

Scripture and tradition lead to openness to other religions. . . .

Interview: Sen. Kamel Al-Sharif

There is a genuine desire for peace

Muriel Mirak-Weissbach interviewed Sen. Kamel Al-Sharif of Jordan, at the Milan conference on religious dialogue. Senator Al-Sharif has previously held ministerial and ambassadorial posts in the Jordanian government. He is currently the editor of Ad Destour, and secretary general of the International Islamic Council for Daw' a and Relief. He was the special envoy of His Highness Bin Talal, Crown Prince Hassan of Jordan.

EIR: How do you view the dramatic developments in the PLO-Israeli accord?

Al-Sharif: We are witnessing a worldwide trend toward peaceful solution of all these standing problems and a genuine desire to build a new world on the basis of just peace. This is a general trend. We are living in a small world, which is too much interlinked now, and any event which takes place in one part of the world affects the others; we are interdependent. So what happened in the Soviet Union and other parts of the world dramatically affects the situation everywhere, especially in the Middle East, because the international political situation and the equation of the balance of power has been dramatically disrupted. All these elements combined have led to the same trend in the Middle East. And then all the parties perhaps agree that things cannot go on forever in this manner and that insistence on power and occupation, denial of the others' right is not the solution: It would generate clashes over a period of time.

So everybody realizes that the peaceful solution is inevitable, if we want to avoid destructive conflicts. There are other elements which came into play, like the disposition of the Americans to solve these problems one by one, and to show that their leadership in the world is beneficial to every party. All these elements combined have led to this development.

Of course, it's early to say whether things will succeed in the end, because there are still many obstacles. The real intentions are not yet known. There is also a big margin for maneuvers—for all parties. But we are optimistic, we think that our hope is based on the realities of the situation, the reality that nobody can dominate the other, nobody is immune to internal problems; the discovery that people can find solutions whereby they can live and cooperate. Our hopes

are not imaginary or fantastic, but I think, based on reality. But sometimes it is difficult to predict how the human mind functions, and there is always the possibility of unpleasant surprises; and we are waiting, waiting to see.

EIR: One of the most important things will be to see whether the economic projects agreed upon will be implemented quickly, giving people on both sides reason to believe that the agreement will work.

Al-Sharif: We can't, at this stage, expect huge, massive projects to link the different parties before a final political settlement; you can't really have a genuine, final economic settlement without a political arrangement in the area. But keeping in mind that the recent accord is limited to certain areas and that the whole arrangement is provisional, some political arrangement could be arranged within these areas. If the Palestinians manage to solve the problems of Gaza and the enclave of Jericho in a proper manner, [and have] something they can show to the people and from there influence the economic situation of the people inside the Occupied Territories, who are the majority, from that base they can influence the events inside; this will be a great encouragement, no doubt about it.

But for big projects, which link, for example, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian state regionally, it's early to think of that, before the remaining issues which are vital to the solution—what is the fate of the Occupied Territories, what is the fate of Jerusalem, touchy sensitive issues—these are questions which have to be settled, so that we can stand on solid ground with more hope, more confidence.

EIR: In Jordan initially there was hesitation in welcoming the accord.

Al-Sharif: Jordan—I am not in the government at present—Jordan was surprised, like many parties. It was something which came against the established current of bilateral and multilateral negotiations. We were not aware of the secret negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis. But after the shock, the government said that if the Palestinians agreed, they are free to choose their way; the government gave its support. Of course, the attitude of the people is different from the government, because the government has its measures and criteria, its relations with the rest of the Arab world, international relations, coordination with the Palestinians, and it stems from basic premises which had been recognized before, that the Palestinians are free to choose their destiny and to solve their problems the way they like. The people are different. They have their own emotional and ideological outlook.

EIR: In reference to the conference here, what do you think the role of Judaism, the Church, and Islam can be in truly forging a peace?

Al-Sharif: Doubtless the religions have a vital role to play in the confidence-building process—in the whole world, not

just in the Middle East. As it was stated in the U.N. Charter, war and peace are on the minds of people; this is a zone where religion can influence. . . . If we accept the idea that religion has a role to play, Islam can contribute to this process, because it is a religion which recognizes other religions, respects their scriptures, and calls for friendship with them, which means contact based on dialogue and persuasion.

And, of course, the religious establishment everywhere has a moral strength and spiritual power which could be applied and could influence events and the policymaking process. Now, we have to pass this stage of just meeting and talking and discovering each other, to more tangible and bolder steps. This is why I called, in one of my speeches, for the establishment of a religious committee, a fact-finding committee, which can reconcile and mediate in various issues and give an opinion [from the standpoint of] religion in some of these things. I think we have reached this stage, that something should be done. We mean really to talk with the policymakers and statesmen and influence their decisions.

Now, to come to the Middle East. I believe it's still early to talk of the role of religion in the process, because, as we see it now, it's easier to talk with the Christians, because we don't have an outstanding problem which separates us. This is not the case with Judaism; we still have an occupied territory, we still have an oppressed people, we still have occupied Jerusalem. Of course, the stand of Islam toward Judaism is no different than its stand toward Christianity. The relation-

ship is based on respect for Judaism, we have maintained good relations with the Jews throughout history, so it's a political issue.

Unfortunately the political movement within Judaism has overtaken the spiritual side—Zionism—so, we don't find a trend which is neutral, which you can talk to. Religion has been exploited in this Zionist movement, that has been justified by religious connotation, making it somehow difficult to start a dialogue. But again, we don't lose hope. If the outstanding political issue is solved, or it becomes clear that it is on the way to resolution, then the dialogue, even of the religious establishment, could not be far away, could not be excluded.

EIR: How do you evaluate the impact of these developments on the democratization process within Jordan?

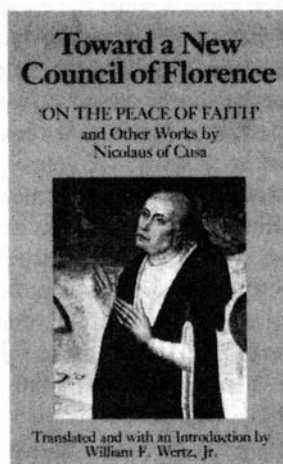
Al-Sharif: I think it will strengthen the process. Jordan has adopted the democratic system. It has embarked on it genuinely in the last few years: Through its practice, it has proved to be beneficial. It has contributed to dissipating many negative aspects of public life. We're facing the future with more confidence, and we believe that democracy is the only solution to our problems. The people are convinced; we have political parties which are convinced; everybody knows where he stands, and everybody has expressed his loyalty to the constitution and to the monarchy; so I think we are sailing with a fair wind, and the future is very promising indeed. *Inshallah* [God willing].

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