



Ihsan al-Nimr

(1905–1985)



By Saleem Zoughbi

I was enjoying a delicious serving of *knafa Nabulsiya* at a small restaurant in the old town of Nablus, sitting next to an elderly man who was smoking his *nargileh* in stupor, occasionally taking a sip of Arabic coffee. All of a sudden, a young boy, playing with his friends on the street, was admonished by a woman: “Ihsan, Ihsan, don’t shout!” I overheard the old man muttering under his breath, “Allah yirhamak, ya Ihsan” (may God be merciful, dear Ihsan). Turning, I asked why he was talking about Ihsan as though he were dead. He beheld me for a moment, then nodded and said, “The real Ihsan, Ihsan al-Nimr.”

Ihsan al-Nimr was born in 1905 into a conservative Nabulsi family. He received his primary education in Nablus, went to Beirut for secondary school, and qualified to enter the science faculty at the American University in Beirut (AUB). Financial difficulties forced him to return to Palestine, but his love for learning prompted him to edify himself on his own, studying classical works of Arab and Islamic history as well as the Qur’an. Ihsan matured and became known as an honest and sincere young man, albeit at times diffident and timid.

During the August 1929 al-Buraq Uprisings, Ihsan realized how seriously Zionism was threatening the future of his people and country. He began to spread awareness of the dangers of Zionist immigration, aided by the British Mandate. Working with young people in Nablus, he formed and led the Youth Conference, organizing border guards and coast guards to combat illegal Jewish immigration, and holding a conference in Nablus in 1931 to protest British acquiescence to the Zionist acquisition of weapons.

Ihsan’s commitment was authentic and supported innumerable nationalist happenings in the 1930s and up to the *Nakba* in 1948. Aware of the limitations imposed by Britain on the Palestinian leadership, he realized that at the national political level his impact

against Zionism would be limited. Instead, he decided to combine resistance with fostering social and economic development locally, engaging in Nablus and the surrounding villages. He understood that social development was a necessary constituent of reinforcing Palestinian national fortitude, resolution, and resistance.

Ihsan founded the Palestinian Arab Progress Party whose main goal was to protect Palestinian landowners by addressing their personal and family concerns. He furthermore implemented numerous society development actions, such as setting up the Islamic Revival School in 1932 to educate children who were not able to enroll in public schools, establishing the community-based Hadaya Society in 1934, and founding the Hadaya Sports Society to enable youth to engage in sports. Ihsan determined that the best way to support and improve the living conditions of Muslims was to engage in reforming morals through socio-educational action on the ground. Thus, he campaigned against the consumption of alcohol and smoking. He organized social and financial support for needy families and the families of people detained by the British authorities for their resistance. Hearing of the worries of a poor shoemaker that were caused by poor business conditions and the lack of local authority support and, to some degree, of the low social respect given to this profession, Ihsan founded the Shoe-Workers Association in Nablus to encourage and support them in addressing their concerns and improving their lot. He moved on to support other workers and professions and improve labor relations. Ihsan furthermore believed that religious reform is key to social reform and development. Thus, he rebuilt the Nasr Mosque in Nablus that had been destroyed by the 1927 earthquake and led several efforts to collect donations to help poor people, also supporting the sending of donations to poor families in Medina

(before Saudi Arabia had oil revenues).

In addition to his political, social, and religious work, Ihsan engaged as a historian, writer, and poet. He wrote several articles on politics, history, and other topics that were published in several Palestinian and Arab newspapers and magazines. Among his more than thirty books, the most famous are the four volumes titled *A History of Mount Nablus and Al-Balqa* (in Arabic). Having composed poetry from an early age, he left several manuscripts at the time of his death with instructions on how publish them.

Ihsan never ceased to call on Arabs to unite and look toward the East. After 1948, however, he gave up politics and devoted his time to research and writing. When Israel occupied Nablus in 1967, he persisted in intellectual endeavors and continued his research, focusing on the records of the sharia courts. His interest in heritage drove him to establish a museum to house the rare antiquities he was collecting.

Ihsan passed away quietly in 1985, well respected by the generation who knew him well. His greatness lies in the fact that although he was deprived of education, he never stood still. He developed himself as an historian, an author, a social reformer, a promoter of religious and ethical morals, and most of all, a devoted patriot who cared for those who were uncared for – from schoolchildren to poor laborers, prisoners of British jails, and poor families, even as far away as Saudi Arabia.

Ihsan al-Nimr represented the transformation of the Palestinian people from simple citizens to people of revolution, resistance, and maturity, and he wisely passed on his legacy to the next generation.

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