

INTERVIEW WITH RAMADAN SHALLAH

Israel at a Crossroads—Unable to Vanquish Resistance or Negotiate Peace



In this interview conducted by JPS's sister publication, Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya (MDF), Dr. Ramadan Abdallah Shallah, the secretary-general of the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine (Harakat al-jihad al-islami fi Filastin), discusses the background and consequences of Israel's 2014 offensive against the Gaza Strip, the regional context of the conflict, and his organization's role in these events.

Shallah, born in the Gaza City neighborhood of Shuja'iya in 1958, obtained his doctorate in economics from the University of Durham in the United Kingdom and was subsequently adjunct professor at the University of South Florida in the United States. In 1995, he assumed the leadership of Islamic Jihad after the movement's charismatic founder, Fathi Shikaki, was assassinated in an Israeli operation in Malta. The Shikaki assassination is often portrayed by Israel as an instance in which an organization is dealt a mortal blow by the physical elimination of its leader. While Islamic Jihad was indeed slow to recover, today it is an integral component of the Palestinian national movement, politically as well as militarily, and particularly so in the Gaza Strip.

Shallah himself remains based in Damascus, reflecting the closer relations Islamic Jihad has traditionally nurtured with Iran and Syria, when compared to Hamas. On the strength of its relationship with what is often referred to as "the axis of resistance," Islamic Jihad boasts a military arsenal and capability that is second only to that of Hamas. Within Palestine, the organization has managed to remain equidistant from both Hamas and Fatah, declining to join the Palestinian Authority while remaining a major proponent of national reconciliation. Despite periodic and sometimes violent tensions with each, it has generally managed to maintain constructive relations with both, and it coordinated closely with Hamas during Operation Protective Edge, Israel's summer 2014 attack on Gaza.

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Before the Attack

Can you talk about the prolonged siege? How has the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt affected the blockade and living conditions in the Gaza Strip? And to what extent did the formation of the Palestinian consensus government hasten Israel's attack?

As far as the first question is concerned, the blockade in force against almost two million human beings for eight years qualifies as one of the most odious crimes against humanity. Israel talks tirelessly about the Warsaw Ghetto and what the Jews there endured, but the Gaza Strip constitutes the largest ghetto in history. It is the ultimate prison, essentially an iron cage barricaded on all sides, whose imprisoned population faces slow death by siege or quick death by war. More insidious than the blockade itself, however, have been the years of political division that have transformed the siege from a Palestinian issue of national import to a “local” problem that concerns only Gaza and, specifically, Hamas—as if only Hamas were under siege. It is easy to forget that the Palestinian population in its entirety is paying the price of the siege, whether the inhabitants of Gaza who are its direct targets and victims, or the rest of the people, especially in view of Gaza’s status nationally, its connection to the West Bank, and its significance for the future of the question of Palestine.

It is Israel, and not Hamas, that instigated the war in Gaza, and to illustrate the point, let me remind you of Israel’s actions in 1967. That year, Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, which Israel considered tantamount to a blockade even though its airspace and Mediterranean waters remained open to the world. That was Israel’s *casus belli* when it initiated the 1967 war. For the Gaza Strip, however, crying out against the injustice and violence of the siege is not permitted.

As to the second question, the impact of the Muslim Brotherhood’s fall is only relevant in that it altered Egypt’s official position on Hamas. Since the new [al-Sisi] regime regards Hamas as a component of the Muslim Brotherhood, naturally relations between Egypt and Gaza have deteriorated—to the point where they are worse today than they were under [deposed president Hosni] Mubarak. But it is the Palestinian people who are once again paying the price. We have for our part, as Islamic Jihad, tried to convince our Egyptian friends to treat Hamas as a strictly Palestinian movement and to separate the Palestinian issue from internal Egyptian political considerations. The rupture has been so great, however, that all confidence has been lost between Egypt and Hamas—and maybe time will heal the breach.

As to the formation of the consensus government hastening the attack on Gaza, I agree with the premise. But the question is, how? There is a paradox here, and I hope not to be misunderstood when I say that it is as a result of Palestinian national reconciliation and the formation of a consensus government that Israel began to be vocal about the strength of the resistance and its arsenal in Gaza. For Israel, security is the primary concern, and as long as the Hamas government was in power in Gaza, Israel considered that its own security was assured because of Hamas’s disciplined commitment to “quiet.” With the reconciliation and the formation of the consensus government, “quiet” with Gaza was no longer a security issue—which is exactly what the former head of the Israel Defense Forces Military Intelligence Directorate, Amos Yadlin, said in the very

first days of the war. So here is where the paradox lies: either the intra-Palestinian schism continues or there is a reconciliation process and Israel stops tolerating the status quo. In my estimation, this is the reverse of what Hamas expected when it agreed to the reconciliation process. I think Hamas believed that the consensus government would shield Gaza from further Israeli assault, but it clearly just hastened the attack. Because obtaining security is the foremost variable underpinning Israeli policy.

In the wake of [three Gaza] wars and subsequent truces, what is Islamic Jihad's reading of the current situation? And what is the connection between your combat readiness on the ground and the emergence of new political prospects?

Since Israel's disengagement in the fall of 2005, Gaza has become a highly complex issue. It quickly became apparent that the real aim of the Israeli withdrawal was to disconnect Gaza from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and effectively expunge it from Palestine's political and geographical landscape. The power struggle between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 2006 [when Hamas routed the PA in the Gaza elections] and the ensuing rift between the two has exacerbated the situation and complicated matters further. Islamic Jihad has remained on the sidelines, fearing that internal Palestinian disputes over who should hold the reins of power would overshadow the struggle against the Israeli occupation—and that, regrettably, is exactly what happened.

Israel's disengagement from Gaza was a redeployment rather than an actual withdrawal. What Israel did was to pull its guns from inside the territory and station them on the borders, thus retaining effective sovereignty and complete control over the movement of people and goods, whether physically at the crossing points or administratively through the use of the Palestinian population register.* Israel monitors every single thing that goes into or comes out of Gaza—the strip is just one big prison.

Militarily speaking, Israel had hoped that Gaza might become like Lebanon following the Israeli withdrawal [from that country in 2000]: a quasi-independent entity that would be separate from the rest of Palestine and from which Israel would not tolerate a single shot being fired against it, regardless of its own actions in the West Bank or Jerusalem. The choice was that or “preemptive war,” which is precisely what both Gaza and Lebanon suffered. This marked a significant evolution in Israel's security strategy: following the debacle of its withdrawals from [South] Lebanon (2000) and Gaza (2005), Israel shifted from geographical expansion as a means of control to the use of massive firepower, as we saw in Lebanon in 2006 and in Gaza in 2009, 2012, and 2014.

In light of that assessment, Islamic Jihad focused on two objectives for which we felt the resistance should be prepared: first, to defend the Gaza Strip and achieve a measure of deterrence vis-à-vis the enemy—in this respect, the resistance really benefited from the truce because it allowed us to prepare; and second, to ensure that the Gaza Strip was *not* wiped off the map of the national struggle or severed from the rest of the Palestinian body politic. Succeeding in these twin endeavors places an immense burden on what I will call the Palestinian collectivity: we must

* Israel has complete control of the Palestinian population registry in the occupied territories. The registration of births, deaths, marriages, and divorces, as well as simple address changes, all require Israeli approval.

define Gaza's role and place in the [broader, Palestinian] national project, if indeed there is such a project, and only then will we be able to determine our political prospects. So, is Gaza liberated or under occupation? Is Gaza the base of the resistance or is it just a component of the PA project? Is Gaza expected to defend itself alone or, as was claimed in a moment of euphoria celebrating the victorious achievement of the resistance, has it become the base and launching pad for the liberation of all of historic Palestine? Or just of the West Bank and Jerusalem, perhaps? These are big questions and they need to be considered by every one of us. Only by coming up with answers to such questions will it be possible for new political prospects to emerge.

During the War

What factors in your view permitted the resistance to remain steadfast and display initiative in the face of: a) the overwhelming superiority of the Israeli military machine; and b) the "pass" Israel got both on a regional and international level in the first two weeks of the assault?

This is a vast topic that warrants lengthy discussion, but I will respond by highlighting a few salient points.

Besides the grace of God Almighty, the great accomplishment of the resistance was made possible primarily by the will of the Palestinian people, which is itself an expression of God's will. The Israelis tried their hardest but failed to drive a wedge between the resistance and the people: the Palestinian people remain the cradle of the resistance and the resistance remains their invincible shield. Israel's operation was painfully brutal, and it was assumed that the frenzied killing and destruction, targeting Gaza's infrastructure and all signs of life in the territory, would make the people rise up against the resistance. Not only did this not happen, but the very opposite occurred: ordinary people defended the resistance, their confidence in it only grew, and they identified with it to such an extent that what the enemy faced was a popular resistance rather than resistance factions!

Secondly, the resistance succeeded owing to its preparedness and its creativity, specifically its good utilization of past experience and knowledge it had gained in previous wars. The exact opposite was true of the Israelis, who seemed not to have learned anything from fighting the resistance in the past, as a result of which they repeated the same mistakes. The resistance was thoroughly prepared on every level: fighters were ready for battle whether physically, mentally, or spiritually and also in terms of their military training, their ability to fabricate weapons, and their understanding of military doctrine, as well as combat strategy and tactics. They were prepared to overturn or at least tilt the military balance of power that was overwhelmingly in favor of the enemy. Within the means available, the resistance succeeded admirably.

The third and most important factor was the unified position of the Palestinian delegation conducting the indirect negotiations in Cairo. Despite all the differences between its members, the delegation worked as one to end the Israeli assault. This had a significant impact on our people and on the resistance, as well as on the enemy who was counting on our disunity. In the event, it was the Israelis who were divided—with both the government and the political establishment suffering from discord and strife.

What is your assessment of the underground tunnels and the rockets? What is the future of this strategy moving forward?

The underground tunnels into Israel were the strategic surprise of this war. In the Israelis' mind, Gaza is doomed militarily, its topography unsuited to guerrilla warfare, unlike southern Lebanon or areas of the West Bank. But Gaza succeeded in creating such a topography with the tunnels [into Israel]: starting from nothing, and to the world's surprise, the resistance was able to take the battle behind enemy lines and to engage the Israeli military in close-quarter combat. While the tunnel network into Israel may have been the unexpected variable in this war, the rockets were the constant that kept over five million Israelis close to their bomb shelters for fifty-one days. The rockets themselves were a significant accomplishment this time around: given the blockade and the rupture of all supply lines, they were mostly assembled by Palestinian hands. But it was their range that came as a surprise—for the first time in the history of the conflict, no Israeli town or city was out of the resistance's range. The rocket fire went on unabated for fifty-one straight days, and even in the final minutes before the cease-fire, Islamic Jihad's Saraya al-Quds and Hamas's [Izzeddin] al-Qassam brigades struck Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa, among others. Although the entire world was witness to the success of this military strategy, its future remains contingent on the ability of the resistance to recover from its albeit minimal losses. Even in our successes, we cannot discount the siege or the conflict's overall trajectory and how its future evolution must be considered in light of the significant milestone [which Gaza 2014 has been].

How is the resistance dealing with the region's political rivalries and polarization? In particular, how is it possible for Palestine to remain the core Arab issue and avoid becoming another flashpoint for regional rivalries to play out?

We did our utmost to keep the battle for Gaza outside regional conflicts and rivalries, to protect both our people and our cause. Palestine as a cause predates all of the current regional turmoil and it needs everyone on its side. The current regional conflagration feels threatening not so much because we fear the irreversible loss of Palestine, but because other countries in the region face an existential threat: the specters of dismemberment and collapse already haunt several Arab states. It is for this reason that we must ensure that Palestine does not become just another regional flashpoint. This requires a Palestinian consensus, or to be quite clear, for the resistance and [what I have called] the Palestinian "whole" to agree that the cause must remain outside the internecine struggles of the region; it also requires that both Arab and non-Arab actors in the region recognize Palestine's specificity and circumstances.

What of Egypt's stance? How do you see the future of Palestinian-Egyptian relations?

Egypt volunteered to mediate right from the start of the assault. In our view, given its historical and geographical position as Gaza's neighbor, Egypt should be an unequivocal supporter of the Palestinian people and not just a mediator. To use a more concrete image, the fire isn't at Egypt's door, it's inside the house—a fact well illustrated by the Egyptian army crossing into Gaza following the 1948 Nakba. That Gaza is intrinsic to Egypt's national security has been part of the country's military doctrine ever since, and it was reiterated by Field Marshal Tantawi in the wake

of the January 25 revolution (2011). I don't think this is a subject of dispute within Egypt's political or military organizations.

In short, given its stature, we would like Egypt to play a bigger role in Gaza. I believe that the question of Palestine, and not just the Gaza Strip, could be Egypt's entryway to reclaiming political relevance, both regionally and internationally.

How would you assess Israel's political and military performance during the war?

Militarily, Israel was unable to realize any of its goals, whether destroying the rockets, obtaining security, removing the weapons of the resistance, or liquidating its leaders. Its only accomplishment was the massive destruction [of Gaza] and the murder of as many women and children as possible, all of which resulted in losing considerably in terms of its international standing. Our adage is, "If the strong are not victorious, then they have lost. If the weak are undefeated, then they have won." We are well aware of the great imbalance of power between the resistance and Israel, but I can say with complete confidence that if a state of Israel's military prowess and might was unable to defeat Gaza, then Gaza must eventually defeat that state, despite the fact that it possesses only a fraction of its military capabilities. There's no denying that Israel is capable of occupying the entire strip, but at what an exorbitant price, and that too factors into the balance of power. Israel doesn't "do" defeat and losing the ground offensive was humiliating for its army. The resistance in both Palestine and Lebanon has time and again given the lie to the notion of the Israeli army's invincibility.

Politically speaking, I won't go into the details and implications of the war on Israel's government or political parties, but I think that there's going to be a strategic shift, a reevaluation among the Israeli public—a sort of deep self-examination like the one that followed the October 1973 war.[†] Because the absence of victory in a battle of this order is a prelude to defeat, were Israel today to have leaders of the stature of Ben-Gurion, Begin, Rabin, or Sharon, it would embark on a far-reaching self-assessment. This war is going to cause every thinking Israeli to wrestle with some big questions: the country stands at what might be the most dangerous crossroads of its history as it can neither vanquish the resistance nor arrive at peace in a negotiated process.

In my view, Israeli society has been so shaken that it is reconsidering the future and asking itself, "What if the war had been with Egypt? Or with Egypt and Syria? Or with Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza, with the backing of Iran?" What happened in Gaza was hugely significant, far more so than we realize.

In light of what happened in Gaza, meaning that the Palestinians closed ranks both on the military battleground and in the negotiation arena, might the unified negotiation team serve as a model for establishing tangible national unity?

Unfortunately, it is not possible to build on the experiences of the delegation and this is why I earlier called it a political initiative, whose importance was specific to a particular circumstance.

[†] Egypt's early successes during the October 1973 war made it clear that Israel would no longer be the region's uncontested military power; this realization eventually culminated in the 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt.

Despite the crisis and the impasse of the Palestinian situation as a whole, the problem in relations between Hamas and Fatah remains a challenge. The battle in Gaza might be over but the war itself continues in various ways and by other means. Beyond the battle [for Gaza], two things are required to address the challenges and threats facing us: firstly, we must complete the reconciliation process between Hamas and Fatah and resolve all pending issues between the two; secondly, we must establish a provisional executive leadership of the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization], whose meetings would be attended by both Hamas and Islamic Jihad, to discuss the challenges of this postwar period and reach agreement on a comprehensive national strategy, one that would address stalled reconciliation efforts, the dead-ended negotiations [with Israel], and the new political objectives that are possible in light of the resistance's accomplishments in Gaza.

After the Attack

What would a ledger of gains and losses look like? And what about the future of Gaza and its relationship to the West Bank? How can the resistance's accomplishment in Gaza be capitalized on in the broader liberation and independence struggle?

This is an important question, and I would like to say two things in response: first, our self-assessment needs to be balanced, by which I mean that we need to avoid the trap of either exaggerating or belittling our accomplishments. The second point is that we do not measure our achievements only in reference to the harm we inflict on the enemy; while inflicting such harm may be our prerogative, it is only one aspect of the larger picture, which includes the losses we incurred, again without embellishing or minimizing those either.

Our greatest achievement was our steadfastness—the fact that we remained standing for fifty-one days and that the enemy was unable to break our will or that of the people. The other major accomplishment was the rekindling of interest in the Palestinian cause and the fact that we earned the world's respect before its sympathy—to the extent that some people called the Latin American states the Arab countries of this conflict [because of their vocal pro-Palestinian stance during the fifty-one-day assault on Gaza]! Given what is going on in the region, discussion of Palestine was a kind of luxury to the nations and states rocked by internal strife. Additionally, the carnage in Gaza placed the Palestinian issue back on international and regional political agendas. And regardless of one's opinion of it, I would cite the unified Palestinian stance and negotiating team as an accomplishment. I would also describe causing the enemy's failure as an achievement, be that in terms of shifting the balance of power towards deterrence or inflicting human as well as tangible and intangible losses. And finally, the same old truce agreement remains: [the terms of the August 2014 cease-fire] are just a reiteration of the 2012 agreement between Hamas and Israel, with the latter demanding “quiet for quiet” while contravening the conditions of the truce and maintaining every aspect of the siege; the issues of reconstruction, freedom of movement, and extending the fishing zone from six to twelve nautical miles remained unchanged; as for Rafah, the crossing is an issue to be resolved bilaterally, between us and Egypt. But there is no real guarantee that the enemy will be held to these commitments and Gaza's predicament remains

much greater than all of those details [might suggest] despite the fact that they are critical to people's daily lives and their ability to resist and endure.

As for losses, these were indeed very high, in terms of the numbers of people killed and injured, of homes and infrastructure destroyed, and of the overall damage and devastation wrought on Gaza . . . No matter the circumstances, we will not forget the losses, or pass them over. Whether for the Palestinian factions, the PA, or the [Palestine Liberation] Organization, recovering from the trauma of war is our number one priority right now. It is ordinary everyday Palestinians who cradled the resistance and enabled it to carry on the fight and remain steadfast for fifty-one days. Were we to turn our back on them now, there would be a complete fracture between the people and the resistance, handing Israel the victory that it seeks. Without the people's support, the resistance could not be sustained.

As to the future of Gaza and its relationship with the West Bank, I would say that the experience of the resistance in Gaza will be borne out by its transferability to the West Bank. To revert to the common vernacular, West Bankers are just as ballsy as Gazans. Gaza's trial has ushered in new possibilities for the West Bank where the conditions for success are, in my view, more favorable . . . And its positive contribution to the broader national struggle is contingent on our coming together in very specific ways: healing the breach in our ranks and completing the reconciliation process, cooperating to end the siege, beginning the reconstruction process, thwarting further settler expansionism in the West Bank as well as the Judaization of Jerusalem, and rebuilding the PLO into an inclusive organization while simultaneously coming up with an overarching national strategy.

Does Palestinian Islamic Jihad see itself as a bridge between the different factions? Do you think you could be the driving force behind the establishment of a unified national resistance movement? You seem to enjoy a good relationship with both Hamas and Fatah as you compete with neither of them for power or authority: how then do you see your future role in [an expanded] PLO?

I have already identified some of the characteristics that distinguish Islamic Jihad from others, in particular the organization's stance on internal Palestinian politics. However, our ability to act as a bridge between Hamas and Fatah is really contingent on their desire to see such efforts succeed, be they our efforts or those of others. Palestinian factions view each other from the prism of either cooperation or competition. Unfortunately, any side that considers you a competitor will not root for you to succeed, even if it would benefit them to do so or benefit the Palestinian "whole." This is something we've experienced firsthand. It's unfortunate that the tendency toward factionalism and divisiveness, alongside other factors, precludes true cooperation. And even more regrettable is the fact that cooperation or partnership in the Palestinian context is a question of quotas and it has little to do with coexistence, mutual understanding, complementarity, division of labor, or joint decision-making. As for the PLO and our role within the organization, actions speak louder than words: we feel that our Fatah brethren and Abu Mazin [PA President Mahmud Abbas] are not committed to taking on the PLO dossier and doing the serious work involved in reforming the organization in such a way as to ensure that all the various actors on the political scene are included and that PLO becomes the unifying framework for the Palestinian people.

Islamic Jihad has been described as belonging to the Iran-Syria-Hizballah axis. Are you part of a regional power struggle? How do regional conflicts impact the Palestinian situation? Are you looking for ways that would reestablish the Palestine question as the “compass” of the Arab world and the wider region?

In light of the fact that Palestine is an Arab and Muslim concern and that Israel poses a danger to the entire *umma*, we as Palestinians have always sought the endorsement of our cause, both now and in the past. The polarized vocabulary prevalent in the Arab political sphere has been devised and foisted onto it by others. To be quite frank, I would add that the rivalries and conflicts between the various Arab and regional “camps” are far worse than their differences with Palestine. You need look no further than Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which are both members of the Gulf Cooperation Council!

I will repeat that we look to all parties to defend our cause, to advocate for our people and their rights, and to support their legitimate resistance. A number of Arab nations played that role to varying degrees in the past. But in the last two decades, it is Syria, Iran, and Hizballah that have assumed that mantle, advocating for Palestine, and supporting the resistance to the greatest extent possible; alongside Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other factions, this has led to their being considered “rogue,” an oppositional alliance, if you will—in contrast to the so-called moderate camp that favors a negotiated settlement along the lines of the Arab Peace Initiative.[‡] Twelve years have elapsed since the Arab Peace Initiative and Israel has still not accepted it, constantly placing new obstacles and conditions in the way of an illusory peace.

We most definitely want Palestine to be the touchstone and we extend our hand to everyone who embraces our cause and our resistance movement. We are aligned with no other cause than that of Palestine, even though we realize that the actual stand of many Arab regimes can be summarized as “Palestine is not our problem.” What’s worse is the Israeli prime minister talking about an Arab-Israeli pact against the resistance without a peep being heard in response.

How will rebuilding proceed in Gaza? And what of the relationship of the resistance with the people whose sacrifices have been so great?

I may have alluded to this earlier, but I will say it again more clearly: rebuilding Gaza is the responsibility of the entire world. Gaza needs a modern Marshall Plan. Our people will forgive those who did not extend a hand to help them defend against attack, but they will not forgive those who are able to aid in the reconstruction process and won’t. On the logistical front, international and regional donor conferences will obviously have to mobilize resources and provide the necessary funding, and the crossings will need to be reopened to allow reconstruction materials to enter the strip. We have no problem with the PA handling the reconstruction, as it should because there needs to be a national regulatory agency to oversee the process and ensure that it unfolds with integrity and fairness, and free of favoritism and corruption. If, God forbid,

[‡] An Arab League initiative, first unveiled at a 2002 Beirut summit meeting, that called for normalizing relations between the league’s member states and Israel in exchange for Israel’s withdrawal from the occupied territories (including East Jerusalem) and settling the refugee question on the basis of United Nations Security Council Resolution 194.

this were not the case and the people were left to fend for themselves without support, it would be tantamount to handing Israel an easy win, driving a wedge between the long-suffering people of Gaza and the resistance, which is one of its established goals.

What is your assessment of the groundswell of popular support throughout the West Bank and Jerusalem during the attack? Is there a potential for it to be sustained? Could we go so far as to say that the next battle [with Israel] will take place simultaneously in Gaza and the West Bank?

By focusing on the organization and singling out as its target Hamas, rather than the Palestinian people, Israel is trying to neutralize the West Bank and, especially, Fatah. Because the West Bank mobilized, the Israeli scenario was foiled, namely for the West Bank to be business as usual while the slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza proceeded. But the more significant mobilization took place in Jerusalem where our young people surprised the enemy and gladdened our hearts.

With regards to the West Bank, in all honesty, I can say that despite its long-standing agony, Gaza is within reach whereas the West Bank remains a conundrum. The battle for the West Bank is the more critical one but it is also the PA's and Fatah's call. When will Abu Mazin finally declare that the peace process and the negotiations are at a dead end? When will he understand that the whole PA enterprise is just a smoke screen for the occupation, to Israel's great satisfaction? The declared goal of the peace process is the two-state solution and the Israelis have truly created two states, both theirs, mind you: the first, on 78 percent of historic Palestine that was occupied in 1948, and the second, in the West Bank, at the hands of the settlers.

Israeli settlements are expanding with every passing day at such a pace that there will be no room for us to erect a tent, much less a state! Israel has not only seized and occupied our land while simultaneously opening the door to continued Jewish immigration, it is now conditioning the creation of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders on Palestine's recognition of a "Jewish state"—basically robbing us of our history and appropriating our narrative of the struggle.

Today, after the Gaza war, we stand at a historical juncture. The resistance has shown once more that Israel is not a safe haven for world Jewry but quite the opposite, and it is up to us now to "bell the cat" as the saying goes and blow the cover on the occupation.[§] The PA enterprise in the West Bank is a mere replay of what happened under the British Mandate, which provided the smoke screen for the establishment of [what I will call] the first iteration of Israel on Palestinian land. The PA's security cooperation arrangement with the occupying force provides cover to the settlements, prohibits resistance, and contributes to the establishment of the second iteration of Israel—a settler state and not a Palestinian one. This is what we need to recognize as Palestinians and we must seize the initiative so that the resistance can blaze a trail in the West Bank in one concerted effort with Gaza. Our people are capable of defeating Israel and of eradicating the occupation.

[§] An idiom meaning to attempt, or agree, to perform an impossibly difficult or dangerous task; the idiom is based on a medieval fable about a group of mice deciding to place a bell around a marauding cat's neck in order to end its depredations. The proposal falters when no volunteer is found among the mice to "bell the cat" because the enterprise is so fraught with danger.

Extremism: Al-Qaeda and ISIS

Al-Qaeda and ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham] appear to have gained center stage in the region. What in your view is a plausible alternative to this nightmare?

It is beyond the capacity of any one faction to extricate us from the current nightmare or protect the region from further conflagration, especially when considering Islamic Jihad's modest stature. It is up to the big players that let the genie out of the bottle to reevaluate their position and do as much damage control as possible before we are all swept away in the deluge. Unfortunately, it cannot all simply be reduced to ISIS or al-Qaeda because the entire Middle East is imploding, which means that everything is up for reevaluation: the relationship between peoples and their governments; Israel's position and its very existence; the relationship between the political and social spheres and their views of each other whether on the level of our societies, or in terms of our programs, projects, educational curricula, and the wellsprings of our culture. Everything that has led up to this implosion was grounded in fraud and deception. One of the most painful reports I saw about ISIS during the war on Gaza aired on Israel's Channel 10, which showed every imaginable horror. The reporter concluded by saying, "They (ISIS) claim that what they do was all done by the Prophet Muhammad before them!" This, to me, felt like as much of a blow as the Israeli bombs and missiles raining down on the people of Gaza. I then remembered the words of the American astrophysicist and author, Michael H. Hart, who wrote *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*. Hart placed the Prophet at the top of his one-hundred list because, in his own words, he not only founded a world religion but also a state, and he was both a prophet and a statesman; moreover, as Hart points out, Islam spread so quickly that it had reached every corner of the world within eighty years—a feat that the mighty Roman Empire itself was unable to accomplish in eight hundred years. Hart also mentions the millennium-long flourishing of Islamic civilization, from the seventh to eighth century C.E. until the eighteenth century. Does what we are witnessing and hearing today in any way reflect the cultural richness and preeminent humanism of Islamic civilization?

In order not to be swept away by this "flood," comprehensive reform is necessary, beginning with a reevaluation of the role of Islam in the life of every Arab state. Extremists consider that secular Arab regimes and elites are waging a war on Islam and that they [the extremists] have sprung to its defense. It is the absence of freedoms and the lack of justice that precipitate unrest and autocratic Arab regimes should reassess their relationships to their citizens with a view to rectifying that situation. Such "rectifications" must be all-encompassing, leaving out no one, regardless of ethnicity, creed, or sect, so that citizenship becomes the bedrock of society. We don't need to mimic anyone, we can come up with a model of our own that takes into account the specificities of our cultures and builds on and benefits from our historical experience of peaceful coexistence and tolerance.