

Al-Yahya, ‘Abd al-Razzaq. *Bayn al-‘Askariya wa-l-Siyasiya*. Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2006 (pp. 55-61). Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*.

“With this expertise, I became the undisputed authority on any issue relating to heavy weaponry...”

We joined the Syrian army as acting officers, under a contractual agreement beginning 06/09/1949 and ending 31/03/1950, in accordance with a legislative decree issued to this end. On 01/04/1950, we were considered non-regular officers in the rank of lieutenant. It was on this basis that I was appointed a non-regular officer (in the rank of lieutenant) in the twelfth regiment in the coastal region of the city of Latakia, in which I had previously served as an acting officer according to another contractual agreement.

Four months later, we – the Palestinian officers – were considered regular officers, effective from 01/07/1950. On 12/08/1950, we were granted Syrian citizenship, in accordance with a presidential decree. Although most of the Syrian army officers welcomed us into their ranks, there were those resentful over the fact that our large number – joining their relatively small army – would lessen their chance of promotion in the army’s chain of command, given that they would be put into direct competition with us.

When I entered the twelfth regiment in Latakia, I found that my classmates Samir al-Khatib and Abdel Rahman Arshid had already joined. I also ran into my classmate from my first year in Arabic college, Ibrahim al-Adawi.

Ibrahim, who had got the top mark in secondary school in 1947, joined the Arab Liberation Army after he was forced to discontinue his studies owing to the situation in Palestine. When I came from the Qatana course to Bint Jbeil, I met Ibrahim by chance – being in the rank of soldier, he gave me the military salute. I could not believe the position he was in, given how he had excelled in his studies. So I spoke with Wasfi al-Tal about his situation, and he granted him the rank of sergeant, a promotion celebrated by all the regiment’s officers.

Ibrahim then left the army and went to Latakia to teach physics, chemistry and maths. When I next met him, this remarkable young man had prepared himself for the British intermediate level exams, which were set in Cairo. But he did not have the necessary documents to travel. So I sought the help of a

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police officer who was a friend of mine, and he gave Ibrahim the document he needed. Excited to learn, he travelled to Cairo, took his exams and headed back; when the results came out, it transpired that he had attained one of the highest marks that year across the whole of the British Empire. It also emerged that he had achieved marks rarely gained by any applicant in these exams.

With this accolade, along with the money that we, his friends, had saved to help him travel, Ibrahim al-'Adawi entered the University of Colombia in New York. He studied for a doctorate in nuclear physics, obtained American citizenship and entered the ranks of distinguished scientists given protection by the state. After he graduated, he asked me to look for work for him in Syria, and I went to the Syrian University and other educational institutes in this pursuit. The response from officials of these institutions were all alike: they did not need someone with Ibrahim's specialism, namely nuclear physics, and that the only contract they were prepared to sign was for a physics teaching post with a salary no higher than 150 Syrian lira, equivalent to ten British pounds at that time.

During my time serving in Latakia, I was able to take a course in Aleppo in heavy weaponry. Ziad al-Hariri, the officer who would take part in the future military coups, was an instructor on the course. This was an opening for professional development, which I pursued all the way until I was considered the leading expert in these weapons across the whole Syrian army. In Latakia, as well as leading the heavy weaponry squadron, the commander of the coastal region appointed me head of the officers' club and pool. This job had a senior legal status among officers and significant administrative importance.

My presence in Latakia gave me experience in a field that had no direct link to technical military affairs. Once, for example, they needed to assess the amount of firewood left by the fires that had broken out in the forests of Syria's north-western mountains, with the aim of exacting how much firewood the army was able to make use of. Colonel Hamad al-Atrash, the commander of the coastal region, issued an administrative order in February 1950 naming me a member of the Tripartite Commission, which was given the task of carrying out these assessments. The Commission was led by Captain Mahmoud al-Ali, and the third member was a sergeant from the military police; none of them had experience in this area, so the onus was on me to complete the assessment. The Commission moved north, accompanied by guides from the General Directorate of Forestry. We began our work from a forest near the village of Safsaf near Latakia, and we spent a week working on our assignment, first in cars and then on the backs of mules and horses. We recorded our assessments of the amount of firewood in each fire we came

across, and on our return to Latakia we drew up an official report of our findings and presented it to the commander of the coastal region and our assessments almost matched those of the General Directorate of Forestry. As it happened, my father had been considered an expert in this field, and his assessments used to be employed in Palestinian courts. This perhaps explained how I managed to execute the task so well; I used to accompany my father on similar assessments when I was younger, and it seemed that I had inherited some of his expertise and aptitude.

In Latakia, I got to know a number of Syrian officers who would play prominent roles in public life. I have already mentioned Ziad al-Hariri, whom I met in the Aleppo course, and on top of that I became acquainted, in Latakia, with Amin al-Hafez when he was the leader of the squadron in which I served. We became friends, a friendship that was later renewed when we met elsewhere during our military service. It was this Amin al-Hafez who became president of Syria and Commander in Chief of the Army between 1963 and 1966. I also met Adib al-Shishakli, when he visited the coastal region's leadership; it was on the occasion of the announcement of presidential elections that he paid a visit to Latakia. I was appointed head of the commission overseeing the elections in the town of Safita, run by mayor Mustafa al-Hourani. I was keen for the voting process to be safe and impartial, and I made sure it went that way. Yet in the middle of the night, after I had closed the polling station, military cars came to the polling station, taking away the boxes containing the real votes and exchanging them for forged ones.

During my time serving in Latakia, Colonel Mohammad Nasser, whom I met in the Arab Liberation Army for internal political reasons, was assassinated. It was my task to lead the gun salute at his burial ceremony in the village of al-Qardaha. I oversaw the burial ceremony, and saw rage burning in the eyes of the young men there. A high-ranking Alawite officer who attended the ceremony advised me to leave the village quickly, before the wrath exploded and I fell victim to it. So that is what I did, without understanding why they were so enraged.

In Latakia, I had the opportunity to see Prince Phillip, the husband of the Queen of England Elizabeth II, up close. He came to the port of Latakia in a steamer with a number of British officers, on a private visit in 1950. The Syrian army gave the Prince an official welcome. Amin al-Hafez was the leader of the honour guard, with myself as deputy. Being the only one of the Syrian officers who spoke English, I kept the British officers company and we spent time discussing a number of different issues and exchanging views.

In March 1951, after two years of service in Latakia, I was moved to the second regiment in the military camps of Qatana, the camps in which my peers and I completed our celebrated military training program. A few months later, our regiment was moved to the Syrian front in the Golan Heights; I served in the front's central area, in Rafad on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. It stood near a dense jungle, teeming with wild boars, hyenas, snakes and black scorpions. Whenever we dug a trench, we would find human skulls, the source of which I couldn't work out. The leader of my squadron there was Muti al-Samman, who was later to become the Chief of Police in Syria; his headquarters were in Tel al-Mashnouq, north-east of Rafad. Local residents would exchange horror stories about the area – of the ghost of a man suspended from a hangman's rope who would emerge on moonlit nights, or of the sword that would appear and then disappear, extending from the ground the sky.

The area where we were concentrated was close to the Sea of Galilee, and every week we would go to the area of Batiha and *al-Hasel al-'Askari* to eat tilapia fish at the residence of the site commander – Officer Shahir al-Dari'i, who would later move to the foreign ministry. Meanwhile, a battle was raging in Tel al-Shamalna, which stood west of the Jordan River close to the lake. The battle was fierce, and continued for a number of days; the Israeli forces used heavy field artillery, and I was able to follow the battle directly when my squadron was placed in a nearby area as a protective unit for the force that was fighting on the hilltop, and which was led by two of my contemporaries from the training course – Wasif al-Jayyusi and Jawad Abd al-Rahim al-Hajj Muhammad. They were both awarded an order of bravery, an honour also awarded to my peer Rashid Jarjou, the leader of the al-Hamma site, in recognition of his defence of the area during the same period.

I returned to the military camps of Qatana from Rafid as the leader of the third defence squadron, which had possession of several kinds of heavy weaponry. With this appointment, my role in the army was settled: I was the specialist in heavy weaponry. I later took a number of courses in this field, as those in other fields, such as map-reading, map-drawing, military engineering, aerial image reading, anti-tank weaponry, anti-aircraft weaponry, and other such courses, while continuing to develop proficiency in my area of expertise. I studied heavy weaponry in greater and greater depth, weapon by weapon, until there was not a single heavy infantry weapon that I had not studied and become skilled in.

In my enthusiasm for weaponry, it was heavy 120mm mortar artillery that most attracted my attention and which I put to most use. I was also trained by French officers in how to fight with tanks and their weaponry, and a specialist

German officer trained me in how to use German-made anti-tank artillery and fight *against* tanks.

Alongside my professional development, I became keen to develop my military culture by my own efforts. So I began to read widely – military books and periodicals – and in collaboration with a number of foreign military publishing houses, I set up a military library for myself with a specialisation in heavy weaponry. I did this to ensure that I continued to merit my title as the expert in heavy weaponry, and to develop my knowledge in other military areas – strategy, tactics and military history. With this expertise, I became the undisputed authority on any issue relating to heavy weaponry. However many problems they presented me with, I would never fail to find a solution.

One of these issues, by way of example, might be lifting an old air missile found entrenched on the coast of the village of Majdal Shams, or cleaning a mortar field of unexploded bombs in eastern Baniyas. Or it could be explaining exactly how to make use of a large stock of old English mortar bombs, or how to use French 120mm mortars, a large number of which the army procured without instructions or throwing guidelines to be used when employing this weapon, as well as the ammunition and trucks included in the purchase, after it became clear that it was unfeasible to apply the given instructions. I was rewarded for my accomplishment that day by Colonel Fayez al-Qasri, the head of the public warehouses, with my squadron being given a supply of new mortars, despite the fact that they had not been allocated for distribution by the Special Forces' Chief of Staff.

In 1952, my colleagues and I left Qatana to join a one-year supplementary course in Homs. The course was convened under the leadership of lieutenant colonel Elian Marin, and it was considered a supplement to the course we took in Qatana in 1948. At the end of it, we received a certificate from the Syrian military college, which was the equivalent of a Bachelor's degree in military science.

The course was taken by all those who remained in the army from the course at Qatana. Even those who did not have the secondary school certificate joined the course. However, it was only those who did have it who were promoted to a higher rank following their completion of the course. I remembered that I had lost my official certificate, and I had left Palestine before finding it; I had applied to the Qatana course with a document from the Arabic College, signed by Professor Ahmed Samah al-Khalidi, confirming I had indeed gained it. Yet if I didn't find the certificate, I would be in the same position as members of the course who had not passed the exams. I

ended up finding it through a chance encounter with my old friend from my student days in Jerusalem, who had come back from the United States; his name was Hussein Washahi, and I ran into him during one of my visits to Damascus. He directed me towards the address of the person charged with receiving certificates from the Arabic College. This person, whom I mentioned earlier, was Emil Saqr, and he worked for the Iraqi Petroleum Company in Tripoli, Lebanon. I wrote to him and I waited for him to send me my certificate, four years after I had earned it. I thanked him profusely for doing so.

The year that I took the complementary course in Homs was the year that we all met up again, those of us who took the course at Qatana; this reunion was particularly powerful since it was for us –the officers from Palestine – alone, exactly as the course itself had been. Four years had passed between the two courses, the second of which had concluded the first. We had matured, gained experience, grown in awareness, broadened our horizons. If local or regional ties had helped draw the boundaries of our friendship groups in Qatana, the deal in Homs was very different. This time, it was the effect of developing awareness, broadening horizons, and shared margins that shaped our relationship and brought us together in public affairs. We became, in one way or another, a ‘bloc’ or at least a homogenous group that shared a common ground. Others would refer to us as the Palestinian officers, even though we had acquired Syrian citizenship. We would frequently meet up and discuss the issue of Palestine, or our own work matters, exchanging ideas and helping one another out. This happened spontaneously; no discussion was had and no decision made about it. With the prominence of our presence as a ‘bloc’ and its distinctly Palestinian nature – along with all the associations that come with that descriptive – the attempts of the Syrian parties to attract the Palestinian officers to their ranks increased. Serious attempts were made by Syrians Baathists and nationalists, among others, to attract me; however I continued to refuse to join any political party.

Officers from our course were spread out in various units and associations in the Syrian army, and the branches of their expertise within them also differed. Most of them were distinguished in their fields, and became known figures commanding both appreciation and respect. The majority of them, too, were attracted by political concerns, not just military ones. Among them were those who formed private blocs, and among them – although they were small in number – were those who joined, or gave a certain level of support to, Syrian political parties. There were also those who remained independent, while still participating in public affairs, and that was the category I fell into. In general, most of the officers from our course – whether a party member or not – had clear leftist leanings. None of us was affiliated to a religious party. Then there

were Hasan Abu Raqba and Abdel Karim Umar, two of my peers, who were affiliated with the Arab Higher Council, or what remained of it after the Nakba. There were many incentives to take an interest in public affairs. Our motivation for volunteering was essentially a Palestinian nationalist one; our service had begun in the Liberation Army, which, whatever was later said about it, was also established with this primary motivation in mind. We continued our service in the Syrian army, where engagement in public affairs was widespread, and our connection to the Palestinian cause continued by itself, never waning. It might, in fact, with everything that happened, and with the development of our knowledge and expertise, have increased in strength, depth and commitment.

Each one of us, following the disasters that took place in succession in 1948 and 1949, began looking for a particular side that actually played a positive role in the liberation of Palestine. In spite of this, we all still considered ourselves leftists. I don't mean by this that we supported all positions of left-wing parties, or were under their authority; rather, we would introduce these parties to our anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist positions, as well as our positions against Western schemes which aimed to strengthen the staying power of Israel at the expense of the Palestinian cause, Arab countries and Arab unity. We believed in Arab unity, in political pluralism, in democracy. At the same time, we set up campaigns against the government, their imprisonment without trial and their brutal, merciless torture. For us, it was clear that these methods did not serve our cause, or other Arab causes, including Arab unity; rather, they served the interests of Israel, and imperialist schemes against Arab countries and their development, growth, unity and strength. Because of our stance, some of us faced prosecution by the intelligence services in a number of Arab countries.

Meanwhile, false rumours were circulating on the political scene about the officers on our course; it was claimed that they were, amongst themselves, a cohesive communist bloc, and that they covertly decided to distribute themselves among various political parties in order influence them in the interests of their bloc. These rumours did not have the slightest truth in them; in reality, even if we happened to come together on some viewpoint or other, here was a group of young people with a whole variety of opinions and outlooks, who in fact frequently disagreed with one another, without it impacting on our work in public affairs.

الثورة الفلسطينية

The Palestinian Revolution