

Shammūṭ, Ismā‘īl ‘Abd al-Qādir. Interviewed 11 October 2003 in Ain al-Hilweh, Lebanon. Translated by The Nakba Archive, 2018.

Time Code: 00:12:03— 00:18:35

IS: One of the most famous holidays was the Nabi Saleh festival, in the city of al-Ramlah. People came in groups from al-Lidd and al-Ramlah as well as from the neighboring villages, and were led by teams carrying colorful flags, chanting or singing specific religious songs. They gathered in the square of the minaret of the White Mosque, which exists until this day and whose architectural design was very beautiful. I saw it again seven years ago, in 1997, when we had the opportunity to visit Palestine...a beautiful architectural piece. Although the mosque had been destroyed by earthquakes more than a hundred years ago, the minaret is still there.. People gathered there to sing, dance the dabkeh, compete in horseback riding and all sorts of activities. It was a well-known festival where they also sold a white walnut-flavored halva in clay pots. Those who participated in the Nabi Salih festival, which lasted two, three days — or perhaps more, I don't remember — would always return home with those sweets.

Another holiday was the Nabi Rubin, which took place south of Jaffa, between Majdal and Jaffa. It was one of the most famous festivals in central Palestine. It was essentially a summer resort for families from the region of Jaffa, al-Lidd, al-Ramlah and their villages. People stayed there for a month or two and pitched tents, opened markets, theaters, and cafés. It was truly a place of recreation and joy. Tents were decorated with photographs, drawings, and motifs, and some people made small huts out of straw mats and lived in them during the period. Incidentally, the [Nabi] Rubin area was covered by sand dunes and the most famous dune was called Tall al-Sukkar, because its sand was so white that they compared it to sugar. We were very happy during those festivals. There were also other festivals like the one in spring. I remember we always went to Wadi Jundas. Families spent an entire day there, it would be an outing, but a collective outing, not just a family by itself, no, everyone would go, especially the women and children. We would go and spend the day there. Water still ran through the valley; it rained heavily during the winter, but after there remained some water.. Springtime was a lush and very beautiful season in our country.

Another festival that we celebrated was the harvest festival, when they gathered wheat and barley crops. People celebrated this occasion and

considered it a holiday. They participated in joyful activities on that day. Another festival that I'll not forget in al-Lidd is the al-Lidd festival, which was celebrated by our Christian brothers. There is a famous church in Palestine called al-Qiddis al-Khader, Saint Georges Church as they called it, and it was believed that Saint Georges or al- Khader was buried in that church. Almost all of Palestine's Christians came to al-Lidd on that day, to celebrate this festival or occasion. It was also a joyful celebration, which started at the church and ended outside in the olive grove. They spent the entire day dancing and doing the dabkeh, singing, racing, eating and drinking. All of the colors that one could imagine were present in the traditional Palestinian costumes, those of our women from the villages of Palestine, especially when they came from a diversity of locations, so accordingly a variety of costumes were present on those occasions. That's what I remember.

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What I do remember is that people became restless after the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine, there was something different, Groups began to be formed to fight against this plan. What people would be drawn to was the news they would hear on the radio. At the time, radios in Palestine, and particularly in al-Lidd, were big and battery-operated, just like the ones you used in cars. People congregated in cafés, where there were radios, to listen to the latest news. So there was a popular interest among the people. As I told you earlier, there were Palestinian organizations, whether they were two, less or more, I am not very sure, but there was the Arab Higher Committee and the Istiqlal Party. There wasn't much competition in the sense that the catastrophe was going to hit us all. so committees started forming to build the resistance. I remember these committees being called national committees. I don't know why they called them that. What to do? They used to meet. I was young so I did not attend these meetings but they said that we had to guard the area or the neighborhood at night. So what was being asked of us? We were asked to stand guard on a street in groups of two or three men. In fear of what? I don't know what we were afraid of. So we stayed up until a certain time and people from the neighborhoods took turns.

Interviewer: Were you also a guard?

IS: I was one of them. Afterwards we also took up arms. These arms existed before the British/English** left Palestine, so before May 15, 1948. The British

had crates of weapons, of British rifles as we called them. We/They cut the wooden crates in half with oxygen and the contents would be sold as scrap iron. The weapons would then come to town, to al-Lidd and others and sold as scrap iron. The rifle would be cut in half with oxygen; people bought it and went to blacksmiths or welders who used oxygen and tried welding the scraps together but it was disastrous because if they weren't welded together with great precision, it caused problems to those who used the rifles later on. Other people used the rifle as decoy.

I was a guard during that period. They used to give us pieces of weapons, but I didn't know how to use them or was scared to, but I was proud because I was doing my duty just like the others, while being sixteen or seventeen years old. One of the most important events that happened during that period was when the people of al-Lidd and al-Ramlah decided to dig a ten kilometer trench around their Western points, because there weren't any settlements near the Eastern points aside from the one I told you about earlier, which was located near the North Eastern part of al-Lidd and was called Beit Shemen. This settlement was established in an Arab area and was cut off ... the closest city was Tel Aviv and there was a distance between them. This settlement sent its representatives to the people of the region -- among them were the people of al-Lidd -- saying "we are peaceful, and here we are raising white flags no one should harm us nor are we going to harm anyone". They [people of al-Lidd] took it that these people were indeed sincere. We have always been known to be easily duped. In any case, we therefore always expected danger to strike from the Western areas. We were called to dig a trench, and the people of al-Lidd and al-Ramlah, came out, men, youths, boys, children and women, each with their own tool, axes, shovels, pickaxes— the women of course helped us with drinks and food — and dug a ten kilometer trench in a single day. It was great day. You could feel the people's rallying and unity, their sense of a common danger, and their sense of security, that they had to do this. It's impossible for me to forget this manifestation. I remember that every neighborhood had an authoritative source from whom we would relay what happened and what could happen. Jaffa fell almost three months before al-Lidd and al-Ramlah. It fell towards the end of April. Whereas al-Lidd and al-Ramlah were confident that they weren't in great danger, moreover, were both considered to be part of the Arab area according to the partition, and so was Jaffa although it was in the middle of the Jewish area. But Jaffa itself, the city, was Arab according to the partition. However, it fell. The Jordanian Army arrived in al-Lidd and al-Ramlah and was supposed to protect this area but

one day, and this happened in July of 1948, one or two days, or perhaps hours, before al-Lidd fell, orders came...

[Video interrupted]

IS: and the Jordanian Army or battalion, or whatever it was, retreated. They received an order to retreat. Why? We don't know.

The situation in both al-Lidd and al-Ramlah was destabilized and a state of fear gripped the people there. What was going on? The Jews entered then from the northern area, from Jaffa and Tel Aviv, until they reached al-Lidd Airport. They managed to arrive at the airport and occupied it. From there, they succeeded in sneaking into the Beit Shemen settlement, which flew the white flags. A large number of Jewish forces assembled there and, as I recall, waged a war against al-Lidd and al-Ramlah from both Eastern and Western areas, which was not expected. The East had been established as an open route to the Arabs. However, that is what happened...a conspiracy. Like what happened in 1967, we expected them to come from the West and they came from the East or vice versa, the same story. In any case, the Israeli forces entered, at the time, the number of people in al-Lidd and al-Ramlah was no less than a hundred thousand people. To be exact, it was between eighty thousand and a hundred thousand people. They were not only inhabitants of al-Lidd or al- al-Ramlah but also displaced people from Jaffa or from the villages of the district of Jaffa or from those between al-Lidd, al-Ramlah and Jaffa. Both cities fell after a battle that, according to my information, killed at least a thousand martyrs from al-Lidd and a similar number of martyrs from al-Ramlah. They closed in from the West and the East and both cities fell.

We were at home of course; I had an older brother, who was two or three years older, as well as my father, mother and younger siblings. We were seven siblings along with my father and mother. We were hearing the bullets and the battles from everywhere, and were sleep-deprived for days, or even weeks before that. We knew no sleep at night for we heard fierce battles at the border. We heard them within normal hearing ranges, and we began to be able to make out the different sounds of a Bren gun, Sten gun, Tommy gun, and others. You know, that's how it was. When the two cities fell, we stayed at home. There weren't any means of communication and telephones were not widespread in homes. The only possible means of communication was to tell your neighbor and he would tell his and so on.

The next day, on July 10, — al-Lidd and al-Ramlah fell on July 9 — the Israelis knocked on our door, came in and saw my older brother. They took him. They took him by force. My father told them, “What do you want him for?” but of course there was no room for discussion and my brother left for one or two days after which he returned home. We lived in terrible fear, we didn’t know... we tried to imagine what was coming... we didn’t know. My brother came back a day and half later and told us that they had taken him and other young men of his age to fill sandbags in order to produce fortifications for the Israelis on the roads, and sometimes to take furniture from homes and use it as obstacles on streets to prevent any potential traffic. In those two days, bullets were fired and clashes happened without us knowing where - we didn’t have a radio or a telephone, we were completely isolated.

On the last day, July 13, 1948, we felt a tumult of people walking outside. People and people. We were scared, we peered through the window and saw the streets filled with people. Moments later, our door was knocked on with rifle butts. It was Israeli soldiers, so we opened the door and they said, “Out. Everyone out. Everyone out” Where to? Everyone was out. We left our homes and joined the torrential river of people walking towards the large square called the Nawa’ir Square in al-Lidd. People remembered, and we too, that this operation was not different to similar operations carried out by the British during the mandate and during the intensification of skirmishes with the Palestinian revolutionaries in the 1936-1939 conflict or even afterwards. People would be required, not with soldiers knocking on people’s homes with their rifles, but a crier in the streets would announce a curfew, and require people to assemble in a specific square. People thought it was going to be similar, meaning that they would stay in the square and, like the British, the Israelis or Jews would enter our homes and search for arms and revolutionaries. After which, at the end of the day, they would tell people to go back to their houses. But it was different this time. After they grouped us in more than one square in al-Lidd, they opened a path — of course, we were surrounded by armed Zionists — and ordered the multitude to head East.

The month of July is hot, there wasn’t any water and it was Ramadan. Children started to scream and cry because they were tired or thirsty and people walked down the path they were ordered to follow going East. We passed through the center of al-Lidd and I saw with my own eyes the stores that were broken into and usurped; they were opened with blocks and everything in there was turned upside down. We found martyrs’ bodies, slain, on the ground while we walked. It got hotter, we started walking around ten

in the morning. As we were leaving al-Lidd, there was an orchard belonging to the Hassouneh family. My siblings were thirsty so I told my father and mother that I was going to see if I could bring water from there. There were soldiers standing along the road but there were twenty meters or so between each one so I snuck from between them and got to a big pool of water, its an orchard. I found a faucet and struggled to open it, until water started running from it, so I found a bucket and filled it with water. People saw me and ran towards me because everyone wanted water. As I finished filling the bucket and headed to join my parents, I saw a Jeep driving fast and stopped right at my feet. An officer came down and put a gun against my head. He told me to “Throw water, throw water, throw water!” He had a gun to my head, you forget about water and everything, Of course, I threw the water. I thanked God that he didn’t shoot me. He kicked me out, I went back to my parents and continued walking.

This was a difficult day. It was a day neither I nor the people who walked along this road will ever forget. The exhaustion, the fear, the panic, the terror, the loss, not knowing where we’re going and for how long...we left with just the clothes on our backs. No one brought anything because we didn’t anticipate this, we were all surprised by people ordering us to leave by force. Not to mention the thirst and the hunger . The road we were forced to take wasn’t even a road, it was mountains. In the summer, our mountains are yellow and arid, dry, rugged, there is no water, no wells. I saw people dying of thirst with my own eyes whether they were children, women or elderly. Their families would leave them there, place some straw over them and kept on walking. I saw with my own eyes people tearing out patches of grass to suck on, to wet their lips with a drip of water from the root of the plant.

After three, four or five hours, at three or four o’clock in the afternoon we found a place that was known for its natural wells, where water would gather and remain into the summer. Indeed, we found a few natural wells that contained remains of water, which was red and mixed with clay at the bottom. There were hundreds of people; some would find a rope or tear their shirt, or tie or anything of the sort to knot them all together and lower receptacles to fill with water. And of course, while they pulled them up they would shove one another and it would spill. I was able to get some water...red water. I ran with it , people followed me, children. I didn’t care about anyone, I cared about my mother, father and siblings; until I got there and they were able to drink it. It was fresh water despite it being dirty and red — God knows what was in it — but our thirst was so acute that we drank anything.

There was a man from the Haroun family that I'll never forget. He was in charge of turning the water on for people in al-Lidd, because they used to open faucets at specific hours during the day. This man was thirsty and riding a mule that was almost dying — I don't even know where he got it from. He started yelling, "Folks! I spent forty years giving you water, a sip of water for the love of God, a sip of water for the love of God".

We kept on walking until there were no more Jews around and we felt like it was a safe area, an Arab area. We kept walking until we arrived to Ni'lin. The people there rushed to our aid with whatever they could; whomever had a pack-animal, some bread or a jar of water saved whomever they could. We levelled the ground under an olive tree and slept with the sky as our blanket, as the saying goes. It was after midnight and some people kept on walking. We were woken up by sunlight the next day, we overslept from the exhaustion. Jordanian military cars drove us from Ni'lin to Ramallah. They filled the cars, as one does with bricks, as much as they could fit.. In Ramallah, they dispatched us in schools and other places. We were sent to a school whose name I can't remember. It was an all girls high school, which I later saw again and remembered when I visited Palestine in 1997. We were crammed in one room with thirty or forty other people. There was no room to stretch, we could only squat. Hunger struck and we wondered how to get bread. They brought in emergency relief food; bread, specifically, bread...