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Joining Fateh in the post-Karameh Context

I want to tell you my story. My name is May Sayegh and I'm a member of Fateh. I was a member of Fateh's Revolutionary Council and the Secretary General of the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW). I'm currently a member of the Palestinian National Council.

I want to tell you how I joined Fateh. I won't tell you about the period that preceded joining Fateh. I was psychologically prepared to continue the struggle I had begun as a child in Gaza. I continued this struggle throughout my time at university until I moved to Jordan. I was a former member of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. I left the party after it split. I was looking for a way to continue the struggle that I started as a child. I believe in the complete liberation of Palestine and the entire Arab World. Before the launch of the revolution, there had been rumours that preparations were being made for political activity and struggle. The Palestinian people never accepted their situation, circumstances or their dispersion. There were continuous efforts to resolve our predicament. What were we meant to do? Should we have accepted our situation? But who could accept such a situation, the Palestinian refugees in the camps? The Palestinians in the cities? Should we simply have accepted that Palestine was lost and started a new page?

I started looking for these people. I looked for them in the parties, in leaflets and in over the radio stations. But when the Battle of Karameh took place it changed a lot of things about the Palestinian reality; it changed things in me. I came into a situation where we didn't only need to liberate Palestine, but we had also just lost the West Bank. Huge obstacles were placed in front of our ambitions that limited our movement. What should we do? I remember when the 1967 War started I listened to the radio all day, at that time there were no televisions, laying on the floor and banging my head against the floor. I didn't do anything except cry all day. When the Battle of Karameh started I could hear the artillery fire from our house. I started wondering how I would find these people and join them. I didn't know what to do. We wanted to establish a first aid clinic. I gathered a group of my female neighbours and went to Jamal al-Sah'er Hospital. We stayed there all day. Then they told us that the wounded would not be coming to that hospital. I went back home feeling helpless and not knowing what to do.

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We held meetings among ourselves discussing what we could do. At that time that Jews had exiled Tawadod Abdel Hadi who was a veteran activist. A collective formed around Tawadod. The number of women joining this collective started to increase. We started discussing what we could do. They agreed that the best thing we could do was to weave sweaters for the revolutionaries in the Jordan valley. They made embroidery to sell. With the proceeds they bought wool and made the sweaters. However, this wasn't the form of resistance I wanted, I wanted real struggle. I didn't know how to make embroidery, or weave or anything like that. I went to the meetings and at those meeting we heard news; news of operations conducted here or there. However, I felt this wasn't my ambition. One day one of the ladies around Tawadod told me someone wanted to see me. I asked her who it was and she said someone. I told her if this someone was from the people I'm searching for then I would see them. She said that the meeting would be in such and such house at 10am. When I went there I found that that someone was Abu Iyad. I knew Abu Iyad from my university days. He was the president of the student union. He asked me "Don't you recognize me May?" I looked at him but his appearance had changed. He was the president of the student union and I didn't know him personally. He invited me on that day to join Fateh. He gave me some of the leaflets published by Fateh. We agreed on meetings and modes of organising. I discovered on that day that there was a women's organisation that was being formed and he invited me to join it.

Fateh Women's Committee in Jordan

I joined the committee of the Tanzim and my contribution to struggle was developing. I stopped having a life outside Fateh. I had children whom I fed and took to school and then I would return to work. Work continued day and night. There was a lot of work and it kept increasing. We opened centres in all the camps in Jordan especially here in Amman. These centres were for recruiting women. Palestinian women were side-lined and forgotten to the life in the camps. We opened nurseries, kindergartens, and centres for women's employment as well as literacy centres. We taught women to work. We taught them that only through work, supporting themselves and helping their husbands in maintaining the household could they liberate themselves as human beings. We used to sell the things they made and give them the proceeds. We recruited a large number of women. This was in Fateh before the creation of the GUPW. Then these centres merged with each other. For GUPW, in 1969 they exiled sister Issam Abdel Hadi after she had already been imprisoned in Palestine. Issam Abdel Hadi was the second president of

the GUPW. There was a union for Palestinian Women earlier headed by the late Zlikha al-Shahabi.

When the first conference for the PLO was held on the 1 January 1965 in Jerusalem, Issam Abdel Hadi became the first head of the GUPW. Then she was exiled to Jordan. On the occasion of her arrival in Jordan the PLO or the Department of Popular Organisation and brother Farouq al-Qaddoumi held a meeting for women from all the Palestinian factions. At that meeting a general secretariat for the GUPW was elected. Sister Issam Abdel Hadi was elected as the general secretary. I was elected head of the cultural committee as a result of my membership in Fateh and my activism in the camps. I was elected to the committee along with a group of women from Fateh. All our efforts were now unified. All the efforts, whether in Fateh or the PLO, were directed in one direction. Thus activity in the camp increased.

GUPW's joining fee was set at 10 Jordanian dinars. This was a huge amount of money for most Palestinian women especially those in the camps. When I visited the camps I told them the joining fee was only 10 pennies. Applications to join GUPW increased significantly.

Then we decided we wanted military training. All the women, despite being housewives, decided they wanted to undertake military training. We can also be Fedayeen; it's not something only men can be! We requested military training for women. We opened the first military training camp for women. Great numbers of women, married, single and even pregnant women asked to join the military training. After we opened the first camp other camps were opened in Amman, Irbid and Salt. After the military training we started requesting to be armed. This was a very difficult issue for the Central Committee and they said it was impossible. We asked why it was impossible? We told them that women have trained like men do. The social constraints preventing women from being active outside their homes were gradually collapsing. We told them we weren't requesting women to be sent to the front, but at least to be allowed to defend the camps. It was a very difficult period back then. The camps were under the threat of Israeli air strikes and raids. They refused. I went to see Abu Ammar and convinced him as to my point of view. I told him that when women carry arms they sense their individuality and feel they are real fighters. Abu Ammar then silenced all opposition and ordered the arming of women. You should have seen the first night when they gave us weapons; new weapons still rapped in the plastic. Women in Wehdat stayed up all night cleaning the grease from the weapons and singing the revolution's songs. It was a very sweet moment of victory for the struggle of Palestinian women.

However, the Palestinian resistance was broken and we were forced to move to Beirut. The forces and the revolution scattered everywhere. A large number of women that remained in Jordan suffered considerably and on many levels. I was forced to leave to Beirut because our house was searched more than once. They threatened to kill my children and my husband so I left for Beirut. The struggle continued in Beirut.

In Amman many things had happened that should be recorded. For example when a husband beats his wife she would come to us. She would tell us that every time she goes back home after being at the centre her husband beat her. We would ask her husband to come to the centre. We would tell him that in the Vietnamese Revolution when a husband prevents his wife from working the other women would beat him. We would tell him every time he beats her we would let the other women beat him in the street! We would ask him if accepts that? He would then leave her alone. We used to read to women about what was happening in the world and tell them about other revolutions such as the Vietnamese and the Algerian revolutions, especially the Algerian revolution as it was the closest to our experience. We would tell them how Algerian women used to take to the hills and the groves to fight side by side with men. The women would always answer by saying that it is true that women fought side by side with men but when the revolution ended they returned home and this is what they feared would happen with the Palestinian revolution. We would tell them about the role of women in the Cuban socialist revolution. Educating women was widespread. We recruited large numbers of women in Jordan for national work, especially in the camps. I will tell you a story about women in the cities not the camps. Women in the cities used to gather in the morning. They call it morning coffee in English. Each morning they would donate some money. The women came to hear the news of the revolution, the role of women in the various revolutions in the world and what they needed to do. They would eat cookies, drink coffee and at the end of the session donate some money. We used to take the money and buy wool or cloth and give it to the women in the camp who would make sweaters for the Fedayeen. We also used the money to buy underwear for the Fedayeen.

The situation was different in the camps. There were centres for employment; some centres taught weaving and tailoring. We even opened centres to teach carpentry in the camps. As for the Ashbal (lion cubs), parents used to send their children to train in the Ashbal camps instead of leaving them playing in the streets.

When we first entered the camp people were afraid of us. The women were afraid. In the beginning we entered the camp to visit the families of martyrs. We visited the families of martyrs because they were more enthusiastic than others and because they were the ones that needed more attention. After the revolution intensified, the number of Palestinian women joining the revolution increased. They joined the women's organisations and the GUPW. When the women saw us in the street they would shout "Fedayeen, Fedayeen" and shut the door. When they opened their doors they would beg us to train their daughters. When the military operations escalated we used to stay on watch at night in the camps. Women would make us coffee and tea all night to help us stay awake. This is how the relationship between women the revolution developed. It was gradual. However, this relationship didn't have the chance to continue and develop.

Some say that we couldn't change the social customs and traditions. We say there have been developments. The traditions and customs and the 'halal' and the 'haram' are entrenched in the social structure. To change them and to change the institutions of law and legislation requires a long struggle. It was very hard for us. The most important thing for us was to improve the situation of Palestinian women and to get them to join the revolution where they would be educated. Changing society's traditions and customs is a very long process and a very difficult issue. You need authority to help pass laws and legislation for the society to accept the changes. They criticise us by saying that we didn't do enough to develop the social situation in the camps. The work we did was part of social work. We couldn't do more than we did, especially as the leadership weren't strong believers women's liberation. For them, women were a complimentary part of the struggle not a primary one. For example, Abu Ammar would have compromised on our rights if it meant improving relations with another Palestinian faction. He would compromise on the rights of women.

I will tell you something; when the GUPW was formed here in Amman we rented a building in Jabal al-Lweibdeh. Fateh paid the rent. I was a member of the general secretariat of the General Union of Palestinian Writers. When the Union of Palestinian Writers moved to Amman they didn't have an office. I offered our office for them to hold meetings there. Most of the women's work was in the morning and then they would return to the camps, their jobs and their commitments. I told the Union that they could use the office in the evening and hold their meetings there. As I said I was a member of the General Secretariat. So we used to meet and work there. Then we decided to form a preparatory committee to prepare for the conference of the General Union of Palestinian Writers. But this never happened as Black September

took place while I was attending the preparatory committee in Beirut. When agreement on the General Secretariat was reached – and I was behind most of the efforts - to satisfy the other factions they compromised on women’s representation. They argued that one person couldn’t be a member of two general secretariats. I was the General Secretary of the GUPW. In our internal rules of procedure we are allowed to be a member of two general secretariats as long as we are not the general secretaries of more than one union. I had the right to be a member of the general secretariat of the General Union of Palestinian Writers and be the General Secretariat of GUPW. They deleted my name to satisfy one of the Palestinian factions; a very small Palestinian faction. They compromised on the women’s quota.

Beginning of Fateh Women’s Military Training in Jordan

There were a large number of women in the training camp. The first camp had about 50 women. I remember it was close to Madaba. Abu al-Raed drove us there in his car. Brother Abu Saleh taught us how to shoot. Brothers Abu Daoud and Naji A’loush ran the camp. They believed in women’s participation.

I remember when the first Fateh conference was held in Amman they included only 5 women in the conference. I was one of those five women. The leadership committee which we were part of was comprised of 11 women but they chose only 5 women to participate in the conference. At the conference we discussed our cause. We discussed the fact that our organisation (GUPW) was very big and yet it was not formally recognised. We asked why we weren’t allowed into Fateh’s various committees such as the Central Committee, the Regional Committee, or the Popular Committee. We asked why these committees weren’t joint committees. It was very difficult then. The discussions were very difficult. They didn’t appoint any of us to the Higher Committee. Instead they considered us the leadership of Palestinian women in Jordan. We weren’t even included in the Regional Committee. We were considered a district committee, which was lower ranking than a region committee. We only had one representative in the Regional Committee. They considered us as a district committee and the head of the district committee was our representative to the Regional Committee.

There were also committees for the popular base, which were independent from each other. They belittled our role at that conference by assigning us the same level as a district committee. There was also another committee, I forgot its name, that acted as a mediator. They recognised us but it was a nominal recognition. It was the first time we could discuss our cause at the heart of

Fateh's conference. We then protested against the ranking they had adopted. Abu Ammar started saying that they would recognise us after they have met the organisation. We asked him what organisation? We are the organisation. Half of Amman's women are members of the organisation. He refused to listen and said that they need to meet the entire organisation. We told him that the organisation was very big but he refused to listen.

We discussed the issue within the women's committee. Some of the members in the women's committee were very strict on maintaining the secretive nature of the organisation in all its aspects. The organisation was still clandestine then. When we proposed meeting with Abu Ammar they found it very difficult to attend. Then we told Abu Ammar that some of the women found it very difficult to meet him. We agreed that the meeting should be with the circle committees. In our organisation there was the leadership committee, then the regional committees, then the circle committees and then the base. We agreed that they wouldn't meet the base but would be meet with circle committees. We held the meeting in the big garden of the organisation's house. The house was huge and consisted of six rooms but it couldn't accommodate everyone. When Abu Ammar, Abu Iyad and Abu el-Lutuf came to the meeting they were surprised by the size of the organisation. We told them that the attendees were the members of circle committees and that we didn't invite the base to the meeting because the house wasn't big enough. I remember that two sisters who had shared the same room didn't know that both of them were members of Fateh. This is how clandestine our organisation was. They were very surprised and happy to find each other at the meeting.

This meeting facilitated the arming of women. After we were armed many obstacles restraining Palestinian women's in the revolution in Jordan fell. Women set out to achieve their freedom and their humanity through the revolution. I meet many people now and they tell me their stories. They say that this period was one of personal progression and advancement for their families as well. They make me happy and sad at the same time. They made me sad because it was an experience that didn't have the chance to continue and develop. The fire of the revolution purified many of the false things that surrounded Palestinian women. It allowed them to enjoy their freedom as equal revolutionaries who both stand on guard as well as fulfilling the commitments of their household, consolidate their position in society and at the same time work and struggle. Women stopped being unemployed. The workshops and the things we did are what really liberated women. We tried to transfer this experience to Lebanon; but lets continue talking about the training camps. There were many camps not just our camp. Sisters from

Kuwait came along with Salwa Abu Khadrah to train in the camps. Salwa fought to bring women from Kuwait to train them in Jordan. She brought a huge number, I can't remember the exact figure, but I think it was around 25 or 30 young women who joined one of the training camps. Then women from Fateh's branches in Syria and Lebanon came to train. It was a wonderful experience. The horizon was open to develop the capabilities and abilities of women further. But this experience was never completed.

In the organisation in Jordan, I mean the women's committee, we considered ourselves to be the women's Regional Committee in Jordan. The person who used to meet with us was brother Hani al-Hasan who represented the Regional Committee. Then brother Sameeh Abu Kwaik (Qadri) started meeting with us. Qadri was the president of the women's committee. We were a complete Fateh organisation. Yet we were still separated from the main structure. This is what we demanded from the conference. We demanded that the women's organisation be incorporated in the general structure of the movement. It was a very difficult issue for them. I told you how it was decided in the end. They decided to keep both organisations separate; and only meet at the level of the regional committee and the movement's committee. They also decided to keep the base cells separate.