

Karimeh Abbud

Entrepreneurship and Early Training

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Abstract

Palestinian photographer Karimeh Abbud has become an icon of female entrepreneurship in recent years. Yet, internet searches will yield distorted information that neglect her real story. Raheb sheds new light on Abbud's family history, her upbringing, and career and how she had to negotiate her role at the intersection of colonialism, Orientalism, nationalism, Zionism, feminism, and Protestantism. Abbud's biography is atypical of most Palestinian women of her era. Her story provides insight into the life of the urban, educated, middle-class Palestinian Christian community in British Mandate Palestine. Abbud has been recognized as a pioneer in photography and the first female photographer in the entire Middle East. Through her photographs, she made an important national contribution to documenting Palestinian life prior to the Nakba. The author highlights Karimeh's role as a female entrepreneur who dared to cross traditional gender lines to enter and excel in a male-dominated profession that became an important and unique part of her life and work.

Keywords

Karimeh Abbud; female photographer; Palestinian photography; Bethlehem; Nazareth; Lutheranism; Protestantism; female entrepreneurship; studio portraits.

It was by chance when I first heard the name Karimeh Abbud, Palestine's first professional female photographer, in

April 2009.¹ It spurred me to embark on a discovery mission, collecting material from archives of the Jerusalem Mission Society in Berlin, as well as from the archives of the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem and, in 2011, I was able to interview Karimeh's niece. I had found little material about Karimeh Abbud in Western mission archives, locating, for example, only one small reference in a report written in 1936 by the German Lutheran pastor at Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem.² This is typical of many mission histories written largely from a Western perspective that treat indigenous people as objects without agency. Ellen Fleischmann, in her work on the Palestinian women's movement during the British Mandate era, remarked: "Palestinian women are almost completely absent from the writing on this crucial period of Palestinian history."³ With increased interest in the biographies of native Arab Christians in general (see the work of Womack⁴), and particularly of Arab women, this essay seeks to fill an important gap in the field.

In Palestine and the Arab world, Karimeh Abbud has emerged in the last decades as an iconic female entrepreneur. Three documentary films have been made about her, the latest for *Al-Jazeera*.⁵ In 2017, Google featured her for their homepage doodle on her birthday, November 13, and renowned Arab novelist Ibrahim Nasrallah published a biographical novel in 2019 entitled *The Biography of an Eye*.⁶

In this contribution toward understanding her life and work, I will focus on examining Abbud's career as a pioneering female entrepreneur, exploring as well her upbringing and family background in the Protestant church.

In a life entwined in Palestine's history, Karimeh Abbud was born an Ottoman citizen and lived through the last two decades of Ottoman rule over Greater Syria at the height of European penetration. She was a young adult when the Ottoman Empire was dissolved and Greater Syria was divided into smaller nation states ruled by two European empires: France and Britain. Karimeh saw how British promises to the Arabs were not kept and how instead Palestine was put under a British Mandate with the aim of establishing a Jewish homeland. In her adult life, Karimeh witnessed how the British facilitated Jewish immigration into Palestine and gave Jews preferential treatment over and against the Arab population. The last years of Karimeh's life were shaped by the great Arab revolt of 1936–1939. This turbulent history was the context that shaped Karimeh's life and career.

Family Background

The story of the Abbud family is closely connected with the history of the Protestant mission in the Middle East. The Abbud family originated from the village of al-Khiyam in upper Galilee, located in today's southern Lebanon. That region (Hasbaya-Marj'ayun) came under the influence of the American Protestant mission at an early stage. On 26 February 1844, several Greek Orthodox families from the town of Hasbaya approached the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in Beirut and expressed the wish to convert to the Protestant faith.⁷ By 1851 a local Protestant church was established in Hasbaya by the American Board. It must have

been in this context that in 1850 a local Protestant convert, Ya‘qub al-Hakim from the small town of Ibl al-Saqi, was spreading Protestant beliefs and came into contact with Dahir Abbud al-Asqar from al-Khiyam. Ya‘qub was able to convert Dahir to the Protestant faith and Dahir convinced his brother Da‘ibis. Da‘ibis, born in al-Khiyam in 1823, was about twenty-seven years old when he converted. Twenty years later in late 1870, Da‘ibis Abbud died leaving behind a widow and eight orphaned children.⁸ The wife of Da‘ibis decided to send her two youngest boys, Sa‘id (Karimeh’s father) and his brother Sulayman to the Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem, known as the Schneller school.⁹

In 1890 Sa‘id left the Syrian Orphanage and went to Bethlehem, where he started teaching at the Bethlehem school of the English women’s mission.¹⁰ Sa‘id met his future wife Barbara Yusif Badr¹¹ there and they married on 27 August 1890. In 1905, Sa‘id Abbud was called to become assistant pastor to the German mission at the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, where he served until his retirement in 1947.

Early Years

Karimeh was born in Bethlehem on 13 November 1893, half a century after the opening up of Ottoman Palestine to European consulates and Christian missions. Karimeh was baptized at the Christmas Lutheran Church, the first Protestant congregation established by the German Jerusalem Mission Society (*Jerusalemsverein*) in 1860. The baptism was conducted by the German missionary Emanuel Mueller on 1 April 1894. At this time, Karimeh’s parents were teaching at the English school in the town, which brought the Abbuds into contact with the European mission.¹² Interestingly, for the baptism of Karimeh, the family chose two English ladies, most probably teaching colleagues at the English school, to be the godmothers: Miss Double and Mrs. Corry Fennell.

The Abbuds were foreigners in Bethlehem and had no family connections there. The only family for them must have been at the English school where they were teaching. This was a characteristic of many of the Protestant converts: their connection to their extended family had been severed and it was felt a privilege to have a European missionary as a godfather or godmother. For the European missionaries, such an occasion was celebrated as proof of the success of their mission activities.



Figure 1. Karimeh Abbud. Courtesy of the author.

Karimeh was born into a family in which both parents were educated. This was not uncommon among many of the Protestant converts of that era, but was in no way representative of the larger Palestinian society, which was predominantly rural. Karimeh attended the English women's mission school in Bethlehem where her mother was still teaching. Catholic and Protestant missions had begun opening schools for girls and women as early as the mid-nineteenth century. Karimeh now represented the second generation of Protestants and these children developed a more critical attitude to the mission agencies than their parents, who had felt greatly in debt to the missionaries and often adopted their Orientalist perceptions. At school, Karimeh encountered a common attitude in which Palestine and Arabs were portrayed as backward and inferior in race and character to the British. In the context of this colonial encounter of the early nineteenth century,¹³ Karimeh felt the need to resist and respond. When one of her English teachers kept repeating that, "Arabs are primitive, they eat with their hands and are not capable of innovation," Karimeh went to the library and brought back an illustration of how English tribes had lived in earlier centuries. She told the teachers, "See how your ancestors were living! So stop talking about the Arabs in such a way."¹⁴ This Orientalist colonial attitude of Europeans, and in particularly British missionaries, triggered a proto-national sentiment in Karimeh's mind that developed further under the British Mandate.

At school, sewing and needlework were important subjects. Domestic work was viewed in girls' mission schools as the ultimate fulfillment for female life and vocation. Karimeh mastered this domestic handicraft. One day, her English teacher asked her to shorten one of the teacher's dresses. Karimeh refused. The teacher asked why when she was so good at it. Karimeh answered: "If I do it now, you will get used to asking me to do it for you. I am not your maid."¹⁵ Such incidents illustrate the colonial encounters facing a female Palestinian pupil, and it also shows the rebellious spirit and courage of this particular pupil. One could attribute this rebellious spirit as an early expression of nationalism, but there might have been another reason. In these years, Karimeh came into contact with the German mission where her father was working. At a time when European missions were competing for the souls and minds of the people in Palestine, the Abbud family felt closer to the German mission than to the English mission. In the early twentieth century, Germany was at the height of its imperial power, and this was manifested in Palestine through massive church construction projects, especially in the Bethlehem-Jerusalem area.¹⁶

Karimeh's Upbringing: Resisting the Confines of Gender

As well as resisting the role of servant assigned to the colonized by colonial minds, Karimeh also resisted the gender role reserved for women. Her behavior was related to her upbringing as a pastor's child, and as the second eldest daughter. Her first brother, born two years after her, died when he was four. This must have given Karimeh and her older sister Katarina the sense that boys were more fragile, something that proved to be true in their lives. One of their brothers died when he was twenty-four, while the

youngest brother, Mansur, fell from a bell tower when he was young, suffered a concussion, and spent his life afterward in a mental hospital. It was the daughters of the Abbud family who proved to be resilient. They were all very well-educated, fluent in three languages: Arabic, English, and German, and all played the piano; Lydia, the youngest sister, also played the guitar. The three sisters were economically independent and worked as teachers, mainly in mission schools: Katarina worked in the Protestant school run by the Germans in Bethlehem, while Karimeh worked in the Syrian Orphanage run by Schneller in Jerusalem.

Barbara Abbud, Karimeh's mother, was more conservative and stricter than her more liberal husband, Pastor Sa'id, in dealing with her daughters, who called her "the Holy Spirit."¹⁷ Karimeh and her sister were liberal and feminist in their thinking and way of life by the standards of the time. The mid-1920s was an era of social and cultural change: the latest Western fashions were imported to Palestine and long Victorian hair styles were abandoned for short hair. Lydia, decided one day to cut her hair short, one of the first women in Bethlehem to adopt the latest European hair style.¹⁸ Her mother shouted angrily that it was only fit for a "prostitute." The conflict between Lydia and her mother expresses the tension between two generations of Palestinian women. Karimeh and her sisters were modern "Protestant girls" who opposed a life of motherhood, and were ready to cross the boundaries set by their society. Unsurprisingly, Katarina and Karimeh were among the first women in Palestine to get a driving license, buy a car, and drive throughout Palestine. Their free and liberal spirit, education, and the fact that they put their career first, may explain why the three sisters remained unmarried or married very late in life. Katarina did not marry at all. Karimeh married when she was thirty-seven, and Lydia when she was thirty-three. This was a common practice among educated women of that era.¹⁹ Even after Karimeh married a widowed distant relative, she was the one who supported the family financially.

Abbud's biography offers a unique insight into the life of a middle-class, educated Christian family in British Mandate Palestine. Karimeh describes the culture in a pastor's household, especially in relation to gender and the role of women, and indirectly sheds light on an era when the concept of gender roles was shifting radically. By the mid-1920s the issue of women was no longer confined to closed circles but was discussed openly in large sections of major Palestinian newspapers.²⁰



Figure 2. From left to right: Barbara, Karimeh's mother with her son Mansour (baby); Katarina; Najib; Karimeh; Karim; and Rev. Sa'id Abbud. Courtesy of the author.

Karimeh's Entrepreneurial Career

Karimeh started work as a teacher at the Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem, one of a small number of Arab women employed in the labor force, mainly as teachers, clerics or junior civil servants.²¹ By early 1920, she apparently decided to change careers and took photography lessons with an unidentified professional photographer in Palestine. Photography was first developed in Paris in 1839 and arrived in Jerusalem the same year, half a century before Karimeh's birth. Hundreds of European photographers flocked to the Holy Land in the second half of the nineteenth century to take photos of biblical sites to sell in Europe or to pilgrims. Some of the photographers were missionaries working in Jerusalem, Jewish immigrants, or foreign residents like the German Templers. Local photographers emerged as early as the late 1850s in the Armenian Patriarchate in Jerusalem. The first local photography studio was opened by Garabed Kerkorian in 1885, eight years before Karimeh's birth. By the turn of the century, several local Arab photographers were active in the Jerusalem-Bethlehem area; the best known was Khalil Raad.²² At the small Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem where Karimeh's father was the pastor, there were two accomplished photographers, Ibrahim Bawarshi and Tawfiq Basil,²³ the latter being the son of the Protestant mukhtar and one of the first converts from the Orthodox faith to Protestantism. Karimeh grew up surrounded by male photographers.

In the early 1920s, when Karimeh decided to make photography her career there were no female photographers among the Europeans residing in Palestine or among the locals. Although several female photographers emerged in Europe as early as the 1840s, in Palestine and the larger Middle East region, photography was an exclusively male profession. Karimeh's decision to cross gender barriers and enter into an exclusively male-dominated profession fits well with her liberal upbringing and her Protestant identity.

Karimeh was more than a photographer: she was an entrepreneur. She used her family and her Protestant network to open studios at several locations in Palestine. She took photographs in Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth, and Haifa at a time when transportation was not easy, few roads were paved, and a journey from Bethlehem-Jerusalem to the Nazareth-Haifa region would have taken half a day. Nevertheless, Karimeh would drive herself to her far-flung studios. (I am not aware of any male photographer who demonstrated such ambition.)

Karimeh was a business-oriented woman. As early as 1924 she was advertising in one of the leading Palestinian newspapers *al-Karmil*.²⁴ These advertisements offer an insight into how she positioned herself in the industry as a local (*wataniyya*) female photographer. Her choice of the word *wataniyya* was not by chance. *Al-Karmil* was a national Palestinian newspaper whose founder, Najib Nassar, was among the first to realize the danger of Zionist settlement in Palestine and its impact on the future of Palestinians. Since this newspaper was mainly distributed in the north of Palestine, Karimeh advertised her studio in Haifa. Although Karimeh had relatives in Nazareth, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem, she did not have relatives in Haifa, so the

choice of that city must have been part of her deliberate business plan. Haifa was developing rapidly at that time due to British investment in the port and had many well-to-do middle and upper-class Palestinians who would likely be interested to have their picture taken. In this advertisement, Karimeh identified herself as the only female photographer in Palestine. Her advertisement added that she had learned this profession at the hands of one of the most famous photographers, and that she specialized in portraits of women and families. This was the unique niche that Karimeh sought to fill, a competitive edge that she sought to exploit. She was aware that women in many conservative families might not feel comfortable going to a studio, so she offered to take photographs in their homes, possibly because Karimeh had her own car. She soon became famous for her sensitive and unique portraits. Her advertisement stated that she was available every day except Sundays. Christian Protestant values were an important element in her identity, but perhaps Karimeh also injected time-management skills crucial for an entrepreneurial spirit.



Figure 3. Rev. Sa'id Abbud. Courtesy of the author.

Karimeh's National Role

The adjective *wataniyya* in Karimeh's advertisement, understood here as local or native, also has a political connotation since *wataniyya* can also be translated as "national." In the 1920s, Palestinian Christian and Muslim women had started to organize themselves politically, to send letters to British administrators, and to protest against the Balfour Declaration and Jewish settlement in Palestine.²⁵ The Western Wall disturbances and the execution of three Palestinian men by the British authorities in 1929 pushed politically engaged women to organize themselves as a national organization with local chapters. Thus, it was ultimately the national cause that united the women's movement in Palestine and that led to the creation of the Arab Women's Association, and the first Arab Women's National Congress that same year.²⁶ Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Palestinian Arab women, both Christians and Muslims, actively participated in political demonstrations.

We do not have any proof of Karimeh's direct involvement in this movement but it was most probable that a woman of her status, education, and mobility was aware and involved in some way. We know that her father, Sa'id Abbud, was one of the first Christian religious leaders in Palestine to become politically active, beginning in 1936 with so-called "Protestant evenings" that discussed topics like Jesus and the fatherland, Christianity and nationalism, and Zionism and biblical prophecies.²⁷ These Protestant evenings were triggered by the great revolt of that year and were geared to address Christian Zionist and Jewish Zionist claims to Palestine based on scripture, while encouraging Christians to become engaged in the national struggle of their people. As a sign of his support for the revolt, the pastor began to wear a kufiya, which had become a symbol of Palestinian identity.

Karimeh's political activity took place on different terrain when her photos became a political battleground. The intensification of the political conflict with Zionism in the 1920s and 1930s affected every aspect of life in Mandate Palestine, including photography. The Jewish Zionist movement was employing photographers to show Palestine as a barren place, as a "land without a people" ready for the "people without a land." Photography became a propaganda tool to demonstrate how Jewish immigrants were making the deserted land bloom and bringing progress, civilization, and modernity to this ancient land.

Karimeh was developing two kinds of photographs: images of religious and historical sites and of contemporary Palestinian cities. These photos were documentary proof that the land was not barren or deserted. In addition, Karimeh was taking pictures of real Palestinian families, mainly middle-class, educated, largely well-to-do and well-dressed. These pictures gave the Palestinian people a face that refuted Zionist propaganda. Abbud's pictures were important on another front: her photographs were not sold to tourists or for the international market but they were made expressly for local people. Her images of Palestinian families in their actual environment rebutted the Orientalist narrative that depicted Palestinians, particularly women, according to the European imagination or biblical imagery. In that sense, Karimeh's pictures are an important national contribution to the documentation of a thriving middle-class Palestinian life prior to the Nakba.

Immediately after her marriage in 1930, Karimeh and her Lebanese husband left to Brazil, where a large, thriving Lebanese diaspora existed, and where her only son, Samir, was born. They did not stay there long before returning home, another indication of Karimeh's attachment to Palestine and her people. Karimeh died young at the age of 47. In 1947 her father and sister Lydia left to Lebanon where their extended family had originated. After the 1948 Nakba, Lydia dedicated her life to assisting Palestinian refugees in Beirut and volunteered as a music teacher. Although Lydia became a Lebanese citizen, she continued to identify as a Palestinian.

Many of Karimeh's pictures were captured by Zionist militias during the Nakba. Several albums of Karimeh's photographs (those depicting landscapes, and religious and historical sites) became commercial collections in Israeli hands, a small part of the confiscated cultural heritage of Palestine.

Conclusion

Karimeh lived in an era of immense socio-cultural transformations and political upheaval. During her life, Karimeh had to negotiate her role at the intersection of colonialism, Orientalism, nationalism, Zionism, feminism, and Protestantism. Abbud's biography is unique and atypical of most Palestinian women of her era. Her story provides an in-depth insight into the life of an urban, educated, middle-class Palestinian Protestant Christian community in British Mandate Palestine. Karimeh has been recognized as a pioneer and as the first female photographer in the entire Middle East. Through her photographs, she made an important national contribution to documenting Palestinian life prior to the Nakba. Her role as a female entrepreneur who dared to cross traditional gender lines and enter a profession that was exclusively male-dominated remains an important and unique aspect of her life and work. She was able to identify a niche where she as a female photographer had a competitive edge over her male colleagues. She excelled in her profession as evidenced by the hundreds of photographs that she left us.

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Endnotes

- 1 Issam Nassar, *Laqatat Mughayira: al-Taswir al-Mahali al-Mubakir fi Filistin 1850–1948* [Different Snapshots: Early Local Photography in Palestine, 1850–1948] (Beirut: Qattan Foundation, 2005), 64. See also Issam Nassar, "Early Local Photography in Palestine: The Legacy of Karimeh Abbud," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 46 (Summer 2011), online at www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/78422 (accessed 7 October 2021).
- 2 Gerhard Jentzsch, Bericht I 1936, Evangelisches Zentralarchiv in Berlin, B34.
- 3 Ellen Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its "New" Women: The Palestinian Women's Movement, 1920–1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3.
- 4 See, for example, Deanna Ferree Womack, *Protestants, Gender, and the Arab Renaissance in Late Ottoman Syria* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020).
- 5 Issam Ballan, *Karimeh Abbud: The First Palestinian Female Photographer* (Nazareth: Ilam, 2016), online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfyIJmh-jVo (accessed 7 October 2021); and Mahasen Nasser-Eldin, *Restored Pictures* (Bethlehem: Diyar, 2012) online at vimeo.com/64880815 (accessed 7 October 2021).
- 6 Ibrahim Nasrallah, *Sirat 'Ayn* [Biography of an Eye] (Beirut: Addar al-'Arabiyya lil-Ulum, 2019).
- 7 Mitri Raheb, *Das reformatorische Erbe unter den Palästinensern. Zur Entstehung der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche in Jordanien, Bd 11*, Reihe: Die Lutherische Kirche. Geschichte und ... edition (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gerd Mohn, 1990), 39.
- 8 Salim Abbud, *Dhikr al-Siddiq li al-Baraka* (Beirut: al-Matba'a al-Adabiyya, 1910), 50–51.
- 9 For more on Schneller and the Syrian Orphanage, see Raheb, *Das reformatorische Erbe*, 62–77.

- 10 The Society for Promoting Female Education in the East was an interdenominational Protestant organization founded in 1834 in London by David Abeel (1804–1846), a minister of the American Reformed Dutch Church. The Society ran several orphanages and schools in Palestine in Nazareth, Bethlehem, Shafa ‘Amr, and Jaffa. These schools were absorbed in 1899 by the Church Missionary Society.
- 11 The Badr family was one of the first Protestant families in Lebanon.
- 12 Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* (1991): 33–40.
- 13 For more on British colonial encounters in Palestine, see: Nancy L. Stockdale, *Colonial Encounters among English and Palestinian Women, 1800–1948* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).
- 14 Najla al-Ashqar, interviewed by author in Beirut, 29 November 2011.
- 15 Najla al-Ashqar, interview.
- 16 The Christmas Lutheran Church, with the highest steeple in the Bethlehem region, was inaugurated in 1893. The Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem’s Old City, with the highest steeple there, was inaugurated in 1898 together with the so-called Armenian Orphanage in Bethlehem, both dedicated by the German Emperor, Wilhelm II. Two major projects in Jerusalem were under construction: the Augusta Victoria Church and sanatorium, and the Dormition Abbey, both finished in 1910. In this period, the Syrian Orphanage was expanding at an unprecedented pace with new land acquired in Nazareth and Bir Salam next to Ramla.
- 17 Najla al-Ashqar, interview.
- 18 Najla al-Ashqar, interview.
- 19 Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its “New” Women*, 46.
- 20 Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its “New” Women*, 63–94.
- 21 Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its “New” Women*, 53.
- 22 Issam Nassar, “The Emergence of Photography as a Locally Practiced Craft in Jerusalem” in *Jerusalem Interrupted: Modernity and Colonial Transformation 1917–Present*, ed. Lena Jayyusi, (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2013), 3–19.
- 23 Mitri Raheb, Ahmad Mrowat, and Issam Nassar, *Karimeh Abbud: Ra’idat al-Taswir al-Nisawi fi Filistin 1893–1940* [Karima Abbud: Pioneer of Feminist Photography in Palestine 1893–1940] (Bethlehem: Diyar, 2011), 46–49.
- 24 Raheb, Mrowat, and Nassar, *Karimeh Abbud*, 44–45.
- 25 Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its “New” Women*, 108.
- 26 Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its “New” Women*, 115.
- 27 Raheb, *Das reformatorische Erbe*, 179.