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'this May Be The Last Chance'

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Yasser Abed Rabbo is worried and one of the reasons for this becomes immediately apparent when we meet: An armed guard escorts him into his office on the third floor of a building in Ramallah midday on Saturday. "Who is he protecting you from - the Israelis or Hamas?" we ask. "From Hamas," he says without hesitating.

A rare example of a Palestinian leader who is not ashamed to admit that he is completely secular, Abbed Rabbo is high on the hit list of Gaza militants. Nor does he appear to have any intention of having his name removed from the list. Hamas, he says, "is a trend in the Palestinian society and in the Arab society that is jeopardizing the future of my children. It will poison their lives. I see that they want to impose their ideology on me, and I hate ideologies. I believe in values far more than in ideologies, because I can share values with everyone in the world. I think that what they are doing now in Gaza is, in effect, trying to create a monolithic society on all levels: what you believe in, how you dress, what you eat and how you behave. From birth to death, they will decide everything for you. It's a version of Orwell's '1984,' but with a divine touch whose implication is that if you don't do a certain thing, God will punish you, or punish them - because they, after all, are the representatives of the great and wrathful God."

But what perturbs him more than Hamas and his personal security is the negotiations with Israel. Abed Rabbo, secretary general of the Palestine Liberation Organization's Executive Committee and a former Palestinian minister, is one of the anguished heroes of the peace process. His presence has been an integral element in every round of talks between Israelis, Palestinians and Americans in the past 20 years. His view that the current negotiations, between Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), have become one big fraud carries considerable weight. If we don't move fast to change the path of the talks, he warns, their inevitable breakdown will spark a catastrophe

that will be at least on the scale of what happened after the failure of the talks at Camp David in 2000. Already, he says, the Palestinian street views the two-state idea as a "joke" and has lost all faith in the prospect of achieving anything in the dialogue with Israel. It won't be much longer before he, too, the last of the Mohicans in the negotiations, will have no choice but to join them and reach the conclusion that a new way has to be found to end the occupation, because the route of talks with Israel has dead-ended.

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Against this background, it is not difficult to understand why he issued a statement last week that surprised and angered everyone on all sides: A day after the Albanians of Kosovo declared their unilateral independence from Serbia, Abed Rabbo announced that if the negotiations with Israel continue to founder and the settlements continue to expand, the Palestinians will also consider declaring unilateral independence.

Abu Mazen did not like that remark, which cast an embarrassing light on his adherence to the negotiation process with Israel. "In the meantime we are not considering unilateral independence," the Palestinian president stated. Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala), the head of the Palestinian negotiating team, also expressed reservations. Most trenchant of all was Abed Rabbo's colleague on the team, Dr. Saeb Erekat, who pointed out that the Palestinians had already declared independence, in 1988. "We need true independence, not a declaration, in order to put an end to the occupation," he says, adding: "We are not Kosovo."

In our conversation with him, Abed Rabbo minces no words: "I have friends who are eternally in love with negotiations, because the negotiations have become the essence of their lives, a career," he says, taking a swipe at Erekat. "You know me. They can say that there are differences between Kosovo and the situation here, and they say, 'We already declared independence in 1988.' But at that time the declaration of independence was purely a symbolic matter. Who recognized us? Only the socialist bloc and the nonaligned countries. Now we will turn to the Americans and to the European Union, with whom we now have different relations."

What's the connection with Kosovo, and why did you make your comment now?

Abed Rabbo: "I was not the one who chose the timing of that declaration; it was Kosovo. Their declaration is an echo of the Palestinian despair, and I don't want that despair to be exploited by the extremist forces among the Palestinians. The despair can lead to different choices: to firing Qassam rockets, to a cessation of the negotiations with Israel, to the dismantlement of the Palestinian Authority - which is a currently fashionable idea - or to the launching of a third intifada, even while the residual disasters of the second intifada are still apparent. For the average Palestinian, the comparison is not between what [Defense Minister] Ehud Barak said and what Ehud Olmert said; it is between what is being said in the meetings between Abu Mazen and Olmert, and the reality on the ground. And the reality shows that after Annapolis things became a lot worse. The building in the settlements did not stop, the number of checkpoints increased. We painted ourselves into a corner by declaring that by the end of 2008 there will be a new world and a different life here. I don't believe that anything significant will occur in the process by the end of the year."

Then what use will a unilateral declaration of a state be? As you know, [the late Yasser] Arafat considered that idea in 1999, but rejected it, because it would serve only Israel.

"As a negotiator, and as one of the moderate Palestinian leaders, I don't think a unilateral declaration of independence is the best option, but we must not rule it out if we fail by the end of 2008, and if we feel that the doors have truly shut and there is no other way. What I feel now is that the Israeli government is trying to buy time. The negotiations that are now under way are simply not serious."

'I call it a joke'

Yasser Abed Rabbo, 63, is decidedly a man of the left. "I have been a Marxist since I was 14," he explains. In the past he was Naif Hawatmeh's deputy in the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, but left that organization long ago and for years has been known primarily for his involvement in the negotiations. At the end of the 1980s, when the Americans were looking for a way to make contact with the PLO, even before the Oslo accords, Abed Rabbo was in the thick of things. He probably has logged more "Israeli hours" than any other Palestinian leader - including Camp David, Taba and then the Geneva Initiative, whose text he drafted together with his friend Yossi Beilin.

Many Palestinians did not like the Geneva Initiative, which was formulated five years ago, when suicide bombers were blowing themselves up in Israel almost daily and the Israel Defense Forces turned the Jenin refugee camp into a punching bag. These Palestinians thought the agreement was too much of a compromise, because even though it referred to an Israeli withdrawal from the territories and to the partition of Jerusalem, it allowed the big settlement blocs to remain and did not completely solve the refugee problem. That agreement consolidated Abed Rabbo's image as a "friend of the Israeli left-wingers."

Even though he does not have a solid political base (he ran in the last Palestinian elections in a small party that won a minuscule proportion of the vote), and even though he was never a member of Fatah, Abed Rabbo has remained close to Abu Mazen. The rais even appointed him to his current post on the PLO Executive Committee - a post which was (only) formally considered second in the movement's internal hierarchy. What Abed Rabbo whispered in the president's ear about what to do after the Hamas takeover of Gaza carried considerable influence: He was one of the public figures who pushed Abu Mazen into a no-compromise posture in the face of the rebels.

Abed Rabbo has been involved in the negotiations with the Olmert government from day one, so he knows whereof he speaks when he says that the talks are moving in a bad direction. He encountered an example of that direction 10 days ago, during the latest Olmert-Abu Mazen meeting, held at the former's residence. At its conclusion, photographers took a picture that will undoubtedly enter the Pantheon of the conflict: Olmert is seen standing in the yard of his residence, under driving rain, holding an umbrella under which Abu Mazen is taking shelter like a kind of ward. Abed Rabbo, usually instantly articulate, hesitates slightly before replying to the question of what he thinks of the photo. "You are pushing me into a field of thorns," he says at last. "I can say that I like polite politicians, but when I see over-polite politicians I begin to doubt their political intentions."

Do you think it's reminiscent of the photograph in which Barak is pushing Arafat into the cabin at Camp David?

"Absolutely."

Immediately after the meeting, Olmert's bureau noted that the sides had expressed satisfaction at the pace of the negotiations. Erekat, who was present, described it as "intensive and positive." A few weeks ago, Abu Ala, too, averred that "a peace agreement is possible by the end of the year." Abed Rabbo is far more skeptical. "In the days before the [last] meeting between Abu Mazen and Olmert, and in the days that followed," he notes, "they agreed to establish eight committees (to deal mainly with civil matters). I call that a joke. It's fine to talk about quality of the environment or about economic ties, but what I want to know is what kind of PA will maintain economic relations with Israel. Will it be a canton state in which the West Bank will be sliced up into slivers, each of which will be like a separate island? They are now discussing the administration of the border passages before they have discussed the borders! I want to know where those passages will be located - between the West Bank and Israel, or between the Jordan Rift Valley and the Kingdom of Jordan."

What do you think is happening here?

"I suspect that the purpose of the negotiations is to create an impression for the external world that things are moving. The goal is to be able to tell the Americans, on every visit of [U.S. Secretary of State] Condoleezza Rice or the visit by [President George W.] Bush in May, that we have done something. They will be pleased to hear that we have created eight committees. After all, one is supposed to forge a culture of peace, when there is as yet no basis for peace! It's absurd. It's self-deception, because we are avoiding the basic questions: Jerusalem, the refugees, the borders and the settlements."

One can understand Abed Rabbo's comments as the result of frustration on the part of someone who for years urged negotiations with Israel, only to find, upon their resumption, that they are going nowhere. Perhaps it is also an echo of the frustration felt by Abu Mazen, whose whole strategy rests on the negotiations with Israel, although in the meantime he has nothing to show for it.

"The problem is what will happen when we reach the end of 2008 and find that we have not dealt with these basic questions," Abed Rabbo says. "If we do not address the basic issues, we will have to declare failure, and that will lead to a crisis that will be no less acute than the one that followed Camp David. Each side will blame the other and we will confront a new U.S. administration that will say: 'You are starting over again? After eight years?!'"

"We are playing with a very dangerous matter here," he continues. "It's said that nations have a short memory. But sometimes they learn something from experience. The Palestinians in the street were very enthusiastic after the Madrid conference in 1991, became a bit skeptical after Oslo, were very disappointed after Camp David, and now have lost all faith in everything and everyone related to negotiations with Israel. We have to restore that faith. If we go on like this for a few more years, not only the extremists but the greatest moderates, too, will say that there is no hope of creating an independent Palestinian state."

What will happen then?

"That is the question. There are some on the Palestinian side who are escaping - and I emphasize, escaping - to the binational state idea. That is not a solution. It is simpler to establish a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza than to establish a binational state, which is a recipe for disaster. Maybe in many more years we will be able to create something here like the European Union, but that will come as a result of the free choice of the nations

and not from the choice of the ruined and corrupt generations who live here today. But the current situation makes it difficult for us to persuade our nation that any other reasonable option exists. So do not take my Kosovo idea literally - take the political message that underlies it: Let us push the negotiations to the right direction, for God's sake, otherwise we will achieve only disaster. The realization of the Kosovo model will be a small disaster in such a case."

Explain to us how you see that model.

"We would declare independence and say: Israel is an aggressor state that is occupying us not as the West Bank and Gaza, but as the occupier of territories of another sovereign state. We will ask the Arab League to convene and adopt our declaration of independence, we will ask the whole world to recognize us. We will tell the world: You recognized Kosovo within 24 hours; recognize us, too."

Do you have reason to believe that the Americans and the Europeans will recognize a Palestinian state within the borders of June 4, 1967?

"I believe there will be some European countries that will respond positively to that idea. I think they will be sympathetic to it, because they know that we are doing the maximum in terms of the political process. It is not like in 1988."

A changing world

The idea of the binational state, Abed Rabbo admits, is gaining momentum in the Palestinian streets. Its underlying rationale is that only in a state covering the whole area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean will the Palestinians have a majority and sooner or later will be able to truly rectify what they see as the injustice of 1948. He, however, is not convinced.

"I learned from Lenin to be pragmatic with regard to national conflicts," he explains. "If you want to talk about justice, then we Palestinians are the victims and you Israelis are the oppressors. But show me one example in the world where nations and peoples were established on the basis of justice. Most nations were established on the basis of injustice toward other peoples. I don't want to reach that pass. I say over and over - and my wife slaps me on the face; I think she takes advantage of the opportunity to slap me - that I do not want to leave this world without my new granddaughter having a different future. That is very simple, very personal and very emotional."

It's said that you are the last believer in the idea of two states for the two nations.

"Maybe so. The number of people who believe in two states for the two nations is decreasing, and that worries me. And I am talking about a circle of rational intellectuals, people with an open mind. On the street the two-state idea has just become a joke. The Palestinian goes through a checkpoint every day, his standard of living is in decline, the prices are going up - it's a terrible situation. In that situation, how can we blame the people who say that it is impossible to believe in the future? They have heard this melody of progress toward a settlement so many times. They have seen that movie over and over. Every time we promise them that this time the hero on the horse will not smash his head against the branch of a tree - and then boom! He smashes into a branch again. And we tell them: Don't worry, next time it won't happen."

Has this lack of belief reached the high political levels?

"In an hour's time, I have a meeting of the PLO Executive Committee. That body consists of the veterans of the movement. They are all pragmatists. But they have growing doubts about the two-state idea, and they ask in a skeptical sort of whisper: 'Where is this political process that you are talking about?' We have to convince them, too, that the political process is serious. Let us not delude ourselves: If you surveyed the Palestinians about whether they believe there will be a political settlement with Israel, not even 20 percent will answer affirmatively. But if you ask whether people want a two-state solution, you will get 60 percent responding affirmatively, including people who voted for Hamas.

"I say to people: 'Do not despair. Today's world is no longer willing to accept occupation.' That is the example Kosovo gave us. Today's world has changed, and I am talking about the European Union and the world of Barack Obama. Even if he loses the presidential race, it is impossible to disregard the fact that half the Americans are saying: 'He is our candidate and he will bring change. Not in the future, now.' And this is happening in the center of the empire, in Rome! The world is changing and uniting, and as for the globalization that everyone is afraid of - I happen to support it. It is the greatest revolution in the history of humanity, because we are all becoming human beings. Accordingly, I tell my nation: Do not despair. That is the other side of my remark about Kosovo. It may sound contradictory, but it isn't."

What do you know about Olmert's intentions? Do you think they are sincere?

"To be honest, I have to say that I think Olmert wants to do something serious. But it is not clear how far he is willing to go. That is a mystery. I think he understands the long-term dangers that are entailed in not achieving a political agreement. But I am afraid that in the end he will choose the option of a Palestinian state within temporary borders and will consider this to be the solution. In my opinion, that is a non-solution and the Palestinians will reject it. Abu Mazen is already mustering the masses against it. I don't think that the Arab states will agree to a settlement that does not include a solution to the refugee problem and to Jerusalem. If people think that the solution of a temporary state is good, that is stupidity. Why not play all our cards now?"

Do you think Olmert is ready for a settlement in Jerusalem?

"From the Palestinians' point of view, the experience of Olmert as the mayor of Jerusalem was negative. But I think that the fact that he was mayor taught him a lesson - namely that he has to find a solution for the partition of Jerusalem. It is impossible to impose so-called 'coexistence.' The solution might be a unique one. In the Geneva Initiative we put forward a

practical solution for Jerusalem: open passage between the parts of the city based on free choice, sovereignty for both sides, respect for religious sensibilities and an element of international supervision so that everyone will believe that the agreements will be honored, particularly in the Old City and the holy places."

The Geneva Initiative effectively divides Jerusalem, including the partition of the Old City and the transfer of the Temple Mount to Palestinian sovereignty. From what you know, is Olmert ready for a solution like that?

"From what I know, I think he is."

Livni's 'positive role'

What role is Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni playing in the talks? And Ehud Barak?

"I can tell you without reservation, and without having to consult the minutes, that Livni is playing a positive role. Don't make me compare her to anyone else. I don't want to step on land mines. I was always on the left, but my experience tells me never to rely on the right and left when dealing with national affairs."

If Olmert and Livni want a solution, why are the negotiations bogged down?

"It's not just Olmert and Livni. Add also the spirit of Annapolis and the Arab peace initiative, and you will understand exactly what is worrying me. I am worried about the disparity between the possibility of making peace and the acts on the ground, which are not drawing us closer to peace. I don't think it will ever again be possible to repeat this combination of opportunities. This may be the last chance. We have today better leaderships in Israel and in Palestine, we have a better European, American and Arab approach than in the past, we have public opinion that is ready for a dramatic change. The problem is that this disparity still exists. Is the disparity the result of contradictory political ambitions in Israel? I am afraid that this opportunity will be lost and that we will be the victims of our own crimes."

The blame lies with the Palestinians, too. The writer A.B. Yehoshua said here that he doesn't understand Palestinians who received Gaza and are continuing to shoot. What do you feel when you get up in the morning and hear that more rockets were fired at Sderot?

"I feel affronted and humiliated. I do not fight against regular civilians and little children, rather I fight to realize the freedom of my people."

And what about Yehoshua's remarks?

"I read what he said and I understand it, but did anyone tell Yehoshua that you left Gaza in the wrong way? When we asked you to leave Gaza you said no, and when you decided to leave you did not come to us. You 'registered' the withdrawal from Gaza not in the name of moderation, and people got the wrong message from the move. Hamas created its whole political line, if it has any sort of line, on that issue. In the election campaign, Hamas' central poster said: 'Ten years of negotiations equal zero, three years of Qassams equal the liberation of Gaza.'"

You cannot blame those who got the wrong message, but those who sent it.

"Yehoshua is telling half the story. The other half is that you did what you did in Gaza, but took

no steps in the West Bank, where the majority of the Palestinian nation lives. The result is that people, even in the West Bank, say: 'Because people in Gaza opposed Israel with missiles, they forced the Israelis to withdraw - not because the Israelis wanted to arrive at a political solution.' Believe me, I cannot argue against that. It is only with a great effort that I will try to prove to someone that the argument is wrong. And there is also the example of southern Lebanon. People watch the insane Al Jazeera, which is the voice of extremism in the Arab world. They see Hezbollah saying: 'We defeated Israel and forced it to withdraw in 2000.'

In this regard, what effect did the 2006 war in Lebanon have?

"It had a very dramatic effect. You turned [Hezbollah leader Hassan] Nasrallah into a mega-hero in the Arab and Islamic world. He speaks in a language that mixes the lingo of a Lebanese merchant and the theological language of the spiritual centers in Iran. On the one hand, the nonreligious intellectuals find something in what he says, and on the other hand his language speaks also to those who think that the angels of God fought on the side of Hezbollah. I had a Lebanese friend who died a year ago. He was a communist and a Christian who became the chief editor of Hezbollah's newspaper in Beirut. He was one of the most sophisticated writers in the Arab world, a man of broad horizons, and he was in charge of Hezbollah's propaganda in the last war. That war generated shock: It led those we call intellectuals to reassess all their past beliefs. Look what happened in Egypt, where 99 percent of the intellectuals are sympathetic to Nasrallah - who will dare criticize him?"

Didn't Nasrallah lose the war?

"No. What is your definition of losing - the fact that he sustained much loss of life? Your definition of losing is measured in terms of the number of casualties, whereas for Hezbollah, the more loss of life the better. The dead become martyrs. They ascend to heaven, and who is waiting for them there? They will be worn out. Thank God I am not a martyr - 70 virgins!"

'Not one bullet'

" Hamas is not an enemy," Abed Rabbo says, "but it is jeopardizing my children's future, poisoning their lives with its ideology."

The more pressing question today is whether he can envisage an Israeli-Palestinian agreement without Hamas involvement. That question elicits a sigh that can be heard as far as the Qalandiyah checkpoint. "It will be difficult," he replies eventually. "But we want to overcome the problem by means of a national referendum. Will Hamas accept that? I don't know. What price will we have to pay them for their agreement? We will see later. I don't want to give them tips now."

Marwan Barghouti [the Palestinian leader imprisoned in Israel for involvement in terrorist acts] talks about a comprehensive strategic agreement with Hamas. What is your opinion?

"It is not possible. Who can talk today about a strategic agreement between Meretz and Shas?"

What is your personal option in the event that negotiations with Israel fail?

"My option is for us to decide on a unilateral declaration of independence and ask for the world's recognition. We will create an acute political crisis and at the same time we will be clear vis-a-vis our nation: This is not a third intifada. We will not use one missile or one bullet

or even one stone. We will ask our nation to use totally nonviolent means in order to protect the sovereignty of our state."

A mass march to the Qalandiyah checkpoint?

"Maybe, but that does not mean destroying Qalandiyah, but standing at the checkpoint every day, every hour, without violence and without clashing with anyone. It may look like a mad dream, but if we tell our public starting now that we have two options, the public will understand us better later on."

Abed Rabbo pauses for a moment and picks up a Palestinian newspaper whose front page carries a large photograph of a bloodied American demonstrator who was injured in the recent demonstration in the West Bank village of Bil'in against the security fence. "Look what happened in Bil'in," he says. "No one believed in it. One village fighting alone in demonstrations. Compare it to the missiles that Hamas is firing at Sderot."

Is Bil'in the model?

"I don't want the Palestinians to be shot like the American activist was, but we can keep going. History has so many examples of resistance. We must not give in, we must show that we want to realize our minimal right, which is the right to be equal human beings."W

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