

VICTOR ATIYEH
June 30, 1993
Tape 42, Side 1

C.H.: This is an interview with Governor Victor Atiyeh at his office in downtown Portland, Oregon. The interviewer for the Oregon Historical Society is Clark Hansen. The date is June 30, 1993, and this is Tape 42, Side 1.

We stopped with your visit to ...

V.A.: Qunaytirah.

C.H.: Qunaytirah. Okay. And you were going to explain a little bit about that. Was that a place that you wanted to go to, or was that a place that they wanted to take you to?

V.A.: No, they take you to that. And it's part of their - oh, we'll say propaganda, because I'm going to get into propaganda when I get to Israel. They take you to this "martyred village," and that's what it's called. As I explained, it definitely was a destroyed village. I can recall photographs of the buildings that were - this would be like homes - collapsed.

Incidentally, they do a lot of construction, a lot of construction, in that whole part of the world, meaning the Middle East, with cement. Cement, cement blocks, you know, like we have here wood, a lot of that's cement. So it's destroyed. The church was empty. As a matter of fact, I have a photograph of sandbags up in the - oh, it's the front of the church leading up to the tower. I say tower; this is not a tall church, a circle there, which was I guess maybe a stained glass or something at one time, and here are sandbags up there, I guess to - for weapons to shoot from.

The hospital was totally destroyed, bullet holes pock-marking the entire building. The cemetery, stones down, bullet holes in

stones. Obviously there's nobody there, there's no - no one's living there, it's a totally deserted, destroyed village.

C.H.: This is near the Golan Heights?

V.A.: This is right at the - near the base of the high point of the Golan Heights. And I described to you earlier about all this electronic equipment which was in the occupied Israeli side.

C.H.: And there was a U.N. outpost in between.

V.A.: And the U.N. is in between on the flat. And the story was that Israel destroyed this village. There had been fighting there, but that they had moved in and they had destroyed the village.

We had some of our trade delegation who were engineers, including ^{NOFAL KARNOI} [indiscernible] with ^{CHARMILL} C.H. [indiscernible] mill, and when they looked at it they could tell, you know, yeah, it had been destroyed. I mean, deliberately destroyed, not as part of - during the fighting, and they were destroyed after the fighting when Israel occupied the town of Qunaytirah. So it wasn't something that happened during the fighting. The cemetery and the hospital and the church, that was all during the fighting. So we had those two elements there.

C.H.: It was destroyed by the Israelis while they occupied it?

V.A.: That's what they had said. Now, the reason I put it that way because I'm going to tell you the Israeli version, and then after I tell you that I'll tell you what my discussion with Kissinger.

So it was interesting to see that vividly a great deal of fighting going on in that village of Qunaytirah. Right up to the high point of the Golan Heights.

Now I'm going to stay in Syria for a moment, then we'll get over into ...

C.H.: Do you want to skip the rest of it until we go to Syria, or would you like to discuss - I mean to Israel - or would you like to talk about the Israeli side of that now?

V.A.: Well, I guess maybe in context it would work right here, because we'll get back to Israel.

I listened to their story, meaning the Syrian. I said okay, and I plugged that in my head. And then it wasn't much more than a week later, I had finished my trip to Syria, I'd gone to Israel, and I can't recall the number of days involved, but maybe a week, maybe less than ten days, I guess.

I am now on the road that I could see from Qunaytirah, now in the occupied Israel side. So I'm - you know, the electronic equipment is right in back of me now, as I look up the hill. And now I'm looking toward Qunaytirah. I'm seeing it down there.

The Israeli version was that the Syrians destroyed the village, and what they were going to do was to, let's say, tear down and rebuild the city. That was the Israeli version. So I plugged that in my head.

Incidentally, it was strange, you know, to be there on the ground in Qunaytirah in Syria, and then a very short time later I'm now on Israel occupied territory looking toward the town of Qunaytirah. And incidentally, I'll pause for a moment. If you will think of it, whenever they refer to Golan Heights and Gaza and even the Palestinian area ...

C.H.: The West Bank?

V.A.: The West Bank, the media - or anyone - they always refer to occupied territory. They don't speak about it being part of Israel, it's always spoken of as the occupied territory. That's important to remember, because I think even Israel speaks of it as the occupied territory rather than Israel.

C.H.: Really?

V.A.: Yes. Then later, remember we talked about Bohemia Grove? And I told you that Jerry Ford and Kissinger were there. I talked to Kissinger about this visit, and talked about Qunaytirah, and gave him both versions. And his was a rather abrupt response. He said, "Oh," he says, "Israel destroyed that village," and he said it was a stupid thing to do. So that was Kissinger's comment. Well, I had no doubt that Israel did destroy it, but now we've got another party, a knowledgeable party, confirming that. That's Qunaytirah. I've got photographs of it.

C.H.: What was your conclusion? Who do you think was telling the truth?

V.A.: I thought the Syrians were, but I was willing to listen to the Israeli side, and test it against Kissinger. What?

C.H.: And Kissinger sort of confirmed that.

V.A.: He confirmed that.

C.H.: Which is ironic, isn't it, in that you would think that he would have been supportive of Israel.

V.A.: Well, he's pretty practical, in the sense that on that particular question there was no doubt in his mind about what happened. And he said it was a stupid thing to do, and it was, in terms of what's happened is it's now a martyred village. The Syrians use it in that fashion to show the destructiveness of the Israelis. So, you know, it didn't help their cause, the presence of Qunaytirah. And Qunaytirah is the same, I'm sure, today as it was the day I was there, and before that. So anyway, it was a stupid thing to do.

C.H.: Right.

V.A.: We really thoroughly enjoyed our visit to Syria. I met then with President Assad. In preparing for that visit, and they were aware that I was intending to visit with Assad - "they"

meaning the State Department and the Security Council - before I left. And "Any messages? Anything you want me to talk about?"

"No," they said. The only thing they would like me to convey is that they would like to open up communications with Syria. So that's the only message that I would have in any official way.

So when I went, I went with the then charge d'affaires; the ambassador was not in Syria. Incidentally, the American embassy is a really tiny thing on a side road, and the Americans own - we own some land that we want to build another one, a better one and bigger one, but the Syrians don't want us to because they think we're going to put a lot of fancy electronic equipment in this thing. They know what's in this one, and we now -.

But anyway, I went to visit President Assad. And I began my conversation like I said earlier: "I want you to understand that I'm a devout American." Assad's reply was even more enthusiastic than even Mubarak, although Mubarak was very positive. "Good, that's really all we expect, that's wonderful, that's the way it ought to be," understanding that we wanted someone who's interest was the best interest of America. Not of the Arab world, not of Israel, but for America.

Then I delivered the message in regard to we'd like to open up lines of communication. And Assad's reply was very perceptive, or descriptive, I should say, of the problem that's posed in the U.S. trying to deal with peace in the Middle East. He said, "That's fine." He said, "But if we sit down with the U.S.," he said, "we sit at the table and the U.S. and Israel is on one side and we're on the other side." His urging would be that the U.S. would at least sit at the end of the table rather than on the same side with Israel.

So it was very hard to communicate with the U.S. understanding that they were effectively talking with Israel. Same thing. And

I think that's one of the problems, the hangup, the real problem with the U.S. being an important element in peace in the Middle East: that we are perceived, and I think with a very good reason, to be favorable to Israel. So you cannot be objective, you cannot, you know, whatever you say, it's got to be something that's going to benefit Israel, you know, it's one of those kinds of situations.

And then I brought up, on my own, now I'm on my own - I'm delivering my message - about the hostages and I remembered that you always are supposed to reinforce good. And Syria had been involved in at least the release of one of the prisoners, and I thanked him for that and would encourage him - Syria - to do what they could in terms of the other hostages. And that went along quite well.

And then I brought up the matter of terrorism. And that was kind of interesting because I got probably more reaction at the outset from Assad on that. So we persisted; we continued to talk about it.

C.H.: What aspects of terrorism were you talking about?

V.A.: You know, the kind of bombing and that kind of terrorism, airplanes, hijacking ...

C.H.: Just in general, rather than specific incidents.

V.A.: In general, terrorism in that sense.

And it's important that - I'm glad you asked the question because we finally got around to defining terms in our discussion. And so he was thinking that my use of the word terrorism related to what we would call guerrilla warfare. Like our Americans, you know, during the Revolutionary War would hit and run from behind fences and things like that. We understand that. And when we got down to the bare really description of terrorism during this course of discussion, President Assad said he agreed that terrorism itself was bad.

C.H.: What was his definition of terrorism beyond ...

V.A.: When we got down to what I thought of terrorism and he thought of terrorism, outside of guerrilla warfare, he thought - he was defending it.

C.H.: What was your definition? What is terrorism for you, and what did you agree on?

V.A.: It would be the same thing. This indiscriminate hijacking, bombing, assassination, that kind of thing.

C.H.: In your definition of terrorism, do you look at it being directly towards civilians rather than other military personnel?

V.A.: No. Obviously I would consider a part of terrorism the bombing of the Marine base in Beirut. But generally, it's indiscriminate killing, bombing, you know, that sort of thing. That's generally what it is. And he agreed.

Now, I would tell you in perfect honesty that as I would listen, there had been some acts of terrorism, and usually they would throw in Libya, Iran and Syria, but they would always say alleged or suspected or that sort of thing. No one has ever clearly defined that Syria was promoting terrorism. They've always speculated. I read it in the newspapers even before I got there and obviously since I've returned.

I came away, though, with the notion that Assad himself did not actively promote terrorism. But I still have that little bit of a doubt that he probably was aware it was going on and sort of looked the other way. That probably may be fair or unfair to the president, I'm not sure. But anyway, I wasn't completely relieved of my own particularly views on that subject that he was not directly, or the government, directly involved in promoting terrorism.

It came up once during my media availability. You recall when we pinpointed Libya directly for terrorism, and we went out there with our American planes and bombed them.

C.H.: And you were supportive of that?

V.A.: I was very supportive of that. And so the media said, "What do you think?"

And I said, "I'm perfectly supporting of that."

Then they went on to say, "Well, how about Syria?"

And my answer was, "If you can definitively prove that Syria was involved, then I would applaud that as well."

That comes back to being an American. I mean, I'm not trying to fool anybody, I am a devout American. That's why I got involved in elective politics. I believe in this country. I mean, my whole history proves all of that.

Anyway, it was a very good discussion. I met with him then for about an hour and a half. I went back in 1985, by his invitation. He had a conference of what they call parliamentarians, we call elected officials, from South America, the United States and Canada. I was invited. I went and I met with President Assad then for about an hour and a half.

Then after I left office, I met with him once more, and that time for about, well, better than two and a half hours. So each time I've been to Syria I've met with the president.

C.H.: Who was at the meeting when you were there, and what was it like? What was the room like, who was in the room?

V.A.: You've seen it. When you've seen pictures of President Assad meeting with whomever, you've seen exactly where I've been.

C.H.: You see the chair and another chair here, and there's a little table in between or something?

V.A.: Yes. Yes. That's exactly right. And when you're looking at the picture, Assad would be on your left, which is

exactly where he was, and I or anyone else is on the right of the screen.

The room is - I'm going to say narrow. It's not narrow. It's narrow in the sense it's a long room and not proportionately wide for the length. But it's a long room. See, all you ever see on television is that end of the room. There had been some speculation, concern, and I think probably the president did have some health problems, heart or something, as to his health. So as he came in, I was just sort of sizing it up. But he was perfectly healthy, as I saw him. Strong, you know, not weak at all, and voice was not weak.

I believe my cousin Sammy Kahl was there with me. He had an interpreter and his secretary. Whether on that first visit that's all or - it was not a crowd. It was a one-on-one conversation, and there was not a lot of people. There was President Assad and myself. And that was generally the case. By that I mean that it was just - it was more or less a closed meeting and a personal meeting with President Assad and myself. He always had his secretary, interpreter. I think he understands English, but I can understand, you know, they're more comfortable dealing in their own language than having to interpret.

So that's the way it pretty well went. I might as well cover the visits because it's important for me to talk about the last visit.

C.H.: Okay. Would you like to discuss the one in 1985 first, or would you like to just go to the last one?

V.A.: Go to the last one. I don't recall a great deal about my conversation on the second visit. It was kind of a continuing thing.

The only thing I would say in my memory was that my first visit, I got the sense that President Assad had this dream of a

United Arab World. And I'm saying to myself, "I don't understand how he has this dream - because I know, having been around these people, that we argue with each other. So how in the world are you going to get -?" That's the typical Arab, you know. We argue with each other, within our families, they argue within Syria, they argue within Saudi, they argue with wherever ...

C.H.: Hadn't they already tried that, though, with the United Arab Republic?

V.A.: Well, they got the closest they got was with Egypt, and then the break came when Egypt made the unilateral agreement with Israel, and then that's when this broke up.

C.H.: But he was still fostering this idea?

V.A.: Fostering - I could tell in the discussion that this was the dream that he had of a United Arab World. And I'm saying to myself, "How can he believe this? He knows his people better than I do, and they argue among themselves, let alone with other countries. How could this - this could never happen."

Then, my second visit, I got the sense that that was no longer a vision of his. He became, at least portrayed to me at that point in time, being a little more pragmatic in that this was no longer one of the dreams that he had.

Now to the last visit. Well, let me think about this a second. I think it was 1987. It was before Reagan left office. And I kept saying to myself, "Here I am, the first governor of Arabic background ever elected in the United States," which carried a great deal of currency in the Arab world, obviously more so in Syria than anywhere else, but in the Arab world.

And I am fully familiar with when you have the State Department, through our embassies or whatever, whenever they talk they have to be very careful of how they talk. There's a form, you

know, they're always restricted - on both sides. Let's say Syria and the United States. They're now talking formally.

And I thought to myself, "If they could somehow use me as an informal conduit. I have no intent of being a loose cannon, I have no intent at all, just be the conduit so that without the formality of state departments in both countries, that there could be some discussions. And they can be rejected or approved or you know, these things. Without anybody feeling that they'd been abused in the process."

And I thought that would be a good way of kind of, you know, get conversations going, and then when you get to some points that look like they're agreeable, then get the formal folks together, and then it becomes public. I didn't intend for any time that what I would be doing would be a public thing. And my only purpose there was that it's better that way, and you serve better that way, than if you're trying to make a big show of it, which I had no intention of doing.

Well, I decided this next time I went to Syria, I was going to propose that to President Assad. So I thought, "Well, I'd better tell the White House about this."

So as I went to - going to take my trip, and I was in Washington D.C. and I met with the representative of the White House, and I said, "Now, I'm going to Syria ..."

C.H.: Which representative did you meet with?

V.A.: Her name was Gwendolyn King, I think. She was an assistant to the president. Neat person.

But I said what I was going to try to do, that I was going to talk to the president, I was going to propose - you know, "Would you be willing to use me in that fashion?"

And she said, "Well, I will take your suggestion to the State Department."

I said, "No, no, no, no. You don't understand me. I'm not looking for any agreement. I'm not looking for - this is not a proposal. I'm telling you what I'm going to do. I'm not asking for your opinion on this subject; I'm just telling you what I'm going to do."

C.H.: And what was her reaction to that?

V.A.: Well, it wasn't - you know, she was not State Department and I suppose if it'd been State Department they'd have maybe got ticked off. "Oh, okay," she says. You know, you can convey to them what I'm going to do.

So when I went there - and that's part of the reason for a two and a half hour conference, and I proposed that to the president. And he finally agreed. He agreed that he would be willing to do that. Now to me, that was very important. Not important to me, it was kind of an important diplomatic move in the sense of, okay, let's see if that'll help.

C.H.: Were they enthusiastic? Or was the president enthusiastic or was he merely ...

V.A.: Oh, I don't know. You know, I don't think I ever saw him enthusiastic. I don't know how it - he didn't jump up and down, but he was very comfortable in agreeing to it. I persisted, I talked about it, explained what I had in mind, how it might be helpful. And at first he didn't respond, "Yeah! Oh, yeah! You bet!" You know.

We had some talk about it back and forth, and he finally said yes. You know, firmly. It was not an "Oh, okay," you know, it was not one of those kind of things.

And even today, as we sit here on this day, I've got phone numbers directly to Syria. I have them.

C.H.: To President Assad?

V.A.: That's right. Well, with that having happened, I came back to the hotel. The then-ambassador Djerijian [DJA], I told him of our conversation. Well, I'll tell you what I did. He wanted a briefing of what happened. We're up in my hotel room - which incidentally is the Sheraton in Damascus. And this thing of course had to be kept I think reasonably close.

So I went through the discussion we had, and I don't recall how long it was. I think I've got it written down somewhere. But then I said, "Oh gosh, I've got to get something down at the lobby."

And the ambassador said, "Well, fine, we'll go down together."

My main purpose was to go to the lobby where there was a lot of noise and tell him this other part, about Assad agreeing to this kind of a communication, because I didn't know in my room whether there was electronic equipment or not. And there I told him so that he knows, that he was aware of it.

There was a change in administration which came in. Sununu was there. I tried repeatedly to move this forward. It was very - it probably is as great a disappointment as I've ever had because I believe it was worthwhile in dealing with peace in the Middle East. I expressed it to John Sununu that, you know, it's like chicken soup when you're sick. It may not help, but it won't hurt. And my frustration by the State Department which doesn't let anybody else meddle around with all the things that they know and I'm liable to screw up things.

Anyway, it never happened, and it's been a great disappointment to me, a great disappointment to me. Only because - not for me, you know, not that anything occurred on my regard, but that I really believed that it was a worthwhile thing to try.

[End of Tape 42, Side 1]