



Pre-walk interview 2

Kajbar, 3 March 2017 (E)

July 28, 2021

I had been in Jeddi with Yāsir, a teacher from one of the islands in Mahas in his mid-thirties, and we crossed over to Kajbar with a small motorboat, called, slightly euphemestic, lānsh. When we reached the house of Fāris, our contact, our serendipitous way of travelling was one of the first issues, followed by banter on the locally produced lime paint. The talk jumped rather suddenly to the issue at hand with the question ‘What do you know about the fires in Kajbar?’ Different to the other interviews, however, this was followed here by a counter-question and a debate on the nature of research and what it is and should be about:

E – Ego, F – Fāris

F: This question of yours [pause], why is it restricted (*muḥtaṣir*) to date palms? I want you to ask about the area with all its problems.

E: Well (*ma khalāṣ*), research doesn't work like this, one cannot make research about all the topics, it is necessary to have a focus.

F: Don't you want the situation of the area, or what do you want?

E: Now, at the moment, in this place, in frame of my research, my question is like I asked you.

F: By God, I respect your question, and I respect your research, but our causes are [pause] enormous, this means, these date palm fires are part (*juzu'ī*) of the instruments (*'āliyyāt*) applied against us (*musalāṭa 'alayna*) so we leave this area, they try to push us out. It is a small part of all the instruments.

In spite of his objection to a question that doesn't seem to grasp the relevant big picture, he shortly accepted my approach reach the larger frame through a specific issue but the mutual challenge remained whether to start with descriptive, specific pieces of evidence, or with the conclusion, the belligerent message he would like to get across:

F: So, if you limit my talking about the date palms, there have been more than 4, 5 large fires that ate more than 20,000 date palms in Kajbar, in these four times.

E: Good, can we speak about them one by one?

F: Of course they were at different times, I don't remember exactly the date.

E: Ah, okay.

F: So, the last fire was some months ago, the one before was a year ago, the one before was 3, 4 years ago, and the first one was probably by now 6 years. These fires, we are certain that they were caused intentionally (*bi-fī'il fā'il*), commissioned (*mukallaf*), against payment (*madfū' al-'ajr*), they commission people so they burn these date palms. And the reason is clear. We are strongly bound (*mutmāskīn*) to our date palms, our primary wealth (*ṭarwa*). If we lost them, the authorities think we will migrate out of this area. The date palm fires are connected to the emptying (*khilā'*) of the place. And this is of course impossible, it will not happen.

E: Okay, is it known, if we start at this point, is it known what money was paid to whom to start the fire?

F: These are of course things, which are not known, so I cannot tell you this or that person (*fulān*). I accuse, but I can't announce him by name, because I have no clear-cut proof that this person did it. But, the clues indicate (*al-qarā'in tu'shīr*), the situations [of the fires] give indications that it was intentional, as they had specific timing. They will always be either at sunset, or the time of prayers when everybody is in the mosque, so they exploit times when the area will be empty.

The dynamic resulting from diametrically opposed starting points betrayed different reasoning underlying our participation in this interview. I attempted to collect partial data that, together with others, would be the basis of my analysis, an analysis generally interested in the changing fate of date palms in their co-existence with humans. For Faris, the only relevant frame would be amassing further proof of the political violence threatening their survival in their ancestral homeland. But the mutual attempts to move towards a point of convergence gave a meandering flow to this exchange:

E: Now the fire next to you [i.e. your house]...

F: Yes, all of it down there is burnt.

E: Okay. This, for instance, which hour did it start?

F: [hesitantly speaking] This started exactly on a Friday, and people were on their way to the prayer. [pause] No, it was Thursday, and it was before the midday prayer, people were preparing for the prayer. And they exploited the weather, there was a strong wind, this was the last fire, a big fire, which took about 12 to 13,000 date palms.

E: This was the last one, so some months ago?

F: No, this was two years ago.

E: Do you remember the month?

F: I don't remember, don't remember.

E: Or the season?

F: The season, you had in front of you (*'ala wajhak*) the harvest, meaning, the dates came close to be mature (*yasannū*).

E: So about month 7.

F: *'adamūhu lēna* (they made it not there for us).

E: You said the number of burned date palms was how many?

F: This one time? Between 12,000 and 13,000 date palms. But all times together was more than 20,000 date palms.

After his interesting distinction between direct evidence and circumstantial evidence, the specifics of the event do not make it easily into the conversation. Reacting to this reluctance of memory, I conceded now the successive move towards a conclusion and shifted the frame to what Fāris had initially demanded. However, I immediately challenged it by questioning the basis of his narrative, the fundamental economic importance of the date palm:

E: Sorry, as a first step I had to had a picture of how the fire went. After this background, we can enter, as you said, the context to the fires in the area here, meaning, the cause of the fire is connected to other things. What are these, according to you?

F: This is the emptying of the area from people, as the date palms are the essential economy of the people. They think if we lose these date palms, we will get out, we migrate. Because they have the dam project here, and we refuse the dam. So they want to empty the area by any means, one of them are the date palm fires.

E: Okay. Now, when I visited other areas, there was the phenomenon of neglecting the date palms, and this was connected to a decrease of harvest, meaning, there is less harvest. Did this not happen here in the area?

F: It happened, the last year, until now. We don't have [enough] dates to eat them [ourselves]. For Ramadan, we don't

have them. Our basic income finished. We plant [new palms] from the beginning.

E: Meaning, now before the fire, all work, like pruning (*naḍḍāfah*), pollination, was continuing, like...

F: The pruning, in the past it was there, but during the last years, the last 15 years, there is absence of pruning, it helped in the fast spread of the fire. But it is not the reason for fire. The reason is intention and command (*muta'ammid*), and what helped in the implementation was lack of pruning, yes.

At this point, a circular principle had established itself. In place of a direct observation, the direct cause of specific fire events remained elusive. While my reasoning bathed in this elusiveness, he captured the cause by a conviction grown over many years, an underlying pattern of political plans towards forced migration that had been founded with the flooding of settlements during the heightening of the Aswan Dam and confirmed with the building of the Merowe Dam and plans for additional dams at Dal and Kajbar. After a section more broadly on economic activities in the area, Fāris therefore returned to the observation that a limited study could not grasp the core of the issue, while I felt it necessary to defend the confines (and expertise) of doing research, albeit not with much eloquence and coherence:

F: This guy, if his study was broad, in all topics, one could give him talk about what is happening here, but he is fixed (*maḥṣūr*) on ...

E: You can say what you want to say (*kalāmak*). Look, research becomes just small-talk, if one is not focussed in it, one cannot discuss the whole world all the time.

F: Right, yes, yes.

E: The topic of date palms is an entry point (*madḥal*), therefore I have to cover the basics about the date palm, but via the date palm, especially since in the past the date palm was essential for the societies here, this changed a little bit and even the way this changed says something about migration, changes in the way people live and so on. Like this

the date palm opens many doors. So the other issues you mention will appear, but I cannot say they are [all] the [research] topic, meaning they appear via the date palm. So, what did you want to say?

Another, more detailed outlook on the pattern of political struggles he unfolded led, indeed, to another fundamental issue, namely voluntary migration from the area and how it relates to the political programme he perceived to exist:

F: Well, I say, like I mentioned before, that the fire is one of the instruments to empty the area. This means [pause], the foundation of this area's problem is that the government tries to bring people to migrate, so they build a dam here. The people refuse. They used force. There are young people who died, they killed them here, in Kidintakkar. They couldn't get them out by force. They used things to diminish the economy of the area. The date palm fires. The people remained enduring with these things, and protest, with patience, they remained strong. Now they [i.e. the government] came and used the chemical cyanide, the administration of companies for gold extraction, so people that stay die at home, poisoned. And there is grabbing (*nahb*) of the area's resources, the Nubian area, an area full, full of wealth, precious resources, of clean, tasty (*naqiyyah*) surface water, of gold, of natural gas, according to the experts we heard from, who did studies. So the basic purpose (*ġarad*) of these date palm fires is emptying the area by damaging the economy.

E: But isn't it the case that emigration out of the area has a longer history than, for instance, now what happened with the dams? I mean, the migration abroad, emigration (*iġtirāb*), and so on, started from early on, I don't know here in Kajbar from when, but I mean...

F: Yes. There is a difference between temporary (*mu'aqqata*) migration and permanent migration, if you leave your homeland (*waṭanak*). If they extrude me from here because of the dam, I will not see this area with my eyes again, over (*ḥalāṣ*), I lost the homeland. But the migration, it was there, to Egypt, one goes to work one, two years, comes again, goes to Beirut, now to the Gulf countries, the emigration

(*iğtirāb*) is there, not the final migration (*hijra nihā'iyah*). We don't call it migration (*hijra*). Our folks (*ahalna*) in the Old Halfa, they made them migrate by force (*hajjarūhum qisran*) to Khashim Girba. Until today they suffer (*ya'ānū*). They brought them in a different environment, they brought them means (*mudhalāt*) of, for the life, I mean, [but] the ways of life were different, and here they lived like us, in the same environment, their economy was the date palm, their environment was clean (*naqiyyah*), and Old Halfa was among the most beautiful towns in Africa. The change started with Halfa. And we see this policy (*siyāsah*) is planned (*marsūmah*) and organized (*munmanhajjah*) internationally, not just from the authorities. Because this area, as I told you, is rich, if they don't get the people out, they will not be able to take this wealth, because all of them steal, they steal, they don't take it legally (*muqannanah*), there is no law. Now these factories are working. There is not one kilo gold that enters the state treasury. All directly from here to Abu Dhabi, smuggling. There are markets in Abu Dhabi, in the name of the areas here, and in the name of persons (*ashhās*) present here, present in Dubai. So the story of date palm fires is one of the instruments for forced migration of the citizens, emptying (*tafrīg*), among them dams, fires, poison factories, cyanide and mercury.