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My experience in China and all north East Asia wasn't an easy one: it was a unique experience. I had the honour to go on four missions to China, the first was in 1968 when I was a leading member in a military delegation where we received training for 6 months, the second was when I went to China as a member of a delegation headed by martyr Abu Jihad - this experience was very rich and I learnt a lot for it. The third was when I was the PLO's and Fateh's representative to China. I arrived in Beijing on 21 December 1971 and left on 15 May 1975, I can talk about this rich experience in more detail if it will be helpful for your pioneering project. The fourth experience was as a member of the Palestinian National Council (PNC) delegation taking part in the Inter-Parliamentary Union meeting in China in 1996. Around 31 years separates the last time I left China and my return to it in 1996.

I don't want to talk about the military training in detail, as it was purely military. I will refer to it briefly, like the Chinese say: "political power grows from the barrel of a gun", and the political framework plays a very important role in military training. Mao Zedong also said "war is the continuation of politics by other means", but we will not talk about this. I'm honoured to say that I have known brother Abu Jihad well since 1966, and despite knowing him well for a long time I didn't know he was an excellent negotiator - in fact, he was excellent at everything he did; he was a teacher for all the members of the delegation. I remained the PLO's representative in China but I was treated as an ambassador: my official title was the PLO's representative to the People's Republic of China.

The warm reception, and the hospitality wasn't the most important thing, the most important thing took place while I was on the flight from Canton to Beijing. My family and I were in the second class. You know when we Palestinians travel we take with us za'atar (sage), chamomile and so on, and each of my children carried some to distribute the weight. Mendes France, the French prime minister during the tripartite aggression in 1956, was on the same flight, and when the plane landed in Beijing, they asked Mendes France to wait, because they had an important guest who should get off the airplane before he did, and I got off the airplane from the first class door while he sat there waiting. I found the Arab delegations and ambassadors waiting for me, so I asked why did they go through all this trouble, and was told that Mendes France had come to ask China to recognize Israel - at that time China hadn't

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recognised Israel. They gave him the answer on that plane: their answer was that the PLO is a resistance movement and an armed struggle, and we give them the recognition they deserve.

This was the first lesson I learnt in Beijing. Our office was in an apartment and our representative's accommodation was in another apartment in a nearby building, and there were two other apartments for the staff. The Chinese paid for all the Chinese staff and the office supplies and services. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided us with an interpreter, two cars, two drivers, fuel for the cars, an aide, electricity, gas, water, heating, phones, and faxes.

At the time they told me I was the most senior chargé d'affaires and the most recent ambassador, for diplomatic arrangements, and explained when in official celebrations, if the more recent ambassador was hostile, I would be seated with the chargé d'affaires, and vice versa. This arrangement was implemented carefully and I benefitted from it immensely, so when a new British ambassador was appointed I wasn't seated with him, but when the new Chilean ambassador was appointed, I sat with him, so I spoke with the Chilean ambassador at length - this was before the coup when Allende was still in power, and the arrangement opened the path for me to discuss with others their struggles.

Support for Arab and Other Ambassadors in Beijing for Palestine

The door was open for me to have conversations with other ambassadors, and the Arab ambassadors supported and helped me a lot, especially the late Dr Youssef Shaqra, the Syrian ambassador at the time. Shawra was Alawite, from Sanjak of Alexandretta but was more Palestinian than I was. The Algerian ambassador, who was previously ambassador in Lebanon and enjoyed strong relations with the Palestinian leadership, had a great position, and the North Yemen ambassador also had great and honourable positions. One made mistakes, or a slip of the tongue during discussion, but they showed great support and taught me a lot - I always accepted their suggestions, and I always learnt from their experience.

This was my first diplomatic experience, it wasn't a long experience but I lived through events I'm proud of. In the diplomatic world it was the custom when an ambassador is appointed to a different post the ambassadors close to him would host a farewell dinner. When Dr Shaqra was appointed ambassador in Bonn the French ambassador wanted to host the farewell celebration. Dr Shaqra told the French ambassador your friends are my

friends and your nation's friends are my nation's friends and so on, but there one person I would like to invite. The French ambassador asked if he meant the Palestinian, he replied yes, so the French ambassador said he would invite me, and he did. After that I sent him a letter congratulating him on Bastille Day, before the actual day on the 14th of July. He replied with a letter saying that France supports the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. This was the French official position. In the French diplomatic structure they have a group of five to seven ambassadors part of the ministry of foreign affairs, and this was one: he was an officer in the French army in Syria, and knowledgeable of Arab affairs. When any embassy sends a letter they send a copy of it to their ministry of foreign affairs. I sent a copy of this letter to brothers Abu Ammar, Abu Youssef the head of the political department, and Abdel Razzaq al-Yahya the general director of the Ministry of foreign affairs. Al-Yahya briefed Mahmoud al-Hamshari of the French position and instructed him to pursue it. Mahmoud al-Hamshari achieved great success as a representative of the Palestinian revolution - and he paid the price for this success with his life, the Zionist movement assassinated anyone who achieved success in his field. Abu Jihad paid the price for the Intifada and Mahmoud al-Hamshari paid the price for his success in his work in France. The letter I sent helped him - I can't say it was everything, but it helped.

One time we were having a discussion after dinner. Usually 7 or 8 of us would stay after everyone else had left and continue the evening in an embassy. In one of the discussions we started talking about Palestine. The ambassador of Yugoslavia was with us that evening. He started defending the Palestinian cause leaving me nothing to say, so I remained silent and gave him space to talk about the Palestinian struggle. The Cuban ambassador and the Chilean ambassador, who was a great patriot then spoke about the Palestinian struggle very eloquently. It was known to everyone that Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia was based in Beijing. I can't say I began these relations because Abu Jihad did, and when we met Sihanouk, Abu Jihad spoke convincingly. Once I was invited to a dinner, and when I asked who was invited they told me the ambassadors of Syria, Algeria, Yugoslavia and Mali, I can't recall who else. I was asked to stand next to Sihanouk - I assumed officially. While I was talking to him, I felt the Malian ambassador (who was also the dean of the African group) was quite annoyed. The Egyptian ambassador was also invited, and protocol was that we would stand according to seniority, and we weren't doing this. Monika Sihanouk noticed, so she took my wife, and they sat to the side. I didn't notice but Sihanouk did, and he suddenly asked everyone if they knew why they were invited, and explained the invitation was to honour Palestine, and the representative of Palestine. He said he invited the representatives because we were under

occupation. He then said when Palestine is free, he will be the first to visit Palestine, and that the Israeli embassy in Phnom Penh would be the first liberated Palestinian land. He implemented the second part of his oath.

Later on he invited the Arab ambassadors for lunch at his residence. I had requested to meet him, to give him a map of Palestine embroidered in prison on a sackcloth. When we met, I told him that because of his stance in support of Palestine, we give the map, because of we don't have anything else to give, and he accepted the gift with great appreciation and respect. He then invited the Arab ambassadors for lunch. My wife noticed, and told me to look behind, and when I did I saw the map of Palestine I gave him hanging over the door: he had framed it in a very beautiful frame. I thanked for taking such care of the gift. His mother fell ill in Phnom Penh, and after an agreement between the Chinese and the Americans, she was brought to Beijing. The diplomats went to wish her quick recovery. The map was in the reception salon where we were standing, and in the salon was a door opening to the room where she was on a bed: we went in one by one, to wish her good health, and speedy recovery, and left the room by a different door. When I went in he asked if I notice how all the ambassadors of the world passed under Palestine, and gave me a book he wrote called: "My War with the CIA". I still have it and next time you come over I will show it to you... these are some of the stories that took place.

Chinese Advice

The Chinese always emphasised the importance and the necessity of national unity. One day I was informed that the Chairman of the State Council wished to see me, and I had engagements that day but arranged it. The first time I met him was to present my letters of credence: he came to greet me at the door of the People's Palace, as the only person he met at the door. He immediately began telling me of the importance of Palestinian and Arab unity. He explained that if they wanted to send us supplies to Algeria, it would be troublesome for us to get them from there, but to a lesser degree if they could send them via Basra, and that the best option was to send the supplies to Tartus, Latakia or Tripoli ports, saying Syria was our best option. He gave me much advice. Then he suddenly asked if I thought Kissinger, after succeeding in the negotiations with Vietnam, as head of the American delegation in Paris, would focus on the Middle East and dealing with the Palestinians. The question caught me off guard, I replied I wouldn't know more about this than him, but said our doors in Damascus and Beirut are open, and any staff in the Chinese embassies at both cities can meet anyone they wanted any time, and since he asked me this question I can give my

personal opinion: I was convinced the Zionist movement had already occupied Palestine, and said we can't be worried about losing what has already been lost, and that we are not worried because, with their support and the support of the world, we will continue our efforts to liberate Palestine. I told him the Zionism is not just a threat to Arab countries, but also to the entire world. I said the Zionist movement was working towards establishing a new system that would follow in the footsteps of other systems of exploitation such as feudalism, colonialism, modern imperialism and socialist imperialism. In the period there was a struggle between them and the Soviet Union about socialist imperialism.

We continued our frank and honest discussions with the Chinese. While my wife was in hospital she told me a Palestinian delegation came to see her, and the men tried to speak in Yemeni dialects, but that their Palestinian dialect was pronounced, and she believed they must be Palestinian. I requested a meeting at the ministry of foreign affairs, and explained what my wife had said. I didn't say these men might be intelligence or anything, just told them there are Palestinians who are now in China without my knowledge. I said I always welcome Palestinians who arrive in China, and always bid farewell to those who leave, and it was my job to be involved in any official work that doesn't include negotiations or talks. I said, of course they had the right to hold negotiations without my presence, but I should be notified if there is a Palestinian delegation, regardless of their nature or size, in the country. They replied that they are a delegation from the DFLP, on military training, and I should go visit them the next day, so I went to the military camp and met them. When they left I bid them farewell, and before that I used to go and check on them every once in a while.