

Bashur, Ma'an. Interviewed 2012. Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.¹

My name is Maen Bashour. I'm the former General Secretary of the Pan-Arab Conference, the general coordinator of the Gathering of Popular Lebanese Committees, and also the coordinator of the Popular Campaign for the Support of Palestine and Iraq, established in 2002.

My relationship with Palestine started in my childhood. The scene that really affected me as a child was how people in Tripoli welcomed Fawzi al-Qawuqji, commander of the Arab Liberation Army, on his return from Palestine. I was four years old. I went out on the street to see what was happening in Tripoli. All Tripoli was in the streets to welcome the commander of the ALA, who was from Tripoli. On the same day two big families settled scores, and a few people died. This incident had a profound effect on my life: it drew my attention to an important cause called Palestine. As I grew older I discovered how important this cause was, and I also discovered how important causes are lost by trivial conflicts. I grew up loving Palestine and hating internal conflict. As I moved through the various stages of education, especially high school, I grew more attached to the Palestinian cause. I participated in demonstrations supporting the cause of Palestine, and all the other related causes, especially the Suez War that the Israelis, British and French waged against Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt. That was a turning point in my life that connected me to Palestine and pan-Arabism. A few years later I joined the Movement of Arab Nationalists (MAN) for two years. I was still sixteen years old then. MAN focused a lot on the Palestinian cause. One of its slogans was revenge against the Zionist enemy that stole our land. After that I joined Ba'ath party. I was one of the people who joined the Ba'ath party through their Palestinian branch in Lebanon, rather than through their Lebanese branch. My superiors in Ba'ath were also Palestinians, most notably the late engineer Marwan Khartabit, who died with Emile Bustani in plane crash in 1963, and the Palestinian historian, the martyr Dr Abdel Wahhab Kaialli. These two men had a great effect in developing my awareness of the Palestinian cause in its different facets, especially the historic side, as martyr Kaialli had written one of the most important books about the history of Palestine.

We lived developments in the Palestinian cause through party circles. In my work at Ba'ath's newspaper, al-Aharar, I met the first groups of Fateh, especially its founders, the martyrs Yasser Arafat, Abu Jihad and Abu Youssef al-Najjar. They visited Beirut often, bringing the first reports of al-Asifah's first military operations. These operations are considered the start of the Palestinian revolution. My relationship with the Palestinian revolution started when I was a Ba'athist. It began with the start of the Palestinian revolution. At

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that time it wasn't easy to distinguish between our pan-Arab struggle and our struggle for Palestine. I was imprisoned more than once as a result of participating in demonstrations to support the Palestinian revolution, and for fundraising with my brothers for al-Asifah Forces, in its early days. I was also arrested following participating in an important demonstration, and I think Ba'ath was the only party to join the Palestinians on this protest: to protest the death of Jalal Ka'aoush who was tortured to death by the Lebanese security forces. All these experiences strengthened our relationship to the Palestinian cause. The struggle was beginning to take a new form, and we were understanding it more and more.

At the American University I had a strong relationship with a new Palestinian organization, which was powerful at the American University. The faction was called the Palestinian Liberation Front (PLF). Many of my friends were members of this organization and we coordinated our work daily. This is how my relationship with PLF began - at the university. My relationship with Fateh's leadership began through my work at al-Aharar newspaper while I was a student. 1967 shook me as it shook many Arabs. I remember the day I submitted my PhD application to one of the American universities. I received the acceptance letter a few weeks after the June 1967 war. I found it very difficult to go to the United States, while our land was under occupation and our people defeated by the Zionist enemy. We started preparing to participate actively in the Palestinian revolution. Ba'ath took a decision that all Palestinian Ba'athist should join Fateh. Khalid al-Yashruti was behind this proposal. Al-Yashruti was a member of pan-Arab leadership of Ba'ath, and a Palestinian from a family with big religious influence. They were from the Sufi order of Shadhili. We spent many evenings in his house, and there we met Fateh's first leaders.

In 1968, the Ba'ath came to power in Iraq. We considered this an opportunity to establish a pan-Arab organization where we could recruit volunteers from all Arab countries to join Palestinian Feda'i activity. We saw the Palestinian cause as an Arab cause for which all Arab cadres should take responsibility. We formed the Arab Liberation Front (ALF). I went to Jordan after receiving training in Iraq. We made sure this experience at the ALF should remain independent of the Ba'ath party itself. I had the honour of participating in drafting the founding statement of the AFL. The statement focused on the unity between the Palestinians and Arabs and warned the Palestinian revolution against closing in on itself. The great thinker Michel Aflaq, founder of the Ba'ath Party, the great thinker Menh al-Solh, and I wrote the outline of this statement in Beirut, in 1969. In the statement we said we had to be careful not to move from false hope to unjustified despair. We celebrated the achievements of the Palestinian revolution, and warned that these achievements might be lost if the Palestinian revolution remained with a narrow, country-specific scope. We emphasized the importance of the independence of Palestinian Feda'i activity from an official Arab relationship. I can say I lived the Palestinian cause with my classmates in school. I lived in Ras Beirut where many middle class or educated Palestinian families that had

come to Lebanon lived. Many of my friends were Palestinians. Many people thought I was Palestinian because my Palestinian friends affected my dialect. At the university we interacted with our Palestinian brothers in the PLF and MAN.

At the time there was a disagreement between Ba'ath and MAN as a result of the disagreement between Ba'ath and Nasser. One day Asa'ad Abdel Rahman, who was a student leader in MAN, and who later on became a member of the PLO's Executive Committee, told me they wanted to disseminate a statement that night in the name of Abtal al-Awdah (Heroes of Return). It was known that anyone taking part in disseminating any statement issued by Abtal al-Awdah would be harassed. He said no MAN members would sleep in the university dorms that night. He hoped we would disseminate their statement because no one would suspect that Ba'athists would disseminate MAN statements. The next day the students in the university dorms woke up to find a statement by Abtal al-Awdah. They interrogated every known member of MAN and it became clear that none of them slept in their dorms that night. Everyone was wondering who disseminated the statement. This story gives you an idea of the level of interaction between all of us for the Palestinian cause. We forgot other political differences about the Arab world for the Palestinian cause.

This feeling continued all my life. It remained the engine for many of our struggles and it kept me attached to the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian revolution. Then we formed the ALF and I was one of its leaders in its early stages. I stayed in Jordan for a few months moving between Amman and the Jordan Valley. Despite my young age I was the political commissar. We had other colleagues in the ALF from Lebanon such as Bishara Barhaj, the head of ALF in Lebanon, who later became the Lebanese interior minister and was elected a few times to the Lebanese parliament. We still work together. There are many events that drew me to the Palestinian cause. We considered the Palestinian cause was our central cause and the cause for which we lived. Our differences within the Ba'ath party emerged from our opposition to the Iraqi regime's position towards the Palestinian cause, especially when the Iraqi army didn't come to the aid of Palestinian resistance during September 1970.

This position and others led to party crises for the Ba'ath, and after some arguments, we left. We translated our belief in Palestine, and the pan-Arab nature of the Palestinian cause, into practice by establishing the ALF. The ALF had Palestinian, Lebanese, Syrian, and Iraqi members, as well as volunteers from the Arab Maghreb, Sudan, and the Arab peninsula. The ALF lost many martyrs from Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Tunisia and Algeria.