

Abu Mayzar, Mohammed. Interviewed 2011. Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.

The Democratic Secular State Programme

I also remember meeting Abdelkarim Gharib, the Algerian ambassador in Paris; he wasn't the ambassador at the embassy; he was Algerian ambassador at the Algerian cooperative. The cooperative looked after Algerians' affairs, and Gharib had enormous responsibilities, and the Algerian ambassador Rida Malek played a great role as well. There were also a group of Egyptian brothers such as Dr. Anwar Abdelmalek, Lutfallah Suleiman and others. At all of these meetings I was asked the same question: you in Fatah (they distinguished between Fatah and the PLO), are leading a revolution, and an armed struggle, but what is your political programme?

I always answered with the same phrases we said to ourselves, and to our Arab brothers, such as the principles, the goals, and the methods that Fatah was built on. Their answer was always this was a work programme, and not a political programme. They wanted to know what our political programme was. They asked about our affiliations, and to which group we belonged to, our tendencies and our positions. They wanted to know our position not only regarding the Palestinian cause, but the cause of the other side, our position on Jews and on the west. They asked many questions about our political activity and political programme, and in light of these questions, I began forming an idea of the necessity of writing a political programme for Fatah.

This political programme wouldn't be written only for the West, but for ourselves as well, and for the other side in the Palestinian struggle. We needed to answer questions like: Who is our struggle against? Is it against the Jews or the Zionist movement? We needed to determine our position on all these issues. The discussions were not the only factor for the necessity of writing a political programme for Fatah, there were other issues as well. For example, during my stay in Paris, I discovered that Israel was founded on the principles written in Herzl's book, *The Jewish State*. We as Arab Palestinian and Arab intellectuals and activists had never read the book. We read excerpts from it, and wrote memos about it, but we never read the book. So I started looking for this book in French libraries and the English libraries in France. Unfortunately, I didn't find a copy in either French or English, in Paris. It happened I met Bahjat and Baha' who are two dear brothers from Egypt. Both were Jewish, and worked for UNICCO, and both were leftists.

¹ This work is made available under a Creative Commons 4.0 International Licence, and must be used accordingly. Please see citation guidelines on the About Us page.

They managed to get hold of a copy and the first translation of the book was made.

The second angle was looking at our history as Palestinians, and the first thing we looked at was the nature of relations in Palestine, in the 1940s. From our intellectual heritage, the Palestinian League for National Action had proposed a programme of coexistence for all Palestinians, in one democratic state in the 1940s. They didn't propose a project or clear principles for action.

Again, I want to mention here the role that our brothers from Algeria played. In addition to Mohammed Yazid, there were brothers Madour Marroush, the late Haidar al-Hesni, Mohammed Harbi, and others I will mention later. There were also brothers from Tunisia such as the late Mohammed al-Shabi and Ibrahim Touban. There was also a big group from the Arab Maghreb I will mention on another occasion. This group played a critical role in Palestinian work and in this political programme, and as a result of all these meetings I wrote Fatah's political programme in Arabic. The programme became known as the programme for the Palestinian Democratic State.

In the first three months, after I had a good understanding from all angles, I wrote the democratic state programme – I insist on using its full name: the Democratic Secular State. The programme began with a long introduction defining the nature of the Palestinian revolution, the relationship between Fatah and Arabism, Fatah's position from the global liberation movement, and its position on the nature of the Palestinian conflict. It is not a struggle between Palestinians and Jews, it is a struggle between Palestinians and the Zionist movement. The Zionist movement is part of the Western imperialist colonial movement. The final goal was set in seven points, which are all documented for anyone who wishes to read it.

The most important part of the programme was its conclusion. The central part was about liberating Palestine from the Zionist movement's occupation, and establishing the democratic, secular Arab society. In the first draft we didn't use the word state – we used society instead. After I finished a draft, I showed it to some of our friends in France, and one of the Egyptian brothers, whom I really respected may he rest in peace, and worked in media, translated it into French. I disseminated the translation to many friends I trusted, and who were fluent in Arabic and in French. All of them had the same opinion. Their opinion was that the translation was correct but it was a journalistic translation, and what we needed was both a political programme and a media programme.

One of the people I presented the programme to was Rida Malek the Algerian ambassador. Malek had the same opinion, and he translated the programme into a real political translation. 48 hours later, he gave me the programme printed in French. All the others who read it thought it was a piece of political literature. Malek was the chief editor of a magazine called al-Mojahed. Al-Mojahed was published in French during the Algerian revolution. He was also the Algerian ambassador in Moscow and in Washington.

I sent the programme to Damascus. The main cadre in Fatah at that time was brother Bashir al-Maghrebi. Al-Maghrebi's real name is Farouq al-Qaddoumi. I sent the programme to Bashir al-Maghrebi and Salaheldin. Salaheldin's real name was Salah Khalaf. When they received the programme, I said if I didn't receive their answer, I would publish the programme on the 31st of December 1968 on the 4th anniversary of the Revolution. They took the programme to the Algerian ambassador in Damascus at that time, Ali al-Kafi. Ali al-Kafi was the military leader of the second district during the war, and then was the ambassador in Cairo, Beirut and Damascus. Later on al-Kafi became the president of the Algerian state, and had his own presidency council. After reading the programme he told them that this was what Fatah wanted and what the Palestinian revolution needed. After that Farouq al-Qadoumi (Bashir al-Maghrebi) gave me their blessing.

I took the programme to the lawyer Michelle de Beauvoir, and she drove us to the French News Agency in her car. Egyptian journalist Doria A'oni had been working for years in the French News Agency, and she was responsible for employee and workers' interests and affairs, at the agency. We didn't meet in her office but met near the wall of the Paris Stock Exchange, which was across the street from the news agency. She took the programme and read it the same night. She published it through the official French news agency. Doria A'oni played a very important role in its dissemination, and I would like to thank her, and everyone who contributed to our programme.

After giving Doria the programme I went with Michelle to Dr Anwar Abdelmalek's house. He lived in the Latin Quarter behind the Pantheon. It was New Year's Eve, and he was hosting a small party at his house. Some of his colleagues and students attended the party. I introduced myself to them as Fatah's representative. The New Year's Eve party turned into a political dialogue. That night I met Roujida Houdi. Houdi was a member of the political office of the French Communist Party, and she was also a professor of philosophy at Nice University. There was a debate about European communism – but this is a different conversation for another time.

One of the things I discovered during that evening at Dr. Abdelmalek's house was that there was a big difference between the position of a professor and that of their students. The students were completely supportive of the Palestinians and the Palestinian revolution, but the professors were more hesitant. Most of them were supportive in one way or another, without attacking Israel. That night I learnt why this was so. Most of these professors were activists, real activists. They resisted Hitler, and the Nazi occupation of France. Some of the members of their resistance group were French Jews. After the Nazi defeat this relationship between the resistance fighters from various groups continued, and they remained very sympathetic to each another. This sympathy became sympathy towards Israel. The new generation, and the students' generation, was sympathetic instead towards the Palestinians.

The French news agency disseminated this programme at the end of 1968. It was disseminated in the newspapers, especially Le Monde, on the 1st of January 1969, the fourth anniversary of the revolution.

Reactions to the Secular Democratic Programme

What were the reactions to the programme? The reactions were varied and quite different. The first reaction was from Maxime Rodinson: he contacted me through al-Bahi Mohammad, and said the programme was a very good thing, and that he was adopting it. He also said that work on it must continue and a few clarifications were needed. The second reaction was strange. At that time Mohammad al-Masmoudi, the Tunisian Foreign Minister, was in Paris. He was very close to president Charles De Gaulle. At that time De Gaulle wasn't in power. The Saudi ambassador, I think his name was Tayseer Sheikh al-Arad, was also in Paris. Mohammad al-Masmoudi called me and asked jokingly, "What did you do to the Saudi ambassador?" I asked him what was wrong. He said, "The Saudi ambassador is very angry with you: what do you think about meeting to reconcile?"

I met Mohammad al-Masmoudi at the house of the Saudi ambassador. The ambassador was furious, and I discovered in this meeting why. The ambassador was angry for two reasons: the first was because the publication in French newspapers of the programme for the democratic secular state. I explained to the ambassador that secularism to us means religion is for God, and the country is for the people, and that it doesn't mean anything else. I told him there is no room to differentiate between French, English and Italian secularism. I explained what we meant was: "Render unto Caesar the things

that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's", and that the country is for everyone.

The second thing that had made him angry had nothing to do with the programme. Mr. Ahmad Hamroush, a prominent journalist, and member of Fatah's revolutionary council at the start of the revolution, but who later dedicated his time for writing in the Rose al-Youssef newspaper, was a friend of Palestine. He interviewed brother Yasser Arafat and the interview was published in Rose al-Youssef. When Hamroush asked Arafat about the relationship between Fatah and Saudi, Arafat answered that the relationship between Fatah and Saudi was a political one, and not an ideological relationship. This answer provoked the Saudis and the Saudi ambassador - he asked if our movement wasn't an Islamic movement, so I replied saying no, our movement wasn't a religious movement but a political one. This didn't simply anger the Saudi ambassador but angered many people.

When the final proposal to establish a democratic secular state where Arabs, Muslims, and Jews live in total equality under the law was made, it angered two conflicting groups. It angered Arab nationalists more than it angered the Islamists, who were furious as well. And it didn't just upset people in Paris but it also upset people in the Arab Mashreq. When the media in Lebanon discussed the programme, Fatah's leadership had to send brother Mohammad Youssef al-Najjar to Saudi Arabia, to clarify the movement's position. These clarifications became part of the programme. The programme that was being circulated didn't have expressions such as secularism and used terms such as "state" instead of "society". Expressions were being used to minimise this intense criticism.

Even inside Fatah there were forces who rejected the programme altogether. It is true that the programme was published under Fatah's name but this programme was opposed from within Fatah, by Fatah's friends, by Arab nationalists and by Islamists. This opposition caused a racket within the movement, and Fatah didn't adopt the programme in the beginning. The programme became something like an accusation that they wanted to get rid off. This was 1969. I remember in 1969 a meeting for the confederation of Palestinian students was held in Frankfurt, Germany with Khaled al-Hassan and myself. Khaled al-Hassan was invited from Kuwait, and we were invited to give speeches. When I went to the conference, I saw a banner on the university wall. On the banner, the seven main points of the programme were written: it meant that the conference adopted the programme.

I was also invited to the PSU conference. The PSU is the Unified Socialist Party then headed by Michel Rocard, and I was invited to attend the third conference of the PSU in March 1969 in Dijon, as the representative of Fatah, and as a result of the dissemination of the programme. There were meetings held with Michel Rocard, and the main officials in his party. Six months after these meetings the relations between the Socialist party and all Israeli parties were severed. There were disagreements with some of the Arab Parties on whether to attend the PSU conference, which was attended by the Israeli Labour party, or not. All the parties, from the Arab Mashreq and the Arab Maghreb thought this issue should be made by brother Said (Said was my alias at that time), and I decided to attend the conference, and these are the results from it.

At the conference I was invited to meet with many European parties such as of the Italian Unified Socialist Party (PSI-PSDI), and after this I moved to Italy, with Al-Mahdi al-A'lawi moving there with me. I met with members of all Italian parties, including Berlinguer, head of the Italian Communist Party. 23 members representing the PSI-PSDI in the parliament were all defectors from the Communist party. The meeting was held in Rome's municipality building. From there I went to Brussels and to Leuven University. I held many meetings and gave many lectures on this topic. There were forces inside and outside Israel that sponsored this meeting, such as Matzpen organisation – the organisation no longer exists. Here I would like to point out a true Jewish activist of that period, called Annia Franckoz. Annia Franckoz had a very strong connection to the Algerian revolution: she also had a son, with one of the Algerian military personnel – her son's name was Salim. She wrote a book about the Palestinian cause in French, which was one of the first books published on this topic, and sadly she later died of cancer.

To return to the repercussions caused by the programme within the Palestinian front, especially within Fatah. In 1971 the third conference of Fatah was held, and the programme was proposed there, quite reluctantly. A counter programme was also proposed, as its replacement. This programme was called *Chain Reactions*, and rejected the democratic state programme. Brother Ali al-Hassan, from the movement's branch in Kuwait, proposed it. He stood up and said, "What is our relation to the democratic state programme? Our comrade Mohammed Abu Maysar in Paris published that statement – why should we take the responsibility for it? Therefore I request it is rejected". He proposed instead another programme, which is very famous in Fatah's literature, called *Chain Reactions*, and the result was that both these programmes were rejected. We shouldn't forget that the third conference was held in a very tense atmosphere following our exit from Jordan, not from

Amman but from Jordan. The conference was held after the battles of Jerash and the death of Abu Ali Iyad, which was immediately followed by the death of brother Abu Sabri, Mamdouh Saidam. The death of Abu Sabri is a different story. The process of obliterating this programme continued until the Palestine National Council (PNC) was convened, where the programme's adoption began. One of example of this was picking the slogan of the PLO, before the programme was ever proposed by Fatah, and taken up by the National Council.