

RECORD OF A MEETING WITH MR YASIR ARAFAT, CHAIRMAN OF THE PLO, IN BEIRUT ON 2 DECEMBER 1980

Prime Minister

*This is the fuller record
mentioned by Lord Carrington*

this afternoon

Amr - 15/11

1. H M Ambassador Beirut had arranged with the PLO that he and I should go to the office of the PLO's Political Department at 9.00 pm. On arrival we found 'Abu Ja'far', the deputy head of the Department, and 'Abu Yahya', an assistant. We chatted with them for about 50 minutes before a telephone call came through to notify us that Arafat's earlier meeting had ended. We went by car, following Abu Ja'far's car, to another block of flats. There was a guard of honour of about half a dozen. We were shown into Arafat's office where, besides him, there was Abu Jihad (Khalil al-Wazir) and an interpreter. Arafat, who was wearing a surgical collar, gives a much more prepossessing appearance in person than in his pictures: his beard, which is streaked with grey, is short but quite respectable, and he was neatly dressed. He speaks fluent English, only occasionally having to refer to his interpreter for a word or phrase.

2. Having explained my function and my wish to re-educate myself in the affairs of the region, I said that HMG attached prime importance to the Middle East question, and that with the EC we hoped to make a serious contribution to a settlement of it. He had done a lot of work on the practical issues to which the principles set out in the Venice Declaration give rise and our intention, subject to what Heads of Government decided that day in Luxembourg, was to make further contacts with the parties, through the Presidency, in order to draw out ideas for dealing with these practical problems. We should also be talking to the Americans, whose influence with the Israelis would be essential, in an attempt to nudge them along and to use constructively our contacts with the PLO. We should have to find a new formula and certainly a new label for any peace-making process if all the Arab parties were to be involved. In all this, it would be extremely helpful if the PLO could say in public, what I believed they had said in private, that a negotiated settlement was acceptable to them and that they would recognise Israel, even if that recognition had to be stated as conditional on withdrawal etc.

3. Arafat said this was not fair. He himself had made public statements which implicitly met my point and the Palestine National Council, for example, in its resolutions in 1974, 1977 and as recently as January 1979, had made

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clear its acceptance of a Palestinian state within such areas as were evacuated by Israel - with the implicit understanding that Israel would exist in the remainder. In the autumn of 1977, the PLO spokesman had welcomed a joint Soviet-US statement to that effect, and although President Carter had subsequently repudiated the statement, Arafat had himself accepted it in March 1978. It had not been easy for him to take that step. His own father, who had fought against Jewish settlement in the '30s, would regard him now as a traitor.

4. It was not fair, moreover, to ask the PLO to go further, since the Palestinians were the victims. It was their tragedy that they were stateless, homeless, with no passports, no rights. He had had a passport, it was true, but he had felt it right to give it up in order to share the lot of his people, who could not travel or send their children for education, and who, alone of the Arabs, could not even buy land in Lebanon, for example, for a graveyard.

5. Finally, it was not fair that the PLO should be regarded as the tool of others. They were free: they were nobody's slaves. They had attended the Islamabad Conference to discuss Afghanistan despite Soviet and Syrian attempts to prevent them; they would have gone to the recent Amman summit, if King Hussain had been ready to accede to their proposal for a two-week postponement. This decision not to attend had been their own, not Syria's. They had had good relations with the Jordanians up to three days before the conference. The Syrian and Iraqi Ba'ath parties were self-proclaimed socialists. Who knew what Libya was? But he, Arafat, was 'not even a socialist', and yet he alone was treated as an outcast.

6. Asked what the PLO's objection to the Venice Declaration was, Arafat said they had been suspicious of the word 'association' in the context of the role assigned to the Palestinians: why not 'participation'? We suggested that he was perhaps reading too much into this and that probably the same Arabic word, ishtirak, would be used for both.

7. Asked what role he saw for the Soviet Union in any peace-making process, Arafat said that they must be involved before the final stage, but not necessarily from the start. The Soviet treaty with Syria, he remarked, had more significance than the Soviet treaty with Iraq.

8. Asked about the crisis between Syria and Jordan, Arafat said that it was sufficient to know that it was settled. Both sides had agreed to cool things down.

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9. Turning to the Iraqi-Iranian war, Arafat claimed great personal credit, first for persuading the Iranian authorities to declare their intention to respect freedom of navigation in the Straits of Hormuz, and, secondly, after the Iranian attacks on the Kuwaiti border post at Abdali, for persuading them to repudiate any intention to attack the Amirates. It was important to prevent the war spreading, and he personally had made a major contribution to that. As for the prospects for peace, it was important to avoid the word 'mediation' which had a bad connotation for Shia's following the betrayal of Ali Ibn Abi Talib in the mediation with Mu'awiya in the 7th century AD. He believed that the non-aligned efforts were more likely to be successful than the Islamic Conference's - he seemed to discount the Secretary General's representative, Olaf Palme. The reason was that the Iranians would argue to any Muslim that since they represented the truth, any good Muslim must support them, while the Iraqis, as Arabs, would argue that any good Arab must support them. This put anybody in the Islamic Conference in an impossible position.

10. Asked about the possibility of evacuating shipping from the Shatt al Arab, Arafat said both sides had agreed to this.

11. The meeting, which was conducted throughout in a friendly and sometimes bantering tone (although Arafat showed signs of passion when talking of the tragedy of Palestine) ended at midnight.

John F. Reid

JF
John Graham
(signed in his absence)

9 December 1980