

Yassin, ‘Abd al-Qadir. *‘Umr Fi al-Manfa, Mudhakhirat ‘Abd al-Qadr Yassin. Damascus: al-Dar al-Wataniya al-Jadida, 2009 (pp. 39-43). Translated by The Palestinian Revolution, 2016.*¹

The March 1955 Intifada

In the 1954-55 school year, my family returned to Gaza. The Israeli military attack against the nearby suburb of Bir al-Safa (28 February 1955) played a central role in my life, as well as the life of the entire Arab homeland. The morning after the assault (1 March 1955) we stood in the schoolyard for the morning exercises and were then ordered into our classrooms. Nobody entered. I shouted the slogan, “No resettlement schemes, No housing plans; You Agents of the Americans!” We were aware of the fact that successive Israeli assaults were all designed to pressure the refugees into accepting the Sinai project. The US administration had proposed to the Egyptian government to establish this scheme in Northwest Sinai, so as to contain the Palestinian refugees in Gaza and Egypt, and resettle them with an eye to closing the Palestinian file. This was one of several resettlement and housing projects that were proposed by successive American administrations in the first half of the 1950s, geared towards liquidating the Palestinian cause forever.

We were then visited by Major Ahmad Ismail, who was the Director of Education in the Gaza Strip, famous for his tyranny and his practice of suspending students over the tiniest infractions. He said, “I am coming to reassure you, and tell you that Egyptian forces will be arriving to defend Gaza”. At this point, a student called Mohammad Syam (Muslim Brotherhood) threw a stone, and it hit Ismail. The Major then said in a sorrowful voice, “After six years of educational service in the Strip, Ahmad Ismail gets stoned! May God forgive you!” Of course, he was greatly surprised by this situation, as he was used to oppressing us.

The circle of students around Ismail grew, and he started to promise us that troops were coming, and that the Gaza Strip was going to be fortified. So I told him, “This is not the first time the Israelis attack us, and you still have not fortified the area. You have not received any firm decision from Cairo about the troops they are sending. You are just trying to anaesthetise us with this talk of yours.” After I said that, Hilmi Abu Ramadan, the school principal, pulled me from behind and took me out of the circle. He told me, “Ahmad

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Ismail has a grudge against you and he could suspend you". I replied, "So be it." So when he left me we started shouting again "No resettlement schemes, No housing plans; You Agents of the Americans!" We went out of the school, and this was the start of an Intifada that lasted for three days across the breadth and length of the Strip. The Muslim Brothers and the Communists were united in this effort, and they were the only political forces in the Strip at the time.

On the third day of the Intifada, the Administrative Governor, Major Sa'd Hamzah, came to the demonstrators and asked for a delegation to negotiate with him. The delegation conveyed the demands of the demonstrators at the Governors headquarters in the Saraya: fortifying the Strip; arming the people and giving them weapons training; cancelling the 'Sinai Plan'; permitting the establishment of unions and the publication of newspapers, as well as respecting civil liberties.

In the afternoon, Sa'd Hamzah came to the Union of UNRWA Teachers, which was the only union permitted in Gaza during the period of martial law. The Union was located in the house of Al-Qishawi, just opposite the government Saraya, and this building effectively became the headquarters of the Intifada. As Sa'd Hamzah entered the building, he was harassed by the teachers. This wheeler-dealer, who was feared by everyone, told Mouin Bseiso (representing the Communist) and Fathi al-Balawi (representing the Muslim Brothers) that Abdel Nasser agreed to all the demands of the demonstrators. This took place on Thursday, the third day of the Intifada (3 March 1955).

If our demands were not met, we were supposed to gather again on Saturday. But Hamza told everyone that everything was fine. Then, the Governor General of the Gaza Strip, General Abdallah Rifat, issued a statement in which he promised on his military honour, "Not to arrest anyone, unless they burnt or vandalized intentionally".

On 9 March, the military intelligence launched a wave of arrests that affected 68 people. Roughly equal numbers were arrested from the Muslims Brothers, the Communists, and the independents. Two days later, I was arrested on the Palestine School campus. Captain Mustafa Mameesh came to the school. The school porter came to class and asked for me, and I left with him. Mameesh then took me to the Intelligence building where the officer Said al-Saqa (who was a Palestinian) conducted a provocative interrogation. He told me, "I will ask, and you shall write". So I started writing the answers. At this point, he 'caught' me when I did not start by writing "In the name of God, the Most

Gracious, the Most Merciful” at the top of the page. I responded by saying, “You only asked me to write my answers to your questions”. He said: “You are a communist, and you want to write, “In the Name of Stalin”. Which cell do you belong to?” He put on a furious face, stared me down, and was on the verge of beating me up when they told him that the Boss had arrived. So he went to his office, then came back and told me, “Go see the Boss”. I was surprised to see the look on Lieutenant Colonel Mustafa Hafez’s face when he saw me. The Director of Military Intelligence in the Gaza Strip asked Said al-Saqa, “Is that him?” and he started to draw a line in the air with his finger extending from the tips of my toes to the top of my head, exclaiming, “That’s Abdel Qader Yassin!” For, what he saw in front of him was a boy wearing sandals and shorts and carrying a schoolbag on his shoulders.

Hafez turned to me and said, “Sit down son”. I sat down. He then said, “What drink can I offer you?” I refused to drink anything. He said, “Of course, they’ve been telling you not to drink anything at the Intelligence building, lest someone put something in the drink to make you confess”. I answered, “Nobody told me anything”. “How about some tea, or some lemon juice then?” ... “Son, you were the first person at the Palestine School to chant, ‘No resettlement schemes, No housing plans; You Agents of the Americans!’ Is that correct?” I answered in the affirmative.

– So why this chant?

– Because the Israeli military assaults are designed to force us to accept the Sinai project for resettling the refugees.

– This project is for your own good. Don’t forget that a quarter of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip have Tuberculosis!

– Yes!

– You are also hungry!

– There are 15 million Egyptian peasants who are in dire need. You can resettle them in Sinai and leave us alone.

He answered, “Stand up and go home!” So I stood up and went.

In any case, I was very shocked by the wave of arrests that took place despite the promise that Abdallah Rifa’t had made in the name of his military honour! I remember that during the night of the arrest, I dreamt of Mouin Bseiso’s house collapsing on top of its inhabitants. I recounted the dream to my late mother in the morning and she said, “Their family will be shattered”. Indeed, they arrested Mouin Bseiso and three of his brothers. However,

Mustafa Hafez returned one of them, Suhaib, as he had no involvement whatsoever in politics. As for the other three, Sa'ad was a tenth grade student, Usama was a twelfth grade student, and Mouin Bseiso was a school principal. All of them ended up in prison...