

## INTERVIEWS FROM GAZA: WHAT HAMAS WANTS

*Abd al-Aziz Rantisi, Skeikh Ahmed Yassin, Ismail Abu Shanab, Mahmoud al-Zahar*

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### **ABD AL-AZIZ RANTISI**

**GAESS:** Do you think the United States has the ability to play a positive role as the conflict stands now?

**RANTISI:** Not if you judge by the proposals of Zinni, Tenet, George Mitchell. All of them told Mr. Arafat to crack down on Hamas, Islamic Jihad, even Fatah. So they are not looking at the situation from the real angle. They don't acknowledge the occupation as the root cause of all the troubles in our area. All the time they pressure Arafat to put an end to the resistance, but they don't press Sharon to end his invasion of [Palestinian] cities, and demolition of [refugee] camps, assassinations of Palestinians, killing of kids. If the U.S. continues with this policy of putting pressure on the victims and not the aggressors, there will be no solution in the foreseeable future, and both the Palestinians and Israelis will continue in their vicious circle of violence.

**Q:** How can people get out of this circle? What do you want to see from the U.S.?

**RANTISI:** They should be fair. Instead, they are supplying Israel with F-16 fighter jets, Apache helicopter gunships and other weapons, and providing financial support and even diplomatic support by way of the [U.N.] veto. They are opposing the Palestinian will even though we aren't the side committing aggression. We are just calling for our liberation, for an end to Israel's occupation, and we are looking to the United States. We hope the United States will one day not be biased against our dreams.

**Q:** Would you like Arafat to take a more focused and less compromising stance? Should he, for instance, just simply say to the U.S. and Israel: Look, the issue is the occupation and until we hear something positive about ending the occupation, we're not going to get tangled up in other issues?

**RANTISI:** We hope that Arafat will say that, but whenever the Americans come to our area, they only pressure him to attack Palestinian organizations in the interest of Israeli security. On numerous earlier occasions, we tried to provide the kind of atmosphere for negotiations to succeed. For example, during Camp David the situation here was very calm. There was no violence at all. President Arafat said to the Israelis, please, give us 20 percent of our historic homeland, and you can build your state on the other 80 percent of our land – and they refused that. They refused to withdraw, they refused to allow the return of the refugees, they refused to return Jerusalem, and they even refused to allow us to build our independent state. There are at this moment four million Palestinian refugees living under tragic conditions because of Israeli policy. But the Israelis have insisted on continuing their occupation, confronting us with aggression and daily humiliations. So we have no [political] choice – just the choice to defend ourselves and struggle for our freedom.

**Q:** Are there any conditions under which Hamas will freeze its armed struggle?

**RANTISI:** An end of the occupation – nothing else. Until the occupiers leave, we'll continue our struggle.

**Q:** What specifically do you need to hear from Israel?

**RANTISI:** We want to hear from them “we are ready to withdraw, and here's our timetable for doing so.”

**Q:** Is the goal of Hamas to end the 1967 occupation, or is it to replace Israel with an Islamic state?

**RANTISI:** We need to hear first about the goals of the Israelis. Do they intend to transfer Palestinians to Jordan? Are they looking to reoccupy Jordan, or seize the northern areas of Saudi Arabia? The Israelis up until now do not even recognize the Palestinians as a people. So we shouldn't answer this question until the Israelis make their intentions known.

**Q:** The reason I ask these questions is in part because in the American press the tendency is to associate the most extreme positions with Hamas, sometimes in order to dehumanize its members, and in that way marginalize them so that they're not a factor in an eventual solution to the conflict. If Hamas was able to say clearly that it's not seeking the destruction of Israel, then certain limits are established and it's a group that no one should have objections to talking with. But when you're ambiguous on this issue . . .

**RANTISI:** The most important objective of Hamas is to end the tragedy of the Palestinians, a majority of whom are living in camps. We want to see our people live like other people everywhere – living on their land, free of massacres, assassinations or siege. As for destroying Israel, we haven't the strength. So to speak as though we did is not at all logical.

**Q:** The Israelis are always saying the return of the refugees means the destruction of the

Jewish state. Is there any way their nerves can be calmed and the refugees still return?

**RANTISI:** Just a minute; you ask as an American. Is America a Christian state?

**Q:** I would say no.

**RANTISI:** So why must there be a Jewish state? Does America support racism?

**Q:** Well, the Israelis are afraid that if they become a minority in their own state, it will be changed into an Islamic state.

**RANTISI:** So, because they fear being a minority, four million Palestinians should live in misery for life? You are speaking about religion – a “Jewish” state. We can’t accept a state that’s solely for Jews. It’s not allowed for another religion [other than Islam] to govern this land. The Jewish people who are living here now, some of them came from the United States of America or from Canada, some from Europe or from South Africa. Why did they leave their countries to occupy Palestine and uproot me from my home?

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Should we suffer forever just because they want to build a state for Jews?

**Q:** But Jews don’t want to live under an Islamic state.

**RANTISI:** But they are living now under an

American state – as we said, it is not a Christian state. Or if we call it a Christian state, then Jews are living in the United States under the umbrella of a Christian state like other Americans. Throughout our history, Jews and Muslims have lived everywhere with each other. Jews are living in Syria now under the umbrella of an Islamic state. They are living under an Islamic state in Iran as Iranian citizens. Why should people live in cantons?

**Q:** Would you be comfortable with the idea of a two-state solution – a Palestinian state and Israel – if Israel were a state . . . I hesitate to say like the United States, but free of Israel’s current apartheid-like laws? That is, if Israel were neither a Jewish nor an Islamic state but existed for all its citizens equally?

**RANTISI:** First of all, as I said, they do not accept at all a Palestinian state or the presence even of Palestinians in the West Bank and are considering transferring Palestinians out of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Mr. Arafat told them clearly that we accept two states, but they refused, and they will continue to refuse that in the future.

**Q:** Not long ago *The New York Times* ran an article titled “Bombers Gloating in Gaza.” Their writer quoted you as saying that you can encourage or discourage martyrdom (suicide) operations through the public use of certain words, like saying “the floodgates of resistance are open” to give the green light for attacks. What role, if any, do you see

political leaders like yourself having in encouraging or discouraging such operations?

**RANTISI:** Many times we've explained that Hamas has a political wing and a separate military wing. The military wing plans operations, while the political wing sets a framework for policy and nothing else. So, for example, if we (the political wing) agreed in negotiations to halt operations, we would see that immediately because we have indirect connections with the military wing, and all the time they respect our declarations. Not long ago, for instance, we said Hamas should stop martyr operations in order to give the Israelis a chance to halt their aggression against our people, but after just two weeks the Israelis massacred a number of people, so our political leaders said we can't continue our cease-fire. Our decisions are announced [publicly] for the very reason that there is no [direct] connection between the two wings.

In killing our civilians, our kids, Israel has used F-16s, Apache helicopters, missiles, tanks, they even demolished houses burying people alive in Jenin. So, if we had weapons like F-16s and Apaches, we would use them, but we haven't, and so we are left with two choices. Either we surrender and accept a quiet death, or we defend ourselves using our own means of struggle. And one of our most effective means, which can rival the impact of their F-16s, is martyr operations.

We've told the Israelis again and again that if they stop killing our kids, our civilians, we will not use this weapon. It has been our response to the Israeli massacre of Palestinians. For example, after [Israeli settler Baruch] Goldstein's massacre in Hebron [in 1994] of innocents at prayer in a mosque, there was a wave of martyr operations; after assassinations, after the killing of five kids in Khan Younis on their way to school, there were other waves of operations. Each time they've been employed as a kind of retaliation to press the Israelis to stop their aggression and massacre of our people. In this last intifada, the Israelis have killed more than 2,000 of our civilians, and more than 350 of the dead have been kids.

### **SHEIKH AHMED YASSIN**

**GAESS:** Earlier this year *The New York Times* quoted you as saying that the focus of Hamas is an end to the occupation. But to that quote the *Times* writer added, "by that he (Yassin) means an end to the Jewish occupation of historic Palestine," which is all of Palestine. That's totally different from an end to the 1967 occupation, and it suggests that the goal of Hamas is the destruction of Israel. So I need to ask you, when you refer to ending the occupation, do you mean the occupation since 1967 or the whole deal?

**YASSIN:** All of Palestine is occupied. And there is an entity for the Zionist movement on Palestinian land which embodies apartheid. We want a place that absorbs Palestinian Muslims, Jews and others without differentiation.

**Q:** But as I understand it, Hamas is an organization formed to end the 1967 occupation, or am I wrong about that?

**YASSIN:** I accept the 1967 border as a stage of the struggle but not as the definitive solution because we still have the right to our land. My home is in Ashkelon [on what is

now Israel's southern coast] and not within the 1967 boundaries, and millions of refugees still have homes inside Israel.

**Q:** I understand that time often creates opportunities we can't even see right now, but, given our limited horizon, is a two-state solution at least a possibility? Can we think of a two-state solution without necessarily thinking that there has to be continued armed struggle after that?

**YASSIN:** Our recognition of an Israeli state is conditioned on their recognition of our rights. Since we still don't have a state – I don't have a home to settle on – that means we're not in a position to recognize Israel.

**Q:** Is a two-state solution possible if Israel recognizes a Palestinian state?

**YASSIN:** To predicate a question on "if" isn't practical in this situation. We can't say "if Israel is not there." If it were that easy, there would be no problem. What we can say is that a solution based on 22 percent of the land for the Palestinians and 78 percent for the Israelis is unjust. Still, Israel has not even acknowledged the Palestinians' right to 22 percent of our homeland.

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**Q:** I'm trying to understand as an outsider what a mutually acceptable solution might be. Short of the idea of an Islamic state in all of Palestine – most of the international community and certainly the Jews of Israel would

oppose that idea – I'm thinking, as we talk, that perhaps ending Israeli apartheid is one of the longer-term goals for achieving a settlement. But I'm also wondering, do you think the only alternative is an Islamic state in all of Palestine, or is there another alternative?

**YASSIN:** Our core position is that the Israelis stole our land and our homes and the whole world supported them, and now, when we are asking for our land back, the world is not supporting us, and this is unfair.

**Q:** America was founded, in part, on the same injustice. The Indians – the native Americans – were dispossessed of their land bit by bit, put on reservations and then essentially marginalized, but at least they are almost equal citizens now because there's substantially an end to apartheid in America.

**YASSIN:** And my own best vision for Palestine is of a land for Christians, Jews, Muslims – a state where everyone has equal rights.

**Q:** And it doesn't necessarily have to be an Islamic state?

**YASSIN:** That question should be left for the democratic process. Let the people select

the kind of state they want, in the same way that the United States is a state for all its people and they solve their differences democratically as equals.

### **ISMAIL ABU SHANAB**

**GAESS:** With both sides now enduring substantial suffering and this second, Al Aqsa intifada nearing the end of its second year, what is the perspective of Hamas on the role of armed struggle?

**ABU SHANAB:** Let me start from the last intifada. In 1987, when Palestinians began to vehemently protest against the Israeli occupation, they did so without recourse to arms. The Israelis responded by shooting demonstrators, and Palestinians of all backgrounds came to their defense, as the intifada spread across Gaza and the West Bank and continued until 1992. When Baruch Goldstein massacred Palestinians in Hebron [in 1994], the Palestinians did not have weapons to confront the Israeli army and settlers, and so they began to explore their options. An early reaction was, one person got explosives and gave his life in an attack on Israelis. Palestinians from that point on found that to be an effective weapon, and, since they have little else, they began to use this kind of [suicide] operation.

Palestinians don't have tanks to use against Israeli tanks. We don't have airplanes to defend ourselves against their airplanes. So as the Israelis kept their occupation in place and continued to kill our people, many means of resistance got developed. People carried out attacks on soldiers, on military jeeps, on settlements and military camps, and they kidnapped Israeli military figures. These, along with martyrdom operations, constitute our limited forms of resistance against Israel's huge military arsenal. Our resistance is a symbol of our rejection of the Israeli occupation, and it serves to remind the Israelis that they will not be able to continue that occupation without paying a price. And thirdly, the resistance is an affirmation of Palestinian determination not to surrender.

**Q:** There is a debate among Palestinians whether resistance operations should be limited to the Israeli settlers and military in the occupied territories, as Marwan Barghouti had urged, or extended to targets, including civilian targets, in Israel. How does Hamas decide what route to go?

**ABU SHANAB:** It depends on Israel's willingness to respect Palestinian civilians. Palestinians will not attack Israeli civilians if the Israelis stop killing Palestinian civilians. All religious teachings say "an eye for an eye." When the Israelis inflict damage on the Palestinians, they have to understand that the Palestinians will respond. We are not attacking the Israelis, we are defending ourselves, and our actions are a reaction to Israeli attacks on us.

**Q:** Under what conditions would Hamas halt its armed struggle?

**ABU SHANAB:** If the Israelis are willing to fully withdraw from the 1967 occupied territories and they present a timetable for doing so. That's been our condition since Oslo. But in the intervening nine years, the Israelis have shown no such willingness. Instead,

they've continued to expand their settlements.

**Q:** So we're really just talking about implementing U.N. Security Council Resolution 242?

**ABU SHANAB:** Yes.

**Q:** The possibility of an upcoming Middle East peace conference has temporarily dimmed, but in what instances would Hamas see something positive emerging from such a conference? More specifically, would Hamas be willing to take another chance and freeze its armed struggle to see what progress a conference might produce?

**ABU SHANAB:** This might happen if there is hope for meaningful international intervention, especially on the part of the superpower, the United States. If they came forward to guarantee a state for our people and full Israeli withdrawal according to the U.N. resolution, then a conference could be positive. But if the Americans merely want to sit the Palestinians and Israelis opposite each other at a negotiating table there can be no progress – because Israel is the relative military superpower and will try to dictate the terms of peace. This is what the Palestinians experienced in seven years of talks during which the Israelis proved unwilling to end their occupation.

Without any guarantee that Israel will withdraw, the Palestinian people – all of them, after all this sacrifice, after all this suffering – will not stop their intifada. And when we speak about intifada, we mean an intifada in all its forms, whether it is a popular intifada of peaceful demonstrations or military activities against Israeli military forces. That the intifada would continue is the view of all Palestinians, not only Hamas, but also Fatah, the Popular Front, the Democratic Front, Jihad. All Palestinians see the Israeli occupation as a threat to their lives, existence and dignity, so they will resist until the Israelis withdraw.

**Q:** The United States periodically sends over CIA head George Tenet to toughen up the Palestinian security apparatus, with the implication that the Palestinian Authority will be pressured to crack down on Hamas and the other resistance groups. Can anything be gained from this kind of U.S. involvement?

**ABU SHANAB:** No. Palestinians see this as a very, very negative role. Tenet is concentrating on security, and security issues are not at the core of the Palestinian problem. The Palestinian problem is a political one; the security solution comes after. In this sense, American diplomacy shows that the U.S. wants to maintain security for the Israelis but is not interested in a political solution for the Palestinians. Tenet came earlier and did not succeed. He won't succeed without a political program and agenda.

**Q:** Within Hamas, but also within Palestinian society as a whole, has the position on Israel hardened during this intifada? Not many years ago there were people in Hamas who were unwilling to accept Israel under any circumstances, and I'm wondering if those numbers have now increased. Is there the feeling that Palestinians will never be able to live with the Israelis?

**ABU SHANAB:** You know, the same can be said of the Israelis. A majority of them don't want to accept the Palestinians. Some Israelis even talk about their state as a biblical land

extending from the Nile to the Euphrates. But what does it matter if some people from Hamas don't like Israel, and some Israelis don't like Hamas? These are personal feelings. This long conflict has developed circumstances that create this kind of outlook. [In contrast,] I'm speaking about a political solution for the whole Palestinian issue.

Hamas is focusing on an agenda for Israel's withdrawal from the lands taken in 1967, the establishment of a Palestinian state and a solution for the refugees – and the only solution to the refugee problem is U.N. Resolution 194. If these things are implemented, the Palestinians will be satisfied, and they will be busy for more than 20 years building their state. The new Palestine can have good relations with Israel, as well as with the rest of our neighbors.

**Q:** How close do you think they got at Camp David and Taba to a solution?

**ABU SHANAB:** From one perspective it was close because the Israelis spoke about withdrawing from 94 percent of the land. But when you look at the details, it's clear that [Israeli Prime Minister Ehud] Barak's offer was a kind of trick.

He spoke about percentages but didn't draw one line on the map. That was a very, very strange thing. I met with people who were on the [Palestinian] negotiating team, and they said they had asked the Israelis to present them with a map to show what 94 percent they were talking about. The Israelis said, no, we are speaking only about general principles.

There was a second kind of dishonesty about percentages. Their figures did not include Jerusalem, and Jerusalem comprises about 20 percent of the West Bank. So that means they were talking about 90 percent of 80 percent, or only 70 percent of that territory. In other words, they were playing games with the numbers.

And Barak wanted the Palestinians to sign a statement signifying an end to the conflict while he simultaneously refused to discuss the issue of the refugees – and clearly the suffering of the refugees is a central Palestinian concern. So while the negotiations got close, they got nowhere as close as some have described.

**Q:** How much flexibility is there on the refugee issue?

**ABU SHANAB:** There are not a lot of alternatives for the people who were driven out of their homes. Israel guarantees the right of return for Jews all over the world, whether from Ethiopia or Russia or Brooklyn. In the same way, we're saying to the Israelis, if you want peace, if you want neighborly relations, let Palestinians also have the right of return. I assure you that not all those millions of Palestinians outside will want to come back. But

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they have that right, as symbolic of their having roots in this land. They long for the places their families came from. Flexibility on the refugees shouldn't mean evading Resolution 194, but there can be flexibility on how it is implemented. The Israelis, for instance, could accept 10,000, 20,000 the first year, the second . . . , and so on. Their return could be gradual over the course of time, as both peoples learn to live peacefully together. But the Israelis have refused to even acknowledge their right to return, and that has made Palestinian refugees more determined to struggle to realize that right.

Secondly, the Israelis want a purely Jewish state. What does this mean other than apartheid? What would be the reaction of Americans if, for instance, the Mormons of Salt Lake City or Boston's Catholics said they wanted Utah to be a solely Mormon state and Massachusetts to be under the domination of Catholics? Wouldn't it be seen as an attempt at discrimination? The Israelis have convinced the Western world that they have the right to a Jewish state because of their suffering under the Nazis. But the Palestinians were not the cause of that trouble for the Jews. Why should they suffer as a consequence? Look at how this problem started. Jews came here and settled and forcibly displaced Palestinians from their homes. Now they are telling the refugees they cannot accept their return and the refugees should solve their problems in some other country. This is unfair.

**Q:** In terms though of dealing with their fears, what Israeli Jews are afraid of is that at some point the Arabs will grow to a majority in Israel and then vote to change the nature of the state in a way that puts Jews at risk.

**ABU SHANAB:** If there is a willingness to live in peace, then the Israelis and Palestinians will jointly find a better way of living together. And if we live together, demographics doesn't have to be a problem. Demographically, Israelis are already outnumbered by Arabs in this part of the world, but there is nothing to prevent them from living their lives as Jews, just as Arabs can live as Muslims. If we treat people as human beings rather than as merely members of particular religions, we can solve the problem.

I raised this question with an Israeli officer while I was in an Israeli jail. He told me, look, Ismail, if you want to live in peace, why don't you want settlers to settle in Gaza? I said, OK, we'll accept Israeli settlers in Gaza, but can Palestinians who are willing to live in peace resettle in their homes in what's now Israel? Would you accept this? He said no. I told him that his understanding of peace meant peace for him but not for me. This is our argument with the Israelis. The problems are complex, but they can be solved with good will from both sides, from Palestinians and Israelis – and also on the part of the international community, because the international community has to pay something for the sake of absorbing the refugees.

**Q:** Even if they had reached an agreement at Taba, and 90 percent of the people on both sides were satisfied, over time this whole thing would probably evolve into forms that people can't even anticipate today. In another hundred years, there may be a single state with really good human-rights guarantees that assure equality for everyone.

**ABU SHANAB:** And at that time, what will we have? We wouldn't have an Israeli state but a state based on democracy.

**Q:** Which ideally would be neither a Jewish nor an Islamic state.

**ABU SHANAB:** No, let's speak about a democratic state, because an Islamic state is compatible with democracy. In this way, we see the Israelis as part of this community, if they want to live as equals. But if they want to maintain apartheid, they will never join this community. This is the critical issue for the Israelis and the Zionist movement, as well as for those in the West who support this state. Now the Israelis see themselves as Westerners in an Eastern area, and they live here as strangers.

**Q:** In not only the American press but also most of the British press, Hamas is characterized as unwilling to accept a two-state solution. Its goal is said to be replacing Israel with an Islamic state in all of historic Palestine. When I listen to you some of what you say sounds a little like this, but on another level I hear you saying that democracy should in and of itself be the preferred form of government in both Israel and a future Palestinian state. So I'm not totally sure whether Hamas would accept two states or not.

**ABU SHANAB:** First of all, we can't answer this question unless Israel gives us our right to build our own state. I cannot accept that Israel will exist on 78 percent of the land and our state on 22 percent [as outlined by U.N. Resolution 242] unless Israel first acknowledges that Palestinians can establish their state in that 22 percent. Without its recognizing us we will not recognize Israel because our rights encompass more than the 1967 border. We have a right to the whole of Palestine. We cannot, just like that, waive our right to our homeland and forget it forever.

So we've stated our minimum need and, as a political solution, said, let our generation live in a two-state solution on those minimum requirements – the 1967 border and the refugees' right of return. When Israel announces its intention to fully withdraw, we can declare a truce and move forward according to the actual progress of life. In that context, we could recognize Israel. Let us live within that framework for 10 years, for 20 years, and see if it is acceptable for later generations. The next generation will tolerate it if conditions are good and they're allowed to get on with their own lives.

**Q:** A person listening to you could read it both ways, and they obviously do. They could read it as the position of someone who's taking a very practical approach and saying that Hamas would be willing to try a two-state solution to see how it initially works, and then if it's lacking, to adjust it and build on that in a peaceful way. Another person could say that this is just Hamas saying we're going to get a little bit here . . .

**ABU SHANAB:** And then later on we'll take everything? No. Islamic teachings say you have to fulfill your agreements. If we sign any agreement, we have to respect it. It's totally rejected by Islamic teaching that you can say one thing and then do something else. But because our crisis is very complex, and we're being asked to accept a compromise of 22 percent when we have a right to 100 percent of [historic] Palestine, we're exploring a practical way to solve the problem – to begin from our minimum need. This would offer a good starting point for the next generation [of Palestinians], because the next generation will have less enthusiasm for historical things, like the Indians in the United States.

You will find extremist thinking on both sides. I can give you a thousand examples of

maximalist Israeli claims, including calls to implement a transfer policy [to deport all Palestinians out of Palestine]. You have to put all of this in perspective and be fair about it. We're speaking about the historic Palestine we left 50 years ago. The Jews are talking about wanting to come back to lands they left 5,000 years ago. Who is being more practical?

If you ask a Palestinian what he wants, he will say he wants his land in Israel. That's all. He's not speaking about politics or about a Jewish state or a Palestinian state, just about going back to his land. I can talk to you about Palestinian rights. I can give you many arguments to try to convince you. But in the end we need a solution. Hamas is offering a practical approach to that solution.

### MAHMOUD AL-ZAHAR

**GAESS:** Hamas and the Palestinian Authority have from the outset had an on-again, off-again relationship. How would you characterize their interaction at this time, and what is the view of Hamas on Palestinian reforms?

**ZAHAR:** We see the Palestinian Authority as part of the PLO, as our political opponent rather than our enemy. We believe their intention is to liberate Palestine, and that's also our intention; and to establish an independent state, and we share that aim. But there is a big difference between us. Ideologically, they are secular and so are more liable for corruption. Hamas is religious. Everyone here will testify that we are honest, and as part of our program we have run an educational system and distributed money to people in need – without a single instance of corruption. So we are looking for the establishment of a genuine authority that distributes money fairly so it can be used to build roads on the one hand and credible institutions on the other.

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assumption to be true. [During the Oslo era] the Palestinian Authority jailed our people and confiscated our guns and money. Nevertheless, we kept open the channels of communication and used no violence against them. I think over time we've convinced them that armed struggle against Israel is our only alternative, because if you are really looking for the liberation of Palestine, Israel will never leave this area without losses. So now we stand side by side with the Palestinian Authority in defending ourselves against the occupation.

Despite what the Americans like to say, we are not terrorists. We are looking for the

We did not oppose [Arafat's] negotiations with Israel because we oppose negotiations per se. We opposed the talks because the terms of the Oslo accords put us at a negotiating disadvantage and would bring us nothing. And Israeli actions have proven our

liberation of our lands, so that our people can establish their sovereign state and put down their guns. For these reasons we are ready to cooperate with the Palestinian Authority, but at the same time we will defend our vision of how to solve the challenges facing Palestinians, including the question of the occupation.

**Q:** What's Hamas's position on the upcoming elections?

**ZAHAR:** We've called for reforming the PLO to give a chance for every Palestinian faction to be represented in the PLO council according to the size of its popular support. If we (Hamas) represent 5 percent of Palestinians, then we should have 5 percent of the seats in the [PLO's] Palestinian National Council; if we are 51 percent, everybody should respect the will of the people.

Secondly, concerning Oslo, we refuse to participate in any sort of Oslo regime because Oslo means autonomy, under which Israel feels it has the right to impose limited self-government on us in our own land. We are unequivocally opposed to any continuation of the autonomy period.

We are ready to participate in the municipal elections and in the legislative election, as long as they are fair and free of corruption. We won't participate in the Palestinian Legislative Council that was established under autonomy, but we are ready to take part in the Palestinian National Council, and are also open to the idea of participation in a temporary government not related to Oslo. We are not seeking a role because we enjoy holding power, but because we want to minimize the suffering of the Palestinian people in the face of Israeli aggression, and also to halt the corruption and destruction of our infrastructure that have occurred under the autonomy administration.

**Q:** If Hamas did participate in elections, would it be through the Khalas party?

**ZAHAR:** No, if we are going to take part, it will be as Hamas. But if any other Islamic party wants to participate, nobody can prevent them. Khalas is a group of Islamists [with roots in Hamas] who believe in the political path alone – they don't share in the armed struggle against Israel. But if Hamas decides to enter as Hamas, I think everybody would be under the flag of Hamas. Believe me, people are not now supporting the notion that Palestinian goals are achievable through politics alone. They are looking for the means to liberate their land, how to convince the Israelis to dismantle their settlements and withdraw. In my opinion, if there are fair municipal elections we are going to win. And if we participate in any [national] council, we are going to be the majority, because Hamas is widely supported and because the Palestinian Authority has such a bad reputation.

**Q:** What must the U.S. do to move the conflict toward a close?

**ZAHAR:** America, as the sole superpower, should support justice. American interests will not be served by blind support of Israel against the Palestinian people. Any American administration should ask itself a series of very simple questions: Is the occupation legal; is it moral; does it serve American interests? If the answers are "no," then America should advance ideas on how to end it. We were unable to get an Israeli withdrawal through the [Oslo] negotiations. What is the alternative?

It would be a historic mistake for America to consider Islam as an enemy, or the new enemy. Islam is not the ex-Soviet Union, Islam is not Iraq, it is not Egypt, nor Palestine. Islam is a very constructive agent, not only in our history but also in the present situation.

And America would be committing a very big mistake if it characterized Islam as a form of terrorism. Nobody in the Arab world sees Hamas in terrorist terms. First, we are attempting to liberate our land. Second, we've limited our resistance activities to within the borders of [historic] Palestine. Not one bullet has been fired outside Palestine, even though Israel tried to assassinate [Hamas political leader] Khalid Meshal in Jordan [in 1997]. Third, we have not carried out a single operation against any Jew because they are Jewish, but only because of their existence on our land as an occupier. And we've concentrated our activities on Israeli settlers and military targets.

Many times we've warned the Israeli leadership that if they persist in killing our civilians, they can expect the same poison in response. The aim of Palestinian attacks against Israeli civilians is to deter Israel's killing of our civilians. On numerous occasions we've reaffirmed our standing offer to Israel for a mutual cessation of attacks on civilians. If Israel agreed, no Israeli civilian would be killed, and the confrontation would be between the Israeli and Palestinian military – even though the Americans are daily supplying Israel with sophisticated weapons, ammunition and dollars that enable it to amass an enormous arsenal we have no way of matching.

**Q:** If Israel stopped killing Palestinian civilians, would Hamas limit its armed struggle to the 1967 occupied area?

**ZAHAR:** Yes, we would stop operations in the area of '48 (Israel). But, up to now, they have not agreed to that.

**Q:** Should the Palestinians continue to pursue talks with the U.S., or should Arafat condition such talks on, for example, the U.S.'s making clear that Israel must withdraw to the 1967 borders?

**ZAHAR:** No, politics is not a football game. We have to continue talking with everybody. But Mr. Arafat should present the real attitude of Palestinians, and the stance of Hamas is an integral part of that. He should let America know that our people are admiring the martyr operations, not because they are pleased about the human casualties but because they are struggling for sovereignty. Genuine sovereignty, not autonomy. So Arafat should speak frankly to America. If we mislead America through a kind of political posturing, it is not going to serve the Palestinian interest or the American interest.

Our aim is the same as any poor country in the world: to be governed by their real representatives, by their own institutions, and to share in the march of progress. As you can see, the poorest area in America is more well-off than how people are living here. So our intention is to make life special for our children, to enable the next generation to live lives more easy than our own.

We need America to listen carefully, and to analyze carefully, and lastly to decide carefully – because, believe me, nobody in the world accepts America's current policy. We don't consider the American people our enemy. We differentiate between the

American people and the pro-Zionists in the American administration who are supporting Israel. But people in America need to inform themselves about what is happening in the world. Ignorance in America is a disease pushing it toward a disastrous condition.

When Mr. Bush spoke about the Crusades, he aroused a deep historical hatred in this region. There are extremists in the American administration, and they misuse power. Blind power will lead nowhere. We read many books about foolish people who believe in a confrontational relationship with the rest of the world. Without cooperation, the human race is not going to survive. Atomic bombs will take their toll without exception. We are facing a choice between progress and a cataclysm in which everyone will be the loser.

## INTERVIEWS FROM GAZA: PALESTINIAN OPTIONS UNDER SIEGE

*Ziad Abu-Amr, Haider Abdel Shafi*

*Dr. Abu-Amr and Dr. Abdel Shafi are independent, pro-democracy activists based in Gaza City. Both were elected to the Palestinian Legislative Council in 1996 under the interim Oslo accords. Abu-Amr, an academic who has published widely, is the chairman of the PLC's political committee. Abdel Shafi, a former chief Palestinian negotiator in talks with Israel, also is head of the Red Crescent Society in Gaza. The interviews were conducted by New York-based journalist Roger Gaess during June 2002 in Gaza City.*

### ZIAD ABU-AMR

**GAESS:** What can the Palestinians do under these circumstances? How do they move toward their long-term goals, including viable statehood, when faced with people like Sharon and the possibility of Netanyahu's return?

**ABU-AMR:** I think it's clear that things are not going anywhere with the current Israeli policies. If the siege goes on, the occupation continues, the incursions into Palestinian areas, then I think our life is impossible. It's difficult for people to live any normal life, even to go about doing what they need to do in terms of work, travel, trade. And I think the continuation of this situation will impede the process of reform that the Palestinians are initiating and that the world, including the Israelis, expects them to undertake. How

can the Palestinians carry out any meaningful reform while they are under attack? Even if they could, it would be construed as done under duress.

And if the Palestinian people can look only to the Israelis to deliver them – if there is no international intervention to protect the Palestinians – then more people will understand or will even sympathize with Hamas when they go and carry out suicidal attacks, because nobody else is coming forward to end this Israeli occupation. And it would be very difficult for the Palestinian Authority to restrain Hamas if that is part of any new arrangements. The PA is under tremendous pressure by the U.S. administration to impose discipline and order on Palestinian society and on the various political groups. The PA will be in a very weak position if Israel continues to occupy and destroy, to arrest and kill, and at the same time the PA is required to help the Israelis do something analogous to Palestinians here.

So I think there is a certain logical sequence for things to be done. The Israelis should pull out their troops, stop attacking the Palestinians, give the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian people a chance to reorganize their situation, especially when there is a serious intention now to carry out a program of reform and when Europe and the United States are involved in this, because people are becoming apathetic to what is taking place. What is this reform they are talking about when the Israelis are pursuing destruction and murder in Nablus, Qalqilya and other Palestinian cities? There is no faith in what is going on. And unless something convincing happens – something that the Palestinian people can feel is done in the right way and is in their interest – then there is going to be a great deal of apathy and frustration and perhaps a continuation of violence.

**Q:** Is there anything the PA can do in terms of a negotiating stance – like refusing to discuss certain issues unless the occupation or the introduction of international monitors is seriously dealt with?

**ABU-AMR:** This is the declared position, but in actuality it seems the PA is responding to American demands. The PA is cooperating and working towards creating a new situation, but the Israelis and the Americans are ignoring the PA's own demand for an end to the Israeli aggression. There is delivery from one side only, and that puts the PA in an awkward position.

**Q:** Would it make any sense to have shadow negotiations with people in the Israeli Labor party?

**ABU-AMR:** No. I think that's a waste of time. We have to deal with the people who make decisions, and that means Sharon and his men.

**Q:** I was thinking, though, that that might change the frame of reference for the average Israeli, as well as the average Palestinian, in terms of holding out some hope for the future.

**ABU-AMR:** I don't think the Labor party is presenting a clear alternative to the Israeli public. In times like this, when the Israelis are being told that their national existence is at stake, I don't think they have room for looking into the Labor party's version or alternative

views because the Labor party is itself trying to adopt the Sharon position. They're in the government. They're equally responsible for what is going on. And who said that the Labor party at this point is the address for the average Israeli? Look at its popularity rating – 70 percent or 80 percent of the Israelis support Sharon, so why bet on a losing horse? If the Palestinians have to do business, they have to do it with the incumbent government.

**Q:** Do you expect municipal elections this year?

**ABU-AMR:** This has been one of our persistent demands. Not only municipal elections but also legislative and presidential. The president (Arafat) has been very reluctant, for his own reasons, which are

not convincing to me and to many other Palestinians. Our president is status quo oriented. But we really need elections to ensure the rotation of power and to exercise accountability, to renew the legitimacy of Palestinian institutions and to restore vitality to the Palestin-

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**[W]e really need elections to ensure the rotation of power and to exercise accountability, to renew the legitimacy of Palestinian institutions and to restore vitality to the Palestinian system and Palestinian society.**

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ian system and Palestinian society. Without elections things will be stagnant; they have been stagnant for many years now. We pressed the president, and he has succumbed to the pressures of the Palestinian Legislative Council and has committed himself to allowing municipal elections before the end of this year, national – legislative and presidential – elections by the beginning of next year.

The problem now is that if Israel continues with its current policies, nobody will be able to travel. I have been a very strong proponent of elections, but I would understand if they are not conducted at the designated time; it may be logistically impossible. I think it is ridiculous for the PA to be sitting with the Americans and others, trying to reform the Palestinian system while Israeli tanks are in Palestinian cities. This is not the way to do it; it is like being an accomplice. People are having problems going to their universities, to their workplaces, moving about from one place to another. How can free, unobstructed elections be held under such conditions? And this does not even address the fact that the Palestinian inhabitants of Jerusalem should be allowed to participate in the elections.

**Q:** Could the presence of international monitors reduce the problems?

**ABU-AMR:** We had international monitors in 1996 during our presidential election, and I suspect it is going to happen again. We want it to happen – this is part of ensuring the integrity of the elections – but, this is a detail. We have to be certain first that the Israelis are going to let the elections take place. We've been preparing ourselves in the Palestinian Legislative Council to work on an elections law and an electoral system, but, when you see what's going on, the issue becomes of secondary concern for us. People are asking



what is being done to stop this Israeli aggression. They want to know if anyone is going to protect them.

**Q:** Getting back to Hamas, where do they fit in the Palestinian political fabric? What kinds of opportunities or dangers do they pose?

**ABU-AMR:** Hamas is an integral part of this society. They are not a bunch of suicide bombers. They are a part of Palestinian pluralism. They are like a conservative party or a rightist party in any country. Unfortunately, in the view of some, they have resorted to some violent tactics. But this is linked to a certain phase – there is an occupation, and there is a struggle against Israel. But Hamas is a movement which has an entire vision and program, and they have a following across Palestinian society. They can be constructive, and they should be included in the existing order within the parameters of Palestinian national interest and the parameters of law and order.

There is a way to include Hamas, but it will take some concessions from both the president and Hamas. As a political movement, Hamas can be talked into political participation. But you have to recognize their due role and their weight in our society and our political life. Hamas would be willing to negotiate a national agenda by which it would comply with a collective decision-making process. They have said this all along, and I know from my own experience with them that if they are part of a national agreement, they will not violate it.

In a conference we organized here in Gaza [in May] that brought together all factions to discuss reforms, leaders of Hamas said that, if they were part of such collective decision-making, they would comply – if it were decided that we will go to negotiations [with Israel], they would support negotiations. If the leadership called for a halt to suicidal attacks, Hamas would stop suicidal attacks. But they said that as long as they are not included in the decision-making process, they cannot just comply with what is decreed by a Palestinian Authority whose formation they opposed from the beginning and have never been a part of.

By the same token, Hamas can play the role of spoiler. In the eyes of others, Hamas may have already played that role, though Hamas would deny having that motive – they'd say they are exercising their legitimate rights. But the collateral damage, or even the primary damage from Israeli retaliation and retribution falls on the PA and Mr. Arafat. So Hamas can be a catalyst for stability, but it can also be a factor for instability.

## **HAIDER ABDEL SHAFI**

**GAESS:** What are the Palestinian priorities at this point?

**ABDEL SHAFI:** Our main need right now is proper organization. We need to be able to benefit from whatever potential we have, whether it is armed struggle or general organization. Without organization we cannot really achieve anything. To do this in the face of the intifada, which is a spontaneous and emotional and unorganized act, becomes extremely necessary and vital. That this has not been done so far has been a serious mistake and has provided Israel and Sharon with pretexts to commit all kinds of atrocities

against the Palestinian people. So we've made a call for organization, for the necessity of establishing what we call a national-unity leadership, in order to get all political parties on the scene to participate in decision making, so that everybody will be committed to one approach and this matter of conflict between points of view is put to an end.

**Q:** That would be a temporary organization, dealing essentially with the state of emergency involving the intifada?

**ABDEL SHAFI:** Yes, exactly. What I call a national-unity leadership is a temporary leadership that can unify the points of view, so that everybody is committed to one revolution. And of course it has to address the serious matter of the legal system. We don't have a proper legal system. In this context we also have to ensure that public money is dispensed in a legal and proper way and not squandered. These are the two most important things that the national-unity authority should deal with. And doing this will press Israel to take a sober look at the future.

**Q:** Do you see Hamas as a member of the temporary coalition?

**ABDEL SHAFI:** Yes, of course. They should be. I know that the feeling among many of us here as well as among people abroad is that it would be very difficult or impossible to have Hamas work jointly with the other political forces. I don't share this view. I think we can convince Hamas to be part of the national-unity leadership and abide by whatever is decided in this body. What's important and legitimate is that we give Hamas and every other political faction a chance to express their views about our real needs and what should be done, and that we reach a decision through the democratic process, with everybody then abiding by what is decided. I don't think Hamas would challenge this approach.

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**What's important and legitimate is that we give Hamas and every other political faction a chance to express their views about our real needs and what should be done.**

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**Q:** Are municipal elections one of the first tests of the good intentions of all parties?

**ABDEL SHAFI:** The election matter will have to wait. Now they are jumping to do things, like reforming this ministry and doing that, before the ground is prepared. Why should we be in a hurry? The first priority is a national-unity authority that can put in place a just legal system and assure the proper distribution of public monies. When these issues are addressed effectively, then the ground will be ready for elections. As it stands now, our society is frustrated. They have doubts about every move that's taken. You have to regain their confidence in what's going on before you go into elections. But once the national-unity authority achieves these things, then the government will be ready to hold municipal and legislative elections. And then the Authority would be replaced by an elected body.

**Q:** In contrast to the European media, which generally presents Palestinian violence as an

attempt to end Israeli's military occupation of Palestinian lands seized in 1967, the American media often portrays Palestinian violence as "terrorism." With that word they can depict Palestinians as simply perpetrators of senseless violence. I'm wondering if you think that's the result of a Palestinian shortcoming in terms of getting its message across to the American people, or is it more the case of America's domestic power balance being reflected in its media?

**ABDEL SHAFI:** We are aware of the realities. Everybody sees that the American government is biased towards Israel. But it is also our serious failure to properly inform the American public. It's high time we put together a real information campaign to the American public to counter the disinformation that is continuously being fed by the Israeli information organs. I cannot overemphasize our failures in support of our rights. But this does not prevent me from pointing an accusing finger at the United States or at the international community and the Arab world in general.

**Q:** As to American mediation, under what conditions can Palestinians have meaningful talks with the United States? The Americans often come here and simply present the Israeli position. How can the Palestinians pursue a dialogue with the Americans that is not counterproductive to the Palestinian aim of ending the occupation?

**ABDEL SHAFI:** All that we want from the Americans is for them to be respectful of U.N. resolutions. We cannot press the Americans to adopt a position that they are not willing to adopt, but America has been a cause for the lack of implementation of many important U.N. resolutions pertaining to our problem. Why was U.N. Resolution 194 [on the Palestinian refugees' right of return] not implemented? Why didn't the United Nations insist on that? Zionism decided right from the start, at the first Zionist congress, to achieve its objectives by force, and the expulsion of the Palestinians in 1948, with the attendant massacres and terrorism, was a clear statement of their program. Then, again, right after the occupation of 1967, Israel started its strategy of *fait accompli*, facts on the ground, the acquisition of territory by force and establishing settlements. This was immediately condemned by U.N. resolutions as being illegal and obstructive to the chances of peace. But because the United States did not support that, Israel continued, and the world simply contented itself with verbal condemnation of Israeli actions, until Israel raided all the occupied territories creating facts on the ground. Now the Israelis not only refuse the minimal Palestinian request of a Palestinian state in less than one-fourth of Palestine, but they also characterize these same U.N. resolutions as obstacles to peace!

**Q:** Given all this history, at what point can the Palestinians pick up a constructive dialogue with the United States?

**ABDEL SHAFI:** The only time that we could hail an American action was in 1957. Israel has always blamed the Palestinians for the absence of peace because we did not accept the partition resolution in 1948, implying that they had accepted partition and we had not. But that is a lie. They accepted partition only as a stage towards their wider objectives, and the proofs for this are many. The first indication was their occupation of the Gaza Strip in 1956. They exploited the British-French invasion of the [Suez] Canal area and

occupied the Gaza Strip and parts of the Sinai. And as the U.N. took resolutions calling on the aggressors to withdraw, the British and French did so immediately. In contrast, Israel retreated slowly from Sinai and then stopped in Gaza. I was living in Gaza and could see that they were engaged in long-term projects, which meant that they intended to stay.

It was [U.S. President Dwight D.] Eisenhower at that time who called on the Israelis to implement the U.N. resolution. [Israeli Prime Minister David] Ben-Gurion even dared to ignore the Eisenhower request, which made Eisenhower very mad. Eisenhower sent him a stiff letter, saying that Israel was playing havoc with world order and must withdraw. He threatened sanctions. That night after we went to bed, we heard the roar of armored cars in the streets of Gaza, and early the next morning we woke to find no trace of the Israelis. I always say – and this displeases some Americans – it took a [U.S.] president with moral fiber to force Israel out of Gaza. And we haven't seen that for a long time.