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Nasir's Egypt and the Reemergence of the Palestinian National Movement

Laurie Brand¹

The post-1948 reemergence of the Palestinian national movement is generally traced to the mid-1960s, specifically to the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization at the initiation of the Arab League and with the special patronage of Egyptian President Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir. However, such an analysis overlooks the fact that some Palestinian institutions continued to function during the 1948–49 period and others began to regroup shortly thereafter to address the new social and political needs of a displaced and stateless people. In addition, throughout the 1950s and early 1960s politicized Palestinians participated in the entire spectrum of political parties and movements, from the Muslim Brethren to the Arab Nationalist Movement. All of these activities, whether specifically Palestinian or more generally Arab nationalist or Islamic, should be understood as laying the groundwork for the establishment of a larger, diaspora-wide Palestinian political entity. Indeed, 1964 and the founding of the PLO may be better understood as the natural conclusion of the first chapter of the national movement's reemergence rather than as its beginning, as it is often presented.

While the role of Egyptian President Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir in supporting the establishment of the PLO is acknowledged (although, at least among

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Western writers, it is generally presented in a negative light), Egypt's role in providing an environment conducive to other, earlier developments among Palestinians has not been fully documented. There were, in fact, several Palestinian institutions in Egypt prior to the establishment of the PLO: the Palestine Students Union, which operated throughout the 1950s and eventually served as a catalyst for the founding of the General Union of Palestine Students (GUPS) in 1959; the General Union of Palestine Workers (GUPW), founded in 1963; and the League of Palestinian Women in Egypt, founded in 1962, which later became the Egypt branch of the General Union of Palestinian Women.

The most influential of the three, the GUPS, was the first democratically elected Palestinian organization, and its precursor, the Palestine Students Union in Cairo, served as a representative Palestinian voice both in Arab and international circles as early as 1955. Moreover, it was from the ranks of the founders and early leaders of the student movement that the current PLO leadership graduated, eventually taking control of the Palestinian national movement. The other two groups also influenced the subsequent development of other institutions. The League of Palestinian Women participated in the diaspora-wide contacts that led to the establishment of the General Union of Palestinian Women in 1965 (GUPWom). The GUPW used Egypt as a base from which to expand activities and subsequently establish chapters throughout the Arab world.

This article will first examine the origins and nature of the Palestinian community in Egypt. It will then detail the evolution of the women's, workers', and students' unions and explain in economic and political terms why it was Egypt, a country hosting only a few thousand Palestinians, that provided the most fertile ground in the 1950s and early 1960s for open Palestinian political activity and organizing.

The Palestinian Refugees in Egypt

Some Palestinians who had relatives living or studying in Egypt chose to take refuge there as the security situation in Palestine deteriorated in late spring 1948. Many came to the Cairo suburb of Heliopolis, where they rented apartments or found rooms in hotels. A large influx of Palestinians was precipitated by the Irgun's 25 April attack on Jaffa. Some 3,000 of the city's Arab residents set out for Port Sa'id and Alexandria by boat. To receive the Palestinians fleeing these hostilities, the Egyptian Ministry of Social Affairs set up two camps: the first in the Cairo neighborhood of al-'Abbasiyyah in British war barracks, and the second in al-Qantarah

Sharq on the Sinai side of the Suez Canal. In September 1948 al-'Abbasiyyah camp was closed, and its inhabitants were sent to al-Qantarah, the population of which thereby rose to 11,000.¹

Gradually, those refugees who had sufficient financial resources *and* the sponsorship of an Egyptian national were permitted to leave the camp to reside in Egypt proper. In September 1949, those who remained were transferred to Gaza according to an agreement concluded between the Egyptian government and the Quakers, who had taken an active role in early refugee relief efforts in Gaza. As time passed, many of those who had in 1949 demonstrated sufficient resources to obtain residency began to feel financial pressures. Forbidden to work—a condition of their residency—many were forced to seek refugee relief in the form of food and monetary subsidies from the Egyptian government. While exact statistics are not available, a reasonable estimate of the number of Palestinians residing in Egypt in 1950 would be between 7,000 and 10,000.²

The regime continued to limit severely any movement of Palestinians from Gaza, which was administered by the Egyptian military, into Egypt. Unemployment and a swiftly growing population plagued Egypt, and the regime was unwilling to exacerbate its internal problems by allowing a mass movement of Palestinians from the even more seriously overpopulated and economically overburdened Strip. Only at the time of the 1967 war was there a substantial influx of Palestinians from Gaza into Egypt.

Administration of Palestinian Affairs

In September 1948, the Arab Higher Committee, the Palestinian political leadership from 1936 to the end of the mandate, which had since spring 1948 been stressing to the Arab League the need to establish a Palestinian government, proclaimed the establishment of the All-Palestine Government (APG) (*Hukumat 'Umum Filastin*). In order to affirm its legitimacy in the face of attempts by Transjordan's King 'Abdallah to discredit it, the APG convened a conference, a Palestine national council, in Gaza on 1 October 1948. The Council proclaimed Palestine's complete independence as a free, democratic, and sovereign state. Although all member states of the Arab League (with the exception of Transjordan) recognized the government, effective recognition gradually waned. The political campaign waged by 'Abdallah effectively demonstrated that certain vocal—if minority—segments of the Palestinian notable class outside the boundaries of what became the Jewish state sought union with Transjordan. Furthermore, shortly after the APG's founding, the Arab League refused to

invite APG members to attend its meetings, and Egypt, the most important patron of the Palestinian government, transferred the APG's headquarters from Gaza to Cairo, thus removing it from the only territory over which it had any hope of establishing sovereignty. An Egyptian military administration was then established in Gaza to administer the territory. Effectively emasculated by the Egyptian occupation and control and further weakened by the fact that the only other part of Palestine not incorporated into the state of Israel, the West Bank, was annexed in 1950 by 'Abdallah, the APG never developed into a political force of any consequence. Its president, Ahmad Hilmi 'Abd al-Baqi, was provided an annual subsidy by the Arab League to maintain an office, but the office dealt with little more than Palestinian residence and travel documents, student problems, and, occasionally, refugee affairs. The institution continued in name and barely in substance until Ahmad Hilmi's death in 1963.³

The Free Officers Revolution of July 1952 initially had little impact on the status of Palestinians whether they lived under the Egyptian military administration in Gaza or in Egypt itself. The new regime's efforts were, naturally, directed toward consolidating power. However, beginning in 1954 a series of laws was passed allowing Palestinians residing in Egypt to practice law, medicine, and dentistry.⁴ Given the small number of Palestinians affected, these laws likely had more of a positive public relations effect (both in Egypt and abroad) than a real impact on the community. More important were the gradual loosening of the no-work regulation—applicable only to *resident* Palestinians, not to those from Gaza—and the dramatic increase in the number of Palestinian students accepted into Egyptian universities and educated free of charge.

The importance of Egypt's opening its universities to Palestinians, especially during this period, should not be underestimated. During the 1950s, when many Palestinians were struggling to reestablish themselves after the losses of 1948, education was a most precious commodity. Many families made great sacrifices simply to put one son through college with the expectation that after graduation he would support the rest of the family. In Egypt, the presence of a well-developed university system, the low cost of living, the increasingly Arab-nationalist political climate (particularly after 1955), and the availability of stipends and subsidies attracted Palestinian students (as well as students from other Arab countries) by the hundreds and later by the thousands. Thus, Egypt's educational policies opened the doors of employment and upward mobility to thousands of Palestinians who would otherwise have had virtually no hope of attending university.

It was in the mid-1950s that Nasir began to rise to prominence in the Arab world and beyond. While the growing feelings of Arab nationalism during the period no doubt account in part for the regime's policy toward educating other Arabs, it is likely there were other considerations as well. Nasir no doubt viewed the cost of educating the students as a minor investment in comparison with the returns: politicized groups of professionals, indebted to the Egyptian regime, who after graduation could be expected to find employment throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf. Moreover, the small size of the indigenous Palestinian community, those who would continue to reside in Egypt after their university years, meant Nasir ran little risk of training young people who might mobilize against him at home. The more mobilized, highly visible, and influential the students were abroad, the greater the potential political benefit to Egypt and its president.

The Palestine Students Union and the General Union of Palestine Students

The presence of Palestinian students in Cairo predates the events of 1948. Indeed, Palestinian nationalist leader al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the mufti of Jerusalem, was one of a number of Palestinians who studied in Cairo in the early years of this century, and, although accounts are sketchy, it appears there was a Palestinian student organization, however informal, even at that time (1911–13).⁵ By the mid-1940s the student group had developed a more formal structure.⁶ Many of the Palestinian students who went to Egypt in this period enrolled in al-Azhar (Cairo's 1,000-year-old Islamic university and the only university at the time that subsidized needy students), Cairo University (Fu'ad I University until the 1952 revolution), and the American University in Cairo. However, with the increased number of universities in the 1950s, students began enrolling in Alexandria University, 'Ayn Shams (in Cairo), Asyut, and some of the higher institutes.⁷ As the Palestinian student population in Egypt grew, the Palestine Students Union (PSU), as the student organization had come to be called, also grew.

During the period immediately following the defeat of the Arab armies in Palestine, the communists and the Muslim Brethren (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*) were the predominant transnational political currents in the Arab world. Arab nationalist organizations were still in their infancy. The Ikhwan in particular had a clear commitment to Palestine, which it had demonstrated through its participation in the 1948 war.⁸ It called for the

liberation of Palestine and it alone in Egypt allowed non-Egyptian participation.⁹ For these reasons, many of those who joined the PSU in the early years favored the Ikhwan. Communist elements were also present, but never in a majority.

In 1952, on a simple platform of Palestinian self-reliance, a young engineering student who had participated in anti-British military activities in the Canal Zone, Yasir Arafat, and a former resident of Jaffa who had come to Cairo from a refugee camp in Gaza, Salah Khalaf, decided to test the political waters of the student union and enter the elections for the executive committee. The list of candidates they assembled included four independents, one communist, one Ba'thi, and one member of the Ikhwan. It won an overwhelming majority and Arafat was elected president of the union, a position he retained until his graduation in 1956.¹⁰

Although the All-Palestine Government served at the time as the ostensible representative or government-in-exile for Palestinians, the APG's lack of power or sovereignty effectively left Palestinians in a political void. During this period, the PSU was the only Palestinian organization that held democratic elections, thereby rendering it the most legitimate spokesman of Palestinian aspirations. Moreover, the Cairo location of the union—at the crossroads of the Arab, African, and Islamic worlds—heightened its potential importance, for it presented wide-ranging possibilities for making political contacts and engaging in informational work. Cooperation and participation with the Egyptian Students Union also helped the Palestinians ease into what might otherwise have been closed circles. As a result, the union continued to grow in size and importance. With the increasing prestige of Nasir and the influx of more students, by the mid-1950s the PSU counted some five hundred members.¹¹

The students scored their first victory in an international forum in 1955 when the PSU sent a delegation that included Arafat and Khalaf to the International Union of Students (IUS) Congress. The Palestinians managed to thwart the efforts of the Israeli student delegation and won for Palestinian students full membership in the IUS. In 1956, in the wake of the French, British, and Israeli tripartite aggression against Egypt following Nasir's nationalization of the Suez Canal Company and in a natural extension of their ever-broadening realm of activity, the students assembled a Palestinian commando unit to serve along with Egyptian volunteers.¹² Arafat, a reserve officer in the Egyptian army, was sent to Port Sa'id to participate in a mine-sweeping operation. Khalaf had to content himself with keeping watch at Cairo's bridges.¹³

In Arafat's own estimation, however, his most important achievement during his tenure as president of the PSU was winning official Egyptian approval to publish and distribute a student magazine called *Sawt Filastin*. The students, according to Arafat, were aware that this magazine was not solely, or even primarily, for the union. It was, instead, a way of addressing Palestinians throughout the Arab world, from Gaza to Iraq, to exhort them to organize.¹⁴

By early 1957, Arafat, Khalaf, and many other members of the union had left Egypt for employment in the Arab states of the Gulf where, by 1959, they had regrouped and launched a new political movement, *Harakat al-Tahrir al-Watani al-Filastini*, more commonly known as Fateh. The departure of these early organizers, however, did not stunt the union's growth. Following the July 1958 coup of 'Abd al-Karim Qasim, the new Iraqi regime began to encourage the establishment of popular organizations founded along sectoral lines. Taking their cue from this idea, Palestinian students in Iraq set up a secret office and began to work toward a federation to unify the various Palestinian student chapters that had been set up in Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria.¹⁵

The deterioration of Egyptian-Iraqi relations in 1959, however, led Qasim to expel Palestinians with Nasirist tendencies, among them, the student leaders. Many first went to Syria, then the "northern region" of the UAR, and after meeting there with Nasir, to Egypt. In Cairo, the PSU, which was then overwhelmingly composed of pro-Nasir Ba'thists, proposed to the Egyptian president the idea of establishing a federation of Palestinian students. Nasir lent full support to the idea and to its realization in Cairo. Plans were set in motion to convene a meeting of Palestinian student leaders from across the diaspora. On 29 November 1959 representatives of Palestinian student organizations in Cairo, Asyut, Alexandria, Damascus, and Beirut attended the first conference of the General Union of Palestine Students (GUPS), held at Cairo University.

The political positions taken by students and their new federation, the GUPS, were a serious matter, for, in the absence of a Palestinian political entity, the GUPS was the sole forum in which Palestinians could express themselves politically as Palestinians. Indeed, it was in its chapters that many Palestinians from various parts of the diaspora first came together to express themselves and act on the basis of a common Palestinian identity. Thus, the experience both consolidated the sense of national identity and played a critical role in political mobilization among Palestinian youth.

For those students committed to their cause, GUPS elections and political debates evoked enthusiasm and passion. Perhaps more important,

Arab leaders quickly realized that GUPS activities represented something far more significant than youngsters playing at politics. From Nasir of Egypt to Faysal of Saudi Arabia, Arab presidents and kings met and conferred with the student leaders. They treated the GUPS as a political organization of consequence: they subsidized it to increase their influence and swiftly repressed it when the subsidies failed to work their political magic.

Indeed, it was the GUPS—not the Arab League or an Arab government—which first called for the establishment of a Palestinian entity, a liberation army, and a liberation organization.¹⁶ It may have been student politics, but the stakes were high and the goals were taken most seriously. However, during the early days of the GUPS the students were still straitjacketed by the Arab states' failure to press for them.

It was during the period between the GUPS' third conference (held in Gaza in 1963) and its fourth conference (held in Cairo in 1965) that the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was established. The students were thus forced to define the relationship of the GUPS to the new Palestinian political entity. Without first receiving student consent, the PLO referred to the GUPS as one of its "bases" (*qawa'id*), meaning it considered the student federation to be subject to its political line. The GUPS rejected such a constraint. Mistrustful of the PLO's leadership (regarded by the students as representatives of the traditional, ineffective Palestinian leadership), political style, and intentions vis-à-vis the GUPS, the students issued a sharp criticism of the PLO on 18 June 1964.¹⁷ Although attempts were made to set down principles regulating the relationship between the two organizations, it was not until after the ouster of the original PLO leadership following the debacle of the 1967 war, and its replacement by the union's first activists (Arafat, Khalaf, et al.) that relations between the PLO and the GUPS were normalized.

The League of Palestinian Women

Although Palestinian women had continued to work in Jordan and Lebanon in various, largely charitable, societies during and after the 1948 war, an organization in Egypt, the League of Palestinian Women, was not founded until 1963. The small size and scattered nature of the Palestinian community in Egypt limited the opportunities for Palestinians to meet and interact. The impetus to organize women came at a medical conference attended by Samirah Abu Ghazalah, a graduate student who later became a leading member of the Palestinian women's movement. During the conference, she was seated, by coincidence, next to another Palestinian

woman. The fact that there were Palestinian women living in Egypt, who shared many of the same problems yet were unaware of each other's presence in the country was a serious problem that Abu Ghazalah believed needed to be remedied.

Together with several other Palestinian women who were also graduate students in the early 1960s, Abu Ghazalah began reorganizing Palestinian women in Egypt. It is significant that none of the women who founded the League of Palestinian Women were from Palestinian families residing in Egypt. Therefore, they were unlikely to stay in the country after the completion of their studies.¹⁸ This common theme—the transitory nature of the Palestinian presence—may be found in all the Palestinian institutions in Egypt. Indeed, it is a phenomenon characteristic to greater or lesser degrees, depending upon country and period, of the Palestinian diaspora in general.

At its founding, the women's league set straightforward and overwhelmingly political goals for itself: to bring together and strengthen the bonds of solidarity and cooperation among Palestinian women; to mobilize Palestinian women's talents and skills to serve the Palestinian cause; and to raise the social and cultural consciousness of Palestinian women. Its constitution forbade interference in Egyptian internal political matters. Membership was open to all Palestinian women as well as to non-Palestinians who supported the Palestinian cause.¹⁹

The already well-established GUPS lent an organizational hand to the women by making its offices available for meetings and by assisting with political and cultural programs. More significant for diaspora-wide organizing, however, the women in Cairo became involved in ongoing efforts among Palestinian women throughout the diaspora, though primarily in Lebanon and the West Bank, to unify the scattered Palestinian women's societies. With additional encouragement from the PLO (after its founding in 1964), a meeting of representatives of these societies was finally held in Jerusalem in 1965. The conferees proclaimed the establishment of the General Union of Palestinian Women along the same lines as the GUPS and the General Union of Palestine Workers, although, unlike the students, the women had no objection to the classification of their union as a base of the PLO. With the establishment of the GUPWom, the League of Palestinian Women became the union's Egypt branch. And although an Alexandria, Egypt chapter of the GUPWom was established after the 1967 war, largely in response to the influx of additional refugees, the center of Palestinian women's activity in Egypt remained Cairo.

The General Union of Palestine Workers

Labor organizing among Palestinians first began in 1925 under the auspices of the Palestinian Arab Workers Society (PAWS) headquartered in Haifa. The PAWS actively defended workers' rights in addition to playing a political role in the national struggle against increasing Jewish immigration to Palestine. The establishment of the state of Israel and the destruction and displacement that followed ended the activity of the PAWS branches in the areas falling under Israeli control—most notably the two strongest branches, those in Haifa and Jaffa. After the war, many trade union activists gathered in Nablus, the major industrial city of the West Bank, and continued their trade union activities. However, a 1957 military coup attempt in Jordan brought the imposition of extensive political restrictions, and some Palestinian labor leaders were forced to seek political asylum in Egypt and Syria. Thus, as had been the case with the women and their reorganizing efforts, the workers who pushed for the reestablishment of a Palestinian trade union came from the communities outside Egypt. The moving force was an experienced trade union activist from Nablus, Husni Salih al-Khuffash.

Despite the small size of the Palestinian working class in Egypt, Cairo provided ideal conditions for the workers' major reorganizing thrust. In the first place, given Egypt's rising influence in the 1950s, Cairo was the political and cultural center of the Arab world. The International Federation of Arab Trade Unions (IFATU) was headquartered there. Furthermore, after the breakup of the Egyptian-Syrian union in 1961, Nasir undoubtedly felt he could reinforce his Pan-Arab credentials and strengthen his hand in inter-Arab politics by supporting Palestinian political organizing. As with the students, such mobilization in Egypt posed little security threat. The long-term resident Palestinian community was too small to be, by itself, a political force of any consequence, and Egyptian intelligence could easily keep an eye on the union leadership.

Khuffash began his efforts to regroup Palestinian workers from within the IFATU. In a letter to Muhammad As'ad Rajih, the head of the IFATU, Khuffash stressed the importance of having an experienced Palestinian capable of explaining the Palestine issue as a delegate to the union and its conferences. Rajih was sympathetic and offered to put IFATU facilities at Khuffash's disposal.²⁰ On 25 May 1962 Khuffash issued a statement in the name of the General Committee for Palestine Workers, calling upon Palestinians to unite. Khuffash was then joined by another former Palestinian trade unionist, Naji al-Kawni, and the two worked together on a

weekly publication, *al-Nashrah*, circulated primarily in Gaza, but also throughout the Arab world. Gradually other trade unionists enlisted in the committee. On 27 October 1962, Khuffash became supervisor of the IFATU newspaper and publications in which he began to introduce with greater frequency articles dealing with the Palestine question.²¹

After the launching of *al-Nashrah*, organizing efforts began in earnest. Kawni, originally a mechanic, was responsible for Hilwan, an industrial area south of Cairo, where there was a concentration of Palestinian workers in the auto factories and iron and steel works. Kawni visited Hilwan virtually every day, going from factory to factory to talk with workers. As an outsider, his task was a difficult one. According to his own testimony, the greatest hurdle was convincing the men that the Egyptian government was not opposed to the idea of their organizing.²² Once convinced that such an institution would serve their interests, six workers joined with Kawni to establish the Chapter of Palestine Workers in Hilwan.

In 1963 Khuffash made a series of trips abroad related to labor organizing. As head of an IFATU mission to the People's Republic of China, he succeeded in having the Palestine issue put on the agenda. In fact, the conference published several decisions in support of the Palestinians and their cause—at the time a virtually unprecedented and therefore highly significant achievement in an international arena. Khuffash also continued his efforts on the Arab front. In February 1963 he visited Kuwait with an eye toward organizing the large Palestinian working class there and then in August 1963 went to Gaza to investigate working conditions.²³

As the only part of Palestine that had not been annexed by Jordan nor become a part of Israel, Gaza, in the minds of Khuffash and others, constituted the most natural place for the reemergence of a strong Palestinian labor movement. Khuffash's memoirs describe the terrible working conditions in Gaza and place substantial blame on the Palestinian upper classes which, in conjunction with the Egyptian military administration, worked to block efforts at trade union organizing.²⁴ Despite the obstacles, in 1963 six labor unions—metal industries workers, carpenters and construction workers, agricultural workers, public services and commercial employees, drivers, and tailors and weavers—were finally established in Gaza.²⁵

In the meantime, Khuffash and Kawni continued to recruit among Palestinian workers in Egypt. Their initial successes in Hilwan were followed by the opening of chapters in Cairo, Kafr al-Shaykh, Suhag, Qina, Alexandria, al-Buhayrah, Tanta, and Qalyubiyah. On 3 August 1963, these chapters of Palestinian workers in Egypt joined together and pro-

claimed the establishment of the General Union of Palestine Workers (GUPW). The primary target of the organizers remained Gaza, but resistance to their organizing efforts had been negligible in Egypt itself, and Khuffash and his associates believed the proclamation of the general union would assist organizing efforts elsewhere, particularly in Gaza.²⁶

On 28 March 1964 the IFATU sponsored a "Palestine Conference" in Gaza. Since many of the Palestinians who participated had not seen each other since 1948, the conference served to reinforce national ties, boost morale, and spur them on to greater action. Attended by labor representatives from throughout the Arab world and beyond, the conference encouraged the Palestinian workers in Gaza and elsewhere to mobilize and demand more freedom to organize. In the wake of the conference, the GUPW increased the frequency of publication of *al-Nashrah* and its circulation widened. Meanwhile, Khuffash, who had been elected general secretary of the GUPW, continued to visit concentrations of Palestinian workers. In 1964 branches of Palestinian workers in Kuwait and Baghdad joined the GUPW.

By virtue of its origins and, more important, its source of monetary support, the GUPW remained a subset of the IFATU. In a meeting in late 1964, however, Khuffash effectively declared the union's independence by refusing further monetary assistance from the IFATU. The separation was not the result of political differences. Khuffash simply felt that the time had come—and that it was possible—for the union to stand on its own. The GUPW general secretary insisted the union would henceforth rely on members' support and he proceeded to rent an independent office on Ramsis Street in downtown Cairo.²⁷

Despite the support provided by the establishment of the GUPW, labor organizing efforts in Gaza continued to encounter problems with the Egyptian military administration. Kawni downplayed the difficulties encountered in Gaza as perhaps stemming from security considerations.²⁸ Khuffash, on the other hand, noted in his memoirs that the military governor of Gaza at the time, General Yusif al-Aghrudi, pushed for the transfer of GUPW headquarters to Gaza where Gazans, i.e., cooperative Gazans, would likely have assumed leadership positions and where, presumably, the military would have had direct control. The military administration evidently did try to exert some pressure on labor organizing in the Strip by making licensing contingent upon the union's not joining the GUPW. Clauses tacked on to labor and work legislation placed additional pressure on unions.²⁹

While Gaza was still the primary focus of the organizing efforts, the leadership opposed moving the GUPW headquarters to the Strip. Even had there not been obstacles to free organizing in Gaza, Cairo had embassies, Arab and international labor organizations, and cultural centers and activities. To have transferred the headquarters to Gaza would have meant severely curtailing the union's informational work and restricting its access to its major sources of support.³⁰

Despite the pressure on the union, the GUPW held its first conference in April 1965 in Gaza. Unlike the GUPS, which had occasional run-ins with the Egyptian government over politics and policies, during this period the GUPW remained fully committed to Nasir and his political program. For students, the consequences of failing to adhere to the regime's political line meant frequent questioning sessions with the police, or at worst, expulsion from Egypt to the host state from which they came and where they could usually resume their studies. Workers, on the other hand, stood to lose jobs and perhaps even residency. Moreover, Khuffash's efforts at labor organizing in Gaza were already tenuous; they could have been completely quashed had he crossed the Egyptian regime. Finally, from the available sources it appears Khuffash and Kawni were, ideologically and politically, genuinely strong supporters of Nasir. Therefore, when the GUPW addressed the issue of its relationship to the PLO, the union not surprisingly expressed its solidarity for the new entity and declared itself a base of the PLO.

Nasir and the Founding of the PLO

The first inter-Arab resolution on a Palestinian political entity was issued during the first summit conference of the Arab League Council in January 1964. In February 1964, Ahmad al-Shuqayri, a Palestinian with long diplomatic experience who, after the death of Ahmad Hilmi of the APG, had been appointed to represent the Palestinians at the Arab League Council meeting in September 1963, called for the convening of a Palestine national council (PNC), to be held in Jerusalem in May 1964.

The January 1964 summit had empowered Shuqayri only to study means of arriving at sound bases for organizing the Palestinians. However, before the second Arab summit and before the convening of the first PNC, Shuqayri, owing largely to Nasir's support, went beyond the bounds discussed by the summit. He succeeded in persuading Nasir to open camps for training Palestinian army units and to provide equipment. Cairo empowered Shuqayri to prepare a law for the mandatory conscription of

Gazans and ordered the Gaza authorities to give the Palestinian representative full cooperation.

Before the May 1964 PNC, Shuqayri showed Nasir a draft of the Palestine National Covenant and discussed his plans for a Palestinian entity, all of which Nasir supported. Beyond considerations of Arab unity and the Palestinian cause, the Egyptian president saw such an entity under his patronage as an important reserve in the game of “verbal outbidding” (*muzayidat kalamiyah*) among Arab states and their leaders. Furthermore, at a time when the existence of the Palestinian people was denied and accounts of border problems with Israel were dismissed as Arab concoctions, a Palestinian entity could likewise prove an important political weapon in the struggle against Israel and its allies.³¹ Given the activity of the GUPS, the GUPW, and the women, Nasir likely also sensed that such an entity was bound to emerge anyway, in which case, early support meant greater potential influence at the expense of Egypt’s Arab rivals.

Acting with Egyptian support, the PLO, during the period immediately following its founding, was able to form and expand units of its Palestine Liberation Army in Gaza (the ‘Ayn Jalut Brigade), Syria (the Hittin Brigade), and Iraq (the Qadisiyyah Brigade). On a diplomatic and informational level, it opened additional offices in Arab and foreign capitals. Nasir himself addressed the second PNC meeting, which was held in Cairo. Nevertheless, the Egyptian president had stated during the 1964 summit that the liberation of Palestine was not an immediate issue and would have to await the solution of a number of other, more pressing Arab problems. His view of the PLO, like the view of many of its Palestinian founders, was that of an entity that would follow the lead of Arab states—not of a group acting with relative independence.

Nasir and the leaders of the other frontline Arab states, along with the leadership of the PLO, which had emerged under their auspices, were discredited by the 1967 war. However, the institutional framework of the liberation organization was in place and had, for a variety of political reasons, received the blessing of these regimes in 1964. At this point there was no turning back. Shuqayri and company were forced out and a new Palestinian leadership, one groomed for power during its days of political activism in the PSU and GUPS in Egypt, was waiting in the wings. By 1969 Yasir Arafat and his Fateh cohorts had consolidated their power in the PLO. They transformed it from a bureaucratic appendage of the Arab state system to a politico-military organization prepared to mobilize the Palestinians and lead a “people’s war.” Armed struggle became the primary *raison d’être* of the movement.

The new leadership owed its first opportunities for open, diaspora-wide political organizing to Nasir's Egypt; but, given the ideology of the emerging Palestinian resistance movement, of which these men were a part, it soon became clear that they intended to assert their right to independent action.

Conclusions

The 1948 war, the influx of refugees into Egypt and Gaza, and the Egyptian occupation of the Gaza Strip forced the Egyptian authorities to devise policies to regulate the Palestinian presence. The difficult economic situation in Egypt coupled with unemployment and a rising birth rate led the regime to formulate and enforce policies intended to keep the initial influx of refugees from Palestine to a minimum and to restrict severely later immigration of Palestinians to Egypt from the most likely provenance, Gaza.

The tiny, fragmented Palestinian community that did come to reside on a permanent basis in Egypt posed no internal political threat, and Nasir continued his predecessors' policies of limiting immigration from Gaza in order to keep Palestinian numbers small. Gaza was another matter, for here was a large exclusively Palestinian population living on Palestinian land. The kind of organizing allowed Palestinians in Egypt, had it been allowed in Gaza, would have had much greater potential to take root in the Strip, expand, and, probably, ultimately challenge the Egyptian occupation. Egyptian security concerns vis-à-vis Israel as well as the shared economic interests that had developed between the Egyptian military and wealthy Gazan merchants meant that formal or institutional expressions of Palestinian nationalist sentiment in Gaza had to be kept in check.

The opportunity to organize was, instead, extended in Egypt. Nasir's admission of Palestinian students to Egyptian universities and his support, both financial and political, for "the cause" earned him wide support. Few in number in comparison with the host population and many of them only temporary residents, the Palestinians in Egypt were relatively marginal to Egyptian society and domestic politics; this marginality rendered their organizing less of a threat. It was for these reasons that the role of Nasir's Egypt was so critical in the reemergence of the Palestinian national movement. A politicized core of Palestinians, particularly students and workers but women too, had been champing at the bit, awaiting any political opening to reorganize more freely. They were out of the gate before it completely opened. And once out, there was no going back.



1. *Al-Lajnah al-'Uliyah li-Shu'un al-Muhajirin al-Filastiniyyin: A'maluha mundhu Takwiniha ila Nihayat 'Am 1966* [The Higher Committee for Palestinian Immigrant Affairs: Its Activities from Its Founding through the End of 1966] (Cairo: Ministry of Social Affairs, n.d.), 6–13.
2. *Ibid.*, 12. The figure of 7,000 is also given in *Al-Filastiniyyun f-il-Watan al-'Arabi* [Palestinians in the Arab Homeland] (Cairo: Ma'had al-Buhuth w-al-Dirasat al-'Arabiyyah, 1978), 93.
3. See *Al-Filastiniyyun f-il-Watan al-'Arabi*, 578–79 and *Qararat Majlis Jami'at al-Duwal al-'Arabiyyah al-Khassah bi-Qadiyyat Filastin* [Resolutions of the League of Arab States on the Palestine Problem], 75. For a more detailed discussion of the APG see 'Isa al-Shu'aybi, *Al-Kiyaniyyah al-Filastiniyyah: Al-Wa'i al-Dhati w-al-Tatawwur al-Mu'assasati* [Palestinian Statism: Entity Consciousness and Institutional Development] (Beirut: PLO Research Center, 1979), 18–22.
4. *Al-Waqa'i' al-Misriyyah*, no. 58, 22 July 1954; no. 74, 16 September 1954; and no. 84, 24 October 1954.
5. Interview by the author with 'Abd al-Muhsin Abu Mayzir, official spokesman of the Palestine National Salvation Front and former PSU member, Damascus, 11 September 1986. Amin al-Husayni studied at al-Azhar, Dar al-Da'wa w-al-Irshad, and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the Egyptian University. See Bayan al-Hut, *Al-Qiyadat w-al-Mu'assasat al-Siyasiyyah fi Filastin 1917–1948* [Political Leadership and Institutions in Palestine 1917–1948] (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1981), 201–2.
6. Shihadah Musa, "Hawla Tajribat al-Ittihad al-'Amm li-Talabat Filastin" [On the Experience of the GUPS], *Shu'un Filastiniyyah* 5 (November 1971): 181.
7. *Al-Harakah al-Tullabiyyah al-Filastiniyyah* [The Palestinian Student Movement] (Kuwait: GUPS, Kuwait Branch, 1983), 4–5.
8. Richard Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 56.
9. Interview by the author with Muhammad Subayh, former GUPS president, 26 November 1983.
10. Abu Iyad (Salah Khalaf) with Eric Rouleau, *My Home My Land: A Narrative of the Palestinian Struggle*. Translated by Linda Butler Koseoglu (New York: Times Books, 1981), 21.
11. Interview by the author with 'Abd al-Fattah Sharif, former employee of the APG and longtime resident of Egypt, 15 February 1984.
12. Abu Iyad, *My Home My Land*, 23.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Alan Hart, *Arafat: Terrorist or Peacemaker?* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1984), 90–91.
15. Interview by the author with Zuhayr al-Khatib, former GUPS president, 10 March 1984; *Al-Harakah al-Tullabiyyah al-Filastiniyyah*, 7–10.
16. Subayh interview.
17. *Al-Kitab al-Sanawi l-il-Qadiyyah al-Filastiniyyah*, 1964 [The Palestine Yearbook, 1964] (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1965), 105.
18. Interviews by the author with Samirah Abu Ghazalah, 17 October and 28 November 1983.
19. "Al-Nizam al-Asasi li-Rabitat al-Mar'ah al-Filastiniyyah" [The Constitution of the League of Palestinian Women] (Cairo: n.d.) (Photocopy.)
20. *Mudhakkirat Husni Salih al-Khuffash* [Memoirs of Husni Salih al-Khuffash] (Beirut: PLO Research Center, 1973), 68.
21. *Ibid.*

22. Interview by the author with Naji al-Kawni, 4 August 1986.
23. Interview by the author with 'Awni Battash, former general secretary of the General Union of Palestine Workers, Kuwait Branch, 7 March 1984.
24. *Khuffash Memoirs*, 71–72.
25. Interview by the author with Yunis al-Katari, member of the PLO Department of the Occupied Homeland and active with the GUPW in Egypt, 21 November 1983.
26. *Khuffash Memoirs*, 72.
27. *Ibid.*, 84.
28. Kawni interview.
29. *Khuffash Memoirs*, 85.
30. Kawni interview.
31. Shu'aybi, *Al-Kiyaniyyah al-Filastiniyyah*, 101–2 and 116.