

Message Text

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ACTION H-03

INFO OCT-01 NEA-07 ISO-00 SS-07 NSC-06 AID-01 /025 W

----- 062283

R 251222Z MAY 75

FM AMEMBASSY JIDDA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1339

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

AMCONSUL DHAHRAN

AMEMBASSY ROME

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BEIRUT PASS BAGHDAD

E.O.: 11652: N/A

TAGS: OREP (BAKER, HOWARD)

SUBJ: SENATOR BAKER'S MEETING WITH YASSER ARAFAT IN BEIRUT

1. SENATOR HOWARD BAKER CURRENTLY VISITING SAUDI ARABIA, REQUESTS THAT THE ACCOUNT WHICH FOLLOWS OF HIS MAY 22 CONVERSATION WITH YASSER ARAFAT IN BEIRUT BE BROUGHT TO THE ATTENTION OF SECRETARY KISSINGER. HE ALSO REQUESTS THAT A COPY BE MADE AVAILABLE TO PAT M. HOLT, CHIEF OF STAFF OF THE SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE, FOR SUCH DISTRIBUTION AS HE BELIEVES APPROPRIATE. EMBASSY ROME PLEASE PASS A COPY OF THIS MESSAGE TO THE SENATOR.

2. AN INTERVIEW WITH YASSER ARAFAT BY SENATOR HOWARD BAKER.

BEIRUT, MAY 22, 1975.

WHAT FOLLOWS IS A FIRST IMPRESSION SUMMARY OF MY VISIT WITH YASSER ARAFAT IN BEIRUT. MANY OF THE OBSERVATIONS ARE NECESSARILY INCOMPLETE, AND THE CONCLUSIONS ARE TENTATIVE.

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I BEGAN BY EMPHASIZING TO MR. ARAFAT THAT I HAD COME TO

LEARN AND UNDERSTAND, THAT I DID NOT REPRESENT THE US GOVERNMENT IN AN OFFICIAL WAY, AND THAT IT WAS NOT MY PURPOSE TO GIVE ADVICE OR LAY DOWN SPECIFIC PROPOSALS. I THEN ASKED MR. ARAFAT HOW HE EXPECTED THE SITUATION TO DEVELOP OVER THE NEXT YEAR.

3. MR. ARAFAT REPLIED THAT THE SITUATION IS "UNSTABLE" AND "FLUID". HE RECALLED THAT AFTER THE WAR OF OCTOBER 1973 A NUMBER OF MISSIONS HAD TAKEN PLACE--VISITS TO ARAB COUNTRIES AND TO ISRAEL. A YEAR AND A HALF OF MANEUVERING FOLLOWED THE OCTOBER WAR, BUT "NOTHING SUBSTANTIAL HAS BEEN ACHIEVED."

THE US, ARAFAT CONTINUED, HAS PROCEEDED ON THE PREMISE THAT A GENEROUS ARMS SUPPLY WOULD INDUCE ISRAEL'S FLEXIBILITY. IN FACT, HE SAID, IT HAD PRODUCED THE OPPOSITE RESULT. ARMS HAVE BEEN POURED INTO THE REGION ON BOTH SIDES, HE NOTED, SO THAT THE SITUATION TODAY IS "EXPLOSIVE."

HE DID NOT KNOW WHETHER THE SITUATION WOULD SOON EXPLODE INTO WAR, BUT HE FELT SURE THAT THE PALESTINIANS WOULD GAIN FROM A WAR EVEN IF THE ARABS DID NOT WIN. AN ARAB DEFEAT WOULD ONLY BRING MORE CRISIS TO THE AREA. "WE HAVE AS PALESTINIANS NOTHING TO LOSE."

THE US, HE WENT ON, PERSISTS IN THE ATTITUDE THAT "THERE ARE NO PALESTINIANS." IN THE AMERICAN VIEW THE PALESTINIAN "INTERESTS" WERE IN THE HANDS OF JORDAN, OR JORDAN AND ISRAEL JOINTLY.

4. MR. ARAFAT THEN SPOKE OF HIS SPEECH AT THE UN IN NOVEMBER 1974. THAT SPEECH, HE STRESSED, HAD BEEN GREATLY DISTORTED BY THE PRESS AND BY OTHERS. THE AMERICAN PRESS SAW IN IT ONLY THE INTENT TO DESTROY ISRAEL, NOT THE "POSITIVE STEPS WE HAVE TAKEN." AND WE, HE ADDED, ARE "THE FIRST LEADERSHIP" TO HAVE TAKEN SUCH POSITIVE STEPS. MR. ARAFAT RECALLED THAT ISRAEL PRIME MINISTER RABIN HAD RESPONDED TO THE UN SPEECH BY SAYING THAT ISRAEL WOULD MEET THE PLO "ONLY ON THE BATTLEFIELD."

5. I ASKED MR. ARAFAT WHAT HE THOUGHT OF AS THE BASIC REQUIRE-

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MENT TO FULFILL PALESTINIAN ASPIRATIONS.

"IT IS OUR RIGHT AS PALESTINIANS," HE REPLIED, "TO ESTABLISH PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY ON ANY TERRITORY THAT CAN BE LIBERATED." THAT POLICY, HE RECALLED, HAD BEEN DETERMINED BY THE TWELFTH NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE PLO IN JUNE 1974.

I PRESSED MR. ARAFAT FARTHER. WHAT WILL YOU SETTLE FOR?

I ASKED.

WHATEVER ISRAEL CAN BE GOTTEN TO GIVE UP, HE REPLIED, EVEN GAZA.

WHAT WOULD BRING PEACE? I THEN ASKED.

HIS GOAL, MR. ARAFAT REPLIED, IS TO ESTABLISH A DEMOCRATIC STATE "FOR MY PEOPLE AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE." BUT, HE ADDED, "THIS IS NOT THE DREAM FOR NEXT YEAR." ISRAEL NONETHLESS, HE WENT ON, HAS "NO HOPE FOR A DECENT LIFE EXCEPT IN THIS ENVIRONMENT." "WE KNOW," HE ADDED, "THIS MEANS LONG STRUGGLE AND A PROFOUND CHANGE OF MIND" ON THE PART OF THE ISRAELIS. IN THE MEANTIME, SAID ARAFAT, IF THE ISRAELIS WITHDRAW FROM ALL THE TERRITORIES OCCUPIED IN 1967, OR LESS THAN THAT, THE PALESTINIANS WOULD BE PREPARED TO ESTABLISH THEIR AUTHORITY ON THE LIBERATED LAND.

6. I ASKED MR. ARAFAT IF VIOLENCE WOULD CONTINUE TO PLAY A PART IN THE PALESTINIAN MOVEMENT.

HE HAS SPOKEN OF THIS AT THE UN, MR. ARAFAT RECALLED. "GEORGE WASHINGTON HIMSELF WAS A TERRORIST IN THE VIEW OF THE BRITISH." "SO TO WAS DE GAULLE TO THE GERMANS," HE ADDED. SO INDEED WERE THE ISRAELIS; HALF OF THOSE WHO ARE THE PRESENT LEADERS WERE AT ONE TIME UNDER SENTENCE FROM THE BRITISH IMPERIAL GOVERNMENT FOR TERRORIST ACTIVITIES. "TERRORIST," HE SAID, IS A TITLE GIVEN TO "PEOPLE ENGAGED IN THIS KIND OF STRUGGLE." HE ADDED AT THIS POINT--AS IF TO ILLUSTRATE THE REWARDS OF HIS STRUGGLE--THAT AS CHAIRMAN OF THE PLO HE WAS RECOGNIZED BY MORE GOVERNMENTS THAN IS THE STATE OF ISRAEL.

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ACTION H-03

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R 251222Z MAY 75

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INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
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AMEMBASSY ROME

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BEIRUT PASS BAGHDAD

7. I STRESSED MY BELIEF THAT VIOLENCE WAS WORKING AGAINST
PALESTINIAN INTERESTS.

"FOR 17 YEARS," HE REPLIED, "WE SAT IN OUR CAMPS AND DID
NOT SHOOT ONE BULLET AGAINST ANYONE...WE GAINED MORE MISERY
AND REMAINED IN OUR CAMPS." DURING THIS PERIOD, HE NOTED, THE
PALESTINIAN ISSUE AS SUCH WAS EVEN REMOVED FROM THE UN AGENDA.

THE PLO HAS MADE A GREAT DEAL OF PROGRESS, I REITERATED,
AND VIOLENCE NO LONGER SERVES A USEFUL PURPOSE, IF EVER INDEED
IT DID.

"I AM AGAINST VIOLENCE," MR. ARAFAT REPLIED, "BUT I HAVE
THE RIGHT TO STRUGGLE WITHIN MY HOMELAND IN ORDER TO LIBERATE
IT." "IT IS STANGE," HE ADDED, "THAT OUR STRUGGLE IS CON-
CEIVED AS TERROR," BY CONTRAST WITH THE "TERROR" USGED AGAINST
THE PALESTINIANS.

I STRESSED STILL AGAIN MY BELIEF THAT PALESTINAIN ASPIRA-
TIONS WOULD BE ADVANCED BY THE RENUNCIATION OF TERROR. MR.
ARAFAT CONCEDED THAT HE AND THE PLO WERE OPPOSED TO THE HIGH-
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JACKING OF AIRPLANES.

8. I THEN ASKED FOR HIS ASSESSMENT OF THE PROSPECTS OF
SOVIET-AMERICAN COOPERATION FOR A SETTLEMENT IN THE MIDDLE
EAST.

MR. ARAFAT NOTED THAT SECRETARY KISSINGER AND FOREIGN
MINISTER GROMYKO HAD RECENTLY DISCUSSED THE PALESTINIAN SIT-
UATION, BUT THAT THE RESULT HAD NOT BEEN FAVORABLE. THE US,

HE ADDED, STILL REFUSES TO RECOGNIZE THE PALESTINIANS, SPEAKING ONLY OF PALESTINIAN "INTERESTS" AND NEVER OF PALESTINIAN "RIGHT."

HOW DO YOU VIEW THE PROSPECTIVE GENEVA CONFERENCE? I ASKED. DO YOU PLAN TO ATTEND?

AT THIS POINT THE HEAD OF PLO FOR LEBANON, SHAIK AL-HAOUT, INTERJECTED, "DO YOU HAVE AN INVITATION FOR MR. ARAFAT?" ARAFAT HIMSELF WENT ON TO SAY THAT THE PLO WANTED AN INVITATION TO GENEVA, BUT ON EQUAL TERMS WITH ALL OTHERS. HE CITED UN RES. 3236 OF NOVEMBER 19, 1974, WITH ITS ASSERTION OF THE RIGHTS OF THE PALESTINIANS TO RETURN TO THEIR HOMELAND--A RESOLUTION, HE NOTED, WHICH IS NOT ACCEPTED BY THE US.

9. WE THEN EXCHANGED A FEW PERSONAL WORDS. I ASKED MR. ARAFAT WHERE HE IS FROM.

HE REPLIED, IN ENGLISH, THAT HE WAS FROM JERUSALEM, AND THAT THE ISRAELIS HAD BLOWN UP HIS HOUSE--"BECAUSE IT IS MY HOUSE." OUR PALESTINIAN INTERPRETER COMMENTED LATER THAT THIS WAS ONE OF THE FEW TIMES HE HAD HEARD ARAFAT SPEAK OF HIMSELF.

10. TILLMAN THEN ASKED MR. ARAFAT TO REVIEW CERTAIN POINTS HE HAD MADE TO SENATOR MCGOVERN, NOTABLY THE DISTINCTION HE HAD DRAWN BETWEEN THE "VISION" OF THE "DEMOCRATIC, SECULAR" STATE AND THE PRACTICAL POSSIBILITIES.

MR. ARAFAT REITERATED THE GENERAL POINTS HE HAD MADE EARLIER, THAT THE PALESTINIANS WOULD ACCEPT ANY TERRITORY THAT COULD BE LIBERATED. "WE HAVE TO STRUGGLE," HE ADDED, "WE HAVE NO CHOICE." HE NOTED WITH VISIBLE PRIDE THAT "WE HAVE CHANGED LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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OUR PEOPLE FROM REFUGEES TO FREEDOM FIGHTERS."

11. MR. ARAFAT CONCLUDED WITH AN APPEAL FOR AMERICAN UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT HE DESCRIBED AS "OUR TRAGEDY." DO YOU NOT BELIEVE, HE ASKED RHETORICALLY, THAT THESE THREE AND A HALF MILLION PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN IN EXILE FOR 27 YEARS HAVE A RIGHT TO A FLAG AND TERRITORY OF THEIR OWN? THE FOUR PALESTINIANS SITTING IN THAT ROOM, HE SAID ALL CARRY DIFFERENT NATIONALITIES. FOR 17 YEARS BEFORE BECOMING CHAIRMAN OF THE PLO HE HIMSELF HAD BEEN "STATELESS" AND "HOMELESS." "IT IS A DISASTER," HE SAID.

12. A WORD MAY BE IN ORDER ON MR. ARAFAT'S STYLE AND THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE DISCUSSION. CONTRARY TO THE PUBLIC IMAGE, MR. ARAFAT WAS ANYTHING BUT STRIDENT IN TONE OR BELLIGERENT IN MANNER. HIS STYLE IS MILD AND GENIAL, BUT IT IS THE MILD-

NESS AND GENIALITY, I WOULD JUDGE, OF A SKILLFUL POLITICAN.

PRIOR TO THE MEETING WITH MR. ARAFAT I HAD MET WITH A NUMBER OF PALESTINIAN INTELLECTUALS, AND THE DIFFERENCE IN BOTH STYLE AND CONTENT WAS NOTEWORTHY. THE INTELLECTUALS SPOKE WITH UNCOMPROMISING STRIDENCY. MR. ARAFAT ENUNCIATED THE SAME OBJECTIVE--"THE DEMOCRATIC, SECULAR STATE"--BUT HE ADDED THE PRACTICAL QUALIFICATION THAT "THIS IS NOT THE DREAM FOR NEXT YEAR." BUT MORE EVEN THAN HIS WORDS, HIS TONE AND PERSONALITY SUGGESTED AN AWARENESS OF THE LIMITS OF PRACTICAL POSSIBILITY. I HAD THE FEELING HE WOULD HAVE CONCEDED MORE IF THE "REJECTIONISTS" WERE NOT LOOKING OVER HIS SHOULDER, OR IF HE HAD MORE TO SHOW FOR HIS COMPARATIVE MODERATION.

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