

VICTOR ATIYEH
June 30, 1993
Tape 42, Side 2

C.H.: This is an interview with Governor Atiyeh. This is Tape 42, Side 2.

V.A.: I have to kind of back up and tell you after my first visit, and again speaking with Kissinger, he told me this story.

He said, "You know, when I was doing the shuttle thing" - and we got to the matter of discussing getting together, that is now Israel and Syria, to do some discussing about peace, and he was going back and forth. And finally he got an agreement from Israel. So he went back to Damascus and was talking with President Assad. Now this is Kissinger telling me this story.

And he said, "Now here's the plan, and here's how we plan to do it, and you know, where we'll meet," and President Assad's listening to all this.

And he said, "Mr. President, what do you think about it?"

"It sounds okay."

And Kissinger said, "You know, I thought to myself, 'God, this is easy. A lot easier than I thought it was going to be.'" Then Kissinger said to me, "I said to the president, 'Well Mr. President, is there any question that I should have asked that I didn't?'"

And President Assad said, "Yes. You should have asked me if I'm going." He says, "I don't care what the schedule is, I don't care what your plan is, I'm not going."

And I thought that was a pretty funny story. Which, incidentally, I repeated to the president the second time I met with him, and he remembered it vividly. He was kind of laughing at it as well, at, "Yeah, you should have asked me am I going."

So Kissinger thought he had it pretty easy.

Well now let's go back to 1984. I would say, incidentally, the visits I always felt were worthwhile, I always enjoyed them, I looked forward to meeting with the president. Oftentimes it wasn't easy, and particularly the last time. There's a lot of people want the president's time, and he's busy quite a bit. As a matter of fact, this last time that I mentioned to you, I kept saying, "When can I have an appointment?" because I wanted to go to my dad's village and spend some time. But I could never - I thought if he says to me, "Oh, maybe in two, three days," that's okay, then I'll go to the village, because I didn't want to go to the village if I had an appointment.

Well, finally on a Saturday afternoon, I got the call that said, "Well, you go ahead and go to the village, but be back by Monday." Well, as it turned out, then, I just had one night and I went. I couldn't do it on Saturday, it was too late to go then, so I went on Sunday and stayed overnight and came back. Bit of a disappointment to me; I wanted to spend more time in my dad's village, but didn't work out that way.

But I really appreciated the opportunity of talking with the president, and you know, what I'm telling you now, I never have really told - you know, this is not anything for - well, I don't think - I think very few people if anybody know what I've just talked about, but just because this was not something they want public. This would have to be very quiet, and no one really should ever know - I mean, if we were actually doing it, no one should ever really know that we were doing it, ever, because it has to be between countries, and a guy like me ...

C.H.: What happened during the Persian Gulf War when they were really courting Assad - the United States and the U.N., really courting Assad for his support in the Persian Gulf War?

V.A.: He supported it.

C.H.: Did anybody contact you to try to talk to somebody in Syria?

V.A.: No. No, they've never taken me up on it, ever.

That was very interesting, because Syria was supportive of it, and President Assad was supportive of it. The one thing he said he just couldn't actually send troops to shoot at his fellow Arabs.

C.H.: Right.

V.A.: And so actually being on their side and saying, "I support what you're doing" was a pretty powerful message. And I think they respected the fact that he may have been - Syrian forces may have been in some kind of supporting role, but they would not be at the front line shooting.

Assad and Saddam Hussein are bitter enemies of one another. They both are Ba'th parties, but they really don't like each other at all. It was Syria that cut off the pipeline. It was an Iraqi pipeline, oil pipeline, going through Syria. It was Syria that cut it off. Which, incidentally, I thought was not a very smart move at the time because Syria has a real problem with foreign reserves - dollars - to do things with.

People are not allowed to buy new cars because they don't make cars in Syria, so they'd have to send money out of the country to get a car. They drive around there - what we call classics here, they're using over there. The greatest business in Syria is the auto repair business because the trucks are all old, and the cars are old, and the only one that has any decent cars are the big-shots, and they have Mercedes and things like that.

You know, in terms of dollars for Syria, their economy is not as strong as it ought to be or could be. Then there's a PR thing, you know. When I was there last time, again, I met with one of the cabinet officials - who, incidentally, went to New York University,

his wife is an American wife, and he's been consistently a bigshot in the Syrian government over the years, and he was a cabinet official. Which is kind of interesting, because those folks kind of come and go.

And I said, you know, "I can help you." I'm talking about the economy. "But you have to help me help you." Meaning, you know, Americans don't think a great deal of Syria, and so you've got to get some PR that would be favorable. And along that line was that there's a proposal for peace.

Assad finally said, "Well, okay, I think we ought to do something about that."

And I said, "You know, you should have jumped in right away: "You bet. We've got to have some peace talks.'"

Now, he's not committing himself to anything. Land for peace or whatever. Golan Heights or anything. He's just saying, "Yeah, that's a good idea, we really ought to do that." So that's a good, that's kind of a good word coming out of there. Just PR, that kind of PR thing.

They still today, they're anxiously to try to develop their country. They have great potential. I would tell you that Syria is an absolutely marvelous historical place to go visit, and there are places like - and I've been to Palmyra - huge Roman city at one time, way out in the middle of nowhere. And you go out there and you see the ruins mostly, but there's still a lot of walls standing and pillars standing, columns, and you can see it, you know, as you look.

When I was out there there was this beautiful, this wonderful, wonderful place to visit. Nobody's there. I mean, it's not like going to the Acropolis or the pyramids. And here it is, right by my dad's village, very close to the village, is the best unrestored

Crusader castle in the entire Middle East. It sits up on a hill and it's just a marvelous thing.

And besides that, I read a book. There's just all kinds of places like that in Syria. They're not really equipped, really as much as they could be, for tourists. They have good roads, but once you leave Damascus - although I shouldn't say - I didn't see the accommodations at ~~Hims~~^{Homs}, which is another large city - but the western accommodations are great in Damascus. But once you get out in the country it's a lot more primitive. But it's a wonderful place to - historical place.

C.H.: Was there concern about discrimination against Arab-Americans, and was your being there - did that have any effect on perhaps perceptions of that? There's often been talk about discrimination against Arab-Americans, and I'm just wondering whether that ever came up.

V.A.: No, not in those visits. Not at all.

C.H.: Or with people you talked to while you were there?

V.A.: No. No. That's not quite right in the sense that there was a constant plea, "Why don't they understand us?"

And if you really look at the American press, they really don't talk about the Arab world in a positive light. That's where we as American Arabs become very sensitive over that. There's some wonderful things. They really are wonderful people. They truly are wonderful people. And all you hear about is Israel and all the rest of that. It's interesting the way the media treats it. That's subconsciously. I don't think this is a deliberate thing, but probably the best way to explain it would be - I happened to be in Washington D.C., I don't recall when, a few years ago. But anyway, on the front page - the front page, upper front page, you know, not the underfolded - was a picture of a Israeli soldier that had been killed by Palestinians. And so here was the picture and

the soldier was on the street and there was a little trickle of blood, and you could see that. Which of course was tragic.

But the point that went through my head was, at that point in time - and of course it's changed dramatically since then - at that point in time, I think this was the first Israeli soldier killed. But at that point, 98 Palestinians had been killed by Israeli, not one of which was on the upper front page of any newspaper anywhere.

C.H.: Right.

V.A.: So it was big news that a Israeli soldier was killed. It is not big news that 98 Palestinians had been killed. And so that's a subconscious thing. You see what I'm saying? That this is a real human being, and Palestinians are not. But I'm not saying that in a sense that I think they do that deliberately, but maybe - but that's the conscious view in their mind.

I suppose the same thing is there's sort of an abstraction about thousands of Somalians dying of hunger. Well, okay, that's Somalians, you know. There's not that intimacy that we apply like we applied to that Israeli soldier.

So when you talk about discrimination, you know, the American public really doesn't have a good sense of who the Arabs are.

Actually, the Iraqi war, Americans learned more about that part of the world than they'd ever learned before.

C.H.: Sure.

V.A.: Where is Iraq? Where is Kuwait? You know, where is it?

So I remember, and I still have - you know, they would have maps. They would show maps of where these countries are. So Americans learned something in that war, if there was a good fallout, which can't be that good, that was one of them.

C.H.: Speaking of news coverage, was there any news coverage on your visit?

V.A.: Only the first one. Well, there was news coverage over there. Over there, yes. And I've got clippings.

C.H.: What was that like? What kind of coverage did you get?

V.A.: Oh, usually a picture, no further away than maybe the second page, or maybe the first time the front page. But there's a picture of the Governor of Oregon visiting with President Assad. But they would have pictures of others and they're always sitting in the same, you know, same thing, against the wall with the in between the two chairs.

C.H.: Right. Did people have an idea where Oregon was?

V.A.: Oh, no.

C.H.: I sometimes wonder about people living on the East Coast of America.

V.A.: That's right. That's right. No, not generally.

Damascus is a very fascinating city. The oldest - they say the oldest continuous city in the world. As you drive from the airport into town, you get a real sense of what the Palestinians' plight is because there's a - let me call it a shantytown on the way into Damascus where the Palestinians are living. There's - you know, the Palestinians are just scattered all over the place.

It was interesting that they have a souk, s-o-u-k, which is small shops in one place, and this one is a very old one and it has a cover over it. At least one of the main streets.

C.H.: Of fabric?

V.A.: No, it's metal, and it's old. It's up there. I never really inspected it, but it's old. It's kind of a cover, and this would be fairly high because there's buildings in there that are three, four stories high, or two to three, something like that. Narrow street. And sidewalks. But people use the street and sidewalk just as all the same thing.

I had, as I told you earlier, motorcycles, you know, a couple motorcycles and police cars and our own entourage, and I was telling people about that, we snuck into the souq. You know, we went eeerrr, the sirens going, you know, roaring into the -. And when you roar into it with the roof on top of it, and, you know, people are all over place, you know, they had to get off the streets so the cars could go in there.

C.H.: Right.

V.A.: And what's going on here, you know, and I say we "snuck" into the souq, and it was fascinating. I've since of course been back to the same souq. Small shops. I mean, small. One after another. Oh, maybe - what? - six feet by seven feet. I mean, that's a whole shop. A lot of gold. Gold bracelets, gold chains, gold. They love gold over in that part of the world, and I suppose it's one way for them to get some wealth, and the women have a lot of gold bracelets, and you know, there's a lot of gold there. So one shop after another shop after another shop, and it all has gold.

On my last visit, that was interesting. I don't quite understand it, but there was some kind of a government edict about you had to sell your gold products at a certain price. And if you didn't, you'd go to jail. You could actually go to jail for it.

C.H.: Because people had so much of their wealth invested in gold?

V.A.: I have no idea why it was a policy. I can't tell you that, except that on my last visit you couldn't see gold anywhere.

Now, what actually happened is one of the people we know and know very well, he knew somebody in the business, and that person knew them. So now there was trust between them. So we went to that shop and we looked at something, ^{IN SILVER} and we said, "Gee, I like that."

"Fine," he said, "come back tonight at" - I don't know, five o'clock or six o'clock. And so we got that product in gold, a bracelet, or whatever it is that we decided we wanted. But they wouldn't do it - I mean, they have it, it's just they just - because if they sell it, whatever that mandated price was, other than that, they could go to jail. And they actually, I learned from some others I was asking questions ...

C.H.: The mandated price being higher or lower?

V.A.: I think lower. If they wanted to sell lower, they couldn't. Didn't want to do it, or whatever reason.

Incidentally, another kind of interesting sidelight: This fellow, this man I'm talking about, is a doctor. His daughter lives here in the United States. And so he was asking us to spend as much money as we - he gave us the money, and he even gave it to us at black market price. And he wanted to spend as much as possible.

Well, but what he had in mind is, when we got back here, we would send his daughter the money. The American money of what we - the equivalent of what we got in Syria. That was his way of getting money out of the country to his daughter.

So we used the Syrian pounds as much you know, he wanted us to spend as much as we could, because as much as we could, that would be more money for his daughter. Then when we came home, we wrote the check to the daughter, and that way he could get money to her. And I'm sure there's some of that going on because they want to obviously support their children and they can't do it. So this is one way to do it. It's fascinating.

C.H.: How did this person seek you out?

V.A.: Oh, we happened to know him. He actually had been in Portland. Same man.

C.H.: Oh, I see.

V.A.: So we were fully aware of it. Very nice man, very nice home; I've been in his home, had dinner there. Both he and his wife are very nice people. He's a doctor. But that was, you know, that was understood, and we understood what it was all about.

When I said earlier they weren't really prepared for tourists, to give you an idea, the rate of exchange at the Sheraton was twelve to one. Today the rate of exchange at the Sheraton is twelve to one. The published official rate by the bank is twenty to one. I mean, that's public. But when you deal with the motel or hotel, it's twelve to one. Then there's the black market rate, whatever that is. When I was there, it was forty-five to one. That was black market.

So you see, you know, you don't want to penalize somebody for going to visit the Sheraton Hotel, which is effectively what you were doing. You're getting penalized for doing it. And you had to come up with the exact amount, which is not easy to do, incidentally. So they really don't have the feel of accommodating tourists.

C.H.: Is there any danger of trading on the black market? I know in some countries there is, and some there isn't.

V.A.: I think there always is. There always is. And I'm not sure Americans should be doing it, really doing it. We didn't - we weren't out on the street for black market. You could go out on the street for black market, and I had some people approach me on that. But that's not worth the risk.

In his case, he had the money. So he just said, 'Here. But I'll give it to you at the black market rate.' So we were getting a break. And incidentally, I bought that last visit, some bracelets for my daughter, and my daughter-in-law, and Dolores, and you know, things like that. It's a whale of a deal.

When I came back, I got this - well, not only that, but whatever jewelry we had appraised - but in the case of this gold,

the price was six times higher on the appraised price here of what I acquired over there. And so it was a whale of a deal. I told them - Dolores said, "Now don't get me anything. Don't get me any jewelry." And I said, when I came back, "I know that's what you said, but I just couldn't - it's too good a deal."

And as I was leaving - my cousin Sammy Kahl was there at the same time, but he was staying, and just as I was leaving, I said, "Sammy, buy me some of those prayer beads." Now, I got some and I like them. But I said, "Buy me in gold." Now, I really didn't want necessarily the prayer beads. Really I was buying gold. "Go buy that for me," which he did. As I say, it's six times higher here.

The way they sell it, you say, "Well, how much is that?" Let's say a bracelet. They'd put it on a scale and weigh it. Then they'd tell you how much it is.

C.H.: How did you know it was pure gold - or whatever gold it was? I mean, I'm sure it wasn't pure, but ...

V.A.: No, no. But the one thing they - that's just the nature - and this, incidentally, is not just Syria, all through the Middle East they don't deal with anything less than eighteen carat. Nothing. I guess how you would assure yourself is that they are more - meaning the people there - are more knowledgeable, and they sure wouldn't want to take advantage of their obviously regular customers. But they don't deal with anything less than eighteen. Eighteen, twenty, twenty-two. Now, I wouldn't know the difference between eighteen and twenty-two.

C.H.: Right.

V.A.: I know it's at least eighteen. So, you know, it's good enough for me. And eighteen is pretty good. But that's also throughout that whole area, whether it's Saudi or Qatar or Kuwait

or Syria, you know, throughout that whole area it's all the same. Same thing.

But anyway, that's sort of a sidelight. I did want a Damascus sword. We've heard about Damascus steel and Damascus swords. And I finally bought one back in a small shop in the souq.

C.H.: Are those the curved swords?

V.A.: Well, not curved quite that much. I'll show it to you. I've got it hanging on the wall there. I always wanted to get one of those. The Saudi, in their flag, you know, they've got a real curve on their sword.

C.H.: Right.

V.A.: Always wanted to get one of those, but I haven't yet. I did get a little dagger, which I'll show you also. I don't collect those things. I just, to me, it was just a kind of thing I would like, and a souvenir of that area. But this souq back in there -

Incidentally, those are not cheap. They're not giveaways. But I bought one I liked. That guy wanted really to sell me. I said, "Gee whiz, that's a lot of money. I don't have that kind of money." Anyway, I finally ended up by giving him a check. A check over there ...

C.H.: He must have really trusted you.

V.A.: Yeah, he did. But you know, that was really something. Usually a credit card or cash - but he took a check, because I didn't have the money to pay for it. But anyway, I brought it back.

C.H.: Did you make any contacts for your business? For your rugs or trade consulting?

V.A.: No. The first time was I was governor. And the second time I was governor. And in those cases, I didn't feel it was appropriate to try to do business.

The third time, kind of looking, but more visiting Syria and my dad's village and President Assad than anything else. But you know, I'm working on something now that hopefully we might be able to do some kind of business over there. This one happens to relate to wheat because it's a food that they would - it's something they need over there.

Well, I kind of strayed. I have to get back to 1984. I talked about my visit.

C.H.: Yes, but you haven't talked about your visit to ~~Hamah~~ ^{AMAR}.

V.A.: Now we talk about that. I'm really quite anxious. I had some small memories of my visit to ~~Hamah~~ ^{AMAR}.

C.H.: When you were six.

V.A.: When I was six. And I was very curious to - you know, I wanted to see if what I thought I remembered was really the case. And obviously also getting back to my dad's village.

We had a lunch and we left late to go ~~Hamah~~ ^{AMAR}. And ~~Hamah~~ ^{AMAR} is about - oh, maybe less than three hours, two and half hours away from Damascus. So we got the message - and here, now, the media is really excited. Channel 6, Channel 2, and the channel in Eugene and the newspapers, but particularly the TV folks, because this is going to be a great show.

We got the message from the governor of ~~Hims~~ ^{Homs} - which is not only the city of ~~Hims~~ ^{Homs} but apparently the district, which includes my dad's village. Wanted us to come to his house. And the answer was, "No, we really can't do that. We don't have time." The time related to getting there in daylight, so they would get daylight pictures.

So as we approached the city of ~~Hims~~ ^{Homs}, at the south end of ~~Hims~~ ^{Homs}, and all of a sudden our entourage slowed down and stopped, and here are a bunch of other cars, which included the governor of ~~Hims~~ ^{Homs}. So I get in the car with him. And his is a Mercedes, and

now we're going together to - we're not going to stop, we're going to go on into ^{Amman} ~~Hamah~~.

I'm a gun collector. So he has the armrest down, and I kind of look down and I see something that looks like the butt end of a pistol. But it has a kind of a leather cover, which I'm not accustomed to seeing. So I'm kind of, while we're talking, I'm feeling and sure enough, it's a pistol.

So at one point I said to him, "I know what that is, that's a pistol. And I'm a gun collector, so that's how I know." He raises the armrest and it's a .38 Smith & Wesson.

He said, "Here. Here. Here."

I said, "No, no, no, no."

"Yeah, here, take it."

"No, no, no, no."

"You want the bullets?"

"No, I don't."

So Lon, my security, you know, at another point, he's - when we got to the village - he knew about this story. He said, "God, I hope they forget this whole thing, because we're leaving Syria to go to Israel, you know. What am I going to do with a .38 Smith & Wesson?"

Anyway, we got to the village and got out of the car. And let me finish that story, because he left, and the gun went with him. So the next day we did stop at his house on our way out. And there he formally presented me with this pistol. And I'll tell you a little bit more about that later on.

So that visit I cannot describe adequately. The town, the village, which is not a big village, everybody turned out. Dolores and I walked up these narrow streets, and this is a very old village. I guess you'd call them cobblestone streets. At one point it is quite narrow, this street we went up. I don't think a

car can go from one end of town to the other up this same street.
It's quite narrow.

[End of Tape 42, Side 2]