

Yale UN-Oral History
Giandomenico Picco
James S. Sutterlin, Interviewer
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James Sutterlin: This is an interview with Giandomenico Picco in New York City on October the 7th, 1998. The subject is the Iran-Iraq War.

Mr. Picco, I want to first thank you for agreeing to participate in this Yale Oral History project, and I would like, if I can, to talk a little bit today about the Iran-Iraq War and in particular about your role in the larger role that the United Nations played in this conflict. So if I may, I'd like to start out by asking you how did your association with this, with the Iran-Iraq conflict first start?

Giandomenico Picco: Actually my first association with Iran started via Afghanistan. I paid my first trip to Iran as a part of the United Nations team dealing with the Afghan crisis, and the first visit to Iran was in fact in 1983. The visit was done by Dio Cordovez, with whom I was working at the time under the Afghanistan shop. And we moved to Tehran, because at that time Tehran had refused formal participation in the negotiations pertaining to Afghanistan. So the formulation that we had adopted, and which was *de facto* accepted, was that the United Nations team would keep Iran informed of whatever they were doing diplomatically on Afghanistan. That led us to Afghanistan in 1983.

I should hasten to add, though, that ever since Pérez de Cúellar became Secretary-General and inherited from Dr. Waldheim the special envoy to Iran, and to the Iraq War, namely Mr. Olof Palme. I began to have some relationship for Mr. Pérez de Cúellar with

Olof Palme and with his assistant, Jan Eliasson. And there was a first level of exchange on this, the matter of the war, even at the very beginning of Pérez de Cúellar's tenure, between me and Jan Eliasson, and eventually the contacts which saw Pérez de Cúellar meeting with Olof Palme, either formally or informally, either in New York or, in fact, in Sweden.

JS: Just if I can ask there, what was the structure? You were not part of the Secretary-General's office at that point, were you or were you not?

GP: Yes I was. I was part of the Secretary-General's office since Day One of Pérez de Cúellar's tenure and, as perhaps it should be said, that by the end of 1982, Pérez de Cúellar had accepted one of the, well, one could call "position papers" which had been discussed by three people at the time in his office on how to create his role as Secretary-General. And in one of those position papers, which are very few in fact, and the people who discussed these things were only three people, because they were Alvaro de Soto, myself, and Pérez de Cúellar. And these papers had one objective: to really carve out a role for the Secretary-General at the moment in the Cold War, when we had gerontocracy in the Soviet Union who was convinced that the United Nations was a Western tool, and President Reagan in Washington who believed that the United Nations was a Soviet tool.

So there was not much room to move, but exactly because of that one of the conclusions we came to was that we had nothing to lose, and having nothing to lose we could try to devise a negotiating role in conflict resolutions like never before, because we could not be in a worse possible position. And it was in this context that specifically,

three crises were identified as early as the new Secretary-General could be attempted. One was Cyprus, for obvious reasons, one was Afghanistan, and one was the Iran-Iraq War. And why was there the Iran-Iraq War? Because it was self-evident at that time, and it was self-evident to us that there was something anomalous to the war which had started in 1980 under rigors of the Shatt-al-Arab. And the anomalous part of the story was that for the first time both East and West were on the same side. So the Iran-Iraq War, to us, offered an incredible possibility. It was a war like no other. It was a crisis like no other, because for once, both Washington and Moscow were on the same side, which meant the Iraqi side. And that was the element which subsequently, in the years that came, we knowingly and politically exploited to the fullest.

Going back to the question of, of the moment of course, Olof Palme was leading a game at that time, and in the Secretariat Dio Cordovez was his counterpart for the day-to-day operations and Dio Cordovez subsequently began to work also with Iqbal Riza on this.

JS: On the Iran-Iraq War?

GP: Yes, on the Iran-Iraq War. And here, I think it is important to note that the role of Iqbal Riza began to play, I think as of '84, when Iqbal Riza came into the picture, was absolutely the most important role that any of us played until 1987.

JS: Can you explain that, because at one point I believe there was some difficulty there, and in fact Iqbal Riza was, wasn't he removed from the subject?

GP: Yes.

JS: What do you mean, then, that Iqbal's role was so important?

GP: Now there are two elements that dictated the way we behaved at that time in the Office of the Secretary-General of the war. The first, I would say, element of the policy was, Olof Palme is doing standard his best, working mainly during those years on removing, or limiting the war, as it was called, "limiting" the war. And possibly trying to remove the famous ships from Shatt-al-Arab, which had been basically strained ever since the war started. And he had focused his attempts starting in a gradual approach, namely saying, "Perhaps we can first remove these ships from Shatt-al-Arab, and then build from it." Well it never succeeded, as you know, afterwards, but the fact was that the first line of policy was, Olof Palme was the front line. Second, ...

JS: Just to clarify that, he was successful in getting the sixty ships out of the league, wasn't he?

GP: But it took a few years.

JS: But eventually, ...

GP: Eventually, eventually yes. But when they were, by that time they were useless. Or the ships in Shatt-al-Arab had become useless. By 1983, what came into the picture was the second element of the policy, which was we can probably do things that the Security Council is not in an easy position to do, and the first line which came up was the issue of chemical weapons. It was in 1983 that really Pérez de Cúellar really took the lead over the Security Council with regard to sending an investigation on the use of chemical weapons, and it should be said, the inspirator of this was Iqbal Riza.

JS: Oh really.

GP: Yes. The inspirator of the move, which became a successful move for five consecutive years, and the first ever investigation by an international body on the use of chemical weapons since the convention was signed in 1925, that was Iqbal Riza. What appeared into the scene with a component, which it is important to say, a component which was a very, very, I would say, humanitarian component in his approach. Iqbal Riza brought to this group of people working on Iran-Iraq, a degree of humanitarianism, so to speak, which had almost escaped the realpolitik approach of many.

JS: And he actually, did he leave one of the ...

GP: Yes, he was involved at some point, I don't remember if it was in the first one, but he was involved even in going physically to the area. Second, it was Iqbal Riza who eventually, in about '83 or '84, led the UN team, which in fact did an ICLC job when the

international committee of the Red Cross was expelled from Iran by the government of Iran, and the United Nations Secretary-General took over some of the duties of the ICLC, at least on a temporary basis. Again, Iqbal Riza was a front-line man for this operation.

JS: And how did Cordovez fit into this?

GP: Cordovez was really playing in this regard the top UN man with Olof Palme, and was hoping to put together the package that would end the war, at least for those years. But even when we are talking about the package to end the war, eventually Iqbal Riza became *de facto* the real mind by 1985. Something else happened in '84, which was very important. And again, has Iqbal Riza on the front. In 1984, Pérez de Cúellar was the author of the truce in the War of the Cities. The War of the Cities, which had seen both sides using missiles just to hit the capitols for purposes of psychological damage, modern practical damage. When in June '84 the agreement was reached to end it, at least temporarily, that truce lasted nine months. That was an agreement conceived and negotiated by Iqbal Riza. So the role of Iqbal Riza in, so to speak, providing to the Secretary-General his own profile in this war was overwhelming.

JS: That was one of the questions I particularly wanted to ask, was who originated that particular initiative on the War of the Cities, so that was Riza.

GP: Iqbal Riza, with no doubt.

JS: Now you mentioned Palme and Cordovez, there have been some indications that Mr. Palme was rather unhappy at times because he wasn't kept informed about what was going on. That perhaps Cordovez did not include him in, so to speak. Was that your impression, did you have, how did Cordovez operate in this regard?

GP: Yes, it was definitely my impression, as with the passage of time, particularly by '84 and '85, as de Cúellar involved me more and more in his discussions on the war between Iraq and Iran, and there was no question that Mr. Cordovez, I would say, consistently with a tradition which I knew much better on the Afghan front, was doing exactly what you said. It was his intention to become the leading figure in both these two crises, and leading figure for him meant a monopolistic figure, so to speak. Having said that, I should add that he did pursue, with tremendous determination, his role, with tremendous professionalism, and with tremendous negotiating ability, an ability that I've not seen within the walls of the United Nations in my career.

JS: Right. Let me ask in that connection, you were in the Secretary-General's office, and you were close to Pérez de Cúellar. Mr. Pérez de Cúellar, I believe, did not fully trust Cordovez, even though he gave him very important positions, because of the professionalism, as you just mentioned. Was it your task to keep the Secretary-General informed about what the Under-Secretary-General was doing?

GP: Pérez de Cúellar never asked me that, nor gave me that task. I thought that the number of people who worked with him on a given issue were so few that it would have

been ridiculous not for everybody to be informed. Whether de Cúellar asked me to be, so to speak, his eyes and ears in the Cordovez team, I would say categorically no, he never did, he never asked me that. I felt that the success of the role of the Secretary-General in which I was personally involved did require that Pérez de Cúellar be informed of what was going on. And therefore I did try to keep him informed as much as I could. I have also to add that on the Iran-Iraq War, by, I would say, late '86, the role of Cordovez had basically faded away.

JS: So by the crucial time of the beginning of the cooperation of the five Permanent Members...

GP: He was out.

JS: He was out.

GP: He was, *de facto*, but he might have been there at some of the meetings, sitting on some of the meetings, but he was *de facto* out. In fact, the entire policy, which led to the suggestion by Pérez de Cúellar to bring together the five Permanent Members at the end of '86, and then the actual meeting in January '87, was a decision, or a suggestion that we came to for reasons which perhaps until now have never been explained fully. What was the rationale behind it? There were two rationales. The first one, and this also was written in this paper that we used to exchange with Pérez de Cúellar, and of which maybe traces have not been kept, but nevertheless. First of all, we did not believe that it was

possible to end the war. So the analysis we made at the time, in the time I was involved in working for him on the Iran-Iraq War quite fully, in fact I'd only two assignments by then—Afghanistan and the Iran-Iraq. I did nothing else in my entire day. Number one, we had, as I said, we were working for a profile of the Secretary-General that had never existed. Number two, by '86 Gorbachev had come into the scene, and as I've mentioned in my book, nobody like Gorbachev and Iran changed the *modus operandi* of the United Nations. The most influential components of the change of the UN in the '80s were in Moscow and Tehran. But, pardon that, ...

JS: Why, let me just ask if, Gorbachev, I understand. Tehran, why? Why do you say that with regard to Tehran?

GP: Because Iran had said to the world for the first time in its own ways, the United Nations is a biceferous organization. It has the Security Council and the Secretary-General. And the two have different roles, and we like one or don't like the other. And therefore both of them, the Security Council and the Secretary-General, became de facto, to behave as two different entities with two different roles. What was magnificent in the second part of the '80s, was that having made a point that there are two different sources of initiative, so to speak, that Pérez de Cúellar in his wisdom was able to prove that the two are not the elements of a zero-sum game, but in fact can help each other to become more and more powerful. And the ballet that was played in the context of the war between Iran and Iraq in their positions, was probably the most evident description. Of

how this ballet can take place, and instead of underlining one's power and one's weakness, it underlines both organs' ability to work together.

JS: Let's pursue that a little bit, because it's an important point. What you're suggesting is that it was possible for the Secretary-General, in his capacity, to utilize the support of the five Permanent Members, acting in their capacity. How do explain that?

GP: Yes. Again, it was the peculiarity of the war between Iraq and Iran that made all this possible. The fact that both Moscow and Washington were pro-Iraqi in their position, and that Iran felt that it could only trust the Secretary-General, created *de facto* where one organ, the Security Council, could not do what the other, the Secretary-General, could do. So this was the first element. The second element was that, let's not forget 1986, what happened October-November 1986. The Iran-Contra. The Iran-Contra had basically put the reputation of the United States in the Arab world in a very weak spot. Because the Arabs and the Iraqis believed that America was on its side, which it was, the betrayal of selling arms to Iran had a tremendous significance for them. So the value of America at that moment was so low that America was almost unable to move in the Middle East. One of the reasons that we thought we could devise a different approach was, American could not move in the Middle East, both the Soviets and the Americans were on the same side of Iraq *de facto*, if we suggest now something that could help America getting into the game in the Middle East, and at the same time putting together these people and giving us a role to play, everybody wins. So by devising the meeting of the Five, we saved America from being totally out of the game in the Middle East,

because now America came back as a part of the Five. It was done also bearing this in mind. I mean that's why it worked.

JS: And the Secretary-General did in fact have this in mind, do you think?

GP: I think this was one of the elements in mind, as it was, in fact, that we knew by then that we were becoming more credible with more ability to have initiatives than the Five. Because do not forget that the first meetings of the Five was very intimidating.

JS: Let me go back just a little bit in time, because before this happened, well, to begin with, during the period when Palme was actively mediating, I think the general approach was more looking for a comprehensive settlement.

GP: Yes.

JS: But this changed after Pérez de Cúellar became Secretary-General to a more incremental approach. Right?

GP: Yes, it did.

JS: Which emphasized to a certain amount things that could mitigate the worst effects of the war.

GP: Yes, it did.

JS: And at that point, the so-called eight-point proposal was developed and I wanted to ask, where did that come from, the eight-point proposal? Who was...

GP: The eight-point proposal developed from an originally five-pointed that Palme prepared. And the eight-point were Iqbal Riza points.

JS: Again.

GP: Again. And it was only eight-point. Eight-point was a comprehensive approach divided into pieces. So it was really comprehensive but it took different steps.

JS: Many of which were basic humanitarian actions.

GP: Many of which were humanitarian actions, yes.

JS: And as you, let me just get this again, you felt that Iqbal Riza was especially interested in the humanitarian aspects?

GP: Absolutely. The contribution that Iqbal Riza gave to the team was in fact this humanitarian consideration that people so used to living in the East-West world,

including myself, had almost lost. We had become really hardened by the *realpolitik* situation.

JS: Now it was at this same point, the eight-points were drafted I think in 1985, ...

GP: Correct.

JS: And at that point the Secretary-General made a trip to both Iran and Iraq.

GP: Yes.

JS: There was a meeting with Saddam Hussein.

GP: Yes.

JS: I wanted to ask, were you there, with the Secretary-General?

GP: Yes.

JS: Could you describe the atmosphere of that meeting with Saddam Hussein, which was the first extensive conversation I think the Secretary-General had had with him?

GP: Yes. In 1985, one should know that the war was not going very well for Saddam Hussein. In fact, in the peak militarily, the war had never gone well for Saddam Hussein except for the first two months of the war in 1980. And he would need another year and one-half in order to recover militarily. So while it was true that generally the war went militarily up and down almost every couple of years, it is also true that by and large, Iraq went in as a great military superiority at the beginning of the war, but then it kept losing nevertheless until the end of '87. And then in '88 it began to win the war, which it did for all practical purposes. But in '85, when we met Saddam Hussein, first of all there was no feeling in the capitol that that was a capitol at war.

One should not forget that by that time the band camps of Saddam Hussein, the Kuwaitis and the Saudis, were pumping tens of billions of dollars into it. By the end of the war, as you know, sixteen had been given by Saudi, and eighteen by Kuwait, so it was a lot of money. The West was pumping other money. But that had no indication whatsoever of a capitol at war. We went shopping for shoes, for gold, like anybody would have gone shopping into Bhagdad for probably centuries and centuries. And he was a very powerful President, who felt he was going, eventually, to win, because the world was on his side. So when he saw the Secretary-General, his concern was only that, "I know my neighbors more than anybody else. They will fool you, they will trick you, don't fall into their trap." And the interesting point was, what was the weakness of Pérez de Cúellar at that point? That by pursuing partial steps, we were saying, in fact, we want to make the war more humane. To which Saddam Hussein, I still remember, always came back and said, "War is not a humane thing. Only peace is humane. So you cannot regulate war." But the meeting was basically the meeting of the man who thought that

the Secretary-General of the United Nations did not count much. He had no divisions. And therefore I never felt that Saddam Hussein really cared too much about our role at that point. He was simply concerned that we would do the bidding for Iran at some point because we would be taken by the nose. And he said, "I know my neighbors. You don't."

JS: Throughout this whole history, there are not many Iraqi interlocutors that appear. Whom did you identify as the main persons with whom you could speak on the Iraqi side?

GP: Well our interlocutors were very few also. Because interlocutors were always Tariq Aziz, the ambassador to New York, at different times and Ismat Kittani, and that's it, really.

JS: And Kittani is a very interesting case, did you feel at the time that he genuinely represented the position of the Iraqi government, that he was fully trusted?

GP: Yes, I feel that Ismat, when he was serving his government, represented his government professionally, properly and completely. Was he trusted by his government? The question should be rephrased. Was he trusted by the President? For there is no real significance whether he was trusted by the government. The Iraqi regime being what it is, I think the question should be was he trusted by his President? The answer to that, of course, lies in Saddam's mind. I do not know. But I think he performed very correctly.

Now, did he perform differently than his predecessor? No question, no question. But of course, the past of Ismat Kittani with the United Nations had been different. He had been a Secretariat official, he knew his colleagues very much, and it was much easier to talk to him. And he would be, as he did to me at some point, he would say perhaps things that other Iraqi officials did not say. But at some point I remember he would say to me, "I cannot talk to you anymore because they don't want me to talk anymore. So we'll stop here." And he said, "Don't come and ask me anything, because I can't tell you anything." So he would add this degree of frankness that perhaps others never did.

JS: But in fact, what you're suggesting is that the only interlocutor was Saddam Hussein himself, and possibly Tariq Aziz?

GP: During the time I remember being present at several discussions with other foreign ministers, particularly the Saudi foreign ministers, about the Iraqi leadership. And in fact, I remember being present at a very small luncheon of all the other foreign ministers of GCC with Pérez de Cuéllar, where the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia told us, "Why do you bother talking to Tariq Aziz?" implying that it didn't matter what he said. The perception during that time was that he was simply given a very short leash of what to say or not to say, as many Iraqi ambassadors would learn over the years, they are given a very short leash, sometimes only twenty-four hours instructions. They don't know what happens at the end of the week. But I think that that changed. My impression was that over the years Tariq Aziz did acquire a little bit more power. But then we go into the '90s. Not in the '80s. In the '80s I don't think so.

JS: What was your personal impression of Tariq Aziz?

GP: I thought always that Tariq Aziz, with whom I had many, many, many meetings, from 1984 to 1992, when I left, and I should add, also afterwards, in private. I think Tariq Aziz, like few others of his colleagues I met, had really taken a position in discussing with foreigners which I define as a Soviet approach. A Soviet approach was, you repeat the same position *ad nauseum* until you get instructions to change. And one day you change all of a sudden. And you repeat the same thing as if it was what you said yesterday, but in fact it is different. But I think that there was also another element in his personality, which was quite evident at these meetings, and that was that he had to perform in front of his colleagues. And he was performing as a very tough personality, very hard. We felt at the time he had to do that because he was not a military man. And he was performing in an environment that was basically a military environment. So I think that that was probably the reason why.

Now we can psychoanalyze Tariq Aziz about his Christian component, and his upbringing as a teacher, and all the rest, but I'm not a psychoanalyst, so I cannot go into that. I think he has done the bidding for his master, as well as anybody can do, and he has in fact been able to replicate even the tone of the master's position, not just the words.

JS: In an interview, Ismat Kittani indicated that the Iraqi authorities did not entirely trust the Secretary-General Pérez de Cúellar, that they considered that he was partial

toward Iran. Can you give any background on that? Did you realize that at the time, that there were some reservations in Iraq with regard to the Secretary-General?

GP: Yes I did, we all did, and the reasons for this were very clear since Day One. The Security Council, in its first resolution five days after the beginning of the War on the 28th of September, 1980, called for a cease-fire, but not for a withdrawal to internationally recognized boundaries. The Iranians said the Security Council is pro-Iraqi. When in the years that followed the Secretary-General clearly became pretty good interlocutor for the Iranians, Saddam Hussein concluded that he was a pro-Iranian power to the Organization and the Security Council was on his side. So there was nothing dramatic about it, nothing political in the sense of plotting about it. I think that it was a consequence with this original development, which nobody could do anything about. It was also very true that with the passage of time many of us in the team had been categorized by Iraq as being either pro-Iraqis or pro-Iranians. And I have no problem in telling you that I was supposed to be pro-Iranian, Iqbal Riza was supposed to be pro-Iranian, because he was a Shi'a, Eliasson was supposed to be pro-Iraqi, Cordovez was supposed to be at times pro-Iraqi and at times you do not know, and so forth. But to be very frank with you, in the practicality of the matters, it makes no difference. I believe that in every conflict there has been a mediator or intermediary, one of the sides would try this, what I call a traditional game, that they would accuse the intermediary had been partial. If you can't take that, in this job, I find it just comes with the territory, and I wouldn't give too much significance to it except that every party would say so. But I don't think that the Iraqi government ever thought that anybody was impartial.

JS: In this connection, one of the things that apparently subsequently greatly disturbed the Iraqi side was the issuance by the Secretary-General of his report at the very end of his tenure, which did identify Iraq as the originator of the War. This apparently surprised them. Can you give a little bit of the background of that? Why would they be surprised, when in fact that was part of the agreement from the beginning?

GP: The Iraqi had been identified as the parties who had used chemical weapons on the Iranians in a report on chemical weapons of 1984. The first time ever, I would say, that a report by the Secretary-General was so partial. It was consequence of an investigation, which led evidence to say that. The Iraqis never thought that paragraph six of Resolution 598 would ever be implemented. They thought it would not be implemented because they thought it had a veto on it. Perhaps we should spend a few minutes on Resolution 598, because I think a book should be written about it. It is loaded of meaning as far as the powers and the autonomy of the Secretary-General's role is concerned.

Resolution 598 was a resolution that was first outlined to the Security Council members in general in 1987 by the Secretary-General and his team. At that time the team had Iqbal Riza, and myself as a component part, and in the course of that year, as you know, we lost Iqbal Riza and then I became more involved as a person who led the team. The resolution, which was adopted in July 1988, which was pretty much along the line of that paper we gave to the members of the Council in January of 1987. And in one of the most, I think, absurd, if you were to put it in theory, decisions and action taken by the

Secretary-General. Pérez de Cúellar prepared, we prepared for him, a written interpretation of what the resolution meant. And this interpretation, which was called the implementation plan, which had several versions throughout the various months, was nothing else but a way to change the meaning of the resolution to suit the negotiating approach of the Secretary-General. Not only the members of the Security Council made any effort to raise their fingers and say, "Excuse me, sir, how dare you interpret our text?" But they incorporated in their proceedings the implementation plan, which is a non-existent document from the point of view of implementation, and allow it to continue and to change the various interpretations as the time would buy. Now in a situation like that, by the time we got to 1988, and we came to the end of the war, and Iraq came to be the military winner, and the only thing that could be done to end the war was simply to agree begin direct negotiations with the two sides. Nobody in their mind really thought that anything more could have been done on the two sides, the two countries, which would have meant to come to a real peace agreement, and therefore to implement all aspects of the resolution. So I think by the time 1991 came, let's not forget December 1991 means after there was a storm. The first Gulf War seemed, at that time, was almost forgotten.

JS: Let me go back a moment. You were saying about this draft that was given to the Permanent Members by the Secretariat, I wanted to ask specifically, what was the Secretariat's contribution to 598?

GP: Enormous. First of all, the philosophy of it. The philosophy was the basis of 598, and the basis of the meeting of the Five in January 1987 was that time has come for the

international community to say clearly what is their opinion on how to end the war without asking Iraq and Iran. It was a fundamental political difference from what had been done before. Not just on that conflict but on many others. So we made clear, we insisted that there was no point in asking the parties what they wanted. And in fact, the parties began to go berserk when the Five began to talk among themselves, because they wanted to be involved in the negotiations, in the discussions of this. And they were not to a large extent. So that was different, and was rather controversial. Second, we don't care what you write at the end of the day, in fact the example used in the discussions with the Council, with the Ambassadors, was why don't you agree and say, "We agree on an embargo on the sale of milk to two countries. As long as you do it."

JS: Did you give a series of points that were incorporated?

GP: Yes we did. We had an entire list of points, which we gave in the meeting of the 15th of January 1987. And those were the points that were listed.

JS: Was that the one in the British Ambassador's residence?

GP: The meeting of the British Ambassador. There was a meeting, actually a tea, which took place before that. But that meeting had no real follow-up in that respect. It was just before Iran-Contra. It was the Iran-Contra that created a different situation for

many. So the paper was given actually in the conference room of the Secretary-General, upstairs on the 38th floor.

JS: That was the meeting that he called, then, which also included I believe, ...

GP: The President of the Security Council.

JS: So the work of the five Permanent Members was really to refine those points into the form of a resolution?

GP: And, of course, to agree whether to include in the resolution a reference to possibility of sanctions if the resolution were not to be accepted by one of the parties. And as we know, that did not happen.

JS: Right. My next question pertains to the Saudis. How and when did they become involved in the efforts to reach a peace?

GP: The last forty-eight hours. The role of the Saudis was brief and effective as any role could ever be in the history of peacemaking. It was the shortest, most effective role I'm familiar with. It had a long route, at least in terms of time. In 1988, two things were happening, and then it was really very, very important, this question. In 1988, the fortunes of war...

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...the Winter of '87-'88, the military offensive by the Iranians did not succeed. Not only that, I would have to check the dates now, but I think that the Iranians had already been expelled from the Fau peninsula in the South, in what was one of the greatest examples of chemical warfare ever seen on the face of the earth. The Fau peninsula, to the best of my understanding, though nobody's gone there to check, was really a mass execution by chemical weapons of the Iranians who had been occupying that peninsula for two or three years. So the outcome of the war, for better or worse, was changing in favor of Iraq. There were less and less responses to the calls in Tehran for volunteers for the front. And interesting enough, I remember like it was today, in February 1988, for the first time, we had been pushing the Iranians to accept Resolution 598 and we had succeeded only in pushing the Iranians to accept the implementation plan of the Secretary-General of 598. And Velayati, who was ambassador here, had used words which had cost blood to all of us, to make him say, which was that the acceptance by Iran of the implementation plan of the Secretary-General is tantamount to accepting Resolution 598. We thought we had discovered the Holy Grail and of course, we hadn't, because by that time the smell of victory had begun to reach the nose of Saddam Hussein, and I think even if the full acceptance had taken place it would have continued. Which possibly, if I had been in his shoes I would have done the same. Anyway, as these things were happening, one of my duties, so to speak, as following whatever happened on those fronts, was that I was trying to read as much as I could about what people were saying in the area about the war. Particularly in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and Iraq and Iran.

Late February 1988, Prince Sultan, the defense minister, in a conversation which was a background conversation with an American journalist had indicated that in his view

the war would end within that year. It was by itself a banal comment, which very few people saw or even read about. I remember picking this up, and just putting it in the file, thinking that it could be useful at some point. And he said that in what appeared to be in the context of the financial fatigue that Saudi Arabia seemed to have shown by then, at least that was my interpretation.

JS: Financial fatigue in providing money to Iraq?

GP: Yes, very much so. And let's not forget that until that point, the war had been for nothing. So when in July eventually Saddam accepts to drink the poisonous chalis and say, "Yes, I accept Resolution 598," as the war was now being lost, so to speak, and therefore the Secretary-General calls the two foreign ministers to town in New York to do the actual negotiation to end this bloody war, I was really the person to which Pérez de Cúellar had given the role to take part in the negotiations. He was conducting, of course, all business himself, naturally, but he was also running the house.

My life was just to live with Velayati and Tariq Aziz, twenty-four hours a day, do everything that could be done. Sitting with them, doing the paperwork, and whatever. And of course it had been difficult to bring them both here, because Tariq Aziz had insisted that he only come to New York to sit down with Velayati. Which was not what Velayati had come here for. In fact there was a trick behind interpretation of when we said to one and the other to come, because we could not say that one would come to meet the other and vice versa, so in communicating to both ambassadors that they were to come to New York, we played a little bit with the Security Council and what to say and

what not to say; eventually they came. It was I think, well the acceptance was on the 17th of July '88, and I think they came here a few days later. It took a week of almost no negotiation with the Iraqis, and a lot of negotiation with the Iranians, to realize that something was very wrong. We negotiated with the Iranians every single aspect of the possible agreement to implement the resolution, every single aspect. Tariq Aziz came to the first meeting and said clearly to the Secretary-General that he had only come to New York to meet with Velayati and not to discuss with the Secretary-General. When the second meeting, which was the most dramatic meeting I attended with Pérez de Cúellar, when in the second meeting Pérez de Cúellar sat in front of Tariq Aziz and I was on his side, across the table in the conference room of the Secretary-General's office, Pérez de Cúellar stood up and said, "The Iranians have discussed with me this way of implementing the resolution." And he stood up in his chair, leaned over, and put the paper in front of Tariq Aziz. Tariq Aziz did not move, did not lean over to pick it up, held his hands on his chest, and he said, "I cannot accept this paper, because I'm not negotiating with you. I have no instruction to negotiate with you. I thought I was clear when I said this the first time."

At which point, Pérez de Cúellar stood up, withdrew his paper, looked at him and said nothing. And after quite a long moment of silence, he said, "Mr. Minister, you can go." Tariq Aziz was taken aback by the theatrics of it, and began eventually to talk, but in fact nothing happened. We then tried to communicate with him through the Egyptians, and I was the one who realized that a long paper to implement the resolution was not anymore useful. What we needed was a very simple paper, very short, which would simply say that we were going to have a cease-fire in some way. And since we could not

cooperate with, we could not talk really, to the Iraqis, or to the foreign minister, I began to talk to Kittani. But Kittani had a limit to what he could talk about, and began to say to me he had now been told, two days after, he said, "I cannot talk to you anymore because I am forbidden." So he could not talk to me. So I said, well let me talk to the Egyptians. So I used the Egyptians to pass on what I thought could be a way to negotiate, and what could be a solution, which was a very simple piece of paper. And by then, by end of July, Bandar had come from Washington to follow these negotiations, which indicated that his father was interested, the famous Sultan who had said six months earlier the war would end before the end of the year. I knew that people had not spoken about it because it appeared as just a banal comment.

JS: Let me just clarify for the record, Bandar was the ambassador in Washington, right?

GP: Bandar was the ambassador in Washington and son of Prince Sultan, the defense minister of Saudi Arabia. I sent a message to him that he could send a message to Tariq Aziz. But even this failed; he had to sit down with Velayati. On the other side, Velayati made absolutely clear to us that he could not return to Tehran without a cease-fire. He said, "I cannot do it. These are my orders." I knew why they were losing the war. I came to know more from the Americans how much they were losing the war in the subsequent days, because I was shown maps of movements and all the rest. But the fact was that by the 1st of August of 1988, the most dramatic episode of my career happened to me in terms of negotiations. Not in terms of life, but in terms of negotiations.

I received a visit of an American diplomat, who said to me that he was carrying a message from the Secretary of State, and the message from the Secretary of State was, “Please sabotage your negotiations. We cannot end the war now, so we can as well call it a day, the war will continue for a few more months, and we believe that by October Secretary Schultz and Foreign Minister Schevardnatze will be able to end the war. Another three months.” It was a stunning message for a forty-year old young man who wanted to good in the world, save peace and prosperity, and all the rest.

So I took the message and I said I would have to answer, I have to consult with my leader. By that time it was the 1st of August, I had been busy without leave, with as little leave as twelve days at least. And I felt, as you know because I think you know me very well, I really live intensively, so I felt the intensity of the responsibility. I had no time to see Pérez de Cúellar to discuss this in detail during the day, so he said, “Let’s go home together at the end of the day,” which we did. And there he was with his wife, myself, and Pérez de Cuéllar having a little bite, and then we walked to the very threshold. And by that time, I had outlined to him the scene of what happened, with the message, and as we were on this threshold and he was outside, and I was literally standing on the threshold, and Marcela was just adjacent, and Pérez de Cúellar asked me, “Gianni, how old are you?” I said, “I’m forty years old.” He said to me, “I’m sixty-nine. You see the difference is that I’m at the end of my career. You are at the beginning. So it depends on what you want to do when you grow up. If you want to remain in diplomacy, you have to think how we are going to answer this question, or to this comment. But I want you to know whatever decision you take, and you tell me tomorrow morning, I will support you. I cannot ask you, or tell you what to do, because it is too important, and it transcends a

professional life. It is the Secretary of State of this country, after all, but I know what you mean, I know the moral aspects and all the rest, our duty and all the rest, so you tell me tomorrow morning.” And Marcela at the door said, “I know that you will go home and you will make the right decision,” she said. And home I went. The following morning I went back to the office and I said to Pérez de Cúellar, “We keep going.” To which he said to me, “Let me tell you something. They will not give us more than five days. Can you give me the cease-fire in five days,” he said. I said, “How could I say that?” And sure enough, sure enough, when my friend from the American mission came over and asked me the answer, I said to him, “The message is, we do accept the suggestion of the Secretary, once we are told that there will be no civilian casualties for the next three months of war, and once we know exactly when the war will end.” To which, of course, the comment was, “So you don’t accept.” I said, “No, no, we accept.” I had adopted the Russian approach. It was Tuesday morning. The events of that week were to say the least, tense.

Saturday morning I’m in the process of going to the office where a meeting was allegedly to take place between Tariq Aziz and ourselves. And I got a phone call at home on the line from the car, Ismat Kittani says, “Gianni, I have the minister here in the car, he’s going to the airport, and he wants to talk to you.” I said, “What do you mean he’s going to the airport, we have to meet in an hour?” So Tariq picked up the phone and said, “Mr. Picco, please inform the Secretary-General my President has called me and I have to return to Baghdad.” Pérez de Cúellar was right to the dot. Five days later, when they thought, and they saw that I was not stopping, they thought, now we know how to stop him. We take away one of the interlocutors. So he cannot negotiate since one side has

gone home. And he had gone home because of course that very morning President Saddam had made a declaration that he was prepared of course to sit down and discuss with everybody and everything, whatever. But he meant, in fact, in due course. He said, “I don’t leave the negotiations, I want to give time for the negotiating power,” which meant, in fact, I want the war to continue but very well camouflaged. And in fact, Tariq Aziz on the phone had said to me from the car, “But I’m prepared to come back in a few weeks.” Now a few weeks of course, you and I know and everybody knows dealing in the Middle East, means a few months. That was a way of gaining time. So when I called Pérez de Cúellar, he said to me, “You see, we only had five days.” I said, “Yes, but we are not dead yet.” And what was the solution? The solution was, if you don’t have the interlocutor, you find another interlocutor who can speak for him. And that is how the Saudis came in. We actually called up Bandar and we said, I said, “Your Highness, we need the foreign minister here with you, you have to negotiate on behalf of the Iraqis because they’ve left. And this is how we’re left to do all the negotiations, and no matter what Saddam Hussein has said, they’re gone.”

Anyway, in twenty-four hours Prince Faysal was in Europe, so he was pretty close—Prince Faysal came to wonderful Astoria, in fact, he came in the night, he was following very closely. And what Pérez de Cúellar and I did, we replaced the Iraqis with the Saudis. After all, they were the bankers, I thought. And I remember the famous Sultan words of February. And on the Sunday of the 7th of October, having spent some time with Bandar the previous night, we spent hours and hours in the Waldorf towers, where Prince Faysal was staying for those two days, and in the presence of Ambassador Shanduq of Saudi Arabia, and of Ismat Kittani, who was absolutely mute, mute. There

was Picco going around with a little piece of paper which he had tried to sell to the Iraqis first, to the Egyptians second, to Bandar third, with no success, and now before him the two Princes representing the Kingdom, and reminding the wisdom of the worlds of the defense minister Sultan, who had said in February the war has to end during this year, and how wise the man was. And I had this thing and I said, yes, and the formulation was, in a way, a brief formulation in which you say there will be an agreement of cease-fire and an agreement on the date to start the direct negotiations. The formulation was also a matter of debate, which caused many papers back and forth, but that was the essence. And Prince Faysal said, "I need to consult," and whatever, "but we will meet in the afternoon." And we met several times on Sunday, and of course the Council was waiting for us to say what was going on. And the newspapers got wind of this, in fact it is very interesting because the *New York Times* reported the failure of the negotiations the very day that the Iraqi left, as indicating that they knew that something was going wrong. So we went really from a mounting positive atmosphere to a mounting negative atmosphere. And on Monday morning, we were supposed to meet with a great answer from the Rihad.

We were waiting for the Prince at ten o'clock, we said we'll meet with the Council at twelve o'clock or something, and of course, the Prince did not come at ten o'clock, but he came at twelve o'clock. So the people downstairs in the Council room were waiting for the Secretary-General, who kept saying I have to make him later. And we had no agreement, as I said. The night of Sunday to Monday morning was a catastrophe for Pérez de Cúellar and myself because we had no agreement and no way this would work. And eventually they came, the Saudis came, to the office of the Secretary-General at twelve o'clock, and there they were with their robes, flowing in, the

two Princes, and sitting down, and Pérez de Cúellar and myself were in their chairs, and Shiab and Kittani were standing, walking in the room, because they were not participating, in fact. Kittani could not. Shiab would not speak, his own superiors were there, and there was no need. And the funny story was that we had the phones, the phones were connected with King Fahd, and the foreign minister said, “We’ve seen this paper, but we would like some changes.”

JS: Prince Faysal you mean.

GP: Yes. And we had the Council downstairs. At that point we had told the Iranians that everything was going to be fine, nothing to worry about, and I was making changes on this paper basically on behalf of the Iranians, selling the Iranians whatever they would say, I would convince them, no matter what. So I was making changes as if I knew what the Iranians would accept. And at some point, they wanted something more, so de Cúellar said to me in Spanish, “What are we going to do?” And I said, “I cannot be sure without checking with Velayati if we can give this. So since we have no time, we have to say we don’t give it.” So de Cúellar said to Faysal, “Your Highness, I would like to agree with you on this, but Gianni Picco tells me we can’t agree, so we will not agree.” Which was very elegant of him to say. So he spoke to Bandar and then he said, “This is difficult, so let me talk to my King.” So he speaks to His Majesty in Arabic, and all the rest. We are talking in Spanish in the mean time, and then there is silence. The King will call back momentarily. So we all wait. So the King calls back, Prince Faysal takes the line, and then says, “Mr. Secretary-General, His Majesty wants to say something to you, which I

will translate to you.” So with some kind of proximity of the telephone, and after the greetings, King Fahd said to the Secretary-General, “Mr. Secretary, let me be the first to congratulate you, you’ve just ended an eight year old, long war.” To which the Secretary-General said, “Majesty, I’m very grateful to hear that. Do you think it would be possible to hear from President Saddam Hussein?” He said, “You will hear in very few minutes.” So we hung up the line, and within two or three minutes, the line rings, it’s Tariq Aziz on the other line, and he says, “Mr. Secretary-General, I’m here with my President, he has asked me to tell you that...” No, he speaks first with Faysal. He said, “I wanted to tell the Secretary-General, that my President accepts what the King has just accepted.” And the Secretary-General said on the line, “Mr. Minister, you can say to me the same thing in English. In English please, not a translation. Tell me what you just said to the foreign minister.” And Tariq said, “I’m in the presence of the President, who asked me to tell you that he’s just accepted what the King of Saudi Arabia just accepted.”

So at that point, Velayati does not know yet what the changes have been. And I say, “We have it, fine.” So this is the contribution of Iran over Saudi Arabia to the war. It’s 1:15, 1:20, the Princes with the flowing robes go to the elevator, we say absolutely nothing, the Secretary-General says, “Call Velayati, I want him here within fifteen minutes.” We don’t leave the room. We stay alone in there, in the office, Velayati comes in, and I said to him, “Mr. Minister, we have made these changes on this piece of paper regarding the timing of the cease-fire, the days, and the day you will meet them in Geneva and all the rest. Make no change because we can’t.” And he says, “I don’t have authorization from Tehran to accept this.” I said, “Yes you do, because you are the authority, you are Tehran for us. We have taken responsibility to convince you, you take

responsibility to convince Iran, we have no more time. You want to go home with a cease-fire, we have given you the cease-fire. You can go home with orders.” And within eight minutes, he said yes. At 2:05 of that afternoon, Velayati leaves, we close the door, go back, and de Cúellar said, “Tell the Council we are coming down at three o’clock. And now I want a glass of red wine.” So he called Victor, the butler, and said, “Prepare a little lunch immediately for Gianni, for myself, for Viru Dayal and Alvaro de Soto.” Who knew nothing at that time of what happened. So we sit down there, de Cúellar and myself sat first, because they came a few minutes later. When they did come, de Cúellar said, “I would like you to know that Gianni has just delivered to me the end of the war between Iran and Iraq, and I just promoted him to be Director in my office on the war field, whatever it’s called.”

JS: On the battlefield.

GS: On the battlefield. And then we had a glass of wine, had a piece of sandwich, and then we went downstairs with the text we had prepared very quickly, and we announce on the 8th of August 1988, the end of the war. Incidentally, because “8” was supposed to be my number in my life, my secretary had put a sticker on my door on my office weeks before, saying everything will happen on “8/8/88.” And it did.

JS: Thank you very much, Gianni, I cannot go on after that highlight, because that really is something that’s very important to put on this Oral History, in your own words. So I want to thank you very much.

GP: Thank you.