

## 4. PFLP and the September Attack

### *Interview with Ghassan Kannafani*

*The Marxist parties view the future evolution of the Palestinian struggle rather differently from Fateh. Ghassan Kannafani, a novelist and founding editor of the PFLP weekly al-Hadaf, sets out the vision of the Popular Front five months after Black September. In this interview with the New Left Review, published in May-June 1971, Kannafani answers criticisms of the hijackings, highlights the dilemmas faced by the resistance in the summer of 1970, and analyzes the present stage of the Palestinian revolution.*

NLR: The Popular Front is best known in the non-Arab world for its hijackings in September 1970. A lot of criticisms of the hijackings have been made. Some of these are bourgeois criticisms. But there are two others which I would like to pose here. The first criticism has been made both by people within the Palestinian resistance, such as the Central Committee spokesman Kamel Radouan, and by people outside: it is that the hijackings gave Hussein an excuse to attack the resistance at a time when he would not otherwise have done so. The second criticism is made mainly by people outside the resistance movement. This is that the hijackings gave an illusory sense of power and confidence to the Pales-

tinian masses which was far in advance of their real organizational and military strength. The hijackings were thereby a substitute for organizing the masses, and were a theatrical event that encouraged fantasy. This is not to deny that the hijackings had the positive effect of giving you a world audience on television to whom you could explain the purpose of the Palestinian resistance. This point is not in question. But do you now defend the hijackings?

*Kannafani:* First of all, I appreciate the fact that you reject bourgeois moralism and obedience to international law. These have been the cause of our tragedy. Now, I would like to answer your questions. I want to talk in general about this kind of operation. I have always said that we don't hijack planes because we love Boeing 707s. We do it for specific reasons, at a specific time and against a specific enemy. It would be ridiculous to hijack planes at the present moment and land them in Cairo, for example, or in Jordan. It would have no meaning now. But you have to analyze the political situation in which we carried out these operations, and the aims we wanted to achieve. Let us recall the situation. On July 23 Nasser accepted the Rogers plan, and a week later the Jordanian government did so too. Once again the Palestinians were put on the shelf. If you read the Arab and international press between July 23 and September 6, 1970, you will see that the Palestinian people were again being treated exactly as they were between 1948 and 1967. The Arab papers started writing about how "heroic" the Palestinians are, but also how "paralyzed" they were, and how there was no hope for these "brave heroes." The morale of our people in Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza was extremely low. On top of that a delegation from the leadership of the Palestinian resistance movement, the PLO Central Committee, went to Cairo to negotiate with Nasser and his government; they spent days and days discussing whether they would allow us to restart broadcasts from Egypt again, after the closing

down of our radio in mid-August. The delegation then complained to the Arab League and tried to get them to discuss the question. Before July 23 the Palestinian resistance was pictured in the Arab press as the great hope of the Palestinian people; at the same time all Arabs consider the Arab League to represent the *lowest* form of politics, the most paralyzed political body, in the Arab world. Now we had the highest form of politics approaching the "dirty shelter" of the Arab League. This showed that the revolution was threatened with liquidation, whether Hussein smashed it physically or not. Everyone—including those who criticized the PFLP operation—was convinced that the destruction of the resistance was an essential part of the Rogers plan.

*NLR:* You agree that Nasser and the Egyptian regime supported this?

*Kannafani:* The Egyptian regime was one step removed from direct participation in this liquidation, since it had no direct contact with the Palestinians; it was in a safer position. The only way the Egyptian regime could help Hussein was by keeping silent: and that it did, to the extent that it could resist the pressure of the Arab masses. For the first three days of the fighting in September the Egyptian government, and all the other Arab governments, were silent, because they thought that the resistance movement could not survive for more than three days. Then they were forced to move, because the people in the streets of Egypt, Syria and Lebanon were angry at the massacre; but the first five thousand Palestinian victims fell in Amman in silence, and no one complained.

The Rogers plan presupposed the liquidation of our movement, and this was now approaching in an atmosphere of Palestinian submissiveness. Therefore, something had to be done: first of all, to tell the world that we were not going to be put on the shelf for the second time, and secondly to tell the world that the days when the USA and reactionary

Arabs could dictate to our people were over. Moreover, there was the question of the morale, the fighting ability, of our own people. We could not let things remain like that when a massacre was on the way, even if we had sat down quietly on the steps of His Majesty's palace, and kissed his hand.

*NLR:* So you don't accept the notion that Hussein himself was unsure of what to do, but that the army forced him to move.

*Kannafani:* Absolutely not. This is complete rubbish. It is true that there are still parts of the resistance movement who think it is possible to "neutralize" the Jordanian regime; but this is nonsense. As for the argument that the hijackings provoked and accelerated Hussein's attack, the short answer to this is that the Jordanian regime had already stopped guerrilla actions south of the Dead Sea, blocked forces moving towards Eliat, and prevented our units attacking the Naharin dam in the north of the West Bank. At the same time the Jordanian army put mines at most of the points where guerrillas crossed the Jordan river, and forced the guerrillas to go through certain specific corridors; these corridors were ambushes. They were sending us to be killed anyway. This was all happening *before* the September massacre; it was a massacre in another form.

Thus the real clash was taking place all the time: they were forbidding us to practice our *raison d'être*. They were preventing us making raids against Israel, and suppressing our political activities in the cities. So our own actions, including the planes, were not provocations; they were the movement of a revolution trying to escape from a circle in which it was trapped.

*NLR:* How was your action going to do that?

*Kannafani:* All our activities were an attempt to get out of our situation. For example, we held demonstrations in Amman shouting "Down with Nasser" and "Down with

Egypt"; perhaps they were a mistake, but they were one of the many ways in which we tried to break out of the circle.

*NLR:* It was obvious that Hussein was going to attack the resistance once he had accepted the Rogers plan. You then had a choice: either you waited for him to attack you, or you could attack him first. Yet in either case, it seems that you never intended to overthrow Hussein, and never imagined that you could. Wasn't your aim essentially to preserve the organizational position of the resistance, and wasn't this the idea behind the hijackings?

*Kannafani:* You musn't isolate the hijackings from the total political context. For example, Fateh sent rocket-launchers to Ghor-Safi below the Dead Sea, and blew up the potassium factories. We were all trying to break out, to give the Palestinian masses more hope, and to say that the battle was going on. We wanted to put pressure on the Jordanian government to postpone its attack on us. Our relationship with the Jordanian government is not based on common convictions, only on pressure; we have no common ground with them. It was a question of balance of power. All our actions, from the great error of going to the Arab League, to the hijackings themselves (which were the highest form of pressure), were forms of pressure. Some of them were miscalculated negatively, and some positively. On the other hand, there certainly were individuals and organizations within the resistance who did believe there was a possibility of overthrowing the king. They were in error.

*NLR:* You didn't even then believe that you could overthrow the king, by waiting for him to attack you? It was thought that the people would be united by the initial adoption of a defensive position.

*Kannafani:* That was our dilemma, and we were in crisis. The resistance, and all the Arab military governments, were in a crisis, which was the price of the Rogers plan. If we had decided to fight Hussein, we should have chosen the time and

the place. But as Hussein attacked us, we had no choice; we had to fight at a time and place of his choosing.

Thus the hijackings were part of an extremely dangerous mosaic that made up the Arab and Palestinian map from July 1970 until now. There were a lot of other factors too. We *were* in a corner, and we had two possible ways of getting out. Either we could defend ourselves till victory, against Hussein, or we could "lose the battle by winning it" if we attacked Hussein. But the outcome was not decided only by us, it was also decided by the other side; they had more plans than we did. You should remember that Hussein had to prove to the Americans that they did not need to create a Palestinian state. The Americans were wondering whether to bring in a Suharto-type officer to replace King Hussein with a coup in Amman, which would usher in a Palestinian state there. The Israelis were also discussing this. Hussein wanted to win back his prestige, and this he did; Nixon has now changed his mind, and the Americans once again believe that Hussein is capable of handling the situation.

As for the hijackings, their psychological importance was much greater than their military importance, at this stage of the revolution. Now, if we had been at the final stage of the revolution, or even at the advanced first stages of the revolution and we had hijacked planes, I would have been the first to denounce it. But in the preparatory phase of the revolution, military operations have their psychological importance.

*NLR:* You still think you were correct to carry out the hijackings therefore?

*Kannafani:* I think that, generally speaking, these operations were correct. Maybe we made some tactical mistakes. Perhaps we should have made the whole Palestinian resistance share much more in responsibility for them, and then if they had decided two hours later to release the planes, perhaps we should have released them. Maybe we should not have been

so stubborn. But you can't imagine what this all meant to the people at that time. You raised the question of whether the hijackings created an atmosphere among the Palestinian masses which the resistance movement was unable to absorb and organize. This may have been the case. But even if it is true, we fought for twelve days in September, and we obliged the Jordanian army to fight the longest war in its history because of what we had done.

*NLR:* In September, many commentators believed that the Palestinian resistance could only win, either if the Jordanian army itself split and a section of it went over to the resistance, or if an outside Arab regime—Syria or Iraq—intervened and helped. Did you expect either of these eventualities to occur?

*Kannafani:* I don't think either of these would have given the resistance a victory. In a guerrilla war conditions are different, and what is important is the *aim* of a particular action. The aim of the Jordanian regime was to finish the resistance completely. But the aim of the Palestinian resistance was not to overthrow the Jordanian regime, but merely to put pressure on it. Neither of these two aims succeeded, so nobody really won. Of course, to some extent, we had to surrender certain points and go underground. But the battle is still going on; the retreat to underground activity or to the mountains is only a tactical aspect of regulating the balance of power.

*NLR:* You don't deny that both the possibility of operations against Israel from Jordan and the politico-military room for maneuver of the resistance within Jordan have been massively reduced by the September events? Isn't the Hashemite monarchy continuing to try to disarm the militia in Amman and to win direct control of your refugee camps, and other strong positions?

*Kannafani:* I know. I don't deny that the Jordanian regime has won some ground, and forced us to retreat. But I

would like to point out two things, to put the September events in their context. The Jordanian regime had nearly succeeded in preventing us from making any raids against Israel *before* September; this was not a result of September, but one of the factors that led to September. We had to tell our people we were doing something; we couldn't sit in Amman and do nothing. Now we are in the mountains, in a preparatory stage, and the revolution has taken a more realistic form than it did when people thought it was at a very advanced stage. I am against saying that we are defeated, because in the past, our real strength was exaggerated and we now have a size proportionate to our strength. We never had room for maneuvering in front of our own people and world public opinion, and some leaders had no such room even in front of their own militants. It will take a long time to restore the previous balance of power with the Jordanian government and we will continue to retreat until we have a correct understanding of our own strength. There are plenty of examples in history of people with rifles living in the mountains, ambushing a truck and shooting the odd soldier, and achieving nothing else. This is our problem, and there is a debate going on within the resistance about it; indeed the PFLP is being accused of not wanting to surrender the militia's arms. In fact, I don't believe that a Fateh fighter would surrender his arms.

*NLR:* To what extent has the Popular Front changed its strategy since September? George Habash was reported in January to be saying that the time had come to overthrow the Hashemite monarchy. Is this true?

*Kannafani:* The Popular Front has always insisted that we have four equal enemies: Israel, world Zionism, world imperialism led by the United States, and Arab reaction. The overthrow of these reactionary Arab regimes is part of our strategy, part of liberating Palestine. The overthrow of the Jordanian regime must be a part of the program for a

Palestinian FLN. We have to do it, but not necessarily tomorrow. We have always insisted on the need to do this, but it must form part of a general strategic line.

*NLR:* It is now five months since the events of September. What, in your opinion, have been the effects on the Palestinian people?

*Kannafani:* It is normal for some to leave during periods of hard fighting. Advanced periods of struggle are attractive to people, who join because there is no price for joining the revolution. They stay at home, they continue going to their jobs; if someone is studying at Damascus University, for example, he can take a year off and work with the resistance. On the other hand, shocks like September crystallize the strength of the revolution, because they have forced it into the mountains. There are now commandos living in the Ajloun forests of north Jordan; they are living in caves, with limited water and food, and little ammunition. In this situation, we can't expect that the thousands who went around Amman in khaki carrying their Klashnikovs will live this kind of life. In the cities, organization and recruitment are different. We used to have a known office, and we could recruit and train people openly in the camps. Now we have a different relationship with the masses: we are not wearing khaki and walking down the street, and we are not making speeches in the camps. We have to operate in a different way, and that is exactly where a *party* is necessary. Although it is difficult in the mountains, the situation is even more difficult in the cities. A lot of people had a bourgeois sense of haste, but we are now in a stage of retreat. Militarily and politically, this is not a mistake, and it is not dangerous. But it does pose psychological problems, because of the need to keep the people with us. Some elements on the West Bank are now calling for a Palestinian state. We knew that they were discussing this plan in private among each other for three years after the June war and that they were in contact with

the Israelis, with the Arab reactionaries and with the imperialists. It is only since the resistance movement was forced backwards that they have dared to raise this project openly. At the same time, the events in September made the masses on the West Bank aware of what it would mean to have Hussein back again, and the resulting reaction of a people under occupation and without a proper organization is to say: "Anything, except Hussein again." For the West Bank a Palestinian state would be better than having King Hussein's regime again. This is a very temporary reaction, resulting from a psychological shock.

Gaza is another story altogether. The resistance was on the defensive on the West Bank and on the East Bank, but it escalated suddenly in Gaza in a remarkable way. The Popular Front has the strongest influence in Gaza, so we acted. Let me mention one specific case, that of Youssef el-Khatib Abu Dhumman. He was the head of Popular Front military operation in Gaza, and he was killed at the beginning of December. For six days there were continuous strikes and mass demonstrations in Gaza; so everyone knew that men were still fighting. This raised the level of action in Gaza, although it made our casualties higher than they had ever been before.

*NLR*: What has created the greater militancy in Gaza?

*Kannafani*: The population of Gaza is 360,000; the majority are Palestinian refugees. In Gaza people are familiar with arms. They were trained by the PLA under the Egyptian administration, unlike the West Bank. Another factor is that the Arab Nationalist Movement was suppressed in Gaza by the Egyptians, but never to the extent that it was in the West Bank. When Gaza was occupied the ANM had its cells there; whereas Hussein handed the West Bank to the Israelis in a "clean" state, as he has put it himself—there was not a single ANM cell there. So we had the minimum base to start with in Gaza. There is also a psychological factor: Gaza is surrounded

on the west by the sea, on the south by Sinai, on the east by the Negev, and on the north by the Israeli state. The Palestinians there are psychologically besieged, and used to difficulty. On the West Bank contacts were much easier in the first months of occupation; it was simpler to send money, men and weapons into the area. The people on the West Bank got used to easier methods, and they weren't able to resist Israeli counter-measures. In Gaza they were tougher and more professional. Another factor was that the Jordanian regime in Amman kept on paying the salaries of teachers, detectives, state employees and the like; this is the only way a reactionary regime can keep the loyalty of these people. The Israelis also paid salaries to these people. It is not true that most of them were *against* the resistance, but they were certainly not in a hurry; in the Gaza strip people were under greater pressure.

I would now like to make some more general comments. In every revolution there is an initial wave of enthusiasm which peters out after a time, because it is not deeply rooted. I think that our first wave reached its peak at Karamah, in March 1968; after that, we started to decline, because we were returning to our real proportions. In such periods of relapse, there are always divisions, exaggerations, romanticizations, tendencies to individualism and to turning the revolution into a myth and so on. These are the illnesses of the underdeveloped world, and they express themselves in a period when one is not engaged in real revolutionary work, but one is nevertheless regarded as making a revolution. If the revolution doesn't develop out of this, if it doesn't do something like Mao's long march, or acquire more force from outside through the liberation of an Arab state, then defeats will have a dangerous effect on the morale of the masses. The period of decline did not begin in September, it began after Karamah.

*NLR*: Can we now come to the question of Israel itself?

Do you think there is such a thing as an Israeli nation? The Matzpen group and others inside Israel have argued that there may not originally have been a Jewish nation, but the Jewish immigrants who have come to Palestine have established there a new community which can be called the Israeli nation.

*Kannafani:* That is the Maxime Rodinson solution. It is a fantastic intellectual compromise; it means that any group of colonialists who occupy an area and stay there for a while can justify their existence by saying they are developing into a nation.

*NLR:* So you don't think the Israelis are a nation?

*Kannafani:* No, I don't. It is a colonialist situation. What you have is a group of people, brought for several reasons, justified and unjustified, to a particular area of the world. Together, they all participate in a colonialist situation, while between them there are also relations of exploitation. I agree that Israeli workers are exploited. But this is not the first time this has happened. The Arabs in Spain were in the same position. There were classes among the Arabs in Spain, but the main contradiction was between the Arabs in Spain as a whole and the Spanish people.

*NLR:* So you do see contradictions within the Israeli population which can divide them in the future, and provide the Palestinian resistance with allies within Israeli society?

*Kannafani:* Of course. But this will not happen easily. First of all, we must escalate the revolution to the stage where it poses an alternative to them, because up to now it has not been so. It is nonsense to start talking about a "Democratic Palestine" at this stage; theoretically speaking it establishes a good basis for future debates, but this debate can only occur when the Palestinian resistance is a realistic alternative.

*NLR:* You mean it must be able to provide a practical alternative for the Israeli proletariat?

*Kannafani:* Yes. But at the moment it is very difficult to get the Israeli working class to listen to the voice of the Palestinian resistance, and there are several obstacles to this. These include the Israeli ruling class and the Arab ruling classes. The Arab ruling classes do not present either Israelis or Arabs with a prospect of democracy. One might well ask: where is there a democracy in the Arab world? The Israeli ruling class is obviously an obstacle as well. But there is a third obstacle, which is the real, if small, benefit that the Israeli proletariat derives from its colonialist status within Israel. For not only is the situation of Israeli workers a colonialist one, but they gain from the fact that Israel as a whole has been recruited to play a specific role in alliance with imperialism. Two kinds of movement are required to break down these barriers, in order for there to be future contact between an anti-Zionist Israeli proletariat and the Arab resistance movement. These will be the resistance movement on the one hand and an opposition movement within Israel itself; but there is no real sign of such a convergence yet, since, although Matzpen exists, what would be necessary is a mass proletarian movement.

*Interviewer: Fred Halliday*