

# Early Local Photography in Palestine: The Legacy of Karimeh Abbud

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Photo of two unknown young women taken by Karimeh Abbud. Source: the private collection of Issam Nassar; gift from Ahmad Mrowat, Nazareth Archive.

*Karimeh Abbud, an early Palestinian woman photographer, practiced her craft from the 1920s on. By then photography was already an established profession in the Middle East, including Palestine. It is easy to recognize her significance as a pioneering woman, but that should not preclude looking at her work in its own right and comparing it with the output of her male peers. Additionally, a look at the beginnings of photography in the region further highlights her individual contribution to Palestinian photography.*

## Photography and the Middle East

The Middle East in general, and Palestine in particular, became one of the world's most photographed places in the nineteenth century, when hundreds of European photographers flocked to the region. Photography was taken up as a career by a growing number of Ottoman subjects, some of whom learned it from the European photographers residing in the area. By the 1860s, the Ottoman Sultan had official court photographers, and photographic establishments started to appear in various cities within the empire, most notably in Istanbul, Beirut, Jerusalem, and Jaffa.

The Armenian Abdullah brothers opened their photographic shop in Istanbul in 1862. Their work was extensive in nature, and sizeable collections of their pictures of Ottoman officials, staff and soldiers may be viewed at the Library of Congress in the United States and the Ottoman archive in Istanbul. Two decades later, in the 1880s, they moved their practice to Cairo, supported by a grant from Egypt's Khedive. They also participated in the International Paris Exhibition in 1867 as part of the Ottoman wing.

In this same period another Armenian started to practice photography in Jerusalem. Yessai Garabedian originally hailed from Central Asia and had lived in Istanbul, but he moved to Jerusalem to become the librarian at the main Armenian convent. A few years later, in 1864, he was elected patriarch of the Armenian Church, and became known as Esayee of Talas (patriarch 1864-1885). He founded a workshop that taught young Armenians photography within the St. James Church compound in Jerusalem. As a patriarch, he was unable to practice photography himself, but diverted his talents and energy to teaching it to others. A number of his students became established and pioneering photographers in the region. Among them was Garabed Krikorian, who in the 1880s opened Jerusalem's first photographic studio outside the Jaffa Gate of the Old City.<sup>1</sup> His apprentice, Khalil Raad, became Palestine's first Arab photographer, soon to be joined by Issa Sawabini and Daoud Sabonji in Jaffa in the 1890s.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, in Beirut, a photography renaissance was taking place with a number of locals taking up the practice. Most famous among them was the Syrian doctor, Louis Sabounji, whose practice started in Beirut in the 1850s. Louis' brother, George, emerged out of that practice as one of the most important early photographers of Lebanon.<sup>3</sup>

Thus by the time Karimeh Abbud started practicing photography the region was already home to numerous photographers and studios. But to the best of our knowledge she was the first woman professional photographer to offer services to the public. Her advertisement published in a *al-Karmel* newspaper sometime in 1932 clearly states that she is the "only national female photographer," and that she was taught at the hands of "one of the most renowned photographers." The advertisement falls short of mentioning the name of her renowned teacher or where he was located, but the text uses the masculine form of the noun in Arabic, *musawer* rather than the feminine, *musawera*. Did she learn photography in Jerusalem, at the hands of one of the few well-known photographers there, such as Raad, Krikorian, or Savedes? Did she learn it from the American Colony photo department, or another establishment in

Jerusalem? Or did she learn it from al-Sawabini in Jaffa, or a photographer in Haifa? Or perhaps, she might have learned it from someone else in the wider region, perhaps in Beirut? We have no definite answer to this question, but more likely than not her master was closer to her home in Bethlehem.

Where do we place Abbud in the context of early Palestinian photography? She was clearly a pioneer being a woman professional photographer in a craft that continues, even to this day, to be largely the domain of men. But was she the first woman photographer in Palestine in particular or the region in general? And what were the distinctive and distinguishing features of her work in comparison with the photographs produced by others at the time?

*The Palestine Directory and Handbook* for the year 1926 lists a number of photographers in the Jerusalem area.<sup>4</sup> All the names listed are of Jewish men. This might suggest that no women were practicing photography in the *Yeshuv*, but since Armenian and Arab photographers were not listed, there is a possibility that Karimeh Abbud was the first Arab woman photographer, as well as the first one in Palestine. In a previous study I conducted of local photographers in Palestine before 1948 I was unable to find any references to women practitioners.<sup>5</sup> Studies on early photographers in Lebanon and Egypt do not mention any women photographers either.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, two other Palestinian women are known to have worked with their photographer relatives in Jerusalem. These were Najla Raad niece of Khalil Raad, who helped her husband Johannes Krikorian in hand-coloring photographs that he took<sup>7</sup>, and Margo Abdou who ran the photographic studio of her brother David whenever he was traveling.<sup>8</sup> But unlike Karimeh, neither of the two women practiced on her own as a proprietor, the way Abbud did.

Early Arab and Armenian local photographers in Palestine were generally speaking studio photographers, producing mostly portraits and occasionally photographing weddings and school graduation ceremonies. Only a few of them—primarily Khalil Raad and Hanna Safieh—also shot landscapes and religious or archeological sites.<sup>9</sup> Abbud appears to have worked mostly in portrait photography, though on occasion one sees among her pictures a few family events, likely to be of her own family. While portrait photographers in Palestine captured the images of their subjects in their studios where carefully prepared settings were at hand, Abbud was taking portraits at her clients' homes. Using makeshift backgrounds and settings, her subjects stood at ease in front of her camera.

## **The Art of Portraiture**

Portrait photography was among the earliest genres to emerge following the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839. Thus its prevalence in early local photographic practice in Palestine was not unusual. In the case of Abbud, it was perhaps the most suitable type for her to practice in light of social norms at the time that restricted women's ability to work outside her own or other people's homes. As a practitioner she

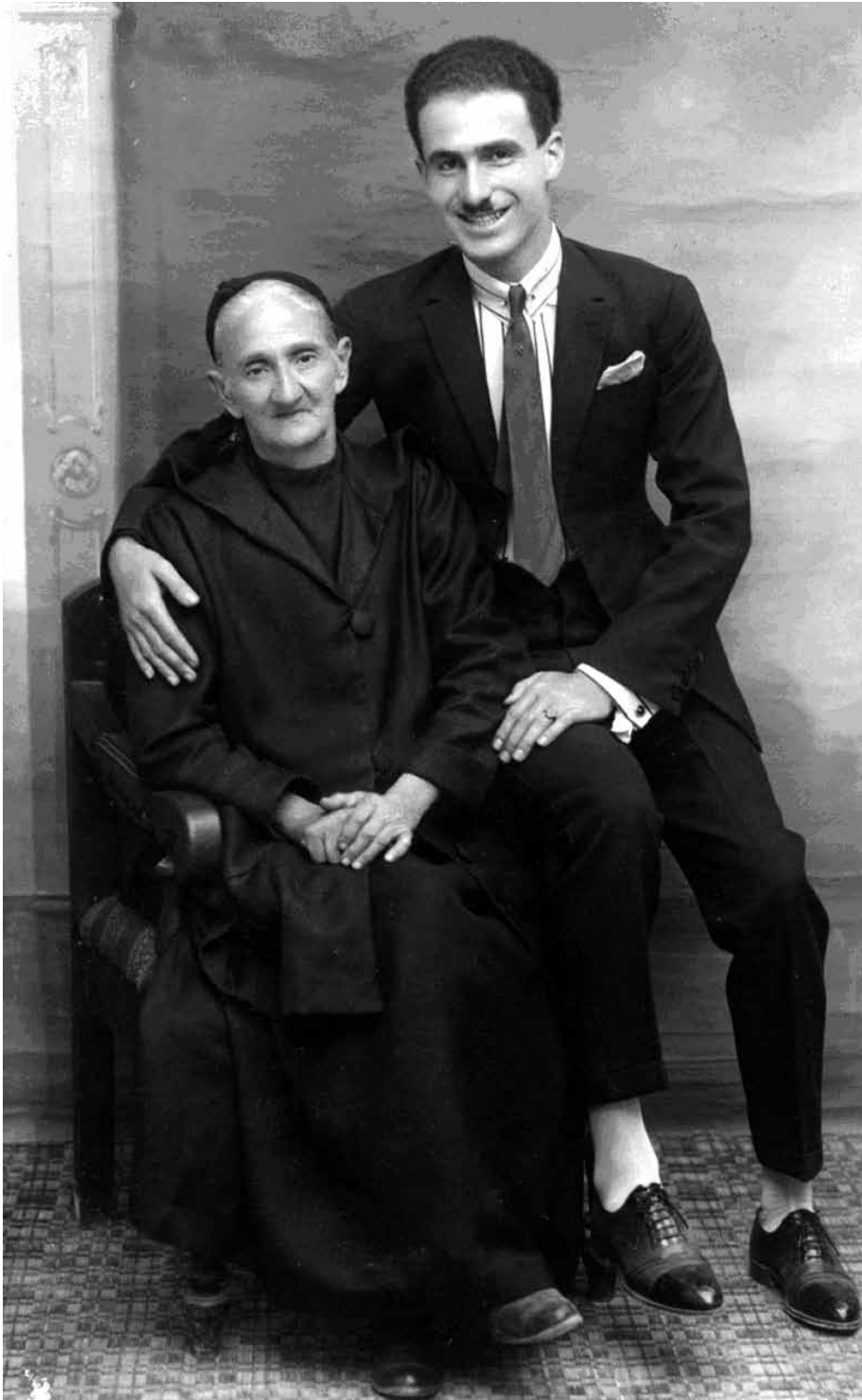


Faidi al-Alami (mayor of Jerusalem, 1906-1909) with his two children Na'amite and Musa. *Source* Library of Congress, Matson Collection.

specialized in portraiture and probably made her reputation based on it. This type of photography allows its creator to pay more attention to details and to plan carefully the setting and lighting. The resulting image, especially with the early photographic processes, had a certain *phantasmic quality* that sometimes is harder to achieve in event or landscape photography. In Walter Benjamin's words, the photograph had "an aura... a hallucinatory quality" to it.<sup>10</sup> Early cameras not only captured the objects in front of their lenses, but they also had the power to alter them. What we see in the picture is separated both from what surrounds it and from what we are familiar with. If for no other reason, this is because of the shades of colors—so different from the ones in which the object appears to us in nature—that we can never see in reality except in the picture. The creation of what Benjamin called the *aura* then is part and parcel of the act of taking pictures. Wearing special garments that one does not usually put on in everyday life, sitting in a particular position and posing in certain ways—often mimicking postures typical in certain genres of painting art—further contribute to the making of the aura of a photograph.

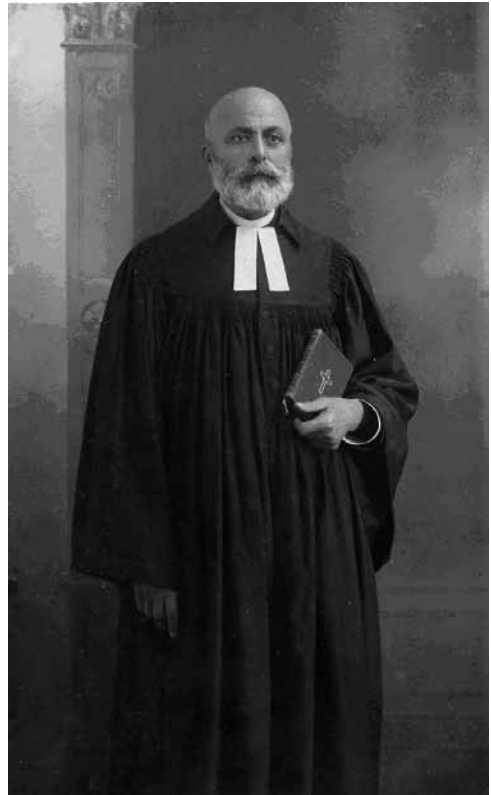
Roland Barthes placed the construction of the aura not in its subject matter, but in the picture itself. It is the photographic portrait, according to him, that alters our perceptions of ourselves once we get one taken. Once being photographed, he wrote, "I feel myself observed by the lens [and] everything changes. I constitute myself in the process of *posing*." Instead of being *his* usual self, Barthes asserts that he was forced into making his body pose, thus transforming it into another body: the one that will be fixed in the picture forever. But the process of posing also transformed the original body. In other words, the observed was transformed at the time of the lens shutter snap into the other image that is in the photograph. It is a case of life imitating photography. The subject chooses and poses, with the aid of the photographer, what he/she *wants* to be and to *appear as*. In the words of a customer of Nagda's Sagar Studio in India, what customers want is to "come out [in photographs] better than they really are."<sup>11</sup> The subject, as she appears in the picture is not herself as she is, but appears as an "other" who in reality is what she would like to be. This photographed *other* self is the one she now can imagine herself to be and transforms herself to become. Barthes points this out when he describes how when he was photographed, what he wanted was "to have captured [his] ... delicate moral texture and not a mimicry." Then, going to the studio, explaining what he had in mind, listening to the photographer's suggestions, posing for the camera and having one's picture taken is more than simply wanting to look in the mirror and seeing one's own face. It constituted an act that culminates in the portrait itself of the subject showing his "delicate moral texture" which deep down one knows one does not have, but wishes it to appear as one possible meaning, not of the photograph, but of oneself.

Thus a portrait photograph of a person helps construct the aura of that person not as who they really are, but as a copy of the person as they appeared in the portrait. Early local photographers in Palestine appear to have been good producers of such an "aura." In the work of Krikorian, Raad, Sawabini and others, the phantasmic quality that Benjamin discusses was clearly produced. Look at the following photograph



This photograph printed on carte postale has the stamp of Karimeh Abbud. It was sent with a note on the back to Um Diabis Abbud on October 30th, 1930 from Dmitri, whose last name is not legible. *Source: the private collection of Issam Nassar, gift from Ahmad Mrowat, Nazareth Archive.*

of Faidi al-Alami, mayor of Jerusalem, and his two children taken by Garabed Krikorian in the first few years of the twentieth century. Wearing the officially adopted Ottoman headgear, the *fez*, a sign of the status of its wearer as an urban official or notable, Faidi is dressed in a formal suit and coat. His son, Musa, is wearing a suit that resembles that of official staff of lower ranking than his father, while the daughter is dressed in a lady-like modern Victorian dress. The pose is carefully planned: the mayor is holding what seems to be an official *firman* and the son is holding a thin book suggesting that he is an educated child. He is also wearing a *fez*. While his father and sister followed the instructions of the photographer to look into the distance—giving them the aura of sophistication—Musa looks into the camera. Was this an act of defiance on his part or a planned act on the side of the photographer? We cannot be certain, but the act of looking into the camera lens makes him appear childlike, setting him apart from his sister and father. A sense of spontaneity is communicated to the viewer. When looking at this photograph we know that Musa is a sweet child as much as we know that his father is an important figure by the mere act of gazing away. The mayor's pose reminds us of classical European paintings where the Pope, cardinal or king is painted looking away and holding a book, a decree, or some other symbol of authority. Examples of this include the portrait of King Louis XIV by the workshop of Hyacinthe Rigaud from around 1701, Raphael's Pope Leo X in the Palazzo Pitti from the early 1500s, and his portrait of Cardinal Bibbiena from around 1516. As John Berger noted, in Renaissance paintings, men often appeared to be doing something while women posed.<sup>12</sup> Following traditions in portrait photography that were common at the time, Krikorian clearly captures and expresses the social significance of Faidi, the mayor.



Rev. Said Abbud. Source: the private collection of Issam Nassar, gift from Ahmad Mrowat, Nazareth Archive.

Karimeh Abbud follows the same traditions she must have learnt at the hands of her teacher. She specialized in portraiture through which auras of her subjects were constructed. Her portrait of Rev. Said Abbud, her father, is one good example.

The Reverend in this picture is standing in his ceremonial gown. He holds the Bible and looks into the horizon. Yet, his posture is more casual way than that of bishops in Renaissance paintings. Despite the somehow stern look in his eyes, he appears to

the viewer to be a humble man. Despite the formal pose the viewer gets a sense of spontaneity conveyed by the aura of both knowledge and humility emanating from the photograph. This use of aura is not unique to this picture, but appears in Abbud's other photographs. Her portrait of Dmitri and his mother taken in 1926 is another example where the sense of spontaneity is evident.

The mother is seated in a pose that shows her dignified, yet at ease. The son, sitting on the edge of his mother's chair, appears completely relaxed and smiling. There is an air of spontaneity about this picture. Both mother and son appear to be themselves and setting the pose seems to have been quick and unplanned. Almost without exception, Karimeh Abbud's photographs share this sense of spontaneity.

Another example is the photo she took of two young ladies, perhaps friends or sisters. Using the exact same background in the two previous photographs, all of which carefully include the decorative wall beam to the left of the picture, the two young women stand in stylish clothes. They wear similar shoes, which the photographer made sure appeared in the picture, set against the decorative floor-tiles. The shorter one, who appears to be the eldest of the two, holds a flower in her hand. She looks away from the camera, while her sister looks directly at the lens. This is most likely a family portrait and the two women came to Karimeh's home/studio in their finery to have their picture taken in what must have been a planned event. Karimeh prepared her camera, installing the negative plate, then moved on to guide them in the pose. She made sure the lighting was sufficient and shining in the right direction. Yet the portrait does not make the two young ladies appear majestic or royal. On the contrary, the two subjects appear, once again, to be both intimidated by the camera and rather at ease in front of it. While this might suggest less craftsmanship on the side of Abbud if compared with her peers at the time, it nevertheless reveals the humanity of the subjects. And herein lies the significance of this photographer's work. Karimeh Abbud preserved the humbleness and humanity of her Palestinian subjects, setting aside the phantasmic *aura* in favor of the impression of real people being who they are.

## Conclusion

Abbud stands out as a different kind of photographer in Palestine. Not only was she the first woman professional photographer, but she was also among the first in the region to set aside European style traditions in portrait art and photography. It is thanks to her portraits that viewers catch a glimpse of a different *aura* in her photographs. This would be the aura of normality, of people appearing at their best, but within a middle-class context. Their best reflects their dreams and aspirations and in their case, they are the aspirations to be normal. They are neither dignified rulers, generals, pashas and religious clerics, nor do they resemble biblical scene or the ethnographic obsessions of the European viewers. It is thanks to the work of this pioneering woman photographer that faces of the Palestinians before their catastrophe of 1948 show their kindness, their simplicity and their tranquility.



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#### Endnotes

- 1 For more on early Armenian photographers see Badr El-Hage, *L'Orient Des Photographes Armeniens* (Paris: Cercle d'Art, 2007).
- 2 For more on the early photographic pioneers in Palestine see Issam Nassar, "Familial Snapshot: Representing Palestine in the Work of the First Local Photographer" in *History & Memory*, Volume 18, Number 2, (Fall/Winter 2006): 139-155.
- 3 For more on early photography in Syria and Lebanon, see: Badr El-Hage, *Des Photographes a Damas, 1840-1918* (Grenoble, France: La Bouquinerie, 2001).
- 4 *The Palestine Directory and Handbook*, Isaiah Pevsner, ed. (Tel Aviv: Trade and Industry Publishing Co, 1926).
- 5 Issam Nassar, *Laqatat Mughayira: al-tasweer al-fotoghraphy al-mubaker fi falastin* (Beirut and Ramallah: Kutub and Qattan Foundation, 2005).
- 6 For example see Badr El-Hage, *L'orient des Photographes Armeniens* (Paris: Cercle d'Art, 2007) and Maria Golia, *Photography and Egypt* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2009).
- 7 Issam Nassar, *Laqatat*, 52.
- 8 Her nephew and niece, George and Nadia Theodori of Bethlehem, conveyed the information on Margo Abdo to me in August 2009.
- 9 On Khalil Raad, see Rona Sela, *Chalil Raad, Photographs 1891-1948* (Tel Aviv: Gutman Art Museum, 2010) and on Safieh see Issam Nassar, "A Jerusalem Photographer: The Life and Work of Hanna Safieh" *Jerusalem Quarterly* (Winter 2007) 24-28.
- 10 See Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 13.
- 11 Quoted in Christopher Pinney, "Notes from the Surface of the Image: Photography, Postcolonialism, and Vernacular Modernism," in Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, eds., *Photography's Other Histories* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 214.
- 12 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 47.