

السورة الفلسطينية

THE PALESTINIAN REVOLUTION

Iyad, Abu (Salah Khalaf). *My Home, My Land: A Narrative of the Palestinian Struggle*, New York: Times Books, 1981 (pp. 3-12).

MAY 13, 1948, is a day that will remain forever engraved in my memory. That day, less than twenty-four hours before the proclamation of the Israeli state, my family fled Jaffa for refuge in Gaza. We had been under siege; the Zionist forces controlled all the roads leading south, and the only escape left open to us was the sea. It was under a hail of shells fired from Jewish artillery set up in neighboring settlements, especially Tel Aviv, that I clambered onto a makeshift boat with my parents, my four brothers and sisters, and other relatives.

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians started for exile that day, often under tragic conditions. Not yet fifteen, I was overwhelmed by the sight of this huge mass of men, women, old people and children, struggling under the weight of suitcases or bundles, making their way painfully down to the wharfs of Jaffa in a sinister tumult. Cries mingled with moaning and sobs, all punctuated by deafening explosions.

The boat had scarcely lifted anchor when a woman started shrieking. One of her four children wasn't on board and she implored us to put back to port to look for him. Caught under the heavy fire of the Jewish guns, we couldn't turn back without risking the lives of the several hundred people, many of them children, crushed together in the small craft.

The piercing cries of the poor woman went unanswered. She broke down into sobs. Some of us tried to calm her by saying that her young

son would surely be picked up and later brought to Gaza. But in vain. Her nerves finally cracked and she straddled the rail, throwing herself into the sea. In an apparent effort to save her, her husband jumped in after her. It soon became clear that neither knew how to swim. The angry waves finally swallowed them up under our very eyes. We all remained rooted to the boat, paralyzed with horror.

At the time I didn't even ask myself why we were so hastily leaving our homes and belongings for the adventure of exile. It wouldn't have occurred to me at my age to question my father's authority, and besides, like everyone else, I was convinced that to stay would have meant sure death. News of the Deir Yassin massacre, which had taken place on April 9, 1948, still rang in our ears. Militants of Menachem Begin's group, the Irgun Zvai Leumi, had stormed the peaceful village west of Jerusalem and wiped out most of its inhabitants: More than 250 defenseless men, women, and children had been shot down, buried alive, or had their throats slashed. Numerous bodies had been mutilated with knives; pregnant women had been disemboweled. We had no reason to doubt the news of this savage killing, confirmed by Jacques de Reynier, the representative of the International Red Cross, who personally conducted the investigation at the scene.

Like Deir Yassin, Jaffa was at the mercy of the Zionist forces which completely controlled the hinterland of the city. The Haganah, the "official" army of the Jewish Agency which closely coordinated its activities with those of the so-called dissident groups like Begin's Irgun, had unleashed a full-scale offensive at the beginning of April aimed at cleaning out the Arab "pockets" within the territory set aside for the Jewish state. Before each attack, the population was warned that it would suffer the same fate as Deir Yassin's if it didn't evacuate the area.

The news of the genocide had spread like wildfire throughout the entire country, helped along by the Zionist mass media which amplified it as part of its campaign to terrorize the Arabs. But there's no denying that the massacre was also used by Palestinian agitators trying to mobilize the population. For example, they stressed that Deir Yassin women had been raped by the Zionist forces and called upon their compatriots to defend their most precious possession, the honor of their wives and daughters. But in most cases the strategy backfired: In a profoundly traditional society such as ours, many men rushed to remove their women from the reach of the Zionist soldiers instead of staying to resist the aggression. I often remember hearing in this connection that "honor is more important than land."

The decision of most of Jaffa's approximately 100,000 residents to flee the city for temporary refuge seemed all the more logical in that the Jews had an overwhelming military superiority. Better armed and better organized than the Palestinians, there was no question that they had the upper hand. The population began to take fright when Great Britain announced at the end of 1947 that it was relinquishing its mandate over Palestine and withdrawing its troops before May 15, 1948. So we couldn't even count on the protection—such as it was—of the British troops. Fright changed to panic when, after the Deir Yassin massacre, the Zionist forces began to pound the city, especially the port and business district. Everyone thought that the economic suffocation would serve as a prelude to the conquest of the city and doubtless new and atrocious killings.

If someone had told me as a young boy that we would one day be driven out of our country by the Jews, I would have been shocked and even indignant at such a preposterous idea. My family had always enjoyed excellent relations with Jews and had many Jewish friends. My grandfather, Sheikh Abdallah, a man of religion at Gaza, had raised his children in a spirit of great tolerance. One of his sons had married a Jewish woman and as a child I often remember hearing of romances developing between various boys in our circle and Jewish girls.

My father had picked up Hebrew through daily usage and spoke it well. In 1920 he had left Gaza, where his family had lived for ten generations, and moved to Jaffa, settling in the al-Hammam al-Mahruck quarter overlooking the sea. As an employee of the surveyor's office, he traveled continually throughout the country and thus got to know the Jewish population. When he quit his job in 1940, he opened a small grocery store in Carmel, a mixed neighborhood near Tel Aviv. About half his customers and suppliers were Jews, with whom he was on excellent terms. In keeping with the traditions in our part of the world, my parents exchanged visits with their Jewish neighbors and friends on Jewish and Muslim holidays.

My brother Abdallah, who was three years older than myself, and I used to work at the store during our lunch periods and after school so my father could take a few hours off. It was while serving the Jewish clientele that I learned to get along in Hebrew. Although my school, Marwaniya, was for Arabs, I had many friends from Jewish schools. Most of them were either born in Palestine or from Arab countries, especially Yemen, so their Arabic was better than my Hebrew. We used

the two languages almost interchangeably. We shared the interests of all children our age, and I remember distinctly our games on the beach of Tel Aviv, our long walks during which we spoke of everything except the problem which was soon to catapult us into enemy camps.

I first became aware of the Jewish-Arab conflict a little before the end of the Second World War. I was on my way to visit some close relatives in Sumeil, an Arab village in the Tel Aviv region. Rounding a bend in the road, I saw a group of young people on a hill in the distance being trained in the use of weapons. After the initial shock, I watched astonished as they went through various exercises, following orders in Hebrew with perfect discipline. I was eleven years old at the time and the scene made a powerful impression on me. Why were these Jewish boys and girls (who must have been about sixteen to twenty-five years old) preparing for war? Whom were they going to fight? What group did they belong to? When I told one of my teachers about it, he said they must belong to the Haganah. That was the first time I ever heard the name, and the first time I vaguely understood that we were heading toward a confrontation.

It was just about that time that a Palestinian paramilitary organization, the Najjadehs, was created under Muhammad al-Hawari. The principal of my school, Rashid al-Dabbagh, was one of its founding members. On his encouragement, I joined the youth section, the "lion cubs," where, along with a few comrades, I got my first taste of militant activity. Meanwhile, some of our professors tried to give us a political formation. They told us about the history of Palestine, the Balfour Declaration, Zionist colonization, the popular uprising of 1936-1939. Our duty, they told us, was to struggle for Palestine's right to be independent, like the other Arab states of the region.

I began to take an interest in the issues that were increasingly on every tongue: the Zionist's demand for unlimited Jewish immigration, their massive purchase of Arab lands, the huge stores of weapons they received from abroad with the active or passive complicity of the British authorities.

The defeat of the Axis powers, which immediately reactivated the Palestine question, marked the end of the careless friendship we enjoyed with our Jewish comrades. We continued to see them, sometimes in secret, despite the advice we each received from our respective elders. But our ardent discussions took on political overtones, and sometimes became violent.

I clearly remember a particularly unpleasant incident which took

place in October 1945. I was with a group of Arab and Jewish boys—there were about twenty of us in all—when a heated argument degenerated into a veritable pitched battle during which we actually threw stones at each other. I dismissed the episode and the next day set off to visit relatives. My father had just given me a new bicycle and I was proud to use it for the ten-kilometer trip.

While I was peddling through Tel Aviv on my way to Sumail, four or five boys a little older than myself suddenly started following me. They were shouting at the top of their lungs: "Aravit! Aravit!" which means "Arab" in Hebrew. They caught me, threw me on the ground, and began punching me in the face, stomach, and back. Since I had never seen these boys in my life before, I had no idea what I had done to deserve the beating. Unable to defend myself, I was so frightened and surprised I couldn't even cry for help. But when two of them grabbed my new bicycle and started tearing it to pieces, I did manage to let out a yell. Some passers-by rushed to snatch me from the clutches of my aggressors, who got away. An older man helped me stand up and led me to a nearby pharmacy where they bandaged my cuts.

My bicycle was ruined. Heartbroken, I left it at the side of the road and took the bus to Jaffa, limping home from there. Aching all over and worn out from the ordeal, I went straight to bed. Some hours later we were awakened in the middle of the night by a loud knocking at the door. When my father anxiously asked who was there, a stentorian voice thundered: "Police!"

Our three-room apartment, hardly big enough for the seven members of the family, was certainly unable to accommodate the ten or so Arab policemen and the handful of officers—mainly British—who crowded into the doorway. One of them handed my father a warrant for my arrest. I was ordered to follow him to the security police headquarters for questioning.

My family had never had any trouble with the police before. The sudden invasion of our apartment by the police at this hour of the night was in itself a shocking thing. What would the neighbors say? What crime had I committed to deserve such a large police contingent?

I can still see my father, white as a sheet, asking what I had done. The officer replied curtly that he didn't know anything. We all recognized the officer as al-Habbab, for he was well known in Jaffa even though he belonged to the secret services. A Palestinian and a servile defender of the colonial power, he had been charged by his British superiors to fight against "subversion." He carried out his task of spying on his compa-

tricts and punishing any deviation which might upset the established order with such zeal, not to say cruelty and cynicism, that he was feared and detested by all.

My father pleaded my youth, saying that it was impossible to take a twelve-year-old to the police station in the middle of the night. Protesting my innocence, he promised to bring me to al-Habbab's office the first thing the next morning. He literally begged, but al-Habbab wouldn't budge. He finally conceded, however, that my father could come along.

The interrogation began as soon as we arrived at security headquarters. Seated importantly behind his desk, al-Habbab asked me where I had gotten the cuts and bruises on my face. When I finished telling him what had happened in Tel Aviv, he called me a liar. He then summoned a plainclothes policeman into the room, who proceeded to accuse me of having stabbed a Jewish boy in the foot during a riot which had taken place that day in Jaffa. I told him that I couldn't have committed this aggression since at that very moment I myself was being attacked in Tel Aviv. Al-Habbab then had two Jewish boys whom I had counted among my good friends brought into the office. Without blinking an eye, they confidently confirmed the policeman's version, adding that I was the leader of the gang that had attacked the group of Jewish schoolboys. I was flabbergasted, crushed, and revolted. Had they seen me take part in the battle with their own eyes? Yes, they replied in chorus. Since I couldn't provide any counterwitnesses, my protests were useless.

When the confrontation ended, my father, still trying to get permission to take me home, was bodily expelled. I clenched my teeth, tears welling up in impotent rage and humiliation at the sight of my father being brutally shoved aside while loudly proclaiming my innocence and appealing to al-Habbab's sense of fairness. Locked up in a cell for juvenile delinquents, I couldn't sleep a wink all night.

The next morning, al-Habbab tried to extract a confession by beating me on the fingers with a ruler. My silence, which he took for arrogance, made him beat me all the harder. "You don't want to confess? All right then! You'll go on trial!" he finally shouted.

I was then led under guard to a juvenile court set up on a lower floor. The Englishman who presided over it asked me a few questions in his limited Arabic. Once again I recited my woes, which obviously didn't make much of an impression on him. The hearing lasted only a few minutes. After I was taken back to the office where I had first been questioned, al-Habbab made me stand for about ten hours until late in the

evening, at which point he delivered the verdict in the presence of my father. Naturally I was found guilty, and to atone for my misdeeds was sentenced to a year of house arrest. Among other things, this involved reporting to al-Habbab once a week with a detailed account of my activities.

For the first time in my life I felt frustration and hatred—hatred for the English who oppressed my people, hatred for those of my compatriots who served them, hatred for Zionism which had driven a wedge between Arabs and Jews. The sense of despair I felt at the injustice was nonetheless partially compensated by the prestige I enjoyed among my peers, who considered me more a hero than a victim. Hadn't I held up in the face of the oppressors and their repressive apparatus? Rashid al-Dabbagh, the school principal, immediately gave me a week off from school so I could recover from my wounds and traumatic experience. When I got back to class, my comrades welcomed me with open arms and I was more than ever the uncontested leader of the Najjadeh "lion cubs."

As for my parents, I had the impression that their protective tenderness toward me increased. My father didn't say much about the ordeal we had been through together, but given his deep patriotism I knew I could count on his complicity. Like my mother, he had approved my joining the Najjadeh, even though he himself was not a member of any military or political organization. Still, he acted rather strangely in the months following my arrest. My brother Abdallah and I noticed that he had begun to lock one of his closets to which no one had access but him. From time to time, he shut himself up in the room where the closet was located, and always emerged without saying a word. Intrigued, one day we decided to watch him through the keyhole. I can't even begin to express our astonishment as we saw him open the closet and take out a magnificent submachine gun! My father, the mildest and most peaceful of men, meticulously cleaning and oiling a lethal weapon, caressing it affectionately! Abdallah and I were thrilled. The gun was well beyond the means of a needy grocer like my father. Surely he must be a fighter in some underground unit!

The reality was quite different from our fantasies. When we finally got up the nerve to confess our indiscretion about a year later—it was toward the beginning of 1947—he told us he had paid for the gun out of his own pocket. It was not inconceivable, he said, that the British would withdraw their troops from Palestine, in which case the Arabs would have to defend themselves against the Jews who were arming them-

selves to the teeth. Most of the people in the Arab quarters of Jaffa bordering on Jewish settlements had done the same. With no one to count on for their defense, they were fearfully preparing for the day they'd be at the mercy of the Zionist fighters.

The Palestinian organizations were cruelly lacking in weapons. The guns the Najjadehs were training their members to handle were made of wood! During the whole time I was in the Najjadehs, I never had the chance to see, much less touch, a real weapon. The bulk of our training consisted of physical exercises and theoretical classes on the art of guerrilla warfare taught by former soldiers who had fought with the British during the Second World War.

The brutal suppression of the great rebellion of 1936–1939 had decimated the ranks of the Palestinian national movement, and dispersed the surviving leaders, most of whom were either jailed by the British or forced into exile. Obviously I had heard of Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the Mufti of Jerusalem and leader of the Palestinian movement, but at the time I knew little about him aside from his aversion to the Najjadehs and his insistence on safeguarding his full autonomy vis-à-vis the “historic leaders.” But I do recall the return from exile of Jamal al-Hussayni, the Mufti's cousin. A huge popular meeting was organized in his honor in Jaffa's main square, and I was one of the thousands of demonstrators who chanted slogans proclaiming the will to fight for an Arab and independent Palestine.

Jamal al-Hussayni was a secret leader of one of the Palestinian organizations of the day, the Futuwa. Shortly after his visit to Jaffa, efforts aimed at merging the Futuwa and the Najjadeh began. To this end, the Arab League dispatched an Egyptian officer named Mahmud Labib, whose links with the Muslim Brotherhood were well known. His mission was a tricky one but met with apparent success since the two groups formally merged to constitute the “Youth Organization.”

Far from breathing new life into the movement, the operation threw the members of the two artificially united organizations into utter confusion, paralyzing their activities. Muhammad al-Hawari, the Najjadeh leader, ceased all activity to protest the merger which he had bitterly opposed. A matchless orator and born leader, Hawari had been a passionate nationalist and contributed to demoralizing many of his admirers and followers by sliding from passivity into collaboration. Indeed, he actually went over to the Israelis when Jaffa fell to the Zionist forces. The Youth Organization petered out during the same period.

I am convinced that the British had a hand in this ill-conceived

merger. Working through numerous channels, including their agents in the Arab League, they tirelessly intrigued to weaken the Palestinian movement either by stirring up divisions or by making it inoperative, as in the case of the Najjadeh and Futuwa.

The Palestinians were unanimous in demanding the end of the British mandate and the full sovereign independence of their country. So the colonial authorities stepped up the measures and initiatives aimed at justifying and prolonging their power. To that end, they had to foster dissensions in Palestine, exacerbate passions among the Jews and Arabs, and when necessary stir up armed clashes. In the spring of 1946, the London government virtually suspended the provisions of the 1939 White Paper by authorizing the admission of 100,000 Jewish immigrants into Palestine and the purchase of Arab lands by the Zionists. At the same time they proclaimed that Great Britain would continue to exercise its mandate over Palestine so long as conditions didn't permit the country to become independent.

At the beginning of 1947, I saw with my own eyes how the English sought to make their presence indispensable, how they tried to demonstrate that their withdrawal would lead to a bloodbath in Palestine. On a number of occasions, my friends and I watched a light tank stationed in Jaffa fire on the Jewish quarters of Tel Aviv. Thinking that the Arabs had opened fire, the Jews fired back. The British went through exactly the same procedure in reverse, firing on Jaffa from Tel Aviv. Skirmishes escalated between the two components of the population until November of the same year, when the United Nations General Assembly, noting that coexistence had become impossible, decreed the partition of Palestine into two states.

Britain's policy of clear-cut partiality toward the Jews was designed to counterbalance the potential means at the disposal of the Arabs, who constituted the overwhelming majority of the population. While the authorities pursued a pitiless repression against the Arabs, they treated Jewish terrorists guilty of atrocious crimes—even against the English themselves—with an indulgence which taxed the imagination. The forces of order turned a blind eye to the massive influx of arms the Haganah and other Zionist organizations received from abroad, but didn't hesitate to jail an Arab found in possession of a simple firearm. Indeed, we were forbidden to carry so much as a knife, an offense punishable by six years in prison.

The balance of power, which had seemed in our favor during the first two years following the war, was soon reversed in the Zionists' favor. It

is true that the Zionists also enjoyed support and complicity from abroad that we lacked. The Arab states had a largely platonic sympathy for us, promising a great deal but in fact giving a merely symbolic assistance. The Palestinians had no organization comparable to the Jewish Agency, which centralized the funds and provided the coordination needed for the purchase and transport of arms. They were likewise devoid of a political and military leadership which, had it existed, could have organized their resistance.

Left to their fate, fearing massacres like that of Deir Yassin, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians decided to leave their country for temporary refuge. The decision was made all the easier by certain "national committees," notably at Jaffa, which assured those who wanted to leave that their exile would be of short duration, a few weeks or months, the time necessary for the coalition of Arab armies to overcome the Zionist forces. The Arab countries' loudly-trumpeted decision to resist the creation of Israel with the force of arms had given rise to an immense wave of hope among the Palestinians.

In retrospect, I think my compatriots were wrong to have believed the Arab regimes and in any case to have left the field open to the Jewish colonizers. They should have stood their ground, whatever the cost. The Zionists could never have exterminated them to the last man. Besides, for many, exile has been worse than death.

My parents decided to leave. After all, they were going to Gaza, my father's hometown. Confident of a speedy return, they left all their furniture and possessions behind, taking with them only the bare necessities. I can still see my father, clutching our apartment keys in his hand, telling us reassuringly that it wouldn't be long before we could move back. Thirty years have passed, and I have never again seen the house where I was born. I still don't know whether or not it was destroyed.