

Amr, Nabil.¹ “Palestinian Radio Stations and Their Role in the Struggle”. *Shu'un Filastiniya*, no. 248, Spring 2012. Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.²

This account is drawn from the author's book Days of Love and of Siege, published in Nicosia in 1982, in which he recounts his experiences working in broadcasting during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the summer of 1982.

“The true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love”, said the great revolutionary leader Ernesto Che Guevara. I understood the truth behind those words during my extraordinary experience in Beirut, where I could find no explanation for many rare and unusual phenomena other than the love that fills the hearts of revolutionaries and inspires them to fight to the death.

That experience showed me that the people I had the good fortune to work with in the radio station *Voice of Palestine – Voice of the Palestinian Revolution* were truly revolutionary. We went through dangerous and tumultuous, sometimes hellish, times together and on the pages of this book I intend to record glimpses of an experience that was of great importance and that provided insights into the nature and creative power of humanity.

It was a rich experience. I cannot claim that I can record it in all its aspects. Everything that is printed on the pages of this book is a retrieval from memory of living images that I do not think can ever be erased. And now, as I write the introduction to this book, I remember that in many difficult or fraught situations I begged God to let me live, not because I had any excessive desire to live, although such a desire is instinctive and legitimate, but so that I would have the opportunity to record these situations, or the opportunity to be a witness to history. When I began writing, I followed my instincts. I dug up from memory things that were buried deep and I ignored the confines of time or place, because I am not a historian trying to document a period of time that was crowded with major events. I am just a human being trying to capture the impression of a human experience in which love was interwoven with danger, hope with despair and success with frustration.

Ni'am Faris, one of our announcers, filled our mornings with joy, hope and confidence. She had a beautiful smile for all her colleagues and flitted like a butterfly to the front-line positions where our fighters were defending the city

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from Israeli attacks. A few hours after she left the radio station one day, someone came and told us that a direct hit by a shell had torn her body apart.

Our pens stopped writing and we burst into tears. We wiped away our tears and went back to writing. Inside us some guardian angel never stopped reminding us that we had no right to overindulge in sadness because we were writing for people and speaking to people, and our mission was to keep the window of hope open till the end.

Yes.

We didn't have the right to overindulge in sadness, because we are not writing personal memoirs, but we did have a duty to overindulge in love and pain. This was our philosophy at work and in life inside that little home called the radio station. The word *hope* here sounds as if it is mere rhetoric. Where could we find reasons to be hopeful when the noose was tightening around Beirut? When we looked out to sea, all we saw was Israeli warships. When we looked up at the sky, all we saw was Israeli planes. When we looked towards the mountains, all we saw was the barrels of field guns and rocket launchers aimed in our direction.

We looked hard for any source of hope. In the first days we at the radio station had decided to keep our listeners away from the slippery slope of the usual calculations that would lead to despair. We set about mobilising the public and the fighters for realistic objectives – prolonging the battle and inflicting as many casualties as possible in enemy ranks. These were possible and realistic objectives and they were achieved. When Yasser Arafat visited us for the first time and met most of the staff for three hours, there was a rich dialogue by candlelight on one idea – the prospects for our battle. Arafat's point of view on this was very simple and profound:

“We have decided to hold our ground and resist. We have rejected offers of a safe exit under the banner of the Red Cross, for two main reasons. Firstly, a political reason, from our realisation that the Lebanon war must not be the end of the road for the revolution. We must turn it into a stage along the road. And so this war must be prolonged, so that the enemy pays a heavy price and so that the repercussions of this war mount up seriously inside Israeli society. That will create a good climate for resuming and continuing the struggle.

“The second reason is one of morale. This revolution has a duty to offer the Palestinian people, weighed down by conspiracies, collusions and disappointments, an example of exceptional heroism, as material from which

future generations can extract incentives to continue. Whatever happens to us as a result of this cruel war, which has been imposed on us anyway, our gains from resisting will be great.”

The rationale was clear to us, so I do not believe we were wrong to stay within realistic limits when addressing our audience. My efforts were focused on one central objective – convincing people that their endurance had great political and moral significance and was the only option that could spare the nation and the people fateful dangers. To a great extent we succeeded. The windows of hope in the wall of the siege stayed open, and we understood on reflection that the hope was not artificial, even if there were moments when it appeared to be so.

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At one point the military commander of the revolution, Sa'ad Sayel (Aboul Walid), contacted me and gave me orders to broadcast an important report about his meeting with a certain Iranian whose name I don't remember but who bore the impressive title “Commander of the Muhammad Prophet of God Brigade”. Aboul Walid told me to include in the report the important detail that the meeting discussed ways to enable Iranian volunteers to take part in the battle to defend Lebanon, Palestine and the Islamic community. I added to the report a statement by one of the leaders of the Islamic revolution in Iran to the effect that he was assembling 100,000 volunteers to march to Lebanon to help the Lebanese and Palestinian victims of the invasion. We followed up this report with a commentary that began, I remember, with the expression “A warm welcome to our true brothers, to the knights of the Islamic revolution, to the sons of Khomeini, to the descendants of Ali and Hussein, to those who embody true revolution...” and so on. The report was top news in all Beirut that day, so much so that many people started talking about a major shift in the balance of forces that would not be in the interests of the enemy. Everyone was full of hope, and yet within days we had forgotten the whole story. When we saw the death of this one hope we were saddened, but we remembered something poetic and moving that Arafat had told us. “We're going to put our own lives on the line here – in the end that's our biggest asset.”

The radio station was in effect a daily declaration that the revolution and all it meant was still alive. In obvious desperation the Israelis had tried to destroy the radio station. They had succeeded a first time when our main station was broadcasting from Sayroub Hill near Sidon. But they failed to hit us when we were broadcasting from the mobile reserve transmitter, and after leaving

Beirut I read in an Arabic newspaper statements by Israeli military commanders who said that *Voice of Palestine* was high on the list of priority targets on the mission board for Israeli planes. When I read the report I recalled that day when dozens of shells fell around and right at the gates of the radio station. At the time we were in a basement behind the Jordanian embassy. They were clearly concentrating on that point although there was no military target in the area. We escaped death purely by chance and the Israelis were probably sure we were there because, just like us, they could hear the explosions that accompanied the voice of the announcer. It was then that my colleague Taher and I decided to move the radio station immediately, taking advantage of the midday break. But the engineers were against the idea and suggested that the move take place at night. That is what we did and most of the workers at the radio station were taken by surprise by the move to the new base. Then we could make fun of the Israelis, who continued to bomb the old site, this time without hearing the sound of their own bombs on the radio.

The radio station moved five times in three months and the young engineers were amazing – Jihad, Tha'ir, Riyadh, Ahmed Hassan and Abu Hussein. As soon as they had set up all the transmission equipment in a new site, they fanned out across Beirut in search of the next site. When shells and bombs were raining down on Beirut, they were the only people you could see on the roofs of buildings as they rigged up a provisional aerial or checked the right height for setting up their equipment.

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People like listening to the radio when it's broadcasting a beautiful song, an interesting piece of news, or an intelligent and honest analysis of the political situation. But when the listeners know that the radio station is broadcasting from a nearby apartment or from the basement of the building in which they live it is bound to give rise to some fear and anxiety. A radio station is an open invitation to planes to bomb. So as we moved from place to place we ran into some difficult situations with our new neighbours. Some of them even picked up their children and presented them to us, saying bitterly and imploringly, "Look, what have these children done to be crushed under bombs?" We knew that these people were in the right and that their fears were justified, but we couldn't stop broadcasting for that reason alone, although it was sound. We did have a dialogue with our neighbours, however, and we tried to reassure them that the radio station that might be targeted was somewhere else and that all we were doing in their building was preparing programmes and news bulletins, and the neighbours reluctantly

accepted our point of view. I think it is my duty, and it does justice to the truth, to recognise the special qualities of our Lebanese brethren – warmth, generosity and attachment to traditional moral values. The Lebanese may have expressed legitimate fears about the presence of the radio station near their houses, but they never forgot their duty as neighbours to offer coffee to their new guests. That led to deep human interaction and close friendships that continue in real life, not just in our memories.

Who were these people who gathered in a cramped room and created a daily recital that lasted sixteen hours, all of them aware that they were in a situation where death was the rule, life was the exception and survival was a matter of chance? They were a group of men and women, some of them from the core of the Fatah movement, some of them members of leftist political parties and others who had adopted Arab nationalist ideas, but they were all witnesses to the siege of Beirut. They ended up belonging to a new party – the party of common destiny. Barriers that in normal circumstances would have been like walls of steel melted away, and the distances that used to separate radicals from pragmatists vanished. Now we could all engage in calm dialogue, avoiding the hysterical chauvinism that dominated our exchanges when we were living under the more comfortable conditions that we found from time to time.

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Youssef al-Qazzaz and Salih Hawwash were the broadcasters on duty on the morning shift, which began at seven o'clock and lasted till eleven. Salih had eight years of broadcasting experience, most of it in times of war, but he needed someone to remind him of the importance of reading calmly, even under intense shelling. The lyrical poems of Mahmoud al-Sarbyouni and Amjad Nasser could not be read in the same way as the commentaries by Taher or Michel. Salih was quick to respond and he played his part with great competence. At this point I have to mention a story that one of our colleagues told about Youssef. Asked how we would react if Zionist tanks turned up at the door of the radio station, Youssef he replied immediately that we would go out “with our Kalashnikovs and fight to the last drop of blood”. Saleh, who had not yet completed his training as a broadcaster, made lots of mistakes. But he had a calm and confident voice. He and his more experienced colleague could be counted on to carry the morning session and to choose the right material that was usually put together for the evening session.

When a radio station such as ours operates for longer hours than normal, unexpected daily problems are bound to arise. In this case people showed an exceptional talent for dealing with problems and unexpected events. One day, for example, Youssef and Salih turned up for the morning session but the engineer on duty did not appear because his house had been hit and he was moving his family to a safer place. Faced with this situation, Youssef behaved admirably. He told the transmission engineer to run the studio and move back and forth between the studio and the transmission equipment. Over the radio he appealed to all engineers to come to the station. Taher al-Udwan heard the appeal and was extremely anxious. He went to the station immediately to find most of the engineers already there. He held a quick meeting, assigned the staff tasks more precisely than previously and told the announcers to receive training on the operating procedures as back up. After that we faced only one major problem that I will come to later. But was the shelter strong enough to protect us from air raids? The question came up every day, if not every hour. It couldn't be answered by consulting a military expert or a civil engineer, because the Israeli air force was full of surprises, which meant there wasn't a safe place left in the whole of Lebanon, but nonetheless an answer had to be found that would provide some clarity and reassurance and ensure that the radio station continued to operate.

Our focus on an alternative radio station arose from an official feeling that we absolutely must not find ourselves without a radio station at any moment. We succeeded in arranging a relatively safe alternative. I don't think I am permitted, at this stage at least, to provide any further details but speaking in generalities one can say that our most important 20 kilowatt station was located in a place that was difficult to discover and we arrived at a modus operandi that would ensure that broadcasts continued even if site 95 was bombed, though by chance that site remained safe until the middle of the war.

Site 95 consisted of a small air raid shelter that been used to store firewood and that lay under a six-storey building that had absolutely no one living in it. It was the scene of incidents that left a deep impression on the people who worked there. A small community formed in the small, damp room, which was more like a corridor. The members of the community developed extraordinary relationships, including deep love, shared pain and communal anticipation of an unknown fate, which could include the building collapsing on everyone. Yes, everyone without exception. There was once a heated political debate between Amjad Nasser, the Jordanian poet and fighter, and Yacoub Shaheen, who was with us because the war had started before he could leave for his work at our radio station in Algiers. The discussion heated up and almost developed into a violent clash. I observed the argument and

listened, although we were in a bomb shelter surrounded by the sound of massive explosions. Michel al-Nimri, the well-known journalist, was amazed how cool I was. "Hey man," he shouted in my face acerbically, "are you in charge of the radio station or just a spectator to what's happening?"

I replied with provocative coldness. "Now I'm a spectator." Silence reigned for about a minute, and then I invited Amjad and Yacoub to sit down. I noticed that everyone was watching with great interest to see how the argument would end. I don't remember what I said in those moments, but I'm sure that the two of them felt they had made a terrible mistake. I realised this when Yacoub and Amjad came together in a long embrace and each went back to his work calmly and with a clear conscience.

Ni'am was the only woman among us at that time. I still remember that heartfelt tribute that a member of staff gave her over the Voice of Palestine and for which I congratulated him. I remember that without mentioning her by name he referred to the human warmth that she radiated. He ended his tribute with the words, "How wonderful it was to have you among us." Ni'am, the only woman until Salwa al-Amd joined the radio station family, was a Lebanese from the village of Sahour in the south and she abounded with beauty and sweetness. Like a butterfly she flitted between the studio, the editorial room and the technicians' section. She was an experienced announcer who read her material over several times impatiently before recording it. Then, rising to the challenge, she faced her audience on air directly, and her delivery was amazing.

She wasn't in a position that allowed us to discuss the profusion of ideas she had about the need to develop, even under siege conditions. We all know she was a relative newcomer and all newcomers have big ambitions that might sometimes be unrealistic. Once Ni'am confronted me in one of the narrow corridors at site 95 to say, with all the gentleness and sweetness she could muster, "Might it be possible, Nabil, to have a five-minute work meeting?"

"Fine," I said, "let's call this a work meeting, starting now." I saw her face beam with delight. An experienced broadcaster who had been given the opportunity to discuss the state of the whole radio station. Ni'am launched into an explanation of her ideas that lasted a quarter of an hour. I had misjudged her creative abilities and her words still linger in my mind today: "I know we're going through difficult circumstances now and death surrounds us on all sides but it is only in such circumstances that commitment can be properly judged, and so I propose, Nabil, that we introduce new formats into our broadcasting work. Why don't we have a

daily serial based on the reality of the war? Why don't we do half of our work outside the studio? Why don't we produce new songs? I know you'll fall back on the excuse that we don't have the resources, but allow me to challenge you on this point and promise to put all these ideas into effect within the resources that are available."

Something inside me whispered, "How could I possibly suppress such righteous ambition?" Ni'am took out some pieces of paper and said, "This is my work plan. I'll start putting it into effect from today. The daily serial is called Have a Fun Fast (the fasting month of Ramadan coincided with the war), and there are three episodes ready, written by Ghalib Halasa. This is a plan to record material outside on front-line positions and this is a plan to prepare new songs."

I admitted that Ni'am had defeated me when I, together with the city of Beirut, heard thirty episodes of "Have A Fun Fast" and more than a hundred recording from front-line positions, accompanied by the sound of bombs exploding, warplanes swooping, guns of all kinds firing and her own familiar laugh, which was always there, even in the midst of missiles and death. The new songs, the crowning glory of Ni'am's success, she recorded in situ when she visited fighters in the company of Egyptian musicians Adli Fakhri and Zein al-Abdin Fouad. The best-known of those songs were *From Sabra to Manara*, *At the Gateway to Beirut*, and *I Still Have My Gun With Me So Why Should I Fear the Siege*. The last song was like a lucky charm that was on every tongue. One verse ran:

*I still have my gun with me so why should I fear the siege
My heart is a cannon shot, my bones are a lance and my blood is fire,
I have seven friends at the ambush site and their cries would shake a mountain
If you cry out for help a hundred heroes answer your call.*

The passing of the days did not erase our memories of Ni'am, and what she had said about judging commitment in difficult circumstances was not just something she had learnt from a book or that had stuck in her memory from the theory sessions that were common in our circles in times of peace. It was a real-life expression of the highest level of consciousness in the heart and mind of a committed militant. Ni'am was not a political adolescent or an extravagant dreamer whose head was a stream of random ideas like the imagination of a beautiful young woman whose only connection with the world is through fantasies and delusions. Ni'am was a member of the Fatah movement. She dreamed of the theatre and on the stage she had produced a revolutionary play that could be seen as an ambitious and serious endeavour.

She also dreamed of having an influential popular role. She had received weapons training and had shared the lives of ordinary people in Shiyah, the old nationalist district where she lived. She dreamed of Palestine to protect Lebanon from harm. Before she was martyred, she happened to meet Yasser Arafat at the door to the radio station to make her final testament. "Brother Abu Ammar (Arafat)," she said, "I've brought you a present from Hayy al-Sillom. May I present it to you, to the battle commander." The present wasn't a flower. She gave him a kiss on his care-worn shoulder. The two of them – the commander and the future martyr – then burst into tears.

Yes, Ni'am was killed. She had said farewell to Abu Ammar as the bee says farewell to the rose bush, sipping a few sweet drops of its nectar before sinking into a deep and eternal sleep.

Ni'am, or what was left of her young martyred body, was buried under a pile of dust, shrapnel and tears. When we went to visit her burial place in Shiyah, one of the young men there told us, "Although there was death all around us and missiles of all kinds were raining destruction, the burial was performed in a way that befitted a precious martyr." A tree had been planted on the grave, and the gravestone was inscribed *Here lies Ni'am Faris, who was committed to the struggle.*