

Habash, George. *al-Thawriyun La Yamutun Abadan*. Beirut: Dar Al-Saqi, 2009 (pp.27-30). Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.¹

On my return to Palestine Lydda was about to fall. I was beyond myself with rage. I wanted to do something to defend my homeland. But what? I did not know how to handle a weapon. Therefore, I decided to tend to the wounded in one of the town's clinics, directed by Dr Mustapha Zahlan. However, because of the lack of medics and equipment, the place was in a terrible state. Many of the wounded who were taken there could not receive the treatment they required. I shall always remember the words of a young woman, injured in her stomach, who was crying out in the main room of the clinic: "I want water! Please give me some water!". There was a young man in his twenties who was lying on the ground after passing away – I had seen him, just a few days earlier, running in the streets of Lydda. This was a town whose combatants left every night with their weapons to attack enemy positions.

Despite the loss of Jaffa and Haifa, the mood of people was still buoyant. The citizens of Lydda confirmed their reputation as solid warriors and steadfast patriots. But gradually we were being encircled. I had the impression of helplessly watching the end of the world. I could not yet operate on the wounded, only tend to them, and lift the spirits of their families by telling them to be patient. Wait for the arrival of the Arab armies which would come to save them from disaster. People were counting on them. Had the Jordanian army not reached the outskirts of Lydda? Sadly, the enemy's attacks also intensified.

One night, an aerial attack completely terrified us and the following nights bombardments increased. This multiplication of Zionist offensives, added to the losses of neighbouring towns and villages, led the population to doubt the Jordanian authorities' commitment to our cause. Some became dispirited. Others, however, wanted to continue the resistance at any cost. But there was a growing sense of anxiety, fuelled by rumours of the disorganization of the combatants. The passivity of some of the Arab regimes was the subject of many a conversation.

I said to myself that if I saw an Israeli soldier at the clinic, I would confront him with these words: "what do you want, assassin? These are our lands! This is our country! We will never leave!"

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One morning I was visited by my great-aunt. She took me aside to tell me that Foutine, my older sister, had died. Foutine was a mother of seven. Her death came as a terrible blow. On my journey back, there were many corpses lying on the streets, including our local 'foul' vendor. A bad dream, a nightmare, an awful reality: I did not quite know where I was. By the time I got back, my family had already buried my sister in the garden, in all haste: she could not be laid to rest in the cemetery as things were so insecure, that the priest could not come to officiate. I found my family overwhelmed with grief.

Lydda fell on July 14, 1948, after a siege lasting three weeks. It was the darkest day of my life. Indeed, a few hours after the burial of my sister, armed Zionists arrived and fiercely demanded we leave our home immediately. "Who are you?" we asked them. They did not reply but insisted that we leave everything behind. As we departed, we saw our neighbours: they too were forced out of their homes, and were fleeing under the watchful eye of Israeli soldiers who were posted at regular intervals on the roads. I wanted to return to the clinic to look after my sister's children. We did not understand why we were being evicted from our homes. We thought they wanted to gather us in a field to give us instructions, and perhaps even search our properties without any witnesses present, and then let us go back. We could not imagine that they wanted to uproot us, and that that we would never see our homes again. In fact, everything had been carefully prepared, so that we would be rapidly expelled from the town.

"Go to King Abdallah, he is responsible for you!" shouted some of the Israeli soldiers as they searched the Palestinians, insisting we should not resist. Amin Hanhan, the son of our neighbour, had brought two thousand dinars with him. The soldiers tried to take them from him, and he put up a fight. They killed him in front of us. We were living the nightmare of a people which was about to be sentenced to exile.

After walking for an hour, we reached the outskirts of the town. Every hundred metres, a soldier would tell us where to go. At a checkpoint, several of them stole the women's jewellery, as they passed though.

As a result of this precipitous departure, some died of thirst, others of hunger. We had to abandon them on the road. Such was our exhaustion that we would avail ourselves of the dirty water from a polluted well. We walked until dusk. We slept under an improvised tent in the village of Naalin, before continuing the next day up to Birzeit, when we arrived at Ramallah, where my family stayed for two years. My parents had left everything behind: their possessions and their furniture. They had only kept the house keys and the legal documents which proved the land around their home belonged to them.

Perhaps these documents would be of some use one day? In the belief that they might be able to come back to their properties soon, some Palestinians had even buried their jewellery and money under ground.

For we were still convinced we would be able to return to our homes. None of us could imagine that we were embarking on an odyssey which has lasted fifty-nine years! Every day in Ramallah I would go to a café to hear any news of our return. I was struck by a declaration of David Ben Gurion, the Israeli Prime Minister: he affirmed it was his hope that the number of Jewish inhabitants of the state of Israel would rise to four million in 1952 – it was a mere 700,000 at the time. This was astounding. But this declaration revealed the scale of the ambitions and designs of the Zionist leaders.