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FORUM



SHARABI: STRENGTH IN RESTRAINT

"After 30 years," Dr Hisham Sharabi told *The Middle East's* Forum Editor Mark Bruzonsky, "I've learned that the most dangerous thing for a Palestinian to do is to submit to his emotional sense of moral outrage. His greatest strength lies in restraint and in giving reason full play in dealing with this problem."

Sharabi now wears three important hats in Washington. His newest and most politically visible is that of President of The National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA) — the mushrooming Arab lobby, featured in *The Middle East* in July.

Sharabi has taught at Washington's Georgetown University for the past 25 years. He entered the US from Palestine in 1947, received his Ph.D in history from the University of Chicago, and worked for a brief time at the UN Secretariat in New York. Sharabi holds an endowed chair in Arab History at Georgetown University's Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies. He is also editor of *The Journal of Palestinian Studies*.

In coming years, he said, he plans to give all his energy to the Arab American Foundation, which he is now helping to establish and which will work with NAAA. (Photos by Mark Bruzonsky).

Bruzonsky: You recently said that you think the US Government should be heavily involved financially in rebuilding Lebanon. What do you have in mind?

Sharabi: Yes, I did. And this is a matter we in NAAA are going to pursue with all our energy. I think the US has been, if not cynical, certainly insensitive in its policies towards Lebanon. Except for some peripheral aid in food and for refugees the substance of American support to Lebanon has been in the form of a \$100 million arms grant.

What Lebanon needs — besides rebuilding its security and armed forces — is to rebuild the economic infrastructure of the country. It needs expert advisers which the US could provide, material aid, and it needs good faith where political issues are concerned.

Don't you think the American people think the Arab world is rich enough to take care of Lebanon — that it's not an American responsibility?

The US is helping Egypt to the tune of \$750 million. And Lebanon has been a long-standing friend of the US. It deserves at least equal treatment.

If the US did come up with substantial economic aid to Lebanon, that would give the necessary political reassurance to some of the oil countries to participate. Now they are undecided whether the country is politically stable enough to put whatever aid they might give to proper use.

When Sadat decided to go to Jerusalem on his "sacred mission," did you support him?

On the emotional level I did. A large number of Palestinians and Arabs, though apprehensive about the final outcome of the step, were hopeful that it might indeed constitute a breakthrough and bring about an acceptable peaceful settlement. Intellectually, however, I was sceptical from the very beginning as to the wisdom of the step and the Israeli reaction to it. Unfortunately, my scepticism has proved to be more well-grounded than my emotional expectations.

So you see the Sadat initiative as having failed?

A failure in what it intended and what people expected it to achieve, namely, to initiate a process that would result in a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian problem.

Did he accomplish anything?

Two things, I think, both on the psychological rather than the political level — although this will have some impact politically. First it showed that the Arabs are indeed sincere in wanting peace. Although Sadat did this on his own, the gesture was perceived correctly as an Arab gesture. Had he been better received by the Israelis he would have had more open,

more articulate, Arab backing.

From what countries?

○ From all over the Arab world. Certainly from all the Arab governments described as "moderate" or "non-extremist", including Syria. Sadat's gesture considerably changed the image of the Arabs in the US and also in Western Europe.

The second thing is a new perception of Israel's true posture on the question of peace and war in the Middle East. Sadat put Israel to the test and showed that the Israelis are more interested in preserving territory than achieving peace. As long as they have military superiority they will not accept peace with the Arabs except on their own terms, which are very close to unconditional surrender.

Do you think that a Labour Government would have acted like Menahem Begin's Government?

○ Yes I do, except probably with more cleverness, with greater ability to mystify the issue than Begin who is a sincere, outspoken person for which, as a Palestinian, I'm most grateful.

Don't you have some anxiety that the Egyptians will forget the Palestinian cause because of their own problems and accept a separate arrangement with Israel?

○ I doubt that.

But supposing the Israelis under American pressure did provide some sort of five-year plan, some concept of Palestinian participation in their own future? Might not the Egyptians see this as enough to go forward with an agreement with Israel?

○ No. Why assume what already is obviously not forthcoming. The Israeli Government has said very clearly that it will not withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza and will not give the Palestinians the right to self-determination — two conditions on which Sadat has been very adamant and consistent.

Joseph Sisco said a few months ago in a Forum interview that Sadat's stated attitude towards the Palestinians was really just a cover and that he was prepared to make a separate arrangement with Israel if it would offer the things the US is telling it to offer.

○ I don't know where Sisco gets his information about Sadat's true intentions. I have no reason to believe that Sadat or the Egyptian Government are lying.

Then how do you make sense out of American policy which seems to want only very marginal concessions from Begin? Carter said in May that the Begin plan could be the basis for an agreement between Egypt and Israel. Are the Americans operating in complete ignorance of what is really possible with Egypt?

○ As time goes by, I can make less sense of American policy and of Carter's position on the Arab-Israeli conflict. His interview

with Trude Feldman that you referred to is quite contradictory to statements he made earlier. He has been wavering, but now he has entered a new stage in which he is taking contradictory positions.

I hope that the Carter Administration will stick to its initial position that a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict must be comprehensive and based on the solution of the Palestinian question. This means Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories and the Palestinians having a homeland of their own in part of Palestine where they can determine their future.

Arafat recently said he no longer believed that President Carter supports any kind of real Palestinian homeland.

○ I don't know what Carter really believes. All I'm trying to say is that I wish to give

"As time goes by I can make less and less sense of American policy, and of Carter's position on the Arab-Israeli conflict. He has been wavering but now he has entered a new stage in which he is taking contradictory positions."

him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe I'm being too generous.

Might it be deliberate ambiguity, for domestic political reasons?

○ At an earlier stage we all agreed this might be a possible explanation, but now I really wonder.

Perhaps he's waiting for Begin to collapse politically or physically?

○ If so, then it would be a sad comment on Carter's policy. If he's reduced to that, then one cannot reasonably expect any fruitful result.

Do you think the time has come for a Palestinian government-in-exile?

○ I think it's probably premature. The establishment of a provisional government-in-exile would hardly change anything today. Unless the Palestinians have something to gain by taking this step, why take it?

Do you think the time has come to amend or repeal the Palestine National Charter?

○ If it were helpful to do that I would advise it. But I don't think it is helpful. It will change nothing, and therefore I'm against changing anything in the Charter. The Palestinians have nothing to gain by any further unilateral gestures. I think the PLO has gone very far in trying to get

accepted, in making concessions on substantial political issues.

Unless these are met with concrete possibilities . . . like a willingness by Israel to make similar gestures as the ones being required of the PLO. . . .

If the Israelis agreed to negotiate with whatever Palestinians are willing to negotiate with them, would you then contemplate revising the Charter?

○ Then there would be some reason to consider the problem.

What if the Americans said they would recognise the PLO if the Charter were revised?

○ Again this is another kind of step that I think would be necessary before the PLO made further political concessions. Since the 1973 October war the Arab countries and the PLO have made concession after concession. The Israelis' position has become more inflexible.

Consequently, I think, the Arab governments and the PLO — all the so-called moderates — have their backs to the wall.

If you don't think that political or ideological changes should be made by the PLO, what is the PLO's strategy?

○ The PLO and the confrontation states, including Saudi Arabia, cannot maintain their present position for long. The way that Israel has held on to hard and inflexible policies regarding peace has put all these governments in a position where they will soon have to take a more aggressive attitude.

Are you diplomatically predicting another war?

○ That at least.

What more?

○ Resort to some sort of . . . the other options.

Actions against the West? Against Israel's supporters? Economic actions? Financial?

○ All possible options including the military one, including the oil one. . . . Otherwise these governments will be hard-pressed to justify their position. They will be eroded from within.

But with Begin in power wouldn't that play right into Israeli hands? And all military analysts agree that the Arabs would be destroyed in another war.

○ Yes, but if we take the assessments given to us prior to the October war everybody said war wasn't possible and the Israelis thought so too. What I'm saying is I'm not willing to rule out the military option on this basis.

How much time do the Arab governments have before their positions begin to be eroded?

○ It's beginning already, I think. If nothing comes through by next autumn I think we will enter into a new phase in the Middle East.

□ Do you think Sadat's repressive steps at home are a means of tightening his eroding position?

○ Probably, although with Sadat you never know. The logic behind his actions is not always apparent.

□ You sound very critical of the actions he's taken.

○ It is more sad than anything else. The democracy he is now dismantling was pitiful to start with. His actions are empty of content. He's like someone confronted with a fatal disease who addresses himself to treating a cold.

□ Do you think he's lost touch with domestic political realities?

○ You're assuming that he was in touch in the first place.

□ It's no secret now that Carter made the PLO an offer last summer. He told them the US was prepared to talk with them and to advocate a chair for them at Geneva if they would accept 242. Did the PLO miss an historic opportunity?

○ As far as I know, there must have been a change of heart on the American side. I was in Beirut at the time and the atmosphere among the PLO was very positive. They were almost certain that this hurdle had been overcome in August last year. But then something happened, the details of which I do not know. President Carter stated in Plains, Georgia, that the US had been informed by a third party that the PLO was ready to accept 242.

□ Were the Saudis the third party?

○ That's right. Carter added, that the Palestinians wanted to insist that they should be considered as a people with national rights rather than as mere refugees. And, he said this is okay with us. I think this was the apex of the process. After that there was a freezing of the situation.

□ The Americans say the PLO then refused to recognise 242, and that Washington felt betrayed.

○ On the contrary. The PLO feels this.

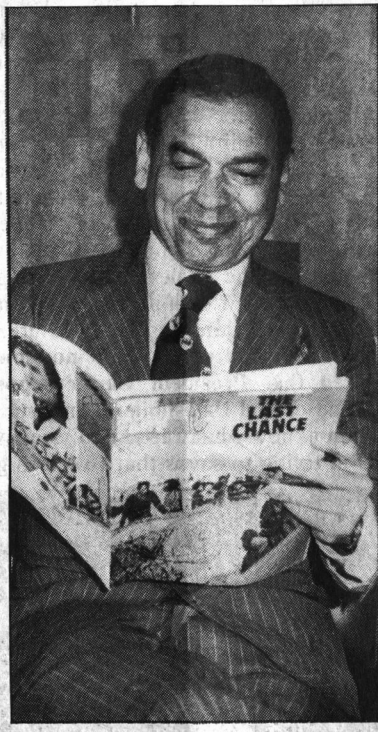
□ But why didn't the PLO recognise 242?

○ They wanted recognition by the US of their status — the status of the Palestinian people as a people with national rights and not as refugees. This is absolutely crucial to them.

□ But Carter said he was prepared to tolerate a reservation as long as 242 itself was recognised.

○ The reservation as I understand it, was to be made by the US. All the PLO wanted was for the US to link Resolution 242 with a statement by Carter like those he had made previously that the Palestinian people have the right to their own homeland.

This did not come. And when they asked the Americans, 'suppose we accept 242, what will you give us?' The answer was, 'we promise you nothing. All we give you is



"The establishment of a Palestinian government-in-exile would hardly change anything today. Unless the Palestinians have something to gain by taking this step, why take it?"

agreement to discuss the issues."

□ But the Carter Administration says it offered to begin negotiations for talks between the US Government and the PLO and was willing to move in the direction of American support for PLO participation at Geneva. Didn't the PLO really miss an opportunity and wouldn't it jump at such an offer if it were made again?

○ My feeling is, in retrospect — I have no evidence to base it on — that the US came under great Israeli pressure as the Carter Administration appeared to be moving towards a greater understanding with the PLO and probably recognition in late summer or early autumn, last year. Carter buckled under the pressure as he did after the October Soviet-American agreement, the homeland statement, and so many other positions that he has taken which elicited strong Israeli opposition.

□ There was another chance last December when the PLO could have gone to the Cairo Conference and put the Israelis on the spot.

○ Theoretically this is probably correct.

Practically, it would have been impossible for the chairman of the Executive Committee of the PLO to send a delegation to Cairo. Politically he couldn't do it, given the psychological apprehensions, the feelings of betrayal, and so on.

It's very easy to say that they would have been clever to do it, but they couldn't have done it.

□ If you were to see President Carter in your capacity as President of NAAA, what would you tell him about the Palestinian problem?

○ I wish I could have the opportunity to see him privately and to have his ear on this issue. I would first try to convince him of the sincerity of the Palestinian and Arab leaders for peace. I would also try to show him how impossible it is that any kind of stability in the region could be attained by mystifying the Palestinian issue; that the Begin plan has absolutely no hope of acceptance by any Palestinian or Arab leader or government; that the principles for a just and reasonable and internationally acceptable resolution must be based on what has world consensus, that is, Security Council Resolution 242, Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, and implementation of the principle of self-determination for the Palestinian people.

To deny these principles or to try to go around them is not merely counter-productive but can result in the breakdown of the first genuine opportunity that we have in 30 years for a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This could thrust the entire area into a new era of instability and probably war and chaos.

□ You've not always held the view that there should be a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, Arab recognition of Israel and co-existence with Israel. When did you reach this conclusion?

○ When I became convinced that if such a state were not established then the rest of Palestine would be absorbed by the Zionist settlers and that the Palestinians would lose any hope of ever getting back any part of their homeland.

□ But the Israelis believe that you want to get what's possible now and maybe all of Palestine later, say in 10 or 20 years when the Arab world is stronger.

○ I'm not going to give guarantees to Israel of my or my people's hopes and fears for the distant future. No enemy can ask of his opponent to mortgage his soul and mind for 30 years. This is absurd. What Israel is saying is said in bad faith to distort the issues.

It's said to prevent a peace settlement, to gain time, to do precisely what I'm afraid might happen, to be able to maintain the status quo long enough to take the land from the Palestinians who have remained in the occupied areas and to face the world

and the Palestinians and the Arabs with a *fait accompli* as they did after they occupied and conquered the area of pre-1967 Israel in 1948-49.

Well, what kind of relations would you envisage between a Palestinian and Israeli state, assuming that some of the people in Israel who support a Palestinian state ever came to power?

I used to make assumptions quite freely. Now I cannot. I've really lost confidence that there is any substantial group in the mainstream of Israeli life who want peace on the basis that I think is minimal from the point of view of the Palestinians.

I think that overwhelming military power, the zealous policies of the ruling coalition, the hesitation and even weakness of the American Administration in dealing with Israel have led them to believe that they do not have to make substantial concessions.

Earlier you said that the Arab states were prepared for real peace and normal relations with Israel if the kind of settlement we've been discussing could be brought about. But you don't seem to extend this to the Palestinians.

Why should I when the Palestinians have been denied all recognition. They barely exist for the Israelis! The Palestinians are constantly asked to recognise Israel and its right to exist, to agree to and have normal relations. But what good will this do the Palestinians?

Zionist leader Nahum Goldmann recently stated that the Israelis should talk to the PLO, that Israel should accept the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, and that there should be a Palestinian state. Who in the Palestinian camp is saying comparable things?

Officials of the PLO like Hammani and others! Officials of the PLO have said that! He said that we accept a Zionist Israel and are willing to co-exist with Israel as it is.

You've been quoted many times saying Zionism is racism. If you believe that, would it not be difficult to co-exist with a racist state?

In order to get my own state, for the Palestinians to get their right to national self-determination in Palestine ... this could be a price that has to be paid. It doesn't mean that I like it. There are many things in life we have to accept even though we may be opposed to them.

I hope, and I think history will make it inevitable, that before too long the Jews themselves in Israel — in a situation that has been pacified — will get rid of Zionism. I mean Zionism as racism. That is, those aspects of the Israeli-Zionist-Jewish state that are racist. By racist I mean very simple things like the Law of Return.

But that's absolutely crucial to the Jewish state.

It is crucial to the racist attitude of the Israeli-Jewish state, the way they are treating the people in the Negav today. They treat poor bedouins as "bush natives". Their treatment of these people is Nazi — more than Nazi because it is not an aberration as it was the Germans who were temporarily seized by that madness.

But what we have in Israel is 30 years of trampling over the Palestinians as a people, of treating them like dirt, of killing their men, women and children as if they are flies.

The US is not asking Israel to end the Law of Return, nor is the United Nations.

Well, the Palestinians are, believe me!

So regardless of any territorial settlement and the establishment of a Palestinian state the Palestinians will demand an end to certain aspects of Zionist ideology.

They're making no such demands. I'm giving you my own feelings about Zionism and my hopes about the future of Zionism and the future both for the Palestinians and for the Jews living in Palestine. If we are going to live together in other than a suspicious, hostile existence, Zionism has to go!

Does a Jewish state stay?

Yes, anything. I don't know how the operation, the excision, is going to take place and keep this body — whatever body — they want to keep. I want the racism out! Because this is the barrier between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East today and as long as it lasts. Until they get out of their minds this racist attitude toward Arabs there will be an unbridgable barrier, an element that will never allow the Middle East and the Arab world to be secure home for the Jews. Because, until this happens, the Arabs will feel that the Jews in Israel and elsewhere in the Arab world are not in their homes.

But knowing what you know about Israel and American Jews do you have any real expectations that the State of Israel will become a non-Zionist state in the foreseeable future?

Not in the near future, but definitely in the foreseeable future.

I'm not trying to find a philosophical dividing line between what you accept and don't accept. Do you accept the concept that if Jews want to be a nation, want to call themselves a nation, that's their decision? But in their relations with the Arabs they cannot be allowed to have racist aspects to the policies of their Jewish state?

If they want to live among Arabs, precisely that.

So it's not Jewish nationalism you're questioning. It's the way that nationalism interacts with the Arabs living in and around Israel? You accept a Jewish state with a different psychological attitude toward its minority Arab citizens and

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neighbouring Arab states?

○ Yes. The issue is how that nationalism expresses itself as Zionism.

□ **Won't your Palestinian state have a Law of Return? Won't you, as an American born in Palestine, or your child, have special privileges to return to the new Palestinian state?**

○ Yes, but without excluding everyone else.

□ **So, it's the exclusivity you object to, not that it's made easier for Jews to become Israelis.**

○ Precisely. It's the exclusivity.

□ **You've lived in the US for 31 years and have been an American citizen for 16 years. Would you contemplate going back and living and building a Palestinian state?**

○ Certainly. Of course.

□ **And would most of your colleagues in the US do the same?**

○ Many of them would.

□ **The professional and personal sacrifice would be tremendous. You're a tenured professor at a major university here, the head of an important Arab American organisation. What would this new Palestinian state offer you?**

○ It offers me a homeland, a home which I haven't had for 31 years!

□ **Would you give up your American citizenship?**

○ I don't need to. You know, many Israelis have . . .

□ **But that's a special case. I'm not sure it would be extended to the Palestinians. I don't think you can be both a Frenchman and an American.**

○ Well, if it came to that, yes I would give it up.

□ **Is this true that, at least in the beginning, there probably wouldn't be a great influx of professional and middle class people?**

○ Yes. It's probably true. But still it would make a tremendous difference to them to have a Palestinian state even if they didn't go to it. To be able to have a Palestinian passport. To be able to go there, say, in the summer or whenever you want and feel that you are in your home.

□ **Where would the capital of the Palestinian state be?**

○ In Jerusalem.

□ **Do you envisage it as an open city with the Jewish part the capital of Israel and the Arab part the capital of the Palestinian state?**

○ Yes. Everything can be worked out. Once we get to that point there will be no problem that can't be worked out.

□ **Is President Carter beginning to lose the trust of the Arab American community?**

○ He's certainly beginning to lose mine. But by and large the Arab American community is politically unsophisticated and they like the leader.

□ **Do you draw much hope from the**

"Peace Now" movement's growth in Israel?

○ But I hear very little even from these people about the real conditions of peace.

They should say: "God damn it! We've been cruel to these people. We've been heartless to these people for 30 years. Human decency, political interests, the future of our children, our place in the world, all require it. Let's stop the Zionist crazies like this man on top and take the bull by the horns and solve the Palestinian problem."

□ **Don't you have some hope when Israeli establishment figures like Harkabi break with Israeli policies?**

○ Harkabi is a man who speaks with bad faith. He is a paranoid, former chief of intelligence, who has all the basic racist attitudes toward the Palestinians. He may think that he's being just, benign and fair-minded. But take the body of his works and put them together. They show the mentality of a settler who is perhaps less ideologically zany than people like Sharon or Begin . . .

□ **But what about Peled, Eliav, Avneri and Yitzhak Navon, who has always advocated talking to the Palestinians and is now President of Israel?**

○ If the Peleds, the Avneris, the Eliavs were in the government, if their ideas were supported by the mainstream, fine, I would change my argument. But they're not.

□ **Are Hammami's ideas supported by the mainstream of the Palestinians?**

○ No, but when you asked me whether there are persons in the Palestinian ranks to correspond with the moderate and fair-minded people in Israeli ranks I said yes there are.

□ **But that's my point. There are such people in both, but neither have major political importance.**

○ With one basic difference. The Palestinians are the victims and the Israelis are the victimisers. What you expect, what you demand from one does not with logical symmetry apply to the other.

□ **How do you rate the Western media as it reports on the Arab-Israeli conflict?**

○ I must admit that the media in the West has become more fair-minded in its attitude. It no longer dismisses out of hand the Arab-Palestinian position. It no longer — and this is perhaps more important — accepts uncritically Israeli positions, attitudes and statements. Even in this country (the US).

I think we are at the beginning of an irreversible development. The process of demystification has set in. It cannot be reversed. And I think Israel, Zionism and the pro-Israeli position can no longer dominate the definition of the situation.

□ **If a settlement were reached and the US were to offer the Israelis a security guaran-**

tee — a treaty which two-thirds of the Senate would have to ratify, would your organisation support or oppose it?

○ I wouldn't oppose anything out of hand. After 30 years I've learned that the most dangerous thing for a Palestinian to do is to submit to his emotional sense of moral outrage. And that his greatest strength lies in restraint and in giving reason full play in dealing with this problem.

□ **Hasn't the PLO violated that by returning to terrorism. The bus incident in March for example?**

○ Yes, I don't want to go into that now, but I do not want to leave you with the impression that the Palestinians are apologetic about their use of violence. Terrorism as the Palestinians have used it was created and perfected by the people now in power in Israel.

What you call terror has been used against them when they were totally vulnerable; when they had no way of protecting themselves. Just read the accounts of what they did to the Palestinian people! Deir Yassin is just one of the incidents. Deir Yassin is not the exception. It is more and more a sort of a pattern.

I'm against the use of terror because it is counter-productive. It puts the Palestinians exactly where the Israelis want them, making it possible to portray the Palestinians by an image which is completely false.

I'm against terrorism because innocent people suffer, they shouldn't. But I know that in a situation such as ours innocent victims, unfortunately, will have to pay for what they were not responsible for in the first place.

□ **You've just become President of the NAAA. What are your main goals for the coming year?**

○ First, to build up the organisation so that it will have a national character by increasing the membership to between 10,000 and 15,000 this year. On the political level I would like the Association to take a more aggressive attitude to Administration positions on the Middle East.

□ **Do you think NAAA has become the main Arab lobby opposing the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the "Jewish lobby" in Washington?**

○ I do, provided that NAAA is not considered solely as a lobby. We're interested in all sorts of activities concerning the Arab American community. We are concerned, for instance, with cultural aspects and the question of "Arab image". An Arab American Cultural Foundation will be established. Although not a subsidiary it will co-operate with NAAA. I intend to give it all my energy when it is established and when I complete my present tenure as NAAA president. We are more like the Jewish community as a whole, engaged in all sorts of activities, than like AIPAC. □