

George Habash: The Future of the Palestinian National Movement

Dr. George Habash, the General Secretary of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, was interviewed by the *Journal* in Damascus on May 14, 1985. The interview is one in a series of *JPS* interviews with leading figures in the Palestinian national movement.*

JPS: Following its departure from Beirut in 1982, the PLO split into two currents: one is described by observers as moderate, is led by Yasir Arafat and seeks a political settlement in coordination with Jordan and Syria; the other is described as radical, enjoys Syrian support and seeks to revive the policy of armed resistance. Do you agree with this analysis? How do you assess the potential of both currents given prevailing Palestinian, Arab and international conditions?

Habash: Before answering, I would like to point out an important issue overlooked by the question; namely, that these two major currents on the Palestinian scene do not date from the period following the departure from Beirut in 1982 but, rather, have been in existence for many years. This division, or distinction, is as old as the Palestinian revolution. Since the earliest days of post-1948 Palestinian national action, there has been a conflict between the movement's two main wings: the rightist wing, representing national bourgeois policy in the revolution, and the leftist wing, representing the policy of the working and popular classes. The

*Please note the interview was conducted before the recent fighting for control of Sabra, Shatila and Burj al-Barajneh erupted—Ed.

distinction may be observed at most, if not all, the major milestones in the history of the revolution and the PLO.

It is true that this distinction did not reach the point of division or a final break, as is now the case, but it is also true that the current state of the Palestinian revolution is a logical and natural result of these past distinctions which—and this is most important—reflect the division and contrasts among the various social and class forces that constitute the Palestine national liberation movement.

Here too I should add that the relationship between these two currents has passed through periods of tension and periods of detente depending on the circumstances and the events we faced. The central issue, however, is that despite everything, the Palestinian revolution maintained its internal unity in the face of the dangers which threatened it, especially in the face of the Zionist onslaught on Beirut which sought to liquidate the revolution in its entirety.

The point to be emphasized is that before Beirut, our differences with the Palestinian right took place against a national background. Unity and struggle were practiced within the same national framework. The new factor after Beirut, however, is that the dominant rightist current in the PLO began to show its readiness to adapt itself to American conditions. This became clear in its wishy-washy approach to the Reagan initiative. In addition, there was an opening up to the Egyptian regime, and close ties were forged with the Jordanian regime. This began to threaten the militant national identity of the PLO and signaled the readiness of this current to abandon both the exclusivity of Palestinian representation within the framework of the PLO and the essence of the PLO's national covenant, which calls for return, self-determination and the creation of an independent state.

This somewhat lengthy introduction is meant to make clear certain facts which some information agencies have tried to cover up in an attempt to portray the Palestinian conflict as temporary and the result of regional factors whose effect and influence on Palestinian decision-making began to grow following the departure from Beirut.

While acknowledging the role and influence of these factors, we cannot ignore the core of the problem which, as already noted, lies in the departure of certain segments and groups within the PLO from the course of the Palestine national liberation movement and their adoption of a policy of concession and surrender which will place them in the enemy camp. The policy is dictated by several factors, the most important being their

bourgeois and conciliatory class nature and their collision with a number of obstacles and setbacks which usually drive such forces to retreat.

The problem cannot be reduced to the dimensions of a moderate current seeking a political settlement in coordination with Jordan and Egypt and a radical current supported by Syria. This problem also has deeper dimensions on the Arab and international levels. As for ourselves, we are part of a national, progressive, democratic Arab alliance which includes all the organizations and regimes of the Arab liberation movement. The deviationist leadership, on the other hand, maintains close and firm ties with the Arab reactionary camp, with all its regimes and forces, and is now moving to become a constituent part of it. On the international level, the process of calculation is also different. They are betting on the USA and have high hopes of gaining its recognition. We, on the other hand, consider ourselves part of the current of revolutionary forces in the world headed by our friend, the Soviet Union.

As for the outlook for the two currents in the present circumstances, on the Palestinian, Arab and international levels, I would like to emphasize that the policy of deviation will run into a brick wall sooner or later. The proponents of this policy will gain nothing from all their attempts to appear moderate.

The end of this particular road is quite clear to us. It means sacrificing all our principles for nothing in return. Indeed, the logical result of such a policy will simply be to whittle away the gains achieved by our people and our revolution, as is happening now.

If we need to give examples to support the accuracy of our forecasts, we can point to the substance of the Amman accord, which grants Jordan something which we ourselves wrested from it through a decade of bitter struggle and sacrifice until we obtained the Rabat resolutions. Now current events seem to point to a turning back of the clock and to Jordan's regaining the initiative.

On the Egyptian front also, the leaders of this current believed they could benefit from Egypt's importance in two ways: first by applying pressure on Washington and Tel Aviv, and second by applying pressure on Jordan, which seeks to reclaim the "Palestinian card." What was the result? The result of the establishment of formal relations between Egypt and the PLO is that ties between Cairo and Tel Aviv have become closer than at any time in the past. The closer the Palestinian right and some Arab reactionary regimes draw to Cairo, the closer Cairo draws to Tel Aviv.

On the other hand, instead of the weight of Arab influence being on the side of the PLO in its relations with Jordan, King Hussein has been able to strengthen his alliance with Husni Mubarak; the PLO is now subjected to the combined pressure of Jordan and Egypt, which seeks to deprive it of its remaining cards, as demonstrated by the Mubarak initiative which went beyond King Hussein's own well-known initiative.

Therefore, it is clear that the option chosen by the rightist leadership will lead only to forcing the PLO into more crises and dead ends. These leaders will not succeed in reaching a "political accord" guaranteeing even the minimum legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.

As for the other current inside the Palestinian revolution, one ought to examine its activity and development. Despite the difficulties facing its struggle, this current has open horizons and is seeking to acquire enough strength to enable it to continue the revolution until the national objectives and aspirations of our people are achieved.

On the Palestinian level, there has been a mass departure from the rightist current following the signing of the Amman accord. There is also broad national and trade union opposition to this accord and a substantial rallying around the forces opposed to it.

On the Arab level, despite the difficulties which the Arab liberation movement currently faces, one can see signs of revival in that movement, what we might call early signs of the coming of revolutionary change in the Arab homeland. These signs have become clearer in Lebanon through the victories of the Lebanese National Resistance Front, in the Sudan and in the "bread unrest" throughout North Africa.

On the international level, the depth of the progressive current on the Palestinian scene reaches the heart of the Socialist camp, led by the Soviet Union, as well as the national liberation movements throughout the world. This international front, with whom the rightist current has neglected to make alliance, cannot but support the national rights of the Palestinian people and its ongoing revolution.

In short, we rely on the historic and strategic alliances of the revolution, whereas the other party seeks new alliances in the enemy camp. Their only concern is to deprive the PLO of all its cards in preparation for its absorption by the Jordanian regime and its transformation into a reactionary caricature in the service of US objectives.

The fate of these two currents is clear and cannot be obscured by present entanglements or problems.

JPS: Do you believe there is room for reconciliation between the two broad currents on the Palestinian scene, and on what foundations?

Habash: Based on my answer above, I believe that the rightist current, misnamed the “moderate” current, will not abandon its political option until the very end. This current is a captive of its class affiliations and present alliances and shows no signs of backing away, especially since this option has become the basis of personal gambles which cannot easily be abandoned if the present leadership remains. Furthermore, in view of the problems created by the policy of the deviationist leadership inside the PLO, we cannot accept the continued domination of the rightist current and the influence of its symbols after all the pain and suffering it has caused our people and revolution, even if we assume that they might abandon the Amman accord under the pressure of the crisis they face today. This is why we have called for linking the struggle to abrogate the Amman accord with the struggle to abrogate the policy and the symbols produced by that accord. It is on this basis that the Palestine National Salvation Front was proclaimed.

What should be emphasized in this context is that the more the deviationist leadership becomes embroiled in US schemes, the more our masses and their national forces will abandon it. We are confident that this leadership will leave the ranks of the PLO isolated and divested of all popular backing or support. We, in turn, are presently engaged in speeding up the process of mass and national disillusionment with this leadership.

This leads us to another essential point, namely, that the remote chance of a meeting between the two currents does not, and should not, in any sense mean that chances of achieving Palestinian national unity in the face of imperialist designs are also remote. This unity will one day be achieved. It will include the broadest sectors of our people, and will exclude only those who bargained away our national rights and the gains of our people and our revolution.

JPS: Do you in the Salvation Front consider yourselves a substitute for the PLO? How do you conceive of rebuilding the institutions and the role of the PLO?

Habash: We in the Palestine National Salvation Front do not consider ourselves a substitute for the PLO. We have emphasized this fact more than once, as we did in the documents which established the Salvation Front

itself. ** In this respect, we proceed from a firm belief in the necessity of the return of the PLO to its national line so that it can remain a framework uniting the Palestinian people and acting as its sole legitimate representative.

Contrary to the propaganda and information campaign waged against us by rightist and reactionary elements, we are the ones who are most attached to this major accomplishment of the Palestinian people and we shall resist all attempts to abandon it or to present it on a silver platter to reactionary circles, as has been done by the rightist leadership. This leadership violated the principle of the unity of Palestinian representation within the framework of the PLO when it signed the Amman accord and accepted Jordanian participation in such representation.

Our concern is reflected in the documents of the Salvation Front, which are designed to be a temporary framework to restore the PLO to its national line. We have affirmed in several instances our adherence to the PLO and to safeguarding its national line. Our rejection of any substitute or parallel formulas has often been stressed.

As for the second part of the question, we believe that a battle must now be waged to isolate the deviationist Right in order to prepare to restore the PLO to its national line. This requires the widest possible mobilization of national forces opposed to the policy of deviation and its symbols so that it may be possible to speak of rebuilding the institutions of the PLO on national and democratic foundations.

We are not about to create a new role for the PLO. When we speak of restoring it to the national line, we mean restoring it to its national role as outlined by the resolutions of its national and legitimate councils, the last of which was held in Algeria. This is a role which derives from the PLO's identity as a national liberation movement opposed to imperialism, Zionism and reaction.

Then again, we do not intend to create new institutions for the PLO. We are simply working to rebuild existing institutions, such as the Executive Committee, the Central Council and the National Council, on democratic foundations which guarantee collective leadership, reject hegemony and grant an active and influential role to the Palestinian democratic and progressive forces. In other words, we shall work to implement the organizational programs approved by the PLO in successive national

**For a full text of the National Salvation Front's political program, see Documents and Source Material in current issue of *JPS—Ed.*

councils. Their implementation has been obstructed by the domination of the deviationist leadership and their monopoly on the decision-making process.

JPS: How do you conceive of the strategy of Palestinian action in the coming stage?

Habash: The strategy of Palestinian action in the coming stage revolves around a central axis: the adoption of a policy of armed struggle and the escalation of that struggle against the Zionist enemy.

We are still living in a stage characterized by a clear imbalance of power to the advantage of the enemy. This means, *a priori*, that it is impossible to wrest even a minimum of legitimate Palestinian national rights, let alone achieve the implementation of a stage-by-stage strategic program for Palestinian national struggle.

Therefore, until it is possible to say that we are capable of achieving these rights, escalating armed struggle against the Zionist enemy is required until the enemy is forced to retreat, as happened in Lebanon. Armed struggle, as we understand it and in accordance with our conception of a people's war, is the most developed form of struggle waged by revolutionary forces. It implies the total support of the masses which have been mobilized, organized and trained. Every citizen has the opportunity to resist occupation by all available means. Theories of armed struggle have been put to the test more than once and their scientific character has been demonstrated. The experience of the heroic resistance in Beirut in 1982 constitutes proof of this. The Lebanese example has been, and will remain, an example for us all.

Defined in this manner and as clarified by experience, armed struggle is closely linked with all other forms of struggle—diplomatic, popular, intellectual and political. Although it is the highest form of all, and the most effective against the enemy, it is closely linked in a complementary manner with the other forms such that no single type of struggle can be ignored.

On the other hand, escalation of Palestinian popular struggle should be linked to and complemented by its Arab dimension through strengthening coordination and alliances with groups inside the Arab liberation movement and with patriotic Arab regimes. The struggle against the enemy has never been just a Palestinian-Zionist conflict, despite the importance and centrality of the Palestinian factor. It is, rather, an Arab-Zionist conflict,

which calls for the mobilization of all the resources of the Arab nation. This is why we have always attached great importance in Palestinian national action to the question of alliances with the Arab liberation movement, in all its forms.

In this context, the Lebanese arena occupies a unique place in Palestinian strategy. The struggle with the Zionist enemy in Lebanon is open and clear. We still have a military presence to fight the enemy and to protect the security of our camps in the face of Zionist attacks.

I am not revealing secrets when I say that we in the Palestinian revolution are incomparably better off today on the Lebanese scene than we were a year ago or more. We are in the process of developing our role in full coordination with the Lebanese national forces and with Syria, so that Palestinians can have sufficient room for maneuvering without being provoked on the one hand, and without returning to the pre-1982 situation on the other.

Furthermore, the Jordanian arena, with its particular geographical and demographic characteristics relative to the Palestinian presence, has special importance within this strategy. We base our analysis on the necessity of creating a base of support for the Palestinian revolution in one of the countries adjacent to occupied Palestine. We accord Jordan top priority in this respect. In addition, as we formulate a strategy for Palestinian action in the coming stage, we cannot but think of a close alliance with Syria, which plays a central role in countering US designs in the area and in blocking its way, whether in Lebanon or in the Arab world in general.

On the international level, we have a set policy, the essence of which is to maintain a close strategic relationship with the Socialist bloc countries led by the Soviet Union, with liberation movements and with communist, democratic and progressive parties throughout the world.

Our alliances on the Palestinian, Arab and international levels are what will ensure the desired transformation in the balance of power in the coming stage. Our people will thereby be able to regain their national rights, foremost among them the right of return, self-determination and the establishment of an independent state.

JPS: Do you believe that there is a link between this strategy and the Syrian strategy? How is this translated into practice?

Habash: There is, no doubt, a special link between the Palestinian and Syrian strategies, which grows out of a common struggle against the enemy.

All the following activities constitute examples of the many points which link Syrian and Palestinian strategy: our political activity in challenging the Camp David conspiracy; the battles we waged jointly in Lebanon which culminated in the abrogation of the May 17 accord and the expulsion of the NATO and Zionist presence and from most Lebanese territory; and our success along with the Lebanese nationalists, who played the principal role, in undermining the fascist hegemony and in driving it back inside the borders of its isolationist ghetto. We find in Syria today a principal base for the struggle at this stage. With its capabilities, Syria plays the chief role in maintaining Arab steadfastness and in challenging efforts to defeat it.

This, of course, does not mean that the two strategies are identical. There is a difference between a strategy of a people's war adopted by Palestinian action and the Syrian strategy, which is based on the strategic balance and conventional war. This difference, however, does not diminish the reciprocal benefit offered by the two strategies and leaves the door open for more advanced forms of coordination and cooperation.

JPS: How do you view the role of the Palestinian people inside the occupied territories within the framework of the strategy of Palestinian action? Do you think the model of national resistance in South Lebanon can be applied inside Palestine?

Habash: The Palestinian people inside the occupied territories occupy a central position in the strategy of Palestinian action. Suffice it to say that almost half the Palestinian people still reside in their homeland. Hence the importance and centrality of their role.

The Zionist enemy has succeeded in using the weapon of land sequestration, but has not until now—despite its terrorist policies, its many massacres and its acts of brutality—succeeded in uprooting that part of our people from its national soil. It may be said that the fact that our people have remained on our national soil constitutes the most effective weapon we possess to combat the policy of creeping dispossession of the land. Furthermore, our masses in the occupied homeland have played a prominent role in frustrating attempts to create a substitute for the PLO. It has become impossible for the enemy to find anyone with any mass following willing to negotiate with them or speak in place of the PLO.

These facts emphasize that all national Palestinian forces and organizations should give the territories the attention they deserve. The facts also

demonstrate the necessity of speeding up the crystallization of a program of action on the popular and leadership levels in the occupied territories.

It must also be pointed out that our concentration on the occupied territories as the central arena of our struggle should not for one moment lead us to ignore or underestimate the importance of Palestinian action in the diaspora; nor should it make us ignore or underestimate the importance of the role played by the structure of the Palestinian revolution abroad. The modern experience of the Palestinian struggle has revealed that the existence of the PLO has played a central role in awakening the masses in the occupied homeland. These masses now have a focal point which unifies their struggle, speaks in their name and expresses their national interests.

At every stage when the PLO achieved certain gains or suffered setbacks, these were directly reflected in the occupied homeland. Demonstrations would erupt in each town and village to everyone's surprise, including the PLO leaders themselves.

As for the second part of the question, we believe that the model of Lebanese national resistance is an inspiration for our people's struggle and will directly affect the situation in the occupied homeland. For the first time a people's war, with all its ramifications, was waged against the enemy which found itself, also for the first time, forced to retreat unconditionally from a land it had occupied and on which it remained at a very high human and material cost.

These central facts should not drive us in the direction of an unreasonable optimism regarding applicability of the Lebanese model to the occupied homeland for the following reasons:

1. The occupied Palestinian territories lack the geographical and demographic depth of the occupied Lebanese south. The result is a scarcity of military support and facilities. Moreover, the occupied Lebanese south found in the liberated national territories and in Syria sources of support whereas the Jordanian regime, for example, stands as an obstacle to the delivery of such support to the occupied Palestinian territories.
2. There is a difference in the conditions of occupation in Palestinian and Lebanese territories. The occupation of the first came after a period of hegemony by the Jordanian regime when public freedoms were suppressed and all attempts at armed action against the Zionist enemy, indeed the mere possession of arms itself, were forbidden. The occupation of the South, on the other hand, came after almost

a decade of civil war: arms were abundant and there were experienced fighters in every town and village in Lebanon. This made it possible to join in the fighting at a rate not possible in our own occupied lands.

3. Zionist objectives in occupied Palestinian land are different from the objectives in Lebanon: broad political groups inside Israel believe Palestinian land to be part of "the promised land," not to be relinquished under any circumstances.

Thus, the repetition of the Lebanese model on Palestinian soil requires arduous struggle to bring about a transformation in the objective conditions. This is why Jordan occupies an important place in our strategy for the coming phase. The difficulties involved in applying the Lebanese model do not in any way lessen the value of the Lebanese example and its many positive effects among Palestinians in general and in the occupied homeland in particular.

JPS: Israel is proceeding to tighten its hold on Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 while the Palestinians are witnessing a paralyzing split. The Arab arena is also plagued by differences which impede the adoption of a unified Arab position. What do you see as the direct response to Israeli measures aimed at leaving little or nothing for future negotiation?

Habash: The situation on both the Palestinian and Arab levels clearly enables the enemy to adopt wide-ranging measures in the occupied lands so that day by day the area of Arab land awaiting absorption or expropriation is shrinking.

Zionist activity has gone far along the path of land expropriation even if on the level of actually settling people the success has not been as great. Colonization, as you know, is a weapon in the hands of the Zionist leadership which it uses against us to exploit both the occupation of Arab lands and the present condition of the Arab world. From our point of view, we have no alternative but resistance, resistance of all possible kinds. Hence, the importance of that segment of our people still residing in the homeland. Israel wants to expropriate the land, but our people continue to live in and to be attached to their homeland. The future belongs to them and this is what scares the enemy, despite the expropriation of land. Shimon Peres, for instance, expresses the fear that by the year 2000, Palestinian numbers will equal those of the Israelis. This is why he is

seeking a regional compromise solution with Jordan through the so-called Jordanian option.

Therefore, we must escalate our military operations in these territories so that life becomes exceedingly difficult for the Israelis and more costly than comfortable for their colonialist enterprises.

Just because Israel annexes this or that territory does not mean that we should abandon our demand for it. Otherwise, how can we call for the recovery of the Golan and Jerusalem? More importantly, what meaning would our slogan of liberating Palestine and creating a democratic republic on our national soil have? We realize that these Zionist measures add new burdens and we know quite well that the enemy wants to create new facts on the ground to make it impossible to demand the abrogation or transcending of these facts. But our only option is constant resistance to restore the balance of power so that not only will these measures be negated, but so that we may go even further in achieving our interim and strategic objectives.

Of course this does not mean that we underestimate the gravity of these measures. They are of the utmost harm to our masses in the occupied land as they place new difficulties in the way of solving our national problem. This requires widely based resistance and close attention to developing forms and methods of common action in the occupied homeland, in addition to escalating our armed struggle.