

Palestinians in Kuwait

The Family and the Politics of Survival

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As it narrates the experiences of Palestinians who came to Kuwait after the 1948 *Nakba* in Palestine and throughout the early fifties (whom I call the early-comers), this article provides only a sample of the Palestinian connections to the Arab Gulf region, focusing in particular on Kuwait when it was still a British protectorate and the early years of its independence.*

The earliest wave of migration to new exile locations in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria in response to the 1948 dispersal came from the Palestinian intelligentsia, predominantly former bureaucrats, teachers, doctors, engineers, accountants, army and police officers, and businessmen. Seeking physical survival and employment, this segment of Palestinian society moved to every corner of the Arab world. Thus, several hundred individuals from Palestine's intelligentsia moved to Kuwait between 1948 and the early 1950s. The young oil state, still a British protectorate at the time, offered increasing numbers of secure and lucrative positions, particularly in its expanding bureaucracy. The expertise and levels of education that this class possessed provided it with the keys for survival, as they constituted the skills most needed in the Arab world at the time and enabled them to relocate and immediately offer a needed service to their host country.

The second major group of Palestinians that arrived in Kuwait during the 1950s was the peasantry. No sector of Palestinian society has paid a heavier price for the events of 1948. Most of the peasants were gathered into makeshift refugee camps in, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, the West Bank, and Jordan. Those who had not been uprooted, that is, the indigenous peasantry of what came to be called the West Bank, were severely hit economically. Most had few skills outside of agriculture, although many had worked as laborers in Palestinian coastal industries. Those who came to Kuwait were forced to travel via the dangerous underground railroad that operated between the West Bank and Kuwait. During the 1950s, thousands of young male peasants, many as young as fifteen, came to Iraq this way and then walked from Basra literally across the desert to Kuwait. Hundreds of others came to Kuwait in boats used by smugglers in the Fao area

(Iraq). On the way, some of those who crossed the desert died of sun exposure, and some of those who used the sea routes drowned.

The economic and physical survival of their families and themselves in the aftermath of the 1948 war motivated Palestinians from both the intelligentsia and the peasantry to migrate to Kuwait. After 1948, the responsibility for the family fell on the young men and women who had the ability to endure the harsh conditions. Their first priority was to relieve their families' suffering and to provide their parents, brothers, and sisters with the necessities of life. They also had to find means to ensure the education of their brothers and sisters that had been interrupted by the war. These pioneers became the bridgehead of the Palestinian community in Kuwait. Their arrival facilitated the migration of many other friends and members of their scattered families.

What follows is an account of the circumstances surrounding the arrival of a sample of the Palestinians from the early-comer intelligentsia who came to Kuwait in the aftermath of the *Nakba*. Khayriddin Abuljubayn of Jaffa came to Kuwait as a teacher in 1948. From 1953 until 1957, he also served as secretary of the sports union, and from 1957 to 1964, he was secretary of the Kuwaiti soccer union before he became the first representative of the PLO to Kuwait. Others who also engaged in sports include Zuhayr al-Karmi and Jamil al-Salih, who had exceptional careers in Kuwait's Ministry of Education. Al-Karmi simplified science through a television program called *Life and Science* that was popular during the 1960s and ran for over a decade. And al-Salih became chief math inspector for secondary schools of Kuwait and is the author of the high

The Palestinians who came to Kuwait after the exodus and during the 1950s, like the Palestinians in the rest of the Arab world, provided the roots for a new and different superstructure in the diaspora.

school mathematics curricula; he was instrumental in introducing modern math to Kuwaiti high schools.

Hani al-Qaddumi was the founder of Kuwait's first Modern Department of Residence and Passports in 1949. In that same year, he was appointed secretary to Shaykh Abdullah Mubarak al-Sabah, the deputy of Kuwait's emir. Al-Qaddumi coordinated all the diverse agencies under the jurisdiction of the emir's deputy, including the embryonic army, the civil aviation organization, the Departments of General Security, and the radio station.

Kuwait's first modern radio station was founded and directed by Muhammad Al-Ghussayn of al-Ramla. He had been a senior staff member of the British Near East Broadcasting Station in Jaffa since its inauguration during World War II. After the 1948 war, the company was transferred to Cyprus, and during the 1956 Suez War, al-Ghussayn and all the Palestinian and Arab staff members resigned. In 1958, within a year and with the help of Kuwaiti,

Arab, and Palestinian employees, al-Ghussayn founded and then directed, at Kuwait's request, the first modern radio station. Sharif al-Alami became one of the first to create a popular informative TV program called *SG* (Questions and Answers). One of the Palestinians who joined the Kuwait radio station as a translator for Reuters in 1959 was Ahmad Abd al-Al. He became one of Kuwait's most distinguished radio and television anchormen.

In 1962, when Ashraf Lutfi, a Palestinian from Jaffa and the director of the office of Kuwait's emir, had a stroke, Hani al-Qaddumi substituted for him until 1965, when he resigned to start a successful private business that became a leader in marketing medical equipment and drugs. Lutfi had previously been director of the office of Abdullah al-Mullah, the secretary of Kuwait's government, and in charge of the relations between the emir and the oil company. Upon the death of al-Mullah, Lutfi became first director of the emir's office and then general secretary of OPEC, while representing Kuwait. He was highly knowledgeable about the oil industry.

From 1948 to 1953, several other Palestinians joined the general security department as administrators. Among them were Anwar al-Hnaydi, Ziyad Zuaytar, Zakarya al-Kurdi, and Abdulkarim al-Shawwa. They all were to have remarkable careers in Kuwait's private and public sectors.

A particularly remarkable contribution to Kuwait's governmental infrastructure development came from Abdel Mohsin al-Qattan. Al-Qattan came to Kuwait in 1951 where he taught at the Mubarakiyah secondary school, at the time the only secondary school in Kuwait. He then went to Jordan where he was

Kuwaiti attitudes were very important in the Palestinians' ability to form their new diaspora society. By employing Palestinians, welcoming them, and facilitating their adaptation to Kuwait, the country significantly helped Palestinians to respond to post-1948 conditions.

in charge of West Bank commercial education until 1953. When he was hired by the Kuwaiti government in 1953, the Department of Electricity was just starting as the result of the government's taking over a small private company that generated limited electricity. By the time al-Qattan resigned in 1963, he was general inspector of the Ministry of Electricity, the second-highest position in the ministry.

But al-Qattan, like Hani al-Qaddumi and many other high-ranking Palestinian government employees, believed by the mid-1960s that it was time to resign despite Kuwaiti rejection of such resignations. Following Kuwait's independence in 1961, Kuwaiti graduates were looking to fill high-level government positions, and a slow, but long-term government policy of "Kuwaitization" began to take place.

Like most Palestinians who had worked with the government of

Kuwait, al-Qattan decided that the only way to realize his potential was through the private sector. This mentality later became widespread in the diaspora and was a revival of a centuries-old practice in urban Palestine. Thus, al-Qattan started al-Hani Corporation in the early 1960s. In a few years and with little capital, he was able to establish one of the best construction companies in Kuwait and in the region whose operations extended into Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and North Africa. Al-Qattan was a philanthropist in every meaning of the word. Along with other philanthropists, he founded Masarat, the Palestine think tank in the West Bank, in 2011. Al-Qattan shared much of his wealth to support Palestinian institutions. He also founded the Welfare Association with fellow philanthropists from the early-comers to Kuwait such as Hani al-Qaddumi, Said Khoury, and others from the Palestinian diaspora including Hasib Sabbagh, Riyadh Kamal, Samir Abdulhadi, Abdulmajeed Shouman, and Munib al-Masri. The Welfare Association is dedicated to supporting Palestinian development throughout Palestine.

Engineer Dr. Zaki Abu-Id, originally from a village near Jaffa that was ethnically cleansed and one of the few Palestinian engineers to graduate from a university in Great Britain before 1948, participated in the efforts to create a modern, efficient department of electricity. The first Arab engineer in the department, Abu-Id, rose to increasingly high-ranking positions in the new ministry to serve as chief engineer until his death in the late 1970s.

The Palestinian role in the private sector of the Gulf region expanded tremendously during this period, starting with the first oxygen factory,

founded by Salim al-Hunyadi in the late 1950s. According to the director of Kuwait's National Bank Ibrahim Dabdoub, during the 1950s the Palestinians in Kuwait were primarily individuals working in the public sector. Laws restricting non-indigenous free enterprise in Kuwait limited the emergence of Palestinian businesses. By the mid-1960s, as Kuwait embarked on an ambitious development program and Kuwaiti laws governing free enterprise were reformed, privately owned, large Palestinian businesses arose. That era also produced skilled managers, bankers, and investors such as Khalid Abu al-Saud, manager of the investments of Kuwait's late emir Shaikh Jaber al-Ahmad.

Palestinians made significant contributions to education in Kuwait. A native of Jaffa, Salwa Abu-Khadra founded the first nursery school in Kuwait and later on a very successful school. She became a key female figure in Fatah and the PLO. Darwish al-Miqdadi was assigned as director of education in 1950 due to his exceptional organizational and educational skills. During the 1930s, he had founded the Iraqi scout movement and was the president of Iraq's Higher Teachers' College (the highest educational post in the country at the time).

Dozens of Palestinian doctors also entered Kuwait between 1948 and the early 1950s. Dr. Sami Bsharah, a surgeon who before 1948 had worked in the Jaffa hospital, was one of the first Arab doctors to come to Kuwait. Only two or three doctors were in the country at that time. Later on, Bsharah became the director of Al-Amiri Hospital. Several Palestinian doctors participated in providing medical services in Kuwait during the early 1950s alongside the 32

British and Arab doctors practicing at the time. Dr. Nazim Ghabra, a cardiologist, and Dr. Ali al-Attawneh, a surgeon, have had remarkable careers. In 1965, they were members of the four-doctor team that supervised the medical treatment of Shaykh Abdullah S. al-Sabah, the former emir.

Most nursing practitioners in Kuwait were Christian Palestinian women graduates of the missionary nursing schools in Palestine, such as Saint Luke's Hospital. They headed most of the nursing departments of Al-Amiri Hospital up to the early 1960s.

Khalid al-Hasan made an outstanding contribution to the municipality of Kuwait and later became a founder of Fatah and one of its main leaders. Talat al-Ghussayn served as the assistant general secretary of the Development Board and in the 1960s he became Kuwait's ambassador to the United States. He was one of three ambassadors of Palestinian origin who represented Kuwait alongside Adel Jarrah (Moscow's ambassador) and Hasan al-Dabbagh (ambassador in Japan). These Palestinians, under the guidance of then-foreign minister Shaikh Sabah al Ahmad al Sabah, were present and active also in the preparations for Kuwait's application for membership in the United Nations after its independence in 1961.

Another pioneer, General Wajih al-Madani of Acre, made his contribution to Kuwait through the army. Born in 1921, al-Madani had served as a corporal in an Arab force during World War II. During that time, no Palestinian army officers existed in the ranks of the British army. But al-Madani's performance in the war provided him with the opportunity to enter the Sarafand British Military College in Palestine. In 1946, he graduated as a second lieutenant. From 1946 until

1947, he trained the embryonic Saudi army. With Hazim Khalidi, he also trained the 85 Palestinians who were recruited to become lieutenants and lead the Palestinians in the defense of Palestine in 1948. Many future Palestinian military leaders emerged from this group.

When al-Madani arrived in Kuwait in 1952 to work in its embryonic army, it had three lieutenants, one of them Fathi Sidir, a Palestinian who during World War II had fought with British forces. Wajih al-Madani participated in the establishment of many of the basic departments and units of the Kuwaiti army, offering his experience to his Kuwaiti colleagues to build a modern entity. His career continued until 1984, with an interruption from 1965 to 1969, when he became the first commander-in chief of the Palestine Liberation Army, the official army of the PLO.

Many other Palestinians also provided essential services to the Kuwaiti army. Umar Zuaytar, for example, founded and led the artillery and participated actively with Kuwait's troops in the 1973 war on the Syrian Golan front. In recognition of his achievements, Kuwait granted him citizenship. Khalil Shhaybar, a former Palestinian police officer, founded and led the police force in 1951, holding commanding posts until his retirement in the early 1980s.

Palestinian musician Talat al-Alami, together with other displaced musicians from Jerusalem, founded Kuwait's first military band in the early 1950s.

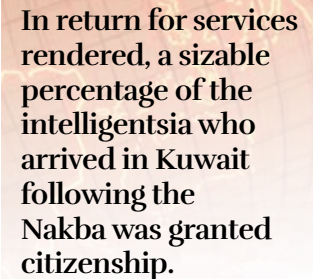
Great contributions were made by Palestinians in agriculture. Yihya Ghannam of Tulkarem had graduated from Khadduri agricultural school in Palestine just before the war of 1948. Indeed, Palestinian participation in

agricultural development in Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Egypt, and Syria has been quite integral to the politics of Palestinian survival, as thousands of Palestinians worked in agriculture in these countries, continuing the millennia-long tradition of their forebears.

In the area of finance, Haydar al-Shahabi, a graduate of the American University of Beirut, was one of five individuals who comprised the embryonic Ministry of Finance in early 1949 in Kuwait. Initially, he was appointed assistant to the director of the finance department; when he resigned in 1969 to enter the private sector, he was deputy assistant secretary of state for financial affairs.

This small, non-inclusive sample illustrates Palestinian accomplishments in Kuwait, focusing only on those who came between 1948 and 1955. The contributions of this group directly resulted from an obsession with professional standards, caused to a large extent by the need to find and maintain employment as stateless refugees. In every area of the private and public sectors, the displaced Palestinian intelligentsia left its mark.

Furthermore, these examples demonstrate how every exiled population, in adapting to a new environment, follows strategies that reflect the original society. The majority of the early-comer Palestinian intelligentsia were urban; their experience had been accumulated in cities such as Jaffa, Haifa, Lydda, Ramla, Acre, Safad, Gaza, Tiberias, and Jerusalem. Their education, knowledge of foreign languages, and experience with the British system of civil administration provided them with tools helpful for survival after the 1948 trauma.



In return for services rendered, a sizable percentage of the intelligentsia who arrived in Kuwait following the Nakba was granted citizenship.

In 1950, the first major wave of Palestinian working women after 1948, independently recruited, arrived in Kuwait. Among them Myassar Shahin, who arrived in Kuwait at the age of 24 and was assigned as principal of one of the two secondary schools for women in Kuwait at the time. Shahin had been a high school teacher in Jerusalem and was a graduate of Jerusalem's teaching college. She worked as a high school principal for 34 years, making a positive impact on women's education in Kuwait until she retired in 1984.

The experience of Said Khoury of Consolidated Contractors Company (CCC) demonstrates how powerful and motivating the force of the family can be. His family's ordeal provided him with the motivation to withstand the pressure and hardships of working after 1948 in the Syrian desert in subhuman conditions. He was particularly torn to see his father forced to cope with statelessness and poverty. The transformation of his father from a dignitary in Safad (Palestine) to a stateless refugee was the most devastating emotional experience Khoury had to endure. In 1948, Said Khoury, Hasib

Sabbagh, and Kamel Abdul-Rahman created what later became one of the most successful construction companies in the Arab world. Khoury spent years after 1948 building infrastructure projects in Lebanon and Yemen before he moved his company to Kuwait. Starting as a small subcontractor that in the 1950s operated through the US company Bechtel, CCC became a multinational corporation with a half-billion-dollar annual budget in the 1970s.

The pioneers who came to Kuwait were participating in a broad social transformation. Most of the members of the intelligentsia who went to the Gulf early were of lower- or middle-class origins. Almost all of them had either a high school or college degree, some working experience, and no investments outside of Palestine. Most of them were in their mid-to-late twenties. They were penniless when the war ended and needed to move quickly to survive and help their families, their parents, siblings,

This article has not offered an explanation of the role of the Palestinians who came to Kuwait before the *Nakba*. Most distinguished among them were the four Palestinian men and two women who were sent to Kuwait in 1936 and 1938, respectively, by Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the leader of the Palestinian nationalist movement, in response to a request by the emir of Kuwait, Shaikh Ahmad al-Jaber. The salaries of this group, which included Ahmad Shahab-Aldin, were paid partly by the Kuwaiti educational institutions and partly by the Arab Higher Committee, led by Haj Amin.

The Palestinians who came to Kuwait and the Gulf in the late 1940s and early 1950s were self-made men and women with exceptional will and intelligence. They accepted and tolerated the harsh living conditions of Kuwait, something the former elite had not been willing to do. Husayn Qalawi, who came to Kuwait in 1950 and opened the Orient Palace Hotel,

to start from scratch. My generation was a self-made working generation.”

Similar to the Palestinians who moved to Kuwait between 1948 and the early 1950s, their counterparts who moved to Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, Lebanon, and Jordan, among other Arab countries, exerted a significant influence. In almost every phase of development, be it economic, military, administrative, or educational, Palestinians had a tremendous impact, particularly from 1948 to 1965. During this period the modern economic infrastructure of Kuwait was established, and the Palestinian role in this work was crucial. In 1965, for instance, 48 percent of all employees in Kuwait’s public sector were Palestinian (15,512 male, 1,477 female). In the private sector, Palestinians comprised 41.4 percent of all employees. Not until the mid-1960s was there a balance in employment percentages between the Palestinian, Egyptian, and Kuwaiti roles in infrastructure development.

Another generation of Palestinians flourished in Kuwait in the sixties and beyond, such as the novelist Ghassan Kanafani, who lived in Kuwait for six years, and Naji al-Ali, who built his cartoonist career in Kuwait. Also, it is not a coincidence that Yasser Arafat, Abu Iyad (Salah Khalaf), Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad), Salim Zanoun (Abu al-Adib), and others were working in Kuwait and had the first strategic meetings in Kuwait before launching the Palestine national movement Fatah in 1965.

These Palestinians, who in response to forced exile and the ethnic cleansing of Palestine established the foundations of diaspora structures, discovered that the traditional pre-1948 system that had depended on family and property to protect individual privilege no longer existed. Education and hard work were the new tickets to survival. What they built in the diaspora was a new structure based on merit. In no way, however, can the new Palestinian diaspora structure be divorced from family. The early-come intelligentsia reestablished their success in the social and family network.

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grandparents. Their work experience and education gave them the lead in finding employment and in building the diaspora structure. Through the will to achieve, they have in fact established a society, but not in Palestine.

the second modern hotel to be built in Kuwait, explained, “In Haifa I lost my work, chiefly a business founded by my great-grandfather, which expanded during my grandfather’s and father’s days. I lost everything – work, inheritance, and country. I had

* This article is based on my book titled *Palestinians in Kuwait*, published in 1987 by Westview Press, and republished in 2019 by London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group. For a more in-depth understanding and analysis of the entire Palestinian community, including the role of the Palestinian peasantry in Kuwait, please consult this publication. For a source in Arabic, please refer to *Al-Nakbah wa Nushoo’ al Shataat al-Filastini fi al-Kuwait*, published in 2018 in Beirut by Al-Markaz al-Arabi. This more recent manuscript covers the events of 1990–91 as well and their impact on the Palestinian community in Kuwait.