



REVIEWS

The Poetic Expression of a Political Man

Ibrahim Nasrallah introduces *Diwani*, a collection of poems by Ahmad Hilmi Abdelbaqi (1882-1963)

This essay was written by poet and novelist Ibrahim Nasrallah as the introduction to Ahmad Hilmi Abdelbaqi's posthumous collection of poetry entitled Diwani. As the editor of the collection, Nasrallah divides Ahmad Hilmi's poems into two parts: contemplations and invocations [ta'amulat wa ibtihalat]. Within each part, the poems are grouped in alphabetical order according to the final letter of the verse (as is standard in Arabic poetry). The poems are written as rubaiyat [quatrains] of four verses, which are displayed on two lines. The collection totals 421 pages and includes the introduction essay by Nasrallah, which has been excerpted here.¹

Researchers and historians concur on the important political and economic role Ahmad Hilmi Abdelbaqi played in the Palestinian struggle from the 1920s onward. He maintained a significant presence at Palestinian political and economic gatherings that aimed at maintaining the Arabness of Palestine and defending the country. In this article we cast light on another part of his character that has

Ahmad Hilmi Abdelbaqi stands in the center front row, with other members of the Arab Higher Committee. Source: *Before Their Diaspora*.

remained largely unknown until the present publication of his poems - that of Ahmad Hilmi, the poet, a bountiful and gifted mind expressing itself in verse.

His Life

Ahmad Hilmi was born in 1882 and finished his education in the towns of Nablus and Tulkarem. 'Ajaj Nuwayhid, a friend and contemporary, described this period of Ahmad Hilmi's life:

He received his early education at the hands of religious sheikhs; [they were] undoubtedly religious studies. His teacher in Tulkarem was the 'allahamah Sheikh Saeed al-Karmi, a graduate of Azhar University and a contemporary of Jamal Eddin al-Afghani in Egypt. Karmi was one of a group brought before the military court of the tyrannical Ottoman ruler Jamal Basha in Aleih at the beginning of war [World War I]. A death sentence was decreed on al-Karmi but later mitigated to a life imprisonment in the Damascus Castle due to his old age.

Early in his adult life, Ahmad Hilmi worked for the Agricultural Bank in Nablus; later he assumed prominent public roles in the military, economic institutions and political life in Iraq, Syria and Jordan. The Arab world that Ahmad Hilmi lived in at this time shared one geographic, political and social vision, an echo of the unifying nationalistic movement that pervaded the region and that called on Arabs to struggle together against colonialism.

During the First World War, Ahmad Hilmi led a troop of volunteers alongside the Turkish forces in the "Ammara" governorate, where he reportedly captured the British War Secretary General Townsend. In 1919-1920, Ahmad Hilmi was appointed general director at the Ministry of Finance when Prince Faisal bin Hussein's government controlled Syria. He became, during Faisal's rule, one of the pillars of the Arab Independence Party, the public face of the secret Young Arab Society. Following the French occupation of Syria, Ahmad Hilmi moved to Amman as finance consultant (equivalent to minister today). Sharif Hussein bin Ali also appointed him overseer of the Hijaz Railroad and then designated him representative of the Hijaz Kingdom at the Public Debt Conference, organized by the states that were newly independent from Turkish rule, which held conferences in Istanbul, Geneva, and London in the first three months of 1925.² After these conferences, the British authorities accused Ahmad Hilmi of inciting resistance against the French mandate over Syria and exiled him to the Hijaz with a number of other nationalists; soon thereafter he moved to Cairo. This period of Ahmad Hilmi's life formed and developed his experiences in a number of active nationalistic arenas, in particular his ideas about liberation and self awareness, which clashed with the new European colonialist venture being built on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire.

His stay in Cairo was short-lived as he moved to Palestine again in 1926 at the invitation of the Mufti al-Haj Amin al-Husseini, head of the Islamic Higher Council. Until 1930, he worked as the General Overseer of the *Awqaf* [charitable endowments], where he put in order the affairs of *al-Haram al-Qudsi*, increasing the number of charitable foundations and participating in the Islamic Conference of 1931 as representative for Jerusalem. Ahmad Hilmi's return to Palestine in 1926 marked a new period in his life, one full of intense and continuous struggles until his eventual death in 1963 in the town of Souq al-Gharb in Lebanon. He was buried in Jerusalem in al-Haram al-Sharif.

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An early ad for the Arab Bank, founded by Abdelbaqi and Abdul Hamid Shoman.

Source: Before Their Diaspora.

This era of his life witnessed the Palestinian struggle for recognition and national independence against Britain and Zionism. When the al-Buraq/Wailing Wall revolt exploded in 1929, the Islamic Higher Council took on the religious and political role of protecting Muslim rights to al-Buraq/the Wailing Wall.³ Ahmad Hilmi found among his duties the need to address the social requirements that arose from the conflict. He formed the Central Committee for Victim's Aid in Palestine [al-Lajna al-Markiziya li-I'nayat al-Mankubeen fi Filastin]⁴, which came into being on 5 September with the stated reason for its founding being the recent harassment and attacks of Palestinians by Zionists, which had left Palestinian women, children, elderly men vulnerable and without shelter, support or ability to generate income. The Committee included political personalities, as well as businessmen, one of whom was Abdul Hamid Shoman.⁵ In 1930 Shoman and Ahmad Hilmi together established the Arab Bank [al-Bank al-'Arabi].⁶ Ahmad Hilmi was appointed Chairman of the Board and served until 1942, when he left to establish the Agriculture Bank [al-Bank al-Zira'i] to give agricultural loans to Palestinian peasants, and later the Arab Nation Bank [Bank al-Umma al-'Arabiya], and the Nation Fund Company [Sharikat Sanduq al-Umma] with the goal of saving Arab land from Zionist buyers. There was wide appreciation for Ahmad Hilmi's land fund idea. Musa Kazim al-Husseini stated that it is "the first practical project taking place in the country, one that our lives depend on. ... The truth be said, our cause depends on preserving our land in our hands."⁷

Ahmad Hilmi's scope of nationalist and economic accomplishments continued to grow and he was elected Chairman of the Jerusalem Chamber of Commerce and head of the Salahiya Charitable Organization which established an institute for the orphaned children of martyrs entitled 'Ma'had Abna' al-Umma li-Iwa' Abna' al-Shuhada'.⁸

In 1932, Zionists set up a trade expo in Tel Aviv, but failed to convince Palestinian organizations to participate. Not only did Palestinians reject repeated Jewish invitations and overtures, but they also went on to organize a competing expo in Jerusalem. The Expo Company headed by Ahmad Hilmi was launched as a public shareholding corporation to manage trade shows. The first expo was inaugurated at the Palace Hotel on 8 July 1933 and was a resounding success across the Arab world as an elaborate display of best-quality products from Palestine, Syria, Egypt and Lebanon. It also expressed the Arab spirit of the times through pictures of the martyrs of the Greater Syrian Revolt. The High Commissioner of the British Mandate, Arthur Wauchope, was not formally invited, although it is said that he attended on his own initiative.⁹

The turmoil of the 1930s saw Ahmad Hilmi taking a larger role in Palestinian politics. Historian Muhammad ‘Izzat Darwazeh wrote about Ahmad Hilmi:

When the decision was taken to establish an Arab Higher Committee [al-Lajna al-‘Arabiya al-‘Uliya] to oversee the long Palestinian strike of 1936, Ahmad Hilmi Abdelbaqi joined, becoming one of its steadier and stronger hands. When Andrews, the Mandate ruler of Nazareth, was assassinated and signs of the Palestinian Revolt were spreading, the Mandate authorities arrested Ahmad Hilmi along with the other members of the Higher Arab Committee and exiled them to the Seychelles (volcanic islands in the Indian Ocean). Ahmad Hilmi was in exile for 20 months until the Mandate government pardoned him along with associates (Dr. Hussein al-Khalidi, Yacoub Ghussein, Fouad Saba, Rashid al-Haj Ibrahim) as a result of pressures exerted by the Arab Revolt and the Higher Arab Council.¹⁰

In 1946, the Higher Arab Council [al-Haya’ al-Arabiya al-‘Uliya] was created by the Council of the Arab League and Ahmad Hilmi was elected as a board member. But these were times when Jewish militias were terrorizing and attacking Palestinians with increasing violence. The members of the Higher Arab Council were mostly living outside of Palestine, and only a few others were tied to the Jihad al-Muqaddis operating between Jaffa and Jerusalem. Inside Palestine, Ahmad Hilmi became solely in charge, with his friend Dr. Hussein Fakhri al-Khalidi lending him support. After the massacre at Deir Yassin, Dr. al-Khalidi also left the country to publicize worldwide the crimes being committed against Palestinian civilians. When the Zionists seized the Baqa’a neighbourhood in Jerusalem, Ahmad Hilmi was forced to relocate to the Old City and established his base in the Dar al-Aytam orphanage, acting as a leader in the defence of Jerusalem against many waves of attacks by Zionists.¹¹

On the 23rd of June 1948, following the Zionist occupation of Palestine, the Council of the Arab League elected Ahmad Hilmi as prime-minister of a newly-conceived

All-Palestine Government [Hukumat ‘Umum Filastin]. On the immediate declaration of the establishment of the All-Palestine Government on 23 September 1948, Ahmad Hilmi sent a memo to the Secretary General of the Arab League and the Arab governments:

It is my honour to relay to you that in consideration of the Palestinians' natural right for determining the course of their destiny, and based on the resolutions of the Political Committee and its deliberations, it was decided that an announcement be made stating that all of Palestine, within its known borders before the end of the British Mandate over it, is to become an independent state ruled by a body called the All-Palestine Government on a democratic basis.

On 30 September, 1948 in Gaza, the National Council, which was comprised of public personalities and representative committees, granted the new Palestine Government its vote of confidence.¹² The subsequent political developments prevented an embryonic government from achieving its goals, and Ahmad Hilmi moved to Cairo to represent Palestine at the Arab League. He stayed there until he passed away in 1963. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) replaced the All-Palestine Government, and opened a new chapter in the Palestinian struggle.

Palestinian and Arab political and social circles were genuinely appreciative of the personal and more general role Ahmad Hilmi played in the struggle against colonial and Zionist aggression. They sympathized with his call for establishing a Palestinian state with his person at the helm.

While the political, economic and military roles that Ahmad Hilmi played formed his person and experiences, we know more about his character and personality from his friends. ‘Ajaj Nuwayhi paints with his pen a clear portrait of Ahmad Hilmi, the poet, a friend he knew closely:

...upright in stature and ever a notable presence, fair-complexioned with an imposing old-world military moustache and his ever-present fez; always meticulously composed in suits as if he'd never left his role as leader of the volunteers brigade in Iraq during the first civilian war. He comes upon you with a firm gait and an inviting smile, tender in his salutations and sincere in his regards for you, your family, your friends and your work. You are soon absorbed by his witty dialogue and his poise. If you were to meet him in an informal setting, and offered a good joke, he'd praise your good sense of humour, rejoicing with profound and worthy remarks of his own. His intellect is that of depth and he never prolongs his speech. If you were to meet him today, you're sure to note the

presence of an exceptional being, one of sophistication and rank, a character manifesting leadership, valour and political acumen; indeed a man of letters and poetry.¹³

Nuwayhid makes clear that much of Ahmad Hilmi's cultured sensibilities and etiquette come from his educational background:

Ahmad Hilmi finished his schooling and mastered the Arabic language, reciting by heart the Quran, and memorizing many of the Prophet's sayings [ahadith sharifah], old prized Arabic manuscripts, poetry and prose. He was also cultured in a selection of stories, aphorisms, anecdotes, wit and comedy. His collection of anecdotes he told grew over time and his gatherings were filled with amusing stories. Following his teacher Karmi's advice, he imbibed in and memorized the best of Arabic poetry, which awakened his creativity and resulted in his writing exceptional poetry. He also possessed a fine hand at Arabic calligraphy at a time when beautiful handwriting was something scholars and artists aspired to. It is said that two persons approached Arabic calligraphy purely for its aesthetic mastery. They were Prince Shakib Arsalan who derived his style from al-Naskh style, and Ahmad Hilmi Basha, who chose the common Ruqa'i style which was dominant in Ottoman diwans. If a hundred letter bags were to be emptied and shuffled up, and you were asked who wrote this and who wrote that, it was clear that you could answer: this is Prince Shakib's and that is Ahmad Hilmi's!¹⁴

The reader of Ahmad Hilmi's poetry will see that his poetic knowledge found its inspiration in old Arabic poetry.¹⁵ Other strong influences on his poetic compositions were popular proverbs and aphorisms which are beautifully woven into Ahmad Hilmi's quatrains [*ruba'yat*].¹⁶ He used his poetry as a vehicle to express many of the values that he believed in, as will be discussed more below. The following quatrain pleads for conciseness and clarity, a quality that Ahmad Hilmi valued within himself, it seems, as well as in others.

*If you want to speak, be brief and don't prolong your words
For prolonging them sickens your expressions
The best words are succinct and articulate
If you do that, you will communicate your thoughts*

In spite of the massive number of poetic compositions in the volume, we find that it was not Hilmi's poetry that brought him attention. His multi-layered career in military, political and economic capacities, and his calculated distance from petty political scuffles among Palestinian factions, qualified him for a leadership position during

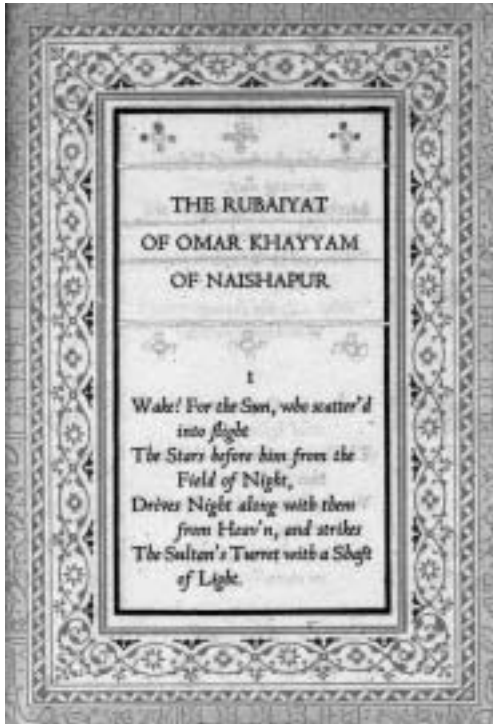
these stormy times. His exemplary role in defending Jerusalem during the 1948 War was the highlight of his long career and the accomplishment that brought him to the attention of most Arab leaders.¹⁷ We are hoping that this volume brings to light his literary accomplishments, as well.

Ahmad Hilmi, the Poet

After just a few moments of flipping through the pages of Ahmad Hilmi's *Diwani* collection, it became apparent to me that I was reading the work of a unique poet of great ability, and his poems expressed a new flavour, one different from the verse of the first half of the twentieth century in Palestine and the Arab world. Essentially, Ahmad Hilmi was devoted to a single form, which he continually wrote in - the short poem [*qasida*] also called a *rubaiya* or quatrain, which consists of four verses within two lines. We have limited evidence that he also wrote longer poems [*qasa'id*]: 'Aja' Nuwayhid refers to Ahmad Hilmi's participation in the battles of World War I in Iraq when he was 36 years old, and Nuwayhid mentions that "the descriptions of battles resounding and echoing in his poems [*qasa'id*] from that time." Unfortunately, these poems were not among his papers, a group of documents which in total comprise more works than the lifetime writings of any other Palestinian poet.

The only *qasa'id* which are among his papers were written later in his life, when he was exiled to the Seychelles Islands by the British Mandate Authority and found himself having to adjust to different rhythms of life. These are only a few poems, a small part of his collected work, and they revolve around two chosen themes: 1) description, as he found himself face to face with a different environment and landscape which required a new vocabulary for trees, birds, and weather; and 2) affection [*haneen*], which seems to be the ideal way to move the poet's mind and sentiments away from his exile and back to his homeland. An example of this type of poem will be discussed below.

We estimate that Ahmad Hilmi began writing in the quatrain form in the 1930s and used it until his death. The quatrain would have been known to a poet such as Ahmad Hilmi, and his poems contain references to his rich and varied knowledge of Arabic poetry.¹⁸ The quatrain was a Persian form that was transmitted into Arabic and used systematically beginning in the fifth century of the hijra (twelfth century CE) around the time that Omar al-Khayyam was writing his most famous of Persian *rubaiyat* verses. Kamal Abu Deeb writes that the *rubaiya* form developed and enriched the Arabic poetic tradition and offered new poetic opportunities, just as it did upon entering the Persian poetic canon.¹⁹ The quatrain reached its climax in the twentieth century with the translations of the *Rubaiyat* of Omar al-Khayyam gaining widespread popularity. Dr. Yusif Bakkar mentions more than sixty different Arabic poetic and prose translations of al-Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*.²⁰ Additionally, Ahmad Hilmi may have read quatrains of al-Khayyam and others in various languages, such as Turkish. He



The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam was one of the works of Arabic literature which influenced Ahmad Hilmi's own quatrain poetry.

utilizes most often the AABA and AAAA and ABCB rhyme schemes.

Ahmad Hilmi's quatrains often express an idea or a thought in the first verse that is completed by the final verse, tying them together through vivid imagery and unexpected turns of phrase. In Ahmad Hilmi's work, the complexity and beauty of the language, in addition to the ideas he expresses, typify the highest standards of *rubai'yat*. He uses common features of classical Arabic poetry like word echoing, word anticipation, and word inversion, all of which refer to the use of the same or similar word appearing in some form in nearby verses. Ahmad Hilmi also uses language that recalls the older poetry he knew so well. He dealt with many subjects and in this essay we explore but a few: the experience of writing, longing, death, and dignity. In reading his verses, it is clear that the *rubai'yat* served as a refuge for him to express his concerns and troubles,

and they provided a figurative form through which he could express the emotions generated through his sharp consciousness of the injustices created in the Palestinian struggle with British colonization and the Zionist assault on Palestine. It was as if poetry lessened the burden and difficulties of that reality, since he could express himself freely through it and play with the complexity of expressing himself in those two lines within a constraining meter and rhyme.

*I drew poetry out of the treasures of my breast
Like luminous planets casting wisdom on life's journeys
Many a difficult problem challenged my understanding
But was illuminated by what my pen writes*

When we read about Ahmad Hilmi's life and its echoes in the writings of his contemporaries about him, we can see that he equated politics with nationalistic endeavours, and homeland with humanity. This humanistic approach to nationalist politics is very different than the idea we have of the traditional Palestinian political leadership which has been disparaged in poetry, prose, and history texts. As Ghassan Kanafani said in his book about the Palestinian Revolt of 1936, "Those who lead, don't fight; and those who fight, don't lead."²¹

The experience of Ahmad Hilmi, as one who tried to defend truth by both leading and fighting, bridges the gap between those who lead and those who do not. At times Ahmad Hilmi chose to defend truth through economic projects that stood in the face of Zionist campaigns to acquire Palestinian land, projects which helped protect Palestinian landowners and peasants. Furthermore, his significant role in the direct defence of the city of Jerusalem - it was those who protected it that formed the main obstacle between the Zionists and their occupation of Jerusalem in its entirety in 1948.

But what does this all mean when we are talking about the experience of a poet, any poet, and his artistic choices and spiritual concerns? For Ahmad Hilmi, and perhaps others, it points implicitly to a great engulfing awareness of the impending dangers facing Palestine and Palestinians. It meant that he had a realistic and painful consciousness of the reality of the situation and the isolation of the Palestinians in the face of the enemy. And as events on the ground changed, his poetry became a shelter to protect his soul, providing him with a small amount of breathing space to ensure his safety and for him to face the future. Hence I suggest that we see in his writing a spiritual exercise that is closer in nature to prayer.

*In times of trouble, my true friend and intimate is my pen
By God, how faithful is the pen during trouble
I point it wherever and however I please, right or left
And it sparks my thoughts and drips into my heart.*

صديقي يراعي في الخطوب ومؤنسي فالله ما أوفى البراع لدى الخطب
أوجهه ما شئت يُمنّا ويسرّة فيومض في فكري ويقطر في قلبي

But even that which he relies on can also betray him:

*The pen tires of what I tell it to write
Don't you see that it disappears from sight?
The pen adopts darkness as a cover for its escape
I exhaust it nightly only to have it disappear in the daytime.*

كلّ البراع من الذي أملتّه أو ما تراه عن العيون توارى؟
تخذ الظلام ستارة لهروبه أرهقته ليلاً وناءً نهّارا

If we accept writing for him as a spiritual and soul-bearing act, we can perhaps understand his reluctance to publish his poetry; or alternatively, we can imagine that not publishing his work demonstrates that the poem, for Ahmad Hilmi, is a spiritual exercise. He resides in it, and it resides in him, a two-way window to his inner world. That said, he also lets his poems seek out an alternate spiritual space away from him. We find among his papers this quatrain:

*I shall leave to my people as the best memorial
Verses filled with good advice
I created structures without forms
For the images of life form its structures*

سأتركها لقومي خير ذكرى بيوتاً بالمواعظ عامرات
نظمت عقودها من غير سلك وإن عقودها صور الحياة

Even while he holds poetry in such high regard, and chooses the quatrain form, he sees how it limits his expression, despite the breadth of his poetic and linguistic education. At the same time that he critiques the poetic measures in his poems, he still abides by them. So when we look closer at his critique we find in its deeper meaning an artistic sense that is yearning for change.

*When you ponder the metrical structure
You find in it ties that chain your thinking
So destroy any such tie when you are inspired
By the most magnificent of thoughts.*

This call to destroy metrical structure doesn't ever take place in his own poems, but that does not negate his consciousness of the constraints structure imposes. Instead you find his insurrection is not against the form alone, but rather a questioning of what is poetry; this is when you find Ahmad Hilmi stretching to new horizons of the human soul, hoping to find the secrets of its existence.

Ahmad Hilmi makes clear that both the mental and the spiritual (the mind and the soul) are necessary components with which to understand the world. He has tens of poems that intertwine them together.

*It is obvious to the eye
That God's creation shines everywhere
Praise be to the one who created with wisdom all that exists
The mind and the soul bear witness to its light*

There is a time in life when the soul awakens ones' inner determination. For Ahmad Hilmi, his toughest times came during the long months of his exile on the Seychelles Islands; but he does not discard these dregs of his life. During the 1930s in Palestine, the Revolt promised much for those who believed in it. One of the longer poems of Ahmad Hilmi comes from this period, in January of 1938. He writes that they arrived at the Seychelles, and "the British authorities allowed me and my companions to get off of the small steam ship and with armed guards walk around the island, amusing ourselves despite our exilic status." He penned the following verse on the subject:

*Recalling a walk on the island allowed us by our jailors
 As the sun edged towards setting and rest.
 We had arrived through waves at night by steamship
 Sans sails and rebelling against traditional sailing
 Fighting the waves, never tiring,
 Even if the waves imitated mountains.
 A tall tree dancing with the winds, playfully
 Shows you ecstasy and provides you with comfort.
 On the branches' edges sit white pigeons
 That have acquired beauty from the morning*

At the end of the poem, he sees a dove on a branch which he addresses:

*You remind me of my homeland
 And my house of beloved people
 You one so adorned
 Have reopened my wound*

We can read in his vocabulary a defiant soul which, despite being oppressed, does not allow him to close his eyes to beauty. Ahmad Hilmi is still able to see beauty, but it is a beauty that refers back to something known. The loveliness of the present in exile in the Seychelles and the loveliness of what has been lost in Palestine derives from the grief which floods his being. Acknowledging this beauty, even in exile, is a sign of his humanity, spitefully guarding it against the vision of the oppressor, while maintaining his homeland within him. This idea of homeland, or a place of strong emotional bonds, recalls the history of the Arabic poem [*qasida*], which is tied to the collective spirit of Arabness, from the first moment of standing on the ruins [*al-atla*] in pre-Islamic poetry²² to the well-known poem by Ahmad Shawqi:

*Two birds in the Hijaz, came unto a garden
 With trees, but without dew and unremarkable
 Whispering to each other in the dawn on the branches of the trees.
 The passing wind from Yemen greeted them and said
 "You are two pearls in a ghastly container."
 I have seen around Sana' and the shade of 'Aden,
 Luxuriant trees so large as if from the time of Dhu Yazan
 The seeds there are like sugar and the water is milk and honey
 No bird has seen or heard of it without being enthralled
 Let me carry you there and we will arrive within an hour.
 The wiser of the two birds said to the wind,
 "You are a traveller, without a place to call home,
 Equate as you may Yemen with paradise,
 But beyond equal remains the homeland." ²³*

Or in another poem by Ahmad Shawqi:

*Although I might be preoccupied whilst in paradise.
Away from my homeland,
My soul would bring me back to it.*

These same sentiments of longing for home and homeland occupy the pen of Ahmad Hilmi. Many years later he will write with no less pain from a place still distant from his homeland, but closer than the Seychelles:

*Never did light bring me the sight of a beautiful face
Without reminding me of the gazelles of my country
Oh caravan leader of camels hurrying by
You fan the flames of grief in my heart.*

His language and imagery recalls the pre-Islamic poets and their use of desert animals and landscapes as vehicles for expressing their feelings.

The poems of longing also allow Ahmad Hilmi to meditate on the meanings of death and how to live life. In some ways, his poetry seems to express hopelessness (we live and we die), that we are of the earth and to it we shall return. But rather than expressing hopelessness, I believe that his poetic vision in these lines expresses the need for humility. Combined with dignity, which he also frequently calls for, humility allows us to live fully and to die freely.

*Night tells us with clarity,
The most articulate form of address,
That the book of life is shut tight each day
Neither content nor comment remain*

Ahmad Hilmi tells us quite bluntly that death happens and nothing remains, neither the body nor the accomplishments of one's life. He uses another quatrain to comment on those who are unsatisfied with life and not ready for the inevitable death.

*I am amazed by those who complain about life and its misfortunes
But at the same time, they desire to live eternally.
If life was perpetual darkness
You could find one who worshipped darkness perpetually*

In this poem he comments on those who live unsatisfactory lives, but cling to this because it is what they know and thus they only want more of the same. As long as humans cling to this darkness, the poet asks with passion, "might people be blind, generation after generation?"

*I wish that I were alone in a deep valley
Or at the top of mountains
I have become wary of all friendships
I even dread their passing through my mind*

His poem expresses his fatigue in life, and the challenges and failures of humanity. But in the midst of this blindness and his despair, the poet never abandons life - he remains its faithful son, an ally of beauty, flowers, and the earth, a companion of dignity and pride, a consort of all that is beautiful, despite whatever conspires to evoke their antitheses.

Ahmad Hilmi's poetry places great importance on living life with dignity and keeping one's head raised high. He gives advice on this subject in verse: "As long as you live, never bow your head nor stoop your back."

Ahmad Hilmi expresses that dignity should be human beings' main priority, for without it, life becomes intolerable:

*Dear to you is what you want to live free
Pride protects you from what you fear
Each calamity has something to console you
But for disgrace there is no consolation*

In many of his quatrains he urges people to find that living a dignified life and helping others to do the same is sufficient. People should refuse to be enslaved, whether to themselves, to others, or to material things.

*It is enough for you to find sufficiency in dignity
And live as far as possible in the goodwill of others.
What is the value of this world lit by its blessings
If you lower your head one day of existence?*

For Ahmad Hilmi, human dignity is not only for the individual but is part of our entire human existence and a quality which we fight to protect. Freedom, as part of our common humanity, goes hand in hand with the freedom of our homelands. Thus, for Ahmad Hilmi, fighting for independence from occupation is also a fight to liberate humanity and the self.

*Don't be forced into humiliating deeds
Indeed, even if you taste death and ruin.
Respect is a natural characteristic of the soul
And one for which the sacrifice is worthwhile*

Palestine functions in the poetry of Ahmad Hilmi as a metaphor for much of his own emotions. The tyrannical sense of disappointment erases the boundaries between the

poet and Palestinian history as they travel the same path. If the homeland is the goal that a person strives for, it is natural that the person and the goal take on parts of each other, and thereby maintaining dignity of self and land become the same goal. This symbiotic tie between homeland and poet stands out in the poetry of Ahmad Hilmi. One line of a poem puts it most succinctly: "If you cry over the ruins [*al-tulul*], you also cry for your own being."

And in another quatrain:

*I was not weary of my life but
I saw desperation crouched on my path.
If the youth loses a homeland and becomes an outcaste
He descends into a deep well.*

This sense of alienation in Ahmad Hilmi's poetry greatly increased after the War of 1948 and the huge refugee crisis it created. The individual is separated from his homeland and both become strangers together.

*Memories of home make me sleepless
When night time comes and rests itself.
But night, do not scowl in my face
For that is all that I meet in the daytime.*

But he also cautions against closing oneself off to the world and he urges the reader to action, to believe, and to try:

*Don't cry over homes even if they are distant
Don't deem yourself too good to live sleepless
The one who yearns for his homeland
Hopes with certainty that he will sacrifice for her.*

His frustrations come out in another poem, which addresses Palestine directly:

*Contemplate, for this world has become dark
And Jerusalem has been plundered and divided
Jewish hands have destroyed its landmarks
So ask the Arabs, "Are you lifeless dolls?"*

Palestine functions as a source for much of the intellectual and emotional expressions of his rich life experience, whether they encourage the dignity of struggle or the despair of exile. In the later stage, post-1948, Ahmad Hilmi's poems do not call for people to rise up or revolt, but they do express the emotions of exile - longing, despair, frustration, sadness, etc. His work borders on supplication or prayer, uniting closely with his writings about hope and contemplation [*ta'amulat*]. For him, these two qualities unite in one greater power which never leaves the poet's inner soul.

*Praise to the one who created the universe
With clear wisdom that confuses the intellect.
Witness for the universe is nothing
But faces that appear and others that disappear*

Based on both the form and content of Ahmad Hilmi's poems, and the huge amount of material he left us, I believe that his experience is one of the most important changes on Palestinian poetry of the twentieth century and the most rich and diverse in the search for new horizons to express the human soul against the backdrop of the Palestinian struggle. With the publication of this book, Ahmad Hilmi's experience and writings will allow him to take his rightful place in Arabic literature.

Endnotes

¹ In translating that essay for this journal, we have edited and shortened it. The volume was published by the Khalid Shoman Foundation (Amman) and the al-Mu'assa al-'Arabiya lil-Dirasat wal-Nashr (Beirut/Amman). Translated and reprinted with permission of Ibrahim Nasrallah by Rochelle Davis and Bilal Hijjawai, with poetry translation assistance by M.H. Khammash.

² Muhammad Khalid al-Az'ar, *All-Palestine Government [Hukumat 'Umum Filastin]* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1998).

³ See Ilan Pappé's article on "Haj Amin and the Buraq Revolt" in *Jerusalem Quarterly File*, <http://www.jqf-jerusalem.org/2003/jqf18/buraq.pdf>.

⁴ Bayan Nuwayhid al-Hut, *Al-Qiyadat wal-mu'assisat al-siyasiya fi filastin 1918-1948* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1981).

⁵ Ibid..

⁶ Shoman's life story came out in print form in 1984: *The Indomitable Arab: the life and times of Abdulhameed Shoman (1890-1974) founder of the Arab Bank* (Third World Center, 1984).

⁷ Nuwayhid, 1981.

⁸ *The Palestinian Encyclopedia [Al-Mawsu' al-Filastiniya]*. Part One (Damascus, 1984).

⁹ Al-Hut, 1981.

¹⁰ *Memoirs of Muhammad 'Izzat Darwaza [Mudhakkirat Muhammad 'Izzat Darwaza]*, Part One (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1993).

¹¹ 'Ajaj Nuwayhid, article in *Nahdat al-Arab* newspaper, Detroit, 13 Dec 1963.

¹² Al-Az'ar, 1998. Editor's note: Modern historians describe the All-Palestine Government as a pawn of Egypt used to counter King Abdullah of

Jordan's claims to the West Bank. After convening a national council and issuing a Declaration of Independence on 1 October, the Government was withdrawn to Cairo where it essentially faded from the scene as Egypt took over much of its role in Gaza. The All-Palestine Government was terminated by decree of the Egyptian government in 1959.

¹³ Nuwayhid, 1963.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Hilmi's reliance on older poems and turns of phrase, etc., is impossible to convey for two reasons: 1) in English it would force further translations and lengthy footnotes and 2) more seriously, it would require writer, editor, and translators of this article to catch the references to other poetry. The author did not bring forth such examples, and the translator/editor had one or two pointed out when getting help in the translation of the verses.

¹⁶ Examples of poems using proverbs are provided in footnotes 11 and 12 on page 30 of the original essay.

¹⁷ Al-Az'ar, 1998.

¹⁸ The author here has a long discussion about the quatrain form in world literature, from its origins in the Greek tradition, up through authors such as al-Farazdaq, Ibn al-Rumi, and Ibrahim bin al-'Abbas al-Sooli as outlined by Ihsan 'Abbas in his article "The short poem in contemporary Arabic poetry [al-qasida al-qasira fil-shi'r al-'arabi al-hadith]", *al-Dustur* newspaper, Jordan, 12 March 1993.

¹⁹ Kamal Abu Deeb. *Rubaiyat of Nizam al-Din al-Isfahani* [*Ruba'iyat Nitham al-din al-Isfahani*]

(Dar al-‘Ilm lil-Malayeen, 1983).

²⁰ Yusif Husayn Bakkar. *Arabic Translations of the Rubaiyat of Omar al-Khayyam: a critical study [al-tarjamat al-‘arabiya li-rubaiyat al-khayyam – dirasa naqdiyya]* (Qatar: Markaz al-Watha’iq wal-Dirasat al-Insaniya at Qatar University, 1998).

²¹ Ghassan Kanafani. *The 1936-39 Revolt [Thawrat 1936-39]* (Al-Hadaf, 1987).

²² No 19: Useful here is the text by Yusif al-Yusif, *Essays on pre-Islamic poetry [Maqalat fi al-Shi’r al-Jahili]* (Beirut: Dar al-Haqa’iq, 1980).

²³ The author only included the first and last line of this poem, assuming it was known to the reader. We have translated the whole poem out of Ahmad Shawqi’s *Diwan* so that the reference makes sense to those who are not familiar with the poem.

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