

al-Khatib, Ahmad. *Kuwait: Min Al-Imara Ila al-Dawla, Dhakariyat al-‘Amal al-Watani wa-l-Qawmi*. Beirut: The Arab Cultural Center, 2007 (pp. 72-83). Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.

The Nakba, the Juncture, and the Birth of the Nationalist Youth

There is no doubt that the United Nations decision to partition Palestine in 1947, the establishment of Israel in 1948, along with the Arab military defeat at the hands of the Zionists, created a total turnaround in our way of thinking. On a personal level, the impact of it was almost unutterably strong. Perhaps its bearing on me was so deep – and so personal – because I witnessed my Palestinian friends who were studying with me losing everything overnight, going every day to the Palestinian borders to search for their families amongst the displaced. I used to share all of that with them. I lived through the sad and painful reception of refugees, I went with them to the makeshift camps that had been set up for them, and saw how the families were squashed together in the tents, and the tiny units separated into individual dwellings with sheets. Every ‘dwelling’ housed one family, and open sewers ran through the middle of the units and between the tents. I sometimes saw two families living in one tent. Even though we hadn’t yet qualified as doctors, we had no choice but to provide medical treatment for the refugees. Owing to malnutrition – or at times lack of nutrition – and the lack of sanitation in people’s homes, tuberculosis began to spread through the camps. At that time, the treatment for tuberculosis was relatively expensive and not readily available for patients. As such, all our efforts went into isolating the sick in allocated tents; but these tents were overcrowded and could not accommodate everyone, meaning that whenever one person died, a new sick person was immediately put in their place.

As such, and after the financial resources of George Habash and Wadie Haddad were completely drained, my pocket money was shared amongst the three of us. One time, it so happened that the only food we had for three days was a peanut sandwich (called *sibal*), sold by Somalis in Bourj Square in central Beirut. Breakfast, lunch and dinner were made up of bread and *sibal*. After three days, we felt nauseous, hating that food, and we preferred to stay without until relief came.

Our work was centralised in Ain al-Helweh camp close to where we lived, and this is how I came to live the Nakba in all its tragedy. I saw it with my own eyes, I touched it with my hands and it was forever chiselled into my memory. Ibrahim Abu Dayya – a fighter and one of the heroes of Tulkarem – arrived in Beirut for treatment; he was shot in his spinal cord and this led to paralysis and intense pain. He was accompanied by Mohammad Nimr Awda and Abi Abdallah Mohammad Khalifeh, who would carry him to help him move around. We would visit him in the American University hospital, and

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he would ask us to sing patriotic songs, in order to inspire us, and to encourage us to engage in patriotic action and sacrifice ourselves for the sake of our national causes. This had an immense impact upon us. We were bitterly angry at the Zionists and the countries that abetted them, alongside the Arab governments and parties that had deserted the Palestinian people. We thus began to think about the best way to react and deal with this terrible situation. This is how our journey began, from mere cultural circles, to 'the nationalist youth', to the 'Movement of Arab Nationalists', believing that the cause was, first and foremost, and Arab one.

Our initial group was made up of some of Dr [Constantin] Zureiq's pupils and some of the followers of the 'al-Urwa al-Wuthqa' society.² We began to organise our work and expand under the name of 'The Nationalist Youth'. We adopted Asma's house in Ras Beirut as our meeting place, for work and discussions, and what had been dubbed the 'al-Urwa al-Wuthqa' society became the front for our activities. Its activities shifted somewhat, becoming more political than cultural; for example, one of our activities was the arrangement of a memorial service for the Lebanese leader Abd al-Hamid Karami in one of the cinema houses, to which Lebanese officials and politicians were invited. The poet Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri was among the attendees, and as he got up on stage, a large photo of Abd al-Hamid Karami behind him, the Prime Minister and other officials in front of him, he performed his legendary elegiac poem '*Bāq w-'a'mār al-ṭughāt qiṣār*' (You Remain and the Lives of Tyrants are Short), gesturing at the photo, and then gesturing at the officials in front of him. As soon as he had finished his poem, we got him off stage, hid him and sent him away – he had caused us a great deal of trouble! As the society had grown, so too had its gravity; and so other parties – the Arab Ba'athist party, the Syrian Nationalist party, Phalangists and Communists – began to join. The society's policy, as recommended by Dr Zureiq, was not to deny anyone from joining, whatever their political leaning. We had to meet the challenge of growing membership if we wanted to control the society. Indeed, the number of members rose above eight hundred, and, accordingly, the election campaigns for the running of the society became lively and extremely difficult. During the process public debates were held, in which the nature of the internal ideological battles came to light. Despite that, we, as the Nationalist Youth, maintained control over 'al-Urwa al-Wuthqa' until its dissolution in 1954.

Wanting to achieve a greater level of discipline, we imposed a strict code of conduct for ourselves. One of the most important rules was not to waste time on 'trivial' activities, such as going for a drink in a cafe or going to the cinema, for this not only wasted time, but also money, of which we were in dire need for our work. We were ruthless in terms of punctuality, since we also saw

² 'Al-'Urwa al-Wuthqa' was the name of a nationalist newspaper edited by Zureiq, who was a professor at the American University of Beirut in the 1930s and 1940s.

lateness as a waste of time; any member who was more than five minutes late to a meeting, for example, was not allowed to attend.

We thus concentrated our energy on reading, focusing mainly on books about Arab Nationalism and Italian and German unification. George Habash suggested to me that I also read lots on media and propaganda, after my capabilities in these fields became evident to him.

We also took sport very seriously, since we used to draw a connection between physical strength and the ability to confront challenges. So we joined a sports club in Beirut, concentrating on boxing since it was a strong and active sport. We tried to use this physical strength in our struggle with the communists; one day, Hamid al-Jabouri, an Iraqi from our group of founders, was sitting in the University cafe (The Soda Fountain) by himself, when a group of communists from the university came up to him and started insulting him. He was unable to oppose them singlehanded. We saw this as a dangerous sign, since if we let things happen like that, it could prompt other provocative action, which could, in turn, have a negative impact on our rank and file and result in scaring our membership, leading to the destruction of what we had built. As such, we resolved to respond to what had happened with force, and set about working on a plan.

Normally, at the end of the year, the society would hold a party to honour the new students, in order to introduce them to al-Urwa al-Wuthqa and encourage them to enrol. So we decided to use this occasion to put our plan into action. Because this party was attended by all the society's members,, among them communists, we decided carry out our provocation during the gathering – instigating unrest in order to truly teach them a lesson, and in order to build up the members' self-confidence. I had been chosen to give the welcome speech to the guests, and to provide the provocation for the communists, and I certainly lived up to my comrades' expectations. My verbal assault was unbearable for our rivals, and a riot kicked off right there in the room. I took off my glasses and got stuck in to the fray, which had become a full-on brawl, and during which a number of communists had to be taken to hospital to get treated for injuries. The next day, the university administration conducted an official inquiry and I was threatened with expulsion if anything like that happened again. But we had managed, in this way, to avenge Hamid al-Jabouri and protect our status.

Ideas and Positions

The concept of marriage was a thought-provoking one for us, but one which came to be viewed as negative; the way we saw it, marriage was a burden for the individual cadre, since it ties them to family commitments at the expense of the patriotic struggle. Even though the subject was not discussed formally, and no official decision was taken, this was a prevailing opinion held by the group. George Habash's foray into marriage, for example, caused great disappointment for many of our youth , and it prompted us to deal the

subject seriously and adopt a binding position on it. I remember when I returned to Kuwait, a spontaneous discussion started up in one of our evenings in the nationalist cultural club, prompted by the late Abdullah Hussein. After one of our seminars, he had been hunted down by the Chief of the Security Forces Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmad al-Subah. Once some of the members had helped to put an end to the crisis, he said what had frightened him most was the idea of his children being exposed to any harm, and he said that if Abdullah al-Ahmad had threatened his children he would have given in to all his demands, since family was a person's ultimate weak spot. The late Abdel Razzaq al-Ahmad, a knowledgeable man, had turned to me and said, 'Do your best not to contemplate marriage, for if you marry, I fear we will lose you.' This is what got me thinking seriously about the issue of marriage, even though at that time I had no plans of that kind. The truth was that a successful marriage is not, in reality, a burden on the nationalist effort; on the contrary, it creates better conditions in which such work can be carried out – a conclusion I came to after my own marriage. My wife Fatima Mula Saleh al-Mula gave me the ideal conditions for my work, whether by taking care of the children and creating a comfortable environment in the house, or by encouraging my dedication to my work for the sake of Kuwait and its people. For that, she has my eternal gratitude.

We strongly resisted the army's involvement in politics and took a stance against the military coups, suspending the membership of anyone who joined the army. We did not welcome the Egyptian revolution of 1952; on the contrary, our position towards it was a hostile one, and this did not properly change until the nationalisation of the Suez Canal and the Suez crisis in 1956. We had a good relationship with the Baath party, and would attend the lectures of Michel Aflaq whenever he came to Lebanon. Yet the behaviour of their university representative left a lot to be desired, and constituted an obstacle to the growth of the party's influence. But when party bases complained about this particular official, the party leadership rejected the complaint and embraced the official. In the south, during the time when the party had a large presence there, similar incidents took place; and it was such incidents, and such poor behaviour, that contributed to the decline of the party in that part of the country.

The pride, self-importance and repellent actions of some of the party leaders contributed to the growth of an unfriendly atmosphere. There had been a group of young people in secondary school, Eli Bouri being most prominent among them, who carried out nationalist activities; when they entered university, we held a 'meet and greet' at Mh'ayou café in Ras Beirut in order to encourage them to join al-Urwa al-Wuthqa. When it was the turn of the Baath party, their leader in Beirut (the aforementioned university representative) gave a forceful speech in which he criticised and derided the students for being so late in asking to join the Baath party. This belligerence provoked resentment among the students, who therefore ended up joining our society instead.

This kind of unpleasant behaviour made us forget about joining the Baath party, which, intellectually, was on a similar plain to us. While some argued that we would be able to neutralise their deficiencies from the inside, the abovementioned incidents made it clear that reform from within would be impossible. We took the decision by forming a new party, after which our relationship with the Baath party ceased to be a close one.

We intensified our humanitarian work in the Palestinian camps, alongside raising nationalist consciousness. The chief role in this regard went to Ahmed al-Yamani (Abu Maher), alongside Wadie Haddad.

We formed a council for the boycott of goods from pro-Zionist states; its work began with the publication of a lengthy leaflet calling on such a boycott, which we distributed widely, alongside a poster campaign. It was through this publication that we were introduced to Ali Nasser al-Din, the Secretary General of the Nationalist Action League, which included some of the leading Arab figures (Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian) in the anti-colonialist movements fighting French and British imperialism.

Our publication impressed Ali Nasser al-Din, and he was keen to meet with us and share his own experience of operating a boycott – which he considered a difficult but ultimately beneficial experience. He also explained that he had to iron his suit twice a day owing to the poor quality of the local fabric.

We would visit him at home from time to time, and took him out of his isolation. For he had sustained a blow after, according to him, the League failed to commit to its principles, especially after certain members started working in government. We managed to convince him to give a lecture to the youth group, which we set up in a hall in the Lebanese city of Tripoli. We titled it 'Vengeance', and this word became part of our political lexicon; when we published a newsletter for the refugee camps, for example, we named this, too, 'Vengeance'. It was to become one of our principal slogans from then on. In this way, our work and activity as 'the nationalist youth' extended past the university environment into the rest of the student population in the South and in Tripoli. We established a good relationship with Melhem Karm, who presided over secondary school students in Lebanon; Lamia Riyadh al-Solh, for her part, took on a prominent role amongst female students, particularly in Christian schools, and she came to run girls' schools in Lebanon.

And so we found ourselves in the framework of the al-Urwa al-Wuthqa society; we had come to command Arab nationalist student action, particularly after we established close relationships with the Syrian University, the Nationalist Youth in Iraq and the Egyptian Wafd Party's Youth Movement. The Egyptian foreign minister at the time was Muhammad Salah al-Din, the godfather of this Wafdist group, and we became close with them to the point that when Egypt began a campaign to end British occupation and Egyptian students decided to go on hunger strike until they secured independence, we decided to join them. As the only one in the

leadership with a passport, I went to the Egyptian embassy in Beirut to apply for an Egyptian visa in order to join the students in their strike, but my application was refused. Nevertheless, our relationship with the foreign minister was strengthened to the point that after 1952 revolution and the dissolution of the Wafd Party, we invited him to give lectures in the Arab cultural club in Beirut and the nationalist cultural club in Kuwait.

The Urwa society made student trips to the Syrian University in Damascus, and a delegation also went, under my leadership, to Iraq, on the invitation of the nationalist youth there. We established close ties with them, building particularly good relationships with the poet and lawyer Adnan al-Rawi and the lawyer Faisal al-Khayzaran. The Iraqi government at the time took pains to ensure the expenses of our trip were covered, and laid out a program for us to see Iraq's sites. We were to leave Iraq the next morning and be back that evening, and we were exhausted. It then became clear that one of the government's aims in hosting us in this manner was to prevent the nationalist youth from implementing *their* program for us to meet the nationalist and pan-Arab nationalist forces in Iraq.

They did organise a party for us, which a large number of nationalist figures and representatives attended, giving speeches in which they attacked all Arab governments including Iraq's. At the front of the audience was Muhammad Fadhel al-Jamali, who had been foreign minister and later became the country's prime minister, applauding enthusiastically. My amazement abated when I learnt that he was a member of al-Urwa al-Wuthqa. It seemed that the quick growth in the relations that sprung up between us, Damascus and Baghdad was perhaps a product of the activities of the Clandestine Arab Nationalist Party, otherwise known as 'the Red Book Group'.³

During that period, Kamel Mrowa got in touch with some of us and suggested the formation of an Arab Nationalist party. We became good friends, but with his establishment of the newspaper 'al-Hayat' the idea got buried. My friends and I would visit him at the newspaper and discuss various issues with him. We likewise established a good relationship with the martyr of freedom Nasib al-Matni who gave us half a page in his newspaper to write about Palestinian affairs, something which Wadie Haddad, Saleh Shabal and I took on. Matni was a unique character – he had a kind heart, and was open-minded towards everyone; we would often see Pierre Gemayel – the founder of the Kataeb party – at his place, and he would encourage us to engage in conversation with him.

During this period, there was anti-colonial unrest in the northern Arab Maghreb; the initial spark was set off in Morocco, and Sultan Mohammad V was exiled. We called for solidarity with Morocco and organised protests in

³ The Clandestine Arab Movement (Red Book Group) was an early Arab nationalist formation that operated underground in the 1930s and early 1940s. The author here refers to it erroneously as the Clandestine Arab Nationalist Party.

support of the country, demanding the withdrawal of the colonisers; students in Egypt, Syria and Iraq got involved alongside us. After calling for help for Morocco, there came the turn of Tunisia, then Algeria, and the support continued even after we had left university.

The reality was that the work was unrelenting, to the point that, after the success of revolution in Tunisia with the return of Habib Bourguiba and the start of the revolution in Algeria, we sent the money set aside in Kuwait for the Tunisian struggle to Algeria through the office of the North African liberation movements present in Damascus. Abdelhamid Mehri – may God prolong his life – was the representative for Algeria in that office. A while later I was sent a signed letter from Mohammad Khidar, one of the five heroes – among whom was Ahmad Ben Bella – who were imprisoned by the French after they hijacked a plane. In the letter he informed me that the donation from the Kuwaiti people was the first donation that had reached the Algerian revolution from any source, be it Arab or foreign, official or grassroots.

Our student protests in Lebanon in support of Arab causes were always violent; we would fight the security forces, who acted ruthlessly towards us. The last time we went onto the streets from university, we had broken through the university's door, and fight took place outside; we clashed with the security forces, and when their position became critical, they started to open fire on us. Atef Danial, a Syrian who was standing to my right, fell to the ground, wounded; Wadie Haddad – to my left – was also wounded and fell. Having taken them to the nearby university hospital, I took off. I was chased and fired at all the way to Sanayeh. I sought shelter under some trees (now no longer there), until I was able to reach Riyadh Solh's house and take refuge there. My skill in taking shortcuts – heightened in times of fear – was put to good use, and they eventually got tired and stopped searching for me.

Neither Wadie nor Atef Danial were seriously injured, so they fled from the hospital, and once Wadie and I ascertained that we were wanted by the security forces, we hid in a small hotel near Tawila market, which Hani al-Hindi – an expert in hideaways – took us to. In the morning, we discovered that the hotel did not offer breakfast, and couldn't find anywhere nearby which did, so I suggested to Wadie that we go to Faisal's, a restaurant opposite the university, and eat there. He rebuffed my idea, so I told him, 'I'm going to go by myself, because I have to eat jam with breakfast.' He unleashed a torrent of crude swear words at me that I can no longer remember, but he eventually gave in, knowing how stubborn I was. We went together and ate breakfast there before returning to the hotel safe and sound! Who would have believed we would be in Faisal's? The authorities decided to turn a blind eye to us after the intervention of nationalist figures on our behalf., and we accordingly returned to university. We found that the university's president, Stephen Penrose, had decided to expel Wadie and I during our final year of

ˆ Abdelhamid Mehri (d.January 2012) was a prominent Algerian revolutionary and politician.

study. Despite the efforts put in by students and teachers alike, Penrose stuck by his decision. So students across Lebanon mobilised, and headed towards the American University. They occupied the site, surrounding Penrose's campus residence and calling for his resignation until nightfall. Students from Tripoli had brought along dynamite, normally used to catch fish, in order to blow up the house and its inhabitants. They were led by a group of dedicated nationalist youth, made up of Maan Karami, Anis al-Saraj, Mustafa Ziyadeh and Talaat Karim, but we prevented them from carrying out their plan. The nationalist political forces in Lebanon then got involved, demanding that we were reinstated into university. Penrose was thus forced into reversing his decision, exclaiming, 'Who is the President of this University? Myself, or Ahmad al-Khatib?'

Directly after this, I returned to Kuwait – in accordance with the training study program in the last year of university – to work in the Amiri hospital for two months. A while later, the American University students protested about a particular issue that I cannot currently recall, incurring the wrath of the security forces. They broke into the university for the first time and clashed with students. They were searching for me, and ended up arresting an Ethiopian student whom they found studying in the library; they beat him harshly, and didn't let him go until they learnt that he was not, in fact, Ahmad al-Khatib. I prayed to God that he would forgive me for the harm that had been inflicted upon that student on my account.

On March 27, 1954, Beirut's university students held huge protests against the plan for the Baghdad Pact. The pact was beginning to be announced, regional arrangements around it were being prepared, and Iraq was being dragged into it. The Lebanese security forces suppressed the protests violently; student Hassan Abu Ismail was killed, and another student, Mustafa Nasrallah, was completely paralysed after he was shot in the spine. Many other students and policemen were also wounded. At that point I was in Jordan, following Beirut's news by phone, and – as usual in such situations – exaggerated news of deaths and injuries came, causing me an immense amount of sadness and disturbance. Dr George Habash was surprised at my reaction, but I felt the gravity of the responsibility and that we were the cause behind the deaths and injuries of those young people. And since I personally detested violence and killing, I warned the young people against any work that put them at risk, and if anything like that was necessary, it would be me who would undertake it, or I would be among those carrying it out.

The university took advantage of the summer holiday period by sending letters of expulsion to a group of leading activists in the university, among them Basil al-Kubaisi, Thabit al-Muhayini, Youssef al-Tamimi, Faisal al-Khadra, Sami Sanbar, Osama Afifi and Ziyad Habash. The aim was to scare other students and prevent hostile activity on campus; yet the students – especially members of al-Urwa – quickly mobilised, and announced their unequivocal positions on Western schemes and the Baghdad Pact plan. This moved the American University to take repressive measures regarding

student leaders, announced in January 1955. Some of these leaders were punished with permanent expulsion from university, and others with expulsion till the end of the year, and still others were given warnings.

The following students were permanently expelled:

- Samir Abu Ghazaleh
- Makram Awdeh
- Ghassan Barazi
- Ramzi Dalul
- Al-Hakam Darwazeh
- Omar Fadel
- Adnan Faraj
- Samir Haddad
- Marwan al-Jubaili
- Issam Qabbani
- Ghassan Mahasni
- Hilmi Saad
- Nizar Sardast
- Hassaan al-Shawaf
- Omar Barazi

The following students were expelled for one year:

- Mohammad Nour Allah
- Fadl al-Faour
- Saeda al-Husseini
- Nabiha Lutfi
- Anwar al-Khalil
- Zakaria Abdel Rahim
- Issam Abu Taha
- Salah Dabbagh
- Michel Haddad
- Walid Husseini
- Stefo Ustufan
- Kamal Horshi
- Nizar Mruwa

The following students were given warnings:

- Intisar Abbas
- Taroub Shubailat
- Salam Ahmad
- Zuhair Atiya
- Mustafa Baydoun

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- Nabil Freij
- Ziyad Habashi
- Maan Karami
- Nizar Mahmoud
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After graduation, we all went to our home countries to continue the struggle – myself to Kuwait, Wadie to Jordan, where he was joined by George Habash after he resigned from the university hospital, and Hamid al-Jbouri to Iraq. We got to work under the same name: ‘the Arab Nationalist Youth’.