

INTERVIEW

TAKING STOCK

AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE HABASH

Soueid: How old were you when you left Lydda? Were you politically aware from an early age?

Habash: I was in elementary school during the Great Rebellion of 1936–39, and I still vividly recall the anti-British demonstrations and strikes organized by the Palestinian nationalists and slogans like “Down with colonialism!” and “Down with the Balfour Declaration!” The principal of our school, Tawfiq Abu al-Su‘ud, was an ardent nationalist. I remember once when a fight broke out in a corridor among the younger students, he chastised them, saying: “Instead of fighting among yourselves, fight the Jews!” Another day our arithmetic teacher asked us to stand and observe a minute of silence. I had no idea what it was about, and I don’t think anyone else did either. When the minute was up, the teacher said: “At this very moment, our young men are going to the gallows for fighting for their homeland.”¹ I was greatly moved by that incident. So I was a nationalist then in a broad sense, but I had no thought of a political career.

When I was thirteen, just after finishing elementary school, my family moved from Lydda to Jaffa. I enrolled in the [Greek] Orthodox School there, but since it wasn’t a full secondary school, after the second year I transferred to Terra Sancta² in Jerusalem. After I graduated, I returned to Jaffa and worked as a teacher for two years. I used to spend my spare time at the Orthodox Club, reading Egyptian magazines, particularly articles on literary and cultural topics. In 1944, I went to Beirut where I enrolled in the American University.

Soueid: Was it at AUB [American University of Beirut] that you became involved in politics?

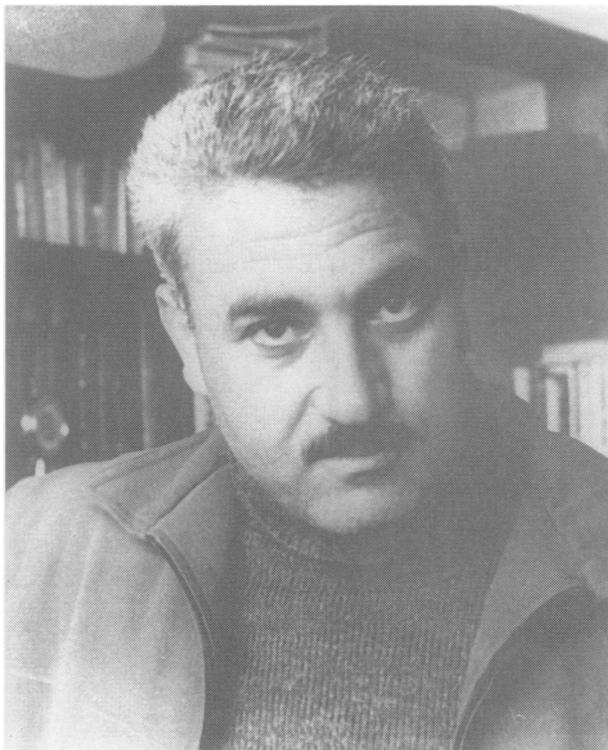
Habash: I was immersed in my studies then but was deeply affected by certain landmark events. The 1947 UN partition resolution, for example. It was difficult to conceive of my homeland divided. And when Palestinians began

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1. In the course of the Great Rebellion, the British hanged some 112 Palestinians.
2. A leading private Catholic secondary school.

to be driven out in 1948, I started wondering: since the Arab world is large and great, how can it be defeated by a handful of gangs?

Then, at the beginning of my second year of medical school, a classmate named Ma'tuq al-Asmar, who came from Nablus, told me about closed seminars of twenty to twenty-five students being organized by Professor Constantine Zurayk,³ who was talking about Arab nationalism, the Arab nation, and the need for a renaissance. I began to attend. Ma'tuq also wanted us to meet with an AUB alumnus named Ramiz Shihadeh to discuss how to



George Habash, founder of the Arab Nationalist Movement and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. (IPS Beirut Archive)

achieve Arab unity and save Palestine. But by that time, I was determined to return to Lydda, so the meeting never took place.

Soueid: You returned to Lydda during the 1948 war?

Habash: It was June 1948. The academic year was over, and the university was closed. By that time, the Zionist forces had expelled the population of Jaffa, and the exodus from Palestine was at its peak. Many had fled to Lydda,

3. Born in Damascus in 1909, Zurayk was a leading historian and exponent of secular pan-Arabism. His monograph on 1948, *The Meaning of the Disaster*, had a strong impact on Arab intellectuals.

including my parents. They were fairly well off—my father had a store, you could call him a merchant—and they had sent me money, wanting me to stay in Beirut. My mother was always worrying about me.

So they were very surprised when I showed up in Lydda. They didn't believe I could be of any use under the circumstances. I thought about it. Could I fight? Since I had already started to study medicine, I thought I could be of service in this area. There was a doctor at Lydda Hospital, from the Zahlan family. I began to serve as Dr. Mustafa Zahlan's assistant.

Soueid: What was the situation in Lydda like at the time?

Habash: There was an extraordinary anxiety, like in the other towns and villages that hadn't yet fallen to the Jews. Air raids had the population terrorized, and the town was overflowing with refugees from the surrounding areas that had been attacked by the Zionist gangs. The Lydda branch of the Arab Higher Committee headed by Hajj Amin al-Husseini urged people to stay put and even tried to prevent them from leaving. Some took comfort from the presence of an Arab Legion force near Lydda,⁴ thinking it would save the city when the Jewish forces launched their massive assault.⁵

Soueid: Where were you at the time of the attack?

Habash: I was at the hospital, helping Dr. Zahlan. The place was overflowing with dead and wounded, and the situation was quite terrifying.

I was totally occupied when my mother's maternal aunt came to the hospital looking for me. She wanted me to return home, saying my mother was worried about me. Of course I refused. Finally she had to tell me that my sister had been killed, my older sister whom I loved dearly [*he pauses to control himself*]. As I rushed through the streets, there was great confusion. Dead and wounded, some of whom I knew, were strewn along the side of the road.

We buried my sister near our house because we could not get to the cemetery. Three hours later, Jewish fighters stormed the house, screaming: "Out! Out! Get out!" My mother and my sister's children—including a small child we had to carry—ran out, as did other relatives and neighbors. We had no idea where to go, but the Jewish soldiers ordered us to get moving. So we walked. It was a hot day in Ramadan. Some people around us were saying it was the Day of Judgment, others said we were already in Hell. When we reached the outskirts of town, we found a Jewish checkpoint where those leaving were being searched. We had no weapons. But our neighbor's son, Amin Hanhan, apparently had some money concealed on him and wouldn't let them search him. A Zionist soldier shot him dead right in front of our

4. A small force, about a company strong (100 soldiers), was stationed halfway between Lydda and Ramla.

5. Operation Dani, launched 9–10 July 1948. The expulsion of the city's inhabitants was complete by 14 July. See the introduction to Spiro Munayyer, "The Fall of Lydda," in *JPS* 108.

eyes. His mother and sister rushed to him, wailing. His brother, Bishara, had been in elementary school with me and we were friends. We used to study and play together . . . [*again he is overcome with emotion*].

You wonder why I have chosen this road, why I became an Arab nationalist. This is what Zionism is about. After all this, they talk about peace. This was the Zionism that I knew, that I saw with my own eyes.

Soueid: What happened to your family?

Habash: We went to Ramallah. My family then moved on to Amman, and I went back to Beirut to continue my medical studies.

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Soueid: What about your remaining years at AUB? Which of your fellow students do you remember?

Habash: Hani al-Hindi,⁶ Wadi' Haddad,⁷ Ahmad al-Khatib,⁸ Saleh Shibel, Hamed al-Juburi, among many others.⁹ We were part of a student political movement with members in all of Lebanon.

Soueid: Were you thinking then of some undertaking beyond student activities?

Habash: Of course. With Wadi' Haddad, Ahmad al-Khatib, and Hani al-Hindi, we were attracted by the idea of direct action—fast and effective action. We were young at the time. Hani al-Hindi told us about individuals in Syria who thought the way we did. That is how the *Kata'ib al-Fida' al-'Arabi* [Arab Commando Battalions] was born. I and Hani and Jihad Dahi¹⁰ and Hussein Tawfiq from Egypt and others were active in the *Kata'ib al-Fida' al-'Arabi*. Our primary targets were first traitors, then the British, and finally Israel. However, following the abortive attempt to assassinate Shishakli,¹¹ which was carried out by Hussein Tawfiq, possibly at the behest of other parties (without my approval or that of Hani and Jihad), it occurred to me that it was unreasonable to expect to liberate Palestine through such tactics and that it was time to start thinking of launching a political movement.

Guided by what Hani and I had been reading at the time, the idea crystallized in our minds that it was not possible to liberate Palestine without first achieving Arab unity. The organization we had in mind could be run only by

6. Hani al-Hindi, a Syrian, was one of the founders of the ANM along with Habash, Haddad, and al-Khatib. He was later a minister in the Egyptian-Syrian United Arab Republic (UAR: 1958–61).

7. A Greek Orthodox Palestinian from Safad and, like Habash, an AUB-trained medical doctor, Haddad became Habash's right-hand man and later operational commander of the PFLP.

8. Ahmad al-Khatib, an AUB-trained medical doctor from Kuwait, eventually became a member of parliament and opposition leader in Kuwait.

9. Shibel and al-Juburi were Palestinian and Iraqi, respectively.

10. A Syrian, later a minister in a UAR cabinet.

11. Adib al-Shishakli was president of Syria (1953–54).

determined men who would forsake their personal careers and dedicate themselves to the cause. Thus the nucleus of ANM began to form.

Of course, a very broad Arab nationalist trend already existed. What characterized the ANM was the belief that the liberation of Palestine required Arab unity. We believed that the movement had to be very tightknit.

Soueid: Was there an ideological basis for the core group?

Habash: It was the thought of Zurayk, who had written about the *Nakbah*, and Sati' al-Husari,¹² known then as the father of Arab nationalism. Once, when Husari was asked why we lost in 1948, he replied: "Because we were seven states." But of course, reading Zurayk and Husari was not enough. When we began to think of organizing a political movement, we realized that we had to read everything. We determined that we would not allow ourselves to form a movement until we were convinced that we had a political vision (in keeping with what we understood political vision to be at the time) and an iron organization, which had to be proven in action, not through words.

Regarding ideology, Marxism had not yet come into the picture for us—we had a negative attitude toward it because of the Soviet Union's support of partition. In any case, we made an intense effort to learn and did an enormous amount of reading. With Hani and Wadi' Haddad, we read a lot of history, about the German and Italian unification movements and the French Revolution and so on. I also studied the Qur'an. So did Wadi'. I still have a vivid mental image of Wadi' and Hani, immersed in their reading. . . .

We insisted first on being honest with ourselves. It wasn't until three years from the time we began thinking about it that we announced the formation of the organization. We began to organize in 1951. I went to Amman, and Wadi' followed me there,¹³ and later it occurred to us that we had to make the movement our full-time occupation and that no sacrifice would be too great. When Ahmad Khatib, who had gone to Kuwait, collected his first pay check of 100 dinars, he sent us 90 dinars. We said: Now we can begin.

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Soueid: If you were to organize the Arab Nationalist Movement all over again, what would you do the same and what would you change?

Habash: I would introduce democracy as a basic motto, starting in the family and at school, in clubs and associations, all the way to democracy in political activities, organizations, parties, and state institutions. Thus, in addition to recovering Palestine, I would add the issue of democracy.

12. Sati' al-Husari, director of education in Iraq during the 1940s and a leading theoretician of Arab nationalism, had a profound influence on Arab nationalist thinking of the 1950s and 1960s.

13. Habash and Haddad started a "people's clinic" that dispensed free medical treatment in Amman until 1957.

I also used to understand unity in terms of the paradigm case of the total and instantaneous union between Egypt and Syria, without adequate preparation, under Nasir in 1958. Now I understand it differently. We must first consider the issue of complementarity and see unity as a cumulative process to be completed in stages, step by step, consolidating achievements conducive to unity in the economic, social, or cultural realms.

I see it now as being achieved in successive stages of rapprochement and in regional units—the Maghrib states, for example, the countries of the Fertile Crescent, Egypt and Sudan, the Arabian peninsula and the Gulf. Moves among neighbors in one region whether or not similar progress is made in others. Eventually, there could be a federation among the regional units modeled on the United States. In the meantime, at the pan-Arab level, there should be freedom of movement for individuals, the promotion of intra-Arab trade, coordination among Arab universities, and certain civil measures. We would be embarking on a long and interlinked process.

Then there is the issue of socialism. At the beginning, socialism was not on our agenda: our motto was “Unity, Liberation, and Revenge”—revenge for what happened in Palestine. Socialism was incorporated later as a result of give and take within the party.

I want to emphasize that my principal ideas were formed in response to events—real events determined my line of thinking. Reading and party debates played a role, but if you are asking about the principal influence on George Habash’s thinking, the answer would have to be events—the break-up of the UAR in 1961, the 1967 war, the 1973 war, the intifada. First, events occur, then the debates about what happened, then what one reads—events, interactions, reading—in that order.

Soueid: Can we go back to the topic of socialism?

Habash: As I said, socialism was not part of our agenda at the beginning, even though we knew that the masses were the basis for everything. In that sense, we were progressive.

Then we issued a very important circular outlining the stages in which socialism had to be realized. That was the first step toward greater democracy with regard to the movement’s ideology. In those days we were still able to evolve without creating splits within the movement. Had that state of affairs continued, the ANM would not have broken down.

The fact that Nasir was advocating socialism at the time of the union with Syria gave rise to a debate within the party. In early 1959, we set up a cultural committee in Beirut headed by Muhsin Ibrahim,¹⁴ with Muhammad al-Zayyat, Joseph Mughazel,¹⁵ ‘Abd al-Hamid Sharaf,¹⁶ and Ahmad Staitiyya as

14. Muhsin Ibrahim, a Lebanese Shi’a, later headed a leftist splinter faction of the ANM and ultimately became head of the Organization for Communist Action in Lebanon (OCAL).

15. Mughazel, a Lebanese Maronite, became a prominent lawyer and president of the Arab Cultural Club, the leading Lebanese forum for pan-Arab ideas.

members. Following a discussion between the ANM's command and the cultural committee, it was decided to incorporate socialism in the agenda and to replace the term "revenge" with "recovering Palestine." Thus the ANM's motto became "Unity, Liberation, Socialism, and Recovering Palestine." The latter change was based on a recommendation of the cultural committee, which argued that the formulation "revenge" was not popular. The committee also advised differentiating between Jews and Zionists.

Soueid: You said earlier that it was the breakup of the UAR that led to greater depth in your socialist thinking and drove you to Marxism.

Habash: The breakup of the union opened my eyes, forcing me to look into the forces that had brought it about. I gained a deeper understanding of class struggle, coming to realize the extent to which it was a factor in our society. I also drew lessons from Vietnam. I see no contradiction between being an Arab nationalist and being a true socialist.

But my real commitment to Marxism came after the 1967 war. My Marxism grew deeper during my imprisonment in Syria. I am indebted to my jailer, 'Abd al-Karim al-Jundi, who kept me in solitary confinement for nine or ten months, thinking he would break me. I spent that entire period reading all the collected works of Marx and Engels, of Lenin, also of Ho Chi Minh and Mao. It was after that that I wrote the declaration of the [Popular] Front's second national convention.

Soueid: How do you see relations between the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Fatah now with regard to armed struggle?

Habash: Armed struggle was a common denominator between us and Fatah until Abu 'Ammar [Yasir Arafat] caved in and signed the Oslo agreement. But we always differed on major issues. For example, we always stressed the interdependence of the Palestinian and Arab nationalist dimensions, that the liberation of Palestine cannot be achieved without this interdependence. Fatah's grave error—its fatal error—was to disengage the Palestinian cause from the Arab nationalist cause.

Second is the class dimension. When the bourgeoisie achieves its class objectives, it ceases to fight. What happened was that a certain class fraction, represented now by the Oslo team, believes it has scored an achievement. But what of the masses? What about their interests?

Look at what has become of the masses. The corruption and co-optation of the Palestinian masses by Fatah constitutes a calamity that boggles the mind. Those same masses that had survived all the wars and the attempts to marginalize and defeat them, that had withstood the Zionist military machine inside and outside the occupied territories are now, after thirty years, despairing and despondent under their bourgeois leadership, due to the under-

16. Sharaf was a member of the Iraqi Hashimite royal family who later became prime minister of Jordan.

mining of their nationalist achievements and institutions and the stifling of democracy by the repressive state apparatuses. Mafias are on the rise, and connections with the occupying power are being exploited to secure monopolies on daily necessities.

Still, although I lay the basic blame for the current state of affairs on the Palestinian Authority team, I do not exempt the opposition, which has not risen to the challenge or been true to its declared objectives and programs.

As for armed struggle, the PFLP advocated it until the intifada. Under armed struggle, it is the fedayeen who fight, but under the intifada, it is all the Palestinian people—children, women, artists, everybody. With the intifada, I felt for the first time that it was possible to achieve freedom and independence in some part of Palestine.

I know now that there were those who turned armed struggle into a sacred rite. We've gone beyond this notion now and see armed struggle as part of the wider political battle. Whether or not one adopts armed struggle is determined not by matters of conscience but by the nature and practices of the enemy. It is also determined by the objectives of the Palestinian people—objectives that cannot be achieved by diplomatic action alone but that require a comprehensive struggle in which revolutionary violence, in its various manifestations, has a special place. There is no contradiction between this and other forms of struggle, such as the political, cultural, and economic.

But the Oslo agreement squandered the achievements of the intifada in the occupied homeland, just as it squandered the achievements of the armed struggle phase. In fact, putting an end to the intifada was one of Israel's basic conditions for agreeing to the Oslo accord.

Soueid: But by the time the PLO started negotiating, the intifada was already in its death throes.

Habash: Abu 'Ammar began making concessions even before that time, at the Algiers conference. This is what caused Israel to demand further concessions. He went to negotiate under the worst possible conditions from the Palestinian, Arab, and international perspectives.

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Soueid: The PFLP has been criticized for hijackings and hostage taking. What would you say about this matter in terms of ideology and procedures?

Habash: Starting in the 1960s, there was a lot of concern about Israel's nuclear capability; I remember discussing the issue with Nasir. We used to have an advisory board consisting of Palestinian professors and other friends, and they thought we should draw world attention to the nuclear issue. Meanwhile Wadi' and I were trying to determine how world opinion could be awakened to the injustice that has been done to the Palestinian people. Wadi' came up with the hijacking idea, but he repeatedly used to instruct those carrying out the operations not to hurt anyone in any way. We wanted to attract world attention through some action, and that was it.

Soueid: Do you think that kidnapping civilians has won supporters for the Palestinian cause? Even if one were a supporter of the Palestinian cause, surely such an ordeal would have a negative effect on one's sympathies. . . .

Habash: We put an end to those operations in 1972. But looking at the three-year period when we carried them out, we have to conclude that they

We have to evaluate the operations in a wider perspective than the bitter personal experience of the individual passengers.

did have an impact. We have to evaluate the operations in a wider perspective than the bitter personal experience of the individual passengers, and our evaluation was that these operations made the world aware of our people's suffering.

As for the operations against Israeli civilians, one opinion was that all Israelis are settlers and usurpers.

I am one of those who subscribes to this view. Nevertheless, we focussed on the military. I agree that there should be an ethical dimension to the struggle, but it is significant that the heated condemnations usually come from Israel's supporters. If you add up all the civilian victims of Zionist state terrorism among the Palestinians, Lebanese, and other Arabs, you will see that the number is tens of times greater than the Israeli civilians killed.

Soueid: What is your opinion of suicide bombings and random bombings?

Habash: As a Front, our view is that any action that undermines the cohesiveness of the occupation is beneficial to our cause and our struggle. Of course, our objective is not to harm civilians. Struggle for us is not an act of vandalism but a means to regain our usurped rights. The enemy's refusal to acknowledge these rights (and its recourse to the most brutal means to avoid it) is responsible not only for what has happened to the Palestinians but also for what may happen to Israelis.

To those who would like me to condemn those operations, I say: why should I? I am not the party who bears the responsibility. I wish to affirm Israel's responsibility. One must go back to the roots of the issue and determine responsibility at the source.

Soueid: What lessons can be drawn from the Resistance's ordeals in Jordan and Lebanon?

Habash: Armed struggle came about as the natural consequence of the 1967 defeat. It was a popular and organized reaction to the loss of homeland and new forcible exile and occupation at a time when the remnants of other colonial ventures elsewhere in the world were being dismantled.

The Jordanian army had collapsed in the 1967 war, and the United States quickly put it back together again as a counterrevolutionary force. There soon arose a situation in which the Resistance was caught between a strong Israeli army on the one hand and the Jordanian army on the other. The Jordanian army could not be said to be an enemy like Israel, but still, it was a regular army caught in a confrontation with revolutionary forces.

The Resistance found itself in a very difficult situation, though I believe it could have been saved if a real national unity, in the full sense of the term,

had been established, if the Palestinian masses had been mobilized, and if an alliance with the Jordanian masses as represented by pan-Arab tendencies inside Jordan had been forged. What happened was that Fatah totally neglected the pan-Arab Jordanian elements.

Then there is the question of possible military alliances with neighboring Arab states: there was an Iraqi army unit in Jordan, and the Syrian army was next door. But there was no comprehensive Palestinian vision of the situation. Perhaps the Palestinian Left was in a better situation than it thought, but it was not up to the task.

I don't want to minimize the unjustifiable errors of conduct of the Resistance in Jordan. We committed grave errors in February, June, and September 1970, but other faults were fabricated in order to heighten popular divisions and to feed the resentment against the Resistance in order to justify a strong attack against it later.

Soueid: Would it have been different if there had been a nationalist regime and army in Jordan?

Habash: It is true that coexistence between two authorities over the same territory is difficult. Still, one can imagine a situation where a nationalist regime would seek to understand the demands and objectives of the Revolution and, without relinquishing its own authority, permit it to build a base for itself. For this, of course, it would be necessary to organize the relationship between the two and define the scope of the authority of each.

Soueid: During the war in Lebanon, which was not purely a civil war, one could say that the country was used as a battleground, and that Lebanon was destroyed without any sense of responsibility on the Arabs' part for what happened. Have you at the PFLP reflected on this in reviewing the events in Lebanon?

Habash: It is very painful to think about what happened to Lebanon, and it is our duty to reflect deeply and responsibly on the lessons to be learned from the struggles fought there.

As far as the PFLP is concerned, the situation in Lebanon was a quasi-permanent topic for discussion at our conferences and at the meetings of our command organizations. In Lebanon, one lost all sight of what was essential, and everything was buried under the rubble of instinctive reactions—sectarian, political, and regional. When relations are allowed to sink to that level of moral and intellectual depravity, one wrongs oneself first and then the others. That is why we issued an important release entitled “Lebanon's Palestinians and the choice of a historical reconciliation, internally and with others” that focused on this ambiguity, i.e., the basic point that the dignity and interests of the Lebanese are part and parcel of the dignity and interests of the Palestinians, and vice versa. The moral and creative bases of unity rest on the acknowledgement of diversity and individual differences, which have no real meaning outside the framework of unity. In turn, unity has no legitimacy except insofar as it takes diversity and individuality into account, the

various forms of which are basic constituent elements of the public [pan-Arab] self. Without this regulator, individual differences become a constant source of destructive internal struggles and hemorrhaging, just as the public self in turn becomes a repressive force which seeks to impose a stultifying sameness. This is how the dynamics stifling freedom and democracy are constantly regenerated.

Soueid: If the Lebanese National Movement (LNM) had been in control, would that have made any difference in the course of events?

Habash: I am not sure the results would have been very different, because I am aware of the weaknesses and the serious defects afflicting the LNM at the time. Its objectives were noble and just, but there was a lack of clarity in its sociopolitical agenda and a weakness in its organizational structure. In fact, the LNM was unable to put forward a program and a vision that transcended the existing crisis. It continued to be reactive, which is why it could not get beyond the dominant culture in its political, social, and organizational practices. The Lebanese formula was held in place by both political and social forces; the confessional mentality and culture in Lebanon were so deeply entrenched and so widespread that only a very strong and mature political movement could bring about serious change.

That was why the LNM was always dependent upon outside forces. That is how the Palestinian Right in Lebanon managed to exercise hegemony over the decisions of the LNM, depriving it of a vital condition of independence and forcing on it the Right's own failed and narrow strategies. For in fact, in exploiting the LNM, the Palestinian rightist trend fell into the same fatal trap in Lebanon that it did in Jordan.

Our point of view at the PFLP was that we had to take a constant hard line toward Israel and to give unlimited support to the LNM and its progressive-democratic plans. That is why we constantly stressed that the leadership should be totally in the hands of the LNM, which of course had to formulate a clear perspective on the confrontation with the Zionist enemy alongside its sociopolitical vision of the solution to the dilemmas of Lebanon.

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Soueid: What, in your opinion, is the secret of the success of Hizballah? How does that differ from the experience of the Palestinian resistance in Lebanon?

Habash: There are four basic elements: In the first place, Hizballah is operating on its own territory, amidst its own people; secondly, there is the secrecy that surrounds its military apparatus and leadership, its refusal to adopt fixed positions, and its brilliant use of maneuver for strategic and tactical purposes; thirdly, Hizballah has a unified leadership; and in the fourth place, Hizballah has benefitted from our experiences, both positive and negative, so that it has not fallen into the same errors that we did. Hizballah is the crowning achievement of our bitter and bloody experiences.

Soueid: Do you believe that the battle of Beirut in 1982 affected the course of subsequent events? Did it help launch the intifada, for example?

Habash: . . . There is no doubt that while armed struggle was being waged outside Palestine, the masses inside could rest content that the revolution was continuing. When that external horizon was closed off and it became clear that the revolution outside Palestine had reached an impasse, the intifada began. So the intifada cannot be isolated from the Lebanon war.

At the Palestinian and Arab levels, two trends became apparent: one proposing to go on with the intifada, the other saying that we were at the end of the road and should take up the political option so as to secure some of the fruits of twenty years of struggle. But that meant not capitalizing on the benefits of seasoned experience, forsaking our cumulative achievements, and cutting ourselves off from what we had lived through, tragically placing our hopes on what the enemy would give us.

In the final days of the Lebanese war, Abu 'Ammar had come to see me at the PFLP office at the headquarters of *al-Hadaf*, our official organ. He asked to speak to me in private. He asked me: "What do you say to us leaving together?" I asked: "Where to?" He said "Tunis or Cyprus." I understood what he was thinking. I told him: "If you think that the revolution is over, I don't share your opinion. The revolution must go on, even under very difficult circumstances. We must stay, and safeguard national unity and our ties with the only power capable of supporting us now: Syria." He left after that, but I did not leave with him. It was clear which path he wanted to take. The Lebanon war did play a role in that.

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Soueid: Would you consider the establishment of a Palestinian state in most of the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital, to be an acceptable solution?

Habash: First of all, we are not anywhere near such an outcome. Even if the Labor party were to come back to power in Israel, there would still be the issues of Jerusalem, the settlements, the right of return, borders, and water resources. If an acceptable interim solution becomes available, we should tell our masses: this is an interim solution, not the end of the matter.

Soueid: Are you of the opinion that the Palestinian cause was better off before Oslo than it is now?

Habash: Even a quick review of the results achieved shows that we lost a great deal more than we gained in Oslo. Conversely, Israel gained much more than it lost—our losses are net gains for Israel. This is a reflection of the impasse to which Oslo has led us and of the Palestinians' difficult circumstances in our occupied homeland and the diaspora.

We should have hung on to our international legitimacy, coordinated our position with the Arab countries. We should have allied ourselves with Syria, put our house in order, and continued to resist in all the ways open to us.

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Soueid: Would you agree to a dialogue with the forces in Israeli society that recognize the national rights of the Palestinian people? Do you think it useful to work with those forces?

Habash: From a tactical perspective, we should exploit any divisions within Israel that exist. We should bear in mind, however, that the forces in Israel that advocate Palestinian rights are extremely marginal and have not played an effective role so far. In fact, they are often used by those who wish to create a compliant Palestinian mentality, offering a public relations position that wins Palestinian concessions which in turn are paraded before Israeli public opinion as proof of Israeli good intentions. In our view, divisions within Israel will not become serious unless there is a solid Palestinian-Arab front capable of forcing Israel to come to grips with the difficult questions it likes to avoid.

Soueid: What is your assessment of the Arab situation today?

Habash: These are the darkest days of the Palestinian cause. When I review the events of 1936, 1948, the fifties, the sixties, the seventies, I find the current period to be the worst. Why? Because the worst thing you can do is to surrender. As long as you are fighting to regain your dignity, which has been debased, and your occupied land, then things are well. I believe that regimes, and some parties or forces, are capable of surrender.

When I review the events of 1936, 1948, the fifties, the sixties, the seventies, I find the current period to be the worst.

However, the Arab people—although they may retreat or lie dormant for a while—will ultimately not accept that their land be occupied and their rights usurped indefinitely. There are positive developments in Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, even in the Maghrib. When I meet youth from various Arab countries, I can sense the extent of their commitment to the nationalist cause.

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Soueid: What would you do about the situation that has emerged since the Gulf War?

Habash: Concerning what happened in the Gulf, I am of course against one Arab country occupying another. We said so clearly at the time, as it has always been our conviction that the road to unity must be a democratic one. Unity is a matter of free choice, not violence. One cannot resort to arbitrary methods, or coercion, to overcome cultural effects and the economic, political, and social realities that over time have resulted in our division into separate states. One has to work toward unity gradually and on a long-term basis.

The question is how to remedy the negative results of the war. We have to concern ourselves with Arab solidarity. For example, three Arab countries—Libya, Sudan, and Iraq—are under an embargo by the United States. The entire Arab nation must struggle to put an end to it. The opposing alliance's determination to persevere in its hostile actions against the Arab nation re-

doubles whenever it sees an increase in weakness and divisiveness in the Arab world. If the Arabs were to undertake some kind of challenge—I don't mean war, but at least a serious economic confrontation or media campaign, they would improve their position vis-à-vis the enemy and gain some respect among nations. . . .

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Soueid: How do you envisage relations with the Islamic forces that have become active in many Arab countries?

Habash: This is one of the greatest dilemmas facing the Arab national liberation movement, at the pan-Arab level and within each country. To begin with, one cannot take an arbitrary decision concerning whether or not to cooperate with the forces of Islam, putting them all in the same basket, as it were. Second, one feels an obligation to deal with them because these forces are indigenous to their societies, except for some movements or groups with dubious connections. This means that we and the forces of political Islam should find a common denominator that would permit us to work together under the current and foreseeable circumstances.

However, we need to differentiate between the Islamic forces that are truly engaged in the struggle on the basis of their perspectives on society and their ideology (as is the case with Hizballah in Lebanon, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine, and the Jama'a Islamiyya in Jordan) and those forces and groups whose acts are no longer either comprehensible or justifiable on the human, ethical, or Islamic dimensions (as is the case now in Algeria and Egypt).

We believe that our relations with Islamic forces of the first type should be characterized by a deep alliance in the struggle with the enemy of our nation to bring about a showdown. The condition for such an alliance should be that joint action should be undertaken on a democratic basis.

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Soueid: The issue of minorities is becoming increasingly sensitive. For instance, there are those who maintain that the Copts in Egypt are a minority with the right to a special status. Some Lebanese Maronites maintain that Lebanon contains two communities differing in culture and civilization and that each has the right to organize the lives of its members as it sees fit.

Habash: We must be careful not to confuse things. There is a huge difference between national minorities with distinct languages, cultures, and identities and religious or confessional minorities. It is categorically unacceptable to deal with Arab Christians as though they were not part of the social and cultural fabric of the Arab nation; quite simply, they are indigenous Arabs, and their religious beliefs have no bearing on their national and cultural identity. Can we ever forget the contribution of Christian Arab intellectuals in Lebanon to the renaissance of the Arabic language and Arab culture? Their roots, history, civilization, and culture are Arab, and they must conduct themselves in conformity with that fact.

This requires two conditions. First, the Arab Muslim majority must be acutely aware of this fact (historically, Islam has been successful in instituting the principle of diversity and freedom of religious belief), and consequently the majority should deal in a democratic fashion with all citizens on the basis of full equality and freedom of belief for individuals and confessional communities.

The second point is that religious minorities should be cognizant of the fact that they are an authentic part of the Arab nation and behave accordingly. Whether they be Muslim or Christian, Sunni or Shi'i, Coptic, Maronite, Syriac, or Orthodox, they have a duty to hold on to their national identity.

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Soueid: What is your position now on a Palestinian state?

Habash: I am in favor of a Palestinian state at this stage. And I do consider this to be an issue to be realized in stages; because I want all of Palestine. All of it!

Soueid: Palestine as a democratic state with equal rights for all?

Habash: Yes.

Soueid: What is your view of the proper relationship between Arabism and Islam?

Habash: As I see it, Arabism is an outline for national reconstruction at a fixed point in time and space. This implies motion, evolution—I want to convey a sense of the Arab world's current state of fragmentation and of the stumbling progress of national liberation and to inject an awareness of the designs of colonialism and the reality of cultural distortion.

Islam is first and foremost a religion. But for Islam, religion is more than just articles of faith, rites, and rituals, seeing as Islam has transcended the concept of religion alone and gone on to a more comprehensive and deeper level. Islam is a constituent of the culture, civilization, identity, and heritage of this nation. In this sense, it is one of the basic components—if not the most basic one—of Arab nationalism. Similarly, one can say that the culture of a Christian Arab is Islam. One must try to be definite about the overlap, bearing in mind that there is interaction between the concepts of Arabism and Islam.

One can speak of Islam in Pakistan without bringing Arabism into the picture, but one cannot speak of Islam in the Arab homeland in isolation from Arabism. Nor can one speak of Arabism in isolation from the Islamic spirit, culture, and civilization at its heart. In this sense, one cannot separate the frame from the picture.

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Soueid: What is your current view of terrorism?

Habash: It really pains me that Israel, which was founded on terrorism, is now being so sanctimonious about terrorism. Why am I here rather than in Lydda? Because I was expelled through the use of terrorism. Syria has made

a very reasonable proposal; it has called for an international conference to define what is meant by terrorism, which is being used today to get at national liberation movements.

Soueid: How would you evaluate the course you have followed? Where have you erred and where have you been right? What is your agenda for today and tomorrow?

Habash: At each of its conferences, the PFLP reviews the course it has taken since the last conference and sorts out the errors it has made. Since I was secretary general of the Front, I had a role in these errors—you can say that these errors are my errors. They are the errors of the PFLP, but they are my errors too. You could therefore say that I have admitted to all the errors that have been committed by the Front to the present.

However, when I think about your question, it seems to me that we are reviewing the course of the Palestinian problem over the last hundred years. These are not the errors of this person or that, they are the mistakes of all the Arabs, and they represent our collective defeat. Of course, we have to consider the exogenous factors that contributed to our defeat. However, what is more important is to engage in self-examination and to correct the problems facing the forces that give people hope for victory.

Here, I fear that we have not used our brains as we should have. We first fought relying on our muscles, then our hearts, because our cause was just. We did not use our brains as we should have. We called for Arab unity, yet if you were to review copies of the *al-Ra'i* bulletin we used to publish in Damascus, you would see that the Arab Nationalist Movement called for unity but did not say how it was to be achieved or identify what obstacles had to be overcome. The same applies to Palestine and all the other issues.

Soueid: What message do you have for future generations?

Habash: On the basis of what life has taught me, taking the bitter and the sweet together, I am convinced that human history moves in a progressive direction. I say this confidently and hopefully, in spite of all the failures and defeats we have suffered. Despite the bitter struggle between the forces of progress and those of darkness, specifically in the Arab region, I predict that the future belongs to our nation. But hopes, wishes, and dreams alone will not achieve our objectives or bring victory. . . .

One cannot roll back the wheel of history, but we can make sure that the lessons of the past are not dissipated or squandered in a fit of emotional, destructive, and unhealthy rejection of history. History is a register open to whoever has the determination and ability to merit an entry therein and the staying power to continue to grace its bright and leading pages. I am full of hope that the generations of our children and our grandchildren will have a future that is brighter than our present. I derive immense satisfaction from this thought.