

Al-Araj, Abu al-Raed. Interviewed 2011. Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.¹

I left the Ba'ath party and I went to work in Saudi Arabia with Aramco on 4 October 1959. I was carrying within me a deep political anxiety, a constant search for the path to Palestine. Where is that path? How can a Palestinian work for Palestine? As a politicised man who had spent some time in a political party, I used to have discussions with my colleagues about politics and the Palestine cause. On one occasion, a colleague of mine called Said Abu Zahra whispered in my ear and told me something along the lines of: "Your ideas correspond to those of someone who works with us here. Would you like me to introduce you to him?" I told him that I welcomed the idea, and this is how I had my first meeting with the late martyr Kamal Adwan in the early summer of 1960.

I was a mid-level Aramco employee, whereas Kamal was working in the same company as an engineer belonging to the senior ranks. Our meeting took place in his house. Back then, the company used to make us work all week, usually only giving us Friday off. We picked a week in which they gave us two days off, Thursday and Friday, so that we could have time to speak comfortably. I went to the house of martyr Kamal Adwan and we sat for more than eight hours, engaged in an exhausting conversation. As the colloquial saying goes: 'Every time I hammered a nail, he hung a hundred dresses on it, and every time I hung a dress, he hammered a hundred nails!' It was a battle of wills, and anyone who knew Kamal can tell you about his stubbornness and sturdiness. I believe that I was no less sturdy in that session.

We continued talking until early dawn. I told him that I was in agreement with him. We discussed Palestinian work in comprehensive detail, but without mentioning any particular organisation. We did not refer to Fateh, or to the Palestinian Liberation Front. The discussion was centered on how we can work together for Palestine. I told him that I agreed to join this work. He told me that the matter was not in his hands, and that someone else could make the decision. I asked him: 'Who is it?' He did not mention the name, but he told me to go to the tennis court the following Friday, and wait there at 2pm. I used to smoke Winston cigarettes. He took one of my cigarettes and drew a line on it. He then said: 'A young man will come, smoking Kent cigarettes. As soon as he sits down next to you, you will take out your pack and say: "Can I have a light please?" He will then take out his cigarette pack

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and tell you: "I insist that you help yourself to one of my cigarettes." You will then take out a Winston cigarette that will be buried amidst all the Kent smokes in his pack, and this will enable you to commence your conversation'. He refused to tell me who that person would be.

It was a summer's Friday in Saudi Arabia, on the tennis court, at 2pm. Kamal put me into the burning hell of the Eastern district and I patiently accepted and completely followed all his orders! I sat in the court and I saw a young man of a commanding height approaching, with a smiley face. His personality immediately and truly captured you from the first meeting. He sat down next to me. I was the only person on the court, and he sat next to me. I took out the cigarette pack and said: "Excuse me, do you have a light?" He answered: "Get up my brother. My name is Abdel Fatah Issa Hmoud, and your name is Mohammad Ali al-Araj, and let's forget about all these Kamal Adwan shenanigans. Let's go sit in an air-conditioned place at least. I know a quiet place".

We left the burning hell for an air-conditioned place, which was a hotel restaurant for Aramco employees. Most of those sitting there were Americans and other non-Arabs, so we could talk pretty freely there... He eventually told me to raise my hand and I recited the oath... We started working, and I discovered that we had a small number of people with us already. For the sake of history, I remember that amongst those who were there at the time was Said al-Mishaal (Abu Ussama), Muath 'Aabid (Abu Sami), Abu Maher, Suleiman Abu Karsh (Abu al-Muther) and Abu Khaled.

I am speaking of the first nucleus that was there. Later on, others joined. Within a month or two, the group started to grow and we commenced our activities. Initially, neither Abdel Fatah nor Kamal mentioned the name Fateh. We were working for Palestine without having a particular name or address. After the third week, we began to receive *Filastinuna: Nida'a al-Hayat*. Of course, the word Fateh was there in *Filastinuna*. But we continued our work until they informed us that we were part of a bigger group called Fateh. We did not care if we were under a group called Fateh or Fathiyeh! What mattered to us was to work for the liberation of Palestine. We were expanding. Within five or sixth months we were able to establish the first regional committee in Saudi Arabia. I do not claim that this committee came out of elections or democracy. For we were working in Saudi Arabia, and the committee needed to fulfill certain requirements. We were committed to consultation, and most of the discussions used to take place between Abdel Fatah, Kamal, and myself. In designing the committee, we ensured that we had a variety of occupational backgrounds represented, so that we do not end up with an organisation that is restricted to Aramco or that only operates

outside of the company. Secondly, we needed geographic diversity, so as to adapt to the realities of the Palestinian condition. After all, our people were living in the countries of refuge and exile. We therefore designed our first regional committee in a way that addressed these two diversity requirements, answering the questions: What is the occupational background of each committee member? And where do they come from?

This selection process was thoughtfully done. For example, Abdel Fatah Hmoud was a refugee who had lived in Gaza and then came to Jordan, so he had connections in Jordan and Gaza. Kamal Adwan was also a refugee who had lived in Gaza and then came to Jordan, but he took on Jordanian citizenship. Mohammad Ali al-Araj was a refugee, but his place of permanent residence was Jordan. Baker Abbas, who was incidentally the brother of the litterateur Ihsan Abbas, was a refugee that lived in Iraq. Marwan Yahya was a refugee that was living in Syria and so was Nur al-Din Mansour. Suleiman Abu Karsh was a Gaza citizen who was living in Gaza and so was Mouath 'Aabid. Issam Shqeir was a refugee living in Lebanon. Lebanon was represented, Syria was represented, Jordan was represented, and Gaza was represented. Refugees were represented and citizens were represented...

My work required me to spend 21 days in the desert and then receive one week of rest. During this week, I enjoyed a great deal of manoeuvring space. That's why the brothers decided that I should make use of this regular time off and become a liaison officer between us and Kuwait. Regarding the links between us and Qatar, two of us used to go to them every two or three weeks. We would drive 800 km to get to them, while they only drove 80km. We had to take the desert path, whereas they could use the paved road between Doha and Salwa. We used to go from Dammam to the border (Salwa) over a path that was filled with adventures and anecdotes.

As for the Kuwait group, the first time I went to them was in 1962. I used to go to al-Khafja, and would be awaited by a young man called Mohammad 'Harb Ulayaan... This young man used to smuggle me from al-Khafja, which is a neutral territory between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. On the road, we used to carry things and talk about ordinary matters. The most significant trip was in 1963. Ulayaan smuggled me from al-Khafja, and I met the 'big four' as we used to call them: the late Abu Ammar (Yasser Arafat), the late Abu Jihad (Khalil al-Wazir), Adel Abdel Karim, and Abdullah al-Danan. We went into a long and bitter discussion. They objected to the member we nominated for the central committee, Abdel Fatah Hmoud. They asked me: 'why don't you become a member of the central committee?' I told them that this was unacceptable. As far as we were concerned, the regional committee was responsible for selecting its representative on the central committee. We went

into a discussion that was closer to a struggle. We were then at loggerheads over another matter, which was whether we should change the status quo in the West Bank and launch the armed struggle from it, or whether we should keep the West Bank as it was, a part of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and to launch from somewhere else. This was a very intense discussion and it took us eight hours to finish. When we were done they said: "Go to sleep." I told them: "I don't want to sleep and put myself between four walls. I don't want to be locked amongst you. And if I go out I might end up bumping into my cousins and relatives who will ask me what am I doing here. I'm going back to Saudi Arabia right now!"

The late Abu Ammar stood up and said: "I will drive you". He was an engineer at the time with the Ministry of Public Works, overseeing the Kuwait international highway. I sat next to him and every time we passed by a police checkpoint, Abu Ammar operated in his usual way, telling them that he was the highway engineer, so they used to welcome us and open the road. Eventually, he got me to al-Khafja. I sat waiting for a taxi, until one arrived... It was late at night, and we arrived to the Saudi customs. They started searching the car, and they found in it smuggled cigarettes and radios. I only had my handbag on me, and wasn't even carrying pyjamas. After a while, they told us that they would be conducting a full body search. Of course, I was carrying a large number of political pamphlets, and this was Saudi Arabia... I told myself: "You are in deep trouble". I got close to the customs officer and I told him: "Can I please see you in a private room?" I then saw him alone and started to take out all the literature that I was carrying on my body, in my pockets, inside my bag. I put everything on the table.

He asked me: "What is this?" I told him "Listen brother, we are a people that want to die for Palestine, and we are not targeting Saudi Arabia in any way. We are just trying to find a way of working for Palestine." We started talking, and I felt that the man was convinced, but he told me at the end that he could not make a decision about this. He was merely a customs officer, and the person who could decide was the prince. In every locality in Saudi Arabia, they had a prince that used to run all local affairs. He called the prince, and we awaited him in a large room furnished in the traditional Arabic style. The prince eventually came. He was a tall man who was dressed, of course, in traditional Arab garb. His face was grim and serious, and I began to sense the difficulty of the situation. He said: "Where is he? And what's the matter?" I told him that we should sit down and talk. During the discussion, he asked: "Why don't you go back to your country and work there?" I told him that I couldn't, as I needed the work. He then said: "We agree with what's written

in most of what you are carrying, but why do you also have Egyptian magazines?" At the time, Saudi-Egyptian relations had hit rock bottom. I told him: "I brought them so that if I got caught at the border, I could tell my company that it was due to the Egyptian magazines. They don't care about magazines, but if they discover that I had literature pertaining to the Palestinian cause, then they would immediately expel me and I need my job"... The man was convinced and I went to sleep outside. The dawn prayer arrived while I was asleep. When they assembled for prayer, the prince ordered them to worship away from me as I was asleep. Later, the prince called for the driver and said: "Had this man not been with you, I would have ruined you. You can now take your cigarettes", and he then asked me if I was going to carry some cigarettes for the driver...

At that moment, I was deeply moved by this display of sympathy and I thought that if only we could manage to present our cause to the Arab world and the Arab people, then we would have a good chance of receiving their support.