

# Al-Sheikh Tells The Media Line PA Is Ready for Direct Talks With Israel

New relationship with Washington presages bilateral and trilateral talks

Civil Affairs Minister Hussein Al-Sheikh is one of the leading figures in the Palestinian Authority hierarchy and is one of President Mahmoud Abbas' closest advisers. Al-Sheikh is the point person to Israel in all security matters and chairs the dialogue between the Palestinian government and the United States administration.

Al-Sheikh, who rarely gives public statements and has not given a full interview in some years, sat down with The Media Line's Felice Friedson in his Ramallah office for this exclusive conversation that included the current political situation, the next steps in jumpstarting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and the American role in the conflict and internal security issues.

Born in Ramallah in 1960, Hussein Al-Sheikh is the longtime head of the General Authority of Civil Affairs. As head of the Coordination and Cooperation Committee, he is the point person for contacts with Israel regarding civilian matters in the Palestinian territories. He also represented the Palestinian side on the Trilateral Gaza Reconstruction Committee following the 2014 Gaza War.

He's a member of the Palestinian National Council, the PLO Central Council, and the Fatah Central Council, and chair of the dialogue with the US administration.

From 1978 to 1989 Al-Sheikh was imprisoned in Israel. He is married with two sons, four daughters, and five grandchildren.



**The Media Line:** Thank you so much for taking the time with The Media Line.

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** Thank you, and you're welcome.

**TML:** It's difficult to find a newspaper story about the Palestinians that at some point doesn't say: "The Palestinians are at a crossroads." What choices must Palestinians make now?

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** First of all, I think that the Palestinian situation is very complicated. The people are under occupation. The people living under the Palestinian Authority since 1994 are not experiencing independence or liberty. For these reasons, the tasks are complicated, between the desire to reach the strategic aim to build a Palestinian state and to build an Authority that is considered preliminary to building this state, and the situation is necessarily complicated – even more so than some might think. We are not in a normal situation and not in an independent state. We are an Authority without authority, without sovereignty. The overall sovereignty is held by Israel concerning land, air, water,

borders and everything. So this is the small basis on which we are trying to build. Unfortunately, it is as if you are digging in stone to build a state on this basis and this big ambition for the Palestinian people is to build a Palestinian country that is stable, democratic, free and living alongside Israel.

**TML: The Oslo Accords are 27 years old. They were not intended to last so long. Why did they?**

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** Oslo was considered a solution to a problem. It was considered to be an introduction to the possibility of reaching a final end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and I think that there is a big difference between postponing and solving the conflict. There are parties on the Israeli side that are still not absolutely sure there is an urgent need to find a historic solution to the problems between the Israelis and the Palestinians. They believe that postponing the conflict is better than arriving at a historic end to the conflict; I think this theory is wrong. It is better for us to go with the Israelis beyond the interim agreements in the Oslo Accords. We were supposed to move forward to the historic final stage of ending negotiations where then finally the Palestinian people and the Israeli people live together, in close proximity, in two states. The Palestinian people have a right to live in an independent state. Our children and grandchildren have a right to live freely and also to decide their future away from the Israeli occupation. So I think this is the main reason that Oslo changed from being an interim agreement to a permanent agreement in the eyes of Israelis.

**TML: The course was routine from administration to administration until President Trump came along and erased conventional wisdom. For four years there was minimal communication and increasing acrimony between Ramallah and Washington. Although it is too early to tell, do Palestinians look optimistically right now to the new Biden Administration?**

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** We went through a very difficult period under President Trump. I think that the main problem we had with the previous administration is the issue of repudiation of international legitimacy (meaning UN Security Council resolutions) and also the Trump Administration's disavowing of all the previous American administrations' views. Whether they were Republicans or Democrats, they mainly concentrated on international legitimacy and the two-state solution. Accordingly, when this new administration came, the administration of President Biden, and after the phone call that took place between President Biden and President Abbas, I think President Biden spoke about very important principles with President Abbas that we might consider to be a type of road map for us and for the Americans. This concerns how it is possible for us to move forward from now. He spoke about the status quo on Haram al-Sharif, Sheikh Jarrah, the residents of east Jerusalem, stopping settlement expansion, and stopping the unilateral measures. We agree on all these principles with President Biden; it will be a road map for us and the Americans with the Israeli side. And because of this, the new American administration gives us hope. We started now building a relationship and restoring the relationship with President Biden's administration. We are in daily contact with the administration. There are committees formed between us and the new leadership. They have already started working.

**TML:** Has President Biden's appointment of Hady Amr, the deputy assistant secretary for Israel and Palestinian affairs, made a difference already? He was just here. Mr. Hady Amr.

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** I think so. Since his appointment, we have had a number of calls, contacts and meetings. The new administration has a broad understanding of the nature of the Palestinians' present situation and Mr. Hady Amr is playing a very positive role in his constant contact between himself and the Israeli government. We agreed in principle that we need first to change the atmosphere between us and Israel. We spoke

about the bilateral dialogue with the new administration and the Palestinians. At the same time, we spoke about the trilateral dialogue between the USA, Israel and the Palestinians.

We agreed to go in two parallel lines. I believe that this path is fruitful in terms of creating new facts and a new atmosphere, helping everyone to enter into a new phase. We agreed to start with what are called CBMs – confidence-building measures – between us and the new administration and between us and Israel.

What is demanded from me as a Palestinian, I am ready to do. What is required of Israel to do? What is required from the USA is to help support that. I think the administration showed its readiness to do this.

The second stage is to find the framework for the nature of conflict resolution between Israel and the Palestinians, which is or should be focused mainly on international legitimacy and legal decisions that refer to two states for two peoples living in peace and security in a stable, cooperative and prosperous environment between the two states. A Palestinian state and an Israeli state. This is the plan that we agreed on with the new administration and we are working on it right now.

**TML: In speaking about confidence-building measures, because there's been a lot of trust lost on both sides, can you point to very specific things that the administration has discussed that you are trying to implement?**

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** With regard to the bilateral matters between us and the Americans, the first issue was the American Consulate in east Jerusalem. When Secretary of State Mr. Anthony Blinken visited Israel and Palestine, he declared frankly and honestly that he would reopen the American Consulate in east Jerusalem. I think this step is positive,

courageous and bold and it helps return the natural and normal relationship between the USA and the Palestinians. On the contrary, most of the CBMs are between us and the Israelis, between me and the Israeli government. Israel is occupying the West Bank, Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip for so many years. There is a reference to the details of the CBMs, which are aiming to create a new atmosphere between us and the Israelis like the Paris Protocols. This we signed 26 years ago. Does it make sense that there is an economic agreement that lasts 26 years without any modification?

**TML: You spoke about confidence-building measures and there's been an erosion of trust on both sides. Can you speak to some of the very important facts on the ground that are being asked that will help to change the status quo?**

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** We said from the beginning that there were bilateral matters between us and the American administration because of the complications that have occurred in the four years of the Trump Administration. We can re-establish the relationship between us and the new administration. Maybe what is required from us are some actions from our side and at the same time, it is also necessary for the American administration to undertake some actions from their side. For example, there is a law that was passed in 1987 in the US Congress, stating that the Palestine Liberation Organization is still considered a terrorist organization.

How come this law still remains and how does it make any sense at all? Israel doesn't consider the PLO a terrorist organization. How come after American sponsorship of the Oslo Accords and signing them, this law still remains in force? In Washington, DC, the American Congress still considers the PLO a terrorist organization.

This in my opinion needs a discussion with the American administration and the American Congress.

On the other hand, there is a law in America called the Taylor Force Act. This law punishes the Palestinian Authority for supporting prisoners, which is said to incite violence. We said to the American administration that we are ready to discuss all these matters in a bilateral committee and we can also establish a trilateral committee with Israel, the Americans and the Palestinians all taking part.

If there is incitement on the Palestinian side, is there no incitement on the Israeli side? For example, the Lehava organization in Israel publicly calls for "death to Arabs." Is this considered a terrorist or non-terrorist organization? Is it an organization that practices racial discrimination and racism and calls for the death of others? If there is incitement, let us set up a trilateral committee made up of the Israelis, Americans and Palestinians to discuss these issues; from the Palestinians' side, I am ready to do that.

What is also required from the Americans is there must be change. And many CBMs also need to come from the side of Israel.

I noted the Paris Protocol. It is 26 years old. It does not make any sense to continue this economic protocol, which is restricting Palestinian commercial and economic development. Israel is also controlling the issue of water, the issue of Area C in the West Bank, which constitutes 63% of the total West Bank land area. Israel is not permitting the Palestinians to establish any rural project in Area C. Does this make sense? There is the issue of the Palestinian prisoners, sick people needing medical care, women, the elderly.

I can also mention in the context of the same topic: the institutions of the Palestinian Authority in Jerusalem, which remain closed.

The list of CBMs is long. In that regard, we have now started talks with the Israelis and also between us and the Americans.

**TML:** One of the questions that we've heard from the Americans as well as from Israelis has to do with Gaza and the bifurcation between the West Bank and Gaza, the control, the security control that you are in charge of. What do you say to Israelis and Americans concerned that if elections were held tomorrow, Hamas could win?

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** First of all, unfortunately, the Palestinian situation has become more complicated since 2007. After Hamas took over the Gaza Strip by force even though Hamas won in the democratic election of the parliament in 2006, we handed over the government to Hamas as it won the election. But unfortunately, what happened in 2007 happened and this had great repercussions on the internal Palestinian situation. So we had long conversations with Hamas and the rest of the Palestinian organizations to reach a formula for reconciliation between us and Hamas and the other Palestinian organizations to reunify the Palestinian geography, which includes the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and Jerusalem.

But, unfortunately, so far up until this moment, this ongoing discussion did not achieve the desired goal.

Months ago, we decided to go to elections hoping it to be the shortest way to solve the internal Palestinian problem and that the same time to strengthen the democracy in Palestinian political life. We believe in pluralism and free expression and the smooth transfer of power by peaceful means. This is the basis and foundation of the Palestinian political system and this is the ambition of the upcoming Palestinian state. This is the way it should be. Unfortunately, we faced a major obstacle, which is the issue of Jerusalem and the refusal of Israel to hold the elections in east Jerusalem as it did in 1996, 2005 and 2006. Thus, unfortunately, it put an obstacle in the way of holding these elections and this caused a big problem, disabling the election process, whether we are talking about the presidential or the legislative parliamentary elections.

We are still looking for a solution to this issue. I say frankly now if Israel would approve to hold the elections in east Jerusalem, the Palestinian president would issue a decree to hold the election immediately in east Jerusalem and the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

**TML:** You work very closely with President Abbas. He's not young. Some will say they're kind of surprised he's still running. Does there need to be a change of guard? Do young people need to come in? Would you look at the position? Some have thrown your name out in the ring.

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** First of all, I wish health and long life to the president, Abu Mazen. I believe that Abu Mazen is among the most historic figures of the Palestinian people and founders of the Palestinian state from the 1950s until now. I was and still am wishing that the agreement with the Israeli side on the final status formula under Mahmoud Abbas' presidency can be reached.

First of all, because he has wisdom and it is my absolute belief that the path of the negotiations is the shortest and the closest path to the two-state solution and at the same time, President Mahmoud Abbas has the historic legacy and leadership charisma that entitled him to sign the historic agreement between us and the Israelis.

I constantly say even to the Americans what I always and forever say to all the Israeli officials, that we now have a historic opportunity.

Regarding the younger generation, I say yes. We believe completely that there is a necessity for leadership across the generations. May these new generations come forward to occupy important positions in the Palestinian political system – in the political, economic and social aspects. Without this, it means the calcification of this Palestinian political system and the chance of development will be downgraded. If the new

generation desires it and new thoughts to give the youth a chance to rule and manage this Palestinian political system and to build the Palestinian future for the upcoming generation, this is a good thing for the future.

**TML: So in short, you're not running?**

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** No, I am not running. I think that President Abu Mazen is the best candidate now.

**TML: What will it take to engage younger than 50-year-olds in the Palestinian Territories in the future? In politics?**

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** First of all, it is required to strengthen democracy in the Palestinian political life and at the same time it is required essential to change the nature of the Palestinian political life. We are, though, not living in a stable political system.

Until now, we are under occupation. It is a very, very complicated situation for you seek from one side to give a simple description of the nature of the political system that you want, that is to say, a pluralistic democratic system governed through the ballot box, giving freedom of expression, giving all generations and ages a chance, but at the same time, you have to interact with daily procedures from the Israeli occupation on the ground: the continuation of settlements, house demolitions, arrests, destroying Palestinian homes, farming restrictions, economic restrictions. In this situation, it is difficult to put out a plan, as if you are walking in a straight line. Concerning this issue, it is a zig-zag plan and sometimes there are big obstacles.

But I think, without giving this new generation the real opportunity to express themselves in making a choice, first about the nature of the system and who should be in the system, there are a lot of problems. The only way to do that is an election. This is the only way that leads people to the

democratic style and the democratic way in their political lives.

The proof that Palestinian society is democratic and applies democracy even under occupation is that we are applying democracy in universities and in trade unions like the doctors', engineers', and lawyers' unions. We have elections for municipal councils. All municipal councils in the West Bank are elected.

**TML: You recently met Marwan Barghouti in prison. Did you ask him not to run for the presidency?**

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** I did not ask him not to run in the election. Marwan is my friend. I have known Marwan for 43 years. I have a personal relationship with him besides the organizational and political relationship. I visited Marwan in prison in order to agree with him first on the Fatah movement unity in the confusion over the election of the Palestinian Legislative Council. I agreed with my brother Marwan on that.

We did not talk at all about the presidential elections and I did not ask him not to run in the elections at all. We did not discuss this subject. The only subject raised was that of the main issue between him and me – to keep the unity of the Fatah party so Fatah runs as one unified list in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections.

**TML: As minister and head of the General Authority of Civil Affairs as well as being head of the Coordination and Cooperation Committee, you've been the lead liaison between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Not an easy task. Was there ever a time when you felt that if security cooperation wasn't existing, what would happen if there wasn't cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians despite the political situation?**

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** First of all, Israel is the one that occupies my land and not any other country in the world. Thus,

it is asked of me to know how to deal with this Israeli conflict. Usually, negotiations happen between opponents and enemies. The one who occupies my land is Israel. Thus, who is the party that I should negotiate with? By necessity, Israel. Thus, the relation with Israel, coordination with Israel, coordination with the Israeli government is a necessity. In fact, although Israel is an occupation force, talks with Israel and coordination with Israel are very essential to search for prospects for solutions between us. The Israeli government controls all aspects of Palestinian life. It controls the air we breathe, the water we drink, the ability of our citizens to have movement, the people, the economy, crossings and borders, etc. Thus, coordination with the Israeli government is a matter of fact and necessity. It is true that it is tiring and exhausting and sometimes we might pay the price on a personal level.

But I think that there are necessities that are forcing the Palestinians and the Israelis to maintain necessary coordination either in a positive atmosphere or a negative one. For the coordination might work well during good times and be very positive when it works well between both parties. Having said that, coordination might also protect the negatives. It might force you toward a state or stage that you don't want your people to be a part of. This is what drives me and the Israel government. I believe that the Palestinians have made a big commitment with these agreements for coordination. The one who did not abide by these agreements, unfortunately, is the Israeli government.

**TML: The media is filled with reports of the accumulation of weaponry here in the Palestinian areas. Whose holding those weapons? And are you concerned about it? Is it a crime? Is it civil unrest? As head of the civil authority that you are chairing, what do you say?**

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** I think any weapon other than those held by authorized Palestinian security forces is an illegal weapon.

Such weapons can never be given any legitimacy. Weapons of chaos and disorder threaten Palestinian society. The weapon of chaos and disorder can develop a set of phenomena that destroy the social, cultural and educational structure of the Palestinian people. The big question is: Where do these weapons come from? For that reason, I confirm that the opinion of the Palestinian Authority on this matter is quite clear. No legitimacy for any weapon other than those legally authorized to be held by the authorized personnel of the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian security establishment has a task and that task is to protect the Palestinian citizenry and to give them security, safety and stability. This is the first national mission stipulated in the Palestinian Basic Law. This is the primary security mission. Some are trying to portray the task of the Palestinian security establishment differently. That is absolutely not true. The Palestinian security establishment is primarily to protect the political system and Palestinian society and to protect Palestinian citizens and their properties and to protect the Palestinian right of expression and the freedoms associated with that. This is its mission.

Any weapon other than those legitimately and legally held by the Palestinian security establishment I think is illegal. Anyone who breaks this rule should be held accountable and judged according to the principles of law and order.

**TML: What can you tell us about the recent death of the activist Nizar Banat? There are so many stories floating. It is an internal story. It is an important story to share.**

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** First of all, I would like to pay my condolences and respects to his family and apologize to them for what happened. It was a sad and unfortunate accident. Maybe a mistake occurred during the action of law enforcement. Even if he was demanded by law or wanted to appear for justice, there is nothing to justify the matter whatsoever. I, in the name of President Abu Mazen and in the name of the

Palestinian Authority, from the first day gave our apologies in this matter and we consider it a tragedy. What happened can't ever be acceptable even in the time of lawlessness, but this might happen in any country in the world. A mistake like this can happen in America, in France, in any other country in the world. It is important that there are procedures in place accordingly concerning matters of law and order and to judge who did wrong in this matter. There is no other way to deal with this and to attempt to right this wrong. Only by learning from what happened and following the right procedures of law and order, we can judge then who had a hand in this case. I repeat again, unfortunately, such a thing might happen in any country, in most democratic countries in the world, but certainly, I repeat and say, it is a tragic and unfortunate incident. We apologize for what happened and wish to learn lessons from it.

**TML: You were active during the Unified National Leadership, it was of the uprising, during the First Intifada. You went on to a more diplomatic track. Do you believe that diplomacy is the only answer? And to put aside the weapons and put aside the fighting?**

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** I do believe that the shortest way is always fruitful. What is the mission of any leader? His mission is to look for the shortest road, lowest price, to achieve the ambitions of his people. The Palestinian people want to end the occupation, want their dignity, want to be live in an independent country, side by side with Israel. The mission of any Palestinian leader or official is to lead the people along the shortest path, at the lowest price. I believe that – we still believe that – until now the shortest path and lowest price for that goal is direct negotiations with the Israeli government. The Israeli people must be convinced that they can't forever remain occupying another nation.

There are more than 5 million Palestinians living in the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem.

The biggest question facing the Israeli people is how can this occupation remain forever? Occupying 5 million Palestinians now living in the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem.

How is that still possible today?

Israel has obvious choices and we say to them frankly: Either the two-state solution that we believe in or one state which means one person, one vote or apartheid, Israel will remain a country that forever practices racism and occupies another nation.

Therefore, the responsibility of any leader who wants to lead his people to the best to choose for them always the shortest way that costs the least price which is diplomacy.

**TML: The new Israeli government: Are you optimistic? Do you feel that you'll be able to have dialogue? What broke down with Prime Minister Netanyahu?**

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** We are obliged to live with hope. We always need to maintain the feeling that today is better than yesterday, and that tomorrow will be better than today.

We are obliged to live on this hope and let us export this hope to the Palestinian people.

Unfortunately, long years passed under the leadership of the former prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. The situation was hard and according to my own estimation, Mr. Netanyahu never believed in peace with the Palestinians and he is not a partner for peace. Truthfully, Netanyahu was against Oslo and Oslo's agreement and so he was seeking to destroy these agreements that were signed in 1994. I don't prefer talking about the past a lot because it became history, but because there is a government in Israel, we have to engage it properly.

It is true that there is a wide gap in the views held among

the partners taking part in the current government. The various parties making up the government are holding diverse opinions.

We are hoping for stability in this government and that this government will seriously seek to change the general atmosphere to an approach of more positive practical procedures that might restore the confidence between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Change in the West Bank and in Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip is needed. We wish for the new government to take big steps forward in this matter to give hope to the Palestinian people and that the opportunity still exists for mutual understanding and to reach a solution between the Palestinians and the Israelis. My personal opinion is that going forward, it could not be worse than the period of Netanyahu's rule in Israel.

**TML: Hussein Al-Sheikh, the man. Not an easy job. Worrying about security and relationships with governments and trying to build to what you hope will become Palestine. How does that impact you and your family?**

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** First of all, I believe in the right of my people to freedom and independence. I spent all my life in this job and maybe it affected my family, negatively and positively. The positive aspect may be that I am a well-known personality, but on the negative side, unfortunately, they were affected and paid a price for something that they don't own or have any relation to.

Those who disagree with me politically have the right to criticize me personally – a natural right – and to give their opinion on my performance, but that doesn't give them the right absolutely to interfere in my family and my house and my children and their lifestyle.

That has to do with or is related to the educational mentality and culture we have. For that reason, if my children were

affected negatively all those years, I apologize to my children, but my children are part of the Palestinian people, they live the conditions all are living and I am happy with my children and my grandchildren. I am very happy and proud of them and I wish that they choose their lifestyle as they want to – not as some want them to be. They are free to live as they wish. I choose my lifestyle to be in this direction. That is ok and I might pay the price for this choice, but it is not permitted under any circumstance to reflect on my house and family. I wish for them a happy good life and that they might choose the way they wish, as I said before.



**TML:** Do you think we'll be having this same conversation in five years?

**Hussein Al-Sheikh:** I hope not. I hope there is a change and that we will take on something different and hope it will be more positive. As I have always said, we are living on hope in this aspect. I am naturally optimistic and I totally believe that tomorrow is going to be better than today. Some may think that the Palestinians' status, no matter how much time has passed, even if one comes back after a year, will be the same.

No! I believe that every day brings change. We must believe that this change will come and that this change will be for the better, surely for the better. I hope that in the next period, the situation will be different in a positive way.

**TML: Minister Hussein Al-Sheikh, thank you so much for this comprehensive interview and for your insight into the workings of the Palestinian Authority and to go behind the scenes a little bit into what you do on a daily basis.**