

A Flâneur's Jerusalem

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The Storyteller of Jerusalem: The Life and Times of Wasif Jawhariyyeh, 1904–1948

Wasif Jawhariyyeh, edited and introduced by Salim Tamari and Issam Nassar, translated by Nada Elzeer, foreword by Rachel Beckles Willson

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The field of self-literature on Palestine in English in the modern period has grown considerably over the past two decades. A significant number of Palestinian doctors, lawyers, writers, politicians, and scholars – among them Izz al-Din Abu al-Laysh, Suad Amiry, Hanan Ashrawi, Ibtisam Barakat, Mourid Barghouti, Ghada Karmi, Jean Said Makdisi, Sari Nusseibeh, Edward Said, Salwa Salem, Raja Shehadeh, and Jamil Toubbeh – have published memoirs and autobiographical texts written in or translated into English. This has allowed English-language readers an entry into the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It has also given Palestinians a chance to narrate their own history, from the transition from Ottoman to British Mandate rule, to the Nakba of 1948, when Zionist Jews proclaimed their state in Palestine and war determined the fate of the country. More recently, we have witnessed an increase in the publication of voices *from the past*. Historical diaries, including those of Khalil al-Sakakini, Hala al-Sakakini, Ihsan Turjman, Sami ‘Amr, and Jiryis Salti (forthcoming), have emerged. They were saved by families, shared with scholars for historical contextualization and editing, and, in some cases, translated into English. These diaries convey the lives of people and their daily encounters, including wartime trials and tribulations (Turjman); the search for an education and a better job as well as a wife, along with the challenges of tradition and modernity (‘Amr); and family life, religion, and modern Arab nationalism (Khalil al-Sakakini). Without a state archive (or indeed a state), Palestinians have to rely on a wide variety of sources to write their history, these diaries among them. Salim Tamari and Issam Nassar collaborated on

the Arabic-language publication of two volumes of the memoirs of Wasif Jawhariyyeh; now the two have worked with translator Nada Elzeer to produce *The Storyteller of Jerusalem*, a shortened version of Wasif's original Arabic memoirs.

Wasif was born into a Greek Orthodox Christian family in Jerusalem in 1897. From the outset, he tells the reader about the pluralistic nature of life in Jerusalem, for his namesake was a Damascene who served as the sitting judge of the criminal court in Jerusalem at the time of Wasif's birth and was a close friend of Wasif's father, Jiryis. As *mukhtar* (head) of the Greek Orthodox community, Jiryis believed in good relations with his fellow Jerusalemites and maintained close ties with members of Jerusalem's Muslim community. He became a member of the Administrative Council of Jerusalem and received honorary gifts from the Empire in Istanbul. Jiryis and Wasif's mother, Hilaneh Barakat – the two married in 1884 and had seven children together – served as role models during Wasif's childhood. The memoir is filled with stories that emphasize his father, include his mother as an important figure, and feature his siblings, especially his brothers, and later his wife, Victoria. Beyond family, the people who come into Wasif's life – as he goes through school, enters his profession, and participates in the entertainment life of Jerusalem – are myriad, ranging from musicians to civil servants.

The book begins with a foreword by Rachel Beckles Willson that focuses primarily on the musical side of Wasif's life, along with the introduction of radio in Palestine, which Wasif discusses in the pages of his memoirs. Introductions by Tamari and Nassar further contextualize Wasif's memoirs. Tamari introduces the reader to Wasif's family history, his social networks (in particular the well-known Husayni family), and the urban development of Jerusalem. Wasif's "cognitive map of Jerusalem's neighborhoods," Tamari notes, convey the fact that "the division of the city into four confessional quarters was a later [i.e. British] development," an important historical correction to the perception of the city having always been divided according to today's divisions (xviii). Tamari shares information about developments in education during the period, focusing on Wasif's musical education, but also his time spent in the new Dusturiyya National School in Musrara, established by the prominent educator and Arab nationalist Khalil al-Sakakini, a reformer who introduced physical education for all students and Qur'anic studies for Christians. While Tamari's introduction focuses on the British Mandate period, it also addresses the mundane aspects of the Holy City. He discusses the lesser known, but more inviting, lives of elite Palestinian men, noting that Wasif writes about their mistresses and the *odas* (bachelor apartments) where single men would pass their evenings with other bachelors – playing card games in smoky rooms, with the attendant alcoholic beverages and oud music – or meeting prostitutes or conducting love affairs. Such spaces might seem totally salacious, but their reputation was not entirely negative during the time period. This, combined with the music, the parties, and the fun that Wasif describes, contrasts sharply with the conservative view of Jerusalem about which, Tamari reminds us, we are often told. The editor offers a more salient and historically accurate view of the city described in Wasif's memoirs, one that will dispel notions of religious difference and antagonism prevalent in present-day views of Jerusalem. Instead, the reader is encouraged to wade into Wasif's city of tolerance and religious pluralism, characteristics found in

other writings from the period. For those who hold the view that the British came and liberated Palestine from the oppression of Ottoman rule, Tamari's introduction offers an informative correction: the Ottoman period was longer than the four years of the war and the British mandate period lasted beyond the initial euphoria that accompanied the end of Ottoman rule. Tamari's introduction thus provides the context that allows Wasif's memoirs to take readers back to the time period in which he lived.

Issam Nassar's introduction explores the Arab/Ottoman question that emerged in Jerusalem not long after the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) came to power in Istanbul in 1908. While the subject of Arab identity and nationalism are weighty ones, they peak through in the form of injustice, identified in Nassar's introduction. Notably, Arabs did not participate in the highest ranks of the empire, with the exception of the *shari'a* court institutions. Nassar notes that Wasif's memoirs includes some passages in which Arabs complained about their treatment within the Ottoman Empire, including its granting of permission to foreigners to excavate at the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem, excessive taxation, and a miserable economy. Still, Nassar states, up until the end of the first year of the Great War, Arabs were not calling en masse for a separation from Turks within the empire, despite the entry of the ideas of Arab nationalism by this time. In fact, Nassar adds, some Arabs in Palestine even joined the CUP before becoming staunch promoters of Arab nationalism as its equalizing mission proved unreliable at a minimum.

Nassar also reveals the structure of Wasif's writing in his introduction: it was written both at the time he writes about and after the fact of his writing. The manuscript that Tamari and Nassar found was written down in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Nassar states that "what Jawhariyyeh left us is essentially a memoir written – and rewritten – after the fact." Having analyzed the text from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, however, the editors determine that Wasif "must have used notes or diaries that he had written earlier." Uncertainties as to how and when Wasif put pen to paper are clarified somewhat by Nassar: places referred to as they are "today" in Wasif's 1960s–1970s manuscript are clues that reveal the era in which he may have originally written certain sections (xxx). Readers familiar with Jerusalem may find fascinating the historical layers of the city that Wasif writes buried within the lines of his text.

The introductions and the preface offer the reader an entry into Wasif's slightly more confusing memoirs. Although the memoirs are neatly divided into two periods – the Ottoman period (1904–1914) followed by the British mandate period (1917–1948) – they do not follow a linear chronology within each section. Wasif begins with a biographical introduction to his family, including a description of his family's home and its location within the city, followed by a thorough account of each of his parents' families. The memoirs give a detailed rendition of day-to-day life, including the lack of electric refrigeration in the house, the comparison of homes in his neighborhood that had "pit toilets" versus "modern facilities," relations between neighbors, and a description of the Schneller School, where Wasif began his education. He describes the formation of his musical talents encouraged by his father, Jiryis; his father's longstanding friendship with the notable Husayni family, which Wasif would continue even after his father passed away; the modern inventions that reached Jerusalem at that time; and the celebration

of religious events by all of the religious communities, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish.

In contrast to what readers might think about a book on Jerusalem, Wasif's writings about the city are hardly focused on the "holy." As mentioned above, Wasif writes about the mistresses of the city's elites, and their *odas*. Topics seem to converge without any order, moving from entertainment to education to Wasif's brother joining the Ottoman gendarmerie in Beirut. The first half of the memoirs begins to reach a crescendo as the Ottoman Empire entered World War I in July 1914. Wasif explains people's fears about the war, its effects on institutions and on his father, and the expectation of the sight of the first airplane in Jerusalem, which ended up crashing in Samakh, near Tiberias. The war was on and it leads the reader into the second part of Wasif's memoirs, when the British entered Palestine.

Because Wasif was not a member of an elite family and, in fact, because – as a musician, though not a professional, playing for friends and family and with musicians whom he admired – he lived on the margins of society, Wasif's memoir takes the reader into elements of day-to-day life that offer an unusual richness with regard to Jerusalem's social and cultural life. Wasif mixed and mingled with Jerusalem's elites as he played music for them; he knew the mistresses and prostitutes of the elite men in society; and he crossed all of the ethnic and religious groupings in society, which were not nearly as sharply delineated as they are today. He also shares a rare glimpse into how a young Palestinian Arab man gained a musical education. However, his writings come in a somewhat haphazard rendering of thoughts that stretch from the Ottoman period to the British period and end in a brief epilogue covering the ten years that he spent in Beirut following the 1948 war.

Writing years after the events happened, both from memory and based on his notes and diaries, seems to have affected his style. In some cases, topics are repeated, and on occasion re-introduced as if for the first time. Wasif did not include many dates (although the editors could have added such references in a great number of the cases). Nevertheless, the topics that Wasif includes in his memoirs are broad-ranging and expand significantly on what we know about daily life during both the end of the Ottoman period and throughout the British Mandate period in Jerusalem, particularly in the area of entertainment. They also demonstrate the ease with which members of different religious and ethnic communities mixed, a stark contrast to the deep divisions and fissures, particularly among religious groups, that characterize Jerusalem today. One of the most interesting aspects of Wasif's account is his familiarity with the traveling Jewish musicians who came to Jerusalem to play. One finds oneself lost in Arab cultural references with Wasif's tales, as when he shares the story of the famous Jewish singer Zaki Murad, originally from Aleppo, whose daughter Layla Murad would go on to become a major film star in Egypt in the 1940s. Wasif notes the beauty of Zaki's voice, particularly when he sang Egyptian composer Sayyid Darwish's *zuruni kull sana mara*.

The book includes some useful photographs to illustrate Wasif's stories and memories, from the surrender of Jerusalem to the British to photos of Jawhariyyeh family members. However, there is some inconsistency in the transliterated spelling of proper names (e.g., *al-Manshiyyeh* on page 11 becomes *al-Manshia* on page 71), which may be confusing

for readers who are unfamiliar with Palestine or the Middle East. A few endnotes are inaccurate as well (e.g., notes 13 and 14 on page 276, both “Ibid.,” clearly do not refer to the same source as note 12). Despite those minor problems, the introductions by the editors, along with the foreword, help ground the memoirs in historical time and context and provide a solid platform from which to launch into Wasif’s fascinating memoir.

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