



Dar Al-Sabagh: Connecting the Diaspora to Its Roots



By Eyad Handal

Dar Al-Sabagh was established in 2018 on Star Street, in the heart of Bethlehem, with the aim of connecting the Palestinian diaspora to the homeland. The house is owned by the family of Alberto Kassis Sabagh and his wife, Ana María, who have generously offered the use of part of it for the creation of the Dar Al Sabagh, after considering the initiative of George Al-Ama.

The story began in 1996 when Alberto Kassis, a Palestinian-Chilean businessman, visited Bethlehem, his city of origin. He was eager to visit his family's house but the owners would not allow him to see it. That painful memory gave rise to the dream of regaining the house.

In 2013, George Al-Ama met Alberto Kassis during the inauguration of the Bank of Palestine branch in Bethlehem. The two met again in 2016 at the inauguration of the Dubai branch of the Bank. Al-Ama happened to know that the ancestral house of Mr. Kassis was up for sale and upon hearing it, the latter immediately asked him to purchase it. Thus the dream of Mr. Kassis became real with the purchase of the first phase of the Sabagh building under the supervision of the Bank of Palestine.

George was taken aback when upon handing Mr. Kassis the keys and congratulating him, the latter refused to accept them. George worried that he had done something wrong. But Mr. Kassis said, "I would like to establish something that will serve the Palestinian community in Bethlehem and the diaspora." George's proposal to set up the Dar Al-Sabagh Centre for Diaspora Studies and Research Together along with the Kassis Sabagh

family and the Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation (CCHP), they established the Dar Al-Sabagh Centre for Diaspora Studies and Research where Mr. Kassis undertook to cover the financing of the Centre. (CCHP) renovated the house (Phase 1) with funding by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), while the Bank of Palestine provided the furnishings.

The center has become a cultural hub - a "house museum" for Palestinian contemporary art and heritage artifacts from the private collection of George Al-Ama. As a result, the CCHP made Dar Al-Sabagh its cultural unit, headed by Al-Ama.

Since 2018, we have conducted three hundred cases of genealogical research following requests by Palestinian diaspora families; have launched numerous cultural activities; and have participated in several festivals in the city. We provide free tours, both of the Centre and of the historical towns of Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour. Our facilities are open to all visitors, especially to the Palestinian diaspora.

"A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots."

Marcus Garvey

Palestine has suffered many occupations and settlers. From the late Ottoman era until the British Mandate (1850–1948), many Palestinians born in Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour left the country in search of a better future. Many of these migrants worked in industries related to their trade in Bethlehem area, particularly mother-of-pearl. Many became traveling salesmen, and others started their own businesses; having done well financially, they chose to remain in Central America, while maintaining close ties with their families back home.

Dar Al-Sabagh Diaspora Studies and Research Centre.



Of the several million Palestinians in the diaspora, the largest community outside of the Arab world is in Chile, where most of the five hundred thousand Palestinian descendants are eager to reconnect with their roots. “Quiero Viajar a Palestina” (I want to travel to Palestine) is a phrase heard in every Palestinian house in the diaspora. It is the dream of many to visit the country, to meet their relatives, and to become acquainted with the neighborhoods and cities of their ancestors.

At Dar Al-Sabagh we believe that knowing our cultural roots helps us develop a strong sense of identity and our narrative. To this end, we recently launched the campaign

#Quiero_viajar_a_palestina *البلاد طلبت أهلها*, to encourage the Palestinian diaspora to visit their homeland and reconnect with their roots through a full-program tour that provides a unique, unforgettable experience. Since April 2022, we have hosted more than eighty Palestinian diaspora families from diverse countries such as Chile, Honduras, El Salvador, Brazil, Mexico, Germany, Dubai, Panama, France, and Peru. They learned about their ancestors through genealogical research based on the archives of Dar Al-Sabagh, which contain more than three hundred years’ worth of data, and by touring the historical towns of Beit Jala, Bethlehem, and Beit Sahur, where they were able to meet their relatives.

The following are indicative stories of people who have engaged with Dar Al-Sabagh’s “I want to travel to Palestine” (Quiero Viajar a Palestina) project:

The Salmans, Honduras

Narrated by Eyad Handal

The family of the well-known Palestinian-Honduran businessman Freddy Nasser Salman informed us, through the Belén 2000 Foundation (Bethlehem 2000 Foundation), that they were coming to Palestine, and were interested in their family’s history and meeting any existing relatives. In researching the Salmans’ ancestors, I discovered that one of their direct cousins was living on Star Street, right next to Dar Al-Sabagh. I visited the house, asked Francis Salman about his ancestors, and realized



The Salman-Nasser family at Dar Al-Sabagh in July 2019. George Al-Ama, Vivian Gubar, and Albert Nasser appear in the photo.

that the two families were descended from the same ancestor, which neither family was aware of. Not knowing the Nasser Salman family, Francis became nervous and somewhat wary of their intentions. However, when I told him that his Honduran-Palestinian relatives were coming to see him, he became more friendly and welcoming. He shared memories of his grandfather, and said, “They are welcome.”

On the day of the visit, the family came to Dar Al-Sabagh, accompanied by Vivian Ghubar, the representative of Belén 2000 in Palestine. We had also invited two members of the Nasser family from Bethlehem, Albert Nasser, the honorary council of El Salvador, and the engineer Michel Nasser, to meet their Honduran relatives. The staff showed them the research on their family, and answered their many questions.

We then headed to the Salman house where Francis and his wife, Amal, welcomed them. They talked as if they had known each other for years. Francis showed them a painting in which they recognized their grandfather. After they left, the families kept in contact by sending letters and gifts to each other. Sadly, Francis passed away two years after the visit.



Group photo at the entrance of Francis Salman's house.

Olga Sofía Bendeck Nasser, Honduras

*Finding My Roots in Bethlehem:
A Home Away from Home*

Many years ago, my aunt told me, “When you go to Bethlehem, you will be welcomed as one of the family. You just have to say you are a Bandak.” I did not grasp what that meant until now.

It has been a lifelong dream of mine to visit Palestine in order to learn about my roots. Just the thought that my family came from Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, made me feel special. I was born and raised in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, the daughter of first-generation Honduran Palestinians.



Olga Bendeck with her husband on the roof of her grandfather's house (Anatreh Clan) on September 30, 2022.



Olga Bendeck and her husband with the Anatreh council, on September 30, 2022.

My childhood was one surrounded by families of Palestinian, Syrian, and Lebanese origin, who spoke Arabic and passed on the values, customs, and food of our culture. To this day, the cultural and economic contributions of Palestinians, many from Bethlehem, are very significant in Honduras.

My paternal grandfather, Elias Juan (Hanna) Bendeck, emigrated to Central America in the early 1900s and settled in Puerto Cortés, Honduras, where he married my Syrian grandmother, María Samra, and became an industrialist. Elias was the son of Hanna Miguel (Michael) Bandak and brother of Costa, María, Jorge (Jerjes), Hanne, and Menne.

In September 2022, my husband and I had the opportunity to visit Jerusalem and Bethlehem for three days. My aunt's prediction came true: throughout our visit, we met many Al-Bandak family members who warmly greeted us at shops, cafes, and markets, and helped me connect with someone close to my grandfather. We also received gifts and were invited to peoples' homes for dinner.

We also visited Dar Al-Sabagh Diaspora Studies and Research Centre to inquire about my family heritage and where my grandfather might have lived. When we arrived at the center, I whispered to Matheos, our tour guide, that we should not stay more than forty-five minutes since we had so much more to see.

To my surprise, Eyad Handal welcomed us fully prepared to engage us in a journey of discovery. The 150-year-old edifice of Dar Al-Sabagh has been beautifully renovated and houses a unique art collection with works by notable Palestinian artists, furniture, documents, and artifacts, in multiple rooms for research, meetings, and cultural events.

After a short tour of the center, we headed to the Al-Anatreh neighborhood, the origin of many Palestinian families who emigrated to the Americas, including the Al-Bandak clan. It was a surreal and emotional experience. We walked along Milk Grotto Street, behind the Church of the Nativity, and learned about the history of Bethlehem, the role that my



Olga at the front door of her grandfather's house.

married to Hanna Michael Bandak.

The highlight of our visit was when Ivonne and the Council members took us a few steps down the street to visit the house where my grandfather grew up and to meet another relative, Jameel Al-Bandak, whose family now owns the home. His father, the late George Al-Bandak, was the parish priest of the Church of the Nativity.

Entering my dear grandfather's family home was an incredible moment. Like many traditional houses, it was made of cream-colored local stone on the outside, with high ceilings, white walls, tall, narrow windows and doors, and traditional tiles on the floor inside.

ancestors played in protecting the Church of the Nativity, and of some highly regarded members of the Al-Bandak line. We were welcomed by Al-Anatreh Council members who showed us their new center and described their efforts to protect our heritage. I also met a distant cousin, Ivonne Al-Bandak, whose aunt was

It is hard to describe my feelings: nostalgia for my grandfather, pride for my family roots, and a sense of belonging to a larger community away from home. My heart is full of gratitude for the warm hospitality we received during our short stay and for the efforts of the community to preserve our heritage. It was truly an amazing experience, and we plan to return with the whole family for a longer stay.

Tareasa Mubarak, Bolivia

How Happy and Sad Can Exist Together

Narrated by Manal Abu Ayash, Dar Al-Sabagh Researcher

Since the establishment of Dar Al-Sabagh in 2018, and while hard at work, we have been witnesses to many emotions: tears mixed with happiness. On a regular day at the center, we heard the doorbell ring and opened the door to find a woman and her husband standing there. "Is this the Sabagh house?" she asked. We welcomed her and offered her Arabic coffee and water as she appeared tired and confused. "Finally, I found the center," she said.

She was Tareasa Mubarak, with her husband, Emilio. She explained that for ten years she had been trying to visit Palestine but had encountered many obstacles crossing the border. She had finally made it and was hoping to find relatives from the Mubarak family.



Tareasa Mubarak from Bolivia and her husband, with newly found cousin Salim Mubarak, visiting Dar Al-Sabagh on July 20, 2019.

After questioning her, we determined that Salim Mubarak was her cousin. The realization that she had finally found a relative made her eyes glisten. We called Salim on the phone, asking him to come and meet his cousin from Bolivia. He was choked, and upon meeting each other, happiness mixed with sadness: sadness because she had never known before about her family here, and happiness because finally, she had family in Bethlehem. After the warm encounter, Salim invited Mrs. Mubarak and her husband to his home for a family dinner.

Benjamin Abu Sleme, Palestinian from Chile

Dar Al-Sabagh Centre at the Service of the Palestinian Diaspora

Ten days in the homeland: occupied, but more alive than ever. Walking through the ancient streets of Bethlehem and Beit Jala is deciphering the past and dreaming of the future. The culture remains alive. With the enormous help of Dar Al-Sabagh Centre, during those ten days, we managed to get even closer to our roots. Visiting Beit Jala, seeing the

house where my ancestors possibly lived, visiting the cemetery and its tombs, and meeting one of my relatives provided images that will last forever and a new anchor to this land. Seeing it with our own eyes reaffirmed where we come from.

The Palestinians of the diaspora are responsible for communicating the Palestinian reality to the world. We have the power to do it. Talking about Palestine is a form of resistance. Keeping culture alive is also a form of resistance, just like the Palestinians

resist living under illegal occupation every day. The realities are different, but the various forms of resistance are a bridge between the diaspora and Palestine. It is essential to keep the bridge standing, to keep Palestine alive.

Blood is thicker than water.



Benjamin Shawrieh (Abu Sleme) while visiting his ancestral house in Beit Jala, on September 30, 2022.



Dar Al-Sabagh Diaspora Studies and Research Centre.

Jorge Jose Zarzar, Palestinian from Mexico

A New Brother Discovered after a Hundred Years!

I live in Torreón, Coahuila, Mexico, with my wife Verónica Díaz and our two beautiful children: Verónica and Jorge Elías.

When I was little, my father told me that my Christian Orthodox ancestors, fleeing from Ottoman rule, arrived on a ship to Mexico, from Bethlehem, a place famous for being the birthplace of Our Lord Jesus Christ. As time passed, my interest grew, and I dreamed of visiting the place of my grandparents' origin.

There is a large Palestinian community in Torreón, with many originating from Bethlehem. The Palestinian Federation in Mexico was formed a few years ago with the support of Ambassador Mohammed Saadat.

The deep-rooted Palestinian heritage and values of the grandparents have been transmitted to their descendants. My paternal grandfather, Yusef Zarzar, taught us the history of Palestine and the importance of family. My *Siti*, my maternal grandmother, Miriam Handal, taught me Arabic words, like the numbers. At family parties, we cook Palestinian food such as dolma (vine leaves), *marmaron* (pearl couscous) made at Christmas, tabbouleh, hummus, *laban* (fermented milk, called *jocoque* in Torreón) and black olives with *za'atar*.

When a few months ago, I took a DNA test, it showed that my ancestors are from Palestine. Grandfather Yusef agreed to take the test, too, and got the same result. Looking deeper into the subject, I learned about the Y chromosome, which is unique to males and does not change in thousands of years: it is like discovering who your first genetic father was.

Within this chromosome, the Zarzar family paternal haplogroup, called "G1", is from the region of Palestine rather than from the Christian Ghassanid clans of Yemen, as my family had thought.

I began researching the Zarzar paternal haplogroup on the internet and came across a fascinating article in



The author's father, Jorge Yusef Zarzar, at the house of his aunt Bedia Zarzar Gidi.



Left to right: the author's father, Jorge Yusef Zarzar; the author's grandfather Yusef Zarzar; the author himself; and his son Jorge Elias Zarzar.

This Week in Palestine (TWIP), written by Anton Mansour, who is originally from Bethlehem. Mansour conducted a study of the ancient clans of Bethlehem and discovered that they all belonged to the same paternal haplogroup "G1," which is native to Palestine.

Thanks to this article, and through the generosity of its publisher, Sani P. Meo, I connected with a Bethlehem study center for the diaspora, called Dar Al-Sabagh. Manal Abu Ayash with the Dar Al-Sabagh team conducted an extensive study, detailing from which clan and from which area the family surname Zarzar comes from, and built a complete family tree.

As a result of this study, my grandfather was deeply moved to discover that his father, Yacoub Zarzar, had an older brother whom he did not know of as he always thought that his father was the eldest son.

Now we are all very excited and want to know more about our ancestors and which family members still live in Bethlehem. We always remain in faith and hope that Palestine will be free again.

Eyad Handal is a researcher at Dar Al-Sabagh Centre and an intern at the Terra Sancta Museum in Jerusalem. He has a bachelor's degree in history and archaeology, a diploma in rural tourism from Birzeit University, and a master's degree in tourism and culture from Bethlehem University. In 2013-2015, he became the first Bethlehem youth council president and participated in several foreign cultural exchange programs and conferences.

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