

Yale-UN Oral History

Jan Eliasson
James Sutterlin, Interviewer
November 9, 1999
New York, NY

James Sutterlin: Mr. Eliasson, I want to first thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this Yale Oral History devoted to the United Nations. Our purpose today is to discuss your role in bringing an end the Iran/Iraq war. And to begin with I would like to ask when and in what capacity did you first become involved in the subject and the efforts to end the war.

Jan Eliasson: I was, in 1980, Director of the division for Africa and Asia in the Foreign Ministry in Stockholm. I had worked with the Prime Minister before when I had been in the United States; I had been in communication with the Prime Minister's office on Vietnam, which was a big issue, of course, in European politics, not only Swedish politics. Through that issue, and my work at the embassy in Washington, I had personally got to know Olof Palme, or at least met him. So there was a personal relationship between us. Also, I had the function in the foreign ministry that was most closely associated to what was happening between Iran and Iraq. The war broke out in September 1980; Olof Palme was asked to be the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Iran and Iraq in early November. And November 12, he was called by [Kurt] Waldheim and asked whether he would accept this assignment. He accepted it in the evening of the 12th of November, and the following morning, after consultation on his side with the Swedish Foreign Minister - because Palme at that time was leader of the

opposition - he asked me whether I would want to assist him in the mediation efforts and accompany him that very same day to New York where he was going to meet urgently with the Secretary-General and other key personalities. So I accepted that very day, packed my bags, and we had a press conference in Stockholm. And off we went, and then we spent two days or three days in New York, preparing for the mission. We then immediately started the first round of shuttle diplomacy in November 1980 followed by two or three shuttles that year, very intense work, getting along mediation efforts. We continued also the first half of 1981, also intensely, so altogether, I think, until mid-summer 1981, we had four shuttle visits to the area.

JS: And how would you describe your shuttle visits? Some of the people whom you met with are still the same people?

JE: Of course on the Iraqi side it was exactly the same people you would meet today. We spent time with Saddam Hussein, considerable time with Saddam Hussein personally. We spent time with Tariq Aziz, but also his predecessor, Hamadi, I think is his name. He is now speaker of Parliament, he was Foreign Minister then. Tariq Aziz was there, too I recall very strongly. We met also a Vice-Minister, a high official in the foreign ministry by the name of Kittani, Ismat Kittani, who is also around but now in completely different capacities. Saddam Hussein and Tariq Aziz were the key people on the Iraqi side. They were always saying, bragging almost, during the war, that you would see changes in the opinions and power, people in power in Iran, but never in Iraq. It seems to be true, although the change probably would occur sometime by natural reasons.

Anyway, on the Iranian side, there was quite a turmoil. We met people who were later to be assassinated: Rajai, the Prime Minister of Iran. We met Bani Sadr, who was leading a more modern tradition, more western-oriented tradition. We could always distinguish the Bani Sadr followers from the mullah followers by the Bani Sadr people having ties while the others were dressed in a more revolutionary fashion. Actually, Olof Palme was joking, saying that we actually had two negotiations, one between Iran and Iraq, and one negotiation in Iran between the mullahs and the Bani Sadr camp. The most important person we met who then later was assassinated was Ayatollah Beheshti, who was extremely powerful, enormously respected, and very strong. We met him, he only spoke German as a foreign language, so only I and Olof Palme were allowed to enter his room. He closed the door behind us even by a key. Diego Cordovez and a few others were rather dissatisfied, waiting outside, and he, Olof Palme, and I were talking in German because Ayatollah Beheshti had been a local mullah in Hamburg.

It turned out to be one of the most interesting conversations. This was in June 1981, and he actually then both found a solution – which later unfortunately did not materialize – to the closed ships in the Shatt al Arab, but also actually lined out a solution and accepted the elements that we had developed vaguely on a comprehensive settlement. And Olof Palme was more optimistic than I had ever seen him during the work on the negotiations after that conversation. Approximately three weeks later, I recall, we received the terrible news in Baghdad, actually through international channels, that Ayatollah Beheshti had been killed, and the terrorist act was committed by the Mojahedin camp against the headquarters of the Islamic party. Seventy-two people were killed at one time. So it was on the Iranian side, a varied lot of people that we met. If I look back

today at the people we met at that time, I don't think anybody is still left, except of course Rafsanjani, who was in different periods, playing different roles.

JS: Khomeini was not yet there?

JE: Khomeini was alive. We never asked to see Khomeini, because we were afraid a 'no' from him would end all negotiation efforts. So we never asked for a meeting and no meeting was offered either. We met later Khomeini but Rafsanjani was probably the most influential person that we met, and who of course is still around. Most of the others are gone.

JS: Now in the development of the planning of the so-called comprehensive plan, how important were you and Olof Palme in that, or how important was the Secretariat, or for that matter Waldheim?

JE: Well, I think in the beginning we played a very active role. We actually developed both a step-by-step approach and a comprehensive approach. We were all the time aware of the possibility of either going for a comprehensive solution or a step-by-step. Comprehensive was to Olof Palme and I, the preferred option. We worked that out together with Diego Cordovez, Iqbal Riza, and the team. Raymond Sommereyns was a very important one, a lawyer who is still around in the UN. In that comprehensive package, we brought in all the elements for a solution, and tragically, what later came out in 1987-88, Resolution 588, very closely resembled what we suggested in 1981, or even

in the late part of 1980. And it is of course tragic that in the meantime, 700,000 people were killed, 2 or 3 million people were refugees, and tremendous material destruction took place. So the comprehensive settlement was what we preferred and presented in general terms to begin with, and a little more precisely later on. But at the same time, we, of course, realized that if there was no progress on the comprehensive solution, we would have to accept the step-by-step solution, although the problem with the step-by-step solution is the parties have to know where they end if they put the steps in one certain direction. But we felt that this could also be a confidence building process, something we then developed later in 1983-84. Even in the beginning, we felt that the release of ships that were stuck in the Shatt al Arab could be both a local cease-fire and a confidence building measure, and the first step in a step-by-step solution. So we actually proceeded in parallel with discussions on a comprehensive settlement.

JS: And that was a success?

JE: No, it was not a success. There is something in your question that gives me the impression that those ships were released. In fact, they were not.

JS: I thought some were released.

JE: No, well, maybe a small fraction of them, but in fact seventy-two were stuck there, and very few, if any, if I can recall, got out. They were hostages, more or less, and we were extremely disappointed that this solution did not come about. We were under

tremendous pressure to act, not least by Lloyd's Insurance Company in London, who had billions of dollars at stake in those 72 ships. But also it would have been a local ceasefire, a very important step.

Now, it failed for an absolutely ridiculous reason. We discussed in the end of this issue who would pay for it. And it turned out that both sides insisted on paying for the whole operation. I've never in my life, neither before nor after, been in that position, that negotiations fail because both sides insist on paying for the operation. But for both parties, this turned out to be symbolic of who had the sovereignty over Shatt al Arab. By paying the whole operation, both of them wanted to prove that it was they who had the sovereignty over the Shat al Arab. We actually were - I think it was a Saturday morning - sitting with Bani Sadr, and Bani Sadr brought out his pen to sign on to the agreement that we had worked out very carefully. Then he just asked to take a pause and discuss it with some experts, and in the afternoon, it was No. Because he had learned about the Iraqi's strong insistence on paying for it and then he realized that this would have been used against him in a more basic settlement.

JS: You mentioned Shatt al Arab. Could I just skip ahead and ask you, throughout the whole series of endless negotiations, how important did you assess this difference between the two countries to be?

JE: It was not an important issue in substance. It was a symbol of the conflict. The reason for the conflict was much more complex. It had to do with the fear of the Iraqi side for export of revolution and the hatred that existed on the Iranian side for the way

Saddam Hussein had treated Khomeini while he was in Karbala, Iraq. All this fuelled the mutual suspicion of fear. It was a basic confrontation between two different systems, the fear on the Iraqi side that this Shi'a Muslim wave would enter Iraq and throw Saddam Hussein's regime over. This, I think, was the real reason behind the conflict. The reason on the surface was the Shatt al Arab issue because it became an important issue, it became the object of negotiations, and in the end, what we hoped, the place where we could save face. But since the real reasons were much deeper, of course, you came to this conclusion rather soon, that whatever solution you presented would not be accepted unless you dealt with the basic fears and basic suspicions. But it was enormously tragic to see that, like two boxers, we advised them to stop the fighting in the fourth round, but they continued until the 15th when they were two bloody bodies falling over each other. And we knew all the time that they would come to this solution in the end, but it took war-weariness and eight years of war before they realized that.

JS: How did you assess the functioning of the Secretariat and the Secretary-General in this first period when Waldheim was still the Secretary-General?

JE: Waldheim was very helpful. Olof Palme and he had a very courteous relationship, almost of the old Hapsburg Swedish royal traditions. The choreography was very stylish, they showed great respect for each other. Waldheim deferred very much to Olof Palme. Every time he came here, and I was with him every time, he organized a lunch in his private dining room with his closest advisors. Brian Urquhart, I recall, in particular, Diego Cordovez, of course, was closely working with us, and he offered all

assistance. Olof Palme insisted that I would be his closest advisor outside of Diego Cordovez and I was given complete access. In the beginning we worked extremely close together, in fact we developed our ideas together during our trips. We were sometimes out ten days, fourteen days, we shuttled between Baghdad and Tehran a couple of times. So we were working night and day with the issues together, which was a period where it was very close coordination. But we were simply forced to work together.

JS: And Diego Cordovez was there?

JE: Diego was there and was working loyally with Olof Palme. The problems, of course, became more clear when we were not doing the shuttling between 1982 and 1984, for two reasons: One, geographic distance. It's not easy when Olof Palme and I were in Stockholm and Diego Cordovez was here with access to the Secretary-General personally all the time. The second reason, of course, was that Olof Palme in September 1982 was elected Prime Minister in Sweden which gave him much more responsibility at home and much less time to deal with Iraq and Iran. I was extremely impressed by the time he spent on Iran-Iraq while he was in the opposition. I was talking to him practically every day for some periods and I became very close to him. His wife later told me that Iran-Iraq was constantly on his mind, and she told me - I was very touched by that - how close we were and how often Olof talked about me and the Secretary-General and Iran-Iraq, and "I have to call Jan" and I was very moved by that, especially after the very tragic circumstances under which he died. He was assassinated, as you know, on the 28th of February 1986. So that period between 1982 and 1986 was less contact and perhaps

more discussion on who did what, but I had the tremendous help of Iqbal Riza, who was part of our team from the very beginning, and who is still a very close friend of mine. We've been close friends all through the years, and I had always all information, all relevant information, coming from Iqbal Riza to me, perhaps not always from Diego Cordovez, due to time constraints, or other reasons, but with Iqbal Riza I had absolute openness.

JS: So there was no problem there?

JE: In the beginning not at all. In the beginning, we were working extremely closely. Even the period 1982-1984, we had good contacts. I was here frequently when Olof Palme became Prime Minister. I was on mission here often on my own for his sake. I also went to Iran and Iraq, particularly Iran in bilateral capacities, because I was first the Prime Minister's Chef de Cabinet in international issues in Sweden. Then I became Political Director General in the Swedish foreign ministry and that gave me also a pretext to put on the Swedish hat to go to Iran/Iraq. So during that period I had frequent contact with New York. With Cordovez, often, but also very often, as I said, with Iqbal Riza. In 1983-84, we developed the concept of confidence building measures where we built on the ideas that we had on Shatt al Arab which had failed, and the ships at that time were starting to rust, and we developed other such confidence building measures. The most successful one was, of course, the idea that was developed very much by Iqbal Riza and the team around him here, and also Diego of course. Also with myself, and with Olof

Palme's full blessing and very active interest in the idea of stopping the bombardment of civilian targets and the villages, which came to a solution on the 11th of June 1984.

The beauty of that agreement was that it was a commitment of the two not to attack, but they didn't have to make a contractual arrangement between each other because they hated each other so much, and they didn't want to give each other legitimacy. So it was actually a cable sent and I remember the phone calls to Iqbal about this cable sent, and we said, "Let's put a deadline for the answer so we have a cable coming back confirming the agreement." So we got first the Iraqi agreement and then the Iranian agreement and Iqbal called me, jubilant, "We have the agreement, and it actually held." Then we wanted to follow that up with restrictions on attacks against the traffic, ships in the Persian Gulf, and also restrictions on the use of chemical weapons which we started to hear about in 1983.

Then, we had more and more evidence that this was taking place. When I was in Tehran on a bilateral mission, 1983, I think, I was offered to go to hospital and see the people who had been attacked by chemical weapons. Others also were given proof of what was taking place. Then Iqbal Riza was courageous enough to suggest here in New York – and it was approved by Pérez de Cuéllar, also courageously – that a mission had to be sent there. I don't think the matter came up in the Security Council, it was done, I think, within the Secretariat.

JS: I think it came up in the Security Council but the Secretary-General decided that it would be better to do it on his own so it would not be associated with the Security Council.

JE: Right. Anyway, Iqbal went there and it ended up in a pretty controversial report. I think Iqbal himself had to pay a bit of a price at the time for doing it, but it was a very important report. In retrospect, I regret very much that the world did not take as seriously as it should the reports that were so damning against Iraq at the time. Olof Palme and I were very upset, both about the use of chemical weapons and the fact that there was such a lukewarm reaction to the use of these weapons. It was no doubt used first by the Iraqis; it is possible that it might have been used by the Iranians but not at all to the same extent as the Iraqis, as they later proved in Halabja and elsewhere.

JS: Now I want to go back just a minute. You were going to first, really, to have direct contact with Saddam Hussein. What was your impression or Olof Palme's impression of Saddam Hussein at that point?

JE: A ruthless leader. An absolute despot. You could feel fear in the room when you met him. I met him also on my own, when I took over the mediation efforts in 1988. I went to the region and I saw him then alone, and I recall conversations where people turned pale if I did not react the way that normally one does facing Saddam Hussein. I recall moments when he looked at me in a combination of puzzlement, surprise, and slight irritation, that anyone could pose questions of that nature. And the rest of the people in the room were absolutely stunned that anyone could pose those questions. They weren't very tough [questions], but very simple ones. I just wanted to know whether he had any plan of going back to the internationally recognized boundaries and

so forth and he came out with a long story about Iraq's capabilities and that indeed Iraq could stay long in the area but this was only to defend its own territory "once we get Shatt al Arab." Then he brought me into the map room and, with his pointer, showed how far in they were, just to prove his point. And he came back to my question two or three times. He wasn't used to having any searching or probing questions to him. And of course the whole security apparatus was extremely tough. You could hear it in the walls, see it around yourself. It was a very violent society, and the violence very much came from the top.

JS: And that was there from the very beginning, even at the time when - ?

JE: Yes, we heard all the stories which we hardly believed in, about how people and the resistance and also inside the government had been treated, and if only a third of what we heard was true, it was a very brutal society.

But he was also very charismatic. He exuberated power and strength; he was very fit. He had a very determined look, looked well, in the beginning particularly. But he stood up pretty well all through the years, physically I think, he did not allow himself to look in any way or show that he would be shaken by anything. He was, of course, a very strong person.

JS: Others have said that nobody else on the Iraqi side even dared talk when he was in the room.

JE: No.

JS: It was always just – that was your experience?

JE: That's right, I can't recall anyone speaking when he was there. I can say, once, this particular situation where they got pale, there was for once not a translator who was very good, or at least he made a bad translation. He started out saying to me that "Oh, Mr. Eliasson, would you like to give your speech first or am I to give my speech first?" So I got a bit confused, he probably wanted to know, "Are you going to begin?" So I said, "I don't plan to give a speech, I just have a few simple questions to put," and everybody jumped. Well, then he looked at me again with this puzzlement and amusement, "What kind of questions?" Said it off rather abruptly. And then of course, the basic question is the issue whether you are prepared to go back to internationally recognized boundaries. That's when I thought that some people were going to faint! And so we had a three-hour conversation which ended up by him taking me like this by the shoulder and saying, "OK, let's go to my map room and show you where we could have been."

JS: So it was not a very optimistic beginning.

JE: No, it wasn't. We saw all the possibilities of finding a settlement. We knew approximately how the conflict would end, but it seemed to me that either two parties come to an agreement when they are equally strong or equally weak. And in this case,

they were pretty strong. Well, the Iranians were rather weak, but they were not hurt by the war so much in the beginning. We also knew that hatred would increase and the possibilities to come to compromises would be diminishing after every month of this terrible magnitude of killing. So instead they decided – well, not decided - but by the turn of events, they continued and when they finally made up, both were equally weak.

The problem was, of course, that Iran had a moral superiority in the beginning, because they claimed, rightfully I would say, that the Security Council should have been clearer on the issue of withdrawal. It was a cease-fire resolution alone, and nothing about withdrawal, and they claimed that the Security Council was partial to Iraq, in favor of Iraq. Olof Palme and I discussed how we could handle this, because our whole credibility was at stake with a resolution which, also in our own view, was a weak one. Therefore I recalled international law and reminded Olof Palme of the principle of non-acquisition of territory by force. So the line we took with the Iranians already in November and December 1980 was to remind them that even with their criticism (and we couldn't be disloyal to the Security Council of course), we were neutral. We said there was also basic international law, so if you would prove that this is a case of Iraqi aggression as you claim, then of course the principle of non-acquisition of territory by force should be applied and then the territories that are acquired by force would be returned. That made the Iranians more positively inclined towards Olof Palme in such a way that we almost feared a split between Olof Palme and the Secretary-General on the one hand and the Security Council on the other, where the Iranians would preferred to deal with us and not at all deal with the Security Council when they had that resolution which they considered so weak.

Now, *they* then, made the almost fatal mistake of crossing into Iraqi territory in 1982, and by that they lost the moral high ground which they had in their hands. If they had stopped at their border, they would have been doing the diplomacy tremendously well. But they were then almost a pariah nation after the hostage-taking with the United States, and they felt that nobody would care anyway. Whatever they did, they would be put in the doghouse; this was more or less the way they spoke to Olof Palme and myself. Then they went into Iraq and then I think there came a resolution which included the call for withdrawal to internationally recognized boundaries, which made them even more bitter.

That was the time to wake up on the basic principle of international law, I suspect. But in the beginning, they knew very little about international law. We met the revolutionaries 1980-81, and of course they had been there for a year or so after Khomeini came back into power and they didn't know a thing about clinical international law. At least, the people on the mullah side had very weak knowledge of international law. I recall, once we had a negotiation about the withdrawal of troops, we were discussing the principle that Iraq would withdraw and we wanted to just make sure that the Iranians then would allow a three-week period for the Iraqis to withdraw to internationally recognized boundaries. We thought that was a reasonable time for an orderly withdrawal. Then they introduced the shari'a rule, that if you break into your neighbor's house, you are supposed to be punished. So they were talking about giving every soldier twenty or forty whips and we were just shaking our heads. This was not normal negotiation, at least that I had seen or was going to see later on.

But Olof Palme was a very innovative person, and a very patient person - normally, that is not associated with him, if you look at his political style in Sweden and elsewhere. He was asking Iqbal Riza to look for something in the Quran that we could use when we started the negotiations the following morning. It had been an awful negotiation, where we got nowhere because of this strange reflection on the Iranian side. Then the following morning, Iqbal Riza came up, hollow-eyed but jubilant, because he had found a passage in the Quran, I think Sura number 15 or 51, where it says that if the enemy turns his back at you, you are not allowed to attack him.

Now we started that negotiation with those words and the Iranians were touched, almost moved to tears, that we had cited the Quran, had found an opening in the Quran. I still remember the sticky beard of someone embracing me afterwards, a revolutionary saying, "Thank you for showing respect for our religion and culture."

So, in the beginning it was a very strange exercise of talking with Iran, not least because of that lack of knowledge of international law. If they had known international law better, they might have still seen the benefits of not crossing the border in '82. That was revenge, they had to do it, the basic shari'a, the Quran like the Old Testament, in fact, says: Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.

JS: And already at that point, were they determined that somebody should declare that Iraq was the aggressor?

JE: They were absolutely convinced that the war had been started by the Iraqis, although they were pretty vague about the Iraqi assertions that there had been artillery

attacks across the border. They did not deny of course, in the beginning, the charge of export of revolution, because in the beginning the Islamic revolution was going to be if not world-wide, at least a region-wide activity. So on those counts they were a bit vague. But when it comes to the organized attack, there was no doubt that it was started by the Iraqis, so they came back to that all the time. Their [the Iraqi's] guilt had to be established, and that they also should be punished for that, pay a price, which later also was discontinued within the framework of Resolution 598. Later, it was my job to implement that resolution.

JS: And was the order of the requirements of 598 that caused you so many problems?

JE: Right.

JS: And that was never resolved until –

JE: We've discussed whether the sequence was a time sequence or just a logical sequence. This was our big problem, and it wasn't solved until after the Kuwait invasion when Iraq suddenly realized, because of the pressures, that they had to agree, and in a way 598 fell into oblivion. It hasn't been fully implemented. What we wanted also to work with, we tried to start with paragraph eight, with regional security, just to get things moving, but we were also stuck in the beginning on the prisoners of war [issue]. Of course the guilt issue was there too.

JS: I wanted to ask you about the regional security concept. Where did that come from and did you really ever have any vision of what –

JE: It's like today in Kosovo, and in the Balkans, where you realize more and more that you have to have regional security in order to avoid explosions within this region. This we finally realized in the Balkans region, that if we don't have stronger regional cooperation, if we don't have a prospect of this region attaching itself closer to European integration, then these explosions will come every third or fourth year. This was very much an Olof Palme concept; we were very much in on the regional security. We had just worked on the CSCE, the confidence-building measures of the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe, now OSCE. This is classical Swedish thinking. Gianni Picco was interested too. He saw it as a device because he worked very closely with me in my last four years, 1988-92. It was the concept we thought could be fruitfully developed but...

JS: Did you have any serious discussions about it with either side?

JE: Yes, oh yes, the Iranians particularly Yavad Zarif, Deputy Foreign Minister, every time I see him, he says, you taught me a new expression: Confidence Building Measures. In the beginning we laughed about it, but now it is a good one. Actually the Iranians say that they are working along these lines in the development of the relations with the Gulf countries, except of course – well, maybe they would even in the end include Iraq in that. The war seems distant today. But it was an interesting concept and I wish we could have

worked harder. You know, in negotiations, it is always important to keep something going, to have talks on something, and we had a list, it was like an a la carte menu. I had a little bit of involvement in [Resolution] 598. When you asked me these questions, I actually recall that I was Political Director in the Swedish foreign ministry, 1987. Olof Palme was assassinated in February 1986. In that time, I had no official function in the Iran/Iraq issues between 1986 and 1988, until I was given the Personal Representative role. However, at the funeral in Stockholm, Pérez de Cuéllar asked the incoming Prime Minister, Ingvar Carlsson, whether I could be available for him for advice, since I had been working so hard with the negotiations. So I was in contact with Diego Cordovez and with Iqbal Riza most intensely, during this period 1986-87.

In the beginning of 1987, I had an invitation by Michael Armacost and Dick Murphy to come to Washington. I think it was in the middle of February 1987. They said that now is the time to push for a resolution to the Iran-Iraq war, because they had received indications that the Russians - I don't know to what extent they were talking to the Chinese - would not necessarily go against a solution along the lines that they hoped. And then, actually, we sketched together the elements at a two-day meeting. Well, we met one day, then lunch, and then I met Dick Murphy the other day. We discussed the elements that could be part of a resolution, which later turned out to be, of course, 598, and which then of course was very much negotiated with the P5 [Permanent Five Members of the Security Council] and where, of course, Pérez de Cuéllar and the people around him played an important role. But I recall that I was a contact both with one of the P5 on this issue and also the British but less so. And the Secretariat.

JS: That's interesting. And was that before the Secretary-General had his press conference, which I think was on the first or beginning of the year, in which he proposed that the five foreign ministers should meet?

JE: No, it was after that. We all pressed that we follow the issue, that we have to bring it back now, and as conditions were improving – we had, at that time, Gorbachev in power and there were signs of Russia that there was change underway.

JS: Gorbachev was already there?

JE: Gorbachev was there. We had generally the feeling that something was cooking in a positive way, and that perhaps one could actually devise a formula, to establish the Security Council authority in a good and solid way, and also finally get the Iranians to realize that the Security Council, which would in the end be necessary, could bring about peace. So I think there was pressure on Pérez de Cuéllar: I myself from Stockholm, people around him here, maybe some people in the region who felt that this war was indeed dangerous. There were, of course, conspiracy theories that many people would like to see both Iran and Iraq get very weak, there were those who even said so, but I think that it was a general realization that this could not go on. But by the beginning of 1987, there was a strong realization that there must be a strong and determined effort.

JS: That's very interesting, because that was the other question I had. During this period, did you on the Swedish side have contacts with the Permanent Members on this subject?

JE: I did.

JS: It was largely with - ?

JE: The US Our ambassador in Washington was very strong. He had a very strong personal relationship with Armacost. I think they played tennis together and Armacost had heard about me and Wille Wachtmeister who was our ambassador, he was there for 14-15 years, he became dean of the corps. I was one of his assistants when he was Political Director-General. We have a very strong personal relationship. And Wille called me and said, "You know Mike Armacost wants you to come over. You have a great chance now to make a contribution," and I flew over the following day. And we were sitting there, I have a strange feeling it was the 19th of February 1987.

JS: It could be, because the press conference of the Secretary-General was about the third or fourth of January.

JE: Oh really? I didn't recall, but now when you say it, I recall.

JS: At one point, Pérez de Cuéllar went by helicopter to the Prime Minister's country residence. Were you there? Can you describe the meeting?

JE: Oh yes, Olof Palme invited me to come up to his [the Swedish Prime Minister's] country place, which is actually a military protected area. Anyway, he has a pretty simple cottage there. We put out sheets on the field outside for the helicopter to know where to land. So there were these big white sheets out on the field, four, five of them and we saw the helicopter coming down. It was an absolutely beautiful summer, morning. It was summer 1984. Sweden was at its very best, sunny, not too hot, and Pérez de Cuéllar upbeat, happier than I'd seen him before, relaxed. He went in a rowboat out there at the rest of the Prime Minister's country residence. Gianni Picco came in, had been jogging in the morning, and said he'd never got such fresh air and so much oxygen in his lungs. Running the most beautiful passage through a wood, a forest around Palme's country residence, where the air was clean and crisp. We had a light lunch with salmon, I recall, and very good conversation, sitting out on the porch, we were all sitting in the library together. We were upbeat because we had had this little success of the June end of bombings, so we felt that now we were on to something, where a step-by-step approach could lead to a comprehensive settlement. We knew what could be the elements and the solution, but also that we could, in parallel – again, I recall the situation in 1981-82 - that we could devise more steps, so we had to brainstorm on what such steps could be. As I said earlier, it was chemical weapons which we were both very upset about, and on both sides, both the Swedish side and the UN side, and also the possibility of protecting traffic better in the Gulf and a few other things. I was using the phrase that Olof Palme loved, we had to “pull the teeth out of the war”. That was what we had our brainstorming about.

JS: To skip ahead, in the end, your question of who was responsible for the war was used by Pérez de Cuéllar in a different context, and that is for the release of hostages in Lebanon. Were you aware of that? You were at that point still Special Representative.

JE: Yes, this was a very sensitive issue. I recognized that there was a new element coming in, and I must admit that my friend Gianni Picco was a bit secretive.

JS: As he always is.

JE: Well, we had a very open relationship, I hope mutual respect for different qualities, although we also saw weaknesses, I think. But anyway, he was a bit more Byzantine than normally. I was asked together with Benon Sevan to go along to Tehran, in September 1991 it must have been, and we were to have a broad range of discussions. That's why, since Benon Sevan came along, he would discuss Afghanistan too. I would be there to give the sign that it was also official talks about the war, about Iran-Iraq, the implementation of Resolution 598. But I realized that something was cooking, because they were going to have a private meeting with Rafsanjani. At that meeting, I was not supposed to be in. Of course this made me upset. I was given some reason that I can't even recall, but it didn't quite calm me. But anyway, I felt that this was happening, and then, although they didn't really confirm that this link was going to be established, but I had the feeling and so did my associate Anders Liden, who helped me here in the mission - I was the UN ambassador. He said that he also had the feeling that something was cooking on getting a deal on hostages linked to Iraq, guilt of aggression. I had no real

problem, because my own belief actually was leaning in that direction, when it comes to who started the war, but of course to tie it to such an issue could damage strongly the credibility of Resolution 598. On the other hand, if this was a way to get a solution, maybe it could be understandable. It was kept in absolute secrecy. I think I was put in a position of what the Americans call “deniability”. I was not involved at all in any such discussions but I had a vague feeling that this was coming.

JS: In this connection, I’ve also interviewed Ismat Kittani and Kittani insists that on the Iraqi side they had no idea about it until Pérez de Cuéllar’s book came out, that on the Iraqi side they never totally trusted Pérez de Cuéllar. Did you have that impression?

JE: Yes, I have that feeling too. They really didn’t trust anybody in the UN. I don’t think they trusted Olof Palme either. I don’t know to what extent they trusted Waldheim, Cordovez, possibly, myself, I don’t know. They had reason to have a guilty conscience too. So who would they trust, if this person would get the facts out? I don’t know if they trusted anybody.

But I must also tell you about the dramatic period in August 1988, after Resolution 598 finally was accepted by both sides. The negotiations started in Geneva, and I want you to know that that cease-fire was extremely shaky. Both parties were, first of all, very nervous, very suspicious of the other side, but also very dissatisfied with the situation and the risks of the outcome for their regimes. They had the option of war as a very real option, both of them, and they also feared the other side – knowing, by the way, that the other side had the option of war. So that negotiation was probably the worst, the

most cumbersome, the most straining negotiation that I've ever gone through. I think Pérez de Cuéllar actually was absolutely exhausted when I came to relieve him in the end of August 1988. He was there himself. He looks frail but he is stronger than he looks, as you know. I like the man so much, by the way, I have tremendous sympathy for Pérez de Cuéllar. Even from what I said, I knew he wanted to put me in deniability on all that, but also I had a very warm relationship, almost a father-son relationship, I would say. He was extremely kind to me. We have been in contact through the years, always passing greetings to each other.

But I felt sorry for him because he called me in Sweden personally and said that, "I am the Secretary-General. This is taking up sixteen hours of the day for me these first three days. I've been in consultation with the parties, I've also been in contact with the P5 informally, and it turns out that you are the best candidate to help me out. Everybody would like to have you, they recall you, you were with Palme." Ismat Kittani particularly, evidently, had supported my candidature. I don't whether this is something I should regret or be grateful for! But anyway, he said, "You are the name that everybody agrees upon, both Iranians and Iraqis want you, and I want to name you my Personal Representative for Iran-Iraq." I was at the Foreign Minister's Meeting up in Kiruna, north of Sweden, and I went up to the Swedish Foreign Minister, and said, "Listen, I got this call and told him about it. Do you think I should take it?" "Of course you should," he said. "But I'm UN Ambassador," I said. "Well, you have to do both," he replied. So in my masochistic work ethic, I accepted it. I went there and this was absolutely incredible, they were so difficult. They were so suspicious. The forms of negotiation were so much reflecting the suspicions, you wouldn't believe it.

We were sitting from nine in the morning often till one o'clock at night, either in a meeting or private meeting separately with them. They were evidently trying to exhaust me because I was alone together with a team which was Ralph Zachlin, Giani Picco was still there, Downs-Thomas, and Paul Kavanaugh. We had these unending sessions. I knew they were trying to exhaust me. I'm a pretty strong person, I'm very physical and usually have been (knocks on wood). I was getting up there with a new fresh shirt in the morning, looking as though I had been waiting for them and sleeping eight hours while I in fact had been sleeping three, and this went on and on and on. It was a tremendous strain.

My wife tells me that when I relaxed over the phone, I asked her what day it is, I forgot the date of the week. And it was important to keep them working and giving them new tasks, giving them new ideas, and we even had a connection to the airport. I had a man out at the airport to let me know if they signaled to the delegations that the plane would leave. They had two planes standing there, one from Iran and one from Iraq and there was a non-aligned meeting taking place on the 6th and 7th of September in Cyprus. We were afraid they were sneaking out to go out to that meeting and then go back home and get out of my hands. So I did everything to make sure to give them issues to deal and work with. I gave them a little hope on this and that, and my big job was to keep them there, because I felt very much that there was a very frail cease-fire. The war could erupt very easily.

That went on and on, and the shape of the table was almost Vietnam-style negotiations. First the tables were facing each other, their tables, so they looked at each other. They insisted that those tables were switched in such a way that they were facing

me, us, and for the first week or so, I negotiated with Pérez de Cuéllar, then he left and I continued on my own. But then they were facing not each other but us, so that they were talking through us to the other side. We had walkie-talkies in both side rooms so that they were entering on the first split of the second together, so that nobody would have to wait for each other. We couldn't bring them together to talk directly anywhere.

Then I said to Pérez de Cuéllar, "Why don't we offer coffee and you suggest that we drink coffee at the end of the table?" And when they came in, they looked with surprise at this coffee table which was down at the end of that triangle, and at the end of coffee, Pérez de Cuéllar said, "And now I suggest we take a break and we invite you to have coffee." And they moved like animals in a herd and slowly approached each side, when they picked up coffee from each side of the table, on their side, and then in the end, Ismat Kittani showed his integrity. He walked over and spoke to the interpreter on the other side because he knew him, or he knew the language. So that was a very brave step. I don't know whether it was authorized.

Then I had something which is still known as - its been joked about both in Iraq and Iran, even Tariq Aziz remembered it when I was there for the Secretary-General in November 1997 on another mission with Brahimi and Cardenas -- I arranged something which I call not "continental breakfast" at the Inter-Continental, but "confidential breakfast." So I had a confidential breakfast with Cyrus Nasser, the brilliant Iranian ambassador in Geneva who was a close advisor to Velayati, who I think was conducting the negotiations on their side. On the Iraqi side, it was Ismat Kittani, who was there on behalf of Tariq Aziz. We had just the three of us, a very important discussion for the first time, together, in rather relaxing circumstances.

JS: And did you have the feeling that Ismat Kittani had the full confidence of the Iraqi side?

JE: I think there was a tremendous respect of his professional competence. They knew he was a master diplomat, but of course they also knew that he was a Kurd. I, myself, discovered in Ismat that there was something in the eyes, and at some instances, also when I saw him later, he was extremely relieved to live in New York, although he never crossed the line. It could cause him or his relatives many problems. But I always entertained the hope that he knew what kind of regime he was dealing with, that he would feel better in New York or Geneva. But he was of course a tremendously good professional, one of the world's best. I would rank him among the best diplomats I have dealt with.

JS: And he's the one who brought the word of Saddam Hussein's acceptance of the cease-fire to the Secretary-General?

JE: Exactly, and he suggested that I take over the Personal Representative role. We have a mutually warm relationship.

JS: He had said that, by the way, on tape.

JE: Well, we had a little bit of a cumbersome relationship because he was Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Somalia, and I didn't quite share the views of Boutros-Ghali and Ismat Kittani on our humanitarian work. I want to do more in humanitarian and less in military.

JS: Why did you agree to accept the Special Representative job when the prospects did not look very good?

JE: Well, first of all, it was the classical duty syndrome, of course, and also I was honored that I was asked to be in this position. I always wanted to mediate and I did it helping Palme and Pérez de Cuéllar and Waldheim, and in this, I would be on my own. I was in my forties, so I felt that this was a challenge, and I also really felt that I had a good idea of how it should be wrapped up. But of course, it was a very difficult job. No, there was really no decision-making process in this, except going to the Swedish Foreign Minister, having him give the blessings for the government.

JS: And in this long period of negotiations, can you identify any one thing that you feel was accomplished?

JE: Yes, I think the model that we developed both for the comprehensive approach and the step-by-step approach was the model that was adopted later on.

JS: Well, I meant when you were Special Representative, in carrying on these fruitless negotiations in Geneva mostly, was there anything...?

JE: Well, the prisoners-of-war exchanges that came about later on, and the contacts with the Red Cross – and the fact that the war did not break out again. The humanitarian aspects, I think, were the ones I was most proud of. We brought about contact with the Red Cross. I myself visited a prison camp, a POW camp, in Iran. The big release came, of course, as you know, after the Iraq-Kuwait war. And then there was a wholesale release.

JS: And your relationships with the IFCRC [International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies]?

JE: Very close.

JS: Okay, because at that point, I think there were some difficulties between the Secretary-General and the president of the IFCRC.

JE: Yes, I recall that, but I had very good relationship because I had helped the Red Cross in Angola before. So I had very close contact, and I think we prepared the ground for the big release, of course, in 1991, but also that we had a few releases of sick people, I can't recall now, but also contact letters and my visit to a camp were important. We also introduced the idea of confidence-building measures. That's when we had the long

discussion about how Iran-Iraq could develop a confidence-building measures system, although very little was done.

JS: But you did discuss those at that point?

JE: Yes, but I think at least in the beginning the main contribution, and its not for me to say this, but the main contribution by Pérez de Cuéllar and myself was to simply see to it that the war did not break out again. Those three four months between August 1988 and November, December 1988 were very, very shaky.

JS: He has said the same thing.

JE: Yes, we were very worried. That's when I developed a very close relationship with Pérez de Cuéllar because he was so tired, and I was tired, and when you are two very tired, you tend to be very open. He showed to me, really, the concern that this would explode again. And he said, "Jan, you have to be strong now, you have to be creative and I trust you so much." We had developed a very strong relationship and that's what I recall, perhaps being the biggest contribution that we kept a structure there, a credible structure, of negotiation. We kept them busy. And also, of course, I can tell you, a very important part of the job was to always keep the P5 in the picture. I had constant briefings; I had extremely good relations with the five ambassadors here and also through other channels, with their ministers. They asked to see me, so I ensured that

they were behind and I was working very closely with them. I didn't like to see a return of that split that I saw in the early part of the mediation with Palme.

JS: Did you do that mainly here in New York?

JE: Yes, yes, I was UN Ambassador here, so I had constantly contact with the ambassadors here, very close ones with Tom Pickering from the US, later on Lavreaux, was it Lavreaux? Like the Chinese, he was very glad that I always briefed him. And I also asked them to put the Iranians and Iraqis under pressure, to tell them, this you will not get away with. So there was both the work between them and then us behind the scenes getting them to stay in line.

JS: And a final question: did you, from a Swedish perspective – this would go back to Olof Palme as well as yourself – see this as a turning point in international relations, that is because the Iran-Iraq resolution was in fact the first cooperation of the P5? Did you perceive that at the time as being significant?

JE: Yes. First, in my speeches, I quoted that as the first sign that the Cold War is coming to an end. I had a tremendously happy period as Permanent Representative here in New York between 1988 and 1992, because there was a whole period where the whole Cold War situation loosened up.

I recall Gorbachev's speech on the 8th of December 1988, that had unfortunately almost too much agreed upon in the Security Council, and references to Chapter Seven

wholesale, and in fact, as you know, Jim, the UN always took upon itself too much during that period. We had problems of digestion and we went into everywhere. For peacekeeping there was no problem of finding hoops, although the problem was we didn't quite know how to deal with the civil wars, we didn't get the right mix on the interventions.

Now when I later entered the UN and saw the Somalia operation, I was almost desperate about the bad mix, that civil wars had to be dealt with in more sophisticated manners. Not only sending 30,000 troops; you have to have a comprehensive program, a civic society program, you have to bring in other elements. If there are complex crises, you have to have complex responses, and we didn't do that. But I always said that in my speeches the first sign was, actually for me, the first sign was – I recall when you said to me in these questions about my visit to Washington in February 1987 – that's when, on my plane back, I said to myself, "My god, finally we get away from this myth that the UN was so effective earlier. We had gone through all these years with a veto either from the West or from Russia, 50s, 60s, 70s, maybe now the Security Council could become a negotiation body.

JS: You would go through –

JE: Yes, definitely. It was extremely – no, I used it always as an example and it actually opened up for what then happened in 1987, 88, 89, 90. Of course then came the whole setback, Somalia, on 3rd October 1993, when eighteen Americans were – when one American was dragged on the street. The same way CNN got the US into Somalia, the

CNN also got the US out, I would say. For me, that date is a very tragic date. That was the beginning of the end of the operation. We never finished the job in Somalia, we're still paying the price for that. And it also meant that the UN became much more than it should have been, a scapegoat for what happened, and the positive trend in terms of US opinion and support for it, the UN, waned and disappeared. I actually came to the conclusion that I would be doing more useful work back in Sweden, in the beginning of 1994 when I left the UN.

You asked about the role of the Secretariat. The Secretariat played an important role in preparing for the rounds of negotiations and as the channel to the Secretary-General during the period I was Personal Representative. All ideas which were put forward were previously discussed with the Secretariat, and the Secretary-General himself, if they were important points. Texts were usually prepared in advance and discussed with both parties in search for a common ground for agreement. Proposals for some confidence-building measures, including the release of POW's were also put forward to both parties. There was a tendency on both sides to seek positive signals as signs of weaknesses, which made it difficult to move ahead with confidence building measures. The reports to the Security Council were usually drafted in cooperation with the Secretariat and the final version accepted by the Secretary-General. The negotiations were held in plenary meetings in Geneva in the beginning, usually chaired by the Secretary-General and myself, sometimes, and indirectly through my travels to Baghdad and Tehran as well as through numerous contacts by me or the Secretariat with representatives of the parties in New York or Geneva. I also tried to involve the Security

Council, to make it back up certain principles that we tried to establish with Resolution 598.

I felt I had the full support of the Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar throughout my assignment as his Personal Representative. Perhaps I would have preferred a more direct contact, for the communications for the Secretary-General often went via his staff and Secretariat; but the important discussions, the most important ones, took place with him.

The insistence of Iran to identify Iraq as the aggressor complicated the effort to find agreement and to build confidence between the parties. The Secretary-General's report came after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and Iraq's withdrawal from Iranian territory.

I was not involved in the drafting of this report, whereby the Secretary-General took the unilateral decision to implement one of the paragraphs of Resolution 598. The international situation and the isolation of Iraq in the world community made this possible without any questions being raised. The decision of the Secretary-General was taken without my participation and without my knowledge, although as I said earlier, I had no problem with the substance of this decision.

The end of the war was primarily the result of war-weariness on both sides and a concerted effort by the Permanent Five members of the Security Council to put pressure on the parties. The Swedish contribution, through Palme and later by myself, was mainly to keep the dialogue, even if indirect, going between the parties. That led to the saving of many lives through, among other things, the end of the bombing of the two capitals and border cities, after the cease-fire, to a consolidation of the cease-fire and to the release of sick and wounded prisoners of war.

JS: Those are all important points.