

**Abdel Nasser, Gamal. "Memoirs of the First Palestine War, Part I". Akher Sa'a (Cairo), April 1955. Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.<sup>1</sup>**

A couple of weeks ago I saw an exciting film at one of the Cairo cinemas. It was a detective story of the closely-knit, breath-taking kind Hollywood is so good at. The story had a villain, who had succumbed to the evil machinations of the devil. This villain commits murder but plans his crime in such a way that suspicion is thrown on an innocent man. All evidence seems to point in the direction of the innocent man. He is pursued with suspicious glances, and the climax is reached when he is actually accused of the crime and placed in the dock. The man loses control over himself and is almost driven to the verge of insanity. Again and again he pleads his innocence but there is no one to listen to him or believe him. Even those closest to him begin to doubt his innocence. The more he tries to defend himself the more entangled he becomes in the meshes into which he has fallen, and the more heavily does the circumstantial evidence which was so cleverly contrived bear down upon him. He is overcome by despair, and the issues of right and wrong become confused in his deeply shaken conscience. Finally, tightly cornered and under the pressure of constant suggestion, he almost confesses to a crime that he had never committed and had never even thought of committing.

This story reminded me of the case of the Egyptian army in Palestine. A defeat had been suffered in Palestine just as a crime had been committed in the film-story. But who was the real culprit in Palestine? In my opinion the crime of the Palestine war was not committed by the Egyptian army but by others. But trumped-up charges were brought against the Egyptian army and it was made to bear the responsibility for something of which it was innocent. Like the innocent man in the film the army almost believed the tragicomedy of its guilt. And the people nearest to the army - the people of Egypt and other friendly nations - were almost convinced of its guilt. In the film, matters were straightened out in an hour or so and truth prevailed. The innocent man left the dock and the murderer entered it to receive his punishment. But in the tragedy in which we lived in Palestine the terrible incubus lasted for six long dark years.

When a few days ago I stood in the Military Academy and said that the Egyptian army had not been defeated in Palestine, my intention was not to make an impassioned speech. Nor was I simply trying to raise the morale of the troops after the recent attack on Gaza. I was describing a truth that I had lived. I was trying to tear away the meshes in which our army had got entangled. I was trying to say quite simply that the army was not responsible for the defeat in Palestine, that the army should leave the dock and the real criminal should be held to account.

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In the Palestine tragedy I was not seated among the spectators as I had been in that Cairo cinema several weeks ago. I was myself on the stage together with thousands of other officers and men. I still remember the day on which my role in the tragedy began. We were in the month of April 1948. The Free Officers Organisation had withdrawn into itself and was lying low, for the bloodhounds were on our tracks and were converging on us from all directions. An abortive attempt had been made in the army. The eyes of the political police were strained in our direction. The time was most inopportune for any activity, and our meetings were few and far between for we did not want to attract attention to ourselves.

I myself was engaged in completing my studies at the Staff College. But the worries and responsibilities of my work at the College could not shut out the sound of the war-drums in Palestine. There was a great deal of excitement among my colleagues and the morale, especially among the younger officers, was high. Many of our comrades in the Free Officers Organisation used to come up to me stealthily to avoid observation and whisper in my ear that they intended to volunteer for fighting in Palestine. I myself was in a quandary. Should I too volunteer? Should I take off my uniform and carry a tommy-gun in my hand and join the fighting? Or should I finish my course at the Staff College now that I had already spent a whole year working for it and there was only one month left to go? About this time a group of the Constituent Committee of the Free Officers Organisation met at my house, and it was decided that some of us should proceed to Palestine as volunteers and that the rest should remain in Cairo.

One morning I found myself at Cairo Station in the company of Abdul Hakim Amer and Zakariya Mohieddin.<sup>6</sup> We were bidding farewell to Kamel al-Din Hussein, who was on his way to Palestine together with other friends and comrades. We congratulated them on the opportunity afforded them to go to Palestine and promised to meet them there in the not too distant future. We also excitedly assured them that we would do our utmost in Cairo to ensure the success of their mission. The last thing that I told Kamel just before the train moved off was: "You must let me know if you need anything. I shall follow up your requests with the army and will see to it that no amount of red tape or inertia should stand in our way."

As the train slowly left the station our hearts pounded with emotion. I did not go home that evening but went instead to the offices of a daily newspaper. I asked the editor to allow me to write an article in description of the scene at the station. I sat down trembling with excitement and wrote what had happened at the station. I stayed awake that night at the offices of the newspaper waiting for the first issues carrying my article.

The first days of May passed and we were still in Cairo. But our nerves lived in Palestine. We were caught up in a vertigo of thoughts and feelings. One day we were told that our group at the College would graduate before the scheduled time, possibly as a result of developments in Palestine. The

graduation ceremony was a simple, brisk affair after which we hastened to find out where we would be posted. Presently I was ordered to join the 6th Battalion. Amer was ordered to join the 9th Battalion, and Zakariya, the 1st. These three battalions were at the time stationed near the Palestine frontier, but we did not know for certain what the future held for us. The three of us, however, were eager to join our units at once. Our orders were that we should leave Cairo on May 16, but so great was our excitement that we were impatient of this delay. The morning papers were full of news of what was happening in Palestine. At the same time there were various forecasts and conflicting reports as to the official stand that the Egyptian government might take on the subject. There was no specific indication in the papers as to what this stand might be. But it was beginning to appear that there was a possibility of our entering the Palestine war, and the general " atmosphere in the country was overflowing with excitement.