A Palestinian Work of Science Fiction from 1943

Source reference:
Arif al-Arif, *Ru'yay* (Jerusalem: Maktabat al-Aba' al-Fransisiyn, 1943), pp. 1-10 and 50-54.

Source:
Introduction for the book
During the last war (1914) I was an officer in the Turkish army. I was taken prisoner with the rest of the officers in the famous battle of Erzurum, in which the Turks were defeated, and the Russians were victorious. They took us to the Caucasus Mountains as prisoners of war, and from there to central Russia, to the Siberian valley with its bitter cold and vast frightening wilderness. There, in Unigorhohq [possibly a small Gulag; E.O.]. we spent three years near Krasnoyarsk.

During the years of captivity, we were often tossed between waves of despair and hope. Sometimes we were threatened with hunger, other times with cold; sometimes with the absence of news of our beloved homeland, and other times with extreme fatigue, or by [the work of] cutting wood in the forests and woodlands. Then we received news of the Arab Revolt and King Hussein's uprising against the Turks (1915). Our minds began to be occupied with the idea of escaping from captivity and joining the revolution to participate in the work and struggle for liberation of our beloved homeland. It felt like only a day and night passed [Quran 79:46; E.O.] until we transformed this idea to the realm of work and practice, and we escaped.

We were twenty-one Arabs, each one of us carrying within him the love of the beloved homeland: the great Arab homeland, which does not differentiate between religion and religion, and which includes between its covers all parts of the Arabian Peninsula, from the lowest to the highest

We set out from Krasnoyarsk, near Lake Baikal, on the sixteenth of September, 1918, nine hundred and eighteen. We had hoped to reach our homeland in a month or two at the most; but we did not reach it until five whole months later. On our way we passed through Manchuria, Harbin, Vladivostok located in the far east [of Russia]; then Japan and China; we crossed the Yangtze River, and visited Shanghai and Hong Kong, the safe port on the shores of the China Sea. We passed by the shores of Sumatra and the Philippines, and landed in Singapore, located in the far south of the continent of Asia. We also landed in the historic island of Ceylon and toured in its capital Columbo. We crossed the Indian Ocean, and landed in Bombay; then we passed through the Strait of Aden, and crossed the Red Sea; then we crossed the Suez Canal, and from there we returned to Palestine.

It is no exaggeration to tell you that we did not stop thinking for a single moment, during this long and arduous journey, about the cause of our country and particularly our expectations for it to flourish during and after the revolt.

And even if tend to forget, I will never forget one of the beautiful dreams that often came to me during that trip. That is the dream I saw on the day we left Shanghai. It is the one I wanted to share with you, so that you can interpret my vision for me, if you can interpret visions [Quran 12:43; E.O.]

My Vision
On Wednesday, the seventh of December, in the year one thousand nine hundred and eighteen, we left Shanghai[1] after staying there for three nights. We left before the sun began to set. The

[1] It is the Chinese city, located on the coast of the China Sea [footnote in the original].

ship Dunera began to sail with us across the sea. The sea was calm, the air was clear, and the atmosphere was pure and thus our hearts grew hopefully. We agreed that there was no danger to us or to the ship from the waves of that Chinese sea, that travellers always told of its horrors, the human souls that had perished in it, and the many ships that had became prey for its hellish storms.

[But then] The lord of the universe raided us with his overwhelming army, submitting us to him completely.

When we arose the next morning, we looked to the sky and behold that its clarity changed to into a strange state, striking terror and panic into the heart. My God, what did we see? A surging sea, and crashing waves, and a gloomy atmosphere. The winds began to blow from every direction, as if they wanted to wreck the ship and make the sea safe from and its tyranny. When the winds did not counter an obstacle that would prevent them from what they were after, they became arrogant and tyrannical, tearing the clouds that were gathering in the middle of the sky, and forcing the rain to pour down. When they did, the ship rose and fell in the bosom of the raging waves. As for us, we could hear nothing in the interior of the ship except frightening sounds, resembling the clamour of tremendous thunders. We thought it would leap upon us to strike terror into our hearts, and to prove to us that a man, wearing the robe of arrogance and the shirt of pride, was nothing in this vast nature, but a drop of water in the middle of a great sea.

We spent the most of that horrible day in that state, between fear and hope; until the day grew old and night fell. Then we turned to isolate in our rooms. I had hardly lay down on my bed when sleep overcame me. I was relieved to find myself in the air carried by a green bird with wide wings, that nature has endowed it with the ability to speak like a human being. I almost trembled when I realized I was flying in the open air, to the point I felt I might be delusional. It was as if the bird felt my anxiety and spoke to me softly:

“Don't be afraid, my friend! I am fond of you. That’s why I want to fly with you in the sky of these universes, to show you the wonders that you never dreamed of. Tell me which spot do you like best?”

I felt reassured, my fears dissipated, and I said to him: “My country! My Arab country.” He said: “What a beautiful name! And how beautiful this country is! It is a country of knowledge and learning, a country of agriculture and industry, a country of earnings and trade, a country of effort and work, a country of seriousness and activity, a country of light and beauty, a country of sophistication and perfection”.

I was amazed when I heard this talk because I knew for certain that my country was drowning in seas of ignorance and misery, and that my Arab nation was and still is floundering in darkness, ignorance and delusion: no soul, no life, no striving, no effort, no movement, no awakening.

The bird read through my face what my conscience was hiding, so it quickly said to me: “Hold on to the rope of patience. I will soon show you things that amaze the hearts! There it is, the Arabian Peninsula!”

- “The Arabian Peninsula? ... No. This is impossible.”
- “Why?”
- “Because it is well known that these places are nothing but barren wastelands; deserts overflowing with sand, unsuitable for agriculture and investment; full of sand dunes and moving mountains, the mention of which makes the body tremble. Those dunes, so I have heard, have not stopped moving in any part of this peninsula, sweeping all the caravans and tents that stood in their way. To that I may add the ignorance of the Bedouins, their distance from the national idea, and the scarcity of rain in their lands, and the abundance of drought,

and poverty, and mutual invasions, and all else that embittered the lives of the people of this country, and robbed them of their comfort, happiness, and bliss."

But now, it is as if the land had been changed into something else. I see nothing on the face of the peninsula but tall trees, singing birds, and lofty palaces with canals running beneath them. All the material and traces reveal, no doubt, that there was life in these lands.

"No, no! It is easier for me to believe in the existence of the monsters (*al-ghul*) and the phoenix than to believe that this rich paradise, which I see shining on earth like a star in the sky, is the Arabian Peninsula."

The bird listened to my words, quietly and calmly. I had hardly finished when it jumped up to answer me, saying:

- "Oh, poor fellow! All that you had heard of the peninsula before is now a thing of the past. The regular dunes that plagued it have been made to stop. The poisonous winds have been tempered by machines and technical methods. As for the sun, which was once a source of laziness and indolence, has become a source from which the Arab nation draws all the necessities of life. Its burning rays now serve for electricity and steam. Modern technology has not failed to invent sufficient means to extract fresh water from the deepest points of the earth. In this way the tents have been removed and the Bedouins stopped their wandering from one point to another. Especially since transportation has increased thanks to organized roads, airplanes and railways, which connect the nearest countries to the farthest ones, and the smallest cities to the largest and most elegant. Schools have been established, factories, plants and institutes, ports and docks, bridges and tunnels, warehouses, houses and palaces. Justice has prevailed, security has been established, happiness has spread, and the fires of sedition and unrest that we used to hear about breaking out between the tribes every morning and evening have been extinguished.

Yes. Difficult years passed before the Arabs achieved this and happiness came. They endured all kinds of hardships and pains. Regretful events caused them to lose their material glory (*majdahum al-madi*) for a short time, but they maintained their spiritual glory, despite the passing of days and the repetition of time. Destiny had betrayed them, bringing them to an epoch that dressed them with garments of humiliation, enslavement, and other reasons for misery that attacked them from every side, robbing them of everything their hands possessed. But all of this could not suck out of their body their Arab blood. Whoever this blood runs in his veins will never lose the quality of intelligence and cleverness, generosity and nobility, loyalty and eloquence, boldness and courage, breadth of imagination and speed of movement. It is clear and self evident, that the nation endowed with these noble qualities, no matter how the hand of fate plays with it, a day will inevitably come when that overwhelming hand will be broken, and it will return to its glorious epoch.

Therefore, wherever you go or stay in the Arab countries, you see nothing but organized roads and wide streets, open spaces and squares, temples and statues, gardens and orchards, schools and institutes, factories and machines, museums and exhibitions, cars and airplanes... and other means that indicate the development of these countries, after they were in the ruins of doom and destruction.

Arabs' perceptions have elevated, their morals have become closer to nature and beauty, rather than to deceit and affectation. They are now not prisoners of customs and traditions as they were before, but you always see them adhering to science, art, logic, and true refined, philosophy."

[The narrator and the bird continue to wander around, but now by foot, inside a city called Aelia, which is one of the names of Jerusalem, although the story does say that explicitly].

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“On this occasion, I am pleased to inform you [the bird continues] that bribery, that obscene custom, has completely disappeared from all parts of the Arab countries. A person who deserves a right [*haq*] can obtain his right without bribing the rulers and officials, and without the mediation of any of the notables and dignitaries, since the law is clear and was laid by their hands. When they laid it down, they considered their interests and the interests of their country. Therefore, they respect it. Now they worship the law and rule by it.”

- I said: “How much is the usual dowry these days?”
- He said: “One hundred piasters exactly. No more and no less.”
- I said: “Can a man marry whomever he wants from the daughters of noble families?”

He said: “In this day and age there are no noble families or dishonourable families. The Arabs no longer care about origin, lineage, and ancestry as they used to do before. The bride is appreciated not by her origin, lineage, or ancestry, rather by her knowledge and morals and contribution to society. Marriage, therefore, is measured by love, and nothing but love.
If an Arab man loves a girl and thinks of marrying her, he comes to her himself and tells her what is on his mind. If she loves him and feels inclined towards him in her heart, she will adhere to his request, otherwise she will politely and frankly apologize, and they will part ways. Both without noise or fuss or gossip.”
I said: “Is the custom of polygamy still common among Arabs?”
He said: “No. This custom was abolished and no trace of it remained among the Arabs at all.”
I said: “How did they dare to do that, and what did they do with the orders of religion? Wasn’t it said in the Qur’an: “if you were to marry them, then marry other women of your choice—two, three, or four” [Surat al-Nisa, 4:3].
He said: “Yes. All of that is true. But it is limited as almost impossibly by the in the same verse [who continues]: “But if you are afraid you will fail to maintain justice, then content yourselves with one”. In any case, nothing in this verse indicates compulsion. This rule was established at a time when the Arabs were in need of such a rule. Therefore, they did not proceed on to abolish it. Rather, they reached a degree of high principles and morals that did not exploit this permission. Furthermore, the number of males and females in the country is equal to a degree that does not allow for polygamy.”
I said: “I don’t understand, what do you mean?”
He said: “I mean that the number of males is equal to the number of females.”
I said: “And how did that happen?”
He said: “The medical sciences have reached a level of advancement in recent generations that is has become possible for a person to ‘fabricate’ the male and female during intercourse as he wishes. And to know before birth, with complete certainty, whether the coming child will be male or female. These matters are no more the product of hopes and coincidences, rather, they have become the result of determination and persistence, will and certainty”.
I said: “Then the laws of heredity must also have been affected and changed?”
“Yes,” he said. “It has undergone not just a little but a great deal of change and alteration. There is no difference these days between males and females in terms of inheritance. The principle that a male has the share of two females is now a thing of the past.[2] Males and females in this age are equal not only in matters of inheritance, but in all rights and duties as well.”
- I said: “How is that I don’t see any newspapers, neither daily nor weekly?
-He said: “There are no newspapers at all. They have disappeared. There are only literary magazines. This is because it has become possible for a person to follow the news not only every day or every hour, but at every moment [What a great idea... ha-ha] and to be in touch

[2] This is true for the governmental (*nizami*) distribution, but as for the religious [*shar'i*] distribution it is still applies. [The footnote in the original. The author probably means that from a pure religious point of view it is not possible, but according to civil law it works; E.O.].

with what is happening in the universe by means of the pocket-radio (*radio al-jib*), that he carries in his pocket wherever he goes and walks. He turns its dial with his finger while he is inside his pocket without anyone seeing him. He hears every sound, and is informed of every conversation, and knows everything that is happening in any part of the globe."
I said: "Has the science of electricity and wireless [*lasilki*] advanced to this extent?"
He said: "Scientists have been able to distinguish the voices of our ancient fathers and the first prophets, those voices that have been echoing in space for centuries and generations without being destroyed or disappearing."
I said: "In which other areas of science did they benefit from electricity and wireless?"
He said: "They were able to contact Mars and other planets. They serve in fact as the telephone services between our Earth and those planets. As for the ancient inhabitants of those planets, they visit us every day in groups or separately in airplanes that fly by the power of electricity and wireless in less than the blink of an eye, just as the inhabitants of our Earth do not stop visiting those planets from time to time."

Blurb:

ʿAref al-ʿAref's (transliteration: ʿArif al-ʿArif) Ruʿyay, (*My Vision*, Jerusalem, 1943) is an extraordinary work in the landscape of contemporary Arabic literature. It is a short science fiction novella of about ninety pages, published in Jerusalem, Palestine, 1943, then under British Mandate rule.[3] The author, was the foremost Palestinian historian of his time and a civil servant in the Mandate government, serving as civil administrator and later governor of various districts across Palestine and Transjordan, also under British rule. He wrote the novella in his spare time, and it was published alongside two other history books he released that same year, a particularly productive period for him: one on the history of Gaza, were he served at the time as governor, and the other on the history of the nearby town of Majdal-ʿAsqalan.

Ruʾyay opens with a literary device that references the author's real-life experience. In the book's introduction presented here, al-ʿAref recounts how as an officer in the Ottoman army, he fought in the Battle of Erzurum in 1915 against the Russian army, and later surrendered with his comrades and taken captive in Siberia. In 1918 they were released, likely due to the fall of the Tsar.[4] From there, al-ʿAref and his friends made their way back home, although probably not through the entire south-east as the text elaborates, but by a ship from Vladivostok. Frome there onwards, the plot is in the form of a dream that the narrator had in one of the nights of the journey. The dream, told in the first person, constitutes the entire plot and concludes with the narrator's awakening.

The dream begins with al-ʿAref finding himself on the wings of a big green bird, which invites him to embark on a journey across the Arab world. Al-ʿAref expresses fear of the ignorance, fanaticism, and parochialism of the region's inhabitants, but with the bird's encouragement, he discovers that the Arab world turned into a utopia. It is now a federation of seventeen states, harmoniously governed by a council of experts, where all aspects of life—from transportation and agriculture to education and health—are managed with precision and for the benefit of society.

The story unfolds as al-ʿAref wanders through Aelia (one of the names of Jerusalem in Arabic; transliterated: Iylyaʾ), a remarkable Arab city located in this federation, which is

[3] Walid Khalidi, "'Aref al-'Aref, al-Nakba wa-l-Firdaws al-Mafqūd ['Aref al-'Aref, the Nakba and the Lost Paradise]," *Majallat al-Dirāsāt al-Filasṭīniyya* [*Journal of Palestine Studies*], no. 90 (2012): 51–85; Eli Osheroff and Dotan Halevy, "Destruction as Layered Event: Twentieth-Century Ruins in the Great Mosque of Gaza," *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 8, no. 1 (2019): 45–69.

[4] Salim Tamari, "With God's Camel in Siberia: The Russian Exile of an Ottoman Officer from Jerusalem," *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 35 (Autumn 2008): 31–50.

temporally situated in the future, at least a few hundred years ahead. The story is rich with Victorian-style science fiction motifs reminiscent of preeminent British author H.G. Wells (1866-1946) featuring elements like climate control that enables farmers to summon rain at will, small radio headphones that provide news updates around the clock, and more such inventions. Flying cars included, of course.[5]

Politically, socially, and religiously, the society al-ʿAref describes can be considered a fantasy of what nationalism scholar Hans Kohn[6] termed around the same time (1944) as "civic nationalism," in which the civic state transcends the ethnic or religious identity of the people. The book portrays an Arab society of Christians and Muslims, effectively free of any ethnic or religious tension. The primary unifying identity is the Arabic language which serves as the main connector among people. Religious institutions like mosques still exist but have undergone radical reform, functioning more like educational clubs where the Imams (preachers) discuss the news of the week and critically analyse governmental actions.

Jews are completely absent from the text for better or worse, in what looks like al-ʿAref's attempt to avoid the issue altogether. At the time of the writing Palestinians were of course enmeshed in an existential struggle against Zionism. Al-ʿAref was well known for his close, even warm connections to Jews and Jewish intelligencia in particular, Zionist or otherwise. One can only guess that rather than wishing for the disappearance of Jews from the future, their absence merely reflected an attempt to avoid yet another contested issue. Avoidance was probably the rhetoric choice of a national historian and civil administrator under colonial rule whose entire life experience was one of contestation.

The overall vision of Ruʿyay it should be mentioned, was not culturally or politically unique. Al-ʿAref wrote during a time when pan-Arabism was almost hegemonic (the Arab League was established in late 1944, for instance). Even in religious terms, al-Aref's idea of reforming religion from within aligned with the intellectual mainstream of his generation. One popular genre in Arabic at the time was biographies of the Prophet Muhammad, portraying him as a social and political reformer who heralded enlightenment.

Economically and socially, the Arab federation presents a non-revolutionary socialist vision, where the state provides all basic needs, such as education and healthcare. In the translation presented to you here, one can sense the acute nature of gender issues, including marriage, dowry and all things romantic. For educated national Arab elites such as the author, implementing this sort of outright, legal, cultural and social feminist overhaul was crucial, maybe the crucial step, in making national progression.

Though it is a bit of a spoiler, the story's introduction would be incomplete without mentioning its ending, which has an unexpected twist, that lights in a different manner the entire plot. At the end of the tour at Aelia, the narrator and the bird arrive at a museum of statues honouring the great figures of the Arab nation. The statues move and speak, and eventually, the narrator notices the statue of the prophet Muhammad as he is about to open his mouth and say something to him. Shocked by the blasphemy of this moment, the author faints and awakens in the ship.

In light of this uncanny ending, what is truly remarkable in al-ʿAref's novella is his direct engagement with science fiction including such ambivalent ending, a benchmark of the genre. Science fiction was rarely seen in contemporary Arabic literature for reasons that are beyond the scope of this introduction. It is unclear why al-ʿAref specifically chose this genre, with the unoptimistic ending. One central hypothesis however relates to the climate in Palestine at the time of the writing.

[5] John Hammond, *A Preface to H.G. Wells* (Harlow: Longman, 2001).
[6] Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in Its Origins and Background* (New York: Macmillan, 1944).

Paradoxically, the material conditions in Palestine during World War II were marked by an economic boom and rapid development as a result of the British war effort. This was especially true for a town like Gaza, a historical crossroads somewhat removed from the new Zionist settlements. New roads were paved, connecting the area with the rest of Palestine and beyond. The area was surrounded by military bases and British soldiers flooded the area. Gaza stood at the centre of this developmental frensy, as a genuine or "pure" future oriented Arab project par-excellence. It's possible, then, that such a period provided fertile ground for a Palestinian intellectual like al-ʿAref to envision the future optimistically, yet also anxiously—humorously, parodically, and overall self reflectively.

Indeed, Ruʿyay, is not a utopia in the lay sense of the word, i.e. a perfect, harmonious world. It is not just a description of the future of Arab world; it ends on a different note, touching on the anxieties and obstacles of reaching this vision. Thus on the one hand, it exemplifies the pan-Arab ideology that dominated the cultural landscape of the time, which aspired to create an inclusive, civic—"ecumenical" political order as historian Ussama Makdisi puts it.[7] At the same time, Ruʾyay demonstrates Arab self-criticism, scepticism and a significant degree of irony, stemming from an awareness of the long path, rife with impossibilities, Arab self and society would have to take to materialize this dream—if it can be ever martialized.

Irony, doubt, and anxiety of progress are, of course, part of modernity. Presumably, when al-ʿAref wrote these words, he could not have imagined how much further removed from that future the region would be in the decades to come—in Gaza, where he likely wrote the book, and the rest of Palestine.

Source selected, translated, and annotated by Eli Osheroff.

[7] Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).