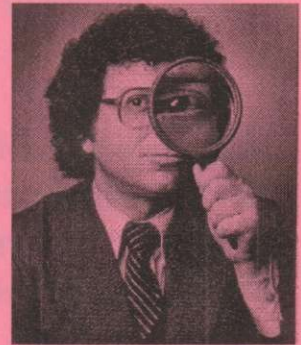


"From Washington" Column

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BUYING SOCKS ...AND POINTING FINGERS

By Mark A. Bruzonsky

"In what seemed like a serious breach of protocol, Nabil Shaath, the P.L.O.'s chief negotiator, suddenly strode onto the stage...and then he talked to Mr. Peres. A minute later, Mr. Christopher interposed himself between Mr. Arafat and Mr. Shaath to talk.

"Mr. Mubarak was fuming that Mr. Arafat had rained on his party. As Mr. Mubarak steamed, Mr. Rabin grew red in the face, and was said to have summoned his motorcade. Opposite Mr. Rabin, Mr. Arafat glowered, and moved a leg nervously as if he were digging in."

*NEW YORK TIMES, 5 May 94
(The day after the recent Cairo ceremony)*

[Washington - May 1994]

For over a decade now, ever since his sudden emergence on the international diplomatic circuit during the brutal Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Nabil Shaath

has been the PLO-man the Americans, and then the Israelis, have somehow been most eager to turn to.

While the PLO was publicly vilified by American and Israeli officials, while laws were passed making it illegal for Israelis to even talk to anyone in the PLO and preventing PLO officials from even entering the United States, somehow Shaath managed to go back and forth with aplomb, somehow Shaath managed to meet with nearly everyone nearly anywhere.

So there he was -- center stage at one of those history-making show and tell ceremonies designed to instantly reverse public opinion and pretend that all the years of conflict are forgotten -- telling Chairman Arafat (as were none other than the Israeli Prime Minister, the American Secretary of State, and the Egyptian President) that he should get out his pen and sign on the dotted line!

Just who is Nabil Shaath? And just why has he been treated so specially and so differently from others in the PLO, others in fact who were gunned down by Israeli hit-teams rather than met with for dinner?

A few aspects are known; others are speculative but nevertheless of considerable interest.

Having been educated in the U.S. and having taught economics at the well-known Wharton School in Pennsylvania, Mr. Shaath is no stranger to American and Jewish circles. Furthermore, since his American days he has lived for quite some time in Cairo and long ago adopted the gregarious mannerisms of Egyptian businessmen.

Most importantly, the Americans and Israelis have courted Nabil Shaath (assuming that is that there aren't more sinister reasons to explain why they have turned to him) simply because he has been known to be ready to make just about any kind of deal, known to be a bit simple-minded in his approach, and most important of all known to have Yasser Arafat's ear, whatever the reasons.

Nabil Shaath: The "Good" Palestinian

So much for what is known, as opposed to what is speculated.

For years now, especially at times of major diplomatic undertakings which the PLO has nearly always handled awfully, the refrain "What's Nabil doing now?!" has been commonplace from many Palestinians far and wide. Especially from Palestinians who have known Shaath for a long time, and in most such cases split with him long ago, "What's Nabil doing this time!" has become an almost mantra-like chorus of despair when people gather to moan about the demise of what was once a broadly supported PLO movement.

Point-man for Yasser Arafat since the Beirut invasion, and most recently internationally visible because of his role in the public negotiations with the Israelis (talks which he purposefully delayed to give the rump PLO more time), Nabil Shaath has emerged as the leading Palestinian proponent of making a deal, any deal, in order to keep Arafat on top and the Americans happy.

In the process of course Nabil Shaath has become a leading target for those who think the so-called "peace process" is little more than a politically choreographed Palestinian capitulation by a bankrupt and corrupted Palestinian leadership, little more than a Palestinian Versailles, pretty much a thinly-veiled Palestinian surrender to the Israelis and the Americans at the behest of rich and powerful Arab interests who have for some time now been dealing with the Israelis.

Accountable to no one really, Nabil Shaath has always been a creation of Yasser Arafat who anointed him and who by so doing welcomed those manipulating Shaath to manipulate him as well. Indeed, it is Shaath, more than any other Palestinian other than Yasser Arafat himself, who is responsible for the humiliating position the Palestinians find themselves in at this point in their history.

"PLO leadership is spread so thin, one diplomat here noted, that chief PLO negotiator Nabil Shaath recently had to interrupt his diplomatic duties to arrange the purchase of socks for the new police force. 'So in the middle of all these negotiations -- he's on

every committee -- he says he's got to go find a factory where he can buy the socks,' the envoy said."

THE WASHINGTON POST

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These days, whenever the name Shaath is heard in some of the most involved and knowledgeable Palestinian circles, substantial vilification usually follows. Many of those who knew Shaath well, including this writer, stopped trusting him quite some time ago. For many years now, long before the numbing events that exploded last August, Shaath's conduct and attitudes had become inexplicable. Well....in retrospect...maybe not so inexplicable as he has actually been working closely for some time with the Israeli Labor Party and the Peace Now movement (itself always controlled by that Party), as well as with senior persons in both the Bush and Clinton Administrations. His old friends and allies had deserted him some time ago, and he they.

How can one explain this situation and this person?

The long and the short of it is that Shaath's constituency is not now nor was it ever from within Palestinian ranks. Shaath hardly knows his way around a refugee camp; and in most he wouldn't be a welcome visitor to say the least. Shaath has no political standing among any sizable group of Palestinians...indeed that may be one of the very reasons Arafat has been willing to let him play the role he has.

The long and the short of it is this: This is the same Nabil Shaath who time after gullible time has been used and manipulated by the Israelis and by the Americans.

This is the same Nabil Shaath, for instance, who came to Washington and personally assured Chairman Arafat, then bunkered down in Beirut in the summer of 1982, that if only he would agree to leave Lebanon the Palestinians left behind had nothing to fear. A few weeks later the nightmarish Sabra and Chattilah massacres took place, the Israelis participating, the Americans making excuses, Shaath claiming he had been misled but would never let such a thing happen again.

This is the same Nabil Shaath who was so insensitive to the realities on the ground for the Palestinians under occupation earlier this year that he didn't even think of insisting on protection of the Palestinians from Israeli settlers; not until the Hebron massacre that is.

This is the same Nabil Shaath, President of the Cairo-based TEAM management consulting firm which has been economically benefiting by his political involvements for a long time now, that in the very midst of the detailed negotiations last month had to excuse himself so he could make calls about getting socks for the new "Palestinian police." Now what does that say about his own management skills?

This is the same Nabil Shaath who is planning to soon go to Palestine -- well to Jericho and to Gaza that is and under Israeli protection to boot -- where it seems his role will be comparable more to that of a Palestinian Kapo (the term applied to those Jews who cooperated in "controlling" their fellow Jews during the Nazi era) than that of a dignified Palestinian nationalist. The Israelis will check him at the border, welcome him to "the Palestinian entity", and make sure he is aware that its now his job to "control" the Palestinians, to suppress the "Intifada", and when the going gets rough to do the very same thing he did on the Cairo stage, i.e., to make sure Yasser Arafat does what he's told.

For this is the same Nabil Shaath who has gotten quite used to having Israelis fingers pointed at him; just as Shimon Peres did on stage to Yasser Arafat last week in front of the whole world -- making it abundantly evident indeed that there should be no mistaking who is really in charge.

So there Shaath strode last week, aiding Shimon Peres whose finger kept wagging straight at "Chairman" Arafat, essentially cornering his own pathetically outmaneuvered patron on behalf of.....

Well....that's exactly the unanswered question...on behalf of whom?

In the past few months a number of important Palestinian personalities have actually indicated, in private, that they suspect Shaath's loyalties may not really be to the PLO, that there is a pattern of conduct over so many years now to raise serious questions about who is really pulling Shaath's strings.

**Well....that's exactly the unanswered
question...on behalf of whom?**

The last time I personally had a long, private talk with Shaath was a few years back in Tunis for about an hour when he introduced me to Yasser Abed-Rabbo. As they left my hotel room...Shaath whispered to me about Abed-Rabbo "...He's not Fateh, you know. But doesn't he talk just like one of us!"

I left Tunis fearing that Shaath would say such a thing about me!

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