

A Revolutionary Palestinian Poet Who Saw Jews as Brothers

'I do not deny any right / Whatever it would be / Of your Jews, Israel,' wrote Tawfiq Zayyad in 1970. A new biography about his life examines his important work



Tawfiq Zayyad. 'We fight the same battle, in the same trench, for the love of the land and the People.' Credit: Hasan Isawi

Ron Gerlitz

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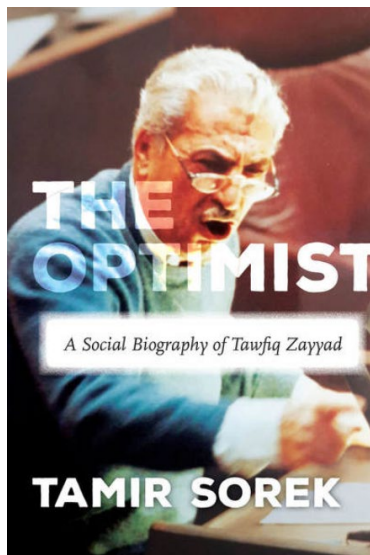
Tawfiq Zayyad (1929-1994) was a leader, a prominent Palestinian national poet, a communist, a native son and mayor of Nazareth and a member of Knesset for almost 20 years. The first-ever biography of Zayyad, by Tamir Sorek – an Israeli sociologist who teaches in the history department of Penn State University in the United States – tells a fascinating life story, from the series of arrests and detentions of Zayyad as a youth, through his long term as mayor and as a member of Israel's Parliament who led the Arab public in Israel to engage in political partnership with the Zionist left.

From the 1960s onward, Zayyad's star rose among the Palestinians and gradually throughout the Arab world, as a widely admired Palestinian revolutionary poet. In 1966 the Palestinian writer and refugee

Ghassan Kanafani, who lived in Beirut, published a seminal essay entitled “Resistance Literature in Occupied Palestine 1948-1966.” Along with such literary leading lights as Mahmoud Darwish, Salem Jubran and Samih al-Qasim, Kanafani called Zayyad one of the the “poets of resistance” among the Palestinians in Israel. In those years, Kanafani wrote that while the Nakba (or “catastrophe,” during Israel’s War of Independence, when 700,000 Arabs fled or were expelled from their homes) separated the local Palestinian community from its pre-1948 poetry, the poetry of resistance of Zayyad’s generation was a direct continuation of the Palestinian poetry of the 1930s.

In a similar context, Sorek writes in his new book that Zayyad’s poetry sought to be a bridge between the different parts of the Palestinian people in their homeland and outside of it, and between pre- and post-Nakba Palestine.

Zayyad stressed the Palestinian nationalism of Israel’s Arab citizens and his own commitment to the Palestinian struggle for freedom in the columns he wrote, in Arabic, and in his speeches over the years. In 1966 he wrote: “We fight the same battle, in the same trench, for the love of the land and the People; we fight the same enemy: colonialism and its soldiers; we fight for the same goal: social and national liberation; we fight with the same weapon: courageous words shining bright.”



The cover of 'The Optimist: A Social Biography of Tawfiq Zayyad,' by Tamir Sorek.

Zayyad’s worldview incorporated support for a national struggle for Israeli Arab citizens’ civil rights with a call for full and equal participation in the state. In his speech at a 1976 May Day rally, he expressed hope for the full integration of Arabs in the state, demanded their representation in the Knesset, the government, administration and the diplomatic realm, as well as national rights and full partnership in decision making. At the end of his speech he warned that without full equality, the Arabs will look for

another state that might want them and their lands. The Hebrew media rejoiced over those parting words, calling them a “threat of separation.” This was not the first time nor the last that Zayyad’s message of integration would be ignored, while the separatist message reverberated.

Zayyad, who was faithful to the path of the Israeli Communist Party, stressed both in his poetry and his speeches the right of the Jewish people to self-determination in the State of Israel, and noted that they should not be denied that which they were denying the Palestinians. In 1970, he published the ode “The Prisoners of Freedom,” which sparked a storm in the Arab world. The poems were written in support of the Palestinians in administrative detention – meaning, detained by Israel without trial – who had launched a hunger strike at the time. Zayyad praised their self-sacrifice and harshly assailed Israeli aggression. But the sixth of the ninth poems in the ode is called “What I Deny and What I Do Not Deny”:

“I do not deny any right
Whatever it would be
Of your Jews, Israel
Because among them
I have comrades in arms.
I would walk with them
Until the last step
To obtain our common bright future.
I do not deny the right of the other People
To be in a state of their own
To build it as they wish.
They could divide it into more than one state
Make it a heaven or hell
Paint it in any color they wish,
Make it a dough, and to bake it into a break and eat it,
If they wish. “

(Translated by Tamir Sorek)

Those lines provoked a furor in the Palestinian diaspora. When Dar al-Awda, a PLO-affiliated Beirut publishing house located in Beirut, published the ode in a book of Zayyad's poems called "Songs of Revolution and Rage," it removed the lines "Of your Jews, Israel/ Because among them/ I have comrades in arms", which might have implied not only recognition of the State of Israel but even a shared camaraderie with Jewish Israelis. On the other hand, out of all of the nine poems, only that one was translated into Hebrew. Sorek's decision to describe in his book the reaction to the "Prisoners of Freedom" poems makes it easier to understand Zayyad's complex image and viewpoints, his courage to express them, and the conflicting reactions he aroused among different audiences.

But what apparently spurred the greatest controversy of all was the ode "The Great Crossing," in one of which Zayyad relates to the Egyptian army crossing the Suez Canal during the Yom Kippur War.

"The night was long

Heavy was the humiliation

And the wound was deep.

Even our bread was full of degradation

But now ... the joy, watered by blood, sprouted in each entity.

[...]

The fierce brown faces collapsed the Bar-Lev line,

The crossing was sacred, and the flags were re-raised in their previous place,

And tears of joy welled up in the eyes."

(Translated by Tamir Sorek)

Shortly after he wrote the poem, Zayyad was sworn in as a Knesset member in the Communist party, in January 1974. The poem was published just before the first anniversary of the war, in October 1974, sparking an uproar. The Israeli poet Moshe Dor attacked Zayyad, writing: "What sanctity did Tawfiq Zayyad find in the war? Out victory poems are utterly different, in their sorrow, their restraint, from Zayyad's 'victory' poem. What sanctity did he find in death, in disability, in destruction? And someone who lies thus – how does he have the right to be called a poet?"

To defend his good name, Zayyad went to Tel Aviv and spoke before a Jewish audience. "They're lynching me," he said at the event. "They claim that I'm thirsty for the blood of Israel Defense Forces soldiers. I am not against the state, but against the occupation. I described in my poem the joy of the Arabs who had succeeded, after 400 years, to prove that they were not afraid and to liberate a small part of the occupied lands. Is it forbidden to describe this joy?"

To soften the assault against him, Zayyad published three of his well-known humanistic universalist poems, translated into Hebrew under the title “Resume” as if he wanted to say, according to Sorek’s biography: “This is me, I am not the person the media portrays.” In these poems I found these wonderful lines:

“I would give half of my life

To anyone who makes a weeping child laugh

And I give my other half to protect a green plant from withering.”

(Translated by Tamir Sorek)

Utopian image of humanity

After “The Great Crossing,” Zayyad wrote no more poetry for 15 years. He later explained that this was due to a lack of time because of his role as lawmaker and mayor. But Sorek says that the long hiatus was also because of the dual nature of his leadership: On the one hand, he maintained a utopian and inevitable vision of the future of humanity and of his people, described with great enthusiasm in his oeuvre, while as a national and local political leader he worked in a careful, well-considered and pragmatic way that did not conform to the state of mind required to write poetry.

Sorek artfully describes Zayyad’s faith in partnership with the Jews and says that even the torture he endured in prison (arrested for organizing protests) at the age of 26, a formative traumatic experience, did not change this faith, and that his support for Jewish-Arab cooperation did not stem from a desire to develop a joint national identity. Rather, he sought bridges to Jewish Israelis because of his belief in a shared humanity, shared class affiliation and in the case of Mizrahi Jews, shared experience of ethnically based discrimination.

In 1976, Zayyad declared in a public speech: “We are in the midst of a struggle for peace and democracy, in the midst of a struggle for our land and our national rights. There is no power that can turn back the wheels of history.” Sorek claims that Zayyad believed that: “human history only moves in one direction, toward progress, equality, freedom and peace,” and that Zayyad’s optimism was a central element in his political worldview and his leadership, as well as a political tool to enlist the public – which is why the author chose to use “optimism” in the title of his new book.

Zayyad believed in the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and supported it over the years, even in the face of opposition in the Jewish and Palestinian communities, in Israel and beyond. In 1988 the Palestinian National Council adopted the two-state solution, as did important figures on the Zionist left. Zayyad saw adoption of the two-state solution by the PLO and the Zionist left as a victory of the historic position of the Communist Party and Hadash, and when he spoke of it publicly he reiterated the verse from the Psalms that “the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.”

As to criticism from the more radical forces in Arab society in Israel, author Mohammed Ali Taha described that at a meeting between Zayyad and Arab students, one asked him: "Who gave you the right to make this concession [i.e., the two-state solution]?" Zayyad banged on the table and answered him angrily: "Who told you to give up Haifa and Acre? Why do you not liberate Haifa? Are you willing to liberate Palestine and I'm the one who's stopping you?" According to Sorek, Zayyad's faith in the two-state solution was also based on his belief that this was a pragmatic compromise, painful but necessary, given the balance of power between the Palestinians and the Zionists.

The final chapter in the biography describes what seems to me to be Zayyad's most important political move: forging a political partnership with the Zionist parties. Zayyad did not see a contradiction between Palestinian nationalism and creation of such a partnership, and led Hadash to a dramatic move that in the end enabled mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO, and shaped the relationship between Palestinian and national Zionist movements for generations to come.

In March 1992, Meretz was established as a union of three left-wing parties. Thereafter, and ahead of the Knesset elections in June of that year, Zayyad worked behind the scenes, unsuccessfully, to unite the three Arab lists, his party, the Arab Democratic Party and the Progressive List for Peace on one slate together with Meretz. The purpose, he said, would be "to generate change in the political map in Israel for peace, equality and democracy and to promote Jewish-Arab democratic cooperation." Zayyad's attempt to get Hadash to run on a Knesset slate with a Zionist party was unprecedented for a Palestinian leader.

The 1992 election led to creation of a bloc of 61 MKs (Labor, Meretz, Hadash, the Arab Democratic Party), which prevented establishment of a right-wing government. Despite the consent of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party to join the coalition, it conditioned its support on not being the party to provide the decisive 61 votes, so Labor Party leader Yitzhak Rabin needed Hadash's support to establish his government. These were historic hours, Sorek notes, with great symbolic significance: Rabin, who in 1948 had ordered the expulsion of the Arab inhabitants of Ramle and Lod, served as IDF chief of staff in the 1967 war and defense minister in the first intifada, sent envoys urgently to Zayyad to ask for the support of his party. And Zayyad ultimately led Hadash to vote, for the first and last time in its history, in support of a new government in Israel.

The agreement between Zayyad and Rabin was that as long as the government moved toward ensuring equality for its Arab citizens and peace with the Palestinians, Hadash would prevent the coalition from falling apart. And so it was that Zayyad, a Palestinian resistance poet, kept his word when leading the representatives of Hadash in the Knesset displayed their confidence in votes time after time in the Zionist government.

Here are Zayyad's moving words in a speech he gave in the discussion in the Knesset in September 1993, approving the Oslo Accords. "Finally it emerges that there is in the Middle East something else besides wars, hatred and bloodshed...Finally it emerges that instead of the blood-drenched sword, the olive branch can be raised...the extreme right these days is tearing its hair out and coming out with its typical demagoguery, that the government has no mandate. I read MK Bibi Netanyahu and his friends; if you will – I heard MK Bibi Hamasiyahu ...But this great rock, which is the rock of peace, has already rolled from the mountaintop, and no force can stop it...As Arab citizens of the State of Israel we welcome this achievement. And if any side, the Israeli side or the Palestinian side, is interested in peace in the Middle

East – we, the Arab population in the State of Israel are doubly interested: once as part of the state and again as part of the Arab Palestinian people.”

Just before the end of the speech he did something he had never done from the Knesset rostrum: He recited one of his poems. According to Sorek, this was a special moment, in which he felt his poetry suited the direction the Knesset was going:

Give the flower, the bee, the kiss, and the shining smile in the eyes, the right to speak.

Give the sun, the top of the green mountain, and the trees, the right to speak.

Give the sea and the sea waves, the corals, the forest, and the nightingale, the right to speak.

Give the school, the field of seeds, and the factory, the right to speak.

Give the morning dew, the moon in love, and the bird, the right to speak.

Give the future, carried on the wings of seagulls, on lilac scent, the right to speak.

Give Peace Now, the right to speak.

(Translated by Tamir Sorek)

In the preface to his book, Sorek addresses the fact that he is an Israeli Jew writing a biography of a Palestinian leader, and he mentions the risk of falling into so-called Orientalist writing that faces someone who draws from a world of knowledge shaped by the power relations between Jews and Palestinians. He informs readers that the biography is “meant simply as an empathetic presentation of an iconic Palestinian political and cultural figure written by a Jewish Israeli scholar.” But Sorek does not fall into the trap that he feared. He describes Zayyad with an empathy informed by means of a direct and sympathetic perspective of his subject’s unique personality and the complex reality in which he operated.

The book deals with one of the issues that to a large extent has shaped Israeli reality until today: that Arab citizens of Israel are both Palestinians and Israeli citizens. Zayyad’s proposal for resolving the tremendous tension entailed in these two identities lies at the heart of his leadership and, in my view, is the way to ensure a better life for Jews and Arabs in our shared homeland.

On July 1, 1994, Yasser Arafat returned to Palestine/Israel. This happened because of the political power of the Palestinian citizens who, under Zayyad’s leadership, supported the Israeli government that had officially recognized the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Zayyad traveled to the Gaza Strip to meet Arafat, returned from there to Jerusalem, and the next morning attended a reception that was held for Arafat in Jericho. As he was driving back that afternoon on the steep road from Jericho to Jerusalem, he was killed in a car accident, bringing an end to his leadership during those crucial days in the effort to achieve Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The influence of Zayyad’s leadership on Arab citizens of Israel, both as a poet and political leader still resonates today. MK Ayman Odeh, head of Hadash, is Zayyad’s heir in many ways. Odeh is not a poet,

but is also an optimist whose leadership combines commitment to the interests of Arab citizens of Israel and Palestinians, and reaching out to the Jewish public with the aim of creating an equal and shared society, and a political partnership that will make it possible to reach peace and an end to the occupation.

Will an heir to Yitzhak Rabin arise on the Jewish side, someone who will forge an alliance with Odeh so together they can lead the two peoples in the shared homeland to a better future? Let's hope this will one day be a glorious chapter in Odeh's biography.