentioned in 242, thus opening the door for any state--it might be Syria or Jordan or it might be also Israel, but it happened to be Israel--in asking an adjustment of the frontiers to the detriment of the existing situation?

JK: Now, you are talking about the language in 242 that takes about secure boundaries?

GT: Secure boundaries. Who is to define which are the secure boundaries? That Israel had boundaries according to the partition plan, boundaries after the war of 1948, boundaries after the 1956 attack on Egypt and the occupation of the Suez Canal, boundaries after the 1967 war? So, there is no end to it. But where it came from? It came from a statement given by President Johnson in 1967 at the General Assembly when the General Assembly was discussing the situation in the Middle East. He said...
[reading] "Address by U.S. President to U.S. Congress on the State of the Union," Washington, January 10th, 1967. "... communication between the Syrian Ba'ath party and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union."

JK: So, this was an address that President Johnson made to the General Assembly?

GT: And they put in the idea that after peace, we cannot at all return to the former borders, to the previous borders that worked before the war, in order to establish security for each state in the region. And he brought as an example the situation of Israel, which has narrow distance at one point between the sea and the borders, and therefore should be expanded.

JK: So, that was Johnson's speech?

GT: That was Johnson's speech.



JK: And the idea is, the language that was from that speech then got carried into the creation of 242?



GT: Yes. Yes. [reading] "Statement by U.S. President Johnson on the first Security Council ceasefire resolution," Washington, June 6th, 1967. If you like, you can take a copy.

JK: We can mark that.

GT: If you doubt what I am saying!

JK: Then we will mark that down as something that we need to look at.

GT: So, this is the origin of secure borders.

JK: Yes. Interesting. Now, we are running out of time, so I want to thank you very, very much. I appreciate your taking all this time, because we have spent quite a bit of time doing this today.

GT: I would be very gratified if I am sure that I was of service to you.

JK: Absolutely. And I want to also put on the record that we have made a bibliography of the wonderful books that you have suggested, and so that will be available also for research.

GT: Let me just add for your information that on the acute and most important problem, such as the problem of refugees, the books that I told you about are written by Israeli authors and they explain the reality of this kind of Israel. It wouldn't be as Syrian Ambassador, representing the Arab point of view. No, this is what all the Israelis themselves are saying now. One last thing: all this could be put in the context that now a revival of real Palestinian history is taking place, not only among Arabs and Americans, but among Europeans and Americans and scholarly people and writers and researchers and so on. As an example of this, I want to give you this book along with the one I gave you on Jerusalem for your library at Yale.

JK: Thank you so very much.

Yale-UN Oral History Project

George Tomeh
Jean Krasno, Interviewer
March 16, 1998
Amman, Jordan

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