

“Recording the History of the Palestinian Revolution: Testimony of Salim al-Zá'nun (Abu Al-Adib)” in Yakhluf, Yaḥyá. *Shahadāt 'n Tarikh al-Thawra al-Filastiniya*. Ramallah: Sakher Habash Centre for Documentation and Intellectual Studies, 2010. Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*.¹

Recording the History of the Palestinian Revolution

I want to go back to the year 1948. I'm a member of the generation that witnessed the defeat and saw the indifference that Arab regimes showed towards the catastrophe caused by the Zionist enemy.

At that time I was a student in the last year of high school. When the battle started we were still not allowed to form student unions. The headmaster by orders from the British Mandate that ruled Palestine at that time didn't allow any student activities in the school. However, we formed such unions in secret. We marched, despite the school's headmaster, out of the school to Tal al-Menthar where the frontline with the Zionist enemy was. There, we participated with the Palestinian resistance fighters in digging trenches even though we were young at that time.

The war ended. Arab states and Israel signed the first and then the second ceasefires. School resumed and we went back to studying. The political situation changed and now Egypt ruled the Gaza Strip. We became more able to be politically active than was possible during the British Mandate. I must mention one of the good things the Egyptian government did was opening the door of education for us. Instead of having the two top students in Gaza continuing their education in Rashidiya School in Jerusalem, everyone who passed high school was able to continue their education in Egypt.

We didn't stop our activities to establish a student union until we went to Egypt in 1951. The group I was in consisted of 54 students. I traveled to Egypt with a friend called Majid al-Mzeini. Majid's father was a merchant and a member of the 1947 mujahideen who traveled to Egypt to bring weapons for the Palestinian resistance fighters. He told his son Majid, “You don't know Cairo's streets or know how to manage life there. Take this book to a man called Yasser Arafat. Arafat used to go with us in 1947 to Upper Egypt and the Western Desert to buy weapons. He was younger than us but he possessed special abilities that no one else could match”.

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When we settled in our new residence in Cairo we called Yasser Arafat who rushed to visit us offering his help. Then he said to me, “My father knows your father, and I heard you are the president of the student union in Gaza”. Then he asked, “How many students did you bring with you?”

I said, “54 students”.

He said, “We have gained 54 more votes. I’m currently fighting a battle against some party members who took over the Association of Palestinian Students. The elections are in a month, and I’m keen that the president of the Association works in the Palestinian national interest not in their party’s interest”.

I said “God willing, I will guarantee these votes for you and we shall cooperate from now on”.

I told him “I know a very charismatic student at al-Azhar. His name is Salah Khalaf”.

He replied, “Come with me, we will take a taxi and go see Salah Khalaf immediately”.

We took a taxi to al-Azhar and the two met for the first time, as they didn’t know each other up to that point. Arafat asked Salah Khalaf the same question: “How many students do you have?”

He answered “150 students”.

Abu Ammar answered, “We need to guarantee these 150 votes”.

Salah Khalaf answered, “Abu Ammar those students are “blind””. He said, “The ‘blind’ are more important than the ones that can see. I will send people to take them to vote”.

This is how energetic and smart the man we just met was. The three of us fought the battle for control of the Association of Palestinian Students. Later on we were joined by Abdel Fattah Hammod, who was also in the group of students I was in. Then he was followed by Zuheir al-A’lami, Mo’ath A’abed and a significant number of students. We formed a group that fought the battle for the Association. Yasser Arafat was elected as the President of the Association, I was elected the Secretary General, and Salah Khalaf, Abdel

Fattah Hammod and Zuheir al-A'lami were elected as board members. We co-opted? Hani Bseiso as another member to the Association's board. Bseiso was student and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

This was the first group where the idea of national unity and non-partisan alignment started, as well as focusing on the national concerns. This was in 1953 in the Association of Palestinian Students in Cairo. This association gained great status and was recognised outside Egypt as well.

The Association replaced the All-Palestine Government, which was diminishing gradually, becoming paralysed and incapable of doing anything. But honestly, we didn't renounce those who had preceded us. This was brother Yasser Arafat's point of view. He told us "once the elections are over we need to visit Haj Amin al-Husseini and say to him "your status is still preserved and we are your children".

We went to Helmeiyat al-Zayton where we met Haj Amin al-Husseini. The meeting was very friendly. The meetings between him and us continued after that. We invited Haj Amin to most of the events that the Association organised. He would give a speech at those events, especially on the anniversary of martyr Abdel Qader al-Husseini's death. We considered his anniversary as an anniversary for all the martyrs and we held a special ceremony for the occasion.

What I want to say about brother Yasser Arafat, may he rest in peace, in that period is that he always handled three quarters of the work. The rest of us handled the remaining quarter. I remember a funny incident that happened between him and me. Once I objected to a card he made for himself as the President of the Association of Palestinian Students. I told him it was showing off. Abu Ammar was annoyed by my remark. Then we started discussing the agenda. We had a huge problem covering the additional fees, which were two and a half Egyptian pounds. The Palestinian students as a result of their poor financial situation were incapable of meeting such costs. Mr. Ahmad al-Shukeiri was at the Arab League at that time. The Arab League covered those fees grudgingly and after repeated visits by us. Abu Ammar was annoyed and withdrew from the session. He said, "You go, consider me on vacation". I said to him, "I will go to the Arab League".

I went with some students to the Arab League. At the door a police officer stopped us and asked me who I was. I told him my name and that I was the Secretary General of the Association of Palestinian Students.

He answered, “We only know Yasser Arafat. Where is Yasser Arafat?” He refused to let us in and our trip was wasted.

At the following session Yasser Arafat was told what had happened. He smiled and said, “If you have taken my card you would have been allowed in. You don’t know the secrets of the trade. I know the secrets of the trade here”.

He continued saying, “My house is in Masr el-Gedida. When I go to the League I take the metro (we didn’t have a lot of money at that time) and about 2 kilometers before reaching the League I get in a taxi and ask the driver to drop me off at the main entrance of the league. When I get off from the taxi the guards will see that I arrived in a taxi. They are there often and I pay each of them 5 shillings and that’s how I get my way. You don’t know the secrets of the trade in Egypt”.

I remembered another incident related to the Association. We wanted to rent a flat to serve as the headquarters for the Association. The Association’s office is still in use, but the Palestinian Consulate uses it now.

I went to the agent, who was a famous doctor, and told him we wanted to rent the flat. He refused and said, “You are students and will ruin the lift in the building”. We returned disappointed.

Yasser Arafat said, “Come with me”.

We went the doctor’s clinic. Abu Ammar took a card out of his pocket and gave it to the nurse to hand to the doctor. The doctor came rushing out and greeted and kissed Abu Ammar. We went into his office with Abu Ammar. The doctor immediately said, “I have accepted your request”. And signed the contract.

Before we left, the doctor said to Abu Ammar “Brother Yasser, you seem to have forgotten this card, and given it to me accidentally”. Abu Ammar had given the doctor a calling card that indicated his close relationship to brother Zakaria Mohieddin, one of the main leaders of the revolution.

The Doctor of course gave Abu Ammar his attention just because of that relationship. Abu Ammar apologised and gave the doctor a plain card. I remember these incidents as examples of Arafat’s genius.

In 1955, I graduated and was appointed as public prosecutor in Gaza. Brother Salah Khalaf became the president of the Association of Palestinian Students

after brother Yasser Arafat graduated. Arafat went on and founded a committee called the Graduates' Committee. He ran the committee with brother Amin al-Agha and a sheikh from the Sharab Family. The committee was a way of maintaining a presence and showing that Yasser Arafat was still there and active.

There were political parties in Gaza in 1955. There was the Communist Party, which was prosecuted and one of its leaders, brother Muin Bseiso, imprisoned; there was also the Muslim Brotherhood, which had the greatest number of supporters; then there was the Ba'ath Party and the Arab Nationalists who had a rather weak following.

When the aggression took place in 1956 we went into hiding for a week. After that we held a meeting that included a number of youth from all the parties in Gaza. We agreed to form a committee to resist the Zionist enemy and to organise activities against the occupation. They elected me to be the president of this committee.

I said to the men who attended the meeting "we tried the political parties and they didn't get us anywhere. You are a cocktail of members from all the parties. We are not an independent state to start forming parties. We need to unify our efforts in national action. We need drop our affiliations to the parties and align ourselves to our homeland as long as we are resisting this aggression, which we don't know how long may last. After we finish this period and succeed in it everyone is free to go back to his party. This period demands national unity. I will be the first one to abandon my party affiliation as a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. I ask my fellow brothers in the Muslim Brotherhood to follow suit. You need to believe in what I'm telling you". Mo'ath A'abed and Mohammad Harbi O'leian were present at the session.

They responded positively and adhered to what I had said. There were two Ba'athists, one of whom was Wafa al-Saygh who lives now in Gaza, as well as a member of the Arab Nationalists and a few independents. We all agreed to what had been said and wrote it in the form of procedural rules. We started the resistance by writing statements. Then violence escalated by the killing of one of the collaborators called al-A'raiysi in the center of Gaza Strip. Then we sent a delegation, headed by Wafa al-Saygh, to Cairo. The delegation was supposed to meet with Kamal el-Din Refa'at and brother Yasser Arafat the president of the Graduates' Committee. Wafa couldn't meet with Yasser Arafat as Arafat had enlisted to fight in the Egyptian army and had become

first lieutenant. The delegation was also supposed to meet with Salah Khalaf in his capacity as the head of the Association of Palestinian Students.

We sent another delegation headed by Kamal Adwan to Cairo. Kamal was one of our most important and enthusiastic members in Gaza.

We disseminated statements more than once and the occupation authorities weren't able to stop us. I remember two military officers used to work with me in the public prosecution department. Both of them were corporals; one was called Youssef Esbitah and the other was called Youssef Mhana. Both men were in the Palestinian force responsible for maintaining order. The force was destroyed by Israel.

Their shifts would start at six o'clock in the morning. They would disseminate the statements at five o'clock in the morning, and then report back to us. This fact remained a secret until the end of the Israeli occupation.

Brother Abu Jihad wasn't part of our group at the time. He was in exile outside Gaza. I consider martyr Abu Jihad, from a legal perspective, the first Palestinian to be exiled. In 1954, two years before the occupation, Abu Jihad organised a secret cell. The cell had extensions in Jordan through brother Hamad al-A'aydi (Abu Ramzi) who left Gaza and went to Jordan to oversee the cell there.

Abu Jihad has his own story with parties. He was considered a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Along with the Brotherhood he followed an explosives course in al-Areesh. The courses were ran by a famous journalist called Mahmoud al-Sharif, may he rest in peace. After the course had finished Abu Jihad went to his superiors in the Brotherhood and said, "We want to apply what we studied. We want to plan bombing operations in Israel that will be launched from Gaza".

After they refused he defected along with his group from the Muslim Brotherhood. They formed a new group that would conduct military operations inside the occupied land. Using primitive tools they managed to cross the borders and attack a small pass inside Israel. The operation provoked a violent reaction. The Egyptian intelligence forces started looking for the people responsible for this attack until they managed to arrest Khalil al-Wazir. Important figures mediated with the Egyptians. It wasn't appropriate to put Khalil al-Wazir on trial on charges of sneaking across the border and to consider his case on the same level as those who sneak across the borders to steal things.

A deal was concluded according to which the charges against Abu Jihad would be dropped, and in return he would leave Gaza. Of course according to international law it's illegal for a citizen to be exiled from his own country. Khalil al-Wazir left Gaza and returned to Gaza when we returned.

In January 1957, I had to leave to Cairo after I was warned by some of the brothers that my arrest was imminent. Mo'ath A'abed along with other brothers assumed the leadership of the committee. I went to Cairo and there I met brother Salah Khalaf who was preparing to meet Abdel Nasser. He asked the president to meet the Palestinian Students in Cairo and the president agreed.

I went to the meeting. Abu Iyad was very brave. He told Abdel Nasser "I ask you not to meet Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary General of the United Nations who is about to visit Egypt".

Abdel Nasser said, "Diplomacy and decency obliges the president of the country to meet the Secretary General of the United Nations. But you students can protest against his visit as you please".

But when the students protested near the airport they were arrested. It didn't help them that the president had authorised them to protest.

I met as well with brother Yasser Arafat who was still in army. After the Israeli army withdrew from Gaza Strip in March 1957 we returned to Gaza. Brother Yasser Arafat and many others went to Gaza with us. Weeklong celebrations were held in Gaza. It is worth mentioning that Israel refused to allow the Egyptian army to return to Gaza and accepted the return of only 25 officers. The 25 officers were the directors of the various administrative departments. Israel wanted the international emergency force to be responsible for security in the Gaza Strip.

Israel pushed towards a tripartite rule in Gaza: Egyptian, Israeli and the international emergency force. This, however, made the people take to the streets in massive demonstrations for seven days.

This public backlash encouraged Abdel Nasser who immediately sent Mohammad Hasan Abdel Latif to be the General Commander in Gaza Strip. The people in Gaza welcomed this decision and cooperated with and protected the Egyptian Officers. Things started becoming normal again with the return of the Arab Administration, as we used to call it, to Gaza Strip.

Brother Khalil al-Wazir returned to the Gaza Strip and there he met Yasser Arafat. Al-Wazir was asked to accompany Yasser Arafat and act as his guide in the Gaza Strip. This was in March 1957. After that Yasser Arafat went back to Egypt where he was working as an engineer. In 1958 Yasser Arafat left Egypt and went to Kuwait where he worked as an engineer in the Ministry of Public Works.

As for us, the brothers in the Egyptian intelligence said, "For you in the popular resistance in the Gaza Strip, everything has finished. There is no need for resistance any more".

We were oppressed, and the crackdown on the parties started in that period. To be fair to everyone in the popular resistance I have to say that the resistance depended mainly on the Muslim Brotherhood and then the Ba'athists. The National Front was also by our side. But we had differences with the communists and the independents as well as the National Front, which was headed by Dr. Haidar Abdel Shafi and Jamal al-Sourani. We had differences with the communist leaders who rejected armed struggle. They proposed establishing a state in Gaza and rejected the return of the Egyptian administration to the Gaza Strip. We proposed the opposite, that things should go back the way they were and the Egyptian administration return to the Strip. This was the main point of difference between them and us. Brother Mounir al-Rais, the president of the Gaza Municipality, mediated between the Popular Resistance and the National Front. An agreement was almost reached, but Kamal Adwan intervened violently saying, "This agreement will never happen".

He started enumerating the reasons for his opposition. He foiled the agreement and then presented evidence that the Israeli Communist Party had contacts with the National Front. At that time this was something completely forbidden. Things ended with each party working in Gaza Strip according to their own convictions.

The period that followed was one of oppression. On a personal level I felt I was getting too many nasty looks in the department of public prosecution. They tried transferring me to another place. The same thing happened to brother Salah Khalaf who was working as a teacher in the Strip. He also felt he was being followed. We were in a state of instability. At the same time the door to the Gulf was opened. I don't know how this door suddenly came to be opened. Brother Salah Khalaf was contracted to teach in Kuwait. I also went to Kuwait to find a job.

Abdel Fattah Hammod went to Saudi. Kamal Adwan left the strip as well. Depression has touched every single one of us.

But it seems that Palestine is stronger than all of us. All those who left to work in various places started thinking again of how to liberate Palestine. This period had led to the emergence of small organisations. I think one of the historians recorded their number to be as many as 25 organisations. All of those organisations aimed to work to achieve the same goal. The organisations comprised 5 to 15 members. The largest group was in Kuwait. Even when I was still working in the department of public prosecution in Gaza in 1959 we used to receive *Filastinuna*. Who ever received this magazine, even if they received it through their private mail, were called to the intelligence. The security apparatus in Gaza had great fear of this publication. The magazine proposed new and brave ideas that were very similar to those of the resistance that we started in Gaza.

On my way to Kuwait in June 1960 I took a transit flight through Beirut. There I met brother Abu Jihad. He told me that he wanted to send some books with me to the Magazine's (*Filastinuna*) library in Kuwait. He gave me 20 kilos of books. I carried the books with me from Beirut Airport to Kuwait. After I settled in my new job as a public prosecutor in Kuwait. Khalil al-Wazir visited me and said, "we are publishing a magazine and we need your help". So I wrote a few articles for the magazine. Then he asked me join the magazine, which I discovered, meant joining the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah).

I was hesitant to join Fatah at the beginning because I was planning on gaining a PhD after finishing my masters. Abu Jihad tried hard to convince me and then he told me that another person would like to meet me. This person used the alias Fathi al-Qadi but his real name was Abdullah al-Dannan, a member of the Central Committee of Fatah. I was impressed by his logic and his way of talking. I was also impressed by the "Statement of Our Movement" and "Revolutionary Structure" sections of the magazine, and I realised the greatness of this movement.

Then a member of the movement's leadership called Nabil Hamadan, whose real name was Adel Abdel Karim, visited me. I thought he had the strongest personality in the movement during the establishment stage. I was very impressed by him and accepted to join the movement. Up to that moment I didn't know that Yasser Arafat was a member of this movement as well.

The movement then sent Adel Abdel Karim to Salah Khalaf under another alias (Abu Yahia). One day and by coincidence I was talking to brother Salah Khalaf about the movement. I started praising Nabil Hamdan's personality and he praised Abu Yahia's personality and extraordinary intelligence. Then Abu Iyad asked to describe Nabil Hamdan. When I did he told me it was the same person. He met me using the alias Nabil Hamdan and he met Abu Iyad using the alias Abu Yahia.

The movement was very secretive in the early stages, and this might have been the most important reason for the movement's success later on.