

Yale-UN Oral History Project

Muhammad el-Farra

Jean Krasno, Interviewer

March 13, 1998

Amman, Jordan

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Jean Krasno: For the record, Ambassador el-Farra, would you please explain something about your background, where you were born and educated and when you became involved in the United Nations?

Ambassador Muhammad el-Farra: Thank you very much. I am glad to have you here, a pleasure really. About my background, I was born in Khan-Yunis, in what is called Gaza Strip today, where the Palestine authority is now. When I finished my elementary school I went to Jaffa. My brother was a merchant there and I stayed with him studying in the British Institute until I got a secondary degree or the equivalent to the British matriculation. Then I applied to three or four universities in the United States. I wanted to finish my university education in the United States. I received an acceptance from St. Louis University in Missouri, Truman's state, from Boston University, and from Suffolk University in Boston. A fourth acceptance from California; I don't remember its name after half a century.

This was in 1947. I traveled by sea to New York. Then I flew to Massachusetts to join Suffolk University. So, I had these three acceptances but after the part played by Truman vis-à-vis the Palestine problem, I said no to Missouri. He was campaigning at that time going here and there to get the Jewish vote, and I said not Missouri. I chose Suffolk University. At Suffolk things were very tough and only one fourth of the class

passed. The students revolted because they said that when three quarters of the class fail it is the fault of the professors. They demonstrated but my friend Salam Dajani and I were among the lucky fourth and did not endorse their activities. They called us the Dean's men. I finished an LLB in 1950. But earlier in 1948 I lost my home. Our land and home were occupied by the Israelis, no Jaffa. I didn't know where my brothers were. I lost my father. I didn't know what to do. I didn't have any funds. That was a serious problem. My passport had expired; it was a British passport because Palestine was under British mandate.

Britain left Palestine. Its mandate was over and had no authority any more. This meant that my passport could not be renewed. So, I appealed to some friends I knew there, good Americans. Americans are good at these things when you don't mix politics with the humanitarian aspect. So they said we'll try to get papers for Palestinians who have become stateless; sure enough, they helped other colleagues and me.

JK: So, you were able to stay and finish your education in the United States.

el-F: Yes, but we had no funds. I wanted to finish law and go back to Jaffa and be a lawyer like my daughter is doing now. But I had no home; I was homeless. I went to the United Nations. I went to our ambassadors to the United Nations, the Syrian, the Lebanese, the Iraqi, the Saudi, the Egyptian, all these. There were six Arab Ambassadors in New York. We spoke to some of them. And we formed the Arab student organization for the Palestinians. We said to the Ambassadors, "You have to help us because you are responsible for losing our lands. You said you would create a state with the Palestinian

revolution and nothing came of it. You are responsible.” The Syrian was an eminent figure in the United Nations. He had silver hair, very impressive, a brilliant jurist. He said, “Look boys, I will try to help you but, give me time.” He was representing all the students. I had lunch with him. We were [at his office] at the Empire State Building. A huge car came. And he said, “I want you to come to the United Nations. I have a speech to make to the Security Council about your homeland. Come and listen to me.” I had heard a great deal about the UN and to be able to go to the UN; I couldn’t believe it. I went with him and walked into the UN headquarters to the Security Council. He asked one of the members to leave and give me his seat and so I sat behind the Ambassador. So, I sat in the Security Council. They were all smoking there. At that time, smoking was permitted. Only when Dag Hammarskjöld came was it forbidden. It was not the meeting yet. They were smoking here and smoking there and shouting. The Latin Americans speak with their hands. So do the Arabs. Then the Security Council was convened. They gave their full respect and became organized and the president said, “I give the floor to the ambassador of Syria.” So, he spoke and said that we should not accept the truce. It was an American trick for the Jews to have their weapons which were on their way. The ambassador said, “Don’t stop, keep going. But we were misled by the Americans and look what happened. The war started and they took all Arab area.” He was furious. “I told them not to, not to.” So, he delivered his speech.

JK: This was regarding the truce in 1948?

el-F: Yes, in 1948, the first truce and now the second truce. He was furious because of the second truce, because they accepted the first. He looked at Ambassador Austin from the United States. He said, "Ambassador Austin, you would displace the people. Go ahead, bring your atomic bomb and destroy the people." Right then and there, Jean, I decided that I would not practice law.

JK: Because you saw all of what happening.

el-F: I had no home to work in, to practice law, and also my problem was there. I will also sit here and defend my home.

JK: At the UN.

el-F: I took that decision in the Security Council.

JK: How old were you then?

el-F: I was 21 years old.

JK: That was a remarkable experience.

el-F: I made that decision; I finished my LLB and I was lucky and finished my LLM. I was lucky again and received a scholarship from the University of Pennsylvania. Of

course that required that I reside in Pennsylvania at the university campus for one full year. The successor of Ferris Bhee wanted a research professor and a secretary, one to do both. My friend Salem Bergheli -- he left the United Nations in 1951. After he received his LLB, he had gone to work at the UN. He recommended me.

JK: I see, so then you could go with him and work at the UN.

el-F: The new man wanted somebody and my name was recommended to him. He asked to see me. I asked my friend why I should see him. I didn't want to lose my scholarship. I had to live one year in Pennsylvania. But I was curious and I went to see him. He took the place of Ferris Bhee. Apparently, I impressed him and he said that he needed me. He said, "I would like to help you with your home, your country, your problem." I said to him, "Mr. Ambassador, I would love to work with you, in fact, it is my dream but, I have a scholarship and I have to live one year in Philadelphia and you are in new York." He said, "It is not a problem. I can fix it. Just give me time." He wrote a letter to the President of the University of Pennsylvania and said to him, "On behalf of the government of the Syrian Arab Republic, I ask you, if possible, to make an exception for a student of Syria who is supposed to reside at the campus for one year. Make it two years and he will spend half the time in the United Nations and half the time at the university." If you put it together it would be one year. So the Board of Directors took the exception.

When I finished school, I became a member of the Syrian delegation. The head of the delegation said to me, "Now you know our policy. It is very clear to you. Don't refer

to me; take a position that is in line with our policy. I have confidence in you to do the right thing. Unless there is a real need, then come to me. But if you have things to decide sitting in the Sixth Committee, then go ahead. This trust gave me confidence. I continued with the Syrian delegation and got my Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania. I continued until Jordan was admitted to the United Nations as a member. Then the Chargé of Jordan – there is a chargé who is in “charge” until they appoint an ambassador – thought that I had good experience. Palestine had been a part of Jordan and he asked me to join the delegation of Jordan to the United Nations. He said that His Majesty was coming to the UN and he wanted me to be down at the UN to receive him. I was not expecting this offer. I said, “Give me time to think it over.” He said that was okay and in four days I came back and started to work. I joined the Jordanian delegation to the United Nations. This was in 1958. This is the background.

JK: At this time you joined the Jordanian delegation.

el-F: And I became a member of the Jordanian foreign ministry.

JK: You became a part of the foreign ministry because the mission was a part of the ministry.

el-F: With Syria I was not a diplomat as a part of the foreign ministry. With Jordan I was given diplomatic immunity. At the UN, Jordan gave me all this. I started in the Jordanian delegation first as a counselor, then as a minister, then as an ambassador. I

continued for many years to represent Jordan at the United Nations in the Security Council, Economic and Social Council, in the legal committees. I am always honest with myself and with others, and frank. I believe in open diplomacy. I don't believe in "hush-hush." So, I had many disagreements with the American delegation. I had many very good friends on a personal basis. When there was a meeting on one of these issues, I would come to the Security Council.

JK: I wanted to ask you about the time that you were the Permanent Representative of Jordan to the United Nations. I believe that was from 1965 through 1971.

el-F: Yes.

JK: Jordan was a member of the Security Council in 1965 and '66, through the end of 1966. You served as president of the Security Council during that period when it became Jordan's turn during that two-year period.

el-F: During the first few months Ambassador Rifai was the Permanent representative and I was his Deputy. He was the head of the delegation. After a few months he was recalled to become foreign minister. So, I took over and became ambassador. In fact, I left the United Nations in 1962 and was in charge in Palestine in the foreign ministry section. During that period I was elected president of the Arab League Economic Unity Council. I was the first one to preside over that council. It was for two years.

Sometimes the developing countries try to be friendly and okay this and that but it doesn't always find its way to implementation. We started a draft and there was no consensus, no agreement. So I said that I would postpone the meeting and we wouldn't have it. And we put it off until the second session. At the second session I brought the most eminent journalists to sit and listen to our meetings of the Arab League. They were usually closed meetings. They never attended the meetings because they were closed. I invited them to attend an open meeting. There would be nothing called a closed meeting. They authorized me to use rules of procedure as I liked until they drafted one. So they gave me this privilege and I said I would like this building to be made of glass like the UN, transparent. So, our people can see everything inside. I remember the Kuwaiti head of delegation. I started the meeting as usual, opened the meeting. There was a speech thanking the host country for their help. He answered me welcoming us to the capital, Cairo. Then we turned to the agenda. Item number one was the movement of Palestinians without visas. The Kuwaiti delegate said, "You forgot to close the meeting; our friends the journalists are still here." I said what do I want to have a closed meeting? I want this to be made of glass so everybody can see what is going on. They should see the hands if you are for or against. The Kuwaiti said it was okay. So, we started the meeting. We wanted freedom of movement like in the United States. We said we think that this would serve Arab unity as a whole. This should take its proper place in Arab relations.

JK: I wanted to ask you, you were in the UN as the Jordanian ambassador during the period of time of the '67 War. I wanted to ask you some questions about that. I

understand that the Egyptians had received information through the Soviets that Israel was building up troops along the Syrian border. The Syrians then notified Nasser that they had gotten this information from the Soviets. Was there any discussion of that at the UN? Was there information coming in regarding this issue?

el-F: There was a discussion but, the distance is very short. You can move troops within one hour and then move them back in another hour. It is not like Iraq and Turkey or Iran and Syria. When it takes hours and hours to get there. The claim was that the troops were there. The other side did not present something to the contrary. The big powers that had the satellites did not deny nor affirm. The whole thing I think is very clear now. It was different than in 1956. I quote you here from the records. What the United States said in 1956 and what the United States said and championed in 1967. In 1956, they said that they would not permit this action. This (the Charter of the United Nations), is international law. No one can defy this. This means peace. This means justice. "We request an immediate withdrawal." This is what the United States said. In 1967, in meetings that I had and my foreign minister had with foreign minister of the United States of America, they said the conquerors should get out. A little bit later they said there might be a minor adjustment.

JK: This is after the Israelis had attacked in 1967. I was going through the period just before that, where there had been some reports that Israelis had been forming along the border of Syria. But it wasn't clear if that information was correct or not correct. Is that what you were saying earlier?

el-F: If you compare this with the attack in 1967, this gives you a picture of the Israeli life. In 1967, very few people know this but, in 1967, the one who complained to the Security Council was Israel, not Jordan, not Egypt. "We are being attacked." None of the big powers would come with their evidence. They had satellites and they knew exactly what was going on. They were literally standing by. They did not bring their evidence to prove that the one that was preparing for the attack was Israel. Until 1982, the whole world was saying that Nasser attacked, Syria attacked, Jordan attacked. The man called Menachem Begin let the cat out of the bag. He came before the students of the military college and said, "Who said that Nasser attacked? Nasser did not attack, we started the war." This was Begin. The first day of the meeting of the Security Council, the Israeli ambassador Gideon Rafael presented a complaint. Rafael came as the new ambassador. And while discussing this he said, "I want to remind you of what Adlai Stevenson said about the threat of Cuba. He said, "Shall we wait until they come to cut our throats before we move?" No one analyzed this. He was telling us that they were going to fight. Nobody knew this until later that they were after us.

We were not the complainers; they were the complainers. Their complaint to the president was that they were being attacked. They were attacking the ports, the airfields. They requested a meeting. They said they had an urgent statement to make to the Security Council. They did not ask for an immediate meeting.

JK: So, Ambassador Rafael of Israel did not ask for an emergency meeting.

el-F: No, he said, "I have a statement to make when you meet."

JK: Let me go back just a bit because at the time the Secretary-General was U-Thant who had received a message that Egypt, Nasser, was requesting the removal of the peacekeeping force. At that time you were the ambassador of Jordan. Was Jordan aware that there had been a request to remove the peacekeeping troops? Was Jordan aware that Nasser had requested the removal of the peacekeeping troops at that time, in 1967?

el-F: In his report, U-Thant states that on May 23, he left New York to go to Cairo. He flew to Cairo to remedy the situation, to diffuse the threat. So far, it was just tension, a threat. On the 24th, disagreement started. The Americans said, "We want to take a decision which would help U-Thant," saying this, that, and so forth. The president said, "No, let's wait until U-Thant comes back to New York. He came back on the following day, the 25th. He went on the 23rd and came back on the 25th. He met President Nasser and Hamoud Riad, the foreign minister. He wrote in the report, "President Nasser and Foreign Minister Riad assured me that the United Arab Republic would not initiate offensive action against Israel. He got this assurance. U-Thant said to give Nasser a chance. They all were thinking that Nasser would fight.

JK: Did you as the ambassador of Jordan have any consultations with the ambassador from Egypt about this? Were you supportive of the removal of the peacekeeping troops?

el-F: We had daily meetings and evening meetings. We were coordinating and working together. Mind you, in the first two days, Jordan did not enter the war. The same with Syria, we were together.

JK: Were you asked or consulted about the removal of the peacekeeping troops? Was there any open discussion about that at the UN?

el-F: U-Thant answered this question. He presented his report #7906 to the Security Council in which he said, "Had UNEF been deployed on both sides of the line, as originally envisaged in pursuance of the General Assembly resolution, its buffer function would not necessarily have ended. However, its presence on the Israeli side of the line has never been permitted." And the question now was why did they refuse to put UNEF on their side of the line? Isn't that it would be an obstacle in the way of attacking and invading and acquiring land by force, conquest? Why? Nobody expected this. Nasser felt that he still had his line to protect him.

JK: Did Jordan agree with that decision of Nasser to remove the peacekeeping troops?

el-F: This was his sovereign right. It wasn't discussed. Jordan was not part of the war at that time. Syria was not. The problem was handled by the state directly involved.

JK: Shortly after that, Nasser closed the Strait of Tiran to Israeli vessels which Israel say as an act of war. What was Jordan's reaction to the closing of the Strait?

el-F: At that time, Jordan was aware of the fact that the Israelis were preparing. And Nasser in trying not to show weakness did this in order to stop the escalation. But it was clear from the very beginning that UN was preparing for war and taking advantage of everything for the Israelis.

JK: What was it that brought Jordan into the conflict in 1967?

el-F: We had no other choice. Because after all, you had the Allied Arab Command and the duty to a sister state. How would appear to your people? Either Syria or Jordan? Because it would be dangerous for the heads of state of either Syria or Jordan not to enter the war. The people would hold them responsible. You would have a coup. It wasn't easy. Look at what happened to Iraq the other day. [The U.S. had been threatening to bomb Iraq if they did not comply with UN weapons inspectors.] When things reach a kind of suicide, the people said no to America. The heads of state said no. There is an awareness among peoples in the Arab world. They may look patient but, when they see a threat coming to the area, they stand up and say no.

JK: Was Jordan ready for that conflict?

el-F: We had one Allied Arab Command, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, under one commander, an Egyptian Hamoud Riad. The main thing is that one power was preparing for war, engineering it. Others were thinking that the Security Council would stop it right away

because of the United Nations Charter and the president and all these things. But that didn't happen.

JK: But that didn't happen.

el-F: Right. When we raised the question of the duty of the United Nations to the UN and to the United States, the Americans insisted on having no withdrawal. In [resolution] 242, first it was withdrawal and this was taken unanimously in the Security Council. All members were for it. In the interpretation of 242 before it was adopted, George Brown, the author of the resolution and head of the British delegation, at the 1529th UN plenary meeting of General Assembly, and he said the same thing in the Security Council before the meeting in the Assembly as well, said the following, "I would like to repeat what I said when I was here before; Britain does not accept war as a means of settling disputes. Nor should a state be allowed to extend its frontiers as a result of war. This means the Israel must withdraw but, equally Israel's neighbors must recognize its right to exist. And it must enjoy security within its frontiers." That is what he took as the understanding of the meaning of 242, what it was. "What we must work for in this area is a durable peace, the renunciation of all aggressive designs and to policies which are inconsistent with peace." This is the explanation of Britain to the resolution. The other 14 members, including the United States supported this. This is what he said.

JK: You were there at the UN. What was Jordan's position at the time in the discussions on this resolution 242?

el-F: Identical with the other Arab states, that America should abide by what it said before adoption to take a just stand to see that the law, the Charter, would prevail and not to play games that would affect future relations. This was the primary idea.

JK: But, was there agreement amongst the Arab states on recognizing Israel because that is part of it?

el-F: At that time, no.

JK: Then there was agreement on a portion of 242, but not on the whole thing?

el-F: There was agreement on withdrawal and agreement on other parts of the resolution, yes. But it starts in 242 with withdrawal. Withdrawal was number one because you cannot at the point of a gun, sign an agreement. This is under duress. It has no legal value. You change the situation as it was before the 5th of June war and then everything can be settled.

JK: I see, so you wanted withdrawal first before agreeing to anything else.

el-F: It not just me, it is what 242 calls for.

JK: Did Jordan play a role in writing any of the language of the resolution?

el-F: Of 242, of course. I had meetings with the different foreign ministries and the United States. The United States was the one at the UN who could make it or break it, the power which had the power. Because the US was sponsoring Israel. In the records of these meetings, which I have here, there are two camps, the US-Israel and the USSR and France.

JK: I didn't understand the second camp, who was that?

el-F: The U.S. was defending the rights of Israel. The USSR and France were defending the rights of the Arabs.

JK: I see, that's the split, USSR and France defending the rights of the Arabs and on the other side the US and the Israelis.

el-F: The USA and the UK.

JK: The United States and Great Britain defending Israel. Where was China on this issue?

el-F: It was not China, it was Taiwan at that time. It was following the USA.

JK: So, at that time, China was on that side of the issue.

el-F: These are my notes from the private meeting that took place behind closed doors.

India, do you want to know what India said?

JK: Okay, this is a meeting that you had with India?

el-F: This is from a meeting at the United Nations. They said, "We cannot accept or acquiesce in any decision that leaves out territories occupied by military conquest from the provision of withdrawal." They said regarding the Latin American resolution -- I must tell you, Jean, that the Latin American resolution called on Israel to withdraw completely and we voted against it.

JK: Why? Why did Jordan vote against that?

el-F: All the Arab states.

JK: Why was that?

el-F: Because there was an assumption attached to it, number two. The ambassador from Argentina was the one who championed this. Argentina emphasized that the contents of the text of the Latin American draft resolution of the General Assembly reads 1) requests Israel to withdraw all its forces from all the territories occupied by it as a result of the recent conflict. "We trust that observance of the formula defined will achieve the ends

that are being sought. It cannot be otherwise since my delegation – he is speaking for Latin America – has always contended that not international order, as the representative of Brazil pointed out, can be based on threats or the use of force. Territorial arrangements cannot be endorsed or countenanced unless they are achieved by peaceful means, etc.” This is a statement by Latin America. “The second point I wish to refer to is that the right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries. We interpret this ...,” this is important. “...expression really to mean the right to live secure within the organized boundaries, not changing borders.” And this was in the closed meeting. DeGaulle suggested that the four, the big four, should meet and work out a certain method, certain rules, which would be helpful to Gunnar Jarring to continue his mission.

JK: You are talking about being helpful to Gunnar Jarring who was continuing his mission.

el-F: Yes, Gunnar Jarring had reached a deadlock with the Israelis and the Arabs. So, DeGaulle, from Paris, sent a message saying, “Let the big four meet and take steps to help Jarring.”

JK: So, the big four, meaning that China was not involved.

el-F: It was really four plus one. They never accepted China [Taiwan] as a Permanent Member. Because everybody knew it was the People’s Republic of China. China had no role, only the four. And who recommended this? France and the USSR. So, the four met

and ended up the resolution 242. And as I was discussing, our real problem is 242. The UK and the US and then the USSR and France became 242, two against two. They met and the problem with the big powers is that they all had interests in our area and they all wanted to get the credit. And this destroyed the mission of Jarring who felt that if it doesn't help me in the area where I get the credit for it, then to heck with it. And I have reason to believe that the United States was not encouraging Jarring because they wanted the credit to go to the US. They wanted Henry Kissinger to be the shining star of America vis-a-vis the area. This is my personal opinion, judging from my experience during this time. The fifteen members spoke the same language, anyone. They said the same thing.

JK: So, despite objections from Jordan, or some of the other Arab countries, 242 was passed.

el-F: Jordan never objected to 242. It was taken by unanimous vote. We were not against 242. Those countries who were far away were working for a stronger decision. But we who were directly involved were for 242.

JK: At that time, Jordan had gone off the Security Council, though, in 1967. You were there in 1965 and 1966. So, Jordan had gone off the Security Council. Was there an Arab state or a member of the Security Council that Jordan could work through?

el-F: Jean, you are very brilliant. This is a good question. There was a gentlemen's agreement among all blocks, the non-aligned block, the European block, the Asian block, the socialist block, that since the Arabs have 21 votes in the United Nations, they are entitled to a seat on the Security Council. All that we would have to do is to present our candidate and they would vote for our candidate. If we didn't do so, then they would not be responsible. It would be our problem. In 1967, something very curious, in December 1966, at the end of the General Assembly session, they elected the non-permanent members. During the elections, two Arab states ran for the UN seat on the Security Council, for the one seat allocated to the Arab region.

JK: Two ran, which two were those?

el-F: This is why it is a good question; you will find out, two good people against each other.

JK: Oh, they were competing against each other. Do you recall which the two countries were?

el-F: This was a lesson to all the regional states, if you compete you will not get a seat. You will not get and the other will not get it. But, both were so confident because members sometimes, you know, feel that it should be given to them. But don't believe it. So, other states were saying the same thing to both candidates. They were both confident and we were sure none would get it. The Arab block met and everyone brought his

evaluation. Who would vote for whom, and this was including myself, in our reports, we said, “None of you will get it.” Till the last minute, we said that one should withdraw. The very stubborn candidates continued to say that they would get it. “I’ll get it.” So, when the elections started, we had two candidates and the other running from the third world was India. So, India took the seat instead of one of the two Arab states.

JK: So, at that critical time in 1967, you did not have an Arab state on the Security Council.

el-F: At that critical time, we were like someone covering his eyes, couldn’t see, didn’t know where to go. Because everything was cooked behind closed doors. We did not know what was going on. Do you know that at the first meeting, the president of the Security Council came to the Council and said, “Look, we are now going to have consultation for a short while. Please stay seated till we come back.” This was when the war started. The war started at 3:10, according to Israel, in the morning of the 5th, after midnight. He said that he didn’t convene the meeting because 20 minutes afterwards the Israelis requested an urgent meeting, to condemn the situation. The president did not convene the meeting. War was going on.

JK: So, the president of the Security Council at that time was Denmark. There was a request to convene the Security Council but he didn’t do it.

el-F: He said to convene at 9:30 but it met at 10:30. And at 10:30, after 20 minutes, he said that he had a statement to make. And he made a statement in which he said ... [el-Farra is looking through his papers for the statement.]

JK: The president was from Denmark. Do you have his name there?

el-F: Yes, his name was Tabor. After hearing the members who wanted to speak, it appeared that the draft resolution prepared by the United States would not get the required majority. Meanwhile, Gideon Rafael [the ambassador of Israel] presented his letter of accreditation to the president of the Security Council, saying that he has been accredited to represent Israel before the Security Council. In connection with the letter dated 23 May, 1967, from Canada and Denmark [it has a document number], Rafael suggested that he be invited to participate in the Council's discussions on this matter. He was given the floor and he made his statement which included reference to the background against which the present military confrontation was taking place. He then said – and how do you explain this, out of the blue; it suggests malicious intention – “It comes to my mind a very fitting statement by the late Adlai Stevenson when his country, the United States, found itself threatened by Cuba. He said right here in the Security Council, -- this is Stevenson quoted by Rafael – ‘Were we to do nothing until the knife was sharpened? Were we to stand idly by until it was at our throat?’”

I say that this statement reflects malicious intention on the part of Israel which led to the attack of 5 June. A new ambassador, and he came with that statement to expose what Israel had in mind. This is a point I wanted to make. The president announced and

this is the 2nd of June at 10:30. The president announced, “There are no more speakers on my list,” – the Israeli had spoken and the Egyptian, and remember that Jordan was watching – “there are no more speakers on my list, but before adjourning the meeting, I wish to make a brief statement.” This was Tabor, the president. “As a result of informal consultations among members of the Security Council, there appears to be general agreement to hold the next meeting on Monday, 5 June, 1967, at 3:00pm.” This was before the war. “Monday at 3:00pm, Monday.” The war started on Monday, not at 3:00pm, but at 3:00 in the morning. With the understanding that the members of the Council would hold themselves available for – and listen to this – “for consultations over the weekend.” Why? “And for an urgent meeting of the Security Council before Monday afternoon in case there are new developments that may require the convening of the Security Council before Monday afternoon.” Is he a prophet? Did he predict it?

JK: So, the Israeli attacks didn’t start until Monday, but he is saying on Friday that the Security Council members should be available.

el-F: Was he a prophet? He was from Denmark. In case there needs to be an urgent meeting of the Security Council, in case there are any new developments that may require the convening of the Security Council before Monday afternoon. So, on the 5th of June, the president opened the meeting at 10:30, earlier than the time agreed upon, saying that it was supposed to be at 3:00 but we have convened it at 10:30 in the morning. He said, “The representative of Israel called me officially in my capacity as president of the Security Council, and reported as follows: ‘I have just received reports that Egyptian land

and air forces moved against Israel and Israeli forces are now engaged in repelling the Egyptian forces. Since the early hours of this morning, fierce fighting has broken out between Egyptian air and armored forces which moved against Israel and our forces went into action to contain them.” The president continued, “The Israeli Permanent Representative told me that he is wishing to make an urgent request for a meeting.” He asked for a meeting. He knew that they would be meeting at 3:30 in the afternoon so he wanted to have all this time for a war. Do you follow me? Am I clear?

JK: Yes.

el-F: On Friday, they had fixed a meeting for Monday. War started at 3:00 in the morning on Monday. He is coming and saying, what is he saying? He is saying that he is wishing to make an urgent communication about this to the Security Council when it is convened. “Relax boys, see you at 3:30. I have something to say at 3:30. I am fighting a war with killing and so forth, a victim, but don’t meet. I will speak at 3:30.” This was the meaning. The president, at 3:30, said, twenty minutes later, “This morning, the Permanent Representative of the United Arab Republic (Egypt) informed me as follows: ‘Israeli has committed aggression against our Republic.’” This was Egypt. The president said, “The information that I have received from the Permanent Representative confirmed the exchange of fire.” Exchange of fire! I have documents that say that he informed the State Department that the war was started by Israel. I can bring you the text of the State Department.

Then the president asked the members of the Security Council to stay available because the recess would not last long. He said, “Stay here; we will not be long. We are just meeting in consultation. Stay here, we are coming back.” What is happening? War was going on. Deputies of the Security Council members, expecting the resumption of the meeting any minute, could not leave the Security Council chamber. You will not find this in books. I was watching with my own eyes. The meeting which was supposed to last a short time, lasted eleven hours, during which the results of the war was almost determined.

JK: So, during those hours in which they were meeting, the war ...

el-F: It did not take 6 days, it took 6 hours. It was almost over.

JK: Still, at this point there was not a call for a cease-fire? The Security Council had not called for a cease-fire?

el-F: No, the United States came with a cease-fire which was not accepted by us. I am saying that everything was discussed behind closed doors and agreed upon behind closed doors, also, in the absence of the Arab parties concerned. The Indian representative played a very constructive role, but he couldn't foresee every development nor was it possible for him to leave the meetings for consultation with the Arabs.

JK: None of the Arab states were in the discussions? Even though they were directly involved?

el-F: No.

JK: So, it was a closed meeting of only the 15 members.

el-F: Only the 15 members, yes. Only the 15 members, we were out, watching and hearing whispering from here and there which makes you more confused.

JK: How many hours did they debate behind closed doors?

el-F: This is a very important point that will not read in books. I was watching all this with my own eyes. Mind you now, the Israelis had said that they would speak at the 3:30 meeting, no rush. The staff members of the United Nations, who were all were sympathetic with the Israelis, came down to give information about what was happening. They came down with a radio, a transistor radio.

JK: When the Security Council was meeting and you were not able to be in the same room, where were you sitting? In the consultation room next to the Security Council?

el-F: No, in the main Security Council chamber.

JK: Oh, they were not even meeting in the Security Council room.

el-F: No, in a private room, behind closed doors.

JK: Okay, so you were in the Security Council chamber and they were off in the consultation room, to the side.

el-F: Exactly, in the consultation room.

JK: So, they were all meeting in there and you were kept waiting.

el-F: Me and all the deputies. We were afraid to leave to even get a cup of coffee because we were afraid that we would have to meet any minute, war was going on.

JK: That's right, you didn't want to leave the room. That must have been extremely frustrating.

el-F: They came down with the transistor radios and spread them out in different corners of the delegates lounge, here, there and everywhere. And the ambassadors who listened to the radios came to tell us that the Arabs were advancing. Israel is defeated. And they would come to us, "Congratulations, my colleague, victory for you, you are advancing." And we believed that because there was no connection with our capitals, no connection, no telexes, no telephones, no telegrams for hours.

JK: So, you were listening to the radio.

el-F: We got our reflections from the radios. And the radios were planted to convey this kind of news. There is a radio station in New York that gives the news all the time. The news was always that the Arabs were advancing. And meanwhile telegrams were coming to U-Thant saying, "You on the Security Council, please save Israel." We were the victors who would be defeated and they were the victims who would be the victors.

JK: So, how was a cease-fire finally reached?

el-F: A cease-fire was reached finally when they reached an agreement that territory could not be gained through the use of force and calling on Israel to withdraw. A cease-fire came at a later stage. The first draft submitted by the United States called for an immediate cease-fire. We said no. Why no? Because way back in 1949, we had a cease-fire which became the armistice line which lasted for 25-30 years. So, we said a cease-fire with occupation, no. Withdrawal and cease-fire, yes. Am I clear?

JK: Yes, right, so you didn't want to agree to a cease-fire at that moment because that would establish a new line that included your territory. You wanted withdrawal first.

el-F: Withdrawal followed by a cease-fire, but a cease-fire without a request for withdrawal, no. This is legitimate; we have experience. Fool me once, shame on you;

fool me twice, shame on me. So, in this case we were fooled once; we cannot be fooled a second time.

JK: We seem to have run out of time. Thank you so much.

el-F: My pleasure.

Yale-UN Oral History Project

Muhammad el-Farra

Jean Krasno, Interviewer

March 13, 1998

Amman, Jordan

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