

George Habash's contribution to the Palestinian Struggle

A look at the late PFLP Founder

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Palestinian women in Nablus demonstrate to remember the life of George Habash, the founder of the PFLP, 27 January 2008. (Rami Swidan/[MaanImages](#))

I lived more than half of my life in the US and I never felt the alienation that I felt on the day I read George Habash, the Palestinian revolutionary who passed away last week, labeled as a “terrorism tactician” in a front page obituary in *The New York Times*. What do you do when they want to convince you that a kind and gentle man you met and respected as a person is a terrorist when you know otherwise? Do you quibble with their definitions to no avail? Do you go back and see how they wrote glowing obituaries for Zionist militia leader and later Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, a man whose record of killing civilians is as horrific and grotesque as that of Osama Bin Laden, former Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin, Fatah Revolutionary Council founder Abu Nidal or Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet?

But they can't invent facts, and they can't distort the narrative of Palestinian history. Many of my generation and older knew and respected George Habash. We did not worship him or declare him infallible. We respected that on the personal level he was incorruptible. Here was a man who refused more than the \$300 monthly pension he was receiving in Amman, Jordan. Once, a group of wealthy Palestinians schemed to try to pay him in his later years because they did not want the symbol of the Palestinian — the Arab — revolution to die in poverty. He would not budge, not even to accept funds to hire a research assistant to help with his memoirs.

George Habash was the antithesis of Yasser Arafat: he was honest, while Arafat was dishonest; consistent when Arafat was inconsistent; principled, while Arafat was shifty; transparent, while Arafat was deceptive; sincere, while Arafat was fake; dignified while Arafat was clownish; modest, while Arafat was arrogant; tolerant of dissent, while Arafat was autocratic, and on and on.

George Habash embodied an era that extended from the Nakba, or mass expulsions of Palestinians from their homeland in 1948, until the beginning of the Lebanese civil war in 1976, when the decline of the Left, and the launching of Sadatism began. Up until that time, when a deep ideological transformation took place in the Arab world, Habash was a major actor on the Arab political stage. He was feared by Arab regimes, and respected and loved in the refugee camps. I don't believe I have ever seen the ordinary people of the camps

react to a person as they reacted to Habash. Their love for him was genuine because they felt that he was genuine.

If there is a world revolutionary symbol for the second half of the 20th century, it should be George Habash. He may not be widely known in 2008, but anybody who read a newspaper prior to the rise of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, when Islamism eclipsed the Arab Left, would know him. Habash is one of the main makers of Arab contemporary history and one of the handful of names who changed the course of the Palestinian political struggle.

It is often said that Habash's "Christianity" — as if he was religious — was the only reason why he was not the leader of the Palestinian national movement, instead of Arafat. I never agreed with the view. Habash's sincerity, honesty and integrity were the reason why he did not lead the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), while Arafat's "skills" kept him in power for all those decades. For those who were privileged to have met Habash, his sincerity and honesty came through, as did his natural modesty, and clear sense of himself. Shafiq al-Hout wrote in *As-Safir* that Habash was a distinctive kind of revolutionary, but then added that he was how a revolutionary should be.

George Habash was shaped by the Nakba. He was born in al-Lydd, Palestine, and his middle class family, like thousands of other families, were violently evicted from their homes by Zionist militias led by Yitzhak Rabin.

Habash was at that time a student at the American University of Beirut (AUB), where he had already been inspired by the Arab nationalist ideas in the student club al-'Urwah al-Wuthqah. He did not wait long to initiate action in revenge after the founding of Israel (we should refer to it as "the destruction of Palestine," as Zionist propaganda in the West has succeeded in portraying Palestinian national aspirations as an act of "destruction") — and revenge was his motive early on. He joined ranks with an Egyptian activist to engage in small-scale bombings in Lebanon and Syria. Some of the attacks were actually terrorist: as when a synagogue was bombed. The early Habash was anti-Jewish, but that would change with time. But this small group, Kata'ib al-Fida' al-'Arabi, was easy for the authorities to dismantle.

Habash subsequently realized that mass movement and collective action was required. He joined forces with his fellow AUB medical student, the brilliant tactician Wadi' Haddad, who wanted action and was impatient with theorization and ideological squabbles that occupied hours of meetings. (Haddad's slogan, "Going after the enemy, everywhere" became the motto for his organization when he was forced to split off from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) in 1971.)

Habash and Haddad joined with other students (who were influenced by the writings and ideas of AUB history professor Constantine Zurayq) to form the Movement of Arab Nationalists. This movement was one of the early political and organizational echoes of the occupation of Palestine in 1948 and left a mark on Arab contemporary politics, inspiring and initiating political organizations throughout the Arab world.

After their graduation from AUB, Habash and Haddad established a clinic for poor refugees in Jordan. There they contributed to the Arab nationalist stirrings that forced King Hussein to oust Glubb Pasha, the British officer who commanded the army, in 1956.

Habash and his comrades also tried to reunite with the Ba'th but came away with the

impression that the liberation of Palestine and “armed struggle” were not a priority for the Ba’th or for its founder Michel ‘Aflaq.

Any evaluation of Habash’s career should also take into consideration the mistakes, errors and shortcomings of the experience — some of which can only be seen in hindsight. The Movement of Arab Nationalists was late in realizing the desire of Palestinians for an armed response to the Zionist occupation and threat. It also was not clear in formulating a political explanation of “liberation.” “Revenge” was one of the mottos of the movement, but that scarcely amounted to a political program.

The Movement should also be criticized for developing into an arm of the Egyptian regime; Habash met Egyptian president and symbol of Arab nationalism Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1964, and the two men clearly hit it off. In his later years, Habash would cry whenever Nasser’s name would be mentioned. Habash put a high premium on an Arab sense of dignity, which he felt Nasser represented in his dealings with the West — in contrast to the behavior of Sadat and other Arab rulers. One wonders what Habash must have thought when he saw [Arab oil rulers literally dancing with US President George W. Bush](#).

Even in the wake of the Arab defeat in the 1967 War, Habash did not want to break with Nasser despite rising political disillusionment and even anger among the refugees. Habash’s only serious disagreement with Nasser was when the latter accepted the 1969 Rogers Plan, a US political framework for ending the Arab-Israeli conflict.

After the war, Habash founded the PFLP which quickly become the second most important Palestinian organization after Fatah, and held that place until the rise of Hamas and the Islamization of Palestinian and Arab politics in the 1980s. The Movement of Arab Nationalists had effectively decided to transform into Marxist-Leninist organizations and adopted the belief that guerrilla warfare against Zionism would achieve the final liberation of Palestine. Unlike Fatah, the PFLP stressed political indoctrination and carefully screened recruits. Young Arabs from different countries joined the struggle, receiving training in camps in Jordan, and later in Lebanon — this was well before the emergence of Dubai as the object of aspiration of Arab youths. Palestine was the destination then.

The PFLP quickly suffered from schisms and defections; the first was by Ahmad Jibril, a recruit of Syrian intelligence, who formed his own splinter group, the PFLP-General Command in 1968 when Habash was in a Syrian jail. The following year, Palestinian politician Nayif Hawatmeh, who was mystified by Habash’s enormous charisma especially as a public speaker, split off and formed the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). Other smaller defections followed, and the DFLP would not have long survived if it was not for the support and funding from Arafat who encouraged, funded, and armed many defections in Palestinian organizations to keep himself in control.

The PFLP argued that the liberation of Palestine would be impossible without the liberation of Arab countries from the regimes imposed by the West and Israel. Looking to Vietnam, Habash called for Arab “Hanoi,” and stated that the liberation of Palestine passed through every Arab capital. “Armed struggle” was the major path to liberation.

In its early phase, the PFLP showed the promise of charting an independent leftist path, not loyal to the USSR and even flirted with Maoism. But by 1973, it had joined the ranks of Arab communist organizations that pledged allegiance to the Soviet Union.

The PFLP was active in Jordan, and played a major role in Black September — the series of massacres committed by the Jordanian regime in 1970 (with the support of the United States and Israel) against the Palestinians and their fighters. The PFLP like other organizations targeted during Black September relocated to Lebanon and helped agitate the Lebanese political situation.

Earlier in 1970, Habash and the PFLP became famous worldwide when the group orchestrated the hijacking of several airliners to Jordan, releasing all passengers and crew before the planes were destroyed. I once met a German flight attendant who told me that she became a supporter of the Palestinian cause after she heard Habash speak in English to a group of hostages in the Intercontinental Hotel in Amman — and she was one of the hostages. Habash would be a bit defensive about the hijackings in later years; he would hate to be associated with the terrorism of Bin Laden or Abu Nidal. He would argue that the practice was limited to a specific reason (highlighting the plight of the Palestinians when former Israeli prime minister Golda Meir insisted that the Palestinian people did not exist) and for a limited duration. But no fair evaluation should, for better or worse, ignore or gloss over that experience.

Habash also had to deal with Wadi' Haddad who insisted on continuing with “international operations” despite directives to restrict armed actions to within Palestine. As a result of several actions seen as reckless, Haddad’s membership of the PFLP was “frozen.”

Haddad’s standards for action against Israel and its allies were different from Habash’s. Habash believed that high ethical and political standards should inspire any political and military action. This is not to say that his organization did not commit some acts that violated those standards, but Habash tried not always successfully to reign in the adventurist tendencies of his friend and comrade. For several years, Haddad continued to carry out operations using the name “International Operations of the PFLP” without the blessing of the organization until he was finally expelled.

George Habash was hit hard by the Mossad’s assassination of his PFLP comrade the writer Ghassan Kanafani in 1972, and he suffered a debilitating stroke. Habash himself survived several Israeli assassination attempts; in one, Israel hijacked a plane that it thought carried Habash (he had switched planes only minutes before the flight).

In 1974, Habash froze the PFLP’s membership in the PLO when he realized that Arafat was working for the two-state solution. Habash was instrumental in forming the Rejectionist Front which advocated a non-compromising stance on the liberation of “every millimeter of Palestine,” as Habash was fond of saying in his public speeches. But here was one of Habash’s major mistakes: the front included many organizations that were loyal to or creatures of Arab governments. This gave the Iraqi, Syrian and Libyan regimes tremendous influence over the organizations, including the PFLP.

Generous financial subsidies were too hard to resist, and the corruption of the revolution, which had hit Fatah much earlier through Saudi and Gulf funding, also hit the PFLP, and compromised its political independence. The Lebanese base of operations, especially after the eruption of the Civil War in 1975, also compromised the revolution. It quickly became too comfortable a base and the PFLP, like other Palestinian and Lebanese organizations, did not want a radical shift of power on the battlefield. (But the major responsibility for that lies with Arafat and the Syrian regime who did not want to create a radical political order that could trigger a confrontation with Israel.) The PFLP, at least, pursued a policy of supporting

the Lebanese National Movement, while Arafat and his associates dragged their feet.

The Rejectionist Front was disbanded in 1977 when Syria and Iraq briefly reconciled following Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's trip to Jerusalem. This period marked the beginning of the decline of the Left and the rise of the Islamic Revolution. Habash began a gradual withdrawal from politics. He had tried for years to leave but his comrades would not let him. They knew that his symbolic presence was too valuable for the PFLP, and feared it would collapse without him. They were right, of course. One can't speak of the PFLP since 2000, when Habash's voluntarily resigned from the leadership.

I last saw Habash a few years ago in Damascus, after his retirement. It was very sad for me because I had to compare the last image with the first image when I first met him as a high school student in 1977. His revolutionary impulse and his passions had not waned, but the empty office spoke volumes. The PFLP was almost dead, and Habash was politically irrelevant. I shared with him some of my criticisms of the Popular Front's long experience, and typically, he was open-minded and very democratic. I was bothered that he seemed too resigned to the rise of the Islamists (Hamas and Hizballah). In my judgment he was too uncritically supportive of both. "We have tried, so let them now try," he would say, "It is their turn." I was hoping to hear words regarding the revival of the Left but I did not.

George Habash lived his life for Palestine — every minute of it. He represented a model of revolutionary struggle that is exemplary in its dedication and asceticism, no matter what one thinks of the PFLP or its long political and military experience. One should not hesitate from rendering a harsh judgment against the PFLP; ultimately it failed politically and militarily. And any evaluation of Palestinian political violence must be made in the context of Zionist mass violence that for decades had set out to destroy Palestinian society and resistance and replace it with its own exclusivist vision. But whatever that judgment it should not detract from an appreciation of the profound influence of the PFLP's founder who helped shape the politics and worldview of a generation. The present political scene is devoid of any leaders of such character.

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