

**Salah, Salah. Interviewed 2011. Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.**

We were not only confronting political projects aimed at dissolving the Palestinian refugee problem and, by extension, liquidating the Palestinian cause; we were also concerned with the Palestinian citizen, who was depressed, lacking in confidence, faced with a future that is completely closed and filled with despair. Through our activities, we hoped to restore respect to this Palestinian citizen. As I mentioned earlier, I was an organiser during that period in Ain al-Hilweh camp and the Saida area more generally. Undoubtedly however, there were activities taking place in all the camps, and there were people who began to join the Movement of Arab Nationalists and operate under its banner in all the camps and areas of Lebanon.

In those days, there were two kinds of active people. There were those that openly carried out activities and were visible at the forefront, leading the public struggle. One of the most prominent amongst them was someone who had recently passed away, the late Ahmad al-Yamani (Abu Maher). He was a school principal and a central figure in the Arab Palestinian arena. He was, in all honesty, the foremost symbol that led this political structure that had spread to all the camps. He had another person with him, Abdel Karim Hamad, who was a teacher in al-Ghaziya in the Saida area. There was also Nazmi Kana'an, who was a school teacher in Sur and Faraj Mawi'd who was a principal in Nahr al-Bared in the north. These were the public names... Surrounding them was a large number of elders. For example, if a demonstration was to be held, contact would be made with these elders in all the camps and they would be persuaded and told that "we want to hold a demonstration and we want you to be at the front row". They used to agree despite the overall state of despair during that period. For Palestine, they would participate, demonstrate, attend sit-ins, and support strikes.

There was another sphere of action that was hidden from vision but was nevertheless the real dynamo of work that was driving everything into motion. This was none other than clandestine organising carried out by a group of cells, circles, and so on. They used to operate secretly, distributing the communiques and the leaflets, preparing the posters and the placards, and standing behind the public veneer of the camp notables, the elders who been around since the days of Palestine. To be honest, it was those notables that used to run the affairs of each camp. We now have something called the popular committees and they used to be their equivalent in those days.

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Whenever there was a problem, they used to solve it. People avoided taking their problems to the state or submitting their claims to court. Instead, they tried to solve their issues with their own hands...

However, this atmosphere in which Palestinians were comfortably operating began to confront difficulties towards the end of the 1950s, particularly following the 1958 revolution which resulted in the removal of Camille Chamoun from the presidency and the election of General Fuad Chehab as his replacement. The latter was a military man, and his first action was to implement martial law in Lebanon. Out of all the country's inhabitants, Palestinians were harmed the most by this policy. In accordance with it, all Palestinian refugee camps were subjected to exceptional regulations for which I doubt there is a precedent anywhere else. For instance, each camp had at its entrance a Deuxième Bureau station, overseeing the implementation of state decrees subjugating the camps. Visiting other camps was not allowed, except with an official permit. After securing it from the Deuxième Bureau branch at their own camp, individuals had to present it to the Deuxième Bureau branch at the camp that they were visiting. Walking down the street was not allowed for groups that exceeded three individuals; any larger group was considered to be the nucleus of a demonstration, and its members would be duly arrested. Staying up after 10pm was not permitted, reading a newspaper or listening to the news in a public space such as a café or the street was banned, and moving home from one area to another required the issuance of a special permit not from the Deuxième Bureau station at the camp, but from the Deuxième Bureau station at the nearest military base to the camp.

The regulations were harsh and unjust, and one of the examples that illustrate the hardship they caused to people is the case of a man from Burj al-Shamali camp. His father had passed away and he wished to write a eulogy and distribute it in the other camps, so he stayed up late. A Deuxième Bureau patrol found that the light inside his house was on, so he was arrested, unable to convince them that writing the eulogy was an adequate justification for staying up. The fact that he broke the law was enough to cause his arrest, regardless of his motives. Of course, in those days it was easy to detect those that stayed up late because there was no electric lighting in the camp, and any light would therefore be spotted amidst the surrounding darkness. People used gas lights on the whole and even torchlights were considered to be an impressive possession! Although the lighting was poor, we used to either live in tents which reflected any light outside no matter how dim, or mud houses whose windows were so low that they revealed everything. Sometimes, the Deuxième Bureau patrols would eavesdrop next to the windows, even listening to conversations between a man and his wife!

I'll give you another example from a camp that used to be called Wavel and is now referred to as Al-Jaleel. A fight erupted with a gendarme that was trying to provoke citizens inside the camp and the buttons of his uniform were torn. The entire camp was subjected to punishment. The Deuxième Bureau division in the camp was asked to compile a list, based on the UNRWA records, of the names of camp residents aged between 18 and 40 years. In accordance with this list, fifteen men would be summoned every day, going from Wavel to Baalbek to Beirut. Of course, they would be insulted, beaten up, humiliated, and kept from the morning till the evening. This continued until all resistance in the camp stopped.

In other words, Palestinian citizens were demeaned and the authority and power of the Deuxième Bureau was imposed upon them. I for one faced an incident of this sort. Despite all the state's enforcement machinery, we would sometimes smuggle ourselves outside the camp from behind the Deuxième Bureau outposts, also evading the checkpoints that would be erected on the roads connecting cities. We used to find ways for avoiding these obstacles. So I was once in Beirut, and one of the Deuxième Bureau officers saw me. Since I have been arrested on many previous occasions, I was very familiar to them. The following day, I was summoned for investigation. How did I get out of the camp without a permit? This must have meant that I was engaged in political activities, attending secret meetings. Who was with me in these meetings and what kind of action were we organising? All of these questions were posed in a lengthy investigation that was accompanied by severe torture, lasting for two weeks. I was eventually released after much effort and sustained appeals coming from different corners.

This was our situation in the camps, and there was a clear attempt to disable any kind of political activity within Palestinian society. In reality however, despite all of these difficult circumstances and the hardship that was imposed on us by the Deuxième Bureau, the miserable economic conditions that we were living, and the political intrigues that we were facing at the time; despite all of these things, we used to find available paths for work and were able to adjust to the Deuxième Bureau's methods. We managed to organise demonstrations in the camps and carry out sit-ins outside. Citizens would smuggle themselves from inside the camps to the mosques in the nearby cities. For instance, they would go from Ain al-Hilweh to the mosque in Saida. People would sneak out individually; we would decide on the mosque as the location of the sit-in and the sit-in would indeed happen in the mosque despite the presence of the Deuxième Bureau and its regulations. Even if the Deuxième Bureau decided to arrest 100 or 200 of us inside the sit-in, we did

not mind. The important thing was that we had achieved the required objective, created enough noise, raised our voices high, and expressed our conviction that what we were protesting was not the Lebanese state, but rather the activities that were taking place against our national cause.