Breaking out of the circle

On the life and work of Ghassan Kanafani

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Ghassan Kanafani, *The Revolution of 1936-39 in Palestine: Background, Details and Analysis*, trans. Hazem Jamjoum (New York: 1804 Books, 2023). 101pp., $20.00, 978 1 73685 004 6

No definitive account exists of Ghassan Kanafani's life, a fact quite remarkable for a writer of his stature; perhaps the finest – certainly the most versatile – Palestine produced in the 20th century. Its main contours are fairly well-known: his birth in 1936, just ten days before the announcement of the strike that triggered the Great Revolt; his expulsion from Acre during the *Nakba*; his adolescence as a young refugee in Damascus; a brief but formative stint working as a teacher in Kuwait; literary success, militancy and martyrdom in Beirut at the age of thirty six. The detail however is often fragmentary, leaving us with more questions than answers. We hear, for instance, that before his family was driven out of Palestine his father was detained for some time by the British. What exactly he was held for (political activity or otherwise) is unclear. Of his early intellectual formation we know he attended a French missionary school in Yafa as a young boy, and was later mocked as a teenager in Damascus for his poor command of Arabic, only rectified after months of concerted study, but exactly who might have guided his early writing, in either influence or teaching, remains to us unknown.[1]

When it comes to his political trajectory we stand on firmer ground. Over the course of his short but astonishingly rich career Kanafani left his mark as an editor and commentator on almost all the major newspapers and political journals of his time – leaving a paper trail which in volume far exceeds the fiction for which he is better known. Indissociable from his work as a journalist was his involvement in two related organisations at the forefront of the Arab and Palestinian liberation movement over the course of the long 1960s: the Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). As the mode of the regional struggle against Zionism and imperialism shifted, so too did the strategic calculi of these groups. In its first decades the struggle for Palestine was wedded to a state-driven project of Arab liberation; only as a result of this project's defeat did a discrete Palestinian Revolution emerge in the form of a localised insurgency. A battlefield of narrowing scope and scale: this was the fundamental terrain of Kanafani's political thought. His extraordinary capacity to visualise and chart this topography – the battle's requirements, its traps, its opportunities – should be grasped as both the kernel of his theorising and the highest moment of its articulation.

The permanence of empire

The political leadership that had led the joint Arab forces in the 1948 war in Palestine did not survive long after its defeat. In Palestine itself, what remained of the Arab Higher Committee ultimately dissolved under Egyptian and Jordanian pressure; in Syria a wave of military coups in 1949 effectively suspended civilian rule until the mid 1950s. In July 1951, King Abdullah of Jordan, accused of bartering with the Zionist leadership to secure personal control of the West Bank, was assassinated at the

entrance to the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. The following year, a group of Egyptian officers – vanquished heroes of the war of '48 – successfully rose up against an ailing monarchy, promising wide-ranging agrarian reform and confrontation with imperialism's continued presence in the region.

It was during this period of regeneration that a group of young nationalist students first met at the American University of Beirut. Most of them had been in Palestine in some capacity during the war: George Habash and Wadie Haddad, two medical students (from Lydd and Safad respectively) had been expelled from their homes along with their families; Hani al-Hindi, from Damascus, had fought in the Galilee as part of a force of Arab volunteers known as the Arab Salvation Army headed by the noted nationalist commander Fawzi al-Qawuqji. Important early members included the Kuwaiti Ahmad al-Khatib, another medical student who was instrumental in establishing support in the Gulf for what was soon to be known as the Arab Nationalist Movement (alternatively, and more accurately, translated as the 'Movement of Arab Nationalists' (*Harakat al-Qawmiyyin al-'Arab*)). Constantine Zurayk, a Syrian historian teaching at AUB, was the first to develop a vocabulary to make sense of the unfolding present in the immediate aftermath of the war in his *Ma'na an-Nakba* (*The Meaning of the Disaster*), published in August 1948. This spirit of elaboration was a determining influence on the student group, which initially coalesced around a literary association, *al-'Urwa al-Wuthqa,* which bore the same name as an influential Egyptian anti-colonial journal of the late 19th century. For the circle, no division existed between the loss of Palestine and the continued subjugation of the Arab world. The former, in fact, was merely an expression of the latter, since the political community envisaged by Arab nationalism was one which could overcome the colonial segmentation inflicted after the end of the First World War.[2]

Right-wing visions of the Arab nation did exist, but for the most part Arab nationalism had different preoccupations from its *völkisch* European cognates. Unity had very practical, strategic connotations: 'five, or six, or seven states', Zurayk wrote, 'each completely independent of the other, each concerned with its own affairs and internal interests, each subjected to various foreign influences and to internal forces with conflicting interests – states in this condition cannot repel the harrowing blows of our time.'[3] Other aspects of the ANM's programme were still under development – the question, for instance, of the primacy of Palestine had not yet emerged. Would the achievement of unity be a prerequisite to defeat Zionism? Or, conversely, would the liberation of Palestine be a necessary step on the path to achieving unity? Well-defined answers were not strictly required in order to begin the work. By 1950, recruitment began to extend beyond the confines of the university, with members from across the Arab East, from Iraq to Yemen, Kuwait to Lebanon. As early cadres returned from Beirut, cells emerged in Damascus, Amman, Baghdad and Aden that began agitating for Arab unity and liberation.[4]

Habash and Haddad spent much of the early 1950s in Jordan, treating the sick in various refugee camps and contributing to the opposition mounting against the regime, led by Abdullah's grandson, King Hussein – a lingering satellite of British colonial rule. In a similar spirit, al-Hindi returned to Syria, where he fostered ties with figures in the military and security apparatus sympathetic to the nationalist cause (much of the ANM's later activities would be enabled by al-Hindi's connections, especially in Syria). In 1954, when the Jordanian government forced Habash to cease publishing the party's newspaper *al-Ra'i*, al-Hindi took over its editorship from Damascus. It was in the Syrian capital that Habash first met Kanafani. The latter was barely a teenager – 14 or 15 by his own recollection – and was working part-time as a proof-reader in a printing house.[5] A teaching job at an UNRWA school in Kuwait took him away from Damascus in 1955, but by then his talents had become clear to the group's leadership. His first short stories – the literary form he would privilege and excel in – date from this period. Very soon he would begin contributing to *al-Ra'i*, publishing 18 texts in 18 months between June 1957 and December 1958, the first release of an astonishing creative energy that would scarcely relent over the next decade and a half.

Politically, Kanafani and the rest of the ANM drifted steadily towards Nasserism over the course of the 1950s. The Syrian experience with military rule (from 1949-54) had proved largely inimical to the ANM's goals, so optimism around the Free Officers' coup in Egypt was, at least initially, tempered with caution. But Nasser's success in repelling the British, French and Israeli aggression

over Suez in 1956 and, perhaps more importantly, his union with Syria (to form the United Arab Republic) in 1958 won him the support of the majority of the nationalist camp. The ANM, for its part, played a central role that year in the peripheral struggles ignited by the founding of the UAR: risings in Jordan (for which Haddad was imprisoned for two years) and the civil war between Lebanese and Arab nationalists that was only pacified by direct American intervention in July 1958.

Early texts associated with the ANM tended to focus on the postwar landscape of imperial power in the Middle East: studies of Israel's early development, the nature of the new Arab states' independence and the relative prospects of the nationalist cause. The relationship between Zionism and imperialism, on the one hand, and class power and exploitation, on the other, remained largely opaque, the latter usually circumscribed as a phenomenon endemic to internal social structures of individual Arab states. The majority held, as a result, that the question of class struggle would be suspended until after unification. In 1960, the movement launched a new weekly, *al-Hurriya*, headquartered in Beirut, which would serve as its official mouthpiece for the subsequent decade. At its helm was a young cadre from South Lebanon named Muhsin Ibrahim, roughly the same age as Kanafani and emerging alongside him as one of the movement's brightest lights. On Habash's recommendation, Kanafani was to leave Kuwait, join Ibrahim in Beirut, and start working for the new publication. It wasn't long after Kanafani arrived that divisions began to emerge between the movement's leadership, now centred around Damascus, and the younger generation converging on Beirut.

Soon after its launch, Ibrahim began using *al-Hurriya* to critique the movement from the left. 'There is no longer a political national question', he wrote in an article published on May Day of 1960, 'standing separately and posing against a specific social question called "the worker's question" or "the peasants question" or the "question of social progress".'[6] Ibrahim's argument elevated class struggle to a position equivalent to that occupied by national liberation; the implication was that one could think of the two as mutually dependent, and not, in the more purely nationalist vein, as separate stages of ascending importance. But the ambiguities inherent in the Nasserist project left ample room for disagreements of this kind. The ensuing factionalism within the movement had as much to do (as is often the case) with personal enmities as with substantive questions of theory and strategy. The split was precipitated by a dramatic reversal of fortune for the Arab revolution. In 1961, the UAR collapsed following a coup in Syria; two years later, the very idea was buried definitively as Ba'athists consolidated their control of Syria in a wave of fratricidal purges of their former Nasserist allies. Returning to Beirut in 1963 after a spell in jail during the turmoil in Syria, Habash found his movement in a state of disarray.

Two successive party conferences cemented the ANM's division between a 'left', led by Ibrahim and Nayef Hawatmeh, a young Jordanian who had just returned from leading the ANM in Iraq, and Habash loyalists, comprising the majority of the movement's Palestinian membership. In terms of their political line, though, there was still much in common between the two groups: Ibrahim's circle still saw Nasserism as the primary vehicle for Arab liberation, whilst to those around Habash who had initially been skeptical, class analysis presented itself as an increasingly compelling way of explaining the challenges faced by the nationalist movement, especially with regards to fraying Egyptian-Syrian relations. The limits of the ANM's drift left were well-defined, however. True to the Nasserist line both wings stood firm in their suspicion of communism (or more accurately, communist parties) not only because of Soviet ambivalence over Zionism, but more importantly on account of the potential threat Moscow represented to Cairo's regional leadership. At stake was also the rivalry between Nasser and 'Abd al-Karim Qasim, an Iraqi general who himself successfully overthrew Iraq's monarchy with the support of the Iraqi Communist Party – by far the largest and best-organised in the Arab world. The mass incarceration and torture of communists was a defining period in the history of the Egyptian left. Other groups that populated Egypt's carceral system under Nasser include the Muslim Brotherhood, viciously persecuted, and, oddly enough, Palestinians: the writers and militants Mu'in Bseiso and Sahbaa' al-Barbari would both write about their time as political prisoners in the early 1960s under Nasser's administration of their native Gaza.[7]

Ideological subtleties notwithstanding, the schism within the ANM would have profound repercussions: Kanafani, on account of his proximity to Habash, was transferred from *al-Hurriya* to an editorial position at *al-*

Muharrir, a privately-owned Nasserist daily. The move proved pivotal. The paper significantly broadened his audience, becoming under his direction the second most read in Lebanon, and cemented his reputation as one of the leading literary voices in Beirut (a city, by that point, awash with writers). More importantly, though, his new position helped him to acquire Lebanese citizenship, affording him unprecedented freedom and stability. He had spent the first few years in Beirut undocumented, and had thus tended to keep a low profile, though in his limited mobility he did however have time to work on several projects, including his first and perhaps most famous novella, *Men in the Sun*, in which three Palestinian migrant workers die attempting to cross the Iraq-Kuwait border – an extended allegory of displacement based on his own observations of the Palestinian condition in the Gulf.[8]

Arab summitry

The earliest piece included in the recently published anthology of Kanafani's translated political writings, *Ghassan Kanafani: Selected Political Writings*, dates from this period, from his first months as editor of *al-Muharrir*. 'Yemen and Iraq: One Story or Two?', published in November 1964, is a skilful report connecting the nationalist struggle underway on two seemingly distant fronts: the nationalist insurgency in North Yemen, in which Egypt had been directly involved since 1962, and renewed discussions between Egypt and Iraq on unification, antagonised at that moment by the aligned interests of Syria, Turkey, Iran and internal Kurdish opposition. The piece gives a sense of scale to the Nasserist revolution at its apex: by 1964, some 40,000 Egyptian troops had been deployed in North Yemen in what amounted to an open war with Saudi Arabia for control of the southwestern Arabian peninsula (in training and arming forces loyal to the deposed King Muhammad al-Badr the Saudis were aided by a motley crew of colonial counterinsurgents, including Belgian mercenaries drafted in from Katanga).[9]

Attempting to take stock of the revolution's gains on the occasion of a temporary ceasefire agreed by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Kanafani notes how nationalist advances are met with counter-offensives elsewhere, as anti-Nasserist forces intensify their activities in Iraq. 'Coincidence?' Kanafani asks. 'No, it is unacceptable to attribute such things to coincidences when a coherent analytical line is at hand.'[10] Counterrevolution may have proceeded unevenly across different fronts, but these were to be grasped as instances of a single, overarching imperial strategy which produced combined effects.

In truth – and despite Kanafani's optimism around the agreement – by the time the Egyptian-Saudi truce in Yemen was signed in late 1964 the revolution had already undergone a profound transformation. Nasser, saddled with foreign debt incurred to finance the war and the coveted dam at Aswan, had at the close of 1963 already begun to publicly abjure the possibility of a military confrontation with Israel (the rhetoric would return, rather belatedly, in the immediate prelude to the Six Day War). In response to an Israeli proposal to redirect water in the upper Jordan Valley westwards towards its coastal cities, in January 1964 Nasser opted to convene the Arab League, a body which had never met before, and which included amongst its members a number of imperial client states, including Saudi Arabia – an early sign for many that the Arab revolution had all but been renounced in favour of a more feeble strategy of 'summitry'.[11]

The main result of the Arab League meeting was the establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), a body the majority of Palestinians hitherto active in the nationalist struggle viewed with profound suspicion. There may have been differences amongst the ANM's ranks on the primacy of the Palestinian question in the broader battle for Arab liberation, but even the factions most focussed on Palestine rejected the idea that the main driving force behind the struggle should be a nationalised 'entity', one which risked relieving the Arab regimes of their responsibilities in the struggle, and, in keeping with the conditions that produced it, seemed better equipped for negotiation than war.

Kanafani clearly saw the dangers of such efforts. As early as October 1963 he had written of his hope for the 'appearance of a revolutionary organization that would put an end to all schemes, plans, trusteeships, governments and projects whose objectives are the pulverization of the Palestinian people.'[12] A related problem was one of leadership: the man Nasser chose to head the PLO was Ahmad al-Shukeiri, a lawyer and former member of the Arab Higher Committee in his late fifties. Kanafani, in all likelihood, knew him well: Shukeiri's father, Sheikh Asa'ad, had been a leading notable in Acre in the first

decades of the twentieth century, representing the city in the Ottoman parliament in the 1910s and heading the Supreme Muslim Council under British rule. The discredited political class of the Mandate period had resurfaced, but the generation of Palestinian militants that had come of age in the wake of their debacle had no intention of submitting to its authority.

The rejection was shared by what was, by the mid-1960s, the fastest-growing Palestinian group within the movement for national liberation. Since its inception in Kuwait in the late 1950s, Fatah had always privileged the battle for Palestine over the broader regional revolution, and as such had felt impatient toward the reigning principle that armed struggle could only be waged once favourable conditions for Nasser and allied Arab armies had matured. An armed PLO with sponsorship from the Arab League threatened Fatah, organisationally and strategically: it represented both a blow to its legitimacy and the subordination of Palestinian militancy into a tool Nasser could leverage to tilt diplomatic settlements in his favour.

Rejection, defeat, rebirth

On New Year's Day 1965, Fatah militants infiltrated the Galilee and sabotaged Israel's water carrier, not coincidentally the very object of the Arab League summit Nasser had hosted the prior year. Fatah would go on to claim over thirty operations over the course of 1965 – three hundred by the summer of 1967. The phase of armed struggle under the autonomous leadership of Palestinians had officially begun, on the date that by most accounts marks the start of the Palestinian Revolution.

Fatah's acceleration was not ignored by other factions. A number of armed groups emerged in the subsequent months, united in Fatah's opposition to the PLO but in competition with it for recruitment and following. The ANM, which had initially admonished Fateh for baiting Nasser into a premature war, calling it 'a suspect movement' acting on behalf of US imperialism, soon busied itself with rising to the challenge it had posed. Since the controversial conferences of the mid-1960s the party had increasingly fragmented along national lines; those closest to Habash ultimately founded the Organisation of Avenging Youth, a paramilitary force which began recruiting members in Lebanon, Jordan, Gaza and even amongst Palestinians in Israel. Publicly, their pronouncements had to adapt to the shifting discursive terrain of Palestinian politics, balancing growing support for direct armed confrontation with loyalty to the Nasserist doctrine of revolutionary patience: *fawq al-sifr, wa taht al-tawrit* ('above zero, but below entanglement') was the desired balance according to Kanafani, who had by now risen to the executive ranks of the ANM's Palestinian branch.[13]

The Arab armies' defeat in June 1967 thus merely intensified dynamics that had been underway for some years. Where exactly to locate the demise of the Arab revolution is a crucial question: the collapse of the UAR, for instance, or the ruinous war in Yemen in their effects certainly hold more explanatory power than the *naksa* (which should be understood less as a turning point in itself, and more as the culmination of these longer-term processes). An equally important question to ask is when, if at all, the break with Nasserism occurs amongst his disciples. Having already taken the initiative to lead the struggle against Nasser's designs, Fatah gained the most from his exit from the field of battle. By the autumn of 1967 it was clear even to his staunchest partisans that the time for stalling was over. Perhaps the greatest testament to the scope of the defeat lay in the fact that the Palestinian 'entity' that the ANM had repudiated in previous years as a dramatic narrowing of the nationalist vision no longer appeared such an intolerable compromise. A sense of critical, begrudging resignation permeates Kanafani's verdict on the war published in *al-Adab* in October of that year.

By the summer of the following year, Fatah accounted for half to two thirds of all Palestinian fighters in Jordan (around 2000, by some estimates). Arafat capitalised on the moment to seize the deliberative and executive institutions of the PLO, with a view to transforming them into the unified, internationally recognised vehicle of the revolution, now under his effective command. The Palestinian branch of the ANM had by now broken off completely from the wider organisation. Save a few early mergers and splits, the core of the resulting group formed the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which essentially amounted to the circle that had begun coalescing around Habash as early as 1963. The PFLP's relationship to the PLO under Arafat would be one of near constant turbulence; both the principle of national

unity and the PLO's international legitimacy prompted the PFLP to join its National Council, though crucially Habash would refuse to participate in its centralised military command, thus retaining for him and his group a significant degree of ideological and strategic autonomy, at least until the middle of the following decade.

At the heart of the anthology of Kanafani's political writings are a series of theoretical documents – many anonymously authored as part of a collective of writers within the PFLP – that date from this period of active struggle and coincide with the Habash circle's development of a distinctly Marxist-Leninist line. In their attempt to give theoretical sense to a seemingly endless web of practical conundrums and temporal scales that balance a coherent theory of imperialism, the political manoeuvrings of rival factions in the struggle, and the exigencies of an active front, the texts are quite extraordinary. They are, simultaneously, somewhat cryptic as documents, replete with lengthy theoretical justifications and veiled attacks on adversaries and rivals, expressing a balance of power in constant flux within and outside of the movement.

Their legibility improves a great deal when historicised, a task which the anthology falls short of performing consistently. The anthology's editors, and many of the scholars and activists convened to introduce its individual texts, give great importance to the Marxism espoused by Kanafani and the PFLP; the common thread uniting the texts that form the volume's core being the indivisibility of anti-colonial and social liberation, the fusion of nation and class as a single front of struggle. Less obvious in the majority of their remarks is the fact that these positions were the outcome of a marked transformation in the group's thinking that had been maturing over the course of the 1960s. Ramzy Baroud and Romana Rubeo offer important insights in this regard, but these arguably come too late, in the form of a short excursus at the very end of the volume (the addenda, as well as

Funeral of Ghassan Kanafani, Beirut Martyrs Cemetery, July 10, 1972. Photograph © Robert Azzi.

the bibliographic and translation notes are on the whole highly useful, and all too often missing from existing editions).[14] And though careful work is done by the volume's editors in situating Kanafani's thought within the global tradition of Tricontinental Marxism, the early Nasserism of Kanafani and his comrades deserves a lengthier and more direct treatment, especially if the aim is to introduce new readers to his political thought. Dedicating the bulk of the volume to the five last years of the author's life of course makes sense – these were, after all, the high point of his militancy, certainly his most creative years theoretically. But insofar as they were the outcome of a *turn* to Marxism, one precipitated by a specific conjuncture, the texts are not timeless – a quality often erroneously thought, at the expense of historicity, to be the measure of relevance. Alongside, or perhaps beyond any individual diagnosis of the Palestinian predicament produced by Kanafani that may still speak to the present (there are plenty), it is precisely the historical boundedness of his theorising, produced by an unerring dialectic of thought and action, that one cannot but marvel at from our contemporary standpoint.

Kanafani was neither born a Marxist, nor can his ideological turn as part of the Popular Front's emergence be adequately described as an 'adoption' of Marxism. The necessity of an idea tends to precede its arrival: if the former is adequately accounted for, the latter rarely appears a matter of pure choice. As the limits of the Nasserist project became painfully evident over the course of the late 1960s, nationalist politics required an increasingly theoretical elaboration to make sense of its retreat. Marxism provided such a theory of practice. It had come in and out of the ANM's debates over the course of the decade, but now, for Kanafani and many Palestinians around him, it answered questions that had only fully matured in the light of the new crisis: the problem of a mass revolutionary consciousness, and the related construction of the refugee as the revolutionary subject, the need for an organisation that could link the sphere of politics and that of action, and the complex web of relations that had, until then, tied the leadership of the national liberation movement to a set of specific class interests (a critique which took aim at Arab regimes and Palestinian factions alike).

'Who are our enemies?', the Popular Front asks in *Strategy for the Liberation of Palestine* (1969), a product of its second congress which effectively functioned as its manifesto and political programme (an abridged version of the 150-page document is reproduced in chapter 7 of the anthology). The answers it provides are basically those developed by the ANM over the previous decade, save for a small addition: Israel, the Zionist movement, world imperialism and 'Arab reaction', the last of which was, in a subtle yet critical development, no longer simply associated with the Arab monarchies, long identified as pillars of imperial rule in the region, but was extended to 'Arab capitalism, whose interests are represented and defended by reactionary regimes in the Arab world'.[15] The category remains a rather nebulous one in the text, and all the more interesting for its lack of specificity – setting the stage, perhaps, for a more overt collision with the debris of Arab nationalism that was to mature in the following years.

'Who are our friends – the forces of revolution?', the text continues; here too we find an implied expression of the Popular Front's predicament. On the one hand, it underlines the importance of 'Palestinian national unity as a basic factor for the mobilisation of the revolution to confront the enemy camp', yet the critique of the Palestinian bourgeoisie is unsparing, and preventing it from taking leadership of the revolution is identified as one of the movement's top priorities – of note, given the brewing disagreements between the Popular Front and Fateh over support for King Hussein of Jordan, is the text's explicit reference to the stratification that had developed since the *Nakba* amongst Palestinians in Amman: 'all these people' – those in wealthy suburbs, working class neighbourhoods, refugee camps – 'cannot have the same attitude towards the revolution'.[16]

The growing tensions between Fatah and the PFLP would soon develop into a full-blown crisis, one which forms the essential context to understanding what is arguably the anthology's most important text. *The Resistance and its Challenges: the View of the PFLP* was published by the Popular Front in August 1970. Its lengthy, almost laborious preamble serves to establish the necessity in theory of a strategy the organisation had already begun actualising in the previous two years. In July 1968, three militants hijacked an El Al flight bound for Tel Aviv shortly after it had taken off from Rome. This would be the first of several operations targeting El Al, Israel's national carrier, along with other airlines, a tactic which

would rapidly (and intentionally) bring the PFLP into the international spotlight.

The primary target of these operations was not Israel per se, but the developing negotiations – the 'Rogers Plan', as they came to be known, named after Nixon's first Secretary of State – between Jordan and Egypt on the one hand, and the US and Israel on the other, around a final peace settlement to the June War, one which included no commitments to Palestinian ambitions. The Revolution, in short, was besieged; its former guarantor on the verge of surrender. Relations between Arafat and the Jordanian monarchy were far from cordial by 1970, but since Fatah ultimately proved unwilling to remove King Hussein from power – a feat it could have probably pulled off by the end of the 1960s – the PFLP had no choice but to escalate the confrontation, 'one of the many ways', in Kanafani's own words, 'in which we tried to break out of the circle'.[17]

A month after the text was published, between September 6th and September 9th 1970, five planes were hijacked by Popular Front cadres, four of which were rerouted to an airstrip in northern Jordan (Leila Khaled, who had successfully rerouted a 707 the previous year, this time was intercepted at Amsterdam airport before her plane could take off). The ensuing hostage crisis provoked a final confrontation between the Jordanian army and Palestinian factions that would result in the latter's expulsion from the kingdom. Within the month – Black September, as it would be remembered in the annals of the revolution – the PLO had largely been cleared from the camps around Amman and Irbid, with the Jordanian army claiming the lives of over 5000 Palestinians.

The restraint that had characterised the ANM's approach to the struggle had been definitively jettisoned; the terms of the equation between Palestinian and Arab freedom finally reversed. 'Whether the revolutionary Palestinian intifada is the gateway to the Arab revolution, or whether it is, indeed, necessary for the cause of Palestinian liberation to become this revolutionary Arab gateway' the Popular Front claimed, presaging the confrontation, '*will be imposed through actions*, as such an assumption cannot be realised arbitrarily or by chance, and continual critical perspectives are required to find the most effective formula.'[18] Could one even still speak of a coherent Arab revolution? In an apposite moment of historical closure, Nasser would suffer a fatal heart attack at the end of September, immediately after chairing a summit of the Arab League with the aim of brokering a ceasefire between Jordan and the Palestinians. A year later, Kanafani would not shy away from attributing to Nasser his share of the blame, in an interview given to Fred Halliday in the *New Left Review* under his own name. 'The Egyptian regime', he notes, 'was one step removed from direct participation in this liquidation, since it had no direct contact with the Palestinians. The only way Nasser could help Hussein was by keeping silent: and that he did.'[19]

A people's war

It isn't clear whether Kanafani ever went to Jordan personally, or whether he witnessed the activities of the *feda'iyyin* there first-hand. In those years we almost always encounter him in Beirut, where the Popular Front kept an important foothold, and where it would ultimately relocate to in the early 1970s along with the rest of the Palestinian factions exiled by Hussien. In 1967, Kanafani had been offered a position on the editorial board of the well-respected daily *al-Anwar*, and was handed the editorship of its magazine. Far from slowing down, his literary output actually intensified. The preceding year he had published *All That's Left for You*, a novel about two siblings living in one of Gaza's refugee camps (which Kanafani would dedicate to Khaled al-Haj, who fell as ANM's first martyr of the armed struggle in November 1965) and his first study of Palestinian literature, *Resistance Literature in Occupied Palestine*. That same year came his landmark study *On Zionist Literature* (recently translated into English by Mahmoud Najib), a collection of short stories (*Of Men and Guns*) and the sequel to *Resistance Literature* in 1968. 'Among his 1969 works', Breony and Hamdi write in their introduction to the anthology, 'were: the novel *Returning to Haifa*, the play script *The Hat and the Prophet*; a critical editorial series of the post-1967 "settlement" promoted by Israel and its backers; a selection of literary reviews for *al-Anwar*, under the pseudonym Fares Fares; writing towards the epochal *Strategy for Liberation*; and an iconic, yellow poster proclaiming that: "the path of armed struggle is the path to liberate Palestine".'[20]

Kanafani worked incessantly. The breadth of his oeuvre is already hard to grasp, let alone the fact that he

simultaneously sat on the PFLP's Politburo and served as its official spokesperson to the international media (sure enough, Kanafani would soon resign from *al-Anwar* to direct the PFLP's new publication, *al-Hadaf*). Although it is difficult to establish the influence of individual authors on the Popular Front's collective texts, there is every indication that Kanafani's role in crafting them was central. Stylistically dense and acute, the texts are clearly shaped by an encounter with Maoism: the search for enemies and friends in *Strategy for the Liberation of Palestine* is a direct reference to Mao's thought (in 'Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society', 1926), as is the characterisation of the 'organisational question' in *The Resistance and its Challenges*, as the bridge or boat necessary to cross 'from the shore of theory to the shore of practice'.[21]

Upon receiving his Lebanese citizenship in the mid-1960s the first trips Kanafani chose to take were to China, first in 1965 and then again in 1966 to speak at the Afro-Asian Writers' Conference (his account of these trips, published in Arabic as part of his collected works, are fascinating documents which await a good translation). One did not need to go to Beijing to become a Maoist in 1960s Beirut, but the experience of the Chinese Revolution on the PFLP's output is difficult to overstate, as was that of Viet Cong, which the Popular Front learned about through research conducted by the Pentagon itself, tracts of which they even republished, in the 1969 pamphlet *The Underlying Synthesis of the Revolution*.[22] An oft-repeated slogan of the late sixties called for Amman to be transformed into an 'Arab Hanoi' – an idea immortalised in the PFLP's iconography. A talented designer, Kanafani frequently drew the covers for his novels himself, and was known to have personally contributed to a number of the PFLP's political posters, which he sometimes worked on with the help of his two children, Fayez and Laila.[23]

Translated experiences of mass struggle in East Asia had a profound effect on the revolution's mental world, in no way perhaps more significantly than in the emergence, in theory and art, of the refugee camp as the primary site and cradle of struggle. At stake with the agreement

reached in Cairo in 1969 for the PLO to take effective control of Lebanon's camps was far more than an influx of ready recruits for the revolution ('Launching bases or detention camps?', Kanafani would ask in *al-Hadaf* in the aftermath of the accords). Just as important were the organic ties this new connection could foster between the revolution's leadership and the revolutionary subjectivity produced by the camp itself. *Umm Saad*, the novella centred around Kanafani's elderly friend from one of Beirut's urban camps, is the great literary expression of this pursuit of a mass line: *ash-sha'b al-madrasa* ('the people [as] school'), as Kanafani would characterise the protagonist in the work's opening pages.[24]

To the extent that we can speak of Kanafani's late thought, it was virtually indistinguishable from that of the Popular Front. The individual author disappears into a collective elaboration of political struggle, two instances of a single movement whose distinction becomes increasingly difficult to make out. Theory here is less an attempt to stand outside of history, but a moment in its very unfolding. Originally commissioned in late 1971 by the Palestine Research Center, *The Revolution of 1936-39 in Palestine: Background, Details and Analysis* is a full-length study in its own right, the object of a recent retranslation – lucid, and of considerable stylistic merit – by Hazem Jamjoum. The work surveys the eruption of the Palestinian national movement into full-blown revolt against the British Mandate and its colonial client, Zionist settlement – the largest anti-colonial rebellion of the interwar period.

In probing the revolt's outcome the text also provides an immediate historical backdrop to the *Nakba*. Having suffered considerable losses – some estimates cite the death of one in ten men of fighting age – Palestinians entered the 1940s beleaguered from three years of costly struggle, whilst Jewish paramilitaries had benefited from their development as an auxiliary police force to the British counterinsurgency. The main theme of the text, however, is still arguably the same as that which animates the documents Kanafani had drafted with the PFLP in the preceding years: the organisational question (as he would call it), or more specifically that of revolutionary leadership. Kanafani's revolt is one that is always ahead of itself: a rising of the countryside, fatefully reined in by a vacillating urban leadership whose structural function and mode of self-preservation was ultimately to come to terms with the colonial authorities, rather than defeat them outright. 'At no point in the entire history of the Palestinian struggle', Kanafani writes, 'was the armed popular revolution as close to victory as it was in those months stretching from the end of 1937 to the beginning of 1939', the period, that is to say, in which the hold of the traditional leadership (Hajj Amin al-Husseini and the Arab Higher Committee) over the *fellahin* was weakest; the former at this point in exile in Damascus, just as the latter advanced over the course of 1938, managing to seize and occupy major urban centres: Hebron, parts of Jerusalem, Bir as-Saba'a, Tiberias and Nablus.[25]

To be clear, what Kanafani identifies here is not a spontaneous self-organisation of the masses, but rather the ability of an organic leadership to spring from its ranks: 'Abd al-Rahim al-Hajj Muhammad, for instance, a local commander from Tulkarm whose death in battle in March 1939 was one of the factors that contributed to the rebellion's defeat, or, more important still for the text, Sheikh 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam, the Syrian preacher and nationalist veteran whose foiled insurrection and martyrdom in late 1935 represented for Kanafani its truest point of origin. al-Qassam's death did not provoke the revolt as such, but somehow managed to synthesise all its political significance before it had even taken place. Present at his funeral are all the essential elements that would shape the subsequent three years of struggle (and, one could say, the many decades since):

> … masses of people came to walk in the ten-kilometer burial procession to the village of Yajur. What is most significant about this moment is that it exposed the traditional leaders to the challenge of everything Sheikh al-Qassam represented, a challenge that leadership felt just as acutely as the British Mandate authorities. According to one Qassamist, al-Qassam had delivered a message through Musa al-Azrawi to the Mufti, Hajj Amin al-Husseini. In it, the Sheikh asked the Mufti to coordinate the declaration of a country-wide revolt. Al-Husseini refused, claiming that the conditions were not yet ripe for such action. The only people who marched in al-Qassam's funeral procession were poor people. The leaders' reaction, by contrast, was one of indifference.[26]

Kanafani's revisionism was, at a fundamental level, a recommitment to what he saw as the revolt's essential content: the growing chasm between an insurgent popular consciousness and an accommodationist bourgeois leadership. If his early nationalism can be summarised

as primarily concerned with the strategic question of revolutionary unity, then making sense of his later Marxism must grapple with what can only be termed an overwhelming concern with democracy, as both the means and end of the mass popular struggle – 'the circulation of blood', as he would term it in the organicist vein of his youth, 'in our political body'. His greatest political tract was in fact his last, an exercise at once new and plainly familiar. The turn to historical inquiry emerged from and intensified his theoretical work of prior years, a continuation of his efforts to parse social reality from its laws of motion. But in this case the diagnostic, prescriptive register of the Popular Front's manifestos is absent; in its place, the relative certainty of causation, emplotted within a discrete historical narrative. The past, it turns out, remains as persuasive as any analysis of the present in pointing to the way out of the revolution's predicaments.

Letter from Gaza

Kanafani himself would be assassinated just months after penning his elegy for al-Qassam, on July 8th, 1972. That morning, he had left his house with his seventeen year-old niece Lamis, who was visiting from Kuwait. Her uncle had offered to drop her off in town on the way to his office. The explosives that Israeli agents had planted under his car detonated as they approached the vehicle. Kanafani's funeral was the biggest Beirut had witnessed in years: 'workers and farmers, intellectuals, refugees from the camps', his wife recalls, 'members of the different groups of the Palestinian resistance movement, representatives of most political parties and public life' accompanied his body through the streets of the city and on to its final resting place, amidst the pines of the Palestine Martyrs' Cemetery in the city's southeast.

It is said that on account of the chronic illnesses he developed over the course of his early adulthood, Kanafani was deeply aware of his mortality. Some have attributed his voluminous body of work to this sense of urgency, though his tirelessness was clearly overdetermined. Snapshots of his extraordinary range captured by the recent anthology of his writings include the satirist who mocks the vacuity of the bourgeois intellectual; the media strategist and spokesperson who reflects on the state of discourse around the Palestinian question in the European public sphere; the military theorist who synthesises the lessons of the global anti-colonial struggle for an escalating battle against Zionism. Out of view are yet more guises – the editor, the critic, the artist – known already to Arab audiences, and only now beginning to be appreciated abroad, thanks to the steadily increasing availability of his non-fiction in English (a trend not likely to subside given the extent of noteworthy work which remains untranslated).

Even then, any attempt to fully assess Kanafani's legacy requires us to step outside the prism of the individual genius. The organisation that he helped found, whose programme he honed, and which he led until his death survives to this day, playing no small part in the continuation of the Palestinian Revolution after Kanafani's martyrdom. Over the course of the 1970s, the PFLP remained in Lebanon, controlling large parts of its South until Beirut fell to Israeli forces in the summer of 1982. Inside Palestine, it contributed to reigniting popular resistance through grassroots organisations such as the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees, part of the web of associations that sustained and gave shape to the First Intifada. Its presence also grew massively amongst prisoners' movement as more and more Palestinians began to fill Israeli jails following the occupation's expanded policing over the course of the 1980s (Ahmad Sa'adat, the PFLP's current Secretary-General, has spent the last twenty three years in prison). *al-Hadaf*, now headquartered in Gaza City, continues to publish articles to this day (through the genocide) and has striven to preserve the Popular Front's intellectual heritage. Two texts included in the anthology were themselves reprinted by the journal in recent years for the anniversary of their publication.

When Kanafani spoke of Gaza – the Strip features prominently in his literary oeuvre – his words were almost always accompanied by a sense of awe and admiration. The work commonly identified as his first, dating from the mid-50s, is a 'Letter from Gaza', in which an unnamed author refuses to join his friend Mustafa to study in the United States after his young niece loses a leg in an Israeli bombardment ('come back', the writer urges Mustafa, 'to learn from Nadia's leg, amputated from the top of the thigh, what life is and what existence is worth').[27] When Israel occupied Gaza in 1967 the PFLP had been amongst the most powerful groups in the Strip,

on account of years of freedom afforded to ANM activity under Egyptian administration. Kanafani would make repeated, excited reference in his writings to Gaza's resistance to the occupation in the late 1960s. His hope was that its unity and resolve could serve as a model for the *feda'iyyin* in Jordan and Lebanon. The rebellion there, along with the PFLP leadership, was ultimately quelled in 1971, and though the Popular Front never fully regained the place it had once occupied, it is difficult to imagine Kanafani greeting subsequent transformations of the resistance in Gaza with anything other than enthusiasm.[28] This in part, of course, relates to Habash's definitive break with with Arafat over the Oslo Accords – 'an act', in his words, 'of humiliation and betrayal' – but perhaps more fundamentally to the historical processes that underpinned the emergence of the leading political force the PFLP would join in its rejection of the accords. One might rightly object to an overly earnest reading of modern Islamism as a form of spontaneous mass consciousness, but it is impossible not to note the transformation in the Palestinian Revolution represented by the social character of Hamas, especially its leadership, one largely drawn from the sons of Gaza's refugee camps. Alongside them, shoulder to shoulder with those who claim 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam as the forefather of their struggle, the PFLP continues to mobilise, prodigiously, against an entire world bent on the annihilation of its people.

How might a people in revolt become conscious of itself and its latent power, and reflect this self-consciousness in its leaders, representatives and organisations? 'The enduring revolutionary effect – novel, rupture, transformative – of what we know and insist on as the Palestinian Revolution', Nasser Abourahme writes, is nothing other than 'the historical production of a collective subjectivity.'[29] This is the underlying preoccupation of Kanafani's later thought – a binding of the national and social question, yes, but one in which the latter emerges, under historically determinate conditions, as a radicalisation of the former. The agent of liberation could no longer be assumed as a force external to the revolution, or otherwise standing at its helm, a transformation which could not but reshape the entire structure of the struggle – its assumptions, its ambitions and the very parameters by which its fortunes are measured.

In the strict sense, then, Kanafani cannot be termed an organic intellectual. At stake here is more than just definitional accuracy. Acutely aware of his class position after experiencing its fragility after the *Nakba* – his father, a well-to-do lawyer, had in his early exile resorted to selling fruit from a cart in the streets of Damascus – he was profoundly aware of the distance that separated the revolution's leadership from its popular cradle. The problem posed an array of challenges, the most crucial of which was strategic. Revolutionary Arab nationalism proved itself unable to transcend the class character of the regimes it produced, leaving the Arab nation fatally fragmented and exposed to the co-option of its constituent parts. The mass organisation the PFLP began to theorise after 1967 is a direct response to this problem of failed state militarism. The question here was less one of representation and leadership as such, but, more profoundly, 'organicity' itself per Gramsci: the very need for a revolutionary consciousness proximate to the social reality mobilising for a very different kind of war – a people's war. The vernacular poetry and songs of the *fellahin* during the Great Revolt of the 1930s, which Kanafani includes in the section on 'the Intellectuals' in his study, and, perhaps most emblematically, the figure of Umm Saad and her son: these are the mental worlds Kanafani seeks to excavate, 'the only possible weapon', he says, 'in the face of the technologically more advanced imperialist countries – the weapon of the masses themselves'.[30] If the revolution stands undefeated half a century on, it is thanks to its astounding capacity, through its daily assertions of life, to transform this disparity into equation.

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Notes

1. Partial biographies can be found in Anni Kanafani, *Ghassan Kanafani* (Beirut: Palestine Research Center, 1974); George Hajjar, Kanafani: Symbol of Palestine (Beirut: Karoun, 1974); Stefan Wild, *Ghassan Kanafani*: *The Life of a Palestinian* (Weisbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, 1975); Mouin Rabbani, 'Ghassan Kanafani' in *Encylopedia of the Palestinians*, ed. Philip Mattar (New York: Facts on File, 2000).
2. See Anis Sayegh, *Palestine and Arab Nationalism* (Beirut: Palestine Research Center, 1970).
3. Constantine Zurayk, *Ma'na an-Nakba* (Beirut: Dar al-

Ilm al-Malayin, 1948), 37.

4. A brief but exhaustive history of the ANM can be found in Arabic in Bassil Kubaissi, *Harakat al-Qawmiyyin al-'Arab* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Abhaath al-'Arabiyya, 1973), originally written in English and submitted as Kubaissi's doctoral thesis at the American University (DC) in 1971. The work is practically a first-hand account of the movement: Kubaissi, who had met Habash, Haddad and al-Hindi at AUB, was a member first of the ANM, then the PFLP. He was assassinated by Mossad in Paris in April 1973.

5. Ghassan Kanafani, 'On Childhood, Literature, Marxism, the Front and *al-Hadaf* (1972)' in *Ghassan Kanafani: Selected Political Writings*, eds, Louis Brehony and Tahrir Hamdy (London: Pluto Press, 2024).

6. Reproduced in translation in Walid Kazziha, *Revolutionary Transformation in the Arab World: Habash and His Comrades from Nationalism to Marxism* (New York: St Martin's Press), 65.

7. Barbari's account can be found in English in Sahbaa' al-Barbari, *Light the Road of Freedom*, eds, Ghada Ageel and Barbara Bill (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2021). Bseiso's testimony is in Mu'in Bseiso, *Dafater Falastiniyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1978).

8. Kanafani, *Ghassan Kanafani*, 13.

9. The classic account of revolution and counterrevolution in the twenieth century Gulf remains Fred Halliday, *Arabia without Sultans* (London: Penguin, 1974).

10. Kanafani, 'Yemen and Iraq: One Story or Two?' in *Selected Political Writings*, 46.

11. The term in English is quite apt, and attributable to George Hajjar, Kanafani's biographer and PFLP militant. Hajjar transcribed and edited Leila Khaled's memoirs – one also finds similar turns of phrase there. See Leila Khaled, *My People Shall Live: The Autobiography of a Revolutionary* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973).

12. Cited in Hajjar, *Kanafani*, 66–67.

13. Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for a State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Washington DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1997), 111.

14. Ramzy Baroud and Romana Rubeo, 'The Arab Cause during the Era of the United Arab Republic: Seismic Changes and Shifts' in *Selected Political Writings*, 290–294.

15. 'Excerpts from PFLP: Strategy for the Liberation of Palestine (1969)' in *Selected Political Writings*, 97. A full translation of the pamphlet was recently republished by Foreign Languages Press.

16. 'Strategy', 104.

17. Kanafani, 'On the PFLP and the September Crisis (1971)' in *Selected Political Writings*, 182.

18. 'The Resistance and its Challenges: The View of the PFLP (1970)' in *Selected Political Writings*, 138.

19. Kanafani, 'On the PFLP and the September Crisis (1971)' in *Selected Political Writings*, 180.

20. Louis Breony and Tahrir Hamdy, 'Introduction' in *Selected Political Writings*, 7.

21. 'The Resistance and its Challenges: The View of the PFLP (1970)' in *Selected Political Writings*, 145–152.

22. The anthology presents the pamphlet's introduction, but not its additional materials. Kanafani, 'The Underlying Synthesis of the Revolution: Theses on the Organisational Weapon (1971)' in *Selected Political Writings*, 165–176.

23. Kanafani, *Ghassan Kanafani*, 21.

24. For a discussion of *Umm Saad*, the camp, and the problem of revolutionary subjectivity, see Nasser Abourahme, *The Time Beneath the Concrete* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2025) 93–125.

25. Ghassan Kanafani, *The Revolution of 1936-39 in Palestine: Background, Details and Analysis*, trans. Hazem Jamjoum (New York: 1804 Books, 2023) 56.

26. Kanafani, *The Revolution of 1936-39 in Palestine*, 41.

27. Ghassan Kanafani, 'Letter from Gaza' in *The 1936-39 Revolt in Palestine* (London: Tricontinental Society of London, 1980).

28. An excellent overview of the struggle in Gaza between 1967 and 1987 can be found in Ann M. Lesch, 'Prelude to the Uprising in the Gaza Strip' in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 20/1 (Autumn, 1990), 1–23.

29. Abourahme, *The Time Beneath the Concrete*, 124.

30. Kanafani, 'The Underlying Synthesis of the Revolution: Theses on the Organisational Weapon (1971)' in *Selected Political Writings*, 170.