

Yale UN - Oral History

Ambassador Samir Shihabi

Interviewed by Jim Sutterlin

July 7th, 1998

James Sutterlin (JS): May I first, Mr. Ambassador, express Yale University's appreciation for your participation in this oral history project.

Samir Shihabi (SS): I am a Yale Law School alumnus.

JS: Oh, are you? That I didn't know.

SS: I didn't graduate from there, I attended a semester there and then I transferred to Cambridge in England. I have very, very strong memories of Yale.

JS: Great. I'm sorry you transferred to Cambridge!

SS: That was what the Dean told me at the time, but there were circumstances, you know, that made it important.

JS: Anyhow, the conversation today will be about the Iran-Iraq war, and about, to the extent possible, the role that Saudi Arabia played in bringing this war to an end. I wanted

to begin, so that it will be on the record, by asking you something of your background and what position you actually occupied during the time of the Iran-Iraq war.

SS: When the war broke out in 1980, I was Ambassador to Pakistan. So, I was in the area, in the area of the war zone, I would say, or adjacent. And I remained Ambassador to Pakistan until July 1983, during which three years the war took a lot of go-and-come, and give-and-take, and up-and-down. In 1983 I was transferred as Permanent Representative to the United Nations and I remained there until... my tour of duty there covered all the period of the Iran-Iraq war. So, I was part to the diplomatic efforts and initiatives and presence in the UN that dealt with the Iran-Iraq war. And you know the UN always remained a diplomatic frontier for the Iran-Iraq war because all the participants in it and those closely interested in it, those indirectly involved in it, carried diplomatic efforts in the UN.

JS: When you arrived at the United Nations, as you say, the war had been going on with great loss of life. Was Saudi Arabia already interested in playing some role in trying to bring the war to an end?

SS: Yes. Because in principle the war came about because of the two attitudes of two governments, which would be the Khomeini regime, at that time, in Iran, and the reaction of the Iraqi regime, which seemed to have had, at the time -- I presume it was not known to us -- bigger designs than what we thought at the time. But recent events have revealed that, which was not clear at the time. The background of it really was, unfortunately, the

belligerence of the Khomeini regime when it took over power, and lack of statesmanship in dealing with their neighbors, and openness of expressing their extremist views, pertaining to what they like and what they don't like, in the area and in the world -- not to say in Iran, itself, also. It created a certain climate in the area that made everybody sensitive towards them, to say the least. And that's what caused the war to break out. Of course it needed more than statesmanship on the part of anybody. And I know that Saudi Arabia is always wary of adventurous people. It looked like an adventure to us, but of course the climate was ready for it, was prepared for it.

JS: An adventure on which side? By Saddam Hussein or Khomeini?

SS: Both.

JS: Both.

SS: By both. Of course, Khomeini's adventurous attitude and belligerent attitude towards all the neighboring countries did not create a climate of sympathy for him when the attack took place. But that does not diminish from the fact that we, in principle, are wary of adventures. You can easily start a war, but you don't know how it could end. But still, we didn't, of course, approve of the way Imam Khomeini approached the whole situation and the whole attitude toward the Middle East countries, including Saudi Arabia. And in one way, it looked to us as if it just furthered away his adventures from us.

JS: Right. What did you think that the Iraqi intentions were? What did you think at that time the objectives of Saddam Hussein were?

SS: My own analysis at the time was that the belligerent attitude of the Iranian regime, and the adventurous nature of the Iraqi regime -- this was the natural result of the situation. You see, a regime that is less adventurous than the Iraqi regime would not have jumped into the war, but they would have taken from the war other measures -- because there would have been many other measures to take to keep Iran at bay, many other measures to take, which we were taking ourselves to keep Iran at bay.

JS: Yes, Saudi Arabia at that time was trying in its own way, you mean, to restrict the influence of Khomeini throughout the region.

SS: Oh, definitely. Of course, we didn't approve of his attitude. Events have proved that it backfired, his attitude: whether it is towards adventures or towards non-adventures. You see, and now we are glad to see that the statesmen in Iran today are looking to things in a very statesman-like manner, which if, at the time of Khomeini, they had adopted those attitudes, nothing would have happened.

JS: At this time, when you arrived at the United Nations, and before that, there was a great difficulty because Iran, understandably, would not deal with the Security Council. It considered the Security Council favorable to Iraq. Did you feel that given the situation,

there was a special role for individual countries such as Saudi Arabia to try to bring about some communication between the parties, between Iraq and Iran?

SS: That was a very difficult period to communicate with Iran on these substantial issues, because they were set on their ideas, they were set on their attitudes to things, they were set on their theories of religion and life and statesmanship and war and peace. And it wasn't really easy to influence them very much at that time. Their attitude towards their neighboring countries was not, also, a helpful factor in communication. I would say the influence on them wasn't really something that one considered... influencing them by direct communication. Probably one could influence them indirectly by other means but not by direct communication.

JS: What do you mean by other means?

SS: If you take a negative attitude towards somebody that what you are doing is wrong, without really taking an active... this is not the means. Taking a particular position that "I am not with you, I oppose what you do." Then these are means. Of course you know that we gave Iraq a lot of material support at a certain stage when they were withdrawing and they were in difficulty, and that was no secret, really. These are many means, of course, to pressurize the other party.

JS: In addition to the material support, Iraq was rather skillful in gaining and maintaining the support in the Security Council and in the United Nations of the other

Arab countries. Did Iraq seek, in particular, Saudi support in representing its position?
Not just in terms of money, but in terms...

SS: Definitely. We gave Iraq faithful support...

JS: That's what I meant.

SS: ... without which Iraq would not have, probably, been able to earn the support that it could at the time. We thought that this could only be achieved by holding the other regime at bay, you see, and bringing the war to an end. And the only way to bring an end was to give that diplomatic support to Iraq.

JS: How did you do that? How could you or Saudi Arabia in fact give this kind of political support to Iraq?

SS: You know, at that time the majority of the United Nations people, if not all of them, were supporting Iraq, and we were instrumental in that.

JS: You were instrumental in that?

SS: Oh yes, in bringing diplomatic support to Iraq at that stage.

JS: Were you in touch with the United States then?

SS: Definitely. Of course, that's where the role of our ambassador in Washington was. All the time we had at the back of our minds that Iran was a neighbor, whether you like it or not, and in the long run you have to live with your neighbors, whether you like it or not. And we were always hoping that these events would bring Iran back to the right track so that it would be the good neighbor that we want Iran to be. But still, at that junction, it was imperative not to allow this belligerency to take an advantage, and that's why it was important to support Iraq, which at that time looked to be defending itself against the belligerency of Iran, to support Iraq in that situation. Of course, we were in contact with all our friends in the political arena. And in the UN we exerted great efforts in that area.

JS: And did the Saudi leadership have direct contact with Saddam Hussein at that point?

SS: In those days, Saddam Hussein was in the good books of all his Arab neighbors, Kuwait included, you see? And nothing showed on the surface of what his designs for the future were, and what goes on in his map-books? That's why it was a great shock.

JS: Did you analyze his intention as primarily to get rid of the fundamentalist regime, Khomeini regime, or to regain the Shatt-al-Arab?

SS: No, at that time it just looked like he was taking measures to put Iran at bay, you see, to put Iran at bay. In the meantime, he would have taken the Shatt-al-Arab, which is not against what we generally felt. But it wasn't clear to us that he had bigger designs than that, and it was clear to us that the belligerency of Iran was really not something that is scientifically planned. It was just the disease of zealots, which could also affect the whole Middle East.

JS: Including Saudi Arabia.

SS: Included. When I say the whole of the Middle East, it means everybody. That's why it was their belligerent attitude, really, that almost decided the issue of who stands where.

JS: Was Saudi Arabia able to have any contact at all with the Khomeini regime during this period?

SS: I wouldn't say it was very significant in terms of positive contacts, but naturally it was not... relations were not severed. There were diplomatic channels that were not closed all the time. Of course, they were at a very low level at that time, very low level.

JS: How did you assess, you yourself, the main actors at the time, who were at the UN many of them, I mean Tariq Aziz was frequently there, Velayati was there. Did you come to know them, and what did you think about these people?

SS: Of course I came to know them all. I think all of them were really not independent operators, you see. They were all carrying out policies that were checked in their capitals. I felt that there was a misconception among the Iraqis at the time, that they dominate... not dominate... that they command high international respect in the world, which we knew they really didn't even at that time, the regime being what it was. And so if it was not for the support of many of the countries that felt that they should be supported, for the situation as it was, they wouldn't have had that international support. Of course, then, it was very clearly revealed when they attacked Kuwait that they don't command any international respect, in the fullest sense of the word.

JS: One of the amazing things is that Tariq Aziz is still there. Did you think of him then as a skillful operator?

SS: Probably, on the team that was there at the time, he was carrying out the orders of his masters, to a reasonable extent, I would say. There was nothing unusual with him, but I would say a reasonable ability.

JS: There are Arab organizations, the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic States -- they all tried to be active at times, but they were not effective. How would you describe this? Why was there so little effectiveness on the part of these organizations that were supposed to deal with Arab problems?

SS: These organizations, if you mean the framework, the Conference, such organizations are really a platform like the UN but of a regional character. So, when the UN takes over, their role becomes supplementary, it doesn't become a major role. In any international dispute today, when the UN takes it over, other regional organizations become supplementary. The members of these organizations played their role in the UN. So, there is in certain situations no sense in duplicating it in different way.

JS: So, they were willing to leave it to the UN?

SS: Well, it had to be left to the UN to some extent, because that was where some of the main operators were. If you left it only to the regional groups, then some of the main operators are out.

JS: Including the five Permanent Members of the Security Council.

SS: Including the five Permanent Members, and members who have interests in the area.

JS: Or the Secretary-General for that matter?

SS: The Secretary-General does what the UN wants, what its major organs want to see.

JS: Yes, but I wanted to ask you about that. In this case, since Iran would not deal with the Security Council, the only means of communication, so to speak, and contact, in the UN context, was the Secretary-General. And I wondered -- you were there then, and in an important position -- what was your assessment of the role that the Secretary-General was playing then?

SS: Pérez de Cuéllar is one of the finest diplomats. He is a very fine diplomat, and he is a gentleman of the first order. A clever man, he is an experienced diplomat. And he played his role, I would say, very cleverly and wisely. He knew his limits and limitations, and he knew the extent to which he could go. And I think he played his role very well. Of course, you see, in those situations, especially when the Iranians were on the losing side of the war, any sign on their part that somebody is not with them, then he's against them. So, when the Secretary-General, or anyone... but it was, you know, a "you don't do this, do that" thing, because "it is better for you. No, no, this fellow is against us." At a certain point they took a negative attitude toward the Secretary-General because "he was not fair, not correct." But it was not because he was not fair, it was because their situation was difficult.

JS: As I told you, I have spoken to Mr. Kittani on this subject, and he indicated that the Iraqis from the beginning felt that Pérez de Cuéllar was partial to the Iranians.

SS: To the Iraqis?

JS: No.

SS: To the Iranians?

JS: To the Iranians.

SS: The Iraqis?

JS: The Iraqis felt that, yes. That clearly was not your impression? You did not have that impression?

SS: No, no. Definitely. He was not partial to... But as you know, the Iraqi regime was a very aggressive regime also. And they wanted people also to... "If you are not with us you are against us." And probably they wanted him to take a more aggressive line towards Iran. He cannot -- he is the Secretary-General and Iran is a member of the UN. And every position that he takes in an extreme manner will be counted against him. He cannot.

JS: Olaf Palme was the special representative of the Secretary-General for the Iran-Iraq war, beginning with Waldheim actually. Did Olaf Palme ever come to you or to Saudi Arabia to ask your intervention?

SS: I wasn't there when Olaf Palme was involved. I wasn't there. I really don't know much about his work. Of course, I knew his successor, Eliasson. Eliasson was one of the finest diplomats also. First class. He was one of the finest diplomats. And I knew Eliasson enjoyed the confidence of Saudi Arabia very much.

JS: Eliasson did?

SS: Yes, yes. And he enjoyed both the confidence of Iran and Iraq.

JS: Yes. Did he seek your particular assistance in it?

SS: Eliasson? Of course. He was a friend, he was a colleague, and whatever assistance I could give him I gave.

JS: Well, in what way could you give assistance? Through intervention with the Iraqis, or with the...

SS: Well, all sides. When people are in his position, they need the assistance of all the friends and those who have spoken, with all parties. Of course my main support to him was towards my government, you know, to foster backing for him in his efforts.

JS: At that point, when Eliasson was working with Pérez de Cuéllar, the main people on the UN side were Pérez de Cuéllar, Eliasson, and Gianni Picco, as a matter of fact.

Did Picco serve as a kind of special kind of contact point between you -- or Saudi Arabia -- and the Secretary-General?

SS: You see, Mr. Picco, who is a very able diplomat, really, and a very able negotiator, enjoyed the full confidence of the Secretary-General, and when I knew him, also he enjoyed my full confidence. Of course, it was healthy and good to have a man of his stature and his intelligence to enjoy the confidence of both sides, myself, on behalf on Saudi Arabia, and Mr. Pérez de Cuéllar, the Secretary-General, to make him a good means of communication between us.

JS: And you had full confidence in Gianni Picco?

SS: Oh yes. Gianni Picco did a great job. He was a tremendous help to the Secretary-General. The Secretary-General was lucky to have a man like Gianni Picco to support him.

JS: And he managed also to maintain contact with both the Iranians and the Iraqis.

SS: Yes. Luckily and surprisingly.

JS: You might say that the changing point in the Iran-Iraq war, but also in world affairs, was in 1987, when the Secretary-General, recognizing the change in the Soviet Union, suggested that it was time for the foreign ministers to meet together as the

Security Council, and that the five Permanent Members should take a special role. Did you recognize this at the time -- because I think you were there then -- as a significant development?

SS: Yes, definitely. I think it was a good step on the part of Pérez de Cuéllar. I told you the man... As I mentioned, you see, Pérez de Cuéllar was a very intelligent and able diplomat, and I think that step was a very good step in the right direction, and I think it was in time, I would say. Probably if he had done that two years earlier, it wouldn't have worked.

JS: And eventually the five Permanent Members began to draft the resolution that eventually would become the basis of the end of the war. Did you maintain contact with anyone or all of the members of the five Permanent Members as they were drafting this?

SS: I don't think it was the five Permanent Members who drafted it. I think it was a group of some of the five and some of the others. So, it wasn't the five Permanent Members' draft. It was really a draft that was presented, you see -- but, of course, we had an active role in it.

JS: You had an input? That's precisely the question I wanted to ask.

SS: It was not an influence, it was a role in it, you see, to see that it would be acceptable.

JS: And you could give advice on what might or might not work?

SS: Definitely. Definitely.

JS: Can you give an example of that -- what you thought was essential to go into this resolution? Let me be more specific: there was one thing that the Iranians were insisting on, and that was that the party that was guilty for starting the war should be identified, which is the most difficult part of the resolution. Did you have any concern about that? Did you give any advice on this?

SS: Of course, the insistence of the Iranian party at the time was when they still had a strong position in the war. When their position became weaker they realized that they can't get it through, you see.

JS: Well, but in the end they did get it through.

SS: Yes, but not in the way that they wanted it. In the way that just made it through the UN respect.

JS: And as part of a different deal.

SS: Of course. One of the items there was concerning the regional of security and peace. Which at that time we thought it was not a practical approach, you see. But you see we didn't think that it would make an issue. It was watered down. Because we thought that was not the way to approach the question of the regional security. But we let it go, the way it came out.

JS: And nothing has happened on that.

SS: Of course, we knew it wasn't practical, you see.

JS: At that time.

SS: It wasn't practical in the context in which it was proposed: of course, regional security is regional security. It has to be approached one day, it has to be dealt with one day, but not in that context.

JS: Now, what proved to be a very difficult point in the negotiations was the difference between Iraq and Iran on the order in which the various paragraphs of the resolution would be implemented. The Iraqis insisted it was an integral whole; the Iranians insisted that the cease-fire should come first. Were you involved in this problem? Did you give advice to either side? Saudi Arabia, I mean.

SS: No, I think if I remember well now, our concern was that something should be accepted by both sides at the time, to finish this situation. That it was up or down, or before or after: it was not our concern.

JS: So, you didn't at any point advise the Iraqis: "Well, you'd better go ahead and take the cease-fire first and then worry about the rest"?

SS: Of course, you know, I was not the contact to the Iraqis at the time. Of course I dealt with the Iraqis when they came to New York, Tariq Aziz or otherwise. So, whether any advice had been given to them from Riyadh, through other channels, I am not aware of it.

JS: But there were other channels.

SS: Oh, definitely. Absolutely. You see, our relations with Iraq were very extensive. We had extensive relations with Iraq and there were many, many channels. The UN was one of the platforms only.

JS: It has been said that Prince Bandar had a particular role in this respect. I think he was in touch with Picco, for example, and...

SS: He was Ambassador to Washington, and of course the role of the United States was a major role in the situation, and that is what his role was. It was direct, of course.

JS: 'Direct' with the United States, rather than with Iraq?

SS: Well, of course, with the United States naturally; with Iraq, probably... he might have been asked to contact Iraq by his government, by his own government you see. And he would.

JS: By 1987, the so-called 'tanker war' had become intense, and the American president had decided to re-flag the Kuwaiti ships. What was Saudi Arabia's view of that? What did you think of that?

SS: That was a Kuwaiti decision. Of course, there was no question of Saudis reflagging their ships. But that was a Kuwaiti decision, which we didn't say yes or no. They decided that: fine. That was their own right.

JS: But at that same point, there were quite a lot of Americans and others who thought that the United Nations should re-flag ships, that the UN flag should be flown on ships going through the Gulf. One person who favored that was Eliot Richardson, for example. Did Saudi Arabia get involved in that at all? Did you have any views on that?

SS: I don't think that we found that that is a very serious proposal.

JS: Pérez de Cuéllar was opposed to it, actually. He thought it was an unrealistic...

SS: I know, because that would have involved the UN unduly.

JS: And that was... in other words, Saudi Arabia would not have pushed either.

SS: No, not to my knowledge. I didn't do anything in that respect.

JS: But did it seem to you that this intensified war in the Gulf, that is the ship war, was a dangerous situation that could bring in the US and the Soviet Union into direct confrontation there?

SS: I didn't think that it would bring the two superpowers into confrontation, but I felt that it could involve the western powers into some sort of confrontation because of the oil, with Iran.

JS: Now, there were really two very serious incidents: one was when the US shot down the Iranian airbus, and on the other hand when the US ship was hit by Iraq. Did Saudi Arabia play any role in trying to reduce the tensions that resulted from those actions?

SS: At that time, tensions were so high. Of course, the Iraqis immediately apologized and they were ready to -- because they admitted it was an error, a mistake, which I think it was. However, whatever you think of the Iraqi regime today, what I think goes at that

time. They could not afford, really, to alienate the United States, and they had no interest in that. Certainly, the shooting down of the airbus heightened the tensions, and I think it was one of the major -- in my view -- one of the major reasons why the Iranians realized that they were going in to deeper waters now. They thought more seriously of accepting the cease-fire.

JS: So, it was step, in your view...

SS: Yes -- in the long run. Of course, at the time, when it happened -- by mistake or otherwise -- and the Iranians took it in a different way, but I think they realized in the long run that to get the Americans more involved in the war would not bring them success, you see. And that also it showed them that really the United States was not leaving the theater and going away.

JS: One of the achievements of Pérez de Cuéllar was to propose, unilaterally there should be a cessation of the so-called 'war on the cities.' It didn't last too long, but it did save a lot of lives, I think. Were you at all helpful in bringing Iraq, in particular, to accept this cessation of bombing on the cities?

SS: Well, such things didn't take place in New York, really. There was Saudi influence in that area, but it was an Iraqi decision and an Iranian decision. They both realized their interest in peace. You see, there was no form of -- I would say -- regular,

systematic consultations in that respect. It was continuous consultations on the whole issue, but nothing systematic.

JS: But it was at this time, of course, that the use of chemical weapons first became evidenced, and you will remember that the UN, or actually Pérez de Cuéllar on his own initiative, to investigate both sides as to whether, even though it was clear it was the Iraqi side was the guiltier. Was Saudi Arabia, to the extent of your knowledge, particularly concerned about the introduction of chemical weapons in this area?

SS: Very much so, because we know that this is not an acceptable situation. We know that the world would not accept it, and Iraq would have lost a great deal if they kept on this path. What they did in at this time was enough, really, to put them in a special category as being ruthless and adventuresome ever when they had still world support.

JS: Did you think your government could give them useful advice on that at the time?

SS: It wasn't through me, but I am sure that they must have told them something, but not through me.

JS: Not through you.

SS: No. But I am sure -- because I know how our people feel about these things. There are certain things -- in our view as a state, there are certain things you can't do, in

principle you just can't do it. But you see, especially some of these regimes that think that everything can be done: We are not a moral. We know that certain things cannot be done.

JS: And this brought a new dimension into the conflict?

SS: Definitely. I think it brought a new dimension, it brought a new factor into being, the defeat. As you know, at that time Saddam Hussein used to use smoke bombs against the Iranians and they would think it was gas bombs and they would fly!

JS: Unfortunately he used the other, too.

SS: Of course. He used both, so they didn't know which was which.

JS: At that point, the war was at something of a stalemate. The Iraqis basically had to use chemical weapons to stop the Iranians, but the Iranian couldn't get very far with their massive use of troops. Do you think this...

[interrupted]

JS: Mr. Ambassador, in your view, and for that matter in the view of the Saudi government what were the factors that eventually did bring the two countries to accept 598 and at least a cease-fire?

SS: Well, both realized that they had failed in their efforts, and they had gained nothing of...

[end of side 1]

[side 2]

SS: So, there was a dominant regional and world public opinion that wanted the war to come to an end. And both realized that they had no chance of success in their aims.

JS: Now, earlier Saudi Arabia, as you have mentioned, had provided considerable resources to Iraq. At this stage, was Saudi Arabia able to exercise its influence in any other way in order to make them stop fighting?

SS: You see, the fighting had to stop when both realized they could not win.

JS: And they didn't need to be pressed by...

SS: No -- the circumstances were pressing. Of course, we would have liked the war to stop at any time, no question about it. And both sides knew that. We were not anxious to have it carried on.

JS: Well, both Kittani and Gianni Picco have said "If you really want to know how the war ended, what helped to bring it to an end, you have to speak to the Saudis." What do they mean?

SS: But you know, of course, in the last stages of the thing, you know, Prince Saud himself was in New York, and we met in his office, and Kittani was there. Prince Bandar was there; I was there. The Secretary-General was communicating with the Iranians, and Prince Saud was communicating with Tariq Aziz across the telephone to Iraq. So that he had to bring things to an end, as early as possible.

JS: So, there was the direct role then, at an important point?

SS: Yes, there was, of course.

SS: I think Tariq Aziz then was on the other line with Saddam Hussein.

JS: Yes. Because he took no decisions without...

SS: Well, I know -- in Iraq, who can take decisions except the President? In Iran at that time no one could take decisions except Imam Khomeini.

JS: This was the point that I really wanted to get to, because actually there is nothing in the UN records on this meeting. I think it is rather important that it be in the historical record because it was an important contribution of Saudi Arabia to peace.

SS: No, no. We wanted it stopped. Because, you see, it is always easy to start a war, so difficult to know the conclusion, and sometimes the people who... People forget always when they start a war, the human factor. In all conflicts in history, people who didn't recognize the human factor, lost. From Napoleon, Hitler, to the adventurers of modern time.

JS: Iraq, Saddam Hussein personally, had utilized an enormous amount of the resources of Iraq in this war with Iran. They were bankrupt, actually. Presumably, and here I am putting words in your mouth, but: did Iraq look to Saudi Arabia as a means of recouping some of its losses in terms of resources?

SS: No, I think we had supported Iraq enough by that time. I don't think they...

JS: You don't think they had hopes of more?

SS: Not to my knowledge. They would have been foolish to hope for more. I mean, they were expensive enough for us by that time.

JS: Because, to go ahead a little bit, it has been suggested that one of the main reasons for the Iraqi attack on Kuwait was to regain some money. They had lost all their money.

SS: That was the pretext.

JS: You think it was a pretext?

SS: I think these people have some designs or platitudes that pertain to their party line, and they had signed the treaties. They wanted to rest the oil wells, but not specifically to cover their losses. But only to get further than that.

JS: Do you want to stop? Well, that's interesting. It's off the subject of Iran-Iraq, but there is this frequent connection made between the Iran and Iraq war and then Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, and it's also said that if Kuwait had been more generous in sharing its wealth, that there might not have been a war. What do you think of that?

SS: It's a very... I won't say it 'primitive', but I would say a very simplistic attitude to international relations. Nobody shares his wealth to other people just because the other fellow wants it. You see, otherwise America would have to share its wealth with the whole world. Kuwait is an independent country that has... they are lucky, they are fortunate. They have a big income and small population. But this should not make them a prey to their neighbors. They have been most helpful to Iraq, *most* helpful to Iraq, in all Iraq's difficulties. But I think the Iraqi design was bigger than that, and they wanted to have the wealth of the oil. The wealth of Iraq itself was not enough, it was consumed in Iran. They realized that a small adventure would consume their wealth, they probably wanted more wealth for bigger adventures, you know?

JS: And leadership in the whole region?

SS: This question of leadership is tricky. You don't become a leader by saying to people, "I am the leader." You become a leader by the people telling to you that, "You are our leader." Leadership doesn't come from above, although it might be sitting high above, but leadership comes really from the bottom to the top, not from top to the bottom. And anybody who can say, "I will be the leader" they are mistaken because it is counter-productive. You do the right things and then you become a leader, but you do the wrong things and you lose.

JS: This is an interesting point. And going back, then, to the Iran-Iraq war, certainly Saddam Hussein had pretensions to be the leading personality in the Middle East. Do you feel, and did you feel at the time, that through, basically, his loss, and through his utilization of chemical weapons, also against the Kurds, that he had already lost any possibility of becoming the leading figure in the Middle East?

SS: Well, you see, it is your acts that make you a leader, not your words. So, what he did -- when you do the wrong things, you lose the opportunity. If you do the right things you have the opportunity. Of course, I don't want to go into personality analysis. That is a different subject that we can discuss another time. But I think the wrong things were done at the wrong time.

JS: Right. Let me go back directly to the Iran-Iraq war, and just ask you -- you were an observer there in a very crucial point. How do you assess the overall UN role in

dealing with the situation? That is, the role of the Security Council, of the Secretary-General, of members of the Secretariat. Was this really an extremely significant time for the United Nations?

SS: Yes, yes. Definitely. I agree with you. I think the significance of the... because the UN played an important role. It was actually the platform on which all the players played their role diplomatically, which had of course its direct bearing on the military situation. And this was also one of the first major efforts of the UN in peace making, which enhanced the prestige of the UN and showed the world that the UN can be really a useful instrument, for those who like it and for those who don't like it. And even those who don't like it, will need it one day. The UN is a very...

[interrupted]

This brings us to the question about the role of the UN as such. The world cannot live without the UN. That's why the people who don't appreciate the UN and its role don't realize that one day they will need it.

JS: And this particular war showed that, right?

SS: Absolutely. It was actually one of the first experiments in which the UN proved its usefulness, and in which a good, intelligent, calm Secretary-General proved his worth.

JS: In your view, and in the Saudi view, who had the greatest leverage on the two parties in finally bringing them to peace? Aside from the fact that they were losing, both

sides. Would you say any one country, or two countries, or the Secretary-General, had the greatest leverage in bringing them to a reasonable acceptance of the resolution?

SS: I said the circumstances forced themselves on them. It's not that they listened to Saudi Arabia or the United States or the Soviet Union. It is when both realized that they have lost the war, and they cannot win.

JS: As far as you could see, the Soviet Union had basically lost any influence by that point on Iraq?

SS: I won't say they had lost it by that time. Still the Soviet Union was very close to Iraq. But the situation itself forced Iraq to accept the cease-fire.

JS: Now, going back just a minute to an earlier stage -- Western countries were active in providing some war material to both sides, France in particular. Was Saudi Arabia concerned about that? Did Saudi Arabia in any way seek to discourage the provisions of war material to the two sides? Or one side? From western countries. Or the Soviet Union.

SS: I wasn't any part of that side of the question. I was not part of it.

JS: Let me ask you Mr. Ambassador, if there is any particular part that you would like to put on this historical record, what you see as especially significant in the Saudi role, in the Saudi perception of this war, of this tragic war between two neighbors?

SS: What is significant?

JS: Yes. Is there something that you feel you would like to put on the record of your own conclusions about this? That we haven't covered.

SS: This was -- basically there were two things: lack of statesmanship on the part of one side, and the lack of total experience in international relations and dealings with other states, and on the other side, adventurism in international relations, of course 'international relations' war and peace included. Both are aspects of a lost war.

JS: And do you think that Saudi Arabia as the richest country in the region felt, or for that matter, feels a special responsibility to do what it can, to do what it could then, to bring about a reduction in conflict in the region?

SS: Absolutely. Undoubtedly.

JS: That was true then -- is it still true today?

SS: Absolutely. You see, when people resort to armament, it seems they have lost the capacity of reason.

JS: And how do you think that Saudi Arabia can best exercise this? How could it best exercise its influence in this period of the Iran-Iraq war, and how can it best exercise its influence now? Through the United Nations? Through bilateral relations?

SS: Still we follow the same principles of policy. Our policy hasn't changed. Our attitude to things did not change. Of course, you really have to provoke Saudi Arabia a lot in order to have a strong reaction. Saudi Arabia is not easy to provoke. But like anybody who is patient, if you really provoke him to the point of reacting, then he reacts, and that would be a difficult situation. But now, of course, we always try to, as I told you, to make reason the master of the situation.

JS: And that, you could say, is the distinction between the Iran-Iraq war and the subsequent war, because basically it was Iran, it was Khomeini who was posing a challenge, not just to Saudi Arabia but in the... and so you were inclined to be of assistance to Iraq in that sense.

SS: Yes.

JS: Whereas later, it was Iraq that was posing a challenge, so you had to oppose him.

SS: Yes. Absolutely. And you know when Saddam Hussein sent an associate to the King, to tell him, “My brother gives you his best regards and says anything you want him to do, he will do it but the question of Kuwait is over.” He told him, “Then there is nothing to do. I think they, he must have misread Saudi Arabia poorly, because he must have really misread Saudi Arabia wrongly and poorly.

JS: That’s very interesting what you say. When you read the Pérez de Cuéllar book you will see the account that Tariq Aziz gives of this mission that was sent by Saddam Hussein to the various countries in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia.