

VICTOR ATIYEH

July 7, 1993

Tape 43, Side 2

C.H.: This is an interview with Governor Victor Atiyeh at his office in downtown Portland, Oregon, at Atiyeh International. The interviewer for the Oregon Historical Society is Clark Hansen. The date is July 7th, 1993, and this is Tape 43, Side 2.

You were wanting to discuss a little bit more about Israel.

V.A.: Well, we were going to talk about this gun that I got, and then we'll get into Israel, because it's kind of a cute story.

As I indicated, we'd been to Saudi Arabia, to Egypt, and into Syria. I had acquired some gifts and souvenirs, Dolores had, Lon had, Denny Miles had. Anyway, we had a lot of stuff.

Now we're going - we're actually leaving any vestige of a trade mission and going to Israel. That was the separate trip, that was what really triggered the trip to the Middle East was you ought to come and visit Israel.

Well, we've gotten all of this stuff, plus this gun. Well, the chargé d'affaires said, "Well, we could send stuff through the embassy." I don't think he knew how much stuff we're going to send. Anyway, we packaged it up, including this .38 Smith & Wesson.

Then to skip rather quickly, we'd gone to Israel, I'd come back, I was home back in Salem, we kept waiting to hear from the State Department, you know, as to when did this all arrive. And it was really kind of a cute story. <sup>6/22/93</sup> Jeri Thompson came, and she was chuckling, and she said that the State Department had called and said the packages had arrived.

"Oh wonderful, the governor's really been waiting for this." And then whoever was on the other end said, "Do you know there's a G-U-N in one of these boxes?"

And she laughed and said, "Yes, we know there's a G-U-N in one of those boxes."

Anyway, it finally arrived, and the Smith & Wesson was there. I saw the Smith & Wesson representative, oh I don't know, a few months later. I said, "Can you check on this?" You know, I'm trying to wonder if this is an American Smith & Wesson in Syria. I gave him the serial number, and they had sold in 1973 - it would have been eleven years earlier - three hundred of those to - it was in French, but it was the Lebanese army. Now, I don't know how it got from the Lebanese army to my friend the governor of Homs eleven years later, but anyway, that's the story on the Smith & Wesson.

C.H.: It wasn't an old gun.

V.A.: No. No, it's a modern cartridge .38 Smith & Wesson.

C.H.: Why did you want it?

V.A.: Well, I told you, you know, I just said - in that part of the world you've got to be very careful if you admire anything. And I said, "Gee, I know what that is, that's a gun, and you know, I collect guns."

And then he says, "Here."

And I said, "No, no, no."

"Yes, here."

Anyway, that's how I ended up with it. And I'm delighted to have it, it's a great souvenir, great story for me anyway. It's not something I would go out and buy, I mean, it's - I like older guns. But anyway, it's kind of neat to have. I've got that little story attached to it, so it's kind of fun.

Well, we went to Cyprus, as I think I already indicated, because we had to go through Cyprus, and I told you about the

topless ladies there on the beach and all. But we boarded the plane in the evening, it was dark, and again I told you how they - security and they strapped our - including Delores's clothes bag - our luggage.

We landed in Israel. We spent nine days in Israel. And they've got a regular deal. I mean, they've got people coming over all the time. They invite people as part of their PR thing. They tell their own story. And we had a guide, his name was ~~well,~~ ~~I'll think of it pretty~~ soon. YAA'COV PNINI

C.H.: Did you feel like you were being hit with political propaganda from the very beginning?

V.A.: Well, not from the very outset, but it was very clear, you know. Now I'm thinking - of course, I'm thinking I'm going to a very historic part of the world, and that's what I'm thinking. I had a little bit of cynicism.

One of the scheduled things is to plant a tree in the forest, and I think I may have mentioned it. It depends who's there, whose forest it is. It was the Tom McCall Forest and the Governor Straub Forest, and I suppose it was the Atiyeh Forest while we were there, and then it's been whose ever forest has been there ever since. A little dedication for Tom McCall there. Had a little marker, planted some trees, and I was viewing that a little cynically, kind of chuckling really, not in anger.

The first thing they did when we landed was to take us to the Holocaust Museum they have. And incidentally, while we were there, at that place, there was some disturbance downtown. Small bombing or something that was going on downtown. And I suppose that's why Lon got a little bit nervous.

I don't recall, I think I did mention that having gone through those three Arab countries that he wasn't at all worried, but when he got to Israel he got real nervous, and he got a .38 pistol from

the embassy and carried it all the time we were there. But that was their first shot.

<sup>YAAKOV PAINI</sup>  
~~Jakob Pianini~~ was our guide; he was a captain in the Israeli army. He was not a young man, but then he wasn't a kid, he wasn't an old man, he was just, I don't know where he was. Middle forties or late forties or something like that. Very personable, very nice guy. But I would tell you, we went - quickly, we went through and we went to all these historic sites, ruins and things of that kind, and stayed at a kibbutz overnight. That's all part of their tour thing.

<sup>DOLORES!!</sup>  
But I finally told Dolores, I guess it was about the third night, when you were asking about, you know, feeling like they were trying to persuade you to their views, I said, "You know, I have" - Now, we're at the Sea of Galilee, and where the Sermon on the Mount is, and all of these ruins and some that had been restored, where Jesus was born and Mary, and all of this was just marvelous. I said to her, "You know, I really don't care where the barbed wire is and where they shot up the Syrians or the Egyptians."

But you see, that was all part of their - it all works into their spiel. We went to one place where there was some ruined tanks, I think, and this was where they shot up some Egyptians, and obviously on the Golan Heights it was all the stories about where they had surrounded and banged up the Syrians.

And then he was talking about in the old town of Jerusalem, you know, where they were doing some shooting - This is now the captain, <sup>PAINI</sup>~~Pianini~~, was telling us/ and I said, "I really don't care about this, you know." But that was part of their spiel. I took a photograph.

They seemed to yearn to hang on to the terrible things. It was sort of a - well, it was sort of a main road, this is not in downtown, but on the edge downtown, I can't tell you downtown

where. Another at least a two-lane highway. But right on the corner was a children's playground, and you could see it. They had swings and things to climb on. It was a children's playground. And on the corner was an old cannon. I said, "That's incongruous. Why put an old cannon there where the kids are?" But you see, that's part of what they're, you know - continue to be scared, continue to worry about it, continue to think that these terrible Arabs are going to kill you.

They tell stories about, you know, the children went out and some terrorist injured or killed some, so all groups cannot go out with some young boy with a gun. And they're walking in the old town and everywhere, walking with guns. Some in uniform, some not in uniform.

Anyway, that kind of got to me, to think that they want to embrace sadness. They want to smother sadness, they want to grasp the terrible things, they want to make sure that they keep rubbing even the young people's nose into it. Maybe that's their culture, I don't know. It just seems a tragic thing to do instead of thinking about the good things and concentrating on the bad.

We went through the West Bank, we went out to where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, we went to Massad [sic], that fortress up on top of a hill, and they tell you the story about how it was all defended and all the rest. It was fascinating, I took a lot of pictures.

I went into the Dead Sea. Terrible. I couldn't wait to get back to the hotel to wash my feet. It was kind of an oily feeling. It's, you know, it's just - it's not something you really want to bathe in, I mean, it's just not a good feeling at all.

The Sea of Galilee is beautiful. You know, I enjoyed my visit there, with the exception that they were continually trying to lobby me on their cause. But it's a great part of the world. I

would tell you that I resented continually - every once in a while they were trying to show us how well they treated the Palestinians. And it was almost - to me, it smacked of down south, I mean in America, and "You see how well we treat our slaves." It smacked of that, to me it did. They'd say see how we take care of them, see how we do this.

And these are not people that want to be taken care of, they want a home. I tell my friends a number of times, you know, to give them an idea about that part of the world, I say to them, "Who are the Palestinians?" And then I'd answer the question, I'd say, "They're people from Palestine."

And then I'd say, "Where's Palestine?" Well, so that's - see, like we're Americans. We're from America. If somebody took over and we were displaced, we're still Americans, but we don't own our own country.

My good friend Sammy Kahl had a great line. You know, we were talking about that God had said this was for the Jewish people. And Sammy said, "God's not a real estate agent."

Well, it is terrible under the guise of a religion that so much torment I guess existed throughout the history of the world. I mean, I'm not just now talking Palestinian which - Muslims mostly - versus the Jewish race. But you go almost anywhere, it's going on in Bosnia now, you know, all of the fighting that's gone on, and you go through the history of time and everybody is pursuing war under the banner of Christ and God.

And you know, you say, "Now wait a minute, I don't think God wants this to happen." So it's a shame, and there needs to be peace over there.

I'll really bring you up to date. I did get - I don't get it any longer - *Washington Report on the Middle East*, a magazine. The reason I'm not getting it is every time I'd get it, I'd read it and

I'd get mad. And the things that we don't know in America about what's happening over there is incredible. I'm talking about in Israel. And the West Bank. And the Intifada.

And I'm saying, "I don't understand this." The Palestinians and the Intifada, they're using rocks, sticks, maybe some fire bombs. But that's what they have. The Israelis have guns and bullets. And so here you have these people that are fighting with sticks and rocks, fighting against people with bullets. It is that stark. It is no different than that.

C.H.: Why is it that we don't hear this other side of the story?

V.A.: Well, when the Intifada first started, that was televised. That was on the news. You could see the Israeli soldiers beating up on the Palestinians. I mean really beating up on them.

C.H.: What is the Intifada?

V.A.: What do I think of it?

C.H.: And what is it comprised of? What does it mean?

V.A.: I knew, but I don't know now what "intifada" means. But you can imagine - let me put it in the simplest terms I could possibly put it. You own your own home. Somebody comes and takes your home and kicks you out. Now you want your home back. It's your home. But under the understanding that we have in America, you are the enemy. You're the bad guy because you want your home back. And the guy that took it is the good guy. That's really what's happening right now.

Now the Intifada, these people have been displaced, they're living in the shabbiest kinds of quarters, they do not have the same rights as Israelis do. Not at all. Whether it is medical care or housing or jobs or anything. They are second-class citizens. I call it apartheid. It is truly apartheid. We're

worried about apartheid in South Africa, we got apartheid going over in Israel.

We are now dealing with forty-six - my goodness, forty-seven, almost fifty years, forty-seven years of displacement. So that would mean at least now maybe three generations for the youngsters, living, constantly - you can imagine how this thing boils and boils and is aggravated: "They took my business, they took my country, they took my home," whatever. "I'm being oppressed. They keep building on my land. The United States doesn't help us." Double standard of the worst kind.

So the Intifada was kind of - smallest kind - of an escape valve, letting off steam. You know, one would expect even worse than what's happened. There are some loose cannons, terrorists, you know - well, not terrorists - maybe some would call them terrorists, like we talked earlier, or guerrilla warfare. But that doesn't represent the Palestinians.

These are some people that just said that, you know, "We're going to go shoot these guys; they're killing our folks." Maybe they're so inclined. But they're a small number of people, you can't lay it on all Palestinians.

Well, I suppose as an American, and because I know so much about it, or at least have some feeling about it, I just really am quite frustrated by the double standard, where we are worried about South Africa, where we went to help people in Somalia and we're getting rid of the warlords, where we are - have - some of our efforts involved, and obviously some soldiers involved, in Bosnia in that part of the world. And yet we close our eyes to what's happening in Israel. And not only that, but we give Israel money, and we give them technology, and we give them military equipment.

And I said, "Now wait a minute, this is all wrong. This is not America. This is not right. This is not fair." But it's

frustrating. There's no question that our Congress is as close to Knesset as you can get. What Israel wants, Israel's going to get. And like I talked about moving the embassy - there's some things they may not even want, they're going to get.

I don't know what the answer to it is. We give them billions of dollars. Recently it was in the news about guaranteeing their loan. You know, we treat them as if they're pure as the driven snow. I don't know how our conscience allows us to do that. It isn't as if Congress doesn't know. There is an annual report on human right violations in the world, out of the State Department, a public document, condemning Israel. You probably never heard of it. There are all kinds of United Nations resolutions ignored by Israel. Now what other country of the world - what other country of the world - will we allow that to happen?

C.H.: Do you feel that they can only get away with that because of the power behind them in the United States?

V.A.: That's right.

C.H.: Why is that power so seemingly disproportionate, since there are just a small number of Jewish families in the United States and there are a lot of Arab families here?

V.A.: Yes - but they're extremely well-organized. Very sophisticated. They've been going at it now for decades. The Arab-Americans are beginning to do some of that, but I mean it's peanuts in terms of what the Israeli lobby has done.

There are more and more Arab-Americans running for office, more and more being elected to office. But very much like many, many, and most, I would say, immigrants, they would come, you know, usually poor, they would work hard so their children would have a better life than they did, and that would carry over to that generation to work hard, and the Arab-Americans are pretty much that way.

This whole matter of politics and being involved in politics and all, that was the furthest thing from their minds. I mean, they're busy on a daily basis, taking care of their family, doing whatever they do to make their children's life better. And it wasn't until recent years that they came to the realization that there's something terribly wrong. They worry, and I think legitimately so, about this misconception of what the Arab people are like. Usually you see them characterized with these flowing robes and rather evil-looking people. Beady eyes and a beard and sometimes with a sword and a pocketful of money, and you know -.

Somebody wrote a book, <sup>W. T.</sup> the TV Arab, <sup>W.</sup> I say. And you know, how the conception of Arab-Americans. And actually, Arab-Americans are very fine people. Well, obviously, not just Arab-Americans, but they're among those immigrants that came to this country that helped this country grow, that are devout and devoted to this country. That's not unlike people from other parts of the world.

Israel is different. Here I am. My father came from Syria. I'm either first-generation or second-generation, depending on how you count. And yet, I am - everything that I would say or do or feel relates to what I think is in the best interest of my country, America. I do have a knowledge about the Middle East, I do know about the people. But I'm telling you, for example, I worry about this double standard. This is my country that's doing that. I worry about my country when I know the Arab world and particularly the oil-rich Arab world has our economic future in their hands. I know that Israel - I mean, they - I don't know where they've become a strategic ally. I don't understand how they become a strategic ally of ours.

C.H.: Isn't part of the rationale that being based in that part of the world, that that area is of strategic interest to us and that it's convenient to use that militarily via the Suez Canal,

the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf. I mean, it's sort of close to a lot of conflict.

V.A.: Yeah, but look at it, how quickly did we get to Kuwait with our equipment? And you understand that we did all of that. Israel didn't do anything. They didn't send any troops, they didn't send any airplanes, they didn't send any rockets, they didn't do anything. We did it all. So in this world today, we can move rather quickly. We don't really need them to defend us. That's number one. But number two, what Arab countries threaten the United States? The only threat, the only threat, really, would be to reduce the supply of oil. That's not war.

C.H.: And the threat of terrorism is -

V.A.: Well, but the threat of terrorism is not something that you can do on an international basis. How do you fight a terrorist? Really, you can't say, "I'm going to go, I'm going to destroy Syria." Well, we didn't even destroy Libya, and we know that terrorists came from there. We destroyed some of their facilities.

It was really kind of fascinating to me, during the Gulf War, they were going to - God, this is terrible. It's also another way of showing how America looks at us. They were going to interview Arab-Americans to see what they knew about terrorists. Why the hell would I know anything about the terrorists? Why would any of my Arab-American friends know anything about terrorists? You see, this is kind of a quirk in their mind. "We're going to go talk to these people because they're withholding some information that they have." How would we know?

I was almost cynically saying what they really should have done is to interview Irish-Americans, because the only bombings and terrorism that took place was the IRA, during this whole Gulf War. Obviously, they weren't bombing - they were bombing somewhere else. But the only ones that were bombing anything or terrorist activi-

ties were the Irish. They should have interviewed all the Irish people in the United States. Obviously, I didn't believe that, but I was just doing that by way of comparison, show how that people think of it.

Well, anyway, whenever I'd read about it, the number of children - the children - that are killed, the inaccessibility of medical facilities delayed for a long period of time, really, you don't have enough tape for what kinds of things that I can bring forth. But it's all there. It's documented. It is part of our - part of history.

But we're ignoring it. We don't know about it in the United States. I don't take this *Washington Report* anymore. I mean, I just - because every time I would get it, I'd say, "This is terrible." And we're still giving Israel money and we're guaranteeing a \$12 billion loan, and we'll probably pay most of it.

You know, I recall one time I co-signed with one of our old-time salesmen. And I made every payment on the note that I co-signed on.

Well, back to where we were. Remember, I told you about Assad and our first visit. It's Israel and the U.S. on one side of the table, and the Arab world on the other. If we would just move to the side end of the table so we're in between the two, that's where I'd like to see us be. Neither pro or against Israel.

You know, I've told some of my hotheaded friends, the ones who really get mad, I said, "Now wait a minute. Israel isn't going anywhere. Israel is there. If anything ever, you know, if there's any danger to Israel, the United States is going to jump in. Forget about Israel going anywhere, it's not. You like it or dislike it, really is unimportant. In practical matters, it's there and it's not going to go anywhere. So let's forget that part. Now how do we get peace in the Middle East?"

And again, just to repeat, which I've done, when we start talking about - always talking about occupied. So Israel talks about it being occupied, the media talks about it being occupied. This is Israel. Israel talks about - well, we need to have this buffer. You know, they keep moving east or north, because they need a buffer.

But you know, that's kind of fuzzy thinking, because wherever the buffer ends, they're still back to back with whatever country's there. You know, they moved into southern Lebanon. Okay, so they moved up into southern Lebanon. But there's still a southern border of Lebanon bordering the north border of this occupied piece of land that they want as a buffer. And we saw what happened during the Gulf War. You know, they can shoot a rocket from Saudi Arabia. They can shoot a rocket from Jordan. They can shoot a rocket from Syria. They can shoot a rocket from Iraq. You know, you don't have to have a border to border kind of thing. But that's the excuse we accept.

C.H.: But some people say that the Palestinian minority is also discriminated against in areas that they occupy in other adjacent and non-adjacent territories, in Jordan, in Lebanon and in Saudi Arabia.

V.A.: And in Syria.

[End of Tape 43, Side 2]