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# Why do we go to War?

English

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أنا جيد، أعاني قليلاً من الوحدة والإغتراب كالعادة، يبدو أنه أصبح مألوفاً عندي لدرجة أنه لم يعد غريباً عليّ، القرارات الصعبة تحتاج يا عزيزي إلى حزم وجرم، لكن بإمكانني أن أدلك على شيء يخفف عنك بعضاً من ألمك، والأمر فيه ألم بكل تأكيد، حاول أن تتذكر أن أزمته الوجودية فعلاً ترتبط بقضية سامية "أكبر من أي صراع آخر، دع هذا الأمر في رأسك سيساعدك على تخطيه، دع فلسطين أمام عيونك"

*I'm doing well. I'm a bit lonely and alienated as usual. It seems that loneliness has become so familiar to me that it is no longer a stranger to me. Difficult decisions require firmness and assertiveness, but I can tell you something that will relieve you of some of your pain, and the matter is certainly pain. Try to remember that your existential crisis is really related to a sublime cause greater than any other conflict, and let this matter in your mind help you overcome it. Let Palestine be in front of your eyes.*

**The martyr Basil Al-Araj**

**The following is an essay written by the "revolutionary intellectual" martyr Basil Al-Araj.**

We remember Basil. Basil would look around with a humble nod to acknowledge those who gathered, but when he spoke, the uncontested truth in his words bellowed loudly and captured the gaze of all. He gave our broken hearts courage as we watched the calamity of Ramallah's USAID and normalization enclave consume and manipulate our people. The cowardly Palestinian Authority could not debate with Basil. All they could do was try to silence him. And even in that, they failed.

Basil keeps Palestine in front of our eyes and continues to tear down the deceptive enemies. He was not reactionary, but was a good teacher who laid out the context for us to arrive at the only conclusion a people under occupation should reach: liberation

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is in the path of truth. There is no room for deception when walls and checkpoints suffocate.

His words live here and everywhere, and for us who shared tea with him and released deep sighs under the clouds of occupation, his words live in our lonely footsteps in exile as a lesson and practice to uphold. However uncomfortable and contrary to the institutions of power, we must speak out. He was willing to die to liberate land and minds.

The Palestinian Authority of normalization hunted Basil and played a significant role in coordinating with the enemy to silence Basil. They hated how Basil taught resistance.

Basil ascended to martyrdom in a multi-hour firefight by zionist gunfire in Qaddoura Refugee Camp, not far from Ramallah's city center where traitors were hung in days gone. Now, it is the traitors leading the executions of revolutionaries and in return they get rewarded a Congress aid package as a bounty.

By Basil's side lay his famous glasses, his kuffiyeh, and his writings, including his will. His writings were compiled into a book, "I Have Found My Answers," (a line from his will), published posthumously.

In this essay, Basil asks his unidentified dear friend, "Why do we go to war?" Weaving history, physics, philosophy, film, and mythology together, he arrives at an answer: romanticism.

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Why do we go to war?

My dear friend,

Starting from today, I will be writing for you. I will write with the amazement of children and with a faith that the prophets have, and I will never be worried about what I am writing. If I live, I will discover either the dreams of children and their fantasies, or I will discover the visions of the prophets, and what I have written down here shall never harm me if I die.

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You, my friend, are variegated. Sometimes I see you as a male, and at other times as a female. Sometimes I see you as my comrade-in-arms and struggle; at other times, I see you as a political opponent. Sometimes I see you as one of my great teachers; at other times, I see you as one of my friends. For you, my friend, are nothing short of everyone I ever knew. In any case, each letter will represent a self-dialogue with some friend, a comrade, or a professor, and perhaps sometimes the dialogue will be with more than one person.

Do you know when the most intense monologue I create in this solitude of mine is? It's when my cigarettes start to run out, and tonight, my friend, I have half a dozen left, so let me tell you what's on my mind.

My dear friend,

I don't really know why I start thinking every time I run out of cigarettes, but I remember how one of my other friends described me as “primitive”.

Do you recall, my dear, what I told you one day: “The city will kill both of us. My hatred for it and my longing to escape its urbanization will kill me, and you will be killed by your ever-lasting greed for the city and its urbanization”?

In all cases, I found some humor in the explanation concerning my primitivism and cigarettes: an explorer asked once an Inuit, “what is on your mind?”, and so the latter answered, “there is no need to think. I have enough food for now.” The Inuit starts working his mind out when the food runs out, and so is the case for me when my cigarettes start to run out.

It is unfortunate that many of the things I used to say were taken seriously, even my nonsense and jokes about feminism, for example. You would always find someone who would take them seriously and argue with them, so I consider it my duty here to say that, unfortunately, I have no claim to the truth, so do not search for it here and subject everything I say to doubt, even if I say it with a heart full of the prophets' faith. Rather, make room for thinking, even if I formulate my thoughts with childlike terms and expressions. As Ali Al-Wardi said: “Nothing invented by the human mind is more horrible than the plot of truth and reality.” Therefore, here, I will claim neither truth nor

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reality, for I am following the doctrine of our teacher who said, “The truth is nothing but the path that you take in your truth-seeking journey.”

My dear friend,

Why do we go to war? Of course, this is a question that haunts me alone, and I believe this question is one for all humanity. This question, in the adult world, is like asking children how they came into this world. Let me be liberated from a search for the elegance of words or the flow of ideas, and let me be liberated from generalizations or particularities. This question has been my companion for more than 20 years; I searched for its answer in the depths of books and the hearts and minds of professors. I searched for its answer in the biographies of heroes and martyrs, for you, my dear friend, know that its answer is directly related to the issue of heroism and martyrdom. Finally, I found that this this question doesn't baffle me alone, but almost every one I know, friend or foe. As you know, the "counterinsurgency" literature buzzes with this question.

Perhaps it's been eight months since my life began to take its proper course, since my first disappearance, then my imprisonment, and here we are in the midst of my second disappearance. Since those days, some things began to reveal themselves to me, and I do not know the reason. Is it experience and/or fear, anxiety and/or clarity of mind and devotion—I do not know the exact reason, or even if it is a hallucination, hallucinations of solitude? Is it a break from reality or an abstract clash with reality?

Have you read Omar Al-Farra's poem, “The Men of God on the Day of Conquest in Lebanon?” He traces the footsteps of these men, so I, like Omar Al-Farra, searched and traced the path of such men, the geography of heroism, martyrdom, and the history of self-sacrifice. Oh God, how humble I am when I walk through these mountains and go down these valleys. There is no comparison to my humility when I am here, even in prayer. I have been searching for an answer to this question on a journey that has lasted me 20 years. I search "for the truth and the missing faces," as my teacher would say about me.

Now, let us get back to the question.

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My dear friend,

Why do we go to war?

One day, you asked me the question, "What is wrong with the motivation for struggle being an individualistic, personal motivation?" while expressing objection to a certain piece of paper. This is not important. What is important on that day was that you told me about the story of Jasser Al-Barghouthi's cell, that young man who commanded one of the most important resistance cells in the West Bank during the Second Intifada. You told me that he decided to carry out his first operation because he was slapped in the face by a soldier at a checkpoint. Although I kept track of everything that was published about it back then, and although I know that the creation of the cell was not motivated by that slap, I still got carried away thinking about it, and still I asked you to narrate to me the cell's story, even though I know more about it than you. The reason behind that was that I liked your narrative much more than the official one about Jasser Al-Barghouthi, and so the slap was not what determined the man's choices. Your narrative ignited my imagination, in the words of our poet friend.

Let us stand here and take a look at all the stories known to history that involved heroism, martyrdom, and self-sacrifice. The world's narratives, including those of our enemies, have a common denominator. The question that lingers is: why do we go to war? The motivations, the duty, patriotism, the escape from troubles, religious and class beliefs, the duality of good and evil, of right and vice, of revenge and greed? Maybe all of these motivations do exist. But they are not what make all of humanity's narrative so similar, for every dogma of faith has one that counters it, for every line of patriotism has one that nullifies it, and so on. So for each one of those motivations, there exists one that counters or nullifies it on the other side of the battle.

And you realize, my friend, that in practice, there is no revolutionary ideology or a reactionary conservative one. Nor are there religions, lines, or currents that follow the same dichotomy, not even nationalities or identities or a people's structure. All of these carry an intrinsic opposition. And it is nothing more than an interpretation. I advise you to read about the Castilian battles against the Andalusian Muslims. You will notice that you feel like you are reading a narrative that's familiar to you from the stories of the Islamic Conquests: a story about that weak barely-armed frightened

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minority that turned to God in the depths of the nights, crying and begging for victory, and with the sun up, those same people became knights that turned towards their strong, numerous opponents in a fierce attack that ended with the latter's defeat; all of the stories involving patriotic, nationalistic, class and religious heroism follow the same line.

My dear friend,

My grandfather used to tell me about the story of the Druze revolution against the Turks. The story that the cause of the revolution was a verse of Ataba1, and although I know the historical "facts" about that revolution, I have always been amazed by my grandfather's narrative.

Take, for example, the enemy's narratives about their own heroes. Cross out the names and the fighting parties, and listen to the narrative. You will find yourself engaging with it. Man, since you are interested in movies, note, for example, the movie "We Were Soldiers" by Mel Gibson. Despite our full and unconditional sympathy for the Vietnamese, we definitely fell in love with Mel Gibson's character and his heroism. By the way, compare this matter to the movies "The Patriot" and "Braveheart" by the same actor.

My dear friend,

I apologize for stretching out the question. Why do we go to war? We go to it looking for romance. The romance of war, that creates a new type of human, for no one stays the same after experiencing war. We chase this romance, and nothing ignites romance more than war.

I recommend that you read a book titled "Memoir of Soldiers." This book has amazed me and informed me about things I couldn't express previously with human language. Maybe language has never failed you or our poet friend, and so you will never know what it's like to be unable to express your thoughts.

It is true that we go to war to seek romance, and perhaps I was ashamed of admitting this to myself. You know how much of a cliché this term has turned into. I used to run away from this romance whenever it tried to sweep me away, and I used to try and

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make sense of all those motives. We're too arrogant to admit this reason but we all know that what draws us towards heroism and martyrdom is the same thing that we are so ashamed to admit: romance.

Retroactively, I went back to what I used to write about the biographies of those heroes, only to find out in hindsight that I used to unknowingly admit it—that we seek romance—all along through the language I used to write with. Let me also tell you that, even though I believe now more than ever in the absurdity of putting words into paper, I still do it until this moment with romance as my motivation: the thought of seeing your smile or your tear (and I know you don't shed tears anymore), the thought of a tear or an emotion expressed by someone reading it, the thought of hearing a word of flattery, and so on. This is what motivates me to write. And so, all other attempts to explain or find an answer to the question are not answers in themselves but are escapes from the answer; they are an attempt to rationalize romance.

We behold and explain the moment with these motivations. The question “why am I here?” cannot be answered except with patriotic, religious, nationalistic, and personal motives and so on, but I can look at the past through a romantic lens, and I can see the future that way, too. Maybe the reason is that romance doesn't exist in the first place; perhaps it is only a mirage that we are doomed to forever chase. We see it when we look behind. We see it when we look forward so that we chase it again, only for it to escape us. And in the moment that we finally catch romance, it turns out to be nothing more than a few whiffs or ephemeral moments of contemplation that end quickly before the material world submits you again to your own reality.

Romance will collapse before your eyes from the first second you start walking on your path toward it; it will evaporate between your fingers at the start of your first real collision with reality, like smoke.

And let me tell you that my romance for war collapsed with my first step into the mountains, and yet, I still used to see it in front of me. I would run behind it, entrap it, and try to catch it while it was still dragging me down, and despite all of this, those few days were the most beautiful moments of my life. As we say in our dialect, “glory is to be found in the tip of the mountains”, and while we were in prison we added to it:

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“Glory is to be found in the tip of the mountains and mountains are to be found of the chests of men.” And again, we found ourselves in prison following the same pattern of chasing romance. And so, do you know what hope is? It is the swift pursuit of and belief that you will reach this romance and you will catch it. I reach my moment where I get the urge to cough, and the smoke of my cigarette blinds my eyes. With that, my romance escapes me again, but only for me to find it in the future. Giving lectures in prison about the “modern history of Palestine,” and the desire to explain that history in order to find a rational logical answer, helped me and others endure the pain of prison. All of those attempts to explain it have done nothing but give me a clear vision of the path leading to an oasis of romance.

Now, the story of our Gazan friend who was hiking in the valleys of Al-Rad and Nablus in her first experience with the mountains. It was the first time she walked on the rocks. I asked her days before the hike about her impressions of the mountains. Her impressions were purely romantic. On the day of the hike, all of her bones nearly shattered. She completely fled from the romance she had been searching for. The next day, after she confirmed that she was repentant from climbing, she wrote the most beautiful text about the experience of hiking and recalled the history of heroism and martyrdom that she knows is linked to the mountain. When she transformed her experience to the past tense, she was able to see the romance in it.

It comes to my mind to ask, "what is romance in the first place?"

And I find myself as you once described me, "a man of faith, not doubtful." I am absolutely sure that I do not need to define this, as certain as Nazik Al-Malaika, the Arab nationalist poet, when she said that some things that you feel and experience do not need a definition. So I will not ask you about its meaning or its linguistic roots.

And you, the academics, are always striving to remove magic from things by defining and interpreting them, thinking that you will reach the truth.

On these rainy days, I will tell you that I do not need an explanatory framework to explain the cause of rain, whether the reason is Thor's hammer or Allah's mercy on his servants, or science's interpretation of this phenomenon. I want none of this; I only want my constant amazement and my foolish smile whenever it rains, to seem



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like the first time, the experience of the wonder of children, and the magic of the world.

Why do I say this about academics? I remembered the way they write history. They remove all romanticism from history, so most people do not like to read history, even though it is possible to write history with a methodology that preserves its romanticism. These are sound and appropriate tools of analysis and serious historical methodology, but they cannot be taken seriously by any other academic if they do not take away the magic from things, the magic of romanticism.

And honestly, I don't know why there is this hostility of modernity towards romanticism. Do you know, for example, that the first practical applications of modern chemistry and physics were originally to add magic to things? But modernity is like poison in honey. It gives you the illusion that it wants the magic, attractiveness, and romance of things, and once it takes firm control over you, it takes away all of that from you. Notice, for example, the "primitive" man's dealings with technology and the beginning of his knowledge of it. Note, for example, how wireless communications stole our minds in its beginnings (I told you about our story with the first telephone that entered our neighborhood).

At first, you see the magic of things. Then, here we are; we have taken that magic away from everything and it no longer surprises us.

Why do we need romanticism?

I would argue that if not for some man having a mad romance that is only a thread of hair away from banality, the history of humanity wouldn't have been of any importance worth mentioning. My friend, imagine how our Prophet Mohammad PBUH was on the run, chased down, frightened, and starving, and yet, when he was caught by Surāqa Bin Malik, he didn't have anything but to promise Surāqa all the cavalry of Khosrow II (the Sassanid King of Kings of the Iranians). If Surāqa had happened to be a modernist, rational, realistic person, he would have firmly tied the prophet, handed him over to Quraish, and collected his bounty of one hundred camels. "Man, you're an escapee, and Quraish, with all its fools and masters, is chasing you and you're promising me the cavalry of Khorsow?" But fortunately, fate

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had given our Prophet Mohammad someone like Surāqa with a vast imagination, with wild dreams, and with a romanticism excessive enough for him to take the Prophet for his word and let him go. I am certain that Surāqa was told, “you naive fool!” at least once after that.

We need romance to continue our existence. I don't see how can we survive as a species without romance.

I will tell you something about war and romanticism. When Napoleon came to Egypt, he was encountered by the Mamluks with their long mustaches, their Sicilian swords, and with their vessels and shields on their horses. Only a few moments after it, the bullets and cannons of Napoleon filled the ground with Mamluk bodies.

At that time and up until recently, most historians, intellectuals, and authors described the mentality of the Mamluks as “primitive” in comparison to that of the modernist Napoleon, and they have attributed exaggerated stupidity and naivety to the Mamluks.

But I see things from a different perspective. I can see that the Mamluks were aware that they are only a few moments away from their certain annihilation, and yet, they refused to welcome that quash with open arms. Do you know what it is like for a person to be raised their whole life on the values of knighthood and bravery? And then someone comes in and tries to take all that away from them. The Mamluk knights knew that, and they refused to give up the romance of confrontations, knighthood, bravery, and death.

Somewhere else, and decades after that event, a similar event to that of the Mamluks came into existence. It has been portrayed in the movie “The Last Samurai”, and by the way, the soldier that fought alongside the Samurai was French, not American. The movie portrays the epic of the last battle, and similarly to the battle between the Mamluks and Napoleon, one can notice the romanticism in the scene that portrays the murder of Katsumoto.

Several decades later in World War I, two-thirds of the British army was annihilated in the first two months of the war. Do you know why? The memoirs of English officers of the British military aristocracy tell us the answer. There, they realized that the war as

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they knew it had ended, and there was no longer any possibility or place for the knights and the brave after this day. After the Germans slew them in the same manner as their Maxim machine gun (the pride of their military), there they realized that they were finished. However, a large number of that military aristocracy did not want to abandon the romance of war and chivalry, only to fall dead to miserable suicidal missions of the nature of the heroics of final stands, and they went to their deaths with all courage.

In World War I, Europeans knew that the first thing that modernity killed was romance. So what does it mean when you sit for months in trenches and death snatches you without looking into the eyes of your killer or feeling the rush of his spear in your chest? There, they were snatched away by death, by shells falling from the sky that they could hardly see, or by the whistle of an officer ordering them to advance one yard to die outside their trenches.

Modernism killed romanticism, and it is still destroying it.

Note, my dear, that you can tell the story of the martyrdom of any martyr in the Second Intifada, and that the climax of the event is not their life but the moment of their death, except for those who were martyred by smart missiles from planes. One can narrate the life of Ahmed Yassin with excessive romance and absorb the lightness of the sheikh's spirit into your own being. However, at the moment of his martyrdom, in his last battle, you cannot describe it in more than ten words in 30 seconds, unlike the martyrs who fell during direct confrontation and armed clashes with the enemy. Do you remember our conversation about the martyrdom of Louay Al-Saadi?

Even your observations and criticism of the paradoxes of the 2014 war were that it made most of society a passive audience awaiting death. You objected to a death that is not surrounded by a romantic narrative. You know that the balance of power between nations is determined by the "potential energy" and "kinetic energy" (a crushing energy). And you know that potential energy—and its function in war—is to transform into a crushing force. I believe that the possibility of creating romantic narratives around martyrdom and heroism is one of the most important elements of potential energy, in which we outperform our enemy.

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We can narrate ten thousand romantic stories about heroism and martyrdom in the last decade alone, narratives that, once picked up by society, can transform from a buried, potential energy into an enemy-crushing force. On the other hand, our enemy does not have more than 50 similar stories from 2006 until now (in the same time period). This is an actual manifestation of our professor's saying that the enemy has lost every ability to produce heroes.

The age of post-modernity or liquid modernity—it is not important to me as what you refer to it as. What is important to me is that this is the era in which romance has died and heroism ended. And surely you know that we, Palestinians, live outside of this era. We live in a colonial Palestinian era, surrounded by a post-colonial, post-modern world, and so, we are still able to produce romantic narratives.

Allow me to address you and our poet friend: do you remember our friend's statements about how much the narratives found within the '48 Palestine communities are charged with imagination? And how this disappears in other narratives? Notice how stories about heroism and victory are the ones that are filled with popular fantasies and romanticism, like the story of the wheat seeds inside the pocket of the martyr from Kafr Kanna<sup>2</sup>. Whilst the narratives that retell the stories of victims are swift, rigid, dull, boring, and nothing more than documentations devoid of any imagination.

And notice, too, how the stories of heroism are narratives are lush with romanticism, while the ones about victimhood are brief. This for me can only mean that nations vanquish when they give up romanticism. Sometimes after admitting defeat, the defeated party tries to hold on to what is left of its dead romance, and so what does it produce? We here can see some sort of a banal fantasy being produced, something akin to superhumans that we usually see in Bollywood or in mid-70s and mid-80s Hollywood. And I am not talking about superhero comic movies such as Superman, Batman, and Spiderman, where that kind of wild imagination should be allowed; no, what I mean here is works like Rambo, for example. I am fully convinced that Rambo, and Arnold's movies and other movies from that era, were nothing more than mere attempts to salvage that American romanticism we have seen killed by the guns of Vietnam. And so, all of these movies, in addition to their bad quality, have a rude, offensive and, corny character to them, and on top of that, they resort to

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appropriating their enemy's romanticism in order to feed their own narratives. A clear example of this is the tricks that we see Rambo use in Vietnam, which were "borrowed" from the actual Vietnamese.

Or perhaps, we can look to Indian movies, which exaggerate in vulgarizing the heroism they portray and make up ridiculous romantic stories because, and I am not quite sure here, the popular imagination in India has no other choice left but to save its lost romanticism. For me, this phenomenon correlates with the caste system found in India.

It is worth emphasizing here that there is a fine line separating romance from vulgarity, and there is also a fine line between constructive romantic narratives and mythological narratives that lack sound analytical tools.

When asked about the martyrs of this Intifada, you will only see men rushing with all their speed and dashes, carrying their knives and rifles, as if they were trying to grab something that they see that we do not see. This phenomenon is nothing but the romance of war.

"Such is the craft of knights, to revolt without guarantee. The spirit of a man is not enthusiastic, but combative. We are fighters, and we are not shopkeepers," as stated in the novel "Freedom or Death" by Nikos Kazantzakis. This was the answer of the fighter, the Caribbean teacher, to Commander Kambata Ross, when he asked for firm facts before moving Russian and Greek ships, supplies, weapons, and soldiers. The teacher called this spirit "insight". Perhaps it is the same as Ali Shariati's "shrewdness", and it is perhaps a descriptive abstraction of what romanticism is.

And I find myself smiling when I accuse Nikos of stealing that saying from our popular Walaji<sup>3</sup> chant called "Waw"<sup>4</sup>. We say:

"Do not consider us foreigners, O Waw

We do not sell spices...

We are the protectors of the women

on the day that there is a raid on the women."

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Finally, perhaps the friends who experienced my anger in my attempt to defend the path of the martyrs would forgive me when they were scratching the outer surface of the romanticism of the martyr and the heroism in my consciousness.

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Glory to you, oh resistant and educated martyr.

The will of the martyr Basil Al-Araj:

Greetings of Arab nationalism, homeland, and liberation,

If you are reading this, it means I have died and my soul has ascended to its creator. I pray to God that I will meet him with a guiltless heart, willingly, and never reluctantly, and free of any bit of hypocrisy. How difficult it is to write your own will... For years I have contemplated such texts by martyrs, and been bewildered by them. Succinct, and without eloquence, they do not satisfy our burning desire for answers about martyrdom.

Now I walk to my death, satisfied that I have found my answers. How foolish I am. Is there anything more eloquent than the actions of a martyr? I should have written this months ago, but what kept me was that this question is for you, the living. Why should I answer for you? You should search for it. As for us, the people of the graves, we seek nothing else but God's mercy.

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1. *The ataaba is a traditional Arabic musical form sung at weddings, festivals, and other occasions*
  2. *Kafr Kanna is a Palestinian village in the occupied interior ('48 lands).*
  3. *From Walaja, Basil's home village near Bethlehem.*
  4. *"Waw" is the penultimate letter of the Arabic alphabet and constitutes the only letter of the word "wa," meaning "and."*