

OBITUARY

Steve Tamari

KHAIRIEH KASMIEH (1936–2014)

The international community of scholars of modern Arab and Palestinian history lost one of its most prominent and beloved members with the passing of Khairieh Kasmieh on 5 August 2014 in Damascus, Syria.

Kasmieh was born in Haifa, Palestine in 1936 and fled at age twelve with her family upon the uprooting of Palestinian society that led to the creation of the State of Israel. She and her family eventually settled in Damascus where she pursued an advanced degree in history, eventually earning her PhD in modern Arab history from Cairo University in 1972. From that time until the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in the wake of the 2011 revolution, she taught at Damascus University where she also served as chair of the history department. Her study of the short but significant period of the Arab Kingdom of Syria under Faysal, *al-Hukuma al-'Arabiyya fi Dimashq bayna 1918–1920* (The Arab Government in Damascus between 1918–1920) (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1971), is a classic in the field. The intersection between Palestinian history and Arab nationalism was at the heart of her scholarly interests and publications. Her study of the Arab policies of Saudi King 'Abd al-'Aziz, *Jawanib min Siyasat al-Malik 'Abd al-'Aziz tujah al-Qadaya al-'Arabiyya* (Aspects of King 'Abd al-'Aziz's Policies toward Arab Issues) (Riyad: Maktabat Darat al-Malik 'Abd al-'Aziz, 1999), was based on the papers of the Syrian Arab nationalist Nabih al-'Azma. She penned a biography of the first head of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Ahmad Shuqayri, entitled *Ahmad al-Shuqayr: Za'iman Filastiniyyan wa-Ra'idan 'Arabiyyan* (Ahmad al-Shuqayr: Palestinian Leader and Arab Pioneer) (Kuwait City: Lajnat Takhlid Dhikra al-Mujahid Ahmad al-Shuqayri, 1987). She edited the memoirs of Palestinian Arab nationalist 'Awni 'Abd al-Hadi, *'Awni 'Abd al-Hadi: Awraq Khassa* ('Awni 'Abd al-Hadi: Private Papers) (Beirut: Research Center, Palestine Liberation Organization, 1974) and those of the commander of the Arab Liberation Army Fawzi al-Qawuqji in two volumes, *Fawzi al-Qawuqji*, vol. 1, 1912–1932 (Beirut: Research Center, Palestine Liberation Organization, 1975) and *Fawzi al-Qawuqji*, vol. 2, *Filastin fi Mudhakirat Fawzi al-Qawuqji* (Fawzi al-Qawuqji: Palestine in the Memoirs of Fawzi al-Qawuqji) (Beirut: Research Center, Palestine Liberation Organization, 1975).

The last two books were produced during a period when she was associated with the PLO Research Center in Beirut. In addition, she published a new and improved edition of Qawuqji's memoirs in Damascus in 1995, in which she included dozens of Arabic primary sources (housed in the Center for Historical Studies in Damascus). Also in the 1990s, she edited the papers of the brothers Nabih and 'Adil al-'Azma under

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the title *al-Ra'īl al-'Arabi al-Awwal: Hayat wa-Awraq Nabih wa-'Adil al-'Azma* (The First Arab Generation: The Lives and Papers of Nabih and 'Adil al-'Azma) (London: Riyad al-Rayyis, 1991) and the memoirs of Muhsin al-Barazi, *Mudhakirat Muhsin al-Barazi* (Memoirs of Muhsin al-Barazi) (Beirut: al-Ruwwad, 1994). Her painstaking research opened up the lives and archives of these individuals, and created an invaluable record of the struggle of Arab nationalists against British and French (and later Israeli) colonialism. She passed away before the publication of her last work, a study of Jews of the Arab world under the auspices of the Center for Arab Unity Studies in Beirut.

Kasmieh wrote a host of articles on related topics including a book-length entry on memoirs and autobiographies as sources for Palestinian history for the *Encyclopedia of Palestine* (2005). She was delivering lectures at international conferences until her final year. I last saw her at the ninth conference of the Committee for the History of Bilad al-Sham held in Amman in 2012.

Kasmieh was a founding member of the Committee for the Writing of the History of the Arabs (Damascus) and a leading member of a host of professional organizations including the Arab Organization for Education, Culture, and the Sciences (Tunis), the Union of Arab Writers (Damascus), and the Committee for the History of Bilad al-Sham (Amman).

She was a visiting professor at the Arab League's Institute for Arab Studies and Research (1976–79), at Notre Dame University in Indiana (1983–84), at the University of Chicago (1989–90), at Princeton University (1993–94), and at King Saud University in Riyadh (1995–98).

Kasmieh played less formal roles that were no less significant for the multitude of young scholars from around the world whom she mentored. During her many years as a professor at the University of Damascus she guided budding historians from their undergraduate through their doctoral studies. She also served as an unofficial mentor for countless foreign students launching academic careers in Arab and Palestinian history and society. I was fortunate enough to get to know her during my first trip to Damascus in the mid-1980s when I attended her lectures at the university. She introduced me to Palestinian, Syrian, and international scholars and political figures like no one else could.

Her ability to connect people of varying (and often conflicting) ideological strains was uncanny. During years of strained Syrian and American relations, she was able to maneuver where few others could. The same goes for periods of inter-Palestinian conflicts, during the darkest days of the rivalry between President Assad and Chairman Arafat, for example, or when Soviets and Americans were jostling for position in the Middle East during the waning years of the Cold War. Syria was one of the few states within the Soviet bloc where relations could be cordial if not warm, and Kasmieh could bridge gaps where professional diplomats were unable to. Attending her lectures in 1987 on post-1945 world history at Damascus was one of the high points of my student career. I will never forget her ability to orchestrate discussions of such topics as the Korean War (with North Koreans and Americans in attendance), the Hungarian Revolution (with Soviets and Hungarians), the Cuban Revolution (with Cubans and Americans), the Vietnam and American War (with Americans and Chinese), and the Berlin War (with Germans from both East and West). She always managed to stay above the fray without diminishing the intensity of the discussion—a unique kind of teacher who could balance

intellectual curiosity, political savvy, and human psychology such that we learned as much about ourselves as about others.

Kasmieh's boundless energy, infinite optimism, and good cheer always made being in her company a joy. She will be profoundly missed by legions of colleagues, students, and diplomats from the world over.