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## THE PALESTINE ARAB REFUGEES IN ARABIC POETRY AND ART

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“THE modern Jews who have re-created Israel may please themselves with the fancy that they are resuming a lost inheritance. In fact they can hardly be surprised if the Arabs of Palestine, still poised upon the historic hills of Judaea, look down upon these sea-borne invaders of the coastal plain as the ancient Hebrews looked down, in their day, upon the encroaching settlers from the West, the Philistines.”

Neither Cairo nor Damascus is the origin of these words. They were in fact written in Oxford, by the Regius Professor of Modern History, Hugh Trevor-Roper.\* His succinct appraisal of the situation in Palestine today raises questions at once political and military, moral and emotional. This study seeks to suggest that future politics, and possibly military operations, may well derive their compelling force from human emotions that often defy analysis. The Palestine Arab—having so far failed to assert his right to national integrity and independence in his own homeland through political and military means, and having moreover despaired of the efficacy of international moral succour, has since 1948 been rebuilding emotional strength with the declared object of regaining the lost homeland.

It is time that a close study of these emotional forces is attempted. A great and increasing mass of literature, chiefly poetry but also drama, song and painting, has been steadily appearing in the Arab world during the last fifteen years. Its theme is the Palestine Arab refugee, his sense of injustice and his longing for return to his homeland. All the poets, singers, writers and artists discussed below are Palestinians with first-hand experience of the calamity of their people as a nation and as human beings.

This most significant literary and artistic output has hitherto been unnoticed not only by independent students of the Palestine problem but surprisingly also by Arabs and Zionists alike. The purpose of this paper is to call attention only to representative samples of this output, and to point out the part it is likely to play in the course of general Arab political thought.

The evidence in the following analysis clearly demonstrates that the present Arab emotion concerning “the return” is no less intense than the sentiments expressed by the Psalmist:

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.  
If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if  
I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.†

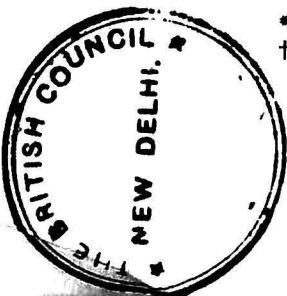
It is important not to underestimate the comprehensive hold which similar

\* *Historical Essays* (Macmillan, London, 1957), p. 5.

† Psalm 137, vv. 5-6.

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sentiments have on the Palestine Arabs. It embraces not only those adults, men and women with their children who are now homeless, but also the children of refugees born in exile.

There is already a striking similarity between present Arab aspirations and emotions concerning "the return" and those from which Zionism was born. There is thus a "new Zionism" in the making, an "Arab Zionism" with the aim of returning to the homeland. Like the old Zionists, the "new" quite obviously intend to translate aspirations and emotions into achievement and action. They may be still vague concerning the means, but there is no doubt about the intentions. This is a phase, after all, through which the old Zionists, too, had to pass before their triumph. It is not likely that the "new Zionists" will be persuaded to accept accomplished facts when they know only too well that the "old Zionists" were able to achieve their ends, to a great extent, by a singular disregard of very hard facts. Their aspirations and emotions proved, in the long run, stronger than the realities of the Palestine scene.

The events of 1947-48 and after have been again and again recounted. About one million Arabs lost their homes and about one million Jews have taken their place. Some professedly academic writers, followed by many journalists, give little or no weight to the human element in the tragedy. They ignore, for example, the natural attachment of the Palestine Arab to his own village, farm and social environment, and express surprise that he does not settle in another Arab land and reconcile himself to loss of fatherland, private property and community life. They ignore the obvious fact that the yearning of the Palestine Arab is not essentially material; nor perhaps primarily political. It is above all a deep aspiration in the soul of every Palestinian Arab in exile, whether he is in a refugee tent or in a more comfortable situation.

Here we should take brief cognisance of the future of Palestine as at present conceived by the Arabs and the Zionists. The majority of the Arabs hope to achieve sooner or later the complete destruction of Israel as a sovereign state. Others, less precisely, think of either (a) the reduction of the state to something like the United Nations partition scheme of 1947, or (b) the elimination of its sovereignty in favour of "Jewish" autonomy within a larger Arab state. The aims of the Zionists are (a) to maintain Israel as a sovereign state by military might and other means, and (b) to transform the present boundaries into permanent frontiers without significant territorial adjustment, and (c) to deny the rights of the Palestine Arabs to repatriation.

It is evident that the attitude of the one side is, to a great extent, determined by the attitude of the other. These attitudes are as irreconcilable as ever. But political and juridical considerations apart, the impasse affects very much the fate of the refugees. Contrary to general assessments which appear occasionally in the press of the West, there is no evidence that any perceptible section of the refugees wish to be settled in the countries which now afford them refuge. Their insistence on repatriation is unshakable and clearly does not diminish with the passage of time. Not long ago trees planted by the authorities in a camp were promptly uprooted by the

refugees, who clearly resented any action suggesting that the camp was anything but a transitional stage leading to repatriation.

So far as can be seen, no Arab politician, even supposing he was convinced of the project as feasible, is likely now or in the foreseeable future to propose or support settlement of the refugees in any country except their native Palestine. Western observers often explain this as exploitation of the refugees by unscrupulous politicians who are moreover blamed for giving the refugees a wrong lead. Quite the opposite is true. The wishes of the refugees themselves, not of the politicians, determine the real Arab stand on the Palestine question. In the last analysis the Palestine Arab refugees do not accept accomplished facts, and impose a similar attitude on the politicians. Of course a few individuals or families have settled, to all appearances permanently, in certain Arab countries and in various foreign countries all over the world. The present study is not directly concerned with these; its concern is with the overwhelming majority still in refugee camps.

On the other hand, Israel has long refused to assume any share of responsibility. As early as 1956, Ben Gurion made his attitude clear. "We cannot", he declared, "accept one single Arab refugee. Why should they come and live in a Jewish state and be miserable."\* The "new Zionists" are thus being further embittered by the perpetuation of their grievance, and the "old Zionists" can scarcely be surprised if they see that the Arab refugees are actually shaping Arab public opinion against Israel in an endless feud.

The emotions that keep the flames ablaze will now be studied in detail. Poems, stories and pictures are discussed below only as a means of expressing emotions and not for their poetic or artistic merits. In translating poetry the aim has been to represent the spirit of the original, not verbal fidelity. Hence some omission and transposition was necessary in places to serve intelligibility in English.

The collection of poems by Ahmad Fahmi,† who hails from Safad, provide an excellent example of the feelings of a refugee who yearns not only for his native town but also for all parts of the fatherland. Here are the opening lines of a poem entitled "The Beautiful Hills".

Sons of the fatherland!  
Do you remember our homes in Safad?  
Do you remember its dreamy days,  
Its majestic Jarmaq,‡  
The mornings in the heights of Galilee,  
The happiness of the days at Dair al-Asad?  
Do you remember also Lydda wounded, and Ramlah,  
And their people smitten by sorrow?  
Do you remember the noble hills,  
In whose soil the martyrs lie?

In another poem entitled "The Land of *Jihad*",§ Fahmi bemoaned

\* *New York Herald Tribune* (August 5, 1955).

† *Ahlam Al-'Audah* (Damascus, 1957).

‡ Name of the high mountain near Safad.

§ *Jihad* is here used in the sense of holy, national war.

the fate of the Palestine Arabs and how they suffered eviction and dispersion :

Palestine, home of grandeur and *jihād* !  
 Arab land since the days of 'Ad.\*  
 Palestine, ever in my mind,  
 Ever in my heart.  
 Happiness has gone from its people,  
 Abandoned to persecution,  
 Disrupted and scattered  
 Through every land.

Finally here are a few lines from a third-poem on the "Dream of the Return". This poem lends its theme to serve as a title for the whole collection and comes as a climax to the poet's sentiments roving over the whole field.

O for some peace to these sleepless eyes!  
 O for some comfort to this sad heart!  
 To freedom and the fatherland  
 Is there no return?  
 O for that thrust which could daunt the invader,  
 And end the long exile.

The Arabic word used for exile is *ghurbah*, which means living in a foreign land. Here is an answer to the argument that the Arab refugees would gladly settle in the neighbouring countries but for the evil schemes of their politicians. This refugee, like the rest, feels an alien (*gharib*) even in Damascus, because he is away from his homeland. His poems abound in suggestive terms or expressions like *tasharrud* (scaring-away), *ijla'* (forceful removal) and *haqqu'rruju'* (right of return).

Next we consider some of the poems of Mahmud Al-Hut,† who was born in Jaffa and received the degree of master of arts from the American University of Beirut. He bitterly laments the injustice (*zulm*) done to his people and native land. His stanzas chronicle the first three years of the life of the refugee. He sings of the bravery and endurance of the Arab community and marvels at the incompetence, by comparison, of the League of Arab States :

What deeds of violence and injustice,  
 What rancour and what heavy blows!  
 Misfortune vanquishes a people who  
 For thirty years unaided,  
 Never failed in mighty war—  
 Fighting alone the oppressor and the usurper.  
 Palestine would never have fallen,  
 Never would its lions have been dispersed,  
 Had not seven mighty states tried to rescue her—  
 Truly astounding was the outcome.

Like other refugees, Al-Hut does not consider himself other than a refugee outside Palestine, whether in Iraq or in Lebanon. Indeed, he describes himself in the sub-title of his poems as "a Palestine Arab lost in other countries", and in an apt verse he describes his fellow refugees as

\* Legendary ancestor; that is to say since very ancient times.

† *Al-Mahzalah Al-'Arabiyya* (Baghdad, 1951).

people "cast out from one country to another". The following lines are fairly representative:

O lost paradise! You were never too small for us,  
But now vast countries are indeed too small.  
Torn asunder your people,  
Wandering under every star.

Once more the poet turns to review the past. He does not spare the Arab states or Arab leadership in general. But the "people" are always right and their misfortune undeserved. They were betrayed alike by their leaders and by British policy, and were evicted from their home by Jewish terrorism:

Evil was made more evil by a nation  
That ruled us by oppression and deceit.  
Created out of Zionist fancies a home  
Which grew to monstrous size:  
"Let the homeland of the natives be usurped,  
"Let the Arabs be herded out.  
"This is the Holy Land  
"To which the Arabs have no right.  
"Drive them out, to make a home  
"For the wandering people with no home."

The final quotation from Al-Hut speaks for itself. It is one of many that inevitably find their way into the effusion of every poet. They depict very vividly the spirit of the Psalmist, the "new Zionist" who never forgets:

Jaffa! My tears have dried but I still wail,  
Will I ever see you again?  
My memory of you is ever fresh,  
Living within my innermost soul.  
How fare your sister cities? I long for them!  
They are parts of everlasting paradise.  
What ails my heart? Wherever I turn, it sadly cries  
For my own native town!\*

Abu Salma† ('Abdul-Karim Al-Karmi) comes from Tul-Karm, which by the armistice agreement between Jordan and Israel lost all its agricultural land and itself escaped only by a few hundred yards. He, too, says that the Palestine Arabs waged a holy war (*jihad*) against Britain and the policy of the Jewish national home for thirty years and lost only when the Arab League took over the fight. Consider the following lines:

On foreign lands they fell  
Like stars, my brethren the refugees.  
Would that they had stayed on the battlefield  
In Palestine, unaided, for the strife.  
Had they borne their own burden,  
Disbelieved in the League of Shadows,  
They would have attained glory  
With their swords, under their own banners.  
Or they would have fallen there  
Hallowing the native soil with their blood.

\* "Town" is an inadequate translation of "*balad*" which in the poem can mean "my home town" and "my homeland".

† *Al-Musharrad* (Damascus, 1953).

This poet, too, laments the injustice (*zulm*) done to his people, and longs to be united with the fatherland. He greets every part of it and kisses its very soil :

How can I forget, I who have been nurtured  
On Palestine's most sacred soil?  
Soil that sings of heroism,  
Echoing through the centuries.  
Martyr of oppression, my fatherland! \*  
Where now I see only heads bent in despair—  
Does not the usurper fear  
The avenging hand of the oppressed?

One more quotation entitled " We will Return " expresses the pain of exile, attachment to the soil of the fatherland and longing for reunion in it. The poet imagines the plains, hills, shores, rivers, towns, villages all beckoning him to return. Here is the climax :

Will there be a return?  
An end of the long exile?  
Yea! Soon we will return,  
The world will hear our marching when we return!  
Then we will kiss the dewy soil,  
With lips thirsting for more!  
With thundering storms will we return!  
With holy lightning, dauntless warriors.  
We are the rebels from every town,  
We came with fire to break away the yoke!

We now turn to consider more recent examples. In this section we take a young Christian Arab nationalist, and in the following two sections two young Muslim Arab women. Kamal Nasir, as the following selections will indicate, is from Jaffa with close connections in Ramallah district. He was educated at the American University of Beirut and founded together with other young associates the Jordanian daily *Al-Ba'th*. His poetry † is expressive of the refugees' aspirations and their insistence on returning to the homeland. The following selected lines were written while he was standing, as many refugees do, on a height overlooking, in the distance, his native town and its sea-shore :

Wounded shore! Vainly fluttering before my eyes!  
You are ever in my heart.  
Not in humiliation will I return,  
Will you, liberated, welcome me back?  
My hands outstretched to you  
Fall wearily beneath the weight of longing.  
When I weep, lamenting my loss,  
I weep for myself and you!

Nasir has ridiculed the assertion that the refugees were turning Communists, or at least that Communist propaganda has been successful in refugee camps. To him this is no more than " enemy " propaganda which ignores the deep emotion of the refugees concerning the return to the homeland :

\* The Arabic is *watan*.

† *Jirah Tughanni* (Beirut, 1960).

The refugees are ever kindling  
 In their camps, in that world of darkness,  
 The embers of revolt,  
 Gathering force, for the return.  
 They have lost their faith in the doctrine of love,  
 Even here in this land of love and peace.  
 Their stolen rights cry in their hearts,  
 Inflamed by misery and hunger.  
 Dismayed by the persistent throng,  
 The enemy spreads poison and hate abroad: -  
 "They are Communists!", he says, "Their rights are false!  
 Let us kill their hopes to return!"

The reason for the repudiation of love and peace by a Christian is further developed to an astonishing climax in the Hymn of Hate (*Unshudatu'l Hiqd*). In an introductory note, the poet explains why he adopts this line of thinking. "I do so", he wrote, "because of the present suffering of humanity in my native land." To him love and peace will come only through the restoration of the natural rights of the Arab refugees to liberty and independence. The poet imagines himself flying over "occupied Palestine" on the wings of an eagle which takes him over all parts. Over Galilee and Nazareth he sings:

If Jesus could see it now,  
 He would preach *jihad* with the sword!  
 The land in which He grew  
 Has given birth to a million slaves.  
 Why does not He revolt,  
 Settle the account, tooth for tooth and eye for eye?  
 In despite of all his teachings,  
 The West's dagger is red with blood.  
 O apostle of forgiveness!  
 Dazed by calamity, I do not know the answer:  
 Is it true you lived to suffer?  
 Is it true you came to redeem?  
 O apostle of forgiveness! In our misfortune  
 Neither forgiveness nor love avail!

Fadwa Tuqan's poems,\* now under discussion, are not wholly devoted to the subject of the refugees. She comes from Nablus and is thus not a refugee herself like the other poets considered above. The following lines are translated from a poem entitled "The Call of the Land". Its subject is a refugee deprived of his own land just across the armistice line who makes a desperate and, in the end, fatal decision to reach it. Although the character is poetically imaginary it is by no means unreal in actual life:

How can I see my land, my rights usurped,  
 And remain here, a wanderer, with my shame?  
 Shall I live here and die in a foreign land?†  
 No! I will return to my beloved land.  
 I will return, and there will I close the book of my life,  
 Let the noble soil tenderly cover my remains.

\* *Wajadtuha* (Beirut, 1959).

† The Arabic *ard gharibah* in the context means "foreign land"; it also means "strange environment".

I will return—I must return,  
 No matter what the danger,  
 The story of my endless shame—  
 I myself will end this tragedy,  
 I will, I must return.

With such emotions the refugee leaves his tent one spring night, lit by stars in a clear sky. He could see in the distance the lights of Jaffa, and the fresh night air is fragrant with the scent of orange blossoms. He had waited too long for this momentous decision and now, as if in a dream, he walked on :

Where to? He did not know. But his yearning  
 Was persistent, compelling.  
 From his own land,  
 A distressed voice was calling him,  
 Ringing in the depths of his heart,  
 Drawing him across the (boundaries) of exile.\*

Like an infant he pressed cheek and mouth to the soil,  
 Shedding there the pain he had borne for years.  
 Revived by its tender breath,  
 He heard the whispered reproof,  
 "You have come back?"—"I have, here is my hand,  
 I will remain here until I die. Prepare my grave."

Two paces away enemy sentries lurked,  
 Their eyes darting shafts of hate,  
 Like arrows thrown from a barbarous bow—  
 Two shots ripped the silence of the night.

Salma Al-Khadra Al-Jayyusi is the daughter of the Arab nationalist Subhi Al-Khadra who took active part in the national struggle during the days of the mandate. In a volume of collected poems† there are at least four pieces that deserve to be quoted, including an elegy commemorating the poet's friend, Haya Balabisa, teacher of the village school at Dair Yasin, who together with women, children and men of the village was massacred by Jewish terrorists in April 1948. There is another elegy commemorating Palestine Arab martyrs in general. On the refugees there is a poem entitled "Without Roots" of which the opening lines are :

A voice, sad and terrified, insistently called :  
 "Send relief eastward, all your kin are refugees! "  
 With sorrowful sighs I sent clothing and raisins  
 And tears, tears, tears and lamentations.

But on the subject of yearning for the fatherland here are lines translated, not consecutively, from a poem entitled "Redemption" (*Fida*):

Blessed be the land, the land of our ancestors,  
 Our land, the land of love, bravery and miracles!  
 It remains thirsty while in it wells the fountain of life.  
 Its proud man, the Arab, is scared hence by the wolf.

\* *Al-Hudud*—the bracket is in the original, implying that such a thing is not recognized by the Arabs.

† *Al-'Audah mina'n—Nab'i Al-Halim* (Beirut, 1960).



For me no more happiness,  
 The mighty God of Misery  
 Leads my people to their death,  
 Raining poison on their hopes.

Do you not see the ghosts of martyrs?  
 Do you not hear the insistent call?  
 Blessed be the call for redemption,  
 With new hope it brightens the way—  
 Rocky and long though the way is—  
 The sun of hope fills it with light.

In this poem, as in many others by this poetess and her like, lamentations almost always end with hope, the hope of liberation, repatriation, return.

There are at least fifteen published collections of poems by Palestinian poets. Six of them have been noted above as fairly representative. It would take too much space to accord similar treatment to the dramatists and the short story writers. Suffice it therefore to single out one author as representative. 'Isa Na'uri, whose father was killed on the doorsteps of their house in Jaffa, describes the ordeal through which his mother and her two young sons went before reaching Beirut as refugees. 'Isa was then fifteen and his brother fourteen. They had a lower middle-class house in Jaffa with a small garden overlooking the sea.\* His story is woven round his school days and the sudden transformation of a happy childhood into a life of misery and restlessness "in a land which is not our land".

But like other refugees he kept both memory and hope very much alive. His longing (*hanin*) is for home and homeland, for the small garden, for the neighbourhood, for the seashore, for the haunts of childhood. "All this", he puts in the mouth of his characters, "is with us every day and every hour, and fills our hearts and our souls. We are only physically here; in spirit we are in the usurped fatherland. All our aspirations live there, and the passage of time cannot separate us from the beloved soil . . . We are there, every moment of our lives, and in spite of everything. And we shall continue till we return . . ."

We now turn to consider the paintings of two or three artists. First, Isma'il Shammut. He was born in Lydda, and studied painting at the College of Fine Arts in Cairo and then in Rome. But before he began his studies in Cairo he experienced life in a refugee camp in the Gaza area, and that left a permanent mark on him. Almost all his paintings centre round the tragedy of the refugees. Shammut is now married to a refugee girl, Tamam Al-Akhal. She, too, is an artist, who had to leave her native Jaffa as a child. She, too, received her artistic education in Cairo, and with an U.N.R.W.A. scholarship received further instruction from a German artist.

Isma'il's paintings are all worthy of notice. There is one of an elderly man carrying an emaciated sleepy child over his shoulder and holding with one of his bony hands another walking child. The man is looking ahead, but the walking child is looking up to the father. The artist labels

\* *Baitun wara' al Hudud* (Beirut, 1959).

this painting "Where to?", and in an explanatory separate note wrote an answer: "Searching for justice . . . for the rights of man . . . for one of the United Nations resolutions." A more personal representation is the painting of the artist's father bending over a brazier at the mouth of their refugee tent. The children are asleep on a mat in a row, but the father is sleepless thinking "of the house he built in Lydda and his old mulberry tree".

Another painting, completed in 1961, is labelled "Children of the Calamity". It shows three sturdy young men, with sleeves rolled up, around a dark shadowy figure. The artist's note says that "these were infants fourteen years ago, but are strong men now; they are a great force, still in a huge prison". Like the poets, the artists seem to see through sorrow a purifying experience that will end in salvation. Isma'il's painting labelled "Palestine on the Cross" is a most interesting evidence of his craftsmanship and his vision. In the centre there is a crucified figure dressed in a white robe, which is on close examination the map of Palestine. In the background there is a refugee tent with a crouching woman at the entrance. In the foreground a young boy holding a white pigeon. To the artist the background and centre represent the past; the foreground the hopeful future.

Tamam seconds her husband's brush and sentiments. One painting shows a Palestinian peasant in complete national dress, except that his feet are bare, crouching in a characteristic manner with one hand serving as a rest for his sad drooping face and the other hanging down his robe over his knee. He is labelled as "Father of the Martyr", a man who lost his only son "in the cause of Palestine" and is now lonely and destitute, with no homeland.

A painting of another old man by Tamam is labelled "Determination"—determination, according to the explanatory note, to return and "recover the land in which he was born, laboured, built and planted". The subject of a third painting by Tamam is even more expressive than either of these two. It is of a young woman with strong mouth and dark wide eyes. Her two brothers were killed in the national struggle in the fatherland, and her parents and only sister were killed in an enemy raid, and she was left alone. The picture is labelled "I will avenge them".

A third Palestinian artist is Nihad Sabasi. He has contributed a coloured picture for the cover, and numerous sketches, for 'Ali Hashim Rashid's "Songs of the Return". The coloured picture is of a soldier in battle dress carrying the Arab flag and a submachine gun, passing through a cut barbed-wire and followed by other soldiers supported by tanks. The sketches are varied, but one shows a woman behind a four-tier barbed wire gazing to what is on the other side. It occurs as an illustration of a poem called "the Scared-away" (*sharid*). The lines just above the picture read as follows:

I am a friendless wanderer in the deserts,  
Behind the wires of injustice is my home,  
For it my soul yearns,  
With anguished pangs.\*

\* *Aghani Al-'Audah* (Cairo, 1960).

Sabasi has a picture which rivals Shammut's "Where to?". It shows a turbaned old man carrying a bundle over his bent back and a walking stick in hand. By his side walks a young daughter carrying a basket in one hand while with the other she protects a very young brother. The three of them are walking abreast with eyes full of anguish. The caption under the picture is one line borrowed from the poem entitled "Longings" (*Ashwaq*), which reads:

Our proud eyes and hearts  
Held in check, cry O my homeland!

But here again the artist and poet discern through calamity and hardship the dawn of a better day. Under a picture of two young school boys, in tattered clothes but smiling, there is a line taken from the poem entitled "I have a Future" which reads:

They say that I have no future,  
They are wrong, my future will be the day of liberation.

These are the dreams, emotions and aspirations of the many expressed by the few. It has been suggested above, and the suggestion is borne out by their actual conduct, that Arab politicians are guided more by the wishes of the Arab refugees than by policies of their own making. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same is true of the poets and artists. Apart from being refugees themselves, they act as channels for voicing the grievances and hopes of the mass of the refugees. An adult refugee of the older generation may be inarticulate, but he cherishes the hope of return all the same in the few words he musters to describe the injustice of the past and the aspirations of the future. A young refugee is on the whole well informed, vocal, bitter, and more determined to return to his native land. The feelings—dreams, emotions and aspirations—are thus communal, shared by old and young alike.



