Our Palestine — Article — 27 August 2001

Abu Ali Mustafa: Life and Assassination of the PFLP Leader



Abu Ali Mustafa, Mustafa Ali al-Ali al-Zibri (1938–2001), was a son of Arraba in the Jenin district, a co-founder of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, its deputy secretary-general for three decades, and then its secretary-general after George Habash. He returned home in 1999 declaring “We returned to resist, not to compromise,” and the occupation killed him on the morning of 27 August 2001 with two missiles fired by Apache helicopters into his office, the first top-tier Palestinian leader assassinated in the Al-Aqsa Intifada. [1] [2] [3] [4]

This article is part of the series “Assassinated leaders of the Palestinian revolution,” alongside the articles on Abu Iyad, Abu Jihad and Ghassan Kanafani.

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Who was Abu Ali Mustafa?

Abu Ali Mustafa was a Palestinian leftist leader who stood beside George Habash from the 1950s, co-founded the PFLP with him in 1967, commanded its forces in Jordan, served as deputy secretary-general from 1972 to 2000 and was elected secretary-general in July 2000 [1] [2]. He was a member of the Palestine National Council, the Central Council and, from 1987 to 1991, the PLO Executive Committee [1] [2]. He rejected the Oslo Accords but held firmly to the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people [1] [5].

Abu Ali Mustafa at a glance

Item	Details
Full name	Mustafa Ali al-Ali al-Zibri [2] [1]
Nom de guerre	Abu Ali Mustafa [2]
Born	14 May 1938, Arraba, Jenin district [1] [2]
Affiliation	Arab Nationalists Movement (1955), then the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine [1]
Roles	PFLP deputy secretary-general (1972–2000), then secretary-general (2000–2001), PLO Executive Committee member (1987–1991) [1] [2]
Prison	Five years in al-Jafr prison (1957–1961), arrested again in 1966 [1]
Return	30 September 1999, after 32 years in exile [1]
Assassinated	27 August 2001, two missiles from Apache helicopters on his office in al-Bireh/Ramallah [3] [1] [5]
Family	Wife Khitam Saleh; children Hani, Fadi, Hala, Hind and Haifa [1]

Timeline

Year	Event
1938	Born in Arraba, Jenin district [1]
1950	Family moves to Amman [1] [2]
1955	Joins the Arab Nationalists Movement [1] [2]
1957–1961	Five years in al-Jafr prison [1]
1965	Fedayeen officers’ course at Inshas camp, Egypt [1] [2]
1966	Arrested again, al-Zarqa military prison [1]
1967	Co-founds the PFLP with George Habash [1] [2]
1968	Fights at the Battle of Karameh [2]
1970–1971	Commands PFLP forces in Jordan, then leaves for Lebanon [1] [2]
1972	Elected deputy secretary-general [1] [2]

Year	Event
1982	Resists the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, then leaves for Syria [1] [2]
1987–1991	PLO Executive Committee member [1] [2]
1999	Returns home on 30 September [1]
2000	Elected PFLP secretary-general [1] [2]
2001	Assassinated on 27 August [3] [1]

From Arraba to Amman

Mustafa Ali al-Ali al-Zibri was born on 14 May 1938 in Arraba, Jenin district, to his mother Anisa and his father Ali al-Zibri, a farmer who had earlier worked as a blacksmith on the railways and at Haifa port and took part in the 1936 revolt [1] [2]. His brother Tayseer al-Zibri recalls that their father was close to Sheikh Izz al-Din al-Qassam, and later to the Arab Nationalists after the family moved to Amman, and that they grew up “in a simple house in the village of Arraba” [6].

Mustafa finished primary school in Arraba, moved with his family to Amman in 1950, and could not complete secondary school for lack of money, working low-paid jobs, including as a messenger at the Jordanian Bank for Reconstruction and Development [1] [2].

The Arab Nationalists and the prison years

In 1955, at seventeen, he joined the Arab Nationalists Movement founded by George Habash, through the Arab Nationalist Club in Amman [1] [2]. In April 1957, when Jordan declared martial law and banned parties, he was arrested and sentenced to five years, served in the desert prison of al-Jafr, and was released at the end of 1961 [1] [2].

After his release he organised cells of students, employees and farmers and led the movement in the northern West Bank; in 1964 he moved to Jenin, where he ran a shop that became a popular restaurant [1]. That year he married Khitam Saleh and

sat on the committee that set up the movement's "Palestine Region" [1]. In 1965 he completed secret fedayeen officers' training at the Inshas camp in Egypt, and in autumn 1966, after the Samu events, he was arrested and held for about three months in al-Zarqa military prison [1] [2].

Founding the PFLP and leading the struggle

After the June 1967 defeat he joined George Habash in founding the PFLP in December 1967, leading its work in the West Bank and Gaza and sending fighters into the occupied land [1] [2]. He then became head of internal affairs in the Front's leadership and military commander of its forces in Jordan [2]. He fought at the Battle of Karameh in 1968 and in the clashes with the Jordanian army in Jerash and Ajloun during September 1970, then left Jordan secretly for Lebanon in July 1971 [2] [1].

At the Front's third national congress in 1972 he was elected deputy secretary-general, a post he held until 2000 [1] [2]. He took part in resisting the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, then left with the resistance for Syria [1] [2]. He led the Front's delegation in national unity talks with Fatah in Aden and Algiers in 1984 and in Bulgaria in 1987 [1] [2].

Earlier assassination attempts

The 2001 killing was not the first attempt. In Beirut the occupation planned to detonate a car bomb in the garage of his building in the Kola district, but the plot was uncovered when his comrades grew suspicious of a "volunteer," who confessed [7] [2]. Abu Ali said in a television interview that it would not have been uncovered "had it not been for our suspicions about the movements of one of the volunteers seeking to join the revolution" [7]. In the Jordan Valley he came under heavy artillery fire while driving and survived by taking cover in a banana grove [7] [2].

His political thought: the PLO, the PA and Oslo

Abu Ali Mustafa opposed the Oslo Accords and the creation of the Palestinian Authority in 1993–1994, but drew a clear line between the Authority and the PLO [1]. “The PLO is not the Authority; it is the product of a Palestinian national achievement,” he said, calling for its institutions to be rebuilt as an instrument of Palestinian unity [5].

He held that armed resistance must not stop and must not be tied to the Authority’s shifting political positions [4]. He summed up his view thus: **“Our battle and conflict with Israel is a strategic matter not subject to any considerations,”** and **“the constant is the state of conflict; what changes may be the means and tactics”** [5].

“We returned to resist, not to compromise”: the 1999 return

On 30 September 1999 Abu Ali Mustafa returned home after some 32 years in exile, and at the Return Bridge he coined the words that became a slogan: **“We returned to resist, not to compromise”** [1] [2]. In July 2000 the Front’s sixth national congress in Damascus elected him secretary-general, succeeding George Habash, who stepped down [1] [2].

When the Al-Aqsa Intifada erupted on 28 September 2000 he took a leading role; the occupation accused him of responsibility for operations in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and near Lydda airport in 2000 and 2001, and put him on its assassination list [1] [2].

The assassination of Abu Ali Mustafa: 27 August 2001

On the morning of Monday 27 August 2001, Israeli Apache helicopters fired two guided missiles into Abu Ali Mustafa’s office in al-Bireh/Ramallah, killing him

instantly at the age of sixty-three [3] [1] [5]. That same day the Permanent Observer of Palestine to the UN sent identical letters to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council, reporting that Israeli helicopter gunships had fired two rockets into the office of “Mustafa El-Zibri” in Ramallah, killing him instantly [3].

Abu Ali Mustafa was the first top-tier Palestinian political leader killed by the occupation during the Al-Aqsa Intifada [4]. His killing opened the way to a policy of targeting the factions’ political leaders in the West Bank and Gaza in the years that followed.

After the assassination

He was succeeded as secretary-general by Ahmad Saadat (Abu Ghassan), who vowed a response: “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a head for a head” [8] [1]. On 17 October 2001 the Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades, the Front’s armed wing, killed Israeli Tourism Minister Rehavam Ze’evi in a Jerusalem hotel [8] [1] [5].

The Palestinian Authority arrested Saadat and his comrades in January 2002; they were moved to Jericho prison under US and British supervision until occupation forces stormed the prison on 14 March 2006 after the monitors withdrew and seized them, and a military court sentenced Saadat to 30 years [8].

Abu Ali Mustafa quotes

- “We returned to resist, not to compromise” [2] [1]
- “Our battle and conflict with Israel is a strategic matter not subject to any considerations” [5]
- “The constant is the state of conflict; what changes may be the means and tactics” [5]
- “The PLO is not the Authority; it is the product of a Palestinian national achievement” [5]

Other widely circulated sayings are attributed to him, among them: “This is your

enemy, who does not want your peace but seeks your surrender," and "A party that does not renew itself through more giving and work dissipates and fades away."

Legacy and memory

Abu Ali Mustafa left his wife Khitam Saleh (Umm Hani) and five children: Hani, Fadi, Hala, Hind and Haifa [1]. The PFLP's armed wing bears his name, the "Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades" [8]. Ramallah named a square after him in al-Tira, and Gaza City named Street No. 10 after him [1].

In May 2024 the Yasser Arafat Foundation marked his birthday with the film "The Committed Leader" and an exhibition of his photographs. His comrades described a man who put the national interest above his own and stayed loyal to his comrades, while his brother Tayseer remembered an avid reader who combined toughness, awareness and intelligence [6].

Videos

"The Committed Leader," a film on Abu Ali Mustafa by the Yasser Arafat Foundation (in Arabic) [9]

"24 years since the martyrdom of Abu Ali Mustafa" (in Arabic) [10]

Al-Araby Al-Jadeed's report "20 years since the assassination of Palestinian leader Abu Ali Mustafa" can be watched on its website (in Arabic) [11].

Conclusion

From a simple house in Arraba, to the cells of al-Jafr, to leading the PFLP in exile, and back home to resist rather than compromise, Abu Ali Mustafa lived the journey of a whole generation of fighters. The occupation killed him in his office on Palestinian soil after failing to kill him in exile, and his slogan lives on at every

stage of the resistance.

Also in this series: Ghassan Kanafani, Abu Jihad, Abu Iyad.

Frequently asked questions about Abu Ali Mustafa

Who was Abu Ali Mustafa?

Mustafa Ali al-Ali al-Zibri, a Palestinian leader from Arraba, Jenin, co-founder of the PFLP and its secretary-general from 2000 to 2001.

When was Abu Ali Mustafa assassinated?

On the morning of 27 August 2001, in his office in al-Bireh/Ramallah.

How was Abu Ali Mustafa killed?

By two guided missiles fired by Israeli Apache helicopters into his office.

What does “We returned to resist, not to compromise” mean?

Words Abu Ali Mustafa spoke at the Return Bridge on coming home in 1999, affirming his commitment to resistance and refusal to concede.

Who succeeded Abu Ali Mustafa as PFLP leader?

Ahmad Saadat (Abu Ghassan), seized by the occupation in 2006 and sentenced to 30 years.

What are the Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades?

The armed wing of the PFLP, which has borne his name since his assassination.

Who was Abu Ali Mustafa’s family?

His wife Khitam Saleh and children Hani, Fadi, Hala, Hind and Haifa; his brother was leader Tayseer al-Zibri.

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