

How Many Battalions Does Sari Nusseibeh Have?

The question is on the lips of everyone who was impressed by the recent visit to Chicago of Palestinian peace advocate Sari Nusseibeh: "But how many battalions does Nusseibeh have?" A growing Palestinian movement of moderates and reformers is publicly advocating many of Nusseibeh's positions on ending all violence and reaching a peace treaty with the Jewish state.

- A new Palestine Democratic Party has emerged which calls for transforming the intifada into peaceful protest, an end to armed violence against Israel and a return to peace talks. The party advocates security and economic cooperation between Israel and a future Palestinian state. Led by Bassam Abu Sharif, it already has 8,000 registered members, and is drawing support from the business class and others in the West Bank and Gaza. (*Jerusalem Post*, Oct. 6, 2002)
- Abu Mazen, Secretary General of the PLO Executive Committee, said in a September 29th interview on LBC, a Lebanese television channel, that "There were many mistakes in this last intifada, and turning to the use of arms against Israel was the decisive one." Turning the intifada into a peaceful, popular struggle is "the only way to convince the world of the justice of our cause." (*Ma'ariv*, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, Oct. 1, 2002)
- Mohammed Dahlan, former chief of the Palestinian Preventive Security Service in Gaza, told a group of businessmen in Gaza that, "the Palestinian leadership has never missed an opportunity to commit a mistake...We should have turned [the intifada] into a popular uprising and put an end to armed operations..." (*Al Hayat*, as reported in the *Jerusalem Post*, Oct. 17, 2002)
- *Al Hayat al-Jadida*, the official journal of the Palestinian Authority, recently published severe criticism of Arafat and the Palestinian leadership for rejecting the proposals that were put forward by former U.S. President Bill Clinton at Camp David in July 2000. The author of the article, an "Open Letter to President Arafat," is the paper's former editor, Nabil Amr, who until recently was a minister in Arafat's cabinet, and is a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council. (*Jerusalem Post*, Sept. 4, 2002, *Ha'aretz*, Sept. 9, 2002)
- Abu Mazen and Cabinet Minister Nabil Sha'ath recently visited refugee camps in Jordan and Syria, and told the refugees to recognize that they will not go back to Israel. (*Ha'aretz*, Sept. 5, 2002)

While they have not yet prevailed, Sari Nusseibeh's views are becoming increasingly popular among the Palestinian leadership and public. He and other Palestinian peace advocates would have an even wider following among their own people if the government of Israel were making greater efforts to reach out to Palestinian moderates.

Yet, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon insists that even if the Palestinians scrupulously satisfy his conditions for months of absolute cease-fire, Israel will not dismantle a single Israeli settlement in the West Bank and Gaza where 3.5 million Palestinians live.

Sharon has announced that even if the Palestinians end the intifada and cease all armed attacks and terror, the Palestinians will be able to declare a state in less than half of the West Bank—a Swiss-cheese province with little territorial continuity or viability. And he has refused to negotiate for another fifteen years over final borders, the status of Jerusalem, refugees, or any of the other issues discussed at Camp David.

Polls of Palestinian public opinion suggest that if Sharon, or another Israeli leader, were to demonstrate a genuine commitment to return to peace talks on all major issues—based on the progress made at Camp David and Taba—Nusseibeh's positions would gain significant ground among his people and its leadership.

This is what happened in 1993, with the signing of the Oslo Accords: hopes were high for a negotiated solution, Palestinian support for violence against Israel plummeted, and support for peace talks soared. According to Palestinian pollster Khalil Shikaki, "Between 1993 and 2001, with the sole exception of 1994, Palestinian support for the Oslo agreement never dropped below 60 percent." ("Palestinians Divided," *Foreign Affairs*, January-February, 2002) This correlation between optimism on the one hand, and rejection of violence, on the other, is the basis for IDF Major-General (res.) Shlomo Gazit's judgment that "when peace talks are resumed, and a basis for hope is restored, Palestinian attitudes will moderate once again, as they have in the past." (*Associated Press*, June 12, 2002)

Fortunately, there are moderate Israeli organizations working to put the Israeli government on a more reasonable course. Israel's Peace Now movement is taking a lead role in the Israeli Peace Coalition—which is comprised of Labor doves, Meretz, Democratic Choice, the kibbutz movement, and others—to give voice to the majority of Israelis who favor a two-state solution, a border roughly along the Green Line, and the evacuation of settlements from the occupied territories.

Israel's Peace Now movement, whose national and local affiliates, Americans for Peace Now and Chicago Peace Now, sponsored Nusseibeh's appearance along with Israeli peace advocate Professor Menahem Brinker at Temple Shalom, believes that it is imperative for Israel to give Palestinians good reason to turn away from their extremists and towards the Nusseibehs among them. Only an Israeli government that offers a carrot as well as a stick has any chance of doing that.

A just and well-crafted political solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the larger Arab-Israeli dispute, will enhance Israel's security, fortifying it economically, politically and socially. We work to realize these goals not only because they are at the core of our moral vision as Zionists. Israeli control over 3.5 million Palestinians and Israeli settlements built throughout the territory where the Palestinian majority seeks an independent state jeopardize Israel's Jewish character and its democracy. A two-state solution is in Israel's highest self-interest: only a just peace with the Palestinians can insure Israel's present and future as a democratic Jewish state.

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