

Turning Social Problems into the Basis for Inclusive Movements: A Study of the Influence the Young Men's Muslim Associations Had in Palestine through their Charitable Activities in the Late 1920s

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This study concerns the formation of the basis around which the cohesive political movements of an organization of youth groups, the Young Men's Muslim Associations (YMMA¹), attempted to address social problems in the late 1920s. Taking this as the focal process of Mandatory Palestine, the span from the late 1920s until the Congress of PAWS in 1930 seems relatively short. However, as the attempt was to indicate a clue about cohesive national movements, this period has significance in that it implies the unchanged social, and thus political, problems throughout recent Palestinian history.

This study focuses on the process of including workers in the National Movement by giving attention to the relationship between the YMMA and workers, who as Halliday suggests, together formulated a society in ways that defined the international system [Halliday 1994: 60-61].² As the YMMA's history embodied the character of Palestinian society in Mandatory Palestine, this article offers an attempt to organize the different understandings of the complicated notion of the "nation," to separate it from the cause but include the socio-economic structures and political benefits. With the emergence of nationalism as "the simple demand for human beings' liberation" from the heavy burden of occupation and the "seriously declining social conditions that resulted from the development of capitalism," every nation and group of people was faced with this assignment [Momose, 2003: 60]. In the late 1920s, the Palestinian demands for "liberation" from their burden and "nationalism" were consisted by the different social starata. However, they were gradually integrated and shared the same aim.; the relationship between the YMMA and workers embodied its social contradiction regarding the process of forming national cohesive movements, which represents one of the unsolved problems. Therefore, this study does not demarcate social problems but tries to signify the historical determinants of the very beginning of the ultimately cohesive national movements of the Palestinians.

1. The Cohesive Movement and the Origin of Its Basis: Studies of Mandatory Palestine

The Great Revolt (1936-1939) is a highlight of the Mandate's history, as there were various

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¹ Jam'īya al-Shubbān al-Muslimīn, established in 1927; its central office was located in Cairo.

² Halliday cited Justin Rosenberg added to Wolf, Andersons and Habsbawm.

organizations involved in it and Palestinians have much remarked on its memoirs [Swedenborg 1988]. Compared to the thickly examined political mappings and analyses of the diplomatic negotiations, the trigger of the Great Revolt has not been paid adequate attention. The YMMA was one of the main actors in making the Revolt cohesive at the first stage, which was started by the general strike; the group was already dissolved in 1934, but their leading politically active people, who were known as the Istiqlalists, mobilized various political groups and led the different social ranks to join the strike [Lockman 1996: 234–239]. The YMMA was established in 1928, a year that showed a marked increase in the number of workers' clubs and parties interested in them. This could indicate the initiation of the endeavor for cooperation and the adjustment of interests among influential groups over the repressed Palestinian society.

Political Leaders' Analyses and Land Systems Investigations

Analyses of Mandatory Palestine have tended to concentrate mainly on two issues. One type focuses on the politics of the political leaders, with their roles leading to either their alienation from ordinary residents or the proof of their Palestinianness—as represented through the independence movements, which could stress their identity of being established before the British Occupation³ and having developed domestically. The other issue concerns land systems and the accompanying local economic transformation. The latter have defined the nation as either an actual or constructed one, the former refers fragmented Palestinian society that could not be identified as a nation.

Just after the British occupation, the Palestinian political scene was active, but it was said to be not for Palestinian residents [Cohen 2008]. Mandatory Palestine underwent a colonial experience, with its typically underdeveloped society—as recently indicated by Smith and Tyler—and political activity erupted occasionally as riots before crystallizing in the Great Revolt. The social problems at the end of the 1920s were an accumulation of contradictions that stemmed from Mandatory policy on urbanization, education, and the discriminative economic gap between Jews and Arabs. There seems to be a need for coherent explanation of the social relations between the Palestinian leaders and the residents participating in the political activities of the time. This could be a starting point to analyze a Palestinian history that could be ascribed to the people dispossessed.

As noted above, the second issue involves extensive narrations about land issues,

³ [Porath 1974; Khalaf 1991]. As the late 1980s analyses of political leaders were also scrutinized to indicate their role in intermediation between the British Authority and Independent Movements [Mattar 1988: 38], Sayigh has argued that the alteration by the peasants, who were primal components of Palestinian population, demanded an independent Palestine [Sayigh 1979: 40–44]. Muslih and Khalidi have challenged the interpretation of counter-nationalism toward Palestinian identities [Khalidi 1997: 26–30; Muslih 1988: 210–212].

which have been regarded as the main Palestinian problem. The economic boom during the Mandate period in comparison to the Ottoman period has often been mentioned. The narrations advocate that the fragmented political direction and divided leadership should be described as the results of self-interest. The national movements are deduced to be the result of the motivation provided by the political leaders, and those who participated in the Great Revolt are said not to have been aware of the necessity of Palestinian independence as their liberation. Through these economic analyses, some peculiar notions of Dual Economy [Metzer 1998] and the articles insisted as the economic development, which were contributed by British policy and the benefit of immigration. They only insisted the separate entity and have been silent to Zionists' Yishuv which was supported by cheaper Palestinian laborers. However, some historical arguments have shifted their focus towards the "view from below,"⁴ that is, the social structure. The counter-narrative of land systems [Kamen 1991] and research on rural development encouraged a rethinking of placing too much stress on economic development.

The "View from Below"

The above social and economic arguments have challenged the description of social dissociations, especially in the field of the labor issues. Those analyses, from the perspective of the social transformation, insisted that a trans-ethnic sense of unity emerged in the 1940s [Taqqu 1980: 261–286]. Along the same lines, Lockman and Bernstein have investigated the Histadrut's policy changes and shed light on the process of lost unity. Sharing the same point of view, Swedenborg has already clarified that there was widespread positive participation in the Great Revolt, with an underlying notion of "national independence" that could liberate them from British colonial reign [Swedenborg 1988]. However, his analysis did not focus on the commitment of the Palestinian citizens to the movements. Furthermore, the processes towards the Great Revolt of integrating the people and the role of core divisions have not been bridged; there appears to be a gap between them.

This study takes the same view as Swedenborg, but tries to fill this gap in the analysis, which does not link the political situation to the social strength of the movements being carried out. A consistent explication for the causes of the revolt needs to focus more on the sustained social network and its power in Palestine. The motivation to participate in the Great Revolt can be traced partly to mobilization and participation through certain social groups, such as youth groups, teachers' circles, and labor associations, and it could be found in the empowerment by those groups that delivered social services⁵ to support people's subsistence,

⁴ With other debate, [Bernstein 2000; Lockman 1996]. One of the most striking validations for the cohesive transformation of Palestinian society at that time is [Swedenborg 1995].

⁵ John Friedmann mentions the term "empowerment" in his book *Empowerment: the Politics of*

as can be inferred from the newspapers of the time and British archives. Additionally, a clue to the social and political cohesive movements might be found if searched for in workers' inclusion, taken as one of the nodes between the leaders and the people that might be traced, especially regarding the activities of the YMMA. Their activities in the late 1920s elucidate the process of the incitement for the retrieval of social power among the Palestinians.

2. Young Men's Muslim Associations

Establishment of the YMMA and *Istiqlālīyūn*

The YMMA, whose original purpose was to promote a healthy environment for Muslim youth and had its central office in Cairo, was just like a Muslim version of the more globally familiar YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association).⁶ In Palestine, it was started in 1928 in Jaffa, where four youth clubs and associations were combined, and soon branches were established throughout the Palestine. 60 years after the Nakba, the YMMA is regarded as an Islamic militant youth group by the majority of historical articles, yet in light of its commitments to social services, it seems to demonstrate an inclusion of various communities to represent themselves politically as Palestinians. The YMMA has mostly been described by Israeli scholars as a militant youth group or as the hotbed of terrorists [Lachman 1982; Matthew 2003]. This tendency attributes to the YMMA a variety of influential activities, especially those conducted by them having "Islamic" propaganda, such as "the defense of Islam" by Muslims against the invasion of "sacred Jerusalem," their restoration of the al-Aqsa Mosque, and their calls for "Muslim unity" in resisting the imperial power. Thus, the described "Islamic" groups are concluded to have stirred people to the Great Revolt.⁷ However, the YMMA and the leaders close to it were not at all anti-Zionists, nor were they exclusive in the formation of the legislative body; their demands were highly political, and not at all religious.⁸

Alternative Development [Friedmann 1992]. The term in this paper does not correlate with the Palestinian political struggle, although the basic notion of gaining social power is relevant.

⁶ [Nafi 1998: 157]. This association has been established by 'Abdul-Ḥamīd al-Sa'īd, who was a member of the Watan Party. According to Darwaza's memoir, it was established against the missionaries' conference held in 1926. For the expansion of its Christian activities, the Protestant missionary representative had donated more than a million dollars to the YMCA at a time. It was not the first experience for them to try to expand in the name of religious activities, so they had a sense of the crisis [Darwaza 1993: 601, 636-637]. Filasṭīn, 1928, Apr. 20. [Bayān al-Ḥūt 1986: 188f].

⁷ There has been a tendency to ascribe the tag of "Islamic-militant" to the group's "Islamic" addresses, especially in the wake of the fact that militant groups started to often undertake suicide-bombardment missions. The narrative is very contemporary in that it describes how politically active groups with a religious character are perceived as Islamic, and their contributions toward alleviating circumstances of underdevelopment are not appreciated.

⁸ Those core members of the YMMA and the Istiqlāl party did not have any intentions to jeopardize Jews, yet the huge economic gap and flow of immigrants were an obstacle to friendly relations with them [Shabīb 1981].

The original members of the Association were regarded as on the Ḥuseinī-side, because of the YMMA's support from the Supreme Muslim Council headed by *Muftī*. Additionally, its relationship was cooperative with the political leaders on religious events, yet this was confined to the YMMA's activities. They criticized Ḥuseinī's politics that centered only on Jerusalem, and the heads of branches as well as its supporters included those from the opposition, so the YMMA position cannot be estimated by the main political divisions. The core members were also the original members of Istiqlāl Party (1931–33), and their Nationalist activities were not limited to only those in Palestine; thus, they were relatively free from the Jerusalemites' rivalry.

The Context of the YMMA's Establishment and the Changed Palestinian Economy

The YMMA was established in 1928, five years after the beginning of the Mandate and three years after the halt of the Palestinian congress that had been held yearly by the Arab Higher Committee. But, there was a political confrontation among the Committee members. The main confrontation stemmed from the division of the Ḥuseinī-Nashashibī line. This rivalry stopped the Congress and created a political vacuum; then the various small groups and parties were established, and some were supported by the Arab Beureau of Zionists.⁹

The activities of the parties and groups showed their superficial interest in peasants and workers, whom the economic changes had highly affected. The status quo policy of the British maintained the feudal relations between the peasants and land owners, while the change of the Land Law increased the poor's debt [Yazbek 2000: 93–113; Tyler 2001: 8, 151]. Those who had found the chance to work in the urbanized newly constructed towns and Jewish settlements became wage laborers [Taqqu 1980, 261–280],¹⁰ and even though they did not lose their land, their salary declined relative to the economic boom, and many became migrant laborers who moved between the village and town seasonally [Bernstein 1995].

In 1925, the Palestine Arab Workers Society (Jam'īya al-ʿUmmāl al-ʿArabī PAWS) was established, and the workers club had emerged not only in Haifa and Jaffa, but also in Nablus.¹¹ The Liberal Party was by far active among them and insisted on support for and organization of workers. The party's appeal regarding the labor problem began after the incidents in Mullabas, known as Petah ha-Tikva, and the small conflicts over employment.¹²

⁹ For example, the Peasant's Party which covered the northern area, and the Arab Liberal Party led by the Nashashibī [Darwaza n.d.: 46].

¹⁰ There was not precise data for the urban-rural population change because of the character of their work, as informal ones, however, there were assumptions on Crosby-Johnson Report in 1931 that Taqqe has mentioned and [Himadeh 1938].

¹¹ In March 1926, Nādī al-ʿUmmāl recorded the place to exchange information among the workers made by ʿĀrif ʿAbd al-Ḥādī and Fayyāḍ Ṭūqān, who established Hizb al-ʿUmmāl [Budayrī 1981: 133].

¹² [Filasfīn 1927 (Dec. 6, 9)]. The newly arrived unskilled Jewish workers protested the arrest of some workers and demanded "to abolish the abnormality of the offer of employment for Palestinian workers at

The Liberal Party raised concern about the Authority's demand for the Chambers of the Commerce to hire Jewish workers, as Arabs were getting into agricultural sites as cheaper wage laborers. They criticized this as an inappropriate demand and appealed to the political leaders to organize the workers. The party's activity did not last for long, but their articles in the *Filasṭīn* clarified the relationship between the workers and the Histadrut and analyzed the Zionist's appeal towards workers as deceit. as "Hebrew Labor" campaign to exclude Arab workers started from 1928 [*Filasṭīn* 1927 (Dec. 23); 1928 (Jan. 3)].

3. Activities of the YMMA: Part 1

By this point, it appears that the Palestinian economy had declined and that the YMMA had included the urbanized or immigrants from rural area providing social services to them, workers union also being involved to their activities, who had mostly been peasants.

The Search for a Relationship with the Workers

Although the YMMA's main purpose was the promotion of the youth, from its establishment it had stressed an intellectual exchange with workers [*Filasṭīn* 1928 (May 1)], and the YMMA's leadership tried to promote this relationship; one of its members reported periodically on the labor movement and its situation. The YMMA had a certain interest in the economic decline; the problem emerged as a shortage of employment.

The British budget was tight and the main industries such as the electricity and petroleum refinery industries were occupied by the Jewish sector, which started to employ Jewish workers predominantly. Palestinian workers could not easily gain employment at the same levels as Jewish people. The editor of the *Filasṭīn* picked up on the issues of employment allocation and the differential wage rate systems [*Filasṭīn* 1928 (Apr. 2)]. The PAWS members suffered a serious economic depression and started to approach leaders through the newspapers [*Filasṭīn* 1925 (Oct. 22); Lockman 1996: 84]. After the three years in the establishment, they were not regarded as representative of the workers; they needed support from those who could work for them. PAWS sent the original members toward the short-lived Liberal Party's conference, and it was certainly interested in the oath of the "National Union"; for the first time they found a common interest with political leaders and their activities.

As for their public work, employment allocation and wages were discussed by the government, Histadrut members and those from the Arab side, as well as the Manager of the

the Moshava" in the face of the numbers of unemployed Jews, and at the meeting more than 1,000 people gathered.

Arab Bank.¹³ At this meeting, the Arab labor wages were estimated to be 30% lower than Jewish wages. The argument in the newspapers for the organization of workers had been raised and reporters started to write about the labor issues. The Arab Higher Committee corresponded to the appeal by PAWS by demanding actual support for not only workers but also their families and children.

However, the Committee's planned implementation was through registration and a questionnaire, which made PAWS doubtful their purpose. PAWS expressed their discomfort about the unpublished result to the Arab Higher Committee, and the committee mentioned that was only a charitable activities supported by the YMMA Haifa branch which had exerted great effort for educational support. The charitable activities in Haifa were carried out by the Islamic Association, but the head of the association regarded it as the same body as the YMMA, who utilized the *zakāt* and started six elementary schools in Haifa alone. Moreover, their income was spent on health care centers in the rural areas around Haifa [Ibrāhīm 2005: 17–21], and most people sent the heads of the household to work in town.

The Menace of Alienation

Political leaders and notables started to realize the necessity of organizing the workers; as mentioned above, workers became an important social component of groups and represented the national organization. There could have been competition with the Jewish Organization to include them in the Palestinian national movement [Ibrāhīm 2005: 203f]. The relationship with PAWS had not been developed extensively, yet it had been acknowledged by the YMMA run night schools and offered workers' children the opportunity to join in education.

The YMMA had sent their support for the railway workers in the northern area and sent their protest against wage differentiation. Their general statements called for the protection of workers and the necessity for the organization of Arab labor, as the National Union had expressed [*al-Jāmi'a al-'Arabīya* 1929 (Jan. 8, Mar. 11)]. The head of the YMMA Haifa branch was conscious of this matter [Ibrāhīm 2005: 203f].

There was competition with Histadrut, in the sense of inclusion as well as other push factors to work for PAWS, involved the menace of communism that criticize Palestinian political circles defined as a exploiting class or bourgeoisie. So the YMMA promoted the inclusion arguing that it would weaken national unity. The Communists' appeals for a joint (bi-national) union especially was opposed to their ideal of forming a National Union (*al-Niqāba al-Waṭaniya*), as discussed in the *Filasṭīn* and *al-Jāmi'a al-'Arabīya*; the sense of crisis sometimes led to admittance for the protection of workers, but they justified their ideals

¹³ Attendants were those from the Histadrut, the Chairman of the Labor Committee, officials of the Government and from the Palestinian side, some members of the Chambers of the Commerce and the General Manager of Arab Bank, who was named Rashīd al-Ḥājī Ibrāhīm and was also the head of the Haifa branch of the YMMA [*al-Jāmi'a al-'Arabīya* 1927 (Dec. 19, 26)].

by criticizing the communism imported with Zionist [*Filasṭīn* 1927 (Mar. 13); 1928 (Jun. 15); *al-Jāmi'a al-'Arabīya* 1928 (Jul. 12, Aug 6)].

4. Activities of the YMMA: Part 2

In 1929, the general congress of the YMMA mainly called for the remediation of unequal employment and the establishment of educational institutions with the support of workers. The night schools were already being run, especially in Haifa and Gaza, where there were high estimates of unskilled labor that led to increases in the needs of the communities [*Filasṭīn* 1928 (Nov. 9)]. The members of the YMMA taught workers how to read and basic mathematics [*Filasṭīn* 1929 (May 9)].

Schools and Medical Care

The YMMA established branches in various parts of Palestine, from the Gaza Strip to Safad [*al-Jāmi'a al-'Arabīya* 1928 (Oct. 16, Aug. 23)], and tried to form the basis of a cohesive movement; moreover, they offered social services, such as charitable support; other night schools which were established in Gaza, Rydda, and Safad [*al-Jāmi'a al-'Arabīya* 1928 (Oct. 23)]; free medical care for Ramleh; and some consultation bodies regarding legislative matters. Schools were set up in Salwan and Akka [*al-Jāmi'a al-'Arabīya* 1928 (Apr. 4)]. The YMMA's activities propagated throughout Palestine. In Haifa, graduates from school were counted as more than 3000 yearly; furthermore, various schools were established in other areas, such as an elementary at Salwan [*al-Jāmi'a al-'Arabīya* 1929 (Jul. 22)], elementary and intermediate schools in Akka [*al-Jāmi'a al-'Arabīya* 1928 (Aug. 26)], and a high school in Nablus [*al-Jāmi'a al-'Arabīya* 1928 (Jun. 17)]. This increase of in the number of schools was the result to match the needs for education, yet failed to the problem of unemployed educated people. The YMMA started the Agricultural Institution in Gaza and Hebron and offered courses for free, the results were not recorded, and could be assumed even the public agricultural school established by the British budget contribute neither to a solution to the unemployment problem nor the improvement of agriculture [Tyler 2001: 181–183].

There were needs for education and the consciousness of this necessity was widely held, yet those who were educated did not have enough opportunities for employment. The unequal allocation at the governmental offices especially was a main issue to be solved [Wasserstein, 1978: 169–171].¹⁴ The educated youths' fear could be seen sometimes in their letters sent to the newspapers, letters which deplored the discriminative wages and few employment opportunities, as well as their lack of capital for starting or conducting any business [*al-Jāmi'a*

¹⁴ In 1925, the rate of Muslim to Christian officials in the government was 914: 856. In 1929, it was 1111:1176. Christians had advantages, even though they were only 30% of the entire population.

al-‘Arabīya 1927 (Sep. 19)].

The Organization of Educated Unemployed Youth

The YMMA started to organize students also as potential unemployed people. Nablus and Akka Branch organized strikes and then Akka branch held a students’ conference that called for an increase in Arab employment [*al-Jāmi‘a al-‘Arabīya* 1928 (May 9)]. Akka’s strike was held just before the Wailing Wall riot, so it had been done as a process of political mobilization [Bayān al-Ḥūt 1986: 324]. The YMMA then started with those students’ organizations that protested the Mandate itself. Those who had participated in the strike were likely to be highly educated and seeking jobs, because compared to agricultural labourers, their employment opportunities were scarce in the public sector with its unequal wages, and in the private sector, where big industry protected by the government routinely discriminated against and the opportunities were much less.¹⁵

If the young educated were going to try to fix the problems radically, the problem of the Mandate itself was in their way. The YMMA had consistently devoted themselves to charitable activities, but the members realized social services and the mutual assistance could not solve the situation. Their activities were aimed at the mobilization of workers and formed the basis of the national movements. In the process, they could not avoid being aware of the shortage of their power; their endeavors for improvement faced a severe reality that also inclined members to get involved in political activities. After the riot in 1929, and the heads of the branches had been investigated and arrested, the members started to criticize the Arab Higher Committee and the Supreme Muslim Council for lacking any solutions [*al-Jāmi‘a al-‘Arabīya* 1930 (Apr. 5)]. In addition, the YMMA’s Central Office in Egypt altered their activities.¹⁶

Although the situation had been calmed after the incident, there was a congress held by PAWS for all the union, and the reaction from the YMMA was a telegram sent to celebrate its opening; but noone attended. The YMMA continued to organize workers and established “the united national union,” but without participants from PAWS [*al-Jāmi‘a al-‘Arabīya* 1930 (Feb. 26)]. From PAWS, there was no official involvement in the political incident, yet they had realized the common benefit and there was not any more cooperation with Zionists’ side.

5. Conclusion

Looking back, the successive organizations conducted by the YMMA in recruiting workers

¹⁵ The employment rates of Arabs are listed as 20% at Shell [Smith 1991: 135-160; *al-Jāmi‘a al-‘Arabīya* 1929 (Nov. 23)]. The Electric Company, Rutenberg, did not hire Palestinians [Smith 1991: 120].

¹⁶ The activities were prohibited by the Mandatory authorities in 1934. [Seikaly 1998: 236].

to participate and become involved in their activities were mutually supportive. Except for its undeveloped relationship with PAWS, there was a mutual linkage. Even though not all the workers were organized, opposed to as with PAWS, there was a sense of shared interests among the YMMA and the newly emerged workers; for the YMMA, they were clearly conscious that alienated people were going to be the significant components of Palestinian society and their movements, and in this sense, the very beginning of the formation of a nationwide political movement was ignited successfully.

This study's original aim needs to deal with the period until the Great Revolt, as it was composed of two phases: one included the larger framework of Middle Eastern regional dynamics as the context in which the Palestinian social problems that were attributed by the problems at that time developed; the other concerned the rather precise contents of these dynamics, with the social dimension relating to the political structure of the leaders and the social structure affected by economic change—which determined the historical momentum and whether the situation would be conflictive or peaceful. Thus, the endeavors of the YMMA, which ultimately transformed the various contradictions of Mandate— and its result—into an eruption of their power during the 1930s, should be examined. The YMMA's potential to revitalize large numbers of people have significant implications that have not been explored enough here. As with most of the study of contemporary history, both objectives strive to bring together all the systems colored by either colonial or feudal structures, for the basis of a national cohesive movement of people to liberate themselves.

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