The book presents a biography of Khalil al-Sakakini (1878–1953), who like many others from the period known as al-nahda (Arab enlightenment, 1791–1933) was a man of many talents. He was a modern educator, a journalist, and a litterateur, as well as a political and religious reformer. In explaining his selection of al-Sakakini, Haddad crisply situates the biography’s objectives within his present-day Palestinian resistance politics (of the late 1970s and early 1980s). He does not expound on the details of his present since he assumes that his readers also inhabit the same moment. Yet, that present is captured in questions of anti-racism, anti-colonialism, and de-colonization within a national liberation framework that runs throughout the biography and deeply informs its structure. To write about al-Sakakini, then, was for Haddad, to write about a significant episode in the history of the Palestinian people, and it was, likewise, to resist attempts to portray the Palestinians as a people without a history. Memory emerges as a site for resisting these efforts at obliteration.

Consequently, Haddad’s biography of al-Sakakini consciously partakes in the politics of memory, and the author is explicit in highlighting the criticality of the late- and post-Ottoman moment for both the life of al-Sakakini and the history of Palestine and the Palestinian people. This is especially clear in the importance placed on the 1908 constitutional revolution and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of its defeat in World War One. The revolution is presented as a moment of promise that dramatically turns towards aggressive politics of Turkification, marginalizing the Arab population of the Empire. At the same time the dissolution of the empire, in the wake of the politics of Turkification, does not beget liberation. Rather, it plunges Palestine and the Palestinian people into a long struggle against British imperialism and Zionist settler colonialism.

On the first page of his very short introduction, Haddad tells his readers that “the choice of al-Sakakini as the subject of our study was not coincidental. Rather, it was intentional and deliberate because he lived through an important period of our modern history, from the late era of Ottoman rule until after the nakba of 1948.” This point will return time after time as Haddad paints a picture, through al-Sakakini’s biography, of Ottoman rule, and particularly the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), as colluding with global imperialism and racism in a way that will precipitate the nakba. Al-Sakakini emerges, on the other hand, as an Arab nationalist who was toiling against global imperialism, Ottoman rule, and traditional local notables with their ossified social hierarchies. In every area of his life, from the most personal and intimate to the most public—as an educator, journalist, litterateur, and political and religious reformer—we are presented with a man who strove to find practices that could impede the risk of violent imperialism that was looming large in the early 20th century for the Arabic-speaking provinces of the Ottoman empire that had not yet been colonized by European states or the USA. Consequently, the chapters of the biography are not organized chronologically. Rather, they present us with facets of al-Sakakini’s practices.

The biography is divided into 10 chapters, in addition to the dedication, a preface by Anis

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al-Sayigh, and an introduction by the author. The first chapter offers a large brushstroke exploration of the sociopolitical and cultural conditions in Palestine during the lifetime of al-Sakakini. The Ottoman constitutional revolution of 1908 is marked as a crucial moment, and so is World War One, whose implications for Palestine and all the former provinces of the Ottoman empire cannot be overstated, particularly given the repercussions of the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) and the Balfour Declaration (1917) for the history of Palestine and the Palestinian people.

The second chapter zooms in further on al-Sakakini himself, and we encounter in it a biography in a more conventional sense, where we follow the protagonist from his birth to his death. It is divided into four stages. The first covers the period from his birth until the constitutional revolution in 1908. The second extends from 1908 to the end of World War One in 1918. The third picks up the story from the end of the First World War and concludes with the end of the British Occupation and the nakba of 1948. The final part shows us al-Sakakini’s final years as a refugee in Cairo. Once again, 1908 and World War One arise as crucial moments, but other events are also added to them. For example, we learn about al-Sakakini’s failed immigration to England and then the USA before returning to Jerusalem after the Ottoman constitutional revolution. We also discover that al-Sakakini was imprisoned by the Ottoman authorities in 1917 before being released in 1918 on the condition that he leaves Jerusalem, which he complied with, relocating to Damascus without his family. In Damascus, he joined the Great Arab Revolt led by al-Sharif Husayn ibn ‘Ali (1854–1931) before returning to Jerusalem again in 1919 after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the British occupation of Palestine (referred to as the British mandate). Yet, even this chapter does not move purely chronologically; it is also organized via practices (i.e., journalistic, literary, pedagogic), and each practice highlights al-Sakakini’s most significant moments or achievements through time.

The third chapter focalizes al-Sakakini’s personality; it strives to uncover his views on life, his philosophy, and what his friends had to say about him. The following chapters (the fourth to the ninth) display facets of his practices as a politician, as a religious reformer, as a pedagogue, as a literary critic, as a linguist, and as a writer, before concluding again with an intimate perspective on his transactions with his family and friends. These chapters cover the same period over and over, each time from a different perspective until we get a fuller picture of al-Sakakini and, through him, his era. As may be expected, there are repetitions across these chapters, but they are also underpinned by variations. The biographic emerges as a site for the crystallization of the entwinement between the individuated and the collective, the private and the public, the personal and the shared across different sites and scales. Yet, Haddad’s treatment also leaves us with some key questions about al-Sakakini’s politics in relation to local social hierarchies as well as anti-imperialism. I will mention just two events that appear repeatedly in Haddad’s biography but are not presented in enough detail for readers to fully grasp the events or their implications for al-Sakakini.

The first pertains to the reason al-Sakakini was imprisoned by the Ottoman authorities. According to Haddad, the Ottoman authorities had declared that all American citizens in Palestine between the ages of 16 and 50 needed to turn themselves to the Ottoman authorities within 24 hours. No further details or sources

2 Anis al-Sayigh (1931–2009) was himself a well-known Palestinian scholar who was deeply committed to questions of history and memory. In addition to being a renowned historian in his own right, he was a propelling force in the composition of al-mawsu’ al-falastiniyya (The Palestinian Encyclopediа); a project that strove to safeguard Palestinian history.
are given regarding this event in the biography, though its background probably relates to Palestine becoming a battleground between the Allied and the Central Powers during the First World War. To go back to the story Haddad relates, a certain Walter Levin refused to comply with those orders, and tried, accordingly, to find someone who would agree to hide him. The story then goes that while most others refused to do so, al-Sakakini agreed, citing the Arab culture of generosity and hospitality as the reasons driving him to do so. Yet, further analysis of this is required, especially because in these final days of the Ottoman empire and debates on what the future might hold, al-Sakakini was of the opinion, according to Haddad, that while he preferred people to be able rule themselves, being forced to choose, he would opt for an American protectorate of Palestine over a British one. These tense moments are difficult to explain away with culture and also need to have some political explication. In the same vein, al-Sakakini’s involvement with the Great Arab Revolt, whose history is quite complex, is also cited repeatedly, but always passingly. What emerges in the biography, therefore, is a vision of al-Sakakini’s pronounced principles and values: al-Sakakini was a voice of nationalism, and specifically Arab nationalism, against imperialist designs that sometimes competed with one another and at others collaborated. Yet, this voice is disconnected from the actual political maneuvers and complex decisions al-Sakakini had to make, from revolting against governments to working with them. Therefore, although the biography brings us closer to practices through its structure, which is organized around those practices, it also does not delve deeply enough into them because of its propensity towards highlighting pronouncements over the actions that would be necessary to turn those visions into a reality.

While Sayigh’s preface and, to a lesser extent, Haddad’s introduction portray al-Sakakini as a figure who has not received the attention he deserves, at least two other book-length works about al-Sakakini, including one other biography, had been published prior to Haddad’s work. And since then, there has been sustained interest in his work. His diary was published in the early 2000s in eight volumes. His legacy is also now commemorated in a cultural center and school in Jerusalem that bear his name. The cultural center was home to another renowned Palestinian writer who had an office there: the poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008).

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3 Haddad, Khalil al-Sakakini, 52. The reference is most likely to Alter Levin (1883-1933) and “Walter” would appear to be a typo in Haddad’s text.

4 Haddad, Khalil al-Sakakini, 61.

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