

INTERVIEW: AZZAM TAMIMI

Dr. Tamimi is director of the Institute of Islamic Political Thought in London and a member of the Conflicts Forum advisory board. He was previously director of the Islamic Movement Parliamentary Office in Amman, Jordan. He is the author of Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat Within Islamism (2001) and co-edited, with John Esposito, Islam and Secularism in the Middle East (2000). Tamimi was interviewed by Roger Gaess, a freelance journalist based in New York, in an exchange of emails March 7-29.

ROGER GAESS: *Given the Hamas electoral victory, where should diplomatic efforts now be focused? On pressuring Hamas to move toward the Oslo-oriented norms? On pressuring Israel to move toward implementation of relevant U.N. resolutions? Or on rethinking the whole Oslo/Roadmap process?*

TAMIMI: The way forward, and the only way Hamas is willing to engage in, would be to pressure Israel to accept the idea of a long-term cease-fire or *hudna* (truce), as it is known in Arabic. The world should just forget about the dead deals of Oslo and the stillborn Roadmap.

Q: *Did Oslo and the Roadmap have inherent deficiencies for achieving at least an approximation of a just solution for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict?*

TAMIMI: Both Oslo and the Roadmap started from the assumption that the Palestinians were the villains. The Palestinian partner in the peace process was expected to end Palestinian terrorism in exchange for some kind of recognition. That was an insult to the Palestinian people, who see themselves as the victims

while the Israelis are the villains. Palestinians perceived the PLO leadership as having betrayed the Palestinian people, and that is why the PLO had no mandate in whatever it sought to negotiate with the Israelis. A peace process will only deliver if the parties negotiating it are credible and have a mandate. Hamas has a mandate and will want to remain credible; for that reason it will not, and should not, make the same mistake the PLO made.

Q: *What should the PLO have insisted on as prerequisites for its entering peace talks with Israel?*

TAMIMI: It should have insisted on acknowledgment of the root of the problem and recognition that the Palestinians have been the victims. The South African model of peace and reconciliation would have worked. If the Israelis were to come to the Palestinians today and say to them, as the South African white minority said to the victims of apartheid, We apologize for what we did to you, and we wish to start a new chapter in order to live in peace together, that would pave the way for a solid peace process.

Q: *What do Israel, the Palestinians, the United States and the rest of the international community need to do to establish a firm groundwork for a final peace agreement — assuming that it is not too late for a two-state outcome. In commentary published in March in Haaretz, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter insisted: “The unwavering U.S. position since Dwight Eisenhower’s administration has been that Israel’s borders coincide with those established in 1949; and, since 1967 the universally adopted UN [Security Council] Resolution 242 has mandated Israel’s withdrawal from the occupied territories.” On the other hand, in mid-2002 Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the Hamas leader, told me that he thought a permanent border along that 1949 armistice line would be “unfair” to Palestinians. I don’t know if Yassin was referring to the fact that there are now about an equal number of Arabs and Jews living in historic Palestine, whereas a strict interpretation of Resolution 242 would create a Palestinian state on only 22 percent of the land, or if he was referring to the often-violent means by which Israel gained control of a substantial part of the other 78 percent. What do you think the Palestinian consensus is in terms of territory acceptable for a Palestinian state?*

TAMIMI: Palestinians — both those who support a negotiated settlement with Israel and those who do not — will never, deep within themselves, accept the legitimacy of the Zionist state on any part of the land snatched from them by force or deceit. What the world needs to do is focus on what is acceptable to Hamas and work from it. Hamas would only agree to a

negotiated settlement based on the idea of a hudna. In reality, of course, that would mean recognizing Israel will exist within agreed-upon borders for a given period of time. It does not, however, mean recognizing that where Israel sits is no longer Palestinian. The mandate given to Hamas means this is the only sort of thing that the Palestinians are likely to settle for. The world should forget about every peace initiative or U.N. resolution that so far has failed. Israel has refused to accept all of these in the past and Hamas will not beg for acceptance of anything that the Israelis have so far rejected. What should be encouraging for the Israelis and the international community is that, unlike Fatah and the PLO, Hamas has a very clear vision of what it seeks. If the hudna formula is accepted, it will work for all sides.

Q: *What mandate do you think Palestinian voters have given Hamas, or have signaled to Abbas, in terms of how they should proceed if negotiations resume? The Oslo accords appear to have put the Palestinians at a continuing disadvantage, essentially letting Israel slip away from its commitments under Resolution 242, which also calls for “a just settlement of the refugee problem.” Is the electoral endorsement of Hamas an attempt by Palestinians to restore the balance in terms of international acknowledgment of Palestinian rights and Israeli obligations?*

TAMIMI: The mandate Hamas acquired from Palestinians who voted on January 25 means that the Palestinians are fed up with the PLO, with Fatah and with all the wasting of time in negotiating useless deals. If the Israelis want peace, Hamas’s option is the way forward. If they do not

want peace, there is little left for the Palestinians to lose.

Q: *Would UN resolutions, if they were implemented, be sufficient to encompass Palestinian national needs? Hamas leader Ismail Abu Shanab suggested to me, about a year before the Israelis murdered him, that Hamas would be willing to work within the general context of Resolution 242. Could Hamas sign on to a peace settlement that is based on relevant UN resolutions and the application, say, of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in all of historic Palestine?*

TAMIMI: The problem with Resolution 242 is that it is not unequivocal in its language, and the Israelis [though rejecting it] have been interpreting it to their own interest so as not to withdraw to pre-1967-war borders. That is why the hudna is a much better alternative. Furthermore, 242 requires recognition of Israel; that can never happen. It was actually unfair of the UN Security Council to include that article in a resolution that was meant to bring Israel to withdraw from the lands it occupied in 1967. Resolution 242, despite not being accepted by the Israelis, rewards Israel for its 1967 aggression. It tells the victims that they had to recognize the legitimacy of their oppressor in order to get part of the property stolen from them by that oppressor in the first place.

Q: *Given the very close U.S. ties to Israel and Washington's reluctance to significantly press Israel to comply with international norms, will Palestinians again accept the United States in the role of a so-called honest broker? What intermediary role can you see the United States playing down the road, and what are the alternatives for bringing the two*

sides together?

TAMIMI: The United States was never an honest broker and is not qualified to play that role. Although Hamas does not officially consider the United States to be a party to the conflict, few Palestinians do not see it that way. The question many Palestinians ask today is, How can the United States, which appears to be more Zionist than Israel, be trusted to play the role of broker in any peace deal? The invasion of Iraq has made the U.S. position even more untenable.

Q: *What would it take for the European Union — or a strong alliance of European nations — to stand up to U.S.-Israeli pressures and force Israel to end its occupation of East Jerusalem and other parts of the West Bank?*

TAMIMI: The Europeans could, should they wish, play a more significant role. However, they are divided, and Israel does not welcome any input from them. So far as the United States is powerful enough and determined enough to keep other players out of the arena, there is very little we can expect from Europe. That said, I think Europe can begin to reclaim some of the lost ground by supporting the Hamas-led government in Palestine. Palestinians have welcomed the French position, which expressed support for the Russian position [of direct dialogue with Hamas]. If more Europeans resist Israeli and U.S. pressure to punish the Palestinians for choosing Hamas, things will get better.

Q: *In the view of the average Palestinian — and it may even be a majority view worldwide — Israel is a state that has been founded and maintained on the basis of violence, ethnic cleansing and laws that may constitute a form of apartheid. While the Palestinians may*

not be expected to recognize Israel's "right" to exist on moral or legal grounds, polls indicate Palestinians do want a two-state settlement and prefer it sooner rather than later. That is not to say that they're desperate for their own state or that they'll ever settle for the kind of tough peace that the Barak government initially offered at Camp David. But I think Hamas needs to work forcefully to present its vision to the international community clearly and in detail and to emphasize its flexibility for moving forward. I would think Hamas can't simply ignore those conditions the Quartet (the United States, Russia, the United Nations and the EU) has set: that it recognize Israel, renounce violence and accept previous Israeli-PLO agreements. Isn't it going to have to respond quite creatively, and offer equivalents that aren't insulting to its sense of fairness and dignity? What options does Hamas have for effectively pursuing its vision for peace in all of Palestine and reducing its near-isolation in much of the international community?

TAMIMI: Hamas leaders have been saying that Israel is not serious about a peaceful settlement. I believe this argument is well-founded, given that the PLO under the leadership of Yasser Arafat met all the requirements demanded by the so-called international community — recognizing the right of Israel to exist, renouncing violence and even acting as a policeman for Israel — but in exchange incurred nothing but utter contempt from the Israelis and eventually punishment. Most Palestinians believe that the Israelis even killed Arafat. Whether that is true or not, it shows their lack of faith in the Israelis. The international community seems to be out of touch

with what the Palestinians feel and want. I would caution against taking at face value those U.S.-funded pollsters in Ramallah and Jerusalem. They decide the result, and then they conduct the poll. I need not remind you of their scandals, the most recent of which was predicting a win for Fatah in the [January] elections.

Hamas, too, would work for a two-state solution, but one that is based on a process that begins with an agreement for a cease-fire. The Israelis have been getting away with doing to the Palestinians whatever they wished while having the entire hypocritical Western world behind them in demanding that the Palestinians disarm and renounce violence. An end to violence has to be reciprocal and in accordance with an official internationally observed and witnessed agreement. This is what Hamas has been talking about since 1994 but no one has been listening. This is what a hudna is about.

So, the day the Israelis — together with their backers in the West — accept that principle and give up the nonsense of “having to be recognized first,” we shall see the fruition of a two-state situation. Hamas cannot and will not offer recognition of Israel on a plate, whether made of mud, silver or gold. If I were a Hamas leader, I would insist as a precondition for any talks that Israel recognize the crimes it has committed against the Palestinians. However, I can see that Hamas is willing to do business, and they are not going to entrench themselves in an argument about who did what to whom. Hamas today represents the Palestinian people, and it alone can deliver if the Israelis wish to deal. The only thing Hamas can offer is a negotiated settlement based on a hudna that entails total withdrawal to the pre-

June-1967 armistice line, release of all prisoners and removal of all settlers. Anyone in the West who believes that pressure can bring Hamas to change its position is dream-walking. Hamas has been receiving blows from the Israelis and sanctions from around the world for some 18 years; more sanctions will mean nothing, especially at this time, when it has the Palestinians, the Arabs and the Muslims behind it. Hamas is not isolated at all; it has more windows open to it today than ever before.

Q: *As an American, I appreciate why a native American might refuse to recognize the “right” of the United States to exist, given how Europeans who settled here carried out a long campaign of ethnic cleansing. But on a secondary level, a native American might now accept the U.S. “right” to exist on the basis on its having accorded equal rights to all its citizens. Could Palestinian Arabs similarly “recognize” Israel on this secondary level if Israel transformed itself from a “democracy” with apartheid overtones into an actual democracy that accorded equal rights to non-Jews as well as Jews? Some senior Hamas leaders have, for example, obliquely suggested to me that, under certain circumstances, Muslims could welcome a guaranteed national home for Jews in Palestine — as opposed to a so-called Jewish state that discriminated against its native Arab inhabitants — according to the notion that it existed under the “protection” of Islam. Ambiguous as such a formula might be, it could provide the kind of constructive ambiguity on which to build a peace.*

TAMIMI: I’m not sure there is much use in making theoretical assumptions. Israel

cannot and will not ever become a democracy for all. If it did, it would cease to exist. Unlike the United States, Israel is a state for the Jews. It is true that European immigrants persecuted, oppressed and obliterated many of the [North American] natives, but the United States was the land of opportunity for any immigrant for much of its history. Had Israel given the Palestinians an indication that it would be prepared to treat them as equal human beings, perhaps the conflict might have been resolved a long time ago. I, among many Palestinians, have advocated a South African solution to the conflict whereby Zionism, which is a racist ideology, is dissolved just like apartheid was, and all people within mandatory Palestine become equal citizens. The unilateralism of Sharon and now Olmert is aimed at avoiding such a prospect. Total separation from the Palestinians is intended to preserve the exclusivity of the State of Israel as a state for the Jews.

Q: *To phrase my previous question another way: Does Hamas, as the Israeli and U.S. governments and media continuously contend, want to “destroy Israel”?*

TAMIMI: Who has been destroying whom? Those who keep saying that Hamas wants to destroy Israel are the ones who do not recognize the rights of the Palestinians to be in their own country on their own soil. They are the ones who are responsible for the dispossession of the Palestinians and their continued suffering for the past 60 or more years.

Q: *Why do you think the international community is pressing Hamas so hard at this point to recognize Israel? After all, Hamas has tacitly accepted the PLO as the designated negotiator for the Pales-*

tinians (though not as the sole Palestinian representative), with, as I understand it, the basic condition that any tentative peace agreement be submitted to all Palestinians in a referendum for approval or rejection. Plus, there have been many political parties in the Israel government — including the Likud and the Likud-offshoot Kadima — that have been far less forthcoming than Hamas in terms of effective mutual recognition and acceptance of international legal norms. So if Israel and the United States actually want negotiations, as they claim, what is their motive for putting such preconditions on talks?

TAMIMI: It puzzles me why they keep talking about these conditions while knowing very well what Hamas stands for. Is it perhaps an expression of a predicament they find themselves in? They are unwilling to admit that their policies have failed. Peacemaking has been on hold for several years now, and the impasse was not created by Hamas's winning the election. The United States and Israel seem to have found a scapegoat for their failure: Hamas. Why didn't the Roadmap work when Arafat was around or even when his successor Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas] replaced him? The United States and Israel are afraid that they may have to acknowledge the facts of history about this conflict; they dread the truth. The apartheid regime in South Africa behaved the same way until it could no longer do so. One day, the Israelis and the Americans will come around and admit they've been wrong all along — not out of a revival of conscience, but out of loss of ability to maintain the unjust status quo. They perhaps think they can find a way of luring Hamas into the same quagmire that

drowned Arafat and destroyed Fatah. That can never happen. Unlike the PLO and Fatah, Hamas is not interested in rubbing shoulders with the Americans and the Israelis; and, if the United States and the Israelis do not come to Hamas, Hamas will not go to them.

Q: *What would be the objective of a long-term cease-fire of 25 years or more? What does Hamas envision being accomplished during those years in terms of Palestinian-Israeli relations? What would the two sides be learning about themselves and each other? Why not go directly to final-status negotiations, as Abbas and Fatah have urged?*

TAMIMI: After 25 years, few of the people who had signed the truce deal would still be around. There would be a new generation in charge, and it would be for them to decide where they wanted to go from there. This is what Hamas has been saying all along. Now, some people expect that in 25 years' time, Israel will lose the ability to continue in existence as an exclusive state for Jews — or, more accurately, as a Western colonial enclave in the Middle East — but would instead dissolve into the region and become part of it rather than simply in it.

I can easily imagine that for the duration of the truce Israelis and Palestinians would deal with each other, and perhaps relations would improve with the passage of time, provided hostilities were ended. Perhaps that would lead one day to a regional state encompassing several of the small and nonviable states that struggle individually to make ends meet. I'm sure you'd have a hundred people come up with at least 50 different scenarios. What matters is that for 25 years, the people would be able to rest and think about how

to build their lives instead of continuing to hit and be hit. Even if little develops between the two neighboring entities, at least there would be no bloodshed. When people are not killing each other, it's a lot easier to imagine rapprochement. That is why the truce is the only way forward. But no truce will hold for long if Israel does not comply with the requirements of that truce as specified by Hamas. This, by the way, is the minimum that Hamas, or the Palestinians in general, can settle for.

Q: *Is the possibility of a two-state solution slipping away? Israel's Olmert, in the run-up to his March 28 election win, outlined his plans for unilateral annexation of large tracts of the West Bank, under the dictum that Israel has no Palestinian partner to negotiate with. Given such circumstances, could the Palestinians simply say: Okay, the Israelis aren't going to end the occupation and return to the pre-1967 borders and allow us to establish a viable state, so we'll dissolve the Palestinian Authority and hand over to Israel responsibility for all the land, in accordance with Israel's international obligations as an occupying power?*

TAMIMI: I am not sure many Palestinians would want to be ruled by Israel. What will happen if Olmert pursues unilateralism is that the Palestinians will take care of themselves wherever they are free from direct Israeli rule. Unilateralism eventually will lead to complete [Israeli] withdrawal

from the West Bank but at a very high price. So long as there are settlers in the West Bank and Palestinians in Israeli jails, Israel will not sleep comfortably. The only way people can be guaranteed peace of mind for quite a long period of time is through an agreed-upon truce.

Q: *What are the near-term challenges that Hamas faces? In terms of Israeli-Palestinian relations, what should we be looking for next?*

TAMIMI: The Israelis are the ones who will decide how things proceed. Hamas has so far observed a unilateral cease-fire and would in my opinion be willing to continue to do so provided the Israelis do not provoke it into a resumption of armed resistance. The priority for Hamas is to put the Palestinian house in order and clean up the mess left by Arafat and his cronies. My advice to the Israelis would be to give Hamas a chance to do that, because stemming corruption would help a future settlement. Hamas would like to establish an independent judiciary and reorganize the security apparatus, which is today in a shambles. The essential needs of the people in health, education and welfare need to be met, but Hamas cannot do that if sanctions are imposed on the Authority it is leading. The failure of Hamas to deliver would most likely be due to [foreign] pressure and sanctions. In that case, the Palestinians will not blame Hamas but those who are forcing failure on Hamas.