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*The Return of Palestinian Self-Awareness*

In 1956, the Zionist attack on Gaza took place, bringing a lesson and a warning to Palestinians everywhere. The Israeli forces had advanced into the Gaza Strip after the Egyptian army withdrew and the Palestinians found themselves alone, defenceless and disorganised, which left the field wide open for the enemy to lash out at the Palestinians with impunity. Massacres took place throughout the Gaza Strip, affecting all sectors of society.

An event of this kind was a historical turning point that revived a Palestinian sense of identity and made them realise, almost in shock, that they had no choice but to organise themselves and get their own house in order, and that unless they relied on themselves they would not be able to achieve any of their objectives. The Palestinians in exile would remain in exile and their homeland would be just a nostalgic memory. One day even the memory would fade and all would be lost.

At that historic moment the Palestinians sprang into action to defend themselves against the merciless enemy. When the Zionist enemy withdrew from the Strip, the Palestinians were surprised to find the United Nations made a decision to put the Gaza Strip under a U.N. mandate. They rose up against the decision, although Egypt agreed with the United Nations on the proposal. Large crowds came out, set fire to the U.N. flag, raised the Egyptian flag in its place and called for the Egyptian administration to come back to the Strip. Palestinian wishes prevailed and the Egyptian administration did come back. This in itself was a valuable lesson for Palestinians everywhere.

*"Liberation Cells" and the Struggle for Demands*

In every location, there were vanguards of our people looking for a way by which Palestinians could bring about their own salvation with their own hands. At first we tried through party activity but we ran into fossilised party mentalities and with the intellectual dogmatism that was prevalent at that time, which was narrow-minded and limited in its horizons. The main preoccupation of party political leaders was to steer us away from direct action and bog us down in peripheral conflicts, but a variety of factors that were discussed earlier in this work had fortified our will, so we proceeded

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with our revolutionary choice. In Gaza for example, which was the scene of our first experiment, between 1953 and 1954 a pioneering group had started to meet and form discussion groups. It then organised into networks and cells, which decided that our first battle was with the administration that controlled Gaza and that was corrupt, repressive and financially predatory. At first we took on this injustice by collecting the facts and having them published in Arab newspapers or sending them to the government in Cairo to expose the corruption in the local administration they had appointed in the Gaza Strip. In fact I can now say that as soon as this information reached President Gamal Abdel Nasser he gave orders that it be dealt with, and President Abdel Nasser did in fact order that all the officers be transferred, including the military governor-general, because the scandals stank to high heaven.

That was the context of our first struggle to enable Palestinians to speak for themselves freely in their own homeland.

### *Armed Struggle: The Formation of Nuclei and the Beginning*

At that historic moment, alongside the struggle against maladministration and in the new context that Palestinian self-awareness had created, the idea of armed resistance to the Zionist enemy began to take shape and form. We began with weapons training for young Palestinians and we were in fact able to train large groups. In reality, however, practical armed confrontation in the occupied territories and in the Israeli settlements was the principal arena for training. What steeled the will of our fighters and improved their training were actual confrontations. At that time we carried out several operations beyond the ceasefire line.

In the Naqab (Negev) we sent groups to plant anti-tank mines or to blow up the water pipes at settlements. This armed activity gradually expanded and our groups even reached the Yazour area close to the city of Jaffa.

### *Action and Reaction*

When our first group carried out an operation, such as blowing up a water pipeline or blowing up a tractor with a mine in the occupied territories, the enemy forces would respond by attacking the Egyptian forces that were based in the Gaza Strip, and the situation would flare up. For example, we would carry out an operation in the Deir al-Balah settlements and Israeli artillery would shell Gaza city, particularly the square where the taxis waited, which

turned the Strip into a powder keg after many innocent civilians were killed or wounded there.

These actions and Israeli reactions constantly created an explosive popular atmosphere, expanding and deepening Palestinian self-consciousness. All this drove the Egyptian administration to try to meet our demand that the Strip and its inhabitants should be protected. It set up the National Guard, not to suppress the mass movement and its vanguard forces, but rather to protect them, especially as our operations created an awareness that armed struggle against the enemy was necessary as a principal form of resistance. That awareness in turn helped to provide protection for our first groups of fighters.

Our activity continued to expand and we intensified our operations, some of which were launched from the Hiribya area. I remember that the fallen hero Abdullah Siyam led one of our groups from this area. He was a student at Cairo University and when he came home on vacation he took on the leadership of the fighting groups.

### *Expansion and the Zohar Reservoir Operation*

One of the most important operations our group carried out in this period was blowing up the Zohar Reservoir, which was part of the National Water Carrier project. We had acquired information about the project from a single source - the reconnaissance missions by our group in the occupied territories. On February 25, 1955, one of our groups planted barrels filled with TNT there and the operation was a stunning success. When the reservoir burst, masses of water was released. I remember that I was on my way to Beit Hanoun and as I approached the valley, I found it was full of water from the reservoir, which then moved on to cover vast areas planted with maize. The water flowed all the way to Beit Lahya, where it spilled into the Mediterranean.

The Israelis reacted immediately to this operation through David Ben Gurion, who was defence minister in the government of Moshe Sharett. Ben Gurion sent his forces to Bir al-Safa to attack the Egyptian garrison there, which amounted to one platoon of soldiers. The Israeli forces blew up the reservoir that provided Gaza with water and about twelve people were injured – civilians and soldiers from the Egyptian garrison.

At that time there was a Palestinian battalion attached to the Egyptian army and based in Rafah. The battalion commander had no choice but to send his men to Bir al-Safa to defend the area. On the way, at Wadi Gaza to be precise,

the vehicle carrying the battalion fell into an Israeli ambush, which opened fire at them, killing 28 soldiers.

This treacherous operation took place at night and when we found out the next morning what had happened we drenched handkerchiefs in blood and set off in a massive demonstration from the Palestine secondary school towards the town. On the way the crowds turned out to join the demonstration, making it into the kind of demonstration Gaza had never seen in its history. The main slogans we chanted in this demonstration were, "Sign us up and you'll save us", "Train us and you'll help us", "Arm us and you'll save us", "Palestine is Arab", as well as slogans that rejected the resettlement of Palestinian refugees in other countries.

It became clear that a popular outburst had started to sweep Gaza in such a way that it would later be difficult to control the situation there. At that time the Egyptian administration reacted by arresting a number of citizens.

#### *Abu Ammar Acts in Cairo*

At that time we had made contacts with our colleagues in the League of Palestinian Students in Cairo who had been following what was happening in Gaza, including an incident in which a hospital was shelled. The students, spearheaded by brother Abu Ammar (Yasser Arafat) and brother Fathi Balawi, staged a sit-in at the Arab League. President Gamal Abdel Nasser subsequently delegated Abu Ammar and Balawi to lead a committee to Gaza to write a report on the situation there.

In the light of Abu Ammar's report President Nasser reinforced the Egyptian forces in the Gaza Strip and sent National Guard forces.

#### *The Moment of Setting Up the Organisation*

Initiating armed action against the Zionist enemy was our main preoccupation at first. We were interested in implanting in the minds of the Palestinian population in general the idea of military action and the use of weapons against the enemy; in the past their thinking had been cluttered with a massive accumulation of theorization, isolated military operations and theoretical dogma.

But after the explosion, and once our armed struggle had begun in practice and had caught the attention of almost the whole Palestinian people, we felt that the circumstances made it necessary to build an organisation capable of

absorbing the situation, reformulating it and channeling it in ways that would lead to sustained action, so that this organisation could speak for the general popular feeling, or act as an expression of it, or represent it in the ongoing conflict.

For us this experience was a valuable lesson that led us to start thinking about forming the Fatah movement. Particularly at that time, in the middle of the 1950s, the idea of setting up and building the Fatah movement had gradually started to move into action to become a tangible reality. Surprisingly, similar ideas and similar initiatives were taking shape at the same time in a number of places with concentrations of Palestinians. Many core groups appeared that converged on the same thinking, with the same inclinations and the same common vision of the Palestinian situation and the state of the Arab world – in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Kuwait and Qatar. The groups formed the first nuclei of the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, Fatah.

The late Kamal Adwan was part of this process with me after we had worked together during our time resisting the Israeli occupation of Gaza.

There was a group of colleagues in Cairo who had started to think of building an organisation. There was also the Gulf group and the group in Europe.

At its core, this political thinking, emerging in all these locations despite geographic dispersion, drew on the principle of self-reliance.