**Interview with Amina Naccache**

**2014**

TAPE 1

*Nicola Pratt (later NP.)*: Let me first ask you when and where you were born?

*Amina Naccache (later AN.)*: I was born on the 9th of July in 1948, in small village in the Dakahlia Governorate called Minyet Sammanud, but I was raised Cairo, because my father had moved us here to Cairo two years after I was born, in 1951 or 195*AN.* Perhaps Farida has a better memory of when we moved to Cairo.

*NP.* Did your mother and father…?

*AN.* My mother was a house wife and she was illiterate. My father was an Arabic language teacher and he belonged to a generation of teachers which was regarded as a renaissance generation of in the Egyptian country, because he was also a poet, he also was very well-read; we had many books in our home in Arab culture, poetry, literature, religion, history and so on... *No, don’t lock up.* He was a special person and a common type of character for his generation; he was born in 1912, he was a teacher, was cultured and read a lot about religion. He would also explain the holy texts to the people of the village. He considered teaching as more of a role than a job; he felt that he had a role to play in his society. My mother loved our father, she saw him as a role model and was very influenced by everything he said and would encourage him. That’s why although we were 8 children in a family of very limited means, we still had high aspirations. We thought that it didn’t matter if one had money or not – our father had told us that – and that all that matter is that one had a good head on one’s shoulders. He also taught us that culture, education and being a productive member of society is wealth. Not only for ourselves, but also, for people around you and the posterity.

*NP.* What are some of your earliest memories of political or social events?

*AN.* My father, god rest his soul, was a Wafdist, but one of the nice things about his personality is that when the July 23th Revolution happened he supported it. He believed that the revolution was and extension of the goals of the national movement led by the Wafd Party before the revolution. So, despite the animosity that was there between the Wafd Party and the Revolution, my father always said that they were not in contradiction with one another. This was the atmosphere I grew up in. My father loved Gamal Abdel-Nasser very much. When Mustapha Nahhas died in 1964, he attended his funeral. When Abdel-Nasser died in 1970, he also attended the funeral. So, it was in this tolerant atmosphere, which finds similarities between the Egyptian revolutions that I was raised. My father was tolerant in matters of politics and religion. My eldest brother, Raga’a Naccache, was influence by the Baathists a bit. Farida as well, but just a little bit in the beginning, but later became part of what was called the Nasserist phenomenon.

*NP.* What did you major in at university?

*AN.* I enrolled in the School of Arts, because one of the effects of a big family is that when I was in Secondary school and wanted to choose the literary stream, my older siblings pressured me by saying that they had all done the literary stream and that they wanted to have a doctor in the family. So they forced me to go into the scientific stream. Of course, I didn’t get very good grades and at that time the School of Arts was considered the school that only the stupidest go to, because it had courses in art, literature, theatre and so on, and not many people wanted to enroll in it, so I was able to even out the balance after being forced to go into the scientific stream in secondary school by enrolling in the School of Arts, which is also considered higher education. I studied theatre, journalism and translation; I went back to the things that I love to do.

*NP.* What year did you graduate?

*AN.* In 197*NP.*

*NP.* During your time at university, did you join any student groups?

*AN.* Of course. At the academy, I got to know the communist groups a bit. I enrolled in the academy in 1968, so one year after the bitter defeat. It was very difficult atmosphere. In 1968, I took part in the student demonstration, which were demanding that the military officials responsible for the *Naksah* be court-martialed. I remember that I was arrested and held at the Giza police station for 18 hours. When I enrolled at the academy, there were already many seeds of leftist groups: the Communist Worker Party and others. Small groups. So, I started reading the fliers they were handing out and so on. There were also some small Marxist parties. So we used to take the fliers they would hand out and hold meetings at… The Academy was in the Haram District and was surrounded by a lot of farmlands, in which we could do whatever you want, away from the government’s watchful eye. So, we used to sit in the garden with some snacks and get the fliers and we’d read them together. I did this up until the National Progressive Unionist Party (Tagammu) was founded. Tagammu was founded in April 1976 and it was the first ever official leftist party in Egypt and so I felt that it was useless to attend secret meetings. Why would I, when there is an official party that might fight for the same things I was reading in the leaflets and fliers. Tagammu was founded in April 1976 and I joined in June, so I’m considered a founding member. I worked at Tagammu, because I believed in its ideology. I admired Khaled Mohieddin, of course, which was one of the main reason for joining. But the idea that drew me in the most was that I didn’t want miss out on being part of and supporting the first ever official leftist party in Egyptian history. I felt that all the other leftist parties should have joined forces with Tagammu, but this was never realized. All the leftist groups wanted to distinguish themselves and remain independent from Tagammu.

*NP.* Why were interested in politics?

*AN.* Why I was interested in politics? I think father is the reason for my interest. My father had a soul that was always yearning for justice. He wanted to see justice in our lives and in the world. He used to evaluate everything… Right and wrong were always measured by how just they were, so, naturally, you can’t pursue justice without politics or without joining a group that is also pursuing this goal. I, of course, was very influenced by my father’s admiration of Gamal Abdel-Nasser. By the way, when I was in secondary school, I sent him a letter wishing him a happy birthday and he wrote me back. I wish I knew where I put that letter. So, the origin of my interest is my father. Reading and feeling that one person on their own can’t affect change, but that one has to be part of a group and that group is either part of a political party, a union or some kind of collective and that’s how I got into politics.

*NP.* Were you a member of Tagammu from the beginning?

*AN.* From the very beginning. From the time of it was founded and I am considered one of the founding members. The founding committee started work in April 1976. I joined in June of the same year and was the only woman whose husband wasn’t a member of the party. He didn’t want to join. He joined later in the eighties; in 1985 or 1984.

*NP.* And do you have any special memories from that time? What was the atmosphere like?

*AN.* How they were dealing with women, for example?

*NP.* Not necessarily. The political atmosphere in general.

*AN.* Around the time the party was founded? In the seventies?

*NP.* Yes.

*AN.* In the seventies, we were coming out of the October War, which was considered by the Left as a victory ruined by politics. The way politics dealt with the war squandered the victory. That was one thing. The other thing was that we had founded the party and then in January of 1977 there were the Bread Riots, because Anwar Sadat had implemented the Infitah policy in 1974 and opened up the country to unconditional illicit wealth and illicit business, which was, to a large extent, at the expense of the of poor and low-income Egyptians. So, when the riots on the 17th and 18th of January, 1977 happened and the party was accused of inciting them, most of the party leader were arrested, including my husband Salah, although he wasn’t a member of the party, but everyone from the left was accused of inciting it. Of course, this was something that shook the chair from under Sadat and made him feel that despite is victory in October, he didn’t have popular support. Because his internal police were not in the interest of the masses of Egyptians. They only benefitted the wealthy and the businessmen and so on. I think the events of January were what made Sadat go to Jerusalem on his famous visit of reconciliation. And this was yet another thing… First of all in 1977, most members of Tagammu had been arrested and in that time I founded the first ever committee for defending human rights in Egyptian political history; to defend the detainees and their families. We used to sit here and meet with the families and organize visits and appointments with lawyers and so on. We also had trouble with the police and things like that, but this committee was the one that paved the way for other human rights organizations in Egypt later on. Because it organized many trainings for lawyers, who then went on to start their own human rights organizations. It trained people on how to arrange prison visits, wire money to people in prison, get food in, get permission to attend the interrogation sessions and also coaching their clients on what to say and what not to say. So, we built a large base which enabled others to start new organizations. After that, in the campaign on September 1st 1981, which Anwar Sadat got all the political powers involved in, we formed the Egyptian Committee for Human Rights, of which I was the secretary of and the late Abdel-Salam Zayyat, who was the president of the House of Representative at some point and also Sadat’s deputy, was the president. That committee played an important role because the entire country was locked up. It created a network that connected the lawyers, in and outside Egypt… We took advantage of the relationship of Abdel-Salam Zayyat and lawyers who travelled a lot, and brought in a delegation from Amnesty to visit the prisons and we spoke to foreign news agencies about their conditions. We really drove Sadat crazy during that time. This is what that period was like in general.

*NP.* What was your role in the party? Were you responsible for the *[inaudible]*…?

*AN.* When I first joined, I was a regular member and then I founded the committee for defending human rights. After that, in the first convention, I was elected as member of the central committee. I also held the position of assistant secretary of edification. Currently, I am the vice president of the party for the second term. I was elected, of course. I am the first woman to be elected vice president of a party.

*NP.* Were you a member of the women’s committee within the party?

*AN.* I was for a while, but I wasn’t too keen on it. Firstly, I’m not a ‘feminist’; I don’t like this atmosphere. It makes me feel isolated. I was a part of the Women’s Union when it first got founded and I wrote it first program *[inaudible]*, but I started to feel that my work in the human rights committee was more important to me than my work with the women’s organization, so I left the Women’s Union and worked in the field human rights and edification – in the more general fields. I felt that women’s rights issues were more important in a society that was in better shape and when there’s not poverty, but in our society both men and women were suffering from poverty and oppression by an unjust state.

*NP.* What challenges did you face as a woman in politics in Egypt?

*AN.* The challenges are always felt in countries that are not very progressed. Some of the challenges are due to the male-dominated society where statements like: “How can a woman be a member of parliament or president of a party?” were common place. Today we do have a woman party president in Egypt. I didn’t let this sort of thing affect me, because I felt that women must get ahead through their own handwork and that women should put in the effort to show that they are worthy of the responsibility, worthy opponents and equals. That’s what I was doing with… As for challenges posed by a backward thinking society, for example: I’m a wife, who’s responsible for my household so I have to wash and cook and what not. The society doesn’t provide me with any help concerning these tasks, which is the case in other countries, keeping in mind that I had it much easier than others, because I don’t have any children. *We’re recording, just give me a minute.* So, my situation was easier than other women trying to be involved in political and public life, who have a home to look after and children to take care of a help with their school work, because our school aren’t doing a very good job at that. Also, there aren’t any affordable kindergartens and day-care centers or restaurants that are clean and reasonably priced where a woman could buy a meal her family instead of having to cook and clean and so on. So, of course there are challenges due to the male-dominated culture that tries to push away women by belittling them and making them feel inferior, which is a phenomenon that I believe exists in all cultures, but is stronger in our culture because of the perpetuation of traditional feminine role and stereotypes, but I feel that overcoming and fighting these stereotypes is women’s responsibility. A woman must insist on doing what she believes in doing and be competent at it. Women must also not have a fear of failure; if at first you don’t succeed, try, try again. Nevertheless, I must admit that during my experience in public life, most of the people that have supported me have been men, whether Khaled Mohieddin, the president if the party, Salah Issa Hussein or Abdel-Razeq – from all the people I’ve worked with, most of the people who supported me were men.

*NP.* Let’s we go back to the period after Sadat’s death. Did the political situation improve?

*AN.* We have to admit that Sadat dismantled the idea of single-party state. He started his Infitah policy and talks with the west primarily to solve the situation with Israel and to bring in loans and aid into the country in order to solve internal problems, so he created a kind of democracy by dismantling the single party and creating a left wing, a right wing and a centrist party. Although at the beginning they were only mock parties, but with time and despite his best efforts, they transformed into a reality. He wanted the left to fulfill more of a decorative function. We didn’t settle for this and we opposed him and his economic policies… Even his labor party, which he had created so as to serve as a centrist party opposed him, before finally allying to him. So, he had is the one responsible for the important change which was the dismantling of the single-party and single-opinion state and the journalism that was unidirectional. The rise of partisan journalism during that time created a revolution in Egyptian society. I remember that Egyptian television during the January 1977 revolution wanted to do a more progressive coverage about the society and the parties so it held a panel discussion that included Lutfi Khouli from Tagammu, a member from the Egypt party, which was Sadat’s party and a number of members of the opposition. The government was shocked that the streets went empty and everyone sat home or at the coffee shops watching, for the first time ever, the opposition criticizing Anwar Sadat and the government on national television. So, that’s the important change that Sadat made in Egypt. When he died… By that time he had already put all the other political powers in prison; the Wafdists, the Muslim Brotherhood, Tagammu, the Islamic groups – Everyone! So, when he was assassinated at the podium the whole country was in danger. Of course, the economic policies didn’t change. Husni Mubarak released everyone and in his first four years in power practiced a kind of political alleviation. People started feeling that he was their savior from the idea of…

TAPE 2

*Amina Naccache (later AN.)* … a state without a head; the Egyptian people don’t like this state at all. That’s why you here many arguments for having the presidential elections first and then the parliamentary ones. Because this is a centralized state that simply needs a leader. They saw this ‘head’ persona in Mubarak and they supported him up until the 1986 Conscription Riots. At that time, the people stood by the police, so they helped uphold the curfew and we all stayed home. After that we transformed into a first-class police state. He had started having this kind of arrogant behavior towards the people, became extremely corrupt, stopped listening to anyone and people’s lives took a downward turn when government services deteriorated. Health services were deteriorating. Education was deteriorating; people had to send the children to private schools and get then private tutors. Costs of living were rising and the state of matters wasn’t improving and so on. You could say that the Egyptian people gave Mubarak a grace period till 1985 and then the people were… In that time he made the fatal mistake which we are experiencing now; he restricted the freedom of political parties, tried to create divisions with them and turned them on each other. He would offer some of them privileges and even promise some political party members government positions. He also started making some sort of deals with the Islamic groups. They were the only groups allowed to be active within universities and factories. They even took control of all or most of the trade unions, student unions and university teaching faculties – most deans were members of the Muslim Brotherhood or other Islamic groups. The result was the state we are in. Then in the early nineties he got the idea of succession. I think it was Susan Mubarak that was their undoing, when she put this idea into his head. Which is the time this extreme police state situation started. People’s houses were being watched and their phones were being tapped. We would hold a convention here at Tagammu and find dozens of central security officers present and have them surrounding the building with police cars and what not. How did he want to encourage political parties, when he was scaring people away from it by this sort of behavior? There were vicious attacks in the wide-reach national media against the opposition. So, no, things did not get better. They got worse, in fact. He had a chance, if… There are no ‘ifs’ in history. The corruption took a big chunk out of the country’s wealth. His son’s desire to succeed him created many power positions in many places, which made them also want him to come to power. He made a deal with the Muslim Brotherhood, which they agreed to, that they would enter the House of Representatives and support Gamal Mubarak’s presidential bid. Now, we in Egypt, are not only trying to solve the problems the Muslim Brotherhood created in their one year in power, but also trying to fix the damage made by 30 years under Mubarak: The corruption, nepotism, wasting pubic funds. Some larger industrial companies were broken up into smaller companies for the benefit of Ahmad Izz and his friends and things of the like.

*Nicole Pratt (later NP.)* Did you write about this corruption that was going on?

*AN.* Yes. I wrote to some Arab newspapers. I used to follow and write about these sort of practices. I also wrote about the political parties. We really wrote and talked about everything. If you review everything I have written in the papers and elsewhere, you’ll find that I warned of this what is happening now; that you can’t trade on religion, that politics and religion should remain separate, that this was just rubbish and that this was business and not religiousness. But the Muslim Brotherhood and the political Islam currents were able to use the poverty of the people to their advantage and founded establishments that the government wasn’t making available, for example hospitals or a clinic where one would have to pay a small fee of 10 EGP for medical care, instead of 250 EGP that one would normally have to pay at a similar private establishment. They would open schools that would offer female students with free books and uniform, provided they wear a hijab or an Iranian chador and so on. They basically took the place of the government in providing a lot of services and thus positioned themselves…. *Excuse me*. What were we saying?

*NP.* That Mubarak…

*AN.* That the Islamic groups took the place of the government in providing services for the public and infiltrated all government agencies, and they are a corrupt fascist organization; they buy the loyalty of others. The centrist party was bought. It’s loyalty to them while they were in power was bought with money. Khairat El-Shater showered them with and insane amount of money. Now, Egypt not only has to fix the damage done by the Brotherhood in the time between January 25 up to today - because they were the ones that broke into prisons and freed the criminals, who are carrying out the terrorist attacks we are witnessing today, opened the tunnels for Hamas, smuggled in weapons from Libya and just caused mass destruction – it also had to come back from 30 years of corruption and stagnation, and the selling off of the public sector at the lowest of prices. Now we need to start rebuilding a modern Egyptian state that was supposed to have started from the time of Mohammad Ali and we should start with these steps. The new thing is the religious terrorism or terrorism that hides behind religion – I don’t know if this has anything to do with our subject – has never triumphed in the Egyptian state. During the reign of the king, the group was disbanded after they clashed with the monarchy. They clashed with Abdel-Nasser during his presidency and were consequently all put in prison and crushed them, but Abdel-Nasser was doing this and at the same time making strides in social benefits; free education, available health care, respecting the dignity of the people and so on. Sadat was for course the one that let them out and allowed them to operate. Husni Mubarak confronted them when the waves of terrorism occurred in the nineties. The society was divided, with half of the people sympathizing with the terrorist groups and saying they were fighting a tyrannical ruler that wasn’t working for the good of his people and the other half and the other half against Husni Mubarak. The situation now is different; everybody supports the police in what they are doing. The army, police and the people are not standing together and this is an important change, because when you are facing a fascist foe, you need public support and they have that now. This gives us hope that we will triumph, but there will be big sacrifices to be made.

*NP.* *Inshallah*

*AN.* *Inshallah*

*NP.* Can I ask you about January 25th?

*AN.* Yes, of course.

*NP.* Did you know that a demonstration was going to take place on January 25th beforehand?

*AN.* Yes. I saw the invitation online and I was against it because January 25th is the National Police Day. Speaking of the police did a terrible deed during the days of Husni Mubarak and Habib Al-Aldy. The police force’s slogan had always been: “At the service of the people” and then then out of arrogance and a feeling of being superior to the people, Habib Al-Adly changed it to: “The police and the people at the service of the country”. What does that mean? When you serve the people, you are serving the country. Is the country only a geographic space? Anyway, the holiday on January 25th commemorates the murder of large number of member of the police force when they confronted the British Army at the Canal. At that time Fuad Sirageddin was the minister of Interior at the time and later became the president of the Wafd Party and he was the one that declared January 25th as National Police Day in Egypt. So we wrote in the Ahali newspaper appealing to the people to choose another day, because it’s a national holiday and the police have the right to celebrate it and of course we were attacked for saying this. But I found out about the demonstration from the internet and the letters that people sent to the talk shows on television. We as a party took part as well. We would come to work here every day and later go out to Tahrir Square as a group.

*NP.* How did feel during this time?

*AN.* I felt that what Mubarak was suggesting - that we would allow him to finish his term until March or April and then promise that neither he nor his son would ever run for president again – was a better way to do things. So, he came out and said exactly that and that he will hand over power after his term was over. As we were at Tahrir Square, I started to feel that there were people pushing in a different direction, especially starting on the 28th, which was the day the prisons were raided. As you know, the prisons were raided, because all the files that were there were about the political Islam groups. The central security forces had been collecting information about the political Islam groups for years. So the prisons were raided, the files either burned or confiscated and the criminals, terrorists and Sadat’s murderers were set free. I would’ve preferred if this was the direction things went. Egypt has a large centralized system that you can’t just try things out in. You can’t just bring in a government for a trial run. You need a government that has a vision for the future that understands the problems our country is facing. During this time, I started telling my fellow party members that the Brotherhood were on their way to power; they’re going to control the parliament and take the presidency. Of course, no one believed me. I kept telling them it was going to happen until it finally did. It was a revolution that brought down the police stat, but the fruits of this revolution were reaped not by the people who started it, but by the political Islam groups with the Muslim Brotherhood at their core. The most important thing achieved by the January 25th events, although I believed that we should allow Mubarak to deliver on his promise, was that politics returned to the streets. The Egyptians were deprived of this for about 60 years since the July 23rd Revolution and this was justified by the ruling class offering social justice in return for the people staying out of politics during Abdel-Nasser’s presidency, later by offering peace in return for people not objecting to the Infitah policy in the days of Sadat and then by ensuring peace and security in the country and nothing else. But now politics has made its way back to the streets. People have made their own decision. This is the most important achievement of the January 25th Revolution. And although I did want that this revolution end with… Of course, there’s a lot of talk of election fraud in both the parliamentary and the presidential elections, but it might turn out to be good thing. We, the Tagammu party, as leftwing party, have been saying that these people are terrorists and are trading on religion since the forties, but no one believed us and we were accused of being atheist, secular and have no fear of god. Finally, the people of Egypt have tried the rule of the god fearing folk and they have proven themselves to be utter failures, greedy, thieving, corrupt and not god-fearing at all. This is another achievement of the January 25th Revolution. The first was that politics was brought back to the street and second was revealing the true face of this fake organization, which Salah Issa describes as all muscle and no brain. And it is just that. The Egyptian people have now seen for themselves how dangerous this organization is and that it is incompetent, a failure and had nothing to do with religion. As for confrontations that are taking place between them and the army and police forces, people are going out on the street to thwart their attempts and this is something that was unimaginable before. As you know, the Muslim Brotherhood started in Egypt and that’s why their destruction in Egypt will have an effect even beyond Egypt. In Tunisia, the Nahda party is going to be forced to form a coalition government or leave, because of the opposition. The U.S. plan to divide the whole region into cantons to benefit Israel is being stomped. All of this is no laughing matter. There will be hardships and, and it will take us a long time to get back on our feet, but it’s all worth the sacrifice.

*NP.* Is there anything else that you would like…?

*AN.* I would like to add that in both the January 25th and June 30th demonstrations, the bravest people… First of all, during the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, in that year, almost every other day there was a demonstration led by women, especially those from Tagammu, against politicizing and trading on Islam. We organized demonstrations here and as women journalists at the Journalists’ Union. Most of the crowd at the January 25th and June 30th demonstrations were women and this means that – I’m not saying that they are braver than the men – they have a bravery that made the families that are worried about their children… On June 30th I was at the Square and next to me was a whole family; a father and his children. Even his daughter and her baby. They sat there all day. There were also many women among the martyrs. Truly, Egyptian women, despite the restrictions imposed on them since January 25th by the Islamic groups, were very brave. During the demonstrations there were also women wearing a hijab and a niqaab that were also against Morsi. This shows you that this fad of hijab and niqaab has nothing to do with religion and is only a social phenomenon and personal choice. It could also have to do with poverty. Although some of the richer classes also wear hijab nowadays, but that’s a fashion. What I mean to say is that the despite the conservative atmosphere, they weren’t able to convince women of the superstitions that they were promoting about women having to stay at home and not take part in public life. On the contrary.

*NP.* Thank you.

*AN.* You’re welcome, dear.