



## Interview

### Waldheim On Palestine

by Mark A. Bruzonsky



The following interview was conducted by Washington correspondent Mark Bruzonsky with Austrian President Kurt Waldheim. The interview with the former secretary-general of the United Nations was conducted in the President's Vienna office earlier this year.

**Q.** *I'd really like to talk very candidly, very openly. The last two years there has been the Palestinian Intifada, the Uprising. Has this changed or affected your views about the Arab-Israeli problem? I mean how has the Intifada impacted on you sitting here as the President of Austria?*

**A.** The Middle East problem is one of the most serious, most urgent, most explosive in world affairs. And it is urgent to resume the negotiating process. I therefore support the suggestions made by different quarters that (it is important) to start a negotiating process again through an international peace conference on the Middle East. I think this is necessary. Negotiations are stuck since quite a time, and I think this is dangerous.

**Q.** *What you've just said, of course, is supported by many countries, but it's the exact opposite of the policies of both the United States and the Israelis who insist that they will not go to an international conference.*

**A.** But that is no reason why I do not support it. I think that there is now, since quite a time already, certain openings in regard to talks with

the Palestinians, and the PLO, as we can see in Tunis when some time ago the Americans began discussing the issues with the Palestinians. So I think there is a certain opening, and I think it should be used for starting the negotiating process.

Such a conference should serve as an umbrella for more detailed and concrete negotiations in regard to the different issues we are facing in the Middle East -- like the question of peace between Syria and Israel; the Golan Heights; and of course the Palestinian issue.

In other words the Middle East question is just not one question but it comprises a number of aspects and they should be dealt with under the umbrella of an international conference.

But the main problem seems to be the composition of the Palestinian delegation, the refusal of the Israelis to negotiate with the Palestinians and things like that ...

**Q.** *Most of the people in the Middle East do think there should be an international conference, that this is what is required. But how do we make that happen when the biggest power, the United States, continues to refuse and continues to veto U.N. resolutions and even keeps the Chairman of the PLO from addressing the U.N. in New York?*

*So what do you Europeans think can be done about a terribly explosive situation that could even result in a major war when the one power in*

*the world that could do something about this continues to act, day in and day out, as if its opinion can defy everybody else's?*

**A.** Well, I have noticed a certain evolution in American attitudes regarding the Middle East problem. The fact alone that they are ready to talk to the Palestinians is in my opinion a step in the right direction. I do regret that nor more has come out of this effort because the talks in Tunis haven't produced ... they are stuck. But we have to continue these efforts. What is the alternative to negotiations? There would be again a military confrontation, and that has to be avoided by all means, that can't solve the problem. Therefore we have to continue the efforts in the direction of negotiations.

**Q.** *But you Europeans could do more. You could not only speak up more diplomatically, you could take certain economic steps to put more pressure on to make real negotiations likely.*

**A.** Look, in my opinion, the Europeans are doing nothing ... The whole matter is left, more or less, to the Americans. And they of course handle everything in close contact with the Israelis. So here I hold for the Europeans, they could and should do more in this regard. They are historically in a good position to do that. I therefore feel that a more intense role by the Europeans should be kept in mind. They can and should play a greater role.

**Q.** *Last year, Arafat was in Geneva and made the final statements which the Americans then said that finally he has recognized Israel. You've received Arafat since then, I believe, here in Austria...*

**A.** Oh, yes.

**Q.** *And has your government recognized their declaration of Statehood?*

**A.** We have recognized the declaration, but not the State because the State doesn't exist ... yet. Therefore, we did recognize, like a number of other Western countries, the declaration and of course we are in contact with the PLO for many years now like when I was in the United Nations. I have received Arafat here, so did our Chancellor, when he came for a visit last year in Vienna. Of course I had met him before at the United Nations and also on a number of occasions in the Middle East.

**Q.** *What are your impressions of him as the leader of the Palestinians, as a diplomat?*

**A.** I think he really wants a negotiated settlement. Therefore his declaration concerning Resolution 242 and his clarification about the existence of the State of Israel. I think there really is now a new basis -- and one should not neglect really neglect this new basis, one should do something with it. To go on with the same old policy of ignoring the Palestinians and ignoring the PLO doesn't really solve the problem and doesn't make sense. For the PLO has been declared as the sole representative of the Palestinian people by the Rabat declaration many years ago, and it hasn't been changed. Therefore, if we want to make progress, one has to negotiate with the Palestinians represented by the PLO as the Rabat decision decided.

**Q.** *You remember Rabat, and I remember Rabat*



because I've read about it. And we're really talking about the Egyptians and Ismail Fahmy who promoted that declaration. But I really wanted to get some sense of Yasser Arafat the person as you are one of the few people in the West who has known him over a long period of time and so you've seen his evolution, you've met with him quite a few times, you've traveled to the region, and God knows you were involved at the U.N. in trying to solve this problem. Can't you just give me some insights how you see him?

A. I think Arafat recognized the fact that the problem cannot be resolved militarily, and of course that terrorism can't resolve the problem as it creates ... how should I say ... very often tragic situations with mostly innocent people suffering from terrorist acts. So the parties concerned, not only Arafat, more and more realize that a negotiated settlement is necessary. And I think Arafat is decided to follow that course with his repeated efforts to begin negotiations. Of course here the help of not only the Big Powers but other forces are necessary. If parties try to settle problems very often they cannot do it alone. They need other parties to help them. I don't think that Big Powers alone can do it. I don't think that the Americans alone can do it. It needs a joint effort, not only by the parties directly concerned, but by other governments including the Europeans. And now with these new developments in Moscow and in Eastern Europe I could well imagine that there is now a better chance to involve the other Super Power in these efforts as I have the feeling that they too want a peaceful settlement of this question. So why not try again?

Q. Before talking more about trying again let me go back to Arafat. Was there ever a time that you considered him a terrorist?

A. When I started to know him -- I had my first meeting soon after I had taken over as Secretary-General, I think it was 1972 -- he reassured me repeatedly that he wants a peaceful settlement. I also indicated to him that it would be important to recognize, or to accept, the existence of the State of Israel, to accept Resolution 242 which in my opinion is still a good basis for a settlement. And he told me that he would be ready to do so, but that he needs also an assurance from the other side. He explained that it couldn't be a one-sided decision by the Palestinians, he said that this is the only card that I have ...

Q. You are saying that he was ready for mutual recognition back in 1972?

A. Well, we discussed it and that is my recollection that he mentioned that of course I do understand the necessity of such a move but why should it be done unilaterally without knowing what the other side will do, why should I play the only card I have now -- that's how he expressed himself -- without knowing that this will lead to a solution.

I explained to him that it is very important to make clear that the relevant statements which were made by some Palestinian leaders that he does not share these remarks -- for instance that they would push the Israelis into the sea. And he said that the resolutions of the PLO do not ask for the destruction of Israel ...

Q. But what he did do, of course, and you were Secretary-General, was not move in the direction of mutual recognition but rather created this tension -- which we are still dealing with -- by passing the Zionism is racism resolution which was a Palestinian initiative. And I gather at the time you felt this was not very helpful ...

A. No, I stated at the time in an article in FOREIGN AFFAIRS that I did not agree with this ...

Q. Did you have discussions at the time with the Palestinians, with the Arabs?

A. They did not consult with me. But when it was adopted I did speak out about it saying that it is unfortunate because it has influenced negatively the image of the United Nations in the international community, there was an uneasiness among the membership.

I was even criticized at the time that I did not do enough to avoid such a resolution. Now I answered that I didn't like the resolution, that it wasn't justified, that it did harm to the image of the United Nations -- I made this statement -- but that I could not, that I did not have the power, to avoid it because this was an autonomous decision of a majority, of a considerable majority, of the United Nations members.

Q. But I think what happened last year did at least as much harm to the image of the United Nations. The image of the host country telling the entire world that the General Assembly could not listen to the leader of the Palestinians. What would you have done? Would you have done something different if you were still Secretary-General? How can the U.N. accept such treatment from the host country?

A. It was in my opinion a mistake, because under the headquarters agreement everybody has the right to come to the United Nations and since the PLO was recognized and is recognized by the United Nations it would only have been logical to permit Arafat to come. He was there before ...

Q. Yes, I remember when he came because I was stopped on the highway as they falsely sent a caravan of cars from the airport making people think Arafat was coming by car ...

A. I remember I got a telephone call from the American Mission in the middle of the night to get permission for the helicopter to land in the part, in the garden, and the question was raised whether there was a possibility to put him up in the U.N. in order to avoid the following morning the crossing of Manhattan to the U.N. Building ...

Q. What did you do, did he stay in the building?

A. Yes, he did. But I said we only have the hospital, the clinic. There was a small clinic on the fourth floor of the United Nations building and Arafat accepted to be put up there. That was all handled through the American mission to the United Nations. They contacted me informing me of this problem and whether I would agree that the helicopter land on United Nations grounds ...

Q. Was that the first time?

A. Yes, it was the first time, yes. Again, he was

invited by the General Assembly, by the President of the General Assembly. I say this because it is said he was invited by the Secretary-General. Well this is a matter for the General Assembly. Who is invited to come to the General Assembly is a matter for the General Assembly.

Q. But let me ask you very bluntly, you're one of the senior Statesmen in the world, very few people have your experience, especially on U.N. matters. When the host country continues to act as it does, threatening to withdraw its financial contributions, threatening private agencies, threatening the General Assembly, refusing visas ... I mean haven't we reached a time in history when maybe we should honestly start discussing that maybe New York is not the place for the United Nations?

A. Well, of course I regret any decision which hampers the normal functioning of the United Nations, but I do feel that New York is an important place for the United Nations. It is an international center, the U.N. gets more attention through the fact that it is headquartered in New York. So, despite those inconveniences which I deeply regret I still feel that it would have been only logical, and in line with the Headquarters Agreement, to permit Arafat to come.

What differences does it make if he speaks in New York or Geneva? He got much more attention through that incident. First the long discussion in the media whether he should come or should not come, etc. Then the decision by the United States government not to permit him to come to New York so there was a decision by the General Assembly to switch that session to Geneva ...

Q. But there is a difference. The difference is that it looks as if the United States is demeaning the United Nations, the whole authority of the United Nations ...

A. Let's be frank, it's all connected between the special relationship between the United States and Israel. We have to see the facts! There is this special relationship ...

I regret the fact that in this case the Headquarters Agreement was not implemented and that therefore the Assembly had to make the decision to hold that special session in Geneva. I don't understand the reason, because it was more expensive to transfer everything in Geneva and Arafat could speak before the same Assembly in Geneva as well as in New York. I really didn't understand the whole thing. Perhaps only for psychological reasons ...

Q. Perhaps the Americans continue to think that only their vote alone is the most crucial vote on certain issues. And that's a very dangerous position for all of us to be in.

A. Well, it is a big power, it is the host country of the United Nations, and therefore it is regretted that this decision was made, but I think the General Assembly ...

Q. What if they do it again?

A. Well, I can't speak for the government of the United States. It's a hypothetical question and it will be up to the General Assembly.

A. Let's go back and talk about the proposed international conference. Are you assuming that when such a conference meets that what it will meet to discuss is mutual recognition, a Palestinian State next to the Israeli State, security arrangements, international guarantees. Is that the general framework within which you continue to think about these issues?

A. In my opinion it should in the first place deal with the implementation of Resolution 242. It contains all the necessary elements. Most of all it recognizes the existence of the State of Israel in secure and recognized boundaries on the one hand, also the need to respect the right of self-determination for the Palestinians, although it is true it isn't worded in such a clear way.

You'll remember that there was also a long debate before 242 was accepted by the Arab countries because of the wording of the Resolution that the Palestinians were dealt with as refugees. And Palestinians supported by the Arabs opposed this wording and said that it's a highly political question.

And I also remember when I had to deal with some of the Arab countries, Syria for instance, they told me when we had to deal with the mandate for the U.N. forces on the Golan Heights how can we continue to accept the U.N. forces on our territory, Syrian occupied territory, if the international community, especially the United Nations, is not ready to negotiate a political settlement.

Q. But do you see any political solution without a Palestinian State? Is it realistic to be talking about any kind of solution without a Palestinian State?

A. No, this is certainly the key question, the main issue ...

Q. You've already recognized the Palestinian declaration of Statehood. I meant to ask you, did you treat Arafat as a Head of State when he came here?

A. Well, I told you that the Austrian Government recognized the declaration but not the State as such, because the State doesn't exist yet ...

Q. Well, how did you treat him?

A. Well ... we found the right approach ... He was received with dignity and with respect ... But ... I think it was a sort of middle way that we adopted.

Q. It is ironic that when you had a Jewish Chancellor your country was much more involved in criticizing the Israelis and much more involved in trying to bring the two sides together ...

A. Maybe he was in a better position. You've just mentioned that there's more opposition by the Jews against those methods applied by the Israeli Government than from European leaders. Well I tried to explain to you the psychological reasons for that. And Kreisky was in a better position to react in the way he did.

Thank you very, very, much. I appreciate your talking about these questions. I appreciate the chance to be here with you.