

Journeys in Palestine During the British Colonial Period

Nicola Ziadeh

Nicola Ziadeh was a professor of history at the American University of Beirut. He was born in 1907 and passed away in 2006. He authored a number of books and countless articles on the history and culture of Bilad al-Sham and the rest of the Arab world. When the editors of Jerusalem Quarterly visited Ziadeh at his home in Beirut in 2004 we were informed that he had just signed a contract for a book that he was planning to finish by his hundredth birthday. Unfortunately, he passed away one year short of that date. That project never materialized; however, this was another indication of how active he remained as he was approaching the end of his century-long life.

The following are selections from the many autobiographical sketches Ziadeh wrote about his early years in Palestine. As a Palestinian who was born in Damascus, lived and died in Beirut, Ziadeh exemplified what it meant to be an authentic Levantine, though he made himself an authority on the North African Maghreb as well. He not only wrote about Arab voyagers, but was one himself, traveling widely across the entire Arab world, and beyond. Thus it seems appropriate to represent his memoirs with a piece about travel documents (a particularly Palestinian concern), another on the start of his legendary trek on foot across Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria, and a third on his earliest motorcar trips.

I. N.

Three Passports, Four Travel Permits

In 1916, when we left Damascus and returned to Nazareth after my father's death, we did not need any travel documents, since the *Villayet* (district) of Damascus (al-Sham)



Nicola Ziadeh with his wife Margarette and son Raid in London, May 1948. Source: Ziadeh family collection.

and the *Villayet* of Beirut (which included Nazareth) were both parts of the Ottoman state. But when in 1925 I planned to visit Beirut, Latakia, Aleppo, and Damascus I had to have a passport because I was crossing from a country under the British Mandate to two others under the French Mandate. I could not get a Palestinian passport because I did not possess an official birth certificate. I used to have one issued by the Sublime Ottoman State (*Devlet-i 'Aliyye-yi 'Osmâniyye*), but it was destroyed in 1921. Therefore, I was granted a *laissez-passer* to make that journey, but was required to surrender it to the passport department on my return to Palestine.

I wrote a letter to the Arab governor of Damascus at the time, Muayyad al-Azm, requesting a copy of my Ottoman birth certificate, but the reply was that the *Mashiriyah* building in Damascus, with which I was acquainted, and where all

official personal and other records were kept, had burnt down. The fire had consumed all its contents, he wrote, so regretfully he was unable to grant my request. Nor could I obtain a birth or baptismal certificate from the priest of the Greek Orthodox parish in Damascus, to which the *Qaradshi* neighborhood and its church belonged, as that necessitated going to Damascus.

At the time Emile Nassar was the Grisham company's representative in Lebanon, covering Palestine as well. Thanks to the concern the education department's director had in the matter Nassar had succeeded in selling life insurance policies to a number of teachers in Palestine's northern province. When he approached me trying to sell me a policy I told him that I was basically convinced of the need for one but was not prepared to go ahead with it just then, and would write him when the time was right.

I did so in 1932, and he came to Acre where I was teaching. I said I would not take out a life insurance policy until he obtained a birth certificate for me from Damascus. He said that he had an agent there who could work miracles. So I gave him the details and in about a month Emile Nassar reappeared bearing with him a birth certificate from the church and a contract for a life insurance policy. I took the one and signed the other, and was able to obtain a Palestinian passport which I continued to use, with the necessary renewals, until 1949. I still have my last Palestinian passport, issued in 1945.

With the end of the British Mandate era in Palestine that passport became worthless. But the Arab League had declared, upon the approval of all the seven

countries that were its members at the time, that the Palestinian passport would be recognized. It was inevitable, however, that some airport officials would not be aware of this agreement, and just as certain that the bearers of such passports would encounter difficulties.

This happened to me in 1949. Having taken up residence with my wife Margarete and son Raid in Lebanon after the American University of Beirut (AUB) offered me a position, I found myself with four or five months free to do something else. While in London I had been appointed assistant director at the education department of Cyrenaica (Barqa) [in Libya], which, along with Tripolitania, had been placed under British administration. But when I arrived at Cairo airport the official in charge would not acknowledge my passport. He made me wait for two hours until he finished processing all the other passengers on the plane then told me to follow him.

He took me to the head of security at the airport, a high-ranking officer. After giving him the official salute my detainer pointed to me saying that I was traveling to Libya with the proper documents but carried an invalid passport. When the officer saw my passport and papers he turned to me, apologized for my detention, and told his subordinate that my papers were in order and my passport officially recognized in Egypt, so he should grant me an entry visa. At this the man became most courteous, "Welcome sir, please sir, this way, sir."

When my service in Barqa ended I feared that if I used my Palestinian passport I might meet with the same treatment at the hands of another official at some other airport. So I obtained a laissez-passer from the government of Barqa, depositing my passport with them to be sent on to me through the British Consul in Beirut, whereupon I would surrender my laissez-passer.

I returned to Beirut via Malta and Damascus. No eyebrows were raised over the ordinary little booklet that bore my name, photo, and the signature of the director of immigration at Barqa.

Nevertheless, it was imperative to obtain a passport. In 1951, The American University in Beirut asked me to join a faculty delegation to Jordan, and I obtained a travel permit from the Jordanian embassy in Beirut. In Amman, I contacted the passport office to apply for a Jordanian passport, since all Palestinians who had moved to Jordan had been granted passports. I was told that the requirements had changed, and I needed to prove that I was resident in Jordan for three years by producing a rental lease and utility bills for that period. I was at a loss. I complained about my situation to a friend who was then the Minister of Education and returned to Beirut still worried about not having a passport.

Jordan's ambassador to Lebanon, Jamal Tuqan, was a friend from my years in Palestine, and I would visit him occasionally for a chat. I had not done so in a while so he called me at my office at the university to rebuke me for my disappearance. I went to see him the next day and as soon as we had greeted each other and sat down he said, "Nicola, I received a letter from the Minister of Foreign Affairs asking me to give you a Jordanian passport." I thought he was joking but he told me to come back the next day with my photograph and I would leave his office with a Jordanian passport

in my hand. And so it was. At the time I did not know how this had come about, but later I learnt that my friend the Minister of Education had declared at a meeting of the government that Nicola Ziadeh is prepared to come to Jordan to work any time we ask him. He further stated that I am doing Jordan great service as a professor at AUB, and had not applied for a Jordanian passport earlier because I was in London pursuing doctoral studies. So the minister proposed that the government recommend to His Majesty the King that he grant Nicola Ziadeh Jordanian citizenship. The ministers approved the proposal and King Hussein Bin Talal issued a royal decree to that effect.

Despite this I still desired a Lebanese passport. I consulted a lawyer who told me that we needed to lie a little about the place and date of birth of my wife, my son, and myself. I refused. Years later I returned to him stating that I was born in Damascus, my wife in Jerusalem (though of Lebanese origin), as was my son Raid, but my son Basim was born in Beirut. I instructed him not to lie about us, and do the job. He warned me that when they had first said they would get me a passport the total cost was 300 Lebanese pounds, but now I would have to pay 900 or even 1,000 pounds. I assured him that I would gladly pay the required amount.

One day in 1958, during the period when Camille Chamoun, then president of Lebanon, was facing opposition because of his desire to extend his tenure beyond the two terms allowed by the constitution, the telephone rang. It was the lawyer. "Come see us tomorrow morning. My clerk will accompany you to the central office where you'll collect your identity cards." When I arrived the next morning I found that the clerk had already brought the IDs. I gave him the amount he had paid in fees, thanked him and took my leave, IDs in hand. My family and I were now Lebanese. I then surrendered my final travel permit, one I had recently used to make a short trip.

On Foot in Northern Palestine

1

. . . I would like to describe an unusual journey made in 1925, although its age does not detract from its significance. The journey took over a month to complete, with more than seventeen days of walking for twelve hours a day on average, the remaining days devoted to learning about the region and its inhabitants.

In cities we stayed at hotels, though some were not worthy of the name, such as the one where we spent our first night in Latakia, while others were very good. But we would choose modest lodgings where they could be found. The two travelers were Darwish al-Miqdadi and I.

Darwish al-Miqdadi came from Tulkarm. He had graduated from the American University of Beirut in 1922, then became one of our teachers at the Men's Training College. But he was no ordinary instructor, content with merely giving lessons. The director of the college, Khalil Totah,² would talk to us about Arab nationalism, an ideology he believed in and promoted. But Darwish's Arab nationalism was of an

altogether different order. It enflamed his soul to a degree that he was constantly talking about it to students during their free time. When teaching European history, whether medieval or modern, he would raise issues relating to Arabs and Islam. For example when he taught the Reformation in Europe he would make a case for the need for religious reform in the Arab east, and discuss at length the problems related to the subject, speaking with total freedom and frankness.

Darwish joined the college as a teacher in 1922, and I left the school in 1924. His name was Darwish al-Hajj Ibrahim but in 1923 he introduced the practice of tracing the Arab ancestry of all the students there, influencing young and old to follow suit. He traced his own origins to al-Miqdadi, in an attempt to prove that he and all Palestine's inhabitants were indigenous Arabs and not newcomers to the land. Thus Darwish al-Hajj Ibrahim became Darwish al-Miqdadi. Mahmoud Suleiman became Mahmoud al-Aboudi, Nimr Habib became Nimr al-Ulaymi, Adib Audeh, was now Adib Audeh al-Amiri, and so on and so forth.

When friends who had changed their names broached the subject with me I would say that I was known as Nicola Ziadeh, and that was good enough for me.

During the spring term of my last year at the college, 1924, a group of students would meet with Darwish to plan a trip to Jabal al-Shaykh (Mount Hermon). Darwish loved walking and had the patience and temperament for it, as did I. About ten of us agreed to make the trek in the summer of 1924, but we never did.

Then I was appointed to a teaching post in Tarshiha, a village in the district of Acre in northern Palestine. I used most of my time there, when not teaching, to explore every corner of the region, managing even to visit a weekly market that used to be held in north Lebanon. It was my first visit to that country.

Towards the end of the 1924-25 school year Darwish went on a walking tour of northern Palestine and stopped to visit. He stayed at the house of the headmaster, Muhammad Beidas, who invited me to join them for breakfast. There was Darwish al-Miqdadi, sitting across the table from me, even though the school year was not over yet, which I found strange. "It seems you are cut off from the rest of the world out here," he explained. "Lord Balfour, he of the declaration that was so calamitous to us in Palestine, came to attend the inauguration of Hebrew University. All hell broke loose. There were all kinds of troubles, demonstrations, school closures, including the Men's Training College. The director at the Ministry of Education thought the head of the college unfit to maintain school discipline and transferred him to a higher position in the central administration, but he refused it and resigned." Ahmad Sameh al-Khalidi was appointed deputy director then made director the following year.³

The Director of Education, Humphrey Bowman, disliked Khalil Totah. Bowman was essentially a military administrator, with little knowledge of educational matters other than what he had managed to pick up in various posts. He saw no value in the American style of education and pedagogy, and took the opportunity of the disturbances to get rid of Totah.

Darwish al-Miqdadi, then out of work, was on a trip to the northern parts of Palestine. The Boy Scout troops in north Palestine were holding a jamboree in the village of Rama

in the district of Acre. Rama was no ordinary village. It was relatively large and many of its inhabitants were educated. This was because the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, a Russian institution, had in the second half of the nineteenth century established two schools in the village, one for boys and another for girls. A number of pupils at these schools had excelled in their studies so they were sent to the Russian “seminarium” for teacher training in Nazareth to complete their secondary education. In addition the village had a government school for boys and another for girls.

Our breakfast took place on Friday morning, and Darwish asked that I be excused from teaching on Saturday (government schools closed for the weekend on Fridays and Sundays) so I could go with him to Rama and return to work on Monday.

We agreed to set off [on our longer, unusual journey] from Safad in August of 1925.

Having settled that we parted and each began to gather the necessary official documents. I did not have a passport so Darwish helped me secure an identity card through friends of his in the department of Immigration and Travel. Permits to visit Lebanon and Syria we obtained from the French embassy in Beirut.

On the appointed day I waited for Darwish in Nazareth, and we made the journey to Safad, the starting point of our walking tour.

In the afternoon of that day in early August we left Safad for the region of Huleh. Lake Huleh still existed back then. It was later drained [by Israel] and exploited as extremely fertile agricultural land.⁴ Heading to Huleh meant making a very sharp descent. Safad is located one thousand meters above sea level, the highest town in Palestine, while Lake Huleh lies two hundred meters below sea level.

We reached Huleh in the evening, and were hosted by its Bedouin residents. They entertained us well, expressing astonishment at our long journey on foot.

We spent a delightful evening with them. We enquired whether the government had opened a school for them, as they are sedentary rather than nomadic Bedouin. One of the women replied that they had a school, but the sheikh, the head of the tribe, did not know how to teach.

The morning after we would begin our long walk.

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Next day, after a pleasant evening and some much-needed sleep, we took breakfast, then accepting provisions to see us through the day we took leave of our hosts, the Bedouins of Huleh, to head north. Soon we entered Lebanese territory, where the springs that feed the tributaries of the River Jordan are located. This indicated that we were climbing to higher ground. We walked the whole day, passing a number of people who were plowing the land while others were reaping their harvest, for this was summer. Eventually we reached inland Baniyas (as distinct from the coastal town of that name) and knew for certain that we were in Syria. Inland Baniyas, better known as al-Subaiba, lies alongside a formidable castle built at the time of the Crusades as part of a line of defense running both north and south from that point. There is a small village not far from the castle.

After a brief rest in al-Subaiba, during which we consumed the last of the provisions given to us by the good Bedouins, we resumed our walk towards Jabbat al-Khashab on the Syrian side of Jabal al-Shaykh.

The chief dignitary of Jabbata gave us a warm welcome, and there was a great deal of conversation after dinner.

The talk was not the usual kind of banter with which villagers amuse themselves during their evening gatherings, and which I had experienced during the year I spent as teacher in Tarshiha, a village in the district of Acre close to the border with Lebanon. There the talk would consist of discussing bits of news some might have picked up. In 1924-1925 (shortly afterwards newspapers became the chief vehicle of news) a newspaper would reach us from time to time; but those who had gone on shopping expeditions would bring local news of Acre. Tarshiha business owners would visit the market town of Bint Jbeil in south Lebanon, and most of the news they brought back was concerned with market matters.

I mention these details in order to indicate how different the kind of conversation we heard at Jabbat al-Khashab was from the norm. Sultan Pasha al-Atrash was leading a rebellion against France in the southern part of Syria known then as Jabal al-Druze, and the iron was very hot indeed.⁵ French forces had attacked the area with great violence, setting fire to crops, burning livestock, and destroying many houses, all of which impelled the Druze of Syria primarily with others of their compatriots to join the resistance. Years later a colleague at the American University of Beirut, Dr Jubrail Jabbour, a professor of Arabic language and literature, told me that he had been teaching in Homs at the time, and was anonymously supplying news reports to the papers.

So that evening the topic of conversation was the rebellion: news of the fighting and the prolonged, unrestrained and widespread brutality of French actions.

Observing the local etiquette it was not until well into the evening that our host ventured to ask who we were, what we were doing in these parts, and why we were traveling on foot, all the while begging our forgiveness for the questions and protesting that he only wished to become better acquainted with us. We obliged by revealing our names, occupations, Palestinian identity, and our plans of crossing Lebanon and Syria on foot.

On hearing this he trembled with pity for us, imploring us to give up the project and thereby save our lives. Nevertheless he asked us if we wanted anything. We said that we were heading for Mount Hermon and were in need of a mule or donkey to carry our water and provisions; and because we intended to spend the night on the mountain we also needed heavy blankets.

He assured us that we would get all we asked for and immediately summoned an experienced mountaineer. We introduced ourselves to him and arrived at an agreement. Next morning we looked like a military expedition in civilian clothing. We set out, our host coming a short distance with us, trying to persuade us to return. When he realized his attempts were made in vain he stood amid a group of peasants tilling the earth, calling upon them to bear witness that he had proffered sound advice but we would not take it, and may God protect us. He bade us farewell, and we proceeded with, as the

saying goes, God's blessings.

The physical environment slowly changed. Gradually, cultivable land began to dry up, and the green grasses that adorned it gave way to thorny plants. We would take breaks and eat a little, but found no one to talk to except the guide, who told us stories of individuals and groups he had escorted up the mountain. But they all had been foreigners: we were the first Arabs he had led.

After about ten hours of walking we reached the summit of Jabal al-Shaykh. A little sunlight remained so we walked around a little. Among the things we saw were the remains of a monument erected to commemorate King Faysal's visit to the mountain but destroyed by the French when they occupied the region.

Darwish felt a little tired, not so much from the hike but rather as a result of a cold he was starting. So we contented ourselves with watching the sun begin to set over the sea to the west, then began our descent.

The guide knew the paths and trails very well so we felt safe. Around nine o'clock we reached Sha'ba and put up at the house of the village head. The first thing he did was to give us water to wash and soothe our weary, aching feet. Then a tasty dinner was served and the three of us fed hungrily. While we ate our host made casual conversation. Eventually the talk turned to our hike. We told him as much as he could follow about the area we had traversed on foot, giving details of what we had encountered along the way, particularly of the revolutionary resistance at Jabbata. He said the uprising had not spread to Sha'ba but some Druze young men had joined the rebels.

After a long, sociable evening we were given comfortable beds and I reckon we slept soundly and deeply.

After breakfast the next morning we bade our host farewell and left Sha'ba, our first stop in Lebanon, in the direction of Rashayya.

[In the remaining sections, omitted here, Ziadeh describes the journey through Lebanon and into Syria.]

The Motorcar and I World War I - 1930

I saw my very first motorcar in Damascus. It was speeding down the street, emitting a sound more like a whistle than a horn.

I barely had a glimpse of the vehicle, but could see the Ottoman flag flying from its rear. It was said at the time that the car belonged to Jamal Pasha, who had recently arrived in town as governor-general of Bilad al-Sham and commander of the Fourth Legion.

After leaving Damascus following my father's death I moved back and forth between Nazareth, Tulkarm, and Jenin. The carriage road linking Jerusalem with Tiberias circled the outskirts of Nazareth: the German command based there might have had an automobile or more in the area, but I never saw a single one.

At Tulkarm, where I was a schoolboy, we were taken one day to greet Jamal Pasha. He passed between the ranks of the greeters on foot. His automobile must have been parked elsewhere, for I never saw it.

The Germans maintained an air-force unit at Jenin, the result of Turkey siding with Germany in the First World War. There were motorcars on the base. We would see them, and hear the peasants protest that the devil himself powered these vehicles, even though each car had a driver. I recall that the driver of one of these German military vehicles was called Yusuf. He was a man of great stature in the community by virtue of his association with the German officers. I remember that when Yusuf sat in a café people would hover around him hoping to learn the secrets they were certain the German officers shared with him.

The First World War ended and the British armed forces entered Palestine, bringing with them a relatively large number of cars. And so Yusuf, who incidentally was not from our town, passed from driving for a German officer to chauffeuring his British army counterpart.

One day Yusuf was driving on some kind of mission with no passengers in his car. Four or five of us lads, twelve to thirteen years old, were romping about in the region of Ayn Nabta. Suddenly Yusuf stops the car and beckons us to hop in for a short ride, thinking we would surely enjoy it. We got in and rode for about two kilometers, back and forth. That was in 1920, the first time I ever rode a car, and it was like a dream.

When we wanted to travel from Jenin to Nazareth we would first go to 'Afoulah by train; then, if we were lucky, a carriage, cart, or donkey might be found to carry us to Nazareth. Otherwise I would walk the distance from 'Afoulah to Nazareth if I found someone else willing to go along. One time we found a car whose owner was prepared to carry passengers from Jenin directly to Nazareth. Three others and I climbed in. Like all other cars that had been brought to the region it was a Ford. Its top was covered but it was open on the sides. The driver however had with him a transparent waterproof sheet that could be fastened with buttons to the roof and the sides to keep out the rain.

We got into the car around noon, with only twenty-five kilometers to go until we reach Nazareth. But we did not arrive until around six in the evening, the reason being that we suffered a puncture, or what is now called a flat tire. There was no way we could resume our journey until the rubber inner tube had been patched. Every time this happened the driver would have to stop the car, remove the damaged wheel, look for the tear by immersing the tube in water if it was available, otherwise he would resort to wetting the tip of his finger with saliva [and feel for the escaping air in this fashion]. This took a lot of time. Once the hole was found the place would be scraped with sandpaper, and a special rubber patch glued over it. The repaired tube would be inflated with a small hand-pump until it was full of air, then the tube would be reinserted into the outer tire, and the journey resumed.

In our case it seemed that the vehicle had been in use longer than it should, and we had five punctures. We thus rolled into Nazareth with the sun about to set. Our driver did not bother to stop to repair the sixth puncture. We were at the outskirts of the town

and the garage was nearby, so he drove on with the torn tire.

I do not believe I used a car after that until September of 1921. I was about to travel from Jenin to Jerusalem to enroll at the Men's Training College. By then people had grown used to automobiles and the possibility of punctures, but the car I rode in 1921 crossed the 110 kilometers between Jenin and Jerusalem in about three and a half hours, with no punctures whatever.

The first shipment of automobiles to reach our country consisted of American Ford cars. They had been intended for the Allied forces in Europe, but with Germany's surrender in 1918 the cars were left in storage until they were dispatched to various international markets, ours among them.

Travelers grew familiar with automobiles during the 1920s, especially those heading for parts of the country with no railroad service. But the use of automobiles remained dependent on road construction, and governments were busy building roads to facilitate transportation by car.

As for saloon cars, it took a while longer for them to reach us. I remember riding in one in 1929 or 1930, on the way back to Nazareth from Jerusalem, preparatory to returning to Acre. But the fare to ride in those cars was about five times higher than for using ordinary cars.

Then things changed. Very, very quickly.

Jerusalem Quarterly thanks Nicola Ziadeh's sons, Raid and Basim, for granting their kind permission to translate and publish the above selections. The first and third items appeared in Arabic in Al Hayat newspaper on September 22, 2004, and January 5, 2005, respectively. The second selection has never appeared in print. The Arabic originals are available online at: <http://www.nicolaziadeh.com/manshurewgayro.asp>

Translated from the Arabic by Alex Baramki.

Editor's notes

- 1 The original title for this section is "An Unusual Journey: On foot from Northern Palestine to the Mountains of Latakia."
- 2 Khalil Totah (1886-1955) was a Palestinian educator from Ramallah. He served in various positions during the Mandate period, including principal of the Friends' Quaker school in Ramallah and the Arab College in Jerusalem.
- 3 Ahmad Sameh al-Khalidi was a notable educator in Palestine. He was born in 1896 and studied at the AUB in Beirut. He served in the British Mandate government's educational department; served as principal of the "Teachers College" which he renamed
- 4 "The Arab College" in Jerusalem; and was appointed Deputy-Director of Education in 1941.
- 4 Israel drained al-Hula lake, located north of Lake Tiberias—known also as the Sea of Galilee—in the period from 1951 to 1958 turning it into fertile agricultural land. The Jewish National Fund carried out the draining operation. The drying up caused the extinction of the unique flora and fauna, including a few kinds of fish.
- 5 Sultan al-Atrash, (1891–1982) was a prominent Arab Druze leader, Syrian nationalist and Commander General of the Syrian Revolution (1925–1927).