



Ma'ruf Ar-Rusafi in Jerusalem

Safa Khulusi

There is hardly a more controversial figure in the literary annals of modern Iraq than the poet ar-Rusafi. His life, both in Iraq and Turkey, is well documented, but his 18-month sojourn in Jerusalem is still obscure. The present paper is an attempt to clarify it. It was after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire that he left Istanbul - not for his native Iraq - but for Syria. The British military administration in the former suspected all Iraqis returning from Turkey and barred those likely to be troublesome. In Syria there was an Arab government under Amir Faisal, son of the Sharif of Mecca, deriving its authority from the British commander-in-chief who conquered Syria with Arab cooperation.

In Faisal's entourage there were prominent Iraqis including Yasin al-Hashimi, Ja'far al-'Askari and Nuri as-Said. Like all Arab nationalists they never forgave Rusafi's poems against the Arab conference held in Paris in 1913, and against the Arab revolt proclaimed in the Hijaz by the Sharif of Mecca in 1916. Accordingly, he was given the cold shoulder during the months he

The walls of the Old City in Jerusalem, 1933.
Source: Before Their Diaspora, p.109

stayed in Damascus. It seems that the British military authorities were unwilling to facilitate his return to Iraq - and at the same time reluctant to force him on the Arab government in Damascus.

The chief political officer of the British military administration was General (later Sir) Gilbert Clayton. He knew that the British military authorities in Jerusalem had established Dar al-Mu'allimin (Teachers' Training College) in the spring of 1918, some four months after the capture of the city. It seems that the offer to teach Arabic at this institution came to Rusafi from the British. He himself said that it came through the good offices of Muhammad Kurd 'Ali, later president of the Arab Academy of Damascus.

Little is known of Rusafi's work in Jerusalem apart from recollections and anecdotes by former students. He made little impression as a teacher, but his presence enlivened the Arabic literary circles in the city. In particular, he associated with Issaf Nashashibi, sometimes principle of the Teacher's Training College, and 'Adil Jabr, sometimes Assistant Director of Education. He wrote:

*The glorious nights in Palestine have effaced the injury
Done to me by fate in Damascus, in bygone days,
For there was an-Nashashibi rendering help unto me
Yea, and I was a bosom friend of as-Sakakini
And there was Ibn Jabr who never failed to console
A grieved immigrant so far from home land.*

Another man of letters befriended Rusafi. Nakhlah Zuraiq was a teacher of Arabic at the English College in Jerusalem, an institution conducted by an English missionary society. Here a party was given in honour of Rusafi at which he recited a poem, in addition to another he composed in praise of Zuraiq. He also composed a poem in praise of the Schneller Orphanage run by a German philanthropic society. But the poem which compromised Rusafi and led to his departure from Jerusalem was of a different order. For the circumstances of its composition it is necessary to record a few events in the history of Palestine and Jerusalem in 1920.

On the occasion of the celebration of the Nebi Musa festival in April, the procession of pilgrims was addressed by the mayor of Jerusalem, Musa Kazim Pasha al-Husseini and others, when a portrait of Faisal was displayed and cheersrang out, calling him 'Our Sovereign'. (He had been crowned king of Syria and Palestine in Damascus on 8 March.) After the display, riots broke out in which several Arabs and Jews were killed. Without trial, Musa Kazim was removed from office by the British Military Governor and Raghib Nashashibi appointed in his place. Two months later, the British government appointed Sir Herbert Samuel, a Jew and a Zionist, to be High Commissioner for Palestine, and despite Arab protest he took office on the first of July. Arab opposition to him and his policies continued, even after the end of the Arab government in Damascus and the expulsion of Faisal by the French.

It is noteworthy that all these events took place while Rusafi was in Jerusalem, but he failed to express the public mood on any of these occasions in his poems. Neither the crowning of Faisal nor the destruction of Arab independence found an echo in Rusafi's verse. Stranger still, the revolt in his native Iraq that began in July 1920 failed to move Rusafi to write a single line of poetry.

While a Palestine Arab National Congress was in session in Haifa and a delegation to London under the leadership of Musa Kazim Pasha was being considered to voice opposition to British policy and to Samuel's appointment, Raghib Nashashibi, the British-appointed mayor of Jerusalem, invited Abraham Shlomo Yahuda, born in Jerusalem of a family that came originally from Baghdad and formerly a professor at Madrid University, to give a public lecture in Arabic on Islamic civilization in Spain. Samuel was invited to attend and he came with a large number of his staff. Although he knew no Arabic and the lecture was not translated, Samuel spoke at the end in English, thanking the lecturer and commenting on its subject. At the same time he announced his intention to establish a college for higher Arabic studies in Jerusalem.

The lecture was attended by Arabs and Jews, in addition to the official party led by Samuel. Rusafi was among the Arabs who attended. There is no report of it [the event] in the leading Arabic newspaper in Jerusalem at the time. But there is a good account in a Hebrew newspaper and a tendentious report by the Jerusalem correspondent of *The Times* under the headline "Arab College for Jerusalem". The Hebrew paper reported Nashashibi describing Samuel as a *hovev* of the Arabs, which is a shade stronger in meaning than 'friend'. (Nashashibi may have used the Arabic word '*muhibb*' which is the nearest equivalent of the Hebrew word.)

The English newspaper's comment is a fair suggestion of Samuel's aim in being present, and in making a promise which he never fulfilled. "This announcement," states the paper's correspondent, "indicates the success attendant upon the efforts towards conciliation being made, and is of importance at a time when certain adverse elements are endeavouring to revive intrigue against British policy in Palestine and one contemplating the dispatch of a delegation to express their views to the British government." The efforts were clearly Samuel's and the 'adverse elements' were none other than the delegates to the Palestine Arab Congress at Haifa. The 'intrigues' were the opposition they offered to the Zionist policy of the British government.

How Rusafi was dragged into an ill-disguised scheme devised by Samuel to deflate the opposition to his policy and to divert attention from the Congress resolutions is a matter for speculation. But things seem to have been arranged in advance, possibly through Yahuda himself who could speak to the poet as a fellow Baghdadi. The poem Rusafi produced could, in the circumstances, have been justified only by Samuel's promise of an Arab college. (Rusafi could not prophesy that the promise was never to be kept.) But the poem went far beyond recognition of this promise. Here are samples of its lines:

*Yahuda's speech made us all pensive
 And reminded us of what we knew so well.
 He celebrated Arab achievement in the West
 And recalled the glories of the Abbassids in the East.
 Samuel followed him with another speech
 Full of magic, without the blemishes of magicians,
 Endorsing the praise of past Arab glory
 And Arab fame in the realms of science.
 He pointed out the evidence of their handiwork
 In the wonder of the Dome of the Rock.
 He declared, whilst the audience was all ears,
 'We shall repair what age has despoiled,
 And lend you a certain helping hand -
 To raise the pillars of science once more.'
 Thou hast promised, but the people are in two minds:
 The sceptic and those hopeful of fulfilment.
 Thou art honest, give the lie to the sceptic
 And prove that a promise is an honest man's debt.
 We are not as we have been falsely accused
 Enemies of the Jews, overtly or in secret.
 The two people are but cousins,
 In their language is the proof.
 But we fear expulsion from the homeland
 And being ruled by force of arms.*

Neither of the two accounts of the meetings at which the lecture was given mention Rusafi. Nor is it clear when his poem was presented to Samuel, who regarded it as a triumph - so much so that he ordered his secretary to write a circular to the Arabic newspapers asking, with the poet's agreement, for its publication. A Palestinian scholar has dug out a copy of the circular addressed to *al-Karmil's* editor, an implacable enemy of Zionism of long standing. He could not refuse an official order to publish the poem, but he delayed publication until he obtained another poem in reply from the Lebanese Maronite, Wadi' Bustani, who was a resident of Haifa and served under the British military administration as an interpreter. Below are samples of its lines:

*Is it Yahud's speech or wonders of magic?
 Is it Rusafi's words or poetic lies?
 By thy soul, I know not and maybe I do;
 What pacing is it between Rusafi and the Bridge?
 O Ma'ruf, I swear by Baghdad, by Heaven and Earth,
 By thy Lord, by Islam, by the 'even and uneven' prayer!
 Your verse, pearls of speech, is truly unique
 And you are the master of fishing pearls in the poetic sea
 But our sea is one of politics -
 Wherein right comes with the flow, only to go with the ebb.*

*Yea, he who crossed the River Jordan was our cousin
But we are suspicious of him who now comes by sea.*

*O Samuel! Are you really our old Samau'al?
And has England been subjugated by Banu Fihir?
Shall we believe in Balfour instead of Muhammad, Jesus,
Moses
And his burden-bearer, Aaron, by force?
Nay, by the Lord. The revelation in the Koran is true -
Belying what is inscribed with ink on paper.*

Rusafi's position both at the college and in the country at large became untenable. There was a great strain between him and the students, if not also his colleagues. But the torrent of public criticism was incessant and some of it violent. There is a reference to a lengthy article by Sheikh Sulieman at-Taji al-Faruqi, published in *Beit al-Maqdis* which unfortunately could not be traced. But Rusafi's reply is available. It was published, not in the same paper, but in *Mir'at ash-Sharq*, more sympathetic to Rusafi and pro-Nashashibi. Its arguments are couched in courteous terms but on the whole apologetic, revealing a man mellowed by the public indignation he aroused.

He said he was encouraged to reply by his critic's words that he respected other people's opinions, right or wrong. He never composed poetry for personal gain, which suggests that such accusation was levelled against him, and he did not claim that all he wrote was beyond criticism. Then he tackles the main point: "There is no doubt that Herbert Samuel is today at the helm of power in this country. I heard him speak in good faith regarding his policy in this land, and he made promises which should be placed on record whatever they may be. He spoke at a meeting which I unfortunately attended. I do not know whether his statements were made deliberately or by chance. But all I knew is that I heard them by chance... And I was moved by what he said and that was the occasion of the poem. But I do not think it contains anything false. I merely responded to a courteous speech by a politician."

After this apology, Rusafi goes on to summarize the main points in the poem. His call for recording Samuel's promises was more in the nature of a threat, not flattery, against not keeping the promise. His statement that Arabs and Jews were cousins and that the fact should lead to friendship rather than enmity was political, resulting from Arabs' fear of expulsion from their native land. He admitted that he could be mistaken, but he was no traitor.

Turning to the accusation of opposing the Arab nationalists, he is less convincing and rather evasive. He accused the Arab nationalist in 1913 of being under French protection "like the lamb taking refuge with the wolf". What he says about the Arab revolt in the Hijaz shows that he was still against the Sharif Husain and his progeny: As to the "Arab rising in the Hijaz during the last war... I have not opposed it, because I had no power to oppose it, and I take refuge from God from it, and I ask God

Almighty not to hold me responsible for its consequences.”

About one month after publishing this defence, a fortuitous circumstance hastened his departure from Palestine to his native Iraq. After the revolt in the summer of 1920, a provisional Arab government was established subject to the British High Commissioner Sir Percy Cox. British policy was for the election of an Arab ruler by the people of Iraq. But by the early weeks of 1921, the British authorities in London were favouring the candidature of Faisal. There was at least one local rival in Talib Pasha an-Naqib, who was minister of the interior in the provisional government. To promote his claim, his supporters thought of launching a new newspaper. As an opponent of Faisal and his family, Rusafi was considered a suitable editor. Hikmut Suleiman is reputed to have telegraphed to Rusafi inviting him to accept the post. According to another report, attributed to Rusafi himself, the invitation came from the government, possibly at the instigation of Talib, through Samuel, who is supposed to have ordered Rusafi's release from his teaching duties at very short notice and expeditious facilities for his travel via Egypt.

Samuel himself was in the middle of March going to Cairo to attend - with Cox and other local British officials - a conference with Winston Churchill, Secretary of State for the Colonies. Among other matters, the conference confirmed the British preference of Faisal. At the close of the conference, Rusafi found himself travelling to Iraq in the same boat as Cox, his Oriental Secretary Miss Gertrude Bell and Jafar Pasha al-'Askari. He arrived on 9 April, and six days later was arrested and deported to Ceylon, having uttered threats against the British authorities.

The abrupt end of Rusafi's teaching career in Jerusalem prompts the question as to the exact length of his stay in that country. The most authoritative testimony is his own when he said, 'I taught Arabic literature at the Teacher's College in Jerusalem and was paid a monthly salary of 25 Egyptian pounds (the currency introduced in Palestine by the British army) plus board and lodging. I went to Jerusalem in (late) 1919 or early 1920, as far as I can recollect. I remained there 18 months.'

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