



With God’s Camel in Siberia

The Russian Exile of an Ottoman Officer from Jerusalem

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First Lieutenant Aref Shehadeh, Russian Identity Card for Ottoman Prisoners 1915. Source: *Aref Family Papers*.

The late Ottoman period and the early colonial Mandates (French and British) witnessed the appearance of a type of political advocate/public intellectual that all but disappeared during the later independence period. This type of activist was then replaced by a new breed of public intellectual—the professional party activist (Ba’th, Nasserite, Syrian Nationalist, and communist), and by the ‘committed intellectual’ of the 1950s, and 1960s—intellectuals who were active within or in the margin of those political parties. An outstanding example of this earlier type of engaged scholar was Abu Khaldun Sati al Husari (1881-1967) the Syrian theoretician of Arab nationalism and author of the seminal *A Day in Maysalun*—a treatise about the defeat of the first unitary Arab State in modern times. Husari’s life spans his involvement in the late Ottoman reforms and the establishment of the CUP of which he was a founding member in 1905.¹



Aref Effendi as translator in the Ottoman Foreign Ministry. Istanbul 1913. *Source: Aref Family Papers.*

Husari's intellectual and political career marks, and played an influential role in the transition from Ottomanism to Arabism.

What distinguished these public intellectuals of the early period was their involvement in the public sphere without the benefit of mass political parties or movements. Their path of engagement in political action was their literacy (confined to an urban elite), their writings in nascent nationalist presses, their membership in literary societies and clubs (*al Muntada al Adabi*, the Vagabond Café, *al Urwa al Wuthqa*), and—for quite a few—training in Ottoman military academies and service during WWI in the Ottoman armed forces. The imperial military schools were significant conduits for establishing a network of collaboration between members of the various ethnic communities in the Ottoman period. For a brief period (1908-1914) it was also a crucible of socialization into a reconstituted Ottoman citizenship. Almost without exception these intellectuals served as public officers in the civil service of the Ottoman and (later in) the French and British Mandate administration. During the Constitutional period of 1908, the Ottoman bureaucracy was much more fluid than its British and French colonial regimes, and allowed for considerable advancement for sections of the urban literate strata, at least in as far as the ability of provincial bureaucrats to belong to various political parties, and to express dissident opinions. Their membership in these government positions did not, in the most co-opt them into acquiescence, nor did it co-opt their role as public advocates of Arab unity, social progress, and for quite a few a radical opposition to the central authority.

One only has to name few of such figures to recognize the disappearance of their type: Sati al Husari (Aleppo, Istanbul and Baghdad), Rustum Haidar (Baalback), Ruhi al Khalidi (Istanbul and Jerusalem), Muhammad Izzat Darwazeh (Nablus and Beirut), Muhammad Dia al Khalidi (Istanbul and Jerusalem), Khalil Sakakini (Damascus and Jerusalem), and Falih Rifki Atay (Istanbul, Damascus, and Jerusalem).

In this essay I will examine the early career of officer Aref Shehadeh, 1892-1973 (later known as the historian Aref al Aref)² whose public life spanned the late Ottoman, Mandate, Jordanian, and Israeli rules over Palestine. Since much of what he later wrote (histories, essays and diaries) constructed a nationalist discourse that was at variance with his earlier activities (and utterances) during World War I and the pre-war period, my purpose here is to re-examine this earlier period in order to understand how both the etymologies and trajectories of Syrian and Palestinian nationalism evolved.

Since Aref spent most of the war period (1915-1918) in Russian exile (which is the focus of this article), his Siberian experience sheds new light on these transformations. Like Husari, Aref shared an early elite education in Istanbul, a loyal affinity for the Ottoman regime, and membership, or sympathy for, the CUP (the Young Turks). Like Husari, he defected from his Ottoman loyalties at the end of the war to join the Syrian National movement under Prince Faisal. Both served as civil servants in the British

Mandates (Husari in Iraq, Aref in Transjordan and Palestine), but whereas Husari became a main advocate and theoretician of Arab nationalism, Aref acclimatized himself to the fragmentation of the post war Arab East, and played an active role in both the creation of Transjordan as a separate state, and in the public administration of Mandate Palestine.

Most of what we know about his earlier career comes from biographic fragments that he wrote, and later re-wrote. Born in Jerusalem in 1892 he was sent by his family to Istanbul to finish his secondary schooling. He later studied literature at Istanbul University, receiving his first degree in 1913. Upon graduation he worked as a night editor in the Turkish daily, *Bayam*.

In Istanbul he joined (and according to Awdat, he was one of the founders of) *al Muntada al Arabi* (the Literary Forum) which was a meeting club for Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian intellectuals from Bilad al Sham.³ After graduation from Istanbul University, Shehadeh was appointed as a translator in the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs. With the eruption of the Great War he enlisted in the Military College in Istanbul, and upon graduation he was conscripted as an Ottoman officer in the *Radif* (Reserve) Forces, and later in the Fifth Army and fought on the Russian Front. There he was captured and spent three years in Siberia as a prisoner of war, before he was liberated by the onset of the Bolshevik Revolution. He returned by land via Manchuria and Japan where he joined the ranks of the Arab Rebellion under the leadership of Prince Faisal. In Jerusalem after the war he published and edited the Faisali organ, *Southern Syria*. He was sentenced to death by the British for his support of armed resistance to the British, and later commuted to imprisonment and exile. Aref eventually returned and undertook a number of public positions, including Qa'imaqam of Beersheba and Gaza. In the late twenties he became Secretary of the Administrative Council of Transjordan, which made him a keen observer of the genesis of the Hashemite Kingdom. His unpublished memoirs in Siberia (1915-1918), and Transjordan (1926-29) constitute a fabulous window to a vanished era. These works should be contrasted with the 'authorized' version of Aref's early biography, based on his post-war memoirs.⁴ We will now examine the divergence and conflicts in these two sets of biographical texts (the early memoirs, and later autobiographical tracts) against the historical record.

Early Education: I found my Arabness in Istanbul

Aref Shehadeh received his early education in al Ma'muniyyeh Intermediate School. On the eve of Sultan Abdul Hamid's overthrow in 1909, when Aref was barely sixteen, his father Shehadeh Ibn Abdul Rahman Ibn Mustafa al Aref, a prominent Jerusalem merchant in the old city, sent his middle son Aref to Istanbul ("*the Qibla of Arab,*



Lieutenant Aref, on graduation from Military Academy in Istanbul 1914. Source: Aref Family Collection.

*Turkish, Armenian, Kurdish, Greek, and Albanian youth, as he called it”*⁵ to receive his higher education. In five (1908-1913) condensed years he was able to finish his schooling at the *Maktab Sultani*, known as *Namu’ah Taraqi*, and at Istanbul University, where he received a literature degree in 1913. While studying he worked as a night editor in the Turkish daily *Bayam* to support his education.⁶

Aref’s assertion of Arabism for this period is retrospectively portrayed as a belief in a separatist future for the Arab nation. By examining his earlier writings and personal papers we get a different picture. *Al*

Muntada al Adabi, which he belonged to in Istanbul, and according to some sources was a co-founder along with Abdul Karim al Khalil,⁷ was a product of the 1908 constitutional revolution, and most of its members were firm believers in Ottoman decentralization—not secession—from Istanbul.⁸ His enlistment in the Military College, and subsequent military career as an officer in the Fifth Army (which he could have avoided by paying the *badal*) suggest that he was more than a neutral believer in the integrity of the Ottoman regime. His fluency in Turkish advanced his career in the Ottoman bureaucracy, but also stamped him with intellectual affinities for its Ottoman culture. Of his self-discovery of his Arab identity this is what he wrote in his diary:

*I was not aware that I was an Arab, and that I should think of the future of my Arab nation until the establishment of the Literary Forum (al Muntada al Adabi) in Istanbul. Of the founders I remember four names: Abdul Karim al Khalil, Yusif Mukhaibar, Jamil al Husseini, and Seiful Din al Khatib. I was registered as a member and was since then engulfed with the prevailing Arab nationalism among the students. It was then that I began to hear the words Arabs, Arabism, Nationalism, and Homeland.*⁹

This was written after the war. It is more likely, however, that the crucial transformation in Aref’s career and consciousness occurred not during his university years, as he professed in the commissioned biographical essay published by Yacoub al Awdat, or during his Istanbul journalistic period, and almost certainly not during his work at the Ottoman Foreign Ministry, where he seemed to be a rising bureaucrat in the system.¹⁰ Rather it is most likely that the radical break with Ottomanism occurred



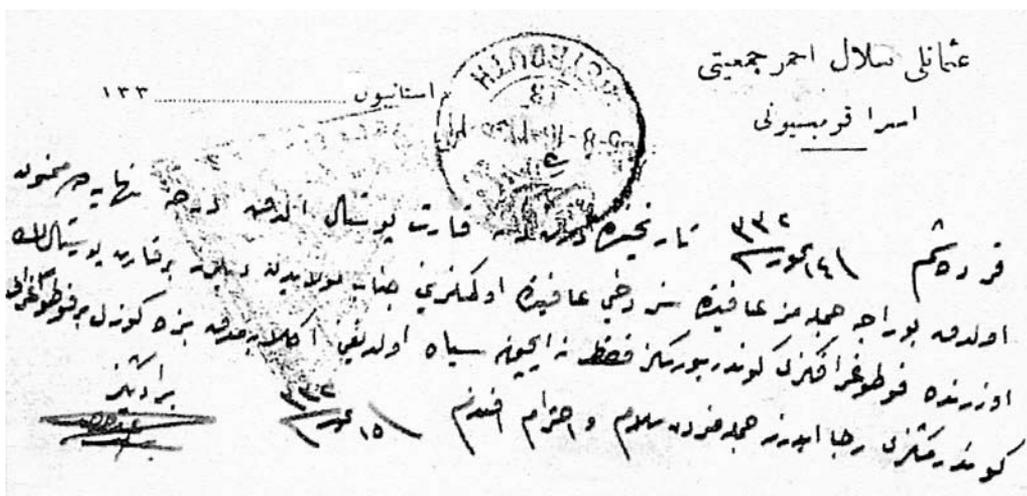
Issue No. 35 of Naqat Allah, dated Krasnoyarsk, Siberia Friday 29 Aylul 1333 Ottoman Calender, equiv. to 25 Dhil Hijja 1335 Hijri (1916).

during his Russian captivity in Siberia. In Istanbul Aref was a member of the Literary Club (*al Muntada al Adabi*), and was very close to its head Abdul Karim al Khalil. Al Khalil was in turn affiliated to the conciliatory wing of the Ottoman Party of Decentralization (OPD), which counseled unity with the CUP. We have no evidence of Aref belonging to either of these parties, but with the entry of Istanbul into WWI on the side of the Central Powers (Germany and Austria), al Khalil and the Literary Club took a position of supporting the state and suspending their demands for reform in the Arab provinces lest it be interpreted as a form of secessionism.¹¹ During the course of the war however, its members began to feel the pressures of the countervailing tendencies that divided the CUP and OPD, and pushed at least a section of OPD, then based in Cairo, to fight for independence from the Empire.

Siberian Exile

Shehadeh had just graduated from military college when he was conscripted and sent to fight against the Russians in the Caucasian front. He was captured after a bloody battle in Ard al Rum (Erzerum), in which most of his regiment was wiped out, with only eleven soldiers surviving.¹²

Shehadeh narrates his Siberian experience in a little known autobiographic text, *Ru'yaii* ('My Vision'), written in December 1918, immediately after his escape from prison camp in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution.¹³ The march of Ottoman prisoners to Siberia was atrocious. According to Turkish historian Yucel Yanikdag only one in four Ottoman prisoners captured in the winter of 1915 reached their destination.



Aref Shehadeh Letter received in Siberia from his brother Suleiman—sent from Jerusalem on 27th of July, 1916. Received in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia on August 20th, 1916. Source: *Osmanli sahra postaları, Istanbul, 2000*.

The rest perished from hunger and disease on their forced march to the camps.¹⁴ This was a much higher ratio than European prisoners taken by the Russians on the Eastern front.¹⁵ This is confirmed in Shehadeh’s own diary:

We were taken to main camp in Krasnoyarsk (Красноярск), near the shores of the Yenisei river (Енисей) in central Siberia. I spent three years in a special internment camp, Wyuni Gorodok where the food conditions and cold were unbearable. The camp was surrounded by an iron fence and barbed wire. Armed soldiers watched us day and night to prevent our escape. But also to prevent us from observing the life of ordinary Russians who were suffering from Tsarist despotism.¹⁶

Once the Ottoman prisoners settled in the camp, controls became more lax and recreational facilities improved. By the second year he was able to report:

There were 3,500 prisoners in our camp. We had several fields to exercise in. One for football games, another for running exercises, and a third for other sports activities. We had a large hall in which we organized lectures and tutoring; a little theatre, and a substantial library. Later on I was able to put out a satirical newspaper, without authorization, for my fellow soldiers.¹⁷

Throughout his imprisonment Aref was able to maintain contact with his family through correspondence administered by the Ottoman Red Crescent. Letters written in Turkish and French to and from his father and brother Suleiman in Jerusalem survive. Because of military censorship (Russian, Austrian, and Ottoman) the exchanges



Col. Karol Riba, The Polish officer in the Tsarist army who became Shehadeh's benefactor in Krasnoyarsk.
Source: AFP.

were confined to enquiries about the family's health, and mundane news about camp life. But he kept close contacts with the developments in the home front. We learn from them that his brother Suleiman was studying at the Salahiyeh College, which Jamal Pasha had established with the aim of recruiting young civil servants for the Ottoman bureaucracy, and about his continued requests for Arabic newspapers and journals to be sent to him in Siberia.¹⁸ The requests indicate that packages were arriving to the Krasnoyarsk (Красноярск) through the work of the Swedish Red Cross.

Eventually Aref was able to obtain a military pass to leave the camp during the day, arranged by a Polish officer in the Tsarist army, Colonel Karol

Riba, who wanted Shehadeh to teach him Turkish. This allowed Aref to earn some money, and—for a period—to move into an apartment in Krasnoyarsk. Photographs that survived from this period indicate that he had several Russian friends, including young women, who invited him to their home. Several pictures show him celebrating new year and other occasions. Inside the internment camp he was able to study Russian and German. His German became well developed for him to translate into Turkish, and publish in 1917 *Die Welträtsel* (The Riddle of the Universe) by the German philosopher and Darwinian scientist Ernst Haeckel.

Peter Gatrell, who examined studies on WWI POWs of the Central Powers in Russia made the observation that war incarceration provides a window for studying the undisclosed consequences of prison experience which include “solidarity, personal and group identity, and the psychological consequences of confinement”.¹⁹ Exile and captivity were often seen as a ‘voyage of self-discovery’.²⁰ Here I will investigate in particular the second of these consequences as it affected Arab (Syrian) prisoners. The most comprehensive study of Ottoman prison conditions in Siberia was undertaken by Yucel Yanikdag.²¹ It confirms much of what Lieutenant Shehadeh has written about in his diary eighty years earlier, but it also provides a wider context of events inside the camps. One main reason why prisoners were separated along ethnic categories had to do with work incentives. Since the Russians employed most of the rank and file POWs to work in mines, railroads and digging canals, they assumed that prisoners work better in an environment of ‘common culture’.²²



Krasnoyarsk 1916. Celebrating the New Year with Russian Friends. Katerina Andrevina Globus and her family. Source: Aref Family Collection.

Yanikdag provides us with detailed accounts of the conditions in Krasnoyarsk, the largest internment centre in Siberia. Ottoman Officers were separated in their housing and living conditions from enlisted men. Officers were paid 50-100 rubles a month, depending on their rank—a sum equivalent to what the Ottomans paid to their Russian prisoners.²³ Initially there was little tension between Ottoman prisoners along ethnic lines, and Islam seems to have been a bonding element among prisoners. Traditional Russian enmity to the Ottoman Turks, expressed by the local Siberian population, also brought the various groups together.²⁴ One main conflict was between elite *mektepli* officers, trained in elite military schools that were the backbone of CPU supporters, and *alayli* (i.e. ‘from the ranks’ officers) who were demoted by the Young Turks prior to the war.²⁵ Possibly because of their religious identity in a hostile environment, Ottoman prisoners experienced less friction on the basis of class identity and social standing than was commonly observed among Austro-Hungarian and German prisoners.

As the war progressed however two factors began to produce Turkish-Arab tensions within the prison camps. One was Russian favoritism towards Arab soldiers and officers over Turkish soldiers, and secondly, the news of Arab rebellion in Hijaz and Syria (June 1916). The fall of Baghdad to the British and their Arab allies in January 1917, was a central event which incited these tensions.²⁶ An explanation for Russian

favoritism to the Arabs could be viewed as a negative reaction to the sympathies of Turkic Russian communities in the vicinity of the camps towards the imprisoned Turkish soldiers, but it is more likely that the Tsarist government, the military ally of Entente powers in the war, was fostering a potential patronage of Arab recruits as part of its imperial strategy in the Middle East.

Yanikdag confirms the picture drawn by Shehadeh on the rich and versatile social activities in Krasnoyarsk (Красноярск), and other Siberian camps.²⁷ Officers had organized a number of musical concerts and theatrical groups. Sports clubs and football teams, playing along national lines, mushroomed. Hungarians, Austrian and Ottoman teams competed against each other. Each major camp had its own library, usually organized by the Swedish Red Cross and the YMCA. Hand printed newspapers were also circulating, both in Arabic and Turkish:

*...every large camp had an Ottoman newspaper at one time. In Krasnoyarsk, for example a paper called Kurtulus (Liberation) was quite popular with the prisoners. It featured not only news from home and about the war, but also articles on the ethnography of Central Asia and the history of the Turkic peoples. It seems that some of the most popular articles and editorials were nationalistic in nature, pointing to the appeal of Turkish nationalism among the officers.*²⁸

It is quite likely that the success of *Kurtulus*, and its emphasis on a Turkish nationalist identity triggered the creation of *Naqatu Allah* (God's Camel), an Arabic hand-written paper published in Krasnoyarsk. *Naqatu Allah* was published clandestinely among Syrian soldiers in Siberia—"one-third satire, and two thirds politics", in Aref's words, "how difficult prison life would be without a farcical side". He edited the paper with a fellow prisoner from Syria, Ahmad al Kayyali. Forty-five issues were published between Rajab 1335 (1916) and Jamadi al Thani 1336 (1917). The paper's masthead displayed a camel lost in the Siberian tundra and announced the journal as a 'literary, critical, satirical weekly', published in Krasnoyarsk and Divnogorsk (Дивногорск 34 km. west of Krasnoyarsk). Each issue sold for 3 *kopeks*, and a year's subscription was one ruble. Commercial advertisements were accepted at five *kopeks* per line. The paper even listed an (obviously fake) telephone "number 49".²⁹ It is striking that Aref and Kayyali chose a Qur'anic image for their paper, given the former's thoroughly secular credentials at the time. Naqat Allah (God's Camel) refers to the miracle enacted by God when the Prophet Saleh was challenged in the desolation of the desert to produce a camel that gives milk, and God responded to his prayers in order to silence his doubters.³⁰ But it does confirm Yanikdag's claim that Islamic imagery was a bonding factor among prisoners, even though a minority of the camp residents (30 out of 400 officers) fasted during the month of Ramadan.³¹

The Bolshevik Factor: Escape from Revolution or Liberation?

The context for Shehadeh's escape from Siberia was the Bolshevik Revolution. In his affidavit to Yacoub al Awdat, Aref Shehadeh gives this account for his escape from Siberia (in the third person). "During the last year of his captivity news began to arrive of Sheriff Hussein bin Ali's Rebellion against Turkish rule. Aref prevailed on twenty-one of his fellow Arab prisoners to escape in order to join the Arab rebellion. They took the route of Manchuria, Japan, China, India, and Egypt through the Red Sea. During this arduous journey the Armistice was declared."³² This paragraph is taken verbatim, with very slight changes, from his Autobiographic Notes, published in 1964.³³ Surprisingly there is no mention here of neither the Bolsheviks nor the October events in these later versions of his writings.

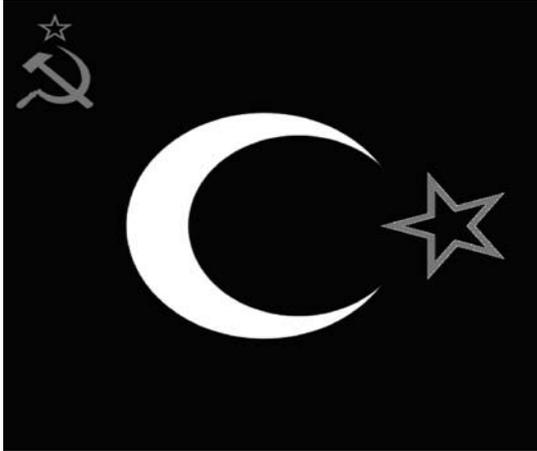
But the 'escape' story needs to be seen in the context of the chaos produced in the prison camps by the revolution, which happens to 'coincide' with the Arab officers leaving Siberia. In his 'visionary' text written in 1918, he referred to the hardships of prison life in Krasnoyarsk, he adds the following sentence which does not appear in any subsequent text about Siberia:

"... this was the situation during the era of Tsar Nicholas the Second, before the outbreak of the Bolshevik Revolution, which broke out throughout the country, and spread anarchy and fear. Matters went out of control [in our camp] and we had to start to scavenge for our food in the woods and the wilderness to secure our living. This situation continued until we received news of the Great Arab Revolt and the Insurrection of Hussein Ibn Ali against the Turks".³⁴

Aref's daughter also confirms in her recollections of her father's life that he 'escaped when the Bolsheviks came to power'.³⁵ She also adds that her father recalled the arrest and execution of Tsar Nicholas and his family in an area close to his encampment.³⁶

It is worth examining this absence in detail because, in my view, it is related to Aref's new nationalist consciousness and his break with Ottomanism, a process which began with ethnic segregation inside the camps and the publication of *Naqat Allah*. During the 1917-1918 periods, administrative chaos spread throughout Russia. The situation inside the camps was even more acute as, "the exiting agencies for POW relief and repatriation struggled to survive and cope with the displaced persons scattered across the disintegration tsarist empire."³⁷

It was in this atmosphere that the Arab prisoners escaped, or, depending on one's perspective, were liberated, to return to their homeland.



The Bolsheviks attempted to organize Red Brigades among Ottoman soldiers, with little success among Arab prisoners.

According to Yucel Yanikdag the issue was much more complex, since “...when the Bolsheviks came to power, they declared the POWs free citizens and guests of the Russian people”.³⁸ Many simply left and went back home. Others joined special communist units to bring the revolution to their homeland. Others yet, mostly officers, were declared ‘class enemies’ by the new regime, ‘and had their salaries cut and were promised only food’.³⁹ Gatrell tells us of ‘factional infighting among POW radicals, some of whom threw their lot in with the Bolshevik Red Guards while others were committed to non-

class militias’.⁴⁰ At home, especially in Austria and Germany there was fear among the authorities that returning prisoners from Russia, would be carrying the ‘germs of the revolution’.⁴¹ This fear was not without foundation since the Bolsheviks began to organize special units among Ottoman (as well as German and Austrian) war prisoners to carry out agitational work for socialism.⁴² Several Ottoman soldiers and exiles, such as the journalist Mustafa Subhi, joined the Bolsheviks and established the Turkish Red Brigades, *Türk Kızıl Alayı*, which included about 1,000 men.⁴³ But apparently very few of the Arab prisoners joined. Aref does not even mention this group in his diary. Instead he and his comrades were determined to join the Hijazi rebellion and fight for the independence of the Arab Kingdom in Syria.

Aref arrived to the Suez Canal five months after he left Krasnoyarsk, and crossed over to what had become British Occupied Palestine. On his arrival he went straight to his father’s shop in the old city. His father had lost contact with any news of his son in Siberia and was worried about Aref’s fate after the October events. He had grown old and hardly recognized his son after the long absence.⁴⁴

In Palestine Aref joined the ranks of the Faisali movement whose aim was to establish the United Kingdom of the Arab East. He became a member of the newly formed Arab Club (*al Nadi al Arabi*) as a branch of the Damascus group with the same name, and headed by scions of the Jerusalem former Ottoman elite—members of the Abul Su’ud, Budeiri, Husseini, and Alami families. Its twin objectives were unity of Syria, of which Palestine was seen the southern part, and the struggle against Zionism.⁴⁵ Its main rival in the nationalist movement was *al Muntada Adabi*, re-organized from the remnants of the Istanbul literary club, but now with the same objectives as *al Nadi al Arabi*. By then its founder and Aref’s comrade, Abdul Karim al Khalil, had been

hanged by Jamal Pasha in Beirut. The rupture with the Ottoman regime was now complete. Both *al Nadi* and *al Muntada*, had active branches throughout Palestine, and strong connections with the same movement in Damascus.

The Arab club (*al Nadi*) was headed by Jamil al Hussein, an old comrade of al Khalil Abdul Karim, as well as Fakhri al Nashashibi, Boulus Shehadeh (editor of *Mir'at a Sharq*), Hasan Sidqi al Dajani, and Is'af al Nashashibi. It is in these two groups that the seeds of factional struggles within Palestine, between the Husseinis, and the Nashashibis originated.⁴⁶ It is noteworthy that Aref, upon returning to Palestine would join the Arab Club, and not the rejuvenated *al Muntada Adabi* to which he attributed the origins of his own Arabism when he was a young Ottoman officer. This has probably to do with the alliances and ideological orientations of each of these two nascent movements. Both Porath and Bayan Nuwaihid-al Hut, suggest that the Literary Club, which had only faint association with its Ottoman namesake (Jamil al Hussein was a leading member of both),⁴⁷ was in contact, and perhaps association, with French interests in post-war Syria. In both rhetoric and programmatic objectives *al Muntada* was strongly for Syrian unity, and against the dissociation of Palestine from Syria. The Arab Club (in which Aref was involved) was by contrast, allied to the British forces in the Middle East. This was a continuation (and perhaps an extension of) the joint struggle coordinated by the British and the Hashemites, and their Syrian-Palestinian allies against the retreating Ottomans, and for the re-organization of post-war Bilad al Sham.⁴⁸ The British, in this regard, saw the Husseinis of Jerusalem, and Haj Amin in particular, as their allies. It is paradoxical that within two years, when the military government was replaced by the civilian Mandate authorities, these roles would be reversed, and the Husseinis would become the main oppositional group in the country, while the Nashashibis and their allies became the balancing force of British interests in Palestine.

These reversals explain al Aref's initial wholehearted involvement with *al Nadi al Arabi* early in 1918, and his close association with the Husseinis. Al Aref experience with Ottoman journalism (*Bayam*) and with his clandestine *Naqat Allah* in Siberia, came in handy. Together with Hasan al Budeiri he became the editor of *Surya al Janubiyya* ('Southern Syria'), the organ of the *al Nadi al Arabi*, first published on 8th September, 1919. Both its name and editorials reflected a strong unity with Syria, and an assumption that the British would support this unity.⁴⁹ The motto of the newspaper (as well as the Arab Club), *Biladuna Lana*, which appeared on the top of every masthead, referred to Syria, as the united homeland.

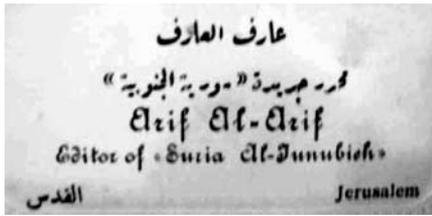
Soon however, *Surya al Janubiyya* became an instrument of agitation against British rule in Palestine, as British intentions concerning the aims of the Mandate became clearer. Aref al Aref, who has adopted his new name by now, as editor in chief, was often a speaker in rallies against the Balfour Declaration. (The picture shows a huge crowd at Jaffa Street on 27th February, 1920 in which the main banner declared



Aref al Aref, centre with Tarbush, addressing an anti-Zionist demonstration at Jaffa Street, Jerusalem on February 27th, 1920. The banner reads “Palestine is an organic part of Southern Syria”. *Source: Aref Family Papers.*

“Palestine is an essential part of Southern Syria”). The paper was suspended several times, and an arrest order was issued against Aref. He escaped to Damascus in 1920 where he represented Jerusalem in the First Syrian Congress (*al Mu'tamar al Suri*) which declared Faisal to be the King of ‘natural Syria’. A military court in Jerusalem passed the death sentence on several nationalist figures, including Haj Amin al Husseini and Aref al Aref, for fermenting unrest. The sentence was later commuted to ten years imprisonment.

Muhammad Darwazeh, the future leader of the *al Istiqlal* party, met him in this period of hot pursuit. “I met Aref al Aref in Damascus when he, and Haj Amin, were seeking refuge from British pursuit. He worked with us for the defense of Palestine in the context of the Palestine Secret Society [*Jam'iyyat Filasteen al Sirriyah*]. I sensed in him a revolutionary spirit combined with cool and balanced judgment. He also impressed me with his command of Turkish and Arabic.”⁵⁰ In Damascus both Husseini and Aref established the Palestinian Arab Society (which emerged from the ‘secret’ society referred to here by Darwazeh. It was established on May 31st, 1920 under Haj Amin’s leadership and had Rafiq Tammimi, Mouin al Madi, and Awni Abdul Hadi, in addition to Darwazeh, and Aref in its executive. This was the historical moment—by most accounts—when Syrian and Palestinian politics began to take separate ways.⁵¹ The rupture was primarily caused by Prince Faisal and some of the leading figures in the Damascene Arab leadership who sought to ally themselves with the British against the French objections to an independent Syria under Faisal. Rashid Khalidi points out that in this alliance the Syrians sacrificed their opposition to the Balfour Declaration (and therefore toned down their struggle against Zionism) with the hope that the British would support



Syrian independence. “This approach”, Khalidi concludes, “produced a reaction from many Palestinians in Damascus, who saw it as a betrayal of the wider Arab cause, and of their own country, to benefit narrow Syrian interests.”⁵²

Shortly after this split and the formation of the Palestinian Arab Society in Damascus, both Aref and Husseini were pardoned and allowed to go back to Palestine, in a policy of cooptation initiated by the new civilian government of Herbert Samuel, the first High Commissioner of Palestine.

Aref, according to Darwazeh, maintained his nationalist line, but “withdrew from all political activities”.⁵³ This is a fleeting assessment, but it is full of implications. It indicates that Aref, having come to the conclusion that the fate of Palestine was now separate from Syria by virtue of the imperial divisions imposed by Britain and France, was now resigned to work within the system. His career took a radical break with his former self as a fighter for Syrian unity. This also placed him in a different milieu from other Arab Ottoman figures in Palestine, like Darwazeh, and Awni Abdul Hadi. From then on he became a senior administrative officer in the Mandate Government becoming the District Officer (Qa’imaqam) of Gaza, Jenin, Nablus, Bisan, and Jaffa). For three crucial years he was sent by the Mandate government to be the Ministerial Secretary of the newly formed Government of Transjordan (1926-29), where he was a witness to the formation of the new Hashemite state.

Residual Ottomanism

This essay accompanied Lieutenant Shehadeh in his momentous journey from Ottoman Jerusalem in 1908 to his military academy in Istanbul (1913) and to his capture and Siberian exile for most of the great war (1915-1918). He stated in his diary that he discovered his Arabness in the Literary Forum in Istanbul, where his comrades from the Syrian provinces were debating the future of their relationship with the new regime in Anatolia. “*I was not aware that I was an Arab, and that I should think of the future of my Arab nation until the establishment of the al Muntada al Adabi in Istanbul*” he wrote then, “... *It was then that I began to hear the words Arabs, Arabism, nationalism, and homeland*”. His circle belonged to a number of political parties that emerged after the 1908 Revolution—mostly to the CUP, but also to the Party of Ottoman Decentralization, and a small minority, to the secret *al ‘Ahd* group, which organized Arab officers in Istanbul for succession. But this new consciousness did not take Aref away from his affinities, if not loyalty, to the Ottoman idea. He voluntarily went to fight for the Fifth Army on the Russian Front where he was captured and led to the internment camp in Krasnoyarsk. It was in the Siberian exile, in the company of thousands of Turkish, Arab,

Balkan, and German soldiers, that he came around to develop a separate Arab political identity, as opposed to the amorphous Arabist consciousness that he experienced in Istanbul. In the early period of incarceration there was a considerable degree of solidarity among the various Ottoman ethnic groups, in which religious ceremonials, fasting Ramadan, and a feeling of common destiny played a significant role. Yanikdag refers to an event in late 1915 when a tea party was organized among Ottoman and German soldiers to jointly celebrate the military victory against the allies in Gallipoli.⁵⁴ By the end of 1916 however the Arab officers and soldiers began to drift away. This rupture with Ottoman identity among the Arabs was facilitated by political developments in Turkish Anatolia (primarily Turkification policies on the part of the Ottoman leadership of the CUP), but in this case by three immediate factors discussed above: The camp segregated dwellings for Ottoman prisoners by ethnicity (and the implicit favoritism extended by the Russians towards Arab officers); the spread of clandestine publications like *Naqat Allah* providing a separatist platform for Arab soldiers and officers; and (most importantly) news of the Hijazi Arab rebellion and the subsequent collapse of the Ottoman fronts at Suez, Gaza, and southern Iraq (Kut al Amara). What was experienced as a potential for emancipation of the Arab provinces from autocratic rule among Arab soldiers, was seen as Arab betrayal by the Turkish soldiers.

When Aref returned to Palestine, his thinking was already set about joining the rebellion and struggling for a separate Arab homeland. At least this is what he claimed later on. Yet this rupture must have been gradual and protracted given that a vision for a separate Arab homeland had not been fully formed. And the looming ‘betrayal’ of the French and British allies was already visible to many Arab nationalists. It was particularly alarming to Palestinians who had to face the prospects of fighting separately against the Balfour Declaration. *That factor in particular made many Arab intellectuals reconsider their break with the Ottoman regime.* But by that time the Turkish national movement had already moved away from a common future with its Arab provinces. Aref’s predicament was similar to another (and better known) fellow Ottomanist, Sati al Husari, who was a devoted champion of Arab rights within a CUP dominated Empire. Like Aref, Husari had a dual command of Arabic and Turkish, and both articulated the duality of Arab-Turkish identity in their early career. Unlike the champions of a reformed Islamic Caliphate in Istanbul (people like Sheikh As’ad al Shuqairi in Palestine), and fellow historian Ihsan al Nimr in Nablus, both Husari and Aref were champions of a secular Ottoman identity that derived much of its ideas from Western liberalism (francophone in the case of Husari, German in the case of Aref). This produced considerable ambivalence (if not regret) about breaking with the Ottomans immediately after the war. Such ambivalence is not visible in the later writings of Arab intellectuals and political figures whose careers flourished in the pre-war period—where the rupture appears, in later reconstructions, as sudden and clear. Husari himself expressed this ambivalence about this period in a retrospective interview, when he said, hesitantly, “I was an Arab, and when the Arabs broke away from the Ottoman empire, *I had no choice but to join them.*”⁵⁵



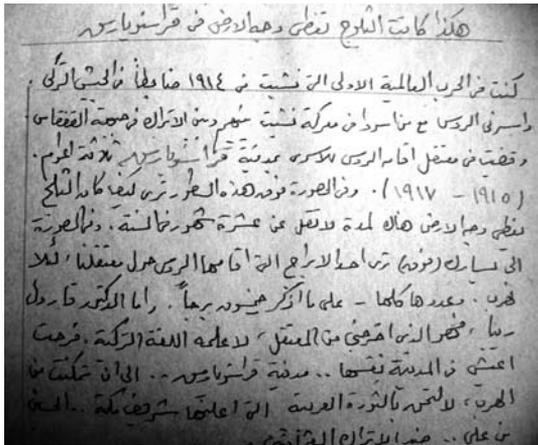
Nevertheless a residual Ottomanism was retained by a majority of these activists. A main feature of its persistence was language. In the spring of 1934, thirty years after Aref left Istanbul to fight in the Caucasian Front, he received a love letter from his wife Sa'ema (Um Sufian) in Jerusalem. He was at the time serving as District Officer in Gaza. Um Sufian (Sa'ima) was complaining about her loneliness in Jerusalem, and her longing to see Aref again. She wrote:⁵⁵

...صبا حلين ايركن اوما ندم. باغجریة ايندم. براز دولاشدم. برازده صيچك قوماردم. دكزيباغجریة نقل اولوم. بریمكلك لوبيه طويلادم. بن دولا شيركن هب فكریده سن بجوردك. سنسزهج برش كوزلی وكل. باغجریة تزين ايدن سنسك. مكر سنسزهج برسیده لذة يومد. الله من باشمدن اكسيك اينمه سون. بوتون حيا تمزی كوزل ایده سنك وجودك. بزون حرکت ایتد يكك زمان براز نزله ايدك. فكرم شغول. رجا اید بن تطمين ایت... سن بتون قلیله سوه رفيقة حياتك. صائمة

What is unique about this letter is the language. It was written in Ottoman Turkish, a language which by that time had ceased to exist by virtue of the Latinization program adopted by the Turkish Republic. Aref and his wife continued to exchange correspondence in Ottoman, partly because they wanted to maintain a sense of privacy in their intimate exchanges, but equally I propose, because it was the language of expression that they grew up with and part of their cultural patrimony.

Al Aref thus belongs to a generation of scholar-politicians whose successful Ottoman career (journalist in the Turkish press, civil servant, and officer) was radically disrupted by war, compelling him to rethink his national identity, his future career as a soldier, and his ideological commitments as a political activist. But the rupture was not as total as it appears by his post-war writings. His journalistic training in Istanbul proved to be an invaluable tool for his clandestine writings in Siberia (*Naqat Allah*), and in his editorship of the *Surya al Janubiyya* (the organ calling for a greater Syrian Arab state). And the debates he was engaged in, in the literary-political circles of the Ottoman capital, were crucial for his political struggles during the Faisali period in Damascus, and in Palestine against the Balfour Declaration.

But these struggles were eclipsed by his accommodations to the new realities of the Mandate regime, and by the shift he made within three short years from advocacy of Arab-Syrian nationalism, to provincial Palestinian patriotism. The significance of Siberian imprisonment for Aref's political trajectory is that it gave him a breathing space, and—paradoxically—a domain of freedom in exile which allowed him to reformulate his future political options and past loyalties in a manner which was denied to most of his comrades.



Krasnoyarsk Days 1915-1918; Aref's handwritten notes in his photo album. *Source: Aref Family Collection.*

A note on sources for Aref al Aref Siberian Exile

Al Aref's internment in Siberia presents a major challenge to the researcher since the main source for Aref's for this period, is an unpublished hand written diary which is so far unavailable to the public. However his Photographic Album (In'ash al Usra Society Archives) contains sections from this diary, also handwritten, accompanying his early photographs, as well as the masthead of *Naqat al Jamal*, that gives the reader an insight into the contents

of this diary. Another section of this diary was published in Aref's *Ru'yaii* and in his separately published Biographic Notes (*Mujaz Siratuh*) listed below.

1. Aref al Aref, *My Days in Siberia: Diary*; unpublished, unavailable, but listed in his list of authored works. In Aref family possessions.
2. Aref al Aref, *Photographic Album*, with biographic notes. In'ash al Usra Society, al Bireh, unpublished.
3. Correspondence of Ottoman Prisoner in Krasnoyarsk (Siberia) Lieutenant Aref Shehadeh with his Jerusalem family in Jerusalem. In Alexander, Zvi. 2000. *Osmanlı sahra postaları: Filistin (1914-1918) : Alexander Koleksiyonu*. Istanbul: Türkiye Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Tarih Vakfi.
4. Aref al Aref, *Mujaz Siratuh 1892-1964*, al Maaref Press, Jerusalem, 1964
5. Al Aref, Aref, *Ru'yaii*, (1918). First Edition, Jerusalem, 1943, n.p; second edition with a new introduction, Dar al Rihani, Beirut, 1957.
6. Aref al Aref, *Diary: Three Years in Amman (1926-29)*, unpublished manuscript, Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut.
7. Aref al Aref, *Gaza Diary (1934-1936)* ; unpublished manuscript, St. Anthony's College, Centre for Middle East Studies, library, Oxford University.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Ḥuṣṭī, Abū Khaldūn Sāṭī'. 1966. *The day of Maysalūn; a page from the modern history of the Arabs; memoirs*. Washington: Middle East Institute.
- ² In this essay I will use the two names interchangeably: Aref Shehadeh for the war period, and Aref al Aref (which he assumed after his return to Palestine) for his reflections in the post-war period.
- ³ Muslih, Muhammad. *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- ⁴ Aref al Aref, *Mujaz Siratuh 1892-1964*, al Maaref Press, Jerusalem, 1964; and Awdāt, Ya'qūb. 1987. *Min a' lām al-fikr wa-al-adab fi Filasṭīn*. 'Amman: Wakālat al Tawzī' al Urdunīyah. Pp.400-403.
- ⁵ Awdat, Yaqoub, 406.
- ⁶ The source for his early years comes from his autobiographical essay, published as a pamphlet. Aref al Aref, *Mujaz Siratuh*, op. cit.
- ⁷ Awdāt, Ya'qūb. 1987. *Min a' lām al-fikr wa-al-adab fi Filasṭīn*. 'Amman: Wakālat al Tawzī' al Urdunīyah. P. 400. In Ru'yaii, he refers to the Mundtada in Istanbul, as the forum, "which we, Arabic speakers have established in Asetanah, and in which we took an oath to struggle for the freedom, unity and independence of our homeland", p.5.
- ⁸ For details about the ideology of the Arab Club in Istanbul see, Muslih, Muhammad. *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*. op. cit.
- ⁹ Awdat, op. cit. p.405.
- ¹⁰ Awdat, *ibid*. p.400-401.
- ¹¹ For a detailed discussion of Abdel Karim al Khalil and debates with the Decentralization Party and the Arab club see Suhaila al Rimawi, "Pages from the history of Societies in Bilad al Sham 1908-1918" in 'Allūsh, Nājī, and Ibrāhīm Ibrāsh. 1997. *al Ḥarakah al 'Arabīyah al qawmīyah fi mi'at 'ām, 1875-1982*, pp.120-123 'Ammān: Dār al Shurūq.
- ¹² Aref al Aref, *Mujaz Siratuh*, p.2-3 However the major battle at Erzurum in which the Russian forces, led by the Grand Duke Nicholas decisively defeated the Ottomans was fought on February 16, 1916. It is possible that Aref was mistaken with the dates.
- ¹³ Al Aref, Aref, *Ru'yaii*, (1918). First Edition, Jerusalem, 1943, n.p; second edition with a new introduction, Dar al Rihani, Beirut, 1957. All quotes here are from the second edition.
- ¹⁴ Yucel Yanikdag, "Ottoman Prisoners of War in Siberia" *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 34 no. 1, 1999; on the high rate of camp deaths see also Peter Gatrell (reference below), p.562.
- ¹⁵ See Peter Gatrell, "Prisoners of War in the Eastern Front during World War I", *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and East Eurasian History* 6, 3 (Summer 2005): pp.557-66
- ¹⁶ Ru'yaii, op cit., p.4.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*. The paper actually was a joint production with fellow officer Ahmad al Kayyali.
- ¹⁸ These letters and postcards have been reprinted in Alexander, Zvi. 2000. *Osmanlı sahra postaları: Filistin (1914-1918) : Alexander Koleksiyonu*. Istanbul: Türkiye Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Tarih Vakfı.
- ¹⁹ Peter Gatrell, "Prisoners of War". *Emphasis added*. Gatrell only addresses literature on German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners.
- ²⁰ The expression was used by the Austrian writer Heimito von Doderer, quoted by Gatrell, *ibid*. p.563.
- ²¹ Yanikdag, op. cit.
- ²² Gatrell, p.561.
- ²³ Yanikdag, p.73.
- ²⁴ Yanikdag, p.77.
- ²⁵ Yanikdag, p.75.
- ²⁶ Yanikdag, p.74.
- ²⁷ See Yanikdag, pp.76-77.
- ²⁸ Yanikdag, p.77.
- ²⁹ Aref al Aref Photo Album and Diary. In'ash al Ustra. As far as I know only one issue of *Naaqat Allah*, no. 35, has survived.
- ³⁰ Qur'an, Hod: p.45. For details on the Qur'anic story see *al Ahsas* web site. <http://www.ahsas.net/vb/showthread.php?t=4611>, cited on September 1, 2008.
- ³¹ Yanikdag, p.77.
- ³² Awdat, p.401.
- ³³ Aref al Aref, *Mujaz Siratuh 1892-1964*, al Maaref Press, Jerusalem, 1964, p.3
- ³⁴ Ru'yaii, p.5. Aref attributes the news to a letter he received from Rashid Rida, editor of *AlManar* (Cairo). He informs him that several of his comrades from Istanbul days had joined Sherif Hussein and were involved in the siege of Medina.

- ³⁵ Faridah Al Aref Al Amad, "Aref al Aref, My Father", *al Turath wal Mujtama'*, No. 41, July 2005.
- ³⁶ Al-Amad, *ibid*.
- ³⁷ Gatrell, op. cit. p.564.
- ³⁸ Yanikdag, p.80.
- ³⁹ *Ibid*.
- ⁴⁰ Gatrell, p.564-565.
- ⁴¹ Gatrell, p.565.
- ⁴² For the impact of the revolution on internal dissension among prisoners see Gatrell, *ibid*. p.564.
- ⁴³ Yanikdag, p.81.
- ⁴⁴ The encounter is told in Aref- al Amad, "My father Aref al Aref", p.1.
- ⁴⁵ Ḥūt, Bayān Nuwayhid. 1981. *Qiyādāt wa-al-mu'assasāt al siyāsīyah fī Filasfīn, 1917-1948*. Bayrūt: Mu'assasat al Dirāsāt al Filasfīnīyah. P. 86-87 . See also Darwazah, M. (1993). *Mudhakkirāt Muḥammad 'Izzat Darwazah, 1305 H-1404 H/1887 M-1984 M: sijill ḥāfil bi-masīrat al ḥarakah al 'Arabīyah wa-al-qaḍīyah al Filasfīnīyah khilāla qarn min al zaman*. Bayrūt: Dār al Gharb al Islāmī. Vol 1, p.326
- ⁴⁶ Muslih, op. cit.
- ⁴⁷ Hut, op. cit. p.87.
- ⁴⁸ Hut, pp. 86-89; Porath, Yehoshua. 1974. *The emergence of the Palestinian-Arab national movement, 1918-1929*. London: Cass. pp.74-77.
- ⁴⁹ See for example al Aref's editorial in Surya al Janubiyyah (unsigned), "Nadhra ila al Ghad", Volume 1, no. 48, March 26, 1920 (6 Rajab, 1338).
- ⁵⁰ Darwazah, op. cit. 326-327 Darwazah was probably referring to Al Jam'yah Alarabbiyah al Filastiniyah (The Arab Palestinian Society) which was disseminating anti-Zionist position in Damascus. See, Potath, op.cit. p.88.
- ⁵¹ Hut, op. cit. p.118.
- ⁵² Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*, 2007, Boston, Beacon Press, pp.96-97
- ⁵³ Darwazah, *ibid*. p.326.
- ⁵⁴ Yanikdag, p.74.
- ⁵⁵ Quoted by Elias Sahhab, "Sati al Husari: the intellectual and the activist", in Naji Allush, *The Arab National Movement in 100 Years*, op.cit. p.409 Emphasis added.
- ⁵⁶ Here is the English translation of the letter:
I woke up early this morning. I walked around in the garden for a while. I picked up some flower and leaves.. I picked up some beans to cook for myself.. While I was milling around, you were always on my mind. It is your presence that makes this garden beautiful. Nothing has a taste without you. May God not deprive me of your presence, for it is you who makes my (our) life beautiful. When you left us last time I noticed that you had a little cold... I am thinking about it. Let me know about your health.
Your life's partner, who loves you with all her heart. Saema.
 I am very grateful to Sibel Sayk and Muna Guvenc for providing the translation from Ottoman Turkish.