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## At the grass roots, an unlikely alliance for Mideast peace

By Charles A. Radin, Globe Staff, 11/23/2003

TAFUH, West Bank -- Huda al-Tardi, a passionate young believer in holy war, is a nightmare for Middle East peacemakers. Alia Salim, a hard-nosed but war-weary middle-aged woman who is ready to stop the fighting, is a hope.

One a mother, the other a grandmother, they sat side by side at a women's association meeting in this village near Hebron last week with 40 other women, debating the presentation they had just heard from a campaigner for the latest and possibly the most novel Mideast peace initiative yet -- a joint Palestinian-Israeli effort to create such a huge demand for peace that even Yasser Arafat and Ariel Sharon could not ignore it.

"Jihad is in our religion, you cannot cancel it," said Tardi, juggling one child and then another in the folds of her head-to-toe black robes. "I am breast-feeding my children the love of martyrdom. If you drop jihad, we will never get our rights."

Jamil Rushdi, a former Palestinian fighter who spent 10 years in Israeli prisons, presented the peace initiative to the women. Rushdi told Tardi she had a right to her opinion. But, he asked, how many of the other women agree? Not one responded.

"We are ready to stop everything," Alia Salim said, "if you can give us a guarantee that Israel will give us our rights."

Leaders of The People's Voice, a campaign headed on the Palestinian side by an aristocratic philosopher-activist, Sari Nusseibeh, and on the Israeli side by a former director of the Shin Bet security agency, Ami Ayalon, seem to believe far more Palestinians are like Salim than like Tardi.

They also feel -- and recent polls bear them out -- that many more Israelis would compromise rather than continue fighting if they were guaranteed an end to terrorist attacks and Palestinian vows to eradicate the Jewish state.

But they say peacemaking has been thwarted, not just by the radicals of both sides and by political leaders who do not lead, but also by the diplomacy of "constructive ambiguity" at the heart of every Middle East peace plan from the Oslo accords of the early 1990s to the current, US-backed "road map." The People's Voice campaign aims to change that by facing major issues head-on.

The idea of constructive ambiguity was to work around the most difficult problems, and to tackle relatively easy issues first to build confidence between sides divided by decades of bloodshed. That was supposed to help tackle more intractable problems such as settlements, borders, refugees, and the status of Jerusalem.

Ayalon, a former naval commando and spymaster who is running the Israeli end of the new campaign, says a decade of failures has proved conclusively that this approach does not



work.

"They will not fight terrorism unless there is a clear future -- a Palestinian state and no occupation," Ayalon said of the Palestinians. "We will not freeze and dismantle settlements . . . unless they give up on right of return" of Palestinians who fled or were driven from their homes during the 1948 war in which the Arab world tried to prevent the establishment of Israel.

Ayalon and Nusseibeh, the former Palestine Liberation Organization commissioner for Jerusalem affairs who heads the Palestinian side of the campaign, have drafted a program that is not at all ambiguous on big issues.

Under the plan, Palestinians would get a state, and it would be as big as the territories occupied by Israel since the 1967 Six Day War. It would contain no Israeli settlements.

The Palestinians would not have any right to return to ancestral homes in Israel. Palestine would control the top of the Temple Mount, or the Haram al-Sharif, and Israel would control the Western Wall. Neither side would have sovereignty there. Palestinian neighborhoods of Jerusalem would be part of Palestine, Jewish ones part of Israel.

Many details would remain for political leaders to negotiate, Ayalon and Nusseibeh say; the point of their campaign is to demonstrate a compelling level of public support for making compromises.

"This is the first time in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that movement is from the ground up," said Nusseibeh, who was pushed out as PLO commissioner for Jerusalem after he began advocating compromise on the refugee issue.

In the four months since the campaign began, organizers say, the People's Voice proposal has been endorsed by 60,000 Palestinians and 100,000 Israelis, most of whom have signed up after attending presentations and discussions in homes, offices, or civic associations similar to the women's association in Tafuh. Organizers say they expect to double those numbers by early next year.

The going is much rougher in Palestinian areas than in Israel. Some campaign workers and signers have been threatened. When a leading Palestinian pollster, Khalil Shikaki, found in a survey that only 10 percent of Palestinian refugees in the occupied territories and the diaspora said they wanted to return to Israel, his Ramallah offices were trashed and Shikaki was pelted with eggs.

But despite these problems, "we have a people's movement, and it is growing," Nusseibeh said. "There is a network, people are going house to house."

Ayalon says the Israeli campaigners have been accused of betraying their country, but "so long as we're considered a naive, Boy Scout-type movement, we won't have too many enemies. . . . We shall have enemies, but only later.

"For Sari, there are serious enemies now," Ayalon said, "because he is touching this sensitive issue" of the Palestinian refugees.

Ayalon and Nusseibeh praise the spirit of the "Geneva Accord," worked out last month by Israeli liberals and Palestinians close to Arafat, under the sponsorship of the Swiss government. The effort seeks a model for a final resolution of all aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

But they vow to pursue their own populist campaign, whatever happens with the Geneva Accord. "Some of the people involved in the Geneva document were saying only a few weeks ago, 'The road map is perfect. We do not need to change it.' I will give them another chance, but I will go on working," Nusseibeh said.

While the Geneva document generated favorable comment in European capitals and in Washington, it is not working in Israel. Even centrists like Ayalon will not accept a partial return of refugees to Israel and Palestinian sovereignty on the Temple Mount.

Yuval Steinitz, a member of Likud and the chairman of the important Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee, condemned the Geneva effort as an illegitimate effort funded by foreign interests, but said the Ayalon-Nusseibeh initiative is "legitimate . . . and contains positive elements."

In any case, says a Western diplomat whose government is monitoring the developments, the two initiatives and a spate of sharp divisions at the upper echelons of both Israeli and Palestinian political circles are warming and reactivating public interest in peace efforts, stimulating a response from leading officials on both sides.

"What's for sure is they are feeling the need to show they are doing something," the diplomat said. "Whether they are really doing something, who knows? But they are feeling the pressure."

Ayalon says this is what the populist initiative is all about.

"The leaders are following their people," he said. "They will go forward only if their people push them."

Charles A. Radin can be reached at [radin@globe.com](mailto:radin@globe.com)

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