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Fateh and Clashing with the Israeli Enemy

My friend Khaled and one of the members of the organisation's cells, who belongs to the Arab Nationalist Movement and works at the Zeqlab dam, came to us one day to tell us that a *fida'i* group called "Fateh al-Islam" had been sneaking from Syria across the Jordan River to the west, toward the occupied territories. The group conducted military operations against the enemy and then returned to the East bank.

We were touched by this news; it filled us with hope and galvanised us to engage in constructive work. Said Fuda, one of our comrades at the Arab Nationalist Movement who studied law at Damascus University, traveled to Damascus to inquire about the group. This was in mid 1965.

In Damascus, Said met a number of personnel from the Fateh leadership. He returned to inform us, with great joy, that the group was a patriotic one, comprising a large number of patriotic Palestinians, and that it was aiming to liberate Palestine through military struggle, by coordinating with all of the people's organisations as they waged a long-term popular war.

We then learned that the sons of Abu Sirdaneh –Ahmed Saleh Abu Sirdaneh, who is nicknamed Ahmed Nafeesah, and Mohammed Saleh Abu Sirdaneh (Abu Rashed) from Falujah town, one of my dearest friends – were covert organisers within the Fateh movement. They had been asked to monitor the path connecting the East bank to the West Bank across the Jordan River, via the Karameh area. Since the sons of Abu Sirdaneh were fishers who fished in the Jordan River, their role as covert operatives would not be surmised.

It was then that I decided to join the Fateh movement. It was 1 January 1966. I put my words into action as part of the movement, which was what I had been seeking. After learning about their affiliation, I met with Abu Sirdaneh's sons. We revealed our identities to each other, and they explained the nature of their mission to me.

They've been calling on me and a few other comrades since then, since we were asked to pave the way to set up bases in the area between north and

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south Shuna. We moved together from the Arab Nationalist Movement to the Fateh movement. There were sixty-five members among us. We started to build bases for the Fateh movement along this sensitive path, and were assisted by the farm owners whom many of us knew on a personal basis, as well as the electrical water pump workers, and the drivers who worked on various development projects in the area, such as the Kafreen and Zeqlab dams.

Among our first tasks was to go to the farm owners along the Jordan River, in order to recruit them. We succeeded in recruiting workers from various farms, including those who worked at the farms of Awadh al-Ghazawi, Hussain Jubriel (this was among the first places where we managed to recruit), Mohammed Abdelfattah al-Attal and his sons, Mohammed Abu Ras, al-Jazeera, Abu al-Mushref, Mohammed al-Nasser (Khamis Fuda works there), Fayez Totah (Salah Fuda works there), Sunqrat, al-Haj Youssef, al-Qattan (where Aqal Hamouda and Hussain Ghazala work), Masoud and Atia (Abu al-Hussain al-Dhaif works there). Then we recruited the employees and students of schools, including al-Ghouth agency, which was a girls' school in heart of Karameh headed by Wajdan Aweedha; the girls' school that was close to the supplies center (headed by Khalidia al-Elmi); and the boys' school of Karameh (headed by Mohammed al-Nuna).

Familial and friendship ties connected me with Dr. Tawfiq Ramadan, who worked as a doctor at al-Ghouth agency, and had a prominent leadership role in the Arab Nationalist Movement. In his house, I became acquainted with major Fayez Abdulmajeed (who went by the alias "major Khaled") and I began to work with him directly. I must mention that major Khaled was among the most distinguished leaders I have worked with; he was loyal, diligent, able and very polite.

We began recruiting the youth and sending them to train at al-Hama camp in Syria, where over 55 young men were sent from the Jabal Amman group in al-Masawra district. They returned to Karameh after completing their training.

Our organisation adopted the name "Karameh organisation", and was originally made up of residents of Karameh. We furnished the movement with everything it requested in al-Aghwar area, be it tractors to carry water to the bases, or digging trenches. Our youth worked hard to dig the trenches using the various equipment at our disposal, including heavy machinery. We knew the area well, because we were its inhabitants. Our base was at the

Khalil al-Ulayan shop (nicknamed Abu al-Sheikh). The latter was a prominent member of our Karamah organisation.

And as per the request of the leader Abu al-Saber, who was in charge of deploying patrols from the East Bank through the West Bank into Palestine, we were tasked with securing everything the patrol members needed and protecting them. We were charged with bringing ropes and tying them between the two banks of the Jordan River (which was called "al-Sharia" by some of the peasants in this area). The purpose of this task was to make it possible to cross the river by hanging onto the rope, which is useful, especially when the river is at its highest tide in the winter, and its flow becomes rather violent. These conditions made it dangerous for us to cross the river at that time of year. It was from this area that the group conducted the great operation of Bait Furaik on 7 January 1967.

As I've noted, Fateh's plan was to build internal infrastructure, which requires a strong presence on the outside in the areas close to the lines of penetration. The purpose of this was to move fighters and equipment quickly, instead of sending them from Syria to Jordan without real support to transport them into the inner territories. The names of those who supervised these bases include:

1. Al-Haj Ismail: his base hosted the hadhar of ash-sham and Lebanon, who trained and prepared to cross into the West Bank.
2. Waleem Nessar: the head of the patrols in the inner territories.
3. Salah al-Ta'amari: his base hosted, mobilised and trained large numbers of young men. Salah's foremost mission was mobilisation, not military.
4. Abdullah al-Attari: the mission of this base was to send fighters to the occupied territories, especially to Nablus.

Abu Sabri returned from leading the patrol of the inner territories at Bait Furaik. Our group monitored and tracked everyone who came from the West Bank. The Jordanian Army had built two military bridges, the al-Mundasah and Um al-Shart bridges. The Jordanian army destroyed these two bridges during the war of 1967, but ordinary people have been trafficking various items across the remnants. Abu Sabri had requested that we monitor these bridges, as many cadres traveled across them to reach the West Bank. The *fidai* presence increased in al-Aghwar area, especially as people began to realise that the possibility of the eradication of the *fidaiyyeen* and their nascent bases in al-Aghwar had decreased. This marked a significant symbolic victory for the *fidaiyyeen*. The movement thus began to develop and move toward joining the revolution, with numbers of volunteers increasing on a daily basis.

Also, Abu Ammas and Abu Sabri brought modern boats from Lebanon, where patrols are also active on a regular basis.

I remember that Abu Sabri once brought a small boat, which could hold two and three people. It was the first boat the Fateh movement used to transport patrols. I remember some of the cadres that crossed through the Karameh area, including Waleem Nessar, and the martyr Hamdi on 30 December 1967.

The Men of Karameh

In our memory live men, leaders, symbols on the path toward liberation; the makers of the times of pride and glory for our people, who gave their lives with deep conviction that victory was nigh. A few such men gathered, and the rest marched onwards... I remember here the leaders of the battle of Karameh, for example. They established bases and prepared modest supplies for the fighters... the *fida'iyeen* ... they lived with the fighters in their caps, under banana and olive trees, in the caves along Jordan valley on the East and West Banks. These men are Yasser Arafat, who was known after the battle of Karameh as Abu Ammar, Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad), Mamdooh Saidam (Abu Sabri), Farouq al-Qadoumi (Abu al-Latf), Abdulfatah al-Humoud (Abu Salah), Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad).

They rotated through roles, each one carrying out specific duties at any given time. They were in touch with every *fida'i*. They made plans and maps, and discussed *fida'i* missions, methods and resources at their disposal. They moved from their positions to those of their targets, and studied the results of each battle.

When Abu Ammar went to Karameh, he stayed at the house of Mohammed Teem (from the family of Muhaiser), where major Khaled was also based at the time. The house was made up of an operations room, where the leadership – Abu Iyad and Abu al-Lutf – gathered. Abu Sabri was also among the leadership, since he was the leader of the al-Aghwar area. Indeed, we cannot discuss the battle of Karameh without mentioning the leader and martyr Mamdouh Saidam (Abu Sabri), who was thoroughly diligent and able to withstand pressure.

Abu Sabri took care of every cell in the occupied territories, and all the members of each base in the East bank. He supervised the dispatch of groups to the occupied territories. Indeed, he personally accompanied some of them. He played a big role in the Bait al-Furaik operation, as well as the start of the

battle of Karameh, where the martyr ordered groups to take position and delivered orders, along with Abu Ammar.

Since Abu Ammar did not like to stay in one place, he often stayed at the house of Youssef Ubaid (nicknamed Wafa). Abu Ammar was very keen on visiting all the Fateh bases, and meeting their leaders and fighters. Abu Iyad, Abu al-Luft and Abu Sabri would accompany him to these bases. Abu Ammar would address the fighters by saying: "Your movement has put together a plan that is based on the various possible scenarios during the time of battle. Will Fateh be alone in battle, or will other forces join it? As you can see, my brothers, the top echelon of your leadership, as well as the military leadership, has refused to leave. The enemy wants to destroy your revolution and your struggle once and for all. This is why Abu Iyad, Abu Sabri, Abu al-Lutf and I have decided to either die or become victorious together". After explaining the situation, he would encourage them to fight and to resist any aggression the area might sustain. He had a famous quote: "The battle of Karameh will enter the books of history. It will be regarded as the second battle of Stalingrad. It is the first battle of Badr for the Fateh movement. I can see victory in your eyes".

The leadership believed that a violent attack was imminent, especially after receiving information from the head of the Jordanian intelligence and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as well as those who had visited the West Bank, about the accumulation of Israeli military units, as well as continuous Israeli announcements.

The patrols would transport weapons to the Syrian-Jordanian borders, where they were gathered inside Jordanian territories at a location called al-Hamra. Abu al-Khal received incoming patrols from Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad) and Abu Ali Iyad. Abu al-Khal used to communicate and coordinate with Abu Sabri to help the brothers in the Iraqi military, who were present in the area, as well as the house in which Ibrahim al-Saidam stayed along with an officer from the Iraqi army. He was responsible for artillery in the area. The group of Iraqi military personnel, which was known as "the forces of Salah ad-din," would help us move from one place to another without the their military leadership's knowledge. They used to transport patrols from al-Hamra to Karameh, and even to the river.

During this time, military operations were escalating in the occupied territories: planting mines, hand grenade attacks, bazooka and mortar attacks. This increased the people's morale, but also drove the Israelis to use the harshest forms of repression. They carried out waves of arrests in all of the

areas. Many of our fighters were arrested. The Israelis worked to plant their agents and informants in our villages and towns, then sent some of them to al-Aghwar to monitor our movements and our capacity. For this reason, we established an anti-spying unit, which was headed by Farouq al-Qadoumi (Abu al-Lutf) before Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad) took the reins at the end of 1967. We also formed a security unit, called the Central Monitoring Unit, which took the place of the "Military Security Unit". Among the first people to join new unit was Zakaria Abdulraheem.

Most of the youth who belonged to Karameh organisation covered their own expenses. When Salah al-Ta'amari came to Karameh, he was well-known. He played an important role in the battle of Karameh in terms of organisation, recruitment, intellectual propaganda, and awareness campaigns. He was a well-liked figure among the youth. Before the battle began, units from the Jordanian military came to pressure the *fida'iyeen* into leaving Karameh, to prevent Israel from attacking the town and killing civilians there. But Salah al-Ta'amari improvised a public address to the Jordanian army that day, and a number of the town's inhabitants went to support him at the mosque where he was speaking. The matter was resolved when the Jordanian military decided to cordially withdraw from the town. Since that day, we at Karameh organisation have been on very good terms with Salah al-Ta'amari, who was the first to establish and train an organisation for young boys. I remember them attending the graduation ceremony of this organisation before the battle of Karameh took place. Salah hid the boys in a refuge near the house of Um Youssef on the night of 21 March 1968. We worked hard to prepare to face the Israeli enemy that night, as all media outlets had reported that an attack was imminent.

We at Karameh organisation held a meeting. The martyr Um Youssef was present. She was nicknamed as the "mother of the *fida'iyeen*". She asked us to bring first-aid kits because there were not enough at the al-Ghouth clinic in Karameh. We had no private clinics, except for Um Youssef's house, where, in many cases, Dr Abdullah al-Hijazi and Ruqaya Abdulraheem would be available. When Israel shelled Karameh and burned all of the agency's warehouses, we were asked to send one of our cadres to Amman to get first-aid supplies. We decided, at Karameh organisation, after a meeting, to pick up a power generator while we were there, in order to dig through the asphalt in order to deploy mines. I went with Salah al-Shawish, on that same night of 20 March 1968, to al-Hajja Tawaddud, who lived in Amman on Wadi al-Sair Street near al-Hurriyah printing house. Unfortunately, I was not able to find any supplies in the house. I went to al-Musawra neighborhood, where the martyr Faiq Ali Saleh joined me. We contacted Barasem al-Ghoul, who

worked with us as a recruiter. We went to a workshop that belonged to Said al-Natour, and there we acquired a power generator.

It was 5.30am on the morning of 21 March 1968 when the battle began. At 9.30am we arrived back in the Shuaib valley, where there was a Jordanian military checkpoint preventing cars from entering Karameh. We stopped our pickup truck, which was carrying the power generator, close to the plantation in the Shuaib valley. We climbed the hill toward Jabal Ayra and Yaraqa. Being from the area, we were very familiar with the route. We sustained friendly fire on more than one occasion, because Israeli units had been deployed, some of them wearing *fida'iyeen* outfits, and others in army uniforms. It was 1.30 pm when we reached the heights of Jabal Ayra and Yaraqa. The shelling was decreasing in intensity by then. All four of us took our positions in this area in anticipation of any deployments. We remained with many groups from various organisations...

At 4.30 pm, the shelling stopped. The Israelis began to gather their casualties in preparation for retreat. All of the units present in the heights began to descend toward Karameh, until 5.30pm that Thursday.

The Israeli army was retreating indeed. We began to survey the camp, to get a complete picture of what had transpired. Houses in the camp had been destroyed, and a number of people had lost their lives. As we inspected the area alongside the leadership, with Abu Ammar at its helm, we began to gather all of the martyrs in the middle of Karameh, close to Abu Ajwa café. As we did this we found some residents of the town among the dead, including the sons of Abu Jarada, a girl from Bareer town, and another wounded girl from Abu Jaber Dudah's household, from Bait Dajn. A helicopter transported her to her town to get medical help.

Our cadres in Karameh organisation, Said al-Natour and Hussein Abdelfatah Salah (Hussain Subhiyah), along with myself, met with Nasser Youssef (Nasser al-Joulan) in the al-Adasiyya area after the battle had ended. We suggested to Nasser Youssef that he come with us to al-Hussain camp to rest at our house that night. He agreed and came with us. Upon our arrival, he asked me to invite his close friend Zuhair al-Salihi. We arranged for him to come. Nasser then asked him to bring two cars that contained supplies and blankets, and he did that. Then Nasser had us take these items to Karameh camp to supply our fighters. We proceeded toward the camp at five o'clock, through al-Sult Street in Shuaib valley. We arrived at seven o'clock on the morning of 22 March 1968, along with Nasser. When he asked about Abu Ammar, they told him that he was at the rallying point, which was Abateet

café in the middle of Karameh. We greeted him and told him about the two supply cars that we had brought with us from Amman. He asked us to drop off the supplies at the rallying point. Among the first people who entered Karameh after the battle was Yahya Fuda. As for the last person, he brought two cars loaded with supplies to Karameh...

Abu Ammar ordered us to gather the martyrs at Abu Ajwa café in the middle of the town. We at Karameh organisation erected barriers on all roads, fearing that people might pass through the roads that contain unexploded mines. Abu Ammar ordered us to transport the martyrs to Amman in preparation for their funeral. As for the rest of the martyrs, they were buried in a mass grave. The grave read: "that which we return to take care of". On the next day, a funeral was held for ten people in Amman. A large number of people joined the funeral march, which started at the grand al-Husseini mosque in the middle of Amman and ended at the graveyard close to al-Wehdat camp, which later became known as the martyrs' graveyard. During the funeral, people were surprised to see Abu Ammar in attendance. He participated in the funeral along with all of the Palestinian leaders and some Jordanian officials. Abu Ammar asked Tawaddud Abdulhadi to say a word at the funeral. The head of the elite council, Kamel Uraiqat, also said a word on behalf of the Jordanians. After the funeral had concluded, we accompanied Abu Ammar to al-Sult, which was the rallying point, and then from that point on to Karameh, to survey the rest of the fighters once again.