

Jubran Kazma

and the Beisan

Land Affair, 1921–1923



By Munir Fakher Eldin

While Zionist settlers were setting foot in early twentieth-century Palestine through communal forms of landownership – borrowing from European experiments at the time – the Palestinian peasantry was forced to accommodate to an emerging regime of private property that destabilized the traditional communal bonds, subsistence economy, and access to land. After 1918, the British pushed this logic of property in a forceful manner and linked it to their pro-Zionist agenda; as we can read in the very early British records, a major end-result desired from the land reform was to push the Palestinian landholder to get rid of his customary rights and practices and make surplus land available for the market – from which the Zionist settlers would benefit.¹ This created a complex landscape fraught with tensions and contradictions: for once, this conception of a land market was enforced only on the natives rather than the settlers; moreover, the Palestinian nationalist leadership, the bulk of whom came from the ranks of the landowning elite, was hesitant to consider the ideology of property and market relations as problematic, and was thus accused of complicity with this colonial

condition. The Palestinian peasantry was far from forming a unified political block, yet it could engage in many practices of accommodation, maneuvering, and resistance, and its ties with the nationalist elite never broke off completely. How can we make sense of this complexity?

My archival research on the village Beisan has convinced me that I need to be more careful about how to present the class divide in Palestine. We can make little sense of how existent tensions and contradictions were handled (or got out of hand) if we imagine a sharp dichotomy between a radically selfish, heartless, and money-mongering elite on the one hand, and an idealistic folk with

perfect communalism and nationalism on the other – an image we still read in modern accounts. Rather, we ought to investigate the micro histories of localities and movements as well as the biographies of activists to obtain the deeper nuances of events from the political experiences of the Palestinians. I was lucky to discover such nuances in the records left by Jubran Kazma – about 40 letters and some newspaper items about the land affairs in Beisan.

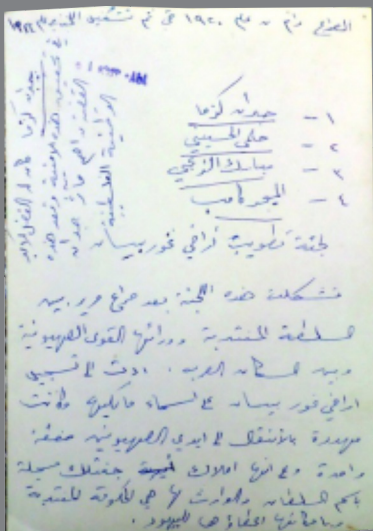
Jubran was the son of a Nazareth-based educator, Iskandar Mikhael Kazma, who supervised the various Russian schools established in the Galilee (1882–1914). Most probably, he moved to Beisan sometime after the town was connected to the Haifa-Damascus

Beisan, 1920.





A photo of members of the Demarcation Commission of the Beisan Land Settlement, 1924: from top left: Jubran Kazma, Hilmi Husseini, Mubarak al-Zu'bi, Unknown.



The back of above photo with a text by an unknown family relative, dated 1970. It tells the names of the members of the Demarcation Commission of the Beisan Land Settlement (as outlined above) and reads: "The struggle was prolonged from 1920 until the formation of the Demarcation Commission in 1924. This commission was the fruit of a bitter struggle between the Arab people and the Mandatory power, backed by the Zionists. As a result, the land was registered in the name of its owners, after it was under the risk of a wholesale transformation to the Zionists, given that it was registered under the name of the Sultan and had moved to the ownership of the Mandate government, which sought [at first] to transfer it to the Zionists. Jubran Kazma played the major role in achieving this Arab dream; it is one of his most important Palestinian national achievements."

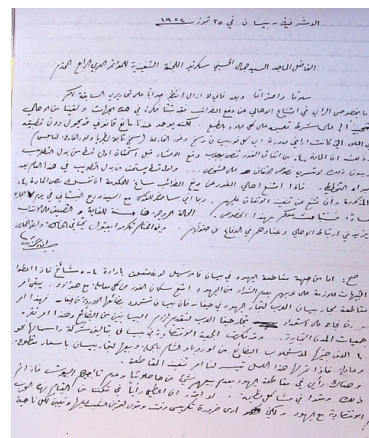
railway in 1904. The Ottomans had seized the Beisan Valley from local village and tribal communities in the 1870s, as shortly after Sultan Abdulhamid II rose to power (r. 1876–1908/9), he annexed the valley to his vast private imperial estates, thus turning the locals into his own sharecropping tenants. The town Beisan began to attract immigrant families of craftsmen, shopkeepers, and small-farm developers from Nablus and Nazareth, including Arabic-speaking Jewish families from Tiberias. Jubran Kazma was one of those who leased a farm therein and developed fruit cultivation. Other renowned Palestinian figures also did the same, including Najib Nassar, the famous journalist and owner of Haifa-based *Al-Karmil* newspaper, Muhammad Darwaza from Nablus, and others. As can be gleaned from their writings of that period, they were motivated by economic opportunity and a sense of a nationalist mission to protect Arab land from appropriation by Zionist settlers.

With the end of Abdulhamid II's reign, new challenges presented themselves to the entire agrarian population – old and new. In 1913, the Ottoman government proposed a privatization scheme for the entire estates in Beisan, bringing an end to the existing arrangements, under a new ownership by a single large landowner. Rumors spread that the plan secretly devised to help a Jewish colonization company get hold of the land. This challenge united the inhabitants of Beisan Valley across class lines in struggle. Motivated by popular mobilization, the Arabic press in Palestine and the wider region, as well as Arab politicians in Istanbul, pushed against the

scheme – most famously Suleiman al-Bustani (the famous Lebanese *Nahda*ⁱⁱ figure who translated *The Iliad* of Homer, contributed to the famous Encyclopedia of *Da'irat al-Ma`arif*, and became the Ottoman Minister of Agriculture and Minerals in 1913). The Ottoman government withdrew the proposal and protected the status quo, yet shortly after the Great War ended, the challenge was renewed, this time under the British.

With British occupation, Najib Nassar, Jubran Kazma, and others hoped for a liberal era that would secure people's property, lives, and dignity, ending Ottoman despotism and corruption. They believed that British liberalism would make them allies against the "Bolshevik" Jewish settlers. They formed a society called the Anglophile Arab Society to promote those ideas. But it was not long before they were disappointed, and their energies were shifted in order to strengthen trans-sectarian nationalist politics through Muslim-Christian societies that laid the foundation for the Palestinian National movement. Their actions were especially felt in Beisan, when the British pondered ways to allow Jewish colonization in the valley. Kazma was a moving spirit in the valley, contacting various village and tribal leaders and coordinating a unified popular position. Their goal was clear: to contest the British understanding of the history of property in the valley and to demand justice and recognition of Palestinian ownership of the land. In April 1921, Kazma was arrested by the British and accused of instigating against Sir Herbert Samuel's visit to the town. The tribal leaders threatened to revolt if Kazma was not released.

The British were unhappy with Kazma's campaign against tax collectors who demanded that the cultivators sign tax receipts indicating payment of the "land rent" – which would have meant



One of tens of letters sent from Jubran Kazma in Beisan to Jamal al-Husseini, head of the Arab Executive in Jerusalem, dated July 25, 1922, Al-Ashrafiya, Beisan. The letter discusses the possibilities of launching a tax boycott and a boycott of Jewish products as early as 1922.

consent to the government's claim of ownership of the land. Instead, they demanded to continue the negotiation they had begun with the Ottomans: to return the land to its cultivators as its rightful possessors. According to the Ottoman official travelogue of *Wialyat Beirut* from 1915–1916, the negotiation with the Ottomans had been cut short by the war, an unfriendly and authoritarian post-Hamidian Ottoman regime, and the unwillingness of the tribal population to abandon their semi-nomadic way of life.

The British felt at first that they could indeed ignore this political history and focus on the strict legal status of the land. Yet soon they were convinced that no public stability could be achieved if they abolished the status quo. A tribal uprising had broken out the year before and new threats for revolt were not ruled out. In November 1921, the British reached an agreement with the representative of the communities in Beisan from a "land settlement" that recognized the existing cultivators as rightful possessors. And for that matter an official demarcation commission was established and staffed by three



A photo of Jubran Kazma as a student in Kiev, 1907.

British officials and two community representatives – Jubran Kazma was one of two chosen by the Beisan communities, along with Mubarak Zu`bi from the village of Sirin.

As we can see from the letters Jubran Kazma sent to Jamal al-Husseini (the chairman of the executive committee of the Palestinian National Conference at the time), the two played a crucial role in defending the work of the commission against various challenges posed by the Zionist settler leaders and British officials. The Beisan agreement was contested by the Zionists from the beginning; they had tried to achieve a concession on those lands from the British already during the 1919 Peace Conference in Paris, and when Herbert Samuel agreed to the land settlement with the locals, they protested and threatened to challenge the legality of the agreement – arguing that it was reached before the Mandate was officially declared in 1922. Yet Samuel responded with a threat to withdraw pro-Zionist measures given in the same period, including the recognition of Hebrew as an official language in Palestine. This was not all they attempted, however. To complicate the work of the demarcation commission, they managed to “purchase” land rights in one locality from some tribal leaders. Kazma and Zu`bi threatened to

deny proprietorship to those who sold land when the demarcation work reached their locality – so the whole deal fall apart. “A coup is taking place within the tribe and the nationalist brothers are now in control,” Kazma wrote in one of his letters to Jamal al-Husseini.

Kazma realized the economic burden under which the local cultivators were placed by the land agreement. On the one hand, the Beisan land settlement was a “historical victory, securing Arab land forever against Jewish colonization,” as he wrote. Yet he soon began to alert the national leaders that economic hardship prevented the cultivators from developing their lands and even meeting the cost of production, after they paid their debts to the moneylenders and dues to the government. He called for financial support to aid the cultivators. He also called for organized work by the nationalist movement to raise awareness among the Beisan communities regarding their national cause. Moreover, he promoted progressive ideas about social coherence and insurance societies and saw it as a continuation of the spirit of cooperation and aid in the prevailing village traditions of the period. He saw modernity and renaissance not simply as borrowing Western ideas, but as discovering ways to translate popular virtues into institutionalized forms of cooperation.

Jubran Kazma died in the mid-1920s. Maybe his ideas were unrealistic or ahead of their time; in any case, the nationalist movement was too slow and too weak – and perhaps too caught in its class interests – to develop effective solutions for a complex social

reality. Whatever the reasons, the mechanisms of colonial rule proved that popular mobilization had its limits and that such mobilization could not substitute for real organized and revolutionary efforts at economic and social development. The British took advantage of the lack of means among the Beisan peasantry and began to allow land sales in 1926. With the development of a land market and a rise in Zionist purchases came also a colonial discourse of security; the British imposed new governmental paternalism on the peasants to prevent a total and uncontrolled collapse and the dispossession and displacement of the population.

In rare moments of frank admission, colonial officers recognized the deep gap and imbalance in power between the conditions of local cultivators who received no means of support from outside, and that of the Jewish settlers who were heavily supported by outside institutions. They may have sympathized with the natives, yet their primary concern was security rather than a real national Nahda. They also feared a rebellion among the peasantry. Their logic would lead them to promote the idea of national partition in 1937, shortly after the outbreak of the 1936–1939 Palestinian revolt. By that time about a third of the valley had been purchased by Zionist companies, and the first settlement outpost was planted in the region.

The Arab leadership did not leave the local population to its own fate; but rather than presenting a real leadership on the ground, it nonetheless remained a potential agent that local communities and activists could mobilize in times of need in their confrontation with the

Mandate government. The hope for a national Nahda dispersed; it was replaced by various means of survival tactics that ranged from moral protest to revolt, from legal action to diplomatic trials. Once the British realized that they had created an unsolvable mess and decided to leave the country, nothing could stop the logic of settler colonialism on the ground. In 1948, the Jewish forces occupied the valley and forced the local inhabitants to leave. The whole valley and its fertile land were ethnically cleansed in order to build a national home for the Jewish people. The land market had helped the settlers to gain estates, yet it was violence that allowed them to build settlements and achieve sovereign control of the territory. Very little has been left in the place to commemorate the lives of the original inhabitants. Today’s visitor to the town – now inhabited by an underprivileged Jewish population mostly of Arab and North African origins – can still see a damaged mosque (in which the people of Beisan gathered for Friday prayers and in which nationalist activists delivered political speeches), a compound of Ottoman official buildings, the Ottoman Khan turned into an unfinished mall, and not far away a neglected Arab graveyard. Traveling across the valley, one sees the mostly Ashkenazi settlements that control the fertile land of the valley.

*Authors’ Note: The article is drawn from my doctoral dissertation research, *Communities of Owners: Land Law, Governance and Politics in Palestine, 1858-1948* (PhD dissertation: New York University, 2008).*

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¹ See my discussion of these early sources in: Munir Fakher Eldin, “British Framing of the Frontier in Palestine, 1918- 1923: Revisiting Colonial Sources on Tribal Insurrection, Land Tenure, and the Arab Intelligentsia,” *Jerusalem Quarterly*, Issue 60, 2014.

² A cultural renaissance that took place around the turn of the twentieth century.