

Freij: When you pass a beggar on the street, with a plate put out for nickels, how many of those who pass drop a nickel? Who respects a beggar? Why do I say a beggar? Because everybody knows that militarily we have no power, we have no land, we face a very strong, well-organized enemy which is subsidized and protected and supported by the United States government. On the other hand, we are to deal with a fractioned, disorganized Arab world, and we have to pay for the mistakes, or disunity, of the Arabs.

The Journal: Are you also thinking of disunity in the Palestinian movement when you say that?

Freij: It is very detrimental to the national cause, and it should be stopped. The legal authority of Arafat and the PLO should be upheld.

The Journal: There must be something that makes you feel hope, day by day.

Freij: If you have faith you have to have hope. If you have no faith you have no hope, and I have faith. If you are a leader, you must always give your people hope and that is what I do there.

Emile Touma

[Editor's note: Emile Touma, Palestinian member of the Israeli Communist Party (Rakah), and past Member of the Knesset, answered questions put to him by Journal Assistant Editors Lynne Barbee and Margaret Chiari in July 1983. Questions focused on the situation of the Arabs in Israel, their relationship to the Arabs of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, as well as to the Arab world in general, and the ways in which the Arabs of Israel had responded to the establishment of the state of Israel.]

The Journal: What is your present position regarding the secular democratic state in Palestine?

Touma: The Rakah position is that we don't call for a secular democratic

state; we call for the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. And we leave for historical developments to change things. We are increasingly converging with the leadership of the PLO. If you take the resolutions of the last session of the Palestine National Council [PNC], you can see how we converge. Moreover, you can see that our relations with the PLO are official now. There was a meeting in Prague in March this year, and there was also a meeting between Arafat and Meir Vilner, our General Secretary. We don't believe that there is a problem in our relations. They say that this is an interim solution, but not officially. We go further: we say that once the Palestinian problem is solved, it will not be the final solution of the national question. When conditions evolve, when social changes create new conditions, then it will be possible to think of all sorts of plans for a confederation, a federation. That is to say, we do not say that this is the end; there is no end in historical development.

If you take the Palestinian Arabs, as a national minority in Israel, in 1948 [after the establishment of the state of Israel] they were only 150,000; now they are 600,000. In 1948 they were demoralized, really demoralized after the shock of the catastrophe, the Palestinian catastrophe. But they have built up their identity, and they have been able to abort the attempt to spread national nihilism. They have generated a stratum of educated people, intellectuals, writers, poets. And now they are cohesive, and they are very active in Israel; what is more, they have become an important demographic force.

The Journal: How would you describe their present conditions?

Touma: Undoubtedly, they are living under very harsh conditions: national discrimination and racial discrimination are the policies of the government. In the past, this was sometimes screened behind developments. When Israel expropriated land, it said it was developing the country. Now, Israel doesn't even say that; it says it wants to Judaize the Galilee. We hear certain expression from time to time like the "Arab national minority is a cancer," "there is a danger that they will take the land that is designed for Jewish settlement," and things like this. In addition, Israel's approach to our local councils is extremely discriminatory. First of all, Israel obstructs the establishment of local councils. For example, we have 104 Arab villages—in fact towns and villages, because you can't call Umm al-Fahm, which had some 7,000 inhabitants in 1948 and now has over 21 or 22,000, a village. But we have only 56 local councils out of 104. And Israel is still obstructing the establishment of local councils and the transfer from village status to town status which is very important because towns

naturally get more services. You can also see discrimination in the distribution of the grants of the central government. In Israel, they say that there is a basket of service; this basket of service should be approximately 6,000 shekels (or \$120 I think) per person. Now that figure is current today in the Jewish sector, but in the Arab sector, only a quarter of this amount is granted.

The most dangerous thing today is that the process of expropriating Arab land is reaching the boundaries of the villages and towns. We feel that there is a policy of choking these villages and towns, of cutting them off from their surrounding land so that the people cannot survive. In this way it will be easier for them to eliminate the Arabs or to pressure them to leave. In fact, in 1980, the ex-Minister of Information, Aaron Yariv, lecturing in the Hebrew University, said there were Israeli government plan to expel up to 800,000 Arabs from Israel and from the West Bank, under certain conditions. In this way they will thin out the Arabs. The danger to Zionism has always been that the very high Arab birth rate will change the character of the state. In Israel today the Arabs are approximately 16 percent of the population.

The Journal: Among all the issues you have to fight on, which do you consider as priorities?

Touma: Land. Land, local councils, education on every level, to fight against racist, fascist laws. One of these laws is the one we call the "Tamir" fascist law although it is not really a law but an amendment to an old order to prevent terror.

The Journal: A British Mandate order?

Touma: No, the very interesting thing is that this order was issued by Ben-Gurion in order to fight Herut in the conflict. This order was amended—through the Knesset naturally. According to the amendment, whoever gets in touch with, or is identified in any way with, a terrorist organization is liable to six months imprisonment and a penalty of something like a quarter of a million lira or 25,000 shekels. This means that everyone who, for example, says that the PLO represents the Palestinian Arab people could be charged and tried. We decided to fight this, whatever the consequences.

The Journal: When did this amendment go through the Knesset?

Touma: In 1981, if my memory is correct. In general, they only implement it from time to time. For example, after the mass meetings and

demonstrations on March 30 this year—Land Day—they did arrest a number of young people because they had Palestinian flags.

The Journal: Is this the law by which the government could, if it wanted to, also prosecute Israeli Jews who have met with Arafat?

Touma: Yes. And to tell you the truth, we felt that if we submitted to this regulation, we would become an illegal party. That is why right from the very outset we denounced it and completely ignored it, and we did so on every level. I met a number of times with leaders of the PLO; Tewfik Toubi met Arafat in September [1982], and later we had many meetings, the last one being in Prague this March. There are various other laws which we believe are discriminatory, even though sometimes the wording is not such. For example, they changed the old Ottoman law of societies, because they wanted to modernize it. This reactionary law gives the minister of the interior the right, without having to give any reason, except in general terms, to determine that any grouping constitutes a threat to the security of the state. What it means is that they will not register a society which is established to do certain things. For example, a few people have submitted an application to establish what they have called the Institution for Popular Arts. They promote theater, painting, and various activities connected with the arts and they have been active for over a year. In spite of that, they are not registered, so at any time they can be closed. We have no other alternative. Similarly, the Committee for the Defense of Arab Land is not registered, although it has been active since it was first established in 1975 and called for the first Land Day on March 30, 1976. However, we do many things to force upon them a *fait accompli*.

The Journal: What is your understanding of why the government is holding back from prosecution in cases when it can prosecute? Is it a case of wanting to wait and see?

Touma: No, I think they have come to the conclusion that if they prosecute, they will generate opposition not only among the Arabs, but rather more among the Jews. We must recognize the fact that in Israel there is bourgeois democracy. It is true that this bourgeois democracy is divisible—they say democracy should be indivisible. That is why they banned the congress we were going to hold in December 1980. They do many things like that, you see. Sometimes, they don't allow us to hold a meeting or demonstration. Nevertheless, there is democracy, and you can move liberals and people like that against such actions.

People sometimes ask me about the peace movement. But this is *not* a

peace movement. I'm referring to the largest demonstration in which 450,000 people took part, after the Sabra and Shatila massacre; that was an anti-war demonstration.

The Journal: You mean, a protest against the Lebanon war?

Touma: Not only that. You see, if you try to divide the people who demonstrated into units, you will find that only a minority called for the immediate withdrawal of the Israelis and for negotiations, not with the Palestinians in general but with the PLO, and called for recognition of the right to self-determination. Nevertheless, we remain active, and our presence is important.

The Journal: When you say "us" and "our," are you talking as a Palestinian Arab, or as a Rakah member? It seems in different cases you mean different things.

Touma: I do, naturally. When I speak about the fight against national oppression and racial discrimination, I speak as an Arab communist. When I speak about the conflict in general, and Arab policy, I speak as a communist. Sometimes people tell me, be objective, don't be a communist, be objective. I say, how can I?

The Journal: Would you like to speak about Rakah? What is the Party's present representation in the Knesset?

Touma: In 1977 we established the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality. Naturally, the Party is the main force in it, and it is in fact the power behind it. So the representatives in the Knesset are representatives of the Democratic Front, or rather of the faction of the Democratic Front in the Knesset. We believe that the Front is important as an attraction for future forces, something which you can put everyone in. To our minds, this aspect has been very, very helpful because, when the war started in June 1982, we were able to form the Committee Against the War in Lebanon. This Committee had a very wide base, and on June 26 [1982] when it called for a demonstration, 20,000 people took part. It was remarkable, especially if you compare this to our situation in 1967 when we were completely isolated. This time we had allies from the beginning, and this coalition was able not only to organize demonstrations, but to become a catalyst for others to organize demonstrations. For example, the Peace Now movement was completely dormant, and when the war started they didn't do anything. They said we can't do anything while the war is going on. But after our demonstration, they called for a demonstration themselves.

The Journal: In the last elections, expectations were that the Front would have gained more seats, and there was apparently some serious evaluation later of how to build the Front. Where do you see the evaluation at the present time? Is there greater movement among the Front and will it change tactics?

Touma: The truth is that in both 1977 and 1981 we returned four Knesset members. But the question is posed differently in our country. They ask us, how is it that in 1977 you got 50 percent of the Arab vote in Israel, while in 1981, you only got 40 percent? I think our percentage among the Jews has not changed—it may be that in certain cases we got a few hundred extra—but the problem was, why didn't we get the same percentage of the Arab vote in 1981? Where did the 10 percent go? According to our analysis, this 10 percent went in the following way: part of them—and it's very hard to know the exact percentage—went to a communal list. Anyone can have a list provided he can get 750 signatures. In 1981, there were two communal lists, one Christian and one Jewish, and they were able to attract certain people who had supported the Front in 1977.

The second group of people who did not vote for us voted for the Labor Alignment, thinking that it would be able to halt the advance of fascism. The Alignment played on that hope among Jews and Arabs alike, and unfortunately certain Arabs were muddled and deceived and they voted for the Labor Alignment. Later on they discovered that the Alignment is, in fact, supporting every action undertaken against the Arabs in the Knesset.

The third group are those who were indifferent. Unfortunately, during the 1981 elections large groups of Arabs were quite indifferent; they did not take part in the elections and this, according to our evaluation, was because of the Camp David agreement. Somehow they were not only disappointed, but they felt there was no point in anything. You see, in 1977 there was no Camp David, no agreement, no initiative, while in 1981 Egypt had already signed a peace treaty with Israel, so the people had lost their impetus and the atmosphere was quite different. You have to remember that the 1977 elections took place after the Land Day of 1976 so the Palestinian Arabs in Israel had a feeling of confidence in their struggle, in their ability to change things and to fight against the policy of national oppression. But in 1981, things had changed.

In fact, I wonder how the situation is now. I have been out of the country for three weeks. I am not quite sure how the Arabs in Israel, who are influenced by events in the Arab world, will react to the latest development within the PLO [the split within Fateh]. But one thing is clear to me from

my past experience: the majority of the Arabs in Israel will side with Arafat and the official leadership of the PLO for two reasons. Firstly, because he has become a symbol, and because his political attitude converges with our political attitude, and secondly because our people are so prejudiced against Syria not only because of the latest developments, but beginning with their role in the Tal al-Zaatar massacre, their role in the war against Lebanon, and their actions today against the leadership of the PLO.

The Journal: How, as a communist, do you see the role of the Soviet Union, given that they have been supporting Syria?

Touma: This is true. This is, I think, the difficulty in relations with the Soviet Union. I don't know how they will act, but I think it is clear that they will not go into the differences; they will call for unity and for the solution of problems, and they will undoubtedly support Arafat. In fact, Arafat was expelled from Damascus a few hours after receiving a communication from Andropov, the leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The Journal: What does that tell you about Syria-Moscow relations?

Touma: In the Arab world, things are very complex. Sometimes I say that the Soviet Union is between the anvil and the hammer.

The Journal: You mentioned what you called the cohesiveness of the Palestinian Arabs of Israel; what is the relationship between the Palestinian Arabs of Israel, the West Bank Palestinian Arabs and the larger Arab world?

Touma: To tell the truth, one of our main objectives, and I speak as an Arab and as a communist, was to consolidate the Palestinian Arab identity. And I emphasize the Palestinian Arab identity because sometimes I feel unhappy about the emphasis on "Palestinian" as opposed to "Arab." There is such a tendency among certain Arab intellectuals, unfortunately. This was one of our main objectives and remains so. That is why in our material, in our documents, in our press, we emphasize that we are part and parcel of the Palestinian Arab people. This is on the level of national identity, of recognition of facts. This is very clear to us and you can go in Israel and ask any Arab about his identity and he will tell you, I am a Palestinian—an Israeli citizen but a Palestinian Arab, or he will tell you first a Palestinian Arab, and second an Israeli citizen.

The Journal: Do you define yourself as a Palestinian Israeli?

Touma: As an Arab, I define myself as an Arab. In Israel, the question only arises as to whether one is an Arab or a Jew. In fact, we never say

Palestinian Israeli or an Israeli Arab; we say an Arab of Israel, and sometimes we use the Arab people of Israel or the Arab masses of Israel, and we say the Arab "masses" in order not to isolate ourselves from the Palestinian Arab people in general. This is one point.

The second important point is that our relation with the people of the West Bank is naturally a brotherly one. We are very active in the solidarity movement in Israel proper, all Israel, with the Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and we take actions like that of organizing a strike on Land Day in 1982 in support of the struggle in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. But we consider that their political organizations are not identical with ours, and that we don't have a common political organization. Our conditions and our perspective are different. In December 1982, we issued a communiqué between the Palestinian Communist Party and the Communist Party of Israel in Moscow, and I had to answer one question: is this party a national party or a territorial party? By "national" the questioner meant a party which contains all the Palestinian people wherever they are, and by territorial, that it is active in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. I answered this question very clearly. A communist party is organized according to its perspective, its political perspective. You can see that the Party in Cyprus considers the 200,000 Cypriots in London or elsewhere as part of the Party. And the Palestinian Communist Party now considers those communists in Lebanon or elsewhere as part of them.

But we also said that we see the solution of the problem as the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel; we do not wish to leave Israel. This is our homeland, and we want to stay, and we will continue our struggle for equality. We have no idea at all of leaving the country. No one thinks of that. I think the Israelis would be very happy to get us out of there, but we don't want to leave. And that is why our relations are very clear to us and to the people of the West Bank. We have many things in common; we do many things in common, not so much political things, rather cultural things. We have many sorts of festivals together. For example, there is a theater group in the West Bank, in Jerusalem, which you may have heard of, al-Hakawati. They perform in Israel; they gave a performance in Tel Aviv in Arabic. The text was translated into Hebrew so that people were able to read and watch at the same time, or read it before the performance. It was a great success, even in Tel Aviv. And it had very good audiences in France, West Germany and England, and not only Arabs. This is how we interact: on the political level through solidarity, and on the cultural level through joint action.

The Journal: You made a reference to the indifference of a certain segment of the Arab voters in the election of 1981. Do you think that indifference still exists, or that it's being overcome?

Touma: If you had asked me before this development in the Beqaa, I would have said that there is no indifference because the war in Lebanon really aroused the anger of the Arabs in Israel very strongly, and I think they moved towards the Front more actively than in the past. About the present situation, I just don't know about their activity or their actions. In Israel, people are extremely politically aware; they are very conscious, very clear, and you can see the difference if you compare the Arabs in Israel and the Arabs in the West Bank. Now there is a leveling of development. The Arabs in Israel had to face a challenge, which wasn't only a political challenge, or only a social or economic challenge; it was really a challenge of identity. And it was this challenge which drove them to rise above the norm.