BOOK REVIEW

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Reviewed by Elaine C. Hagopian

Edited by the distinguished anthropologist, Rosemary Sayigh, from taped interviews with her husband, this memoir should be required reading for anyone who wants to understand Palestine’s history. Yusif Sayigh’s life (1916-2004) was Palestine’s history. His years spanned the crucial twentieth-century period of the transformation of Palestine into Israel, up to and including the debacle of Oslo and the Second Intifada. A major Palestinian intellectual, economist, and nationalist, he never broke stride with his dedication to securing the rights of his people. A humble man, he sought only justice for his people—not power or glory. He leaves a legacy of principled commitment and personal integrity.

Sayigh and his generation faced an embedded Zionist movement in Palestine buttressed by British Mandate authorities. He worked to challenge and neutralize Zionist designs on Palestine while that process was well in place and advancing rapidly. His and his political colleagues’ efforts could never catch up to the well-funded, aided, and organized Zionist plan to transform Palestine into a Jewish majority state. The same was true post-1948. The added variable then was poor Palestinian leadership and self-interested Arab states. And while disheartened, he kept devising new plans for bolstering his people’s institutional development to support resistance. His life exemplifies the qualities of character and professionalism required for those who want to liberate Palestine today.

Sayigh was born in Al-Bassa, Northern Palestine. His mother was educated in a girls school; his father was a minister. Shortly after his birth, the family moved to Kharaba, Syria, where they remained till 1925. They returned to Al-Bassa for five years until Sayigh’s father was appointed in 1930 to serve in Tiberias, Palestine, where the family remained until the 1948 catastrophe. The family consisted of six brothers and one sister. All were educated in spite of the limited means of the family. After 1948, the family moved to Lebanon.

Sayigh attended the American University of Beirut (AUB; 1934-1938) and later (1957) completed a PhD in political economy at Johns Hopkins University.

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While at AUB, he was influenced by Charles Malik (Lebanese nationalist), Constantine Zurayk, and Fuad Mufarrej (Arab nationalists), and George Hakim (Marxist). But the person who influenced him most was Antoun Sa’adeh, founder of the Parti Populaire Syrien (PPS) in 1932. Sa’adeh was not with AUB but taught languages to its students. Like many of the famous intellectuals of that time, Sayigh joined the PPS (1936). It was the only secular political party at the time that had a clear program. The Party’s platform included the right to self-determination, separation of state and religion, unity of the Fertile Crescent countries (Greater Syria), resistance to Zionism, colonialism, and imperialism. The Party operated underground in its first years, and it remained secretive through later years. Its organ was a monthly journal distributed widely at AUB. Sayigh had his formative political experience through the PPS. He was impressed by Sa’adeh’s brilliance and by the Party’s commitment to liberating Palestine from Zionism. The French Mandate authorities saw the Party as a threat to its authority and jailed Sa’adeh for six months in 1936. After his release, he visited Germany and Italy on his way to Latin America, giving rise to suspicions that he was influenced by fascism. The PPS was quite popular, although secular Arab nationalist thought was also forming at the same time. Ultimately the independent Government of Lebanon under the premiership of Riad al-Solh had Sa’adeh tried and executed in 1949 for his attempt to revolt against the Lebanese Government. By that time, Sayigh had become wary of Sa’adeh’s growing demand for salutes and praise, resembling fascist practices. He quit the Party in the 1950s. The PPS was a very important part of modern Arab history, and Sayigh’s observations provide a rare window into it.

The 1940s were a politically hectic period in Palestine, during which Sayigh’s talent was claimed for many tasks. He became director of the Arab National Treasury and devised a plan for collection of taxes from Palestinians, even though there was no official indigenous Palestinian Government. He wrote a report on the quality of land owned by Jews and Arabs in which he confirmed that Jewish-acquired land had better conditions for agricultural productivity than that owned by Arabs. His work with the National Treasury brought him in touch with the leadership of the Arab Higher Committee. He met the Mufti, Haj Amin Al-Husseini in 1946. He felt the Mufti was a Palestinian patriot and upright leader. However, Sayigh also notes that the Mufti lacked organizational ability for confronting the Zionists. The Mufti met with Hitler on November 28, 1941. The meeting was primarily held to convince the Germans to stop their policy of allowing Jewish immigration to Palestine aimed at transforming Palestine’s demography and creating a Zionist political mass. Zionist-Nazi collaboration on immigration was based on a 1933 Transfer Agreement between the parties. This collaboration strengthened Zionist efforts to appropriate Palestine. Sayigh gives us important insights into the character of the Mufti.
In May 1948, Sayigh found himself in Qatamoun, West Jerusalem, with some 20 plus men. As the Zionists were advancing, they went to a German hospice run by nuns. Sayigh directed all to put their names on a list, which was given to the nuns to give to the Red Cross. They were taken prisoners by the Zionists. Indeed the Red Cross did come looking for them. Within a year, they were released. His recollections of this period are riveting.

Gamel Abdel Nasser become president in Egypt in 1956, and with him hope for Palestine grew. In 1958, unity between Egypt and Syria was declared, believed to be a step toward Arab nationalism. By this time, Sayigh had begun to embrace Arab Nationalism. The PPS in Lebanon was diminished and ineffective. In 1964, backed by the Arab League, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was formed. The first chairman of the PLO, Ahmed Shuqeiri sought Sayigh’s opinion as the Organization was being formed. Sayigh was chosen to serve on the first Palestinian National Council (PNC), the legislative branch of the PLO. He also served on the Executive Committee until 1969, when Fatah’s Arafat became the chairman. Other institutions were established, such as the National Fund and the National Army. Sayigh soon discovered that the PLO contained many groups with diverse ideas and different loyalties whose politics varied considerably. His signature advice to the PNC was that planning was essential, be it military, political, economic, financial, public relations, etc. He was made chairman of the board of the National Planning Center. He toiled in this role for three years (1968-71) and then with the National Fund (1971-74). He came up with a plan for the PLO, but the leadership did not read it. In fact it was quoted to Sayigh that a main member of the leadership said, “Revolution and planning can’t go together.” This statement heralded what became the PLO pattern—no planning, corruption, competing factions, and leaders who monopolized power.

Nonetheless, when PNC leader Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala’) asked Sayigh to prepare a plan for the economic foundation of a Palestinian state, which the PNC declared in 1988, he accepted. The plan was finished in 1989. He also suggested that a program for development be added in advance of possible statehood. To complete his task, Abu Ala’ told him he should reside in Tunis where the PLO leadership was located. He moved there only to find how politics interfered in the selection of experts to develop the plan. He completed the plan in the summer of 1993. Patriot that he was, he also simultaneously accepted to head up the Economic Development and Cooperation Working Group in 1992, which was part of the Madrid process. The Israelis protested his appointment and refused to attend the first meeting. Sayigh was replaced.

Sayigh recounts his struggle with Arafat around the structure and function of the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR) and the World Bank. In this section of the memoir, Sayigh gives a clear example of Arafat’s devious and appalling modus operandi as he sought to control PECDAR and its funding.
While Sayigh was in Tunis, the secret Oslo talks were going on. He was not informed of those talks. When they became public, he wrapped up his work and returned to Tunis. He rejected the Oslo Declaration of Principles. He, like others, was appalled by the fact that Arafat and the negotiating team had neither maps nor lawyers present when this accord was negotiated.

In a final chapter of the memoir, Editor Rosemary Sayigh fills in the gap not covered in the tapes, i.e., her husband as an Arab economist. He wrote his first noteworthy book as an economist while returning to Beirut from the United States on a Dutch Freighter. *Bread and Dignity* was published in Arabic and won the prize of the Friends of the Book in 1961. The book foreshadowed his later economic scholarship on Arab development. It focused on the requirement that development should relate to social justice and meet Arab national needs. “‘Dignity’ … must go hand in hand with economic growth” (p. 302) for all Arab peoples. He wrote and published profusely on issues of Arab economic development. After retiring from the AUB, he became an independent consultant. His office was commissioned by the Arab League to develop a plan for Joint Arab Economic Action. He and his colleagues completed the three-volume project, but the plan was never implemented. Arab state leaders seemed more interested in gaining and maintaining their power rather than in promoting economic integration and Arab independence. He did studies for other separate agencies as well, but Arab economic nationalist development never saw the light of day. Nonetheless, his economic policy studies and plans remain as prototypes for the future as well as explanation of the failures of the present.

Another important plus in this rich memoir is Sayigh’s recollections of life in Palestine in the early twentieth century as he was growing into adulthood. His anthropological observations allow us attendance in the daily life of his family and local villagers. While Palestinian society was based on customs of modesty and discretion, transgressions—including affairs and sexual diversity—did take place without excommunication. Family loyalty and commitment were ingrained values. Readers will find a number of challenges in this book to the general stereotypes of Palestinian Arab society. They will also realize how integrated the Levant was culturally and economically and with what ease people moved about in the area before the Western-drawn borders became fully entrenched.

What does one take away from this book? If ever there could be a human template for what constitutes a selfless, productive worker in pursuit of a just cause, Yusif Sayigh is a prime example. He gives us intimate insights into the tragedy of Palestine and the horrific internal pettiness and incompetence of some of its most powerful leadership. There are lessons to be learned from the life of this humble, loyal, and brilliant patriot. One only wishes that he could have had the time to flesh out his memoirs.