

Yale-UN Oral History

Ahmet Esmat Abdul Meguid

Secretary-General of the Arab League

Interviewed by: James Sutterlin

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James Sutterlin: Mr. Secretary-General, it is a privilege for me to interview you, today, on behalf of the Yale United Nations Oral History program. I would like to begin by discussing some of circumstances surrounding the 1973 war in the Middle East. I believe that you were the permanent representative of Egypt in New York at that particular point. Could you, though, just describe the extent to which you were involved in the discussions which took place at the time of the outbreak of the war?

Ahmed Esmat Abdul Meguid: Let me first tell you that I am happy to participate and to discuss that with you, and I'm sure that if it's for the record and for history, maybe some lessons can be drawn from these very serious and important events that took place before and during and after the 1973 war. I hope we are on tape.

JS: That red light means you're being recorded.

AM: Very good. And then, maybe I will tell you, to put you in the atmosphere, that before coming here to the United Nations as Ambassador of Egypt to the UN in 1972, I had been a

member of the Cabinet of the late President Sadat, who took office after President Nasser died in September of 1970. At that moment, I was the Egyptian Ambassador to France, and then I was called by late President Sadat to join his Cabinet; so I was at that moment the Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs, that meets directly with the President and the Prime Minister. The government resigned in the beginning of June 1972, and then I was appointed here to represent Egypt at the United Nations and I stayed here at the UN from 1972 until 1983--as you can see, eleven years which were, for the Middle East, eleven eventful years.

JS: Very.

AM: Taking the point you mentioned, I think that you are certainly entitled to know from the outside what the circumstances were before this operation. It means that at that moment, before the outbreak of war, in October 1973, which in a few days we will celebrate twenty-four years after October.

JS: I thought of that, yes.

AM: It is here, I came in 1972; this was my first encounter with the United Nations, as Ambassador to this organization. The situation was a very difficult one, and I certainly felt that this was also causing to us Egyptians and Arabs a lot of frustration. Having known the late President Sadat closely, because as a Cabinet minister for two years, two and a half years, with him, this was for me also an asset, as I think about it. Not many ambassadors can claim what I am saying. It is not out of vanity I say that, but I think it relates to some of the facts.

President Sadat was a man of great vision. At the same time, he was a decision-maker, a man who took decisions, after a lot of thought. I say that because I am not. In May, June, July 1973, and these are some of the very important events that I want to put on record, the late President Sadat called me for consultation in Cairo and with the then-foreign minister of Egypt, the late Dr. Mohammed Hassan el-Zayyat, we had a meeting in Cairo. After being asked to come to consultations, in May, the late President Sadat, asked us “What are the possibilities that we can move the peace and find a resolution to our problems with Israel?” This meeting was, in my opinion, a very important one, and it showed that the late President Sadat was trying to find a peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict by starting this initiative from Egypt.

I refer you to what has happened in the Security Council that was called by Egypt to discuss a Middle East peace conference. At that moment, the American ambassador in the United Nations was the late John Scali. John Scali, who was a newcomer to the United Nations, under instructions certainly from Washington, opposed the convening of such a meeting of the Security Council that was requested by Egypt but I took that initiative after my meeting with late President Sadat in Cairo. He was overruled by the great majority, and there was no right of veto, you know, for procedural matters concerning the Security Council, so the meeting took place.

And, in that meeting, Egypt asked for a resumption of the peace conference for finding the solution to this matter, with the help of the United Nations.

JS: According to 242?

AM: According to Resolution 242. I think, Professor, this is a very important political and legal matter that has to be thoroughly studied, because we came to the Security Council, upon

instructions from the late President Sadat that a draft resolution should be sponsored by the Western countries. The Western countries, in addition to the two permanent members, the United Kingdom and France, were at that point Austria and Australia. The Security Council adopted a resolution promoting the peace process, promoting negotiations between the parties with the support of the Western countries, all together fourteen votes out of the fifteen, but this resolution was vetoed by the United States, which has really doomed the resolution. So, here was a very serious diplomatic setback to efforts, and to the peace approach by the late President Sadat at that point.

I remember, after many years while I was here, Senator Moynihan, who was Ambassador Moynihan at that point, published in his book, probably you have his book, he wrote that he asked of me a question: “Dr. Abdul Meguid, do you think that if the United States would have not vetoed the Security Council resolution adopted on the 26th of July, 1973, would the October war have come, yes or no?” This was the question of my friend, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. I told him, “My dear Ambassador Moynihan, you are certainly asking me a very good question. And if I am a kind of prophet or someone who is reading the world from our side, we tried. The United States cast the veto, and then blocked the road to peace, and the responsibility must lie with those who took the decision to veto this resolution. And I am sure, if there was no veto, and this resolution would have been adopted, then many, many things would have changed.”

This is a very important lesson, Professor, to draw, for many diplomatic actions. As a diplomat and as a lawyer, I think we have many lessons to draw from that, and not only from 1973, but for many, many other international important events. Sometimes you take a decision and you cannot measure the consequences of your decision except by something happening in the future, and it can be too late to save (the boat). I am just mentioning that because I am sure, in

your analysis, you will go in depth in discussing these kind of things, just superficial action. But, the decision was taken, the veto was cast, and then Egypt at that point had no other choice but to restore our land which was under Israeli occupation and to move ahead because, diplomatically, the door had been closed. And in a way, that was really very upsetting to us, to all the peace-loving nations. And as I said, this resolution was adopted by fourteen votes, which means all the Western countries voted in favor of such a resolution. I'm sure it would be very interesting to put on record this resolution, and the discussions that took place in the Security Council at that point. I remember sending the text of the resolution to the late President Sadat on the 26th of July 1973, when he was in Alexandria, because this was also a celebration of the Egyptian revolution of 1952. This was an important event.

After that, I think, the situation became very critical, very difficult. If you remember, also, that the late President Sadat decided to send back to Russia the Soviet experts. This also should not go unnoticed. There was a very firm determination among the leadership in Egypt, the people of Egypt, about regaining our land, our territory that was under Israeli occupation. It was a certain way of feeling, that now that the Soviet experts were no longer with the Egyptian army, this army was incapable of any action. What a big blunder, a big mistake, to draw such conclusions. And here I come again to the lesson we should learn about this kind of thing, and maybe this is more philosophical. I am not a historian like you, but I am someone who has been involved in many difficult negotiations; I have seen a lot, I have read a lot, and I have discussed a lot with many of the distinguished leaders in the United States and in Europe. So, we came to the situation where, here is a situation in July 1973 — no way to move this matter, and to come to some kind of agreement to see if we can achieve peace, peacefully, respecting the international legality in line with the Security Council Resolution 242.

I was, as I told you, following that very closely; I have been involved in this matter, as I am saying in my memoir that I hope to publish soon but I am giving you the prime ideas because of the seriousness of your work and the objectivity and fairness of what you are trying to organize. I am giving you this as someone who has lived through it and as a direct witness, not by hearsay. And, in that respect also, I am still a very firm believer in peace.

I was later chosen by the late President Sadat to lead the first Egyptian delegation to negotiate with Israel in December, 1977 after the trip to Jerusalem of November 1977. All that, I lived here, in this city, in this Organization. Then the situation, an interesting part of it after June, July, August, September, coming to October and I am sure you have heard also that the change that happened when Henry Kissinger took over the State Department just at this point. Kissinger, a very distinguished man, certainly was coming new into this job, [where the Middle East played an important part].

JS: Which he had stayed out of in the White House.

AM: Yes, but I mean, he took over after William Rogers. The General Assembly was in session, usually at that time, as it is now, and at that moment, also, interestingly, there were no diplomatic relations between Egypt and the United States; they were broken since 1967. So, officially, the foreign minister of Egypt, [who] was here, was not supposed to meet or receive the Secretary of State. But I received in my office an invitation from Secretary of State Kissinger for a luncheon at the US mission here, addressed to the foreign minister to attend the luncheon hosted by Kissinger, for all the Arab foreign ministers and their ambassadors. It was a gesture. For us, we had no diplomatic relations -- "Shall we go? Shall we not go? Shall we accept?" We

decided to accept and to go, and to hear the speech of Henry Kissinger, delivered at the end of the luncheon.

JS: Could I just interrupt to ask, at that point had Kissinger already established contact with President Sadat's office, through Ismael?

AM: No. It had not yet come to that.

JS: ... not yet come.

AM: It was here, in pinpointing this, it's very important. At that point, the foreign minister was Dr. Mohammed Hassan el-Zayyat.

JS: Right -- I know.

AM: He was attending the General Assembly, as all the foreign ministers are here now. At that moment, Kissinger was appointed to take over the Department, I think, around September or October.

JS: September, I think.

AM: So, he was to deal with the Arab foreign ministers, among them Egypt, but Egypt had no diplomatic relations with the United States. When we received this invitation, the interesting part

of it [was], we accepted it, certainly. It was a pleasure, the speech of Kissinger, he improvised the speech. He said that he is now taken over the responsibility, he is nearly a newcomer to the Middle East, and he has hardly read resolution 242, which was part of his way of joking, but it meant a lot. And that this matter would need some time to be addressed. So, for that reason, the speech was not a very encouraging one for us. Hearing the Secretary of State speaking to the Arab foreign ministers and ambassadors about such a reference. Anyway, this was maybe -- you hear that for the first time? -- but I was there, present, noting every word and every reaction.

Anyway, the situation was serious, and I think this has been covered. A meeting was arranged with Dr. Kissinger at the request of Dr. el-Zayyat, at his residence in the Waldorf-Astoria, on the 5th, on Friday the 5th of October, at 9:30 in the morning. Dr. el-Zayyat, myself, and our diplomat in charge of our office – we had an office, not an embassy – in Washington, and we found Mr. Kissinger very pleasant, warm, welcoming, but at that meeting [Kissinger said] the Middle East question is something that has to wait until January, February 1974, because Mrs. Golda Meir is entering the election in Israel. As you see, I am following step-by-step everything, for your knowledge. So, his reaction, I mean I tell you that after twenty-four years. So, “it will take time until Mrs. Golda Meir will form a government, she had to have consultations, and this is the Israeli system, we have to wait until January 1974 to start opening the Middle East file.” You can imagine the reaction we had after this meeting, which was a very pleasant and a very polite one. But on substance? It is exactly what was said. The feeling was that Mr. Kissinger was very much not on the same wavelength with us.

JS: And this was on October 6th?

AM: The 5th. Friday the 5th of October. The day before the 6th. This is something I can never forget. It was put as if this has to wait three or four months until Mrs. Golda Mair has the time and pleasure to form a government and start discussing. And he repeated something about 242. Another lesson to draw. Friday went, Saturday in the morning, the 6th of October, at 7:00 in the morning, a day off for the United Nations, a telephone rang near my bed. I lifted the telephone, and I heard foreign minister el-Zayyat telling me that Kissinger just told him that there are some indications that there are two military formations on the Suez Canal, and that he is very, very much worried – a different Kissinger than the one the day before.

JS: But when you and el-Zayyat had the meeting with Kissinger, you did not know what was going to happen?

AM: No, no, sure. But we found, in front of us, a Secretary of State totally out of the picture in the Middle East, totally. “It will wait three or four months,” which was kind of very upsetting to us. Anyway, this is our inside information. So, he [el-Zayyat] told me, “please, Dr. Esmat, come immediately to my place in the hotel.” Very early. So, I went, and arrived at about 7:30, 7:45, and it was Kissinger on the phone, expressing anxiety, concern, at what was going on, and so on and so forth. Then, Mr. Hafaz Ismael, the Secretary of the State Security Council [in Cairo] called telling him that Israeli naval units had attacked Egyptian positions on Zapharan island in the Gulf, and requesting us please to go to the United Nations and [call for the Security Council to meet]. And then Kissinger after that called saying “the situation is very critical,” what can we do, and so on and so forth?

JS: Called Ismael? or called...

AM: Called el-Zayyad, while I was there. But as I said it was a different Kissinger from twenty-four hours ago. Then the news came at 8:00 New York time, because this is 2:00 Cairo time, that the outbreak of the war had started by artillery and aviation. Then the situation totally changed. Immediately we went to the United Nations and we started acting according to what we had received from National Security Adviser of the President, Mr. Hafez Ismael. If I take you back, three days before, I think on the 3rd or the 4th, and I am trying to find the speech of Abba Eban at the General Assembly, I don't know if you have it or not. It is important to look at it.

JS: It's available. We have interviewed Abba Eban on this point.

AM: What I want to say ... I was the Ambassador of Egypt, attending the general debate, he was a man relaxed, full of confidence, and speaking with great arrogance. On the 8th of October 1973, two days after the outbreak of hostilities, he made another speech but with a very different language, these are my documents, but I am sure you will find them, because many lessons can be drawn from these speeches of Abba Eban before the outbreak of hostilities and after the outbreak of hostilities, to analyze the situation. Abba Eban, in the first, was full of confidence, so sure of himself, and that really there is no hope for these Egyptians, they can do nothing, now, that the Soviets are out. They are at our mercy. Big, big mistake. All these, Professor, are indications for us, the Egyptians and the Arabs, that many, many things can change as the result of strong resolve. So, the change came. Then came resolution 338.

JS: Right, but wasn't there some delay in that?

AM: There was some delay because Kissinger flew to Moscow, to meet Gromyko. This was a little far away from what I am leading to. My assessment, having been part of these developments is that the point had come when things had to change, and we have opened the door to this.

JS: At that point, because Kissinger did go to Moscow, and even delayed his trip to Moscow for several hours, did you assume, you or the government in Cairo, that he was intentionally delaying in order to give the Israelis a chance to improve their position on the ground?

AM: Yes. But they didn't. This was a lot of miscalculation. A serious miscalculation. When I say that now, it is because it is for the record. It is very important to understand this. So, the situation was clear for us. The Egyptians will control the situation – no doubt about it. We wanted to prove that we could change the status quo, and it has changed. And then, we are ready to go to peace.

The effort of the US to end the fighting was welcome, because here there was the interest of the United States, which was not contradictory to our interest, because we want stability, and Israel must stop trying to act as a superpower. So, they learned the lesson that the Israeli army is not invincible, and the Suez canal is not the best anti-tank barrier that can never be crossed. We crossed the Suez canal, we destroyed the Bar Lev line and we took a lot of Israeli prisoners. The '67 era was finished. It was a new era opening.

Then, I became involved in the late President Sadat calling on me to lead the Egyptian delegation to the Mena House conference in December of 1977, after his memorable trip to Jerusalem on the 19th of November, 1977. I was officially responsible to meet Prime Minister Begin, to invite him to come to Mena House as the head of the Israeli delegation. I went to Ismâ'iliya; I went to Jerusalem.

All that, I did. And if you look at some of the books published, especially by Israeli journalists, you will find what I had said to Begin, in this meeting in Ismâ'iliya where I was asked by the late President Sadat to be the rapporteur of these meetings, which I did, and then to negotiate in them, which I did. And opposite to me was the acting Ambassador of Israel in Washington, Yehuda ben Elisson.

JS: What did you personally think of Begin?

AM: Begin was a strong man, he was a very tough person to negotiate with, but I think that when he agrees, he will deliver.

JS: And that was your assessment?

AM: Yes... And certainly for him, it was very important that a country like Egypt would make peace with Israel. Peace for us based on justice, not peace of submission or domination -- never. And when we started negotiating with the Israelis in the Mena House Hotel in the first week of December, it was very clear that the Americans, who were represented by Harold Saunders--no, the former ambassador, Herman Eils, from the United Nations there was Siilasvuo and Jonah.

We invited the Palestinians, who refused to come; we invited the Syrians but they rejected it. It was very clear to us, we were serious, because they were no longer afraid from the Israeli side, this 'superiority' considered. No, here we spoke as equals and tried to find a solution.

JS: You mentioned that Jonah was there, and Jonah had been important in the negotiations on the separation of the forces.

AM: Yes, yes.

JS: I wanted to ask you, how did you see the role of the United Nations?

AM: Helpful.

JS: And important?

AM: Important. We were very much keen on them, they were keen, the Americans were keen, the Israelis were keen. So, I pay tribute to the UN, because men like General Siilasvuo were very distinguished and respected persons. Jonah, who is a friend of mine, is a knowledgeable person; he knows what he is talking about, and the American side was distinguished. There was Herman Eils.

JS: With regard to the United Nations, I wanted to go back if I could to these days at the time when the war broke out. One has the impression in reading some of the histories, especially Henry Kissinger's account, that very much was done between the United States and the Soviet Union to bring about the cease-fire and the resolution in the Security Council. Very little mention is made of the United Nations, although Waldheim is sometimes mentioned. I wanted to ask you your impression, from the Egyptian side: did you look to the Secretary-General for any particular assistance or role at that particular time?

AM: Yes, yes. I mean, in trying to make things advance we never neglected him. You know there were sometimes problems, we had to ask Waldheim to mediate. And it was a role that is supposed to be played by the United Nations; we wanted to involve the UN more. Maybe there was a reluctance from the Americans, from the Israelis, yes, maybe, to confine the role to them and to leave the UN out. We were not in agreement with that. But everybody looked to the UN, because at the one hundred and one kilometer point, there was a United Nations presence.

JS: Yes. There was another specific question I wanted to ask in this connection: very early, when there was the move for a cease-fire, I believe that you on the Egyptian side indicated a willingness to accept that a UN presence in the territory that the Israelis were being forced out of, which was actually Egyptian territory. My question is, was Egypt at that point ready to accept a UN presence in what was Egyptian territory?

AM: It came after, with the objection of the Soviet Union, because the Soviets didn't participate in the Mena House conference, because the Arabs boycotted the conference. So, the

Soviets were putting a sort of veto, and when we came to the Camp David agreement, the resolution on the presence of the United Nations forces was vetoed, by Jacob Malik. At that moment, Ambassador Malik was their representative here, and I met him, discussed it with him, and I told him, “if you are not going to accept, we will go to what is now known as the MFO, multinational force of observers.” This is what I told him. He took us lightly, because there was big tension between us and the Soviets at that point; I’m sure you will remember that. So, we went ahead with the MFO that still exists until now. We would have preferred the United Nations peacekeeping force, but at that moment the Soviets put their veto on it. So, we over-ruled [by-passed] the veto and we accepted the multinational force.

JS: Let me ask another question, going back to the outcome of the Yom Kippur war. President Sadat, in announcing his objectives, there were actually two: one, the withdrawal of Israel to the 1967 border, and two, satisfaction for the Palestinians. Now, that second part was dropped at some point. Can you give any background on how the Egyptian position changed?

AM: I would refer you to what is the outcome in the Camp David accords.

JS: Well that’s true, but when resolution 338 was adopted, it did not change anything.

AM: No, but it was a cease-fire, more or less, to enter into negotiations, and this under appropriate auspices. At that moment the United States and the Soviets were not ready to consider the “under the auspices of the United Nations.” Waldheim didn’t preside, there were co-chairmen, the Soviets and the Americans. We went along with that, it didn’t bother us.

JS: This was in Geneva, you mean?

AM: Yes.

JS: ... at that so-called Peace Conference?

AM: Yes. The so-called peace conference. You see, this was the prelude of the Mena House conference. But here, it is the question of the role of the United Nations. We were very much in favor of that.

JS: I wanted to ask you that, because Waldheim was simply invited to sit there as a symbol, and then that was it.

AM: Yes, and the 338 resolution was "under the appropriate auspices," ... you saw that.

--- More Arabic ---

JS: Now, according to my information, the wording of resolution 338 was actually worked out in Moscow, between Henry Kissinger and Brezhnev and Gromyko.

AM: Yes, exactly.

JS: My question is, Egypt was not involved in that at all?

AM: No, we didn't object to that.

JS: You didn't object to it?

AM: What we needed was a peace conference, be it under the UN chairmanship or the two superpowers. I mean, the result for us was what we achieved by this peace process. Because the peace was really launched, and I considered that the launching of this peace was the result of the October war.

JS: So you didn't feel left out?

AM: No, no, no. And I can say that because I was here, following that, and for me the result was... I don't know if you've seen that book...

JS: I have seen it yes.

AM: It's right here, the discussion that I had with Begin. A heated discussion.

JS: Right, right. I know you have to go... Maybe we can continue this the next time you come to the United States.

AM: If you come to Cairo, I would like to see you, but I'm sure what you are doing here, I consider it a very scientific and objective process.

JS: Well, it's important to get all of this on the record, it really is important, and ...

AM: I want to say that this is very much needed, that people would know the truth, the reality of these things.

JS: You have unique access, for example the fact that you were in the Cabinet with Sadat. Now, there's still many questions as to when he decided...

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JS: Sadat had a very good camouflage for his intentions. Kissinger says he was fooled because President Sadat was constantly saying that he was going to take action, but didn't take action, and so then nobody expected him to take action at the time that he did. So, it's still an historical question unanswered: when did President Sadat actually decide? Was it after this meeting in May that you have referred to, when the United States vetoed the resolution?

AM: July.

JS: July. Or was that the trigger -- had he not made up his mind? We haven't mentioned the relations with Syria. When did the coordination with Syria begin, in preparation for the military action.

AM: It is maybe difficult for me to say when, because I was in New York but I was involved with him as a member of cabinet for three years, from 1970 to 1972, and then I left the cabinet and I came here.

JS: ... which were formative years.

AM: Yes, exactly. So, hear what I can say with full trust. There was a determination to change the status quo that Kissinger and maybe others doubted very much, especially after he sent home the Soviet experts. Then it was a kind of relief. "Now, it is impossible for the Egyptians to move" -- and here was a big mistake. This is very important. Because he sent the experts, the Soviet experts, in June, July 1972, I think, in July 1972, one year before the war. Sadat, I've known him, he's a man of vision. He is a planner. I think he had these qualities to take into consideration, and that maybe later on he was acknowledged, but at the beginning this was not acknowledged.

JS: I have many more questions, but I know that you have to leave now, so I am going to stop, but if I could, I would like a return engagement. We have really just started.