

Al-Hout, Bayan. Interviewed 2012. Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.

In the name of Allah, the most gracious, the most merciful.

My name is Bayan Nuwayhid al-Hout. I'm from Palestine. My family is originally from Lebanon but I was born in Palestine in the city of Jerusalem, in the year 1937, the autumn of '37. I am happy about this, but I wish that I had been born earlier so that I would have known Palestine more, because I was only 10 when we left. Palestine was always in our thoughts and the entire time we were growing up, we always dreamed of return.

In reality, political work and political struggle on the part of all Arabs took place in the decade of the fifties. The decade we grew up in, and came of age, was amongst the most important decades, as far as Arabs are concerned, because of the many revolutions that took place, beginning with Egypt, and not ending with the Iraqi revolution, but continuing with the Algerian revolution.

We lived in Amman and then I studied in Ramallah for a period of two years, and during those two years the most significant thing was the development of my political awareness, and that of my classmates, at college. The problem we faced was the prohibition of political discourse – who was able to speak about politics? Meaning, we were at the point of martial law, jail and even prison camps, so we had to keep our conversations very secret.

At that stage, the most prominent political currents in our eyes pertained to the nationalist movement, specifically the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party and the Arab Nationalist Movement and other parties as well. I'm speaking of Palestine and Jordan at this point, as well as my experience specifically, because it emerged from there. Among other parties there was also the Communist Party and some of the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, and there was "Hizb al-Tahrir", that is the Islamist liberation party, etc.

I grew up in a 100% Arab home and every year in December we always remembered my maternal uncle, a martyr of Lebanese descent who gave his life in the battle of Majdal Shams against the French in Syria, where he served as a military commander. My mother was a little girl at the beginning of the 'Great Arab Revolt' so it was she who taught us the songs of the first Arab revolution, I'm referring to the 'Great Arab Revolt', and original Arab

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identity, meaning there was no question as to my Arab political affiliation. The problem was: the Arab nationalists, or the Ba'athists, or what? Unfortunately nothing came to fruition. We tried our best to get a copy of the Ba'ath constitution, but in college this was impossible.

We returned to Amman. In '56 I graduated from the teacher's institute and began teaching at schools in Amman. I taught for 3 years. The most significant moment was when I turned to a close friend of mine (he was also a relative of mine); I knew that he was a good Ba'athist, and so I asked him to bring me the constitution and bylaws of the Ba'ath party. One afternoon he came over and gave them to me, and that night I did not sleep. I mean, I read the whole thing in just an hour, and after that I read it again more carefully, and with more appreciation, so I finished reading about the principles. I read the details. I felt – and I don't say this for any reason but the truth – as if I was the one who wrote those words. And that points to the perfect harmony I experienced. It's not that I have the ability to write, no, but it shows that the principles resounded deeply within me.

In short, the Ba'ath Party is an Arab party. Unity, Freedom, and Socialism – those are the slogans and its slogans proclaim one Arab nation that has an eternal message. This became a famous phrase to all who deal with these matters. But how to join? I went to that friend and told him the very next day, and he was shocked. I told him I want to join the party. He said: is that possible? There's no one who joins in one day. I said: I want this because I've been thinking a long time, but now – especially after I understood the principles and the thesis and all else, I am confident in myself. So it happened, and he presented the idea to the leaders in Jordan - he himself was one of the leaders. There was a certain respect for him. That led to them asking me to join the party and I didn't have to go undergo a trial period or a friendship period or any intermediary stage. I was sworn in at the first meeting. I remember exactly, there was the wife of doctor Muneef Al-Radhadh who came, and the comrades were surprised that she suddenly showed up so to this meeting, because she did not usually come to such meetings. This was simply a local chapter or cell, and we were only five or six people. I have comrades who were very surprised at my presence. They thought I came to disrupt the meeting, or that I came by chance, or wondering why, or whatever. I was sworn in before starting the meeting.

We were in Jordan at that point, in a very difficult situation, as far as safety was concerned. Speaking was forbidden. This was imposed on us and others from other parties, and we used to know what to do. Which means never repeat the meeting time, so a Wednesday would change to a Thursday or a

Friday or Saturday. It could never be at the same time and never the same place. If the meeting was in someone's house, the next time definitely in another person's house. This protocol was applied to everyone and we were always ready in case we had to face the police. If they would enter any meeting, those of us in the meeting would suddenly be having a party, because it was forbidden to get together as much as we did.

We started to work and there was no doubt at the school that politics were prohibited. I used to have comrades who didn't speak about politics ever, never ever: absolutely not. I mean, even general conversations. So I was surprised to discover they were Ba'athists. And I was surprised, as their situation was surprising for me in Jordan. Of course, the prisons were full in Jordan and our work was difficult in Jordan. In the party there was great respect for the simple daily duties. We used to perform them on a continuous basis, and I used to feel, while I was meditating, that I have to, I must, must ask of God, the most Gracious, the most High, for us to reach some stage and I dreamed that victory was so close.

Because don't forget that I'm talking about those current times. I'm talking about '56 and '57 and '58. It was the Port Said battle, which happened and ended. Meaning the Port Said battle was a great motivator for us to join and I won't ever forget that. I am from the Port Said generation and I learned about the triple attack on Egypt, and how the Egyptian people resisted, and that was so important to us. The biggest event that gave us a feeling of absolute happiness was when the Iraqi revolution triumphed in the year the revolution occurred, 1958. When the revolution started in 1958 in Iraq, the Algerian revolution was already with us, because it was existing and continuous in our blood and our dreams. And we communicated with it in our thoughts. And for sure the film "Jamila Buhayred" was the most important film at that time.

However, when the Iraqi revolution launched, there was a feeling that we the Arabs are strong. And there was a war in Yemen, and, on top of that, we reached unity between Egypt and Syria. Here I want to say that it was in the year of unity, 1958, in February, when it started. I used to visit Damascus because I used to belong to the Syrian university, after my graduation from the teachers institute, along with some of my peers I went to the Syrian University to study or to arrange our papers and our situation.

Section II

We would also carry messages when we would come and go, and there was a great sense of unity amongst the comrades. Many parties were in the struggle

together, and specifically the youth of these organizations – those who were struggling and fighting in all the parties. In reality, from the ranks of the Jordanian army as well, there was a strong unity in the struggle.

Sometimes we didn't know who the message came from, but I had to deliver it to the unknown recipient, me or someone else, we used to carry this message and go, and thanks to my good fortune, God was generous so during the first days of the unity between Egypt and Syria, I was in Damascus. One of my comrades and I were in Damascus, and with all love and frankness, I wish that the coming generations will understand because I felt it was paradise, I mean some version of God's paradise manifest on earth. The days of unity between Egypt and Syria were happy for people. The people's happiness was overwhelming. The national rejoicing and songs that filled the middle of the night into the small hours of the morning – I can't describe it.

But after years and years I think that maybe – just maybe – the overwhelming feelings and sensations and the passions, these are the things that dragged us into these catastrophes later on. I mean, from the very beginning, it was the feelings. Where is the rational analysis? I mean, there we were in 1958, very happy with the unity, but we were miserable during the Nakba and the loss of Palestine. Where was the rational analysis of the Nakba? Where was the rational analysis of '56? At that time, in the moment of '58, we walked away pleased with the realization of unity. But who protects it, who knows its secrets, who guides it? Therefore we were all surprised when the days of the separation arrived just three years of unity. This was a major catastrophe. We as members of the Ba'ath Party didn't doubt that the Ba'ath Party was the strongest among the Arab parties both in terms of number, and intellect, and popularity in all Arab countries. So at that stage we moved to Lebanon. We returned to Lebanon in 1959 and now, I had a different and sad experience, different than how it used to be in Jordan. When we were in Jordan, the work used to be completely secretive with the utmost confidentiality. We came to Lebanon even though the party was forbidden. Even after Minister of the Interior Kamal Jumblatt allowed the parties to carry out political work, we were still basically suspended. Nevertheless, there were some nice intellectual openings, such as Al-Sahafa newspaper. It used to be known secretly that the paper was actually Ba'ath. We used to meet each other and those who came and there I recognized so many faces. In Jordan, we used to hear so-and-so but we weren't able to meet them. Here [in Lebanon] there was more freedom of speech. The work was expanded and I started journalism work. In Lebanon, my life crystalized – around the line of university, the line of journalism work, and the line of party work. There was compatibility between the party work and the journalism work. In reality, there were many of my

peers who used to help me a lot and support the issues and the struggle. Of course, so many important Arab activist personalities used to come to Lebanon. Maybe if I am a journalist, still in my first year of journalism as they say, I should need a lot of time to get a meeting from them. Because there was also the magazine al-Sayaad, which is now gone. In that stage [of the career], you publish the interviews and put forth your best efforts, but there's no profound competency and there's no aptitude to pioneer in this subject or any other subject, etc. So I used to feel that this was a beautiful national service – you really get to know these individuals and conduct the interviews with them. I remember I received a phone call at the al-Sayaad Magazine saying that, after an hour you should come quickly. They told me the address of the hotel and I asked, why after an hour? They said because he is leaving for the airport in three hours. Guess who that person was that they were talking about: it was the Mahdi bin Baraka, so I went there right away. And it was one of the most beautiful interviews in my life. I met him for half an hour, I remember, and there were others besides the Mahdi bin Baraka, but they did not want to reveal their names. I remember deep-rooted Arab activists who were well known to the generations of that era. One was Zaki Al-Arsuzy and he was one of the founders and also one of the old Ba'athists. He was from al-Iskenderun and he was one of those who demanded the freedom of al-Iskenderun. So I allowed myself to say that I am from a generation who used to believe that we are making mistakes and feel ashamed about how we used to demand a free Palestine while we haven't yet freed al-Iskenderun. We haven't dreamed of living in a time where we can feel as if freeing Palestine is a dream that has come to be reality. It's a problem; I don't know where to go from here. And suddenly I found on the phone Zaki al-Arsuzi and I asked him, where are you? He said, No, I will come to you, to al-Sayaad magazine. And in less than half an hour, he arrived to Al-Sayaad. The weather was really hot and there was not enough air conditioning. And he talked about the all the beginnings and the struggle, etc.

But I return to say that, seriously, this is not enough. For example, the party used to be popular in Lebanon, very widespread. I did a lot for Algeria – I wrote tens of articles on the subject of Algeria. But, through writing, I felt that there is no ability for the party to do more.