

## INSIDE THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT

**My Life in the PLO: The Inside Story of the Palestinian Struggle**, by Shafiq al-Hout, edited by Jean Said Makdisi and Martin Asser, translated by Hader al-Hout and Laila Othman. London: Pluto Press, 2010. 320 pages. \$104.00 cloth, \$29.00 paper.

### *Reviewed by As'ad AbuKhalil*

The memoirs of Shafiq al-Hout are the story of the Palestinian national movement in the twentieth century. Al-Hout lived a long life and was at the center of the Palestinian political struggle. He used to tell George Habash of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine that he was a communist (in his youth) when everyone around him was an Arab nationalist, then he became an Arab nationalist (in the 1960s) when everyone around him became a communist. During those political transformations, al-Hout remained a progressive and loud voice for Palestinian struggle.

Al-Hout was half Lebanese and was almost a Lebanese political figure. He often quoted Pierre Gemayyel, who wanted him to stick to his Lebanese roots and abandon the Palestinian struggle altogether. Al-Hout never did. Palestine was his life-long dream and obsession, and in his later years he felt frustrated with Palestinian political infighting. Shafiq al-Hout was many things in his long political career: he was at once a revolutionary, a writer, a journalist, an orator, an intellectual, a diplomat, and a political leader and adviser. He played a role in the Palestine Liberation Organization since its founding. He was a hard-core Nasserist, and his transformation from communism to Arab nationalism was partly due to his admiration for the Egyptian leader, whom he got to know rather well. His memoir vividly describes his

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long political journey, but al-Hout is too modest to give the reader the full picture of his political influence and impact.

Al-Hout became the first representative of the PLO in Lebanon, a role that allowed him to become a member of the political class there. He knew all its major and minor political leaders and had low opinions of most of them. His role was difficult not only because Israeli agents were constantly trying to kill him or bomb the PLO office, but also because his job coincided with the Lebanese civil war. Early on in the course of the war, al-Hout was a mediator between the PLO and the Phalange. He knew several Phalangist leaders well and used his contacts to help free many kidnapped Lebanese and Palestinians (although the Phalange rarely released any Palestinian in their custody).

The book is also quite essential to understanding Yasir Arafat, with whom al-Hout had close dealings over the years. Al-Hout was among the many Palestinians who were charmed by Arafat. Although he was much closer politically to the Rejectionist Front of George Habash, he knew that Arafat ran the show. Al-Hout was principled but capable of compromise. He was a full participant in the PLO's diplomatic initiative of the 1970s and accompanied Arafat during his famous UN speech (of which he was also a key writer). Al-Hout, however, never believed that diplomacy was an alternative to armed struggle; he believed they went hand in hand. And his relationship with Arafat went through ups and downs. Al-Hout was very cynical about Arafat: he knew that he was duplicitous and deceptive, but never doubted his keen political sense and his connection to the Palestinian masses.

But al-Hout was very critical of how Arafat managed the PLO and the Fatah movement, especially during the Lebanon sojourn. Al-Hout knew Lebanon well and knew the corruption and misconduct that characterized the PLO's presence in Lebanon would harm the Palestinian cause and poison Lebanese-Palestinian relations. He spoke privately and openly about such affairs, which strained his relations with Arafat.

Although al-Hout tolerated Arafat's diplomatic maneuvers and initiatives, he could not reconcile himself to the Oslo process and the agreements that it produced. He resigned from his leadership role in the PLO and kept his distance. In his later years, he was very bitter about Arafat's concession in Oslo and felt Arafat had betrayed the Palestinian cause. But he also was not a fan of the Damascus-based groups and spoke harshly of the role of the pro-Syrian organizations in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

The memoir is an excellent read in Arabic: al-Hout was a gifted writer and an entertaining storyteller. But he rushed these memoirs, which could have been more detailed. He never really told us the story of *al-Hawadith* magazine, an important story in the history of modern Arab media. Apart from writing for the magazine in its heyday, al-Hout also held senior positions on its editorial staff. Nor do we glean an inside view of Palestinian-Lebanese negotiations before and during the civil war. Al-Hout was not a harsh critic, at least not in public, and he took many secrets and impressions with him to the grave. He seemed to be of two minds about Arafat: he saw him as a charlatan, but Arafat still knew how to seduce him, even in his later years.

Of all the books by Palestinian political contemporaries, this may be one of the most important. The author is not a braggart and does not seek to get credit for his accomplishments. His cause is beyond his person: it is about Palestine only. This book is recommended for those who know about Palestine and wish to know about the role of one of the most important leaders, and for those who don't know much about Palestine and wish to learn about it from the standpoint of someone who lived the Palestinian cause every day of his life.