

**Qut, Saadallah. Interviewed 2011. Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.**

Towards the end of 1969, I returned from al-Arqaob to the Sur district. We entered Rashidiyeh at night, expelled the army and intelligence from the refugee camps, and remained there. This was a surprise for the masses. To be honest, people could not comprehend the extent of the organisation that had arrived. Everyone had thought that they existed alone with their group, not knowing that dozens of groups were present in full force. I mean, in one night alone we assembled 500 armed men in Rashidiyeh. This was a surprise for the people, the state, and our leadership. Centrally, they had not expected such large numbers. When we asked for weapons, they would exclaim, “Are you sure you possess this capacity?” We would say yes. There were doubts that we had this capability in the Sur district alone, and that we would be able to enter the camps without firing a single bullet or engaging the army, marshalling these large numbers in one night.

Before entering the camps, we had an agreement with the Palestine Liberation Army, which was present in Ain al-Hilweh. We had already entered Ain al-Hilweh in a manner that was simultaneously publicised and clandestine – neither fully publicised nor entirely clandestine. We prepared the youth at night in Ain al-Hilweh, and we relied on the folks in Sur. We gave them the code word, informed them of the zero hour, and told them that young men would be arriving to join them from other camps. They then marched out on foot – the people marched at night from Ain al-Hilweh and the surrounding camps to the camps of Sur. We got there around 3am. Then we gave the order for all groups to surface, and there was no longer any fear. “Arise!” we told them, and the people in the camps were surprised when the fighters appeared. In the morning, they discovered that groups had gained control of all the main areas of the camp, wearing military gear and carrying weapons. “When did these large numbers enter the camp?” they wondered. They did not know that these were their own sons; the fighters were their sons but their faces were covered with *Kufiyehs*. They thought that all of these *fida'i* had come from outside.

In fact, this helped create an element of surprise for the Lebanese army and state. When they saw the numbers that suddenly appeared, they thought this was the Palestine Liberation Army coming from Syria. However, the reality was that no more than fifty men had come from outside. Most of those present came from within the camp, and I had personally transported

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weapons to them from Al-Arqaob. I had stored them in the camps with the individuals involved, without letting anyone know exactly how many we had. So when we entered in the morning, you can't imagine how happy the people were. They wanted the pressure, the nasty pressure of the Lebanese intelligence on the camps, to be lifted. There was meanness in the way people were treated; a great deal of slyness existed, and the people suffered under a heavy weight. In some cases, it was not possible for two Palestinians to talk to each other. Any state official could randomly ask you for your ID, even when you were inside your own camp. There was humiliation, and to be honest it was this humiliation that may have encouraged a large number of youth to join clandestine work.

Humiliation always creates a condition that I would describe as a revolution, a revolution against oppression. The Lebanese state contributed to this. Although I am often harsh when talking about the Lebanese state, I always say that it should be given credit: by humiliating the camps, it endowed us with the ability to launch the armed struggle and allowed thousands of young men to join in action. Had it not been for this pressure, the situation would have been very different. I can't really say what the picture would have looked like, but humiliation definitely helped a large section of the youth to belong, to carry weapons and carry out operations, to fight and sacrifice their lives at a time when there was none of what we have today. Certainly, there were no salaries and the Families of the Martyrs Organisation was not yet been present on the ground.<sup>2</sup> That was the story. Between 1967 and 1970, no-one used to say, "this person was martyred" or "this person is owed a salary". Not even the families would ask back in those days. There was no such thing as management; all the work was geared towards party organising, information, and motion. Quite simply, people rushed to work...

At any rate, the Palestine Liberation Army units, which were called the Popular Liberation Forces, moved from Saida by sea and landed in Rashidiyeh. We, the Fateh groups, went there by land. There was a decision to make the Liberation Army, or the Popular Liberation Forces, the cover for this work; as we moved towards controlling the camps, these forces were to be present at the forefront for media purposes. Why? Because Abu Ammar (Yasser Arafat) wanted the PLO, rather than Fateh, to take control. After his

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<sup>2</sup> The interviewee is referring here to *Mouassassat Ri'ayat Usar al-Shuhada'a Wa al-Jarh'a* (Care for the Families of the Martyrs and the Wounded Organisation), which was established by the PLO in 1965.

election to the PLO chairmanship in 1967, he paid attention to the Palestine Liberation Army and he had to focus on the PLO as well as Fateh.<sup>3</sup>

One story that I forgot to mention is the sea. Some fighters came from the North, I don't recall if I told you. Other fighters came from Saida. But all the members of groups from outside [Sur] did not number more than 50, because we relied completely on local young men. Fateh was present and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine was also present as the second largest organisation after Fateh- we undoubtedly relied upon them in defending the camps. So it was an unforgettable night with the masses, with the people, and the happiness of the people was enormous. Honestly, it was an unforgettable night!

The late Ziyad al-Atrash was involved in this work; he was the commander of the camp troops in Lebanon. There was the late Na'eem who was the commander of the Arqoob, the district from which I used to bring weapons to Sur. There was Hamdan who was the district officer and the person overseeing the youth action, the progress of the work, and the provision of political cover for this operation. Then there was Abu Ayad, who had effectively made the decision to enter the camps. The Syrians backed the decision in principle. Back then they were with the revolution and were involved in the details of the work. Honestly, the decision came from more than one corner. It was a joint Palestinian-Syrian decision in all its details: the camps had to be liberated; they had to become a base for the Palestinian revolution...

After the entry to the camps we assumed new responsibilities that had not existed before. Previously, the work was clandestine and organisational in character. You were initially responsible for specific sectors of society. However, after assuming leadership over the camps you became responsible for society as whole with all its social, security, and economic problems. The field of vision changed and you now embarked upon an era that was completely different from the one preceding the entry to the camps. You were now responsible for any disagreements within the camp and you needed to solve them. You became responsible for establishing a structure that deals with the economic condition of the camp. The unions began to work publically and in this period the Cairo agreement was signed, giving a role to

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<sup>3</sup> In actual fact, Yasser Arafat was elected as PLO chairman on February 4, 1969. However, his party Fateh had played an important role in the PLO even before that, especially after the resignation of Ahmad al-Shuqairi from the PLO chairmanship on December 24, 1967.

the Al-Kifah al-Musalah Organisation<sup>4</sup> and the Popular Committees. The Popular Committees were established to provide services and political representation, while Al-Kifah al-Musalah was responsible for providing security. Al-Kifah al-Musalah was established then, and it levied a mixed group from the Liberation Army, Fateh, and the other factions. Al-Kifah al-Musalah was established to provide security inside the camp. Fateh was not accountable for camp security and nor was the Liberation Army; this was the responsibility of Al-Kifah al-Musalah. Then there was the selection of a Popular Committee from each represented faction, along with 4 or 5 of the camp notables. These were referred to as the Popular Committees. They had an office in each camp and their role was to address civilian problems, resolve issues arising between Palestinian society and its neighbours, and provide services such as electricity and water as well as handling construction issues. We had not been responsible for such things before the entry to the camps. This had been the responsibility of the state: water, electricity etc. However, after entering the camps, these became your responsibilities. You were required to undertake all these duties, and resolve problems that arose with the state and Lebanese institutions. This gave a different flavour to the work. Your task was no longer restricted to you organising a person to become a *fida'i*; the scope of your work expanded to include resolving his problems. How were you going to solve the people's issues? How were you going to the organise those that wanted to go to the bases? Actually, during that period between 1970 and 1972 we had a party policy referred to as Al-Ta'ayush. This had to do with allocation. While you had military conscripts who were allocated to the bases, you also had cadres dedicated to organisational work. They were inside the party, were sons of the party, and were armed, but were still pursuing normal careers: carpenters, workers, mechanics, students etc. Each one of them had a normal job but we began to send them to the bases when they had time off from work. This was referred to as Ta'ayush (cohabitation) with the troops. Cadres would go for two, three, or four days, depending on their ability to take time off from work. They would live with the full time fighters, sharing with them meals, fighting, operations and everything. This also signified a new era. Now that you were operating in the open and there was no longer any fear, you were able to send groups that would be absent for two, three, four, and five days.

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<sup>4</sup> Al-Kifah al-Musalah literally means "the armed struggle" in Arabic. However, in its capitalised form it refers to the structure established to oversee internal security within the Palestinian camps in Lebanon.