

Arab feud is temporary

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I believe this is why we are saying that we are in a better condition because we are needed.

Q: The last time the Palestinians were involved, the leadership in Tunis was involved and the question of Palestinian nationalism was involved. Now it looks like its only leaders in the occupied territories who are involved and the issue is not Palestinian nationalism but autonomy.

A: That is what others want. But that is not what is going on.

It didn't happen before that the United States sits with a Palestinian delegation or a group as now they are doing with the appointed group, by the PLO, who are holding the views of the PLO, who are taking questions and answers, moving them between the PLO leadership and themselves.

Before this it was Egypt that was doing this...I am talking about direct meetings, continually and consistently between the Americans and the Palestinians. I believe it is the first time.

Q: Well it's maybe the first time because it's the first time you've been willing to do it in this way, the first time you local leaders have been willing to step in and conduct negotiations with the Americans. So that's why it's happening.

A: The consul here (referring to the American Consul General in East Jerusalem), Mr. Baker, and the whole media in this area were waiting, phoning me every day, six and seven times in a day, and my answer was "Tunis did not decide yet, we are waiting for a decision from Tunis."

Then I told them, "OK there is a decision. Who will go there? We are waiting for a list to come from Tunis. And no list will be put before Tunis will give the names."

Q: So, from your point-of-view, sooner or later, you're in a position to say to them "Now it's time for you to deal with Mr. Arafat."

A: Yes.

Q: And from their point-of-view...

A: We are ready for this "dialogue." If it is questions and answers, I am ready to give personal answers. But the moment that they will ask for negotiations...

Q: It's not the way it looks if you sit as I do in Washington. If you sit where I sit it looks like Yasir Arafat was tricked in 1988, it looks like the Americans wasted two years of precious time squandering the gains of the intifada while Ambassador Pelletreau sat with Abed-Rabbo in Tunis, it looks like now the Americans have downgraded relations with Palestinian nationalists and are only talking with leaders in the territories because that's what the Israelis want them to do. And it looks like the stage is being set for Camp David II.



Palestinian leader Faisal Hussaini (l) talks at length with columnist Mark Bruzonsky

Q: What if Mr. Baker comes to you sometime in the future - you've met him now many times and have some rapport with him - what if he comes to you and says: "All right. We've arranged a regional conference. Not an international conference; not the old what we were discussing with U.N. resolutions but something new, a regional conference. And you've always told me that the PLO has designated you and the other Palestinians here as representatives and that you take your directions from the PLO. And now we need you to come to this conference. You know the Israelis won't come if official PLO people come. So we need you to come and get this conference started."

It seems to me it would be very difficult for you to say no.

A: What are we going to discuss there?

Q: Each party has its own agenda. The Israelis certainly aren't going to discuss a Palestinian State!

A: This is what we discussed in the first meeting (with Baker). And the answer was, OK, what do you have?

Q: And he doesn't have very much, does he?

A: No, not yet very much. But given time, he is trying to come with...Everytime he is trying to come with something different, with something new, which we are not ready to accept it.

Q: How do you think he has done? He's been very busy. What kind of progress do you think he's made?

A: If in the first meeting the atmosphere was that the Americans are trying to find a way how to get rid of the PLO, but I can say that the other two

Q: In other words these meetings give you credibility as well as him. And its credibility that you can use at an appropriate time.

A: And this "no" of me it will be more strong after the third meeting than after the first or without any meeting.

Q: OK, this is true. But back to the key issue. My impression is that we are only in the opening phases of a very long and tortuous negotiation. There's no settlement likely to come soon. All kinds of things are going to happen. We're nowhere near a real peace conference. But the political, theatrics of all this have to be gone through because of what's happened in the region. Would you agree?

A: I can say like this. Nothing, long or short, can start without us. Nothing, long or short, can end without us.

Q: But if I were the Israelis I would respond by saying to myself that every year we can delay this we put more settlers, we build more roads, we take more lands, we demoralize more Palestinians.

How much time to do you have? You can't have two years "dialogue" in Tunis; now two years dialogue with Faisal Hussein, then the next President will come and have dialogues with someone else...

A: Maybe it will not take such a long time. Maybe we can be able to come to a conclusion, to a result. When this time. Shamir will say "No" maybe Mr. Baker will not say "here is my phone number".

Q: You think a confrontation can be created between the U.S. and Israel?

look at it from our point-of-view that (if we are) coming back to the jungle let us send the players who can play the game of the jungle.

Q: What do you mean by that?

A: He must sit with someone else.

Q: Who? You said earlier that there wasn't anyone else.

A: Someone with a bigger beard.

Q: A bigger beard? Much bigger?

A: Yes, much bigger...Maybe.

Q: Those people don't want to sit with Baker, they don't want to even sit with guys like me!

A: When they will feel their importance, they will meet. No one in this world is not ready to meet with the other side. No one. I can meet with the other side, in one of two cases: when I feel that I am strong enough to talk to him, or when he will force me to come to talk with him when my hands are tied behind my back. And now, we believe that we are strong enough to meet with them, with the Israelis, with Baker, and to talk and to negotiate and to give and to take.

Q: If you are strong enough to meet with Baker why aren't you also strong enough to welcome him to your country when he comes, to hold a meeting, maybe two meetings, and then to say in front of a press conference something like this: "Mr. Baker is engaged in shuttle diplomacy with all the leaders of the region and we've informed him that, as people who live under an occupation, we cannot be the negotiator under such conditions and I gave him the address and phone number of Mr. Arafat in Tunis and encouraged him, on his way back to America, to make a stop to see our leadership." Why didn't you say something like this?

A: It is the decision of Mr. Arafat to take.

Q: Mr. Arafat doesn't want to meet Mr. Baker anymore?

A: No, it is the decision of him when I will say such a sentence.

Q: You're suggesting that Mr. Arafat doesn't want the Secretary to include the PLO in this round of shuttling?

A: You don't understand me well. In the first meeting with Mr. Baker Mr. Arafat was isolated in Tunis. In the second meeting with Mr. Baker a lot of people, media and diplomatic people, they were ready to go and try to find from Mr. Arafat what is the real relationship between what is going on in Jerusalem and what is going on in Tunis. After the third meeting with Mr. Baker France was so anxious to invite Mr. Arafat and to have a meeting in Paris. If the mother of Mr. Baker had not died, then after this fourth meeting you would have seen Mr. Arafat, again, as in the old time, invited by more than one President and State in Europe, the same ones that were mad at him because of his position during the war.

And the Americans will be forced, and the Israelis will be forced...either to come quickly and accept Europe, telling them that you can enter the conference but not through Mr. Arafat who they are trying to isolate. But the price then is to have an