



## ARAFAT AND THE JOURNEY OF THE PALESTINIAN REVOLUTION: AN INTERVIEW WITH SHAFIQ AL-HOUT

*Shafiq al-Hout, founding member of the PLO and the Palestine National Council, former PLO spokesman, and longtime (1965-93) Palestinian representative in Lebanon known in recent years as an outspoken critic of Oslo and a passionate defender of the Palestinian right of return, died in Beirut on 2 August 2009 at the age of seventy-seven. To mark the passing of a figure known for his integrity and adherence to principle, JPS decided to translate a long interview al-Hout gave to our sister publication, Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya (MDF), a month after the death of Yasir Arafat. While the interview focuses on Arafat and his leadership, it also illuminates, through specific incidents witnessed over a long and complicated relationship, the roots of problems that continue to plague the Palestinian national movement to this day, including the fatal confusion/overlap between Fatah and the PLO and Arafat's progressive monopolization of power. It also gives a sense of al-Hout's personality, his characteristic honesty, clear-sightedness, and fairness, his humor and passion, and goes a long way toward explaining why this inveterate "independent," who never belonged to any Palestinian organization, remained respected and admired by Palestinian leaders across the political spectrum.*

*The interview was conducted in Beirut on 12 December 2004 by Mahmoud Soueid, director of the Institute for Palestine Studies in Beirut, and Ahmad Khalifeh, managing editor of MDF. The full interview was published in issues 60-61 (Autumn 2004-Winter 2005) of MDF.*

*Khalifeh: We'd like to begin by asking you, who knew Arafat so well over the decades, to sketch a portrait of the man and the leader. What were his strengths and his weaknesses? How—despite the presence of other strong personalities and of Palestinian organizations besides Fatah—did he become a national symbol?*

*Al-Hout: Leaving aside whatever differences I had with him, let me begin by stating a number of objective facts about Yasir Arafat that cannot be denied: that he was at the center of the Palestinian movement, the uncontested leader of the struggle for four decades; that he succeeded in imposing Palestine's place within the family of Arab states, even though he was a leader with neither state apparatus nor territory; that for all practical purposes all the Arab leaders were obliged to share with him part of their sovereignty over their own people . . . Of course one could argue—and rightly so—that these accomplishments were not due to Arafat himself but to his leadership of a specific cause that literally has become sacred in the Arab and Muslim worlds. These*

facts are uncontested, and the days following his death showed the man's immense popularity in Palestine, the Arab world, and beyond.

But now we come to the critical evaluation of Yasir Arafat's personality and political practices. And for that, we have to begin with a few words about the two national leaders who preceded him: Hajj Amin al-Husayni, who led the Palestinian people during the Mandate years, and Ahmad Shuqayri, who became the preeminent leader after 1948. They were practically of the same generation and both opted for a traditional clan-based approach to power that was ill suited to the realities of Palestinian politics after the Nakba. New groups, organizations, and political parties emerged that wanted to see the younger generation represented. They wanted to see a leadership that was up to the task of mobilizing the popular masses in the refugee camps. And there, I regret to say that the Fatah leadership—and Abu Ammar's leadership in particular—would not be very different from the leaderships that came before.

It was not until the Arab defeat of June 1967 that Fatah took off and that Abu Ammar gradually consolidated his position. Far more than as a military leader, Arafat was exceptionally gifted in his ability to utilize the media. That's how he succeeded, starting from the battle of Karamah in March 1968, in literally dominating the Palestinian scene through a kind of spontaneous politics of the image.

How often does one see a leader walking through the streets, a rifle on his shoulder? You could understand a revolver at the belt, but here was Arafat, striding through streets and alleys with his rifle. The people who saw him said: "Here is a real leader, a man close to the people, down-to-earth and indifferent to protocol—a leader who's like us." And the people were right. Arafat would later prove how gifted he was at capturing his people's imagination by being like them, by adopting their slogans, by dispensing with political jargon. When he arrived on the scene, many militants were absorbed in defining themselves ideologically, but Arafat proclaimed: "We have just launched a nonideological revolution, and together we are going to invent a theory for it." . . . In other words, while others were preoccupied with revolutionary vocabulary, Arafat dealt with reality. Is that an asset or a liability? It might look like an asset, but I think the opposite.

Arafat can be compared to someone who ensures the daily meal, who insists that his table is always set with cheese, za`atar, and olive oil, but who never gives a thought to planting the olive trees. The idea of long-term projects was foreign to him. At the same time—and nobody would ever dispute this—Abu Ammar always took care, consciously or otherwise, to keep all the reins of power in his hands.

From the very start, when his Fatah comrades would retire for the night, Arafat would stay up for hours asking himself whether there was anything he had overlooked that day, if there was something that needed to be organized, and if so, how to fit it into the next day. In a word, he was always on the job, and all his actions were directed toward being the top man. Later on, his leadership was taken for granted, but it's important to emphasize that

this was not always the case and that it took him some time to get there. He became personally involved in everything. If there were student elections, for example, he would throw himself into the campaign as if he were a student himself. . . . Abu Ammar knew that in order to consolidate his power he needed to secure a majority in all the various Palestinian institutions and organizations, and he didn't neglect a single one. That's how he became the paramount political leader and the military chief and the treasurer and the ultimate authority, affectionately referred to as "the old man."

The leaders of the other guerrilla organizations—and the other Fatah leaders too—never made themselves accessible to ordinary people, but Yasir Arafat's door was always open to them. Anyone with a private matter or personal problem found Abu Ammar anxious to help. Of course, the person in need could go instead to a Fatah social institution, but even there Arafat's signature would ultimately be needed for the request to be satisfied.

People quickly understood that Abu Ammar was indispensable, even for simple everyday matters. By the same token, organizations and other political parties came to understand that in order to reach an agreement or take a collective decision, Arafat's accord was indispensable. Many tried to open "channels" with Abu Iyad, Abu Salih, Abu This or Abu That in the hopes of getting Fatah's aid or support, but all these attempts inevitably failed and the only effective channel remained Arafat.

*Khalifeh: So it wasn't simply since Oslo that he so successfully monopolized power?*

*Al-Hout:* When Ahmad Shuqayri resigned as chairman of the PLO in 1968 to make way for the fedayeen organizations, there were two currents within Fatah. The first supported the movement's participation in the PLO with the aim of controlling it. The second opposed participation, fearing that the PLO would continue to be what it had been during the first years of its existence: the creature of the Arab states, which were working to liquidate the Palestinian cause. Arafat, who clearly understood the stakes, led the battle within Fatah in favor of participation and won. The result was that he was able to add to his leadership of Fatah the chairmanship of the PLO, which from then on gave him a clear advantage over his Fatah comrades. Thus, when he was unable to win Fatah over to his point of view, he would fall back on the PLO and its financial, political, and media means, and vice versa—because Fatah was an autonomous entity and so was the PLO. Both were at his disposal and it often happened that he played one off against the other. What's more, he later managed to merge the finances of Fatah and the finances of the PLO in order to create a third financial entity which he alone controlled.

Let me give an example of the extent of his control. After 1982, when we were no longer in Lebanon, I recall an incident when Arafat was in conflict with the entire PLO Executive Committee about something—I think it had to do with what position to take concerning Jordan. And since the Executive Committee had taken a position against him, he went into a sulk

and immediately took off for Yemen. With him gone, nothing could get done—all of Fatah was paralyzed. Not him. He made use of the occasion to visit ten African countries. Which was his way of saying: I'm more important than all of you. . . . Some people see nothing wrong with such behavior. This is not my view. This is no way to lead a national movement, even if such methods "worked" for forty years.

*Khalifeh: If the other Fatah leaders were so powerless to act on their own, did they even have enough weight for Arafat to take them into account?*

*Al-Hout:* Let me answer with two examples from my own experience. Once, when I was in Tunisia, relations between Arafat and Abu Iyad [Salah Khalaf] were extremely tense—Mahmud Darwish can testify to the truth of what I'm telling you, because he was there too. Abu Iyad began complaining about Arafat, criticizing his way of operating and his leadership of the movement. Finally, I said, "Abu Iyad, everyone considers you the Fatah second-in-command. Some even say that you are the real head of Black September and a man to be feared. And *you* are coming to *me*, who doesn't have the protection of any organization or state, to tell me your complaints and problems? *I'm* the one who should be complaining to *you*, his longtime comrade in arms and colleague within the [Fatah] Central Committee, to ask you to speak to him about this or that action or even to correct his behavior." At that point, Abu Iyad gestured toward the heavens and said: "Only his Creator can correct him."

Another example. I happened to be in Tunisia when Arafat's plane crashed in the Libyan desert and we had no news about his fate for twenty-four hours. I can attest that all the Fatah leaders without exception—and I will not name names—were heaping criticism on him: "We have to impose limits on the man, he controls everything, the finances, the apparatus, the contacts, et cetera. Look at the vacuum that would result if he dies! May God bring him back alive, but if he makes it out, it is absolutely essential that all this be reviewed and that the current state of affairs be changed." Everybody spoke along these lines. Abu Ammar did come back unscathed from this terrible accident and we called a meeting of the PLO Central Council. I was confident that this time these problems would finally be addressed. But no one said a word on the subject. Ten minutes passed, another ten. I was sitting next to him on the podium—I don't know why he had insisted that I sit there that day. Anyway, I decided to speak. I said, "Abu Ammar, when the Almighty took you with Him, what did He say to you before He brought you back among us? Did He speak to you of a vice presidency? A rotating leadership?" Arafat exploded in anger.

In other words, this brush with death, this terrible proof of man's fragility and vulnerability, far from instilling in him greater detachment or a certain distance from the honors of this world, instead reinforced his conviction that he had been singled out by Providence, increasing further still his tendency to solitary rule.

But coming back to the Fatah leadership: how can we explain the "silence" of that meeting? And how to explain Fatah's silence many years later, in 1993,

when the PLO Central Council met to discuss the Oslo Declaration of Principle, which had just been announced? Many of them were hostile to the declaration, but only Abu Lutf [Faruq al-Qaddumi] expressed his opposition. No one else said a word—they even voted in favor of signing it. Why? As I said before, Abu Ammar kept a tight grip on the reins of the organization to which he devoted twenty-four hours a day, spending his time with the fighters, the popular militias in the refugee camps, the militants. He lived like they did, and people thought that he was the only one close to them. The other leaders to whom he had allocated “departments” were satisfied with building personal fiefdoms aimed at preserving their “portion” of power, which could be maintained thanks to budgets allocated by Arafat! And every time one of these leaders disappeared from the scene—most were assassinated by Israeli intelligence—their department disappeared with them, and what remained of it fell back under Arafat’s control. Abu Jihad [Khalil al-Wazir] was an exception within Fatah. Despite his gifts and his great abilities, he was satisfied with his role at Arafat’s side, a little like the Egyptian marshal ‘Abd al-Hakim ‘Amir was satisfied with his role at Nasser’s side.

*Khalifeh: How did Arafat use financial control to consolidate his power, to obtain allegiances?*

*Al-Hout:* Abu Ammar was fully aware of the importance of money for the survival of his movement and I have to admit that, as an idealist, I learned the importance of material resources for a liberation movement from him. I was naïve and thought that in order to mobilize groups or states, it was enough to convince them. But he knew—and he was right—that patriotism and commitment to the cause need material support and that whoever wants to lead must also loosen his purse strings. Important personalities, heads of clans, local community leaders—Abu Ammar gave them all some amount of money to help them maintain their standing.

He used money in this way at all levels, where it was justified and where it was not. I remember how, after the forced departure of the PLO from Beirut in 1982, I began receiving visits from people asking me for money, and I discovered to my horror the incredible number of people who had been receiving money from him until then. During one of our meetings after that I said, “Abu Ammar, so and so, to whom you were giving money in Lebanon, is now insulting you from morning until night. Should we continue paying him?” His answer: “I pay him and he insults me. Imagine what he would do if I stopped paying him!”

Arafat had an incredible flair for spotting the men who could be bought and those who could not. Everyone was assigned one of those categories: journalists, professionals, political leaders, and even ministers from Arab governments!

*Khalifeh: Of course one of the results of this kind of leadership is that after forty years we have neither institutions nor leaders of great caliber ...*

*Al-Hout:* The big mistake was the solitary exercise of power, which in practice means the end of institutions. Shuqayri’s PLO did have institutions, but

Arafat put an end to them. Worse, the Palestinian leadership before the 1968 fedayeen takeover had prided itself on its financial transparency—that was when Darwish al-Abyad was secretary-general of the Palestine National Fund. The PLO had a National Fund Council at the time, but the council disappeared gradually.

*Khalifeh: Concerning the leadership of the PLO, which includes the various Palestinian movements, is it possible to say at what point Arafat's control over it was complete?*

*Al-Hout:* To answer this question we have to ask ourselves about the other leaders, the heads of the other organizations, about their role, their participation in power. The strength of Arafat and Fatah derived, among other things, from the fact that nobody could accuse them of subservience to any Arab regime. Abu Ammar had a certain freedom of maneuver among the regimes and, like a train, he managed to run on two parallel tracks, one track being the patriotic or progressive popular masses, and the other being the Arab regimes. He was skilled enough as a tactician always to prevent the two tracks from crossing and the train from derailing. And meanwhile, the other leaders, those of the other organizations, all those who criticized Arafat, would be coming to him at the end of each month to collect their budgets.

*Khalifeh: A huge amount of financial aid was pouring in from the Arab states, "progressive" and "reactionary" alike. Did this influx reduce Arafat's autonomy?*

*Al-Hout:* I don't believe that this money influenced Arafat's behavior with regard to the regimes. On the other hand, the money ruined the revolution. Logically, we could think that the petrodollars would serve the movement and that militants' commitment would take precedence over the monthly stipend—and that was in fact the case for all our organizations in the early years. But in the end, the money spoiled them all, starting from the time when quotas were agreed for dividing the Arab money coming in: five parts for Fatah, three for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, two for the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, one for the Popular Struggle Front, one for the Communist Party, and so on. From then on, *all* the organizations were under Arafat's control because he was the one who distributed the money. The recipient had to preserve good relations with the "source," the one who ordered the fund transfers.

So the money did us great harm. It corrupted our organizational structures. The problem became glaring during our "Lebanese period," when we built a quasi state and even forgot to some extent our vocation as a liberation movement. We became a bureaucracy and many leaders were taking far more from Palestine than they were giving to it. Corruption grew in step with the influx of petrodollars. We started investing in financial, agricultural, and commercial projects, which ended in failure. Our standards of living improved to a level that was indecent for a liberation movement.

*Soueid: Many Lebanese are convinced that Arafat's hidden motivation in Lebanon was to take over a substitute country. Do you think that Arafat or other Palestinian leaders could have had this thought at the back of their minds?*

*Al-Hout:* I can say in the most categorical way possible that neither Arafat nor the Palestinian leadership ever believed for a single day, even for a second, that Lebanon could replace Palestine. But there's no denying that from the moment that Lebanon became the PLO's sole military, financial, political, and media base, some Palestinians let themselves be pulled into an ambiguous policy that made such accusations credible. In 1974, Arafat and Lebanese president Suleiman Franjeh went together to New York to defend the Palestinian cause before the UN General Assembly—it wasn't the *same* cause, but it was a *common* cause. A year later, clashes erupted in Beirut. Why? Because we had not taken into account the objective realities of Lebanon; we hadn't understood that certain limits could not be crossed. After all, your cousin can welcome you and put up with your long visit, but you have to respect his limits.

*Khalifeh: Now that we're on the subject of our "long stay in Lebanon," what in your view were our mistakes?*

*Al-Hout:* Anyone who thinks that what the PLO and the Palestinian revolution have experienced over these last four decades is the exclusive consequence of our own decisions is very much mistaken—so often circumstances forced us to react to events. But an answer to this question requires asking other questions. In adopting a strategy of armed struggle waged across Israel's borders, did we really reflect on whether it was possible to liberate our country by force? Did we ask ourselves how Lebanon, the weak link in the chain of states bordering Palestine, could be *the* base of our struggle for liberation?

When we created the PLO in 1964, it was headquartered in Jerusalem. The city fell in 1967 and the leadership naturally withdrew east of the Jordan River, to the Hashemite Kingdom. Jordan, with its Palestinian demographic majority and its long border with Israel, became the base for the movement. After 1970, we were driven out by force of arms: the Hashemite Kingdom thereby resolved the contradiction of a state and a revolution coexisting on the same territory. Heading north through Syria, we arrived at the junction where one road leads to Damascus and the other to Beirut. Syria is a country with a strong army, a clear policy, a strategy, and a ruling party, and its borders are not open to those wishing to conduct their revolution from there. Obviously, we opted for Lebanon, a country that I have always compared to a beautiful garden without a fence, a country whose strength derives from its weakness. And besides a political and military vacuum, there was the advantage that the Palestinians at the time enjoyed strong Lebanese popular support. That's how Lebanon seemed to us then, and the decision was taken to establish our forces and set up our bases there. It was thus objective conditions, rather than a particular strategy, that led us to Lebanon.

*Khalifeh: One would have thought that the recent disastrous experience of Jordan would have led the resistance to draw certain lessons. Why didn't this happen?*

*Al-Hout:* There was a formal self-criticism concerning the Jordanian debacle, and some serious objections within the movement were voiced regarding our behavior in Lebanon. The idea that Palestine could be liberated through military operations conducted from outside the borders was—as I always thought and said—a false option. But all of our organizations fell into this trap, forgetting that in order to reach the Israeli soldier, the Palestinian fedayee would inevitably run into the Arab soldier first. The logic of the state and the logic of revolution cannot coexist on the same territory. Of course, when we came to Lebanon we said we would not intervene in its internal affairs, but whether we liked it or not we held the keys to war and peace in that country: by virtue of Lebanon's entire makeup and situation, we could drag our hosts along with us, because the decisions we made inevitably impinged on its sovereignty. We thus launched our operations from south Lebanon. And Israel knew how to make the most of this situation.

*Khalifeh: You worked closely with Arafat for many years. Was the Arafat you knew before Oslo the same as the Arafat after Oslo? Did he change, and if so, how?*

*Al-Hout:* . . . Arafat went through many stages on the road to negotiation. The first was after the October 1973 war, which convinced the Arab leaders that as long as Washington and Moscow between them were in control of the international situation, there was not going to be an armed solution to the conflict. That's when the Arabs began pushing for participation in the Geneva conference convened after the war. We Palestinians were invited to the conference alongside Egypt and Syria, but we were not ready. The step was premature, it was impossible because of our internal situation. But we all noticed the change with our two main allies, Syria and Egypt, which were now open to the idea of a negotiated solution. I still remember a talk given at the Institute for Palestine Studies in Beirut by Zuhayr Mohsen [leader of the Syrian-controlled Saiqa group], when he said that the era of revolutionary romanticism was over and that from now on it was necessary to think in rational terms. He was transmitting a veiled message from the Syrian leaders, but we chose not to hear it.

We did manage to go to the UN General Assembly in November 1974 and make our peace offer. Any intelligent person would have understood that Arafat's "gun and the olive branch" speech to the UN General Assembly was an implicit recognition of the State of Israel—how could we have been given UN observer status without recognizing its charter and its resolutions? We can therefore consider that since that time we were bound in principle by this peace offer. It's important to recall that the essential background to these events was Egypt's withdrawal from the strategic Arab consensus by signing

a separate peace with Israel in 1978. Nothing could fill the void left by Egypt. Among other things, this absolutely pivotal event had the consequence of strengthening the Palestinian conviction that armed struggle was impossible. At the same time, the conviction that it was unrealistic to believe in the liberation of the whole of historic Palestine took root, and there were many who, without giving up the idea completely, thought it should be postponed for future generations.

As for Arafat, having known and closely observed him, I can testify that he too was convinced of the rightness of a negotiated solution, especially after the siege of Tripoli in northern Lebanon in 1983, when he was expelled from the country a second time along with his fighters. That day, having lost his last foothold in a state bordering on Palestine, he finally understood that the only course open to him was political action. It wasn't an accident that immediately afterwards he stopped in Egypt to mend fences with Husni Mubarak.

This entire phase was marked by stagnation for the Palestinian movement—up until the start of the intifada in 1987. The uprising brought the PLO back to life, just as it moved the Palestinian cause back to the center of the conflict, expanded its popularity, and opened its doors to world opinion when it put aside its arms in favor of a political struggle. It must be added that while the Palestinians were back on the scene, the official Arab system was in full decline and the Soviet Union was moving toward collapse. These developments culminated in the first Gulf War of 1991, which U.S. secretary of state James Baker characterized to Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad as a “defeat of all Arabs,” enemies and allies of the United States alike. George Bush senior convened the Madrid conference less than a year later.

I was among those who were in favor of accepting the invitation and participating in Madrid; the alternative was a slide into nihilism. Besides, the demands of our brothers leading the intifada were moderate, which is why they had succeeded in being heard. The internal leadership at the time was not asking for the liberation of Jaffa, Haifa, Akka, Safad, and so on, but only of the territories occupied in 1967. And they made this demand more palatable by adding concrete demands such as democratic and social measures—demands that were so obvious that nobody could reject them. I should also say that Arafat, besides the fact that he truly favored negotiations, was also under great pressure from Egypt and Saudi Arabia to go faster and farther on this track. There were also those within the PLO who opposed a peaceful solution simply because it was . . . peaceful. As if it were possible to prevail over Israel with a wave of the hand!

The Madrid conference began, consecrating a logic to which I subscribe, which is that in the last analysis, all conflicts, whatever their scope, must inevitably end at the negotiating table. I also didn't think at the time that we were going to the conference without any cards to play. On the contrary, I believed we could hold our own in the talks and make gains as long as we didn't ask for the liberation of all Palestine. We went to Madrid based on the principle of land for peace, and land here meant the territories occupied in 1967.

It was from this time forward that Arafat's bad choices began.

Our delegation in Washington was by no means unworthy. It was headed by Dr. Haydar `Abd al-Shafi, a respected patriot, devoid of demagoguery, and our negotiators succeeded time and again in bringing the debate back to the essential issues: nonguaranteed borders, repression by the occupying forces, the Judaization of Jerusalem, settlements, the policy of creating facts on the ground—all actions condemned under international law. Our delegates were waging a diplomatic battle to freeze these practices, which “emptied the talks of their meaning,” so that negotiations would have a chance. But rather than supporting its delegation, the PLO leadership rushed to open a secret channel in Norway—kept secret, that is, from the Palestinians. Why did Arafat do this? Because he feared that the inside leadership would be strengthened by a diplomatic victory.

If the Oslo negotiations had remained firm on the issues, we would have supported them even though they were secret. But they weren't honest. Take my case. I was a member of the PLO Executive Committee, at least theoretically the supreme body of the Palestinian leadership, but here I was in Tunis, coordinating the negotiations in Washington with three or four of my colleagues, without a clue as to what was happening in Oslo.

Abu Ammar committed two grave errors in signing that agreement. First, by doing so, the agreement became the ultimate reference for the Palestinian cause, taking priority over the United Nations and all its resolutions. It also relieved the United States of any responsibility for the implementation of the accords. And he deprived the Palestinian National Council, the highest Palestinian political authority, of its right to decide on the fate of the people it represented.

*Khalifeh: In other words, the Palestinian National Council should have had a role in this historic decision.*

*Al-Hout:* That is what I demanded of Arafat before I resigned from the PLO Executive Committee. I began by telling him that I was suspending my participation in the committee because I had been informed of the secret meetings underway and of an agreement that was about to be signed. I said that it was imperative that these matters be referred to the Palestinian National Council. Of course, he denied that there were any secret negotiations.

But here too, and despite my position of principle, if the secret negotiators had negotiated decently and obtained concessions from Israel, we would have found a justification for ratifying the agreement. But this was not the case. Arafat settled the bill and paid the fee before he got even the smallest guarantee of what he would get in exchange. One of Yasir Arafat's greatest weaknesses was his stubborn inability to admit his mistakes, despite the tragic end to which the accords led him: a prisoner in his *muqata`a* in Ramallah. And even then, he insisted that he had been right.

*Khalifeh: Could Arafat's intuition have been so dead-wrong that he put all his bets on agreements he knew were flawed?*

*Al-Hout:* I still remember a conversation I had with him in Tunis, very relaxed, when the Washington talks were still going on. That day, I said to him, “Abu Ammar, why don’t you rent a little house in Carthage and let our brothers from the inside negotiate? That way you could keep your freedom of action, you would remain the source of legitimacy, the one to whom they would have to come to obtain approval and confirmation of the rightness of their actions.” I should have known that Arafat could never accept to stay in the background and be a figurehead.

But it would be unfair to him if we didn’t consider the constraints under which he was operating, the narrowness of his margin of maneuver. Abu Ammar was constantly under all kinds of pressures—political, military, and financial. You also have to consider the Arab environment—degraded, not to say capitulationist, and plotting against Palestine. At the same time, Palestinians were telling him, “Fight on! Go to war!” without ever telling him from where this war could be waged. From Lebanon or Jordan, from which we had been expelled? From the Golan, where hardly even a sparrow can enter? From the Sinai, where any Palestinian presence is completely forbidden? Not to mention that Arab financial aid had been cut and he was off in Tunis, far from his people.

Perhaps it would have been different if there had been a shared leadership, but Arafat’s makeup was such that he believed that in order to remain in the game he had to go along with Oslo. He did so without second thoughts, convinced as always that he was Palestine and that Palestine was him. This character trait cannot be underestimated and goes a long way toward explaining his conduct during the negotiations.

*Khalifeh:* Before moving on to the post-Arafat period, I wanted to ask if, in your opinion, there is anything that can be salvaged from the Oslo accords, anything in them that’s positive for the Palestinians?

*Al-Hout:* . . . There may be one thing—I say “may” because I am not sure—but it is this: the accords moved the conflict back to the occupied territories. The leadership was wherever Abu Ammar was, so it was good that he chose to remain in Palestine. The reality that came out of the accords also brought back to the Palestinian memory—especially to those of us in exile—many names that we had almost “forgotten”: Jerusalem, Qalqilya, Jenin, Balata camp, Nussayrat camp, and so on. It was good that the struggle was no longer waged from across the borders, from Lebanese places like Aytaroun, Kfar Shuba, Kfar Hamam. Previously, when our operations were launched from the outside, we were seen as foreign aggressors against Israel. Since Oslo, the fight has been in Jerusalem, Tulkarm, Gaza, Jenin, and countless villages across the territories. I think that’s important, especially in this period of Arab decline. Another small benefit: moving to the inside has forced Israel to come face to face with the Palestinian cause. The Israeli public is now just a little closer to the conflict—it’s not just on their television screens.

But none of this changes the fact that the Palestinian entity is built on moving sand. The governing body has a name, the “Authority,” in perfect contradiction

with its reality. Can Mahmud Abbas, for example, go from Ramallah to Gaza without getting permission from Israel? None of these leaders with fictional titles—their Excellencies, the ministers of this or that—can import so much as a pencil if Israel doesn't authorize it. And if Israel does grant authorization, it dictates from which company the pencil must be ordered. We exaggerated our vision of Oslo to our public because we had deluded ourselves with the titles and red carpets, to which we are now going to add a grandiose presidential tomb. It's true that Abu Ammar liked to impose the protocols and trappings of power in the hope that at a later stage they would acquire some content. The question is the price paid for all this.

The current leadership continues to insist on its commitment to the right of return, but they do not speak the truth. I know why they talk that way, and I know their real position. But have they thought for an instant of the consequences of their words for the millions of Palestinians in exile today? What will we do tomorrow in Lebanon? Do we solve the refugee problem for the Israelis by prolonging a problem for Lebanon and Palestine? I am still waiting for convincing answers. We had to yield with regard to the lands occupied in 1948, but it was in exchange for a Palestinian state on the lands occupied in 1967, with East Jerusalem as the capital. I consider this a stage—an acceptable stage, because it does not deprive future generations of the right to continue, our generation having preserved the Palestinian identity and cause despite everything. But we find ourselves today facing complete surrender.

*Khalifeh: In your view, what is the solution?*

*Al-Hout:* I personally believe that the real solution has been postponed, because there won't be a real solution in Palestine until there is one state, a democratic state in which all citizens live as equals without segregation. But this solution will take generations.

Compromise is only an extension of the past. Since 1947, we have done nothing but compromise. We haven't stopped compromising and losing. How many years did it take us to recognize Resolution 242 or vote for the Declaration of Independence in 1988? During this whole period, the Palestinian leadership never stopped—and still hasn't stopped—trying to get a solution based on renunciation of the major part of our country, the part seized by Israel in 1948. In return—and I ask this question in the most objective way possible—what have the Israelis and Americans offered? A road map that means only one thing: the liquidation of the resistance.

After Abu Ammar's death, an American diplomat visited me to talk about the post-Arafat period. I told him that the Americans had just lost the only Palestinian capable of moving toward an unfair but acceptable compromise; the only one who could have convinced his people to go along. From now on, there is no one who can do that, no one who can sign the compromises that Arafat accepted and that Israel refused. How can brother Mahmud Abbas or brother Abu Ala`a move forward on the path set by Arafat, who thanks to his charisma was able to get his people to accept the long and painful tunnel they

would have to go through? What can his successors do? Concede on the question of Jerusalem? Impossible. Make the people accept—as Arafat would have been able to do—a state on 22 percent of the Palestinian territory and with tens of thousands of settlers planted there to boot? Impossible. What's left for them to concede today? Nothing but surrender, pure and simple.

No doubt the Arafat period will continue for some time, but without Arafat. Why? Because the majority of the Palestinians, certainly those in charge of the Palestinian cause, are still prisoners of Arafat's style of leadership. The political, organizational, associational, and popular organs were all structured according to Arafat's vision and practice. Arafat is no longer there, but there are many who want to maintain the status quo to preserve their interests.

Gradually, inevitably, new ambitions will appear. Let me give you an example to illustrate the difference between Abu Ammar and his successors. Arafat used to wave the portrait of Marwan Barghouti. He was so much in control of the situation that he wasn't afraid that Barghouti would overshadow him. Today, the same Marwan Barghouti, still in prison but very popular with many supporters, is a source of worry for Fatah's Central Committee.

In the meantime, while waiting for the Palestinian house to be put in order, for the PLO to be transformed and adapted to the new situation, for the Palestinian Authority's powers and obligations to be strictly and precisely defined—in other words, while waiting for the relationship among the various spheres that formerly depended solely on Arafat to be sorted out—while waiting for all that, it is essential that our brothers from Fatah and the other organizations, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, put in place a crisis leadership at the highest national level. This is the ideal temporary solution. The task of such a leadership would be to establish the lines of conduct of the Palestinian Authority inside the territories, while at the same time formulating a political program that would define relations between the PLO and the other organizations. Unity is vital to avoid confrontations between those who want to pursue the armed struggle and those who want to stop it. We have to come together without excluding any of us.

To conclude, I would say—and this is a point that most people do not really understand—that it is vital not to forget that more than half of the Palestinian people lives outside, that the exiles must also participate in deciding their fate. Ten years have passed during which we were never consulted by Abu Ammar, who decided alone for the inside and the outside. Today, nobody has the means or authority to act that way. But the Palestinians outside have their fears, and, as a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon, for the first time in my life I feel an existential danger if the leadership abandons the right of return.