

Interview with Raja Aghbariya

«We must fight - we have no choice.»

This interview with Raja Aghbariya, secretary-general of *Abna Al Balad*, was conducted in June by DP staff member Itimad Musa in London, where he was participating in the Return group's conference (see DP no. 39). In it, Mr. Aghbariya speaks honestly about the failures and achievements of *Abna Al Balad*, its conflicts with the PLO, the intifada and the future of his organization and the Palestinians inside the 1948 occupied territories.



When was *Abna Al Balad* founded and why?

Some youths from Um Al Fahm and two or three persons that came from *Al Ard* movement, which had been banned in 1965, began to try to do something after the 1967 war. All the Arabs were shocked. All the time they had been waiting for the Arab countries to liberate them from the Israelis and Zionism. Then in six days something terrible had happened: all the Palestinian land, all the Palestinian people were under occupation. The Palestinians inside Israel had lived under an Israeli military regime until 1965, and two years after that the authorities transferred all the occupation infrastructure to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. So these youth - some Arab nationalists, some Trotskyists, some from the Communist Party - were looking for a new way to express their Palestinian identity and their rejection of the new situation. They knew very well the experience of *Al Ard* movement - which was a Nasserite Arab nationalist organization that had been banned by the Israelis because it didn't recognize the Israeli state. So they began to think of how to create a local organization in Um Al Fahm. Actually, they called it *Abna Al Balad* because the name has two meanings. On the one hand, it means «the sons of the village,» but the real translation is «the sons of the country.» They played with the name because they were afraid of what the authorities' reaction might be to anything other than a local organization.

They began by putting forth a list of candidates in the 1972 local council elections. They succeeded in winning one seat in 1972, and many people began joining at that time because it was a local organization. They raised two slogans: the one against the clan system of representation in the local council, where candidate lists represented families and not political organizations, and the other against the parties that were active in Um Al Fahm. *Abna Al Balad* did not want to operate as a political party. They opened a club after their success in the council and began giving lectures, publishing platforms and leaflets about every subject, slowly beginning to speak about politics.

When the PLO began to say that it represented all the Palestinian people, uniting them politically, this affected the situation inside the green line. Later in 1975, *Abna Al Balad* began saying that the Palestinians inside the green line are an integral part of the Palestinian people and not an integral part of the Israeli people, which is what the Communist Party and all the other Zionist parties had been saying. So this stand is what set *Abna Al Balad* apart at the beginning. *Abna Al Balad* began moving into other villages and the universities, and became very strong after Land Day in 1976 - the first big strike by all Arabs inside the green line. I was a member of *Abna Al Balad* by then, having been active in university and joining the movement in 1975. We published our first national leaflet about Land Day in 1976. I think that was the day *Abna Al Balad* changed from a local to a national movement. After that, the PLO and the Palestinian revolution began to be strong, and all the Palestinian people became infused with a national soul. *Abna Al Balad* was also affected by this and became an organization that represented this soul.

We worked without a political program until 1978. Until then we had positions, but no ideological program. We began to think about a program in 1978 after we succeeded in three out of four universities in winning the leadership of the majority of Arab students. But at that time *Abna Al Balad* wasn't really united and organized. Everybody thought that if you are a Palestinian and believe the PLO represents you, then you are *Abna Al Balad*. When we began to discuss this, we discovered tragic differences between the various positions, especially in Um Al Fahm because that's where *Abna Al Balad* was founded. We succeeded in 1978 to write a primary program, but the differences remained as to whether or not we wanted to form a party and participate in the Israeli elections to the Knesset, and if we are an integral part of the Palestinian-Arab national arena against Zionism. We split in 1983 in Um Al Fahm, because that is where the biggest branch was. The split was over whether or not to take part in Knesset elections, with the other side supporting the Progressive List for Peace (PLP).

Why did *Abna Al Balad* oppose participating in Knesset elections?

We don't think that we can solve the class and national question from the Knesset. We know that this is a difficult position to explain to the people who have regularly participated in elections. Arabs have, in the past, voted in larger numbers than Jews in Knesset elections. The position of the PLO has also encouraged more people to vote. But what has happened in the past two months with Peres validated our long-held position that this state is racist. As this is a Jewish and Zionist state, we are not, we cannot and they don't want us to be considered as part of the regime in Israel. The last two months Peres hasn't succeeded