



“This is Radio Jerusalem...1936”

Elias Sahhab

When Radio Jerusalem was established in 1936 it was only two years after the founding of the first official Arab radio station in Cairo (mid-1934) and one year before the death of the renowned Italian physicist Marconi (1937), famous for his application of wireless frequencies to radio broadcasting and receiving, and otherwise known as the inventor of broadcast radio.

In truth, the emergence of Radio Jerusalem at this time in the 20th century was not just an important indication of early contact with the inventions and discoveries of modern life. It was also an indication of the vitality of an early and extremely abundant culture. All of the historical information about this Arab radio station confirms this, despite a life span no longer than 12 years before being moved to Ramallah in 1948, and then again from Ramallah to Amman, where it became the Jordanian radio station.

One distinctive feature of this pioneer radio

station was the three people that headed its Arabic section in the radio's short life: Ibrahim Touqan, Ajaj Nuweihed and Azmi Nashashibi. The first two are prominent figures in the fields of poetry and history. Ibrahim Touqan was the first Palestinian poet in the pre-Nakba era and Nuhweid was a Palestinian intellectual and historian, whose personal memoirs have provided us with basic information about Radio Jerusalem.

We must note for historical purposes that the initiative for establishing this Arab radio station came from the British mandate authorities, with the intent of producing political propaganda. Furthermore, the station's history confirms that the British authorities concentrated their influence and attention on the arena of political news, over which they exercised direct and strict supervision. As for the areas of culture and art, these were left to the locals, to express themselves with near complete freedom.

Radio Jerusalem established three sections: English, Arabic and Hebrew. The joint section was comprised of newscasts, which were subject to political censorship by the British Mandate authorities, and the main points of which were edited in English and then translated into Arabic and Hebrew. Cultural and artistic pieces, such as music and radio programs, their production and supervision, were left to the heads of the Arabic and Hebrew sections.

Radio Jerusalem and Culture

It appears that the British concern that Radio Jerusalem succeed in its given mission and attract Arab listeners in Palestine and neighbouring Arab countries pushed the authorities to establish the station on two basic principles:

- *A strong radio transmission, which covered all Arab areas surrounding*

Palestine as far east as Iraq, and as far south as Egypt.

- *Heightened culture and the arts, a goal that Radio Jerusalem was careful to address from its inception. The choice of a notable poet (Ibrahim Touqan) and a notable intellectual (Ajaj Nuweihed) [to head the station] was just one indication of this trend. Nuweihed wrote in his memoirs¹ about Radio Jerusalem that before Ibrahim Touqan was chosen as head of the Arabic department at the station, the British authorities were leaning towards two prominent men learned in culture, literature and the Arabic language in Palestine to head the Arabic section - Khalil Sakakini and Adel Jabr. In the end, Ibrahim Touqan was selected.*

Radio Jerusalem later presented ample evidence of its elevated cultural programming in the heightened level of Arabic used at the station in written texts and in presentation. It was of utmost importance to the Arabic department that it emphasise a high standard of Arabic at the station. Head of the Arabic department Nuweihed chose the renowned Palestinian author Khalil Beidas to serve as an Arabic proof-reader and to monitor from his home the quality of the Arabic texts and their presentation by the broadcasters on air.

Furthermore, the radio organized a competition in order to select the best broadcasters for language and culture. The result was a group of the most important Arab broadcasters of the time, the most famous being Raji Sahyoun, Ali Murad and Aqeel Hashem.

Nuweihed says that the meticulous care given to the standard of Arabic at Radio Jerusalem attracted the attention

of prominent Arab thinkers in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq. He added that the broadcaster at Radio Jerusalem tried to avoid any grammatical mistakes, even if he were to read continuously for a half an hour on end. If one grammatical mistake were made on Radio Jerusalem, it was the talk of the town among Jerusalemites, who gossiped about it afterwards for an entire week.

Later, Radio Jerusalem initiated paid talk shows, which had already been introduced in well-established European radio stations like Radio London. This attracted some of the most prominent Arab intellectuals at the time to the station from Arab countries neighbouring Palestine to present their programs from the station. Some of these intellectuals included al-Aqqad and Mazini from Egypt, Khalil Taqi Eddin from Lebanon and Mohammed Kurd Ali, head of the Academy for the Arabic Language in Damascus.

As for poetry, Radio Jerusalem became famous for its competitions between Arab bards. The judging committee for the 1942 competition was comprised of leading Arab poets of the time - Fuad Khatib, Khalil Mardam Beik and Bishara Khouri (*Al Akhtal*). The cultural discussions broadcast from Jerusalem were of such high quality that there was serious thought given to publishing them in a series of books. Unfortunately, only the first part entitled, *Radio Talk*, was ever published.

Radio Jerusalem and Music

By the end of the 1930s, the Arabic section of Radio Jerusalem included two Arabic music groups, each comprised of 20 musicians. One was led by the Palestinian musician Yihya Saudi and the other by Egyptian musician Mohammed Atiyeh, who played the *qanoun* [a complex stringed instrument]. The Arabic department expended effort to develop

these two groups by forcing its musicians to learn to read and write musical notes. This was enforced through a strict system; any musician who could not read and write music was given a certain period to learn the skill. Those who did not adhere were fired.

At first, this seems to have caused some unhappiness among the members of the two groups. In the end, however, there was a recognition of the tremendous benefit reaped by the severe rules, the greatest benefit being learning to read and write music in the dawn of the 20th century. After the 1948 *Nakba*, these musicians formed the backbone for radio music groups in the Arab countries where they sought refuge: in Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad and Amman. Palestinian musician Yousef Batrouni, who had studied music in Italy, led the development process. Batrouni also played another major role at the time in conducting the orchestra for Radio Jerusalem, which was made up of European and Arab musicians. This symphony, it appears, was the only artistic common denominator among the three departments of Radio Jerusalem, but it was placed under the direction of Yousef Batrouni when the symphony threw parties for the Arabic [language] section of the radio station.

Radio Jerusalem expanded to the extent, 60-and-a-half years ago, that it became a source of interest for musicians, composers and singers from Palestine's Arab neighbours. Big names in Arab music and song, like the famous Egyptian *qanoun* players Mohammed Attiya and Abdel Fattah Mansi, used its airwaves. Examples of singers who crooned on Radio Palestine included Farid al-Atrash, Asmahan and Mohammed Abdel Muttaleb. This last confirms in his memoirs that his initial appearance in Egypt ended in failure, but when he moved to Radio Jerusalem he was given the opportunity to grow and flourish. He returned from Palestine to

Egypt (he was Egyptian) a famous singer recognized by all.

Likewise, the well-known Lebanese musician Toufiq al-Basha, who worked at Radio Jerusalem when it moved to Ramallah after the *Nakba*, said that Lebanese folklore types were being presented poorly by Radio Beirut, which at the time had minimal facilities. However, this same style was given the utmost importance at Radio Jerusalem, and was presented with the participation of talented Lebanese singers and skilled

Palestinian musicians. It was of such a high quality that it may have laid the foundation for the musical renaissance that took place in Lebanon afterwards, in the 50s and 60s.

In truth, the creative, cultural and artistic record at Radio Jerusalem early in the 20th century is much too long to summarize in these lines. Here we have sufficed with offering enough examples to shape a picture of a great cultural renaissance whose course was cut short one day in 1948.

The opening of Radio Jerusalem

This station was opened after the preparation of all its technical equipment, including modern studios. This occurred after the government had modified the inside of the building in the large halls to be adoptable to wireless technology. The house was then complete. "The Habasheh Building" comprised of two elegant floors was considered one of the most beautiful buildings in Jerusalem, [and it] was owned by the Ethiopian government. The transmission equipment was considered the strongest in the Middle East after Ankara and its highest antenna was 225 meters...

Ajaj Nuwehed, "Memoirs" (Beirut:1986)

Endnotes

¹ *Sixty years with Arab Culture* (Beirut: Dar al-Istiqlal, 1993).