

Al-Hindi, Hani. *al-Ḥarakah al-Qawmīyah al-ʿArabīyah fī al-qarn al-ʿishrīn*. Beirut : Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-ʿArabīyah, 2012 (pp. 58-62). Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.<sup>1</sup>

It would be hard for someone who didn't live through those days to imagine how bleak it was for our generation in the year of the Nakba, so it would be useful at this point for the generation that came after us to find out more about the circumstances and the factors behind it, or rather the motives behind the ideas and practices that accompanied that period. There's a big difference between, on the one hand, reading and listening and, on the other hand, living the events and situations that we experienced in those days.

We lived through terrible, dreadful suffering. The details of those days of the Nakba left an indelible impression in our minds and hearts. We saw what the Nakba meant in real time as we watched Arab towns and villages fall into the hands of the Zionist forces. We saw how the Palestinian Arabs were driven out by force and through intimidation by murder, expulsion and the rape of women, and wrenched out of their houses.

All this happened to us – we Arabs – after the victory over aggression and fascism in the Second World War. Was it in vain that the blood of tens of millions of people had been shed and so much property destroyed? Hadn't the world, and especially the victors, told us that racism was dead and buried forever?

We suddenly found that the trappings of independence, membership of international organisations, the media, the official processions and the army parades were all a fraud. What was the value of the “complete independence” of which the Arab regimes boasted? And what about the Arab political parties – those that supported the regimes and those in opposition? What had they done? What had they contributed?

They were all sterile and meaningless facades. They were all hollow drums. Within a few months we found ourselves face to face with the naked truth: we were almost nothing. We were close to zero, close to death or annihilation, or rather a quasi-life. We were deeply pained at the extent of our ignorance, at the state we were in and at what we were worth in the eyes of the world and in our own eyes. We were dispirited at how little we knew of the world we lived in: we had belatedly discovered that the pillars of our society were

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<sup>2</sup> Barout, Mohammed Jamal. *Harakat al-Qawmiyyiin al-ʿArab – al-Nashʿa wa-l-Tatawwur wa-l-*

eroded and crumbling. The defeat was both material and moral and its effects penetrated every corner of our lives and our souls, as individuals and a group of human beings, because we had been shaken to the core.

If the Nakba that we experienced was harsh and painful, it also opened wounds that were still quite fresh. In every decade since the beginning of the century Arabs had endured one indignity after another: from attempts at Turkification, to the international conspiracy to partition the East, to the Zionist project that received international status through the Balfour Declaration, to the 1920s and the tragedies Arabs suffered when our uprisings were crushed in the Middle East and North Africa, and Arab Khuzestan was lost to Iran without a confrontation or resistance. In the 1930s, our uprisings were defeated in Libya and Palestine, and the province of Iskenderun annexed by Turkey. The 1940s brought us the Nakba, which was the greatest, cruelest and most bitter and humiliating blow.

If Palestine could fall so easily, who could stop the Zionist monster pushing on to Amman, Damascus and Beirut? Were we doomed to the same fate as the inhabitants of the Caucasus when, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Russian Tsars wiped out hundreds of thousands of Chechens, Daghestanis and Circassians and drove the rest of them out of their homes? Or would we meet the same fate as the Armenians when the Turks massacred more than a million of them in 1915 and expelled hundreds of thousands of them to Arab countries?

There was deep anxiety, and fear of the dangers of the future haunted us, especially as the Zionists had shown extraordinary efficiency and competence when they enlisted the backing of the two great powers to serve their settlement project, despite the disagreements between the two giants. So everything inside us had changed, the presence of Zionism had become our major concern, and the struggle to dislodge the Zionists was central to our thinking by day and by night. As young people, we were convinced deep in our hearts and minds that this nation, which had faced invaders since ancient times, could not be defeated so easily when human, social and national awareness had advanced to such a stage across the world. We had lost a battle and it was a very important battle, since the enemy had established a bridgehead in the Arab homeland, but the war would be long, very long, because this land, which had been Arab for dozens of centuries, would not accept a partnership. It was either ours as Arabs, or our enemy's. So what would we, those of the Nakba generation, do?

At university, some of us were members of Constantine's study groups. His lectures were of great benefit to us: he expanded our intellectual horizons and

often spoke to us about the gravity of the Nakba. He would put forward his opinions and views from a historical perspective, explaining to us the reasons for the Nakba and why we were in such a bad state. We would often say that we were not fighting Jews or the Arab or Oriental Judaism with which we were familiar, but, "We are face to face with the cream of Western civilisation and the finest elite in those European and Americans countries, which are themselves stronger than us, and so we have no choice but constant, patient and systematic work." In short, this man, as described by Mohammed Jamal Barout, was "a proselytiser rather than an organisation man, a professor rather than a leader, a teacher rather than an organiser".<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it was clear in his cultural seminars that he was interested in his intellectual and cultural role and avoided any discussion of daily political matters. He was unusual for his great humility and his respect for everything that was said or suggested in those seminars. He was also known for his high moral commitment and his attachment to his principles and ideas.

Zurayk was not the only person we spoke to about our concerns, our anxiety and our questions. We had debates and discussions with many intellectuals and politicians. But the disturbing question that constantly nagged us was: "What is our duty? What should we do? Should we accept the situation we are in and the future we face as something that is pre-ordained and inevitable? Or should we act and do what we can?"

The way forward was to resort to violence since, as part of an oppressed people, we found ourselves to be the weakest party in the jungle of international politics. All forces had taken the offensive against us, even the Jews. We looked around us and found that that violence was commonplace, in our country and in many parts of the world.

When does violence appear in society? When there is injustice and oppressors. It reflects a real crisis in society. It reflects rejection of a corrupt reality and gives expression to deep structural problems. However much it might be criticised, violence is in essence an important indicator that the pulse of life is still alive and active in that society in crisis.

Some of our readings of experiences of violence in European countries, especially Tsarist Russia and then the United States at the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, struck a chord in our minds. But the most important factor at that period was the fact that Zionist organisations such as the Haganah, the Irgun Tzvai Leumi and the Stern

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<sup>2</sup> Barout, Mohammed Jamal. *Harakat al-Qawmiyyiin al-'Arab – al-Nash'a wa-l-Tatawwur wa-l-Masaa'ir* [The Movement of Arab Nationalists – Its Origin, Evolution and Fate]. Beirut: al-Markaz al-'Arabi li-l-Dirāsāt al-Istiratiiji, 1997 (p. 56).

Gang had carried out military operations against the British and their institutions in Palestine, especially after the Germans withdrew from El Alamein and Stalingrad in the autumn of 1942. These operations, while humiliating to the English, were just as much intimidating to the Arabs, and, most importantly, they set the stage politically and militarily in Palestine for the declaration of a Jewish state.

These operations had a powerful effect on us and sowed the seeds of political and organisational ideas. They also encouraged our aspirations to build a secret armed organisation that would be a strike force for effective nationalist action.

If this is how we were as students at the American University, a similar trend was common among many Arab students in several Arab countries. More important than these violent tendencies among students was what was happening on the ground in Palestine, where there were two phenomena:

Firstly, the Egyptian monarchy had brought home the volunteer force, most of whom were Muslim Brotherhood members led by Captain Ahmed Abdel Aziz in the south of Palestine. The fact that these people had taken part in the fighting and had had direct contact with the people of Palestine and with enemy forces was an important factor in making these fighters more politically aware. It also made the Egyptian masses more conscious of the Zionist danger. The important thing was that these elements directed their violence at Zionist institutions active in Egypt, which led to a violent confrontation between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. That was the first round in their conflict with the regime in Egypt, which would last for decades to come.

Secondly, where the regular army had fought, some Arab officers realised that the political and military atmosphere was unhealthy. Suspensions were rife, and within weeks those suspicions were transformed into a conviction that there was more at stake than just indifference and neglect. Many of the officers were restless and angry, and from those trenches in Palestine Abdel Aziz took the initiative of creating his own group of free officers. In the north – Jenin, Tulkaram and Nablus – Rifaat al-Hajj Sirri began his secret organisation of Iraqi officers.