

A Palestinian Woman's History

Hamda Iraqi

Hamda is a Palestinian who was able to return following the Oslo Agreement. She now lives in Nablus after years of exile in a refugee camp in Lebanon with her family, who came from Nakhle al-Nusf, a district of Acre. She lived the various stages of the Palestinian struggle in the camp, firstly under the repressive fist of the Lebanese Deuxieme Bureau state security, then through the growth of the resistance movement, the long siege of the Palestinian camp of Tal al-Zaatar, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and the massacre of Sabra-Shatila. Her commitment to the revolution led her to train in electronics and communications and she became a colonel in Fatah's wireless department. She was a member of the General Union of Palestinian Women and of Fatah.

My family is originally from a town in Palestine between Haifa and Akka [Acre] called Nakhle al-Nusf. Today it is inhabited by Russian Jews and they call it Kiryat Motzkin. My family was uprooted in 1948. They had problems with the British over the land. The Zionist occupation expelled us. My parents suffered a lot to reach south Lebanon when I was barely a few months old. I grew up knowing that we were living as exiles in Beirut. Around 1965 we were forced to go to Tal al-Zaatar camp — we were 13 or 15 families, all relatives.

It was difficult to build in the camp. We built two small rooms with a zinc ceiling. Bullets would easily penetrate it and, in winter, we couldn't hear each other for the sound of the rain on the roof. In summer it was hot and cold in winter. We were six girls and two boys. My father's worry was

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to feed us. The only work available was picking oranges.

I studied in the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) school in the Nahr area until the sixth elementary grade, and continued my middle school in Sin al-Fil until the 'Brevet' certificate. UNRWA had only two classes after the sixth grade: seventh and eighth. I wanted to enrol in a secondary school but things were difficult, so I started work at the Ghandour biscuit factory.

The situation of women in the camp was difficult. Some families did not allow girls to go out; older women would work in the flower gardens nearby. The younger women could work at the Ghandour factory or as maids. We were able to go out alone — because my father had grown up as an orphan, he didn't like to upset his daughters. He used to say, 'It's alright to upset the boys, but not the girls'.

The 'Deuxième Bureau' [Lebanese Intelligence Service] was very repressive. For example, if we wanted to hammer in a nail or build something we had to get the agreement of the 'Deuxième Bureau'; we had to bribe them. If someone was troublesome, they would confine him for a month and then let him out so that he would cause further trouble. That way people would go on paying.

I joined the resistance movement when the Palestinian Liberation Army held training sessions and there were girls training, too. From the window of our house which was near the training camp we would watch the girls in their military uniform and wanted to join in, but we were afraid to ask. My cousin was always telling us to join, so we enrolled. We bought our military uniforms for five liras and started training. We remained in the organization for a long time – without the knowledge of our parents. We participated in social affairs and with the families of martyrs.

Joining the wireless system

In 1975, I worked at Samed [Palestinian economic institution] in Fakhani, a Beirut neighbourhood close to Shatila camp, in the sewing division. Then there were training sessions in using the wireless. The organization nominated me for training. Those who came top were selected to work in Central Operations, so I left Samed and joined Operations.

The first ones in the section were Sajida Dughman, Nadia Abu Issa and me. Nadia was killed in 1982, while working in the wireless section in the Sanayeh building during an Israeli air raid. Almost all the girls working in the section had finished university. I was the least educated and afraid to fail. I had not studied as much as they had, but I was addicted to reading, and things went well. There was a girl who was as educated as me, but she

became afraid and left. I didn't like them saying that she couldn't cope because she was a girl.

Communications with the camp were cut off when the main siege of Tal al-Zaatar began. A group of young men came to take arms from the operations unit. I asked permission of Abu al-Walid, God rest his soul, to go to Tal al-Zaatar. He refused at first, but later accepted when I insisted. He gave me some clippers for cutting the barbed wire, and some other things, including a book which he said was mine to keep.

We went by car to Aley where we stayed for three days. A large amount of arms stored there, still immersed in grease. We would boil water in big pots and pour it over the arms to melt the grease. I cooked for the men — there were no dishes. We then entered a Kuwaiti mansion in Aley where one bed was big enough to sleep four people. I made salad and we made a cone with the cover of *Palestine the Revolution* magazine, like they do in the market, and ate from it. We walked at night from Abadiyyeh to Tal al-Zaatar. We were sixteen people, the guide, and me. I was the only girl. As we were walking, I felt as if something was preventing me from lifting my foot. The men were carrying a lot of arms. I was carrying the wireless set weighing 7 kilograms and its battery, maybe 2 kilos, as well as my personal weapon. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to keep up with the young men, so they made me walk with the guide, with all of them behind me. Sometimes there were houses below; we would go up to avoid them. Once they all shared one cigarette, shielding it with their hands for the light not to show. Another time the guide discovered that we were going the wrong way, so we had to go back. The guide was the master of the road.

We got to a point where I heard young men from the camp calling, 'who is there?' All of them were at the ready. I said, 'no one asks "who is there" except *our own* men'. When they approached, I was afraid that they might not be our men. But then I heard kisses being exchanged. I arrived home at sunrise. There was a dog nearby. The house was gone, it had been burnt down. My parents were inside an iron factory, and the dog would not allow anyone to enter. My father couldn't open the door at first, and my mother shouted 'who did you come with? You've put the family to shame, everyone is talking about you! I wish I had six children instead of you. You spent the whole night with sixteen men?'

She talked on and on but, in the end, she heated the water and they all bathed. We made our first [wireless] connection with appliances and aerial systems. I received a personal cable from Abu Ammar saying 'we congratulate you on arriving safely. May God be with you ...' It stayed in my pocket till the last day. When I walked through the camp, both those

who knew me and those who didn't would call 'hi'. One young man asked for my hand in marriage and my father told him, 'this is a man, she needs a man!' The Lebanese Forces [right-wing Christian militia of Bashir Gemayel] would slaughter young men and when we saw a young man over fourteen we would congratulate him. I became very popular in the camp, everyone wanted to talk.

We took a room and set up the apparatus on the roof, which had been all but destroyed. Adham was just saying that the bombardment was coming from there, so immediately I grabbed the apparatus and hung on to it. The first strike hit the cable which transfers current from the electrical system to the battery to recharge, so now I had to take the apparatus with the battery to somewhere I could charge it — there was no longer a charger because it had been hit. I would carry the apparatus with its battery and go to the mosque, wait until it was charged and then bring it back. The mosque was at the end of the road. I only saw my parents every six days; day and night became one. This continued for a while, then they told me to sleep during the day. But I couldn't sleep because the wireless room was also the leadership room, the meetings room and everything was in it.

The wounded in the mosque suffered increasingly from worms and gangrene. One of them would grab his leg, and when he pressed it the worms would emerge. Imagine someone living with worms in his body; the worms reached a stage beyond prayer. They would remove them with zinc boards. A shell hit the place where there was a hole like a mass grave and the dead bodies flew about near the mosque, which was the Red Crescent centre. No one was able to be buried. I had a sister who was struck in the head; they buried her in the shelter where my parents were. People were buried in any empty space. Even today my mother says my sister's hand was visible, that they didn't bury her well. A shell had hit the staircase when she and my mother were closing the door. A mortar exploded over them hitting my Mum's hand — to this day there are splinters in it. My sister was hit in the head and died instantly. She was 12 years old.

On the last day before leaving I burnt all my papers and went to the wireless office. I sprayed the keys, removed the pin from my weapon and threw it. The day the camp fell was terrible. I put my clothes on and carried a little child; my mother was holding on to me at the Fundukieh (hotel management school) in Dikwaneh, banging her head against the ground and cursing. We left in trucks. Any child aged ten and above would be kicked by the Lebanese Forces, who with their guns pushed people out of the truck onto the ground. A three-year-old girl was killed when she was

trampled on. One of the Lebanese militia lifted her by her hair and put her on a donkey. My mother and father, my remaining brother and I reached the museum crossing-point by car with great effort.

When we reached the museum we were thirsty. There were security forces there with the green hats, the Deterrent Forces [Arab League intervention force] and they told us to go straight ahead. There were cars at Bir Hassan waiting to take the people who came from the camp: cars of the armed struggle. However, we didn't go with them; we went to my uncle's house. After Tal al-Zaatar we went for a while to Qassimiyyeh and then to Damour.

During the siege of Beirut I was working in the central operations section in Fakhani. With the first Israeli air strike the two floors above were gone and we moved to the Engineering College. We entered the college through the back door, stayed for a while there, but then we were bombarded again. They were targeting ground floors and air raid shelters. We moved from the Engineering College — there were always alternative operations. The one who comes out alive from one place would go to another ... We went from the Engineering College to Burj Abu Haidar ...

I remember the shelter there was fewer than three or four steps of iron and cement. The shelling penetrated this fort and broke the iron stairs. Abu Aala's driver, who was with us at the time, was wounded. All the people in the building came down to the shelter with us when the shelling started. When it receded somewhat the people ran away, but when the bombardment from the air continued, we couldn't leave. As the shelling became a little less again, Abu Moussa, one of the military leaders, told us now was the time to leave. We said, 'when you go, so will we'. 'Go out!' he yelled, and so we left. He told us each to go in a different direction. The next morning, we went to Ras al-Nabah, to the shelter of a building that was still under construction. Its shelter was very poor and it also was hit.

We moved to two or three buildings in Ras al-Nabah. I was allergic to the smell of paint and cement which was terrible, two floors underground. Even the Bic pen wouldn't write, due to high humidity. Then we went to Hamra. When we arrived I told Ussama I hadn't passed by Nadia that day. Her voice had sounded sad and I felt she might have a problem, so I asked him to let someone relieve me while I went to see her. Ussama said 'Ok, there is some fresh meat, can you cook it for the boys first — they haven't eaten for a long time'. I cooked the meat and waited while they had lunch. Abu Hassan was still washing his hands when there was the sound of a bomb. Poor Nadia! She was killed by that bomb. We waited for the dust to settle and then her mother identified her from the tip of her foot and the

earrings she was wearing. Many people were killed by this vacuum bomb.

Abu Ammar never stayed with us for long — he would come and go. He became like an infected person! Whenever he entered a building people would run away, because any building he was known to be in was shelled. We met at the port during the departure from Lebanon. When our fighters left Beirut, Lebanese people sprinkled them with rice — too much rice; it created a rice crisis!

My brother Mustapha left Lebanon with the last group of Palestinians to leave. I told him, 'I thought you weren't leaving'; he replied, 'Didn't you hear that man Bashir swearing and threatening what he would do to those Palestinians who remained in Lebanon!' [Bashir Gemayel of the right-wing Phalangist party, elected Lebanese President in 1982 under the Israeli invasion and assassinated in September.] My brother went to Tartous on the northern coast of Syria and from there he came back to the Bekaa. The night of Bashir's assassination, I slept in Rawsheh, in a building where there were refugees from Dbayyeh camp. I didn't leave, I stayed; but how could I stay? I would go in the morning, not knowing that when the Israeli army tanks came to search the area, I would stay with Deebe, my sister, who worked in the hospital.

I had stayed to see my parents and provide them with a home. Tal al-Zaatar was gone. I was in Fakhani when the massacre of Sabra and Shatila took place. That same day I met a girl at Dana, the entrance to Sabra. She told me: 'They put my mother and brother against the wall and killed them in front of me'. When I told people they would say, 'Don't spread rumours'; they didn't believe me. But after three days it became public. My mother would go down daily with the civil defence and help to identify the dead bodies. She knew many people in the camp. In the end, those who were unidentified were taken to an area near the Kuwaiti embassy and buried in a mass grave.

I had no job. I left Beirut in 1983 and went to Tunisia to where my fiancé and his group had been evacuated, but I was unable to work until they started a branch for the General Union of Palestinian Women there. By then I had given birth to Tarek. There is a year and a month between Tarek and Ala'.

The Revolution changed my personality

Despite my lack of formal higher education, I felt I could be at the same intellectual and awareness level as the university girls who were my age. I learned a lot by reading. Fatah — not school — taught me to read books and summarize them. I felt my personal independence, everything in me

changed. I wouldn't have this awareness if I hadn't joined Fatah and participated in group work. I prefer group and women union work to organizational work – when you are dealing with people who think differently from you, you benefit more.

Marriage

In 1981, when I returned from Bulgaria where I had been for cadre training with a group of Palestinians, I found my future husband visiting my parents; he knew them and had heard of me. Everything indicated that he was a good person. I got to know him before marriage; he would visit my parents and we could sit together alone at home. He used to borrow books from me. I had a library at home in Damour. My mother used to criticize me: 'Look at other girls — they buy gold but you buy paper'. I would always buy books from exhibitions in Beirut and my brother made me wooden shelves for them.

My husband read too. He treated me with respect. In Tunisia our situation was very good because I was connected to the GUPW. But when we went to Baghdad the environment was different. The people we knew there were from the Baath party and the Arab Front. They married in the traditional manner. My husband did not want anyone to know that I had travelled back and forth.

When we returned to Palestine after the Oslo Agreement there was disappointment with the general situation. On a personal level, my husband re-married. He worked with the Palestinian Authority.

Looking back now at the Tal al-Zaatar massacre, I would say that the sufferings of the people there did not get the attention they deserved. They suffered a lot, but their experience was not known widely enough to benefit from it; in its spontaneity everyone in the camp participated in the struggle and remained steadfast. We used to blame the leadership when we were in the camp but when we left, many who used to say 'Forget the phase of Amman' [when the Palestinians were evicted from there to Beirut], started then to say 'Forget Tal al-Zaatar', and now tell you 'Forget Beirut', as if there is no connection between them. Over here [the West Bank], I would hear in the Nablus area that Beirut is gone, 'Do not talk of Beirut'. Beirut may be gone, but I am a daughter of Fatah of the revolution: Fatah is not gone. We do not know our history.

If I were to make choices for my life again, I would choose the same path of resistance. I made no mistakes and I regret nothing — I was convinced of all I did.