

**Kleib, Sami.** “Ibrahim Mohammad Saleh: Resistance with Words and Poetry”. Interview Broadcast. Al Jazeera, 29 September 2009. Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.<sup>1</sup>

**Sami Kleib:** Welcome, my dear viewers, to this episode of “Special Visit”. His father was martyred while resisting in Palestine. His son was martyred while resisting in Lebanon. Who could forgo joining the resistance with his words, poetry, singing, haddai, and his beautiful voice? Abu Arab – Ibrahim Mohammad Saleh – is here for a “Special Visit”.

*The Nakba, Treason, martyrdom and Poetry*

**Sami Kleib:** Abu Arab didn’t live on the land where he was born for long. He was only 6 years old when the 1936 revolution erupted. He witnessed the English prosecuting his family and arresting his uncle. He was 18 years old when the Nakba took place. He left Palestine, leaving his father buried in its land.

**Abu Arab:** I remember the English used to come to our village, surround it and arrest the young men. In the village there were prickly pear plants....

**Sami Kleib:** Prickly Pears.

**Abu Arab:** Prickly pears. They used to force the young men to cut the prickly pear plants barefooted. This was in addition to beating them. They used to go into people’s houses and mix the wheat, barley, corn, vetches and all the other grains together, to punish the people. They also arrested whomever they wanted. My father spent two months in prison. I remember my mother preparing a bundle of food, like boiled eggs and bread, and going with a group to visit the prisoners.

**Sami Kleib:** I understand that your father was wounded and martyred in one of the battles.

**Abu Arab:** al-Shajara Battle.

**Sami Kleib:** During al-Shajara Battle. Do you remember how this tragedy happened?

**Abu Arab:** Our village was on the borders between the Arab and Zionist areas. The skirmishes between them and us started and continued until one night they attacked us. I think it was on 6 May 1948 at three o’clock in the

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morning. I was 17 years old then. We didn't carry any weapons, but we carried a small first aid bag for the fighters. I remember we went to look after the women and children. After the Deir Yassin massacre, there was fear of women being raped and children slaughtered. The battle continued from 3am to 10am. Sixty-four fighters defended our village. 28 were martyred and 14 were wounded. My father was one of them. The rest of the fighters managed to retreat using rugged trails.

**Sami Kleib:** Was your father killed instantly, or was he injured for a while?

**Abu Arab:** He was in an English Hospital for four or five days. Because of the great number of the wounded they sent him home. The wound was already infected. He was shot with a Dumdum bullet. He was martyred and buried in Kafr Kanna village.

**Sami Kleib:** The image of his father the farmer and the son of the stolen land didn't leave Abu Arab who was also injured by Israeli bullets while returning to his father's fields in al-Shajara village. The wounds turned into poems and the beautiful voice summarised the Nakba of a family and a land and the image of a martyred father.

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**Sami Kleib:** Bravo! What a beautiful voice! The smell of the homeland can always be found in your poetry. Does Palestine still mean a lot to you, or did you get used to exile?

**Abu Arab:** Absolutely not, Palestine is still in my mind and memory. When a person lives in a country and gets used to it, the air he breathes and the food he eats tastes different. But the fruits and vegetables I ate and the air I breathed in Palestine are the most delicious.

**Sami Kleib:** Abu Arab I understand that your grandfather and your uncle also wrote poetry in the Palestinian dialect and in classical Arabic. Was poetry something you inherited from them, or did something else motivate you to write poetry chronicling the Palestinian wound?

**Abu Arab:** Yes, I inherited classical poetry from grandfather, the poet Ali al-Ahmad and folk poetry from my uncle; we call it Haddai. From age 17 or 18, I was in love with folk and traditional songs. Thanks be to God, who gave me a voice that enabled me to pursue this path.

**Sami Kleib:** Where did you listen to those songs?

**Abu Arab:** I listened to them at weddings. When my grandfather used to write poetry I sat next to him. He used to tell me...and by the way when my grandfather wrote a poem he tried to sing it as well.

**Sami Kleib:** It is strange that not much was written about your grandfather, though he was an important poet in Palestinian history. Why do you think his poetry wasn't collected in volumes?

**Abu Arab:** They were not written. We are trying to collect as many of his poems in a volume. In all his poems he mourned the revolutionary leaders.

**Sami Kleib:** And criticised Arab leaders as well.

**Abu Arab:** This was after the Nakba.

**Sami Kleib:** I understand there is a poem similar to Muzaffar al-Nawab's poem about Jerusalem.

**Abu Arab:** About Jerusalem, Yes.

**Sami Kleib:** Do you remember what the poem said?

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**Sami Kleib:** Oh God!

**Abu Arab:** The poem is long.

**Sami Kleib:** Its strange this indignation against the Arab, or some Arabs, at that time. You also expressed it in some of your other poems especially against the Arab Rescue Army and against Qawuqji. What was the reason?

**Abu Arab:** Because al-Qawuqji surrendered control over areas like Nazareth area.

**Sami Kleib (interrupting):** Did you see that with your own eyes?

**Abu Arab:** Yes. For example, Saffuriyya was a village that came to the rescue of all the villages. The Zionist army attacked Loubia, a village close to us, with thousands of soldiers and couldn't occupy it. According to what the Zionists acknowledged in a radio broadcast 151 of their soldiers were killed. I saw 40-45 of them lying dead in the fields.

**Sami Kleib:** How was that the fault of the Arab leader al-Qawuqji?

**Abu Arab:** The first thing this Arab leader did was to prohibit Palestinians from carrying arms. Why? Apparently because they wanted to mount organised military resistance. If any Palestinian in the Nazareth was found

with a rifle, they confiscated his rifle. After that, they declared a curfew in Nazareth and ordered Saffuriyya to remove the mines planted between them and the Zionists. Why? They said they wanted to attack Shafa Amr. At 10pm, the people of Saffuriyya were shocked to see Zionist armoured vehicle in the town. At 3pm, the people of Nazareth saw Zionist armoured vehicles entering the town, and they thought they belonged to an Arab Army. A woman came out ululating and they shot her in the head.

**Sami Kleib:** Maybe the poor man miscalculated. Maybe he wasn't a conspirator.

**Abu Arab:** He was a conspirator. He was called Fawzi bek al-Qawuqji and he Arab leadership promoted him to pasha.

**Sami Kleib:** Maybe Fawzi al-Qawuqji is responsible for what happened to Palestine and maybe he is not. Historians couldn't agree on this. But undoubtedly the people who lived through oppression occupation, and the humiliation of refugeehood can't be blamed for holding the Arabs responsible for some of their misery. The young boy Ibrahim Saleh, before he became known as Abu Arab and before he became the poet of the revolution, dreamt of becoming a teacher. His dream was crushed by the rock of refugeehood.

**Abu Arab:** I saw the worst image while we were fleeing, when I went back to visit my father's grave in Kafr Kanna. I was on a hill, and the Zionists had blocked the road, so I went through a field called al-Bottouf. The Zionists ambushed those who crossed between the occupied land and the Arab areas. The worst scene was seeing tens of bodies rotting in the cornfields. I asked myself, did the families of these people know that they had been martyred? Anyone caught would be shot, and their body thrown away.