

# Modernist Trends in Palestine before the Nakba



By Walid Salem

**R**oughly speaking, modernity refers to “a socio-economic, political and cultural structure that opposes the traditional one, and represents a revolt against it.”

Jean Baudrillard, 1991

In the Arab world in general, and Palestine in particular, a discussion is going on over whether modernity emerged as a result of internal processes or merely as a result of Western influence. Pointing out the reforms that were carried out during the late Ottoman rule and the renaissance process they initiated, many Arab thinkers argue that the subsequent Western colonial occupation stymied rather than fostered modernist trends in Arab societies that had started prior to this conquest. Indeed, the Arab Moroccan thinker Abdallah al-Arawi argues: “If the renaissance reform had succeeded, colonialism wouldn’t have happened.”<sup>i</sup>

Western colonialism transformed the realm of thought, pushing many Arab (and Palestinian) thinkers to focus on political aspects and the struggle against colonialism, rather than on modernity and social development. The agenda of national liberation took over the agenda of modernization and progress. The concept of “colonial modernity,” giving the credit for the modernization of our societies to Western colonial powers is simply misleading.<sup>ii</sup>

In the late Ottoman period, five main trends expressing modern ways of thinking emerged, and they were continued with some modifications during the British Mandate period. First among these was the reform trend among Islamic and Christian scholars. On the Muslim side it included several students of the Egyptian reformist Islamic thinker Mohammad Abdo, among them Sheikh Said Murad from Gaza who included equal rights of women as a point on the agenda

of the first Syrian National Conference of 1920; Sheikh Abdelatif al-Jayyousi from Al-Kour village near Tulkarem, whose writings in 1923 defended women’s equal rights; Suleiman al-Taji al-Farouqi who in the 1930s published the progressive newspaper *Al-Jameah al-Islamiyyah*; and Sheikh Said al-Karmi, the progressive thinker from Tulkarem who was arrested by the Ottomans in 1915 for his opposition to despotism, among many others. Some thinkers of that trend called for the preservation and unity of the Islamic nation, to be built on justice and equal rights for all citizens. Thus, the Palestinian thinker Ruhi al-Khalidi (who studied and then taught at the Sorbonne in Paris, France, in the late nineteenth century) celebrated the Ottoman constitution of 1908 that alluded to equal rights for all Ottoman citizens, regardless of their nationality, religion, or any other kind of difference – including gender.<sup>iii</sup> The Christian thinkers of this group include, for instance, Khalil al-Sakakini (in the early stages of his life), who in 1913 campaigned for and wrote a booklet about the “Orthodox Renaissance in Palestine.”<sup>iv</sup> Other Christian reformers

Palestine in the early twentieth century was a lively, vibrant country with an active socio-cultural discourse that included women as contributors and participants, and touched on social, religious, political, and cultural topics and themes.

are Bishop Gregorios Hajjar, who was called the Bishop of the Arabs due to his positions on Arab issues;<sup>v</sup> Najib Al-Saati, Anstans Al-Kameli, and many others who called for tolerance between religions and equal rights of all citizens. Women writers who joined this trend include the Sufi writer and practitioner Fatima Al-Yashrutiyah (1890–1979) from Acre, who participated in the Al-Shadhiliyya Sufi group that followed the path based on the teachings of her father.<sup>vi</sup>

*The annual family photo of the Spridon Sarouf family, Jaffa, 1928. From the family album of Abla and Alfred Tubasi. ©The Palestinian Museum.*





Students of the Jerusalem Girls' College, 1920.



Jerusalem Radio Oriental Orchestra.



Wedding in Bethlehem, 1930.



Al Hambra Theatre in Jaffa, 1937.

The second modernist trend was Palestinian nationalism, which emerged during the British Mandate period, after Palestine had been separated from Greater Syria in the First Palestinian National Conference of 1919 in Jerusalem. An early expression of this trend can be seen in an article by Najib Nassar, the editor of *Al-Karmel* newspaper in Haifa, titled “What do we have to do with the people from Beirut?” (مالنا وما للبيروتيين؟) Here, Nassar pointed out that, other than Beirut, Palestine was facing Zionist immigration that, as he warned, aimed to take over Palestine. He made an early call to Palestinians to stand up and take on their responsibility to confront these Zionists plans. The thinkers of this trend were mainly either journalists or political leaders who combined writing with national struggle, such as the editor of *Falastin* newspaper, Issa al-Issa, and Boulos Shihadeh, the editor of *Mirat al-Sharq* (*Mirror of the East*) newspaper. Many of the political leaders during the British Mandate also played an intellectual role, such as Awni Abdel Hadi, the founder and leader of Al-Istiqlal (The Independence) party. Women writers who joined this trend included Sadhiq Nassar, the wife of Najib Nassar mentioned above, the editor of the women’s section of Haifa’s *Al-Karmel* newspaper. She was also the first Palestinian woman to be imprisoned by the British Mandate, being sentenced for one year for her calls for national struggle. An article written about her

in *Mirat al Sharq* in 1931 described her as “rebellious against traditions, the tyrannical powers, and all kinds of oppression.”<sup>vii</sup> Another woman who expressed the positions of this trend is Matiel Mogannam, who was among the leaders of the women’s movement in Palestine and who, in 1938, published a book in London about Palestinian women.<sup>viii</sup> Her husband, Mogannam Mogannam, was the secretary of the Defence Party (Hizb Al Difa’a) that had been established in the 1930s by Raghieb al-Nashashibi.<sup>ix</sup>

The third trend constituted thinkers who called for Arab national unity, such as the historian and thinker Aref al-Aref, the political leader Hamdi al-Husseini, Ajaj Nweihed from Lebanon who became one of the leaders of the Palestinian and Arab national movement during the Mandatory period, and Mohammed Ezzat Darwazeh, the Arab nationalist writer from Nablus who participated in the Syrian National Conference of 1919 and wrote tens of publications about the Arab national movement.

The fourth, the Marxist trend, included Najati Sidqi from Jerusalem, who wrote a book about historical materialism, and Emile Habibi, who after the *Nakba* began to combine his political activism with writing literature. Included here also is Kulthoum Odeh (1892–1965), a woman from Nazareth who married a Russian doctor and moved to Russia, where she translated Arabic literature

into Russian and Marxist books from Russian to Arabic. When she opposed the Soviet government’s position of accepting the partition plan for Palestine of 1947, Stalin ordered her arrest and called her an “enemy of the people.” She was released only after several interventions by Russian scholars who had either worked with or been taught by her.<sup>x</sup>

The fifth trend is humanitarian. Khalil al-Sakakini later in his life became a humanist and wrote: “I am not Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, or Jewish. I am also not an Arab or an Englishman, nor French, German, or Turkish. But I am an individual member of humanity.”<sup>xi</sup> In this same line of thinking, two women writers can be mentioned, Asma Toubi (1905–1982) and Anbara Salam al-Khalidi (1897–1986). Asma Toubi was born in Akko and was a writer of literature and short stories, as well as a theater actress and playwright. Furthermore, she worked at the radio stations *Huna al-Quds* and *Near East*, was editor of the women’s section in *Falastin* newspaper, and wrote for other newspapers. In her books about women in Palestine, she focused on their equal human rights. One of these books was left in the publication house when in 1948 she had to leave for Beirut.<sup>xii</sup> Anbara Salam al-Khalidi was an activist for women’s rights in Lebanon and all around the Arab region before she moved from Lebanon to Palestine in 1929, after she married Ahmad Sameh

al-Khalidi (another humanist who dedicated his life to the development of education in Palestine). In Palestine, Anbara allocated some of her time to radio programs about women’s rights, and to translating Virgil’s *Aeneid* into Arabic. In this context, we should not forget our famous poet Fadwa Tuqan; and May Ziadeh, who was born in Nazareth before moving to Lebanon and Egypt, a key writer of the renaissance in Mandate-era Palestinian literature.

It should be clear by now that Palestine in the early twentieth century was not an underdeveloped country. It was not waiting for Zionism to develop and make it prosperous, neither in the realm of culture, nor in other aspects (but that has to be the focus of another article). Palestine was a lively and vibrant part of the world, interacting with the various trends of global and regional Arab cultures, adapting and incorporating them to its own cultural discourse, and women were participating and producing part of this ongoing discourse. On the contrary, the British Mandate and Zionism hampered and attempted to thwart the country and Palestinian society’s progress towards modernity, transforming Palestinians into refugees both outside and inside their country. Indeed, the “Zionist project” went further, expelling the majority of the Palestinian people from their homeland in 1948, destroying their villages, and taking over the centers of Palestinian modernity – Acre, Haifa,

Jaffa, and others. Today, the Palestinian intellectual map is without a center, as divided and fragmented as the Palestinian people.

Walid Salem is a lecturer on democracy, human rights, and conflict resolution at Al-Quds University, and a PhD candidate

in international relations at the Near East University of Northern Cyprus. He is also a member of the PLO Palestinian National Council and the director of the Center for Democracy and Community Development in East Jerusalem.

<sup>1</sup> Abdallah al-Arawi, "The Legacy of the Renaissance and the Crisis of the Present," *Liberal Introductions to Modernity*, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Walid Salem, *Modernity Thinking in Palestine*, Al-Quds University, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> See Ruhi al-Khalidi, "The Causes of the Ottoman Revolution and the Young Turks," *Al Hilal Magazine*, 1908.

<sup>4</sup> Khalil al-Sakakini, *The Orthodox Renaissance in Palestine*, Jerusalem, 1913.

<sup>5</sup> See Johnny Mansour, *A Modern Vision of the Life and Work of Bishop Gregorios Hajjar* (in Arabic), Acre: Abu Rahmoun Publishing, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> For more information, see Leslie Cadavid, *Two Who Attained: Twentieth-Century Sufi Saints: Fatima al-Yashrutiyya & Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi*, Fons Vitae, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Qustandi Shomali, "Pioneering Women in Palestinian Literature: Kulthoum Odeh and Sadiyah Nassar as Examples (in Arabic)," Moien Halloun (editor), *Feminine Literature in Palestine*, Bethlehem University, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Ellen Fleischmann, *Jerusalem Women's Organizations during the Mandate*, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Aida Najjar, *Palestinian Newspapers and the National Movement in Half a Century (1900-1948)* (in Arabic), Beirut: The Arab Institute for Studies and Publication.

<sup>10</sup> Shomali, *ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> Salem, *Modernity Thinking*.

<sup>12</sup> Abdelhamid al-Farrani and Mohammad al-Alawi, *Eminent Palestinian Women* (in Arabic), Beirut: The Arab Sciences House for Publication, 2013.



**Our products by Our hands**

**Come enjoy local products  
made by the hands of Palestinian women!**

You will have the opportunity to purchase handmade products such as pastries, jams, pickles, medicinal & decorative plants, sweets, clothes for children, handmade jewelry, fabric handicrafts and other interesting items.

Wednesday 13th of September 11:00 am – 6 pm

Thursday 14th of September 11:00 am – 6 pm

French Institute Chateaubriand  
Salah Eddin Street 23 - Jerusalem

This event is organized by ACAD within the EU funded project "Advancing the Rights of Vulnerable Palestinian Women and Children in East Jerusalem" managed by the Heinrich Boell Stiftung.



HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG  
PALESTINE & JORDAN



# Ambassador Hotel

JERUSALEM

AI Diwan

Bar

Terrace

118 Rooms

Garden

علاج طبيعي  
Natural Therapy

Sauna

Spa

Wedding

Pastry

Fitness Center

Food Catering

☎ 5412222



5828202



P.O.Box 19186, 5 Nablus St. Sheikh Jarrah, Jerusalem



www.jerusalemambassador.com



reservation@jerusalemambassador.com