

Palestinian diplomat: America should be assertive in dealing with Israel

by CNS

Afif Safieh, born in Jerusalem in 1950 and educated there and in Belgium and France, is a Palestinian diplomat. He has represented the Palestinians in diplomatic postings to the United Nations, the Netherlands, the Vatican and the United Kingdom. In 2005, he was appointed to represent the Palestine Liberation Organization in the United States. The San Diego World Affairs Council sponsored his visit to San Diego on March 12 when he was interviewed by members of the San Diego Union-Tribune's editorial board.

Q: Please explain to our readers your diplomatic status. You're not officially an ambassador because the Palestinian Authority is not a country or a government. So what exactly are you? What is your official status in the United States?

A: The name of the mission that I have is called the PLO mission to the United States, that's an agreement.

Q: Not the Palestinian Authority but the Palestine Liberation Organization?

A: The PLO mission to the United States. And with this affirmation the office was reopened in 1994 just after the Oslo breakthrough and the signature on the White House lawn. We are not a diplomatic mission. I don't have full diplomatic status for the simple reason that Palestine is not yet a fully sovereign political entity.

Q: What are the prospects and how should the peace process, which has been almost moribund now for quite some time, certainly since Hamas' electoral victory last year, be revived?

A: First of all, the peace process was nonexistent for the last six years, not since Hamas' election a year ago.

Q: Well it was certainly nonexistent during this violent second intifada in which there was virtual warfare between Israel and the Palestinians.

A: If you go back to the (former U.S. Sen. George) Mitchell Report, it says that the second intifada started as a nonviolent movement, and it was the ferocious repression of the Barak government then that pushed a few unwisely to use the little weapons they had. But the peace process was nonexistent the last six years. And by the way, this is one of the major reasons why Hamas won the legislative elections; nonexistence of the peace process for the last six years and the unconvincing nature of that process in the previous years. I believe in the

need of a third-party (intervention). So I personally believe that the American role is decisive. In my analysis, I always - even in my dealings with the State Department - often speak of what I call the self-inflicted impotence of the American administration. America is a superpower all over the world except in its dealings with Israel. And up to now, we have witnessed what I call static diplomacy. You're not unaware that Dr. (Condoleezza) Rice has been there in the area in the last few months nine times with very little fruit of that agitation. And I perceive, indeed, that America should be more vocal, visible and assertive. We have a wonderful window of opportunity if the players want to capitalize on it. The Arab world is available for historical compromise, was available for that compromise for years.

Q: Let's look at the other side of that equation. Yes, Israel has a government with public support that's weak, but on the Palestinian side, even up to and including today, you have Palestinians fighting Palestinians, you have a president of the Palestinian Authority who wants to deal with the Israelis but doesn't seem to be able to deliver on anything, and you have the rest of the government controlled by Hamas, that for the record will not accept Israel's right to exist, will not renounce violence and will not agree to recognize past agreements. Those are the three preconditions set down by the Quartet, which is not just the United States, but also Europe, the U.N. and Russia. So where is the partner for peace with whom the Israelis can negotiate?

A: Let me tell you how we see it from our side. First of all, by the way I belong to the secular wing of Palestinian politics. I'm supposed to be sociologically a Palestinian Christian, so I have no ideological affinities with Hamas, I'm a democrat. Hamas won (the Palestinians' parliamentary elections) with 44 percent which was hardly a landslide but it was the obvious victor, and I believe in democracy. Winners and losers have to behave gracefully.

Q: What did Fatah get?

A: 41 percent. I would see it differently from your summary. First of all, I believe the Mecca Accords (for a Palestinian unity government) should be perceived as a breakthrough. Why? Because the national coalition government that will emerge will make that the Palestinian partner in any peace process more representative than it has ever been before. Number two, Hamas in Mecca accepted that those who negotiate on behalf of the Palestinian people is the PLO. And the president of the PLO happens to be (Palestinian Authority President) Mahmoud Abbas. They accepted number three, that in the PA, as a political system, the conduct of foreign affairs is the prerogative of the president. Again, the same Mahmoud Abbas. Hamas accepted in Mecca to honor all agreements that were signed in the previous peace process. Hamas accepted to endorse all relevant Arab summit-meeting resolutions, which means the Arab peace initiative. They accepted that the activity of the government would be based on international law and international legality. Abbas went to (Israeli Prime Minister Ehud) Olmert with a Palestinian offer of a prolonged cease-fire, not only between Israel and the Gaza Strip but extended to the West Bank. And Olmert answered back, 'I'm not interested.'

Q: Some people don't absolve Israel of anything it has done, but they look at what's going on and conclude that the Arab world wants there to be a Palestinian crisis. It wants victims, it wants this spectacle to go on so it can divert attention from their own problems or regimes. Do you think there's anything to that?

A: No, I think it's a very simplistic point of view. I think in the Arab world, governors and governed people would like to have the problem and the crisis and the conflict behind them. Why? Because it has been too costly, because it has frozen every possible area of (progress), and believe me it's the unresolved nature of that conflict that is destabilizing, dehumanizing and defying the established order. The Arabs are not obstacles for peace. They are not the ones occupying Palestinian territory.

Q: How is the centrality of the Palestine crisis, how does that have anything to do with the lack of economic opportunity in Egypt - with a massive oppression and the lack of basic rights in Egypt. You say if the Palestinian question were resolved, somehow this goes away in Egypt? I just don't get that at all. It seems obvious that the reason the Egyptian state-run media runs 10 times as much stuff about Palestine and Israel and the United States as it does about its own problems is because it wishes to keep a potentially angry population focused on external affairs. Why is that simplistic?

A: But much of the anger that you see in the streets of Cairo is also addressed to the impotence of their leaders, vis-a-vis the Israeli challenge. So I don't think that they are analyzing a nonexistent anger. You have to bear in mind that there is authentic solidarity with the Palestinians.

Q: You described earlier what you called the self-inflicted impotence of the United States. What do you mean by that? And does the United States still have enough credibility in the region to serve as the third-party negotiator?

A: The popularity ratings of the USA in the Arab world among public opinion, and even among the ruling elite, is very low. Yet I believe that America is indispensable. It's not very lovable in the formation of its foreign policy these days, but it is indispensable. And the realist in me is saying that there is an important role. America is a superpower all over the world. It has waged two controversial wars in the last five years. We are inviting it to wage peace on us and we'd be your consenting victim, yet America is undecided. And I often say America in its dealing with the Israelis unfortunately often looks impotent.

Q: In 1989 when James Baker was secretary of state under George (H.W.) Bush, there seemed to be a balance in U.S. foreign policy. Then came the invasion of Kuwait, and it doesn't seem things have ever gotten better since. American public opinion seems to have solidified along pro-Israeli grounds. The Gallup Polls suggest that there is a stronger level of support now for Israel than 15 years ago. How would you explain this?

A: First of all, the evenhanded foreign policy of Bush's father and James Baker deployed itself after the Gulf War, not before. And the Gulf War did not affect it negatively. For the historical record, the convening of the Madrid Conference (on an Israeli-Palestinian settlement) and followed by Washington talks followed the war. And I believe Baker and Bush's father were aware that all the movement on the Palestinian problem could give respectability to the other exercise. And we used to joke politically, it's a sad joke, by saying we, too, happen to have oil, meaning we happen to have rights even though we don't have black oil, we have olive oil.

Q: And what of U.S. public opinion moving toward greater sympathy with Israel?

A: I don't know if we read the same opinion always. Support for Israeli existence, of course, is massive. But are you committed to Israel's existence, or are you also committed to Israel's expansion? I believe only Israel's existence. In Israel, there is a debate on the wisdom of keeping the hilltops of the West Bank. But what is America's interest in Israel keeping the hilltops of the West Bank? None. Are you going to accept going on a collision course with the Arab and the Muslim worlds? Believe me, Hamas is the moderate wing of Islamic movements, not the more radical wing. And they can become even more pragmatic if they are encouraged.

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