

## Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad): The 17th Palestine National Council

*Khalil al-Wazir, also known as Abu Jihad, is one of the founders of Fateh and is now Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Palestinian forces. Along with his aides headed by the late Abu al-Walid, Khalil al-Wazir planned and helped execute the defense of West Beirut during the 1982 Israeli invasion. The following interview for the Journal was given in Amman, immediately after the closing of the 17th Palestine National Council session, held November 22-29, 1984. Abu Jihad talked with Ghassan Bishara, the Washington, DC correspondent for the Jerusalem-based newspaper, al-Fajr.*

*Bishara: Now that the Palestine National Council has met, what do you see beyond the PNC?*

*al-Wazir: We must assess the nature of the conditions which preceded the PNC, in which attempts were made to target Palestinian legitimacy and to hinder the functioning of our institutions. The convening of the PNC embodied the free will of our people and the restoration of legitimacy. We have fundamental tasks ahead of us. On the Palestinian level, how can we strengthen Palestinian national unity? Unity is an essential weapon in our struggle. How can we strengthen the Palestinian relationship within the occupied territories and elsewhere? How can we pursue and continue the dialogue with those organizations which abstained from the PNC, so that we can achieve unity within our ranks? We are eager to pursue negotiations so that they can free themselves from pressures placed on them by the Syrian regime.*

Then we must turn to the Arab arena, to strengthen the PLO's presence and to resolve many of the problems between us and many Arab countries. We must do everything possible to lessen the suffering of our people in the Arab countries and to decrease the oppression they face. In the previous phase we did not pursue these issues. We must pursue contacts with Arab parties to strengthen Arab unity, so that a unified Arab stand *vis-à-vis* Palestinian activity can be achieved.

From there we can turn to the international level. Our political activity must be expanded to include all fronts and to strengthen the voice and presence of the PLO, conveying to the world the revitalization of our institutions and the continuation of our struggle for our usurped rights.

*Bishara: Is there any place for armed struggle?*

*al-Wazir:* Of course. One of our main tasks in the coming phase, a legitimate right for us as oppressed people facing occupation and aggression, is the right to continue our struggle by all means. In the occupied territories we continue our resistance against the Israeli military occupation with armed struggle. We continue our political struggle with political activity against the occupation by all means, whether by throwing stones at Israeli tanks threatening our camps, or by demonstrations and strikes. It is the right of people whose land has been taken to use all means of struggle to restore their rights and liberate their homeland.

After the PLO departure from Beirut, our fighters were dispersed to many destinations in the Arab world: Algeria, Tunis, Egypt, Sudan, North and South Yemen, Iraq and Jordan. Everyone expected that this dispersal would lead to the dissipation of Palestinian strength. But our will was strong, and we have transformed our new positions into bases for reorganizing, restructuring, rearming, retraining, and finally restoring the will to continue the struggle for the goals of the Palestinian people. The Palestinian military exhibition during the commemoration, in January 1983, of the establishment of Fateh sent a message from the PLO to the whole world: far from being destroyed, the PLO's military ability has been restructured, restored and replenished.

While large numbers of fighters left Lebanon, there is still a Palestinian presence in Lebanon defending the people's existence so that they are not exposed to further massacres, such as happened in Sabra and Shatila [in September 1982]. They have the right to bear arms in defense of their existence, their lives, their future and their families.

As for the political institutions, the PLO leadership immediately restored and reactivated them following the PLO departure from Beirut. These institutions began functioning on all levels, of which the highest organizational level was the convening of the PNC in Algeria in February 1983.

*Bishara: Clearly, you don't agree with the assessment of some Western commentators that the PLO is finished?*

*al-Wazir:* The whole world can testify that the PLO is not finished. During our international political activities, such as the continuous visits by Abu Ammar [Yasser Arafat] and PLO delegations to China, Italy, Europe, and African and Asian countries, the PLO's voice has been raised. We are still here; we have not been eliminated from the international scene.

Our real presence is in the occupied territories where the Palestinian people rally around the leadership of the PLO and struggle in its defense. They say to the world that our nation lives, that the PLO has not died. Today, as the PNC convenes—after having faced conspiracies, including Arab ones, aimed at postponing its convening and thus hindering the activity of Palestinian institutions—it continues the cycle of the re-emergence of the organization. The success of the PNC constitutes a strong reality, namely that the PLO continues its mission and takes pride in its legitimacy in the Palestinian, Arab and international arenas. The PNC embodies an international phenomenon, as testified by our people in the occupied territories and their expression of support for the PNC, by the activities of the Palestinians in the camps in Syria, the support of Palestinians in the diaspora, and by Arab and international support for the PLO.

*Bishara: In the past eight months, prior to the convening of the PNC in Amman, the PLO was in a state of suspension from the scene due to internal politics and external pressures.*

*al-Wazir:* After confronting the Israeli aggression [in Lebanon] and departing from Beirut, the PLO faced another kind of conspiracy. The assumption was that the weakness of the PLO after the departure from Beirut opened a suitable opportunity for various maneuvers. Attempts were made to use every means to shatter the PLO leadership, and elements within Fateh, the largest Palestinian organization, were encouraged to split under various pretexts, with the aim of controlling decisions of the PLO leadership.

When the split proved incapable of controlling PLO affairs, [the dissidents] began a military campaign completely supported by Syria and all organizations affiliated to its policies. It began a military campaign in the Beqaa and Tripoli, so that the second Palestinian departure from Lebanon was at the hands of Syrian forces.

However, the PLO's departure, its establishment of the leadership in Tunis, and its political activities on an international level, have prevented the policies of the Palestinian leadership from falling under Syrian control.

*Bishara: Is Syria the main obstacle to a Palestinian understanding between Fateh dissidents and the PLO currently, and the other non-participating organizations?*

*al-Wazir:* Since the beginning of 1984, we have been negotiating with the other organizations. We have not closed the door; we sincerely wish to meet with them. We reached an agreement in Algeria and in Aden, under Algerian-Yemeni auspices, with the Democratic Alliance, consisting of the PFLP, the DFLP, the Palestinian Communist Party and the Palestine Liberation Front. But Syrian pressures on the members of the Democratic Alliance influenced the positions of our comrades who absented themselves from the PNC because of the direct threats of the Syrian regime. We understand their situation, and we took a decision on their behalf and held the PNC. We understand their situation and excuse their absence. We have been careful to leave them positions from which to continue the dialogue after the new leadership exercises its responsibilities and assumes its tasks.

As for the National Alliance, which is also committed to Syrian policies, we used all means for them to participate in the broad Palestinian national dialogue, the last time being as recently as November 1, 1984, the anniversary of the Algerian Revolution. The Algerian and the Yemeni parties to the dialogue did their best to bring the National Alliance to the room in which we (Fateh) were meeting with members of the Democratic Alliance, in the presence of the Algerians and the Yemenis. Those linked to Syrian policies refused to participate in the dialogue, and flew directly by plane to Libya. We understand the meaning of the Syrian rejection of revitalizing Palestinian institutions, aimed at paralyzing their effectiveness so that the Syrians can then create the tools they want, to use the Palestinian card as they use the Lebanese one.

The convening of the PNC was a clear announcement that all factions and representatives of the Palestinian people reject the policies of Syrian

hegemony, because their decision springs from their will and determination to retain control of political decisions without subjecting them to Arab or other pressures.

*Bishara: Apparently, you haven't ruled out the possibility of reaching an understanding with Syria.*

*al-Wazir:* We supported Syria throughout the last phase, despite its criminal attack on our forces in the Beqaa and in Tripoli. Syrian support of, and collusion in, efforts to expel the PLO's forces from Lebanon were clear to the whole world. Syrian policies are geared toward achieving what the Israelis have been incapable of. Despite this, since leaving Lebanon and Tripoli, we have been careful to continue the dialogue. We have tried through various intermediaries, but these attempts have been confronted with Syrian intransigence, which wanted to impose its conditions, namely, deposing Brother Arafat from the leadership of the PLO. Despite continuous Syrian obstructions, we still maintain that we are willing to continue the dialogue with Syria, and we will stay in contact, using all means and all intermediaries to resolve the problem and to restore normal Palestinian-Syrian relations. We are more concerned than the Syrians about this, because it will serve the purpose of our struggle.

This does not mean that we are demeaning ourselves if we seek understanding with Syria, nor are we begging Syria for this position, but rather that this position springs from our belief as Palestinians that we need the entire Arab nation, that our voices are stronger with Arab support. Our slogan will continue to be: how can we resolve our problems with those who wish to pressure us into becoming one of their intelligence agencies? We reject this completely. We insist on our independence, that our voices remain free, and that we remain opposed to bribery or pressure.

*Bishara: There is a question which, to my knowledge, has never been answered. It has been said that Arafat made a statement in Damascus, the intention of which, according to some analysts, was to provoke Syrian anger so as to bring about his expulsion from Syria, and thus cause the Palestinian people to unite behind him. How accurate is this assessment?*

*al-Wazir:* It is not true that the reason behind Arafat's deportation [from Syria] was a statement or a newspaper interview in Damascus. Actually, this was a carefully deliberated plan, aiming above all else to expropriate the Palestinian decision, or to place the Palestinian leadership in subservience

to Syrian orders. Syrian officials told us point-blank: you must either support our policies or leave Syrian soil. Foreign Minister [Abdul Halim] Khaddam said to us: "If you wish to resolve your problems, you must conform to our policies; our friends are to be your friends, and our enemies are to be your enemies." We rejected this rationale, saying: "We cannot smile on whomever you smile on; we cannot quarrel with whomever you quarrel with. We have our own policies, our own decisions and our own choices to make which might conflict with your policies, interests and positions. We cannot submit to your policies." This was the direct result of the Syrian expectation that, after our departure from Beirut, we would be within Syrian control, and fall into Syrian decisions and political perspectives.

*Bishara: Regarding the occupied territories, some of the leadership in the West Bank and Gaza Strip believe that the PLO takes decisions without consulting them, then asks them to implement these decisions. Is that true?*

*al-Wazir:* No. Whenever we take a decision, our first concern is the position of our people in the occupied territories. We are fully aware of, and take into consideration, their realities, their feelings, and the harsh conditions they face under occupation. We appreciate the severity of these conditions and the pains of coping with the Israeli occupation. This is also true of our people in other areas; we interact with their conditions, with their pain and struggle, with the pain from this Arab [state system] reality under which they live. Our decisions take these conditions, first and foremost, into consideration. When we reach a decision, we are convinced that our decision expresses the struggle and aspirations of our people, and their hopes of removing the painful realities under which they live.

*Bishara: In the same connection, it has also been said that the Arab support funds directed to the West Bank are falling into the wrong hands: those who should be receiving them are not, in fact, receiving them.*

*al-Wazir:* There is considerable misinformation on this issue. Many of our brothers in the occupied territories think that "supporting steadfastness" means that every person gets some direct support. We cannot, in fact, reach every person. But we have principles and guidelines regarding activities in this framework: first, we don't give funds to individuals, rather we support institutions and public bodies, agricultural and industrial cooperatives or social concerns. When we provide support on one of these levels, we are guided by these facts: if we work with individuals, we should start with the

families of prisoners and martyrs, who have a right to compensation. These families have a right to expect compensation, and if the enemy destroys the house of a fighter for reasons connected to his struggle, it is only fair that the Palestinian society should contribute to compensating the family, and then building an alternative house. This cannot be considered assistance to an individual; it contributes to intensifying the spirit of struggle within those who are fulfilling their obligations.

As to the productive sectors, we have ways of dealing with agricultural cooperatives and with those who can develop agriculture in the occupied territories. These ways are determined by facts gathered from organizations about some of the projects intended to help the agricultural sector. After studying them, we make a decision concerning their support. The same is true for the industrial sector. When many factories in the occupied territories are closed, and others are threatened with closure due to the severe economic situation, the support we give to enable the reinvigoration and productivity of these factories—in order to keep industrial work alive in the West Bank—does not constitute support for the factory owner, who may be rich, but rather it is support for the overall industrial sector. Also, whatever is given are loans in exchange for guarantees [from responsible parties in Amman]; if the initial terms of the loans are met, we then can continue making a second payment. If, however, the conditions are not met, the loan is discontinued. If these loans are not repaid, the co-signatory in Amman is asked to return the funds. We have guarantees to get the funds back. This is also true with regard to support given to other institutions in specific sectors, such as charitable, academic, medical, agricultural, manufacturing, transportation or housing. We consider these methods a guarantee enabling contact with [and support for] the largest possible number of people.

Those who think that we pour money into the pockets of individuals or that we give large amounts of money are simply wrong. They should realize that the facilities which were available to us three years ago, such as the municipal councils, and other institutions, are now fewer. Secondly, the dollar amount to be spent in the territories agreed upon during the Baghdad summit [of 1978] was \$100 million. In 1983, only \$39 million were received from the Arab countries, and only \$18 million of that \$100 million total in 1984. This indicates that there are no vast amounts of money pouring in, as some think. The small amounts available to us are spent on academic, medical, agricultural, industrial and social institutions, simply because we

don't have the funds enabling us to expand our support.

We should remember that the campaign to discredit Palestinian steadfastness has clear objectives, namely to raise doubts and suspicions about money squandered left and right without justification. Whenever a West Banker sees a large villa belonging to a factory owner, he mistakenly thinks the money has come from the steadfastness support funds. The truth is that these funds do not support such endeavors. If money is given to a factory owner, it is under certain conditions and with a repayment schedule, and the second half of the loan can only be secured when those specific conditions have been met and the equipment or raw materials are present.

*Bishara: In the same connection, a large part of Palestinian success depends on keeping the Palestinians in the occupied territories, which depends, in turn, on taking serious measures to improve the conditions of life there so as to discourage emigration. Do you have any comments?*

*al-Wazir: We are aware of the plans of the Zionist enemy to expropriate the land and make life for the Palestinians more and more unbearable. They want to pressure all aspects of life—the social, the economic and the psychological—so that people get fed up and leave. Therefore, our task is always to confront this plan and to maintain, at all costs, the steadfastness of the people so that the Israeli aim will not be realized.*

*Bishara: Israeli, American and Jordanian attempts—through some wealthy Arab-Americans and American Jews—aim at strengthening Jordan's role and creating a local leadership in the occupied territories, at the expense of the PLO. What are your comments?*

*al-Wazir: We should remember that the US-Israeli plan has as its target the elimination of the Palestine question and the PLO as sole legitimate representative [of the Palestinian people]. The Israeli goal is clear: it seeks to distance the PLO from any participation in a solution and any recognition of the role the PLO might play in overseeing the concerns of Palestinians in the occupied territories. It always seeks alternatives. Thus arises the so-called Jordanian option, preferred by the Israelis so that they can distance the PLO and the Palestinian people from their right to self-determination and to establish an independent Palestinian state. This choice, which the Israelis call the Jordanian option, is rejected by the Palestinians, by the Jordanians, and by all the Arabs because it perpetuates*

the aggression against the Palestinian people, expelled from their lands and victimized by Israeli aggression.

*Bishara: What solution does the PLO seek to the Palestine problem?*

*al-Wazir:* The Palestinian people have been victimized by the Israeli military aggression; the Israelis occupied the land and sent the people away. For the past thirty-six years, this wandering people has struggled to restore its rights and return to its home. After the Israelis occupied the remainder of Palestine in 1967, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, a large number of our population came under Israeli military occupation.

It is our right to struggle. It is our right to ask the world to support our aspirations for freedom and to end the oppressive Israeli military occupation which uses all means to persecute our people and to institutionalize the perpetuation of this occupation. Therefore, when we struggle, we look for international support for our cause. We expect the world to support us in our struggle to return to our homes, and to support our legitimate right to self-determination (which the whole world concedes), and our right to establish an independent Palestinian state. This is a right the whole world admits, even if the US and Israel stubbornly reject it. We believe that the circle of international support we have received has expanded.

We are the victims of this aggression. Israel continues to pursue terrorist policies in its bombardment of refugee camps with the heaviest weaponry, destroying them. This enemy has massacred our people, as was the case in Sabra and Shatila, and later in Ain al-Hilweh in South Lebanon; our camps continue to face this aggression and terrorism. We trust that the world supports us in our defense of our rights, and our freedom to struggle to achieve freedom and national independence.

*Bishara: Is there any kind of Palestinian-Jordanian-Iraqi-Egyptian alliance?*

*al-Wazir:* The PLO does not enter one axis in the Arab world against another; quite the contrary. The Palestinian cause demands the widest possible Arab support from all sides. Therefore, we are careful about our relations with all Arab countries. We strive diligently to make sure we retain Arab support, because the Palestinian voice is strengthened by Arab support and weakened by the rupture in the Arab position. We are not partisans of one axis as opposed to another on the Arab scene. This is one of the premises of our continuous political activity, and we are careful to

maintain relations with all parties; if disagreements should arise, this does not mean we favor a particular axis.

*Bishara: Along the same lines, then, what is the current nature of the Palestinian-Jordanian relationship?*

*al-Wazir:* We are especially careful to ensure that our relationship with Jordan is a natural one. More than 1.5 million of our people live in Jordan, and more than 1.5 million Palestinians live in the occupied territories; for them, the communication link is through Jordan. Therefore, we are careful that these relations remain natural. This state of affairs did not come about as a result of our departure from Beirut. We have been careful to restore normal relations with Jordan ever since we left Amman in 1971. We have used every method and a variety of Arab intermediaries. All of them—ranging from King Faisal, and King Fahd to presidents Qadhafi, Boumedienne and Assad, and Arab Gulf leaders—tried to restore normal relations between us and Jordan, until suitable conditions arose after the Baghdad summit meeting [March 1979], and intensified after the events in Beirut and Tripoli.

The convening of the PNC in Amman is a giant step forward. We are careful about this relationship, and we are concerned about developing these relations. We would like to develop a special relationship with our brothers as groundwork for political movement. We are the party most concerned about the cause of the Palestinian people. No one knows better than we do the circumstances surrounding our cause. We are careful to ensure that our activity in the international arena remain a joint one, springing from a Jordanian-Palestinian movement, supported by Arab activity, so that we may attain greater international support for our cause.

*Translated by Ida Audeh*