



## Between Jerusalem and Damascus

The End of Ottoman Rule  
as Seen by a Palestinian  
Modernist

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The Sakakini family.  
Source: *Khalil Sakakini's Diaries: Volume II*.

The second volume of Khalil Sakakini's diaries<sup>1</sup> covers the final years of the Arab East's Ottoman era, just before the four centuries of Ottoman rule (1516-1918) took their final curtain call. Despite the importance of this lengthy era, few studies have been published in Arabic on the history of Ottoman Palestine. The few items that are available in Arabic are academic studies whose audience is limited to specialists and researchers. As such, the overwhelming majority of the public form their ideas of the Ottoman era from oral histories about the days of *Safar Barlek* (conscription into the Ottoman army), the tyranny of Sultan Abdel Hamid and so on.

Those well-circulated books covering the modern history of Palestine suffice with passing references to the final years of the Ottoman era, or 'Ottoman rule and its iniquity', before moving on to Zionism and Palestinian resistance to it.<sup>2</sup> Most of the historical writing that touches on the final years of the Ottoman era is replete with stereotypical generalizations that brand the four-century-long period as tyrannical,

oppressive, corrupt and persecutory. Likewise, Ottoman rule and administration has been described, one generation after another, as backward and inferior, lacking any role for Arab residents in the government, economy, culture, or indeed any aspect of life.<sup>3</sup>

This type of nationalist writing, so overwhelmingly antagonistic towards Turks and Ottoman rule, grew out of the years of World War I and its miseries, the policy of Turkification following 1908, and the maltreatment of Arab Nationalist activists by Sultan Abdel Hamid II prior to that. Persecution of the leading personalities of the Arab Nationalist Movement reached its climax following the revolution of al-Sharif Hussein and his sons in 1916. Gallows were set up in Damascus and Beirut, and prisons were crowded with hundreds jailed for the most trifling of reasons.

During the years of the Great War, the general populace suffered from compulsory military recruitment and forced labor in the name of the war effort. The public also suffered from the spread of famine, epidemics, and locusts, as well as other catastrophes resulting from the war.<sup>4</sup> These difficult times left their mark on the collective memory of Palestinians, just like other peoples of the Arab East. This memory was then fed by intellectual writings and nationalist historical studies that entrenched stereotypes and negative generalizations about the entire Ottoman era, without differentiating between one period and another.

These stereotypical and generalized writings about the 'rule of the Turks' and their tyranny over four centuries have not only precluded a close examination of the real history of the Ottoman era, but also a bold dialogue between the present and the past. Similarly, nationalist rhetoric has sometimes relieved twentieth century leaderships of responsibility for the Arab peoples' circumstances since World War I, casting the burden of backwardness, occupation and Zionism upon the 'Turkish occupation' and its tyranny.

The Arab nationalist account of contemporary history suffers, like other nationalist and ideological narratives, from faults and shortcomings this article does not have room to address. Likewise, a deep and serious analysis of the reasons that led Palestinian intellectuals and historians to form a superficial and flawed account of the history of the entire Ottoman era is beyond the scope of this introduction to the second volume of Sakakini's diaries. Still this subject remains worthy of serious critical research independent of Islamist or other ideological narratives.

Here, in this quick sketch, we suffice to point out that Sakakini's diaries cover the final years of Ottoman rule, including their generally difficult conditions. They also cover the personal tribulations which led Sakakini to prison and exile - but which did not cause him to lose his balance or ability to document events with a rare evenhandedness and sincerity.

## A Window to Ottoman Demise

Despite the increasing number of graduates from modern schools and the expansion of freedom of expression and publishing following 1908, a limited number of intellectuals left us a sincere and comprehensive recording of the most prominent events of that period. Arab culture generally, and that in Palestine particularly, did not yet consider memoirs, autobiographies, and diaries an acceptable and legitimate part of its literature. These literary works, which document events from a perspective other than that of the state, are rare and this increases the value of Sakakini's diaries. The pages of the second volume of Khalil Sakakini's diaries throb with life as the author lived it during the four final years of Ottoman rule (1914-1918). The quality of these diaries and their author's diligence in depicting his surroundings with sincerity are the most important characteristics of this work, whose likes are so rare in Arabic literature.<sup>5</sup>

Diaries differ from memoirs and autobiographies in that they present daily portrayals of public and private realities as the writer sees them at the moment of their occurrence. Memoirs, on the other hand, are separated from the occurrence by a lengthy period of time that forces the writer to attempt to recall images of the past from his memory, from which the passage of time has already erased pages and paragraphs. The writer who chooses to record his memoirs or publish his autobiography selects, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not, images from the past he believes will be suitable for the endeavor at hand and appropriate for the spirit of the age he is living in. As for diaries, they are to a large extent a contemporary portrayal of events without touch ups. Diaries are closer to frames in a documentary film, whose images are shot day after day. Memoirs and autobiographies, in contrast, are artistic works in which the writer and hero of the story produces a historical narrative film about his personality, life and works.

Sakakini's diaries are distinguished by the fact that their author was a sophisticated intellectual and committed patriot from an early age, and yet at the same time was a critic of his society and surroundings. He depicted his life and the events of his surroundings, Jerusalem, without editing. In contrast to politicians and self-proclaimed leaders, he did not limit himself to his role in the public realm in order to justify his works, aggrandize his influence and erase his faults. During the years of World War I, Sakakini was a committed patriot who ran after his daily bread and recorded events from the angle of his humble social status and not from the viewpoint of the coterie dividing up the bounties of rule with statesmen.

The author of these diaries is honest with himself and his readers. He records his moments of weakness and strength and times of joy and sadness with his family, students and friends. Although Sakakini was aware that his daily recordings were being written for publishing and not merely to be kept in the family coffer, his uprightness and well-known trustworthiness, of both statement and action make this a reliable documentary recording of his personal and family life on the one hand, and his surroundings and society on the other.

There is not enough space here to fully address the importance of Sakakini's diaries, and this introduction will not attempt to present a summary of Sakakini's life, ideas, and influences. A number of scholars have published studies in the last half century about the author of these diaries, and there is still need for more such work.<sup>6</sup> The following pages will focus on illuminating specific aspects of his life related to the second volume of diaries that cover the final years of Ottoman rule in Palestine and the Arab East. These years formed a crossroads in the region's history that witnessed the setting star of the last Islamic empire and the rising star of Britain and France, which both inherited rule of the countries of the Arab East.

As for Palestine and its Arab inhabitants, the issue of the Balfour Declaration, which blessed the establishment of a national home for the Jews, played a fundamental role in British Mandate policy that led to the establishment of the state of Israel. Although Sakakini is not a historian studying those developments or directly documenting them in his diaries, he depicts for us the spirit of the age and the pulse of everyday life that is often absent in historians' studies of those events. As a result, Sakakini's diaries open a window to its readers from which to gaze upon the theater of events in the public sphere no less important than the daily depictions of his personal life.

Sakakini was a sophisticated and committed intellectual who joined his principles and opinions to actions and set a good example in various fields of life, from politics and Zionism to sports and physical health, from education and culture to the family and the status of women, from religion and the tyranny of the church clergy to his disdain for sectarianism and his call for national unity. His positions on these issues matured when he was in his thirties, without study in universities or colleges. So what are the educational sources that formed his personality and culture?

Yousef Haddad, in his comprehensive study of Sakakini's life, opinions and influence, points to his family members' pluralistic cultural origins and multiple languages as a source from which he drank in his childhood and youth.<sup>7</sup> He also mentions that Sakakini loved to read, and that he mastered English, through which he learnt of the heritage and modern development of Western culture.

Before recounting other external influences on Sakakini which contributed to building his personality and ideas, however, it is necessary to mention his innate intelligence and open-mindedness. He loved knowledge and discovery and was ever eager to learn from life's experiences in addition to reading and listening to others. Sakakini's personality enabled him to educate himself and polish his ideas and personal opinions. That did not all occur within a vacuum, but rather within a process of historical transformation beginning with mid-nineteenth century Ottoman reforms and an openness towards the West which produced a cultural renaissance.<sup>8</sup> These transformations brought about a rejuvenation of various fields of life and fostered the development of pioneering personalities who transmitted their culture and experience to subsequent generations.

Jerusalem has won the lion's share of the deep-rooted transformations that Palestine

has undergone since the mid-nineteenth century, and Sakakini himself referred to some aspects of these transformations in his diaries. Generations of Jerusalemite intellectuals and those in other Palestinian cities benefited from the establishment of modern educational institutes, led by missionary schools, in the second half of the nineteenth century. While there is not room here to mention the many pioneers of that renaissance, we will suffice initially with referring to the most prominent of the Jerusalemite intellectual elite, Yousef Diya' al-Khalidi, who has yet to have his personality and work thoroughly researched in Arabic.<sup>9</sup>

Yousef Diya' held numerous administrative positions, including that of the head of the Jerusalem municipality for ten years, the vice governor of Jerusalem in the Ottoman parliament (*majlis al-mab'uthan*) from 1877 to 1878, and consul and then governor of the area in which Kurds resided in northeast Turkey. Yousef Diya' was a capable politician, a daring orator, a champion of reform and constitution and an opponent to the tyrannous policies of Sultan Abdel Hamid. He noted the dangers of the global Zionist movement, starting with its inception following the Basel conference, and wrote to Herzl in early March 1899, warning him of the consequences of implementing the Zionist project by establishing a state for Jews in Palestine. This project would face opposition from Muslims and Christians in Palestine and the entire world, wrote al-Khalidi in his letter, concluding, "by God, leave Palestine in peace."<sup>10</sup>

Yousef Diya' al-Khalidi (1843-1906) was part of the Jerusalemite elite that was contemporary to the Ottoman tanzimat and studied western culture and was influenced by it without conceding its Arab identity and eastern Islamic culture. After Yousef Diya' was another generation of intellectuals who followed the same path, the most prominent of whom was Ruhi al-Khalidi (1864-1913).<sup>11</sup> During that period at the end of the Ottoman era, Christian sects benefited more than others from the opening up to the west and the spread of missionary schools. Intellectuals immigrated to Palestine from Lebanon and other Arab states, and they played an important role in education, journalism, and other cultural fields.

Among those who were contemporaries to Sakakini, and whom he mentioned in his diaries, are Bandali al-Jawzi (1871-1942), Najib Nassar (1865-1948), Hanna Abdullah al-Eissi (1858-1909), his brother Yousef and cousin Issa al-Eissi, George Matta (1872-1924) and Nakhleh Zureiq (1861-1921).<sup>12</sup> Nakhleh Zureiq was of great help to his student Khalil Sakakini, who mentioned him numerous times in his diaries and who usually sufficed with referring to him as "the teacher."

Nakhleh Zureiq graduated from the venerable scholars of the Arab renaissance in Beirut and traveled to Jerusalem in 1889, becoming director of the boy's preparatory school in 1892.<sup>13</sup> Making a simple comparison between the personalities of Nakhleh Zureiq and his student Sakakini, it is easy to see their shared characteristics. Zureiq was also enamored with purchasing books and reading them, and he may have been influential towards his student in this regard. The teacher was also highly enamored of Arabic and taken with the secrets of eloquence and the rhetoric of the Qur'an. As

he became acquainted with western culture he remained enthusiastic about Arabic literature and eastern heritage. He hated superficial imitation of the West, and found it threatening to nationalist ideology and the spirit of independence and authenticity.

Following his death in 1921, al-Sakakini published a glimpse of Nakhleh Zureiq's life in the November issue of *al-Muqtataf* magazine, in which he mentioned the most prominent characteristics of his teacher's personality. The student continued on the path of his teacher, developed his teaching style and polished his personal ideas, which were joined to methodical practice, in order to develop intellectual and physical abilities. Sakakini, then, was a gifted student of the previous generation of teachers and pioneers of the cultural renaissance in Palestine and the neighboring Arab countries that had not yet been divided up by narrow state lines.

### **Sakakini's Early Intellectual Battles**

During the years of World War I, Sakakini held on to his firm humanistic views despite the hardships he suffered, like others, from the miseries of that war. Sakakini kept his chin up, and the horrors of war failed to extinguish his hope and intellectual optimism, even during the days of his imprisonment and exile. Yet some writers and researchers have exaggerated at times by adding characteristics of heroism, revolution and angelic purity to the author of these diaries, making the man something more of a legend.<sup>14</sup> Despite the importance of showcasing the positive characteristics of the pioneers of the cultural renaissance and the Palestinian national movement and presenting them as a good example for subsequent generations, balance, methodical accuracy and criticism must remain fundamental to the work of researchers. Sakakini himself was led by these characteristics in his diaries, for he was a role model to be emulated in his critical writing, integrity and sincerity in speech about himself and others.

Sakakini was a human of flesh and blood, and not a legend or an ideal and infallible personality. Nor was he incapable of weakness or immune from occasional feelings of alienation and despair. The examples that follow from the second volume of his dairies do not lower the standing of this patriotic educator with lofty humanitarian principles. Rather, they aim to bring him down from the heavens of legend to the bitter reality of this world and the difficult challenges Sakakini faced, especially during the years of World War I. The image the author of these diaries leaves for us is more human and complex than the idealistic and near legendary characteristics some researchers and historians have lent to his life, opinions, and works.

Sakakini was a "revolutionary and a rebel against tyrannous power, notables, institutions, customs and immoral ways of earning a livelihood", but he was also a realistic person and responsible for supporting his family in a time of little. Sakakini was a patriot who noted the dangers of Zionism for the future of Palestine and its Arab residents and yet did not cut off those activists he knew closely, consider them

sly enemies or strip them of their humanity. Sakakini taught some of them Arabic, and discussed with them the nationalist question as well as issues concerning language, religion, the status of women and other matters. As for his ordeal with Alter Levine, who sought refuge with him in his home and then suffered with him imprisonment and exile, it did not affect the friendship that bound the two for a long period, which we will soon return to.

Sakakini was an enthusiastic patriot and reformist who believed that education and culture were the two essential means of elevating Arab society to the highest level of sophistication. Following his return from America, this educator worked with other intellectuals in Jerusalem to develop education and turn the wheel of cultural renaissance. But this patriotic intellectual, who rebelled against the restrictions of the Orthodox Church and the sway of notables who cooperated with the corrupt authorities, discovered more than once that narrow interests and weak souls are adversaries not to be taken lightly. Despite the hardships and setbacks he faced, Sakakini held on to his deep belief in the possibility of building a better world and a sophisticated society that would rise above the ruins of the corrupt environment he lived in. Despite this, the flame of hope that lit the way for his principles and daily activities sometimes went out, pushing him to despair and a sense of alienation, to the point of planning to emigrate and distance himself from his homeland and loved ones.

On Saturday, 7 March 1914, after giving an Arabic lesson to al-Khawaja Ibry and discussing with him the issue of women in the East and West, Khalil Sakakini spent quite a bit of time thinking about his future. He had begun to think about emigrating to Egypt and working there, after he found all doors closed to him and faced various difficulties in securing his family's food. When he summed up his successes and his failures over the past five or six years he found little to be optimistic about from his experiences.

*I traveled to the lands of the English and then to America and returned to my country a failure. Then I worked in the Orthodox renaissance and fought a hero's battle, and many benefited from that behind my back. Then I established my constitutional school and gave private lessons. But I still, to this day, have a limited income that keeps me preoccupied and does not safeguard me from danger.<sup>15</sup>*

Sakakini waged vicious battles to Arabize the Orthodox Church and worked with others to foster a renaissance within it.<sup>16</sup> But he discovered that many of his acquaintances and partners in those battles were ready to cut deals and go back on their principles when faced with material temptations or spiritual pressures. Sakakini expressed his disappointment with his friends and some of his loved ones for their opportunism and lack of integrity, without allowing that to affect his rational optimism for social reform and belief in the need to liberate humanity from inferiority and depravity. Yet the patriotism of al-Sakakini and his optimism as a human who

believes in change did not blind him from the difficult realities that undermined his determination and sometimes drove him to despondency.

On 31 March 1914, Sakakini recorded at the end of his diary lines that expressed the extent of his feelings of alienation and despair:

*Not a glimmer of hope flashes before me one day without being followed by jolts of despair for days. This is how I have been, and remain after twenty years, and if it weren't for the vigor and vitality of youth, I would have already become a worn out old rag. Yesterday I went into town and laid my eyes upon no one without feeling disgust and becoming depressed. Not a face I examine without noting signs of inferiority. I should have left Jerusalem long ago, because life is only sweet here for those with superficial minds and dwarfed souls, insensitivity and fallen principles. I cannot work here alone and I can not mix with people. Life is bitter here for my like.<sup>17</sup>*

Such moments of despondency and alienation recorded by Sakakini in his diaries shed light on another human dimension of the personality of this usually optimistic intellectual, a dimension rarely presented or focused on by researchers.<sup>18</sup> The true patriot, no matter how strong his enthusiasm for his people and homeland, does not lose the ability to see flaws in his society, and does not cover them up as he strives to change and reform them. Humans, regardless of how much revolutionary optimism or patriotic enthusiasm they possess, are defeated by occasional setbacks and shocks, as befell the author of these diaries.

Yet Sakakini's strong determination quickly overcame his short moments of despair. He would return to his indefatigable work, and his physical and mental activity gave him new energy. The sophisticated Renaissance man that Sakakini was did not allow hardships to frustrate his determination; he would rise from his frustration to continue his work, initiatives and projects. The educator in him believed in the values of life and happiness and believed that waking his people from their hibernation did not allow the luxury of giving into despondency no matter the difficulties faced. On the contrary, difficulties drove him to strengthen his determination and continue his path with an enlightened humanistic mentality that found specks of light illuminating the path even in the most difficult of times.

Perhaps Sakakini's multi-faceted personality and humanistic values helped him to see his successes and failures through the lens of relativism, far removed from the views of proponents of pure ideals. Sakakini was a patriot who saw the flaws of his society and attempted to reform them with education and by setting a good example. Despite his criticism of the Ottoman state and its administration of political affairs and rule as he observed them in Jerusalem, his position was a nationalist one, and he



was not driven to hold the Turks responsible for inferiority and backwardness as some politicians and intellectuals did after the Ottomans left and British rule began.

Sakakini the critic of tyranny and corruption was not driven by his patriotism to fanatic nationalist views that were resentful towards the Turks as a whole. He expressed his fear of the Ottoman state entering the war with Germany, and expected its armies to be defeated if they attacked the British in Egypt.<sup>19</sup> When what he feared took place, and the Ottoman armies approached Sinai, he spoke of “our army” that he feared would be tired, hungry and thirsty in the desert opposing “the enemy” the British.<sup>20</sup> He who was depressed by the tyranny and corruption of Ottoman rule had no problem admitting that “the Turkish race pulsates with life, and how I wish that the Arab race would pulsate with life.”<sup>21</sup>

The voice of Sakakini the person rose far beyond fanaticism, even after he witnessed many of the horrors of war that the Ottomans brought to his people. Rather, he again announced his humanity and belief in people’s human worth above and beyond their religions and nationalities. “I am not a Christian, Buddhist, Muslim or Jew. Likewise, I am not an Arab, a Brit, a German, a Russian or a Turk. Rather, I am one individual amongst all those individuals of humanity.”<sup>22</sup>

He then added in the same context that he was born in an Arab environment and so worked to help it rise above and to breathe life into it, “just as, should fate have placed me in the steppes of Anatolia, the center of Africa or India, the East or the West, I see it as my duty, or rather, it gives me great pleasure, to work in what benefits people regardless of their color, religion or language.”<sup>23</sup> This humanistic voice that Sakakini possessed rose in more than one place and time, and even in the worst of times, as was the case in the years covered by the pages of the second volume of his diaries.

## **An Early Critic of Zionism**

Arab researchers have highlighted in their studies on the life and views of Sakakini his animosity towards Zionism, his defense of Arab’s rights to their homeland and his prescience concerning the dangers of the Zionist project for the future of Palestine.<sup>24</sup> Yet the other sides of Sakakini’s conversations with his student al-Khawaja Ibry and his friend Alter Levine have not been given sufficient interest until now. The issue of Sakakini’s position on Jews and Zionism goes beyond its connection to the years of World War I, which are addressed in volume two of his diaries, and yet an in-depth study is beyond the scope of this humble introduction. Thus, the following observations merely attempt to open a file on this issue as presented in this section of the diaries. A comprehensive and in-depth study of this issue remains to be undertaken.

On the eve of World War I, Khalil Sakakini, like some of the patriotic intellectuals from his generation such as Ruhi al-Khalidi, Najib Nassar, Issa al-Eissi and others,

foresaw the dangers of Zionism for the future of Palestine and its Arab residents.<sup>25</sup> Like them, Sakakini expressed his position opposing Zionism in articles published in the press, at his social meetings and in the lessons he gave to Arab and Jewish students. Among his Jewish students in 1914 were two enthusiastic activists for the Zionist project - al-Khawaja Ibry and Iliyas Afandi Faraji. Some of the Arabic lessons that Sakakini gave to al-Khawaja Ibry turned into political discussions about Palestine and Zionism. The teacher also discussed with his pupil other important issues related to the Torah, the status of women, and other matters.

It appears from these lessons and repeated meetings with his students and some of his Jewish acquaintances that Sakakini differentiated between his politico-ideological position against Zionism and his personal humanistic relationships. Before presenting these dialogues and Sakakini's positions on Jews and Zionism, however, it is worth familiarizing the reader with the identity of these two students who took private lessons in Arabic.

On 17 March 1914, Sakakini recorded with relief that his private lessons had recently increased, so that "they have taken up all of my nights and days, and if it weren't for them I would be unable to live, because my income from the school is very low and does not meet a person's needs or enable one to rise above hunger."<sup>26</sup> He then recorded his income for that month, which was 221 franks, including income from six lessons for al-Khawaja Ibry and four lessons for Iliyas Faraji. Mr. Faraji, who Sakakini called Iliyas Afandi, was the lawyer Eliyahu Faraji. Little is known of his origins, life and work. We do know that he was one of the first Jewish lawyers in Jerusalem prior to World War I, and that he was a legal consultant for JCA, the Jewish Colonization Association, which was active, with other Zionist organizations and companies, in buying land and building settlements.<sup>27</sup> In any case, the Arabic lessons that Faraji took from Sakakini did not turn into political and cultural discussions as was the case with the lessons of al-Khawaja Ibry. Sakakini's diaries, therefore, do not help readers to learn about Mr. Faraji or his work or opinions.

Al Khawaja Ibry was Benyamin Ben Israel Barstein, who was born in Russia to a wealthy family in 1870. During his youth he moved between Geneva, Berlin and Paris, where he completed his studies and met Herzl and other leaders of the Zionist movement during that period (1895 -1898). In 1906 he settled in London, where he became close to Ahad Haam (1856-1927), one of the prominent intellectuals of the Zionist movement. It appears that in London Barstein took on a new name, Ibry, and obtained British citizenship in 1912.<sup>28</sup> Then "Ibry" traveled to Palestine in early March 1913, and moved from time and again between Jaffa and Jerusalem. Ibry arrived in Jerusalem in early 1914, and spent a few months in Fast Hotel, where Sakakini gave him lessons in Arabic.

This student loved books and reading and had mastered five languages, thus paving common ground for discussion with his teacher, who was younger than him. Yet Ibry's interest in Arabic, like Faraji's, was not due to mere love of culture, but rather

to facilitate the new mission he had taken on since his arrival in Palestine - contacting Arab land brokers.<sup>29</sup> The most important deal Binyamin Ibry (Barstein) made was buying land on Mount Scopus from the Englishman Sir John Grey Hill to build the campus of the Hebrew University.

The second volume of Sakakini's diaries reflects the complex human relationship that bound Sakakini to al-Khawaja Ibry. The friendship that developed between them transcended the official relationship between teacher and student. When Sakakini discovered that his student wasn't at Fast hotel "because he went to Jaffa to greet Rothschild, the greatest Jew of this age," he also mentioned in his diaries the issue of the "Jewish people's renaissance, awakening to its nationalistic feelings and longing to reinstate its independent life in Palestine."<sup>30</sup> A few days later he wrote in his diaries that his close friend Hussein Afandi Salim al-Husseini, head of the Jerusalem municipality, had informed him that "Rothschild donated 1,000 Lira to help Muslims," and that he intended (that is, Hussein Afandi) "to establish an association like the YMCA, called the Islamic Youth Association."<sup>31</sup>

In general, Sakakini was preoccupied with the issue of Zionism and his position on it for a lengthy period. Yet his diary entries for the month of February 1914 reflect more preoccupation with the issue than at any other time. He found in his lessons and discussions with his student al-Khawaja Ibry an opportunity to record his views on Zionism and its dangers, and these are issues that a number of researchers who have written on the life and thoughts of Sakakini have made reference to.

In the days that followed, Sakakini continued to ponder the issue of the Arab people's renaissance and the reasons for its latent power as opposed to the Jewish people, whose Zionist movement was attempting to establish an independent state in Palestine. The teacher again discussed Zionism with his student Ibry, clarifying to him the reasons for his hatred of this movement and its plans that "want to raise them above the abyss of misery and the descending steps of weakness...on the ruins of others, by occupying Palestine as though it had occupied the heart of the Arab nation."<sup>32</sup>

Sakakini, in his evenhandedness, did not suffice with recording his opinion of Zionism, but rather also recorded the views of his student, who was a supporter of spiritual Zionism under the leadership of Ahad Haam.<sup>33</sup> In his diaries Sakakini did not merely cloak himself in the role of a nationalist herald, but also presented his views at the same time that he listened and learned. He then concluded by saying, "my interaction with others enlightens my vision and widens my knowledge base. I must study and read and linger over the facts of issues in their widest scope. Therefore I have taken it upon myself to buy the English lore series on installment, and read some books in English."<sup>34</sup>

After he read some books in English and others in translation to widen his knowledge and awareness, Sakakini wrote in his diary:

*I don't read books in English, or translated into Arabic from English and other languages, without discovering the secrets of the progress of western countries and their significant superiority over us. There are numerous European novels written by great authors that have various moral and scientific agendas... All of them are written in comprehensible language that is taken from life.*

Elsewhere, the teacher who is ever ready to learn and take lessons from others with the aim of advancing his people, said that “in order for our schools to be useful, we must visit Israeli and foreign schools of all stripes and colors to see how they run them, what they teach and how, and what books they use.”<sup>35</sup>

In conclusion, it is worth reiterating the vast difference in the relationship that developed between Sakakini and his student al-Khawaja Ibry in comparison to his relationship with his student Iliyas Afandi Faraji. Other than the fact that he gave Arabic lessons to Mr. Faraji from time to time, the diaries don't mention anything about discussions during those lessons. As for al-Khawaja Ibry, however, he had discussions on various topics with Sakakini and a fond relationship developed between them. The teacher frankly mentioned in his diary after finishing one of his lessons, “every day the friendship between us grows.” Even the student allowed himself to say to his teacher “When I take a home in Jerusalem I will prepare for you a water pipe, so that you can come and we can smoke and discuss and read.”<sup>36</sup>

The relationship between Sakakini and Jewish intellectuals in Jerusalem extended beyond his students who studied Arabic with him in 1914, as others took private Arabic lessons with him after World War I. While space does not permit mentioning all of these relationships, we will address below just one, Sakakini's relationship with Mr. Alter Levine.

## **Sakakini's ordeal with Alter Levine**

Alter Levine was a Zionist activist who lived in Jerusalem. Sakakini sheltered him in his home on the eve of the city falling into the hands of the British, an act that resulted in them both being imprisoned and then exiled in Damascus. It isn't known when the relationship between the two began, but Sakakini narrates in the second volume of his diaries the details of his ordeal with his friend Levine.

Sakakini learnt that the Ottoman government had “announced that all Americans between 16 and 50 must turn themselves over within 24 hours, and that anyone who failed to do so would be considered a spy. It had also announced that anyone who intentionally or unwittingly hid an American would likewise be considered a spy.”<sup>37</sup> When Levine knocked on Sakakini's door seeking shelter, his friend decided to take him in despite the danger of this act which might put him at risk of a death sentence.

On 4 December 1917, less than a week before Jerusalem fell into the hands of the British, Jerusalem police chief Aref Bey knocked on Sakakini's door with an old Jewish woman who had led him to the house in which Alter Levine was hiding. The rest of the story about Sakakini and Levine's imprisonment and being transferred to Damascus, where Sakakini spent a month and six days in jail and was released on condition that he remain in exile in the city, are described in detail in the second volume of Sakakini's diaries.<sup>38</sup> [Ed.'s note: See "Khalil Sakakini's Ottoman Prison Diaries" in *JQF* 20] Who then, is this Alter Levine?

Alter Levine was Asaf Halivi Maqdisi (1883-1933), who immigrated to Palestine with his family from Russia in 1891 and worked as an agent for global insurance agencies. Levine had manifold relationships with the American Consul, the Spanish Consul and others, and so the Ottoman government accused him of espionage. Moreover, he was an American citizen who did not turn himself in to the authorities after the United States entered the war with the allied powers.<sup>39</sup>

Sakakini does not inform us how and when he met Alter Levine, and so the beginning of their relationship remains a mystery. However, we know that Levine was a poet and intellectual who read a great deal and had mastered several European languages in addition to Hebrew. Sakakini did not abrogate his friendship with Alter Levine, even after leaving prison while his companion remained several months longer. He visited him several times. Then the two companions kept up their relationship after Levine left the prison in Damascus and moved from there to Aleppo and other cities. The relationship between them later continued in Jerusalem during the days of the British Mandate, and Sakakini neither denied his relationship with Alter Levine nor regretted taking him in despite what happened to him as a result of this relationship in terms of imprisonment and exile in Damascus far from his family and loved ones. When Levine ended his life by committing suicide in 1933, al-Sakakini wrote the following to his son Sari.

*If you have seen Filistin newspaper, you have no doubt come across the news of a wealthy Jew's suicide. Do you know who this wealthy Jew is? He is my prison companion Mr. Alter Levine, who sought shelter with me during the final days of the Turks in Jerusalem and I took him in. They went after him and found him and took him, and me with him, to prison, and then they transferred us to Damascus in fetters. Poor thing, I felt so sorry for him. He was a poet in Hebrew and had a volume or two of poetry. He was well-mannered and was fluent in French, English, German and Hebrew...His library was one of the grandest in Palestine. He read a great deal. He never met me without hanging his head in respect because I had put myself in danger when I welcomed him in my home after he had knocked on the doors of many of his people and they did not accept him. They say that he committed suicide*

*because of family problems. If the British had been a little late in entering Jerusalem, his fate and mine would have been the gallows. This man, who was saved from the Turks' gallows, hanged himself by his own hands. He escaped from death and death caught him in the end, may God have mercy on him.*<sup>40</sup>

Some mystery still surrounds the strong relationship that bound Sakakini to Alter Levine, and of which culture, reading, and love of books may have been its foundations. A larger mystery surrounds the personality of Alter Levine himself, and his various relationships with foreign consuls and leaders of the Zionist movement. This intrigue drove Turkish intelligence (Aziz Bey) to mention in his memoirs that the most important spy that assisted the British in World War I was "Alter Levy" and not the Jewish spy network called "Nili" led by Oronson.<sup>41</sup> According to the opinion of Aziz Bey, Alter, who moved between the principal cities of the East, set up within them a ring of brothels from which he obtained important intelligence.<sup>42</sup>

Mamdouh Adwan, author of the recent novel *A3da'i (My Enemies)*, read and benefited from the memoirs of Aziz Bey.<sup>43</sup> He also depended on the diaries of Sakakini, and the memoirs of Najib Nassar and others for the plot of his interesting novel with its numerous characters such as Alter Levy, the cunning spy, and Aref Bey, the patriotic Palestinian police officer loyal to serving the state and homeland even in the final moments of Ottoman rule in Palestine and the Levant.<sup>44</sup>

*A3da'i* addresses the roots of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict during the final years of the Ottoman state during World War I. Novels, as we know, do not record minute or objective history relying on documents and archives. Literary work allows itself to soar above the limitations of reality and thus question the present and its rulers by illuminating unique and obscure personalities from the past.

The novel, as Daraj says in his analysis of Mamdouh Adwan's work, allows itself to "say what historians don't want to say, and what the novelist wants to say in a historical essay."<sup>45</sup> Daraj analyzes the novel *Ada'i* and finds within it two important ideas whose wisdom transcends the boundaries of the novel's time and place, binding the present to the distant past. The first lesson is: the tyrant invests everything within himself and does not leave anything for the outside. He pays attention to what protects him and ruins what remains. The tyrant destroys the meaning of history and destroys values, because the formation of tyranny eliminates freedom, justice and equality. The second is: the only fundamental animosity in a tyrannical regime is that between the tyrant and his subjects. The first sees the outside as an enemy, and the subjects see the tyrant as an enemy.<sup>46</sup>

Space here is too limited to attempt to analyze Mamdouh Adwan's novel and match its historical characters, whether Zionist, Arab or foreign, with real people mentioned in Sakakini's diaries. Let us suffice with repeating that novels permit a reading "more liberated" from the restrictions of ideology and tyrannical authorities. They mix the

pages of the past with the present in a way that allows readers to examine history in a creative manner that frees their mind and awareness from the molds that abridge history and its characters by putting them in ideological casts. Likewise, novels sometimes enrich our reading of historical events and illuminate aspects missing from the studies of historians. Literary works also seek the aid of historical characters and events to pass along to their readers lessons and ideas that are difficult to express in other ways because of censorship and the authorities' embargo on information and the freedom of thought and expression.

Yet no matter how sophisticated and creative a novel is, it does not serve as an alternative to writing history. Literary works benefit from historical characters and events, and allow the creative imagination to mix events to present the novelist's reading of the past joined with concerns of the present. The work of historians, however, is governed by the rules and methodology of writing history, and they try as much as they can to reconstruct the events of the past based on documents and available sources. While novelists soar above the restrictions of the authorities and events without being held accountable, historians must support what they say about events of the past with documentation that leaves no room for doubts or imagination.

So who then, is Alter Levine (Levy)? It's an intriguing question, and Adwan's novel gives a particular answer based on historical sources including the diaries of Sakakini and memoirs of his contemporaries. What remains is for historians to give other answers that might lift the veil of mystery from this character whose path crossed with that of Sakakini and who went with him to prison and exile. Sakakini's diaries (and the memoirs of Aziz Bey) served as a resource and inspiration for Adwan's novel. Their full publication would serve as motivation for new historical studies that would illuminate other aspects of these events and personalities of that period and remove some of the mystery that surrounds them until this day.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This essay is the translated introduction to *Khalil Sakakini's Diaries: Volume II*, now available in Arabic from the Institute for Jerusalem Studies.

<sup>2</sup> Abdel Wahab al-Kilani's book *Tarikh Filastin al-Hadith* (the Arab Institute for Studies and Publishing: Beirut, 1970) is a good example. It has been reprinted several times and a large number of university students study with it. Most of the books that have addressed the modern history of Palestine since then have followed its path, thus reinforcing negative generalizations about Ottoman rule without study or methodical examination of historical facts.

<sup>3</sup> Among the books replete with such negative stereotypical views of the Ottoman era are those that address the history of culture, journalism or specific personalities that lived during the final years of the Ottoman era. An example is Yusef Haddad's book *Khalil al-Sakakini: Hayatahu, Mawaqifahu, wa Athaarahu* (Al Sawt Association: Nazareth, 1985). The Palestinian historian Beshara Doumami published a daring critical analysis of this subject. Beshara Doumami. "Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine: Writing Palestinians into History." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Winter 1992): 5-28.

<sup>4</sup> For more on this topic see: Manna', Adel, *Tarikh*

*Filastin fi Awakhir al-'Ahd al-'Uthmani (1700-1918): Qira'a Jadida* (Institute of Palestine Studies: Beirut, 1999): 258-266. Also see other studies mentioned in this study's footnotes.

<sup>5</sup> George Zeidan (1861-1914) was one of the first Arabs to write their memoirs shortly before World War I. Zaydan, who emigrated from Lebanon to Egypt, wrote his memoirs in 1908, but their publishing was delayed until 1968.

<sup>6</sup> The most comprehensive and extensive study of Khalil al-Sakakini in Arabic to date is Yousef Haddad's book mentioned above (see footnote 2). Since the mid-eighties, other studies have been published such as Ishaq Mousa al-Husseini's book *Khalil al-Sakakini: al-Adeeb al-Mujadid* (Center for Islamic Studies: Jerusalem, 1989). Extensive sections of al-Sakakini's diaries that were published in *Kadha Ena ya Dunya* have been translated into Hebrew (Katar: Jerusalem, 1990). The translator, Gideon Shilo, added a valuable introduction and notes.

<sup>7</sup> Haddad, 99-100.

<sup>8</sup> The best and most comprehensive study written on this subject is Alexander Sholoush's book, *Tahawulat Jidhriya fi Filastin, 1856-1882* (Amman: 1988, Second printing: 1990. Also see Manna', *Tarikh Filastin*, 165-310.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to Sholoush and Manna', who both included in their books a chapter on Yousef Diya'al-Khalidi, see Manna', Adel, *A'alaam Filistin fi Awakhir al-'Ahd al-'Uthmani* (The Institute of Palestine Studies: Beirut, 1995, Second printing: 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Same references as above. Herzl responded to al-Khalidi's letter a few weeks later in an attempt to calm fears of the effects the Zionist project would have on Arab residents of Palestine, Muslim and Christian, saying that the goal of Zionism was the development of the country for all of its residents.

<sup>11</sup> Nasser Eddin al-Assad, *Muhammad Ruhi al-Khalidi*, (in Arabic) (Ma'had al-Buhuth: Cairo, 1970).

<sup>12</sup> See biographies of these prominent individuals in Manna', *A'alaam Filistin*, mentioned above. Also see Ya'qub al-Awdat, *A'alaam al-Fikr wa al-Adab fi Filastin* (Amman: 1976)

<sup>13</sup> Manna', 192.

<sup>14</sup> There are many examples of this in more than one Arabic study of Sakakini and his life, opinions and influence, the most prominent of which are in Yousef Haddad's comprehensive study mentioned above. See for example Haddad, 14-15, 105-106, 122-124, and others.

<sup>15</sup> Volume two of Sakakini's diaries, 47.

<sup>16</sup> In addition to what Sakakini himself mentioned in his diaries on this topic, and what researchers who have written on Sakakini's life and opinions such as Haddad and others have addressed on this issue, see the following studies: Tsimhoni, Daphne, *The British Mandate and the Arab Christians in Palestine 1920-1925*, Ph.D. thesis (SOAS, University of London:1976); and Tsimhoni, Daphne, "The Arab Christians and the Palestinian Arab National Movement during the Formative Stage" in G. Ben-Dor (ed.), *The Palestinians and the Middle East Conflict*, (Tel Aviv :1978 ) 73-98.

<sup>17</sup> Volume two of Sakakini's diaries, 60. Sakakini also

expressed his feelings of alienation to the point of disgust at other times in his diaries. For example, he recorded on 7 February 1915 the following: "Never a day passes without my dissatisfaction with life increasing. I don't sit with anyone without feeling that I am different from him, and I don't lay my eyes on anything without feeling disgust." 118.

<sup>18</sup> Most of the studies written on Sakakini in Arabic overlook his feelings of alienation and his moments of despondency and despair with life and society. Rather, they stress his ever upheld chin and his optimism even in the darkest of times in prison and exile. His feelings of alienation and despair led him to think of emigrating to Egypt or elsewhere more than once. When he crouched in his prison in Damascus, for example, he thought again of emigrating to America: "Although I love Jerusalem and have lived there a long happy time, I only feel as though I am strange there. Therefore the first thing I will concern myself with after the war, if I live, will be to tear down my tent, gather my family, and immigrate to America." Diary entry for 24 December 1917, Volume two of Sakakini's diaries, 167.

<sup>19</sup> Volume two of al-Sakakini's diaries, 66.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Haddad, 64-65, 130-133. al-Agha, Nabil Khalid, *Wujuh Filastin Khalida*, (The Arab Institute for Studies and Publishing: Amman, 2002) 94-95.

<sup>25</sup> Manna', *Tarikh Filastin*, 250-258. For more extensive information on this issue see Mandel, N., *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I* (London: 1976).

<sup>26</sup> Volume two of Sakakini's diaries, 54.

<sup>27</sup> Gad Fromkin, *A Judge's Life in Jerusalem*. pg. 1 (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: 1954). This judge mentioned in his memoirs that after he graduated from law school and returned to Jerusalem to work as a lawyer in 1914, there had only been four lawyers in the city before him: Ali Afandi Jarallah, Najib Abu Sawan, and two Jews, one of whom was Eliyahu Faraji, who worked as a legal consultant for the JCA settlement company.

<sup>28</sup> Gideon Shilo, "A lesson in Zionism: the puzzle of al-Khawaja 'Ibry's disappearance" in *Katedra* magazine (in Hebrew), Volume 58, December 1990, 84-110.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-95.

<sup>30</sup> Volume two of Sakakini's diaries, 31.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 35.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 37. See also 33-34, 35-36.

<sup>33</sup> Ahad Haam (1856-1927) is Asher Tsvi Ginsberg, one of the most prominent Jewish Zionist philosophers and considered the founder of what is called cultural or spiritual Zionism. Ahad Haam harshly criticized the first Jewish settlers following his first visit to Palestine in 1891 and recorded his criticisms in a letter he wrote about his impressions of this visit. It is worth pointing out here that one of Ahad Haam's criticisms of the first settlers was their isolation from Arabs and their not learning Arabic: "There is not one among us until now, not one person who is trustworthy, who at least knows how to read Arabic as one should." Then he added in his comment on the settlers' superiority and their position



on Arabs: "Outside the country the belief has become widespread among us that all Arabs are wild desert dwellers, a people closer to the donkey that doesn't see or understand what happens around it, but this is a huge mistake. Because Arabs, especially city dwellers, see and understand our activities and goals in the area, but they remain silent and act as though they don't know." For more information on this topic see Sabry Jaris' book *Tarikh al-Sihyoniya*, Part One (Jerusalem: 1987).

<sup>34</sup> Volume Two of Sakakini's diaries, 38, 48.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>38</sup> It is worth pointing out here that the historian Tom Segev, who was permitted to read the entire diaries some years ago, addressed the relationship between Alter Levine and Sakakini in depth in his book on Palestine during the British Mandate: Segev, Tom. *One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate* (Metropolitan Books: New York, 2000).

<sup>39</sup> Segev published the above book in Hebrew in 1998 before publishing it in English. Segev (in Hebrew) 19-20.

<sup>40</sup> Khalil Sakakini, *Kadha Ana ya Dunya* (Jerusalem: 1955. Second printing, Beirut: 1982) 256-257.

<sup>41</sup> Aziz Bey, *al-Istikhbarat wa al-Jasusiya fi Lubnan*

*wa Suria wa Filistin khilal al-Harb al-'Alamiya al-Ula* (Beirut: 1937). A previous printing of this book was issued before that in Beirut in 1933, after it had been published in stages in the Beirut newspaper *al-Ahwar*.

<sup>42</sup> The issue of the extent of accuracy of the information in Aziz Bey's memoirs is open to discussion, research and examination. It is worth noting here that the Masters thesis of Danila Reich at Haifa University revealed that the Jewish Agency was behind establishing a large network of brothels in which thousands of private hostesses worked in the Tel Aviv area during World War II. The primary occupation of those hostesses was entertaining officers and soldiers of the British army and its allies who were stationed in Palestine, and who reached about 100,000 soldiers. Shahuri, Dalia, "Al Yushuf leadership asks Israel's girls to entertain the Mandate soldiers," *Ha'aretz* newspaper, 11 April 2004, 7b.

<sup>43</sup> As this essay goes to publication in January 2005, we received news of the death of Mamdouh Adwan, the noted Syrian writer and novelist.

<sup>44</sup> Mamdouh Adwan, *'Ada'i* (Dar al-Ris: Beirut, 2000).

<sup>45</sup> Faisal Daraj, *al-Riwaya wa Ta'wil al-Tarikh* (The Arab Cultural Center: Beirut and Casablanca, 2004) 106-107.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.



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