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## Interview: Dr. Nabil Shaath

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# Toward a viable program for peace in the Middle East

*Dr. Shaath is head of the political committee of the Palestine National Council (PNC). A graduate of the Wharton School of Business, he lives in Cairo, where he runs the TEAM Corporation. The interview was conducted on April 16 by EIR correspondent Scott Thompson at the annual conference of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee held in Arlington, Virginia. An earlier interview with Dr. Shaath was published in EIR on April 7.*

**EIR:** How successful did you consider the visit by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to the United States? Do you think there was anything new in the policies of the Bush administration?

**Dr. Shaath:** During his visit, Mr. Mubarak expounded to Mr. Bush what amounted to a plan for the peace process—the PLO plan for the peace process that was formulated by the Palestine National Council last fall. And Mr. Mubarak was well received by Bush. We felt that it contributed to the peace process. Mr. Mubarak explained to Bush the position of the PLO. All in all, I thought it was a positive development, and it contributed to the peace process.

**EIR:** There was some commentary in the press that Mr. Mubarak accepted the idea of “shaping the atmosphere for peace,” which, from my last interview with you, I believe we agreed was a formula for interim measures and confidence-building measures that would drag out actual peace. What is your interpretation of what occurred?

**Dr. Shaath:** I think he did a good job of explaining the need for an international conference. And, he explained, really, the negative aspects of the Shamir proposal for elections. We want to get to elections eventually. We did not feel that Mubarak abandoned the PLO peace plan, or was drawn into, in any way, a negative position. On the contrary, if you agree on basically the plan of the peace process for an international conference, which Bush during Mubarak’s visit gave at least a potential nod to, then you can talk about elections and confidence-building measures, as a step toward the international conference. . . . What you then negotiate is good con-

fidence-building measures.

**EIR:** In our last interview, I drew you out on some of the potential drawbacks of an international conference. But, you are right that Bush gave a nod to an international conference. Bush also gave a nod to the need for an Israeli withdrawal. Can you elaborate on what you think Bush meant by that idea of a withdrawal? Was there a timetable suggested, conditions, or anything?

**Dr. Shaath:** I don’t really know the details of what Mubarak discussed with Bush. I’m sure that whatever he concluded, he had in mind the PLO position on the matter. He had to consult with us. Mubarak is consistent in saying that he will not play a separate role from what the PLO wants.

**EIR:** So he would have said in regard to this proposal of a withdrawal, that he might have to go back and consult with Chairman Arafat? But, he would have said that he was lending his good offices to the peace plan that was developed at the last PNC meeting?

**Dr. Shaath:** Yes. Good. That was the tenor of his desire to meet with Arafat, to get from Arafat a clear position before coming to meet with Bush. I believe that Arafat today has seen Mubarak, before Arafat travels on to Amman, Jordan to meet King Hussein before his visit to meet with President Bush.

**EIR:** The last time you were in New York on March 12, Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* received a leak from a “senior administration official” on the negotiating position for the visit of Shamir and also for the Tunisian PLO-U.S. dialogue. The article included measures for winding down the *Intifada* [Palestinian uprising] in exchange for easing the conditions of the occupation, and even for the Palestinians to stop circulating “inflammatory pamphlets.” Were those the actual steps presented by the United States in Tunis, when Ambassador Pelletreau met PLO officials?

**Dr. Shaath:** That was a very positive meeting in the sense that during the five-and-a-half hours of it, they examined

positions very carefully: the position of the PLO and the tabling of the American ideas of the *Intifada* and the exchange of information. I think in general the discussion was very open and friendly.

**EIR:** But was the focus on the specific measures of the *Times* or was it more broad-ranging?

**Dr. Shaath:** I would say the United States did not demand that the PLO stop the *Intifada*. The impression that came from the *Times* article had been tempered by Secretary Baker, so that there was not a demand that the PLO stop the *Intifada*. There was discussion instead of such questions as whether something could be done on the border in the north.

**EIR:** In my last interview with you, you raised a negotiating position of Chairman Arafat, that in exchange for stopping any attacks upon Palestinian camps in Lebanon and so forth, the PLO would cease any guerrilla raids into Israel.

**Dr. Shaath:** I think this position was explained to the United States for certain reciprocal measures. I think the United States government also now takes the position that all of these activities are not terrorism, because they do not affect civilians. And, therefore, they have taken the position that this does not preclude the dialogue.

**EIR:** But, as I understand it, these incidents are being carried out by the PFLP, the DFLP, and the PFLP-GC [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command—all radical Palestinian splinter groups—ed.], Fatah. The Syrian-backed PFLP-GC is not even part of the PLO, but clearly conducts terrorism. As I understand it, the PFLP and DFLP have said that they will not heed Fatah on this matter. Is that not correct?

**Dr. Shaath:** Yes, but the Israelis continue their operations, as evidenced by the fact that all of the commandos that would have carried out these operations were killed inside Lebanon. Fatah wanted to cool down the situation. Yes, therefore, Fatah would have liked to see a stop to the operations, at least as a cooling-down measure, but could not get a categorical position from the other parties until it obtains some reciprocal measures from the Israelis that would need to be discussed.

**EIR:** Is there any significant counter-reaction since the PNC meeting to the chairman and the more moderate position that has been taken?

**Dr. Shaath:** Yes, I would say that there has been some tension developing with the PFLP itself as to some of the pronouncements of the chairman. In fact, the PFLP has published some statements against the chairman, which took exception to the last executive council meeting. But, by and large, they center around his statements and they will not lead to anything more than statements published. In fact, at

the executive council meeting, the PFLP joined the unanimous decision to appoint the chairman President of the Republic of Palestine. So, it was basically tension about some of the statements.

**EIR:** There are also reports of tension between the chairman with Farouk Qaddoumi, the chairman of the PLO political committee. It appears that Mr. Qaddoumi is more of a hard-liner, who appears closer to Syria, Libya, and the Rejection Front countries. Is that anything significant?

**Dr. Shaath:** No, not really. There is some tension about the nature of the process. . . . Let's say that there has been some division of labor between the foreign minister Qaddoumi and the chairman Arafat. But, by and large, there is not a significant tension.

**EIR:** What about the role of Syria right now? For a while you were talking about mending fences, then things seemed to go back to the same level of confrontation after the PNC peace plan was announced. Previously, Syrian-backed Palestinian groups had even tried to assassinate the chairman. Where do things stand now?

**Dr. Shaath:** Well, I think that there is a possible rapprochement, because both verbal statements have been made and there has been discussion through the other Arab states such as Algeria. There is a real possibility of an opening and rapprochement.

**EIR:** There is a growing concern in Britain, Israel, the United States, and elsewhere about the possibility of an Israeli-Syrian conflict that would derail any progress toward peace.

**Dr. Shaath:** Right. We feel about this also that. The chairman made some statements warning of the possibility of an Israeli invasion that would lead to an Israeli-Syrian war in Lebanon. He is speaking from a depth of experience. He is the one who warned about the 1982 invasion of Israel into Lebanon, when others did not believe that this was possible.

**EIR:** What role do you see the Soviets as playing in the confrontation between Israel and Syria or the rapprochement between Syria and the PLO?

**Dr. Shaath:** First, take the rapprochement. They would like to see this happen. They are trying to bring together the five Arab confrontation states to become a negotiating bloc for the international conference. . . .

**EIR:** Yes, but the Soviets are supplying Syria with modern weapons—including Sukhoi 24 bombers, surface-to-surface missiles, and so forth—that even give the Syrians a chemical warfare capability against Israel. These are the same weapons that the Syrians are using to reduce Lebanon.

**Dr. Shaath:** But that is consistent with the Soviet policy in the Middle East. These are essentially defensive weapons that help Syria protect itself from Israel.