

Taha, Aba. Interviewed 2012. Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.

The first school I attended was al-Qadisyah Elementary in Sa'adyeh neighbourhood. After the fifth grade they transferred us to a school called Khawla Bint al-Azwar, which was located between Wadi al-Jouz and al-Mamouniyeh. Finally, I completed high school at the Mamouniyeh School in Jerusalem. History was important for me. When I was in the sixth grade we bought a radio, and I used to listen to the news. I remember that I would take out my pen and notebook, writing down the most significant news items. This was before I joined a political party or anything like that. It was a way of remembering the events that came with the passage of the days. This interest developed in secondary school; no, even in elementary school. Back then, the teachers would give us history lessons and provide us with general knowledge. They would talk to us about Palestine and tell us about the 1948 Nakba, and I would listen with the utmost seriousness.

People had been forced out of their homes. I met people in Jerusalem, I would talk to the girls in my class, and they would say, "We are from Deir Yassin". I would ask, "Where?" and they would reply, "From the 1948 areas. We are refugees". I started to feel that the daughters of the Palestinian people had been forced out of their homeland, leaving their villages and cities. They were now living in Jerusalem and nearby villages; they were here to escape Israeli occupation, Israeli violence. They started mixing with the new society surrounding them, and began to tell us about their memories of the homeland. The teachers would tell us about Jaffa and Haifa, about Acre and its walls, about the sea of Jaffa.

By the time I turned 15, I was leading demonstrations in the city of Jerusalem – large marches, which included something like ten thousand men. I would sometimes be the only woman in the crowd, but I would lead the demonstration and we would walk down the streets of Jerusalem: in Khan al-Zeit, Bab al-Silsilah, and elsewhere. For example when the assault on Samou village took place, we went on demonstrations. We used to go on these demonstrations against... perhaps against is the wrong word, I think it was more of a reminder about Palestine and a call for liberating that part of it that we had lost.

At this stage, my late brother Taha and my brother Fadel were involved in party work, and they nominated me for membership of the Movement of

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Arab Nationalists. This was in 1959-1960. I was in grade 11, the penultimate grade in high school. Girls older than me got in touch. They were connected to the movement, and they called me, based on my brothers' nominations. So I joined the movement, which was a nationalist one calling for Arab unity and the liberation of Palestine. I liked the ideas of the movement and I joined it. I became active in organising young women who were a similar age, as well as some young men. We would contact them in accordance with established methods. At that stage, we used to focus on quality, as opposed to numbers. So we used to have good cadres who were loyal, committed, and disciplined in their thought and practice.

The movement used to spend a lot of energy on developing us. It also had a presence across the Arab world. I saw this after I graduated from high school. They were asking for Arabic teachers in Algeria, so I went as part of the effort to Arabise, following the end of the French occupation. In Algeria I found people from the Movement of Arab Nationalists. They used to speak the same way I did, and I used to speak the same as them. They were connected to the movement, whose ideas was not restricted to a single area, but was spread across the length and breadth of the Arab homeland.

Did the nomination on the part of your brothers come as a surprise or did you actually know about their experience with the Movement?

No. I just felt it, because they did not show any opposition to my decision. I just felt that they were the ones who had nominated me. I only knew for certain at a later stage.

This did not happen directly then?

No, at the stage I joined I did not know. I thought that maybe the girls that had contacted me saw I was active in school - talking about patriotism and patriotic subjects, so that's why they approached me. Later I learnt from one of them that my brothers had nominated me.

Did you hear of the movement before this period? Did you have any information about it...Even of a basic sort?

No, I just had a general patriotic feeling. I was impressed by the late Gamal Abdel Nasser; we used to listen to his speeches. He played a major role in raising awareness about colonialism and against Israel. He called for the liberation of Palestine from Israeli occupation, so I was attracted to his ideas. Arab nationalist thought used to attract a very large section of our people,

whether they were middle class or poor. This patriotic nationalist thought included diverse sections of society. Nasserist Arab nationalist thought was the mainstream current at the time, in the midst of all the chaos that surrounded us. It was a really beautiful time back then. We used to work in the Movement of Arab Nationalists as if we were one family. We used to love each other, defend each other, and look after each other. I mean, people used to look after each other in hard times as well as good times, and we did not feel that there was any discrimination. So we carried out this work.

At the time, one issue we discussed was what we could do as women, as sisters. In this stage, prior to 1967, we would carry out social activities. We would visit poor families and help them as much as possible. We used to combat illiteracy, giving classes in schools. We undertook social work as a way of entering society, eradicating illiteracy, and reducing its percentage. On a family level, this could ensure there would be something to give life to this generation. Mothers could now intervene and help children learn, or read to them. We felt we did something important in combatting ignorance and illiteracy. Back then, work tended to be more spontaneous than organised. The neighbourhood I lived in was quite big, and when people would say that there is a demonstration, we used to automatically go, chanting for Arab unity and other demands.

We chanted slogans like 'Palestine is Arab'. This slogan has been around since I was little, and until today we still chant "Palestine is Arab". This is a constant slogan that cannot be erased until Palestine is liberated. We used to also chant for Arab unity. We marched on demonstrations for unity between Egypt and Syria. We were so happy that Egypt and Syria had become united and we called for a stronger unity: a comprehensive Arab unity that could confront colonialism and occupation. In that period, as young men and women, our aspirations were extremely high. We were not very politicised. I mean now we sit and analyse, but back then we were in a patriotic phase of history, and we would all assemble under a patriotic banner. We did not have factionalism, and would never say, "I only participate in the demonstration that my party is organising" or "I will not participate in a demonstration another party is organising, because I don't want their demonstration to succeed more than mine". Back then, we in Palestine, or what is known as the West Bank, did not discriminate between the parties, despite the fact that the PFLP, Jabat al-Nidal, Fateh, and so on were around.

At that stage, the national movement and the Movement of Arab Nationalists and its leaders experienced arrests. The Communist Party and its leaders also endured arrests and harassment, so our work went even more deeply

underground than before. It was a difficult time. Around then, the attack on Samou village took place, and we learnt there were Israeli preparations to occupy the West Bank. We had a sense there would be greater assaults on the borders, so we increased efforts in spreading political consciousness. We engaged in social and party work to raise the people's awareness, and give information on how to confront and deal with that stage.

We were organised into cells, and had weekly party meetings. We had a party official that was responsible for us. We would convey our point of view and our needs to him and he would communicate with the leadership in turn. In the following meeting, he would assign us tasks. We also used to discuss books; a new book each week.

At first it was young women only, with a male official leading. Then, when we had enough trained female cadres, women began to undertake leadership roles. We had no gender segregation. Whoever had capacity and ability would lead the meeting, be they a young woman or a man. Throughout my life I did not work in any party sphere in which there was separate organising based on gender. After we left to outside, and started to witness work centred on women's organisations, I refused to participate in this form of segregation. I told them that I would continue working as before, that I didn't want to work in a women's organisation separate from common national work. So I continued to work in the mixed party structure.