

**Ta'amari, Salah. Interviewed 2011. Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.**

My acquired name is Salah Ta'amari, my real name is Asad Abdel Qadir. I was born in Bethlehem on October 27, 1942, studied in the schools of Bethlehem, and around the time of my graduation in 1962 or 63, Egypt was the Mecca of poor students. This was in the days of Abdel Nasser, when education was free, so I went to Egypt and I enrolled in the Faculty of Literature at Ain Shams University, to be honest, I was more interested in joining the General Union of Palestine Students than in joining the university. I even signed up for the union before registering at the university! This was because we were deprived of student organising in in the West Bank, which was part of Jordan at the time. With me at the General Union of Palestine Students was the late Hayel Abdel Hamid (Abu al-Houl) as well as Lam'i al-Kundarji, Mahdi Bseiso, and Al-Tayeb Abdel Rahim, these are some of the people I recall, we entered the student elections on the Fateh list in 65-66. The union was controlled by the Movement of Arab Nationalists at the time and its president was Tayseer Quba'a, we entered the elections and won all the seats, and brother Abu al-Houl (Hayel Abdel Hamid) became the president.

The 1967 war erupted while I was sitting for my final exams, and I remember that I had only two courses left for graduation and I was about to receive my BA degree. However, we received a circular instructing us to leave Egypt and enter the Occupied Territories via Syria. Fateh had a training camp on the outskirts of Damascus in a location called al-Hameh. The *nom de guerre* of my colleague who delivered the letter to me, from the martyrs Abu Jihad and Abu Ammar, was Ribhi Ka'wash – his first name was real.

I left Egypt and I went to al-Haameh camp and took a refresher military training course, for I had already taken a military course in Tanta, Egypt through the General Union of Palestine Students. I then went to Damascus and headed from there to Karamah. Karamah was a base for us; we used to spend a night or two there before crossing the [Jordan] river to the Occupied Territories, the person who drove me from al-Haameh to Karamah was the martyr Abu Sabri (Mamdouh Saidam), he had just come back from the Occupied Palestinian territories, from Beit Fureik. Karamah, of course, was a refugee camp and as mentioned it was a base in which we used to assemble. After spending some time there, I was sent in Ramadan 1967- along with William Nassar and some other young men- on the first patrol to the Occupied Territories, I remember this because it was the last day of Ramadan

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and just before the Eid in 1967, I remember how cold it was; it was a really harsh winter, and even in the Jordan Valley it was extremely cold.

The means of crossing the river were extremely primitive – we had a neon-coloured small rubber boat and we were being helped by a young man called Abu Sirdaneh- I don't know where he is today, there was another guy called Mohammad Tayem and I also don't know where he is today, and as for the guide, his name was Abu Ibrahim. Our task was very hard: by the time we got to the other bank, we almost got stuck in the slippery riverside mud, and then we had to climb up the inclines next to the river, which are referred to there as "catarat"; this was not easy, because we would climb up a bit, and then slip down again. We only got to the top after enormous effort, so by the time we were up at the valley, it was late. And we were then suddenly under Israeli illumination bombs; we were not experienced back then, we were walking in the dark areas that were booby-trapped. The Israelis used to fire illumination bombs and would keep their traps in the dark areas... we bumped into one of these traps and we were forced to go back - after all, dawn was about to break and we were in the middle of the valley. When we got back, the boat flipped over, I was in the boat and I was the last one to go back so I drowned. This was my second encounter with death - at the moment of drowning, you feel that there are mermaids there to lull you to the bottom and you simply stop resisting. However, with the help of my brothers I emerged out of the river, and the last thing I saw was the hand of Abu Ibrahim the guide as he was sinking. We later recovered his body from the Dead Sea: the current took him there.

In any case, I went back to Karameh and began to work on developing it as a base. We began to organise the people. I would pass by the houses carrying a briefcase with a Port Said machine gun inside it, and would train the people inside their homes because there was no way of organising a military camp, as a result of the problems we had then with Jordanian security, we were once besieged, so I relied on the younger youth, who were just under 12 to deliver messages to the bases that were under my command or that were close by. This was where I got the idea of creating the Cubs and the Flowers. The first person I confided in was the late Abu Sabri. I told him: "I want to organise the young ones." he answered back: "we haven't even organised the adults and you want to organise the young!" I replied: "I want to try my luck, and let's see what happens". Abu Ali Iyad, God bless his soul, told him: "let him, his craziness might work – his craziness sometimes bears fruit!", that's how Abu Ali Iyad thought of me.

Immediately after the Karameh battle, I established the first camp for Cubs and Flowers in Baq'aa refugee camp, and the idea then spread - at the time, I was aware that what was important in this project was the cultural, rather than the military, dimension: the focus was on culture and deepening the belonging of these young people to their cause. And so, the idea of the Cubs spread... the condition for entry was the agreement of parents, I did not want this to become a place for runaway boys. A boy had to come with his mother and father and they had to say that they wanted their son to join. Boys had to also be successful at school. I remember that we used to mark March 8 as the "Day of the Outstanding Palestinian Student," and Abu Ammar (Yasser Arafat) used to insist on coming to the event along with members of the Executive Committee to highlight its importance. I remember the martyr Abu Ammar once addressing them: "school comes first, school comes second, school comes third, and the revolution comes tenth!" ...

if one is to evaluate an experience, then they must examine it within its history, its setting, and its context; the idea of the Cubs was born in Karameh... and since we are talking about Karameh, one of the loveliest people there was a woman called Ni'mah Jaber, may she rest in peace, she was an elderly nurse and she stayed with us even after the Karameh battle, we had so much respect for her and she was one of the most devoted and loyal people. Her sons were with us, and she moved to Lebanon with us, and she passed away a few years back: it's important to give each person their due.

As for the battle, there were several events in the run up to it. Israeli pressure increased, and we were constantly being shelled, every week we were subjected to an Israeli bombardment "party" and the final one lasted for 8 hours, resulting in the death of tens of martyrs. The Israelis were obviously preparing for a big attack; it was certain, and this pushed us to prepare in coordination with the Jordanian army. Brother Abu Sabri and I went down and met the Commander of the Princess Alia Brigade in the Hashemite Regiment just 48 hours before the battle, his name was Kaseb al-Sfoog,<sup>2</sup> He was a courageous, valiant, and loyal Arab Jordanian officer, and we agreed to coordinate because it was certain that the attack would start in a matter of hours, he sent, as far as I can remember, four armoured vehicles into Karameh.

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<sup>2</sup> The interviewee is referring to Kaseb Sfoog al-Jazi (1928-2010), who later rose to become a General in the Jordanian army and a member of the Jordanian Senate.

The battle began at five in the morning, and the Jordanian artillery intervened between 9 and 10 am. Our weapons were modest. I know it is sometimes rumoured that we had RPGs, but that is not true, we had weapons that were completely unsuitable, such as Schmeissers, Bazookas, and a very limited number of landmines. I remember we had a flamethrower that we did not even know how to use and did not have adequate supplies for.

For the historical record, the Jordanian army did well in Southern Shouna: they fought, they lost martyrs, and they caused considerable damage to the Israelis. As for the Iraqi army base that was close to Karameh, it did not participate. Those that fought in Karameh were the *Asifah* forces, the Popular Liberation Forces that were allied to Fateh, and the Jordanian army, this is the truth. In my meeting with the Commander of the Jordanian forces in the Jordan Valley, we were joined by Ahmad Jibreel, who was the Military Commander of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. He ordered his forces to withdraw at 3am, and he did not even tell us that he was not going to participate. I mean, if he had told us his reasons for not participating before the battle then we would have understood - he was free to act as he wished.

His point of view was correct in so far as we were not really able to fight a war of positions, what we were capable of was guerrilla warfare: hit and run. Nevertheless, when we decided to enter this battle, it was because we were instinctively aware of the historical importance of that moment: just staying steadfast in Karameh would have been an achievement and a major move upwards; it would have been the first time an Arab force stood its ground in a fight against Israel. As I mentioned earlier, we did not have the experience or the weapons, our military knowledge was based on rudimentary training and what we had read in the writings of Che Guevara, Mao Zedong, and all the other revolutionary books that were available in the 1960s, but we saw with our own eyes that Karameh was going to enter history, and that each one of us who was going to fall as a martyr was going to be replaced by a thousand others - indeed, we lived and saw thousands flooding into Karameh after the battle.

It is not appropriate or even logical for Karameh to be discussed from a military standpoint, as at most, at the very most, we had three hundred fighters. This was in the face of thousands of Israeli soldiers with their tanks, fighter jets, rockets, and artillery. It's not logical! We entered Karameh with our high spirits that were not affected by the imbalance of power between the occupation army and us: we fought with our morale, with our revolutionary impulsiveness; we were young, young men who were not afraid. And victory

was achieved in the sense that this was a major breakthrough for the PLO and Fateh - we were underground and emerged above the ground. Of course, this victory had its negative consequences as well; the thousands of volunteers that were rushing into Fateh did not go through the traditional stages of joining the movement. First, one starts as a candidate member, and then gets accepted as a member after a period of examination, people did not immediately become members before Karameh. I mean, we used to distinguish between one cadre and another, someone would ask: "is so and so an original Fateh cadre?", and we would reply: "from the bones of the neck!"<sup>3</sup> The relationship between people inside Fateh, and the relationship of Fateh members with Palestine had romance to it, there was talk of heroic deeds. Where does heroism come from after all? Each human being has the seed of a hero inside them. This seed grows through talk as well, I mean, we used to chat about heroic deeds: "how come Rex has been able to raise the flag inside the Occupied Territory, participating in ten operations without me being able to enter? I want to be part of twenty operations!" There was genuine revolutionary competition: of course, we did not acknowledge ranks or anything like that – there were no ranks, and there were no cars. There was only one Volkswagen Beetle, and I only saw it once, we used to use an agricultural tractor - once, I drove it to distribute water to the bases that were further away from the headquarters, and Abu Ammar came with me, placing himself somehow on the side! This was our life. Wages? A bachelor would be given 10 Jordanian dinars and a married person 15, and most of the people who would take this money were guides, and we were unhappy with them, we used to view them as mercenaries for doing that, despite the fact that they needed to feed their kids and that some of them used to be fierce fighters and fell as martyrs.

We used to smoke Lulu, which is not only the worst cigarette brand in Jordan, but perhaps in the whole world! nobody used to diverge from that rule. Abu al-Lutuf (Farouq Qadoumi) used to smoke Philadelphia but was forced to hide it in a Lulu pack – he would joke with the late Abu Ammar, saying: "these people are deceiving you. Lulu is the most expensive kind." Abu Ammar did not smoke, so would believe him. Our food was Zeit o Zatar (olive oil and thyme), that was it, sometimes we used to take breaks and more often than not we didn't.

Amongst the people I remember from that time was the martyr Al-Zaroor, with him was Abdel Ilah al-Atiri, who is still around in Nablus. Abdel Ilah

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<sup>3</sup> "From the bones of the neck" (*Min 'Itham al-Rakaba*) is a colloquial Palestinian saying, and describes someone who is very close.

used to serve in the base commanded by martyr Abu al-Sharif and was taken prisoner. When I arrived to the base the dawn after the battle I saw his gun, so I thought that he was martyred. Abu al-Sharif had been martyred, and his body was there and there was a bullet in his head. I covered his face with tomato vines. Karameh, you see, was famous for growing vegetables. I later learned that Abdel Ilah al-Atiri did not fall but was captured, and we met years later. Abu al-Sharif fell, Raouf fell, the problem is that I don't know Raouf's real name. I remember we were sitting under the almond trees talking about the battle that was about to take place tomorrow. Raouf came up to us wearing something straight off the laundry line, and we started making fun of him, so he said: "just to annoy you, tomorrow I will be the most beautiful and handsome martyr!", he was martyred in the battle and his chest and face were covered with dozens of bullets.

My location was in the middle of Karameh next to the main square, to my right was Raouf and to the west between me and the river was Abu Sharif's base, to my left was al-Haj Ismail, and behind me on the hills was Saeb al-Aajez with the Popular Liberation Forces. The Israeli tanks arrived next to my location and called for me by name with their microphone: "surrender", so I fired the last round I had with me, and then the place I was sheltering in was blown off, luckily, I was next to a tunnel.. the "tunnels" we had could not be called that in the literal sense of the term, they were more like covered trenches. I buried myself in the trench, and heard their voices while they were looking for me. I stayed silent. I had a young man with me, I forgot his name. I stayed until they left. Once they were gone, I went up to see what the situation was like outside, just after noon, I went to check up on the injured, taking them outside of Karameh, to the east.

Around 6pm, the Jordanian artillery began to shell the Israeli forces stationed next to the river, the Israelis decided to silence the Jordanian guns. I was walking with the civilians and the injured towards the Jordanian artillery, so the gunfire was hitting us as well, even now, I can almost hear the sound of the shells. We took shelter in a few tiny caves awaiting the end of the raid, but we ended up sleeping even beyond that. Around 4am, as dawn was about to break, I returned to Karameh, gathered the remaining bodies of the martyrs along with some weapons. In the evening of the following day we buried a number of martyrs in Karameh cemetery, east of the town, there weren't even enough people to bury them, and there wasn't enough sand on top of them, it rained and the sand was washed away, so we gathered the remaining bodies and put them in the vegetable market. When the rain came the dry blood became runny, as if it had exploded out of their bodies once again. At that moment, we were completely drained and exhausted. The first people to

arrive the following day was the late sister Um Sabri and sister Um al-Lutuf. I asked them to quickly leave Karamah and they did. With us in Karamah were brothers Abu Ammar, Abu al-Lutuf, and Abu Iyad. The night of the battle, I made them sleep on the eastern edge of Karamah. I tried to keep them away from immediate danger...