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Yale-UN Oral History Project

Ismat Kittani
James S. Sutterlin, Interviewer
16 October, 1997
New York, New York

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Yale - UN Oral History

Ambassador Ismat Kittani

Interviewed by: James Sutterlin

October 16, 1997

New York, New York

James Sutterlin: Ambassador Kittani, I want first to thank you for agreeing to participate in this Yale Oral History project. I would like, if we may, to talk about the Iran-Iraq war. But first I would like you to indicate what your responsibilities were at the time that the hostilities began between Iran and Iraq.

Ismat Kittani: I was the senior under-secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Baghdad, responsible mostly for all multilateral relations of Iraq, under the minister. At that time Mr. Hamadi was the foreign minister, but Tariq Aziz was always responsible for the foreign affairs of the regime, whether he was foreign minister or not. I worked with Mr. Hammadi for multilateral matters. Just before the war broke out I had spent five weeks in Geneva as the president of the Second Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. I was elected as President. As you will probably see, it is ironic that less than a year later the Israelis attacked the Iraqi reactor. I had five weeks of that and I returned to Baghdad around the end of the first week of September.

JS: Before hostilities broke out?

IK: Before hostilities broke out. Then I spent six or seven days, no more, in Baghdad, because I had a brother in Baghdad who had developed cancer. I took him to London for check-ups and observations and treatment. I remember very well I arrived on the 17th and it was after I arrived in London that I heard that Iraq had repudiated the Algiers agreement that day. During the week I was in Baghdad there was a lot of tension because there was a lot of small scale but serious fighting, skirmishes, on the border between the two countries, which of course was a culmination of the political and ideological tensions between the regimes and a genuine fear on the part of the Iraqi regime--a real and present danger.

But it wasn't until I arrived in London, five days later, that war broke out. On the 23rd, I believe, I got instructions which I recall was one sentence: I was to proceed to New York and the instructions were to try to delay any action by the Security Council until the objectives had been achieved--something like that. Obviously I am not quoting verbatim. The ambassador Al-Shawi called me while I was at the hospital--almost at the same hour that it was confirmed that my brother had cancer and I had to tell him. The ambassador, asked me to go to the embassy. He gave me the cable and made plans for me to arrive in New York on the 23rd, which was a Friday. I think it was the day that Secretary-General Waldheim, having used Article 99, had asked for an urgent Security Council meeting. It happened also that the President of the Council was Mr. Taib Salim of Tunisia, an old friend. So I saw him and a number of other members, and I saw Waldheim; you remember I used to be the head of his office in 1973-1975.

JS: That's right! I wanted to get that on the record that you had previously been in the UN.

IK: Yes, I was on loan from the Iraqi foreign service since 1964; I was recruited by U Thant and stayed until 1975 when I went back to Baghdad.

JS: And you were *chef de cabinet*, right?

IK: Yes, but the title had been reverted to the old title of Andrew Cordier: Executive Assistant to the Secretary General. But I was an ASG for two years, then the government asked me to go back and I went back. In those eleven years I went from Secretary of ACC and ECOSOC, and then I worked in U Thant's cabinet, deputy for Mr. Narasimhan, and then I went back as ASG for inter-agency affairs before Waldheim asked me to head his Cabinet.

But anyway, on the 25th, on that weekend, Saturday and Sunday, with all my interlocutors, I asked for a postponement of any action until the foreign minister arrived, which was my line. Of course, I didn't tell them what my instructions were, you understand! I think the deliberations took until Monday anyway.

But then a dramatic thing happened. Of course we were telling Baghdad of the decision and giving them the drafts as they were circulated over the weekend, but when they were taking the decision by actually voting in the Council, I was sitting there--of course, Iran was boycotting the Council and a lot of people give me a lot of credit which I don't deserve mostly because I was sitting alone there; our opponents were absent, and one has to take these things with some humility. I remember Tony Parsons and Brian

Urquhart and many others saw me as instrumental in preventing the Council somehow from taking action, but I don't think so. You remember, this was in the middle of the American hostage crisis and all that, and Iran was not popular anywhere, but more importantly they made my task much easier by being absent.

And so, what happened was that Saddam Hussein was making a major speech as the Council was meeting and Mr. Zahawi, who was the Director-General of International Organizations under me in Baghdad, we were about the same age and very good friends, was on the phone getting excerpts from this speech and bringing them to me at the Council. I couldn't leave the chair. I noticed that Saddam had said that we were going to accept the cease-fire, but he was putting conditions including, above all, Iran's recognition that the Shatt-al-Arab was Iraqi, etc.

When the meeting was over, I got on the phone because Zahawi kept the line open with Baghdad. By then it was past midnight in Baghdad and I told them, please, I want Iraq to accept the Security Council's resolution simply and without any reservations or preconditions, and I also told them that my expectation was that Iran was not going to accept it anyway, but please, no conditions. I learned later that at the other end that Al-Qaysi and the others on duty could not reach Hammadi the foreign minister. Finally, a colleague of mine, the other under-secretary, called Tariq Aziz to say there is this message. And Tariq Aziz was able to get to Saddam Hussein. I woke up the next morning to learn that, to my great relief, Iraq had informed the Secretary General of its unconditional acceptance. As you probably know by now, and the Secretary-General [Pérez de Cuéllar] has said in his book, subsequently every single resolution was accepted

by Iraq immediately or very shortly after its adoption, while Iran refused all of them until a year after the passage of resolution 598. That is very vivid in my mind: acceptance by Iran of any of those numerous resolutions could have ended the carnage of that senseless war.

That is the background. You asked for the background of my involvement and that is the background. I stayed in New York until December, the end of the General Assembly.

JS: That raises two questions, relating to the motivation of the Iraqi regime. You mentioned concern about the evangelical nature of the Iranian Shiite, and the other is the issue of the Shatt-al-Arab. What was your impression of the importance of these two issues?

IK: Let's take the second one first. It will be recalled that when Saddam and the Shah of Iran signed the Algiers Agreement in 1975, it was admitted and subsequently elaborated, and in retrospect confirmed, that Iraq did it under duress. The Shah was helping the Kurds in the north, and the Iraqis were down to their last two or three bombs. Until then in all the treaties Iraq had never accept the Talweg as the international border, or the involvement of the Iranians in the actual operations of navigation on Shatt-al-Arab. Shatt-al-Arab was enormously important to both countries, commercially. As I recall one piece of statistics, something like 85 percent of Iran's imports by sea came through Khorramshahr across from Basra, and probably the same amount by Iraq. Iraq used to have, under the Ottomans--well the Ottomans had sovereignty over the eastern shore of the Shatt-al-Arab, and subsequently Iraq never accepted the Talweg or Iranian control of

navigation. One of the reasons, incidentally, that the Iraqi regime quoted was that the Iranians were refusing to live by the rules of navigation, for piloting and all that. I think the Shah had done the same thing before Algiers, and refused to recognize the regime of navigation. It was a bone in his throat, in Saddam's throat, that he had given up half of the Shatt-al-Arab. Incidentally, this became our issue between the rival regimes in Syria and Iraq. Iraq was attacked bitterly by Syria at that time: "how dare they give up Arab territory with the signing in Algiers." This is significant and ironic since Syria was subsequently very much pro-Iranian in the war itself.

Saddam wanted to correct, to correct historically, his role, since he personally was responsible--he was the one who negotiated the agreement with the Shah and signed on behalf of Iraq. Of course, president Boumediene was the one who played a major role--he was the host of the OPEC summit where this was signed. Subsequently, F.M. Boutaflika was involved in the actual commission for delineating the border.

The other issue was ideological. That was really something you could feel, you could cut it with a knife. Because they came, as you will remember, Khomeini and company, with a huge attack. This was the beginning of the export of the revolution and Iraq was, of course, on the front line. It had a majority of Shias--a big majority among the Iraqi Arabs, if you take the Kurds out. I recall one incident--now I don't know when this was, 1979 or 80--and we had a big conference, I think one of those non-aligned conferences on women, in Baghdad, and Iranians were there and there was a big reception at a club. This lady with a scarf around her head, the leader of the Iranian delegation, was there and Saddam was there. He extended his hand and she refused to shake it and began

to attack the regime. He was very calm and tried to argue with her reasonably. Then there were radio and television stations with their propaganda focusing on Iraq and the liberation of the Karbala and Najaf, the holy Shia cities in Iraq.

I think it is safe to say the regime felt really threatened. There is no doubt.

Following the border skirmishes from the beginning of September 1980 the Iranians actually used force on the Shatt-al-Arab – of course after Iraq had officially abrogated the Algiers agreement.

JS: Going back to the Shatt-al-Arab just a minute, I noticed in the records that just until the war over Kuwait, Saddam Hussein was still referring to the Shatt-al-Arab as Iraqi territory--so, he never changed? The regime never changed?

IK: No, but after the war over Kuwait, as Pérez de Cuéllar points out, he gave up everything and he went back to the terms of Algiers, and he accepted more or less everything without any conditions.

JS: In these days in which you were here, at the time that Waldheim had used Article 99 of the Charter to bring it before the Council, what was your impression of Waldheim at that point? You had known him before, of course.

IK: As you know, he was an activist Secretary-General. Some people thought he was over-active. I think it is very interesting from the point of view of the UN that his predecessor, for ten years, refused to use Article 99, as a matter of principle. I remember hearing it from U Thant's own mouth--I worked in his cabinet--that there are fifteen

members of the Security Council and there are 120 others, and if none of them wanted to bring it to the Council, why should the Secretary General? He always recalled the Congo and the tragic role of the Dag Hammarskjöld.

I remember one thing though, not on this subject but it may clarify it. As you know he sent me as an envoy to negotiate the presence of humanitarian help in what was then East Pakistan. I was able with great help from my assistant Diego Cordovez, to secure the agreement of the President of Pakistan and I took the UN representative to Dacca in East Pakistan. I was then the ASG for Inter-Agency Affairs, but Brian and he asked me to go on the mission. At that time, of course, we had no humanitarian department, and we had no UNDRO--United Nations Disaster Relief Organization-- (actually, this crisis led to that, but that's another subject). Then I had to go to Geneva for ECOSOC and from there, with my assistants Diego and Miles Stobic, we had to deal with this enormous problem, as tensions were building up. I remember [Secretary] Rogers came here, after I came back, and incidentally Diego Cordovez was also with me on that trip, ... He took all the notes and could verify this! Secretary of State Rogers was very concerned about it, and there were Cisco and George Bush as the U.S. Permanent Representative sitting at the end of the table taking notes (I think I have a picture of that) and U Thant said opened the meeting and let me do all the talking, which I did and I made it very clear that we were heading for a big blowup. Then I went to Geneva, where after about two or three weeks I wrote a four page coded cable to U Thant. I said I know your feelings about Article 99 [the dangerous situation between India and Pakistan fully justified its use]. He sent me a very nice response, saying he very much shared my views.

He said Roberto Guyère will be arriving tomorrow in Geneva with a draft on the subject. Sadruddin Aga Khari was deeply involved as High Commissioner for Refugees. Roberto Guyère arrived, the USG for special affairs, and we spent two or three hours (Diego was with me) at the Chateau changing the draft. And he took it back to New York, but instead of actually calling for Article 99 U Thant sent it confidentially to the members of the Council. This is perhaps a little footnote to the history of Article 99.

There is a very interesting anecdote in this connection. Before U Thant sent it to the Council they gave it to the Indians in New York. Shahi, the Ambassador of Pakistan, happened to be in Geneva so they asked me to give him a copy. I asked Shahi to come in. He came, and Diego was with me, and I said "I have been asked by Mr. U Thant to give you this note he is sending to the Council" and Shahi looked at it very quickly and said "This is an interference in the internal affairs of Pakistan--this is a conspiracy", and he immediately canceled all his appointments, caught a plane, and went back to New York to fight it.

JS: Just to clarify that, then, actually in U Thant's case this did not count really ...

IK: ... as a clear invocation of article 99.

JS: So in fact Waldheim was the first to do it since Hammarskjöld.

IK: ... since Hammarskjöld did it on the Congo, and he did it maybe somewhere else.

JS: But going back to Iran/Iraq, the Council still did not act for several days. I wanted to go ahead now and ask a question about your assessment at the time, or the assessment on the Iraqi side of the Iranian objectives.

IK: I really don't know. You are asking me to speculate. You know I never was in the inner circle of the Iraqi side; I was not really privy to whatever intelligence they had. But I can speculate, and this is pure speculation--I think this so-called Iranian Islamic revolution was in its very formative stages. They were in a state of euphoria. Remember they took the Israeli embassy and gave it to the PLO. Of course, later on they fell out with the PLO. If you wanted to get to the upper echelons in Tehran, the best route was through the PLO and Mr. Arafat! I don't know, but I think at least some of them, including Khomeini, had their eye on Iraq. Remember that he was twelve or fourteen years in exile in Iraq, from the Shah.

JS: He was your guest.

IK: Yes, and he was treated very shabbily. When they signed the Algiers agreement, they showed him the door. He went to the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border and the Kuwaitis would not accept him; he never forgave the Kuwaitis for that. Then he went to Ankara, from there he went to Paris and the rest is history. Don't forget the center of Shi'ism is in Iraq, is in Karabala and Najaf. During the first Gulf War a number of their attacks and counter-attacks were named Karabala and Najaf.

Of course, Baath'ism and Saddam were anathema to these people. First of all, there is nationalism, which Islam does not recognize but of course when it comes to

Iranian nationalism later on it was and is very different. And the second is the Iraqi regime was really secular and, in the eyes of the Iranian Mullahs, atheists. The Baath'ist until then, and much later, used the argument that Iraq is a secular country and Iran is a theocracy, a dangerous theocracy. I used this line to full effect in all my contacts, especially with the media. Certainly, as I said before, the regime was threatened.

Whether Iran actually intended to topple it by force, I don't know. Perhaps another indication is what happened subsequently, until Khomeini accepted 598, where his number one demand was the removal of Saddam, knowing full well that if Saddam was removed during the war with Iran the whole state would collapse! We will come to that, however: why the war stopped, and how it was stopped; some clarification is needed, and I have some information on that.



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JS: The first thing that Waldheim did was appoint a special representative, Olof Palme, as mediator. What was the reaction on your part, on the Iraqi side?

IK: I think they welcomed it. Remember, at that time, at the beginning--it went through many states--I think already it is 1980 that he was appointed and had his first trip with this team--headed by Diego from the UN and Eliasson from the Swedish side. Their first trip I was not there because I was still here. But subsequently I attended all the meetings. I also went three or four times, as I recall, to Stockholm to meet Mr. Palme. The first two or three times he was still in Opposition, and the last time he was Prime Minister. Always, Eliasson was the host more or less. So it wasn't a complete coincidence that Eliasson subsequently became the Special Representative ... I think we had something to do with that.

JS: There is a reference in one of the files to the suspicion that Iraq had something to do with Eliasson's appointment.

IK: Yes, I think I can tell you this now. We were sitting in my office here in New York, I was then the Permanent Representative (1988). Tariq Aziz was there too. De Cuéllar had been suggesting names to replace Palme and Aziz had been saying no. I said, "You know, you people are very funny--you always say no, no! and you react. If we have names, why don't we present them?" He said, "Like whom?" I said, "I don't know--I'm not proposing anyone." And Tariq Aziz said, "There is this former Prime Minister of Spain..." Apparently he had known him. "Anyone else?" I asked. I don't know, maybe I started the idea and said what about Eliasson ... After all he knows the files.

When we met with the Secretary General, there was a tête-à-tête between Aziz and him. And apparently they talked about who should replace Palme and I think it was Aziz who mentioned "the Swedish Diplomat who accompanied Palme" and the Secretary General agreed without hesitation. Aziz said, of course, he had to clear it with Baghdad, and he did. Eliasson knows this although not until later, not then.

JS: Yes, I think that's where this came from, as a matter of fact.

IK: The Secretary-General probably didn't know the background, the discussion in my office. "Why don't you propose somebody instead of just saying no, no."

JS: On Palme, your reaction was a very good one?

IK: Yes, very good. He always received me cordially and all his initiatives were sincere and original. If they did not succeed it was due to refusal by one or both sides. Incidentally, in the chapter about the war in de Cuéllar's book, there is no mention of a Palme initiative that almost succeeded. The Iranians went back on it at the last moment according to members of the UN mediation team. You should check this from the UN records.

This was to reopen Shatt-al-Arab for navigation. To have a cease-fire on the river to allow the seventy trapped ships to get out and to clear the Shatt-Al-Arab for navigation.

JS: This was Olof Palme's effort, wasn't it?

IK: Yes, yes. And we all accepted it. Eliasson was telling me years later, and this was confirmed by Diego, that Bani Sadr (exiled president of Iran) picked up his pen to sign the agreement. But somebody told him in Persian, "look, you can't have a cease-fire because if you have a cease-fire on the river alone there then you have to have a cease-fire everywhere." And so they turned it down. The UN spent a lot of time on that, and there is absolutely no reference in the chapter. This was an enormous effort, and it almost succeeded. I remember the volume of talks and cables. Diego came with three alternatives for how this would be financed. We insisted we would pay the full cost! The Iranians insisted they would pay half the costs! This was a major obstacle. You must have a lot of this in the files; it was a long, laborious process.

JS: Yes. There is something on that. If I'm not mistaken, that was before 1982, right? Or was it after? I remember the fact that both sides insisted on paying.

IK: And so finally, the Secretary-General said the UN would pay, or something like that. And then the question was which flag would fly. They came up with a compromise, the Red Cross flag, I believe. I think these things we are talking about as part of an oral history should be pursued by scholars. This is all coming back to me as we talk.

JS: My next question is one that is perhaps difficult, but that is, what the Iraqi perception of the UN "team" (they were obviously all your friends), and I am really speaking now of after Pérez de Cuéllar was Secretary-General.

IK: Well, as you know, Iraq's relations with de Cuéllar, himself, were not the easiest. As a matter of fact, they were very difficult. I think you will know, or you can know easily, that I played, several times, a role to prevent a complete breakdown of the relations between my government and de Cuéllar.

JS: Why was that?

IK: Well, first of all, Iraq was frustrated that the UN was not stronger and the Secretary-General was not enthusiastic enough--he certainly tried to distance himself from the resolutions. As he says in one chapter, he wanted to play a role. And I understood his position but I was in the middle. Two or three times... well, the last time I remember, at the summit in Belgrade, I had already accepted to be a consultant and I had been put on pension from the first of September. But, I was taken there as my farewell assignment because I had played such a role in the non-aligned movement. So I was in

the Iraqi delegation. Again ... relations were tense. And I played again the midwife, in trying to mollify the relations of the Iraqi delegation and the Secretary General. That was my last thing, but before that there had been several.

JS: And that applied to Tariq Aziz also?

IK: Yes. More to him than to others. People were feeding us that he [Pérez de Cuéllar] was prejudiced, that he was anti-Iraqi, that he was sympathetic to Iran. The positions of Iran and Iraq changed completely on the central point, about whether there should be a cease-fire and withdrawal or not. As long as Iraq was occupying Iranian territory and no Iraqi territory was occupied we wanted a cease-fire, and then we would discuss everything else in the package. But when they occupied Faw and other territories in Iraq then the positions were reversed. Again, at the very end of the war when Iran's military collapsed and we were inside Iran going forty miles an hour, we then reverted back to our previous positions about withdrawal. Remember, that was the implementation of Resolution 598.

With others, we had easy going, except that we didn't have very strong feelings. But the whole team, you see, was looked at as one, and not as individuals. I remember there was a great deal of tension between the then head of our Legal Department [al-Qaysi] and Rolf Zachlin of the Legal Department. But I don't think these things played a major role; the central point was that they never really trusted de Cuéllar.

JS: And they saw Diego Cordovez as simply an employee, so to speak, of Pérez de Cuéllar?

IK: No, I think he was... there was one incident, certainly, which might throw some light on your question. This is also in the chapter of Mr. de Cuéllar's book. He says when he was visiting with Palme, Palme complained about not being fully informed. I can tell you how that happened because I was an eyewitness to what Palme was referring to. I was visiting Stockholm; I was speaking with Palme, I think while he was Prime Minister, and the Iraqi ambassador said to me there was a very urgent matter. I went to our embassy and spoke to Aziz in Baghdad by phone. He told me that he had received an eight-point proposal from the Secretary General, which was totally unacceptable to Iraq. He said, "No decision has been made but I may go to New York. If I go to New York then you have to go to Tunis and attend as head of the delegation to the Arab League. If I go to Tunis, you go to Geneva." He went to New York and I went to Tunis. The next morning I saw Eliasson. In complete innocence, I mentioned the proposal (the text was in my pocket), thinking it was inconceivable that this would be developed without Palme's knowledge. I thought they, Palme and Eliasson, were withholding information from me! Lo and behold, neither he nor Palme knew the eight points. I didn't say anything except, "I understand that there are new proposals and either Aziz or I might be going to New York." And I think Eliasson got on the phone with Diego to find out what was going on. So, I think Diego did play a major role in the mediation. That is a fact, what I am telling you; the rest is conjecture!

JS: More could have been said! But this is interesting because going to later history, after Pérez de Cuéllar went to Baghdad just before Desert Storm, and reported to the

Security Council that he had not succeeded in persuading Saddam Hussein to comply with the Security Council resolutions, Tariq Aziz made a statement

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saying in effect that Pérez de Cuéllar had betrayed the confidence of Iraq.

IK: Yes, they also kept him waiting for hours. They said he was a stooge of Baker or Bush. But maybe I should go back to that incident about Diego, and ask you a question-- I'm sorry, I know you are supposed to be asking the questions. But isn't it strange that either the Secretary-General or Diego conveyed this to Iraq through the mission here (in NYC) without Pérez de Cuéllar at least saying to Diego, "does Olof Palme know about this?"



JS: It is very strange!

IK: Does this mean he was really "hands-off" to that extent? Because the chapter reads as if "I did this... I did that." I mean, one has to be fair and this does raise a question. If I didn't know it from my personal experience, I wouldn't speculate.

JS: I would also like your assessment on the attitude of the Permanent Members of the Security Council during these years up to 1987, before they were working together, so to speak. Were you concerned about what the Americans were doing, what the Soviets (at that point) were doing?

IK: No, no, I think I had excellent relations, indeed Iraq did, with them. We made it a point to visit the capitals, and we also invoked the Arab group--you know, the Arab

League established a committee on the Iran-Iraq war which went all over the world. I was involved in at least three or four visits as part of the delegation. We met with Thatcher, we met with Mitterrand, we met with all members of the Security Council, not only the Five but the others. To Moscow I went twice with Tariq Aziz. Even when I was here in New York we met twice with Shevardnadze. So we had very good relations, and we cultivated them--even with non-permanent members. So our relations were good. The Arabs were our strength, materially and diplomatically, because we kept the momentum, Saudis, Kuwaitis. This was especially evident during the months beginning with the tea at the British mission by the Ambassadors of the P-5. From then until 598 was agreed I think I can say without much exaggeration that we knew very well what was happening immediately after it happened. They had two committees, one at the ambassadorial level and one at the counselor level, and I can say that from all sources, but primarily from the French and the Americans, in that order (I think the French were more forthcoming), I knew and Baghdad knew within the day if they had any proposals; I would convey them to Baghdad and get the government's position.

JS: That was one of my next questions: were you able to have an input into the preparation of 598?

IK: Oh yes. At least be *au courant* and to work to mobilize all our efforts to remove anything that could be considered hostile. As you know, it was carefully worded. Perhaps you will ask me a question later about when it was, about paragraph six, regarding responsibility for the war. It was so water-tight that nothing could happen without Iraq's approval. And so I was surprised at what de Cuéllar did in the last weeks

of his term. I think I remember Ambassador Blanc, and Walters and his team, Bob Immerman, and Cameron Hume.

JS: I don't remember which ones other than...

IK: Bob Immerman was the counselor, and Cameron Hume wrote a book about Iran-Iraq--he was very generous to me, over-generous. But anyway, shall we say that we knew what was going on and we did participate, not in the meetings, but in pushing our views with the P-5 and, later on, with the other ten. I will tell you one incident, this was after the five had agreed on the text and they took it to the non-permanent members. Germany was a non-permanent member. Count York, I think was the ambassador. The Germans made a few cosmetic changes, and one of them had to do with a passage that read "cease-fire and withdrawal"--they wanted to put in-between there, the word "subsequently." Perfect German logic, because you can't have them simultaneously. I raised hell, and somebody with me said "I've never seen you like this!" Well, Count York and I were friends and we remained friends. You will remember the Iranians were in our territory, and after the meeting with York I went back to the mission and called for the Foreign Ministry in Baghdad and I said "I want you to call in the five permanent members' ambassadors; the Germans are trying to put this word in. I've tried to but I don't think I've convinced them." They called them in at I think ten o'clock in the evening--needless to say, now as you read it, there is no "subsequently" in there! But this is an example of my involvement, not only in the drafting, but on more substantive aspects of the resolution. Of course, if it had been in 1980 I would have not said "subsequently" but I would have said "much, much later"! Because in that period we were occupying Iranian

territory – positions were reversed when facts on the ground changed. I mean, one has to be candid about this!

JS: You mentioned paragraph six. Could I pursue that a minute, since we've mentioned it. It was obviously a matter of enormous sensitivity on the Iraqi side.

IK: I don't know whether the Secretary-General knew the importance of this, not just as an incident in freeing the hostages, but the Iranians were talking of \$100 to \$150 billion. I don't know if he was aware of this, or if he was simply thinking this was a small matter. He talks about this that he knew from the beginning Iraq had attacked and all that. But I think if one is historically inclined, one has got to answer the question "was Iran completely blameless?" And is it that categorical? Strictly speaking his action was not in accordance with the resolution. Because it says "in consultation with the two parties..." You know how carefully it was drafted. You asked about our involvement, and we made very sure that this would be something, not simply the Secretary-General going in and asking a few people and informing the Council. And that's what he did. But it is also either *naïveté*, or, well, I don't think it's deliberate--the whole hostage problem, he talks about "why Iran changes it's mind", but Iran did not change its mind on anything. This is what they wanted, from the beginning to the end of the hostage crisis, this is what they wanted. That is what the Iranians wanted. It was enormously important for them.

JS: For Iran?

IK: Yes. And they never dreamed that they would get that. And then to do it the last, well the last month of de Cuéllar's term in order to get two or three hostages freed as he freely admits. As you know I have a great respect for de Cuéllar and we had excellent personal relations.

JS: What I wanted to ask you in that connection was why Saddam Hussein made the decision to accept the cease-fire, essentially without conditions?

IK: That's another thing that I think will interest you, and anyone who is interested in knowing of how things really happen in life. Remember Iraq said we will not cease fire unless the Iranians agree to direct negotiations. Aziz came to New York, and he went on and on, and there was a complete impasse. I remember on the 3rd or 4th of August '88, in my office at the mission we were pacing up and down, and suddenly I yelled and I said, "I have an idea." He said, "what is it?" I said, "why not propose a temporary cease-fire." I was reminded of the first cease-fire in Palestine in 1948. And we went to the UN Year Book and consulted the text. I said "because this has the advantage that we can say... you know, for a month or so... I don't know if we can get it through, but let's propose that and say that if at the end of the month there are no direct negotiations, the extension [sine die] of the cease-fire would depend on the start of direct negotiations." Aziz liked that, and he decided to convey this to Saddam. The president's plane, which had brought the delegation from Baghdad was parked in Washington, I think at Andrews. He decided to draft a letter to Saddam explaining the proposal and its advantages and someone would carry it to Baghdad by hand. That someone was our ambassador in Washington, then Al-Anbari, who later succeeded me and was the Permanent Representative during the Kuwait

Crisis. He is now our ambassador to UNESCO. Thursday and Friday, the message was drafted, I think 14, 15, 16 pages. On Saturday morning, the plane was being fueled to take Anbari to take to Baghdad, and we were in my office and suddenly we hear that Saddam had accepted the cease-fire provided there was agreement on talks later.

Aziz and his delegation left that evening and Monday was the 8th of August. By then they were in Baghdad. Then they wanted some document that the Iranians would agree to direct negotiations before a cease-fire actually came into effect. The Chinese Permanent Representative was the president of the Council, as you recall, and he kept calling me in the morning to see if I would attend the session at 3 P.M. Later that morning I went to see Prince Saud, the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia in his suite at the Waldorf, and I opened a direct phone line with Aziz in Baghdad. I also called Picco and, for about two hours, I had one line to Baghdad and one to Picco at the UN, who was presumably clearing the draft. And we finally agreed on the text of the letter to be addressed by the Secretary General to the two parties setting a date for direct talks after the cease-fire. Somewhere I have all the drafts of this document.

JS: The twentieth of August, that was?

IK: Yes. But the date of the decision was 8-8-88, which the Chinese, in their Confucian way, considered it a very good omen.

JS: But the proposal was to begin the 19th, I think.

IK: Yes, was it? Something like that. The twentieth, twenty-second... then that's when we met in Geneva with Eliasson and the rest is history.

JS: Explain a little more on the Saudi role.

IK: Why they did it I don't know. But I speculate--we, of course, were not hitting Saudi ships, we were only hitting Iranian ships, and the Kuwaitis had flagged their ships with the American flag. And the Saudis were afraid that the Iranians could retaliate. But before that, in June, July, the \$64,000 is question why did Khomeini accept 598 a year later? I was told by an Iranian that, I forget his name.... I had heard this and asked him is it true? And he said that yes, from usually reliable sources, it is true. What happened was that they all went to see Khomeini, and they said the military front has completely collapsed, and there is a real danger that the whole regime will go down. That's when he said, "it's like poison but I accept it." In our delegation to Geneva, for the discussions--a member of the delegation was the head of Iraqi military intelligence. He told me the following story: he said there was absolutely no resistance; "we were going thirty, forty, fifty miles an hour inside Iran without any fighting." He said, "we came upon this enormous military base with hundreds of thousands of pounds of equipment, including tanks, and the only people at the entrance were the telephone operator and one other guard. We just drove in." That's where they got all these things, and that's why they delayed. He said he asked for trucks to carry this enormous quantity of material. Iraq gave some Centurion tanks from that base to Jordan? So, if you want in one short sentence for why the war ended, it is because Iran collapsed militarily, entirely. It was in danger of collapsing politically as well if the war did not end. None of this is mentioned in the chapter of Pérez de Cuéllar.

JS: No, I think it's true that the impression here is that it remained a stalemate on the ground.

IK: Until Iraq swept all... Remember when the Mujahideen Khalq went into, I think, Karmanshah, and then they got a beating? But before that, that's how Khomeini accepted in the first place. Then of course, there were these, what, two weeks? Between his acceptance and the actual meeting on the 8th.

JS: Can you discuss a little this long period of negotiations after 598 was accepted by...

IK: Well, it was complete deadlock, complete deadlock. Let's see--1988, then we had... May I just inject a personal note, here. I had wanted to leave the service ever since I was President of the Assembly, in 1981-1982. Then Aziz was appointed foreign minister and he appealed to me to stay on because of the war situation and the next non-aligned summit that was supposed to be held in Baghdad in 1982. I agreed to stay on for six months after which we would review the situation. To make a long story short, six months extended to six years. But as soon as the war was over, I reminded him and insisted on leaving and agreement was obtained from Saddam for my early retirement at 60 in 1989.

JS: It's interesting, related to discussing the extensive negotiations that took place after 598 was accepted.

IK: ... It was a complete deadlock, and nothing really happened on each side. Iran had escaped, with the cease-fire, and they wanted one thing, which was the withdrawal of

Iraqi troops. Then, of course, Iraq wouldn't give up territory. This went on, in effect, until the invasion of Kuwait. And then there were extensive talks between Barzan, the half-brother of Saddam, Iraq's Permanent Representative in Geneva, and the ambassador of Iran there, Nasiri. They were the ones who worked out the whole accord in Geneva. But that was way after. But you know, we had the UN presence there on the Iran-Iraq border, but the withdrawal did take place. That was agreed between Barzan and Nasseri.

JS: It was? Because I was just noticing, there is this telegram from Eliasson and Picco who were in Baghdad and they did see Saddam in November of 1989, and at that time they...

IK: Wait a minute--1989?



JS: Yes, first of November, 1989.

IK: There was one meeting with Saddam and Eliasson where I was present, he came from Tehran and Basra, I took him on the plane from Basra to Baghdad and he made some... But that could not have been November because I had retired by then.

JS: Well, that must have been a little earlier, because this one is definitely dated the first of November. At that point, he says he met with President Saddam Hussein, and the highlights of his comments were that, contrary to the earlier Iraqi assessment, the President referred to the consolidation of the political situation in Iran and of his decision not to undermine such processes.

IK: That must have been the middle of the discussions going on in Geneva between Barzan and Nasser, maybe at the tail end of it.

JS: I wanted to ask you, on the Iraqi side, who were the major actors other than Aziz?

IK: You know, when you are talking about Iraq, Jim, there is only one actor

JS: ... and that's Saddam Hussein.

IK: Yes. There is a supporting cast. There is an inner circle, but they are all completely dependent on him. They have no political existence of their own, any basis. The regime is one of the most secretive in the world. Let me give you an example. As you know I worked closely with Tariq Aziz and we have stayed friends and I respect him a great deal, but during all the years we worked together, do you think he would give me even a hint as to what goes on in the inner circle? They are all, not only loyal to him, but completely dependent on him.

JS: And so everything was cleared with him?

IK: Slightest things. There is another thing about him, and that is that he would never go over the head of someone to call someone below him. I don't know about the inner circle, but as far as the administration was concerned his approach was, as far as I know, strictly hierarchical.

It really is a one-man show. Influential? It's a question of who is more valuable to him, and who is in the inner circle, and what goes on in the inner circle--very, very,

very few people actually know, aside from those who are actually participating and they do not reveal much.

JS: There are several references in the files to the fact that Iraq did not like the UN approach on POWs. Do you recall anything about that, as to why there was...

IK: I think, not only that, but it was really not the UN so much as the ICRC. I remember when we met the President of the ICRC Samaroga, Tariq Aziz said, "All right, here I have in my pocket a list of all prisoners of war, I'll give them to you if Iran gives you their list." Samaroga said, "But that's contrary to the convention, because the obligation is not conditional or reciprocal." I don't know about the Iranian side but the Iraqi side was frustrated with the way the Iranians were handling our prisoners. First of all, they were separating the Shiites from the others, and then they were training some, indoctrinating them, and actually some of them fought on the Iranian side. In general, the conventions were not being strictly implemented by either side. Of course, the Iranians had similar complaints, but I think they were not as serious.

JS: We've mentioned the hostages. When, if at all, on the Iraqi side did you perceive that the hostage question was related in a way to the war?

IK: You mean the last chapter? After the Kuwaiti thing? I don't know--I didn't know this. As a matter of fact, this year I asked Jean-Claude Aimé (because de Cuéllar's book hadn't come out and I wasn't really familiar with these files), and I said, "how did it happen that in the last months of the Secretary-General's... I had no idea that this was part of a deal to free the hostages." And I said, "No, but I can tell you that Aimé said it was

Picco but they don't like each other anyway." Aziz said, "As part of the hostage deal?" Then I suddenly remembered that Gianni was involved in it. But being an innocent, I didn't know. I didn't know when they knew. I didn't connect them until Tariq Aziz told me, so they must have got it from somewhere else. I was laughing as I was reading that chapter--when the Israelis--Lubrani--were putting pressure on the SG not to give them this until their hostages were released! Doesn't that tell you something!!

Interrupted

I'm sure that this confirmed their worst suspicions about Pérez de Cuéllar, and I don't blame them for that. All the other things can be explained. I doubt that he would have done it had Iraq had any diplomatic credibility or clout left. Iraq, after the Kuwait fiasco, could be ignored with impunity. He probably went with his instinct. And also his anxiety to have this hostage thing settled with strong support from the US. I don't know. We are now not talking about facts but about opinions, which is not history!

JS: I wanted to ask also, who do you think of as other people that we should interview who, aside from the Iraqi side, who had knowledge or were participants in this drama?

IK: Have you done Picco? Have you done Diego?

JS: No--you're the first one; we're starting with you.

IK: Well, I've given you enough material, and you should verify some of these things! Eliasson I think played a very big role because he was with Palme all the time, and then at the end came back on his own. From ... beginning, he always accompanied Palme to

Baghdad, and was always with Palme when I went to Stockholm. Who else? When we first met with the Iranians in Geneva, the Saudis sent Bandar to help. He could clarify many things, especially in regard to Saudi Arabia's role.

JS: The prince?

IK: Yes.

JS: That would be interesting because there is very little reference to that in the files.

IK: You might try him. I don't know if they will agree--they are very reticent and they don't like to be interviewed. The Saudis could throw a lot of light on why Saddam accepted the cease-fire before direct talks! As it happened we were all happy because it led to a early cease-fire.

JS: We haven't discussed at all the use of chemical weapons. Do you have any comments on that?

IK: No. I accept that Iraq used them extensively, and I think there is credible evidence that the Iranians used it on a smaller scale, on one or two occasions.

End of Tape 1, Side 2

JS: It was simply your job to try to defend it.

IK: Well, I never did really, as you probably know. The Iran-Iraq war was a continuous nightmare for me for eight long years. You know a real nightmare is much better because it is one night, and you wake up--and it has a happy ending. This was not

good, it was a nightmare, because I woke up every morning, every week, every month, and it went on. Close to a million people were killed by “conventional” means. This is not the only part of international law that both sides violated contrary to their obligations under international conventions, but I can’t say I can defend any of it morally or ethically, no. The diplomat has one option, and that is to resign. I can’t say I didn’t think it through but my decision was it wouldn’t have helped anybody to have resigned and become a happy exile--or an unhappy one!

I also, and I think you would understand this, have a very definite personal attitude toward diplomacy, which is probably old-fashioned, classical, but I passionately believe in it. That is why I have refused to move to politics. I believe that the diplomat’s job is defending his country and its interests – who gets the political advantage or disadvantage? That’s not the real care of the diplomat. And it shouldn’t be. As long as he and his conscience is clear. War means the failure of diplomacy. A diplomat’s sacred duty is to do what he can to prevent a war from happening, and once a war starts, to bring it to an end. And I can say without any hesitation that for those eight nightmarish years everything I did I always justified it to myself as “this senseless tragedy has to stop.”

JS: That was your philosophy?

IK: That is still my philosophy. I think that is my definition of a diplomat. In other words, it is a total failure of diplomacy when war breaks out. And then the diplomat’s job is not to--if the diplomat’s job was to participate in the war effort, then every little soldier would be a good diplomat, wouldn’t he? No, his job is to try to find a way to stop the damn thing. And it pained us that there was absolutely no light at the end of the

Khomeini tunnel--that he simply closed all the doors. No negotiations with Saddam for eight years. Now, whether it was justified or not, but from where I was sitting this was bleeding both countries to death, and I knew neither of them was going to come out any better than before the war. That much was clear from the beginning, when it started. It should have never started.

JS: In that connection, there was never, to your knowledge at least, any thought on Saddam's part of recommitment to the Algiers agreement?

IK: Well, by letter or by spirit? Because what he accepted finally was really the reaffirmation of it in other words.

JS: But that was at the time of the Kuwait thing. I meant during the Iran-Iraq war.

IK: I think there was one period when Iran was occupying Iraqi territory, and when the military thing was not... when he was preparing to do it--it took about two years. Maybe in that period he would have accepted it, as part of an overall [agreement]. Then when they occupied the north, then he might have accepted if there had been a serious effort on the Iranian part to offer a settlement. Remember, Khomeini until July 1988 insisted Saddam must go. People don't forget: all right, Iraq started the war, Iraq started the war; crossing the border in large numbers means starting the war; Iraq started the war. But who was responsible for eight years of fighting? You can't say Iraq alone was responsible.

JS: That's a point that's made in the book, in Pérez de Cuéllar's book. A last question, not based on your actual experience but on your perceptions--it is often said,

and I have sometimes concluded this myself, that because the Security Council basically didn't do anything at the beginning of the military action in 1980, this was seen by Saddam Hussein as an indication that the Security Council probably wouldn't do anything if he invaded Kuwait. In other words, that this had a lasting impact. Would you think that had some validity or not?

IK: I don't know. For one thing, I think you would admit, an observer would admit, that no one expected what happened to Iraq, or what was done to Iraq by the Council after the invasion of Kuwait. If somebody had told you then, before that, that this is what the Council would seven years later do to Iraq--the sanctions, the disarmament... If you say Saddam wasn't expecting this, then you wouldn't have been wrong! But, I don't know--I think his major miscalculation was that they wouldn't do anything, and if they did they would have to come to Kuwait and there would be large American casualties and so on. Second, that the Arab regimes will be shaky. Third, he never expected this coalition could be put together, and be made to stick together. Fourth, he didn't expect the Security Council to coalesce. All these were revolutionary things that happened that not only happened but he helped to bring about. This was a major miscalculation.

I remember visiting Tom Pickering when what became the Mother of all Resolutions, SC resolution 687, was being finalized and he showed it to me and I said I had a modest proposal. He said, "what's that?" I said "you have all this long Resolution--why not add one paragraph that says there will be no formal cease-fire before free and fair elections are held in Iraq under UN auspices." He said, "it's too late! This whole thing is now final."

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Ismat Kittani

James Sutterlin, Interviewer

October 16, 1997

New York, New York

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