
Interview: Salah Abdul Shafi

‘People Have Lost Hope In the Peace Process’

Salah Abdul Shafi is a member of the Palestinian Steering Committee for the Geneva Initiative. He is Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Palestinian Forum for Democracy, and a member of the Palestinian Authority National Reform Committee. He was interviewed in Washington by William Jones on Feb. 10.

EIR: What difficulties have you had to overcome in organizing support among the Palestinians for the Geneva Initiative?

Shafi: Well, the first problem we face is that people are pretty much frustrated. They have lost hope in the peace process. Given the daily difficulties that people are living under—constant Israeli incursions, demolishing of homes, targeted assassinations, and disengagement of the international community—all these factors together make the people think that this document will not see the light of day in terms of implementation, and will end up as the other plans that were presented in the last three years—the Mitchell report, the Tenet report, and the Road Map.

EIR: You mentioned the growing poverty and the economic decay in the Palestinian areas. From Oslo on, there were certain signs of hope, and I think there were promises to the Palestinian community that there would be an improvement in their conditions of life, promises which have not been kept. There has been a great deal of discussion, but little has happened. Do you feel that something must be done in this area to revive people’s confidence that the process will indeed lead to better conditions for the Palestinian people?

Shafi: Absolutely. The paradoxical situation that we’re facing is that after the peace process, living conditions deteriorated, the living standards declined, the unemployment rate went up. People were expecting the so-called ‘peace dividend.’ People expected that living standards would improve, that they could move freely. None of this happened. On the contrary, everything deteriorated. That’s why people don’t believe in peace anymore.

Of course, the international community is providing money in different areas, economic aid in terms of infrastructure, emergency assistance, supporting the budget of the Palestinian Authority. But what is needed is to link this economic assistance, this funding, with a political horizon so that people know that at the end of the day they will be living with dignity within their own independent, sovereign state. If this assis-



Palestinian Geneva Accord negotiator Salah Abdul Shafi at the podium during conference at Johns Hopkins: “People were expecting the so-called peace dividend. People expected that living standards would improve. On the contrary, everything deteriorated. That’s why people don’t believe in peace any more.”

tance continues the way it has been done in the last 13 years, it will only be within the concept of emergency assistance, but not as an assistance that is aiming at establishing the basis of a future state.

EIR: Do you feel that the recent stagnation has pushed people more and more into terrorism? When people feel they have their backs to the wall, they are sometimes willing to sacrifice everything, including their own lives, in order to change the situation. And that desperation, of course, is often manipulated by people who want to increase the terrorism, foment more chaos. How do you think the situation stands today? Has it become more desperate?

Shafi: Absolutely, this is on the increase. The fact is that extremist political groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad use the desperation, the frustration, the poverty of the people. That’s why if people see hope in the future, combined with an improvement in their economic situation, their living standards, it will minimize the chances of Hamas and Islamic Jihad to dominate the political scene in Palestine. So what is needed is a combined effort to give people a political vision, give them economic assistance, give them something to eat, and I’m sure they will turn their backs on Hamas and all the extremist groups.

EIR: . Has the U.S. invasion in Iraq had a big effect in shaping Palestinians’ attitudes toward the United States?

Shafi: Definitely. You see, Palestinians are living under occupation. They see that the Iraqis now are living under American occupation. What adds to the hostility of Palestinians toward America is the biased policy of the current American Administration in favor of Israel. People feel that the United States is not an honest broker in the process, but that the United States rather adopts Israeli positions. So people emotionally are pitted against the United States, and these emotions, of course, have been fueled by the U.S. war in Iraq.

EIR: The proposal by Prime Minister Sharon to demolish the settlements in Gaza—do you think this will lead anywhere?

Shafi: Of course, as Palestinians, we welcome any kind of

withdrawal from Palestinian territory. Palestinians in the Gaza territory will certainly be happy to see Israelis dismantling settlements and withdrawing their forces. But, if Israel continues to besiege the Gaza Strip; if Israel continues to impose restrictions on the movement of Palestinians from and to the Gaza Strip; if Israel continues to control the movement of goods to and from Gaza, at the end of the day, this will not help. And, if Israel intends by this move to impose final borders or impose a final settlement, I think this will be a recipe for the escalation of further violence.

Interview: Amnon Lipkin-Shahak

‘The Occupation Cannot Last Forever’

Gen. Amnon Lipkin-Shahak (ret.) served as the Chief of General Staff of the Israeli Defense Forces from 1995-98. He was Israel’s Minister of Tourism and Minister of Transport from 1999-2001, and took part in the Israeli delegation to peace talks at Camp David II, Sharm El-Sheik, and Taba. He was a member of the Israeli delegation to the Geneva Initiative negotiations. General Lipkin-Shahak was interviewed by William Jones in Washington on Feb. 11.

EIR: Maybe you want to explain something of the background to the Geneva Initiative. Obviously, in a very difficult situation, in which there was almost no optimism regarding the Israeli-Palestinian situation, people on both the Palestinian and Israeli sides took the opportunity to put something forward in order to create a ray of hope, to show that there are potentially agreements, on all major areas of contention, that can be reached. What effect do you think this has had on the population in Israel? in Palestine? What do you hope to achieve with this?

Lipkin-Shahak: Well, first of all, as you mentioned, if there was any other political initiative in the air, maybe this initiative wouldn’t be needed. But this initiative came on the political level at a point in time when there was nothing—a total vacuum. And I think that the timing for this initiative was perfect. Of course, nothing is perfect; but the time was ripe. Because the initiative creates for the people in Israel and, in other ways, for the Palestinians, a public discussion about the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a discussion of “where are we going”?

Before the Geneva Accords, we all agreed that terror should not continue, that we should fight terror, and that we should do whatever is needed and whatever is possible to fight

terrorism. But just by fighting terrorism—even if [we] will be very, very successful—we are not going to bring an end to the conflict. And after the Geneva initiative was brought to the public, suddenly we saw the Israeli government, we saw Sharon—the first week that Geneva was in the air, things started to move. Sharon sent his son to meet Palestinians. The Labor Party came with new ideas about a future peace agreement. Another party, the Shinui, which is a member of the coalition, started to suggest certain ideas. The Israeli Prime Minister with his present unilateral proposal came only at that point.

And by the way, Sharon said recently—in order to explain why he made this unilateral suggestion—that whenever there is a vacuum, we have these Genevas. And to prevent Geneva, we have to initiate something. And I think he’s right, by the way. And I think this public, internal Israeli debate is needed. Because we are talking about the future. Nobody is happy in Israel. The economic situation is not very promising. Every aspect of life is affected by the conflict.

And in the end, we have to have a certain answer to the conflict, a certain solution. We are not rewriting the Bible and telling people, “ ‘Look, here you have a paper that gives answers to most of, or to all of the difficult questions.’ ” No, if you want, take the paper and change things or suggest things. But what we are telling you is that, given the most difficult questions, there are, in fact, Palestinians with whom we can sit together and reach answers to these questions. There are Palestinians who are willing to enter into reforms inside Palestinian society. And those reforms are needed. So don’t lose hope.

EIR: The Geneva Initiative has gained considerable international support, in Europe, and from Canada. Now you have presented this in a major way here in the United States, with your meeting here.

Lipkin-Shahak: Yes, but already a month ago we had meetings here. We met Colin Powell.

EIR: Who also expressed support for the Initiative.

Lipkin-Shahak: Yes, and we also met a number of Congressmen and Senators. But, look, Washington is not the place where we are going to spend a lot of time and effort. We are going to work, and we’re working hard, back in Israel; and the Palestinians are working among their people. I think that what we have to do: To convince more Israelis and Palestinians to support the initiative, or to understand that an end to the conflict can only be done by means of an agreement, and not by an unilateral act, or by doing nothing. And therefore, most of our efforts are not here or Europe or somewhere elsewhere, but in Israel and among the Palestinian people.

EIR: The United States has, however, traditionally played an important role. To the extent that there was something