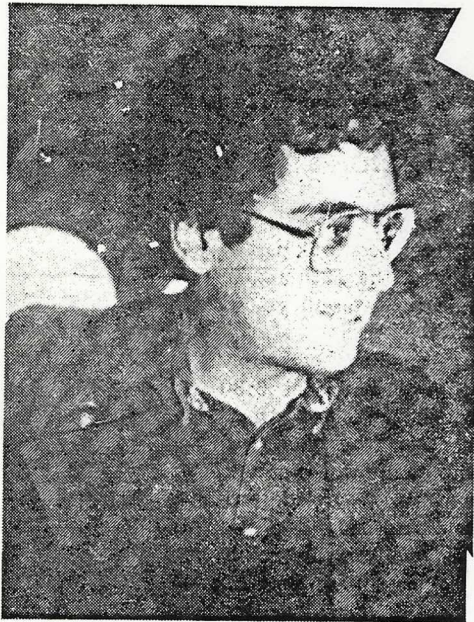


Abu Sharif's Article Is Daring, But Not Enough



As discussion over an article written by the PLO chairman's adviser, Bassam Abu Sharif, grows more heated, al-Fajr's Maher Abukhater talked to Bir Zeit University Professor of Philosophy Sari Nuseibeh on the subject.

Q: The burning issue of the moment is Bassam Abu Sharif's perspective for a settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Do you share the views of some Palestinians that Abu Sharif came up with a revolutionary, so to speak, proposal, or what others call the PLO's political equivalent to the *intifada*?

A: The perspective provided by Abu Sharif's document for a settlement is, in my opinion, one that was endorsed by the Palestine National Council (PNC), especially since 1983 when in the 16th PNC both the Fez peace plan and Brezhnev peace proposal were approved. Both these peace plans call for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel as an acceptable perspective for a settlement.

What is new in Abu Sharif's document is the style in which it was written as well as the clarity and the forthright manner of presentation. He also included some details and references to negotiating possibilities as a way of enhancing the document's power of appeal to the Israeli public and the international media.

In my view, the overall impact of this document has been positive and it was necessary to provide a Palestinian peace program to complement the *intifada*. As much as the *intifada* has been daring, imaginative and revolutionary, so the Palestinian leadership must also provide a daring, imaginative and revolutionary peace initiative. Bassam Abu Sharif's article, by itself, does not fulfill this criteria. It is a step in the right direction which should be complemented by a series of other steps that should be taken by the Palestinian people both inside and outside the occupied territories.

Such steps may include addressing Israelis through the Israeli media, holding joint Palestinian-Israeli conferences both inside and outside the territories, initiating

a program of lectures by Palestinian political and intellectual figures inside Israeli institutions as well as an analogous campaign by the PLO political department. The overall idea is to put Israel in a position where it can no longer fight us back, whether on the level of street fights or on a diplomatic level.

Q: Israel either ignored or totally disregarded the article from day one of its publication. The U.S. is not sure what position it wants to take, while at the same time playing its same old game of demanding further Palestinian commitments. Meanwhile, the Palestinians are once again arguing over something that so far does not seem to have impressed any other party. Are we doing the right thing?

A: The first thing you must remember is that the circle of people actively engaged in discussing the article and presenting views for or against it is very small indeed, relative to the entire Palestinian population. In my view, disagreement between intellectuals and politicians within the Palestinian community over the article and its content is a healthy sign and reflects a state of political maturity that we as a people have reached and which the PLO as a representative institution has enabled us to practice.

As for Israeli reactions, I agree that they were extremely disappointing, especially at the beginning. On the other hand, it seems to have had a snowball effect and more articles and positive statements are written about it in the Israeli press now than was the case when it was first published.

As for the Israeli government, we should expect a negative response and indeed it is precisely because of the official Israeli policy of rejecting the PLO as a peace partner and its continuous attempts to convey to the Israeli public that the PLO is unacceptable as a peace partner that it is necessary for us, and especially for the PLO, to address the same constituency, namely the Israeli public, in order to discredit official Israeli attempts to portray us in a negative light.

In my view, we should look beyond the Israeli official party spectrum to the Israeli public and we should address ourselves to Israeli public opinion and influence it in a programmed manner that fits our political aspirations. In all cases we must remember that, like it or not, we will exert an influence through our actions on the Israeli elections. It stands to reason therefore that we should attempt to make this influence programmed and a reflection of our aspirations.

Q: There seems to be a slow and gradual local Palestinian reaction towards backing Abu Sharif's position. Do you sense this too?

A: When the article was first published there was an attempt by a large group of political activists to draw up a document in its support but the effort seems to have been shelved because of the possibility that this would then create a confrontational dispute between the various points of view rather than a mature discussion between everyone concerning the pros and cons of the initiative.

I believe that, especially concerning some of the new ideas which I see as marginal to the spirit of the initiative, such as the idea of bilateral talks, presence of UN troops and acceptance of 242, there was a lot of heated debate at the beginning. Perhaps by now it is possible to appraise the article from the perspective of its overall impact and overall philosophy rather than from the perspective of some of the partial elements which are present in it. Perhaps in this sense there is a growing feeling that it should be encouraged, if not itself and if not word by word, then at least in the philosophy it upholds of waging a peace

offensive that would complement the *intifada* and would enable the PLO to ensure a seat for itself in the forthcoming international conference.

Q: It Abu Sharif's proposal is buried, like the many other similar proposals made on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, what do you anticipate should be the next Palestinian political move?

A: The Palestinians have no option but to carry on in the Abu Sharif spirit because if you take away the details, the overall idea of Abu Sharif is that we must clarify our position concerning the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

If our point of view is indeed to have two states in Palestine, we must say so clearly and we must be clear about the fact that it is not part of our intention to destroy the state of Israel. Negotiations when they come, and if they come, can be held not in order to endorse principles but in order to work out details, especially the question of borders between a future Palestinian state and Israel.

On the other hand, if we do not want a solution based on two states then the leadership of the PLO and

political factions involved in the PLO must state this with equal force. They should say that we want a democratic secular state in all of Palestine and that we should not recognize Israel and that there is no need for an international conference. But no one has the right to say one thing and do the other. In other words, to accept through the PNC the international conference, the Brezhnev peace document, the idea of confederation with Jordan and the Fez peace plan and then declare that they are still in pursuit of the replacement of Israel by a democratic secular Arab state.

Clarity of position is required not just for Israeli and American consump-

tion, but especially and most importantly for the peace of mind of the Palestinian people themselves. We have the right to know what the PLO wants and we insist that the PLO makes its position, whatever it is, clear and unambiguous. Abu Sharif's article is a step in this direction and in that sense it deserves the full support of the PLO factions.

A final note, I can equally respect the political decisions of the Islamic Hamas movement and of Abu Nidal's group and some of the other groups which are also clear about what their aims are. I disagree with their aims, but at least I respect that they are made with clarity.