

Life in Burj Al Barajneh

DEFENDING THE CAMP

We interviewed the fighters in a PFLP military base defending Burj Al Barajneh camp. Comrade Abu Jilda began: «We are in this position to defend our people and camp. We would prefer to be in the South facing 'Israel', but Amal forces us to fight here. We have been in this position for two years. Amal continues its harassment. We are expecting war any day, and we are ready.»

Comrade Adnan, deputy leader of the PFLP in Burj Al Barajneh, related the background of the wars with Amal: «The battles with Amal were forced on us. It was part of the conspiracy to negate the Palestinian role in Lebanon and enforce sectarian solutions. As Amal rose to be the dominant Shiite force, it viewed all Palestinian and non-sectarian Lebanese forces and parties as obstacles, because of the history and strength of the democratic, progressive forces within the Shiite community. Amal is not a homogeneous organization. It needs to open a war with an 'outside force' to keep itself from shattering, and to create support among the Shiites in the face of the growing influence of Hezbollah. After the fascist forces were thrown out of Beirut, Amal did not continue the fight against 'Israel' because of the presence of a pro-Israeli trend within it. Instead, it made war on the Palestinians on the pretext of Arafat's activities, and not wanting to return to the situation before 1982.»

«During the last battle (June 1986), we were fighting only defensively, but when we saw that the camp was being shelled deep inside, we decided to take the battle out of the camp. We divided the frontline into three sections, 2 defensive and one supportive. Our plan was that as soon as we face aggression, we will expand to control the square just beyond the camp. We were able to accomplish this, as you can see for yourself. We were able to defeat Amal's forces, though they were much greater in number.»

Comrade Abu Nidal Al Ashqar, military responsible for the PFLP's forces in Burj Al Barajneh, assessed the results of the last battle: «Before the last battle, certain elements in Amal, especially from their security forces, began instigating trouble. Together with hostile propaganda, this caused tension to rise. Later on, Amal started heavy bombardment of the camp. We were prepared and our military ability was good. We could carry out any political decision that was made, even to advance. We decided to expand the area we control only to the extent needed to save the camp from aggression. That's why we took the square... We observed the ceasefires with good will, hoping each would be the last, but the other side has used the ceasefires as a tactic for inflicting heavy losses

among our people by suddenly opening fire. We cannot have the same practice, because we do not believe in such tactics.»

Concerning expectations about future battles, Comrade Abu Nidal said, «Definitely, Amal will not be able to enter the camp. The balance of forces is changing to our favor. Amal is getting weaker internally and the Lebanese national movement is reconsidering its alliance with Amal.»

LIFE IN THE CAMP

Abu Iskander is a member of the Burj Al Barajneh popular committee. He is fifty years old, comes from Kwaikat near Acca in Palestine, and has five children. He described living conditions in the camp: «We are living a tragedy. We have lived in a state of siege since 1985. The camp needs to be cleared of the debris from the war, but we could not accomplish that yet. People cannot move in and out of the camp. There is no work. People depend on the help of the Palestinian organizations. UNRWA gives a little help, and some have family members in the Gulf (who send them money). Unemployment here is 100%.»

Abu Iskander discussed the effects of Amal's attacks on the camp. One thing he mentioned is that «this caused our people to increase their ties with the revolution and solidify the resistance. We did not want Amal to be our enemy; we were allies before,» he added. Amal's attacks have also led to the problem of emigration. Abu Iskander said, «There are many people who emigrate for financial and social reasons, but the most important reason is the security situation. More than 200 men left recently. If the security situation was good, no more than 20 would have left.»

Mr. Taysir is a respected person in Burj Al Barajneh camp, and responsible for rebuilding Haifa hospital there. He has six sons. Five of them have been freedom fighters, carrying arms, since the revolution started in Lebanon. One of them was martyred. His girls attend university, and work in the students' and women's unions. He evaluated the work of the popular committee in Burj Al Barajneh as follows: «After 1982, the popular committee faced a very difficult situation because of the Zionist-Phalangist aggression. Though it provided some services, it did not develop. Then after the return of the revolution, the situation improved.» About efforts to rebuild the houses that have been destroyed in the camp war, he noted, «There was some help from the PLO and the Palestine National Salvation Front, but there was no jointly organized work. Each force took care of its own people. Many houses were repaired, but Amal does not allow rebuilding unless we rebuild Amal's

areas as well, and that is impractical».

Through discussion, it became obvious how the security situation is affecting all aspects of life in Burj Al Barajneh, for as Mr. Taysir explained, «It is very difficult to leave the camp, to go to Beirut for example. No one can leave to obtain ID papers or a passport, or to go to the dentist. (We are working to establish a dental clinic here.) For this reason, the phenomenon of brokers sprang up. Camp residents pay others a lot of money to do errands for them, because they are afraid to leave the camp themselves. Also because of the bad security situation, many young men travel abroad in order to go to university, but of course, not every family can afford to send their children to a university outside Lebanon.

UNRWA's policy also affects the education situation, as Mr. Taysir explained: «After 1982, the UNRWA schools were affected because UNRWA's policies are closely related to those of imperialism, 'Israel' and the Arab reactionary countries. UNRWA diminished educational services. After 1985, schools were closed for long periods. As of now, they have been closed all year. This has a negative effect on our youth. In my opinion, this is an attempt by US imperialism and UNRWA to keep our people ignorant.»

«IF WE ABANDON OUR ARMS, WE ABANDON OUR LIVES»

Mr. Taysir also discussed various issues related to the political situation and the recurring camp wars. He evaluated the role of the Palestinian organizations and the Lebanese national movement, in defending the camps, as follows: «During the 1985 camp war, the Lebanese national movement did not even issue a statement to support us... In 1986, however, most Lebanese nationalist organizations were supporting us on the media level. However, in practice, nothing was done, except for providing some food, although we all fought alongside the Lebanese national movement in the February revolt in 1984 and in the mountains (against the fascists). We don't ask them to fight Amal, but we need their political support. All Palestinian and Lebanese nationalists, including Amal, should unite to confront Zionist aggression against South Lebanon and Palestine. The Palestine National Salvation Front fought fiercely in defense of the camp. Fatah also did. Many were martyred on both sides. It was a great expression of national unity in the field. Though the right-wing PLO leadership has deviated, this did not negatively influence our masses in the camp. Everybody fought together to protect the camp.»

Mr. Taysir explained the purpose of weapons in the camp, saying, «The people say that if we abandon our arms, we abandon our lives, our honor and our cause. As long as Palestine is not liberated, we have no right to