Iyad, Abu (Salah Khalaf). ***My Home, My Land: A Narrative of the Palestinian Struggle*****, New York: Times Books, 1981 (pp. 29-40).**

On October 10, 1959, a small group of us met in a discreet house in Kuwait to hammer out the organizational structures of Fatah. More meetings with other participants took place over the following days, always in the greatest secrecy. There were fewer than twenty of us in all, representatives of underground groups from various Arab countries and beyond, coming together to centralize our activities for the first time. This limited congress marked the formal creation of what was to become the most powerful national liberation movement Palestine had ever known. And yet, the total number of militants represented by those attending the restricted congress was under 500 persons.

A number of documents were drawn up and approved during those October meetings. These involved the movement's structures and statutes as well as the strategy and tactics, means of action and financing, of the revolution we intended to launch. The tasks of Fatah's various organs were spelled out as were the methods of recruitment and training of cadres. The political program per se, defining the guiding principles of the movement, had been finalized at the beginning of 1958. Drafted by a committee formed for that purpose, the document had been cussed, revised, and then approved through personal contacts or correspondence.

The program reflected the consensus we had reached in the course of countless discussions throughout the 1950's in Cairo or Gaza, but it was

also based on the experiences of our predecessors in the national movement.

Although at the time we hadn't undertaken a systematic study or collective reflection on the subject, each of us had drawn lessons from the past through his own reading. The conclusions we reached were similar, even though our perceptions and analyses of the events marking Palestine's history differed. Furthermore, our assessments were to evolve and crystallize as time went on.

I don't think it would be fair to condemn totally the actions of those who came before us. First of all, they didn't constitute a monolithic bloc. There were among them members of the great families and men of the people, patriots and traitors, those who saw clearly and those who didn't. In any case, they can only be judged in the context of their time, taking into consideration the prevailing mentality, the objective and sometimes decisive difficulties they had to face without the necessary experience to carry them through. Many of them made heavy sacrifices, some paid with their lives for their miscalculations. But the failure of the Palestinian movement cannot be attributed solely to an unfavorable international situation or the enemy's strength and cleverness. Serious errors were committed. One of the tasks we set for ourselves was to pinpoint and analyze these errors so as to avoid repeating them.

There is no question that our predecessors failed to set up a strongly structured organization. Until the creation of Fatah, the national movement was led by members of the great families, particularly the Hussaynis and the Nashashibis, more often than not pitted against one another in bitter rivalry or open conflict concerning the course of action to follow. The organization, when indeed any existed, was improvised and never rooted in the masses, so it fell apart as soon as the leader who dominated it disappeared. Through the local committees which sprang up spontaneously, various forms of struggle were waged, such as strikes and demonstrations or even guerrilla warfare. The uprisings of 1919, 1922, 1928, 1933, and 1936–1939 testify to the fighting spirit of the population, but also to the sterility of a struggle which is not launched, directed, and sustained by a central, structured, and permanent body. This is why Fatah's founders attached such importance to the development of an authentically popular organization which would survive whatever the fate of any of its leaders.

Another error committed by our predecessors was that they underestimated the importance of integrating the Jewish population, or at least part of it, into the national liberation movement. Before the Second

World War there was no question in the minds of the movement's leaders or the population at large that the struggle was being waged against the British occupier. They invariably demanded the withdrawal of British troops, the proclamation of independence, and the sovereignty of the Palestinian state. They accused, and rightly so, Britain of having provoked the conflict by issuing the Balfour Declaration in 1917, which promised the Jews a national home in Palestine, and of having fueled this same conflict through various means in order to justify and perpetuate its colonial power. It was clear that this policy could only be detrimental to the entire population, Arab and Jewish alike.

If for no other reason, Hajj Amin al-Hussayni, Mufti of Jerusalem and preeminent leader of the resistance between the two wars, deserves credit for obliterating any trace of religious antagonism among the Arabs. He managed to unite both Christian and Muslim Arabs in the same anti-imperialist struggle. But why hadn't he tried to convince the Palestinian Jews that their real interests lay in renouncing Zionist illusions and making peace with the Arabs? And why didn't the Palestinian trade unions form a common front with the Jewish workers? Of course it was difficult for the victims of Zionist colonization—particularly those who lost their lands and jobs to the new immigrants—to distinguish the Jews who tried to live with the Palestinians from their Zionist leaders. Still, the Palestinian leadership should have made a real effort to dissipate the ambiguities and misunderstandings that stood in the way of Jewish-Arab understanding.

From the very beginning, then, the founders of Fatah had foreseen the possibility of creating a democratic state on all Palestine in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims could live in harmony as equal citizens. In the early stages, however, various political factors prevented us from making public the proposal we were to offer the Israeli Jews in 1968.

Our predecessors also committed the grave error of placing the Palestinian national movement at the mercy of the Arab regimes, confusing the selfish motives of these last with the disinterested motives of the Arab people. Most of the Arab governments at the time were heavily influenced if not dominated by Great Britain, and thus could not, either by necessity or inclination, be sincere allies of a liberation movement struggling against the very imperialism to which they were tied. Sheikh Izz al-Din al-Qassam, a true freedom fighter who organized the peasants before taking to the maquis in 1932, died heroically in 1935 at the end of a battle doomed from the start because of the total lack of support from any "brother" country. It was the British who actually killed him, but

responsibility for his death must be borne primarily by the Arab accomplices of the mandatory power.

Nor did any Arab regime help the Palestinian people during the great popular uprising of 1936. The general strikes—the first of which lasted six months—the demonstrations, the pitched battles that followed one after another in rapid succession up until the very eve of the Second World War, were all put down in blood. The Arab states stood by idly, neither trying to stop the carnage nor supplying the slightest material aid to a defenseless population confronting British cannons and tanks. As if that weren't enough, they issued an appeal to the Palestinian people inviting them to stop fighting against "our great ally, England." At the same time they tried to divert the revolution by designating the Jews as the enemy to attack.

After the war, while the Zionists were receiving huge quantities of arms with the complicity of the British, while the balance of power was tipping dangerously in the Zionists' favor, while Haganah in early 1948 was pursuing its conquest of territory, still the Arab states refused to give the Palestinians the means to defend themselves. For form, they sent a few hundred guns which had to suffice for the tens of thousands who could have been mobilized for the battle.

To justify their passivity, the Arab states said they had taken it upon themselves to liberate Palestine. The outcome of their miserable adventure is well known. Their armies, which poured into Palestine on May 15, 1948, were not even capable of retaining the area allotted to the Arabs under the partition plan adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in November 1947. And with good reason. King Abdallah of Jordan, casting a covetous eye on the West Bank, rushed to annex it, while King Farouk, more discreet, placed the Gaza strip under Egyptian administration. The Palestinian government set up in Gaza in September 1948 under the presidency of Ahmad Hilmi Pasha never even got off the ground, with no Arab capital willing to risk supporting it. In practice, the Arab states favored the consolidation of the fait accompli, enabling the new Israeli state to extend the territory allotted to it by the UN.

Countless examples could be given to illustrate the popular dictum that "all revolutions conceived in Palestine abort in the Arab capitals." Experience has shown that when the chips are down all the Arab regimes, whether progressive or reactionary, act in the same way, sacrificing the Palestinian cause to their own parochial interests.

So the founders of Fatah swore to resist all attempts to place the

Palestinian national movement under the tutelage of any Arab government, regardless of which one. It was only at this price that our undertaking could be lasting and succeed in the long run. This being the case, we were not, as we explained to our militants, separatists. Quite the contrary, we aspired to become the champions of Arab unity, especially since we were convinced that the Palestinians would not be able to liberate their country single-handedly as long as the local and international balance of power remained what it was. Our goal was to become the catalysts of a unitary and revolutionary Arab force, the spearhead of a wide front which alone would be capable of restoring Palestinian rights. Such was and remains our strategy. In the meantime, our stress on self-reliance in no way precludes agreements or tactical alliances with foreign governments, Arab or otherwise, whose interests coincide with ours.

This principle was falsely applied by Hajj Amin al-Husayni when he rallied to Nazi Germany during the Second World War, thereby committing an error which we vigorously condemn. However, his behavior must be placed in its true context. For obvious reasons, Zionist propaganda presents him as a Nazi sympathizer. Anyone who knew him personally, myself included, knows otherwise. Hajj Amin was a nationalist, a conservative to be sure, but sincere all the same. In his defense I must say that despite his mentality and the serious differences which separated us, he never publicly criticized Fatah and its leadership.

I saw him for the last time in 1974, three months before his death. When, during our conversation, I reproached him for having linked his fate to Germany, he explained why. Outraged by Britain's role and activities in Palestine, relentlessly hounded by the mandate authorities, he felt it was only natural that he should join the enemy camp. Like many other Arab nationalists, especially in Egypt and Iraq, he believed that the Axis powers would win the war and that they would grant Palestine its independence as a mark of appreciation toward those who supported them during the conflict. I told him that such calculations were a bit naive when one considers that Hitler placed the Arabs in fourteenth place, *after* the Jews, in the hierarchy of races on our planet. If Germany had won, it would have instituted a far crueler occupation than the one known under the British Mandate.

Hajj Amin in any case was not a Nazi, any more than the Palestinian leaders who supported Great Britain during the war were agents of imperialism. The pro-British faction was quite simply betting on an Allied victory and hoped through their support of Britain to wrest their coun-

try's independence, which after all was the primary and sacred goal of all the struggles waged by the Palestinian people since the First World War.

Those who have tried to promote the belief that the Palestinian nationalists were agents of Nazi Germany conveniently forget that thousands of our compatriots fought in the British army. Even today, Fatah's best military instructors were trained in the British forces. Ironically, General Wajih al-Madani, the first commander-in-chief of the Palestine Liberation Army constituted in 1965, was a classmate of General Moshe Dayan in a British military school in Palestine.

It wasn't only the experience and errors of our predecessors which helped guide our first steps. The guerrilla war in Algeria, launched five years before the creation of Fatah, had a profound influence on us. We were impressed by the Algerian nationalists' ability to form a solid front, wage war against an army a thousand times superior to their own, obtain many forms of aid from various Arab governments (often at odds with one another), and at the same time avoid becoming dependent on any of them. They symbolized the success we dreamed of.

At the time we didn't have any relations with representatives of the National Liberation Front (FLN), so we read everything we could get our hands on concerning the Algerian movement. My political culture was somewhat lacking in those days. As a philosophy student, I naturally had some familiarity with Hegel, Marx, and Lenin. But my personal readings were eclectic, ranging from Michel Aflaq (founder of the Baath party) and Sayed Kotb (one of the ideologues of the Muslim Brotherhood) to adventure stories and detective novels. It was only after my return to Gaza in 1957 that I developed a strong interest in revolutions, all revolutions.

I devoured the works of Lenin. I found his courage, his basic optimism, even while living as a political refugee abroad, exalting. The Bolsheviks' seizure of power and the difficulties they faced held many lessons of universal interest. But I personally felt closer to Mao Zedong, whose moral sense struck me as more akin to Islam than to the strict materialism of Lenin. More than anything, the Long March captured my imagination. In my mind's eye, I pictured the Palestinian people, armed, returning to their country to drive out the usurpers.

Frantz Fanon was one of my favorite authors. In his *Wretched of the Earth*, which I read and reread countless times, he said that only a people who doesn't fear the guns and tanks of the enemy is capable of fighting a revolution to the finish. By that he meant that the Algerian nation-

alists would never have started anything if they had taken into account the balance of power at the time they launched their insurrection. Later it became clear how right he was—from one end of the Third World to the other, entire peoples, deprived of everything, took up arms to gain their freedom and independence.

The founders of Fatah were well aware of Israel's military superiority, the means at its disposal and the power of its allies, but still they set as their main objective the launching of the armed struggle. Not that we harbored any illusions regarding our ability to overcome the Zionist state. But we believed that it was the only way to impose the Palestinian cause on world opinion, and especially the only way to rally our masses to the peoples' movement we were trying to create.

In this regard, we took two factors into account: the mood of the Palestinians and their dispersal among various Arab political parties. As for the parties, we couldn't compete with them on ideological grounds. We didn't have anything better to offer than the Muslim Brethren, the Communists, the Arab Nationalists, or the Baathists in their respective domains. In truth, we believed that these formations were negative in that they divided the Palestinians and relegated the liberation of Palestine to the background.

Only armed struggle would be capable of transcending ideological differences and thus become the catalyst of unity. Indeed, we had noticed that many of our compatriots, saturated with the speeches and promises of Arab parties and politicians, began to tire of this sterile verbosity and to ask themselves if pan-Islamism, pan-Arabism, or Communism weren't really tedious detours or, worse still, substitutes for the goal most important to them, the recovery of their country.

We exposed our doctrine to the public through a monthly magazine called *Filastinuna (Our Palestine)*, edited anonymously in Beirut as of 1959. It appeared irregularly, in keeping with our means and possibilities, and included news coverage and items, editorials, and articles signed by pseudonyms. In it, using simple language understandable to everyone, we outlined our basic theses which could be summarized as follows: revolutionary violence is the only way to liberate the homeland; it should be carried out, at least in a first stage, by the Palestinian masses themselves and led independently of parties and states; although the active support of the Arab world is indispensable for its success, the Palestinian people must retain the power of decision and the role of vanguard.

Fatah, running counter to the Arab nationalist theses which held sway

at the time, also proclaimed that "Arab unity will be achieved through the liberation of Palestine" rather than the reverse. These were daring positions at a time when Nasserism was at its peak and when the birth of the United Arab Republic grouping Egypt and Syria seemed to herald a tidal wave that would submerge the state of Israel.

Our primary task during that autumn of 1959 was not to win over large sectors of public opinion, but rather to set up an organization which would enable us to launch the armed struggle and become a mass movement. We conceived two branches, one military and the other political, to be built on a pyramidal model. Cells at the base, sectional and regional committees, and a revolutionary council were to function under the supreme control of a central committee. The committee would draw its authority from a national congress, a sort of parliament grouping representatives of all segments of the Palestinian population—merchants, functionaries, manual laborers, members of the liberal professions, and intellectuals—among whom our members would lobby as independents.

During the phase devoted to the training of cadres, which lasted from 1959 to 1964, we created hundreds of cells, not only in the areas bordering on Israel (the West Bank, Gaza, refugee camps of Syria and Lebanon) but also within Palestinian communities in the other Arab countries, Africa, Europe, and even North and South America. Our militants, without revealing their membership in Fatah, succeeded in getting elected to leadership positions in trade unions, clubs, cooperative associations, and municipal councils. Those who possessed particular talents were even entrusted with high positions in a number of Arab governments.

Absolute secrecy was the cardinal rule dominating all our activities. Each cell consisted of a maximum of three members who knew each other only by code names which were changed from time to time for additional security. The cells generally met in public places in full view of everyone. Telephone or postal contacts were strictly forbidden, and all messages were delivered orally even if the leadership had to send emissaries to other countries for this purpose.

In keeping with our determination to safeguard our independence, we refrained from asking the slightest financial aid from any Arab country during this period. But our needs were great. Not only did we have to assure the operation and development of Fatah, we also had to pump money into various funds, including one for arms purchases. We had to ask heavy sacrifices on the part of our militants, who turned a large share—sometimes over half—of their salary or wages over to Fatah. Our

funds were further increased by generous donations from Palestinians of the diaspora, who either belonged to Fatah or sympathized with our cause. Over the years, our fund raisers set up a vast network of contributors, integrated or not into the official support committees.

Fatah really began to take off in 1964. Two events contributed to swelling its ranks. The first was our success in unifying most of the thirty-five to forty Palestinian organizations which had spontaneously come into being in Kuwait. It's true that many of them had a very tenuous existence, with only a small number of enthusiasts. But their absorption into Fatah ended a wasteful scattering of goodwill and effort, and in some cases brought us dynamic and competent elements. Still more important was the merger we negotiated with the organizations in Qatar and Saudi Arabia led by three men who were to play major roles in the future: Yusuf al-Najjar and Kamal Adwan (both killed by an Israeli commando in Beirut in April 1973), and Abu Mazen, presently a member of Fatah's central committee. Their ideas were very close to ours, so the merger agreement was concluded without difficulty.

But it was really the breakup of the United Arab Republic in September 1961 which marked the beginning of our transformation into a mass movement. The letdown following the collapse of the Syrian-Egyptian union was commensurate with the immense hope raised when it was proclaimed under Nasser three years earlier. Bitterly disappointed, numerous Palestinians left their respective parties to join Fatah.

It would be difficult to empathize with the Palestinians' impatience to recover their land without some idea of the extent of the hardships they endured. Exile in itself is a painful experience that can only be understood by those who have gone through it. The grief of losing one's home and country is even greater when compounded by separation from one's loved ones. Rare is the Palestinian family (which is traditionally close-knit) that was able to stay together, and not be scattered by the force of events throughout various Arab countries and parts of the world as far away as the United States or South America.

The situation of my family is not unusual in this regard. My older brother Abdallah was a mechanic in Saudi Arabia before becoming an air-conditioning technician in Kuwait. My young brother Ahmad is a professor of English literature in Qatar, but before that lived in Pakistan, Egypt, and England. My two sisters, Salwa and Insaf, are both in Saudi Arabia, but one teaches in Jiddah and the other lives in Riyadh where her husband works for the Defense Ministry. In a quarter of a

century we managed to get together only once, in 1977, when my brother Abdallah underwent a serious operation in Kuwait. The only one absent from this memorable family reunion was my father, who had died the year before in Cairo.

When the Palestinians left their country in 1948, they thought they would be welcomed like brothers in the Arab states. A big surprise was in store for them. The lucky ones were treated like foreigners; more often it was as undesirables. In Lebanon, a hospitable country if ever there was one, they were admitted with solicitude, but the refugee camps soon turned into ghettos which you couldn't leave or enter without permits. In Jordan there was free access to the camps, but the refugees were subjected to unremitting police surveillance: Any political activity, the slightest hint of dissent, was punished by harsh interrogations, arbitrary imprisonment, even torture. Everyday conditions were less severe in Syria, but on the other hand the authorities demanded a total conformity and unconditional allegiance to the regime of the moment, whether rightist or leftist, separatist or pan-Arab. The employment problem was the same from one end of the Arab world to the other: The local citizens had priority for the available positions, the Palestinians having to accept the difficult and ill-paid subaltern jobs. In any case, they had first to get clearance with the security police, who thus had the power to condemn to unemployment any Palestinian judged "disloyal" or suspected of "subversion."

Kuwait was one of the rare exceptions to the rule. Both the citizens and the rulers of this minuscule state have always given us sympathy and support. It's true that our people contributed immensely to the development and well-being of the country, even before the vastly increased oil revenues started pouring in. The Palestinian community, which today represents about 20 percent of the population, includes numerous teachers, engineers, doctors, and high government officials, not to mention a large body of skilled workers.

It is not a coincidence that Fatah was founded in Kuwait. Many of us had good positions in the country: Yasir Arafat was a respected engineer at the Ministry of Public Works, Faruq al-Qaddumi (Abu Lutuf) headed a department at the Ministry of Public Health, Khalid al-Hasan and Abd al-Muhsin al-Qattan were part of the high government administration, Khalil Ibrahim al-Wazir (Abu Jihad) and I were teachers in secondary schools.

Compared to Palestinians living in other Arab countries, we were privileged. Although vigorously pursuing underground activities, we

were neither hounded nor persecuted. I used the courses I taught in philosophy, psychology, and Arabic as a platform to expose Fatah's ideas, and never had any trouble. Moreover, I recruited excellent elements from among my students.

On the other hand, our movements were subjected to the same restrictions as those of Palestinians everywhere. Although we had travel documents delivered by this or that Arab state, we were obliged to obtain exit and entrance visas which were granted sparingly and only after repeated and time-consuming applications. No matter that we were Egyptian, Syrian, Jordanian, or Lebanese subjects, the authorities of our adopted countries continued to treat us like foreigners, and suspicious ones at that.

I had to travel quite frequently in connection with my political duties within Fatah. Added to the problems of getting visas and exit permits, I had to go through considerable administrative red tape to get time off during the school year. Due to my frequent absences, the educational authorities began to suspect that I was involved in troublesome activities, so I ended up avoiding trips that weren't absolutely necessary.

I remember a case in March 1963. My wife had just gotten word that her older brother, an engineer who worked in Cairo, had been killed in an accident. We had to go at once, and with some difficulty I got permission to leave. There were no direct flights to Egypt, so my wife, three-year-old daughter Imane, and I took a plane to Beirut, where we planned to spend the night before catching a connecting flight for Cairo. But the Lebanese authorities refused to give us a twenty-four-hour transit visa, and we were forced to remain at the Beirut airport. We were herded into a tiny room where we didn't even have space to lie down. I begged them to let my wife and little girl go to a hotel in town while I stayed at the airport, but the security officer was adamant.

At this juncture, a dog was ushered into the room where we were being sequestered. It hadn't been granted entrance into the country either since it didn't have valid vaccination papers. I began to console myself with the idea that no discrimination separated Palestinians from dogs, when someone came in to fetch the creature which in the meantime had received a special dispensation thanks to an "intercession from high quarters."

The incident, which struck me as symbolic of our fate, remains vivid in my memory. More than ten years later, in an effort to illustrate the sad plight of the Palestinian people and the sense of our struggle, I told this story to a prominent Lebanese who today has a high position in the

Falangist party. The Lebanese, after coldly looking me up and down, replied contemptuously: "Your so-called liberation movement hasn't attained any of its objectives. You will remain undesirable foreigners and you will never have free access to the Arab countries. The only concrete result of your presence here in Lebanon is that we have to pay our servants higher wages thanks to your salary demands." The Falangist's wife was unable to hide her indignation at such cynicism. "If I were Abu Iyad," she said to him, "I'd shoot you down right here."

He was right about one thing: Despite our struggles, despite our thousands of martyrs, our dead on the Arab battlefields, we are still treated like a plague-ridden people.

Another and equally revealing incident happened not so long ago. A certain Naji al-Astal, holder of a bona fide Egyptian travel document, was refused entry at the Cairo airport one day in 1976. The authorities packed him onto a plane for Damascus, whence he was sent to Kuwait. There, they put him on a plane for Amman, which similarly refused to let him in. He thus made a tour of various Arab countries for several weeks before being granted asylum thanks to countless interventions on his behalf. To my knowledge, Astal had never committed a reprehensible act. But a police report based on mere gossip is enough to incriminate a Palestinian.

A stateless people are a people without recourse, without defense. It is hardly surprising that we seek our identity, indeed our very existence, in symbols such as a passport or a flag.

At the beginning of the 1960's, then, discontent was rife among Palestinians faced with the indifference of the Arab regimes. Increasing numbers of my compatriots, inspired among other things by the campaign we were waging in the *Filastinuna* magazine, began to feel a pressing need for a purely Palestinian fighting organization. Various governments, taking note of the situation, believed that this "vacuum" should be filled by the creation of a movement that would channel the growing anger and make sure it didn't turn against them. But they needed a man capable of restoring Palestinian self-confidence and organizing them under Arab government sponsorship.

Egyptian President Nasser favored Ahmad Shukeiry, an eloquent lawyer and excellent orator who had gained experience in international politics as Saudi Arabia's representative to the United Nations. So in September 1963, Shukeiry was assigned the task of seeking ways to bring about a "Palestinian entity."