

Yusuf al-'Isa: A Founder of Modern Journalism in Palestine

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Yusuf al-'Isa was an early pioneer of modern journalism in Palestine which began to flourish during the second Ottoman constitutional period. During the years 1911–14 he worked as the editor-in-chief of the Arabic newspaper *Filastin* (Palestine). The texts written by him reflect his broad cultural horizon, progressive modernist thinking, open-mindedness, and aversion to dogmatism. These writings also manifest his commitment to secularism, Ottoman and Palestinian patriotism, and religious tolerance, as well as a respect for and inclusive approach to other religious and ethnic communities within the Ottoman Empire.

Beginnings of the Arabic Periodical Press in Palestine

The history of the private Arabic periodical press in the Ottoman Palestine began only after the Young Turk Revolution of July 1908. Thereafter, the autocratic rule of Sultan Abd al-Hamid II (1876–1909) came to an end, the constitution was restored, a new parliament elected, and press censorship significantly eased. In Palestine this spurred a sudden boom in newspaper publication. While previously no private Arabic newspapers had existed in the *sanjaqs* of Jerusalem, Nablus, and 'Akka, more than thirty Arabic periodicals were established in the years following the revolution until the outbreak of World War I. This was a development of crucial importance, which led to an accelerated flow of information and had a momentous impact on the identity of Palestine's inhabitants. Many of the newly founded periodicals had a very short lifespan, and only a few became well established. Among the most long-lived were *al-Karmil* (1908–1914) published in Haifa by Najib al-



The team of the Arabic newspaper *Filastin*, Jaffa, 1993. Yusuf al-'Isa might be the first person from left in the middle row. Photo published in 'Isa al-'Isa's memoirs by Noha Tadros Khalaf.

Khuri Nassar and *al-Quds* (1908–1914) published in Jerusalem by Jurji Habib Hananiya. Most of the newspapers of this era were either weeklies or biweeklies and contained four pages. All pre–World War I Arabic Palestinian periodicals were printed in Jerusalem, Jaffa, or Haifa.¹

The newspaper *Filastin* was established in January 1911 in Jaffa, and continued until the end of October 1914. In total, 367 issues were published during the second Ottoman constitutional period. Unfortunately, not all issues of the newspaper are extant. Of the first fifty issues from the first half of 1911 only one has been located;² the last twenty-two issues printed after mid-August 1914 are also missing. The owner and managing director of *Filastin* was 'Isa Dawud al-'Isa (1878–1950) and its editor-in-chief, his older cousin Yusuf al-'Isa (1870/74–1948). The biweekly appeared always on Wednesday and Saturday and for most of its pre–WWI existence it consisted of four pages (in mid-June 1914 its size was enlarged to six pages).³ It was a truly modern newspaper with a wide network of contributors and correspondents. Most of its coverage focused on the Jerusalem mutasarrifate, but it was also concerned with the neighboring districts, the Ottoman Empire, and the wider world, drawing extensively on reports from other newspapers and several news agencies.⁴ With more than a thousand subscribers, *Filastin* was one of the highest circulation Arabic periodicals in Palestine.⁵ In 1913, the editors adopted the innovative approach of sending free copies of the newspaper to the villages of the Jaffa subdistrict in order to disseminate information in the countryside.⁶ However, this was a short-lived attempt which ended in failure.⁷ *Filastin* was suspended three times by the government in the Ottoman era, once in 1913 and twice in 1914. The third hiatus lasted all through World War I. The al-'Isa cousins spent most of the war in exile in Anatolia and towards its end Yusuf al-'Isa settled down in Damascus,

where he later founded the newspaper *Alif Ba'*. *Filastin* was only reestablished in March 1921, this time with 'Isa al-'Isa as its editor-in-chief.⁸

The main reason behind the establishment of *Filastin* was to serve the Orthodox Renaissance [*al-Nahda al-urthudhuksiyya*]. This was a movement that strove to empower the native Arabic-speaking Orthodox Christians in the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which was monopolized by the clergy of Greek ethnic background. Many issues of the newspaper contain columns entitled "Orthodox Matters" [*al-Shu'un al-urthudhuksiyya*] and "Orthodox Renaissance" [*al-Nahda al-urthudhuksiyya*] which were dedicated to this cause.⁹ Furthermore, the newspaper focused on diverse subjects including reforms, modernization of agriculture, conditions in the countryside, trade, security and education. Other important topics were concessions and infrastructural projects; in this regard, the insufficiency of port facilities in Jaffa was frequently discussed. During the wars that occurred throughout the years of *Filastin's* publication (Italian invasion of Libya, Balkan Wars, World War I) much space was given to their coverage. Finally, gradually more and more space was devoted to Zionism and Zionist colonization, which by 1914 became the most discussed subject in the periodical.

The Life of Yusuf al-'Isa

Yusuf al-'Isa, an Arab Orthodox Christian, was born in the Palestinian port city of Jaffa, between 1870 and 1874. His brother, Hanna 'Abdallah al-'Isa (d.1909), was the founder of one of the first periodicals in Palestine, the short-lived semimonthly journal *al-Asma'i* (1908–09). Not much is known about Yusuf al-'Isa's childhood and youth. Later on, he was employed at the Jaffa–Jerusalem railway company. He was an active Freemason and a member of the Barkai lodge in Jaffa. After the revolution, he joined the Committee of Union and Progress and acted as a member of its leadership committee in his hometown. What is more, *Filastin's* editorial office served as the seat of the Committee of Union and Progress in Jaffa. Yusuf al-'Isa actively participated in the Orthodox Renaissance, was one of the leaders of the movement, and was elected as a member of the mixed council which consisted of twelve members drawn equally from among the Greek clergy and the native laymen. The council's responsibility was to take care of social services, healthcare, and education for the Orthodox community. Already before *Filastin's* establishment he contributed to various periodicals including *al-Asma'i* and *al-Taraqqi*. In addition, in 1912 he became the editor of a short-lived comical newspaper *Abu Shaduf* founded by Wahba Tamari.¹⁰

Yusuf al-'Isa and the Newspaper *Filastin*

Yusuf al-'Isa played a very important role as one of the founders of modern journalism in Palestine. As the editor-in-chief of a leading Palestinian newspaper he exerted a strong influence on a large number of people. *Al-Muqattam*, one of the most widely

read contemporary Egyptian dailies, reportedly described his journalistic standing in the following words: “Heads of Arabs in all major cities bend to the editorials of *Ustadh* Yusuf al-‘Isa.”¹¹ The majority of *Filastin*’s editorials were written and signed by him. In these, Yusuf al-‘Isa discussed a broad range of subjects. He criticized the passivity of the Palestinians, pointed frequently to various social and political problems, censured those who caused them, and berated officials who ignored them. In spite of being an admirer of European culture and civilization, it was not an uncritical appreciation as he castigated the Western powers for their expansive policies, predatory intentions, and acts of deceit aimed at non-European countries. He pointed out the double standards of the Europeans. For example, when an act of injustice had been perpetrated in the Ottoman Empire against a Christian, it caused a great commotion in Europe; however, when a European had committed such an act on Ottomans, it was met with silence.¹² Moreover, he also upbraided Europeans for their haughty attitude towards the Ottoman Empire and its inhabitants. He argued that Europeans should be prevented from buying land in the Ottoman Empire unless abolition of the Capitulations¹³ takes place; cooperation should be based on equality not domination of one over the other.¹⁴

The editor-in-chief was conversant with both European and Arab cultural and literary heritage. His writings contain references to various pieces of mythology, literary works, and their “authors” among them Aesop’s fables (“The Ant and the Grasshopper”), Honoré de Balzac’s *Labors of Heracles*,¹⁵ William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*,¹⁶ and al-Hariri’s *al-Maqamat*.¹⁷

Yusuf al-‘Isa was a staunch secularist and an Ottoman patriot and it seems that he developed this perspective under the influence of Western education, literature, and press:

They [Europeans] have told us in their schools, they have explained in their books and newspapers, that religion belongs to God and that there is no bond that links the nations [*al-umam*] and no association that unites the peoples [*al-shu‘ub*] apart from national unity [*al-wahda al-wataniyya*]. ...[W]e have started to understand that, and the adherents of the three religions in our country have agreed to revere patriotism and to dedicate themselves with heart and soul to love of the homeland.¹⁸

The editor-in-chief did not distinguish between Jews, Christians and Muslims in this regard, and he saw religion as a private matter separated from the state, race and nation. Furthermore, he was convinced that all ethnic and religious communities living in the Ottoman Empire are equal members of the Ottoman nation, and he considered both Ottoman Jews and Muslims his brothers [*ikhwanuna al-Isra‘iliyyun*¹⁹ and *ikhwanuna al-Muslimun*²⁰]. In another editorial, published at the end of 1912, Yusuf al-‘Isa once more openly and unequivocally demonstrated his secular spirit. After emphasizing the religious tolerance of the newspaper, he continued by saying: “We endeavor ... to allocate to the religions two noble places, appropriate to their sublimity, whose borders should not be overstepped, and these are [the people’s] hearts and places of worship.”²¹

Filastin’s coverage of Zionism clearly demonstrates the openness of its editors to

discussion, their readiness to listen to different opinions and to modify their view under the mounting weight of evidence. As already mentioned above, with the passing of time this subject was discussed with increasing frequency on the pages of the periodical. At the beginning, the editors maintained neutrality in this regard, offering space to both supporters of Zionist colonization and to its opponents, but avoiding taking part in these discussions. Surprising as it may seem, the way the al-‘Isa cousins treated the subject implies that they at first considered Zionist colonization beneficial to the rural areas. In June 1912 Yusuf al-‘Isa wrote: “[W]e have said and are still saying that we do not believe in the existence of danger in the Israelite colonization of our vast open country; no, we even see some benefits from it.”²² At that time the editors apparently thought that the positive example of the Jewish settlements and exposure to modern agricultural practices could help the Palestinian peasants to improve their situation. However, from mid-1912 Yusuf al-‘Isa’s attitude began to change as he started to consider Zionism as economically and socially detrimental to the native Arab Palestinians. Furthermore, in the latter part of 1913, his position went through another, even more radical change as he arrived at the conclusion that Zionism poses a political, demographic, as well as existential threat to the native Arab Palestinians. This gradual, but profound transformation occurred under the impact of several events and affairs.²³ By mid-1914 the editors of *Filastin* had already forgotten their previous, more ambivalent attitude as manifested by the following statement: “The newspaper *Filastin* since its establishment has continued to emphasise the Zionist danger for the country and to warn the people [*al-ahlin*] about it and to alert the natives [*al-wataniyyin*] to what threatens their existence.”²⁴

In 1911, Menachem Beilis, a Russian Jew from Kiev, was detained and subsequently falsely accused of ritually murdering a Christian boy. Two years later, in the autumn of 1913, he stood trial in his hometown which was covered by the media from around the world, among them *Filastin*. Yusuf al-‘Isa showed strong professionalism in writing about this affair.²⁵ Even though the newspaper’s editorial line had by that time become clearly anti-Zionist, he did not use this event to criticize the Jewish community. Moreover, the editor-in-chief did not remain silent vis-à-vis this injustice. Quite the contrary, more than ten articles discussed the trial and its aftermath in which both the editors and the contributors unequivocally rejected the accusation and voiced support for Beilis, Judaism, and Jews. In his editorial “The Disgrace of the Twentieth Century,” published during the trial, Yusuf al-‘Isa wrote:

We said in the previous issue and repeat that their accusing the Jews [*al-Yahud*] of shedding blood to perform a religious ritual is a fabrication with regard to those who believe it; an abomination with regard to those who spread it; and a disgrace to the twentieth century, during which, if minds are not liberated from the shackles of ignorance, God will never liberate them.²⁶

Similarly, on other occasions he stood for the oppressed and exploited. In the summer of 1914 he criticized two prominent notables from Gaza, Sa‘id al-Shawwa and Ahmad ‘Arif al-Husayni,²⁷ for taking advantage of the poverty of the Bedouins in the Beersheba

subdistrict and of their problems with the authorities in order to buy their land for a fraction of its real value.²⁸

Yusuf al-'Isa and his journalistic legacy have been to a large degree forgotten. This was likely caused by the relative brevity of his journalistic work in Palestine and his post-World War I absence from the country after his move to Damascus. In addition, the memory of his activities had been overshadowed by the fact that his cousin 'Isa al-'Isa acted subsequently for many years as the editor-in-chief of *Filastin* which after World War I became the preeminent Arabic newspaper in Palestine.

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Endnotes

- 1 Ami Ayalon, *Reading Palestine: Printing and Literacy, 1900–1948* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 1–3; Ya'qub Yehoshua, *Tarikh al-sahafa al-'Arabiyya fi Filastin fi al-'ahd al-'Uthmani (1908–1918)* [The History of the Arabic Press in Palestine in the Ottoman Era (1908–1918)] (Jerusalem: Matba'at al-ma'arif, 1974); and Yusuf Q. Khuri, *al-Sahafa al-'Arabiyya fi Filastin, 1876–1948* [The Arabic Press in Palestine, 1876–1948] (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-dirasat al-Filastiniyya, 1986), 3–26.
- 2 To the best of my knowledge, issue number 16 is the only complete issue which is available from the first half of 1911 and is located in the Ottoman Archives of the Prime Minister's Office, Istanbul (BOA)/Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (DH.MTV/52-1/49). I would like to thank Zach Foster for pointing out the existence of this issue and for sharing it with me.
- 3 The first expanded issue consisting of six pages was published on 17 June 1914.
- 4 For a discussion of *Filastin's* geographic scope of interest, see Johann Büssow, "Mental Maps: The Mediterranean Worlds of Two Palestinian Newspapers in the Late Ottoman Period," in *Cities of the Mediterranean: From the Ottomans to the Present Day*, ed. Biray Kolluoğlu and Meltem Toksöz (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 100–115.
- 5 "Ahsan tariqa li al-i'lan" [The Best Way of Advertising], *Filastin*, 18 December 1912, 3. All translations from *Filastin* are by author.
- 6 "Jaridat Filastin" [The Newspaper *Filastin*], *Filastin*, 11 June 1913, 3.
- 7 "Batilan yat'abu al-banna'un" [The Builders Toil in Vain], *Filastin*, 28 August 1913, 3. For a short analysis of this attempt and its termination, see Emanuel Beška, *From Ambivalence to Hostility: The Arabic Newspaper Filastin and Zionism, 1911–1914* (Bratislava: Slovak Academic Press), 2016, 19–20.
- 8 Yehoshua, *Tarikh al-sahafa*, 116–120; Beška, *From Ambivalence*, 25–26, 30–31, 67.
- 9 For a comprehensive discussion of *Filastin's* coverage of this issue, see Evelin Dierauff, "Negotiating Ethno-Confessional Relations in Late Ottoman Palestine: Debates in the Arab Palestinian Newspaper *Filastin* (1911–1914)" (PhD diss., University of Tübingen, 2018), chap. 4.
- 10 Yehoshua, *Tarikh al-sahafa*, 28, 108, 110–11, 113, 118; Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 98, 107, 187; Johann Büssow, "Mental Maps," 104; "Surat

- al-khitab” [A Copy of the Speech], *Filastin*, 27 March 1912, 2; “al-Majlis al-mukhtalat” [The Mixed Council], *Filastin*, 8 November 1911, 3.
- 11 Quoted according to Yehoshua, *Tarikh al-sahafa*, 118–19.
 - 12 “La yakhlus al-ghariq bi al-ghariq” [A Drowning Person Cannot Be Saved by Another Drowning Person], *Filastin*, 9 September 1911, 1.
 - 13 Capitulations were treaties between European states and the Ottoman Empire which conferred extraterritorial privileges and tax exemptions on the subjects of the former. The cornerstone of the capitulatory regime with European countries was the accord concluded with France in 1535. The capitulations were abolished by the Ottoman government after the outbreak of World War I. Jacob Coleman Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East: A Documentary Record: 1535–1914, Volume I* (New Jersey: D. van Nostrand, 1956), 1. For the text of the treaty with France, see Hurewitz, *Diplomacy*, 2–5.
 - 14 “Istimlak al-ajaniib” [Acquisition by the Foreigners], *Filastin*, 20 September 1911, 1.
 - 15 “La tansana ya Basha” [Do not Forget Us, Pasha], *Filastin*, 19 August 1911, 1.
 - 16 “A wujud am la wujud” [To Be, or not to Be], *Filastin*, 2 August 1911, 1.
 - 17 “Wa fariq abaka idha ma abaka” [Leave Your Father if He Disdains You], *Filastin*, 30 September 1911, 1.
 - 18 “Man huwa al-muta’assib?” [Who Is the Fanatic?], *Filastin*, 8 November 1911, 1.
 - 19 “al-Quds – li murasilna: Ruhi al-Khalidi” [Jerusalem – by Our Correspondent: Ruhi al-Khalidi], *Filastin*, 6 March 1912, 2; “al-Sharif Ja’far Basha wa al-Isra’iliyun” [Sharif Ja’far Pasha and Israelites], *Filastin*, 30 March 1912, 3; “‘Id al-fish ‘inda al-Isra’iliyin” [Passover among the Jews], *Filastin*, 23 April 1913, 3.
 - 20 “Shahr Ramadan” [The Month of Ramadan], *Filastin*, 30 August 1911, 1.
 - 21 Yusuf al-‘Isa, “al-Walad al-mash’um” [The Sinister Son], *Filastin*, 7 December 1912, 1.
 - 22 Yusuf al-‘Isa, “Naskut wa yuntiqunana” [We Are Silent and They Make Us Speak], *Filastin*, 5 June 1912, 1.
 - 23 For an extensive analysis of the transformation in the editors’ attitudes towards Zionism, see Emanuel Beška, “*Filastin’s* Changing Attitude toward Zionism before World War I,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 72 (Winter 2017): 86–101.
 - 24 “Ta’til jaridat Filastin wa muhakamatuha: muhakamat jaridat Filastin” [The Suspension of the Newspaper *Filastin* and Its Trial: The Trial of the Newspaper *Filastin*], *Filastin*, 6 June 1914, 7.
 - 25 For a detailed examination of *Filastin’s* treatment of the Beilis affair, see Emanuel Beška, “‘The Disgrace of the Twentieth Century’: The Beilis Affair in *Filastin* Newspaper,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 66, (Summer 2016): 99–108.
 - 26 Yusuf al-‘Isa, “Ma’arrat al-qarn al-‘ishrin” [The Disgrace of the Twentieth Century], *Filastin*, 25 October 1913, 1.
 - 27 It is noteworthy that the two most prominent and influential Gazan families, al-Husayni and al-Shawwa, whose relations were very strained and who were engaged in a prolonged factional conflict for power in the city, managed to overcome their differences and cooperated in order to gain the ownership of these lands. For a treatise on the internal political strife in Gaza at the turn of the twentieth century, see Yuval Ben-Bassat and Johann Büsow, “Urban Factionalism in Late Ottoman Gaza, c. 1875/1914: Local Politics and Spatial Division,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 61 (2018): 606–49.
 - 28 Yusuf al-‘Isa, “Aradi al-Sirr – aw – kitab Allah wa kitab al-Walid” [The Lands of al-Sirr – or – The Book of God and the Book of al-Walid], *Filastin*, 22 July 1914, 1. For a discussion of this case, see Emanuel Beška, “The Lands of as-Sirr Affair in 1914: Its Reflection in the Contemporary Palestinian Arabic Periodical Press,” *Asian and African Studies* 27, no. 1 (2018): 1–20.