

Interview with Ramadan Shallah, Secretary General, Palestinian Islamic Jihad

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as reported by Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod

Introduction

On December 14-16, 2009, a delegation from the World Federation of Scientists, including the authors, traveled to Damascus to interview senior Syrian and Palestinian leaders from Syria and various Palestinian factions, including the members of the leadership of Hamas and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The objective was to gain insight from field interviews into how to further advance scientific understanding of cultural and political conflict in order to create new theoretical and practical frameworks for negotiation and cooperation.[1]

Unexpectedly, the opportunity arose to interview Ramadan Shallah, the Secretary General of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). The delegation seized the sudden chance to probe this individual's mode of thinking about political and religious conflict, decision-making, and notions of sacred values. After the meeting, the authors conducted supplemental background research on the Internet, only to learn that Ramadan Shallah is on the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorist list, with a \$ 5,000,000 reward for information leading to his arrest or conviction (cf: www.fbi.gov/wanted/terrorists/tershallah.htm). Accordingly, the contents of this interview were delivered to the FBI and National Security Council. The interview was conducted in English.

Interview

After introductions were made, Ramadan Shallah (RS) went into a detailed explanation of PIJ's decision to opt out of the peace process.

RS: *We did not ever have a peace process. Abbas's [December 2009] decision not to seek re-election is confirmation of the fact. The Israelis couldn't possibly find anyone better for them. I understand he's playing this card to put pressure on the US government, but Clinton's response was to "let him go."*

Since Madrid and Oslo, 18 and 16 years ago, Palestine has gained nothing. It started with a two-state solution. But if you look at the West Bank today, with the expansion of the settlements and security arrangements, you have Israel in possession of more than 50 percent of the West Bank, which Israel in the end will not give up. That's 22 percent in the Jordan valley, 10 percent in Jerusalem, 10 percent in border crossings, and 10 percent in settlements.

Netanyahu learned that the most complicated issue for Barak and Arafat was Jerusalem. But Netanyahu has finished with that. So the hope of a two-state solution is gone.

You will not find any political faction in the future that will accept a two-state solution based on Israeli security needs. We see that a sovereign and independent Palestinian state is impossible under such conditions.

I cannot blame the Israelis or the Americans alone. The formula was “peace for land, and land for peace.” I am now convinced Israel will never give a piece of land because the Arab governments have already accepted to live with Israel.

So, we seem to have only two options left: to go for a two-state solution or a one-state solution. In a one-state solution, Palestinians have rights in all of historic Palestine, in a two-state solution they won't even have rights in 50 percent of the West Bank. But there is little support in the world for a one-state solution, and Israel will never accept this.

The South Africa example won't work, and it isn't being discussed. So, I see no end to the struggle until Israel is defeated.

We are living in an age of a clash of civilizations. But how can we escape that if Israel insists on only allowing a Jewish state? What about the Christians? We don't want a state based on religious identity.

If Israel won't consider a one-state solution, then the struggle must continue, and support for it will come from other sources. The masses and groups of people will take matters into their own hands, like Hamas in Palestine, Hizbollah in Lebanon, and we'll see other such grassroots movements everywhere, and the Arab governments will eventually have to join them or you will have the same kind of situation that made [Ayman al-]Zawahiri come out of Egypt to join Bin Laden.

[Senior Hamas leader Ismail] Haniyeh made it clear yesterday that the ultimate struggle is the liberation of all of Palestine, and that is also our goal. We are the indigenous people of the land. I was born in Gaza. My family, brothers and sisters, live in Gaza. But I am not allowed to visit them. But any American or Siberian Jew is allowed to take our land.

There is no possibility today of a two-state solution. That idea is dead.

And there is no real prospect of a one-state solution.

So, we are appealing directly to the people of the region — not to take action against any Arab government — but if the Arab governments don't face up to their responsibility, then people will take matters into their own hands. There is a "people force" in Lebanon now, and in Gaza.

The Palestinian struggle started with the idea of a one-state solution, then made every concession for a two-state solution. And nothing.

The 2002 Saudi "Arab Initiative" was a post-September 11 gesture of conciliation to the Americans: "Take Palestine, we will bargain away their rights, because we are sorry for September 11." And Sharon said: "The proposal isn't even worth the ink on paper."

We told Arafat that we will do Jihad. The meaning of Jihad is to defend our people.

Question: Is there a difference between you and Hamas?

Ramadan Shallah: *We share the same Islamic identity. From a strategic point of view, there is no difference between us and Hamas, only a tactical difference. For instance, in conflict management, we reject participation in the elections because we believe that the basis of the Palestinian Authority is the Oslo Agreement.*

We told Hamas: "Just leave Abbas; Fatah gave Israel every concession and got nothing." We coordinated our struggle with Fatah, with Hamas. But we don't believe [in] participating in the PA, which was basically established to liquidate the Palestinian cause. Now the PA is the umbrella for a cheap occupation by Israel.

Question: Do you want Palestine as an Islamic state?

Ramadan Shallah: *I would like to live under Sharia, but I would not impose it. The people must decide. I told brother Khaled Meshaal: I do believe in hijab, my family wears hijab, but you cannot impose a law that all women must wear hijab!*

Question: How come you speak English so well?

Ramadan Shallah: *After I got my PhD in 1990, I spent 5 years teaching in the US about the Middle East in a university in south Florida.*

Question: What was your degree in?

Ramadan Shallah: *My PhD was on banking systems, working with Islamic banks without interest.*

Question: Are you on the same wavelength as Iran?

Ramadan Shallah: *I criticize the Islamic regimes for not having a worldview. You have to develop a worldview. In Iran the situation is complicated. Yes, it is an Islamic state but it's different than the Sunni worldview, which is mine. I do agree with their foreign policies, but not their internal politics.*

If we remain in the political arena, then we, the Arabs and Palestine, must thank the Iranians for their position, and thank God we have Iranian pressure to compensate for the collapse of Arab pressure. But the Sunni view is more open than the Shi'ite view of humanity. Islamic history, its accomplishments, is Sunni history: the Umayyads, Abbasids, even the Ottoman Sunni groups. The Shi'ite groups worked underground. So their view is different.

Question: Well, the Taliban had a Sunni state?

Ramadan Shallah: *Yes, but given their history it was a narrow vision that didn't consider others who didn't believe exactly as they do. The Sunni worldview is much more open.*

Question: Do you see a way forward in a peace process?

Ramadan Shallah: *I believe that the Middle East problem is not less important than the climate problem, which has drawn 192 countries from all over the world. So if the international community gets together, and can get Israel to really change, then maybe there can be a road to peace. But this will not happen with just the Americans, and I don't see it happening. I don't see the international community forcing Israel to accept a genuine and independent Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, including East Jerusalem. But the Palestinians have great endurance, and will survive.*

Even [Israeli historian Martin van] Creveld says Israel should give Palestine all of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem lest Israel be defeated because the Palestinians will outlast Israel.

I live in Damascus, under shelter. I don't have a passport, even my children don't have a right to travel or go to a university. The United States is the best place in the world to live in. But, unfortunately, the gang in the White House sees everything through Israel's eyes, and the government manipulates the people's vision of what is going on outside the country.

Even the polls, which ask people: "Do you fear the Iranian nuclear program." Just by posing the question that way, the polls manipulate fear: 85 percent of Israelis fear Iran; 41 percent support attacking Iran; 23 percent of Israelis say they want to leave Israel because they fear Iran.

So I say (laughing): "Let's work to make 23 percent into 53 percent!" The US and Israel heighten Iranophobia to gain the support of Arab regimes, which fear Iran.

Question: Is Iran trying to provoke Israel?

Ramadan Shallah: *Only if there was a madman acting on the spur of the moment. No one knows how Iran would then develop their nuclear capabilities.*

Question: What about the concept of a *hudna* [truce] with Israel?

Ramadan Shallah : *I don't agree with Hamas's idea of a long hudna with Israel, because Israel will only use the time to make things worse. We can agree on a short-term truce for specific purposes, like getting food in to the people. Don't ask me what the political solution is to be. We aren't the guilty party to be asked for a solution because we didn't create the problem. Our sacred duty is to fight, to resist occupation of our sacred land and change the conditions of our people. That is our duty, our sacred duty. Others, like Fatah, have maps and negotiations. We resist.*

Question: What is the role of women in this resistance?

Ramadan Shallah : *Our resistance is the resistance of the family. We cannot talk about women as a separate problem. They are our core. They are everything. They are bearing all of the difficulties in our life and society. Therefore, when Hamas imposed the hijab, they did not respect women. We have no right to impose anything on women. More than half the demonstrators for the Hamas anniversary yesterday were women.*

Question: If the Golan were returned, could Syria make peace with Israel?

Ramadan Shallah : *I don't think that Israel is sincere. I don't think they will give back the Heights in ways the Syrians can live with. But they will dangle the prospect before Syria to buy time, and use it to test to see whether Syria is ready to break off from Iran and join the American camp. Israel can't repeat the Egypt deal because of the demography of Syria, its close relations with Lebanon [and] Iran. They gave back land to Egypt, but then Egypt was in their pockets. It would take a grand coalition in Israel to make a deal.*

Question: What will you do if Israel attacks Iran?

Ramadan Shallah : *Only a madman would do that. But if Netanyahu is pressured to go back to negotiations, or into some other undesirable thing, then he may attack Iran, but probably go after Hizbollah first. It is possible, but not likely.*

Question: What about Egypt's role in reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas?

Ramadan Shallah : *Egypt, unfortunately, is not an honest broker. They are trying to impose Abbas's view on Hamas. In the past, PIJ tried to mediate reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. But there is a new gang leading Fatah. With the [August 2009] Bayt Lahm conference [of Fatah], it's even worse today.*

Question: Both Israelis and Americans, including their leaders, want to know if there is any possibility that you or Hamas could ever recognize Israel, not necessarily now but in the future, under whatever conditions? And if you could, what would you want for it?

Ramadan Shallah : *I cannot speak for Hamas. But I will never, under any conditions, accept the existence of the state of Israel. I have no problem living with the Jewish people. We have lived together in peace for centuries. And if Netanyahu were to ask if we can live together in one state, I would say to him: "If we have exactly the same rights as Jews to come to all of Palestine. If Khaled Meshaal and Ramadan Shallah can come whenever they want, and visit Haifa, and buy a home in Herzliyah if they want, then we can have a new language, and dialogue is possible."*

But until then, I would say to Netanyahu: "I will not accept the existence of Israel. I will never accept the existence of a state of Israel. Never. Ever." (Smiling) I hope that is clear enough.

After the Cold War, Americans began asking: "Is Israel a liability?" Under the Bush years, it was worse for us with America than even with Israel. Until the Americans see Israel as a liability, nothing is possible.

We have had three Islamic-Israeli wars, including the one with Hizbollah, and we are headed to a religious war between Muslims and Jews — a clash of civilizations.

*About the Interviewers: **Scott Atran** is Research Director in Anthropology at the National Center for Scientific Research in Paris, Visiting Professor of Psychology and Public Policy at the University of Michigan, and Presidential Scholar in Sociology at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City. **Robert Axelrod** is the Walgreen Professor for the Study of Human Understanding at the University of Michigan, with appointments in the Department of Political Science and the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy.*

Note

[1] For background, see: Scott Atran, Robert Axelrod and Richard Davis, "Sacred Barriers to Conflict Resolution," *Science*, 317, 24 August 2007, pp. 1039-40.