

Sha'ath, Nabil. Interviewed 2010. Translated by The Palestinian Revolution, 2016 (pp. 54-62).¹

I became seriously involved with the Fatah movement while I was studying for a doctorate in the United States. I recall that my liaison with the Fatah movement at that time was Dr Zuhair Alelmy. Dr Zuhair was one of the founders of the Fatah movement, along with the late President Abu Ammar (Yasser Arafat) and his brothers; he had a major role in the foundation of the Fatah movement with Abu Jihad (Khalil al-Wazir), Abu Iyad (Walid Ahmad Nimer al-Nasser) among other well-known names.

Zuhair Alelmy is a relative and an old friend of mine, from my youth in Gaza and later in Cairo. Therefore, when I went to complete my Masters and doctoral degrees in the United States at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, my first contact was Zuhair. At the time, he was studying at the University of Texas in Austin. He was studying engineering while I studied Economics and Business Administration in early 1960. I arrived in the United States on 9 October 1959, but our first meeting there probably took place sometime in 1960; the debate was always about Palestine, as were our previous discussions in Cairo and Alexandria.

However, this time the debate took a more structured approach towards the issue of Palestine, by which I mean: what is the organisation, who is the leader, what is the formula that can be used to build a national liberation movement to regain Palestine? The union between Egypt and Syria (UAR) disintegrated towards the end of 1960 and with it the hope for Arab Unity. Certainly there was merit to the image of President Gamal Abdel Nasser who has always been portrayed as the saviour, the liberator; but after the failure of the 1958 UAR and the several problems he faced in Egypt and in the Arab world, followed by a drop in the pace of the talk about Arab Unity, President Nasser turned away from the Palestinian cause. He was too busy with efforts to build a strong Egyptian economy, and the socialist experiment in Egypt and nationalisation. I was one of the people who was very glad to witness the creation of the United Arab Republic in 1958. I was in Egypt at the time, and it was overwhelming.

On February 2 1958 I was in my final year at Alexandria University, and we were on our Bachelors' trip as they called it, to Luxor and Aswan to visit the Ancient Egyptian sites. The day following our arrival in Aswan we gathered around the radio to listen to President Abdel Nasser's and President Shukri

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al-Quwatli's speeches. Once the Union was announced we all erupted in cheers; the joy was overwhelming. Today would be the day we put the first building block to regain Palestine. The joy about the unity was a win for Palestine; here was a starting point for the liberation of Palestine.

No one expressed a different opinion. If there were any reservations, they came from members of the Muslim Brotherhood. But anyway at the time the Muslim Brotherhood weren't very vocal and they did not have a problem with the Unity. They had problems with the way Egypt was being ruled. But other nationalist forces like Ba'athists, Arab nationalists and even the communists believed that because Khalid Bakdash was a communist then the communists supported the Unity, and the Ba'ath party supported the union of course. The Palestinian Student Association in Cairo at the time had representation from practically all factions; Muslim Brotherhood, communists, Baathists and of course what later became the Fatah movement.

While I was in Cairo I didn't know anybody connected to the early movement. Of course I knew Abu Ammar (God rest his soul) and Abu Iyad, mainly because they were activists in the Palestinian Student Association, which later became The Union of Palestinian Students.

The future leaders of Fatah were friends with Zuhair Alelmy, my friend of eleven years. When Abu Ammar, Abu Lutf, Abu Iyad and Abu Jihad first arrived, they came to us in Alexandria. My father Aly Rashid Sha'ath (God rest his soul) was the manager of the Arab Bank in Alexandria and the President of the Palestine Club of Alexandria; so he was a sort of mayor for the Palestinian community in Alexandria. When this student delegation, led by Yasser Arafat, came to ask for help, my father was the first to meet him in the Arab Bank. Their second meeting took place at our house in Alexandria. Prior to their arrival my father told me he wanted to introduce me to some excellent young men, and that he had no doubt one of them will be the President of Palestine one day. His name was Yasser Arafat.

I managed to sneak a glance while they were coming into the house, and I think I recognised him straightaway; he was the apparent leader of the group. A little later my father came and brought me to sit with them, they talked about Palestine and about the role of students. My father helped them. They came to Alexandria many times to ask for financial and political support to resolve some of the problems they were facing with the Egyptian government at the time.

The fact that my father was prominent at a big economic institution as well the Palestine Club actually constituted the first step towards assemble the Palestinians in an organised framework in Egypt. By the way, after that, the Palestine Club became the first branch of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) after Cairo. It became the branch of the PLO in Alexandria, even going so far as to become the location of the PLO.

The opening ceremony of the Palestine Club was in 1953. Speakers included Mohamed Naguib, leader of the Egyptian revolution which had only taken place the previous year, Ahmad al-Shuqairi and Akram Zuaytar. The fourth speaker was Gamal Abdel Nasser, who in 1954 talked about the Egyptian-Czechoslovak arms deal.

The Palestine Club was a hub of activity, so Abu Ammar and his fellow student leaders would always come to Alexandria, and they always came to our home. We had a good relationship and when I attended university, I joined the Palestinian Student Union. I remained in contact with them, not as Fatah leaders, but because they were Palestinian national political figures that attracted me on the basis of their characters. They were not isolationists; rather had good relationships with all political factions, they were never ones to say no Muslim Brotherhood or no communists.

When unity was proclaimed in 1958, it dramatically reinforced the role of Gamal Abdel Nasser as a loyal commander. After the UAR failed, and even though nobody blamed Abdel Nasser for its failure, he took a very Egyptian view of the matter and claimed that the failure was entirely his, even going so far as to place further blame himself for not extending the unity to Iraq. When the Ba'ath party went to Iraq, he failed; he felt like he had to build a base in Egypt to relaunch his efforts. That also kept him away from the Palestinian cause.

I went to the USA in 1959, so that was before the failure of the UAR. But when Zuhair Alelmy was telling me about Fatah in 1961 and '62, the picture of Gamal Abdel Nasser and the success of the UAR had started to crumble. I played an important role in student circles; condemning the separation (of the UAR), student protests, and even going to the Egyptian Embassy in Washington from Philadelphia with Arab delegations to stand by Abdel Nasser and condemn secession. However, gradually the role of Abdel Nasser in the Palestinian cause became non-existent.

Zuhair talked to me about something I was engrossed in at the time. I turned away from the subject of unity to the Algerian revolution. At that time, the

Algerian revolution was at its peak, and I was living with a young Algerian man called Mohammad Thamini. He was a Mozabite, a Berber from the south of Algeria who were Ibadi Muslims, originally descended from the Khawaarij. Sharing a house with Mohammed Thamini reignited my feelings for Arab unity. Mohammad, who grew up in Bani Azkn, at the end of the world as far as I was concerned, shared the same view of the world. The same poetry, same Qur'anic verses, the same history that I knew.

He didn't know a whole lot of modern Arabic poetry, as he didn't know many of the Palestinians who remained in Israel such as Mahmoud Darwish and Samih al-Qasim and others. But we loved al-Mutanabi, al-Mutanabi was our first poet; but anyway even the nursery rhymes we had learned as children he knew, all our shared history he knew. Here I was, a Palestinian who grew up as a refugee in Egypt and here he was, an Algerian from the south of the Sahara who was a refugee in Morocco, educated in France and now the USA and it was as if we had grown up in next door villages. Mohamed and I shared a house for a year and a half, by then I had become completely absorbed by the Algerian revolution. Many Algerians who arrived in the USA slept on our floor.

I was elected as the President of the Arab Student Union in Philadelphia, then President of the Arab Student Union of the whole USA and Canada. But in 1963 all our activities revolved around the Algerian revolution. So when Zuhair told me about Fatah, all our conversations were about how the Algerians had succeeded; the National Liberation Front integrated all other political parties within the framework of a national liberation movement and was independent of all parties and the neighbouring regimes of Tunisia and Morocco.

I went forward with the idea of the armed struggle and that he had been preparing for some time. The idea was that armed struggle was the key to liberation. It was the most important aspect and the total liberation of all Palestinian territories was the goal. There was no alternative. This all happened in 1967 before the occupation of the West Bank, there was still a West Bank and Gaza. We talked and set the rules for proceeding from the west bank and Gaza. People in Gaza, Beirut and in the Gulf, especially Qatar and Kuwait started working together. Zuhair didn't give me any names or a specific job, however, one day he handed me a card from a Palestinian magazine *Filastinuna*, which was published in Beirut, and said you're a correspondent. He added that they would ask me to conduct interviews and focus on the Palestinian community. They wanted articles and information on the USA. Afterwards, I found out this magazine was Abu Jihad's

responsibility. The editor was Tawfiq Huri, a Lebanese whose name didn't ring any bells. Zuhair did not share any of these people's identities until I was elected President of the Organisation of Arab Students in the USA, and had arrived in Beirut in early 1964, I was elected in '63. This would have been in early 1962, right at the beginning. Zuhair started talking about assignments I didn't consider to be journalism related. Such as speaking to certain people, and seeing who would be open to the idea of Fatah and likely to become members.

I was close to many people in Philadelphia, not just Palestinians who were ready to work with us. Incidentally, he was the one who advised me to return to work for the Arab Students Organisation of America. When I came to America in 1969. In the summer of 1960 it was the Conference of the Organisation of Arab Students. I ran for president but I didn't win so I stepped away from the parent organisation. I did attend all the conferences but didn't run again till 1963. In the summer of 1963 Zuhair told me 'we are called Fatah'. He added that he would tell me all about the members but not now. Little by little he mentioned the names like Yasser Arafat, Abu Yousef al-Najjar, Kamal Adwan, and God bless his soul Khaled Alicherti. These were the names he mentioned and swore me to secrecy. I asked him if that was the same Yasser Arafat who came to visit us, the same one who was a member of the students Union of Palestine? He replied that it was. He didn't say they were the leaders; just that they were people he met with frequently and added that he would introduce me when I came to Beirut. He told me that I had become an official in the movement and made me swear an oath, the same oath Fatah have now; it never changed.

Anyway, when I arrived for the Arab Student Organisation elections Zuhair had travelled to Beirut. The elections took place in Fort Collins, Colorado. The problem with this election was that the Ba'ath party was in control of the union. Zuhair was close to the Baathists but he wasn't in league with them. However, I was against the Baath party because I thought they were responsible for the breakup of the UAR. When I was nominated for President there was a fierce battle between the Baathists and the Egyptian nationalists and Nasserites.

Fateh hadn't been officially founded yet. We didn't have any regional organisation yet. We would meet in the Arab Students Organisation meetings. There comes to mind one person I remember more than others; his name was Mahmoud Maghrabi. Mahmoud Maghrabi was my friend and I would see him whenever I visited Washington where he studied law. He constantly talked about the necessity of organizing the Palestinians, and I

took permission from Zuhair (who he didn't know) to discuss Fatah with him. What Mahmoud longed for most of all was the chance to go home; back to Haifa. Even if it was to work as a sweeper, he would obey any orders but all he wanted was to go home. Following the election night in Fort Collins, Mahmoud and I spent six hours discussing Fatah. He said that he had lived in Qatar and grew up in Damascus so I know some people, like Kamal Adwan and Aby Youssef Al-Najjar. I didn't want to confirm their identities. He said whatever happens I am with you and we will wait to see how matters evolve.

Anyway, I won that election by a large number of votes and I became president of the Arab Student Organisation and embarked on a year of very intense activity and also went to Beirut. I didn't meet Abu Ammar as he was not in Beirut at the time, but I met a lot of other movement leaders such as Abu Jihad, Abu Iyad, and Abu Al Lutf and several groups. I didn't know who was who or who was responsible for what in the organisation at that point. I still went to Gaza and helped resolve the issues of the Palestinian student union that was divided between Baathists and Fatah and Arab nationalists. As President of the Arab Students Organisation they felt that I was representing them, and asked me to observe the conference and guarantee that the elections were democratic and true. The stars of the conference were Hani al-Hassan, and Mohammed Sabih, and Said Kamal, Taiseer Quba'a, Sharif al-Husseini, Abu al-Houl, and Hail Abdul Hamid. I went in my capacity as President of the Arab Students Organisation, as a monitor and a guarantor. There were stars from Fatah and also from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, who were well known also. I got to meet a large group of people, and returned to the US to complete my doctorate.

We only read what was in *Filastinuna* magazine. Zuhair told me that all Fatah's efforts would go into establishing this magazine. To tell you the truth, I didn't like everything in the magazine.

I noticed in the early writings that most of the attacks were directed at Arab regimes and not Israel. I agreed that Israel was the enemy, Fatah's goal in the beginning was to be free of the Arab regimes, not just to liberate Palestine. As such we wouldn't be able to liberate Palestine unless we united as Arabs like the Algerians had done. The Arab regimes had been divided; Nasserites, Baathists, communists and Arab nationalists. They were all Arab parties and not specifically Palestinian. All the work done by Palestinians was of course conducted from abroad.

I remember the first Palestinian I met who had remained in Israel since 1948; he was Dr Elias Choufani. We ended up sharing a long history but

unfortunately he left after the split in Fatah. Elias Choufani was a professor in the Arabic department at the University of Pennsylvania. The university asked for me to be examined in another language other than English and French so I chose Arabic. I asked for Elias to conduct the examination and we became acquainted. He was the first person I met who was one of the Arabs of 1948, he was also one of the Palestinians who were originally from the West Bank and Gaza and had come through other Arab countries. Most of them had lived abroad with their parents. The Fatah movement originated from Gaza and abroad. The movement's operations were delayed in the West Bank and even Jordan. The work was divided into Beirut and Damascus, Gaza, the Gulf: Kuwait and Qatar more than Saudi, and finally Germany.

Hani al-Hassan, Hail Abdel Hamid, Hamdan Yahiya Ashour, Abdallah al-Afrangy and Adnan Samara were all students in America when they joined Fatah. They formed the German wing of Fatah. This was the truth, and Cairo also. These were the locations of the first Fatah operations now in Gaza but I wasn't a part of that. The armed struggle in Gaza was underway with nuclei formed by Abu Jihad and Mohamed al-Afrangy. We did not hear about what Abu Jihad was doing; in Egypt we heard more about Salah Hafiz, the Egyptian policeman and his armed struggle.

I found out about Abu Jihad's role in the operations later, not at the time they were taking place. There was also of course what Abu Adeeab had done, and also Kamal Adwan and Abu Iyad after 1965, the Israeli invasion of '65 I mean. Then after 1965 the efforts to return the administration of Gaza to Egypt rather than the United Nations taking Egypt out of the equation. These were all things we heard about while I was still in Egypt. We were not aware of a real armed struggle in America until the revolution of 1965.

I heard about the launch after it all happened. Before, I wasn't told by anybody what the plan was. Zuhair wrote to me and I knew about our role but I was not informed. It was not possible that someone would call and say this is our plan; it remained a secret for the majority of the people involved. In 1964, I was president of the Arab Students Organisation and very busy in Beirut; I had to collect donations. But in the summer of 1964, I undertook my first dangerous task; I sent Abu Jihad a chartered plane full of Palestinian students to Algeria. Prior to that, it was all administrative, student-related tasks.

It was the first time I had direct contact with Abu Jihad in Algeria. I had organised for two planes to land home; one flight we named 'the homecoming trip' and the second flight was filled with American friends

visiting the homeland, including the west bank and Gaza. Many of our people had not been back to Palestine or the Arab world in many years. This was the guise we used for the other flight. We leased the planes from Egyptair, who gave us the planes for a very reasonable price. These people were also going home but they went to Algeria. Those who took part in the operation didn't know exactly where they were going, did the CIA ask where they were going? No, we did all of this covertly. They arrived in Algeria and trained on the ground with Abu Jihad.

There were eighty of them. I had spoken to the majority of them about Fatah and armed combat. Many of them were familiar with Fatah from the beginning. There were people I was close to and was told it would be them. Therefore, a plane full of Arab students was the Arab Students Organisation plane to the public. The Arab Students organisation plane arrived in Algeria in the summer of 1964, in July I think. They stayed for a month and trained with Abu Jihad. That was my first action unrelated to student administration and my first link to the Palestinian armed struggle in the Arab world.

I first started corresponding with Abu Jihad. I think Zuhair played a big part in arranging the planes and the schedule etc. But I did have direct contact with Abu Jihad by telephone, before fax and telegrams were difficult. Letters from America to Algeria I'm not sure...I think the call came from Oman, from America to Washington most of it was logistics...

I think we sent a telegram with the names so they could arrange visas. We called the Algerian embassy in Washington where a dear friend of mine worked, a friend of Mohammed Tmini's called Mohamed Arbikan. So I suppose there was contact via the Algerians and through Zuhair AL Elmy, but also direct phone calls that encompassed visiting the Arab world. Abu Jihad had been in Algeria for several months after leaving Damascus, and he had a good base out there.

At first I went to England in 1958, where I remained for a year and then I went to America in 1959. I remained in the US for six years. But I can tell you that I had been very active (in terms of student union activities) ever since I got to England. In America I was very involved with the South African war first and the battles for liberation in Africa, and I was in constant contact with the African students as well as other groups fighting discrimination in the American south. I was very impressed with Martin Luther King Jr. and his advocacy for nonviolence but unfortunately I never met him.

The American student movement at the time was actively involved with the civil liberties movement, and it was beginning to wield results. The Free Speech Movement of the University of California, Berkeley was made up of Leftist American students essentially. We had close relationships with the African student unions.

You remind me of a story. While I was president of the student union at that time, President Abdel Nasser sent me a group of delegates to help establish a relationship between Egypt and the leaders of the African student's union. Abdel Nasser was trying to forge a stronger relationship with Africa. He framed it as trying to overwhelm Israel. Israel had started to creep up in African countries and we had good connections with the African liberation movements. Particularly Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and South Africa. Those four groups were given more scholarships by the Americans than any other group. President Kennedy had started a huge scholarship program; he had given Egyptian students three thousand scholarships. Two thousand of them had come from Moscow. When Abdel Nasser fell out with the Russians he withdrew all the Egyptian students from Moscow and sent them to America. Kennedy had also awarded scholarships to African and Asian students, so we had many friends.

The president of the Afghan student union was the Hafizullah Amin who became the President of Afghanistan and later assassinated. And Khan Ali who became the Prime Minister of Pakistan was in the Pakistani student union. The President of the Indian union was also my friend. He became the Minister of Planning in India. His deputy was my roommate at the University of Pennsylvania. He became the President of the Central Bank of India. This was a period of strong relationships with Africans and Asians, all focused on the idea of liberation and I used it to support Algeria. The American student union and even the Free speech movement, we all talked about Palestine frequently. However, Algeria was a big part of our active work. We had good relationships with the civil rights movement and their fight against discrimination in the south. We also had a good relationship with South Africans and their very active movement at the time. As well as with Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Namibia. They had all been student leaders who returned and became political leaders in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. We had deep ties with everybody especially when I became President of the Arab Student Union in America. Prior to that, I was elected chapter president of an International Student Organisation, it was called International student association. That was in Philadelphia. But on a national level I was just an Arab and a Palestinian, and they were allies that we worked with.

Can you tell us what happened to the people on the planes to Algeria? What happened to the ones that received training? Are they still around?

After I finished my term as president I realised that I had been in America for five years and had yet to finish my doctorate. I had finished my masters and had started to prepare for my thesis while I was a Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, when I got married and my baby girl was born. Afterwards, my parents sent both my sisters to finish their studies. As they were going to live with us, we got a bigger house. I was very busy with my family at that time. I realised that the year I spent with the Arab Students Organisation and with Fatah had completely distracted me, so I gradually returned to my studies. Before my work at the student organisation was over, Ahmed Al-Shuqairi came to America to set up the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO).

Shuqairi came to consult me about whether or not they should set up this organisation and how to go about it. He met with many Palestinian figures like Dr Fayez Sayegh and others. There were many Palestinians working in America. Dr Fayez Sayegh was head of the Kuwaiti delegation at the UN. Shuqairi was himself head of the Syrian delegation at the UN, then the Saudi ambassador to the UN so he was familiar to many people. Shuqairi focused on the Arab Students Union and he would spend many long hours talking to us; Shuqairi had his own approach...

When the top leaders announced that Shuqairi would be the Chairman of the PLO and the Palestine Liberation Army he came to America. He spent lots of time with us and we had many long discussions. I was not impressed following our first meeting; he was very personal. His approach didn't seem very genuine. It was all, 'Oh Nabil, you're just like your father... he was a dear friend...' and he repeated that to each one of us. Trying to share personal stories that somehow involved all of our relatives. If he didn't know a relative, then it was the town, or the country...

It's true, I had seen him before, when he visited my father in Alexandria and he also gave a speech at the Palestine club. But anyway we started to talk seriously about the future. We spoke about our vision for the future, I talked about Fatah and how we would integrate the different organisations, the need for Palestinians to enter into an armed struggle. We asked him why he was insistent on being involved with the Arab countries, and he said that we needed their support, but that we would form an independent movement but

that we should learn from the Algerian revolution. He added that he was going to China to see Mao Zedong.

We had many reservations in the beginning and I spoke to Zuhair to relay my concerns. He assured me that we would not be working too closely with them but there might be a framework for the Palestinian issue that Fatah could operate through. Fatah attended the first PLO conference in Jerusalem but relations were not always good after that, and then of course the world changed after the 1967 war. But that was probably my last foray into activism.

Nothing really, he said that he was just sharing ideas and information. We talked to him about the Arab and Palestinian communities in America and what could be done with new students or the pre-existing immigrants who had settled in Michigan and other places. Little by little, I stepped away from student activities and worked on my doctorate. It was June and I still hadn't written a word of my dissertation. On 9 June I decided to burn all my bridges and quit the university. I was a very popular professor; my classes were always overbooked and I was the highest rated teacher in the 'Student Guide to Classes'. My students would tell me that they had already got their PhD, and I was ashamed because I had not yet received mine. So I postponed politics and focused on my dissertation. I burned all my credit and gas cards! I told my landlord that I would be leaving on 9 October; that was the date I chose because it was the date of my arrival in the USA in 1959. It had been six years and I was far away from home. I worked extremely hard and completed my dissertation on 6 October. On 8 October I was in New York City, and on the ninth I was boarding the ship home. I can say that after December 1964 or early 1965 and the revolution I had been drowning. My political activity shrunk until I finished my doctorate and returned.

When I returned to Egypt, it was to Cairo University, I had been awarded a scholarship to study Management and Economics so I would go back there. A few weeks before I left Dr Ahmed Fouad Sherif, an Egyptian who was my mentor and a family friend, had advised me to enter into the Faculty of Commerce. Dr Sherif asked me to join the National Management Institute as it was overseen directly by President Abdel Nasser. He added that this was the place to create a new generation of Egyptian and Arab leaders. He put me in charge of the Arab sector of the Institute in order to be involved with Palestinian issues.

The Institute took up three years of my life. I can say that until 1968 my relationship with Fatah was very painful. The first problem arose when I asked who was in charge of Fatah in Egypt and I was told it was Hail Abdel

Hameed, who I had met with in Gaza. I told him that I was back in Egypt and ready to get back to work but the response was lukewarm. He asked me what I wanted to do and I said I would be happy with anything. The next time he saw me was at my house when he turned up with two other members of Fatah. They asked me where I was educated and I said America. They said that since I spoke English maybe I could translate military data into English so they could distribute it to the embassies.