

Hawi, George. Interviewed by Ghassan Charbel, 1993. Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.

The Secretary General of the Lebanese Communist Party remembers...

Headquarters during the Siege of Beirut

Where were you based during the siege of Beirut? Where did you meet?

We were part of the same team as Yasser Arafat and Abu Jihad (Khalil al-Wazir), and Saad Sayel. We spent most of our time in the operation room holding meetings and discussions, moving from one place to the next to avoid the bombing and to avoid getting caught. We had made our preparations earlier and had set up a few shelters in Beirut; some of them were six floors below ground. My primary headquarters was below what is now the 'Marenyan' cinema, near the entrance of the American University Hospital. Nobody suspected that this uncompleted garage was in fact home to a popular and military leadership during the siege. Arafat remained there underground with me for about a month and a half just as the siege was ending. There were two military style beds and when the bombardment intensified Arafat visited and he liked the place so I asked my wife, who would visit me from time to time to give up her space for Arafat. George Habash was staying in the seventh floor below ground of the same building. I also had another shelter near 'Clemenceau' cinema where we held many meetings with the leaders of the resistance and the national movement. Abu Ammar (Arafat), Abu Jihad, Ahmed Gibreel, George Habash and the leaders of the national movement all attended. We also had an apartment and a shelter on Clemenceau street, near the French embassy. There was also an office nearby that we designated for meetings between Arafat and several ambassadors, including the ambassadors of Greece and Yugoslavia, as well as various foreign officials. Cuba's Foreign minister came to Beirut during the siege and he met with us and affirmed his support.

A funny incident took place when we were having dinner with him and Comrade Waleed Jumblatt and the Cuban minister. The minister told us Fidel Castro had sent him to the Levant to challenge the siege and express solidarity with Palestinian resistance and the national movement. He asked us what our demands were? Jumblatt in his usual undiplomatic protocol replied by asking what Cuba could do for us? Could they send money, fighters, weapons?? This was nonsense. The Cuban minister gave a very diplomatic

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answer that embarrassed us, prompting Jumblatt to rephrase the conversation in a polite and diplomatic tone and they became close friends.

We also had an office at the "Riviera" hotel by the sea. There we received a delegation of Egyptian artists, including the actress Nadia Lotfi and Mohsena Tawfiq. I remember a funny incident that happened after the luncheon we had organised in honour of the delegation. The food was so delicious that Nadia Lotfi turned to a member of the delegation and asked him 'And when are we getting a siege?'

I remained in Beirut until the Israelis left, to attend the funeral of Leonid Brezhnev. No doubt our previous work in covert operations had enabled us to be cautious during the siege. I took measures to impose procedures on the political bureau to ensure our comrades could go abroad. They all refused but I wanted two things: first, to stimulate the global campaign against the Israeli siege in Damascus, Aden, Moscow, Paris and others. The second was to ensure the safety of the leadership of the party in the future; to revitalize the struggle once again.

Everybody supported my resolution except for Comrade Nicolas Chaoui chairman of the party, who said: "Your goals are right George, you want to preserve the potential for subsequent struggle, if this leadership is destroyed, there will be an alternative to ensure the continuity of the political work. But I belong here, I have given my whole life and if I die, I die here in Beirut." He refused to leave but his refusal was the only one I accepted even though others wanted to stay as well.

'Competence and Capability'

How tough was Arafat during that period?

Arafat and I are not on the best terms nowadays but that doesn't mean that I can't say that he was very solid. I don't like to make accusations. He is a natural problem solver, always looking for solutions and flexible, so he appears to give in too easily and make concessions. But during the siege of Beirut he fought the battle with honesty, competence and capability. Of course, there were mistakes. Yasser Arafat bears a large part of the responsibility for the situation we found ourselves in, but it is incorrect right to say that he was weak or that someone else was the hero of the siege of Beirut.

When did he discuss leaving Beirut with you? Was the decision made after discussions with you or with the circle close to Arafat?

He was looking to leave Beirut from the first moment of the invasion.

Not in the leadership meeting?

No, I'm not revealing any secrets by telling you that the leadership meetings were the last place to come to a decision. It was the place where decisions were matured or revealed. For example, after the Israeli invasion in 1978, partial consultations were held by the United Nations for a ceasefire and there was a fallout regarding this subject. We Lebanese were against the resolution as it was our land that was occupied and it was our duty to fight so we told the Palestinians they should stand behind the national movement's decision as it was the base and the foundation. There were calls that included France and the United Nations for a ceasefire and my friend Samir Sanbar was the UN representative in Beirut. Arafat considered the decision to be a political victory that forced the Israelis to recognize the fighter as the Palestinian revolution.

After deliberation, we understood that Arafat wanted to record this victory. He asked that Sanbar be told that he agreed to a ceasefire at 1700. It was brought to Arafat's attention that he ought to invite his comrades in the joint leadership to discuss the matter first due to the gravity of the situation and its importance. He said 'Don't worry, we'll just get into screaming matches and lessons in nationalism.' I insisted on inviting them nonetheless and he agreed. It was heavily attended. In the meeting, I said that the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) can declare a cease-fire on Palestinian land but that we would continue to fight until we liberate every inch of Lebanese soil. However, we agreed to stop operations inside Israel and on the border. After Mohsen, myself and others intervened, we agreed that a temporary ceasefire would be beneficial but a permanent ceasefire wouldn't be possible, it would be temporary in the South.

That was in the presence of all the Palestinian leadership, Abu Ammar summoned Abu Hameed, the commander of the armed struggle at the time and asked him to call Sanbar and tell him that they agreed to a ceasefire starting 1700; this was happening at 1400. But 'clever' Abu Hameed replied quickly and said 'I've already done that Abu Ammar; I told him this morning based on your instructions.' Everybody laughed and it became clear that the decision had already been made, the meeting was nothing but a formality. This is the reality and the tragedy of the Palestinian revolution and is the

reality and the tragedy of the Palestinian Authority today if the situation continues.

Let me share another amusing incident that took place. An unknown man at one of the meetings was brilliant at creating chaos and tension so Arafat asked him who he was. He replied that he was 'Abu Adwa', a member of the Revolutionary Council 'Jabhit al-Nidal'. Arafat became very angry and stated that he does not accept his presence unless he was accompanied by Samir Ghosha personally. He smacked the table and asked Abu Adwa to leave the meeting as he didn't accept representation from any person whose position was lower than a secretary general. I intervened and begged Arafat to let him stay because it is the right of every faction in the joint leadership of the Palestinian resistance and the national movement to delegate any member they choose. Abu Ammar reluctantly agreed. Luckily, Abu Adwa took Arafat's side throughout the meeting and he spent the second half of the meeting asking Abu Adwa what his opinion was on every issue that arose. Abu Adwa became a legendary leader in the Palestinian revolution.

Let's get back to leaving Beirut. The topic of leaving Beirut was a daily discussion. The actual process of leaving was as follows: Philip Habib was responsible for the transport of Israeli messages to the Lebanese authority. They had chosen an officer who was a friend of the nationalists and the resistance, General Nabil Koraytem, to send messages to Arafat. We would meet every night and respond to the questions. The meetings were attended by Arafat, Abu Jihad, Abu Walid, Abu Iyad, when he wasn't preoccupied, Nayef Hawatmeh, Yasser Abed Rabbo, Salah Salah, Hani al - Hassan and sometimes Abu al-Zaem, Walid Jumblatt, Mohsen Ibrahim, Samir Sabbagh, Fouad Sahabaqlu, Munir al-Sayyad and myself. But generally, in the end there was a group of us that always stayed late, and it was Arafat, Abu Jihad, Abu al-Waleed and Mohsin and myself. Overall there wasn't a specific framework that only allowed card carrying members. Abu Ammar added many to the group and whoever attended participated.

Who opposed the decision to leave Beirut?

Nobody opposed. There was no objection from the Palestinians nor the Lebanese. I say none of the decision makers, but in the media, many people called for 'dying before kneeling' etc. We were in constant coordination with the hard-line but realistic revolutionary wing, by that I mean George Habash, and we were considering the viability of the siege. We were aware that the Popular Front's hard-line position was only a bargaining chip to improve conditions, and they didn't have to be met. It did not need to be negotiable. Its

historical role was to reject the solution in order to improve the terms and conditions of the solution.

And this was the joke Hany al-Hassan thought to share with you in 'Al Wasit', that Abu Ammar unfortunately took the wrong way and saw it as a way for me to tell them to get out of Beirut.

On the 12th of August, we were in one of the headquarters of the joint command on the second floor of a bombed building, and Arafat was sulking in the presence of Abu Jihad and Abu Walid. Mohsen Ibrahim asked him what was wrong? Was he afraid of the bombing? We had been in the throes of a 12-hour raid that culminated in the massacre of more than a hundred people in an orphanage in Bourj al-Barajneh. He replied that the bombing didn't scare him but that things were tough. The Americans were using a computer with them. By that he meant that the Americans were asking the same questions (via Philip Habib) and comparing the answers to see if they matched. You know it's not in our nature as Arabs, and especially Lebanese and Palestinians, and particularly Abu Ammar, to be so precise and accurate... We just respond without thinking and could give different answers to the same question within minutes. The result was the Americans said the answers don't match. The Americans were asking about the types kinds of weapons, exits, fighters, supervision of the exit, etc. Arafat kept saying 'They're using a computer on us'. I laughed.

He insisted on knowing why so I told him a joke about a man from Upper Egypt who visited Cairo and found people gathered around a computer so he asked what it was. They answered: you ask it a question and it responds. So, he asks 'Who am I?' The computer responds by saying 'you're Abdelmawgood, son of Abdelmawgood and you are getting the four o'clock train to Tanta'. He repeats the question, this time changing the tone of his voice and the computer gives the same answer. Finally, he dresses in women's clothes, adding make-up and a wig and repeats the question in a softer tone of voice. The computer responds by saying 'Stop fooling around and get on the train before you miss it.'

Yasser Arafat took this as an insult directed at him; my indirect way of telling him to not miss the train and made a note of it in his book.

What is Abu Ammar's book?

It was a 12x8cm notebook that he kept in his back pocket and recorded everything that took place, big or small. He wrote everything in that

notebook. Lecture summaries, appointments, briefs, for his future memoir probably.

Coincidentally we were invited to go to Libya after leaving Beirut. The Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi reproached us for leaving Beirut; he thought we should have stayed and 'martyred' so future generations could carry the flag and liberate Jerusalem. The Palestinian leaders didn't share that sentiment, even those who shared his view.

At this meeting, some of them blamed Arafat. Abdul Salam Galud and Abu Bakr Younis Gaber were present with Gaddafi. Arafat replied that he left Beirut at the request of the national movement. I said: 'Abu Ammar that's not the whole truth'. So, he took out his notebook and read the joke.

Gaddafi asked me: 'Is this true?' I said that yes it was, and added that we had agreed with brother Abu Ammar on a few points. We laid out the terms for him.

'Our only goal is to protect the revolution at this stage, and you're Arafat so you know the circumstances of the revolution, it is being fought in a land that isn't its own. We can see that you're in an awkward position. If you call for an early exit you'll be accused of failing, and if you call for staying in Beirut, you'll be accused of letting others fight your battle. To spare any awkwardness between you and your brothers in the Palestinian revolution and the Lebanese revolutionaries, you make the decision and we will announce it. If you decide to stay, then we will announce it and proclaim that we're responsible for our people. If you decide to leave, then it would be a request from us so you can save face in front of your comrades in the leadership.'

Who formulated this exit plan?

I did. Adding that we would continue to fight after they left, we were confident that Israel would not settle for them leaving and will enter Beirut afterwards. Abu Ammar realized that was an official statement and didn't object.

Who was negotiating with the Lebanese authority?

Formal negotiations were as I mentioned. But Arafat always had lots of plans in motion. They met at the Madrid peace conference then we discovered that his plans made it all the way to Oslo from Bassam Abu Sharif to Abu Mazen and a dozen others he hadn't mentioned.

What were these plans?

Hank al-Hassan was negotiating, so was Abu Iyad and Bassam Abu Sharif. Apart from Habash, everyone was negotiating, either directly or through the Arab regimes and embassies.

Were there different channels?

There were; Saeb Salam was an essential channel.

Albert Mansour?

Albert was not a negotiator on behalf of the resistance with the authority. He was tasked to negotiate with Bashir Gemayel on the Lebanese issue and the presidential elections. Saeb Salam was a major and effective channel even when we had difficulties with Philip Habib. Some ministers negotiated such as Rene Moawad, who became President, Michel Edde, Marwan Hamadeh, Abdulrahman al-Labban the former minister. They met regularly in the Ministry of Tourism building which was occupied by Hamada. Johnny Abdo's informers.

Did you negotiate with Johnny Abdo? Director of Intelligence of the Lebanese Army?

Not us, but Johnny had agents and supporters among us so we used to meet with him and not meet with him... we sent messages using the agents among us and they reached him quickly.

By the way, is it true that the goings on at the national movement's meetings reached Abdo word for word?

That's true. Once, a friend, Snan Braj, looked at over at someone who was clearly busy writing every word and he in jest said to him 'please, I have kids'. Another time I was talking about something dangerous and Braj turned to two people busy writing and said, 'Write that George Hawi is joking!' We knew our meetings were infiltrated and everything said between two or three people was reported.

Infiltration at what level?

Infiltration wasn't even required. We had volunteers who transferred news. In any other country in the world, an agent who gets caught is arrested but in

Lebanon politicians paid them. Maybe this is a Lebanese speciality, 'an agent not for hire'.

Where were you the night Arafat left?

We had agreed to meet at Nabih Berri's house in Barbir. It was Walid Jumblatt, Mohsen Ibrahim, Samir Sabbagh and myself. I think "Abu Yahya" from 'Amal' was there too. Arafat came and was exhausted. He asked to have a shower and Berri gave him some clean clothes. Arafat was very modest in comparison with other revolutionary leaders and the corrupt leaders of the revolution who lived abroad. Arafat was a real fighter who lived a very modest life. When Berri brought him clean clothes, he remarked that his were perfectly fine as he had only been wearing them for a week. It's funny but this shows you what he's like.

Arafat began to wipe the sweat as it was summertime and he explained that the pores secrete more sweat after a shower. He was in an emotional state, proud that he held out but it was also bitterness because he had to leave. Afterwards we moved to Sinan Braj's office in Mar Elias where Arafat slept. Mohsen Ibrahim stayed with him while I went to arrange the following day's events.

I'm going to be honest, talking about the siege is easy but being responsible for it is not. The good people of Beirut stood by the revolution despite the political differences.

I recall the positions of Prime Minister Saeb Salam and Sheikh Muhammad Mahdi Shamseddin, head of the Shiite Supreme Islamic Council and the Mufti Hassan Khaled and the public as well but there is only so much you could take; there is a limit to tolerance. The residents of any neighbourhood or building we walked into with Yasser Arafat would greet us politely but they left moments later. Arafat and I knew this and we never failed to be moved by it. These people loved us and supported us, but they knew it came at a cost.

Was Yasser Arafat subjected to assassination attempts during the siege of Beirut?

There were several attempts on his life during the siege. Let's start with where he spent the night. He assigned a Palestinian official with the task of finding him a new place to sleep every day. This official who we knew well, Essam, was later injured in an assassination attempt in Sida. Essam would take Arafat to a new ordinary, unguarded house every night, as guards could

give away the place. As for us, our hideout was discovered. The house was safe from shelling but air raids could turn it into a graveyard.

One day we were in our building and as usual we had lunch at noon. That day Arafat reproached me and said that since I never saw my wife, why don't I go home for lunch? He wanted to sleep and we were supposed to meet that night anyway. Mohsen Ibrahim and I left together, while Arafat, 'Abu Jihad' Khalil al-Wazir, 'Abu al-Waleed' Saad Sayel, Nayed Hwatemah and others left together.

I had just got to rue Verdun when I heard an explosion. I got home and heard that the shelling targeted a building in al Sanae' area. We returned immediately to the scene and didn't find a trace of the building; twelve floors had just collapsed. Arafat was of course the target of this bomb. Years later, when I met with my dear friend the minister Elie Hobeika, we were talking about shelling and explosives here and there, he told me the story of this attempt on Arafat's life.

He said that one day they were with Bashir Gemayel and Fadi Ephrem when Bashir told them he had an appointment with Ariel Sharon, the Israeli defense Minister. They went to the College Mont La Salle school and entered with Sharon and Raful Eitan, IDF Chief of Staff and other military personnel. The nuns objected to them entering so Sharon asked Bashir silence them because this was an important matter so Bashir handled it.

They turned one of the monastery's rooms into an operations room and placed a computer screen connected to a radar and targeted the building in Sanaye' where Arafat was staying. Hobeika recalls being very impressed with the advanced technology. He added that they saw on the screen two Israeli planes take off from Lod Airport and headed to the set target. Eitan looked at Sharon who issued the command from Mont La Salle to the planes and two rockets were launched, hit the building and they watched as it collapsed. They all started laughing, exchanged congratulations and opened bottles of champagne thinking Arafat must have been killed. But Arafat wasn't there. This is a historical description from Hobeika himself, and it should be enough to respond to those who claim that that Arafat was in cahoots with Israel and that if they had wanted to kill him, they would have done.