



INTERVIEW

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

AN INTERVIEW WITH
HAYDAR 'ABD AL-SHAFI

Khalidi: Given the terrible situation of the last months, some people have been saying that the disaster is of similar magnitude to 1948. From your own witnessing of events, is this an exaggeration?

'Abd al-Shafi: No, it's not an exaggeration. In a way, what is happening today is worse. What happened in 1948 was an obvious aggression by the Israelis, with the tacit acceptance of Britain and the silence of the democratic world that had just adopted all kinds of conventions to prevent state aggressions. Still, it happened so quickly, within the space of a few months, that it was as though the world was taken by surprise. There was no chance to intervene.

Today, all the powers know exactly what's going on. It's not a sudden event, but part of a *process* that has been continuing steadily for the past thirty-five years under the noses of the entire world. Everyone is looking on without making any effort to stop it. Israel began the settlement activity in the occupied territories right after 1967, and this was immediately condemned by explicit resolutions by the United Nations. But the democratic world failed to implement these resolutions, and Israel has been left to have its own way until the entire occupied territories are riddled with facts on the ground. Everything could be solved by implementing the resolutions, yet they don't do it. There has been a terrible failure of the democratic world to stand by its declared principles.

At the same time, one has to say that our own bad performance carries a good part of the responsibility. You see, world public opinion until now does not have a clear picture about the aggression that took place in Palestine—they don't understand the roots of the problem. This is a great failure—

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that we have not succeeded in enlightening them. So Israel capitalizes on our failures—we've been helping the Zionist program.

Khalidi: Unfortunately, that isn't the only failure.

'Abd al-Shafi: Of course. The Arabs and Palestinians failed to learn the lessons of 1948. And this paved the road to further deterioration of the situation, which we have been witnessing all along. The only bright spot was the ability of the Palestinian people, in spite of the 1948 disaster, to rally. After 1948 everyone thought they were finished. But within the space of fifteen years, and despite their dispersal and harsh conditions, they managed to establish a leadership. I mean the All-Palestine Conference that established the PLO in 1964. This was, in my opinion, a real achievement.

Khalidi: You were a member of the conference, were you not?

'Abd al-Shafi: Yes I was. I was also a member of the first executive committee of the PLO named by Ahmad Shukayri and continued in that capacity until the convening of the first session of the National Council in June 1965. Shukayri's chairmanship lasted about three years, and then it was taken over by the militant factions, with Fatah in the vanguard.

Unfortunately, the leadership that emerged has failed so far to establish a process that is built on democratic principles and that has the ability to benefit from whatever potential we have. We criticize the leadership of the Mandate period, but I find excuses for them because Palestine at the time was still a semi-feudal society coming out of Turkish rule. The leadership structure was made up of the landowners and elite families who had their own interests, and they were not able to organize or even to fully understand what the Zionists were up to.

When the PLO was formed, the first thing they needed to do was to make a real assessment of the performance of the first leadership in the period leading up to the disaster of 1948 in order to draw the necessary lessons. But they didn't do this. They immediately and without much analysis adopted a military strategy. I wish they had done justice to it. A military strategy requires unity of action, and there was none. The movement was made up of different factions, each with its own military force. There were rivalries in the field of military action and often they would have conflicts about which group performed this or that action—a scandal!

Khalidi: If you look at other national liberation movements, they succeeded because they were unified.

'Abd al-Shafi: Yes. Really, I blame the leadership for the deterioration that has continued until now. The failure is obvious now in the intifada. With all these political forces on the scene, all with different views on how things should be managed and carrying out their own actions—there is terrible disarray. There has to be unity of action. And for this you need a body responsible for decision making, with all the forces committed to one course of action adopted democratically through open debate. From the very begin-

ning of the intifada we've been calling for a national unity leadership. Only this can end the disarray that has been prevailing so far, which has provided the pretext for [Israeli prime minister Ariel] Sharon's brutality and aggression.

Khalidi: But precisely because there are these different agendas and rivalries, what would induce all these groups to come together in a national unity leadership?

'Abd al-Shafi: Because this is an emergency situation. We cannot leave things as they are. The intifada itself is a spontaneous and unorganized act, stemming from the real emotion and deep feelings of injustice and persecution of the people. It needed to be organized, to be transformed into a sensible strategy. How are you going to do this if there are all these different groups? The spontaneity of the intifada continues to provide excuses for Sharon to do whatever he wants.

Khalidi: Aside from national interest, why would they go along? A few years back there were negotiations for Hamas to join the Palestinian Authority, but they broke down.

'Abd al-Shafi: If a real unity government had been offered, with a true democratic leadership, Hamas might have been persuaded.

The last time I saw Chairman Arafat, three or four months ago in Ramallah, I brought up this national unity leadership idea and pressed for it.

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He pretended to accept it. I sent him a follow-up letter. A few days later one of his aides called me and said the chairman was pleased with the idea and then began to talk about its implementation. It was clear from what he said that nothing had changed. Clearly the chairman insists on remaining the sole decision maker, and since he is unable to force his decisions

on others, Hamas and the others continue to do as they wish.

Khalidi: Given your long-standing criticisms of Yasir Arafat, how do you react to the current calls by the United States and by the Sharon government for his removal?

'Abd al-Shafi: Well, in spite of my criticisms, I certainly do not accept this. I reject on principle the intervention of America or anybody else, especially since we know that America is not a friend and wants to put us on a road that doesn't lead us to our goals—on the contrary. But the main thing is that Yasir Arafat and the Palestinian leadership is strictly a Palestinian issue. I think this is obvious. Actually, in spite of my criticism of Arafat's performance, I think he should stay on in his position until we achieve the necessary reforms that will make it possible to change.

Khalidi: What about the question of elections in present conditions?

‘Abd al-Shafi: You see, this is not the time for elections. The people are very frustrated. If there were elections now, many people would not even participate. This is the importance of a national unity leadership—to prepare the way for elections, as a transitional government that would carry out some basic reforms—such as dealing with the legal situation, the disbursement of public money, ending corruption, and so on. Certainly, one of the main tasks would be to regulate the intifada. Once the national unity leadership paves the ground properly through these means, elections should be held. Under this situation, I am sure, the popular reaction will be positive.

Khalidi: In an interview with JPS just after Oslo was signed, one of the things you said was that the agreement was framed in such general terms that there was wide latitude for interpretation, which worked to Israel’s advantage. The question is, could Oslo have worked out differently?

‘Abd al-Shafi: I do not believe so. Actually, my main criticism of Oslo is that it did not address the settlement issue. Israel’s settlement building was a clear violation of the very terms of reference of the peace process—it made the process meaningless. It was over this issue that the Washington negotiations that preceded Oslo reached an impasse, which lasted for twenty months, while we pressed the Israelis to stop their settlement activity and they refused. Finally they said plainly, “Why are you asking this? We are settling in our own land.” So we went to see [Secretary of State James] Baker. In fairness, he did try to get Israel to stop but they would not budge, so he came back to us and said, “Why don’t you set this issue aside, delay it?” I said, “How can it be delayed? It deprives the peace process of any meaning.” I asked him how we could engage in a process when the other party was violating the basic terms of reference from the very beginning. That’s where the Americans did not honor their commitments and responsibility as the party that had called for the peace negotiations. They violated their trusteeship by allowing Israel to continue to violate the ground rules that they themselves had established.

So after the second negotiating round in Washington, my advice to our leadership was to suspend our participation. Our sitting at the table provided Israel with a cover for its violations on the ground. But the leadership did not take my advice. I then wanted to leave the process myself, but I stayed on under pressure from the PLO and from the people in Gaza. Yet despite the fact that it was settlements that deadlocked the Washington negotiations for almost two years, when Oslo came out it was completely void of any reference to settlements. How could this be? And since they started negotiating the implementation of Oslo, Israel has doubled its settlements. Can anything be more crazy than this?

Khalidi: From the start, you were very outspoken in your criticisms.

‘Abd al-Shafi: Yes. Before the agreement was signed, I was on my way from Gaza to Washington, with a stopover in Paris. When I got to the hotel, at midnight there was a phone call saying that Arafat wanted to see me urgently

in Tunis. They had a ticket for me on the first plane. I went straight from the airport to Arafat's office, and he handed me the agreement. I read it there, while I was with him. And the first thing I told him was that this was a very bad agreement and that it would put him in all sorts of difficulties. I warned him about this. He didn't say anything, and as a matter of fact, I thought he was not listening because the first thing he said after that was, "I expect that you'll attend the signing ceremony." I was dumbfounded.

When I came out of his office, I met Abu Mazin [Mahmud Abbas] and [Yasir] 'Abid Rabbuh, who asked me what I thought of the agreement. The first thing I asked them was whether there had been a legal advisor with the delegation. They said no. I said, "How could you not?"

Anyhow, the next day I proceeded to Washington. It was supposed to be the eleventh negotiating round, but it was not convened. And of course I expressed my views on Oslo to the press. Nabil Shaath was very disturbed by my comments and said, "You cannot be that pessimistic. Can't you see that the Palestinian state is already a fact?" Really, that was what Nabil said.

I also got a telephone call from Dennis Ross following my criticisms in the press. Often during the negotiations when we would go to the State Department, I would say to the Americans that I could not understand why matters were being conducted as they were. I told them, "You know very well that we are negotiating on behalf of our leaders. So why this roundabout way? Why should not these negotiations take place directly with our political leadership, instead of through us?" I said this again and again. So when Ross called he said, "I read your comments, and you are critical, but I want to tell you that we made the agreement according to your advice. Your advice was to have direct negotiations between the political leaders, and that's what we did, just like you said. And now you tell me this is a bad agreement." I told him, "OK, I say it is a bad agreement. But if you, the American government, want to make it work you are still capable of doing it. So my view of the agreement is as it is, but it is in your hands to make this agreement work."

I am sorry to say that when I called Oslo a bad agreement, none of the delegation members sided with me. We had been united and stood firm throughout all those negotiating rounds, but when the agreement came out without any reference to settlements, whatever they felt privately they all went with Arafat. From then on I distanced myself from all that was going on.

Khalidi: The question that comes to mind is, given the balance of power, what should the Palestinians have done differently?

'Abd al-Shafi: When the Palestine National Council adopted the resolution to go to Madrid, we were not under any illusions about the Israeli position. We knew they had never given up their claims to all of Palestine. I remember Israel's occupation of Gaza during the Suez invasion in 1956. It was clear that they were engaged in long-term planning, that they intended to stay. When the UN passed resolutions calling for withdrawal, France and Britain withdrew immediately from the canal area and Israel began—slowly—to with-

draw from the parts of Sinai they had occupied. But they made no move to withdraw from Gaza and even when President [Dwight] Eisenhower sent a letter to Prime Minister [David] Ben-Gurion asking why Israel did not withdraw, Ben-Gurion had the gall not to reply. But then Eisenhower wrote a second letter threatening sanctions, and Israel withdrew in one night. That night we went to bed with the noise of armored cars roaming the streets of Gaza, and we awakened the next morning to find no trace of the Israelis in the Strip. It took a president with moral fiber to get them out.

Of course it was especially with the settlements that Israel showed that it had not given up its claims. They began building immediately after they occupied in 1967. They didn't care about the resolutions passed by the UN declaring settlements illegal, because the world under U.S. leadership did not do anything but pass resolutions calling them illegal without doing anything for implementation. And when the Sadat initiative ended in a peace treaty between Israel and the strongest Arab state, instead of making Israel more ready for peace by making it more secure, Israel exploited the treaty for further aggression and stepped up the pace of settlement. A few years later it invaded Lebanon.

But even though we knew that Israel remained committed to its original aims of keeping all Palestine, still we went to Madrid. We went to Madrid in the hope the American government—the sponsor—would adopt a balanced position. This was right after the American intervention in the Gulf under the banner of liberating Kuwait from Iraqi occupation and invoking international law. They were not patient with this occupation that lasted four months. So there was some hope that they would be ready to adopt an objective position in a peace process they themselves called to end an occupation that had lasted twenty-four years. A second reason for going was not to give Israel the chance to make propaganda that we don't want peace, that we only want violence and terrorism and so on.

Khalidi: So you are saying that you could not have done anything differently until that point.

'Abd al-Shafi: Yes. Even though we had enough reason to believe that we would gain nothing from going to Madrid, still we had to go. It didn't cost us anything to enter the process. The mistake was remaining in the process after Israel had violated the terms of reference, and the sponsor had allowed it. We should have stopped right then and reflected on our situation and priorities. How can we get out of this impasse? And this is the same question we are facing today: What are we to do? We are not using the potential we have, because we are not organizing.

Khalidi: Was there anything at Camp David two years ago that should have been been done differently?

'Abd al-Shafi: I'm in complete agreement with the Palestinian leadership's performance at Camp David. I know that with what has happened since, some people regret that the Palestinians did not accept what was offered

there, but I consider our declared objective—a state within the 1967 borders—as the minimum that we can accept. We cannot really retreat from that. Israel was talking about exchanges, about retaining settlement blocs here and there and giving us some territory somewhere else in exchange. During the meeting of the PLO Central Council, I said that the territorial exchanges would be terrible for us. Israel has no objection to giving us a nonviable state because it does not conflict with their long-term goals. They have not abandoned any of their claims from the first Zionist Congress. They are still intent on seeing us out of Palestine altogether. But they bide their time—they give us a nonviable state, assuming it will die a natural death in time.

Khalidi: What about the Palestinian people? Given the enormous pressures they are under now, do you think they would now be willing to accept less than their minimal national demands?

‘Abd al-Shafi: No. And I don’t think that they should. In spite of the terrible situation as it is, there is no cause for despair or for giving in or for making more concessions than we have already made. This is the message of the intifada. The intifada came as a result of a lack of progress in the negotiating process, and the message of the intifada is that there is no point to continuing negotiations under the current balance of forces. And the second part of the message is that the Palestinians will fight in defense of their rights.

Khalidi: So then you are not against the military dimension of the struggle?

‘Abd al-Shafi: No, I am not against it. Not at all. We should fight, but the fight should be regulated. We know that we are no match for the Israelis militarily,

I am not at all against the military dimension. We should fight, but the fight should be regulated.

so we cannot get involved in military aspects without any process. We must limit our fighting to defensive action to make clear to the world that we are fighting against aggression. In other words, we should limit ourselves to fighting against Israeli actions such as the demolition of homes, the destruction of farmland, the uprooting of trees, and of course settlements. The actions taken by the fighters against the Israelis in settlements are legitimate. The settlement process has been repeatedly condemned by the United Nations as illegal, as an aggression, so these young men are fighting this aggression. Just because the UN has failed to honor its commitments and resolutions, that’s no reason that we should accept it.

But we have no business going to Haifa or Tel Aviv. If we had a defensive strategy, no one could criticize us. On the contrary, I think the world would be on our side, and Sharon would not have escaped world censure for his brutal acts.

Khalidi: Of course, Israel has managed to blur the line between what is occupied and what isn’t—the concept of occupation unfortunately is not always understood in the West, at least not through the press.

‘Abd al-Shafi: Israel has been able to blur this because of our failure to convey our message to the world, our failure in information. Otherwise, how could this distinction be blurred? All this stems from our failure to organize, from our inability to profit from the potential we have.

With the scale of the destruction inflicted on us every day—the dead, the maimed, the demolition of homes, the destruction of the land—it’s easy to say: we are finished. But the Palestinians are still reacting, they are still fighting. Of course what they inflict on the Israelis is not comparable to what is inflicted on them, but still it means that they have not despaired, that they are still struggling with whatever they have, that they are not beaten. I say that if we start really organizing properly, if we build on this potential of the people, it will be the beginning of hope for us. . . .

Part of this involves helping people endure the terrible difficulties they are subjected to. This means to care for their needs, helping them sustain themselves. This I told Arafat clearly. I said, “This is the only way that we can beat the Israelis. We can beat the Israelis by our greater ability to endure difficulties and hardship.” We are ten times more able than they are in this. We can’t beat them militarily, but we are more capable than they are of enduring hardships, punishment. If we organize, if we endure, and if our struggle is clearly defensive, then, I tell you, we will succeed.

All this should be the task of a national unity authority. But Arafat did not respond. On the pretext that Arafat is the elected decision maker and all this nonsense the PA wanted to have sole control. And of course they failed. Arafat could have prevailed on Hamas, and if we had gotten Hamas in a national unity leadership, we could have managed differently.

Khalidi: I wanted to ask your opinion about suicide bombings.

‘Abd al-Shafi: Of course I am against suicide bombings. They do away with innocent lives and make it possible for the world to allow Sharon to go on with his brutal acts. But I protest calling them “terrorist acts.” They stem from the deep sense of injustice and from Israel’s physical aggression against Palestinians. How can they be terrorist acts when the person committing them is sacrificing himself in the process, in the prime of life? A terrorist act is when you inflict damage on others while remaining safe yourself.

Khalidi: Finally, do you see any point in negotiating with the Israelis now?

‘Abd al-Shafi: No. No, not at all. The main message of the intifada is that there is no sense in negotiating under the present balance of power. Full stop. This comes from the heart of the people. The people remained silent for ten years. They were looking on, watching, sensing things, and only after this long time did they say frankly: No, there’s no point. But I fear that our leadership will think that they can manipulate things and that because the people are under this extraordinary pressure, they will be able to go back to the negotiating table, and all these sacrifices will go to the dogs. Could anything be more terrible than this?