

6. The Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine

The Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, created in February 1969, is a breakaway group from the PFLP. Its general secretary is Nayef Hawatmeh. This Marxist movement may be regarded as the only revolutionary Palestinian group in that it is the only one which is not purely nationalist. The Sixth Palestinian Congress has given the PDFLP the opportunity of expressing and justifying its standpoint in public.

I first came into contact with this movement at the end of January 1969, before the official split, when it was only a small faction preparing for the split and for the establishment of a Marxist political movement with a popular mass base. At that time, besides dealing with organizational problems and recruiting support in the camps around Irbid, the future PDFLP was already training political and military staffs.

This political training is divided into two successive stages:¹ a beginners' course, in which the Palestinian problem is explained, together with an account of its history, present situation and future prospects. Text-books concern revolutionary violence and the problems of armed struggle: Guevara, Castro, Mao Tse-tung, Giap. Each text is placed in the social and historical context which it expresses or seeks to explain. Thus the guerrillas I was able to interview were quite familiar with the recent history of Cuba, Vietnam and China.

In the second stage, which lasts another six weeks, problems relating to revolution as such are discussed: the class struggle, transitional phases, etc. Students study Lenin (*What is to be done?*, *State and Revolution*); and the practical experience of other revolutionary movements from which lessons might be

1. This passage reproduces part of the author's article published in March 1969 in *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

drawn (China, Vietnam). Discussions are organized on national revolutions that have not resulted in a radical social transformation (Algeria). The basic principles of economics are taught from works by M. Dobb, P. Baran and Ch. Bettelheim. Training includes one hour's obligatory reading per day.

The guiding spirits behind this movement all have pseudonyms, but a number of personalities connected with the group do not trouble to disguise their identity; one need only mention Nayef Hawatmeh, or Mohcen Ibrahim and Mohamed Kichli of the journal *El Hurriya*, published in Beirut.

The break with the (majority) Habash faction came in August 1968, on the occasion of the first clandestine PFLP Congress, held in Jordan. During this Congress the group submitted a programme and ideology covering the following points:

- The nature of the national democratic revolution in an underdeveloped country. The inability of the petty bourgeoisie to carry the revolution through to its logical conclusion.

- A critique of the Palestinian national movement as expressed in its various organizations. Critique of its relations with the Palestinian masses and the Arab masses in general. Critique of the attitude of the Arab states towards the Palestinian national problem.

- A proposal for the creation of a national front based on a minimum programme, but to be independent of any control.

Despite its minority position, the left wing managed to get the Congress to accept its theses, but they remained a dead letter. Shortly afterwards the PFLP drew closer to the Egyptian and Iraqi régimes.

Generally speaking, the group considers that all the Arab states, and particularly Jordan, have prevented the Palestinians from settling their own problem and from arming themselves for the struggle, and that this stems from the nature of these régimes. But it also considers that the Palestinian problem cannot be treated in isolation from the problems facing all the Arab countries and the social revolution which will have to take place in the Arab world. The group thinks it is illusory to believe that if the guerrillas do not intervene in the internal

affairs of the various states, the states will not intervene in the Palestinian struggle. One of the basic factors in the Palestinian problem is precisely the interference of the Arab states. Conversely, the group considers that various of these régimes have been affected by the Palestinian problem despite themselves. It thinks therefore that these states should be criticized openly, that it is important to demonstrate that they are either régimes with imperialist connections or 'petty-bourgeois' régimes incapable of carrying out a revolutionary struggle against Israel and against imperialism. The group, criticized by El Fatah as sectarian, criticizes El Fatah for its part as being right wing and 'acceptable to the Arab régimes'; it reproaches the larger organization with doing insufficient groundwork to awaken mass consciousness among the Palestinian population, and does not think it capable of transforming the present commando struggle into a full-scale people's war. Like the other Palestinian organizations, it spares no criticism of the Jordanian Communist Party (which has Palestinian and Jordanian members) for its reformist line, its slavish obedience to the demands of Soviet foreign policy, and the fact that it accepted the Resolution of 22 November 1967, which opens the door to a compromise deeply damaging to the Palestinian people.

On the political stage, the group has made strenuous efforts to create a hard core of politically trained and sophisticated militants firmly rooted in the working classes, enjoying neither rank nor pay. Meals are frugal, living conditions and material means are modest, as the author has been able to observe for himself. Sectarian or no, this group undeniably provides a formidable hard core of armed militants. Certainly it is guilty of 'leftist' errors, such as the agitation it initiated at Amman University in mid-January 1968, where certain elements of the group were so actively in evidence that it gave the Palace an excuse to strike at the movement at a time when the balance of forces was unfavourable. It seems that El Fatah exerted its influence in an attempt to moderate the agitation, realizing that a confrontation with the Royalist troops would be disastrous. The group also trains mobile units which it sends

off to live with the Palestinian refugee population to give them practice in working with the masses; it has agents on the West Bank who operate as political instructors and agitators; and it launches commando raids to strike at the Israeli economy and communications systems.

In order to train the initial core of members – several hundred militants – the group was obliged to engage in difficult ideological struggles, in which its own sectarianism saved it, in the initial phase, from making compromises which might rapidly have eroded its unity. Now, however, that it has an established independent position, the group's political maturity will be gauged by its tactical skill in the simple or complex situations in which it finds itself and in which it has to work. It possesses practically no funds. However, its major handicap, in the author's view, is that it was set up too late. It was perhaps perfectly possible to set up, in the Palestinian context, a popularly-based national movement with a revolutionary outlook; such a combination between national movement and revolutionary movement with social aims has been successfully achieved in other countries. But it would have to have been the first on the scene and to have won over the masses quickly. Above all, however – and for this the Palestinian Marxists are not to blame – they would have to have been the only ones able to mobilize on the basis of objectives that were uniquely acceptable to the mass of the people. But all the Palestinian national movements advocate armed struggle for the reconquest of the lost homeland. It is often forgotten, for example, that in Vietnam – and in China – the revolutionary movement grew in strength because of the incapacity, the failures and successive elimination of rival nationalist movements which proved unable to satisfy national aspirations and social needs. The question may reasonably be asked, therefore, whether the group was set up too late, or whether it is not rather *premature* in relation to the objective level of mass consciousness among the Palestinian people, currently satisfied with a primarily nationalist movement such as El Fatah.

The group wanted a thoroughgoing split affecting the whole of the movement; contact was therefore made with left-wing

elements of the PFLP outside Amman. A democratic conference was proposed by Habash's supporters to settle all differences, but the group rejected the proposal on the grounds that the bureaucratic nature of the organization made it impossible for the Congress to be democratic. Since the split, relations between the breakaway group and the PFLP have become extremely strained, and a number of PDFLP militants have been murdered or maimed.

At that time, El Fatah intervened on behalf of the PDFLP so as to prevent any deterioration of the situation in the Palestinian Resistance movement in Jordan. Since March 1969 the PDFLP has launched a series of military operations in order to get itself recognized by the other organizations and by the people, particularly sensitive to what N. Hawatmeh calls the 'culture of the communiqué'. In this early phase, the PDFLP hastily enrolled and trained recruits, shortly afterwards joining the High Command of the Palestinian Armed Struggle (CPAS), and acquiring a little money and some arms. Only after April 1969, when its situation had become a little less precarious, did the PDFLP begin to lay down bases for its organizational work, improved training facilities for its staff and centres for mass propaganda work. The first area in which it was able to establish itself was in the north of Jordan, around Irbid. Then gradually the movement was able to build up a presence in all the major centres: Amman, Zaha, Karah and the eleven refugee camps – especially those of El Baqaa, El Hussein, Souf and El Ouahbad.

After its creation, the PDF was joined by a number of small Marxist groups such as the People's Organization, composed of one-time militant members of the Jordanian Communist Party, and the League of the Palestinian Revolutionary Left. The PDF also has in its ranks activists from the Iraqi Communist Party (General line), which has agreed to place some of its militant members under the PDF's authority. While the leaders of the party are young intellectuals and students (all seven members of the Political Bureau are between twenty-three and thirty-five years old), the middle ranks are semi-intellectuals from generally poor backgrounds, while the vast

majority of the rank-and-file militants come from refugee camps.

Within a few months the PDFLP had grown considerably, and is today no longer a minor movement. The level of political awareness of both officers and rank-and-file is high, and has the advantage of not being excessively abstract. Work among the masses, which has already begun, will be stepped up during 1970.

The military bases are manned by about forty-five guerrillas. Daily meetings are held for political discussion and readings. Each base has set up groups of field workers with the task of establishing contacts within the refugee camps or in the villages, whether Palestinian or Jordanian. The group starts out by finding out about the actual conditions in the village. After that, it establishes various contacts designed to place relations on a basis of friendship and cordiality, by helping the peasants with the harvest, for example, or with fruit-picking or any other collective work. These contacts give the group a good idea of what the local problems are, enable it to adapt its language to that of the villagers, to get the PDF known and at the same time to disseminate its ideas. In contrast to those of the other Palestinian movements, these ideas are centred *both on the national condition and on the class struggle*. PDF propaganda does not only speak of liberating the land of Palestine, but also the people from their enslavement by the rich, who have betrayed their cause, seized the product of their labour and oppressed them through the apparatus of the State.

The movement's line is always expressed in relation to the problems of the village, and it is therefore indispensable to know what these specific problems are first. The field workers are therefore particularly concerned to do their work thoroughly; in less than five months, the PDF has succeeded in establishing itself – with varying degrees of success which it is of course extremely difficult to measure – in 10 per cent of the villages in the north of the country. In every village into which the Front has penetrated it has created cells at village level, and a people's militia, often composed of Jordanians.

This militia is said to have more than 1,200 members spread over the country. Among other duties, it is charged with disseminating the PDF's political ideas. Some exploratory attempts have been made to get the poorest peasants to work together on common land and distribute their produce equally under the supervision of the party. The peasants have exhibited no hostility to this attempted penetration, because the *fedayeen* have a very high moral prestige; but the difficulties are great, resulting in the first instance from the inexperience of the field workers, but also from the peasants' fear of the state, and more specifically the police, their consequent mistrust, and also a certain apathy among the older peasants.

The PDF makes every effort to improve the refugees' living conditions in the camps wherever possible. The women's section teaches women and girls to sew, read and write.² The most dynamic elements in the camps – usually the younger people – are always the prime targets for recruitment, since they will be the most able to create a political organization within the camps themselves. The drive towards mobilization of the refugee population has proved easiest in refugee camps set up after the 1967 exodus, where the shock of defeat is still felt and living conditions are especially precarious.

The PDF gives its activists far and away the most intensive political training of any Palestinian movement. During the summer of 1969 a special summer school for officers run by Palestinian and Maghrebini instructors (of whom there were unfortunately too few) gave courses for a month, and this experiment is to be repeated at regular intervals throughout 1970, with five or six monthly courses over the year.

Out of sixty militants, thirty-five have completed courses including lectures and discussions on the following points: the national movements in the Arab countries; analysis of the class structure in the Arab countries and the prospects for revolution in those societies; revolutionary situations and prospects on the world scale; revolutionary organization and its operations (legal and clandestine work – democratic and bureaucratic centralism); Palestine from 1917 to 1948; the Palestin-

2. El Fatah does similar work in the refugee camps.

ians from 1948 to 1967; Why June 1967? the PDFLP party programme.

Some books and pamphlets have been distributed, read collectively and discussed. They include: Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*; Lenin, *State and Revolution* and *What is to be done?*; Engel's *Wage labour* and his *Utopian Socialism and Scientific Socialism*; *Marxism versus Dictatorship* by Rosa Luxemburg; Mao Tse-tung, *The Prolonged War*; Giap, *The People's War*; Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*.

Besides giving political education with the object of encouraging rational and scientific thought, these courses aim to give the movement a greater ideological homogeneity. In practice, the PDF has in its ranks, especially at the intermediate levels of the hierarchy, numerous auto-didacts from very different political backgrounds, who create considerable confusion. Ultra-leftist currents of the populist type tend to make themselves felt in criticisms of the leadership's tactical flexibility (for joining the CPAS and the PLO, for example) or in complaints that the leadership is failing to keep in contact with the grass-roots.

In order to strengthen the organization and keep it in smooth running order, the Political Bureau seems determined to keep a close watch on the cohesion of its local bases by ensuring that the most efficient militants are elected into responsible positions and by setting up a permanent political commission to sort out any differences that might arise between militants and party officials. Painfully aware of the danger to the movement of the slightest divisive tendency, the leadership is currently devoting a very considerable proportion of its time and energy to the question of cohesion: training officers, raising the level of ideological comprehension, and exercising political control. The PDF is also trying to drum up international support for its movement's line, in an attempt to break out of its local isolation. In this respect, its development will depend to some extent on the practical support given it by the revolutionary elements of the Arab intelligentsia. These elements are unfortunately a pitifully flaccid collection, most of whom would prefer to wait until the PDF has overcome

the difficulties of the moment on its own, and only join it if it is victorious, or alternatively, if it is not, sit back and declare that the cause was lost from the start. It will perhaps one day be found that in no country, with the exception of India, has the revolutionary or nationalist intelligentsia, in the full sense of the term, failed more abysmally in its historical task than in the Arab countries. If the confusion does not lead to an impasse, it will be the war of words that will have provided the outlet.

On the military level, the PDF has conducted a very large number of operations compared with the number of bases and *fedayeen* under its control. Some quite major operations have been conducted, such as 'Operation Red Line' and 'Operation Ho Chi-minh'. This latter operation was carried out shortly after the death of the Vietnamese President by fifty-five PDF *fedayeen* in the Kuneitra region, and directed against various targets: Tell El-ahmar (13 km. north of Kuneitra), Bir Ajam, Hamieth, Tell Abu Zab (9 km. south of Kuneitra). This operation, which fulfilled most of its objectives, was partly filmed under fire by two young Belgian film-makers, Roosen and Verentbrughen. The PDF left two dead, as was reported the following day in Arabic on Israeli radio (broadcast on 7 September 1969).

Because it has no party-political allegiance, the PDF has to contend with considerable financial difficulties, and has trouble in obtaining arms. While it is in a position to take advantage of the current situation in Jordan to strengthen itself, it is well aware of the precariousness of the situation, and sooner or later it will be faced with the problems of survival. In the Middle Eastern context, its opportunities for development are bedevilled by various uncertainties. But the PDF is determined to press on in spite of all. In this the PDF, with its militant style, its straightforward practice, its political courage and honesty, marks a radical departure from the petty-bourgeois Arab movements of the last decade, who still hold to conspiracy theories of history and for whom horse-trading is a substitute for strategy and lies are a matter of policy.

The PDF's long-term aim is to contribute to the overthrow

of the social and political order in the eastern Arab world. Its chances of success are slender, but by its very existence the PDF marks an important point in Arab political history. It is in fact the first revolutionary movement to have no connection with any Communist party, and therefore to be independent of the party line of any particular country primarily concerned with protecting its own national interests. The PDF is a revolutionary movement firmly anchored in the current realities of the Arab East, which aims to do away with the traditional humiliation and dependence of the Arabs, their backwardness and poverty. Sooner or later, the revolutionary elements of the Arab intelligentsia will have to make clear where they stand in relation to this new, young movement.

In October 1969, a PDF conference decided to enlarge its Political Bureau and Central Committee. A body consisting of some members of the Politburo and the Central Committee has been set up to safeguard the cohesion of the party's bases and to ensure harmonious relations with the camps and villages, with the object of centralizing and coordinating the activities of the movement.

At the same time, to ensure maximum democratic participation, each camp, each village where the PDF has a militia and each base elects a council consisting of seven members, of which four are freely elected and three are chosen from a list submitted by the PDF leadership. Each base has a coordinator nominated by the seven members of the Council. The councils are elected for periods of four months, until a future congress of the movement lays down a statutory period of office. In cases of dispute within the council, the matter is settled by a simple majority vote by the members' assembly on the base. As regards relations with the peasantry, each base will in future send a permanent working-party into a village, the members of which will stay there for an extended period, instead of the current sporadic contacts. Finally, on the military level, it has been decided that each base shall be responsible for providing trenches and shelters to reduce casualties from air-raids.

THE SIXTH PALESTINIAN CONGRESS

The Sixth Palestinian Congress, held in Cairo in September 1969, enables us to gauge the relative size and importance of the various Palestinian Resistance organizations as seen by themselves. What is known of the discussions held has also made it possible to gain a clearer impression of the political context of the resistance.

Out of 112 prospective delegates, of whom 105 attended, El Fatah was allowed 33 seats, Saïka 12 and the PDFLP 8. The PFLP, which had been offered 12 seats in the preliminary negotiations, refused to take part in the conference. 5 seats went to the trade unions, 3 to student bodies, 3 to Ahmed Djibril's PFLP (General Leadership), 2 to the Palestinian women's organization, 2 to the Front for the Palestinian People's Struggle (Abu Gharbiya), 1 seat to the Arab Movement for the Liberation of Palestine (Ahmed Zahrouh) and 1 to the Writers' Union. The other seats were distributed among 'independents', Palestinian dignitaries and bourgeois who had belonged to the Palestinian National movement since Shukairy's era (i.e. from the First, Second and Third Congress). Some of these latter had more or less close ties with one or other Resistance movement, so that instead of 33 votes El Fatah was able to command about 48, while Saïka had a following of 20 instead of 12. The PDFLP commanded about 10 votes. There were about 20 true independents, who represented the most conservative elements in Palestinian society.

A number of practical questions were decided: a resolution was adopted to the effect that all Palestinian Liberation Army forces stationed in the UAR should be brought back to Jordan to fight; it was agreed that all the commando units of all the movements should be increased in numbers; the commanders of fighting units should be granted wider powers; a Revolutionary Court was to be set up. The Assembly reaffirmed its rejection of the United Nations Security Council Resolution of 22 November 1967. Several points which were debated highlighted the clear divergence between the attitude of the (minor-

ity) revolutionary elements and that of the more conservative groups. Some of the principal differences were:

- the refusal of the conservatives to reconsider the matter of the high salaries paid to the administrative staff of the PLO, and to the higher military ranks (between 80 and 160 dinars);
- the rejection of a resolution condemning Palestinian 'reactionaries', i.e. those giving active support to the Jordanian government, and those cooperating with the Israeli authorities in the occupied territories;

- refusal to condemn the more conservative Arab régimes.

On the other hand, the Assembly also adopted the principle that no pressure that might jeopardize the Resistance movement's independence would be tolerated.

Whereas the very term 'reactionary' was objected to by the majority of the Assembly, a debate on the organization's attitude to the USSR enabled those elements known for their right-wing sympathies to express sentiments of a universally anti-Communist nature. The central point of all the Conference's deliberations, however, was the view of the democratic state offered by the Palestinian Resistance as the final solution of the conflict with Israel. *The PDFLP was the only movement to put forward the notion of a Palestinian state in which Jews would enjoy full national rights*, whereas the majority of the Congress opted for an Arab state in which the Jewish population would only have religious and cultural rights. It would even seem that for many of the Congress delegates the prospect of a democratic state was principally an expedient slogan designed to win over world public opinion, rather than an actual strategic objective. This factor is bound to be at the centre of future debates.

The new factors to have emerged in the course of 1969 include the creation and growth of the PDF, the setting up of the High Command for the Palestinian armed struggle (CPAS), and the military strengthening of the Resistance - and particularly of El Fatah. But perhaps the most important political fact is the growing hostility to Israel among increasingly large sectors of the Palestinian population in the occupied territories, despite the 'liberal' conditions of occupation in Gaza and the

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West Bank, and also, indeed, among many Palestinians in Israel itself.

Although it may happen that 1970 will see the beginnings of a settlement between Israel and the UAR – which remains the most important front from Israel's point of view – the Palestinian national problem will not be solved through proposals resulting from Soviet–American negotiations, which at the moment do not consider the question from the point of view of the possible creation of a new state. It is more than likely that the Palestinian Resistance will have no alternative but to continue the struggle, regardless of what settlements may be reached between states. The expansionist aims expressed by General Dayan have helped to stiffen the official attitude of a number of Arab countries, but this might easily change with the adoption of a different policy by the Israeli government, a course which is advocated by certain leading circles in Israel. Despite appearances, the Egyptian government would clearly like to see a diplomatic settlement. Of the other Arab frontier states – which are the ones that count – Jordan and Lebanon seem rather to suffer than support the Palestinian Resistance, while the Syrian Baathist régime is still too insecure to be able to assert itself. As for the current Iraqi régime, it has like all its predecessors since Kassem committed the mistake of trying to settle the Kurd question by force, which cannot but weaken its position.³

3. It would seem that the Iraqi government is currently seeking an alternative solution to that of armed conflict.