

George Habash: 1916-2008

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I first became aware of the Doctor as a small child. Although not Palestinian myself, I grew up regarding him, in a roundabout way, as one of "our" leaders. Here was someone an Arab patriot and secularist from a Christian background, a highly-educated man, and a self-declared Marxist and supporter of the oppressed, an opponent of Zionism and Western imperialism, and a modernist opponent of the Arab regimes to whom I could point without any embarrassment and say: "he is one of ours".

Born to a well-off merchant family in Lydda during Britain's colonial rule of Palestine, Habash was a medical student at the American University of Beirut at the time of the 1948 Partition. He returned to his home town during the war that followed in time to witness the Arab population being driven at gunpoint, Nazi-style, to the Jordanian lines at Hebron, on the orders of the future Nobel Peace Prize winner Yitzhak Rabin, an event during which his sister died of typhoid.

Returning to Beirut to complete his medical studies, he and his close friend Wadie Haddad tried to formulate a response to the "Nakba", or catastrophe that had befallen their people. Drawing on the ideas of the Syrian radical Arab nationalist history professor Constantin Zureiq, they formed a group known as the Brotherhood of Vengeance, which advocated the overthrow of the Arab regimes they held responsible for the loss of Palestine.

Arab disunity the division of the Arab nation into artificial and unviable entities by British and French colonialism was held to be the cause of the defeat, and "Arab unity" the solution. Because this disunity was itself only a symptom of the backwardness of Arab societies in the face of a modernised capitalist West, the revolution they advocated would also require the removal of the dominant semi-feudal and religious elites, given an artificial lease of life by colonialism, and the promotion of secularism and social progress.

Despite this apparent radicalism, however, their initial outlook was decidedly not socialist. Zureiq's original vision had been one of developing a nationalist intellectual elite to promote this revolution arguing that the struggle to educate the masses was more important than the seizure of power by any party. It was an outlook that implicitly rejected class struggle in favour of a "popular" struggle in which class distinctions were blurred. It was a revolutionary-democratic programme, even a "patriotic" programme (in the sense used by Karl Marx when he described Giuseppe Mazzini as an Italian patriot), but it was not a communist programme.

Habash abandoned early efforts to unite with the Syrian Michel Aflaq's Ba'ath Socialist Party (later the ruling party of Syria and Iraq under the Assads and Saddam), when he realised that liberating Palestine did not rank highly on the Ba'athist agenda. Towards the official Communist parties, Habash's group displayed an open hostility, competing with the Lebanese Anton Sa'adeh's Syrian Social Nationalist Party (a secular nationalist movement that derived some of its inspiration and symbols from Hitler's Germany) in the

intensity of its anti-communism.

This apparent paradox is not so difficult to explain. Stalin's Russia, sensing an opportunity to supplant British imperialism's influence in the Arab world, had supported the Zionist case for a Jewish state in Palestine, casting its vote in the United Nations in favour of Partition in 1947. The Arab Communist parties loyally followed the ensuing orders from Moscow to defend this decision, while Palestine's Communist Party the only sizeable political organisation in the country with both Jews and Arabs in its ranks partitioned itself into "Israeli" and "Jordanian" organisations. Stalin's Czechoslovak satellite later supplied the Zionist state with arms at a key turning-point in the war.

Stalinism's complicity in the "original sin" of Zionism cost the Arab Communist parties and the Arab working-class movement dearly, setting them back for a whole period. Only Iraq's Communist Party, with its solid mass base, was able to emerge from the aftermath of the Nakba relatively unscathed. Elsewhere, and in Habash's base in Lebanon in particular, the loyalty of the official Communist parties to the twists and turns of Moscow's latest diplomatic manoeuvre meant that they were frequently outflanked on the left by radical nationalists like Zureiq and Aflaq on national and democratic questions. Their often narrow focus on economic and trade union questions, combined with a generally cautious and reformist approach meant that they were often to the right of the nationalists on questions of social justice as well.

Following his graduation as first in his class, Habash, together with Haddad, went on to create a free children's clinic in the Jordanian capital Amman. As a paediatrician, the young doctor would have been deeply aware of the common medical problems of the Palestinian children of the camps chiefly malnutrition and preventable disease and their social causes the denial to their refugee parents of economic opportunities or the right to make a living stemming, in turn, from an identifiable political fact the denial of their right to a homeland. Simply to work in this environment, ignoring the lure of a more profitable medical career abroad, was a political act.

This, of course, was the Golden Age of anti-colonial struggles, against the systematic violence of the Western imperialist metropolises towards their subjugated peoples, which saw the emergence of the ideas of such figures as Franz Fanon, Régis Debray and Che Guevara. Habash was one of, and one with, this generation. He founded the Harakat al-Qawmiyyin al-Arab (Arab Nationalist Movement ANM) with Haddad and Hani al-Hindi in this period, during which GamalNasser came to power in a revolution that swept away the remnants of Egypt's pro-British monarchy.

Nasser subsequently acquired an immense popularity, especially after his defiance of Britain, France and Israel over the 1956 Suez crisis. Given their ideological outlook it is understandable, although not completely excusable, that the ANM became the arm of Nasser in the Arab world, seeing his regime as the embodiment of the "Arab revolution" that they advocated, and looking forward to seeing Egypt acquire a position of strength from which it could wage a successful war to regain Palestine.

Habash fled Jordan for Syria after being implicated in a coup attempt by pro-Nasser military officers in 1957, and remained there during the period 1958 to 1961 when Nasser's rule extended to Syria under the short-lived "United Arab Republic".

In the meantime, other forces were at work amongst the Palestinians. A group around Yasser Arafat based in Kuwait, tiring of Nasser's inaction and opposed to any notion of an "Arab revolution", founded what was to become the Al-Fatah movement, and began to organise guerrilla raids into Israel from the Jordanian-ruled West Bank in 1965. Partly in response to this, Habash reorganised the Palestinian members of the ANM into a "regional command". Fatah primarily saw the liberation of the Palestinians coming through the Palestinians themselves, though supported financially and materially by the other Arab leaders, whose

overthrow they could therefore hardly argue for.

The PFLP

The June 1967 war which saw Israel's swift and total defeat of all the front-line Arab states in the space of six days sent Habash's schema of a conventional war spearheaded by a Nasserist Egypt crashing to the ground. The Palestinian regional command of the ANM effectively fused with several other Palestinians organisations, such as the Abtal al-Awda, (Heroes of Return) and was re-launched as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

At its founding conference in 1967 it passed a series of resolutions and documents which began to mark the process of forming them as a socialist orientated cadre party (adopting Leninist democratic centralism) and with a clear concept of revolutionary armed struggle. They wrote "The only language that the enemy understands is the language of revolutionary violence."

Signalling that they wanted a broad movement which was not only limited to guerrilla fighters they said: "The crossfire of armed struggle is not known to have limits and the armed resistance should not be confined to the militants, but also embrace all parts and sectors of the Palestinian resistance against the enemy at every level, dealing with the enemy militarily, but also a total boycott of all economic, civil and political institutions of the enemy and a rejection of all ties." Today the principle of boycotts and workers sanctions against apartheid regimes such as Israel has been given a new lease of life with the campaign to boycott Israeli academic institutions, part of a process of fighting to end Israeli legitimacy on a world scale.

Flying the flag of their origins in pan-Arabism, their progressive distinction from Fatah's programme was that they made a direct link between the Palestinian struggle and all those struggling against oppression across the Arab world. "In our response to the Zionist alliance and colonialism, we must make the organic link between the struggle of the Palestinian people and the struggle of the masses of the Arab people, facing the same risks and the same schemes, and therefore the work of the Palestinian armed struggle determines the position of the Arabs who stand by the struggle, against those who stand against it."

In 1969 they published their strategy for liberation document which elaborated on this theme. "We may say that the fate of the Palestinian revolution and the armed struggle commando action now being carried out by the Palestinian people depends on the extent of their coalescence with a revolutionary strategy which aims at mobilising the forces of revolution in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iraq and the rest of the Arab countries". The PFLP quickly grew to become the second most powerful faction in the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), behind Arafat's Fatah. One aspect of their tactics that did mark them out compared to other Palestinian groups was their extravagant and elaborate hijackings of planes that drew international attention.

It is for this period of spectacular "international actions" and so forth that he is most well-known in the West, providing the basis for the claims by his detractors that he was a "Godfather of terrorism" as if Palestinian resistance, no matter if it is misguided, were not a justified response to US, Israeli and Arab state terrorism. The hijacking of three planes to Dawson's Field in Jordan in 1970, where they were blown up (minus passengers) before the world's TV cameras, proved to be the 9/11 of its day.

A common criticism from the left is that he tried to out-Fatah Fatah, and placed a naïve faith in the ability of these spectacular actions to further the struggle for liberation. He himself always justified the "external operations" by referring to the necessity to remind the world of the Palestinians' existence, and their suffering.

In fact, it seems more likely that he merely gave a free hand to Wadie Haddad, who had much less patience for the "mass work" that Habash advocated, in order to keep his organisation together at a time when the Palestinian masses themselves were clamouring to be allowed to fight Israel. He abandoned this tactic as soon as it had served its limited purpose, and expelled his lifelong friend Haddad when he tried to continue the "external operations" without authorisation.

The contradictions lodged within the situation of so many Palestinian refugees, armed and organised to fight, effectively a proto-state force through the institutions of the PLO, exploded in 1970. The bulk of the Palestinian fighters were based in Jordan, not just in the refugee camps along the border with the West Bank but also in the capital Amman, and other cities, and effectively ruled those areas with their own militias.

Sensing a threat to its authority and its existence, and not convinced by Arafat's insistence that he was fighting solely for a Palestinian state, the Jordanian Hashemite monarchy moved to disarm the Palestinian guerrillas. The Dawson's Field hijacking gave King Hussein the pretext to launch his "Black September" massacres of the Palestinians, while Nasser's Egypt and Ba'athist Syria looked on, offering only mediation and verbal assistance. After the defeat in Jordan, the PFLP, like the other Palestinian movements, continued the guerrilla struggle against Israel from the much less welcoming terrain of Lebanon, and later supported the Lebanese National Movement's 1975 rebellion against sectarian Maronite rule.

It was in the period after Black September that the PFLP and Habash finally took on the form in which they are known today, redefining themselves as a properly "Marxist-Leninist" movement, although it is difficult to say how thorough Habash's own assimilation of Marxism was. The external evidence suggests that it was adopted under pressure from the Maoist-inspired splitters led by Nayef Hawatmeh who formed the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), a group that would later advocate the two-state solution and make its peace with the post-Oslo order.

Even so, key PFLP militants like party spokesman Ghassan Kanafani (a popular novelist with a stature easily comparable to Israel's Amos Oz or England's George Orwell, murdered by Israel in an explosion that also killed his 14 year old niece) had been quite unapologetically Marxist in their outlook for some time. This turn was also accompanied by an orientation towards the global left (in stark contrast to Fatah, whose leader preferred to be seen shaking the hands of Western politicians from respectable bourgeois parties), and to the organised working class. PFLP militants on the ground in the territories occupied in 1967 built trade union organisations, women's organisations and self-help groups or co-operatives, and would later play a key role in the 1987 Intifada.

At the same time, the PFLP maintained the separation of the revolutionary-democratic programme from the communist programme that had been a hallmark of the ANM. In effect, this meant adopting the politics of an older generation of Arab Communist parties (first democracy, secularism and national independence, and the struggle for socialism later on), without the stigma of their previous support for the Partition. While Habash's unconventionally non-Stalinist past gave him a healthy degree of scepticism towards the Soviet bureaucracy's drive to hegemonise anti-colonial struggles, his movement would come to share the dependence of the pro-Soviet left worldwide on their sponsor in Moscow, and the disorientation produced by its own games of chess with the Western imperialist powers.

The PFLP, despite looking to the Arab masses as part of the revolutionary struggle to liberate the Palestinians, and seeing it indissolubly linked up with the struggle against their own undemocratic regime was unable to develop a meaningful transitional programme, one which would plot a course from the democratic struggle to a fight for working class power the strategy of permanent revolution. They wrote:

"In the light of Israel's occupation of Sinai and the Golan Heights its very existence and its persistence as a base from which imperialism prepares to attack any move towards Arab liberation in the light of this concrete picture the stage which the Arab people are now traversing is that of national liberation, of democratic national revolution, notwithstanding the class and economic changes which have taken place in Egypt, Syria, Algeria and Iraq in the direction of socialist transformation[our emphasis. FI] "

The belief that only a democratic revolution was on the cards for the Arab workers and middle classes was a self limiting perspective for the working class across the region, effectively arguing for a period of stable bourgeois democracy before a socialist revolution could take place. This is despite the fact that in the same paragraph they acknowledge that even bourgeois regimes in four Middle Eastern countries have carried out nationalisations of industry in order to combat world imperialist control of their own economies.

Decline of the PFLP

The outbreak of civil war in Lebanon in 1975 (which lasted for another 15 years), followed by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, saw the end of the "armed struggle" as a mass phenomenon, and the turn to diplomacy by the PLO under Arafat, that culminated in the great Oslo betrayal in 1993. While Habash, quite rightly, tried to resist the drive to a negotiated sell-out, his allies in the Iraqi-based "Rejectionist Front" were, with the exception of the DFLP, creations or mercenaries of the so-called "progressive" Arab regimes (Syria, Iraq and Libya), adding their influence to the hazards that the PFLP had to navigate. On later occasions, Habash's periodic attempts to reconcile with Arafat's PLO (in the interests of "Palestinian unity") saw the PFLP provide Arafat with a left cover for his own manoeuvres.

Ironically, the one great event that ought to have vindicated Habash's revolutionary outlook and focus on mass work the great Palestinian uprising from 1987 to 1992 instead saw the movement's decline and the rise of political Islam, accompanied as it was by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decimation of Saddam's Iraq in George H Bush's "Operation Desert Storm".

The Oslo accords which Habash vehemently opposed ushered in a new period, in which Israel intensified its expansion of illegal Jewish settlements in the 1967 territories, safe in the knowledge that no Arab state would lift a finger to stop it, and that the services of Arafat, the hegemonic leader of Palestinian nationalism, had been bought.

The revival of the Palestinian struggle, marked by the outbreak of the "Al-Aqsa Intifada" in September 2000, saw PFLP militants playing a new role, with their new leader Abu Ali Mustafa assassinated by rockets fired from an Israeli helicopter at his office in Ramallah in August 2001. But the intervening years of decline had clearly taken their toll on the movement.

They must have taken their toll on the Doctor as well. Uniquely for a leader of his status, he stepped down voluntarily from the leadership of the PFLP in 2000, the same year as the beginning of the second Palestinian uprising. In later years, he would give the impression that he was resigned to the idea that "we the left, have failed", leaving it to a future generation to pick up where he left off. It is certainly the case that the two great objectives that he stood for historically Arab unity and Palestinian liberation seem further away today from being accomplished than they were at any time before.

It is difficult to blame the man as an individual for this. His movement, after all, was not without some concrete political achievements the Yemeni branch of his ANM led a successful struggle against British colonial rule, while Kuwait, one of the most reactionary and oppressive monarchies in the region whose existence the United States fought a war to preserve, owes its elected parliament to the willingness to go to prison and exile of the Kuwaiti members. Most importantly of all, he kept the flame of Arab and

Palestinian defiance alive in the face of the arch betrayals of the 1993 Oslo accords.

Of all the main Palestinian leaders, he was the least interested in the trappings of power, or in the acquisition of influential "friends", for their own sake. He died barely able to support himself, having turned down the offers of well-meaning sympathisers keen to prevent the symbol of the Arab revolution from spending his final years in poverty as well as the approaches of somewhat less well-meaning reactionaries in power, keen to buy the prestige associated with his name.

Within the movement for Palestinian liberation he easily represented a progressive current as compared with his arch-rival Arafat (not to speak of today's more religiously-inspired figures), not because he stressed the primacy of the "Arab nation" over its intended constituent parts, but because this set of priorities indicated an understanding that the liberation of Palestine could not be separated from revolutionary social and political change in the Arab world that the Arab regimes were part of the problem, not the solution.

Within the Arab nationalist movement, his tradition represented the most democratic variant of pan-Arabism, avoiding the ideological shapelessness of Nasserism or the self-interested and amoral mystifications of Ba'athism, with its commonplace denunciations of recalcitrant Arab minorities, and its chauvinist indifference to non-Arab ones. This is because it represented a living, breathing mass struggle, and not the degeneration of a regime legitimising itself on the ruins of a mass struggle whose failure brought it to power

Within the Arab left more generally, he, again almost uniquely, resisted the rush to acquire a more reputable status following the collapse of the Soviet experiment, albeit only by remaining in a type of political stasis. It is certainly difficult to imagine Habash, who placed a high premium on the importance of dignity in politics, adopting the behaviour of Iraq's Communist Party, rushing to take its place in America's drive to bring "democracy" through occupation, or Lebanon's Democratic Left, supporting a neo-liberalising, pro-US government in the hope that this will provide a guarantee of Lebanon's independence.

Any future revival of the Arab left will have to deal with the legacy of Al-Hakim, the Doctor with his mistakes as well as his insights, his compromises with the Arab regimes and periods of defiance of them. But in an age when we are taught that no other world is possible, that the only choice that exists is between standing behind the American juggernaut so as not to be crushed by it, or resigning oneself to a life of struggle and sacrifice in this life with a reward only in the next, we must learn from the positive aspects of the attempts to build a secular, revolutionary organisation, whilst rejecting the mistaken tactics and theories which led to its failure.

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