

Highlights of Palestinian Struggle

Women Confronting Occupation Jerusalem, 1967

Aida is a Palestinian from Jerusalem. Her political involvement dates back to the sixties when the West Bank and East Jerusalem were under Jordanian control. Since that time, she has been active first in the ranks of the Arab Nationalist Movement and then in the PFLP. She has participated in all fields of struggle - political, military and mass work. Today she devotes her main energies to the work of the Palestinian Women's Organization.

I was still a student when I became interested in the Palestinian and Arab national cause - the struggle against the various Zionist, imperialist and reactionary plans against our people. It was the time of Nasser, the rise of the Arab national movement, demonstrations against the Baghdad Pact, etc. (The Baghdad Pact was a US project to group Middle East states in an anti-Soviet military axis, in the 1950s.) I was driven by nationalist feelings to participate in these activities. I remember one incident in particular. My school organized a field trip on the occasion of the Jordanian Army Day. On the way in the bus, we students were singing and shouting things unfavorable to the regime - and even against it. Afterwards, people from the Education Ministry and the authorities came to our school and warned us not to do such things again. The way they spoke to us really drove me into political involvement.

I read many books and attended meetings, but I didn't think about being organized. At first, I was inclined towards the Communist Party - some of my family were in the party, but I didn't have contact with them. Then it happened that a teacher I knew came to talk to me. Her brother was a leader in the Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM - precursor of the PFLP). I visited them and through discussions, I was convinced to join the ANM in 1960.

After two meetings I became the women's responsible in Jerusalem, although I didn't yet feel completely prepared for this. However, others from Jerusalem, who had been studying in Cairo and Beirut (ANM centers at that time), or in Damascus, returned and gave me training. I gained contact to the leadership, and we organized ourselves as a cell. We began working among women, especially teachers and students, in the Jerusalem area and then in Ramallah. Within one year, we had about eighteen women and girls working with us. As we drew more women into the work, those who were organized became responsible for the others, which is how it should be.

PREPARING FOR LIBERATION

The first PNC, held in Jerusalem in 1964, gave a push to our work. It encouraged more Palestinians from different classes and groups, to take part in nationalist activities aimed at liberating our homeland from Zionist occupation. From 1965, we worked in the name of the PLO and the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW). We began to prepare people for the liberation struggle. We conducted first aid and literacy courses. I remember that of the ninety girls who graduated from one such six-month course, many went on to finish secondary school, and one later went to the university.

In that period we learned the value of working through existing legal societies whenever possible. For example, we were able to work through the schools and clinics of the Moqassad (Islamic Charitable Foundation), where much of the staff was politically conscious. We went to clinics and spoke to women about medical care while they were waiting to see the doctor. We introduced political ideas in relation to their own problems. We also went to villages where there were progressive doctors working. When going to the villages, we were careful to respect the traditions of the people there, which were often more strict than in a city like Jerusalem. We wore long sleeves and covered our heads. We always went directly to the mukhtar of the village. If we could convince him of the seriousness of our work and win his support, things were much easier. We were able to have activities in about 29 villages in this way, with the mukhtar's consent. We talked to the women there, and held literacy and sewing courses. In this way we created a circle of supporters much broader than the number of women who were actually organized. In some villages, we were given an empty house to use for our activities.

At first, it was hard for women to go out of the house. To deal with this, we would visit the homes of our members. We talked with the family until they felt confident that their daughters were safe with us. Sometimes this took two or three months. Then they might allow the daughter to leave the house for an hour. We were always careful that she returned on time. Then, later, when the family really had confidence in us, she could leave for a longer time. Often we held activities in people's homes; nobody refused to open their house for us. Sometimes we would gather as many as sixty women in a home for a public meeting. We would station one person at the door so that if the authorities came, she would begin beating a drum and we would all sing and dance as though it were a party.

In 1966, the Jordanian authorities began a campaign of repression against the nationalist movement. Many were arrested - from the Communist Party, the Baath Party, the Arab Nationalist Movement, etc. I was also arrested, as were others I worked with. The authorities closed down the GUPW center in Jerusalem. The work became much harder and we were not able to gather such large groups together at one place, but the people didn't stop. Some families were afraid for their daughters to associate with those of us who had been in prison, but usually the women themselves insisted on maintaining our friendship and work together. We had to learn to work in secret ways. By the time we were faced by the Israeli occupa-