

Ghassan Ali, a libertarian communist in the PFLP

Alternative Libertaire interviewing Ghassan Ali

February 2010

Ghassan Ali is a 3rd-generation Palestinian refugee. His grandparents were driven from their village in present-day Israel. He and his parents were born in refugee camps in the Gaza Strip. As a child, he threw stones in the First Intifada (1987–1993). He recounts his journey to Alternative Libertaire and explains his position as a libertarian communist in the PFLP¹ and the path he sees for the Resistance.

What's the situation in Gaza since the war in January?

Gaza is still at an impasse. On the one hand, the humanitarian situation continues to degrade. The blockade imposed by Israel and the international community has locked us in this ghetto, where the people are faced with destruction, hunger and a sanitary catastrophe. Over 40,000 houses and buildings were destroyed and their inhabitants, who have been living in tents and camps, have faced their first winter.

The political situation is desperate: Israel continues its colonial project after imposing its conditions on the American government, with Europe lining up behind. The Israeli warlords are threatening Gaza with a new war and the West responding by slowing down the UN investigative committee's condemnation of Israel.²

Then there is the internal situation, which affects Palestinians more deeply than any other problem. Internecine strife is fueled on the orders of Fatah and Hamas, who focus on their own interests and their regional and global alliances. The Palestinian people are the ones who will pay for these conflicts. The situation is very grim and the risks grave. Never has the Palestinian cause been more in danger than it is today.

How did you originally join the PFLP?

As a teenager, I was a Fatah supporter. But at the time of the Oslo Accords, I met Haydar Abdelshafi, a major figure in the resistance who had presided over the Palestinian delegation to the peace conferences in Madrid. He gave me a copy of the Oslo Accords and explained to me the dangers for our cause. My political awareness was built through this meeting and through my observations of corruption, social injustice, political imprisonments and the suppression of any voice that was critical of authority. This era, called the "Golden Days of the Oslo Accord", saw me joining the student union of the PFLP and then becoming a member.

How would you characterize the PFLP in 2009? Are there any differences between its stated goals and its real politics?

In 2006, the PFLP only won 3 seats in the general election. However, it is better placed today because of disappointment with the policies of Hamas and Fatah, which lead to internal division

¹ Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine

² France did not support the 5 November 2009 UN resolution which approved with a large majority the conclusions of the enquiry committee reports into "war crimes and possible crimes against humanity" in Gaza. Three weeks later, France's ambassador to Tel Aviv was assuring the State of Israel of France's friendship, by denigrating the UN committee of enquiry ("Canard enchaîné", 21 October 2009).

and civil war and which serve the occupation more than anything else. But the PFLP — and all left-wing forces — have been shrinking for years and cannot be seen as strong, credible alternatives. That will require major changes in strategy.

As a libertarian communist and member of the PFLP, what is your position inside the organization?

The PFLP has a broad, diverse heritage. It was mainly Arab nationalist when it was formed (1967), but later came to identify as Marxist in 1972. It primarily revolves around the struggle for liberation and social justice. It is currently made up of Maoists and Stalinists, but also libertarian militants like me. Everyone tries to make his or her voice heard. As a libertarian communist, I think that collective struggles are more important than attempting to unify all the forces of the Palestinian left: uniting weaknesses will not necessarily result in strength and effectiveness. To play an important role in our future, the PFLP should look to its past: for example, the experiences of the popular committees during the First Intifada, which created educational, social, cultural and economic structures. Popular schools replaced those closed by the occupation, and backyard cooperatives replaced jobs that had been lost in Israel. It was a very effective struggle: the experience gathered the whole population — men, women and children in every town, village and refugee camp. Then, yes, we could speak of a united left.

What about the current relations between Hamas, the PFLP, and Fatah?

The PFLP has always had the principle: “A united fight against the occupation and democratic debate on the social struggle and internal issues”. The PFLP, Fatah and Hamas all seek to change the internal situation and end the division between the resistance forces. Unfortunately, the two poles of the right — Hamas and Fatah — are rather clannish in their behaviour: “If you’re not with us, you’re against us!”. Both want a monopoly on political legitimacy and want the others to comply. After the 2006 elections, the PFLP took a clear position: we are for the unity of the resistance, for democracy and order amongst Palestinians. This has been our basis since. We are against political imprisonments and other violations of civil and personal liberties. Because, for the PFLP, there is nothing that justifies Palestinians killing one another. But these positions have given us trouble with the security apparatuses in the West Bank and Gaza. That is to say, with both Palestinian authorities.

What is the current situation of social movements in the resistance against Israel?

During the Second Intifada, which began in 2000, organized, armed resistance did not begin until the third month of the Intifada, after the massacre of demonstrators by Israeli forces. The unevenness between demonstrators and fighter jets generated a popular armed uprising.

But the remaining problem is still a lack of strategy and political demands. The Palestinian [National] Authority is required to negotiate with Israel — something which has been and re-

mains totally ineffective — and to obey the United States. As for Hamas, they continue to resort merely to demagoguery, fed by Israeli brutality.

Nevertheless, there are several examples of popular resistance against the occupation: the boycott, the demonstrations against the wall, the campaigns to harvest olives with the peasants, and so on. If the Palestinians and the international solidarity movement could expand these actions, they could play an important role in resisting the occupation.

Do you think we're heading towards a Third Intifada?

Given the regional and internal context, it is difficult to say if this is possible. Negotiations are in a state of clinical death and the Israeli government has no intention of conceding anything to Mahmoud Abbas, who is the last to believe in the negotiations. Anything is possible. The absence of national unity and the total political divergence between the two major Palestinian forces make a united strategy of resistance, a “Third Intifada”, difficult to achieve in the near future. But we must also remember that no-one predicted the birth of the first two Intifadas.

To conclude, the thorniest question: one State, two States..?

Let me remind you that until 1974, the Palestinians called for a one-State solution, a secular and democratic State. This demand was abandoned under pressure from the international community. Since then, the PLO has been calling for a Palestinian State confined to the borders of the territories occupied since 1967, which corresponds to 27% of the old Palestine Mandate.³ Since the start of negotiations to implement the UN resolutions, there has never been a single sign of recognition of these resolutions by Israel. On the contrary, the territories of the future Palestinian State have been cut to pieces; the issue of refugee return is rejected; the end of colonization has been postponed indefinitely. Finally, Palestinians with Israeli citizenship — 20% of the population — risk being deported to erase their threat to the “demographic purity of the Jewish state”.

The important thing, in my opinion — for all the residents of the Palestine Mandate — is bring Israel's colonialist project to an end and for everyone to be in a place where they are entitled to equal treatment, irrespective of religion or ethnic group. A single, democratic State would allow this dream to see the light of day, but today, I do not think the situation and the balance of forces offer this solution a chance. In any case, whatever the position of one or the other on this issue, the role and the immediate task of all is to put an end to the colonial occupation and to struggle for a dignified life, which can give hope to the generations to come.

³ The British Mandate of Palestine, territories occupied by the British between 1920 and 1948.

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