



Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies

Interview with Dr. Nabeel Shaath

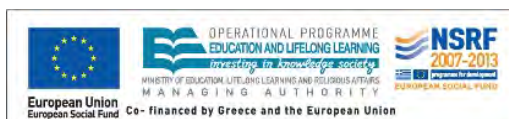
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CEMMIS: We do know the traditional relationship between Greece and Palestine. How do you see it now in light of the relationship between Israel and Greece? How do you feel about that?

Nabeel Shaath: Look, there is a traditional relationship between Palestine and Greece. There is a very special relationship between Palestine and George Papandreou. But of course every government that came, whether it's Right or Left, in Greece had a very special relationship with Palestine and with the Arab Muslim world in general. Now unfortunately the problem about the relationship of Greece and Israel has to do with your competition with Turkey more than it has to do with anything else. Turkey used to be the prime regional interlocutor with Israel and now the Turks decided to put pressure on Israel. So Greece takes a new stand trying to get better relationship with the Israelis. We cannot of course decide for any country what foreign relationship it takes; it is your right, you have to make your calculation. My only hope is that that increasing relationship with Israel will not be on account of our relationship with Greece. But Greece has a wide area of cooperation with Israel. We hope that when we have peace with Israel that there will be absolutely no problem in having a good relationship with Israel and good relationship with Palestine at the same time. Today there is an area that is in between. An area, that Israel benefits on account of the Palestinians. And [it is] that area I hope Greece will not go into. Greece needs to be one of the European countries closest to us; therefore, putting pressure on Israel to stop settlement activities, to stop the siege of Gaza. There are many aspects that Greece as a country and as a member of the European Union should do to really put pressure on Israel to behave correctly so that we can have fruitful negotiations with Israel. That is the only area that France also goes on, Italy goes on. Sweden, Spain, all of our friends in Europe have good relationship with Israel. But, they try as much as possible not to make it on account of our relationship with them. The latest incident was the Flotilla. I can't blame Greece because also Cyprus, and Turkey, all of them refused to help the flotilla go to Israel. Obviously

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Israel put pressure on everybody, to save it the embarrassment that this flotilla was a flotilla of peace and they're willing to submit to full search by an international unit to make sure that they don't even carry a knife. Ok, so they will be totally peaceful. But the Israelis would send the Israeli navy and if needed, from their point of view, they would kill more people. And they wanted to be saved this embarrassment. Now, so far I can understand. But I hope that in the process Greece does not justify what it's done by the right of Israel to control the East Mediterranean. Israel should not have that right. We want to eventually open the border, the port of Gaza. The only way to save Gaza is to open the port of Gaza. And Israel cannot claim that Gaza is part of its jurisdiction and therefore the sea is part of its jurisdiction. It's against international law; their occupation of Gaza [is] illegal. And they said in 2005 that they are withdrawing from Gaza. So if they are withdrawing from Gaza, how do they control the sea of Gaza? So, this is really my question. When I was in Athens, I talked to George Papandreou about this and he said "Ok, we are facing problems; if they simply state that we are not going to Gaza, we just want to leave the port; they can leave". But apparently the Flotilla people were not making life easier for George Papandreou. And George Papandreou has so many problems so I could not really put more weight on his shoulders. In final analysis, we care about Greece; in fact, I offered to Papandreou if I can help in being with him in going to Arab Gulf countries, to help support Greece financially with projects, and I understand the heavy burden you have. If we can help – not from Palestine, we don't have much money from Palestine – but the Gulf countries have lots of oil money that they're not even required to give you as a grant. But if they will, for example, put the money to invest in tourism, to invest in real estate, construction that would be good for both.

CEMMIS: How do you think the Palestinian bid in the United Nations will contribute to the peace strategy and the building of a Palestinian State?

N S: Alright, part of that is historical strategy. Our problem has been the Israeli takeover of 78% of our land in 1948 which became the state of Israel. And now they are taking the rest of our land which is 22% of the area in the West Bank and Gaza. At one time that denied the Palestinians even their entity, their right to be a Nation, the right for self determination. So part of what we're doing now is part of asserting our right as a nation to self determination. When we go to the state, the state is actually the choice of our people. When they say we have the right of self determination, ok, we [are] determined we want to have a state on our land. It's occupied today. But, there have been many countries that were occupied but they never took away their state as a state; all of Europe was at one time occupied by the Germans but they did not deny France the fact that it was a State, occupied by Germany. Iraq today is occupied by America, but Iraq is an independent state occupied by America. So our search for identity has now taken the shape of membership at the United Nations as an independent state. We searched at the beginning for more recognition; we have now 130 states that have recognized Palestine. In fact, only 56 recognize Kosovo. And 130 recognize Palestine. The United States is the country that went to the International Court and got a resolution supporting the recognition of the state of Kosovo. But the same principle applies with more vigor in our case because Kosovo – the Serbs can say – was part, a historic part of Serbia and they are seceding. In our case the Israelis cannot claim that, in fact they don't want us to be part of Israel. We are an original nation, an indigenous nation on the land of Palestine. So this is part of our historical quest for independence and equality, and freedom. But tactically today its value is to put pressure on Israel. It's to tell Israel "you cannot deny these people their right; if you want to negotiate with them, stop stealing more of their country, building settlements. Sit with them, and negotiate on the basis of two states on the border of '67. If you want some land from them, then

you have to pay for it, in equal lands from you. If you want some water from them then you have to justify your share of water and their share of [water]". We are willing to negotiate all that. But as two independent states; one of them occupying the land of the other and not as occupied people who have been occupied. We are negotiating for twenty years. We've been occupied for 62 years but at least we signed the Agreement of Oslo 18 years ago. And they don't implement anything. Therefore our quest for UN membership tactically is to put pressure on them, to bring international support, to delegitimize their occupation.

CEMMIS: At this point, in the attempt to delegitimize their occupation we have another factor that plays an important role in this equation, the United States. What do you think is going to be your next step, knowing that the US is pressuring everyone around the table not to support the Palestinian bid?

N S: Yes I know that but still, you have seen how the world treated the speech of Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) in the United Nations and how they treated the speech of Netanyahu. I mean Mr. Abu Mazen got far more applause than Mr. Obama so the world sees the injustice that has been dealt to the Palestinians and I think the world, at this moment, only very few countries can be pressured in this sense. In the UNESCO the other day all the pressure of the United States just brought Romania and Latvia. Romania and Latvia were the only countries beside America and Israel who voted against the recommendation to give full membership of Palestine in UNESCO. In the past it used to be Micronesia and the Marshall Islands but they are not members of UNESCO...so Romania and Latvia. So no, the ability of America to put pressure in this case is limited. And why, I mean the Palestinians are not joining al Qaeda, they are not joining the Mafia. They're joining the United Nations. I mean, they have 130 countries supporting them. So I don't think that the Americans really have at this time any justification for their pressure. You know, when the Americans put pressure, they do it for their interest, but they have to be convincing that it's also in the other peoples' interest. And no country in the world except Israel sees that it is in its interest to block the Palestinian from becoming a member. What is the interest of Greece, for example, to block the Palestinians from becoming member of the United Nations? There's no interest. So I don't see the American pressure as justified and therefore as being effective. It's not being effective. When we went to the Security Council three months ago for a decision on settlements, fourteen out of the fifteen countries voted with us and America alone used the veto. The Germans voted with us, French voted with us, the British voted with us. All the countries of the world voted with us, against America... condemning settlements. And the Americans are very busy with their elections anyway. Maybe at the end of the elections ... honestly I hope that Mr. Obama is re-elected. Maybe when he is reelected in the second term he'll have more freedom to support us.

CEMMIS: Many people have mentioned a generation shift in the Palestinian leadership, regarding the PLO or in general. Do you think it is necessary? Do you think it will help the Palestinian unity and statehood?

N S: Look, the generation shift, the Arab Spring, the Palestinian Spring. It's there. But its cause is different. They don't call to bring down the regime. They want to bring down the occupation. And they want to end the separation. All the calls of our young people are about these two issues. One issue of unanimity: they support going to the United Nations, they support making the state and they support the end of the occupation. They are willing to go into non-violent struggle on the ground, to bring down the occupation, as well. But of course, unity is very

important. And I think this exchange of prisoners the last few days has improved the chances for unity. And there will be a meeting between Abu Mazen and Mr. Mishal very soon in Cairo to revitalize the negotiations for unity. That is also something our young people have been calling for.

CEMMIS: Don't you find it essential vis-à-vis to the UN?

N S: It started without it but I hope it will end with it.

CEMMIS: Coming to Palestine, one can witness a certain economic development going on compared to the previous years. Do you think that this economic development is part of the Fayyad program of state building? Has it succeeded? And most importantly, do you feel that this economic development is evenly distributed across the Palestinian society, or that it creates gaps inside it?

N S: There is a geographic gap because nothing has been done to Gaza. Gaza is totally under siege, there has been five billion dollars committed by the international donors for Gaza but not a penny has gotten inside because the Israelis would not let any bag of cement to go inside Gaza, and the donors will not buy cement coming from the tunnels of Egypt. So, we're stuck. We can't get the cement from the sea; there are only two ways you can get it from: the land, it must come either from Israel officially, or from Egypt unofficially. And the donors will not accept this and they cannot force the Israelis to do that. So unfortunately, it's uneven geographically. Now, if you look at the West Bank, in which I think there has been more development in the center of Ramallah here, because Nablus and Hebron were also under great siege, not as much as Gaza but quite. Now it's much less, and the development is spreading geographically but it's not widening the income gap between groups and general distribution of income because it has allowed more employment. And in fact we are suffering now from higher wages. The wages are higher now and they are putting pressure not very much on the businessmen, but on the state which has a lot of employees that have been employed really as a measure of putting money in the economy. So I think there is room for rationalization. But it all depends on reducing Israeli control. It is Israeli control that is destroying really our real development, but despite that and because of the donations from the world, we have been able to bring up the economy in general with the problem of Gaza.

CEMMIS: Our last question concerns the Arab Spring. How do you see Palestine regarding these new imbalances and turmoil in the Arab World? How will the Arab Spring affect the Palestinians?

N S: The Arab Spring has raised hopes for the Palestinians for change because the Arab Spring has created a new dynamic in the Arab World. Egypt, the biggest country under Mubarak was just like a sitting duck, no dynamism. In fact, always advising us not to do anything that might anger the Americans, anything that might anger the Israelis, anything that might anger the Europeans. So the Egyptian leadership in the past was dampening any dynamic effect in the area. So when this Arab Spring came in Egypt it created a lot of hope among the Palestinians, that we will see a new Egypt, dynamic and capable of really helping us. Obviously, the Palestinians now are in a little bit of a dilemma. Because the Spring in Syria has become very bloody because of the regime's behavior. And it affects Lebanon. And they are not so sure where things are going. I think it's inevitable that all the regimes will change but it might take time and between

Lebanon and Syria there are 700.000 Palestinian refugees. And some of the refugee camps, in Latakia and in Damascus have been hit by the army, the Syrian army. Hamas is in trouble because the Muslim Brotherhood is part of the revolt in Hama in Syria and the leadership of Hamas is sitting in Damascus. Its relationship with the government therefore has affected them. Maybe positively, because now they see that unity is more important to save them. In Libya, it has taken a long time and turned military. In Yemen it is still going back and forth. And in those countries that have a mild Spring, such as Jordan and Algeria, Morocco, Oman, and Bahrain, I think it's getting a little bit of a sense of uncertainty, as to where the Arab world is going. In the short run. But I think that in the long run it will be in our interest. A more dynamic Egypt, a more dynamic Syria, a more democratic Yemen, and Libya, I think will produce more hope for the Palestinians. I mean already there is now a medical committee that went to Libya – a Palestinian medical committee – not committee, delegation. Full of doctors who were operating in Libyan hospitals and a big commission of engineers has gone to help the Libyans rebuild and all the taboos of the Qaddafi regime has put on the Palestinians are broken. So... it's good. Spring is good.

CEMMIS: Thank you very much.