

Interview with Comrade Habash

In anticipation of the PFLP's 16th anniversary, we had the opportunity to interview Comrade George Habash, General Secretary, in late November. We focused on issues that are of principle and historical importance for the PFLP's political line and course of struggle.

Comrade Habash, in PFLP Bulletin no. 69, we printed your speech on the crisis in the Palestinian revolution, where you touched on the relation between this crisis and that of the Arab national liberation movement. Today, we ask you to concentrate on the crisis of the Arab national liberation movement - its roots and solutions.

It is impossible to evaluate the present Palestinian crisis, or to foresee the future of the Palestinian revolution without seeing the real interrelationship between the Palestinian revolution and the Arab national liberation movement. To illustrate this, suppose that Egypt at present was ruled by the party of the working class. Suppose Egypt had a strong alliance with the Soviet Union. Suppose this was the case in other Arab countries surrounding Palestine. Then the situation of the Palestinian revolution would be completely different.

Concerning the Arab national liberation movement, we must distinguish between two features of its crisis: One is the class structure and leadership of that branch of the movement which assumed state power in a number of Arab countries; in this case, with the exception of Democratic Yemen, the crisis is structural. The second feature is the relative weakness of the working class and its parties; concerning this branch of the movement, the question is a different one.

To explain the roots of the structural crisis, we must go back in history and see which class forces were leading the Arab national liberation movement at each stage, and what they achieved.

Anti-colonial struggle

Historically, we can trace the roots of the Arab national liberation movement back to the last quarter of the 19th century. At that time, the aim was freedom from the Ottoman Empire and having a united Arab state, especially in this part of the Arab world, the Mashraq (east). No social demands were raised at that time. The slogans were those of dignity, freedom, unity, Arabism, etc. By the way, certain Lebanese figures, including Maronites, played a positive role in the cultural movement that was a prelude to the political movement.

During World War I, the leaders of the movement decided to cooperate with the Allies, hoping that after the French and British defeated the Ottoman Empire, they (the Arabs) would have freedom and unity. Of course, before the end of the war, the Sykes-Picot agreement (to divide the area between Britain and France) was exposed by the Bolsheviks. When the war was over, the Arab national liberation movement found that the French and British had replaced the Ottomans. The traditional leaders of the movement, Hussein, Sharif of Mecca, and his sons, Abdullah and Feisal (the Hashemites), decided to cooperate with the plans of the colonial powers, but the mainstream of the movement rejected this. The victory of the October Revolution in Russia, and the new incentive it gave to the oppressed peoples, increased the Arab people's motivation for struggle.

From 1918 and through the twenties, the movement tried to fight for the previous slogans, but as you know, the reality was that the area was divided. The leaders raised the same

slogans - freedom and Arab unity. In practice, they began fighting the new form of imperialism in each country: Fighting the British Mandate in Palestine, the French in Syria, and the British in Iraq. There was armed struggle: In Syria, the revolt led by Sultan al Atrash in 1925, and another revolt in the Alawite area in the north; in Palestine, the 1936-39 revolt; the 1919 revolt in Iraq, etc. Until the second world war, the struggle continued mainly against French and British colonialism.

The outcome of World War II changed many things: Britain and France became secondary powers in relation to the US. There was the victory of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the socialist camp. There was a general change on the international level as seen in the United Nations Charter and the slogans of freedom, peace, self-determination for the peoples, etc. On this basis, the Arab national liberation movement was able to attain some victories. Of course, we must evaluate the character of these in relation to the slogans that had been raised. These victories were limited to gaining independence in Syria and Lebanon, their joining the UN, having a flag and national anthem, etc. This was formal political independence without unity.

We can relate the nature of these victories to the class leadership of the movement at that time. From the last quarter of the 19th century until World War II, the leadership of the national movement was in the hands of the feudalists and the emerging bourgeoisie. During World War II, the bourgeoisie had expanded, especially in Palestine and Lebanon, and in Syria to some extent, because it was in the interests of French and British imperialism to facilitate the growth of a local bourgeoisie; they needed more local production to supply the needs of their soldiers. Thus, in the late thirties, we saw a new phenomenon in the area - the growth of a bourgeoisie, which was, however, subordinate to the imperialist powers.

The demise of the feudal leadership

1948 was a turning point in the history of the Arab national liberation movement. At this time, it became apparent to the Arab masses that these feudal and bourgeois classes, which had received formal political independence, were not at all able to defend the people's real interests. What happened in Palestine in 1948, exposed the meaning of this independence: that it was superficial; it meant nothing in terms of the people's interests or ability to face the Zionist attack.

I experienced this time; even without a class analysis, it was very easy for me and the masses to see that there was no independence, no dignity. One could see that these newly formed states must disappear in order to have a truly independent Arab state and the unity required to face Zionism in Palestine. At this time we said, "Traitors, traitors, they only want to keep their thrones". There was broad popular rage against the rulers. The class leadership of the Arab national liberation movement, represented by the feudal lords, and this type of bourgeoisie, had failed. If the movement was to fulfill its aims, it would have to be reconstituted. It is thus not a coincidence that in the following period we witnessed the formation of the Baath Party and the Arab Nationalist