



Sa'id Nimr's Stormy Career

*From the Dungeons of
Istanbul to the Ranks of
Faisal's Arab Army*

Sonia Nimr

Sa'id Nimr and his son, Fathi, the author's
father. *Source: Sonia Nimr*

When my grandfather died in 1970, men carried his coffin on their shoulders on their way to the cemetery. As I watched the sad procession from the balcony, I thought I saw the coffin swaying sideways violently, as if it was trying to force the men to turn back. I told my friend about this, expecting her to laugh at my thoughts and accusing me of having a wild imagination.

But to my surprise, she looked at me with awe and said in a very serious tone, "Oh my God, your grandfather is blessed; he will be elevated to the ranks of holy men."

"But that is impossible", I said, finding it very difficult to imagine my grandfather as a saint or a holy man. He seemed not cut out for that kind of stuff. "You know he was a doctor and a man of science. He never prayed once in his life!"

But she insisted and said with deep conviction, "People have seen this sort of thing happen before. I heard that in the village of Qabatiyya, when a man from Abu

Rubb family died, they needed at least 20 men to force the coffin down into the grave. They say that holy men refuse to be buried.”

I was confused. I asked, ashamed of my ignorance in such matters, “But if he is not buried, then what they would do with, you know, the body?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “They must put him in a cave or make a shrine for him or something.”

I began to imagine my grandfather’s shrine, and people visiting him, lighting candles or oil lamps and reciting Quran, asking him for little favours, love, marriage, or a cure for a sick one. I could hear my grandfather’s voice coming from the depth of the shrine in response: “Is your son allergic to penicillin?” Or perhaps something even more dramatic, like “Move your oil lamps away; they are suffocating me.”

As it happens, I never told my mother about this discussion because I knew for sure that she would come up with a scientific explanation and strip the incident of its magic. I decided that I much preferred the impossibility of my friend’s explanation.

As I remember him, my grandfather was not the kind of man who expressed his feelings. I knew that he loved me (and his other grandchildren) but he never hugged or kissed us, he never put one of us on his knees and told us stories like other grandfathers do. He was always busy at the clinic. He was more passionate and dedicated to his patients than he was to us.

On the first day of the 1967 War, we went across the street to hide with our neighbours in a shelter. It wasn’t exactly a shelter, but a basement where they kept their animals. But it was covered and deep enough to be deemed safe. The place was crowded with people: hot, smelly, and suffocating. An hour after we settled in and found comfortable spots for our behinds on the hard floor, my father suddenly shouted with an alarming voice: “Where is your grandfather?” He was not in the shelter, so we crossed the street back to our house to find him sitting in his clinic with the doors opened wide on the main street.

My father was furious. “Father, you should be in the shelter. It is too dangerous for you to stay here.”

My grandfather was equally furious. “I am a doctor, I have a duty towards the people. Don’t you understand? I will stay here and treat the injured.”

But my father wasn’t convinced. “But father, if you are dead, you won’t be of much help to anyone”.

“Still, I have to be here.” Grandfather was adamant. “As a doctor I made an oath.”

Fifteen minutes later, we had taken hold of both his arms and were dragging him back to the shelter. We made the trip between the shelter and the house three times that day. In the end, my father decided that it was much safer to stay at home than to cross the street under the threat of bullets. We spent the remaining days of the war at home.

My grandfather, Sa'id, was born in 1885 in the village of Tubas between Nablus and Jenin. The oral history of the family recounts that his clan, the Sawaftah, was originally a Bedouin clan that arrived a few hundred years earlier from a village east of the Jordan River, most probably running away from a blood feud. No one can tell me more accurately how long ago that was.

It was recorded that our great-great-grandfather Suleiman had two boys, Mohammad and Nimr. Mohammad became a Sufi, and he was the one who brought the *Shadhiliyya* Sufi order (*tariqa*) to Tubas. To this day, the *diwan al-shadhiliyya* is open and functioning in the town.

Nimr (my great-grandfather) was married to two women at the same time. My great-grandmother Fatima lived to the ripe old age of 110. After Nimr died, she came to live with my grandfather. Fatima and Nimr had four sons and two daughters. The daughters were all married to men from a neighbouring village, Raba, at the age of sixteen.

Each of Nimr and Fatma's sons were known for a different character and personality. The eldest, my grandfather Sa'id, was very intelligent and eager to learn. Zayed was a horseman (*faris*). I still remember him riding on a white horse, wearing boots, with a dagger in his belt. He had the most enormous moustache I have ever seen: black and curved upwards, almost reaching his ears. He was the one to count on as a strongman when feuds between tribes broke out, but he was also the one to be asked to mediate. His sons became the natural leaders of the Sawaftah clan members in Jordan.

'Amr was a romantic poet. He believed that the word is mightier than the sword, and it was said that people were more afraid of his poems than the sharp edge of his brother's sword. His only son became an ambassador of Jordan in various countries. The fourth son was Sayyel, the youngest and most spoiled. Nicknamed 'the Jew' within the family, he used his cleverness and craftiness to enhance his fortune, sometimes even at the expense of his own family.

There is a story that the family recalls every time Sayyel's name is mentioned.

One of Sayyel's ventures was raising a flock of sheep. He needed money but was too



A Nimr family photo. Standing, from left to right: Iyad, Isam, Thafir, Rabab, Sahar, Husam. Seated, from left to right: Awni, his wife Stilla, Dr. Sa'id, his wife Nadera holding Sahar's son Imad, Fathi's wife Adla holding Sonia, then Fathi. Seated on floor, Suhad. Missing from photo, Awni Said's daughter.

Source: Sonia Nimr

proud to ask his brother Sa'id for a handout. So he asked him to be partners in raising the sheep. Sa'id was not interested, but he gave his brother the money, and told him he agreed to be a partner. The following year Sa'id asked his brother what happened to the sheep and Sayyel said, "Well, I hate to tell you this, but your half of the flock died."

The Nimr family was one of the big landowners in the Tubas region and worked mainly as farmers. Apart from Sa'id, the other three brothers remained in Tubas, tending the land.

In his early years, Sa'id studied at the village *kuttab* before leaving at age 12 to Nablus to study at al-Rashidiyya School. As transport in those days was very difficult (he made the journey by horse), Sa'id stayed as a guest in the house of Abdul Fattah Touqan (father of the renowned Palestinian poets, Fadwa and Ibrahim). A trade relationship between the Touqan family and the Sawaftah clan in Tubas had existed for many years. This developed into a friendship, and later, kin relations through marriage.

Fortuitously, the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid announced that one son from each tribe was to study in Istanbul at the full expense of the government. This initiative was part of the Ottoman reform and centralization program, one aim of which was to strengthen the relationship between the tribes and the central government in Istanbul.

Sa'id saw this as a great opportunity, and he went to Istanbul in 1907 to study medicine. I still remember the following story vividly:

*On the first day, we were all taken to the palace after bathing and putting on our finest clothes. We were led through the halls until reaching the dining hall. The sultan himself was there. We greeted him, but he did not rise from his chair. We didn't mind. After all, he was the sultan. Dinner was brought in. I had never seen such amounts and such a variety of food—served on real silver platters. When the sultan raised his hand gesturing to us to start eating, a group of jawari [slave women] appeared suddenly from nowhere, and each one stood behind each of us. They held golden scissors and started to cut the bread, handing us the pieces with each mouthful. That was a dinner from *The Thousand and One Nights*. Then the sultan gave us a short speech about the good relations between the Ottoman Empire and the Bedouin tribes, and that we should strive to study hard to become good citizens of the empire, that he had high hopes for us, etc... Then he raised his hand, signalling the end of the meeting. A hajib [doorman] ordered us to leave.*

This heavenly atmosphere didn't last long for my grandfather. Just as he was preparing to enter medical school, they found out that he wasn't the son of a Bedouin chieftain, but of a *fellah* [peasant] landowner. Consequently, they threw him into prison. This is how he described that experience:

The Gendarme [Ottoman police] took me to prison; we went deep into the dungeons. They opened what seemed like a trap door in the ground, and when I looked through the hole I saw prisoners down there. The walls were so high that people looked as small and as numerous as ants. They threw me down with them. I can't describe the conditions there—they were worse than a nightmare. Two weeks later, I was taken out and the officer told me to get out of Istanbul and never return.

Sa'id went to Beirut, and enrolled in the Jesuit College. Seven years later, in 1914, he graduated a fully-fledged medical doctor. He immediately found a job as a medical officer in the Ottoman army.

By becoming a doctor and an officer in the army, my grandfather changed the fate of his decedents, elevating the family from the ranks of peasantry to the ranks of a well-to-do educated elite. He kept good relations with his family in Tubas, but he stood apart in his ways and style of living. After leaving Tubas to study in Nablus, he had stopped wearing traditional men's dress, instead donning western-style suits with the Turkish red fez.

After graduation, he was sent to the battlefield, attending to casualties in the early stages of World War I. He said it was an awesome and ugly war, with thousands of wounded soldiers, and in which he had to operate in the field. He said the accelerated experience made him a well-seasoned, experienced physician sooner than he had anticipated. He stayed in the service and became a lieutenant colonel. His regiment was transferred to a battlefield called 'Dera'a' located on the Jordanian - Syrian border.

One of the stories he liked to repeat about his days in the Ottoman army was the following:

One night I and another doctor from Syria (I cannot recall his name), were drinking with the Turkish military officer. The officer got really drunk and started an argument. I don't remember what it was about, but he became very angry, and called the soldiers and asked them to dig a hole in the ground and bury us alive.

After we were put in the hole and when they were just about to put earth on us my colleague said to the officer, "If you kill us now you'll never know where I hid a whole barrel of wine."

The officer said, "Ok, get him out." But my colleague said that the barrel was so heavy it needed at least two to carry it. And that is how he saved our lives. In the morning, the officer was sober and had no recollection of what had happened the night before.

In 1916, my grandfather Sa'id left the Turkish army to join the forces of the Arab Revolt. He was on the train (Hijaz line) going to Dera'a from Damascus when he was detained by Arab rebels who attacked the train. He was taken to the rebels' headquarters, the railway station:

As I entered the room, I saw a large table in the middle, and on the table there were severed heads of Turkish officers. They said that I was a Turkish officer and that they were going to cut off my head. I was still wearing my army uniform, so they didn't believe it when I said that I came here to join the rebels.

But God interfered in my favour. One of the rebels shouted, "I know him. He is not Turkish. He is from Tubas."

Still they didn't believe, but at least they didn't cut off my head. They kept me as their prisoner until they were sure of my identity and then they used

me to treat their injured. After that I didn't go home, staying instead with the rebels in Dera'a. Later, I joined King Faisal, becoming his personal doctor in Damascus where he established the short-lived Arab Kingdom.

Sa'id remained in Damascus another two years. It was during that time that he met my grandmother, the daughter of Mohammad Asqalan, an important officer from Nablus who died in battle. Actually, he himself did not meet my grandmother before their betrothal. Rather, her Kurdish mother sought treatment from my grandfather and liked him so much that she simply offered him her daughter in marriage. He reluctantly accepted.

“It wasn't honourable to refuse,” he said later, “so I accepted not even knowing what my bride-to-be looked like.” Lucky for him, she was very beautiful, wealthy and played the lute. Consequently, he had to break off his engagement to his cousin Sanajiq (the name was the plural form of *sanjaq*, or the Turkish name for ‘governorate’) that had been arranged by the Nimr family.

In 1920, King Faisal's army was defeated by the French army at Maysalun and he was forced to leave Damascus. He asked my grandfather to accompany him to Iraq. But Sa'id declined, and decided to go back to Palestine instead.

Accompanied by a pregnant wife, a baby, mother-in-law, furniture and an entourage of servants, he embarked on a tedious journey on camelback. On the way, he decided to rest in the Jordanian village Kufrranjah, not far from Ajloun. It seems that some of the poor villagers thought that the rich doctor and his wife with so much jewellery were a good target. My grandfather sensed that, and he sent his servant to seek aid from Tubas.

“I sent my slave [*abed*] to Tubas to bring help. He came back with a hundred armed horsemen lead by my brother Zayed. The people of Kufrranjah were afraid of this army and the horsemen escorted us back to Tubas.”

Going back to Palestine he decided to settle in Jenin and open a clinic in a house given to his wife by her father.

Later on he opened another clinic in Bisan. He went to Tubas once a week to treat the people there for free. He went by car to Aqraba village, continuing on by horseback. Later, he paid for the road to be opened so he could get to Tubas by car.

My uncle Issam recalled these days in his memoirs.¹

When we were young, we used to accompany my father to his clinics, in particular Tubas, where we passed the time in the countryside in play with our cousins. It was fun for us. I remember once that six of us squeezed ourselves into his 1937 brownish Chevrolet sedan and went with him on his rounds to clinics. After dad completed examining the last patient, we always had a good meal before heading home.

During the Mandate Period, he still managed his two clinics, becoming one of the more prominent personalities in the area.

In 1927, Sa'id lost his wife, Ramziyah, who had given him three sons and one daughter. She died very young, but her legacy still continues through her children and grandchildren. Often I am told by older women in the family that I have the personality of my grandmother, but "alas, not her looks."

My grandmother gave birth to three boys and one girl. The girl was married at the age of sixteen. The first boy, Awni, studied medicine at the American University of Beirut and later opened a clinic in Bisan. After the loss of his clinic in the 1948 War, he moved to Kuwait and remained there until the first Gulf War in 1990. He moved to Amman, where he lived until he died. He was married to an Armenian woman from Jerusalem.

Fathi, my father, studied engineering in Cairo. He worked at ARAMCO (the American Oil Company) in Saudi Arabia, and then moved back to Jenin where he became an electric engineer with the Jenin municipality. He died in 2005. My mother is the daughter of a merchant from the Arafat family, a prominent Nablus family. Her mother and my grandmother on my father's side were first cousins from the Asqalan family.

Isam, the third son, went to the United States after 1948, where he completed his studies as an aerospace engineer and held an important position at the National Aeronautics and Space Agency (NASA). He was in charge of the combustion engine for the Apollo spacecrafts. One of the stories told about him is that he gave the astronauts of Apollo 11 (the US mission to first land on the moon) a small stone with the word 'Jenin' written on it, and asked them to place it on the moon. Later, someone asked him why he didn't write 'Palestine' on the stone. He simply laughed and said, "They wouldn't have taken it."

After the death of his wife Ramziyya, Sa'id brought his sister, Nijmah, a widow with one son, to live with him to take care of the children. She was a strong woman, with an iron will. Though illiterate, she managed to run not only the family, but also the family property and everything else. My grandfather gave her all the money he earned, and she managed it, including buying him land.

From the stories I heard about my great aunt Nijmah (usually called Um Tahir) she was the pillar of the entire family, including those in Tubas.

She wore a beautiful coloured costume that she refused to change. Although my father remarried a few years after my mother's death, my aunt Nijmah refused to abdicate her position in the family, and remained the undisputed mistress of the house. She was not only an aunt, she was a mother to all of us [and] counsellor to the neighbours, to her brother and even to some extent to the new bride. Family, friends and neighbours used to seek her advice and ask her to arbitrate between those seeking favours from her brother (my father). Although she was an undisputedly tough person, she was for us the most loving, caring person. Above all, I thought she was the best storyteller in the world. She was simple and wise. Her actions and sayings were so colourful, and unusual, that they stuck in my mind forever.²

After the death of his second wife (who died giving birth to twins), Sa'id, age 42, became the most wanted bachelor in town. Many mothers competed to marry their daughters to him. But the most cunning of them all was a woman from a very prominent Jenin family who managed to marry him to her 16-year-old daughter. This brought a new dynamic to the family (a Cinderella stepmother syndrome) that later created a wide split in the family that affects the grandchildren and great-grandchildren even today. She gave him six children, three sons and three daughters. The sons, two doctors and one pharmacist, all graduated from the American University in Beirut. His three daughters went to a private school, the Schmidt school in Jerusalem. All married.

Sa'id was known in the entire northern region, including Nazareth, Tiberias, and Bisan. In the 1980s, as I did interviews for research into the revolt of 1936, many people offered stories about my grandfather. I was told by more than one interviewee that when Izz ad-Din al-Qassam was injured in clashes with the British police in November 1935, in Nazlat as-Sheikh Zayed near Ya'bad, that my grandfather was sent for. Al-Qassam was carried on a ladder, a makeshift stretcher, and taken to a house where my grandfather examined him before telling those waiting, as he wept, that the sheikh was dead.

Because of his connections with the Rebellion he was sometimes able to use his influence to retrieve pillaged funds. For example, my father told a story of how my grandfather stepped in to help the Arab Bank:

During the revolt, my father helped the rebels although he didn't join their ranks. In 1937, he saved the Arab bank from a ruinous end. Some of Abu Durra's (a rebel leader in the Jenin area) men captured an Arab Bank

employee on his way from Jerusalem to Haifa, and stole from him 3,000 Palestinian pounds designated for the opening of a new branch of the Arab Bank in Haifa. Abdul Hamid Shoman, the founder of the Arab Bank, contacted my grandfather and asked for his help in getting the money back. My grandfather sent for Abu Durra and asked him to return the money. He finally agreed and returned the money.

Every time my father told this story he added jokingly, “if the Arab Bank would only give us the interest from this money, we would be rich.”

In 1937, rebels shot W.S. Moffat, the British assistant district commissioner of Jenin. The British sent for my grandfather, the only doctor around, to examine him. He said that the man was dying and beyond salvation. They took Moffat to Haifa and he died on the way.³

My grandfather was not interested in politics, nor did he willingly interfere, but sometimes he was compelled to act, especially when concerning a member of his family. Uncle Isam recalls an exceptional incident.

I remember during the 1036-39 revolt against the British, my father received word that one of his distant cousins was arrested with a member of another family who had been collaborating with the British. The accusation was possession of a concealed weapon without a license. The other fellow was released immediately, but my father's cousin was thrown in jail and had to stand trial. My father was furious and upset about the injustice. He summoned the principal of the school, a better master of the English language, and dictated to him a telegram to send to the British high commissioner in Jerusalem.

I vividly remember his fiery words, and it was then I saw the tiger in him. I was very proud. He started the telegram first by praising the well-known justice of the British empire all over the world, then he relayed the circumstances in which his cousin and the other fellow were arrested, followed by the consequences of the arrest. He concluded his telegram by requesting that the government release his cousin within 24 hours, otherwise, he would summon 1,000 armed men from his village and personally lead them into confrontation with the British. I carried the telegram to the post office and had it wired.

Within 24 hours, a military car parked in front of our house carrying my father's cousin (who had been released) and a British officer who offered his apology on behalf of the British government.⁴

One of the funny anecdotes I heard about my grandfather was told to me by our neighbour:

Once they brought a young man to him, age 16. His mother told your grandfather that her son wasn't eating and was losing weight. After examining him, he found nothing physically wrong with him. So he took the boy's wrist in his hand and started reciting names of girls. At a certain name, the boy's pulse quickened. Your grandfather told the boy's mother, "Your son is in love, take him home and marry him to a girl named Jamila." One year later, the boy came to thank your grandfather and told him that he had named his first son Sa'id.

After the mandate ended and most of Palestine was lost, my grandfather lost his clinic in Bisan, thereafter investing all his time and energy in the one in Jenin. He decided not to get politically involved, and during the '50s and '60s lived a quiet life. Come to think of it, none of his ten children were involved or interested in politics. They were professionals who minded their own business.

Of Sa'id's grandchildren, it was only me and my brother Sa'd who were politically active and repeat visitors to Israeli prisons. That was mainly due to our mother, who made us recite by heart nationalist songs about Palestine (which were prohibited during the Jordanian period). It was my mother's 'other' history that made me understand that there are two kinds of history, the 'official version' and the history of the people, which guided me to become an oral historian.

In January 1970, my grandfather died. His clinic in Jenin became a confectionary shop; his house was turned into a clinic by another doctor.

But the people of Jenin say that they still see at five in the morning every day, ghosts of 12 men wearing full suits and red fezzes, sitting in a circle on the pavement in front of the clinic, smoking *nargila*.

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Endnotes

- ¹ These memoirs remain unpublished, but were distributed among family members. Moffat's headquarters, told a very detailed story about the assassination and his own role in helping the rebels.
- ² From Issam's memoirs, translation mine.
- ³ My father-in-law, the policeman on guard in ⁴ Issam's memoirs.