



## A Jerusalem Photographer: The Life and Work of Hanna Safieh

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*Although photography arrived in Palestine only a few months after Daguerre officially publicized his invention, it did not become a profession practiced by Palestinians until the last two decades or so of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The first photographic studio in Palestine was established in Jerusalem by the Armenian photographer Garabed Krikorian around*

<sup>1</sup> The invention of photography is commonly associated with the name of Louis-Jaques M. N. P. Daguerre, who in 1839 announced the new invention to the world. For more information see Beaumont N. P. Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982).

1885. *The closing years of the nineteenth century witnessed the establishment of at least two more photographic establishments in the city, that of Khalil Raad and of the American Colony group.*<sup>2</sup> This article looks at the life and work of Hanna Safieh, one of the early local photographers of Palestine. A large selection of Safieh's photographs are included in a newly released book entitled: *Hanna Safieh: A Man and his Camera, Photographs of Palestine 1927-1967.*<sup>3</sup>

Born in 1910 to a Palestinian Arab family from Jerusalem, Hanna Safieh was one of the few Palestinians at the time to take up photography as a profession. Growing up in the city of his birth, Safieh saw his country ruled by many conquerors. At the time of his birth, Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire; he subsequently saw it fall under British rule, Jordanian rule, and Israeli occupation. As a photographer living in Jerusalem from the years before World War I until some thirty years after the creation of the state of Israel in the land of historical Palestine, Safieh was, indeed, in a privileged situation to document the events that shaped the current history of the area. And it is obvious from his pictures that he took full advantage of the opportunity before him, for a significant

part of the photographic collection that he left behind documents some of the most important historical events during his lifetime. They bear testimony to the life of Palestinians under the British Mandate (1917-1948), Jordanian rule (1948-1967), and the Israeli occupation (from 1967).

Soon after Hanna Safieh's photographic profession took off, he started working at the American Colony photographic department in Jerusalem. There Safieh worked as an apprentice to the Swedish photographer Eric Matson (1888-1977), with whom he collaborated until the end of Matson's career in Palestine in 1946. During the last few years of British rule in Palestine, Safieh was employed by the Mandate government as a Public Information Officer. Working as a photographer for the government provided him with ample opportunity to capture the events that were taking place around him. However, only a handful of these pictures are known to us today. Most of his photographic collection dating from before 1948 was stolen from his studio in Jerusalem in the aftermath of the 1967 War. A number of his photographs from that period survived, however, because they had been published abroad in a number of newspapers and journals. *The National Geographic Magazine*, the *Readers Digest*, the *London News* and the Associated Press Services were among his many customers. A photograph that he took in the 1930s even made it to the British Parliament. It showed a group of Palestinian women in a demonstration near the New Gate of the Old City, taking off their shoes to fend against the British troops who were trying to stop them. Following the publication of

<sup>2</sup> Khalil Raad started his photographic career working with Krikorian and eventually moved on to establish his own photographic studio in 1898 on Jaffa Road in Jerusalem. The Swedish missionaries associated with the American Colony in Jerusalem also launched a photographic establishment around 1898.

<sup>3</sup> The book was published by Hanna Safieh's son Raffi in Jerusalem in 1999. A version of this article appeared as the introduction to the book.

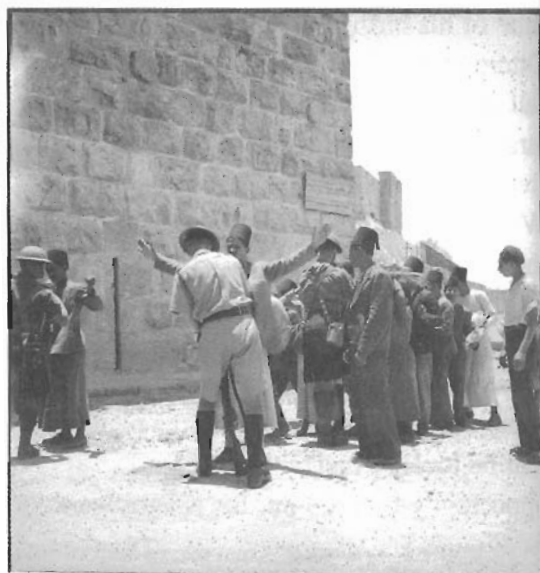
the photograph in question, the Parliament ordered an investigation into the entire affair.

In the context of local Arab photography in Palestine, Safieh is a unique and pioneering figure. While most early local photographers were producing studio portraits and photographing weddings and other social events, Safieh was working on what could be called landscape and ethnographic photography. His photographs dating back to the late 1940s, the period during which Palestine ceased to exist as a political entity and Israel was established, bear witness to some of the worst violence of the time. Of particular importance are the photographs he took in the aftermath of the massacre at the village of Deir Yassin in Jerusalem's western section. The massacre, an event that many Israelis still refuse to acknowledge, took place on the night of 9 April 1948, when Jewish forces raided the village and killed a large number of civilians in cold blood. The number of the victims is believed to have been between one hundred and two hundred and fifty, depending on the source. The day following the massacre, before the bodies of the victims were removed, Safieh went to Deir Yassin and captured the gruesome scene with his camera.

Other important events captured by Safieh include the funeral of the Palestinian leader Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni, killed in early April 1948 in the battle of al-Qastal near Jerusalem. His images of both the battle site and of the funeral constitute important historical records in the history of Palestine. Equally important are his images documenting the fall of the Jewish Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem in

May 1948 to Arab fighters. His picture of the Jewish prisoners being escorted by officers from the Jordanian Army has, in fact, already made it into a number of history books.

In the 1950s and 1960s Safieh continued to be a very active photographer. The Jordanian government often commissioned him to document the country, its customs and peoples. It was during this period that he joined an archaeological expedition, as an underwater photographer, in search of the remains of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Dead Sea and documented the famous Jericho conference which, in 1950, granted King Abdullah of Jordan the right over the West Bank. Rarely missing an occasion, Safieh was also keen on documenting visits



Searching for weapons: British officers searching Palestinians at Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem, 1938.

of important dignitaries to Jerusalem. He took images of the Pope's visit, and of the historical meeting between the Pope, King Hussein, and the Greek Orthodox patriarch of Jerusalem in 1964. Similarly, following Israel's occupation of the West Bankin

1967, Safieh photographed the house demolitions that took place in Jerusalem's Jewish Quarter. Carefully documenting all the houses that Israel demolished, Safieh left to the next generations a record of how Arab life in the Jewish Quarter was brought to an end. When a year later, in 1968, an extremist set fire to al-Aqsa Mosque, not far away from the Jewish Quarter, Safieh was also there to photograph the damage caused by the fire.

Hanna Safieh lived a life like few others. In many ways his life seems to have been that of a man with a mission. A glance over his pictures is enough to give the viewer the sense that he felt an obligation to document. It is as if he knew that one day all that was familiar to him would no longer be recognizable. Today, for instance, we only know life in the Arab sections of West Jerusalem through his photographs and the photographic works of others like him. In many ways nothing can better explain the life of a man like Safieh than the photographs he took during his lifetime. It is in these photographs that one gains a sense of how he, as a photographer and as a person, saw the world around him. Most of the pictures that he took indicate a preference for documenting history rather than for catering to the demands of the market at the time. This does not mean that he was not interested in producing photographs that were intended for a tourist audience. A few of his photographs depict historical or religious sites from different angles, or at different times of the day. A few others are staged to bring to mind a biblical image, such as the one of the woman getting water at the Well of Jacob in Nablus—a common practice at the time.

However, such images do not represent the bulk of Safieh's work. His pictures of women and men smoking *nargile* or pipes, of Jews and Arabs walking down the same street of Jerusalem during the British period, and of men with their plows looking over Bethlehem are typical. Pictures like these constitute important documents for any ethnographic study of Palestine, for they are documents of local culture, traditions, and folklore. They capture the reality of the Palestinian people, just as his pictures of the destruction of the Arab neighborhood of al-Musrara in Jerusalem in 1948 document the fate of an entire nation.

A new book of Safieh's photographs, *Hanna Safieh: A Man and his Camera, Photographs of Palestine 1927-1967*, provides us with a unique opportunity to explore the work of an important—but rarely remembered—artist. Safieh was not just another photographer like many others after him; he worked in an environment that was not used to the idea of a native photographer. In Palestine, as in the rest of the region, photography was seen as a European phenomenon. Almost all of the



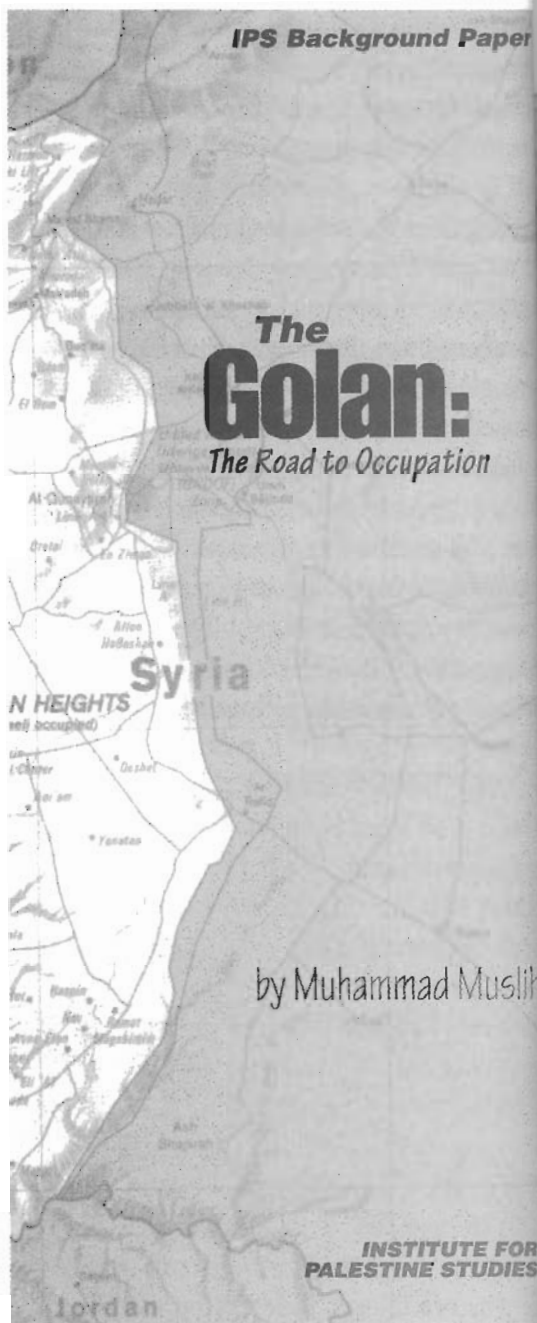
Destruction in al-Musrara neighborhood outside of the walls of Jerusalem during the 1948 war.

major photographers of Palestine in the last century came from abroad. As a result, attention was rarely ever given to early local photographers. A quick glance at the dozen or so books published in the last twenty years on the photography of Palestine suggests that local photographers were largely absent from the history of the field. This omission is no doubt due in part to the fact that the first photographers of Palestine were Europeans and that locals appeared on the scene rather late (around the turn of the twentieth century). But it is also possible to argue that overlooking early Palestinian photographers is part of a larger process through which Palestinians themselves were written out of the history of their own country. After all, if it is true that all early photographers of the Middle East were non-locals, it is also true that a significant number of books exist on early local photography in Egypt and in Lebanon.

Hanna Safieh died in 1979. His photographic vision, however, remains with us. Not only was he one of the few who has made it hard for others to ignore what Palestinian photographers have produced, but he was also a witness to history in the making. His work is an important testimony to the modern history of Palestine and captures vividly many of the events that shaped the image that we have of ourselves as well as our sense of identity.

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