

Interview with Afif I. Tannous

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DR. AFIF I. TANNOUS

Interviewed by: James O. Howard

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Today is March 9, 1994. This is an Oral History interview of Dr. Afif I. Tannous. It is part of the Agricultural Foreign Affairs Oral History Program. I am James O. Howard.

Q: Afif, I know that you had an unusual background. Start by telling us something of it.

TANNOUS: I'd be glad to; for truly it is unusual. I was born on September 25, 1905 (quite old!) in a village of North Lebanon with the name of Bishmizzin, which is a Syriac name indicating its remote background and the history of that area. I grew up in the village within the farm family structure, with the whole extended family involved. That farm had been, at that time when I was growing up, in our own family line for 5 generations. We grew up to feel a strong attachment to the land, and we gave almost a personal name to each piece—the olive grove, the quince grove, the grapevines and all the rest of the various crops that we grew in that village for self-sufficiency. I was very happy in that type of situation; I loved that agriculture and I loved that wild nature surrounding the village proper.

Then as I grew up I was very much conscious of not only belonging to my nuclear family, the primary unit of father, mother and children, but also to the extended family, which is now being talked about more and more in the United States. We need to emphasize that.

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Also within the whole village community, I was at home with the elders. I knew how to court them, to deal with them. I felt very much at home with everybody in the village—a whole integrated community, especially when it came to the reality of the village made up of two religious groups, a majority of Christians and a minority of Muslims; and yet, living in full harmony for generations. As a whole, therefore, that integration had an impact on the life of the people, the culture of the people; in which agriculture, economics, recreation, religious life, were all integrated into one whole unit, with the overall feeling of here we have a total community living together in harmony with nature.

Q: You were educated there in Lebanon for some years. Tell us about that.

TANNOUS: My first education was at the village school. And there was something very interesting about that school, which relates to international relations. Before it became a fully community school, it was influenced in its organization by two forces: the force of the American religious missions education that got established in Lebanon as early as 1840 and also the influence of returned emigrants from the USA. One of them, imbued with the notion of education in America, wanted to establish that system in the village, and combine it with the local culture and the Arab background. He succeeded, and from that time on, that village school continued and prospered over the years. I might mention here, before I move on, that in the early '50s, when I was signed on as the Deputy Director of the USAID mission in Lebanon, one of our many projects was to help that school extend its curriculum and activities. I felt delighted that was happening and that my old village school was still going strong; and it is now in 1994, radiating high standards of learning and good relations with the U.S.

After the village school, I went to the American Boys School in Tripoli, where I finished high school and had wonderful experiences both in my academic work and in sports. I enjoyed everything there, and it had a large influence on my life, with much of the American culture atmosphere mixed with the Arab cultural background, all together to hold a strong impression on us students. Then after I finished, I taught for 2 years in the high

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school, elementary grades, and was in-charge of sports. I had to do that because I needed to help the family with the education of my sisters, moved by that strong feeling of family solidarity in the village culture.

After 2 years I registered at the American University of Beirut. It was the leading institution of higher learning in the Middle East. I spent there four years and graduated with my B.A. degree. I majored first in Biology and Agriculture, because of my love for that aspect of life, and hoping later on to work in that field among the rural communities, not only of Lebanon, but of the whole area. After I finished the requirements of my major in Biology and Agriculture, I added another major, Social Science, on the advice of my faculty supervisor. The rationale was that to do adequate work in the village communities later on and to help raise the standard of living among the majority of the people who were the rural people, I had better combine my knowledge of agriculture with knowledge of social-psychological-economic systems, so that I would know how to deal with the people effectively. During those four years, I sustained myself by working part-time and winning scholarship prizes; and I earned my graduation "With Distinction". Also I was very active in sports.

Q: And then you went to work somewhere else in the Middle East.

TANNOUS: That's right. After I finished my graduation, I could have stayed and taught at my Alma Mater, but I couldn't, because I needed more income, again to help the family. So I went to the Sudan to a well-paying job with the British Colonial government, which was at that time ruling the Sudan. I was assigned to an administrative position in the personnel section of the government, in which I worked for two years. It was the most difficult post you can imagine in the early '30's. We had to live in very difficult conditions. We had to endure very high temperatures during the summer season and most of the year, in fact. And besides the sand storms, we had to filter our water from the Nile through sand and charcoal in earthenware containers. But we endured and we went through it very well.

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After that I went back to my Alma Mater to resume a new line of work according to my early love, as I have mentioned.

Q: That's not when you came to America; then you worked in AUB for awhile before you came to America.

TANNOUS: That's the experience I wish to highlight. At the AUB my major responsibility, in addition to teaching, was to take charge of an extensive rural development program. It included agricultural development, social welfare, health care and education. It was badly needed in the village communities all over the Middle East. I got involved deeply in that and had wonderful experiences, which later on proved to be very helpful in my Federal service career in the U.S. It was based on the idea of having the educated people of the AUB and national leaders be more concerned about the deprived peoples of their various countries. We had volunteers from the University students and faculty; and during the summertime, we went to live in village camps and helped the people improve their health, agriculture, and other aspects of life, as they needed. I was on that program from 1931 to 1937.

Q: And what brought you to the United States?

TANNOUS: One, a strong bug that developed in me, from my early love for learning in the elementary grades, high school and college, that I should move into higher levels as much as I could, and I knew that my destiny was to resume that in the United States. That was so, because of my background of education in an American high school and university; and also because of the influence of the American way of life that we experienced with the families of the professors. But I couldn't do it financially and had to wait. Then I was lucky in getting a Fellowship from St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York. In fact, my professor in Philosophy at the AUB had become the president of St. Lawrence. I wrote to him, he said, "By all means, we want you to come over here on a teaching Fellowship."

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And that's how I came to the United States. I arrived with fifty dollars in my pocket; but the Fellowship took care of all my expenses.

Q: But that's not where you took your Doctorate.

TANNOUS: I took my MA there, teaching and also studying. The faculty were so nice, so kind, so helpful, and they all did their best to help me in my learning. I was very grateful to all of them, and I'll never forget that. It's a debt, which I have tried to pay back in many ways to St. Lawrence University. Until now I make contributions. Then after one year there, with my MA, I moved to Cornell University. I applied and was accepted in the Department of Rural Sociology. But my major was not really limited to that, it was in total Social Science including Economics. I spent 2 years there, and during that time I was lucky in being granted a top Fellowship from the department, to go back to my home village where I grew up, and make a study of its cultural history. I had excellent professors at Cornell from whom I learned in depth.

Q: I never heard that before, go ahead.

TANNOUS: That was a landmark in the development of my career. The department felt that, with all my background in rural life and Arab culture, instead of making a study of an American rural community as other graduates were doing, they would like for me to go back and study my old village. In fact, I had begun studying the village when I was at the AUB. So on that basis I got the Fellowship, adequate to take me by boat back to Lebanon and return. I spent about 2 months researching in the village, assisted by a large team of advanced students from the AUB and some faculty members. That's how I went into the long history of the village, including the family organizations, the social structure, the agricultural system, the economic condition and came to my own conclusion about its status and future prospects. I came back and wrote my thesis on that subject; and it was accepted with flying colors. In fact, I was rewarded with election to the Scientific Research Society of Sigma Xi.

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Q: When did you finish your doctorate at Cornell?

TANNOUS: I earned my Ph.D. in June of 1940.

Q: And then you went where?

TANNOUS: I was planning to go back to the AUB and become a member of the faculty. In fact, I went down to New York from Cornell with a friend of mine to get a ticket on a boat for Beirut. On the way to New York I heard that Mussolini declared war against the allies on the side of Germany. No more boats were going to the Mediterranean; and that established my destiny, or the turning point in my destiny. I went to the office of the American University in New York and they said: "No more possibility of your going back; in fact we have a cable from Beirut that all the faculty who are in the U.S. should not return. So I had to stay and begin my career in the United States.

Q: And then you went to Minnesota?

TANNOUS: Yes, that was my first move. I applied for teaching positions and my professors at Cornell were most helpful, and I was, and still am grateful to them. They gave me top support to find a position, knowing that I was stranded. They located one for me at the University of Minnesota, at Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Q: There you worked for awhile and met a lady who has played an important part in your life.

TANNOUS: The most important part, indeed, and I was lucky! Shortly after I arrived there, a graduate student appeared on the campus (I don't want to describe her, but must say "Brilliant and Beautiful!). We met, got acquainted, dated and finally we declared our commitment and then we got married. But I had to go back to her home in Seattle, Washington, to get married, driving 1600 miles in two and a half days after her!

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Q: Well, I've known her for many years.

TANNOUS: That's Josephine, the one you know, and we are still happily together after 53 years!

Q: You chose very wisely. Let's move forward fairly rapidly now. World War II is on the way and what happened, you eventually wound up in Washington, how?

TANNOUS: After I taught for two and a half years at the University of Minnesota, I was almost drafted into the army. In the meantime, with the war on and the whole world changing, I decided to take American citizenship. So I went over to the U.S. Consulate in Canada and came back on a visa that I could reside here. Later I got my first papers, then my citizenship in 1943. So as a potential American citizen, I volunteered for wartime service. I was examined at Fort Snelling near Minneapolis and was about to go with the army on the North African campaign, where we were involved in the war effort. Because of my knowledge of the Arabic culture and Arabic language, they wanted me to be on that kind of an assignment. I was ready to go; then a call came from Washington that I was needed for wartime service there.

Q: That was a lucky break for a young married man who didn't want to leave his wife.

TANNOUS: It was a lucky break especially because our baby was on the way—David, our first son. We had agreed to sell our car so that she would have enough money to go back home and have the baby there and stay with her family in Seattle, Washington. But the call came from Washington, in fact, from FAS, the Foreign Agricultural Service, which used to be the Foreign Agricultural Relations.

Q: So now we get you into what is now the Foreign Agricultural Service, where you and I worked together for so many years. Tell us of your early work in the Foreign Agricultural Service.

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TANNOUS: The time I arrived, the first thing I was asked to do, after I got acquainted with my situation in the office, was to sit down and quickly write a report on the food conditions in the Middle East area, including production, processing and consumption of the food items they use. And they said not to worry about research; just write what you know from your background. I set to work with two reactions. One was, wonderful, my early background and my experience in the Middle East are being used. The other was saying to myself, "Look here, I go get my MA at St. Lawrence, my Ph.D. at Cornell, and I come here feeling that I could contribute very learned research for the benefit of the government, and all they want from me is what food I ate in the old village and what the people ate in the Middle East!" But I realized it was very important for the wartime effort.

So I did it, finished that report, and submitted it first to my immediate boss, Clinton Whipple, our late friend Clint. He was very understanding, because he had experience in Greece, and knew about the Middle East. He was confident that my report was going to be very useful. But when I went to the higher boss, John Stewart at that time, I told him, "Here is my report, that's the best I know from personal experience." He took the report, read it, then came back to me with this comment, "Afif, I wish we had somebody here who could tell you, you are a damn liar! But we don't have anybody of that caliber. So we accept your report, whatever you say is the gospel truth."

Then I went before the Wartime Food Board who had read the report, but who wanted to make sure of what I had written, because they had no other source of information. In those times there were only 3 or 4 of us in Washington who knew about the Middle East. They scrutinized it and began questioning me about this and that to make sure I knew what I was talking about. I realized their dilemma and answered their questions in personal terms: "We did this, we grew that; I did it myself with my grandfather, etc. In our village welfare program, as I mentioned before, I told them we experienced all of this in Palestine, in Syria, in Lebanon, all over the area. I assure you, this is it." Then they began to question

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me about the olive tree, because I had mentioned it in my report—very important for its olives and precious olive oil.

Q: I was just amused, because I remembered the olive tree.

TANNOUS: They questioned me; “How come this olive tree lived so long, you mentioned 500 years, almost a thousand years old, and still it produces!” I said, “Gentlemen, I know what you are after. I understand your caution. But let me give you one answer to this question and I hope that will convince you. I was baptized in olive oil in my own village church, I know about olive oil, and the olive tree.” They laughed and felt more at ease.

Q: You didn't tell them that the tree that Socrates sat under was still growing.

TANNOUS: No I didn't mention that but I told them that in Jerusalem there is a grove of olive trees that is still claimed as “from the days of Christ.”

Q: Go ahead with your work in the Foreign Agricultural Service.

TANNOUS: After that first assignment, I was on-call to give more of my personal knowledge; and later on-call to give what I knew to other government agencies, especially the State Department—what I knew about the Middle East, about the political conditions, about the leadership in the area, and who was who. I had much intimate knowledge of these various matters, and I was very happy to make some contribution in that respect. At the same time, I was put on assignment as a regional analyst for the Middle East for the benefit of FAS, USDA and the government as a whole. Then through the years, I kept going on doing research, writing, publishing, and lecturing on that whole area.

Q: What was the significance of some of this research, do you want to talk on that a moment?

TANNOUS: All of it was factual and practical in nature. None of my research in FAS was really theoretical. What I wrote, what I researched, what I published (with all of my

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colleagues in FAS doing the same in other areas) on the Middle East, and later Middle East and Africa, was related to agricultural and other relations with those countries for the benefit of the U.S. interest and overall policy for the Middle East. So my research and writing and lecturing were aimed in that direction and I believe they were helpful and meaningful to those who needed them. Also, they were helpful to those countries in the development of their resources.

Q: Is this an appropriate time for you to talk about your work in land reform? And if you talk, paint the broad picture, because the other leader that we had in this field is dead. So you're the only one I know who still knows something of what the Department of Agriculture contributed in this period and later.

TANNOUS: That was a very important subject and we shouldered it at FAS on the basis that about half of FAS was regional analysts for various regions of the world, especially the developing countries, which we now call the Third World. And the other half of FAS was made up of Commodities Division and Marketing Development. But the two worked together, as an integrated unit, feeding into each other. Land reform became a significant subject in the work of FAS because we knew that a large portion of the world, the peasant masses, the rural people were suffering for many reasons, and were very much neglected. There was a gap, we knew a big gap, between the elite, the well-to-do, and the masses of the rural areas. We knew that the future and the development of these countries toward democracy had to be through the elevation of the rural living standards.

The State Department was aware of it, especially our own Foreign Service officers for the two areas. They were highly knowledgeable of the Middle East especially; and I was always in contact with them and TCA (now AID) people on these matters, and they were all for the idea—"Let us emphasize land reform." So we went on in FAS doing our research and writing for the benefit of U.S. policy and the countries themselves. Of course, I did my research but I had known much of it from before. I confirmed the way they owned the land—private ownership, state ownership, communal ownership—and various aspects of it.

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So we dwelt on that, all of us in the regional units, dealing with various countries, and we developed report after report, research after research. Then we combined them into a total picture of what was needed to lift up the rural masses in the developing world—based on the imperative that they must own the land instead of being landless peasants. That was the central theme of land reform, all of my colleagues in FAS working on it, especially Wolf Ladejinsky.

Q: Okay, I was hoping you'd get to him.

TANNOUS: I couldn't but mention him. Wolf was the leading light in the whole land reform research and publication emphasis. He had tremendous experience in that field as Assistant to General MacArthur in Japan, where he designed its land reform program, which was applied nationally.

Q: He was really known as the architect of that land reform program in Japan.

TANNOUS: Exactly. He was the one who really developed it. I am glad you put in that word, which would be my word, the architect of land reform in Japan. Then after that was well established, he came back to the FAS and made his leading contributions to the research and study on land reform as I have mentioned.

Q: Now later he went to Iran, did he not? Did the Shah of Iran not hire him to come and work on land reform?

TANNOUS: I am trying to answer that question; but you may have a better memory of it, so please say what happened because I forgot about that. Go ahead.

Q: He did go to Iran, employed by the Shah and was instrumental in getting started some land reform there. How far it got, I don't know.

TANNOUS: I know, I know how far it went. I can tell you; therefore, I'm glad you mentioned that because I had forgotten that Wolf was assigned to it. Well, what happened was that

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the land reform struck deep roots in Iran and it was successful under the previous Shah, who died a few years ago in Egypt. That was a very effective land reform because it distributed tremendous state land areas and feudal estates among the peasants, giving each family a certain sufficient acreage.

Q: During this period with FAS and later, you participated in a number of foreign missions. The first one, you were loaned by FAS on a mission to the Middle East. Tell us of that.

TANNOUS: The first mission on which I went to the Middle East was a joint operation by USDA, which means the Foreign Agriculture Relations (Service) and the State Department, which was much interested. It was aimed at gaining in-depth knowledge of the agricultural conditions and the possibilities of future development in that area. At that time, as you may recall, the U.S. Technical Assistance Program was related to South America only. But thinking was developing that it should open up to the rest of the world.

Q: This was what year?

TANNOUS: The mission was in 1946—from February to June.

Q: Go ahead. The war was just over.

TANNOUS: Right after the war. Remember, President Truman declared “a bold new” program in our relations with other countries, a program of technical assistance to build up their economies and enhance their development.

Q: Point Four.

TANNOUS: Later it was called the Point Four Program (because it was the 4th item of President Truman's declaration). I think the momentum came to the whole idea from the success of the Marshall Program for Europe. Anyway, President Truman declared it as a

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new orientation in U.S./American policy abroad. It was hailed by so many people abroad and here.

In 1946, as I mentioned, we organized a mission, a combination of State Department and the Foreign Agricultural Service, to go to the Middle East and visit a number of countries—to meet with the leaders, and with the people and report on what were the possibilities for future agricultural and other development, in cooperation with the United States. That's how we went on that mission. Now I describe it briefly, unless you wish to ask questions and details about what we did on the mission.

Q: No, I won't ask questions and details because you were on several missions. But before you get into that, when I was getting ready to go to Egypt as Agricultural Attach#, you sat down and gave me a list of your friends in the Middle East, with whom you had been in the AUB and who had now been in important posts. Talk about a few of these.

TANNOUS: That's going back to my education at the AUB, and what it meant. It meant developing very close association with a number of students going through four years of education. And then, practically, each one of these graduates occupied a position of high responsibility in his own country. My association with them as a fellow alumnus continued over the years. That's why I felt at ease in giving you that list to see these people, knowing they would respond. And I have examples that I may mention later.

Q: Okay, going back to this mission.

TANNOUS: Briefly, touching the highlights, because it's a long story and we don't have all the time for it. We visited the following countries, Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Syria. Our late colleague, Ross Moore, was in-charge of Technical Assistance in FAS, and he was the one designated as the sponsor of this mission, in full cooperation with the State Department. Also, the oil company ARAMCO was involved in relation to Saudi Arabia.

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I had better mention this. ARAMCO, in my own evaluation, had a very enlightened policy of foreign relations with the Saudi government and the Gulf area. It was based on the idea of developing resources for the benefit of these countries, not to just exploit them—very wise policy. I'll stop here, but I wanted to give this testimonial.

We visited each of these countries extensively (and remember this was shortly after the war; Lebanon had just become independent and Syria, when we arrived there, was celebrating the evacuation of the French soldiers). In each one of the countries we met with the leaders on all levels, newly responsible, some of them AUB graduates, fellow alumni. We could talk freely and feel at home fully, as we emphasized U.S. relations with their new countries. In all of these countries we had the same positive dealing with their leaders; also with their people, as we went all over each country, not just the capitals. We wanted to go and look at their agricultural possibilities. So we met the people in the villages, and many of these were people with whom I had worked, in that rural program of the American University of Beirut. I felt completely at home and they felt happy that I was coming back and trying to help them establish new relations with the United States.

We were very well received everywhere we went, including a reception by two Presidents—Bishara el-Khoury of Lebanon and Shukri al-Kuwatli of Syria; also the legendary King Abdul Aziz al-Saud of Saudi Arabia. I say legendary advisedly. He was well known at the State Department, and he was a legend for what he did for his country. So we had many experiences, we cannot cover them all, I cannot dwell on them, but you may wish to highlight any of them.

Q: Well, this report, did it become the basis for the first Technical Assistance programs of the United States government in those countries?

TANNOUS: Definitely. Our reports on these countries, oral and written, contributed to the establishment of our technical assistance relations with them. That's what I felt over the years, deeply satisfied that, in spite of the personal struggle we endured on this mission,

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many difficulties, and separation from the family for 5 months, we felt rewarded on behalf of the United States, and my own department. What we did on that mission was very meaningful in the development of our sound relations in technical assistance and political assistance too; I don't separate the technical from the political.

Q: Afif, I would assume that your fluency in Arabic must have been a great contribution to this team.

TANNOUS: Thank you. I'm glad you mentioned that point and that's quite true. I say it objectively. Before I do that, let me mention the other two members of the team. We were three, President Franklin Harris of the University of Utah at Logan, and Dean Earl Buchanan, Dean of Agriculture at the University of Iowa.

My knowledge of the language, my knowledge of the culture and the people was crucial. I am quoting now the words of the two other members of the team—as they witnessed the positive response wherever we went and I translated for them, also as I spoke in Arabic as a member of the mission, not only a translator. “Afif, we don't know how we could have done this without you.” And later they wrote a very nice report on my meaning to the mission, to my own office, and to the State Department. I was grateful, as I was the junior member of the mission. So my knowledge of Arabic was very important; especially as I knew not only colloquial, but also classical Arabic; and those among the leaders with whom I could discuss Arabic poetry and literature felt elated.

Q: We'll get other examples of this as we go because you served on a number of missions during this period. What was the next one?

TANNOUS: The next one, in 1949, was also a very significant mission in my estimation.

Q: Wait a minute, before that '49 mission, didn't you have a short stint with the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia?

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TANNOUS: Thank you for mentioning that. I forgot about it, but I will cover it very briefly. That was again very meaningful for me and for our government. The State Department, in 1947, requested that I join the entourage of Crown Prince Saud of Saudi Arabia, who was here on an official visit arranged by the State Department and ARAMCO—to visit all over the country and give him an idea of what the American way of life, the American culture means; to expose him to all of it, because he had never been outside of his country. So they assigned me to that, and again my knowledge of Arabic, both colloquial and classical, and of the Arab culture, both old and modern, was very helpful.

Let me go back a little bit. When we arrived in Saudi Arabia on that early 1946 mission I mentioned, and were received by King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, we had a great experience meeting with him, listening to him talking. He asked that I translate for him, although he had an official translator right there, sitting on the side with the Crown Prince and other princes surrounding him, but never saying a word. Only the King speaking and I translating. I did not only translate, but also commented on what he said, and he appreciated that.

Also we had with us other State Department representatives, including my life-long friend Ambassador Pete Hart who was then Consul General there. He had a good command of the language and was very helpful indeed.

Q: The crown prince now, that you were shepherding around the United States.

TANNOUS: Crown Prince Saud was the one with whom I went around the United States, observing agriculture, the navy, the air force, industry, economic organizations, etc. and I never dreamed that I would be able to see these things as I was able at that time. And all the time I was talking to him—emphasizing this and that and the other in Arabic, what it means, why the American system has succeeded so well, what is the way of the American people about things. All my knowledge of the American culture came forward to help in terms of the Arab culture which I knew very well, especially the Saudi cultural background.

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Q: Our relationships with Saudi Arabia have been very good over recent years. Have you sometimes felt that—I, Afif Tannous, played a small part in that?

TANNOUS: Let us say I played a part, how big, how small, I don't know. But I feel very happy that I played a part which paid off for the good of Saudi Arabia and the United States in later years. Especially lately as we know.

Q: Let's move on now to 1949 and you were going back to the Middle East to develop projects for Palestinian refugees.

TANNOUS: That's right. That mission of '49 was organized first by the State Department in response to the UN. Of course when we say in response to the UN, at that time, State Department initiative was there from the beginning. Gordon Clapp was assigned as Chairman of the mission; he was the Chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority and he was a wonderful leader. I developed a beautiful association with him as I shall mention later. He organized the mission efficiently and we went on to visit in the Middle East to study the condition of the Palestinian refugees; and in light of that condition, to negotiate with the Middle East countries, especially Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, about accepting settlement of the refugees permanently, with tremendous aid from the United States for developmental projects.

On that basis we moved on to study and negotiate. And from the beginning, Gordon Clapp told me “Afif, you know the leaders at various levels of the government, you know the people, you know the Palestinian refugees (these were the people with whom I had worked for 3 years intensively in the early '30s, when I was at the University in Beirut. I knew them in person, I knew those who were there living in the camps). Now you go ahead on your own. I'll be talking to them too but I want you to talk and see how they react to our mission.” We did.

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After about one month of operation we were convinced that none of the Arab countries were ready to accept resettlement of the refugees, even though they would be given aid. They just refused; whether rightly or wrongly, we leave that for history to judge. They insisted that the refugees should return to their homes in Palestine. Therefore, Gordon Clapp, in his wisdom, changed the direction of the mission, after consultation with State and the UN. The shift was to work projects for the refugees in the camps, wherever they were. And the shift was made, as we went all over these countries to study the situation and report on what projects could be established in each one of them. And that was the foundation for UNRWA—United Nations Relief and Works Administration, which is still functioning, I believe, 45 years later!

Q: I wanted to put this in perspective for just a moment. We did not say when we started with this mission, how it related to the establishment of the state of Israel. The state of Israel had been established 2 years before?

TANNOUS: This is very briefly the history of Israel. In 1948 the UN decided on dividing the country into two segments, one Arab and one Israeli, with some mixture, unavoidable. In my thinking that was the best possible solution to the problem. The Arabs refused and war broke out. Then after the war in 1948, Israel was established as a state, mostly on the basis of the old division, with Jordan in charge of the West Bank.

Q: And 1949 was the year of this mission which you have just mentioned.

TANNOUS: That's right; the refugees were only one year old. But I want to mention one or two things about the refugees, which I believe to be very important and should be on the record. Number one: the refugees were only 1 year old; their homes which I had known were still there, their orchards were there, their land was there, one year away from it all. The UN made a very wise decision, that those refugees who wished to go back, whether to live in Israel proper after the division or to live in the West Bank on the other side,

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should be allowed to go back. Those who did not want to go back, to be compensated for their property. Nobody paid attention to that!

Today, in my judgement, had we done that, had our Congress supported that decision, had we insisted, with our own government's influence at the UN, that this should be implemented, we would have avoided tremendous sacrifice and bloodshed. Israeli and American bloodshed. Three hundred Marines blasted and killed in Lebanon. Remember that? And many, many more. Everyone has suffered tremendously, as a result of that whole episode, because we declined to nip the problem in the bud. We ignored it until it became a catastrophe, lasting over forty years.

And I put much blame on our Congress. State Department people knew the score; we had a very fine group of Foreign Service officers there. I knew and worked with them very well, including Ambassadors George McGhee, Raymond Hare, Pete Hart, Lucius Battle, Talcott Seelye, Armin Meyer, John Badeau, Hermann Eilts, Dean Brown, Dick Parker and others. These people knew the situation thoroughly and advised. Yet their advice was not heeded.

In the years that followed I kept raising that issue in my public lectures, and in my contacts at State Department, hoping it would be resolved, but to no avail. We persisted in that erroneous policy—keep feeding the refugees at the camps, and eventually they will disappear into the Arab countries. But they did not disappear, and I developed the slogan, “We will feed, and they will brood and breed.” They did; and full of vitality and becoming desperate, they exploded, and we paid heavily for it. I put the blame at the doors of our Congress.

Q: Alright.

TANNOUS: Excuse me for talking so vehemently about it, because of the price we, Israel, and the Palestinians had to pay.

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Q: Well we don't have anyone from Congress to come to their defense so we'll just continue on. The last field assignment in this period was on the Task Force for rural development in Egypt where I served.

TANNOUS: If you don't mind, I'll connect this with my assignment to Lebanon on U.S. Technical Assistance Mission. I was assigned on it because of my knowledge of the country, as Deputy Director; later I became Acting Director, before I returned to FAS. I was on that mission from late 1951 to early 1954.

Q: Of the U.S. Technical...

TANNOUS: Technical Assistance Mission to Lebanon. I was working there with the Lebanese on development, and we had many projects, in education, agriculture, health, industry and others. It was a very successful assignment, and the people were really for it and moved ahead. I was given a secondary assignment to Egypt. It was for a six months period (1952-53) to join in a task force from USDA, AID and other agencies. Of course we worked closely all the time with the State Department, through the U.S. Embassy in Egypt. The task was to develop a large scale rural development program for the Fellaheen of Egypt. We were to choose the area and decide on the project, working in close cooperation with the various agencies of the Egyptian government. They put at our disposal any facility we needed. It was truly a cooperative project.

Here I want to mention one point before I end about this. Under Nasser, the Egyptian government was anxious to show the people quick results, in vindication for the revolution of 1952. They wanted the mission to take a look at a whole new province, and offered to cooperate with the U.S. in developing it with irrigation for large-scale settlement—a tremendous project. It looked very inviting, but when we discussed basics we found their idea was to have it finished in 2 years, with the authorities doing everything from the top down. Imagine, 2 or 3 years, 4 years at most, but we were concerned about the rural development of the people, not just irrigation and technology. Therefore, we said,

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“no, we leave that to you to do, to show the quick results. But we will work on a project of development that involves the people, from the roots up.” And that's where my cultural knowledge of the background there was very helpful to the task force. I advised on how we should direct our own program in light of the Egyptian rural culture. Erwin Hannum, Director of the task force, was very knowledgeable and understanding, and I had a beautiful relationship with him, as I did with Gordon Clapp of the 1949 mission.

Let me give one example of the imperative of the cultural knowledge in these developments. We had experts on housing, education, agriculture, irrigation, health and others. I was sort of the overall jack-of-all-trades—to relate our effort to the rural atmosphere and cultural realities by using my language, my background and my experience in rural development. The housing expert in cooperation with Egyptian engineers had a housing design made that looked so beautiful on paper. He said he had done it in other places, was making improvements on it, and therefore, that was it. In other words, the system of housing originating in the conference room and at the desk of the expert should be taken over and applied in the field. He had little knowledge of the Egyptian village housing culture.

Q: This was the Egyptian government expert.

TANNOUS: No, it was the task force expert, in cooperation with the Egyptian side. I kept insisting, and Director Hannum supported me, that we would not accept his design. I could talk freely and strongly, we would not accept any project unless we went to where we were going to apply it and see what the people thought about it. We were going to consult with the people and not just impose things on them.

(All throughout my missions, my assignments, I emphasized that basic principle and I hoped that more and more of our technical experts going abroad would follow it, and would learn more about the culture of the country where they were going to work, instead of just coming in like miracle-doers, imposing Western culture.)

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We went to the villages, and I went around with the people and talked to them, where houses were already built by the Egyptian government without consulting with them; and I would argue; "What's wrong with these houses? Look how nice, neat, efficient; they have enough rooms instead of one room, and so-on." Then they began to show me where they saw the defects in their own thinking, in their own view of life, according to their village culture.

So that was a part of my contribution to the mission. Finally, we succeeded in getting a rural development project on a large scale, near Alexandria. With a tremendous irrigation scheme and communities developed there with families brought in from other villages. I worked very closely with the Social Service Ministry of the Egyptian government to decide what families to choose, and how many acres to give.

In later years, on my trips to Egypt, when I became Area Officer, I used to stop there and visit the project and see how it developed. It was flourishing beautifully, in contrast with the Tahrir Province that the Egyptian government developed from top-down, without involving the people.

Q: Afif, you mentioned another example of the value of knowing the culture in working in technical assistance. This I believe had something to do with miracle wheat in Tunisia.

TANNOUS: That's right, Tunisia.

Q: Tell us about it.

TANNOUS: I'd be glad to bring out the meaning and significance of this. Of course I could mention some 20-30 examples in various aspects of our relations with these countries, but I think it's enough to mention one more. Before I do, I must give a brief background.

Earlier in my career in FAS, in 1956, when Tunisia was just beginning to become independent, I went there with a mission to look into their wheat needs, as they had

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appealed to us. They had hunger and they wanted the wheat badly. We went there, investigated all over the country and recommended strongly to Washington that we send over 50,000 tons of wheat. We did, and that relieved the country.

By the way, I am digressing now, I hope you don't mind if I digress a little. There's a significant point. At the end, we showed Prime Minister Habib Bourguiba (later President) the approval from Washington for 50,000 tons of wheat. He asked me to translate for him, because he didn't know much English, and he said, "Please tell our American friends how much, how deeply we appreciate this wheat help to meet the desperate needs of our country at the beginning of our independence. But please assure them that in line with the American spirit, I am not going to begin my country on charity. I am going to request each family that receives the wheat to do some kind of work for national development."

And that started a kind of trend, later on adopted in our own technical assistance programs. So this is the background for the wheat need in Tunisia. Therefore, I come forward now to when I visited there years later and we were helping them with a project of miracle wheat, which began to be developed in the United States in our research programs.

Q: I think it was developed in the Philippines.

TANNOUS: You are right. I can't recall; I'm glad you mentioned that. That wheat was high yielding, no question about it. Samples were given to the Tunisians through the technical assistance program. They accepted to try it and it looked like a very successful scheme. When I went there, I had that old cultural bug—find out what the people think, not only what the government officials think; the people in the villages, on the ground, next to the soil, and the crops.

So I went to one of the villages and began to talk with the people, saying, "Tell me now," as they showed me the wheat fields, "tell me how you feel about this 'miracle wheat'; what do you think?" They were reluctant at first. Finally I said, "Please let me know what

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you think.” And they said, “We don't like it.” I said, “This is a wonderful project by your government and our government and you say you don't like it; and it gives you high yield! Why?” And they gave me their reasons. “True, it gives higher yield, no question, but to get that higher yield we have to adopt a new system of culture in our wheat growing. This includes high dosage of fertilizer, and we are not used to that. Second, this wheat has short and rough stalks, whereas the traditional wheat has long and soft stalks. If we change, it means a shortage of feed for our livestock, and to us that is very important. Number three, when we come to bake it into bread, we find that it doesn't have the flavor we are used to, and that's important to us, too.” Another thing they said was that they had been growing their own wheat for centuries, always getting good yields from it, and they trusted it; they were not sure that this new wheat would be as dependable in the future.

Q: Did they continue to grow the new wheat, and if so, what use was made of this information you got from them?

TANNOUS: Well I discussed this with the government officials in Tunisia and with the technical assistance people, there and in Washington. I told them we have to watch out for this and see what substitute corrections we can have for those things that they had mentioned.

The technical assistance people and the Tunisians' experts did their best to show them how to handle the new wheat—how to grow it, how to apply the fertilizer and how to grind the stalks for feed. In a few years, the farmers adjusted, as they found they could gain much more from the high yields by selling in urban markets. They continued to depend on their traditional wheat for their bread, with both wheats growing side by side.

Q: Afif, based on your experience in Lebanon, as Director of the technical assistance program, Deputy Director, for some years, what do you consider the pros and cons of the wisdom of sending a native son back to run a program like that?

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TANNOUS: I'm glad you raised this question because there is a significance in it that I will try to explain. My answer is "Yes and No." There are two sides to the assignment of a native son back to his own home country, not on a long term basis. There are positive features that cannot be doubted, which I experienced, which were very helpful to our foreign relations with Lebanon—knowledge of the people at all levels, of the leaders, of the living conditions in the villages and in the urban centers, and all throughout the Lebanese structure. To the native son, such knowledge comes forward to be most helpful in guiding our technical assistance operations and other relations in the country. My work in Lebanon, on that basis, was very helpful (I say this with all modesty) in getting our mission across there.

I mention one example. At the beginning, there was a threat that the Lebanese parliament was delaying over and over, with much discussion back and forth, the approval of the mission program; not only the program, but approval of the whole principle of U.S.-Lebanon cooperation. With this almost at a dead end, the Ambassador at that time, Harold Minor, told me, "Afif, we have reached a point of decision and we may close this whole program. See if you can contact some of the leaders and your fellow alumni who have leading positions and whatever you can do on your own; go ahead. Add your personal touch to the resolution of the problem."

So I went to talk with a fellow AUB alumnus, a professor at the university, and at midnight we drove 40 miles to Sidon, to the home of the Speaker of the Parliament, my old classmate, Adel Osseiran, and woke him up, and he received us graciously, because of the old ties. We told him about the emergency. Then I sat down with him and said, "Adel, this is Afif, the Lebanese now talking for the good of Lebanon." Then I explained the whole problem. Also I told him that the U.S. Embassy might cancel the whole mission. He said, "Go home and sleep well. I will do my best tomorrow in the Parliament;" and he did.

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A few days later I met with another leader from a different segment of the country and did the same thing with him; and these two contacts spread around, plus the contacts and the influence of the Embassy and the Ambassador, which produced very good results.

And I remember an incident, which I must mention with a bit of humor. I attended the session when the Parliament was going to decide. I sat in the gallery watching. And here was another classmate of mine, Emil Bustani, who became a leader and a member of Parliament. He began to argue against the program; and while he was arguing, I was watching and listening. He had a certain kind of ulterior motive, a political interest, and he had to put it on as a facade. And while he was parading and talking he looked at the gallery and saw me smiling at him. He looked at me, smiled and began to modify his rhetoric in favor of the mission! So anyway, these are examples of the positive side of assigning a native son to his original country.

Q: How about the negative?

TANNOUS: The negative side is equally important. A native son assigned on a long time basis to his own country gets to be under two doses of pressure. Two forces will have an impact on him and the question is: Will he be able to take care of them both and come out with his contribution intact? There's the pressure of his own people, his own communities who think of him as the native son. They talk confidentially with him and tell him about their causes and problems and what they want to be done. He cannot meet all this and try to influence the program. Some of these pressures are not good pressures, some of these requests are not good requests, and he has to contradict them. He has to stand against them, which means antagonizing some of his old friends, some of the people in the country.

I had several experiences like that but I stood firm on the basis of our policy principles and the benefits for the people at large. I don't need to give examples, but the pressure is

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strong. The question: Can he stand it and keep functioning well? Also, can he stand it and function well and keep his intensive contacts with the people in the country going?

The other pressure is from the American community itself—from the Embassy community, from the technical assistance community. The pressure of: maintaining your identity as an American citizen, as a member of the American community there. The agitation was raised once against me, the criticism that I was “going native.” But Ambassador Raymond Hare was most understanding and supporting, and always urged me to make best use of my contacts.

So I tried to play it both ways; and that was not easy. But in all modesty I say that I was able to make it and left with a deep feeling that we had established a wonderful program in Lebanon.

Q: Afif, now we leave your Lebanese experience. Move yourself forward to 1994, look back on this experience, and address this question. How effective was our technical assistance program in Lebanon?

TANNOUS: Thank you for raising this question because it caters to my ego! In all honesty and modesty I say on behalf of the technical assistance mission, on behalf of our Embassy staff who were most supportive, from Ambassador Raymond Hare to Deputy Chief of Mission Armin Meyer, who later became Ambassador to Lebanon and then other countries and who knew the situation very well, all of us working together as a team—that the program was most successful.

We were able to establish a large number of fundamental projects in Lebanon of which we have always been proud—in livestock development, public health, education, scholarships for students, nursing services, forestation, horticulture, poultry development and industrial development based on local production. On all these fronts we established full cooperation with the Lebanese who were capable, ready and willing to move ahead. All of these projects flourished, and within 5 or 6 years, as I recall, we didn't need to be there anymore.

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Of course I left earlier, but the mission didn't last much longer after that. The Lebanese took over and moved ahead, which has always been the principal objective of our technical assistance—"Let the country take over, we are not going to stay there forever."

Q: Describe what has taken place since then in Lebanon to erase these accomplishments.

TANNOUS: What I'm talking about are the years of when I was there—'51 to '54; and let us say up to 1960, when the mission was reduced and finally concluded. The disturbances began in 1975 in Lebanon. They began as such, but soon became a fully flamed civil war, a bloody conflict, involving us too heavily. Therefore, there was a long stretch of years, 15 years, during which these various projects were taken over, expanded and improved by the Lebanese themselves who are very ingenious. They struck roots in the country. I confirmed this after I returned to Lebanon on several official visits before the disturbances. Then, talking with my friends, after the war, who come back and forth; also on the basis of what we see now at the time of peace, I can say definitely that the civil war disrupted some of these assistance projects, but didn't kill them, and they are now coming back to flourish throughout the country.

Q: Now let us move into a new phase in your career. In 1954 you had finished your work in Lebanon and were ready to return to Washington. Tell us about your return to the Foreign Agricultural Service and what you did after you returned.

TANNOUS: The basis of which I returned was a new administration was taking over; the whole government was being reorganized.

Q: When Eisenhower had become President and Benson was Secretary of Agriculture.

TANNOUS: Correct. So I came back on that basis, resuming my old job, head of the Middle East Unit. Also, in addition, I was asked to act as the Liaison between USDA, not only FAS, but USDA as a whole, and ICA, which is now AID. Actually I was coordinator of

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USDA services to ICA, which needed special services in personnel, knowledge, research, etc., to cater to its own technical assistance programs abroad.

Q: And handling teams which they were bringing back to the U.S.

TANNOUS: Very much so, I'm glad you mentioned that. Team after team from various countries of the developing world were coming in to be trained in the United States for short periods; that was to learn more about the process of development in their countries, then go back and continue to serve. It was a very important aspect of the technical assistance program, and USDA was very much involved, including FAS primarily. I was heavily involved in that. I was asked to give lectures to the trainees on the basis of my knowledge of how to go across cultures with technical assistance help.

Q: That was true regardless of whether the group came from the Middle East or Africa or Asia, right?

TANNOUS: Yes.

Q: Okay, now before you get into this work, what changes did you see in U.S. policy when you came back with the new administration—on some of the things we talked about in the earlier part of this interview.

TANNOUS: I saw changes in policy; one was positive, as I mentioned—organizing USDA services for ICA. But there were negative changes, which I felt very strongly about. All the government administration was involved, from the White House down to State Department, ICA and USDA. The first one was: “Taboo on Land Reform! Don't touch land reform. Don't research on land reform. Don't talk land reform.” For what reasons, I don't want to discuss now. Thus FAS leadership in that project for the benefit of the whole world, and for the good of our relations with the world as I mentioned and emphasized before in my interview, was stopped suddenly. This short-sighted policy went so far as to ostracize the leading figure in FAS in that program, Wolf Ladejinsky, who was the architect of land

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reform in Japan with General MacArthur previously. It went that far—to ostracize him and in a way punish him, and gradually banish him. ICA took him over as a rescue, and then he was assigned to the Far East, to continue working for ICA on various projects. That was a very unfortunate policy against land reform.

That was one policy defect, but there was another, equally important. In fact, now in light of world global conditions, it was the most erroneous decision that was made by the new administration. Not only land reform; but don't touch population control, family planning; don't talk about that at all. Leave that alone. That was tragic and lasted for a bad while. Think of it now in terms of what has become the leading global problem, that of the explosion of population all over the world.

Q: Alright, we must move forward. Now you are in FAS, you are responsible for coordinating our AID relationship. Talk about this period now in your work in FAS.

TANNOUS: I continued my work; I was doing a double job really. Of course, FAS was helping with the coordination. I wasn't doing it alone, but I was the one who was in charge. But I was doing the other job, my own research and publication on the Middle East and later Africa. During this period, I published a large number of items, mostly in the Foreign Agriculture Journal, with which you are familiar. My publications on various aspects of the economic, agricultural and social conditions, of these various countries were meaningful to our trade interests, to our universities of agriculture, and our policies in relation to the area. I continued on that double duty from 1954 to 1961.

Q: During this period, when you were wearing these 2 hats, you were also on several foreign short time missions. I believe there were 4 or 5 of those, would you like to tell us about them?

TANNOUS: I mention first the 1956 mission to Tunisia, right after Tunisia became independent from French rule. The mission was organized upon an urgent call from the Tunisian government led by the hero of the liberation of Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba,

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with whom our government was cooperating strongly, because we were all for Tunisian independence, as we were for Moroccan independence and the rest of North Africa. It was a matter of freedom of humanity.

Within that policy, Bourguiba appealed to his American friends for help with wheat to feed his people, who were going hungry as a result of the liberation struggle. So the mission was organized as a response to that urgent request and I was a member of it. There were four of us, from USDA and ICA. We went to Tunisia and spent one full month investigating all over the country, until we came to a final decision—that the country really needed the wheat; also that it had political organization, locally, that would distribute the wheat honestly and effectively. I told the rest of the story earlier in this interview. It was a happy ending, when Washington approved 50,000 tons, as we had recommended. Again, my knowledge of the language and the culture were very helpful, especially in communication with the Minister of Agriculture and Prime Minister Bourguiba.

Q: What was the next?

TANNOUS: The next mission was in 1957—to Tunisia and Morocco, for State, USIA and USDA. They wanted me to participate in an international student conference in Tunis, and find what the international student gathering thought, for the benefit of our relations with Tunisia. So I went there and it was a short mission in Tunis. But again, my identification with the people was very helpful; not only with the leaders, who happily received me, because of my previous mission a year before, but also with the Tunisian students, especially when they found that I could recite Arabic poetry. They were so eager to hear it because they were estranged from their Arabic language under the French regime, as happened in Algeria and Morocco. I sang some of the folk songs of Lebanon, and they shared with me some of their own folk songs. We had a deep rapport there, which was very rewarding for me and for U.S. friendly policy.

Q: You at that time had 2 sons who were about that age, am I right?

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TANNOUS: Alright, if you want to bring the family into it. That was 1957. My older son was born in 1942, and my younger son in 1946; so they were 15 and 11, still on the young side!

Then from Tunisia I went to Morocco to look over their agricultural condition as I did in Tunisia before. That was for FAS proper. I spent two weeks and developed a very good idea about the conditions of the country—the political, the economic, and the agricultural.

And wherever I went, Jim, on anyone of these missions when I was on my own, I would make a point of it at the end of the mission to sit down and report to the Embassy; confirm with the Embassy staff, and report to the Ambassador, for the benefit of our policy relations with the country. So I considered it, my assignments, my missions, to these various countries not only a service to any one of our agencies but a service for the interests of the United States and the U.S. government as a whole.

Now I will continue about what I did in Morocco. At the consulate, I told them I would like to go on a trip in the country. And they told me, we don't have the facilities yet, and the country is in transition. I said, "Alright, introduce me to a responsible individual in the new Moroccan government and I will see what they can do from there."

So I recall very vividly how the Assistant Consul, took me to meet with the official dealing with foreign relations in the new government. I explained to him what we were after; that I would like to travel over the country and learn about its agricultural areas. I told him where I came from originally. He looked at me and asked if I spoke Arabic. I said of course, and let go in classical Arabic! We started talking back and forth, and I expressed U.S. congratulations and jubilation over the independence of Morocco. At the end he said to our Consul, "Leave Afif with us, don't worry about him; we will take care of him." After the meeting, the individual in charge of foreign relations entrusted me to the care of the new Moroccan Director of Agriculture, by the name of Benslimane. He was a very fine young man, highly educated and very happy to go on this trip with me.

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We went all over the country observing forests, agriculture, plains, mountains, and irrigation schemes in the southern areas. It was quite an experience for me, especially as we talked with the people at all levels. I gained a great amount of knowledge about a country new to me. Here is a personal aside. During this trip we were riding in an official car driven by a French chauffeur. As we sat down talking back and forth—personal history, exchanging poetry too—I made the comment in Arabic, “Praise Allah, how He makes things change! Here we are, you the native son riding in a car driven by a French chauffeur.” He shook his head and said, “Praise Allah, and also our effort, that we were able to attain this emancipation. Afif, if you came here two weeks ago, I would be driving this car instead of he driving it.”

Here is another personal incident, very meaningful. When we arrived in Fez, the old city and learning center of Morocco, I asked at what hotel we were going to stay overnight. He said that we were not going to stay in a hotel. “You are going to be a guest of the family.” I said, “Why bother the family with this unexpected visit? He said, “I insist.” “Okay, if you insist, I cannot refuse Arab hospitality.”

So we drove through the center of the city, through the Casbah, until we came to a very imposing kind of building. And when we stopped at the gates of that building, with a huge extended compound behind it of open areas, I was amazed. I didn't know what was happening. There were soldiers guarding the gate, and, as we stepped out, they came forward, saluting. My amazement increased. Then he told me, “You are staying at the home of the new Governor of Fez province, who is my father. Two weeks ago, this was the home of the French governor.”

As we stepped in, he met us at the door, dressed in the national costume of Morocco—a venerable elderly gentleman with a white beard. We shook hands and spoke in Arabic. From then on, it was all Arabic, of course. We sat down and had a beautiful visit in his home, going over their origins, the history of their family beginning in Andalusia, Spain. When the Spaniards took over in 1492, they immigrated into Morocco and maintained their

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family line all throughout the centuries. He said, "You come from Lebanon, when were you there last?" I told him that I was there three years ago. He said, "I was there much later than you, I was there two months ago." I said, "How come?" He said, "I went to Saudi Arabia on pilgrimage to Mecca. On the way back I wanted to find the source of my early ancestors on the Arabian campaign, the conquest campaign, about 700 AD, when the Arab Islamic wave began. At the town of Yanbu, I discovered the origin and got acquainted with it; and still some people there remember the Beni Slimans!"

That was a very rewarding kind of experience. I told him one more thing, "Well, you were ousted from Spain and had to come over here. Now you are in the position to tell the French, who are still resident here, to go back home or else!" He said, "No, that's finished, that's past, any French, any foreigners are welcome to stay here as long as they abide by our laws and regulations." That was a very enlightened response.

After I finished my trip over the country, I reported to the Consul and, of course, brought back to FAS much valuable knowledge.

Q: That's another interesting example of your use of the talents you had as a native son of Lebanon. But now let's go back. You're back in Washington now and we are making another and very different use of your talents. You are asked to be the Deputy Director of a big fair trade exhibit that we were putting on in Cairo as part of a rather new marketing development program in which I was considerably involved. And I was delighted when you agreed to take your talents over there in an entirely different milieu, and participated with us. Tell us about that.

TANNOUS: Jim, that was a very interesting, different experience for me; the first time I had been involved in an agricultural exhibit like that on an international basis. I thanked you then, and I thank you again, for selecting me to be the Deputy Director on that assignment. Because it meant a great deal for our own country's interests and also for the benefit of the host country's, Egypt.

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Very briefly, our exhibit was in the heart of Cairo, in an area that could be reached from every part of Cairo easily, where the state had enough room for some 30 countries maybe, from all over the world, to set up their exhibits—to construct their own buildings, exhibit whatever they wanted of their own agricultural enterprise. We were given a choice area, with a miniature lake in front of it. On the other side of it, another choice piece was given to the Soviet Union. We began the construction of the buildings with the help of our engineer and architect; and we had the Director, Mr. McLaken, who was very knowledgeable about exhibits. Once he told me, “Afif, you be my co-Director.” I told him, “No, you are the Director and I am your Deputy. You are the expert in this field and I am the newcomer.” We worked together very effectively and harmoniously.

Let me digress and mention one of my side contributions. As we were constructing, we wanted to put up a large welcome sign, quoting from President Kennedy's wise statements, including the one I still remember, “New horizons are challenging us to move ahead in cooperation with the world...” We wanted to put it in Arabic. The risky phrase was “New horizons challenging us.” The expert translators at the Embassy were doing the translation. They consulted with me on a few occasions, but they were excellent translators. They put one translation for that phrase, which didn't give me the thrill of Kennedy's statement (the challenge of farther horizons or something like that). So I concocted an Arabic term for it, to which the translator of the Embassy responded with, “This is it and nothing else will do!” That's one little contribution, I mention in passing.

The establishment and the operation of the exhibit became a tremendous show for the Egyptian leaders and people—a great show in its own right, that was so, because we had every aspect of the American agricultural enterprise there: the trade, production, and processing. In fact we had cows and dairy processors right there in the exhibit; we had poultry, with chickens laying eggs, and the eggs sorted out; we had an irrigation system, farm machinery and many more.

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So it was really a very successful show. It amazed the people who came to see it, in contrast to the others, especially the Russian one, which was big in size, but rigid and forbidding. You know, the Soviet style. So people would come, visit and compare.

Nasser came on one visit and he was appreciative. I remember very well when we all met him and showed him that he was welcome. He went all over the exhibit; he went to all the exhibits as a matter of policy. But he expressed his special appreciation of what we were doing. On that basis, he asked his agricultural leaders in the government services to arrange for meetings with our experts. That was a very interesting development; he saw the meaning of what American agricultural enterprise could do and was eager for his people to learn from it. We had several such meetings, which were rewarding to both sides.

Q: Nasser was an intelligent man, I met him years later.

TANNOUS: He was very intelligent, very capable, but unfortunately, he went off on that irretrievable path of dictatorship and couldn't know how to come back. He threw his lot with the Soviet regime to a very large extent; but believe me, we were to blame for that, at least partly, because of the way we slapped him in the High Aswan Dam incident.

I'm going to digress; it's very important. We were to blame for his deviance towards the Soviets. Our Secretary of State at that time was Foster Dulles. I mention his name now, because he is no more here, and I will not be here pretty soon; so I can mention names. Our policy for Egypt was working very well; our own Ambassador there, our State Department people were promoting good relations with Nasser, hoping that we would contain him. That included helping with the building of the High Aswan Dam; which help we had promised, with Congress supporting. When it reached the point of accomplishment, for some kind of inspiration that Secretary Dulles got, I don't know what, he called the Egyptian Ambassador to him and said, "Tell your government that help on the Dam is out." That created a furor, and you can imagine what happened there.

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Q: I can imagine, because I was the U.S. Agricultural Attach# in Cairo at that time.

TANNOUS: You were there? I knew you were there but I didn't know it was about that time. You had to contend with the reaction to our erroneous policy shift.

And the Ambassador of Egypt here was a wonderful Ambassador, he and his wife were excellent representatives of Egypt in rapport with our own government and the people. He was dumbfounded when he got that slap from Dulles; he didn't know how to move; he was stunned. Nasser was furious, and went straight to the Russians, who took charge of the project.

I come back now to the exhibit and finish with it. One incident I might mention, again about cultural relations. I was asked to interview some 30 young men and women—college students who were willing to serve as guides with us for the various exhibits. What was the principle behind it, the cultural meaning? If we had American guides, it'd be a different story—all American. But having the Egyptian aspiring young men and women there as guides and demonstrators of various subjects of the exhibit would mean a great deal to the Egyptian people and their government. Of course we did this in cooperation with the Egyptian government, and they loved the idea.

So I interviewed and recruited them, of course in Arabic, by having each talk from a distance, as they would be talking to the people in the exhibit, letting their voices go across. We selected 30 people, from among the cream of the Egyptian youth—boys and girls, and they did a beautiful job.

Towards the end, there was a cultural faux pas, and I don't want to name who was responsible for it. That was when we had the public opening dinner for everybody to come, see the exhibit and enjoy the food. It was a celebration, a jubilation. Our young guides were told that while that was going on, they would stay at their stands with the individual exhibits and keep explaining to the people. They would have their share in the festival

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after the crowd had gone. That was an unfortunate cultural faux pas, because these young people were so eager to show their own families, their own people, that they were respected members of the exhibit and that they would show them around; they were not just dummies sitting on the side. They wanted to participate in the festival. Thus insulted, they refused to eat the leftovers and, the following day, went on strike. I tried to convince them, did my best talking to them individually, but they were adamant. Of course, there was always the communist elements in Egypt moving on behalf of the Soviet regime, always trying to find fault with our exhibit. So they had their opportunity to do damage by instigating our guides to go on strike.

Finally, I went to my old friend, Dr. Hassan Abdulla, Director of Foreign Agricultural Relations, in the Ministry of Agriculture, and told him what was happening. He came with me right away to the exhibit, and called a meeting of all the guides. We listened to their complaint, and talked to them in terms of honoring their contract, of up-holding the dignity and authority of Egypt, the host country, and that the mishap was a mistake and not intended to degrade their status. They responded positively and resumed their duties.

Q: You did a great job Afif, and we will always be appreciative. There was one other short time assignment during this period, in quite a different environment. You went to Nairobi to be Acting Agricultural Attach#, talk about that. Nairobi, you spent 2 months there.

TANNOUS: This happened in 1971, at the end of my career in FAS. We had a gap at the Nairobi post, between the departure of the attach# and the arrival of his replacement, and I was asked to fill in. That time, I took my wife, Josephine, with me, and had a wonderful experience. It was the first and last time that I served as attach#; also it was the time of transition from British colonial rule to Kenyan independence. I was able to work smoothly with both sides, British and Kenyan, because of my knowledge of Africa and my experience with colonial systems in Lebanon, Palestine and Sudan.

Q: Who was the U.S. Ambassador there at that time, do you remember?

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TANNOUS: I try to recall.

Q: The reason I ask that, is that Ambassador Steven Low is now running this Oral History program. I talked to him yesterday. He served as Ambassador to Nigeria at some stage and I thought it might have been the same time.

TANNOUS: I could recall if I dig into my memory.

Q: Okay, let's go ahead now. You are the area officer and you are doing other things than area officer during this period—lecturing at the Foreign Service Institute. Will you talk about this rather final period in your career.

TANNOUS: All through my service in FAS, I was often called to lecture at the Foreign Service Institute, the School of Advanced International Studies, where many of our Foreign Service officers studied, and on official trips across the U.S. and abroad.

After my return from Egypt, I found that it was a new administration again, with the Secretary of Agriculture, Orville Freeman, in '61.

Q: And Kennedy was President.

TANNOUS: Kennedy was President. When I came back, I found a new reorganization taking place. We had always to live with reorganization, as you know, which keeps going off and on. We won't dwell on that, the faults, the mistakes and the gains, whatever, on both sides; God bless them all!

When I returned I found FAS reorganized with one major change, which I did not like, although I liked the policy of going back to land reform. The new administration opened the door on that and other previously tabooed subjects. But the fact that they took out all the regional units from FAS and gave them to the Economic Research Service, I felt that was a big loss.

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Q: That was a loss.

TANNOUS: It was a short sighted policy unfortunately, because FAS lost a fine group of people—Hans Richter, Wolf Ladejinsky, Wilhelm Anderson.

Q: Quentin West.

TANNOUS: Yes, Quentin West, Larry Volin, Lois Bacon and many others. It was quite a group that over the years developed into a functional organic unit feeding into the commodity divisions, into the market development unit of FAS, and also feeding into U.S. interests on a general basis. Knowledge of these countries was important, and we were doing fundamental research. So out to Economic Research Service! Well they were still doing research there, that's alright. But they were weaned from their colleagues in FAS, which lost its holistic integrity, and I didn't like it. Wilhelm Anderson was in charge of the regional operations and wanted me to go with him to ERS. I was reluctant but I considered it. Bob Titro, our late friend, was then Director of FAS.

Q: Administrator.

TANNOUS: Administrator of FAS, with whom I had very fine contacts before. He called me in to tell me about his plans for FAS. Before he began, I asked him why did we lose the regional units. He was frank and said, "I would have loved to have them stay with us, but I had to make a deal, so that things will move smoothly and satisfy the Economic Research Service; all within the family."

"But I want you to know that I have a plan to set-up a new FAS unit of area officers and agricultural attach#s. We are going to build up that whole business in a rigorous manner. We want you to stay with us in FAS, not any longer as the Specialist on the Middle East and Africa, but as the Area Officer for backstopping and supervising the attach# service

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in these two regions. You have an offer from the other side, and I hope you will choose to stay with us, but you make your decision.”

So I talked with my wife about it and with some of my colleagues, and finally decided to stay with FAS. That's how I stayed on, and from 1961 until 1971 when I retired, I was the Area Officer for Africa and the Middle East; in charge of supervising, backstopping and supporting 12 agricultural attach# posts. I wish to emphasize, among the three words I used, supervise, backstop and support, the word support. That was my compassionate management stance. These attach#s are sent abroad on difficult assignments, sometimes at hardship posts, and they deserve to be supported. Even though they make mistakes, don't clobber them; and often they were clobbered. I had to appeal and contend for them at FAS, felt at home with them on my visits to their posts, and supported them in my reports. They always responded with their best on their duties.

On that basis I was able, as part of my assignment, to select attach#s to these two areas; also, I went on some 20 missions to visit various posts. No longer just as a researcher or technical assistance representative, but to ensure that the attach#s' responsibilities were carried out well. But each time I visited, I made it a point, as my program was organized by the attach#, to include one day or two to roam all over the rural areas of the country. I didn't want to lose touch, in my ivory tower in Washington, with the conditions in these countries. The attach#s knew about them and I wanted also to know; so when I reported on them and when I sent messages to them, I knew what I was talking about.

I was delighted, and felt fully rewarded with that assignment from beginning to end. In fact, our whole agricultural attach# services all over the world rendered a tremendous service not only for USDA and FAS, not only for American agriculture and trade, all of which are important, but also for the American policy relations with these countries. This was so, because we dealt with a segment of the population that was very important, and coming up on the rise towards higher levels of living in various countries, especially in my own areas, the Middle East and Africa.

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Q: Afif, I know from personal experience your tremendous knowledge of the Middle East, and you developed quite a knowledge of Africa also.

TANNOUS: In fact, if I might mention, I visited practically each country of Africa; let's say 90% of them, on both sides, west and east; also north and south!

Q: What I was coming to is that your knowledge and your prestige in this area were of tremendous value to these agricultural attach#s.

TANNOUS: I thank you.

Q: Some of them were relatively new at this business, and you were the father figure, you were the mentor and you were very valuable to FAS.

TANNOUS: I appreciate, Jim, the way you put it about my status and role with them—raising it to such a high level. I still prefer to stay with the concept of “compassionate support.” But I can say objectively that my method of relating to the attach#s paid off abundantly in their performance. They were a mighty fine group of people, and I still remember their names, one by one, and cherish my association with them.

This brings me to explain why I did not go along the same path and serve as an attach# at one or more posts. I had several good possibilities; but I always felt that, because of my special background, training and experience in foreign cultures, I would be much more useful in taking care of twelve posts in my two areas than being restricted to one post at a time. Also, I believe that our FAS Administrator, Ray loanes, and Assistant Administrator, Horace Davis, appreciated my reasoning, for they never insisted that I should go to any one post.

Now, if you don't mind, Jim, I wish to end this interview with a few examples of how my special personal-official relations with several of our Ambassadors to the Middle East (whose names I listed above) was so meaningful:

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(1) I don't need to repeat what I said above about my happy and productive association with Ambassador Raymond Hare in Beirut, Lebanon.

(2) When my life-long friend, Pete Hart, was assigned as Ambassador to Turkey, he consulted with us at FAS. I told him about the low status assigned to our attach# and agricultural interests at the Embassy in Ankara. It was a tough problem for us. Also, I told him that a new top-level agricultural attach# would be arriving there soon. He said, "Surely I will take care of that on your next visit to the post." Upon my arrival there a few months later, he called a meeting of the Economic Officer, the Director of AID Mission, the Agricultural Attach# and myself. After listening to the views of each, he said, "Our agricultural relations with Turkey are highly important, and so is the Agricultural Attach# post. Therefore, from now on the Agricultural Attach# will attend the policy meetings of the Economic Staff and the AID Staff. Also, he will attend my policy staff meetings." The following day he took me and the attach# to introduce him to the new Turkish Minister of Agriculture. Finally, to confirm his declared policy, he came with me to say goodbye at the airport.

(3) My other life-long friend is Ambassador Talcott Seelye. In fact, I knew him from my student years at the American University of Beirut, when his father was my professor of philosophy. At the end of my last assignment for FAS, in Kenya in 1971, Talcott (who was at that time in State Department in Washington) arranged with FAS for me to visit a number of Middle East countries. I had a wonderful tour of Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. I was welcomed by old friends in each country, and gathered valuable information—agricultural, economic, social and political—for the benefit of FAS and the State Department.

(4) In 1975, Ambassador Hermann Eilts was in charge of our Embassy in Cairo. He asked for a task force of top level agricultural experts, to study, advise and report on how to improve Egyptian agricultural yields. He sent a special message that Afif Tannous be included in the team, to take care of the human aspect of the study. We went there, 15 of

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us, stayed two months, made thorough studies and wrote a substantial report. Again, my knowledge of the leaders, the rural people, and the culture, was very helpful.

End of interview