

Habash, George. *al-Thawriyun La Yamutun Abadan*. Beirut: Dar Al-Saqi, 2009 (pp. 72-75). Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.

In March 1968, during one of my visits to Syria, I was summoned by Abdelkarim al-Joundi, the head of the secret service. I thought to myself, "Perhaps he's going to relay good news about arms shipments to Jordan, or provide reinforcements for Fedayeen activity in the Golan Heights?" I couldn't have been further from the truth. It all started with comrade Faez Kadoura and I spending hours in the waiting room at the Syrian secret service building. When they came for me, it was to throw me in prison. What a surprise! I was gobsmacked.

In the wake of the 1967 defeat, Arab governments should have been ashamed of themselves. If they wanted to live down their failure, they should have gone all-in to assist Palestinian organisations in combat. Yet, here they were, putting me behind bars!

And not just anywhere: the Sheikh Hassan prison for political detainees, even more dreaded than the Mezzeh jail in the suburbs of Damascus. I was accused of fomenting a plot to overthrow the regime. But the real reason was my resolve to continue fighting against Israel on all fronts, the Golan Heights included.

I was in solitary confinement from March to November 1968, in a tiny cell infested with cockroaches. There was a skylight and a hole in the ground by way of latrine. The guards wanted to break my nerves, to psychologically destroy me, for instance by obliging me to stand on my feet day and night for nine days, with no sleep. But I braved this ordeal like challenge. My detainers had thought I'd cave in after three or four days, like other young prisoners before me. But I stood the course.

Forty years on from this painful experience, I still can't forget the way in which the chief interrogator, a certain Youssef hailing from Deir-ez-Zor, treated the prisoners, the abuse and insults he submitted them to. His abuse and insults were relentless. I would hear their cries, the pain of those who had been tortured. I would ask myself, "How can an individual sink to such a level of brutality and crudeness?" Without saying a word, he glowered at me. Luckily, I was not tortured, but I suffered psychologically. At the beginning, I was banned from walking in the prison courtyard. I was even denied the cup of tea granted to other prisoners.

¹ This work is made available with kind permission from the publisher. Please see citation guidelines on the About Us page.

After a month, I was allowed to leave my cell for half an hour every day. Whenever I lay down, I fretfully thought of my daughters, Mayssa and Lama, and their mother Hilda, to whom I wrote a long letter saying how much I missed them as soon as I was allowed to do so.

The situation within the Front, which we had just created, worried me greatly. I cared about the positions that we had to adopt in relation to Fatah. This was because Fatah had founded another front with small organizations after the foundation of the PFLP, in an obvious effort to counter our projects of national unity.

After a certain amount of time, thanks to comrades who had secretly managed to get hold of a radio, I was able to listen to two pieces of news that filled me with joy: the battle of Karameh in Jordan², and, later on, reports of the first hijacking of an Israeli airplane by the PFLP, who diverted the flight to Algiers airport.

I got to know a few Syrian political prisoners, like Issam al-Malhairi, but also members of Akram al-Hourani's group³, and Baathists opposed to the Damascus regime. Bit by bit, I managed to arouse the sympathy of prison guards' who exhibited respect for our battle; and, with time, I realized that I could count on them if I wanted to get in touch with comrades outside the prison.

Once I managed to obtain books, I could begin experiencing complete mental repose. I was starving for reading material. These particular books focused on Marxist theory, which I hadn't had time to delve into in enough depth before then. I thus read Lenin and some of Marx and Engel's work. When I got out of prison, all this reading would influence my leanings.

And then one day I received a letter from Waddie Haddad. A guard with whom I had secured good relations passed it on. I then understood that my comrades were planning my escape in leading people to believe that my family would soon be paying me a visit.

After nine long months of detention, the penitentiary authorities ended up giving their consent to a visit with two young women who claimed to be my

² On 20 March 1968, the Israeli army launched a surprise attack on the Jordanian city of Karameh. This battle would prove legendary in the Arab world: it saw the death of 21 Israeli soldiers over the course of 15 hours of clashes with Palestinian *fida'iyeen*.

³ Akram Hourani represented an Arab socialist trend within the Baath party.

nieces and who Waddie Haddad had selected to organise my escape. Our meeting took place in the office of the intelligence services, situated off the prison site. On the way back to the cell, some comrades dressed up as soldiers succeeded in stopping our vehicle. One of my guards resisted when he realized what was going on, but the abduction was a success and we charged towards the Syrian-Lebanese border. And there, I was finally able to see Hilda again, in a house where a number of my companions in struggle awaited me.

My flight was a blow to al-Joundi's morale, but we knew that the reaction of the Syrian intelligence services could be harsh. Al-Joundi was terribly vexed by my escape. When certain people advised him to liberate me, he replied definitively with this well-turned phrase: "Even if the sky fell onto the earth, George Habash will never leave prison!" Al-Joundi even threatened to kidnap me to take me back to my cell¹. Taking Waddie Haddad's advice, we decided that my family and I would leave for Cairo with haste, as soon as I was brought up to date with what was happening on the Arab scene and within the PFLP. It was good timing; I wanted to meet with Nasser to discuss the situation after the 1967 defeat, and dissipate certain misunderstandings between our movements, articles and criticism having been published in our magazine, *Al-Hurriya* [Liberty].

From November 1968 onwards, I would therefore remain in Egypt.

¹ George Habash later learned, directly from a high-level Algerian official, that the latter had declared to a Syrian, Nouredine al-Attassi, that, "it was shameful that during his presidency, a personality such as George Habash." Attassi replied: "I am responsible for the security of my country, you are not in my shoes. What's more, I learned from a reliable source that Habash wanted to use arms found in Syria to overthrow the regime". According to Habash, this affaire was "entirely fabricated" by the Syrian regime.