



## **With Us or Without Us:** extended interviews

**Interviewer:** Edward Stourton

**Interviewee:** Chris Ross, Senior Advisor to the Under-Secretary of State

Date: 10 April, 2002. 16:00 EDT

**QUESTION:** Ask people what they remember about the day on September 11th.

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** I remember being at home in retirement and turning on the television and seeing scenes of carnage in Lower Manhattan, including the impact of the second aircraft on the southern tower. At first, I thought I was watching some kind of simulation because it was all so neat and clear-cut, but very quickly I realized this was reality and I had quite a shock.

**QUESTION:** Did you feel frustrated during those early days? I mean this was a field in which you have had all this unique experience. There were a few gaffes, talk of a crusade, calling the operation "Infinite Justice." Did you feel your fingers itching?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** I looked around for something I might usefully do and initially I volunteered my services to assist in handling all of the Arabic language materials that were being picked up here and there as part of the preliminary investigation. For one reason or another that didn't work out and then, lo and behold, in the latter half of October I got a call suggesting that I should come and share some of my knowledge of the Middle East with the new under-secretary for public diplomacy. I came down thinking that's what I was going to do and instead was immediately recalled to duty, at that time, to serve as the Arabic-speaking resource for the Arab media.

**QUESTION:** What was the concern that prompted your recall? Were people worried that Arab opinion wasn't being given the attention it deserved?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** I think very quickly into the hostilities it became evident that Osama Bin Laden and the al-Qaeda organization were putting out a fair amount of what we would call propaganda and that the efforts we were making to counter that propaganda were not sufficient. It was an effort that was entirely in English, which for the Arabic-speaking audience required either subtitles or dubbing which took away a fair amount of the immediacy and strength of our positions. So it was decided in the Department of State, before I was ever engaged, that the department needed to rally some Arabic-speaking resources to begin delivering our message in Arabic. They looked around and, rightly or wrongly, decided that I was the person with the most fluent Arabic, either active duty or retired, and here I am.

**QUESTION:** The first time your reappearance caught headlines is when you appeared on Al-Jazeera to respond to Osama Bin Laden's tape. Can you describe how you prepared for that, whether you watched the tape and so forth?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** That was a fairly intricate and not altogether personally satisfying event because we had seen the tape in time for us to create a response. Creating that response required the usual consultations among a number of parties in Washington, and what we ended up with was a rather formal, stiff text which I was obliged to read on Al-Jazeera without benefit of a teleprompter. And so it was a rather

awkward initial performance. I got the points across, but I also got lots of commentary back from the region saying you looked like a talking robot. Subsequent appearances did not require a prepared text and it was easier to be more natural. And I think, for me at least, they were more satisfying experiences.

**QUESTION:** How did you go about crafting a strategy to deal with Arab opinion?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** The various parts of the State Department that deal in policy and public diplomacy with regard to the Middle East had embarked on consultations among themselves involving elements of that National Security Council staff and the White House, to determine how best to approach the Arab world and, as I say, first there was the determination that al-Qaeda's propaganda should not go unanswered, and second that it was best answered in Arabic on the very station, Al-Jazeera, that he was using to get his message across.

Initially, there was some criticism from the Arab world to the effect that we were paying too much attention to this Al-Jazeera, at the expense of other satellite stations and other media of various forms. In fact, initially it was necessary to focus to a large extent on Al-Jazeera because, number one, it was the only television station with a correspondent in Kabul at a critical phase and, number two, because it was the channel of communication that Osama Bin Laden himself was using.

After an initial phase, we did begin to interact and I began to appear on a number of Arab satellite stations and on a number of Arab national networks. So that by now, I think I've appeared on every major satellite station and a great many of the national networks, in addition to all the radio work that I've done for the BBC and others.

**QUESTION:** To what extent were you able to influence policy towards the Arab world, which must have been very much a part of the attempt to influence Arab opinion?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** Certainly as the weeks passed into months and patterns of opinion began to emerge, these were reported to the very senior levels of this department, other departments and the National Security Council staff of the White House, and it was at those very senior levels that that was taken into account and had its role in shaping policy. The fact is that September 11th felt as a real blow in the United States, and emotions ran extremely high and we looked to the outside world to understand this. And many did and many expressed their sympathy. There were some - many - in the Arab world who expressed their sympathy. There were those few who instead chose, in a very sick way, to celebrate.

But throughout we were conscious of the main elements of opinion, the main themes that were emerging in the Arab media and, to the extent possible through my appearances and others, we sought to counter those themes. Among these themes, one that emerged very early was that somehow, instead of seeking to deal with al-Qaeda and its Taliban supporters, we were striking out against Islam as a whole. This was patently untrue and we lost no occasion to say so, pointing out that on many, many occasions in the past we have helped defend Muslim populations, in some cases along with our European friends, pointing out also that we have a very large and vibrant Muslim community here in the United States. With other similar themes, we tried to present the facts as clearly and as persuasively as we could.

**QUESTION:** How important was it to be seen to be trying to do something about the Palestinian problem?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** I think it was an issue that was very important in the minds of particularly the Arab populations. They drew some false conclusions from the fact that we focused very heavily after September 11th on terrorism and appeared, therefore, to

be neglecting the important effort to reach peace in the Middle East. What we tried to point out was that our efforts vis-à-vis the Palestinians and the Israelis, and indeed the Arab world as a whole and the Israelis, were long-standing - that we continued to remain engaged. And indeed, as you've seen now in the secretary's latest trip, we are becoming more and more engaged. But there is no doubt that that was an issue of prime importance with Arab audiences, and it's been important throughout this process to demonstrate that we continue to recognize its importance and are prepared to talk about it in all of our exchanges with our Arab friends.

**QUESTION:** Were you involved in the policy process that led the president to talk about two states - Israel and Palestine - living side by side in his address to the United Nations?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** Not directly. I was certainly involved in conveying the mood of Arab opinion at that time. But, as they say in the State Department, those were decisions taken far above my pay grade.

**QUESTION:** How important do you think that was in terms of your job of selling ...

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** It was very important. The president's comments, similar comments that the secretary made, were very important indicators of the seriousness with which we continued to regard the Arab-Israeli conflict and its settlement, and the seriousness with which we were regarding the Palestinian-Israeli crisis that has been with us now for this lengthy period.

We determined at a certain point that it would be useful to try and go beyond the crisis of the moment to describe our vision of the future for Palestinians and Israelis, and then to try to encourage the leaderships on both sides to take steps consistent with progress toward that vision. It was groundbreaking for us in that we had never spoken as clearly as that of a Palestinian state living in peace and security with its neighbour. So we did make a very real contribution to the re-centring of our position vis-à-vis the Arab world certainly, and to the Muslim world as well.

**QUESTION:** There was also talk as Ramadan approached that continuing bombing during Ramadan would upset people. Was that the message you were picking up from the Arab world?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** We received a very mixed message on that. Some of the people we talked to said that it would be an element of upset. Others said: "Look, you know, even Muslims in our own history have fought during Ramadan. So don't take it as a major issue." And in fact, we decided in the end that we would let the ebb and flow of the hostilities determine just what we would do, and as you saw, we continued to fight and there was no particular reaction to that specific point.

**QUESTION:** There was a period, though, wasn't there, when people seemed to get anxious just because the bombing appeared on the outside - and we now know differently - but it appeared on the outside not to have had much impact. Did you find yourself towards, say, the middle of November having to reassure people in a way you hadn't done before?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** It usually came out in terms, not of ineffective activity vis-à-vis the enemy but of the collateral damage that was being caused among civilians. And all we could do there was point out that, unfortunately war is war, people do get hurt, but that we were doing everything possible to minimize injury to civilians and damage to civilian installations. In the end, it's hard to know how many civilian casualties there have been. We shall see. But certainly the clear intent of the coalition forces was to strike at al-Qaeda and Taliban targets and spare to the largest extent possible civilians.

**QUESTION:** Did you ever get worried during that period that you might, not so much lose a major ally, but have somebody who really mattered coming out and saying something critical?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** No, insofar as the campaign against al-Qaeda and the Taleban was concerned, we were confident that the coalition and the attitudes, generally supportive attitudes of the international community, would continue because there was such a direct link between the events of September 11th and al-Qaeda, and behind al-Qaeda its Taleban supporters. To go further than that into other steps might raise that question. But certainly with regard to those activities, we felt on fairly solid ground.

**QUESTION:** The Palestinian leadership, and we talked to Nabil Sha'ath a week or so ago, feel that once Kabul had fallen and the American victory was secure, they were just dropped, people stopped calling. Do you think that's fair?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** I don't think that's fair. The fact is that the Palestinian-Israeli crisis has had a dynamic of its own and there have been moments when it was possible to engage constructively and other moments where it was not possible, whatever one wished to do. We have called consistently for an end to violence, counter-violence, terrorism, reprisals. Our calls have been heeded to various extents at various times and I think our pattern of contact has more to do with that dynamic than with anything that was happening in Afghanistan. We ourselves rejected any notion that there was some kind of linkage between the ebb and flow of events in Afghanistan and the ebb and flow of our engagement with the Palestinian-Israeli crisis.

**QUESTION:** Their perception is that they mattered when you were trying to build an Arab coalition and when you were trying to please Arab opinion, and that once Afghanistan had been won, you didn't need them anymore.

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** I can certainly understand that kind of perception. We all tend to analyse the world in terms of our own being, and for a Palestinian, at a time when perhaps communication with the American administration was not everything that the Palestinian leadership might hope for, that might have been a natural perception. But it was an erroneous perception.

**QUESTION:** What impact did it have on your job when the president included Iraq in his "axis of evil" remarks before Congress?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** Iraq has been another question mark in Arab opinion since well before that particular statement was made. We have been concerned about Iraq's WMD (weapons of mass destruction) program. We have been concerned about its history of threats to neighbours and to its own population. We have noted possible links with various of the terrorist groups that were active in the past. All of this has led the administration to look very carefully at Iraq and what might be done about Iraq. As you know, our initial focus has been on getting the United Nations sanctions' regime on the one hand to be applied, and on the other hand to be eased. To be applied, that is to say to see the return of the weapons inspectors to Iraq, that was part of the framework of resolutions put in place during and after the Gulf War. Eased in the sense that we were looking for a new set of what are popularly called the 'smart' sanctions, which would greatly increase the efficiency of the mechanism by which funds that accrued to Iraq in escrow under the oil-for-food programme, could be spent for civilian goods for the Iraqi population.

The Arab world has been very concerned that the Iraqi people were suffering. We share that concern. The Iraqi people have indeed suffered. We do not agree with those who claim that the reason the Iraqi people are suffering is because of the sanctions. If you

look at the record, Saddam Hussein, through his oil exports, and through the monies that have accrued in the escrow account, has had ample opportunity to purchase large quantities of food and medical supplies, and for various reasons has not done everything he could in that regard. So the blame for his people's suffering lies clearly on him. But we were conscious of this criticism, this charge, and therefore have been working with members of the Security Council, including the Russians, to clarify the sanctions regime so that it's very clear, once and for all that it is not the sanctions regime that is at fault here, but it is Saddam.

**QUESTION:** But it can't have made your job any easier. When the president made that remark, you must have had a few of your friends in the Arab world on the phone?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** I think they were more concerned about the notion of an "axis of evil" than they were about the inclusion of Iraq per se. To them it was something of an escalation in the rhetoric. But they knew very well that Iraq had been a longstanding concern of ours and that things had not really changed that much. And at this point, while people were very.... remember that very dramatic and colourful phrase the "axis of evil". It's kind of fallen away from the daily litany of complaints.

**QUESTION:** Which is helpful?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** The simple truth is that when you're the superpower, there's always something to complain about and something that will come along. But we'll deal with it when it does.

**QUESTION:** You went on a tour of the region in January. What was the message you brought back?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** The under-secretary and I made our first trip overseas in our current capacities, and it was her first trip and my first trip back to the region in some time. We visited Morocco and Egypt basically to give ourselves a sense of what the state of opinion was, what we might do in the realm of public diplomacy to improve communication with the Arab world, to improve the state of our dialogue with the Arab world. The message we got back at one level was very clear. That seemed to be [if] you want to improve dialogue, [then] the single most important thing you can do to improve dialogue is to change your policy. And clearly that's not in the cards. Our policy is our policy. It is a policy that is widely misrepresented and widely misinterpreted in the Arab world. But, be that as it may, it is our policy and it doesn't change because someone here or someone there isn't entirely in sync with it.

We heard that message though loud and clear in Morocco and in Egypt. Virtually every person, every group we talked to, used the opportunity of meeting with us to communicate through us to Washington that there was great unhappiness in the Arab world over the way in which we were handling particularly the Palestinian-Israeli crisis and what in the Arab world is seen, and I think what everywhere is seen, as the very real plight of the Palestinian people.

We brought that message back. At the same time, during this trip we were able to have a number of useful discussions about what could be done to improve the dialogue, and they were along the lines of better information, better exchanges, et cetera.

**QUESTION:** What was your response here when you brought that message back?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** It confirmed the impression that people had. It did not result in a change of policy. But we did not expect it to.

**QUESTION:** Do you think, looking back on the last six months or so, there was a missed opportunity? A lot of people felt that in the aftermath of September 11th, it had shaken things up so dramatically that there really was a possibility of things changing, particularly between Israelis and the Palestinians. And today it seems, I wouldn't say business as usual, but business in a more horrible way but very similar to what it's been in the past.

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** Two things. First, things are not business as usual today, not with the secretary of state travelling in the region, not with the various statements that have been made over the past few months about how we see the future for the region. For us, these are new steps of re-engagement.

But second, we cannot want peace more than the leaderships on both the Palestinian and on the Israeli side. We're there to help, we're there to push, we're there to suggest. But in the end, it has to be their political will to work towards a settlement. And the decisions, the hard decisions, are theirs to make. So we keep pushing, and I must say that in the last period it has not been easy because our appeals for an end to violence and counter-violence and terrorism and reprisals have not been terribly well-heeded on either side. And, of course you know our position on the utter absence of any justification for the kinds of acts of terrorism that we have seen from the Palestinian side.

**QUESTION:** Finally, people say the world has changed forever after September 11th. Is this true or just a hyperbolic phrase that came to mind at the time?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** I think for a very long time we will be carrying the scars of September 11th. We will certainly be more attuned to the possibility and the dangers of acts of terrorism. But like all things in life, there will come a day when it is a distant memory, perhaps not in our lifetimes. But it will come.

**Do you want this final section left in for the web.**

**QUESTION:** Just before we end, could I just ask you to talk about that moment with the Bin Laden video. I mentioned to you the mechanics of it, the kind of story. Did someone really (inaudible) on the phone and say, "Look, you know, we've got this video, come and have a look at it?" And did you look at it and did you think: "My God, that's the sort of story I wanted to (inaudible) finally?"

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** I don't turn the tape (inaudible).

**QUESTION:** Can we do one for the tape?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** There's no point in wasting tape (inaudible) to reconstruct that because there were actually three or four Bin Laden tapes over the months, I've really forgotten how each one came to ....

**QUESTION:** This was the one which was sort of ...-

**AMBASSADOR ROSS:** Oh, I remember. I remember the tape very well. But I cannot remember at this point whether we saw the tape or whether we had a transcript of the tape. One way or another, we knew its precise content. And then we sat down very quickly and, as I say, wrote a response which then had to be checked out with various people in the foreign affairs community. Then I had to translate it into Arabic and then I had to read it. I had a car accident on the way there which was kind of amusing.

**QUESTION:** Put you off you stride a bit?

**AMBASSADOR ROSS: Well, it certainly put me in a tenses mood than I would have been in had I not had car accident.**