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I was engaged in the work of the Association alongside the steps of establishing the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) – yet these two processes were inherently linked. A third was also added to the mix, namely my following of the movement characterised by the establishment of disparate factions calling for armed struggle, and the conflicts and competitions that started to spring up between them.

The community of Palestinian elites in that period operated much like a beehive, its activity non-stop day and night. During the preparations for the General Conference, Ahmad al-Shuqairi said yes to practically everyone who asked to be represented; this meant that it ended up being an amalgamation of various familial, provincial, regional, Palestinian nationalist, and Arab nationalist leanings. Our group, meanwhile, were keen for the Conference to be limited to those with political roles and ideas. Nimr al-Masri, who became al-Shuqairi's right-hand man, was also of this opinion, but he did not clash with the president whose view was so different. Among the various sides that were spoken for at the conference (whether they deserved to be or not), our group of officers from the course [in Qatana] had a certain share of representation. Considering how many officers we had attending, this share was a decent one; in fact, the number of our officers surpassed the number of representatives of any participating armed faction or party.

My name was at the top of the list of the course's representatives. As an employee in a Syrian government association, I had to obtain permission to leave the country for Jerusalem – in which the conference was held – but my application was refused. So my name was struck from the list, and one of my colleagues took my place.

In the end, despite mountains of obstacles and frustrations, the PLO was founded, and a decision was made to found the Palestine Liberation Army. The Conference that founded the organisation became the first Palestinian National Council representing the Palestinian people after the Nakba of 1948. With some provisional stipulations, the second Arab League Summit approved the establishment of the PLO, and with it authorised the formation

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of the army. This latter establishment was authorised on the condition that it join the ranks of Arab armies overseen by the united Arab military leadership, and that its presence and movements in its host countries abide by the terms imposed by those states.

In the attempt to establish this army, Al-Shuqairi began his Summit. Having become the Chairman of the PLO – both of its Executive Committee and National Council – he failed to refer to any party within it before hurrying to name the commander-in-chief of the army. He chose for this position the instructor on our first course, Wajih al-Madani, and granted him the rank of major general. The journey of this Palestinian officer had ended in Kuwait, where he had worked in the defence ministry. So Al-Shuqairi had requested the permission of the Kuwaiti government and granted him this new post. I don't think that Al-Shuqairi consulted the participants of the Arab League Summit about his choice. What am I certain of is that he had chosen this officer in particular because he had distanced himself from organisations, parties and currents which had exploded onto the Palestinian scene. Perhaps Al-Shuqairi also intended with this choice to woo Kuwait to his side, against Saudi Arabian opposition to his position at the head of the PLO.

Whatever the deal was, it was intended for the Palestinian Liberation Army to be a classical army made up of regular brigades, based on the model of Arab armies. The Executive Committee (which effectively meant Al-Shuqairi) formed a Military Committee, which brought together Wajih al-Madani, Commander-in-Chief of the Palestinian Liberation Army, Executive Committee member Bahjat Abu Gharbieh and Qusai al-Abadala. This was the Committee that drafted the agreements drawn up between the PLO and each host country of the Palestinian Liberation Army; it was also the Committee that set up the relationship between the army and each of these states, these being Egypt, Syria and Iraq. The naming of a commander-in-chief and the drafting of the agreements were considered the starting pistol for the formation of the army itself. Everyone who took an interest in the matter got involved in the work. It was natural that I got involved – the Palestinian soldier – in this work. In that regard, a new chapter of my life – and the lives of most of the officers from the course – had begun.

## *Chapter 7*

The PLO's Military Committee came to Damascus and met with us, the officers of the Palestinian course who were discharged from the Syrian army, one by one, and asked each of us what we thought about joining the Liberation Army. I agreed, as did my peers, to sign up to this as yet

uncompleted army. Yet joining in practice took time, since I had to first resign from my government job. The Committee asked me whether I would accept taking over the position of Chief of Staff, along with Wajih al-Madani as Commander-in-Chief. I put to the Committee the same reasons for turning down this offer as I had put to Al-Shuqairi, adding that my situation was unclear, that I didn't know when I would be discharged from my job, and that the setting up of an army required officials ready to take over responsibility straight away.

Ahmad Mar'ashli, with whom I collaborated closely in the running of the Association, was not inclined to accept my resignation from it. Ahmad raised the issue of my resignation to the top brass of the organisation, urging them not to accept it. The issue, along with this advice, finally reached the office of the President.

The president of Syria at that time was Amin al-Hafez, with whom I had become friends with when I met him during my joint service in the Syrian army. It should be noted that Hafez was one of the people most enthused to establish the Liberation Army, and he played a decisive role in facilitating our course's officers joining the force. So for the sake of my resignation, and obtaining permission to join the new army, I requested a meeting with my old friend.

He gave me a warm reception, to the point that he neglected the rules of protocol which bound the movement of the President and ensured he commanded a fearful respect. He began joking with me, all formalities forgotten, in front of his employees and guards. Having broached the topic at hand, I learnt that Al-Shuqairi had written to him about it. He agreed to my resignation and to my joining the Palestinian army, but on one condition, a condition I found favourable: that I complete a study about the future of the Palestinian refugees which I had already started to prepare, and that I attend the second Conference of Supervisors in Amman and present it there. So I, as a Palestinian Liberation Army officer, attended the Conference of Supervisors as part of the Syrian delegation.

It was later said to me that many Baathist officials had opposed our course's officers joining the Liberation Army, not because they were against the establishment of the army, but because they believed we carried political ideas that did not fit in with Baathist politics. They were worried we would return to the political front through the Palestinian Liberation Army or the PLO. Yet the enthusiasm that Amin al-Hafez had for us as a group, knowing

many of us personally, undoubtedly helped to soften the opposition of his hardliners.

This reminds me of an incident that happened prior to that, when Hafez had become the Interior Minister after his comrades took over shared power with the Nasserists in 1963, and there were disturbances in the streets between Baathists and Nasserists. Most Palestinians aligned themselves with the Nasserists who were, at that time, calling for the immediate and unconditional return to Syrian-Egyptian unity. The security forces increased their grip on the Palestinian camps, which were holding firm to their positions. Hafez called together a Palestinian group, myself included, to deal with the problems of the camps. Hafez received the members of the group warmly, and responded generously to our requests. In his defence of his inner-circle, Hafez argued that they were new to power and were resolute on doing anything which would further the Palestinian cause. In his simple style of speaking, he compared the Palestinian cause to the state of a sick man surrounded by doctors with different specialties, each trying to diagnose and treat him.

This comparison offended Dr Osama al-Naqib, who, in the period of the unification, was the Secretary General of the Palestinian Nationalist Union set up by the unification's leadership. He remonstrated against what Hafez had said, but this aggravated the president, who did not believe he had said anything provocative, and an argument ensued. Naqib said that the comparison made it seem as if the Palestinian cause was a sick man at death's door, and that this was unacceptable. This silenced Hafez, who then withdrew what he had said, and apologised repeatedly. He then asked us to work on pacifying Palestinian sentiments, and said how grateful he would be to us if we did that. Once the group meeting had finished, Hafez held Samir al-Khatib and I back, and asked us to recall our days of joint service in Latakia. He then reiterated his apology, asserting that he did not mean what Naqib had understood by what he had said; he spoke about Palestinians with great positivity, and he did not let us leave until we promised him to re-connect with him.

The Liberation Army was to include three brigades: Hattin, in Syria, Ayn Jalut, in Egypt, and a third in Baghdad, called Qadisiyyah. Of the men from our course, Subhi al-Jabi was promoted to the rank of brigadier general, and was named Chief of Staff. Then Uthman Haddad was appointed commander of the Hattin brigade, Mansour al-Sharif commander of the Ayn Jalut brigade, and Ayoub Ummar commander of the Qadisiyyah brigade. I was appointed chief operations and training officer in the general staff. Those of us who, on

dismissal, held the rank of major, received our ranks and our new military badges by Military Committee member Qusai al-Abadala, and began our service. Once the formation of the Army's leadership and all its brigades was complete, the traditional formation of military units began, and the PLO came to have an army.

In a meeting convened by the Executive Committee, Uthman Jaafar Haddad and I were charged with establishing a structure for the Liberation Army. We went together to Cairo, so as to be close to the military and political leadership. It was I alone who was firm about the structure to be put in place. I learnt that those in Al-Shuqairi's inner circle had already decided everything, determining that the army would be formed of classical brigades, which was something I disagreed with them about.

Despite the prior decisions, I completed my study and advised the formation of private battalions instead of the traditional brigades. This opinion was not immediately taken on board, and they went through with their initial decision. All that was left for me to do was to carry out another study highlighting the tasks of the Liberation Army, its training program, and the weaponry it required – that sort of thing. I was also asked to lay out a strategy for Palestinian military action; the way I visualised the structure was to build a military base in Gaza and another in the West Bank and a third in the Galilee in northern occupied Palestine. Two communication centres in Jordan and Egypt would accompany these bases, according to their geographical position. I made it clear that the regular forces would begin operations once the three bases were built and fortified, and the links between the three were reinforced. I reiterated my view that the Liberation Army should not become a 'classical' army made up of large battalions, but rather remain an army of smaller, private, more mobile units, trained to implement this strategy and these tactics.

I presented my written study to the Executive Committee, and I was invited to meet with them and discuss it. At the end of a long discussion, the Committee accepted my study. Under the guidance of what was contained within it, the Palestinian Leadership altered the scheme that had been approved by the united Arab leadership, and set up battalions as I had suggested. The first battalion in Syria was made up of Palestinian fighters who had, before that, made up the backbone of the Syrian reconnaissance battalion. Samir al-Khatib took up leadership of the new battalion, in which he was supported by a number of officers from our course. Following this, the Qadisiyyah brigade in Iraq was made into battalions, while it was unfeasible to form private battalions out of the Ayn Jalut brigade in Egypt. In all three

countries, Egypt, Syria and Iraq, the defence ministries provided the land necessary for the establishment of our military camps, and provided individual weapons. The governments of both Syria and Iraq, meanwhile, gave further provisions to help implement the 'private units' scheme – rather than the larger units – as well as army training based on this model.

I should mention here that the weapons provided were not exactly what we were looking for. Given that the PLO didn't have a relationship with any arms companies, we couldn't do much more than meet basic needs. But the work to build the battalions carried on in full swing, and it wasn't long before all three forces, Hattin, Qadisiyyah and Ayn Jalut, had filled up their ranks. As for the link between the forces of one army being spread out across three countries, it was extremely complicated. The link was a vertical one, in the sense that there was not a direct link between one force and another, but rather it ran through the General Command. To give an example: if the Hattin forces needed the help of an expert who was present among the forces of Ayn Jalut, three parties would have to agree on bringing him over: the Palestinian General Command, the Syrian defence ministry and the Egyptian defence ministry. Even with the moving of a soldier, not an expert, the latter would need to get the agreement of all these parties, and it was hard enough getting the agreement of two of them...

In short, the reality of the situation was patently clear. The Hattin forces were made up of Palestinian officers and fighters from Syria; likewise, Ayn Jalut was limited to Palestinian fighters and officers from Egypt and the Gaza Strip, and the Qadisiyyah forces were pretty much limited to Palestinian-Iraqis. At the start, Hattin was made up of three battalions, each three hundred soldiers strong. After Palestinians were included in compulsory military service in Syria, according to the agreement between the Syrian government and myself, the number greatly increased. Ayn Jalut, meanwhile, remained as it was, in its capacity as a brigade.

Since the beginning, my efforts had been focused on building and developing the army units. The Executive Committee had a positive impression of my military capabilities, following the study I had prepared and presented to them. The Committee issued a decree naming me the deputy to the Chief of General Staff. However, the commander of the Hattin force, Uthman Haddad, opposed this. And the Syrian authorities supported Uthman. The unity of the Qatana course, whose officers had always been bound by their common ground, had begun to crack since the formation of a Palestinian organisation and national army, and the position of Uthman and others was a manifestation of this shift.

Given my aspirations for the Liberation Army to participate in the liberation of Palestine, I pushed wholeheartedly for the training of the military units to be completed. When the army became bound by its commitment, it planned out the united Arab leadership and drew up agreements for the army's relationship with host states. It thereby became unfeasible for this army to carry out guerrilla operations in occupied Palestine along the lines of what Fatah and the Palestine Liberation Front had begun to carry out from time to time. The subject was constantly on my mind, particularly since no party had a clear idea of the role that the Palestinian Army was to be given. However, although the next step was not clear, the prevailing conditions had confirmed the importance of forming this army from private units – exactly what I had advocated from the start. What I can say is that, in terms of the guerrilla operations carried out by the factions of the armed struggle, nascent at the time, I was supportive of them at times, and not at others.

News had been circulating about such operations being carried out in the Gaza Strip and elsewhere since I became part of the Refugees Association, and I myself disseminated the information in the newsletter I edited. When Fatah announced its first operation, I – who had become an official in the Liberation Army – did not have a negative stance towards it. However, I regarded the incident in the framework of my overall vision of the struggle, one that was, for me, wide, deep and enduring. So when the armed factions carried out what they did, I granted it no more than the significance it deserved, and did not absorb myself in the issue.

I, like others, followed what was going on with Fatah, whose presence had been welcomed by the Baathists in Syria. It came to have a presence there that was distinct from its presence in any other country, without becoming particularly large. I took pains to meet with Khaled al-Hasan whenever he came to Damascus, as I had been doing before he participated in the establishment of Fatah and became a member of its Central Committee. I would discuss all kinds of matters with my old friend, without our conversation revolving around Fatah in particular.

As for Yasser Arafat, he had begun to visit Damascus so often that he had become a semi-permanent resident, and so it wasn't until sometime in 1950 that I ended up meeting him. At that time, Arafat met Dr Osama al-Naqib, a member of PLO's Executive Committee, and he invited me to attend the meeting. Arafat came to Naqib's residency, carrying a small notebook that I would learn he always had on him, and posed the committee member question after question concerning military action in the occupied land and

the opportunities for collaboration between the PLO and Fatah, and he wrote down all the responses in his notebook.

I cannot recall all the details of the meeting. What I do remember is that the meeting went on a long time and that Naqib was wary about Arafat's zeal for the guerrilla operations. I don't know why I maintained my silence throughout the meeting even though their talked often touched upon military affairs. Perhaps it because it was the first time I had met Arafat, or perhaps because I knew just how modest the few operations were that he mentioned Fatah had carried out. In any case, this meeting did not affect my disapproval of the presence of disparate armed factions.

After other meetings had taken place between our army's officers and leaders of armed factions, I – as the person in charge of operations and training – issued and circulated a written order for the Hattin forces. I demanded that no soldier join any faction, so as to ensure their loyalty remained with the army alone. To further emphasize this, we agreed with the army's General Command that all members pledge an oath of loyalty to the army. We also agreed that the oath should be both verbal and written, signed by the person concerned and kept in his dossier. A soldier who joined any of the factions could be punished with anything ranging from an official warning, to expulsion from the army (if the person in question insisted on remaining a member of the faction).

With regard to the Palestine Liberation Front, I knew that there was someone from our course, Ali Bishnaq, who had helped set it up. As arranged by Ali, I met the first lieutenant, Ahmed Jibril, who had been discharged from the Syrian army, for the first time. He, who would later become the leader of the Front, informed me of his military and tactical ideas and the training program that his faction's fighters were following. Ahmed was an officer of military engineering, specialising in explosive devices, and he had asked the Commander-in-Chief of the Palestinian Liberation Army, Wajih al-Madani, to collaborate with him. Madani had agreed to this collaboration, and I made special arrangements for it. I won't conceal that the training program shown to me by Ahmed Jibril had greatly impressed me.

At that time, I also met the leaders of the organization called 'Youth of Vengeance' the faction that had sprung up out of the Arab nationalist movement and what was going on around it, and formed one of the initial cores upon which the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) was later based on. It was in that context that I met Dr Wadie Haddad, who held opinions I did not approve of. Haddad told me at that time that they trained

young people along similar lines to those of groups like Fatah. He asked for my help in training the Youth of Vengeance fighters, and he got what he wished.

Although I was drawn by Ahmed Jibril's training program and the ideas of Wadie Haddad, my focus remained on the affairs of the army. I did not give the factions more consideration than that which their actual significance required. As for the factions' propaganda against the army, its bureaucracy and its self-serving relationship with Arab governments – along with other such criticisms levelled by opponents of the PLO leadership – its influence within the army was minimal at that point, and so we didn't lose much sleep over it. The army was at present coming together as a very prominent bloc, while, in contrast, the factions remained weak.

I did not, back then, predict the future growth of Fatah, or of any of the other factions. I knew about Fatah's links to Syria, and about the presence of the upper council in Syria that supported Fatah, headed by the country's president Amin al-Hafez. Arafat's perseverance in his activities was indeed striking, but I did not expect Fatah to become the force of the future.

Of all the issues occupying me during that period, what stood out for me were the Baathist attempts to interfere in the affairs of the Liberation Army and expand their influence in the forces of Hattin by drawing away the loyalty of its officers to the party, or by getting Baathists to join. We in the army leadership were agreed on stopping these attempts, and we coordinated our efforts with the Executive Committee through our close relations with Nimr al-Masri. Despite that, the efforts of Syrians to intervene in the affairs of the Liberation army continued, as did the pressure, in particular, on the 48 officers from the course – i.e. us veteran officers from Qatana. A decision was handed down by the Syrian defence ministry to cut our pensions that we were claiming from the Syrian army, to be applied retroactively since our enrolment in the Liberation Army. This ruling would later force me to file a lawsuit against the Syrian defence ministry, which I was to win, but the court's decision was not implemented since presidential decree number 45 passed on 14/5/1972 annulled it.

Importantly, the Army's relationship to the Syrian authorities during the tenure of Amin al-Hafez was generally a good one. In the period following the 23 February 1966 coup d'état, which overthrew Hafez and his circle, the good relationship continued in part, although the Baathist attempts at hegemony intensified.

It just so happened that I had met the military leader of the coup, Salah Jadid, who had been promoted to the rank of major-general, in passing. I met him, back then an obscure Baathist officer, by chance during the period of unification, prior to my imprisonment; we were both part of the large audience listening to Abdel Nasser's speech in Qasr Al-Diafa Square in Damascus, and we exchanged views on it, and on Nasser, after he had finished. He said that we should meet up and talk further, and we agreed to do so. However we didn't meet up as he wished, since the conditions, some of which I have described, prevented us meeting at that time.