

**Bahjat Abu Gharbiya. *Min Mudhakhirat al-Munadil Bahjat Abu Gharbiya: Min al-Nakba Ila al-Intifada*. Beirut: The Arab Studies and Publishing Institute, 2000 (pp. 256-275). Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*.<sup>1</sup>**

*The Palestinian Entity Project*

The unification of Egypt and Syria in 1958 brought about the most important strategic development for Arabs and the Palestinian cause. After unification, the Zionist enemy's state was surrounded on two fronts, and the Egyptian and Syrian armies merged. The circumstances now resembled those of Muslims and Arabs during the time of Sultans Nur al-Din and Saladin al-Ayyubi. It was at this point that President Gamal Abdel Nasser initially proposed a project to establish a Palestinian entity.

In 1959, when I left Jordan for Syria in secret, many people asked me my opinion of the "Palestinian Entity". I was always reluctant to answer before having studied the Egyptian proposals. In Cairo, I met Minister Kamal el-Din Refa't, who was at that time the point of reference for Palestinian affairs. When I enquired about the "Palestinian Entity Project" and its objectives, he showed me a huge folder containing the proceedings of Egyptian-Palestinian negotiations on the issue thus far. The negotiations had involved Haj Amin al-Husseini, the President of the Arab Higher Committee for Palestine, members of the Arab Committee, and a great number of Palestinian figures from Gaza, Syria, Lebanon and elsewhere.

The bottom line is that Egypt was trying to form a new, strong, dynamic, and popular leadership for the Palestinian people. The Arab League Council examined the issue in March 1959, according to an initiative proposed by a delegation from the United Arab Republic. The Council issued two important recommendations.

*First Recommendation:* The Council should hold a high-level meeting to formulate a unified Arab policy that all Arab member states commit to implement. The plan would propose practical solutions to liberate Palestine.

*Second Recommendation:* The Palestinian people should be reorganised, and it should be highlighted that they are one united people who make their voice

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heard on the pan-Arab and international levels through their popularly elected representatives.

During the Arab League Council meetings that followed, in 1960, fierce opposition from the Jordanian Government made it impossible to pursue the project. Jordanian opposition persisted until 1963.

Kamal el-Din Refa'at denied all rumours surrounding this project. Rumours claimed that the real goal of establishing a Palestinian Entity was to separate the West Bank from Jordan, and that the Arab States were reneging on their responsibilities towards the Palestinian cause. Refa'at said it was time for the struggle for Palestine, and that this struggle would not be complete without Palestinian leadership, and the Palestinian people's full participation in the battle to liberate Palestine. He said, "We felt a lack of Palestinian participation when Arab armies entered Palestine in 1948". I replied that Arab governments were the ones who had undermined the Palestinian people's effective participation in 1948, and refused to arm them in accordance with an explicit and public British request.

As I read the negotiations folder, it became clear that Haj Amin al-Husseini maintained that the High Arab Committee, under his direction, should be the Palestinian leadership. Its composition would be altered to include younger members, and it would require support from Arab regimes to fulfill the desired Palestinian role. This contradicted the opinion of every Palestinian in Egypt I had consulted about the issue. It also became clear that Saudi Arabia and Jordan opposed the creation of a Palestinian Entity.

Efforts stalled, and the disastrous separation of Syria and Egypt ensued.

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*Personal and General Doubts about the First PNC and the Foundation of the PLO*

*Al-Shuqairi's Work*

Ahmad al-Shuqairi began consulting Arab States and various Shatat communities of Palestinian Arab people, especially in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. He aimed to implement the Summit's decision to develop "safe structures to organise the Palestinian people". According to the text of the decision, Shuqairi was meant to draft a project to organise the Palestinian people, but he didn't comply with these instructions. After drafting his

project, he went about implementing it on the ground and began forming the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

During his tour, and the consultations he organised in Jordan and the West Bank, Shuqairi visited Jerusalem and held a general meeting at the Ambassador Hotel. I was one of the people invited to this meeting. During the meeting, which I attended, Shuqairi presented his plan to establish the Palestine Liberation Organisation. A discussion was then held. Attendees raised criticisms and questions regarding the role of Arab governments, especially the Jordanian government, their true intentions with regards to establishing the Palestinian Entity, and possible connections with the peace and compromise attempts pursued by the Zionist Enemy State, which the Jordanian regime had expressed willingness to participate in. Such peace attempts could lead to recognition of the enemy's state and liquidation of the Palestinian cause. Al-Shuqairi's answers were diplomatic, semi-reassuring, and sometimes arrogant.

Later on, al-Shuqairi formed a committee and appointed Rawhi al-Khatib, the President of the Jerusalem Governorate of, as its head. The committee was charged with selecting and nominating the representatives of Palestinians in Jordan, who would participate in a general conference in Jerusalem. At the general conference, the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organisation would be announced. al-Shuqairi formed similar committees in Gaza Strip and other places.

*The First Palestinian Conference (The First Session of the Palestinian National Council), 28 May 1964.*

Al-Shuqairi faced many difficulties and criticism of his popular efforts to name the members of the conference. For example, when the committee finished selecting the representatives from Jordan, Rawhi al-Khatib, the head of the committee, called me to his office to show me the list of names. I expressed relief upon seeing the list, and said they were correct and reassuring choices. A few days later, he called me again to tell me that the Jordanian government had requested a copy of the list, so that they could evaluate the names that had been chosen. He apologised, and told them he would only give the list to the person who had charged him with creating it, Ahmed al-Shuqairi. He told them that only al-Shuqairi had the authority to share the list with the Jordanian government. They again asked al-Khatib to hand over the list "at the request of King Hussein who wants to see it", saying that al-Khatib had no option but to hand it over.

I asked him to give me a copy of the list, and immediately went to the offices of Palestine Newspapers. The editor was Ibrahim Sakajha, my friend and a former Ba'ath Party member. I told him, "I have a scoop for you". I asked him to publish the list so that the facts would be clear on the ground. The list was published the next morning. The Jordanian government was outraged, and expressed their disapproval of the list to al-Shuqairi. Al-Shuqairi was forced to announce that the list wasn't final. He also agreed to let the Jordanian government add the names of all Palestinian members of Jordanian Parliament and Senate, and all Palestinian government ministers, to the list. Later on, the Jordanian General Intelligence Department (GID) blatantly intervened to add more names to the list. This raised more doubts, fears and complications.

More questions and fears were raised after invitations were sent to representatives, and it became clear that the conference would be held in Jerusalem and attended by King Hussein. This exacerbated fears that the GID would further interfere in the Conference. Here is an example of such interference:

Shortly before the Conference, Sa'adat Hasan, a former Ba'athist leader and activist for the Palestinian cause in the United States, arrived from the United States and asked me to help him get his name on the list of representatives. I took him to the Continental Hotel, where the conference was to be held, and introduced him to Dr Izzat Tannous, the General Secretary of the Conference's Preparatory Committee. Dr. Tannous and I knew each other very well from our time in the Palestinian Arab Party. It's worth mentioning that he was commissioned by Haj Amin al-Husseini to represent the Arab Higher Committee for Palestine in the United States for many years. When I asked him to add Sa'adat Hasan to the list of the Conference attendees, he apologised and said, "This is out of my hands. You need to see Mohammad Rasoul al-Kilani, the director of the GID. His office is in room number such and such in the hotel. He has the authority to add you to the list." We didn't agree to see the director of the intelligence.

This incident, and many other similar incidents, provoked significant backlash. The newspapers published many articles criticising Jordanian interference. A prime example was an article written by Mr Youssef al-Najjar entitled "The Destiny of a Nation is in a Man's Suitcase". In this article, al-Najjar criticised al-Shuqairi's monopoly over conference affairs, and his broad cooperation with the Jordanian regime.

At a meeting at the Ambassador Hotel one day before the conference, a great number of representatives discussed doubts and fears about the conference. I was one of the main speakers at this meeting. We phoned Mr Ahmad al-Shuqairi to ask him to come and answer representatives' questions, but he declined.

On the morning of the conference, on May 28 1964, I met with a group of representatives with whom I had developed close relationships through my work for the Palestinian cause. I remember Ishaq al-Dazdar, Youssef al-Najjar, Rasem al-Khaldi and Abdel Rahman al-Kalouti were part of this group. We decided to boycott the conference sessions on account of our reservations about the decisions that might be taken.

Over the days of the conference, some representatives from the Ba'ath Party in Syria visited me in my house for consultation. Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad) visited me as well. It was the first time I met him. My visitors shared my fears and reservations. The representatives of the Ba'ath Party in Syria asked me whether or not I thought they should withdraw from the conference. I advised them not to.

[...]

#### *First Executive Committee of the PLO*

It wasn't easy for Ahmad al-Shuqairi to choose the members of the first Executive Committee for the Palestine Liberation Organisation, despite the quantity of competent Palestinians. Their high number could have been one of the difficulties he faced. The greater difficulty, however, was satisfying all stakeholders, including governments, organisations and the masses. The most important thing to do was to select people that had popular trust. Selecting such people would spread hope and dispel fears and doubts that surrounded establishing the PLO.

I never expected or even imagined that al-Shuqairi would offer me a place on the executive committee. Before to the first conference, feelings between us were not positive. When my friend Abdel Khaleq Yaghmour, the President of Hebron Municipality who accompanied al-Shuqairi on his West Bank tours, visited my house to offer me Executive Committee membership at al-Shuqairi's request, it wasn't easy for me to make a decision. I considered the offer from many angles with Abdel Khaleq Yaghmour.

I wondered what had motivated al-Shuqairi to make such offer. Abu Farouq said, "Wherever al-Shuqairi went, people asked him to make you a member of the Executive Committee." Then he said, "You need to respond to those who trust you and pin their hopes on you." We discussed my fears and doubts surrounding the formation of the PLO, and its potential to be manipulated, or pushed, to negotiate with and recognise the Zionist enemy state. We wondered if the Arab states, especially Egypt, truly intended for the PLO to spearhead the battle to liberate Palestine and end the existence of the state of the Zionist enemy. Abu Farouq expressed his fears too, but said he had accepted membership on the Executive Committee. He named the other people who had accepted membership. He said that we could form a coherent group capable of overcoming negativity and fulfilling people's aspirations. He said, "Abdel Nasser's Egypt is calling on us to answer the call for liberation. What should we tell them? We need to carry out our responsibilities at this time, taking advantage of the positives and resisting the negatives". He said he planned to resign from his position as elected president of Hebron Municipality Council in order to dedicate his time to the Executive Committee, as stipulated by the internal procedural rules of the PLO. He considered his service to the Palestinian cause more important than his service to Hebron Municipality.

I was, and still am, among those who believe and advocate that Arab unity is key to our liberation, and that the struggle of Palestinian Arabs, how powerful it may be, cannot win the battle so long as this battle is not a pan-Arab one. But the disaster of the separation of Egypt and Syria in 1962 pushed us further away from establishing a united Arab state. What was to be done during the period of work towards establishing unity? We needed a long-term strategy – a strategy for unity, on the one hand, and a long-term popular struggle to preserve the Palestinian cause, deprive the Zionist enemy of stability, and prepare the Palestinian people for the liberation battle on the other. The call to liberate Palestine could be a motivation for keeping unity alive, as a prerequisite for winning the battle. The text of the PLO's National Charter clearly expresses this, especially article 13, which states, "Arab unity and liberating Palestine are integrated goals, with each goal leading to the other. Arab unity leads to liberating Palestine, and liberating Palestine leads to Arab unity. Working towards either goal goes hand in hand with working towards the other".

The Palestinian people required a leadership that assumed command of the renewed popular struggle, and aligned this struggle with pan-Arabism. Palestinian Arabs had had their own leadership since the beginning of the British Mandate: the Executive Committee, headed by Musa Kathem al-

Husseini until this death; followed by the Arab Higher Committee, headed by Haj Amin al-Husseini; and the Arab Higher Commission, also headed by Haj Amin al-Husseini. The Arab Higher Commission still existed when the PLO was established, but it had lost its popularity by that time due to various internal and external factors. Thus the PLO came to represent the hope of establishing a leadership to guide the popular Palestinian struggle, once it had gained the widespread support from the Palestinian Arab people and Arab officials.

After this discussion, and having evaluated the situation from all its sides, I agreed to the offer relayed to me by Abdel Khaleq Yaghmour. The Executive Committee was comprised of the following people:

- 1- Bahjat Abu Gharbeih
- 2- Hamed Abu Siteh
- 3- Dr. Haidar Abdel Shafi
- 4- Khaled al-Fahoum
- 5- Farouq al-Husseini
- 6- Falah al-Madi
- 7- Qasem al-Rimawi
- 8- Qusai al-A'badalah
- 9- Abdel Khaleq Yaghmour
- 10- Abdel Rahman al-Siksik
- 11- Abdel Majid Shoman
- 12- Niqula al-Der
- 13- Dr. Walid Qamhawi
- 14- Major General Wajih al-Madani

#### *The Evolution of the Executive Committee*

The Executive Committee had to start building the PLO from scratch, on the basis of its National Charter and internal procedural rules. Structurally, the Charter stated that the PLO would include a national council, an executive committee, Palestinian brigades, a national fund, offices in Arab capitals and a media apparatus.

The Executive Committee had to build and staff all these institutions. Before that, it had to outline its diplomatic and military strategy, enact legislation to govern its various institutions, and gain broad, official Arab support.

In advance of the first committee meeting, I prepared a comprehensive report on my vision for our political and media responsibilities, financial structure and staffing procedure, together with a special plan to establish the Palestine

Liberation Army (PLA). I emphasised the importance of caution and extreme vigilance to prevent enemies from infiltrating the organisation, especially the staff and army.

The first committee session was held in a big rented building in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of Jerusalem. We considered this building to be the main PLO headquarters. During this session, I presented my study and my plan to establish the PLA. President Ahmed al-Shuqairi had a plan to establish "independent brigades", which he said Major General Shawkat Shqair, the former Chief of Staff of the Syrian Army, had prepared for him. Qusai al-A'badalah, a lawyer from Gaza Strip and a reserves officer in the Palestinian Forces in the Strip, had also prepared a plan to establish the army. He and I agreed to combine our plans to establish the army. The Executive Committee approved our joint plan and ruled out al-Shuqairi's plan, which proposed establishing independent brigades instead of an army.

In the following sessions, some of which were held after the Second Arab Summit Conference, the committee approved regulations prepared by the lawyer Abdel Rahman al-Siksik for all PLO departments and institutions to adhere to. al-Siksik used the word "regulations" instead of laws for constitutional reasons. He lifted many regulations from Jordanian government law. The regulations covered all aspects of the PLO's activity including staffing, the financial system, bonuses, Palestinian education, etc. We also developed the internal procedural rules of the Executive Committee itself. New rules guaranteed the stability of committee members by protecting them from pressure or expulsion by the president who had appointed them, and who up until that point had reserved the right to expel them. For this reason, the internal rules of procedure included an article that stated, "No member of the Executive Committee should be relieved of his duties or expelled unless a unanimous decision is taken by all members of the Executive Committee." This was passed with al-Shuqairi's approval.

We agreed to postpone assigning the various departments and responsibilities to committee members until after the Second Arab Summit Conference.