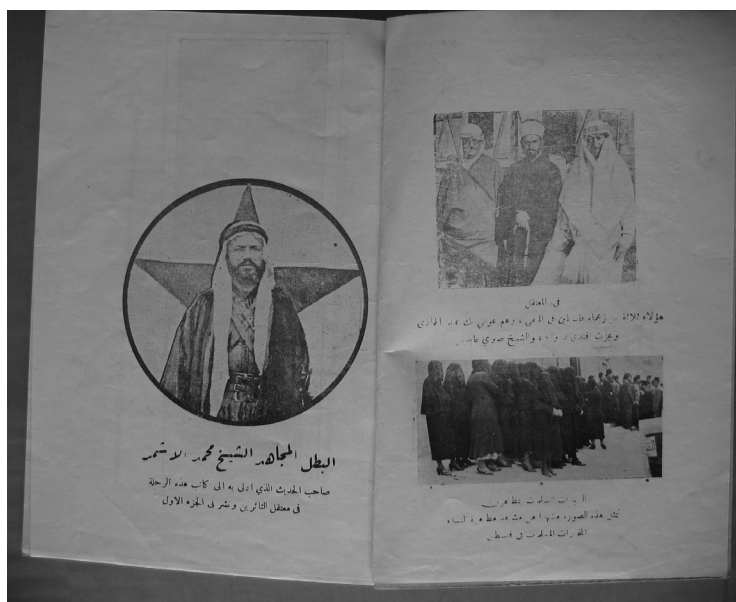


**Left:** Cover of *Rihla bayna al-jibal fi ma'aqil al-tha'irin* (Journey across the mountains in the strongholds of the rebels).

**Bottom:** Photo spread from from *Rihla*, volume 2.



# Reporting the Insurgency: An Arabic Reportage on the 1936 Revolt in Palestine

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**Abstract:** Scholars have highlighted the relative dearth of literary journalism in the contemporary Arab Middle East. In the twentieth-century interwar period, though, a few works of narrative journalism were published in Palestine, when the British controlled the country under the terms of the League of Nations Mandate. This study explores “Rihla bayna al-jibal fi ma’aqil al-tha’irin” (Journey across the mountains in the strongholds of the rebels)—an Arabic text that covers the Palestinian revolt of 1936. Initially serialized in a Jaffa newspaper toward the end of the insurgency and then collected in book form, the text was presented as a translation of the articles of a Western foreign correspondent. A close reading will reveal that it is rather the work of an Arab journalist, written for Palestinian readers, and that it meets the defining criteria of literary journalism, despite its concessions to fiction. Factors that would explain the scarcity of Arabic literary journalism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries will be used as terms of reference to investigate the circumstances of publication, the design, and the models of this Palestinian reportage. It will be argued that: the political sensitivity of the topic attracted readers and did not discourage advertisers from supporting the daily in which the reportage appeared; British press censorship contributed to shaping its design; and the format of literary reporting, borrowed from the U.S. and European press, was employed to convey an anticolonial message.

**Keywords:** literary reportage – Palestine – 1936 Arab revolt – Arabic literary journalism – censorship

Times of tremendous political transformation have often been met with matching changes in the domains of literature and the media in the Arab world. One such time was the twentieth-century interwar period when the current states of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, and Palestine were administered by France and Great Britain within the framework of the League of Nations mandates. Devised with the intent to assist these countries make the transition to self-determination, the mandates proved a controversial structure that the mandated peoples often regarded as an unjust and oppressive form of colonial domination. Consequently, in coincidence with specific historical moments, they did what populations perceiving themselves as oppressed and wronged against usually do: they protested, organized strikes, set up opposition groups and, in extreme circumstances, took up arms and rebelled. In all of this, Arab journalists followed, and sometimes took part in, the events, while always remaining vigilant to the forms of writing that were coming from Europe and the United States. Thus, they could not help but notice the spread of a new journalistic format that was used to cover troubled times and contentious topics such as political revolutions and civil wars.

Despite the current academic interest in narrative journalism, very little research seems to be available about its history in the Arab world. In one of the few scholarly pieces on the contemporary Middle East, David Abrahamson and Ibrahim Abusharif note the relative absence of literary journalism in the region and ascribe such a conspicuous deficiency to three fundamental reasons.<sup>1</sup> The first is based on both financial and literary considerations: relying on the authority of the Egyptian feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi,<sup>2</sup> they conclude that Arabs prefer fiction over nonfiction because the former allows them “to escape the harsher realities of their life.”<sup>3</sup> This would have dire economic consequences for nonfiction because not only would readers be unwilling to bear its costs, but advertisers would also be discouraged from choosing newspapers that publish it out of fear that narrative reporting might incur the anger of despotic governments. Second, the level of control that Arab governments exert over the press smothers longform journalism in the cradle because the genre often deals with sensitive topics. Third, the memory of Western colonialism and the Israel-Palestine conflict would have generated “an underlying mistrust for many of the cultural forms that the West has to offer.”<sup>4</sup>

Contrary to the expectations built on the limited academic literature, some works of Arabic narrative journalism come directly from Palestine and date from the years of the British Mandate. More specifically, some examples of literary reportage were published when the anticolonial struggle of the Palestinian Arabs took the form of a violent, all-out rebellion between 1936

and 1939. As Thomas B. Connery has noted about the United States, so also in Palestine, the 1930s saw an increase in works of literary journalism because the decade was “a time of tremendous change,” linking the appearance of progressive ideas to big changes in the media.<sup>5</sup> A reader knowledgeable of the forms of contemporary newspapers would probably liken one of these texts, serialized in 1936, to a work of literary reportage. Titled “Rihla bayna al-jibal fi ma‘aql al-tha‘irin” (Journey across the mountains in the strongholds of the rebels),<sup>6</sup> its twenty-one installments came out in the Jaffa newspaper *al-Jami‘a al-Islamiyya* (The Islamic union) from September 27 through October 28, after which the series was discontinued and left incomplete without notice or explanation. Around the same time, the publishing house belonging to and named after *al-Jami‘a al-Islamiyya* collected the installments in two small volumes. The newspaper editor introduced them as a collection of articles penned by an unnamed foreign journalist who had granted exclusive publishing rights in Palestine to *al-Jami‘a al-Islamiyya*.<sup>7</sup> However, far from being what it claims, the book rather reads as a reportage originally written for a Palestinian audience.

Peculiar circumstances brought about the configuration of this book through a hybridization experiment that extended the already blurred boundaries between fiction and reportage as they were conceived in the U.S. and European press of the time. Nonetheless, the *Rihla* fulfills the main criteria that define literary journalism according to its practitioners. The three factors that Abrahamson and Abusharif propose to explain a general phenomenon in the contemporary Arab world will then provide the frame of reference for this attempt at elucidating the appearance of a reportage in an earlier period. In other words, while Abrahamson and Abusharif’s propositions may explain the apparent dearth of literary journalism in the contemporary Middle East, there is reason to believe that precisely the same factors underlay this earlier work of literary reportage.

In fact, in a climate of intense political and military confrontation, reader response pushed *al-Jami‘a al-Islamiyya* to collect the installments of the “Rihla” into two book volumes, while advertisers kept supporting the newspaper. At the same time, the level of censorship that the British authorities were imposing on the press in Palestine contributed to informing the design and features of the serialized episodes. Finally, this exploration will show that the (presumably Arab) author decided to follow the example of European and U.S. journalists, who had made literary reporting well known through their coverage of other violent events, because he trusted the “revolutionary” potential of this genre of writing. In so doing, the author brought to the surface the transformation affecting the narrator’s viewpoint and personality during

his immersion experience, which usually remains unexpressed in works by Western authors.

A preliminary sketch of the Palestinian revolt will provide some historical background. Then, evidence will be provided to support the argument that the *Rihla* was written by an Arab author and meets the requisites to be considered a reportage. Finally, the study will expand on the roles that reader response, advertisers' support, censorship as an opportunity for creativity, and the specifics of this transfer of a literary form from the Western press contributed to the inception of the *Rihla*.

### **In the Strongholds of the Rebels, as a Literary Reportage**

The historical context in which the *Rihla* came to light is what Ted Swedenburg has dubbed "the most significant anticolonial insurgency in the Arab East during the interwar period."<sup>8</sup> Because of the growing influx of Jewish immigrants, groups of modern-educated political activists from a middle-class background led the struggle against the British administration and started a general strike on April 19, 1936. In the first month, national committees were established across the country to organize the protests. At the same time, the leaders of the main political parties formed the Arab Higher Committee (AHC) to provide national leadership for the strike. They convened a meeting of the national committees in Jerusalem on May 7, 1936, during which they demanded that the British concede local government to the people of Palestine, curb Jewish immigration, and stop land sales to Jews. Starting from May, the turmoil escalated into an all-out revolt. Armed bands, mostly of peasants, carried out acts of guerrilla warfare against British and Jewish targets. In the second half of August, several hundred fighters from other Arab countries joined the rebellion under the command of the Lebanese Fawzi al-Qawuqji. The AHC called off the strike on October 12, 1936, but the only concession they obtained from the British was the dispatch of a royal commission. The latter published its proceedings in July 1937, recommending that Palestine be divided into two states: one Arab and one Jewish. The Arab population strongly rejected this solution and in September 1937 resumed the revolt, which would eventually be stifled in 1939.<sup>9</sup>

The first installments of the "Rihla" were published in the last few weeks of the 1936 stage of the revolt. The newspaper editor presented it as an account written by "a correspondent of one of the major foreign newspapers."<sup>10</sup> The correspondent had recently undertaken a journey in northern Palestine and was sending the pieces to his newspaper, on the same date of their publication in *al-Jami'a al-Islamiyya*. Readers also learn from the reportage itself that the narrator-reporter hails from an unspecified Western country and

studied Arabic at university.<sup>11</sup> All the episodes published in the newspaper are numbered, and each carries the overall title and an explanatory subheading (“A foreign journalist describes his experiences in the north”). Yet the short chapters do not quite fit the editorial needs of the newspaper, as they are sometimes interrupted in the middle.<sup>12</sup> Overall, the “Rihla” seems more a long text written for a book project that was then divided into installments to be accommodated in the newspaper columns without much change.

The foreign correspondent’s journey takes place over an uninterrupted period of five days. Textual clues suggest it started on or around September 10, 1936, and there are hints the author may have conflated different journeys or compressed a longer trip into one narration. The narrator departs from Jerusalem by car without a clear plan, wishing to meet the armed bands operating in the northern region, where the fiercest fights were then occurring. At the first stopover in Nablus, he interviews the president of the local national committee. There, the two men watch from the balcony of the president’s house as Palestinian guerrillas attack a Jewish convoy.<sup>13</sup> In the town of Anabta, the narrator chances upon a man who agrees to become his guide. This unnamed Palestinian provides the narrator with Arab clothes and travels with him by horse to the rebel bands’ headquarters. Thus, on his very first night, the reporter has the good fortune to interview two prominent, unnamed, rebel commanders, whom Palestinian readers of the time would easily identify as al-Qawuqji and the Syrian Muhammad al-Ashmar. The two rebels articulate the reasons foreign fighters like themselves are joining the Palestinian insurgency from, respectively, an Arab nationalist and a Muslim viewpoint.

The following day, the narrator stops at a larger town, where he has lunch with a group of rural notables that include a wise and taciturn person. This man, unnamed but to be identified as the Palestinian rebel commander ‘Arif ‘Abd al-Raziq, argues for the Palestinian rebels’ love for freedom and their independence from the decisions of the AHC. All along the journey, villagers and insurgents share with the foreign correspondent both their views and a wealth of stories about the revolt. At the same time, the narrator frequently complains about the hardships and perils of his journey, sometimes expressing regret about his choice to visit Palestine. At the last stopover, though, he realizes that his many experiences have radically changed his attitude towards the Palestinian Arabs.

### **The Foreign Correspondent as Literary Ploy**

Some features of the text suggest the claim that a foreign correspondent is its author is a literary ploy. Neither the foreword to the book nor the first installment in the newspaper provides any detail regarding the identity of

either the journalist or his newspaper. The editors of the book try to make up for this failure to comply with the rules of translation from the foreign press by asserting that the author had asked that his name be kept secret.<sup>14</sup> Yet, in addition to the anonymous authorship, other peculiarities and inconsistencies of the text stand out, revealing plot holes and glaring omissions. For one, the correspondent describes his journey as unplanned wanderings that sometimes take turns and trajectories chosen on a whim.<sup>15</sup> Even his travel guide, who is well acquainted with the whereabouts and secrets of the insurgents, is a Palestinian whom the correspondent chances upon while smoking a narghile at a coffeehouse. In reality, such a journey would have required thorough planning and liaising with the rebels, because some of its stretches, especially the road between Nablus and Anabta, were the favored areas for bomb attacks and landmines.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it seems unlikely that al-Qawuqji would have allowed an unknown foreign journalist with no connection to the milieu of the rebellion to visit his headquarters, because he was very cautious about the risk of being spied upon.<sup>17</sup> What is also surprising in a reportage allegedly written for foreign readers is the lack of background information related to the political landscape of the rebellion in Palestine.<sup>18</sup> The author goes so far as to attach an announcement issued by the rebels in response to a Statement of Policy of the Colonial Office, but he glosses over the British document itself and the related reply from the AHC.<sup>19</sup> It is therefore clear that this account was written for a Palestinian audience, as the implied reader would need to be abreast of many details of the revolt without subscribing to the positions of the Arab political leadership.

Such an interpretation brings up that most important question when reading a book, which, as Gregory Currie has noted, readers seldom need to ask: Is this a work of fiction or nonfiction?<sup>20</sup> More precisely, is the *Rihla* a novel containing portions of factual references or a reportage of a journalistic mission that is partially cloaked in fiction? Determining the answer to this question will first address the issue from the viewpoint of pragmatics and narratology and then measure it against the description of the literary journalism genre proposed by practitioners.

First, a prefatory remark to the book version of the *Rihla* suggests its nonfictional status. Written by an anonymous editor, the foreword begins as follows:

Perhaps, the best testimony of the Arab Palestinian question in its latest stage are these installments that were written by a foreign journalist, who imposed as a condition that we do not reveal his name, . . . after he carried out a tiring journey in the northern mountains of Palestine, where a devout group of Arabs that are fighting on the path of God and the homeland are stationed.<sup>21</sup>



This introductory passage then describes the journalist's account as "what he saw," as does a similar short paragraph introducing the first newspaper installment.<sup>22</sup> Second, the *Rihla* delves into current events and public figures of paramount importance in the Arab Middle East at the time of publication, and the newspaper in which its installments appeared does not hint at the possibility the content might be fictional. Later issues of the daily also quoted passages of the interview with al-Ashmar that is contained in the *Rihla*.<sup>23</sup> Thus, paratextual comments and situational clues point out its status as nonfictional.

### Possible Breaches of Literary Journalism Conventions

Then, there are the questions of how to explain the use of a fictitious narrator and other changes that likely altered facts by recasting some events and changing dialogues as if the journalist were a foreign reporter? Contemporary practitioners of literary journalism might regard these features as objectionable and conclude that the *Rihla* breaches some fundamental aesthetic conventions of reportage. However, a look into the tradition of European and U.S. journalism in the first half of the twentieth century confirms that the boundaries between literary reportage and novel tended to be less inviolable than today's critics might expect. For example, a few scholars share the opinion that the U.S. writer John Reed sometimes departed from factual accuracy because of his love for embroidering a good story.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in the writings of several famous authors dealing with the Spanish civil war, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction was often blurred. Well-known books that are traditionally categorized as novels, such as Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), André Malraux's *L'Espoir* (*Man's Hope*, 1937), and Gustav Regler's *Das große Beispiel* (*The Great Crusade*, 1940), contain elements of factual reporting. On the other hand, works usually regarded as reportage, such as George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) and Georges Bernanos's *Les Grands Cimetières sous la Lune* (*A Diary of My Times*, 1938), make many concessions to fiction, or appear to, because of forgetfulness and inadvertent mistakes.<sup>25</sup> In particular, according to Simard-Houde, the French *grand reportage* in the interwar period is often characterized by a high degree of fictionalization, and sometimes even trespasses into the field of the novel.<sup>26</sup> Early authors of literary journalism who did not conform to strict rules of accurate representation may be "exculpated," Mark Kramer suggests, by the early phase of the genre itself and "the presumed lack of intention to deceive."<sup>27</sup>

As will be shown, the *Rihla* possesses most, if not all, of the characteristics that, according to some experts of the field, define the craft of literary journalism. In particular, the following defining principles, which Kramer pro-



posed in his list of “breakable rules,” will be examined: immersion research, covenants about accuracy and candor, voice, style, a disengaged and mobile stance, structure, and meaning built upon reader’s sequential reactions.<sup>28</sup>

The *Rihla* meets the first rule of being based on immersion research, as it claims first-hand experience of the people, places, and living conditions of the insurgency. Its author was probably a Syrian newspaper’s correspondent who spent time with the armed bands in September 1936. According to the Damascus newspaper *Alif-Ba’*, an unnamed reporter from their staff traveled to Northern Palestine to interview some rebels.<sup>29</sup> His mission lasted at least ten days and, in his own words, was “an adventure surrounded by countless perils.” Oddly enough, the assignment produced only a two-column account with a relatively narrow focus.<sup>30</sup> In a separate study, this author has argued the journalist is an *Alif-Ba’* correspondent from Jaffa, Mahmud al-Jarkas, who would later author a long interview with the commander-in-chief of the revolt.<sup>31</sup> There are several reasons to surmise that al-Jarkas authored the *Rihla*, the content of which draws from the mission he had originally carried out for his newspaper. First, the *Alif-Ba’* correspondent’s article is datelined Jenin [Palestine], September 6, only a few days before the time, and close to the place, of the setting of the *Rihla*. Second, the article shares some points with the book: both the unnamed, *Alif-Ba’* reporter and the narrator of the *Rihla* declare at the beginning of their pieces that their missions are motivated by their “desire” (*raghba*) to interview the Palestinian rebels.<sup>32</sup> And third, the interviewees of the *Alif-Ba’* article and the rural notables in the *Rihla* are asked the same questions regarding their obedience to the AHC, and both give similar answers that stress their independence. The author of the *Alif-Ba’* article downplays the differences, praising the complementarity and solidarity between politicians and guerrillas—as does the *Rihla* narrator.<sup>33</sup>

As Kramer writes, “*Literary journalists work out implicit covenants about accuracy and candor with readers and with sources.*”<sup>34</sup> The sort of implicit covenant that binds the writer to his readers is easily recognizable in the *Rihla*, as are the camouflage the narrator has taken and his relationship with his sources. The author promises his readers that he will be offering a testimony based on first-hand experience. However, as already evidenced, the noncompliance with the conventions regulating the translation of articles from the foreign press warns readers about the limits of such a claim to truthfulness. At the same time, the preface to the book exposes the implausibility that a Western, non-Muslim journalist would have authored “a memorial of a glorious jihad that wrote for the Arabs of Palestine pages that will remain immortal examples.”<sup>35</sup>

### Retrospective Narratives, Framing Devices

While the *Rihla* may well be based on real experience, what emerges is the writer's craft of selecting, simplifying, amplifying, and ordering fragments of impressions and events to offer his readers what Susanne Langer describes as the appearance of "a purely and completely experienced reality."<sup>36</sup> Two features reveal the artificiality of the attempt at constituting what Langer calls "*virtual life*."<sup>37</sup> One is the retrospective narrative that, even if realized a few days after the travel, aims to confer on the tale the virtual appearance of a complete experience. The other feature is the framing device adopted: the two different forewords that introduce the newspaper installments and the book, written by an editor who is not, or pretends not to be, the author. As John Hellmann also points out, although such prefaces often emphasize the factuality of the text that they frame, they acknowledge the "imaginative transformation" wrought by the author, thus betraying the fictional nature of its form.<sup>38</sup>

The *Rihla* author's attitude towards his sources is clearly stated in the argument he employs at the beginning of the book to convince his would-be guide of his good intentions. He writes, "After some effort I managed to convince him that my work is of benefit to the Arabs and the *mujahideen* themselves, and, that the publication of such facts in the newspapers of the West would serve the [Palestinian Arab] cause."<sup>39</sup>

Although the book's foreword stresses the correspondent's fairness towards his subject, the reportage makes little room for another point of view other than that of the bands grouped around al-Qawuqji. This leads to another essential characteristic of literary journalism, stressed also by Tom Wolfe: voice.<sup>40</sup> In more recent times, scholars of literary journalism have employed this term with two competing meanings. First, voice may signify the narrative voice telling the story.<sup>41</sup> In this case, Gérard Genette's terminology devised for fiction would identify the narrating voice in the *Rihla* as "auto-diegetic," for the first-person narrator is also the main character of the story. The perspective from which the foreign reporter relates the facts is what Genette calls "internal focalization," which means the narrator filters all the information provided without being able to intrude in the inner thoughts of the other characters.<sup>42</sup>

However, scholars and practitioners of literary nonfiction more often refer to personal authorial voice, a metaphor that suggests coherent inferences regarding the relationship between a piece of writing and its individual author. Thus conceived, voice is one of the defining marks of literary journalism, as opposed to the impersonal tone of news reporting. As Kramer stresses, it is the means through which the personality of the author comes out, without any "bureaucratic shelter" and unaffiliated with "any institution."<sup>43</sup> The

personality that the authorial voice conveys in the *Rihla* shows enthusiasm for the ideals of the revolt, extends a great deal of respect to the top rebel commanders, cannot hide his religious faith, and is fascinated by the life choices of the rebel bands. When approaching his first stop, the narrator enthusiastically cries out:

. . . the driver said that this is Nablus. This is Nablus?? This name is not unfamiliar to anyone who has stayed in this country even only one day. It was the first-born daughter of the revolt, and from there the first rebel left for the mountains; there the [British] army faced horrors that they have not encountered anywhere else, so much that even its name became intimidating.<sup>44</sup>

### Betraying Cultural Identity

In the same way, some stylistic features betray the cultural identity of the author. Sentence length and punctuation in the reportage are typical of Arabic journalistic prose, as is also the division of the text into small sections, often comprising only one short paragraph each and introduced by explanatory headings. Alternating descriptive passages and direct dialogue in some sections of volume two also recall the style of shorter journalistic pieces bordering on literary journalism, such as the aforementioned *Alifba*' article of September 10, 1936. In the text, the implied Arab author does not signal any gap between his positions on the parties involved in the revolt and the views of the narrating 'I,' the alleged Western reporter. The inquisitive tone the narrator sometimes uses with lower-ranking insurgents as a self-conscious tool of his craft gives way to self-effacement when he interviews more prominent figures, who almost intimidate him. Thus, the author omitted his questions to the two top commanders and arranged a synthesis of their answers as if they were uninterrupted monologues.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, some parts of the *Rihla* make for dull reading. The device of ascribing the narration to a foreign reporter combines with the excluding of details to avoid the wrath of the censor to flatten the style of the book. That the narrator of this adventurous tour does not give personal insights and describes insurgents and villagers in generic and colorless ways, results in the places and people failing to come alive on the page. However, rare passages do let seep a mixture of reverential awe and genuine fear of the rebels. For instance, the simile that describes their demeanor inside their headquarters evokes the feral slowness and fixed gaze of predators in their lair: "In the commander's headquarters we sat on Arab seats prepared for the visitors. I looked around, right and left, where the tough armed men were sitting heavily like lions, all of them staring at me menacingly."<sup>46</sup>

Another exception to the dullness in the narration is the telling of stories about Palestinian women's courage. One of them in particular is worth quoting because it condenses the main themes of the discourse on the 1936–39 revolt: the brave self-sacrifice of the insurgents, the unequal contest between the most powerful colonial empire and the small rebel bands, the unmistakable religious connotation that the revolt acquired, especially in the countryside; and villagers' spontaneous support of, and women's unprecedented participation in, the anticolonial struggle.

Everything starts with a massive operation, whereby 3,000 British soldiers—employing tanks, armored cars, and airplanes—surround a much smaller rebel band in the mountains. Then, there follows:

In a village close to the battle, an Arab noblewoman had come to know how things stood. She was one of those women in whose heart faith dwells, and, as soon as she knew of the battle, she made her way through mountains and valleys. Bare-footed and with her face unveiled, she stirred up the spirits of thousands of armed men and took their lead, awakening their zeal with her angelic, warm voice. She arrived at the battlefield while the *mujahidin* were on their knees because they had almost run out of ammunition. The army was closing in on them, and they had set their minds on fighting with knives and bayonets, because they preferred the honored death of the martyrs to surrendering. . . . In such a predicament, the Arab lady joined them, leading a large multitude of men who were praising God and repeating "*Allahu Akbar*." They surrounded the army as tightly as a bracelet wraps the wrist, and the two factions clashed in a deadly battle, at the end of which the rebels withdrew in an orderly way while the soldiers dispersed.<sup>47</sup>

The young Palestinian journalist Muhammad Mustafa Ghandur noticed the symbolic potential of this story. He would develop the character of this heroine into an allegory for the violated country and exploit some details of this clash in his novel, *Tha'r al-dam* (Blood Revenge), published in 1939.<sup>48</sup>

### Recollection and Digression

Another important feature of literary journalism is the adoption of "a disengaged and mobile stance" to tell stories and address readers. As has been suggested in this analysis, the whole *Rihla* story is narrated from what Kramer calls a "retrospective platform," which the narrating "I" uses, not only to recollect, but also to comment on his memories, address the reader directly and allow digressions.<sup>49</sup> The digressions of this reportage are usually short and explanatory or anecdotal. The reporter does not dwell on explanations, adding, instead, mostly concise clarifications. For example, when he passes by the place where an event that is considered the prelude to the insurgency happened, he tells his readers:

Along the route between Deir Sharaf and Anabta are sinuous, high mountains, across which the road twists and bends repeatedly. In one of these curves, which the driver said is called Bal'a Bend, the first incident happened in the night between the 16 and 17 of last April. The first spark of the current revolt was ignited two days later.<sup>50</sup>

The narrator sometimes slows the pace of his narration to tell stories that provide evidence for some of the points he makes. Besides the accounts attesting to women's participation in the rebellion, for instance, he narrates an episode to undergird his assertion that "the hatred of colonialism and colonizers is deeply rooted in the hearts of the Arabs." Remarkably, here the author dares to put his thoughts in the mind of a British officer:

In that village . . . there was a child that was playing in the street. When he heard the news that the army was arriving, instead of fleeing to hide at home, he ran to the place where he had already prepared a scrap of iron as sharp as a razor blade. He grabbed it and used it to attack the soldiers, while calling them names. The [British] commander happened to be close by and ordered a soldier to bring him the child. The soldier dutifully went to catch the child, but the latter resisted and, instead of running away, attacked him with his knife! While the soldier was lifting him up with his hands to take him to the commander, the boy never stopped fighting back and repeatedly stabbed his captor, until he had been brought in front of the officer. After the commander had had an unusual and pleasant exchange with that innocent child, he liked him and undoubtedly believed that a country that makes children like that, who was fed by his mother the hatred of colonialism and colonialists from the earliest age, a nation like this will not be colonized and will not perish."<sup>51</sup>

Kramer argues that structure is of primary importance to readers' experience, and meaning is developed by "*building upon readers' sequential reactions*."<sup>52</sup> The narrative of the *Rihla* follows a chronological succession of travels and stopovers. The author slows down and indulges in telling stories at certain points, adding the narrator's impressions, or providing information, at certain others. Thus, the tour brings the foreign correspondent, and with him also his readers, to realize the rebels are not brutes and all the different strata of Palestinian Arab society support the insurgency. The first interviewee, the president of the Nablus national committee, projects an image of "gravitas and dignity" as he shares "valuable special information"<sup>53</sup> with the narrator. The visit to the rebels' headquarters shows they are organized according to democratic principles that enable all of the fighters to be acquainted with the developments of their struggle and address their commander freely.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, the journalist seeks to show that the leaders of the revolt are remarkable individuals who would be able to lead the army of a modern state.

To this goal, he gives “. . . a summary of [the] invaluable declarations [of the Commander-in-chief], so that the people of my race in the West understand the cultural level of these whom some deceptive newspapers describe as criminals. By my life, as far as I saw and heard, they are the best of men in science and morals.”<sup>55</sup>

The narrator attends a rebel congress and attaches a copy of its deliberations to his reportage to show that the insurgents have established a council that responds to the statement of policy of the British government as the institutions of a modern state would do.<sup>56</sup> After his conversations with people from the countryside, the reporter concludes that “the [Palestinian] peasants are deeply concerned with the political situation and the destiny of their country, and they are as able to understand the national politics as do men of culture in towns.”<sup>57</sup> After having been taken along all the steps of this tour, readers will have had all the vicarious emotional and intellectual experiences that allow them to draw their own conclusions regarding the final meaning of the complex experience narrated in this book. Even though the text never spells it out, the succession of scenes the author sets up converge to argue that the Palestinians deserve to have their own state, because they have the moral standing and intellectual aptitude to rule themselves without the assistance of the Mandate Power.

### Readers' Response to the Text and Censorship

Three different kinds of evidence witness to the success of the *Rihla*. The first is the decision to collect its installments into bound volumes. Publishing was an expensive venture in the 1930s in Palestine, due to the high cost of both paper and printing facilities, and the competition of high-quality publications that were coming from other Arab countries, especially Egypt.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, *al-Jami'a al-Islamiyya* decided to collect the “Rihla” into volumes shortly after its publication in the newspaper. As the anonymous foreword to the book explains:

. . . people received [the installments] very enthusiastically due to the moderation that they contain, as the situation requires, and they rushed to them. That is proven by the fact that many insistently requested the issues [of the newspaper] that they had missed, in which those installments had been serialized.<sup>59</sup>

The success of the book is also confirmed by diplomatic documents from other Arab countries where its distribution was attempted and by intertextual references. In March 1937, the authorities of the French Mandate banned the *Rihla* from Lebanon and Syria.<sup>60</sup> Their assessment was that “this booklet is likely to overexcite the spirits” of the readers, because “[t]he insurgents,

most of whom were Syrian (Kaoukji, El Assi, El Achmar, etc...), are treated as heroes.”<sup>61</sup> However, the *Rihla* continued to circulate in Syria, as can be deduced from a reference in a 1938 book by Khidr al-‘Ali Mahfuz, one of the Syrian volunteers who had joined the revolt in Palestine in 1936. Mahfuz probably referred to the way the author of the reportage—as is the “custom” of journalists—embellished “the description of this insane adventure” of crossing the barren mountains of Northern Palestine.<sup>62</sup> During the second phase of the revolt, another anonymous reportage titled *Mughamarati fi jibal Filastin* (My adventures in the mountains of Palestine) imitated the format of the *Rihla*.<sup>63</sup> In 1939 Ghandur would also borrow some passages and take inspiration from the *Rihla* for his novel, *Tha’r al-dam* (Blood revenge).<sup>64</sup>

Third, as noted earlier, Abrahamson and Abusharif argue that “fear of disapproval and retribution” by Middle Eastern governments might prevent advertisers from employing media outlets that are not aligned with the interests and prohibitions of the ruling parties.<sup>65</sup> In the 1930s, however, the publication of this reportage did not affect the appearance of advertisements in *al-Jami’a al-Islamiyya*. As in other newspapers, advertisements had virtually disappeared during the revolt because of the general strike, but they resumed as before in the second half of October 1936.

Reviewing a contemporary Iranian novel, critic James Wood argues that “Tyranny is the mother of metaphor, and all that.”<sup>66</sup> In some instances, Wood continues, limits imposed by censorship have inspired the creativity of fiction writers, who need to invent more sensitive and thoughtful strategies to illustrate their points. Similar reasons probably prompted the author of the *Rihla* to attribute the narrative of his travels to a foreign correspondent.

In April 1936, Arabic newspapers in Palestine enthusiastically supported the general strike and offered detailed coverage of the activities of the popular committees and the AHC.<sup>67</sup> When the protest took a violent turn, they started meeting a growing repressive action from the British. The latter put into place measures of control of the press, which included preventive censorship of newspaper articles, as part of the emergency regulations implemented in the country.<sup>68</sup> Newspapers had then to bear many restrictions or they would be suspended, with heavy financial consequences for journalists and owners. The regulations prohibited, inter alia, the mention of the names of the rebel commanders and the dispatch of correspondents to the battlefields or the places where the armed bands were located. Journalists were supposed to limit their coverage of the fights to what was contained in the official communiqués of the British authorities.

Such being the context, if an Arab journalist had undertaken a journey to interview the insurgents, he would have needed to devise special expedients



to publish his articles without falling into the net of British censorship. For this reason, the author of the *Rihla* would not only have omitted the names of the rebel leaders but would also have resorted to ascribing his mission to a foreign correspondent. Otherwise, no series of articles would have ever gone beyond the first installment, and *al-Jami'a al-Islamiyya* would have been suspended and warned to avoid publishing “inciting news.”<sup>69</sup>

### Transfer of a Literary Form

Indeed, the choice of ascribing authorship to a Western reporter shows that the author of the *Rihla* was aware of the features of narrative journalism in many parts of the globe. In the first half of the twentieth century, the most representative authors of reportage leaned to the left or were openly affiliated with its political parties.<sup>70</sup> When they reported on revolutions and social upheavals in foreign countries, they would openly show a bias towards the viewpoint of the belligerents that represented the progressive faction rising against the reaction. Some of the best examples of such reporting were the U.S. ‘radical’ journalists and writers John Reed and Lincoln Steffens.<sup>71</sup> Particularly, the *Rihla* recalls the framework that Reed devised to reorganize his dispatches on the Mexican revolution in his book, *Insurgent Mexico*.<sup>72</sup> Reed offered the model of a foreign journalist who started his mission from a position of relative sympathy towards the cause of the Mexican rebels, but also of fear of their different and violent world and of inexperience of war. During his mission, he wore the same clothes as the insurgents, shared their food, rode their animals and trains, enjoyed their hospitality and protection, met figureheads and rank-and-file members of the revolutionary troops, and repeatedly put his life at risk. Thus, Reed gradually developed a liking for the qualities and ideals of the Mexican rebels until he eventually found them “wonderfully congenial,” as he wrote in his short autobiography.<sup>73</sup>

Such being the characteristics of some representative books of the genre, no wonder that the author of the *Rihla* considered it suitable to serve the cause of a colonized people. In fact, the foreign correspondent’s mission translates into the discovery of the many qualities of the rebels and the soundness of their cause. Commenting about Reed’s dispatches from Mexico, Knudson observes that “the revolution enveloped everyone.”<sup>74</sup> Similarly, each person the narrator of the *Rihla* meets contributes to draw the picture of the Palestinian Arabs as a people who share the same political project, are determined to sacrifice their lives and properties to their cause, and can rule themselves according to the conventions and institutions of a modern state. In a way reminiscent of Reed, what the journalist finally achieves is more than knowledge acquisition, as he undergoes a change that invests his whole personality

and identity along with his attitude towards the Palestinian Arabs. Unlike the U.S. writer, however, the narrator sums it up explicitly in a direct address to his readers:

Trust me, my dear reader, when I started this journey of mine I was a foreigner. I was not sharing the feelings of the people of this country, nor the sentiments that they harbor. All my research and trips were motivated by a journalistic goal, nothing less and nothing more. However, after carrying out a short journey, I became aware of truths that are not easily accessible to others, and I saw things that would be difficult for a foreigner to come to know. Thus, I started feeling the same sentiments as the people of this country! I share their feelings and experience their same pains. In the end, I have become an Arab . . . after I was a foreigner.<sup>75</sup>

The evolution of the fictitious narrator shows metatextual awareness of what John Hartsock delineates as the mission of literary journalism—that of narrowing the distance between the writer’s and reader’s subjectivities and the objectified world.<sup>76</sup> However, while works like Reed’s are written for foreign readers and genuinely aim at correcting “the cheap stereotypes heaped on the Mexicans by their United States counterparts,”<sup>77</sup> this study has reconstructed the *Rihla* as addressed primarily to Palestinian Arab readers. As such, it rather reads as a nationalist text that, as Partha Chatterjee explains about nationalist literature in the colonial world,<sup>78</sup> tries to prove that the Palestinians are not backward people. On the contrary, they can rule themselves and live up to the highest standards of modern societies.

This reportage prompts readers who belonged to the same society that was the object of reporting to realize their moral and intellectual equality to the universe of the purported narrator. Thus, the text claims the compatibility of the Palestinians with the needs of the modern world and the worthiness of their project of state by constructing the empathic approval of an open-minded Western observer. In conducting this creative operation, though, the author missed the point that, despite their enthusiastic openness to other cultures, journalists such as Reed did not lack balance. Neither were they completely blind to rebels’ faults. The Arab insurgents of the *Rihla* are superhumanly flawless, and the continuous celebration of their virtues risks falling into conceitedness. The choice of turning the subject into the “objectified world” and projecting its observations on, and celebration of, itself onto a straw-narrator sometimes takes a toll on both the credibility and readability of the book.

### Conclusions

Despite the dearth of academic literature documenting its history, there is evidence of experiments in literary journalism having started at a relatively

early stage of the history of the Arabic press. Some examples emerged in the 1930s, when violent transformations were affecting a few of the countries placed under the mandates of the League of Nations. In particular, the fluidity of the political situation in Palestine prompted authors who were professional journalists to borrow a genre that European and U.S. writers had already been employing to cover social changes and political upheavals.

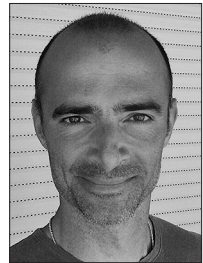
Published at the end of the 1936 revolt, *Rihla bayna al-jibal fi ma'aqil al-tha'irin* meets the main requisites that define literary journalism. Its author, probably the correspondent of a Syrian newspaper, narrated in a personal and passionate voice the account of what was likely an actual journey. He imparted his narrative from a free, retrospective platform, often slowing down its pace to relate stories he had been told or to demonstrate a point. The overall structure, which follows the chronology of the foreign correspondent's journey, is constructed in such a way as to lead the reader along the same path the narrator follows, aiming at the final identification of both narrator and reader with the insurgents and their cause. Contrary to what might explain the scarcity of Arabic literary journalism in contemporary times, the sensitivity of the topic of the *Rihla* met an enthusiastic response from readers and did not alienate advertisers; British censorship seemingly contributed to shape its fictional component; and the format of literary reportage was redeployed to defend the anticolonial struggle of the Palestinian Arabs.

Indeed, even though the *Rihla* mimics the reportages of Western writers, it challenges the premises of colonial domination from the very perspective of the colonized, not from a foreign observer's approximation. It defends the ability of the Palestinians to cope by themselves with the challenges of the modern world and their resolution to resist the colonial projects that the Mandate Power was set to implement.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Abrahamson and Abusharif, "Literary Journalism in the Middle East," 24.

<sup>2</sup> All references herein to Nawal El Saadawi use the more common transliteration, "Nawal El Saadawi," rather than the hyphenated El-Saadawi, as used in Abrahamson and Abusharif.

<sup>3</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, from interview by David Abrahamson and Ibrahim Abusharif, August 13, 2010, tape recording, as quoted in Abrahamson and Abusharif, "Literary Journalism in the Middle East," 28.

<sup>4</sup> Abrahamson and Abusharif, 32.

<sup>5</sup> Connery, "Research Review: Magazines and Literary Journalism," 5.

<sup>6</sup> From here, the "Rihla" for references to the newspaper article installments and *Rihla* for the book title. Throughout this article Arabic has been transliterated according to a simplified version based on the system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, omitting all diacritics except 'ayn (') and hamza ('). (Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.)

<sup>7</sup> "Rihla bayna al-jibal fi ma'aqil al-tha'irin," [Journey across the mountains in the strongholds of the rebels], *al-Jami'a al-Islamiyya* [The Islamic union] (Jaffa, Palestine), September 27, 1936, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Swedenburg, introduction to *Memories of Revolt*, xix.

<sup>9</sup> On the revolt, see Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement*, 162–294; Matthews, *Confronting an Empire*, 233–63.

<sup>10</sup> "Rihla bayna al-jibal fi ma'aqil al-tha'irin," *al-Jami'a al-Islamiyya* (Jaffa, Palestine), September 27, 1936, 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Rihla*, 1:15–16.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, the installments in *al-Jami'a al-Islamiyya* for September 27, 1936, 3; September 29, 1936, 3; October 13, 1936, 3; October 14, 1936, 2.

<sup>13</sup> This episode may refer to historical events that happened on September 7, 1936. See "Ma'raka kabirah fi jibal Nablus" [Big battle on Nablus mountains], *Filastin*, September 8, 1936, 4. A photograph of the balcony on which this interview would have taken place can be found at <http://www.akramzuayter.org/gallery/1/2.jpg>. Accessed June 24, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> *Rihla*, 1:2.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, *Rihla*, 1:3: "When we were ascending through the mountains, I felt the desire to see some of those that the Arabs call mujahidin because they left good life in towns to defend their Arabism and rather preferred the hardships on top of the mountains." See also *Rihla*, 1:26–27.

<sup>16</sup> "Weekly Summary of Intelligence, Palestine and Transjordan," September 11, 1936, 6, and September 18, 1936, 6, FO 371/20030.

<sup>17</sup> *Al-Qawuqji*, Mudhakkirat Fawzi al-Qawuqji, 211.

<sup>18</sup> For example, the narrator does not explain that he is concerned about traveling by car because the rebels are targeting the few vehicles still circulating, which would belong either to Jews and British or to Arab drivers who are breaking the strike. Also, the author does not expand on the national committees, but simply says that he meets with the president of the Nablus committee. Neither does he

mention that the two rebel leaders he interviews are not from Palestine. *Rihla*, 1:7, 13, 16. All this would have been well known to Palestinian readers but would have needed additional explanations in a reportage for a non-Palestinian audience.

<sup>19</sup> *Rihla*, 1:17–23.

<sup>20</sup> Currie, *The Nature of Fiction*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Rihla*, 1:2.

<sup>22</sup> “Rihlah,” *al-Jami‘a al-Islamiyya*, September 27, 1936, 3; *Rihla*, 1:3.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Rihla*, 1:14–15, with the captions to the pictures of al-Ashmar in “Min dhikrayat al-thawra” [From the memories of the revolt] and “al-Shaykh Muhammad al-Ashmar” [Shaykh Muhammad al-Ashmar].

<sup>24</sup> Knudson, “John Reed,” 66.

<sup>25</sup> Monteath, “The Spanish Civil War,” 75–76; Jurt, “Malraux et Bernanos,” 73–87.

<sup>26</sup> Simard-Houde, “Le reporter devient un auteur,” 16.

<sup>27</sup> Kramer, “Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists,” 24.

<sup>28</sup> Kramer, 21–34.

<sup>29</sup> “Mandub Alif Ba’,” *Alif Ba’* (Damascus), September 9, 1936, 4.

<sup>30</sup> “Hadith thuwwar,” *Alif Ba’* (Damascus), September 10, 1936, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Macaluso, “Claiming Modernity in Mandate Palestine,” 366.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. “Mandub Alif Ba’,” 5, and *Rihla*, 1:3.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. “Mandub Alif Ba’,” 5, and *Rihla*, 2:37–38.

<sup>34</sup> Kramer, “Breakable Rules,” 23 (italics in original).

<sup>35</sup> *Rihla*, 1:2.

<sup>36</sup> Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 212.

<sup>37</sup> Langer, 212 (italics in original).

<sup>38</sup> Hellmann, “Fables of Fact,” 421.

<sup>39</sup> *Rihla*, 1:7. See note 14.

<sup>40</sup> Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, 17.

<sup>41</sup> Aare, “A Narratological Approach to Literary Journalism,” 110–11.

<sup>42</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 245.

<sup>43</sup> Kramer, “Breakable Rules,” 29.

<sup>44</sup> *Rihla*, 1:4.

<sup>45</sup> *Rihla*, 1:13–15; 23–24.

<sup>46</sup> *Rihla*, 1:16.

<sup>47</sup> *Rihla*, 2:42 (italics added).

<sup>48</sup> Ghandur, *Tha‘r al-dam* [Blood revenge].

<sup>49</sup> Kramer, “Breakable Rules,” 31.

<sup>50</sup> *Rihla*, 1:6.

<sup>51</sup> *Rihla*, 2:49.

<sup>52</sup> Kramer, “Breakable Rules,” 33 (italics in original).

<sup>53</sup> *Rihla*, 1:5.

<sup>54</sup> *Rihla*, 1:16–17, 25.

<sup>55</sup> *Rihla*, 1:16.

<sup>56</sup> *Rihla*, 1:17–23.

<sup>57</sup> *Rihla*, 2:36.

<sup>58</sup> Henry, "Palestine Arab Literature," 763; Jarallah, "Da'alat al-intaj," 57.

<sup>59</sup> *Rihla*, 1:2.

<sup>60</sup> "Decision du Haut-Commissaire no. 48," March 8, 1937, Carton 911, Mandat Syrie-Liban, Cabinet Politique, Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes.

<sup>61</sup> "Le directeur de la Sureté Générale à Monsieur le Chef du Cabinet Politique," March 3, 1937, Carton 911, Mandat Syrie-Liban, Cabinet Politique, Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes.

<sup>62</sup> Mahfuz, *Tabta rayat al-Qawuqqi*, 24. Mahfuz refers generically to the way some journalists have described the adventurous journey through the mountains when they were covering the revolt, but without mentioning specific names or titles. Because al-Qawuqqi writes that only one Arab journalist came to interview him, it appears likely that Mahfuz referred to the *Rihla*, but that cannot be verified.

<sup>63</sup> *Mughamarati fi jibal Filastin* [My adventures in the mountains of Palestine].

<sup>64</sup> Cf. *Rihla*, 1:24–25, 2:42, and Ghandur, *Tha'r al-dam* [Blood revenge], 70–71, 78–96. On the latter, see Macaluso, "Revolt in the Novel."

<sup>65</sup> Abrahamson and Abusharif, "Literary Journalism," 29.

<sup>66</sup> Wood, "Love, Iranian Style," 72.

<sup>67</sup> [Peel Commission], *Palestine Royal Commission Report*, 133; Kabha, *The Palestinian Press*, 160–66.

<sup>68</sup> Kabha, 155–200; Goodman, "British Press Control," 703.

<sup>69</sup> Goodman, 704.

<sup>70</sup> Wagner, "Literary Reportage in the Left-Wing Movement of the 1920s and 1930s," 325–57; Williams, "Reportage in the 'Thirties." Williams's dissertation explores the radical, leftist reportages of the period, specifically in the United Kingdom, but also in other countries.

<sup>71</sup> Gunn, "Three Radicals and a Revolution," 393–410; Stein, "Lincoln Steffens and the Mexican Revolution," 197–212.

<sup>72</sup> Reed, *Insurgent Mexico*.

<sup>73</sup> Reed, "Almost Thirty," 114.

<sup>74</sup> Knudson, "John Reed," 63.

<sup>75</sup> *Rihla*, 2:48.

<sup>76</sup> Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism*, 42, 67–69, 247.

<sup>77</sup> Knudson, "John Reed," 63.

<sup>78</sup> Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 30.

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