Al-Yahya, ʿAbd al-Razzaq. *Bayn al-ʿAskariya wa-l-Siyasiya*. Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2006 (pp. 39-44). Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*.[1]

While I was working hard at my military course, Haifa fell to the hands of the Zionists, and Tantura followed in turn. As soon as I learnt some officers in the Salvation Army that fought in Palestine had come back and were stationed in Camp 1 in Qatna, I went to them immediately, asking for details of what happened to my village. From these officers, I learnt that Tantura had witnessed a massacre. One of them said that all the villagers had been killed and not a single one escaped alive. How hard was the shock at hearing this news! So that I would not be shattered by this disaster, I went around looking for something to refute or play down the events these officers had heard and recounted. I searched here and there in the hope of finding witnesses, but I was unable to reach any certainty. The next day, I went to Damascus, and headed straight to the residence of Haj Amin al-Husseini in the Orient Palace hotel. I found this leader, who was exiled from his homeland, sad. The Mufti confirmed a massacre had taken place in Tantura, and told me that the Arab Higher Committee had published a statement about it in the Syrian press.

After the Mufti personally confirmed the massacre; after my anxiety on the fate of my family grew as I failed to find any of them; after I was utterly frustrated by the poor performance of the Arab armies, and their inability to defend Palestine; after seeing the mass groups of Palestinian refugees wandering homeless in Damascus; after all this, I felt utter despair at the usefulness in pursuing a military path, and I came to the conclusion that military life does not play an important role, and what mattered was politics. Bearing these feelings, charged with the horror of catastrophe, I decided to submit my resignation from the military course, and resolved to pursue politics instead...

Even before the idea of resigning took hold in my mind, some of us taking the military course (especially from the Haifa district, with Rashid Jarbou and Abdel Rahman Mifleh al-Sa’ad at whose forefront) made political contacts in Damascus. We visited the headquarters of Syrian parties and met their leaders with the aim of conveying our views and listening to theirs. I developed the impression that these parties were unable to achieve any of their political ambitions, due to their disagreements on the one hand, and the instability of the political situation on the other. Nevertheless, I was heavily influenced by the democratic political atmosphere in Syria, which included such a large variety of parties. Amongst the politicians I remember us meeting at the time was Akram al-Hourani, the leader of the Arab Socialist Party who had fought alongside some members of his party in Palestine. We also met Salah al-Bitar, one of the most prominent founders of the Ba'ath Party; Khaled Bikdash, leader of the Communist Party; and Khaled al-Azm, one of the most important leaders of the national bourgeoisie. In these meetings, we heard a wide variety of views and I found myself heavily involved in political discussions, without losing my habit of avoiding commitment to any party, or fully adopting its agenda. As such, my resignation from the military course did not come out of nowhere, but was influenced by the experiences generated by these political encounters.

I did not wait for my resignation to be approved; I left as soon as I submitted it, and went to Damascus to look for a job. I found one faster than I could have hoped for… I then went to Qatna to cut off my relations completely with the military course, only to find out that my resignation was firmly rejected, and that this rejection was accompanied with the threat of disciplinary action if I were to submit a new resignation… So I stayed in the course and retained my connection to the Mufti who remained in the Orient Palace Hotel in Damascus…

Initially, after enrolling in the course in April 1948, we were meant to spend a year and a half in it, after which we would graduate as officers with the rank of Second Lieutenant. However, developments taking place in Palestine required shortening the length of the course, and we ended up graduating in November 1949, which was 9 months after the course had begun. By then, fighting had stopped and negotiations were taking place to transform the ceasefire into a permanent armistice… The knowledge and training we had received did not entitle us to become full-fledged officers. Yet, as holders of a Palestine Matriculation certificate, we were over qualified to become non-commissioned officers. Accordingly, each one of us was given the rank in-between: Officer Cadet… We were allocated to the various units of the Salavation Army; with our rank, we assumed officer responsibilities without enjoying officer privileges! I was, along with Samir al-Khatib, the first to join the Fourth Yarmouk Regiment which was based in Bint Jbeil in Lebanon…

In the meantime, I was still searching, to no avail, for some clue that would extinguish the flames of doubt I had concerning the fate of my family. On this, I managed to get some leave after withdrawing my resignation, and went from Bint Jbeil to Damascus. At the entrance to Souq al-Hamidiyeh, I saw by chance my aunt's husband (incidentally, he was the father of Izz al-Din al-Qalaq, who was only a child at the time).[2] I learnt from him that my mother, father, and siblings had survived the massacre and that my parents were in Damascus along with some other members of the family. My aunt's husband directed me to their place of residence. He, along with my uncle Mohammad al-Yahya and their families, resided in an old school that gave shelter to Palestinian refugees. As for my parents, they stayed in a humble hotel in the Hariqa area next to Souq al-Hamidiyeh. How quickly I raced to that hotel!

I wanted to surprise my family so I went up to my parent's room without making any noise. The door to the room was open, and I heard my mother worrying that they had been in Damascus for a week without finding me: "they told us he's in Adana, and Adana is in Turkey. How are we supposed to get there?" My mother, who was told that I was in Qatna, thought that Qatna was Turkish Adana. She was despairing as a result, but nevertheless reiterated her hope that she would see me. At that very moment, I entered the room, and it was a deep and warm reunion.

None of my immediate family members were killed in the massacre. And at that meeting at the humble hotel in Hariqa, I heard from my father the details of what happened. I then heard the same details from my uncle Mohammad who had also survived the massacre by leaving Tantura before it was attacked. Their two narratives matched exactly.

The Zionists assaulted Tantura on May 23, 1948, facing strong resistance and suffering substantial losses. The attackers went into the village from two sides: the sea and the eastern entrance to the village. The villagers were ready for defence. They were equipped with personal weapons (which was all the Palestinian fighters really possessed); the Turbine "dynamite" bombs, which are usually used for fishing; and some limited ammunition. Despite the valour of the resisters, the attackers had greater numbers and superior weapons, and they were able to completely control every part of the village. Wherever they took hold of an area, they forced its inhabitants to congregate, and they took them next to the graveyard. This was the same assembly point that the British used to force the inhabitants into whenever they attacked the village. As used to happen in the days of the British, the people were divided into two groups: one reserved for children and women, and the other for men.

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[2] Dr Izz al-Din al-Qalaq was a Palestinian scientist and diplomat. He held a PhD in Chemistry from Poitiers University in France, and was the PLO representative in Paris until his assassination there on August 2, 1978.

Once the inhabitants were assembled, the men were ordered to stand in rows, each row of 7 to 10. My brothers were distributed to two of the back rows, while my father found himself in a row behind them. Those standing in the front rows were ordered to dig a trench next to the wall that separated the graveyard from the old window factory, and they were forced to make the trench wide and deep. The men who stood in the first row were then instructed to stand on the edge of the trench that they had just dug. In front of them were machine gunners, who received an order in Hebrew and began to shoot: as the bullets were fired, the bodies of the standing men fell into the trench. The men in the second row were then ordered to move the bodies so that they would all rest at the bottom of the trench. They were then ordered to stand on the edge, and were gunned down in turn. Thus, the number of columns decreased, as the number of corpses increased.

When the turn came for the row in which two of my brothers stood, they bid their third brother who was standing in a different row farewell. They also bid farewell to my father, proceeding to the edge of the trench. As the men standing in their row were waiting to be shot, a message arrived, carried by a soldier on a motorbike. It was submitted to the officer overseeing the killing, and the massacre stopped. The number of those whose corpses were thrown into the trench was around 80 men. They were killed that day without discrimination to age; they included elderly men as well as teenage boys.

After the killing stopped, the surviving villagers were transferred – children, women, and men – to another location where they were force-marched under the threat of arms towards the village of Freidees, located three kilometres to the east. The perpetrators of the massacre robbed the survivors of all what they had on them: money, watches, and jewellery. This was after they stole everything they could find in the village itself. As they were marching on this rough path east, the villagers were not safe from insults and beatings all along the way. In Freidees, survivors of the massacre spread to houses in the village to which they had been placed. My parents went to the house of the *Mukhtaar* of the village, Ismail Barryeh, who was married to my half-sister. The few houses of the village were too small to fit all these newcomers, to the degree it was difficult sometimes to find any space in the house to sit.

The people of our village continued like this for a whole week, closely observed by the armed men who had forced them into this place, and prevented them from movement. After the week had passed, the teenage boys and the men were taken to the concentration camps around the colonies of Netanya and Beit Lid, and others. As for the women and the children, they were forced out of the areas that were under the control of the Zionists, those areas that were renamed Israel…

My father's stay in the concentration camp did not last long. With the intervention of the Red Cross, he was released after six months, on the grounds of old age. In Nablus, my father met up with my mother, who had left before him with my sisters and my youngest brother Zuhair. As for my brothers Fuad, Adnan and Marwan, they remained imprisoned for a long time, and I was eventually able to correspond with them through the Red Cross. They were finally released one by one, joining the family in Damascus. The last to be freed was Fuad, who was whipped by the jailors and then banished to Bir al-Sabe' (Beersheba) for helping some prisoners escape. I heard from all my brothers their stories about the Tantura massacre, and all their accounts exactly matched those of my father and uncle.

It turned out, however, that my family had only witnessed one aspect of the massacre, which was what occurred at the graveyard. They did not see what happened in other locations, something I was able to discover after making repeated attempts to learn the facts of what took place in Tantura. The attackers threw lethal bombs through the windows and the doors, killing the villagers who had remained in their homes, in defiance of the assembly order. Additionally, the attackers killed any young men they saw hiding between the houses in the village. Accordingly, the total number of those killed that day was around 180, not counting those that were martyred as they were fighting to defend their village.

After I found my family, the first thing I did was to rent a house in the Muhajireen neighbourhood. I furnished it with what I could afford, and took the family to it. After all, I was the only one in the family who was receiving a regular salary, regardless of how small it was. Since I was now responsible for supporting a family that had lost all it owned, I expunged the notion of resigning from my mind. As for my ambition to study engineering, it sunk by itself in the turbulent rapids of those horrendous events that destroyed my aspirations, along with the dreams of others around me. To help my family, I took a letter from my uncle addressed to the Damascene merchant Kamal al-Halabawi, and he gave me a small amount of money, that nevertheless made a huge difference at the time. As for my sister Nihad, who was in Haifa, she died there before her husband and sons left to Syria as refugees.

After the family reassembled in Damascus it eventually dispersed again. The young grew older and received higher educational degrees in their respective fields, establishing families that they settled with, in different countries. My older brother Fuad, who is a retired bank manager, settled in Jordan, and so did my late sister Souad. My brother Mahmoud is an agricultural engineer, my brother Marwan is an architect, and my brother Zuhair is a medical doctor specialising in endocrinology; the three of them settled in the United

States. My brother Adnan is a medical doctor who settled in Germany. As for my remaining sisters, Widad stayed in Damascus, Riad and her family settled in Libya, while Raghda and her family went to Saudi Arabia. As for me, I continued my service at the time in the army, and I channelled all my resources towards serving my family.