



## INTERVIEW WITH KHALIDA JARRAR

# The Israeli Occupation Must End

*"It is the occupation that must leave our homeland," Khalida Ratrouf Jarrar told the Israeli soldiers who delivered a military edict on 15 August 2014 ordering her to leave her home in al-Bireh for Jericho. Jarrar, as is her wont, boldly went straight to the political point, one that, at least for a moment, lifted the fog engulfing contemporary Palestinian politics. That August, Israel was waging a relentless war against Gaza: we in the West Bank were largely reduced—or perhaps had reduced ourselves—to bystanders, obsessively watching the news. Now a fifty-two-year-old Palestinian woman, a member of the inoperative Palestinian Legislative Council, a longtime activist for women's rights, and a long-standing member in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), voiced one simple, resonant message to the occupier: "Leave."*

*The "Special Supervision Order" issued by an Israeli military court ordered Jarrar to leave for Jericho within twenty-four hours and to stay there for six months; it gave no reasons other than "intelligence information"—always secret of course—that is perennially invoked by the Israeli army. Consider for a moment not just the arbitrary cruelty of the order, but as an editorial in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz pointed out, its sheer foolishness: If issued, as seems was the case, to silence Jarrar's public activism, had the army never heard of social media? We are reminded that military power is more brutal than brilliant. Jarrar's response, on the other hand, was effective: she immediately set up a protest tent in front of the shuttered Palestinian Legislative Council headquarters in Ramallah and a month later, it seemed as though she had won. On 16 September 2014, an Israeli military court reduced the restriction order to one month. Ostensibly, it was all over.*

*But with the near fifty-year-old occupation, it is never over. On 2 April 2015, as she describes in the interview, a large band of soldiers surrounded her house and Jarrar was taken away under yet another arbitrary order, this one mandating six months of administrative detention—detention without trial—which Israel allows itself by deploying the never-rescinded British Defence (Emergency) Regulations of 1945. Following international pressure, the period of administrative detention was reduced to one month, but then Jarrar, still in prison, was charged with twelve counts, including for such activities as visiting a released prisoner and participating in a book fair. She was refused bail, and her hearings were postponed at least three times: in one summer hearing that took place, she was finally allowed a word with her two daughters, Yafa and Suha, who had come from Canada where they are university students. In December 2015, she was found guilty on two counts—membership in an illegal organization and "incitement." She was finally released in June 2016, having spent fifteen months in prison.*

*Jarrar shared the harsh conditions of all Palestinian political prisoners since the Oslo Accords: she was held in Hasharon Prison inside Israel (must we once again wearily note that the transfer of prisoners from occupied territory is against international law?), where family members could only visit by special permit both to enter Israel and to penetrate the prison confines. No family member who has been accused (let alone convicted) of a so-called security offense may receive a visit permit, eliminating her husband, Ghassan.*

*But Jarrar did not only suffer—from solitary confinement at times and from poorly treated medical conditions—she learned from her experiences. Her sharp and sensitive observations about her fellow women prisoners, as well as her interventions, bring us into the prisoner's world, whether the conditions of underage and ill detainees, or the wish of longtime prisoner Lena Jarbouni to see, at least once, a star in the night sky. Crucially, Jarrar admits she is surprised at the number of prisoners “whose actions were triggered by social pressure,” citing the example of an abused young woman who took herself to an Israeli military checkpoint, knife in hand, after her appeals to the Palestinian police had gone unheard. A long-standing belief that the political cannot be separated from the social has shaped Jarrar's feminism, which allowed her to see the complex circumstances of at least some of the forty-six women imprisoned for “knife possession.” Many Palestinian political leaders have not wished to acknowledge these circumstances, partly in response to a host of pro-Israeli commentators who describe all acts of resistance by Palestinian women as driven by patriarchal oppression rather than occupation.*

*Jarrar's first and only other arrest occurred during a Women's Day demonstration on 8 March 1989. Along with at least four other women, she was sentenced to one month in prison for “disturbing public order.” That incident is a reminder that Jarrar's biography has been shaped by the mass student and women's activism and solidarity that emerged in the occupied Palestinian territories in the 1970s and 1980s. Beginning as a high school student in Nablus with the volunteer work committees, she was active in the student movement, with an emphasis, she would add, on women's rights during her time as an undergraduate at Birzeit University (graduating in 1985). The crucible of the first intifada completed her education as a political and women's activist; she went on to direct Addameer, an organization for prisoners' legal defense and human rights. This commitment led her back to Birzeit for a master's in democracy and human rights, completed in 2003. And from there, on to victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections of 2006, which also ushered in a victory for Hamas. The subsequent split in the Palestinian political field—and the contradictions and complications of the post-Oslo environment as a whole—are some of the issues that Jarrar addresses in this interview.*

*Jarrar insists that the Left to which she belongs cannot open up an important conversation regarding Oslo and other urgent and important questions because it does not have a “unified political vision” that can challenge the platforms of either Palestinian neoliberals or the religious Right. The reader may feel a certain frustration on the part of the interviewer who tries to persuade her that there is some common ground for such a Left vision, but Jarrar insists there is no magic solution.*

*Jarrar's imprisonment was met with sustained protest by international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which were particularly*

*concerned that Jarrar might have been targeted for her activism on the Palestinian national committee to take Israel to the International Criminal Court. Global campaigns demanding Jarrar's release were launched by solidarity groups and women's peace groups such as CodePink. In Palestine, a local committee valiantly tried to keep up a momentum of protest and Jarrar's legal team worked tirelessly on her behalf. But, in my view, there was a worrying, indeed disturbing, lack of activity from one of Jarrar's most natural allies: Palestinian women's organizations. While not entirely silent, Palestinian women activists and organizations palpably failed to mobilize. This may be an urgent reminder that women's organizations in the occupied Palestinian territories, mostly now organized as nongovernmental organizations with specific agendas, cannot replace a women's movement, however worthy their individual projects.*

*I asked a longtime Palestinian feminist, who is the leader of such an NGO and friend—a person I greatly respect—why women's organizations responded so tepidly to the arbitrary and cruel treatment of Jarrar, herself a leading advocate for women's rights. My friend was honest, answering simply: "Everyone is so tired." Indeed, she herself had just broken down at the Qalandia checkpoint after being refused entry to Jerusalem: the Israeli soldier told her it was Saturday so she could not pass even though she was over the age requiring a permit. I met her when another panelist smuggled her into Jerusalem for our opening session of an international critical geography conference. Critical geography indeed. It is not only political, but physical fragmentation that Palestinians face. These are both the obstacles to, and the reasons for, the urgent task Jarrar proposes, namely, "to revive the ethos of cooperation and solidarity that Oslo destroyed."*

*Jarrar raises many issues that remain unresolved, issues which some will contest, some will agree with, and some will just despair of. But her words remain: it is the occupation that must leave.*

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*This interview was conducted by the IPS office in Ramallah and first appeared in Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya, the Arabic-language quarterly of the Institute for Palestine Studies. Penny Johnson, who wrote the introduction, is the associate editor of the Ramallah-based Jerusalem Quarterly. The text of the interview was translated by JPS staff.*

***You have just spent fifteen months in Israeli prison, cut off from your family and your community. The Israeli authorities had already tried deporting you earlier. Could you reflect on your feelings in the face of such repressive measures: What was your incarceration like as an activist, an organizer, and a citizen? How did you experience this whether in relation to yourself (writing, reading, or reflecting), to your comrades and other detainees in prison, or indeed, to your jailers?***

To be honest, I missed my family and friends terribly. In prison, feelings of distance, deprivation, and isolation are heightened to the *n*th degree. It was four months before I was allowed my first and only family visit and I can't tell you the joy I felt when I saw them, even though several family members were barred from visiting me. The hardest thing in captivity is the longing for one's loved ones, and for all of life's quotidian details which one takes for granted on a day-to-day basis.

Broadly speaking, my feelings were ones of defiance, anger, and indignation. I felt defiant when they raided our house, detained me, placed me in the armored personnel carrier, and took me before the magistrate—and especially during my transport from the interrogation center to the jail. Given the indignities to which the occupation authorities subject us, both as human beings and as Palestinians, I can only feel defiant. I also felt angered and outraged by all the little ways in which my dignity was trampled. And, of course, I was suffused with empathy for the other prisoners, whose moving experiences I could have never learned about from the outside.

***You were already in the sights of the Israeli occupation authorities before your detention, and had been ordered to take up house arrest in Jericho even though you reside in Ramallah. Your arrest had long been anticipated, and you were likely not surprised when it happened. We all expected to wake up one morning to the news that Khalida Jarrar had been detained.***

Yes, that night I had been working late on some research when I suddenly noticed some strange movements and noise. I had been expecting them ever since they had served me with that deportation order on 15 August 2014 . . . and now they had finally come for me. They broke in without a sound: suddenly dozens of soldiers were swarming the house and its environs, guns drawn, terrorizing us. As they separated my husband from me, I immediately recognized the voice of the Shin Bet officer who had served my deportation order. “You didn’t comply with [it],” he said, “so now we’ve come to arrest you.” I told him to go right ahead.

I’m not sure how or why but what I felt was a mix of defiance and indifference as the officer and the soldiers invaded our home. [After they had finished their search of the house,] I went to the bedroom to dress suitably for prison—something I had learned from my husband Ghassan’s own earlier arrest. They kept pressing me to hurry up. “You’ve taken two hours to complete your search,” I told them, “now let me get dressed.” I got some clothes together, as well as my medications; they tried to prevent me from taking them with me but I simply insisted. I hugged my family good-bye and stepped outside under the escort of several soldiers; there, I almost laughed at the sight of maybe two hundred troops surrounding my home, in combat mode, guns pointed, in a blaze of lights. I looked at them with scorn and felt proud of myself as a public figure.

I had decided from the very outset that to protest my treatment, especially the endless hours of waiting, I wouldn’t eat, drink, or talk during the interrogation. I was kept in the military jeep for six hours before they let me out at Ofer, after which a man dressed in civilian clothes greeted me saying, “How are you, Umm Yafa? Welcome.” I asked him who he was, and he told me that he would be my interrogator. Based on a dossier he consulted periodically, he asked me some questions, but I wouldn’t answer them. I said practically nothing during the first six-hour interrogation and actually drifted in and out of sleep the whole time. In addition to being exhausted, I was exasperated by his absurd questions. He’d say things like, “You participated in a protest on such and such a date, and in such and such a solidarity action with prisoners; you gave speeches at public events; you attended a student book fair where you greeted the students in such and such way; you are part of the PFLP leadership; you encourage the kidnapping of [Israeli] soldiers in order to obtain prisoner exchanges,” etc., etc., etc. At one point, I just told him that I knew nobody and had the right to remain silent. Eventually, he said I was being placed under administrative detention and that I’d be transferred to the

Hasharon women's prison (near Tulkarm). Throughout the interrogation, he repeatedly asked me why I was refusing all food and water. I told him that I neither ate nor drank with interrogators—but that I would have my meal with the prisoners—and that I would not answer his ridiculous questions.

Then I was handed over to the Nachshon,<sup>1</sup> who are notorious for their rough treatment of prisoners. They placed two sets of handcuffs around my wrists, and after a miserable and grueling journey, I finally reached Hasharon Prison at 5:00 P.M. on the day after my arrest. Once inside the prison walls, I felt such relief. The women there had heard a newcomer was arriving and they all came out to greet me, as was customary whenever a new prisoner arrived. I could hear them calling my name and welcoming me even during the intake process.

***What would you say were your strengths and weaknesses throughout this time, whether under interrogation, at your trial, or when you were first welcomed by the other prisoners? What is it like to go through that kind of experience? Did you feel afraid or alienated?***

I had mixed feelings. . . . On the one hand, I found it odd that they had sent so many troops just to arrest a Palestinian woman. . . . The soldiers were so jumpy, so over-the-top, and their questions were so ridiculous. But on the other hand, there was no denying the reality, which was that I was being arrested and that they had decided to place me under administrative detention.

Fear is a natural feeling, and at that moment when I saw our house surrounded on all sides, I felt afraid, of course, but I also felt lucky to have been awake when they arrived. My heart began racing as I imagined all the possible outcomes. I knew that this was going to be an arrest but I wondered if it would be violent like my husband's had been—they had beaten him within an inch of his life. Yes, I was afraid in those early moments, but as soon as they actually entered, the feeling of fear turned into one of defiance.

There were also feelings of alienation as I began grappling with what was going on around me, and already imagining how my encounter with the interrogator and prison guards would go. When I had been detained once before, in 1989, I was arrested on the street for participating in a protest and throwing stones: I was held for only one month and it had been a mass arrest. But this was entirely different. [After we'd left the house] I couldn't tell where we were, I didn't know whether we were still in Ramallah or someplace closer to Jerusalem, and when I questioned the soldiers they wouldn't tell me anything. I had to ask to go to the restroom so as to figure out where I was, and once I saw a minaret [close by], I knew I was in an Arab area.

At Ofer, they removed the handcuffs but kept my feet shackled. The holding cell was freezing cold and very dirty . . . and it had an absolutely filthy toilet. After spending twelve hours there, I was handcuffed once more and sent to the courtroom where again I had to wait for hours on end. They put me through this rigmarole some forty-five times [throughout my detention], they were trying to break my spirit; just the bus journey was exhausting . . . that four-to-five-hour-long wait alone was enough to make you yearn for your prison bed!

On my second day in prison there was another interrogation and the same interrogator brought with him footage of my public speeches and of protests I had attended in solidarity with prisoners. I told him that I wouldn't be watching the footage and that I maintained my right to remain silent. He tried to force me to look by moving the computer into my line of vision, and I simply repeated,

“I won’t look. Note down whatever you like, I don’t care.” They tried to use this against me in court, arguing that my lack of cooperation during the interrogation and my disrespect for the interrogator were evidence that I had something to hide.

The only good thing about going to court was that I got to see my relatives. That made me so happy, even though they had no idea of the hours and hours we had spent getting there, both on the road and in [holding] cells. When I was alone on these long and exhausting trips, I would meditate or talk myself through my problems, and sometimes I would try to scribble something on the cell walls like prisoners had done before me—names of leaders, political slogans, or the map of Palestine. I found it almost impossible to sleep because the ground was so filthy: it was in those moments that I felt truly alone and that the world seemed really remote and indifferent.

In addition to the women, there were also children in the holding cells and there was a mix of Palestinian and Israeli prisoners. The latter were all felons and the former a mix of common criminals and security/political prisoners. When I realized that some of the Israeli felons were also settlers, I feared they might attack us as political activists.

***What was your relationship like with the prisoners, as a parliamentarian, as someone who has a legal background, and a person well versed in the study of democracy, human rights, and the legal framework of occupation? Did any of it apply to Palestinian prisoners, and particularly to a member of the Palestinian legislature like yourself?***

The legal system [in the occupied Palestinian territories] is a comprehensive system of military law devoted to suppressing activists’ rights and violating their dignity at every stage of the detention process. The prison was essentially a series of rooms where prisoners were completely isolated. The only time a prisoner ever sees the sky is when she meets with her lawyer or waits for transportation to the court; and even then, she can only hope to see the sky. A prisoner called Lena Jarbouni once told me of her yearning to see a single star [in the night sky].

One time, a young prisoner who had sustained an injury to her intestines and carried a colostomy bag as a result became gravely ill. The prisoners’ representative [a woman selected to represent the prisoners in dealings with prison officials] had to bang on the [warden’s] door repeatedly until they took the sick woman to the hospital. On another occasion, they had to let us out for fifteen minutes to air the room in which we all were because there was practically no oxygen left and we couldn’t breathe. That night, as we milled around outside, and I spotted a star, I called Lena over to come and see it.

***How did you spend your day?***

I would wake up around 8:00-8:30 A.M. and listen to the radio every morning so as to stay informed about the outside world. I would also listen to citizens’ complaints that are broadcast daily on the air, and to the 9:00 A.M. Ma’an News Agency program that covers culture, the arts, as well as current affairs. We were allowed out of our cells between 10:30 A.M. and 1:00 P.M., and the first thing I did was to go by all the rooms and greet the women; they were really glad that I checked in with them like that. Then I would drink coffee or tea, and on Saturdays, Mondays, and Thursdays, we’d wait for the official Sawt Filastin broadcast that would transmit greetings from prisoners’ families.

We had a special [educational] program for the underage detainees, whose numbers have been on the rise [for some time]. There were two women who ran the program and others sometimes joined them; first we'd chat, then the lesson would begin. A teacher, who is a Palestinian citizen of Israel, would come in to teach most subjects, and I taught English and Palestinian social and cultural studies. I felt that they really needed to be introduced to some basic concepts, particularly the notion of political, cultural, and religious pluralism. Then I usually read between 1:00 and 2:30 P.M. and again at nighttime.

***What books were available, and how many books was each prisoner allowed?***

Each prisoner was allowed to receive two books per visit, and as books are continuously added to the library, the prison's collection has become somewhat extensive. We were allowed to have all types of books. I mostly read novels, including *The Bamboo Stalk*<sup>2</sup> and *The Bastard of Istanbul*, as well as [Rumi's] *The Forty Rules of Love*, which my family gave me. It's one of the most beautiful books I've ever read and I circulated it to the other women, many of whom also enjoyed it. I also read some works of political economy. Eight months into my detention, I decided to start doing some research on the topic of female prisoners, after becoming aware of the particular problems they face and as a result of my trying to help the prisoner representative address some of them. The questions I focused on were: the repercussions of the occupation; structuring daily routines inside prison; and the individual factors that had led to each prisoner's incarceration.

***Can you comment on Israeli reports claiming that Palestinian girls and women who carried out knife attacks against Israeli soldiers and settlers were in some way attempting to escape some of the pressures arising from their own family lives?***

People resist occupation for lots of reasons, foremost among them their national aspirations. Occasionally, people are influenced by what they see on the news and through social media but I *was* surprised at the number of prisoners whose actions were apparently triggered by social pressures. For Palestinians, this issue has become concerning, and I devoted some of my energies in prison to finding out more about it, which included communicating with the [women's] lawyers on the outside. I can't talk about this topic in great detail because I'm working on some research on the topic, but I must be blunt here and say that Palestinian women, and especially young girls, do suffer from oppressive social norms and mistreatment, and experience a dual subjugation—as a result of the occupation, on the one hand, and of our patriarchal society, on the other. It isn't simply rumor that some of the knife attacks were fueled by “social factors,” such as girls being forced into unwanted marriages, and thanks to several lawyers, I was able to bring this to the attention of relevant organizations and institutions such as the Palestinian Committee for Prisoners Affairs, Addameer, and the Palestinian Forum to Stop Violence Against Women, etc. During my incarceration, I tried to help such prisoners—particularly the ones who had chosen incarceration over a forced marriage; I tried getting their court dates delayed, and had lawyers visit their families on my behalf as a member of parliament to advocate for the girls' right to choose their partners and not face violence from their husbands, fathers, or brothers, and for them not to have to resort to incarceration as a form of escape. One prisoner who came in with

bruises all over her body had herself arrested by the Israelis after going to a military checkpoint brandishing a knife! She had repeatedly called the Palestinian police, without success, and finally told them that's what she was going to do [to escape her victimizer]. There were forty-six women incarcerated on charges of knife possession. We must acknowledge that many of them were motivated by social factors. This is not simply a rumor.

There was no organized resistance, in the proper sense of the word, inside the prison as very few prisoners belonged to a political organization; what brought the women together in prison wasn't political affiliation but friendship and a feeling of kinship or commonality. Most of the young women wore hijabs although they weren't necessarily religious. When I arrived, there were twenty-five underage girls and fourteen of them were still there when I left. There were also children and elderly women among the prisoners and they hailed from all parts of Palestine.

One prisoner, a forty-six-year-old woman and mother of several children, was affiliated with Daesh (ISIS) and had been convicted of contact with a foreign agent. When I met her, I asked her what she thought of the killing of Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh.<sup>3</sup> She told me that in her view what happened to him was permissible in Islam; we had long arguments about the heinous nature of such acts and the violent ideology at their root.

***Please respond honestly: At what point did you feel that all you wanted was to curl up on your bed and cry? What were your most emotional moments, when you were most moved or upset? The ones that affected and upset you the most?***

One day, an injured woman arrived in critical condition. She hadn't been adequately treated at the hospital [from where she was brought] and she was in agony. We agonized with her and that is when I truly felt crushed and overwhelmed by the conditions we had to endure. I cried a lot that day, as did Lena, but I did it in the bathroom. Many of the other women and girls in prison looked to me for strength, and I didn't want to appear broken in front of them. They often sought me out for help with their problems or to talk about the hardships of their lives and the longing they felt for their loved ones—they had no inkling that I too yearned for my daughters, my husband, and my parents. I occasionally shared those feelings with Lena and a few of the other women. The hardest thing for me was seeing how the young girls suffered, whether from physical injury or from the social pressures they faced. That was particularly painful because I felt I had to rein in my emotions and remain available to them.

***As a rule, Palestinian political factions do not take on such social issues, even those groups whose vision includes a social agenda. Do you think that as a result of your recent experience you might now be able to bring such questions into the Palestinian political sphere?***

The connection between the social and the political already exists, of course. Prison reinforced it for me but I cannot separate the two, especially when it comes to women's issues. I am aware that we live in a patriarchal society in which women are marginalized by the relations of production. I have always maintained that change cannot be limited to the realm of the law or simply come from above. To be effective, change must be foundational, it must come from below, and women cannot reclaim their decision-making power without broad participation in the processes of production and the

labor market. Empowerment programs, training, and workshops alone are not enough to create change. In terms of their current social struggles, Palestinian women are completely on their own . . . they're not getting any support from men.

***On the one hand, you were an elected member of parliament practicing the right to defend your people and address the needs of your voters; and, on the other, you were a detained legislator appearing before an Israeli military judge in a military court that represents the occupation and domination of your people by Israel. How did you reconcile the two?***

Well, it was hard to reconcile, which is why I wouldn't stand up whenever the judge entered the courtroom—I was not going to accord him that respect. I would also look at my family and at the [foreign] consuls in attendance rather than acknowledge the occupation officials. When I was first detained, I gave an interview to the media in which I said that I represented my people, that I was being imprisoned for defending their rights, and that I wouldn't stop until the occupation ended. To punish me, they threatened to put me in solitary but were stopped by protests and unrest on the part of the other prisoners. When a prison warden and the director of Ofer tried to tell me that I had broken the law, I told them that I didn't recognize the authority of their laws.

***On the day of your release, you were hoisted up on the shoulders of your male comrades, a gesture that was met with strict condemnation by Islamist political factions—this also coincided with the furor in Nablus over a young woman wearing a short skirt in public. What are your thoughts on the subject?***

To me, it's shocking that people still judge women for what they're wearing or for being carried aloft by their male supporters upon release from prison. But, ultimately, I'm really not concerned by people who base their judgment on something as trivial as a skirt—it just goes to show how superficial they are. That kind of attitude stems from reactionary views that view women as chattel. Just as men are held aloft, so too are women, and I was proud to be hoisted up on the shoulders of my comrades. Those whose distorted view sees women purely in sexual terms exhibit an inferior and primitive mindset, in my view. There's no point in engaging with them: they are the same people who do nothing to stop assault, murder, and other violence perpetrated against women. Indeed, some of them are themselves perpetrators and drive women to act in ways which they know will result in their being locked up.

Here, I'm really addressing myself to women's groups and other rights groups, which need to put in place proper mechanisms to protect women and address domestic violence. Many Palestinians may not be ready to hear this, but it's important to say it: we, as a society, turn a blind eye to discrimination and violence against women, and that is completely antithetical to our popular liberation struggle. What kind of Palestine do we want? Me, I want a democratic, secular Palestine with political, cultural, and religious pluralism and respect for all. This is how Palestine used to be, and this is what we would like it to go back to after liberation. And just as we have bold and unambiguous stances on national issues, we need the same on social issues. Resistance is needed on both fronts, even if one currently has to take precedence over the other. Social change is difficult to affect, and it takes time.

I spoke to the young prisoners about pluralism because I sensed a deep conservatism [among them] both socially and politically. I stressed the importance of acceptance and respect for all opinions. The younger women and girls—those who hadn't even heard of the concept—responded positively to the idea, and we also told them about the history of the Palestinian revolution, and how it included nationalists, pan-Arabists, leftists, secularists, and Islamists, some of whom were Muslim and others Christian. The history of Palestinian resistance hadn't been confined to a single faction, we explained.

One day, a committee of women came to meet with us at the prison. They were Palestinian citizens of Israel who had been sent there at the behest of the Israeli Ministry of Justice to voice their concern for the growing number of women prisoners who'd experienced domestic violence. I told them frankly that we weren't ashamed of the fact that we [Palestinians] had many problems, and that although there was no denying our own share of responsibility [in them], the most insidious problems we faced were those caused by Israel's regimens of occupation, control, and blockade. When they asked what the solution might be, and suggested that we cooperate with them to find such a solution, I told them that we were prisoners, and that their role was to question the military judge's sentences of twenty or thirty months on charges related to social issues. "We know what to do and there is really no room for cooperation between us—you belong to the institution that occupies us," I told them.

***What is the significance of preponderantly individual actions versus collective action in the current phase of the Palestinian struggle? Is this the reflection of a deep and multifaceted impasse?***

The absence of representative leadership attuned to the people's aspirations has given rise to myriad problems. Today we're consumed by the Palestinian rift or split (*inqisam*), but even before that, there were hundreds of visions on the table and endless conversations about them. The split is being institutionalized even though *all* Palestinians agree on the need for unity in order for the occupation to end and for us to realize our legitimate national rights. What is required is a unified political vision. Without it, competing political interests become entrenched to the detriment of the greater good. We are regressing in every arena, and this is true both regionally and globally. But this is a phase, and I am hopeful it won't last forever. . . . We need a political leadership that is capable of both reflecting on our past political experiment and of respecting the people's choice.

***Oslo went awry and produced the opposite effects [to those intended], including the entrenchment of Israeli occupation, control, and settlement activity. Simultaneously, no new vision has been elaborated nor any alternative proposed for rebuilding the national movement. What do you think has impeded such a development?***

The major impediment has been the absence of a unified vision—along with the fact that the Palestinian Authority (PA) continues to exist within the Oslo framework and that it cannot jettison Oslo simply by suspending security coordination [with Israel] or the Paris Protocol [on economic relations]. The Palestinian people are capable of coming up with new forms of resistance—think of such innovations as the popular resistance committees [during the first intifada] and popular education initiatives when [the Israelis] shut down our universities. But we

also need some breathing room . . . we need to be freed of authoritarianism and repression, whether direct or indirect. It will be difficult to transition to an alternative without ending Oslo as a political contract. The factions that are most enthusiastic about liberation and ending the occupation must be the ones to put an end to the Oslo Accords.

***Are you talking about the Left?***

The Left no longer has a clear and bold vision. The PFLP has a vision for ending the Oslo Accords, but it's not taken seriously by other leftist factions. It's not enough to demand the application of Central Council decisions without a wholesale reexamination of Oslo. We must get to the root of the problem: what we need is a framework that institutionalizes a broad-based alternative, and a leadership that takes unambiguous and unwavering positions. Unfortunately, narrow interests have developed over time as a result of current structures . . . I don't want to get into the details here . . . I am confident that the Palestinian people are capable of creating new types of resistance that can produce such change—as they have throughout the ongoing *habba* and during the first intifada. But the *habba* will peter out and its participants become deflated without a leadership that can extend them political protection, articulate their goals and demands, and identify effective forms of resistance.

***What is your view of the pervasive chaos and associated acts of violence in Palestinian society?***

There are many reasons for the current chaos, one of them being disastrous economic conditions as a result of which the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer—specifically, our relationship of economic dependency [vis-à-vis Israel], monopolistic economic policies, and the domination of the Palestinian economy by a handful of megabusinessmen. Coupled with the oppression of the occupation and the PA's corruption and incompetence, you have the perfect storm for localized conflicts. The question should be: What is the role of political forces in the current Palestinian landscape? Absent organized political efforts to break the logjam and champion the interests of the majority of Palestinians who live in camps, villages, and towns, the situation will not change. People are being ground down by an economic crisis that is exacerbated by the resurgence of tribalism, sectarianism, clan identification, and conservative traditionalism. There are no templates or magical recipes to cure this condition: rather than privileging particular interests, our political movement should be placing resistance to settler colonialism front and center and defending the rights of refugees, a question that is close to being completely jettisoned.

***Are elections the solution?***

Even if they usher in a new authority, elections in the West Bank and Gaza will solve nothing. Incremental democracy is not a solution and the basic setup would remain the same, if not worse! Nor is authoritarianism a solution—it is partly to blame for our current predicament. Once again, we must return to the root of the problem, by which I mean, going back to the Palestine National Council and holding proper elections that reflect the people's views, and culminate in the election of a new PLO Executive Committee. Only then can we undertake a proper political reassessment.

Recent attempts to cobble the National Council together on the basis of wheeling and dealing by influential figures have only exacerbated the existing rift. To function properly, institutions must be the outcome of a democratic process, and we currently have the opportunity to do just that. The National Council might find that Palestinians don't want an Authority, that they don't want Oslo—and that they may want to come up with other alternatives.

***Wouldn't it be best for the establishment, so to speak, to initiate a new social contract that could function as an organizational and foundational framework for national elections?***

Formally, that contract already exists in the form of the National Charter [adopted in 1964 by the Palestine National Council]. And please note, that by democracy I don't mean just the procedural act at the ballot box; I'm talking about democracy in its fullest sense.

***The charter is being impugned because it is secular, according to Hamas, and it sets quotas for the Palestinian armed factions. Why don't we renew the National Charter on different grounds, such as banning takfeer [declarations of apostasy] and the use of religious symbolism in political slogans?***

Naturally, I'm against the use of religion in politics—we're on the same page, here. I would have no objection to producing a new charter that further refines the foundational concepts of the current one. The charter enjoys popular support in terms of overarching Palestinian national rights. Only a minority of people support two states for two peoples.

***In 1988 the Palestine National Council (PNC) unanimously decided in favor of the two-state solution!***

No, it wasn't unanimous. The Declaration of Independence referenced a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state on the 1967 borders, which is different from two states for two peoples.

***The PNC's Declaration of Independence recognized the 1947 partition resolution (UN General Assembly Resolution 181) which calls for two states!***

Reservations were expressed about the Declaration of Independence, and there's a big difference between a fully independent Palestinian state along the 1967 boundaries and the two-state paradigm. The national consensus platform calls for the creation of an independent and sovereign Palestinian state in the 1967 territories and references UN General Assembly Resolution 194 on the right of return (of Palestinian refugees). That is what the national consensus platform says and it also enshrines secularism—whose dilution or infringement I oppose and which, I believe, must undergird the election of a new national council by the Palestinian people; the idea that economic cooperation and security coordination will lead to a political settlement is a paradigm that needs to end.

***Why hold onto a platform that dates back to 1964 and has been superseded by sea changes? Why not create something new?***

Because the goals that were outlined in the Charter have yet to be realized: the refugees remain dispersed, the right to self-determination has not been established, and the occupation [which started

three years after the charter was published] continues. The Palestinian people's continuing struggle for the right of self-determination subsumes the right of return and the rejection of the occupation, as well as the settlements and the definition of Israel as a Jewish state. That is why the platform remains valid. The current "negative climate" is perhaps encouraging the adoption of initiatives that dilute some of these rights, which the Palestinian people continue to uphold, although it actually should renew our resolve to resist in every way possible and spur us on to embrace new goals rather than jeopardize the original ones.

Just as Nasserism and Leftism did earlier, today Islamism is on the rise and expanding; but that won't last forever. Every people, regardless of their origin, naturally want to protect their freedom, their culture, their heritage, and their accomplishments.

***Why doesn't the Left develop a joint platform or common vision that could buttress positive developments and channel popular anger in such a way as to upset the balance of forces in favor of those who support an alternative to Oslo? Absent such a move, doesn't the Left also qualify as one of the obstacles?***

The Left's inability to agree on a political vision is definitely an obstacle. On socioeconomic issues, the Palestinian Left is in agreement. Where we disagree is on the question of abandoning the Oslo model and how to work as one to end the contractual commitments that come with the accords. We have no unified political vision: some of us want two states, others want a national consensus platform, and yet others want nothing less than all of Palestine. The Palestinian Left's political disagreements are well-known and public.

***There is no disagreement, however, about core issues such as the return of refugees, a fully independent state with Jerusalem as its capital, an end to settlements and the occupation, and self-determination. So where are the disagreements?***

Does the Left agree on ending the Oslo Accords? I don't think so. Is the entire Left against Oslo? No. The majority is opposed to Oslo, but do we all agree on how we should jettison the agreement and go in a new direction? No. The Left doesn't have an alternative vision that could fuel a political battle. Even during the student elections, the Left was rarely united because it has not articulated a platform dedicated to serving all Palestinians and to combating all the social ills we spoke of earlier (nepotism, cronyism, tribal and clan favoritism, corruption, etc.). The Left has no comprehensive or distinctive ideological, political, social, and economic platform that is a match for the platform of Palestinian neoliberals or the religious Right. Sadly, some leftist factions have even allied themselves with the Palestinian Right.

It would be easy to use self-interest as a starting point. Nothing would be easier than to sit down and agree that the PFLP should have three seats on Nablus's municipal council. Here you are, three seats, just like that, and now you can stop all the work that you do in pursuit of justice and ending the occupation. The PA has brought PFLP activists to trial for participating in municipal elections, and student activists have been detained for two and three years simply for belonging to the organization's student wing. The power of the Left is no longer what it once was and it operates in the shadow of the religious Right's hegemony and dominance of all our resources; the religious

Right enjoys support not only from the worldwide Muslim Brotherhood movement, but also from opportunistic alliances with the secular Right, and other forces. Despite some gains in recent elections which reflected a measure of alignment with the people's wishes, it's been like banging our heads against a brick wall.

***The habba died down because the political factions, women's and youth associations, and labor unions that participated in the first intifada didn't get involved this time. It was an opportunity to build the leadership of a new popular movement that would spearhead an alternative to Oslo. Don't you think that progressive forces, and especially the opposition, missed that opportunity?***

They weren't up to the challenge that the *habba* afforded us. I agree with you that individual acts [of resistance] weren't going on in a vacuum. The primary participants emerged from the dire socioeconomic conditions created by the occupation. While many of the young men and women involved do belong to [political] factions, their actions have not been based on decisions made by those factions. They are the spontaneous expression of popular feeling that Oslo is a major obstacle, in the same way as the absence of a unified mass-based political leadership and the lack of international protection for Palestinians under occupation. The alternative to Oslo is to convene an international conference with full powers, by which I mean that it will implement international resolutions (that have the force of law), and extend protection to the Palestinian people. This is the political alternative to bilateral and direct negotiations with Israel. This may be considered a difficult option, but the other option has failed. An alternative political vision that enjoys widespread support—such as developing the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement and pursuing war criminals—involves complementary tactics in my view. But all these will remain moot if we do not abandon the accords, consider alternative economic options, adopt development plans that can support the people's continued steadfastness, and revive the ethos of cooperation and solidarity that Oslo destroyed.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The Nachshon Unit is the operational arm of the Israeli Prison Service in charge of security, transport, and escort of prisoners, as well as order enforcement in Israeli prisons. For more information, see <http://mops.gov.il/English/CorrectionsENG/IPSUnitsENG/Pages/Nachshon-Prisoner-Transportation.aspx>.
- 2 *Saq al-bambo*, by Kuwaiti-born novelist Saud Alsanousi, won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) in 2013. It is available in English translation as *The Bamboo Stalk* (Doha: Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing, 2015).
- 3 Muath al-Kasasbeh was a Jordanian air force pilot who was captured by ISIS in Syria and burned alive as his captors looked on. The video of the gruesome incident went viral, provoking outrage and heated debate throughout the Arab world. In the aftermath, Jordan put to death several ISIS militants held in Jordanian prisons.