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Response to the Nakba in the 1950s and the Beginnings of Fateh

The Palestinian people suffered a great loss with the Nakba. Perhaps my father, my family and I didn't suffer as much as most others, as my father had married a Lebanese woman from Sidon (after my mother passed away), so we fled to her house in Sidon; she had a two-story house there. This was in the early 1950s.

In Sidon, my father would take me to a café – I think it was called al-Qazzaz (the Glassmaker) café, something like that, because the entire shop front was made of glass. People from Haifa could meet there and enquire about each other. Many Palestinians met there too - it was an intellectual meeting place for Palestinians. I used to listen to my father speak... as I revisit these memories, and that period, it's worth saying that most discussions were on the certainty of our return home on May 15 - that was the day Arab armies were meant to enter Palestine. So the few Palestinians who had money didn't bother with renting and furnishing a house, it wasn't seen as necessary. People were confident of returning home - they believed it was only a matter of weeks; the Palestinian psyche couldn't accept this total rupture was long-term, and would endure.

After May 15th, I began hearing new conversations: people were saying it was a matter of weeks – just a month or two. The most pessimistic would say that it was a matter of three months. People would get angry, and start challenging this person, asking how could it take three months? This was in the 1950s. If we were to divide the 1950s into stages, this would be the stage when people believed that return was certain, and the story couldn't last long. I consider the 1950s to be made up of more than one stage, and this was the first one.

I witnessed the second stage when I moved to Damascus at the end of 1949 or the beginning of 1950, to continue my studies. My eldest brother had secured a respectable job at the post, cable, and telephone centre. I left Sidon, and went to Damascus to continue my studies there, enrolling in a high school, where I made many friends - there was a large number of Palestinians at the school. It was called the National Secondary School in Saroujah Market. I noticed then a number of Palestinians had joined Arab parties: some were

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members of the Movement of Arab Nationalists (MAN) from its inception, some were members of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, which was also beginning, since the Palestinian cause drew new recruits to these parties. Everyone realised that return would not happen quickly – everyone was looking for a way to achieve return and liberation through party struggle.

Many I knew joined the Movement of Arab Nationalists and the Ba'ath party. I lived with a friend called Abdel Muttaleb al-Saqqa, we shared a room, splitting the rent and living expenses. He was a member of a party that attracted my attention – the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party - it attracted my attention because of its military focus, its leaning towards armed struggle, and its extreme discipline. I didn't only see this discipline in Abdel Muttaleb, it was also apparent in many other friends at school. Some friends like Nabil al-Sukhun and his siblings - I don't know what happened to them or where they are now. When we talked, they would address me as the 'southerner', and refer me as 'southerner', whenever they introduced me to others. They were referring to Greater Syria, and the fact that Palestine was the southern part of Greater Syria, meaning that Palestine was part of their country, and so they were committed to liberating it. This militant tendency attracted many Palestinians to the SSNP: I really liked them, and perhaps I still do, but I never joined any party. I felt I was searching for something else - I still feel that I'm a pan-Arab nationalist. From then on, I've never seen a possibility for liberating Palestine outside of the framework of the pan-Arab cause. There was also the Communist party, and there were Palestinian members of it. There were also the Islamic movements. There was the Muslim Brotherhood.

In Damascus, I met Khalid al-Hassan and his brother Ali, who were from Haifa, who were members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Mustafa al-Siba'ai was head of the Brotherhood, and later I learnt that Khalid al-Hassan had left the movement. In 1954, I was in al-Jamarek, walking home. I saw a man walking towards me slowly and a big group walking behind him, and when we got closer, we ran towards each other and shook hands enthusiastically: it was Ali al-Hassan, Khalid's brother. He took me to his house which was near mine. I understood he was a Muslim Brotherhood leader for the central region of Syria, and that he represented significant and dangerous competition for Mustafa al-Siba'ai... you see, at that time Palestinians relied on Arab parties, and the struggle within such parties, as a means of advancement towards Palestine, return and liberation. Another party was also the Islamic Hizb ut-Tahrir – perhaps they used the word *tahrir* (liberation) to attract Palestinians to the party. Taqi el-Din al-Nabhani, the man who established the party, was Palestinian. This was the second stage. The second stage overlapped with the first: in the first stage return was believed to be certain.

All the youth had big questions - I remember in high school a group of us decided to establish a small organisation amongst ourselves, and we used to meet in an orchard, where one of the student's fathers was working, and where we would meet at night. The big questions we had were: why did Palestine fall? Why are we refugees? What was the real problem? Where was the flaw? These were big questions, and I remember that, despite being young and lacking in experience or political culture, we came to a few conclusions. I remember those conclusions affectionately, because they were correct. First, we concluded there was a power imbalance between the Israeli enemy and ourselves. This was true in terms of training, military equipment, and numbers. There were 5,000 Palmach fighters in Haifa attacking 350 Palestinian fighters at most. The second conclusion was that we didn't know our enemy very well, and we needed to know him better. The third was that we needed to understand our cause better, and to understand its historic context and its history. We were poor at that time, but we needed to buy books. So one of us would buy a book, and when he finished reading it, he would pass it on to another of us, and so on. Then we would sit and discuss the lessons we learned from the book.

This developed, and we discovered that while we had been organising in our group, others had also organised into similar ones, with everyone engaged in the Palestinian cause. The Nakba Generation was so busy on this; I do want to emphasise this. The Nakba Generation was working hard on the matter, each group in their own way. We started expanding our organisation, and meeting people, and building relations with other Palestinians. This was the third stage, which overlapped with the previous two. Despite the surge in membership of various parties, we had an ambiguous sense that party membership wasn't the right way to go about this, and that there had to be another way. The fact that the Palestinian cause was disintegrating fed into this feeling: the Palestinian people, as the main party to the conflict, had become absent from the demographic map, and we now appeared as refugees, seeking a humanitarian solution. The Palestinian cause was erased from the United Nations and was replaced with the Middle East problem. The Palestinian cause was now only mentioned in the reports of the High Commissioner for Palestinian Refugees Affairs. Even in the Arab league it was replaced with the Arab-Israeli conflict. When Khrushchev met with Abdel Nasser, Abdel Nasser told Khrushchev about the Palestinian cause, and asked the Soviet Union, which supports third world countries and national liberations, to stand by the Palestinian people. We read this in the newspapers at that time. After Abdel Nasser finished asking Khrushchev for the Soviet Union to support the Palestinian people, and their just cause

Khrushchev replied, “where are the Palestinian people? I don’t see a Palestinian people.”

This is what was taking place; this is what we discussed among ourselves. All this contributed to the maturing of a Palestinian consciousness that was seeking the correct path. In many meetings we reached the point of boredom, repeating ourselves too often: the how, the why, and what are we going to do. The biggest question was what to do. Mahmoud Abu Ghaidah, a friend of mine - who last I heard of was in America and I don’t know where he is now - in one of the sessions, said “brothers, if we have recorded what we said these last two years we would find that we have been repeating ourselves: until when?” The groups grew larger. I met Abdullah al-Dannan in Tal Benin, where both of us lived for a while, and we used to meet, discuss, and argue on the same things. I met Adel Abdel Karim with whom I discussed the same issues as with other groups. The meetings grew larger until the idea matured that the Palestinian people needed to take their cause and fate into their own hands, the need for a Palestinian armed revolution, and that we can never count on the Arab regimes. The Arab regimes filled us with promises that another round, and liberation, are coming. Adel Abdel Karim used to repeat a phrase that he read in a story in *Kalilah wa Dimnah*. Some mice wanted to protect themselves from a cat who oppressed them, so they convened a conference, and decided to tie a bell around the cat’s neck. This way the mice would hear the cat coming and run away. The question proposed in *Kalilah wa Dimnah* was: who would tie the bell? At the end of every session Adel would say, “who will tie the bell?” The path to an armed Palestinian revolution, as way to national liberation, began to develop in the Palestinian consciousness of that generation. But the issue still remained as to who would tie the bell. We graduated and went our separate ways - some went to Kuwait, to the Gulf, or Qatar, in search for a living.

Returning to the nucleus of the organisations, we said we found an imbalance in military capabilities between the enemy and ourselves, and we had reached the conclusion that once we graduated from high school, we should join a military academy, and we took a decision amongst ourselves to do so. I had finished high school and traveled to Homs with Mahmoud Abu Ghaidah. Why did I travel to Homs? I went there to see Rashid Jarbou’. Rashid Jarbou’ was one of my teachers at the school in Haifa, one of the Palestinian officers who joined the Syrian army. We called them the 1948 officers. These officers had wanted to fight in the Arab Salvation army. He was an officer and responsible for military security at the headquarters in Homs. I visited him and asked for his help in joining a military academy. I was astonished when I went to his office, to find high-ranking officers sitting there. He was

responsible for security, which meant his position in the army wasn't high ranking, yet some of them were afraid of him. He had a very unique charisma; he was dressed in his military uniform, which I really liked at that time. He sat me with the officers until he finished with them and when they left, he took me to the officers club in Homs, and bought me lunch. I met some of the Palestinian officers at the club, and remember officers Samih al-Shahed, Abdel Aziz al-Wajih, Samir al-Khatib, and Abdel Rahim - I will remember his full name in a second. I met all of them at the club – we were all so proud of these officers.

There was a hunger and an eagerness to fulfil Palestinian military capacities – the lack of such capacities was one of the reasons for the Nakba. He tried to help me. I underwent a medical check, which I failed, then they asked me to undergo some surgery, and return again. Then they asked me to provide a certificate, which I didn't have at that time. This was in 1953 or the end of 1952. I gained my high school certificate in 1952 and immediately tried to join a military academy. I wasn't successful in joining a military academy, and was devastated because I couldn't join.

I heard from brother Abu Mazen that he had a group in Damascus - even though I knew him, I never knew that he had a group, and he didn't know that I had one. But whenever we met, we would talk about the same desires, and the same concerns. They were thinking about the same issues as us: this is a phenomenon we need to pause and look at - the entire Nakba Generation was searching for military capabilities as a way of returning to Palestine, and liberation.

The second thing we discovered, which I mentioned earlier, was the need to know our enemy on one hand, and on the other to know our cause. We continue on this until today. Lets return to developing this idea: it was the Palestinian armed revolution, but "who would tie the bell?" Then many brothers travelled to the Gulf States after university, in search of work – we were in abject poverty at that time, and needed to find any job opportunity to be able to support our families. The Gulf provided this chance, and it may have contributed indirectly to developing the idea, of who would tie the bell. It seemed that when people were more financially stable, they were able to better think about the Palestinian cause, and dedicate more time to it. This is basically what happened. Fateh was established in Kuwait. Why Kuwait? The idea was conceived in Damascus; the interaction within the movement happened there and most activity happened also in Damascus.

On the subject of this eagerness for military activity - there was a desire for conscription, as we wanted Palestinians to do military service and make them equal to Syrians on that level. Many demonstrations were held: I participated in all the demonstrations, but the demonstration I remember best was the biggest one. It was the demonstration held at al-Salhiya Gate. Khalid al-Hassan was leading it, and we stood for a long time chanting for liberating Palestine and for the draft. Then the chief of staff came out to the demonstration - the headquarters of the military was in a very old building, he was tall, and had yellow skin. His name was Adnan al-Maliki. Adnan al-Maliki came out to the demonstrators and gave an excellent speech: he swore to us that he sympathised with us, and that he will review the issue, and soon Palestinians will be drafted in the army just like Syrians. The activity in Damascus was huge; we used to demonstrate in front of the UNRWA offices, where there were projects that reeked with the smell of resettlement. We used to meet, gather in numbers, and demonstrate at the UNRWA offices chanting, raising awareness and a warning. A delegation of us would meet with officials and refuse resettlement as an alternative to return, declaring that we must return to Palestine. That stage was the burning activity stage - this generation was not silent, it was dynamic and eager to find a way for return and liberation. This was our fixed and central goal, and that justified the lives of our generation.

We faced many problems in the newspapers, especially when they wrote about the Palestinian cause, and we had many concerns about the articles we read - the BBC in London was disseminating many rumours. They used to say that the Palestinians sold their lands, and some newspapers, out of ignorance, would repeat such statements. A group of us would meet and visit the editor of that newspaper, discuss the situation with him, and present him with names and facts. For example, the Sarsrouq's are among those who sold their lands, but such families were mainly Syrian or Lebanese, and we would also explain the situation of Palestinians. We had read a book by the head of the Yafa municipality; I think Hussein Haikal was his name. The book was called The Palestinian Cause, and discussed such issues in some detail, as it was a huge book - an encyclopedia. It was our reference point at that time, in order to correct facts to newspapers in the country. Lets return to the Gulf: in the Gulf people became financially secure, and began thinking of the Palestinian cause seriously. Maturity increased among the people, and political culture and knowledge increased as well. People began to realise that the Palestinian armed revolution was the only way, and that the revolution needed to start despite all the Arab circumstances that had prevented such a dream from being realised. In 1960 Adel and Abdullah came to visit me. I was very happy when I found out that Abu Mazen was in this movement. When I

went to Kuwait people took me to some houses of those who were in the movement. I was surprised once, when we visited someone that I didn't know, they didn't tell him his name. When we entered, his son received and welcomed us, and they called him Sa'id. I didn't know who Sa'id was. We sat in the lobby and his father walked in, and it was Khalid al-Hassan. It was a very intimate meeting. I told him "you are one of us!" and he replied to me: "you are one of us". This is how we started – our personal relationships supported our clandestine work, because it was work that was built on trust.