

Fawzi Al-Qawuqji:

Yesterday's hero

By Mona Anis and Omayma Abdel-Latif

To those who still remember him, today, his name is synonymous with the bitter taste of defeat: of hope deferred, then disappointed. But he was a hero, then, write Mona Anis and Omayma Abdel-Latif: the man who would liberate Palestine

Fawzi Al-Qawuqji's name is probably unknown to anyone too young to have lived through the events of 1948. During the months preceding May of that year, however, his name, along with that of the leader of the Palestinian guerrillas, Abdel-Qadir Al-Husseini, entered the hearts of the common people on Arab streets. They chanted his name in demonstrations, and bestowed upon him the legendary status of a saviour.

He was the leader of the Arab Liberation Army (ALA), a voluntary force of some few thousand Arab irregulars formed to help Palestinians resist the partition of their homeland after a recommendation made by the Arab League in December 1947. Unlike Abdel-Qadir Al-Husseini, whose martyrdom in Al-Qastel Battle in April 1948 lent his name a lasting glow, Al-Qawuqji lived on, long after the humiliating defeat of the Arabs, regulars and irregulars, to see his name ridiculed as it became synonymous with empty talk.

When he died in Beirut in December 1976 -- he was Lebanese, although at the time of his birth there was no such a thing as a Lebanese nationality -- few remembered him. But the PLO executive committee, still in Beirut at that time, issued a statement mourning his death and recognising the "role he played on the land of Palestine".

Quite why Al-Qawuqji became the figure on whom people pinned their hopes when his record on the battlefield was nothing but one defeat after another is a question beyond the scope of this article. It would seem, however, that part of the celebrity surrounding his name was due to his constant defiance of the dominant powers. A perpetual rebel, he participated in almost every major Arab revolt during the first half of this century.

He graduated from the Military Academy in Constantinople in 1912, fought in the first World War, then returned to his native Tripoli. There he met Prince Faisal, the son of the Sherif Hussein, the leader of the first Arab revolt. Faisal asked him to join the Arab forces marching to Damascus under his command, where they intended to establish an Arab state. He fought the French in the battle of Maisloun, in Syria, and in 1925 participated in the Mount Lebanon revolt, led by Sultan Al-Atrash against the French. Following the quashing of the revolt, he went to live in Saudi Arabia, where he remained until 1932. In the Kingdom, however, he fell out with King Abdel-Aziz, who had him arrested and then expelled.

In Baghdad, he entered the Military Academy for further studies and remained there as an officer in the Iraqi army until his departure to Palestine in 1936. The revolution had broken out, and he

led guerrilla operations against the British and Zionist gangs until the revolution, too, was crushed. On his return to Baghdad in 1941, he joined Rashid Ali Al-Kilani's movement against the British, and fought fiercely on the Jordanian borders against the Transjordan Army, led by General John Glubb, the foremost British officer in the Middle East, who was wounded in one of these battles. Later, Al-Qawuqji was seriously injured on the battlefield and was taken to Germany. There he underwent treatment, met and married his German wife, and remained until the end of the second World War.

The story of his return to the Arab world after the end of the war is a series of adventures, and it is only thanks to top-secret British documents, released only last year, that we know the true story of his flight from Germany to France, his narrow escape from arrest in Palestine, and his arrival in Cairo on 23 February 1947.

The documents at the British Public Records Office prove that Al-Qawuqji's name was legendary not only among the common people, but among the British authorities as well. The British, however, considered him not a hero but a dangerous man, and exerted every effort in attempting to stop him. On his way from Paris to Cairo, the plane carrying him was diverted to Lydda airport and a British officer accompanied by a Hebrew soldier boarded in search of Al-Qawuqji. If they failed to recognise him, it was only because he was sitting next to his wife, speaking in German.

In the House of Commons, British Colonial Secretary Arthur Creech Jones was asked what would have happened if the British authorities had been able to identify Al-Qawuqji in Lydda. Creech Jones revealed: "Had security forces recognised him they would have done something, but he remained in Lydda airport for only one hour, he was carrying a false passport and his luggage was registered under a different name."

A telegram to London from the British ambassador in Cairo, dated 1 March 1947, provides further details of Al-Qawuqji's arrival in Egypt: "Fawzi arrived in Almaza [Cairo] airport on 23 of February. Upon our request his name was put on the black list, hence the passport officer refused to grant him a permit to leave the airport." After some argument, the ambassador continued, Al-Qawuqji persuade the officer to let him talk to Abdel-Rahman Azam Pasha, and the Secretary-general of the Arab League instructed the officer to grant him 24-hour visa. Then Azam phoned Nuqrashi Pasha, the Egyptian prime minister, who feared the news of Al-Qawuqji's arrival. At first Nuqrashi refused to allow Fawzi to stay in Egypt, and asked that he leave immediately. But Azam drew his attention to the fact that any cruelty against Fawzi "must remain within limits, as he is a national hero." Finally, Nuqrashi agreed that Al-Qawuqji spend four days in Egypt. "He is now residing at the Hotel Continental," the ambassador wired, "and will be leaving to Beirut midnight tomorrow."

From Lebanon Al-Qawuqji made his way to Syria, where on 3 November 1974 the British chargé d'affaires in Damascus reported to the Foreign Office that his American counterpart had been to tea with Al-Qawuqji at the house of his host, Ahmed Al-Sharabati. The British official noted with not a little spite: "He is living in a plush house in the best neighbourhood in Damascus, owned by Sharabati, the minister of defence, who gives him a monthly allowance of 1,000 lire."



Al-Sharabati's generosity, he told the American diplomat, was due to the fact that "he is rich while his friend is poor." As for the encounter with Al-Qawuqji himself, the American diplomat had apparently learned that the regular armies of the Arab countries would be inefficient, "as the Arab countries are divided among themselves and cannot fight a united battle." People's war is the solution, the Arab revolutionary revealed, adding that he had "great experience in that kind of war". The British chargé d'affaires concluded that, according to his American colleague, it was that Al-Qawuqji was exerting every effort in preparing for this project, which he had returned to carry out.

On 2 February 1948, *Al-Ahram* published an interview conducted by the UP correspondent in Damascus, Samir Souqi, with Fawzi Al-Qawuqji. The UP correspondent described the headquarters as follows: "This Arab leader, motivated by utmost resolve, has made of his home a military headquarters guarded by irregulars in American military uniform. Not an hour of the day passes without Bedouins, peasants and young men in modern clothes turning up on his doorstep, demanding to enlist as volunteers in th Arab Liberation Army. He also has headquarters in Qatanah, where volunteers are undergoing military training, waiting to be sent to Palestine. He refused to let me visit the place, though, which no journalist has ever seen. In his house there is a special room entered only by trusted people: the room of his aide-de-camp, Mahmoud Al-Rifa'i, a graduate of the Potsdam Military Academy. While we were talking, Taha Al-Hashimi Pasha, whom military experts say is one of the greatest military leaders in the Arab world, entered. Al-Qawuqji asked to be excused and took him to another room. I noticed that Al-Hashimi was carrying several large maps of Palestine."

Al-Qawuqji told the UP reporter: "American policy on the partition of Palestine threatens all American interests throughout the Middle East. How on earth can America think of laying

pipelines in the region now? They have angered the Arabs so much that now they will never be able to carry out a single project."

The tension rose further, and Al-Qawuqji's plans made front-page headlines. *Al-Ahram* of 9 February reported: "Attack on Palestine begins next week." Below the headline, *Al-Ahram's* special correspondent in Damascus wrote: "Well-informed sources reveal that the Arab leaders have decided to stage the first phase of their attack on the Jews in Palestine in the coming week. The same sources reveal that Ismail Safwat Pasha [head of the technical committee formed by the Arab League has been appointed general commander of the Arab Liberation Army, while Fawzi Al-Qawuqji has been appointed commander of the forces stationed in Syria and Lebanon." *Al-Ahram's* correspondent added: "Instead of the scattered battles that have taken place in Palestine until now, Palestine will be divided into three main fronts, so that military operations can be coordinated according to a master plan. Al-Qawuqji will command a front including northern Palestine and the coastline, including Haifa, Jaffa and Tel Aviv. He is now in Beirut, working on the final details of his plan."

The other two fronts, the correspondent wrote, "will be Jerusalem and southern Palestine. The Grand Mufti, Hajj Amin Al-Husseini, will designate the leader of the Jerusalem front. It is said that the post will go to Abdel-Qadir Al-Husseini, while the southern front will be placed under the command of an Egyptian leading battalions of Egyptian volunteers as well as Libyans and the Bedouins of the Sinai Peninsula." The report concluded: "Of course, Taha Al-Hashimi Pasha who has been appointed General Inspector of the Arab Liberation Army will be supervising the overall logistics."

On 15 February, *Al-Ahram's* main banners announced: "Arab forces preparing to march on Palestine. Plans for the war of liberation. The regular armies' mission. Damascus to be the Arab Army Command headquarters." Below, the paper's correspondent in Beirut reported: "The Arab forces are ready to launch the Jihad outside and inside Palestine according to a master plan, to be implemented in several phases." He added: "Four thousand *mujahidin* [guerrillas] are fighting alongside the Palestinians inside the country, while hundreds of others are awaiting the orders of General Ismail Safwat to cross the borders under the command of Fawzi Al-Qawuqji."

The reporter went on to discuss the positions of the Arab regular armies: "On the southern front, Egyptian forces are stationed in Al-Arish and Rafah near the coast. Behind them are small Egyptian units stationed at various posts along the Egyptian-Palestinian borders." As for the Transjordan Army, the *Al-Ahram* correspondent in Beirut did not neglect to mention that "some of the units of that army are cooperating with the British troops". As for the Syrian and Lebanese armies, he noted: "Their forces constantly patrol the borders and carry out frequent military maneuvers before the Zionist settlements."

Though the role of these regular armies, reported *Al-Ahram*, "is not yet clear: there is speculations that they will enter the Arab areas evacuated by the British troops, and supervise from there the military operations carried out by the Arab Liberation Army." He added: "It is also possible, however, that these armies will engage in combat with the Zionists. Informed sources, however, assert that the Arab countries will not send their armies to fight inside

Palestine as they are members of the UN. The sole mission of the Arab armies will be to police the area in order to cut off any weapons or food supplies to the Zionists in Palestine."

In an interview in *Le Monde*, reported in *Al-Ahram* the same day, Fawzi Al-Qawuqji said: "Major military operations have not started yet, but when the war breaks out, we will stun the Jews and the whole world. The war may last for a month; it could last for a century. But we will surely win."

At the beginning of March, there was still no news of the Arab Liberation Army, or its leader, Fawzi Al-Qawuqji, entering Palestine. *Al-Ahram* of 3 March reported the "Arab Liberation Army is anxious to fight"; the attack, however, was postponed "until discussions in the Security Council are concluded."

Below the headline, *Al-Ahram's* special correspondent from "somewhere in Palestine" reported that "crossing into Palestine from Syria or Lebanon has become easy now". He himself had crossed the border by car and met Al-Qawuqji's men at a post 30 miles inside Palestine. His guide during that journey was a 19-year-old Saudi, who had told him that the soldiers longed for the battle to begin, for all they had done thus far was "child's play". The young guerrilla mused: "War today is not the war our fathers and grandfathers fought. Politics are part of war now."