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Haifa before the Nakba

Translated from the Arabic by
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Until the middle of the eighteenth century,

Haifa was a small town located at the far western edge of the bay known as the Gulf of Acre. After al-Shaykh Zāhir al-‘Umr al-Zaydān took control of the city of Acre, in the north of the peninsula, making it the capital of the Galilee region, he decided to move Haifa eastwards to a spot protected by mountains on the west and washed by the waves of the sea. Zāhir surrounded the new city of Haifa with walls. At the foot of Mount Carmel located to its west, in a place overlooking Haifa and Acre, he placed a tower called *Burj al-Salām* (Tower of Peace) to protect the new city and the peninsula, and to prevent pirates from harassing boats carrying goods in and out of Acre.

Zāhir built a small wharf at Haifa, as well as government offices, a church and a mosque, all of which are still standing. He divided the city into two parts: east and west. The eastern district came to be known as *al-hāra al-sharqīyya* (the eastern neighbourhood), and contained the homes of Muslims. The route to Acre began from Haifa's eastern gate. As for the western side, it was designated for Christians, and known as *al-hāra al-gharbiyya* (the western neighbourhood) or *hārat al-nasārā* (the Christian neighbourhood). It was later known as *hārat al-kanā'is* (the neighbourhood of churches). The road from the western gate led to Jaffa.

Haifa's importance changed fundamentally in 1831, due to the campaign by the Egyptian Pasha Ibrahim to control northern Palestine. Acre, the state capital, withstood violent attacks and a siege for six months. But when it fell, with the resulting devastation, prominent merchants and European representatives decided to move their headquarters and economic activities to neighbouring Haifa. From then on, Haifa expanded at Acre's expense.

Recognising Haifa's importance, the Ottoman state made it an administrative centre in 1864. When the German Templars began migrating to Palestine in 1868 they stayed in Haifa, their first settlement, in expectation of the city's future development. Migration of European Jews to northern Palestine began in the 1880s and the Jewish neighbourhood gradually grew in *al-hāra al-sharqiyya*. Soon afterwards, the Bahá'ís established their first homes in Haifa following their expulsion from Iran. European merchants and officials who worked in European consulates and in missionary organisations began to spread around the city. With Haifa's increased administrative importance, the number of Turkish agents sent from Istanbul to administer the city's affairs also increased. As the economic infrastructure expanded in Haifa, so the number of immigrants increased from inside and outside Palestine, both urban and rural people, and from various religious communities. This human diversity became a characteristic of the city. Palestinians gave Haifa the name of *umm al-gharib* (Mother of the Stranger).

During the second part of the nineteenth century growing exports of agricultural produce from Syria, especially Hauran, were shipped to Europe by way of Haifa. Visitors expressed amazement at seeing the caravans carrying crops on their way to the port. Sources estimated arrivals at more than 200,000 camels from Hauran in one season alone. Recognising the important location of Haifa and its port, investors began in the 1860s to prepare projects to connect Haifa with Syria by railway.

Construction of the Hijaz Railway started in 1892 and, on 15 Tishreen I / October 1, 1905, celebrations marked the line's opening. It connected Haifa with Damascus in the north and with the Hijaz in the south. The Ottoman administration's choice of Haifa as the major rail terminus brought with it railway maintenance works and the railway administration offices. Endless projects and programmes to expand the port followed. Investors, both locally-based and from abroad, set up heavy industry in Haifa because of its excellent infrastructure.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Haifa had become the leading city in northern Palestine. As a result, Zionist immigrants settled there in *Hayy Hirtsiliyya* (Herzl neighbourhood) at the foot of Mount Carmel to the northwest of the city, the first specifically Jewish area. An indication of the city's importance to the future Zionist project was the opening of the first academic Jewish institute in 1912, the Technion, now the Israel Institute of Technology. In addition, the arrival of Jewish-owned heavy industry changed the city's economic base.

Merchants with businesses in Beirut or Damascus relocated to Haifa or set up branches and warehouses there. The expansion of industry and commerce in Haifa and the presence of the railway network encouraged many wealthy Palestinian families, by the early twentieth century, to invest in Haifa and to live there. In addition, people from the countryside moved to the city in search of work. A variety of new neighbourhoods appeared, a process speeded up with the end of the First World War and the beginning of the British Mandate.

The rapid change in the social and economic infrastructure of Haifa from the late Ottoman Era onwards was reflected in cultural developments. When, after the 1908 Young Turks upheaval, the Ottoman authority permitted newspapers to be published, Haifa emerged (after Jerusalem and Jaffa) as a centre of journalism. By the end of the Ottoman era, nine newspapers and magazines were edited in Haifa, the most important of which was *Sahifat al-Karmil*, first published as a weekly in 1908, and then a bi-weekly. Its owner and editor was Najib Nassār. It became well known for its anti-Zionist views, and strongly criticised the Ottoman state. Its publication continued until 1933.

The leap in newspaper production was accompanied by a similar increase in book publishing. Bāsil Jada', owner of *al-Matba'a al-Wataniyya* (the National Press) was the first to establish an Arabic press in the city in 1908. *Matba'at Karmil* (the Carmel Press), also owned by Najib Nassār, came to Haifa in 1909. In 1910, Iliyā Zakkā set up *Matba'at al-Nafīr* (the Party Press) to publish his newspaper. During this period, the first bookshop, Jamil al-Bahri's *Al-Maktaba al-Wataniyya* (the National Bookshop) was opened, specialising in science, history, literature and textbooks, as well as poetry collections in Arabic, French and English.

During the Mandate period Haifa's development continued to expand. From the early years of British rule over Palestine, the Gulf of Haifa was a military base for the British Empire, a strategic assembly point for the Suez Canal, a sea and land connection between Haifa and Baghdad, and an air and marine base. The British Mandate also made Haifa the administrative capital of northern Palestine. The region's largest factories were built in Haifa during the first decade of British rule, *Le Grand Moulin Shemen* for soap production, *Nesher* for cement, al-Hājj Tāhir Qurmān's factory for cigars and tobacco, as well as many others.

Initiatives by the British Mandate included building a new, up-to-date harbour to give Palestine a main maritime port, constructing a large airport, establishing new railway workshops,

building pipelines for transporting oil from Kirkük in Iraq and establishing a refinery in the Gulf of Haifa.

Expansion of the economic structure of the city during the British Mandate years made Haifa a very attractive city for immigrants, both Arabs and Jews. A population increase from approximately 20,000 at the end of the Ottoman era to more than 140,000 by the end of the British Mandate completely changed the city's character.

Neighbourhoods sprang up in the city for wealthy and poor alike, for Christians, Muslims, and Jews. The poorer neighbourhoods tended to be in areas remote from the city centre, with Christians in the lower west side and Muslims on the lower east side. As for the middle class and wealthy of both communities, their homes were located on the Carmel heights. In the upper *Wādī al-Salib* and *al-Balān* neighbourhoods on the eastern side of the city, wealthy Muslims built large homes – rich Christians lived in the upper



WHO'S THIS? It is Zahir al-Umar, the Founder of Modern Haifa. Do You Recognize Him ?
Neither Does the Municipality. (Kolbo, Haifa weekly, 25/01/2009).

Wādī al-Nisnās and areas towards the German Colony, while poor Christians gathered in lower *Wādī al-Nisnās* and the area of the train station, *al-Mahatta*.

Jewish neighbourhoods were located on the Carmel heights over the Arab neighbourhoods in the *Hadar* area where Jewish recreational and shopping districts developed. Wealthy Jews established neighbourhoods on the upper slopes of the Carmel in the area later known as *Merkaz Hacarmel*, the Carmel Centre.

Newspapers and magazines published in the city continued to flourish, contributing to Haifa's importance. New publications included the Haifa Chamber of Commerce magazine started in 1924 and the Palestine Arab Labour Society's magazine in 1945.

During the Mandate, Haifa's Arab population was among the most dynamic in Palestine because of the continuing arrival of immigrants. Most were labourers from village backgrounds and did not mix with Haifa's citizens. From the 1920s new neighbourhoods named after the places from which their residents had emigrated began to appear. For example, immigrants from Gaza lived in an area called *al-Ghāzwa*. Immigrants from the village of *al-Tayra* lived in a neighbourhood known as *Hārat al-Tayyārana*. Damascus merchants gathered in a market called *Sūq al-shawwām*, "Market of the Syrians".

During the Mandate period a large number of Arab charitable organisations were established to help immigrants arriving from many different places and cultures. These organisations strengthened social relations among immigrants, but were an obstacle to assimilation. In addition, the development of different types of neighbourhoods did not help bring people together, an issue compounded by polarisation within Arab society.

The numerous poor immigrants who lived in slum conditions on the margins of Haifa society were not entitled to official aid, but they did attract the attention of Shaykh Izz al-Dīn al-Qassām, a prayer leader in *Jāmi' al-Istiqlāl* (the Independence Mosque). Al-Qassām organised nutritional and health services for the poor who became some of the most enthusiastic supporters of the first Palestinian political movement calling for the use of force against the British Mandate to achieve independence.

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