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AHMED QURIE ('ABU ALA')

BEYOND OSLO

THE STRUGGLE FOR PALESTINE

INSIDE THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS
FROM RABIN'S DEATH TO CAMP DAVID

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I dedicate this book to the soul of my late Brother, President Yasser Arafat, whose presence I sorely missed as I was writing. I feel keenly the lack of the Martyr Brother and Leader, and I am acutely conscious of his absence at a delicate time in the history of Palestine.

Every day, I remember his wisdom and determination in times of calamity. My memory of him encourages me to strive to the best of my ability to follow in his footsteps. I shall never forget the way he patiently confronted injustice, foolish talk, and rivalry. I am never parted from my recollection of his simple way of speaking, his open heartedness, his broad vision, his humanity, modesty, and vigour, as well as his unrivalled ability to know people, his insight into political situations, and his gift for choosing the right path.

It is scarcely possible to say enough about the image of this great Palestinian who has been treated unfairly and disgracefully slandered by his enemies, in his lifetime and after his death. His departure from among us has left the entire Palestinian nation bereft. He was a true man of peace, who led his people from desperate exile to the threshold of independence. He has become a symbol of Palestine in the minds of millions of his people. Therefore, I have found none other than my Brother and Leader Abu Ammar to whom I would offer this book, dedicating it to his pure soul and immortal memory.

I accompanied my late Brother Yasser Arafat for some four decades of our lives and forty years of the Palestinian struggle. I trust that the book will serve as a fulfilment, however modest, of my duty to acknowledge all that I owe him. I also hope that its publication will help assuage the feeling, now he is no longer with us, of irreparable personal loss.

Ahmed Qurie
(Abu Ala)

CHAPTER ONE

STARTING AFRESH

The prospect of the Palestinian–Israeli negotiations was from the outset daunting for the Palestinian side. When the Oslo talks began, we were unprepared and inexperienced. Nevertheless, from our achievement there we learned the confidence and skills we needed for what was to come. Our success at Oslo came as a surprise both to the United States administration and to some of our Arab brethren. Those who had gleaned information about the Oslo channel while it was under way had seen it as a mere intellectual exercise. They believed it was no more than a talking shop, indulged in by representatives of the Israeli leadership and officials of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), who had been for years sequestered in Tunisia and were divorced from the realities of the situation on the ground in the Palestinian territories. However, not only was Oslo a success, it also proved to be only the initial stage of a lengthy and ongoing process. With the Oslo talks completed, together with the process of mutual recognition and the economic arrangements that went with it, we embarked at once on a new round of negotiations to conclude the Gaza–Jericho agreement. No sooner was this done than we initiated the negotiations that led to the signing of the Interim Agreement (Oslo 2), which took nearly another whole year to finalise. On 28 September 1995, these efforts culminated in a ceremony at the White House, like that held for the original Oslo Agreement nearly two years before.

Then we immediately launched ourselves into further talks to work out the details of the Interim Agreement, already 460 pages long even before we began the painstaking process of adding the appendices, tables, illustrations and schedules, all of which we discussed line by line. This was undertaken under the umbrella of the American Letter of Guarantee, signed by the then American Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, and sent to both parties on behalf of the US administration. The letter expressed

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the commitment of the United States to be the guarantor of all provisions and commitments that might be mutually agreed between the two parties. Because of the intricacy of the agreement's details, Warren Christopher described it at the time as the most complicated document in the history of international diplomacy. For example, it covered security issues not only at the national level but also down to the level of arrangements for individual towns, villages, and settlements. It also defined the differing powers of the Palestinian administration over the three differently administered zones of the Palestinian territories, or Zones A, B and C as they had been called. In the eyes of those outside the process, its complexities seemed to be such that they placed the final goal virtually out of reach. On the other hand, those of us directly involved in the negotiation never ceased to believe we would in the end arrive at our goal.

A death unheralded

Soon, however, events were to take an unexpected turn. The ironies of history are unfathomable. On 9 November 1995, I found myself flying to Tel Aviv in an Israeli military helicopter in the company of my brethren Abu Ammar and Abu Mazen (Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas), on a secret mission that was revealed to the public only after it was completed. Our purpose was to offer our condolences to the family of the deceased Israeli former Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin. On Saturday, 4 November, a youthful Jewish extremist had murdered Rabin with three shots fired at close quarters after a peace rally at Tel Aviv's Kings of Israel Square. The late Prime Minister had been our negotiating partner when the Oslo Agreement was concluded, and had played a key role. His killer, Yigal Amir, was not some social misfit but a member of the elite Golani Unit of the Israeli army. The repercussions of his three murderous bullets filled the Middle East with noise and blood, and within Israel both the public and the political classes were obsessed by the causes and consequences of his fateful act.

Not the least strange aspect of the circumstances in which we found ourselves on that day was that the aircraft was one just such as had in the past been frequently used to hunt down fugitive fighters of the PLO. In contrast, as we boarded the helicopter, the Israeli crew installed us

carefully, solicitous for our safety. When the helicopter landed, under cover of darkness at a small military airfield near Tel Aviv, we were driven through the night to Rabin's home in vehicles provided by the security services. The strictest security surrounded our clandestine journey, from the moment the helicopter took off in the northern Gaza Strip until we reached the home of the stricken family.

As we flew through the night, I was unable to stop myself thinking of how the sudden and unanticipated violence of Rabin's death had plunged into turmoil all that Rabin stood for and hoped for. The simple act of pulling the trigger of the murder weapon had changed history. Rabin's death seemed to me like the demise of a hero in a classical Greek epic. Rabin had been singled out by destiny, not to fight against foes and champions, but to become involved in the Palestinian people's struggle. He had first fought against the Palestinians, when he saw them as a threat to the nation of Israel. His fatal hubris had been to change direction, ceasing to be a man of the sword and embarking on the struggle for peace. Rabin was an Israeli patriot through and through. He was born in Jerusalem in 1922. His mother was a Russian Jew who had migrated to Palestine in 1919, and his father, originally from Ukraine, had come to Palestine from the United States two years earlier. Rabin grew up in what had been the Palestinian countryside between Tel Aviv and the Jaffa border, where he played with Arab boys, made friends with them, and lived peacefully in a hospitable environment. In due course, he enrolled in the renowned Kadoorie Agricultural High School, from which he graduated in 1940.

Of course, the image of Rabin uppermost in my mind was that of the mature statesman whom I had first known at the time of Oslo. I vividly recalled his frowning face, his rasping voice, and his stern manner. I remembered his part in the agreement we had made together, but I also recalled cruel episodes from his earlier career, when he had oppressed the Palestinians in order, as he then believed, to defend Israel. He had not spared even our children. During the first Intifada he had infamously appeared to authorise Israel's soldiers, no more than boys themselves, to break the arms and legs of our brave young stone throwers, who did not hesitate to play David against Israel's Goliath. I also recalled his image, in a famous photograph taken on 7 June 1967, the day Jerusalem was lost to us, standing in his officer's uniform and battledress helmet behind Moshe Dayan at the Western Wall of the Temple. The pictures were intended

to immortalise the moment Israel took the Old City, and to commemorate that historical event, which is to this day linked in the minds of the Palestinian people with the onset of all our pain, toil, and bitterness. Finally, I thought of Rabin's body lying in state, surrounded by candles, medals, and mourners, at the impressive funeral ceremony a few days before. I had attended the ceremony on behalf of the Palestinian Authority and had stood shoulder to shoulder with President Clinton of the United States, King Hussein of Jordan, President Mubarak of Egypt, and many other world leaders.

Other things float back to me from my memories of that nocturnal journey. This was the first time that Abu Ammar had been able to fly up that stretch of coastline, the shore of historic Palestine, now under Israeli rule. This was a land redolent of our history, and its landmarks were inseparable from the pain that was an intimate part of the experience of all Palestinians. I looked at the night sky and gazed down at the ground, recognising only intermittently and with difficulty the towns illuminated by the patterns of the street lights. So much was new and changed. But as we passed over Jaffa, I saw the famous minaret of the Hassan Bek Mosque and realised we were over the beautiful city that meant so much to me when I was young. I urged Abu Ammar to look, but he refused, bowing his head and looking neither right nor left. This was what he insisted on doing throughout that strange journey, though it was a once-in-a-lifetime chance for us to see our beloved country. I have never asked him why it was that he did not want to see the panorama of historic Palestine that lay beneath us. Perhaps he remembered how it was and did not wish to see what it had become.

This was also the first time our brother Abu Ammar had been to the Israeli city of Tel Aviv, and the emotion this aroused in him was clearly intense. When we at last entered the Rabin family's duplex apartment on the fifth floor of a building in the modern city the Israelis had built, Leah Rabin, the late Prime Minister's grief-stricken widow, was there to greet us. Dressed in black mourning, she welcomed us with words full of courtesy and was kind enough to express her appreciation for the role we had played in the peace agreement of which her husband had been so proud. I was struck by her tone of voice, which gave evidence of her fortitude and composure. With her were her children and granddaughter, together with Israel's Chief of Staff, Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, as well as the security official Yossi Ginossar, one of Rabin's particular confidants, who

had greatly assisted him during the Oslo process, and other high-ranking military officers. Leah Rabin comported herself in those difficult days with unbending dignity, and her strength was such as to serve as an example and an encouragement to any widow laid low by the pain and despair of losing the partner with whom she had shared her life. None of the Israelis present could take their eyes from us as we were invited to take our seats in her modest drawing room. This was especially so after Abu Ammar suddenly took off the hat that had served him as a disguise throughout the secret trip, unexpectedly exposing his bald head, which, without his customary *kefiyyeh*, seemed wider and shinier than anyone had expected!

The conversation soon moved from expressions of condolence to a discussion of the widow's thoughts on the assassination. She seemed to be reading from the political testament of her late husband and evidently shared his objectives. Rabin had been a deeply serious man, who had scarcely ever made an open display of good humour. On the night of his death, however, he had surprisingly joined with his audience of peace activists in singing pacifist songs. This symbolised an aspect of Rabin's behaviour since he had become involved in the peace process that was a step too far for Israel's bellicose right wing, which was determined to halt the Oslo process at all costs. Rabin's participation in such events was seen by Israel's security-obsessed right-wingers as a deadly sin, and was detested by the fanatical, racist, and hateful settlers. Leah Rabin had quickly recovered from her personal ordeal, and no sooner was the funeral over than she took it upon herself to speak to the Israeli people, passing on Rabin's final message with dignity and determination. She addressed herself both to the converted and to those who were yet to be swayed to the position Rabin had adopted in his final years. She spoke both to the old guard and to the younger generation, to her Labour Party colleagues and to the officials of Israel's security services. She shook the collective conscience of Fortress Israel. For the Jewish people, the crime of Rabin's death was especially unsettling. The shedding of Jewish blood by the hands of Jews was regarded as a dreadful sin. Leah Rabin sought a way to use the tragedy of her husband's death to serve his own political objectives. Her goal was to create a narrative of that bloody incident that would touch the emotions of the Israeli people, perhaps reopening the way to the continuation of the peace process.

After her husband's death, Leah Rabin took the initiative against those