**Interview with Abla Abu Elba**

**2014**

**TAPE 1**

**Nicola Pratt**: Go ahead, please.

**Abla Abu-Elba**: My name is Abla Mahmoud Abu-Elba… I'm the chief of a Leftist political party, and I was one of the founders of the Jordanian women union in 1974. I'm also a member of the Jordanian writers' society, and was a member of the Jordanian Parliament in its 16th session… I am currently a member of the Royal committee for integrity… which deals with the national system of integrity… I've played this political role since 1960 which is the period you specified in the table of the study… After 1967 and as a result of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, and I'm from a small village in the West Bank called Qalqeliah, and it was occupied when I was a student. We suddenly saw the occupation steal all our simple and big dreams, so the direct reaction of all Palestinian people was joining the Palestinian resistance as a response for the occupation.

At the time, I was lucky enough to meet a Palestinian Leftist group with which I stayed until this day. However, I worked with the Palestinian organization in civil activities within the national institutions, namely the general union of Palestinian women when it operated from Amman, Jordan. After 1970 when the Palestinian resistance shifted from here to Lebanon, I worked with the Jordanian national movement, because there is a social structure in Jordan that is unparalleled in any other country. About half of the population here are Palestinians or from Palestinian origins. The West Bank where we used to live was a part of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan for 17 years from 1950 until 1967, so we were Jordanian nationals during those years. At the same time, since the occupation, most of the Palestinians here hold the Jordanian nationality with the same rights and responsibilities of Jordanians. There is an overlap in our political, social, and cultural interests which is distinguished from any overlap between other Arab peoples. Therefore, we needed a specific political formula for the Jordanian-Palestinian relationship and the national movement of both parties which would consider the needs of the Palestinians, their right to struggle for their return to their homeland, along with their right to struggle for democracy in Jordan… in addition to their respect for Jordan's independence and sovereignty. Jordan should also consider the Palestinians' right to struggle to return to their homeland and acknowledge their right to democratic struggle... This is a deep overlap that can only be realized by those who live it. My entire political and patriotic experience was based in Jordan, I lived in Beirut for one year or less, and then I stayed here with the Jordanian national movement under a Leftist party named the Jordanian Democratic People's party or "Hashd". I lived through very difficult times, particularly during the years of martial law from 1980 until 1989. We were persecuted since political parties weren't legal… Our male comrades always went to jail and back, while the women were dismissed from their jobs. I was personally fired from my job and wasn't allowed to travel for 17 years. I was a teacher and I was dismissed, and 13 of my family members were punished because of me. Great difficulties faced those who were involved in politics and worked with the opposing Jordanian national movement whether Jordanian or Palestinian…

The main dispute we had with the regime was over two issues; first, the representation of Palestinians, since the Jordanian regime claimed to represent them before the development of the Palestine Liberation Organization. The other issue was the lack of democracy and parties, so there was always a state of political conflict because of that… I never stopped my national activities in Jordan even in really bad conditions and under the restrictions they placed on our freedom, I kept going and covered two very important things; the first is direct practice of public service inside Jordan directly with the people, the women, the youth, and the poor whom we always defend as a Leftist organization… I certainly learned a lot from them. The second matter is general knowledge and learning from books and from experience and so on. The Left is a school… and I think these things, field work with the people and constant knowledge through learning from other nations, gave me a lot of experience, and when I entered the Parliament, I was completely ready to carry out a legislative and political role in the Parliament. The funny thing was that the officials, ministers and governmental people were amazed by all that energy. The energy was always there but they didn't recognize it before. There was no direct contact or any possibility of listening to the opposition in general.

I was surely affected by the war of 1967, and there was no solution even for my personal crisis let alone the public ones except joining the resistance against the occupation by any means. But I only participated in civil services, as that was my thing; I love civil and public service, and I've never participated in armed resistance… I generally don't like violence, and my friend Reem Abu-Hassan who is now the minister of social affairs and whom I used to teach reminds me of something I did when I was an Arabic teacher, I asked the students for examples on sentences, and I refused any violent words like "hit" or "kill". I asked them to use "read" and "write" instead of violent words. This was a long time ago, and I prefer to affect change through civil activities… Anyway, there are many real political events such as the war of 1967, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, 11 September, and what followed that, then the Arab revolutions, and I'd like to discuss these revolutions if I may. The other events are definitely very painful for us, because it wasn't necessary at all for Iraq to invade Kuwait, and this resulted in great problems. The Western Imperialism was ready to attack Iraq and other states, and so Iraq was occupied and that has caused and will still cause trouble for the Arab people and for Imperialism too. This occupation destroyed Iraq and it will remain destroyed for hundreds of years, and it deeply affected the Palestinian cause and the situation in Jordan. It totally disturbed the balance of powers at the Arab and international levels, and its destruction was huge… The reaction of the Jordanian people was as if the event took place in Jordan; there were protests all the time against the American invasion of Iraq, in addition to campaigns of support for them. The people were restless, and even when King Hussein asked the people in 1999 not to protest in support of the Iraqi people, The Jordanian people gathered to support them because there were many mutual interest between Jordanians and Iraqis. Many Jordanians received their education in Iraq, and hundreds or thousands of people worked in factories to provide services for Iraq, many drivers worked between Iraq and Jordan, and all these mutual interests were damaged, not to mention the important national issues. Anyway, all of that has deeply affected us, and during the invasion of Kuwait, there were discussions between the Palestinians and the Israelis that resulted in two treaties, the Wadi Araba treaty with Jordan, and the Oslo accord with the Palestinians. I think that these treaties were signed in a state of inequality and unbalance that cannot establish peace, so they created a new reality that wasn't in favor of the national liberation movements or moving forward. All these development pushed us several steps backwards… and whenever these events took place, the political autocracy increased more and more. When the Americans and the West called for democracy and women's rights in the Arab World, they were being unrealistic, because democracy and the freedom of women can only be achieved when the political regime is democratic and when there is public participation, so this is wrong and history has proven its inaccuracy… The 9/11 incident in 2001 was really grievous, and I'm not just against this method, I incriminate it because it's not the right way to fight Imperialism, and those who were killed had nothing to do with the American administration, they were innocent people. The act brought endless destruction upon us whether that was in the relation between the West and the Arab World or in the activation of terrorist groups around the world. It also gave a very wrong message regarding the Arab World and the message of liberation itself; this isn't how liberation should be, and we're still suffering from these consequences. The image of the scene when the attacks took place included the fanatic Right Wing on one hand, and it governed the American administration and backed up the terrorist groups with money and politics. On the other hand, the Arab World was under a lot of democratic, sustenance, and political pressure, and frankly, this incident was misread as many people supported it since it affected America, unaware of the consequences that would affect the world's political map as well as the social and cultural map. The world is still suffering the consequences until this day.

Anyway, I'd like to point something out; I attended the Beijing conference in 1995, it was the fourth world conference on women… I realized then that the world was sharply divided into two parts; one part was run by the international companies that we call globalized companies, along with Imperialism that leads it of course. The other part includes the poor, oppressed, and helpless nations. This sharp division resulted in the emergence of trends that possessed all the evil aspects of racism, and such trends included those that were against women, black people, poor people, nations that didn't achieve independence. The world is truly divided into two parts, and I always like to remember the Durban conference which was held in 2001 before 9/11. It yielded great results regarding racism, but after 9/11, Durban and its results disappeared and nobody talked about it…

The world was thrown off balance, and there was a sharp polarization. We saw phenomena like starvation, poverty, and deaths resulting from vagrancy, and we hadn't witnessed all that before… Anyway, during that period, the international organizations were paying attention to ease the tension in our developed societies, so they funded several women's organizations in order to reduce the intensity of social problems or reactions in the name of women empowerment, democracy, peace and so on. The titles are beautiful and tempting, and I definitely support them, but their mechanism was incorrect, and they yielded no positive results. For example how can we empower women under a dictatorship? How can we empower women while supporting highly fanatic terrorist movements? How can we reinforce something and its opposite? Most of these women's organizations are being reviewed now, and they have isolated themselves from the women's social foundation. The only concern for many of them is how to get funding, and how to speak in the global language of the United Nations and so on, so they have departed from their main public foundation which they should be based upon, and which needs their efforts for development. This isolation between the women's organizations and this social foundation has changed the image of the Arab Feminist movement. We've lost a lot of women staff and important women's organizations, and a lot of dispute arose between the organizations over this matter while we're in need for the unity of Feminist movements for the sake of poor women; the farmers, the factory workers, the teachers, and the clerks. We have forgotten about all of that and started talking about workshops on theoretical issues like empowerment. These issues are important, but they can't gain important apart from the public foundation, it's not possible, and that was our problem. These trends needed a lot of support from the International women's organizations. If you go to the United Nations, and I've gone to New York 3 or 4 times to attend the annual conference on the status of women in New York and in the world… To be honest, there is a touch of luxury in their speeches about women and their status. There's also lying particularly by the ministers of Arab states about the status of women in Arab countries. They're unfortunately lying because that's not how Arab women live; we do have some achievements, but we have big problems that aren't being discussed, and left for the NGOs to deal with. In such meetings in New York, the representatives of the NGOs like myself sit faraway and aren't allowed to even speak. It's very difficult to speak for just 5 minutes… Anyway, I think the status of women needs some reviewing, and the Arab women's organizations need to review their programs and activities over the past years, and how to improve their programs and performance under these new circumstances.

I'd like to talk now about the Arab revolutions. I don't like calling them "spring" or "fall", but what happened was inevitable; the Arab revolutions didn't happen by choice, because the contradictions within societies reached a level where nobody could bear the other. The explosion was bound to happen and it happened without a choice; it wasn't organized by any political parties or any specific people. Some social groups played a key role for sure, but the main reason was the huge polarization. There was severe internal oppression, economic deprivation of the people, and a lack of political and democratic participation, so the people had nothing to lose and didn't care anymore about the oppression or anything, and they set out to the streets… This is the issue here; naturally, every Arab country is different from the others based on its level of development. Tunis, for example, is number one in my opinion. In Tunis, the civil society organizations are really advanced, they have a developed and advanced economy, and they have a substantial middle class. The middle class is usually the one to affect change through civil society organizations. They have the "Union General des etudiants de Tunis" with 1.25 million members, they have political parties that are weak but still existent, but the "Union General", the unions, the institutions display a Feminist movement unlike any other movement in the Arab World, and I know the movements. Even during Zain Al-Abdeen's reign and before that, there were very important women and Feminist movements. Therefore, the civil society in Tunis protected its revolution from sliding into violence… It's true that there are still fanatic religious groups in Tunis, but they're not the major player right now. The major players are the political parties and the civil society organizations. Even the Muslim Brotherhood soon backed down because they have internal factors to prevent them from doing what the Muslim Brotherhood did in Egypt. These civil organizations can protect a revolution… They established a very important constitution and an election law unmatched in the Arab World or even in Scandinavia. It states that half of the Parliament should constitute of women, and that the electoral lists include all areas of the country, in addition to total proportional representation. This is something we dream of. They also have an advanced constitution stating that Tunis is a civil state although it respects Islam and Sharia…

Things are different in Egypt, because civil institutions and political parties are very weak and couldn't protect the revolution. The civil organizations alone are able to protect a revolution rather than individual people. Therefore, Egypt witnessed the ruling of the Muslim Brotherhood and their practices, and it was on the brink of an abyss because of the Muslim Brotherhood and their policies. The Brotherhood see no value for the national state or their homeland, they only value their doctrine and their capital. So they supported the policies of the International Monetary fund, and they wanted to sell the Suez Canal to foreign companies. Imagine that they wanted to sell the Pyramids which are major cultural properties; they have no problem with anything because they don't value their national state. Egyptians have a high regard for their state almost like their religious doctrine, so the Brotherhood clashed with the state in Egypt and got this result.

I never thought another military official would rule Egypt again, but the Egyptians see Al-Sisi as their rescuer who saved them from the Muslim Brotherhood. This is a stage they must go through, but there is also rapid growth of the secular trends in Egypt, they're organizing themselves now. I'm not pessimistic about Egypt, on the contrary. But it will be more difficult for them than it was for Tunis to overcome the obstacles and move forward particularly when it comes to the economy and solving the problems of the poor, the oppressed, and the women, and that will take time… As for what happened in Syria, it is a disaster. When the protests started in Syria, they were peaceful, and remained peaceful for 6 months. The Syrian regime could have contained it and protected the country from entering into this universal war. But unfortunately, they confronted the revolution and the protests at the beginning with suppression and blood, and they gave all their enemies in the world the chance to fight inside Syria in their own way. Imagine that there are around 500 terrorist organizations in Syria now that don't know about each other. It's unbelievable, the entire world in fighting in Syria. And even if the war ends tomorrow, it won't go back to the way it was before. The regime is regaining its authority over several areas and so on, but I don't know what this means for the Syrian people. What is happening in Syria is a great loss for our cause as Palestinians. This is giving great support to Israel and its aggression. It's also a great loss for us in Jordan and for Lebanon. There are endless problems in Jordan that resulted from the situation in Syria, and it's not just about the refugees, but there's a possibility of terrorists entering the country. There are huge problems. There were deep trade relations and social connections between Syria and Jordan and they were all destroyed… This is unfortunate. I believe that revolutions and change will inevitably reach all the Arab states with no exception. Not a single Arab government will escape this. It will happen sooner or later everywhere including the Maghreb, the Levant, and the Gulf.

TAPE 2

**Abla Abu-Elba**: All the countries will get their turn in this change, but our problem is that the substitutes for dictatorial regimes aren't ready or existent. In this case, revolutions cannot be operated with a remote control, they wait for nobody, and they simply break out in the streets when the polarization amounts to an explosion. This is what scares me, and in my opinion, the Arab revolution is a gateway into the democratic transition. However, there were global and regressive forces that interfered trying to contain or ruin them. This is all a part of the stages of change. The French revolution took a long time to reach its achievements, and all over the world, there were no revolutions that reached their achievements within months. Arabs are used to rapid victories or defeats. We don't have specific customs for social revolutions, in the modern age, that it, because such customs existed in the past. That's why we hear educated and literary people object to the revolutions and say that they are against the people and so on. But what's the alternative? What do you suggest? Do you encourage things to stay as they are, or do you want the Islamists to rule alternatively?

My choice as a representative of a political party is the democratic one. Neither the Islamists nor the dictators of course. Our choice is democratic and pluralistic. There must be pluralism where everyone recognizes all the others. There has to be respect for the social representation of parties, organizations, intellectual trends, religions, and ethnicities. Everything must be respected and run on a democratic basis. That's what can save our nations from these circumstances. I'm sorry for taking a long time.

**Nicola Pratt**: No, may I ask you a question?

**AA**: Of course.

**NP**: I mean… Did you face any difficulties in public service because you're a woman?

**AA**: Of course, but not to a great extent. I come from a small family, and I happen to have an elder brother who is very democratic and open-minded. I grew up in a conservative environment, but then moved to Amman during the Palestinian revolution after 1967. The entire community was leaning towards change, so I didn't face a lot of difficulties. However, I have lost a lot when it comes to my privacy and personal life. I've lost my job when I was fired, I didn't get married and start a family. I didn't have the privacy that any woman may have at a certain age because I started my activities at the age of 18. Yes, I've lost a lot. But to be honest, the society had a lot of appreciation for me. I don't like to look like a victim because I'm not. People have a lot of respect for my political role, and this gave me a lot of moral strength whether before entering the Parliament, during it, or after it. There are numerous examples on women who were pressured and oppressed, but I didn't face this problem so much. I don't want to claim that something like that happened to me…

**NP**: Can you tell me a little more about your experience in the Parliament?

**AA**: My experience at the Parliament was a very rich and important one. I was elected alone as a representative of a Leftist party, and there were no representatives for any opposing parties inside the Parliament. I was the only one out of 120 members. I represented the party's program and principles with devotion… My political role was very important to me and I have a lot of experience and training in it. This was noticeable, and within a very short period of time, the members of the Parliament started to consult me on several political matters. I sought the help of experts in legislative matters, especially in the laws related to the people. I sought the help of legal experts and so on. My first month at the Parliament was very difficult, and there was a strong feeling of wonderment and concern about the role of an opposing member who is antsy, nervous, and radical. That's because they saw such a female member previously. She represented an individual opposition, she was easily agitated and very nervous, but I had political experience so I wasn't like that. I offered everything I had in a different way; I did oppose the government's policies in a smooth diplomatic way that respected everyone. I learned lobbying inside the Parliament, and even the most regressive members accepted my practices. They respected my opinions and we had agreements about certain issues in laws for the sake of the Jordanian people, not anything else

All the officials say that they respect me because I was loyal to my principles and party. I didn't give them up under any temptations. I had no personal demands at all, all my demands were surely for the people. All my comments and activities were for this objective. My relationship with everyone at the Parliament was excellent, even the conservative and regressive members. I agreed with them about some issues, and when we disagreed, we decided that we're both free in our opinions. There's no need for fighting.

The Parliament lacked the presence of political parties and this reduced the significance of my role, because I'm one individual, and no matter how positive my logic is, there's voting at the end and we need a number of votes, so this was one of the problems. In the first session, I was a member of the labor committee, and in the second session, they elected me as president of the public liberties committee at the Parliament… There was a lot of attention from the media in all its kinds, everyone was either discussing my role or interviewing me about the current political issues.

Listen, Nikole, It's very important for a woman going into political public service in particular in our Arab World that she presents herself in an appropriate manner that doesn't overstep our traditions, while not giving in to what's currently prevailing. I don't know if I got the idea across or not, but… I don't like secondary battles, I like the major ones and I concentrate on them. This is what I do. For examples, law in favor of women or the poor and oppressed. I make every effort for those causes, and if this requires anything at the expense of my time, effort, and personal interest, I still do it, I have no problem.

At our Parliament, they watch women, how they behave, what they wear, how they speak… How they laugh or behave around men and so on. I knew all that very well, and I was very calm and cautious in my behavior. I have no problem dressing like you but I always wear long sleeves to the Parliament… I pay attention to everything in order not to draw their attention to anything else. I used to even watch the way I laughed and how often I smiled. This is all unimportant to me and so is joking around. I was very nice to them but major issues are major issues. I didn't make any room for marginal conflicts. If someone spoke against women for example, I might express my objection, but if they discuss a law against women, I wouldn't let it go, I would definitely fight for it. But I wouldn't pay attention to some words against women. It's very important for our women to fight the real battles and avoid the secondary battles or the showing-off battles; this is not good for them. They are originally there to represent women in a balanced, advanced, and calm manner so as to convince people. My mission was to convince them with my logic and that's what's important. That's why I fought for the amendment of the constitution article to achieve equality between men and women. I didn't succeed in that unfortunately, because the voting wasn't in my favor, but I fought the battle.

I fought other battles related to the status of women in the municipalities' law, the law of parliamentary elections, and the rent law related to housing. These battles are worth fighting… My experience at the Parliament was really significant, and my relationship with my female colleagues was excellent; I always advised them and told them what to avoid and so on. I respect all of them despite their varying capabilities and I treated them with respect like I treated my male colleagues. My experience was a very positive one, and legislation is a principal element in any country that wants to make a significant transition from one stage to the next. It is really important. Still, I sometimes faced vicious attacks from the media because of my criticism of the conservatives, my stand against corruption for example, as well as my daring attitude in several political issues that I discussed frankly and boldly. So they attacked me online in a very bad way. However, I didn't care to respond and fight them, but I was certainly disturbed by them. It's natural for a woman who works in public service to face people who oppose her and have different views…

It's difficult **[inaudible: 0.14.37.6]**

**NP**: But… Do you have time for a last question?

**AA**: Yes, dear.

**NP**: Under all these difficult circumstances, why is it important for you to continue in the field of public service?

**AA**: Why is it important to continue? Because the idea of democratic change, which also changes people for the better, is a very important principal… This change cannot happen without collective efforts rather than individual efforts. I can't work alone for sure, and the individual work has no value without the group. I'm one of many who believe in collective work and the possibility of change. I belong to this community and these people, and I believe it's necessary for me to serve them in my own way through moving them to a different situation. We have many problems. We have the issue of backwardness concerning women within many social classes. We're required to change this status, and the official authorities cannot play this role without public pressure, it's not possible. By the way, I was offered the position of a minister in the current government, but I declined the offer. I was also offered to be a senator at the Senate, and I declined it too… I was eventually offered to head the Jordanian National Commission for Women as a replacement for Asma Khider if you're familiar with her; she was the head of the commission and then became a member of the independent committee. I declined that too. I like public work and belong to the grassroots world. All the lessons I learned and all my abilities are because of this school. This was my school in addition to what I learned from books through constant reading and learning. Anyway, Nicole, I have your e-mail, but what studies do you… I wrote many things and I always write, so if you need me to provide something specific, just tell me and I'll send it to you, but in Arabic, and you can have someone translate it for you.

**NP**: Okay.

**AA**: So tell me what headlines would you like me to focus on in the material I'll send? I wrote about women in Arab revolutions, women in laws like the parliamentary election law, women in political parties, Jordanian women in political and unionist work. I can send you these if you want, and have someone translate them if you need to…

**NP**: Of course… All of that is important to me because it offers a context for women's public work in Jordan, and not just in Jordan.

**AA**: In the Arab World.

**NP**: Yes… if you can send me many things, that would be great… Is there anything else you'd like to say?

**AA**: No, I just want to thank you, and say that we're currently in a transitional stage here in the Arab World. It's really important for us to understand the nature of this stage. It's witnessing the participation of social forces that were completely marginalized… This is of great importance, and we should consider the positive things and not just look at the negative aspects. We should look at how things can change. This transitional stage carries many difficulties, but we have to study these difficulties and try to offer solutions in this area. Thank you very much, and I hope you find this material useful…

**NP**: Of course.

**AA**: …and write to me if you need anything in the future.

**NP**: Alright.

**AA**: My e-mail is…