

SHUKRĪ AL-^ʿASALĪ, AN EXTRAORDINARY ANTI-ZIONIST ACTIVIST*

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This study deals with the anti-Zionist activities of Shukrī al-^ʿAsalī in the last years before the First World War. In the autumn of 1910 Shukrī al-^ʿAsalī was behind the most vociferous campaign against Zionist purchases in the pre-WWI period. In his capacity as the *qā'immaqām* of Ṭabarīya he took all possible measures to prevent the transfer of the lands of the village of al-Fūla from Ilyās Sursuq to the Zionists. Even though eventually his efforts were not successful, his extensive publicizing of the case helped to spread awareness of the ongoing Zionist undertaking in Ottoman Palestine throughout Greater Syria and was one of the most significant reasons for growing anti-Zionism during that period. Following his election to the Ottoman parliament in January 1911, he continued to point his finger at Jewish immigration and land purchases. The most important act of his parliamentary career concerning Zionism was the speech he delivered in May 1911 along with two other Arab deputies – Rūhī al-Khālīdī and Saʿīd Bey al-Ḥusaynī.

Keywords: anti-Zionism, anti-Zionist activist, al-Fūla, land purchases, Palestine, Shukrī al-^ʿAsalī

Shukrī al-^ʿAsalī (1878 – 1916)¹ was born in Damascus. He came from a family which belonged to the higher social classes but which was not one of the prominent Damascene families, as is claimed in some studies.² He acquired

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¹ SEIKALY, S. *Shukri al-ʿAsali A Case Study of a Political Activist*. In KHALIDI, Rashid et al. *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, p. 75. The year of Shukrī al-^ʿAsalī's birth is disputed and some authors indicate the year 1868 as the year he was born.

² SEIKALY, S. *Shukri al-ʿAsali A Case Study of a Political Activist*, pp. 75, 92, note 7. Information about his noble origins can be found in KHOURY, Philip S.: *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism: The Politics of Damascus 1860 – 1920*, p. 60; KHALIDI, R. *British Policy towards Syria and Palestine 1906 – 1914: A Study of the*

his primary and secondary education in his native city of Damascus, where he graduated from the state secondary school of Maktab 'Anbar. During his secondary studies, he was determinedly influenced by Shaykh Ṭāhir al-Jazā'irī and the group concentrated around him. Under this impact he developed a strong Arab awareness and reformist leanings. In the second half of the 1890s he continued with his studies at the prestigious *Mekteb-i Mülkiye* in Istanbul.³

Thereafter he held various posts in the regional state administration (as an assistant secretary to a governor and assistant to a *qā'immaqām*).⁴ In about 1909 he was nominated as *qā'immaqām* of the district of Nazareth (Arab. an-Nāṣira).⁵

Shukrī al-'Asalī welcomed the Young Turk Revolution with open arms and it seems that he stood as a candidate in the first post-revolution parliamentary elections.⁶ However, he did not succeed in the second round because the electors advanced a more prominent candidate, 'Abdarrahmān Pasha al-Yūsuf.⁷ Less than three years later, after the deputy Muḥammad al-'Ajlānī had passed away, the way to the Ottoman parliament (Arab. *Majlis al-Mab'ūṭān*) opened up for Shukrī al-'Asalī. In the by-election in 1911 several heavyweight contestants ran for the mandate, one of them Ḥaqqī al-'Aẓm, the latter secretary of the Ottoman Administrative Decentralization Party.⁸ In spite of that, Shukrī al-

Antecedents of the Hussein – McMahon Correspondence, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and the Balfour Declaration. p. 223; MANDEL, N. J. *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, p. 88.

³ SEIKALY, S. *Shukrī al-'Asalī A Case Study of a Political Activist*, p. 75.

⁴ KHALIDI, R. *British Policy towards Syria and Palestine 1906 – 1914*, p. 223.

⁵ SEIKALY, S. *Shukrī al-'Asalī A Case Study of a Political Activist*, p. 75.

⁶ During the Second Constitutional Era in the Ottoman Empire, general elections were held three times (1908, 1912 and 1914). The Ottoman electoral system had several limitations: Firstly, the franchise was restricted to tax-paying men over 25. Secondly, the elections were indirect: primary voters casted votes for electors, who then chose the deputies. KAYALI, H. *Arabs and Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908 – 1918*, p. 65; KHALIDI, R. *British Policy towards Syria and Palestine 1906 – 1914*, p. 210; KHALIDI, R. The 1912 Election Campaign in the Cities of Bilad al-Sham. In *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (November 1984), p. 462.

⁷ SEIKALY, S. *Shukrī al-'Asalī A Case Study of a Political Activist*, p. 76. 'Abdarrahmān al-Yūsuf, as the only heir of two prominent Damascene families (al-Yūsuf and Shamdīn), was one of the most influential notables in the province. At the end of the 19th century he took over from his grandfather a significant post as the leader of the pilgrimage caravan. (Arab. *amīr al-ḥadẓdẓ*). KHOURY, P. S. *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism: The Politics of Damascus 1860 – 1920*, p. 40.

⁸ QĀSIMĪYA, Khayrīya *An-nashāṭ aṣ-ṣahyūnī fī ash-sharq al-'arabī wa ṣadāhu, 1908 – 1918*. [Zionist Activities in the Arab East and the Responses to Them.], Note 166, p. 83.

ʿAsalī eventually succeeded primarily due to the overwhelming support which he enjoyed in areas outside the city of Damascus. One of the major reasons behind his success may have been his membership in the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), since at that time he was the chairman of the party in Nazareth.⁹ On the other hand, his anti-Zionist credentials, which were widely publicized in the contemporary Arab press, must also be taken into account. Anti-Zionism was an important element of his electoral manifesto, in which he proclaimed that he would combat Zionism “to his last drop of blood”.¹⁰ The fact that Zionism played an important role in the elections proves that already during this period the issue of Jewish immigration, land purchases and political ambitions in Palestine must have caught the attention of the public even in the areas of Greater Syria beyond Palestine.

At the beginning of 1911 the British consul in Damascus George Pollard Devey portrayed Shukrī al-ʿAsalī in a letter to the ambassador Gerard Lowther in Istanbul:

Of superior intelligence, he knows both Turkish and Arabic, and law remarkably well; in the offices he has held ever acted with justice and energy. His views are liberal and wide-minded, and there can be no doubt that by far the best of the candidates has been elected on this occasion, a man of high character, and of opinion strongly progressive and possibly even rather ultraradical, but who has always gained for himself universal esteem and sympathy.¹¹

Shukrī al-ʿAsalī was also a member of the following Arab organizations – al-Qaḥṭānīya¹² and the Ottoman Administrative Decentralization Party.¹³

After the censorship of the press had been abolished, he started to write in the most influential Damascene newspaper of that time, *al-Muqtabas*. The owner of

⁹ SEIKALY, S. *Shukri al-ʿAsali A Case Study of a Political Activist*, pp. 76 – 77.

¹⁰ KHALIDI, R. *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, p. 109.

¹¹ F.O. 195/2370/27: Devey to Lowther, 25 Jan. 1911. In KHALIDI, R. *British Policy towards Syria and Palestine 1906 – 1914*, p. 224.

¹² Al-Qaḥṭānīya was a secret association founded in 1909 which aimed for the federalization of the Ottoman Empire and its transformation into a dual Turkish-Arab state modelled on the Austro-Hungarian Empire with a similar division of powers between the federal government and the two national entities. ANTONIUS, G. *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement*, p. 110.

¹³ KHALIDI, R. *British Policy towards Syria and Palestine 1906 – 1914*, p. 224.

this daily Muḥammad Kurd ʿAlī¹⁴ was a good friend of Shukrī al-ʿAsalī and the two men held similar political views. He had very strong social feelings and was highly critical of the abysmal social differences in his homeland. He paid special attention to the lot of the peasants, with whom he sympathized and whom he defended.¹⁵ It is likely that this positive attitude towards Arab peasants was an important factor that formed his hostile view of the Zionist colonization, of which Arab peasants were the main victims.

He was very dissatisfied with the cultural and educational conditions in the Levant. In his opinion the person primarily responsible for the sorrowful situation was the former Ottoman sultan Abdülhamit II. However, he was not the only one to blame. Shukrī al-ʿAsalī also condemned the passivity, disregard and carelessness of the inhabitants in this matter. Furthermore, he advocated the right of women to education and their equality with men.¹⁶

In a manner similar to other Arab thinkers of his era, he expressed criticism of those of his countrymen who in his opinion misconceived the European concept of freedom and understood it as freedom to enjoy bad habits and conduct immoral acts.¹⁷

In a very interesting development, Shukrī al-ʿAsalī's position gradually changed from being an advocate for a strong Arab-Turkish bond (1909) to a defender of Arab linguistic rights (1910) and finally to a fighter for Arab-Turkish equality and a sharp critic of the Committee of Union and Progress.¹⁸

His growing distrust of Turks was certainly influenced by his personal experience from acting as the *qā'immaqām* in Nazareth. "It is certain that this shift was, at least in part, occasioned by his failure, as an Arab official, to convince the Turkish *wali* from Beirut and the central government in Istanbul to block the transfer of the land of [sic] ʿAfula¹⁹ from its Arab tenants to Zionist colonists."²⁰

¹⁴ Muḥammad Kurd ʿAlī was a historian, journalist and activist. After the First World War he became the president of the Arab Academy in Damascus and twice acted as minister of education in the Syrian government.

¹⁵ SEIKALY, S. *Shukri al-ʿAsali A Case Study of a Political Activist*, pp. 77 – 78.

¹⁶ SEIKALY, S. *Shukri al-ʿAsali A Case Study of a Political Activist*, pp. 79 – 80.

¹⁷ SEIKALY, S. *Shukri al-ʿAsali A Case Study of a Political Activist*, p. 82.

¹⁸ SEIKALY, S. *Shukri al-ʿAsali A Case Study of a Political Activist*, pp. 84 – 88.

¹⁹ Instead of al-Fūla often the name of the neighbouring village of ʿAfula was mentioned in the contemporary Arab press. The Zionists were interested in buying the lands of this village as well, but because of the intricate circumstances the sale was not executed before the First World War broke out. MANDEL, N. J. *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, pp. 103, 106.

²⁰ SEIKALY, S. *Shukri al-ʿAsali A Case Study of a Political Activist*, p. 85.

The sale of the village of al-Fūla

The sale of al-Fūla by Iliyās Sursuq to the Zionists can be undoubtedly labelled as the most important event that formed the attitude of Arab public opinion towards Zionism prior to World War I. It was a similar case to one which occurred almost one decade previously in the neighbouring *qaḏā'* of Ṭabarīya. At that time the *qā'immaqām* of Ṭabarīya, Amīr Amīn Arslān – just as Shukrī al-^cAsalī later – tried in every possible way to prevent the transfer of the ownership of lands to the *Jewish Colonization Association* (JCA).²¹ Similar were also the results and impact on the original cultivators – the Zionists brought this purchase to a successful close and got rid of the Arab peasants. What was diametrically different, however, were the post-revolutionary circumstances under which this affair occurred and its impact on public opinion. After the revolution, Shukrī al-^cAsalī had access to new information channels – the press and the parliament – and he made full use of them for the purpose of effective dissemination of the developments in the al-Fūla affair and of his opinion of it.

The village of al-Fūla, which had about ten square kilometres of land, stretched to the south of Nazareth to the borders with the *sanjaq* of Nābulus. Its soil was very fertile, much like the whole Marj ibn ^cĀmir Valley²² where it was located.²³ The owner of this village and of large part of the valley was the Lebanese Sursuq family.²⁴ In the autumn of 1910 Iliyās Bey Sursuq concluded an agreement with the *Jewish National Fund* over the sale of the village with its lands. However, the inhabitants fought against this decision and in this they were supported by Shukrī al-^cAsalī, who at that time held the position of *qā'immaqām* of the district of Nazareth. He declined to submit the title deed to the purchased lands to the Zionists. Arthur Ruppin tried to solve the impasse

²¹ For more information about the affair, see BEŠKA, E. Responses of Prominent Arabs towards Zionist Aspirations and Colonization prior to 1908. In *Asian and African Studies*. Vol. 16, 2007, No. 1, pp. 33 – 34.

²² The valley has various names; nowadays it is called Jezreel Valley. Its other historical name is the Plain of Esdraelon.

²³ Originally there were eighteen Arab villages in the Marj ibn ^cĀmir Valley. QĀSIMĪYA, K. *An-nashāṭ aṣ-ṣahyūnī fī ash-sharq al-^carabī wa ṣadāhu, 1908 – 1918* [Zionist Activities in the Arab East and the Responses to Them, 1908 – 1918.], p. 81.

²⁴ At the end of the spring of 1910 notables from Haifa and representatives of all religious groups from the town of Nazareth sent protest telegrams to the government and newspapers in the Ottoman capital dealt with the planned sale. MANDEL, N. J. *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, p. 103.

directly with the governor of Beirut Nürettin Bey, who ordered Shukrī al-^cAsalī to approve of the transaction.²⁵

Not giving up, Shukrī al-^cAsalī turned to the military headquarters in the capital of the *sanjaq* of ^cAkkā and reasoned that a castle of military importance was located on the purchased land. He also tried hard to clarify to the *wālī* of Beirut that the estates were being bought through straw men, behind whom was the *World Zionist Organization* (WZO) which harboured political ambitions for Palestine.²⁶ It is possible that Shukrī al-^cAsalī arrived at this conclusion thanks to the personal involvement of Arthur Ruppin in solving this case. Ruppin was the chairman of the Palestine Office²⁷ as well as of the Jewish National Fund established by the WZO. In this situation the governor turned to the Ministry of the Interior, which confirmed the sale as the transaction was formally in order because it was concluded between Ottoman citizens. Shukrī al-^cAsalī also tried to avert the evacuation of the inhabitants of al-Fūla and refused to accept fees from a Jewish officer working for the Anglo-Palestine Company. On this occasion he accused the Zionists of their goal being “solely to expel the poor Arab peasants from their land, and to set up their own government”.²⁸ The officer remonstrated against the allegation of disloyalty and argued that his brother served in the Ottoman army. Shukrī al-^cAsalī countered that “he was sure [the Jew] had become a soldier only to acquire proficiency in shooting, so that later he could shoot the Arabs”.²⁹

In his address in Parliament in May 1911 Shukrī al-^cAsalī described his efforts to convince the government to buy the land or to compel Iliyās Sursuq to sell it to the tenants in instalments. However, this attempt did not bear fruit either.³⁰

²⁵KHALIDI, R. *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, pp. 107 – 108.

²⁶ Shukrī al-^cAsalī said in his anti-Zionist speech in parliament: “When I saw that the governor insists on the execution of the transfer, this was my last reply to him: ‘The al-Fūla castle is a historic fortress which moreover occupies an [important] military position and therefore it [its purchase] requires the attention of the ministry of war. I persuaded the commander of the ^cAkkā division and he today is conducting an investigation, particularly since the sale is inconsistent with ... patriotic duties. It is necessary to wait for the authorization of the ministry of war and its approval of the sale.’” AL-^cAZM, Haqqī. *Al-isti^cmār aṣ-ṣahyūnī fī majlis al-umma: Chiṭāb rannān*. [Zionist Colonization in the Parliament: A Resounding Speech.] In *al-Muqtabas*, Vol. III, No. 691, 31.5.1911, p. 2.

²⁷ The Palestine Office was set up in 1908 by the World Zionist Organization and its seat was in the coastal town of Jaffa.

²⁸ MANDEL, N. J. *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, p. 106.

²⁹ MANDEL, N. J. *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, pp. 106 – 107.

³⁰ AL-^cAZM, Haqqī. *Al-isti^cmār aṣ-ṣahyūnī...*, p. 2.

The *qā'immaqām* next took action when he learned that the grounds of the village had been taken by some thirty Jewish guards. Shukrī al-^cAsalī used his powers and sent the army to drive them out.

In January 1911 the affair was closed and the village al-Fūla was replaced by the Jewish settlement of Merhavvia. The peasants did not easily reconcile themselves with their expulsion and skirmishes between them and the Jewish settlers often occurred. In one of them in May 1911, a Jewish watchman killed one Arab.

In addition to the abovementioned practical steps, Shukrī al-^cAsalī unleashed a press campaign against the sale of al-Fūla. At the time when he held the position of *qā'immaqām*, he published several articles in newspapers under the pen name Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Ayyūbī (Saladin).³¹

On 5 December 1910 the Damascus newspaper *al-Muqtabas* featured the article *Letter from Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Ayyūbī to the Commander of the Expedition to Ḥawrān Sāmī Pasha al-Fārūqī*.³² The author of this article was Shukrī al-^cAsalī and it was a fictitious letter from the legendary medieval sultan to the contemporary Arab general of the Ottoman army. The introduction of the letter is devoted to important historical events that took place in Palestine – the Arab conquest of Palestine during the Caliphate of ^cUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the Crusades and the reconquest of the Holy Land by Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Ayyūbī, his brother al-^cĀdil and the Mamluk sultan Baybars.³³

In the letter Ṣalāḥaddīn appeals to the Ottoman general to confront Zionism: ... I beg you ..., to hurry to repel the Zionist threat from Palestine, which soil soaked with the blood of the Prophet's companions and with the blood of my armies and for which retrieval I have sacrificed [the lives] of my brothers, my people and commanders...³⁴

³¹ KHALIDI, R. *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, pp. 108 – 109.

³² *Kitāb min Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Ayyūbī ilā qā'id al-ḥamla al-ḥawrānīya Sāmī bāshā al-Fārūqī*.

³³ AL-^cASALĪ, Shukrī. *Kitāb min Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Ayyūbī ilā qā'id al-ḥamla al-ḥawrānīya Sāmī bāshā al-Fārūqī*. [Letter from Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Ayyūbī to the Commander of the Expedition to Ḥawrān Sāmī Pasha al-Fārūqī.] In *al-Muqtabas*, Vol. II, No. 542, 5.12.1910, p. 1. Mandel deals with this letter in detail, but he draws from the translation of the letter in the Hebrew paper *ha-Ḥerut*, which, however, is not the translation of the whole letter as he claims. From his description emerges the fact that the version in *ha-Ḥerut* starts in the middle of the second column of the original article, from the quotation from the Bible. MANDEL, N. J. *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, pp. 87 – 90.

³⁴ AL-^cASALĪ, Shukrī. *Kitāb min Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Ayyūbī...*, p. 1.

He addresses Sāmī Pasha al-Fārūqī at various places in the article as “wise commander”, “virtuous hero” or “courageous commander”. In the second column the author explains the Biblical roots of Zionist aspirations:

The Jewish *Zionist Organization* and its accomplices, the JCA organization,³⁵ fā‘ūlīm,³⁶ Alliance and others strive to regain Palestine, which was promised to them by their Lord in Chapter 32 [of The Book of Jeremiah] ... that mentions the promise of the Lord that they will return to Palestine ... “Men will buy fields for money, sign and seal deeds, and call in witnesses in the land of Benjamin, in the environs of Jerusalem, in the cities of Judah, in the cities of the hill country, in the cities of the lowland, and in the cities of the Negev; for I will restore their fortunes,” declares the LORD.³⁷

Shukrī al-‘Asalī used this letter to enumerate critical remarks on the Zionist movement and to describe its activities in Palestine. At first he exaggeratedly described the extent of Zionist land purchases and then he moved to the regions to which they recently turned their attention:

Today they are trying to enter the district of Nazareth, to take possession of the Shārūn Plain which is mentioned in the Torah and today is known as Marj ibn ‘Āmir [sic],³⁸ through which runs the al-Ḥijāz Railway from the West to the East. All this [is done] under the names of Ottoman [citizens] and with the guidance of treacherous *simsārs*,³⁹ who consider themselves to be the elite of the nation and distinguished people of the country, but in fact they are the most shameful ones whom God has deprived of honour and love for the homeland. ... They [the Zionists] have unofficially bought the village al-Fūla in the Nazareth district that is located on the al-Ḥijāz Railway and are trying to get into it [with the help of] legal tricks. In this manner they have acquired and bought many villages. They do not mingle with Ottomans and do not buy anything from them. They have the Anglo-Palestine Bank, which lends them money at an interest rate that does not exceed one percent per annum.⁴⁰

³⁵ Jewish Colonization Association.

³⁶ Distorted form of the word *po‘alim* – which means “Jewish workers” in Hebrew.

³⁷ AL-‘ASALĪ, Shukrī. *Kitāb min Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Ayyūbī...*, p. 1. Quoted according to the New American Standard Bible. The Book of Jeremiah, Book 24, Chapter 32, Verse 44.

On <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/search=Jeremiah+32&version=NASB>, downloaded 23 June 2010.

³⁸ The Shārūn Plain is situated on the Mediterranean coast and is not identical with Marj ibn ‘Āmir.

³⁹ *Simsār* – means broker in Arabic, and has pejorative connotations.

⁴⁰ AL-‘ASALĪ, Shukrī. *Kitāb min Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Ayyūbī...*, p. 1.

Then he deals in brief with autonomous Zionist institutions at various levels:

They have a flag of a blue colour, in the centre [of the flag] there is the seal of Solomon and under it a Hebrew word that means "Zion", because it is written in the Torah that Jerusalem is the daughter of Zion. They raise this flag instead of the Ottoman flag during their feast days and gatherings and they sing the Zionist march. They have deceived the government and falsely registered as Ottomans in the population register and they continue to hold foreign passports that protect them. When they get to the courts they present their passports and request foreign protection. They solve their lawsuits and disputes between themselves ... they do not turn to the government. They teach their children physical education and how to use weapons and their houses are full of weapons and there are many Martini [rifles]... They have their own postal service and post stamps ... which proves that they have already started to implement their political objectives ... If [our] deputies will not pay attention and the government will not be vigilant and does not stop this violent torrent, it will not take much time in Palestine and you will see that it will have become the property of the Zionist Organization, its accomplices or its nation ...⁴¹

The letter is concluded by a modified Ṣalāḥaddīn's request:

... remind our Turkish brothers ... and tell them to protect Palestine and not to leave my grandchildren and grandchildren of the Muslim armies as a target for Zionist colonization and remind them that it was me who prepared Syria and Palestine for their ... hero Sulṭān Selim I. ... and tell the constitutional government that money and banks are in Jewish hands in Europe and America and that men in the West were not able to compete with them in the fields of economy and finance.⁴² Are these [Palestinian] people, whom you know and understand to be uneducated and unawakened, able to compete with the settlers? This ... I present before your eyes ... protect the country of your ancestors and do not let my efforts be smashed to smithereens...⁴³

On the one hand Neville Mandel correctly asserts that Shukrī al-^cAsalī exaggerates the extent of territories the Zionists acquired. However, on the other hand, his rebuke that Shukrī al-^cAsalī does not explain the circumstances under which Zionists obtained low-interest loans is not justified. The main purpose of

⁴¹ AL-^cASALĪ, Shukrī. *Kitāb min Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Ayyūbī*..., p. 1.

⁴² Behind this belief was not anti-Semitism but rather Zionist propaganda about Jewish influence. In this regard, Mandel points out that: "Herzl and other Zionist leaders after him had claimed that they commanded immense funds and they had influence in the most important of European newspapers. There is considerable evidence that the Arabs accepted these Zionist claims ..." MANDEL, N. Attempts at an Arab-Zionist Entente: 1913-1914. In *Middle Eastern Studies*, I, 3 (1965), p. 241.

⁴³ AL-^cASALĪ, Shukrī. *Kitāb min Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Ayyūbī*..., p. 1.

this open letter was not to deal with the banking system in Europe but to rouse not only Sāmī Pasha and first of all the Arab readers of the newspaper in general. Mandel also groundlessly accuses Shukrī al-^cAsalī of separatist intentions.⁴⁴ At that time Shukrī al-^cAsalī was a supporter of the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁵

The editor-in-chief of *al-Karmal* Najīb al-Khūrī Naṣṣār joined this campaign and devoted a couple of articles to the al-Fūla affair. He accentuated that Shukrī al-^cAsalī did not allow the Zionist agent Hankin to fool him.⁴⁶ He met with the *qā'immaqām* of Nazareth personally and discussed with him the Zionist movement. In respect to his uncompromising attitude towards the sale of al-Fūla lands, Shukrī al-^cAsalī expressed himself in the following manner: "I am young and my soul desires high positions, but you can be sure that I prefer suspension from my office and losing my future to agreeing with the sale of my homeland to the enemy of my nation and my state ..."⁴⁷

In the same month another anti-Zionist article written by Shukrī al-^cAsalī was issued under the pen name Ṣalāḥaddīn in the Arab newspaper *al-Ḥaḍāra* that was published in the capital.⁴⁸

Another article by Shukrī al-^cAsalī, devoted specially to al-Fūla, was published in the daily *al-Ittiḥād al-ʿUṭmānī* after his election to parliament. He labelled the replacement of the original Arab inhabitants with foreign colonists as treason. To this article he enclosed abstracts from messages exchanged between him and the governor of Beirut in the previous months. Furthermore, he used in this article a number of motives with the potential to affect the patriotic and religious feelings of the readers. One of them was the assertion that on the lands bought by the Zionists there was a castle captured from the Crusaders by Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Ayyūbī and that foreigners had now acquired its ruins. Another was the fact that not far from the purchased real estate ran the Ḥijāz Railway

⁴⁴ MANDEL, N. J. *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, p. 90.

⁴⁵ SEIKALY, S. Shukrī al-^cAsalī: A Case Study of a Political Activist, p. 91.

⁴⁶ NAṢṢĀR, Najīb al-Khūrī. Bayna banī Ismāʿīl wa banī Ishḥāq. [Between the Descendants of Ismāʿīl and Ishḥāq.] In *al-Muqtabas*, Vol. II, No. 562, 1.1.1911, p. 1. Najīb al-Khūrī Naṣṣār mentioned him in a positive manner in other articles as well, e.g.: NAṢṢĀR, Najīb al-Khūrī: Aṣ-ṣahyūnīyūn „wa al-Jamʿīya aṣ-ṣahyūnīya“. [Zionists and the "Zionist Organization".] In *al-Muqtabas*, Vol. II, No. 591, 4.2.1911, p. 1.

⁴⁷ QĀSIMĪYA, Khayrīya: Najīb Naṣṣār fī jarīdatihī al-Karmal (1901 – 1914): Aḥad ruwwād munāḥaḍat aṣ-ṣahyūnīya. [Najīb Naṣṣār in his Newspaper al-Karmal (1901 – 1914): One of the pioneers of Anti-Zionist Resistance.] In *Šuʿūn filasṭīnīya*, 23, 1973, p. 105. It is a paraphrase of the words of Shukrī al-^cAsalī.

⁴⁸ MANDEL, N. J. *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, p. 84.

branch line to Haifa that was used to transport pilgrims to the Muslim holy places.⁴⁹

Newspapers in the region of Greater Syria devoted to al-Fūla affair substantial, continuous and long-term attention.⁵⁰ The situation must have been serious when the *Wālī* of Beirut at the end of February and at the beginning of March 1911 decided to publicly vindicate his decision to uphold the sale of al-Fūla on the pages of several newspapers – *Ḥadīqat al-achbār*,⁵¹ *al-Iqbāl* and *al-Muqtabas*. After a couple of weeks the governor resigned from his office, giving eye illness as the reason. Khayrīya Qāsimīya is convinced that his abdication was connected with the al-Fūla affair and since it happened shortly after the portrayed events, this assumption is in all likelihood correct.⁵²

On the 3rd of March, the *al-Muqtabas* daily wrote the following words about Shukrī al-^cAsalī in connection with his performance in the al-Fūla case: "... We have seen a *qā'immaqām* in one district of the province [Beirut], how he ascended from the second class into the first ... his homeland rewarded him for his good efforts and delegated him as a deputy for 50,000 [citizens], that are followed by thirty million Ottomans."⁵³

The ultimate parting of ways between Shukrī al-^cAsalī and the Committee of Union and Progress came during his tenure in parliament, but the seeds of this decision were planted by his previous experiences. He became one of the leading personalities of the Arab bloc and helped to form the Arab Party,⁵⁴ which included most of the Arab members of the Ottoman parliament and advocated Arab language rights in education and in government offices. In discussion with ^cAbdarraḥmān al-Yūsuf during a meeting of the members of the *Arab Party* he rejected the prerogative right of Turks to rule the Ottoman Empire and emphasized the equality of adherents of all nationalities to have share in the government.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ KHALIDI, R. *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, p. 139.

⁵⁰ KHALIDI, R. *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, p. 109.

⁵¹ MANDEL, N. J. *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, p. 107.

⁵² QĀSIMĪYA, K. *An-nashāf aṣ-ṣahyūnī fī ash-sharq al-^carabī wa ṣadāhu, 1908 – 1918*, [Zionist Activities in the Arab East and the Responses to Them, 1908 – 1918.], p. 99.

⁵³ QĀSIMĪYA, K. *An-nashāf aṣ-ṣahyūnī fī ash-sharq al-^carabī wa ṣadāhu, 1908 – 1918*, [Zionist Activities in the Arab East and the Responses to Them, 1908 – 1918.], p. 83.

⁵⁴ Al-Ḥizb al-^carabī in Arabic.

⁵⁵ SEIKALY, S. *Shukrī al-^cAsalī A Case Study of a Political Activist*, pp. 85 – 86.

In April 1911 he delivered a speech in parliament in which he pointed out the marginalization and discrimination against Arabs in high government positions and called for a change in this situation.⁵⁶ For instance, at the ministry of finance there was no Arab among the almost hundred and forty civil servants.⁵⁷ A prominent Syrian politician of the interwar period, ^cAbdarrahmān Shāhbandar labelled this speech as epochal, since it represented a fundamental diversion from the usual performance of Arab representatives, who were until then considered to be malleable and easily influenced.⁵⁸

At the same time he was trying – together with two other Arab MPs, Rūhī al-Khālīdī from Jerusalem and Riḍā aṣ-Ṣulḥ from Beirut – to persuade their colleagues to take measures against Jewish immigration.⁵⁹

Shukrī al-^cAsalī's speech in parliament

In May 1911, when the budget of the ministry of finance was discussed in the Ottoman parliament, a trio of Arab deputies – Rūhī al-Khālīdī, Sa^cīd Bey al-Ḥusaynī and Shukrī al-^cAsalī – delivered speeches on Zionism. According to the newspapers *al-Ahrām* and *Lisān al-Ḥāl*, Shukrī al-^cAsalī was the first one to address the assembly.⁶⁰ However, this version of events is not reliable. Most of the authors – Khayrīya Qāsimīya, Hasan Kayali and Neville Mandel – agree on the following order: The first to appear was Rūhī al-Khālīdī, followed by Sa^cīd Bey al-Ḥusaynī and Shukrī al-^cAsalī.⁶¹

The entire address was published by the Damascus daily *al-Muqtabas* on 31 May 1911. The transcript of the speech took up eight columns (more than one and half pages) and was placed on the first and second pages of the newspaper.⁶² Shukrī al-^cAsalī dealt therein with a number of dominant themes. Analogous to other Arab deputies who spoke before him, he wanted to refute a widely prevalent opinion among non-Arab politicians in Istanbul that Zionists

⁵⁶ SEIKALY, S. *Shukri al-^cAsali A Case Study of a Political Activist*, p. 87.

⁵⁷ KHALIDI, R. *British Policy towards Syria and Palestine 1906 – 1914*, p. 228.

⁵⁸ SEIKALY, S. *Shukri al-^cAsali A Case Study of a Political Activist*, p. 87.

⁵⁹ MANDEL, N. J. *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, p. 112.

⁶⁰ Ash-shu'ūn al-^cuṭmānīya. [Ottoman Affairs.] In *al-Ahrām*, 10091, 24.5.1911, p. 1; Al-yahūd fī Filasṭīn. [Jews in Palestine.] In *Lisān al-Ḥāl*, 6649, 31.5.1911, p. 1.

⁶¹ QĀSIMĪYA, K. *An-nashāṭ aṣ-ṣahyūnī fī ash-sharq al-^carabī wa ṣadāhu, 1908-1918*, [Zionist Activities in the Arab East and the Responses to Them, 1908 – 1918], pp. 101 – 103; KAYALI, H. *Arabs and Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908 – 1918*, pp. 104 – 105; MANDEL, N. J. *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, pp. 112 – 116.

⁶² AL-^cAẒM, Haqqī. Al-isti^cmār aṣ-ṣahyūnī fī majlis al-umma; Chiṭāb rannān. [Zionist Colonization in Parliament: A Resounding Speech.] In *al-Muqtabas*, Vol. III, No. 691, 31.5.1911, pp. 1 – 2.

are only a “group of lunatic fools” as Tal^cat Bey, a deputy from Ankara, retorted when he interrupted his address.⁶³ The first part of the speech represents a historical excursion into the time of inception of political Zionism, the foundation of the World Zionist Organization and its ensuing enormous advancement. Thereafter he proceeded to the situation in Palestine:

One of the essential decisions of the Zionists is to take possession of the Palestinian land by purchase before any other activity and subsequently the transition from political intentions to their materialization. They have pursued this plan and have begun to acquire lands by paying several times the value of the land, evoking the desire of the owners to sell [it]. They do not enter a village as long as one Muslim or Christian remains in it and they try to drive them out of it and then they arrive in it and in this manner the village becomes Jewish. There are no members of other nationalities and its owners keep their foreign citizenship.⁶⁴

Then he described the Zionist institutions in Palestine and the virtually autonomous functioning of the Jewish settlements in terms of administration, judicial system and postal service. He took notice of the change in the situation regarding the protection of Jewish settlements compared to the past. They had once employed Arab guards, but now they were self-reliant in this respect:

And because the Zionists were known for their cowardliness at the time they started to come to the country, they employed guards from among the local population for the protection of their lands and homes, but step by step they shook off the dust of cowardice, plucked up their courage and started to procure weapons by hundreds from weapon smugglers until they became able to do without local guards and capable of defending themselves and their properties. I will give you an example of that in what happened this year when the Şuqūr tribe, known for their poverty, attacked one of the Jewish villages and pillaged many of their properties. The Jews took up arms ... and got back from them everything they had robbed in their village.⁶⁵

Shukrī al-^cAsalī discussed in detail Zionist goals and methods which they decided to use in order to achieve them. Their goal was the establishment of a Jewish state and the replacement of the native inhabitants with Jews as had happened in the villages they purchased until then. The means as to how the Zionists wanted to achieve this were land purchases. This was facilitated by their financial strength and their financial institutions that provided them with

⁶³ AL-^cAẒM, Haqqī. *Al-isti^c mār aṣ-ṣahyūnī fī majlis al-umma*, p. 1.

⁶⁴ AL-^cAẒM, Haqqī. *Al-isti^c mār aṣ-ṣahyūnī fī majlis al-umma*, p. 1.

⁶⁵ AL-^cAẒM, Haqqī. *Al-isti^c mār aṣ-ṣahyūnī fī majlis al-umma*, p. 1.

easily attainable loans. Perhaps intentionally, in order to add weight to his words, he exaggerated the extent of the lands Zionists had purchased until then. He was convinced that Zionist territorial ambitions extended beyond the borders of Palestine into Greater Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, Shukrī al-ʿAsalī devoted a large part of his speech to the recent sale of al-Fūla to the Zionists, which he had defied in the position of *qā'immaqām* of Nazareth. He talked about the steps he took to prevent the land sale and criticized the inaction of the government and local authorities, which in some cases allied themselves with the Zionists. This had also happened in this case when the purchase was approved by the governor and the Ottoman government.⁶⁶

On the next day after he had delivered his speech on Zionism, Shukrī al-ʿAsalī departed for his hometown and after his return he left the Committee of Union and Progress.⁶⁷ He tried to come back to Damascus without raising much public attention, but Ḥaqqī al-ʿAz̧m informed the daily *al-Muqtabas* about his arrival and called for his grandiose reception. "We have to show respect to the one who defends the right of his nation, to give an useful lesson to other deputies and to demonstrate to the public that we appreciate the [political] line which our deputy follows ..., and that we stand behind him body and soul ..."⁶⁸ In the letter he underlines Shukrī al-ʿAsalī's humility, conscientiousness and patriotism. It is remarkable that Ḥaqqī al-ʿAz̧m had been one of the defeated rival candidates of Shukrī al-ʿAsalī in the January 1911 by-election and in spite of that he discussed him in such a highly positive manner.⁶⁹

Zionist public relations efforts

In August 1911 Shukrī al-ʿAsalī wrote an article in *al-Muqtabas* where he described Zionist efforts in the field of public relations and self-propagation. A friend from Istanbul had sent him a letter together with a copy of the newspaper *L'Aurore* in which there was an article about an excursion to Palestine organized by the Zionists.

The opening of the article in *al-Muqtabas* shows that Shukrī al-ʿAsalī and his Istanbul informant were very well aware of the connection between Zionist institutions in Istanbul and certain newspapers. He described the financial support of the Anglo-Levantine Bank directed by Victor Jacobson (who was at

⁶⁶ AL-ʿAZ̧M, Haqqī. *Al-istif mār aṣ-ṣahyūnī fī majlis al-umma*, pp. 1 – 2.

⁶⁷ SEIKALY, S. *Shukri al-ʿAsalī A Case Study of a Political Activist*, p. 88.

⁶⁸ AL-ʿAZ̧M, Haqqī. A letter sent to the newspaper published without a title. In *al-Muqtabas*, Vol. III, No. 681, p. 2.

⁶⁹ AL-ʿAZ̧M, Haqqī. A letter sent to the newspaper published without a title, p. 2.

the same time the representative of the World Zionist Organization in Istanbul) to the newspapers *L'Aurore* and *Le Jeune-Turc*.⁷⁰

This educational journey to Palestine organized for the representatives from various communities from Thessalonica and subsidized by the Zionists had two major goals. The first was to show visitors the benefit of Jewish immigrants to the development of Palestine. In the translation of the article from *L'Aurore* there appeared well-known myths and exaggerations about the successes of Jewish immigrants. "[The visitors] will see what human effort is capable of in the struggle against the scorched desert." ... "They will see, how the forearms of the people, their hearts and the sweat of their foreheads have softened the deserts and planted sands parched by the sun which has made from them something like slaked lime." ... "In these empty lands, where many deadly diseases spread and where nothing can be heard but the barking of hyenas and howling of foxes ... a reviving spirit has succeeded, driven out decay, removed diseases and liberated the beauty of the nature, its splendour and the merciless nature has become a paradise." ... "There, where a miserable Arab used to build his shack from dry clay are today dignified houses crowned with red roof tiles which have a beautiful look as if a magic wand had created them."⁷¹

The second objective was an effort to eliminate doubts and fears about the Zionist movement and present it as politically harmless and economically beneficial. At the same time the Zionists hoped that after their return the visitors would share their positive impressions with their communities and thus contribute to a change in attitude towards the Zionist movement. "And if these tourists wish to know the blessed hand that transformed this misery into happiness and this grief into joy." When all these Turks, Greeks, Bulgarians, Armenians, and perhaps there are among them also some Jews, will know that all this renewal and all this revival is the work of a handful of serfs who escaped from death and oppression and will see with their own eyes and touch with their own hands the results of the work of these several hundred refugees ..." ... "They will say: The Jew is not that despicable as is said and is far from being a threat for the country where he lives freely and honestly, on the contrary, he repays honour and freedom with complete happiness that he disseminates." ... "Sound minds, proud and honourable people will return from this illuminating journey inspired by reality. If these tourists truly love their county and desire its success, then they are coming back and their souls are open to the light all the

⁷⁰ AL-^CASALĪ, Shukrī. *As-siyāḥa fī Filasṭīn*. [Tourism in Palestine.] In *al-Muqtabas*, Vol. III, No. 752, 11.8.1911, p. 1.

⁷¹ AL-^CASALĪ, Shukrī. *As-siyāḥa fī Filasṭīn*, p. 1.

more that they [harbour feelings of] love, esteem and justice towards the Jewish nation which they have not known for such a long time."⁷²

Shukrī al-^cAsalī does not agree with the content of the article in *L'Aurore*. He compares the Jewish settlements to agriculturally developed regions in Syria (Ba^clabakk and al-Ġūṭa) and asserts that these Arab areas are more advanced in spite of the fact that no one financially supports them. At the same time he points out that the economic successes of the Zionists do not contradict their political ambitions. In doing so he refers to the article on Zionism in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*.⁷³ He familiarized himself with the article through the translation published by Najīb al-Khūrī Naṣṣār in his semi-weekly newspaper *al-Karmal*. This occurred in 1911 in numbers 133 (31.3.1911) to 149 (2.6.1911).⁷⁴ This translation was later in the same year published in the form of a book.⁷⁵ Most of this book consists of the translated abbreviated articles, but a few pages at the beginning and at the end of the book as well as a couple of paragraphs in other places are the commentaries of the translator.⁷⁶ Shukrī al-^cAsalī also noticed that apart from the abovementioned pro-Zionist newspapers the press had not dealt with this journey at all.⁷⁷

In the second half of 1911 the conflict between Shukrī al-^cAsalī and the Committee of Union and Progress intensified as he criticized it for its policies in the Arab provinces and incapability to defend Tripolis against Italian aggression.⁷⁸

At the beginning of 1912 the Committee of Union and Progress dismissed parliament to stay in power until new elections were held in order to exploit the state machinery to win these elections. Shukrī al-^cAsalī was one of the leading personalities of the opposition in Syria, which on 21 November 1911 united to form a new political party called Entente Libérale. His speeches in the cities of

⁷² AL-^cASALĪ, Shukrī. *As-siyāḥa fī Filasṭīn*, p. 1.

⁷³ GOTTHEIL, Richard. Zionism. In *Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. XII. New York, 1905, pp. 666 – 686.

⁷⁴ These copies of *al-Karmal* do not exist anymore. KHALIDI, R. The Role of the Press in the Early Arab Reaction to Zionism. In *Peoples Mediterraneens/Mediterranean Peoples*, 20, (July-September 1982), pp. 108, 120.

⁷⁵ The book was published in October 1911. NAṢṢĀR, Najīb al-Khūrī *Aṣ-ṣahyūniya, tārīkhuhā – ǧaraḥuhā – aḥammīyatuhā. Mulakhkhaṣan 'an al-insiklūbūdiyā al-yahūdīya* [Zionism, its History, Goal and Importance. Abbreviated from the Jewish Encyclopedia]. QĀSIMĪYA, K. *An-nashāṭ aṣ-ṣahyūnī fī ash-sharq al-^carabī wa ṣadāhu, 1908-1918*, [Zionist Activities in the Arab East and the Responses to Them, 1908 – 1918.], Note 38, p. 100.

⁷⁶ It concerns pages 2 – 3, 12, 16 – 17, 44, 50 – 51 and 58 – 64.

⁷⁷ AL-^cASALĪ, Shukrī. *As-siyāḥa fī Filasṭīn*, p. 1.

⁷⁸ SEIKALY, S. *Shukri al-^cAsali A Case Study of a Political Activist*, p. 88.

the Levant received a strong public response which almost cost him his life. In March 1912 an attempt on his life was made in Damascus, when an army officer tried to shoot him. It is very likely that the Committee of Union and Progress was behind this abortive assassination attempt.⁷⁹

The arrangements taken by the Committee of Union and Progress were highly successful and the opposition in the Levant (where according to foreign observers it had the majority of the public on its side) did not win a single mandate. In the entire Ottoman Empire only a few deputies for the Entente Libérale were elected.⁸⁰ Anti-Zionism was an important criteria in these elections even for the selection of CUP candidates in Jerusalem, which led to the discontent among the Zionists.⁸¹ The fact that the party that rigged the elections did not allow itself to nominate pro-Zionist candidates in Palestine is clear proof that anti-Zionism had by that time gained such an influence that it was impossible to disregard. Fear from the negative response of the public was the main reason behind this decision taken by the Committee of Union and Progress.

In 1913 and at the beginning of 1914 Shukrī al-ʿAsalī worked as the editor of *al-Qabas* (at the time when *al-Muqtabas* was stopped from being published by the government).⁸² At the start of 1914 he returned to the civil service. It is possible that he was forced to take this decision by his difficult financial situation.⁸³

This prominent civil servant, politician and activist met his fate during World War I when he was sentenced to death and executed on 6 May 1916 in Damascus.⁸⁴

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⁸⁰ KHALIDI, R. *British Policy towards Syria and Palestine 1906 – 1914*, pp. 237, 241. For details about the 1912 elections and manipulations and repression of the Committee of Union and Progress, see KHALIDI, R. I. *The 1912 Election Campaign in the Cities of Bilad al-Sham*, pp. 461 – 474.

⁸¹ MANDEL, N. J. *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, pp. 119 – 120.

⁸² SEIKALY, Samir *Shukri al-ʿAsalī: A Case Study of a Political Activist*, p. 90.

⁸³ SEIKALY, Samir *Shukri al-ʿAsalī: A Case Study of a Political Activist*, pp. 90 – 91.

⁸⁴ MŪSĀ, Sulaymān *Al-ḥaraka al-ʿarabīya: Al-marḥala al-ūlā li an-nahḍa al-ʿarabīya al-ḥadītha, 1908 – 1924*. [The Arab Movement: The First Phase of the Modern Arab Awakening, 1908 – 1924.], p. 116.

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