

Abd al-Rahim Abu Hussein (1951-2022): A Palestinian and Lebanese Historian of Ottoman Studies

*Mahmoud Yazbak**

Abd al-Rahim Abd al-Hadi Abu Hussein was born in Palestine on March 1, 1951 in Nuba, a village in northern Hebron. He was born about three years after the Palestinian Nakba in 1948 which resulted in the erasure of Palestine from the map, and the establishment of the state of Israel on most of its lands, which expelled its people from their homes and eliminated their cultural, economic and social existence, and destroyed their villages and cities. The area known as the West Bank of the Jordan River was annexed in 1948 by the Jordanian state to its territory and became part of Jordan until it was occupied again by Israel in 1967. The Palestinian region known as the Gaza Strip was placed under Egypt's protection until Israel occupied it as well in 1967.

Abd al-Rahim Abu Hussein was born in the shadow of this political reality in an occupied land and homeland, and has no official presence in the papers of the official international institutions. Thus, like the rest of the Palestinians in the West Bank, he received a Jordanian identity card and a Jordanian passport number at birth, despite his birth was in Palestinian territory. The lack of clarity in terms of the (Palestinian) national identity and the official Jordanian identity created a lack of clarity among those who wrote about Abd al-Rahim, some of whom described him as Jordanian, as he was born in the small village of Nuba in the West Bank, which was then affiliated with the Jordanian state. Others described him as a Palestinian, as he was born in historical Palestine. The personal identity became more

* University of Haifa.

complicated when he later moved to Lebanon to continue his higher education and died there. He lived in Lebanon for about fifty years and carried a Lebanese passport and identity card. Many of those who knew him described him as Lebanese. These multiple identities and mixed cultures refined Abdel Rahim's cultural identity and emerged clearly in his studies and academic research.

In his childhood he studied at the elementary and preparatory school of his village, then moved to Amman to continue his secondary school, which he graduated in 1971. Despite the harsh conditions of life and sufferings under the Israeli occupation, he was able to finish high school with distinction and was among the top ten high school students in Jordan where the West Bank schools followed the Jordanian education system though being under the Israeli occupation. This academic excellence qualified him to obtain a scholarship to start his academic studies at the American University of Beirut in the Faculty of Arts and History. This university was one of the oldest, most famous and prominent universities in the Middle East.

Abu Hussein arrived to Beirut when it was suffering from the civil war (1971-1975). Despite the circumstances of the war, he completed his studies at the American University in Beirut and completed his PhD in late 1982, coinciding with the short occupation of Beirut by the Israeli forces. And as Abd al-Rahim told me, this occupation had a great impact on him and put him in a difficult psychological condition that prevented him from studying. And had it not been for the intense pressure exerted on him by Dr. Kamal al-Saliby, the famous historian of Lebanon, who supervised his dissertation, he would not have been able to get out of that psychological crisis and the state of anger and frustration.

Later Abu Hussein was appointed as a professor of Ottoman studies at the American University of Beirut. He was interested in the sources of the Ottoman history of Lebanon by the Ottoman Archives which had not attract the attention of Lebanese researchers by that time, for ideological and political reasons. These reasons did not play a role for Abu Hussein, the Palestinian, and these sources became one of his important research tools for the study of Lebanese history during the Ottoman administration. He wrote a large number of books related with the history of Lebanon during the Ottoman era in different languages, the most important of which is in Arabic: *Lebanon and the Druze Emirate in the Ottoman Era: The Muhime Defters, 1546-1711* published by An-Nahar in 2005. In this book he investigated a set of administrative laws issued by the Ottoman sultans to study social and political affairs in Mount Lebanon. He also wrote *Arab*

Churches in the Ottoman Ecclesiastical Record (1869-1922), where he documented the conditions of Christian churches and sects in the Levant. This book was published in 1998 by the Royal Institute for Religious Studies in Amman Jordan. It included a large collection of Ottoman documents related to *berats* granted by the Ottoman Empire to Christian and Jewish sects and institutions, and various foreign missionaries in the Levant and Iraq, during the Ottoman rule, built new churches, or to restore existing churches, or to establish schools, hospitals, orphanages, nursing homes, or other institutions. The utmost importance of these documents, which are published for the first time lies in their being a primary source for studying the history of Christian Arabs in the Arab provinces, at the end of the Ottoman Empire.

His latest book, *The Industry of a Myth: The Tale of the Long Rebellion in Mount Lebanon*, published by Dar Al-Saqi (2019), remains the topic that crowned his career. He dealt with Prince Fakhr El-Din (1572-1635), a symbolic figure in the Lebanese historical consciousness. Abu Hussein analyzed him as part of a series of long rebellions in Mount Lebanon against the Ottoman rule, which changed his ideas about an imagined Lebanese patriotism.

In his readings of the history of Ottoman Lebanon, Abu Hussein opposed the attempts of some current Lebanese politicians to create a sectarian history for Lebanon that serves their political ideologies. For example, he boldly confronted the position of the President of the Lebanese Republic in September 2019 through an article he published on the "Al-Modon" website under the title "The General and the Osmanli" in which he opposed the statement of the President of the Republic, General Michel Aoun, on the occasion of the anniversary of the foundation of modern Lebanon. This article, which expresses Abu Hussein's opinion, is considered a key to understanding his comprehensive and fair view on Ottoman history in Lebanon and in the Levant in general. During his talk about the period of Ottoman rule in Lebanon, the President of the Republic described it as an "occupation" and referred to "state terrorism practiced by the Ottomans against the Lebanese." Abu Hussein objected the misleading comments of the President of the Republic. He also objected the Lebanese Minister of Defence's comments about the period of Ottoman rule in Lebanon and the Arab countries, who said: "There was an occupation as we call it in Lebanon... We and a large number of Arab countries have the same position on the Ottoman occupation of the Arab countries... and what the president have pointed to are historical facts, and no one can deny it."

Abu Hussein's objection to the politicians is that they lacked historical evidence. He pointed out that the curricula of teaching history in some Arab countries changes according to the political positions of these countries regarding their relations with Turkey. Abu Hussein also confirmed that what the Lebanese president said in this regard "is not consistent with the facts and is not accepted by common sense." To prove his position on the history of the Ottoman rule in Lebanon, Abd al-Rahim quotes for the Lebanese reader, especially for those who developed an unfair attitudes to the Ottoman history, from local Lebanese sources from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and he writes through what was written by the Maronite Patriarch Estephan Douaihy about 1516 when Lebanon came under Ottoman rule: "Sultan Selim, due to his great dreams, commanded the construction of villages and he arranged a sum of money for the area of Keserwan... appointed Prince Assaf as governor. And when he built the country, people came from every side. When Sultan Suleiman came to Aleppo in 1550, he received the heads of the Lebanese Christian denominations and bestowed upon them Firmans "that no one opposes the Christians in their religion or in their marriage and that churches are restored." These and other examples were used by Abu Hussein in popular newspapers and magazines, not only in his scholarly articles, to tell politicians in Lebanon that they are misrepresenting the Ottoman past in Lebanon, intentionally to fuel internal sectarian conflicts.

In appreciation of Dr. Abd al-Rahim Abu Hussein's contributions in the field of Ottoman studies in Lebanon, the Turkish Historical Society awarded him an honorary membership in 2013. His students at the American University of Beirut, they called him "the Mu'allim" the "teacher" out of respect and appreciation for his scholarly efforts and his respect for his students.

Finally, Abd al-Rahim was a dear friend whom I met in the late 1990s at one of the scholarly conferences of Ottoman studies at the University of Aix en Provence southern France. This friendship lasted for about three decades until his death. Shortly before his death (2019) Abd al-Rahim, finally visited his village in Palestine, he also kindly invited me to meet him in the homeland, so that we could roam together, in Jerusalem, Haifa, Acre and my hometown Nazareth.