

‘Issam ‘Abd al-Hadi, Interviewed in ‘Abd al-Hadi, Fayha’. *Adwar al-Maràa al-Filastiniya fi al-Arbàiniyat, al-Musahima al-Siyasiya li-l-Maràa al-Filastiniya*. al-Bira: Palestinian Women’s Research and Documentation Centre, 2006 (pp. 367-371). Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*.¹

How did the community regard a young woman moving around freely, travelling and attending political meetings?

I experienced no discouragement or negative talk or anything such thing. Despite being a conservative city, Nablus is patriotic. I mean, the general atmosphere in Nablus is patriotic and supportive of the struggle. We shouldn’t forget that Nablus produced the first female Palestinian nationalist poet, Fadwa Touqan. The first poet was Ibrahim Touqan, who opened the people of Nablus’ eyes to nationalism. Let’s just say that Nablus produced many prominent figures. Dr. Ilham Abu Ghazaleih is teaching on this subject, explaining why the first female novelist, the first female poet, the first president of the General Union of Palestinian Women, the first leadership committee for GUPW came from Nablus. Nablus was first in many domains, and all this in spite of the general conservative atmosphere and prevailing conservative traditions, which is to say the obsolete traditions. At the same time, it was open-minded. In Nablus, you can find many traditions, and at the same time good activities. Thank God I didn’t find despair. Women’s committees assigned me to the Preparatory Committee for the first Palestinian National Council. It’s not a simple task being one of the first female participants in writing the Palestinian National Charter. That’s why I’m against writing it off, because whoever writes something down wouldn’t write it off. The women’s committees assigned me to be a member of the committee for the first Palestinian National Council. Today the look; let me say in the beginning it had an aura of great importance. On daily basis I went to attend all that is related to the Preparatory Committee for the National Council and then return to Nablus. Everyone accepted me at the time, and that was a blessing from God. I forgot to tell you that Izdehar Srour and her mother Um Salim were among the many ladies who played strong roles...Um Hilal al-Nabulsi was among them. You see how the names are flowing.

Now I want you to tell me about the period of your arrest and imprisonment. When? Why? And how did it affect you?

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Lets talk about forming the Union first. I was arrested after the Union.

One year after the PLO was formed, we found that there should be a branch for Women, a women's wing if you will, to be one of the tributaries for a popular organization. Of course it would be formed along with the other popular organisations, such the teachers', engineers', workers', and students' unions, etc., all of which were tributaries to the PLO. We would form the women's wing. Here, a preparatory committee was formed to unify the efforts of women inside and outside the homeland. We shouldn't forget that following the 1948 Nakba many women leaders, who operated inside the homeland, left to the host countries and formed women committees. Sa'adeh al-Kilani for example formed the Association of Female Returnees (al-A'adat) in Damascus. Samira Abu Ghazaleih formed the Association of Palestinian Women In Egypt, which now is the General Union of Palestinian Women, Egyptian Arab Republic Branch. Many others formed associations in all countries, in Algeria, in Kuwait. After they fled Palestine they formed committees under many names in the Arab countries. This is the Palestinian woman represented inside the homeland by committees and out side the homeland represented by associations. We must collect their energies and unify them in one organization that speaks in everyone's name and would be a tributary to the PLO, or as we say a tributary to the Palestinian Revolution. I insist on using the Palestinian Revolution represented by the PLO. A preparatory committee was established; from its members I remember Sa'adeh al-Kilani, Dr. Salma al-Khadra'a al-Jaioussi, Samira Abu Ghazaleih, Wade'ah Kharbatil. Wade'ah Kharbatil fled Tulkarem and formed the Union of Palestinian Women in Lebanon. The preparatory committee was formed by such figures. Meetings with representatives of women's committees inside the homeland were held to form this union, to be one force in cooperation with women's committees, inside and outside the homeland. Meetings were also held with the Department of Popular Organization in the PLO. After the meeting of the preparatory committees that I have mentioned I was invited for a conference that was held in Jerusalem from 15 to 20 July 1965, one year after the PLO was established. It was held in Jerusalem, which wasn't occupied yet. The Arab part of Jerusalem was still an Arab Part. I still remember the opening ceremony, which was held at the house of the Late Ahmad al-Shukairy's, the Head of the PLO. The conference was attended by Tawfiq Hasan Wasfi, representing the Arab League; Wasfi al-Tal, representing his Highness King Hussein; Raouhi al-Khatib, Secretary of Jerusalem, representing Jerusalem; and Zalikha al-Shahabi, President of the Women's Union, representing women committees. At that time I was the master of ceremonies. The conference commenced with a great number of attendees from everywhere. The opening ceremony was as beautiful as it

could be. For the first time committees from inside and outside the homeland met. There were 139 female representatives from inside and outside, and other competent women also attended the conference. It was held in Jerusalem. On the last day of the conference, 21 July, the establishment of the General Union of Palestinian Women was announced as a democratic popular women organisation that speaks in the name of Palestinian women and a sole legitimate representative of women in all Arab and international levels. Secret elections to elect the GUPW's leadership were held. At the time the leadership was referred to as the Executive Committee. Now it's called the General Secretariat. Representatives to the General Leadership were elected. The conference also elected 139 to the administrative board, which is the intermediary committee. The leadership, which is the executive committee, was elected. Some of its members are still outside the homeland, other are inside. When the establishment and the conference were concluded, re-election was held twice. It was held to adjust things and to ensure people's trust in the elections. The establishment was finished and the members of the administrative returned to their countries. There they established branches for the General Union of Palestinian Women, whether there were committees in that country or not. Before the events in the Gulf we had 13 branches. We had branches in Germany, Netherlands and America. Some are still up and running. This was the establishment of the General Union of Palestinian Women.

So you consider it [the 65 Jerusalem Conference] an important stage in your struggle history of course? Now your imprisonment period, can you tell me about it?

Prison. We jumped three years. Because it was in 1969, I was imprisoned on the 13th of March 1969. Earlier I was called for interrogation by the Israeli authorities many times. Especially when they found out that I was the President of the General Union of Palestinian Women. This was a very important point for them and they wanted to pursue this point. Through their extensive pursuit of me they discovered some of my activities, which led them to find out that I was the head of the General Union of Palestinian Women. Of course there might or might not have been *some tipoffs*. The important thing is I was taken to prison; to al-Maskobeih Prison in Jerusalem. On the 13th of March 1969 my daughter Faiha'a and I were arrested at the same time. She was accused of belonging to a banned student or political organization. Fiha'a is another story. They came to the house and arrested us. They took us in two different cars. Faiha'a was taken to Nablus prison and I was taken to al-Maskobeih prison. Some of the accusations against me were related to Jerusalem. They accused me of many things, some of which were real while other charges were out of my league. The most important charge

was providing financial assistance to the armed resistance and harboring fida'een. Harboring fida'een was the most dangerous thing; they don't allow it. Before that I was going through an ongoing interrogation on charges of receiving President Arafat. At that time we didn't know who he was. It's true I received him in our house, we spoke and we did what he and his group wanted, but we didn't know who he was. He was a person with leadership attributes, truth to be said. When he came he said they were sent to me directly from Jerusalem to tell you that they need efforts and that they want to start popular resistance one month after the occupation in 1967. This was an ongoing investigation, but the Israeli authorities didn't get a single word from me. I never admitted receiving the group; I never admitted it. The interrogation took place every once in a while during the two years I stayed in the occupied land in Nablus. It was an unacceptable interrogation to me. Every time there is knocking on the door we thought it was the Israelis. The authorities came to the house very often to ask about this or that, about receiving the president, about supporting women chaos, they used to call it women chaos, and many other things. I was eventually arrested in 1969. They intensified my interrogation but I managed to deny all the charges against me. A person should never admit; the most important thing is not to admit. I managed to deny many of the charges. Unfortunately however, one of the leaders who was related to me in one of the charges against me was the one to confess. We don't know the circumstances in which he confessed or the intense interrogation he was subjected to or if he was given injections to the brain. We couldn't know anything. But now they had confirmation on this topic, supporting and harboring fighters. For them this is supporting, harboring and denying; it was unbelievable. This was regarding the charges. They resorted to dirty ways; I don't know how to define it. They tortured my daughter Faiha'a in front of me to force me to confess. Her charges were different from mine; she had her own charges. They started torturing her from the first day. When called me again for interrogation I didn't know who tortured her. I always denied all the charges. Then I was faced with a new charge; I didn't know who confessed. They took me again and interrogated me. They tortured Faiha'a very painfully to force me to confess. They had clear instructions not to beat or hurt me. They had letters from human rights committees and the World Peace Council objecting to and condemning my arrest. This why they didn't dare touch me and why they resorted to these dirty ways, which is torturing my daughter in front of me to force me confess. There was a conversation and a dialogue and by mistake they hit me on my forehead.

This period must have been really hard for you because it touched a very dear person to you as well. Did this period have an effect on your struggle and activity? What was the effect of this period on you?

The effect it left was that I discovered to what extent, I didn't discover it at that time yet, this enemy was low; it is unbelievable. Not because of my daughter Faiha'a, but because I saw the rest of the girls in an unbelievable state. Some of the girls that were tortured at that time were: Randa al-Nabulsi, Ghada Abd el-Hadi, Amal al-Hanbali, Sawsan Shinnar, Sa'adeh al-Nabulsi. They were 25 girls. We found them together 2 minutes before we arrived, 25 of Nablus's girls, Amnah Othman. It was unbelievable, the harsh treatment and the torture of some etc... this was a motivation to increase my activity to stop this Zionist enemy, to stop the human rights violations inside the prison. It was very hard for me.

So this period was a motivation for you?

Yes for more activity, not fear, more activity. It could have made others afraid of doing anything. But it increased my activity.

Generally speaking, what do you think were the obstacles and motives for women's participation in the struggle?

I want to go back to the first Charter, the first constitution or first rules of procedure for the PLO. We insisted that women should be given a share of work opportunities in all the departments and institutions; that women should be included in all the departments, committees and organizations of the PLO. Unfortunately only a small number of women were included, not enough. It wasn't as we wanted or aspired to. I don't know this question. Is it enough I think for women's activity or not enough? Is this the question?

This is another question; it is regarding your evaluation of the role of women in that period; this is the next question. I'm asking what would be the motives for women's activity? Let us talk about you?

Generally, we believed, that liberating women is part of liberating the homeland. Liberating the homeland leads to liberating women. We used to say that we started our activity to liberate the Palestinian land and the Palestinian person, males and females. This was our motivation: to lift the Palestinian citizen from suffering under the circumstances of the Zionist occupation, circumstance of oppression, torture, pain and suffering. To elevate the Palestinian citizen, to liberate the homeland from the authority of

the occupation, to simultaneously liberate the homeland and the human being. Such a motivation is enough to make anyone strongly active, in order to achieve this goal at all levels, Arab and international. This is the motivation: to liberate the homeland and the human, to lift the citizens from the oppression, abuse, violations they suffer from and to liberate the homeland from occupation.

If we consider there the motivations, if there were obstacles for women's activity, what were these obstacles?

The obstacles ceased to exist completely after the Intifada. Or started to *disappear in the years following the end of the occupation*. The one whose father didn't allow her to leave the house started allowing her to; what previously prevented her from having an activity started allowing her to have some activity to some extent. The presence of the occupation lessened the grip of these conservative traditions. During the intifada women participated fully within the framework of the intifada. Circumstances allowed women; we shouldn't forget that other circumstances didn't.

Were there no social obstacles in that period, the 40s and 50s?

Of course there was. There was a great phenomenon after the 1948 Nakba, which saw women starting to join education and the work force. Women's start to learn and then to work gave them a new opportunity. Before 1948 they didn't believe a lot in this. It is true that the Palestinian people, women and men, are keen on education. Those who went to the gulf and other places to work, practice their profession or for education *were not commoners*. One of the essential ways to guarantee the welfare and social security of a family is to have educated women who work in the fields they studied. As we said education is essential for Palestinian males and females. It wasn't like this in all families, but after 1948 when it was proven that the educated woman were the ones that could help their families, education spread on a wider scale. Education by itself is capable of removing many of the obstacles; work as well. When women started to work they paved the road for themselves. This is one of the factors that helped to spread education and work.

If we want to define your evaluation of the role of women in struggle, in that period, meaning the 30s, 40s and 50s?

In the 30s it was the beginning, a strong beginning. From the famous conference that we keep talking about, which was a very important stop on the path of women; going to the higher commissioner asking for political

demands, which we are still demanding; the demands of the Palestinian people at that time were: the cancelation of the Balfour Declaration, stopping illegal Jewish immigration, releasing the prisoners, lifting pressure off the Palestinian farmers; the pressure was designed to force Palestinian farmers to sell their land. Three of these issues are still ongoing: illegal immigration, which multiplied now with settlements; the Balfour Deceleration is the first of course but its too late to be canceled; this is the danger that we always say is not right; and the pressure on Palestinian farmers, which now is on all Palestinians.