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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *MERIP Reports*, No. 83 (Dec., 1979), pp. 15-17

Published by: [Middle East Research and Information Project \(MERIP\)](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3012396>

Accessed: 26/01/2013 01:56

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Abu Leila: Confronting the Dilemmas of the PLO in Lebanon and Jordan

Abu Leila is a member of the Political Bureau of the Democratic Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Sheila Ryan, George Cavaletto and Tim Roberts of the Palestine Solidarity Committee in New York interviewed him in Damascus on September 21, 1979.

How do you assess the situation in Lebanon at the present time?

It's giving us a bit of trouble, but in general there is no danger of a total explosion that could lead to the liquidation of the resistance movement. The present situation is at an impasse, and the only possible way out is a large-scale Israeli invasion. Within the present political context, it's out of the question that the Israelis could send their forces into Lebanon in a way that would change the situation radically.

They are trying to use military force to weaken the position of the resistance politically. They are having some success in that direction, insofar as they're able to completely depopulate the south. People from the south are living as refugees in Saida and Beirut in very miserable conditions. The economic situation is also intolerable. This is being used by the right wing and reactionary tendencies even among the Moslem community, and is directed against the Lebanese patriotic movement and Palestinian resistance. The right wing is having some success in this because of the way this problem is being dealt with by the patriotic movement and the resistance. There's no general plan of dealing politically and economically with the real problems that are being raised by this exodus from the south.

This situation is being used by the Lebanese government, by President Sarkis in particular, to force concessions from the Palestinians to use in bargaining with the right-wing Lebanese Front. Now they're pressing the resistance to withdraw from Tyre, especially from the harbor. They're even talking about sending the army into so-called Resistance Land, between Saida and Tyre. They are building up the army of the government: it has reached about 22,000, the same strength as in 1975. But with a difference. The army is now completely fascist-oriented, or Maronite-oriented. They want to send this army into the region which is controlled by the Palestinians and the Lebanese National Movement.

But in spite of that, we have a very good weapon in our hands. The fact is that south of the United Nations (UNIFIL) zone there is a territory occupied by Saad Haddad and that from the point of view of all other Arab states we could always say that the army should clear out this zone first and then we're ready to let them into our areas.

Hasn't the Lebanese Army been deployed

to a very limited extent in the UNIFIL zone?

Yes, they have two regiments in the United Nations zone, but they are not very effective. And both regiments are supposed to move into the zone of Saad Haddad. But they're not pushing ahead very efficiently in this.

How can this impasse be brought to an end?

A radical change could come either from an Israeli invasion, or from the development of the Lebanese patriotic movement. You cannot ask the Palestinian resistance to give a political alternative. The political role of the resistance is more or less limited to the demand of safeguarding the armed existence of the Palestinian revolution in Lebanon. More than that no one will accept, and it's not even correct in principle to put forth. The Lebanese National Movement is called upon to present this political alternative, not only in words—because in words they have a very beautiful program—but in actual fact. The cumulative effort to move this program from a matter of rhetoric to an organized and mobilized mass movement really doesn't exist. This is a very bad situation, and it's even weakening the Lebanese movement among its own masses.

You cited the depopulation of southern Lebanon as a critically pressing political question for the Palestinian movement. Even assuming a lull in bombardment, an organized program of return of the refugees to the south and initiation of reconstruction, all it would take to recreate the problem would be another big round of shelling: people would leave again. So what are the options of the resistance movement in dealing with this problem, at least within the 32 kilometer range of Israeli artillery?

First of all, there's a question of the political mobilization of the people in order to put a stop to the reactionary political effects of such a situation. People are thrown out of their houses and maybe some of their relatives are killed; they're almost starving; they're torn one way or the other to listen to all kinds of complaints and propaganda. And the right wing propaganda which places the responsibility for all this on the existence of the Palestinian revolution is very damaging. This is the first task facing us.

On the other hand, this political effort will not be very effective if the material conditions stay as they are for the people in the south and for the people where the refugees are living. They are also causing a very big problem in Saida and in Tyre. One way or the other, the inhabitants of these areas are beginning to show some political unrest and to complain about this situation. For the people to go back to their homes in the south is a bit unrealistic under the present circumstances—in the actual conditions of the Israeli raids and the daily



A street in Amman, Jordan

Credit: Lynne Barber

bombardment by the Saad Haadad troops—and this is the line that we've been taking for the past year. There is no more economic activity in the area. People cannot just go on living in trenches and underground shelters. An effective apparatus has to be built up for the relief of the refugees in the places where they are now. In housing, they are causing problems for the people in Saida, Beirut and Tyre. They took over all the schools and every kind of building you can think of, and even some of the private flats that do not have tenants. They just took them over by force. So one way or the other there has to be some solution for their housing and also for their economic relief, as far at least as food and medicine are concerned.

But, as I said, within this material support and aid, the main thing is that the Lebanese National Movement should begin dealing politically in order to mobilize it in the right direction. Unfortunately, this is not taking place on a sufficient level.

How do you appraise the role of the Jordanian government these days, particularly in regard to its stated rejection of the Camp David agreements, to the so-called Palestinian-Jordanian dialogue, and to its impact upon the internal political situation of the occupied areas, especially the West Bank?

First of all, we proceed from the hypothesis that as far as the interests of the Hashemite regime are concerned, Hussein is ready to go even further than Sadat in collaborating with the Israelis and the Americans. But Hussein is in a different situation from Sadat. First of all, Jordan is more or less a Palestinian country. Secondly, on the Arab level, Egypt as a state could stand a long period of isolation from the Arab world, but for Jordan this is impossible. They have actually tested this kind of isolation in 1971 and 1972, and they saw how

devastating it was for their economy and for the political stability of the regime itself. Because of the present Arab situation—the PLO, Syrian, Iraqi and the more or less unanimous Arab rejection of the Camp David plan—the Jordanians don't seem to have any way out except to commit themselves to this unanimous Arab position.

But they are trying to make the best use of their forced rejection of Camp David, to use this rejection to strengthen their regime and to gain as much economic and political support as possible. Secondly, they are also trying to use this umbrella of rejecting Camp David to cover up a practical policy which will enable them in the future to line up again with the American circle of policy. This is why, for example, in their relations with the PLO they insist that a Palestinian-Jordanian "dialogue" involve some kind of Palestinian recognition of the Jordanian role in solving the Palestinian problem. You may have heard of the common framework on relations between the PLO and Jordan. In this plan they insisted on including formulas concerning the mutual resolution by Jordan and the PLO of all political settlement plans concerning the Palestinian question. And on this basis they insisted on giving the Jordanian party the best part of the decision-making powers in the Joint Committee concerning the distribution of the Baghdad Conference Steadfastness Fund for the West Bank and Gaza. The Joint Committee is in fact acting only as a cover to sanction the Jordanian decisions and resolutions.

Of course they are utilizing the present outwardly good relations with the PLO to break through the isolation of their pro-Hashemite people in the occupied territories. They're not very successful, but they're doing their best. And particularly in the past six months, their personalities in the West Bank are reviving their activities in a way that is noticed even by the Israelis. The Jordanian government is even trying to find a

foothold for Jordan in the attempt to arrive at some kind of solution, or temporary solution, of the Lebanese crisis at the expense of the Palestinian revolution. Their last proposition, made in the meeting of Hussein and Arafat that took place in Amman only two days ago [Sept. 19], was that a limited Arab summit of Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the PLO should be held to draw up a so-called "realistic Arab alternative" to the Camp David plan. This six party committee should continue after the summit as a permanent committee to decide on all the diplomatic and other kinds of political moves concerning the Palestinian question. Jordan very much criticized the so-called individual activity of the PLO towards Western Europe, the United States, and the UN Security Council, arguing that these political moves by the PLO were not discussed and not agreed upon; and that this "individual conduct" would lead to destroying the unity of the Arab countries, and so on. And they're very interested, of course, to frustrate any kind of PLO contact with the Americans, to stay recognized as the only channel to the United States.

That's the way the king makes his living, isn't it?

That's exactly the way they are making their living. So they want to hold onto this function. On the other hand, they're doing their best to evade any kind of concessions from their side to the PLO, even concerning things like releasing a few prisoners.

Is it true that the Jordanian government has put restrictions on who can represent the PLO in the Joint Committee?

They've objected to some people, especially from the Democratic Front, people who are engaged in organizational mass activities against the regime. They think this is a question of state security, which is very holy for them. You cannot even discuss it. So in actual fact, they're using this so-called dialogue to cover for their internal crisis. From a tactical point of view, this policy seems very brilliant, but it is also very short-sighted and very ineffective over the long-term, because their main objective is holding onto the function of representing the Palestinian people. They're forced to recognize the fact that they cannot play this role without the consent of the PLO itself, so they're coming back to where they started. Without a radical weakening of the Palestinian revolution, in the final analysis, all these maneuvers will come down to absolutely nothing, especially since the political situation inside Jordan itself is developing in a way which is not to the regime's advantage. In the early 1970s the regime was able to use the Palestinian-Jordanian feud to gain stronger positions amongst the Jordanian community. In one way or another the economic situation also enabled Hussein to base himself amongst the Jordanian sector. But now that situation is completely different. Ever since 1973-74, the new capitalist upsurge of the economy is driving more and more people, even from the Jordanian community, away from the regime. The inflation, the proletarianization of the people, the economic deterioration of most of the toiling masses, including the Jordanians themselves, and the political crisis of the regime are factors in breaking up all the mass base that Hussein could rely upon among the Jordanians. Of course he's still in a very weak position in the Palestinian community in Jordan or in the West Bank and Gaza. So, the relative equilibrium of his base in the early seventies is beginning to break down.

In March 1978, when the Israelis invaded the south of Lebanon, the government couldn't do anything in the face of

mass protest except to give verbal promises that the demands of the masses will be taken into consideration. In March and April 1979, and especially in April 1979, the government could not keep on ruling without brute force and open dictatorial measures. They sent their police against a very peaceful demonstration that included about 120 lawyers with suits and ties. The policemen beat the demonstrators up, and some of them were taken to hospitals. This raised the question of the apparatus of the state. And the question of democratic liberties is beginning to be a daily problem that very wide sections of the population are becoming really interested in.

Of course, there are different views and trends within the ruling class itself, trying to find some sort of solution that would save the present dictatorial power of the king. What this reflects actually is that the situation is falling apart. The economic problem, the internal political crisis, and the perpetual problem of the relation of the regime to the Palestinian question—no real solutions are being put forward. In all these spheres the crisis is being quieted down by maneuvers, by verbal measures, by evasions rather than solutions.

Unfortunately, the king is being helped by certain trends within the PLO, because the main maneuver now is this so-called Palestinian-Jordanian dialogue. He's making the best out of it without giving the PLO any real concessions. So what is actually taking place is that the king is taking all the profits of the dialogue and giving nothing in return. Unfortunately the PLO leadership is drifting in this current, despite the fact that concessions could be snatched from the Jordanian side, because the Jordanians very much need this dialogue to go on. As far as the United Kingdom question is concerned, I think that this campaign, this propaganda campaign, is being very much made up by the Jordanians themselves.* The question wasn't even mentioned in all the discussions and the meetings that took place between the PLO and the Jordanian government. But it was highlighted in the information and propaganda, especially by the pro-Hashemite personalities in the West Bank. The idea is not that this so-called plan should be revived again as an alternative to the Camp David plan or as a realistic solution for the Palestinian problem. Hussein knows very well that this plan no longer has any chance of succeeding, not only because of the Palestinian rejection, but mainly because of the fact that the Israelis themselves reject such a plan. And now the United States is committed to the Israeli standpoint by the fact that they adopted the autonomy plan, at least as a temporary solution for the Palestinian problem. So even if the Palestinians agreed, the chances that this United Kingdom project could find its way into implementation is very slight. The fact that it's being brought up again, I think, has very immediate and very minor tactical objectives. The king is trying to collect all the possible cards to push in his pockets in order to be in a better bargaining position in his next meeting with Carter. The resurrection of the United Kingdom plan could also play a role in this direction in reminding the United States that King Hussein still has something to say concerning the Palestinians, especially since, when he invited Yasser Arafat to visit Jordan in the context of all this talk about the United Kingdom, he gives an impression that there is some kind of Palestinian consent to his plan. But in actual fact there is no such consent. The issue has never been brought up.

*The plan announced by King Hussein in March 1972 whereby Jordan would become "a United Arab Kingdom" with its capital in Amman and consisting of "The Region of Palestine, that is, 'the West Bank and any further Palestinian territories to be liberated. . . ' and 'the Region of Jordan.'" King Hussein, of course, "shall be Head of State and shall assume Central Executive Power." The proposal can be found in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 1,4 (Summer 1972) pp. 166-68.