Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali: Historian of Modern Palestine, Killed 1981



Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali (1939–1981) was a Palestinian historian, thinker and activist from Jaffa, author of *A History of Modern Palestine*, founder of the Arab Institute for Research and Publishing in Beirut and a member of the PLO Executive Committee. He was assassinated in the Sakiyet al-Janzir district of Beirut on 7 December 1981 and buried in Amman. [1] [2]

[3]

This article is part of the series “Assassinated leaders of the Palestinian revolution,” alongside the articles on Ghassan Kanafani, Majed Abu Sharar and Abu Jihad.

Contents

1. Who was Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali?
2. Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali at a glance
3. Timeline
4. From Jaffa to Beirut: a son of the Nakba
5. The student activist
6. In the leadership of the national movement
7. The historian: writing the history of modern Palestine
8. The publisher: the Arab Institute for Research and Publishing
9. The assassination of Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali: Beirut, 7 December 1981
10. Testimonies
11. Legacy
12. Video
13. Frequently asked questions
14. Sources and references

Who was Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali?

Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali was a man of letters, writer, historian, political thinker and fighter, in the words of his comrade Gen. Arabi Kaloub, one who “fought with the rifle, with his thought and with his free, honest pen” [2] [1]. He combined academic research, national struggle and publishing: he wrote the history of Palestinian resistance to colonialism and Zionism, founded one of the leading Arab publishing houses and held leadership posts in the PLO [1] [3] [4].

Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali at a glance

Item	Details
Name	Abdel Wahab Said al-Kayyali [2]
Born	1939, Jaffa [1] [2]
Education	BA in political science, American University of Beirut (1961); MA (1965); PhD, University of London (1970) [1] [5]
Best-known work	*A History of Modern Palestine* [1] [2]
Institutions founded	Arab Institute for Research and Publishing (1969), Arab Centre for Strategic Studies, Third World Centre for Research and Publishing in London (1979) [3] [1]
Roles	Palestine National Council member (1968), Secretary-General of the Arab Liberation Front (1972), PLO Executive Committee member and head of its Education and Culture Department (1974–1977) [1] [5]
Assassinated	7 December 1981, Sakiyet al-Janzir, Beirut [1] [2] [3]
Buried	Amman [1] [5]

Timeline

Year	Event
1939	Born in Jaffa [1]
1948	The Nakba; the family takes refuge in Amman [1] [2]
1958	Joins the Ba’ath Party [1] [5]
1960	Expelled from AUB over protests backing the Algerian revolution, then readmitted after a student strike [1] [5]
1961	Graduates in political science; co-founds the General Union of Palestinian Students [1] [2]
1968	Joins the Palestine National Council; launches *Free Palestine* in London [1] [5]
1969	Founds the Arab Institute for Research and Publishing in Beirut [3]
1970	PhD from the University of London [1] [5]

Year	Event
1972	Chairs the Arab Liberation Front’s first congress and is elected its secretary-general [1] [5]
1974–1977	PLO Executive Committee member and head of the Education and Culture Department [1] [5]
1979	Founds the Third World Centre for Research and Publishing in London [1] [5]
1981	Assassinated in Beirut on 7 December; buried in Amman [1] [2]

From Jaffa to Beirut: a son of the Nakba

Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali was born in Jaffa in 1939 to a patriotic family of activists [1] [2]. He went to primary school there until the Nakba of 1948, when Jaffa fell to the Zionist militias and most of its people were driven out; his family took refuge in Amman [1] [5]. He finished secondary school in Amman and Beirut [1] [5].

The student activist

Al-Kayyali enrolled at the American University of Beirut, and in 1960 he and several classmates were expelled over protests supporting the Algerian revolution, then readmitted under the pressure of a general student strike [1] [5]. He graduated in 1961 with a BA in political science and helped found the General Union of Palestinian Students [1] [2].

He joined the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party in 1958 and in 1961 became secretary of its Palestine branch in Lebanon [1] [5]. He then worked at Kuwait’s Ministry of Guidance and Information and as managing editor of the magazine *Al-Ra’id al-Arabi*, before returning to Beirut in 1963 to head the studies and opinion page of the newspaper *Al-Ahrar* [1] [2].

In the leadership of the national movement

In 1968 al-Kayyali was elected to the Palestine National Council and launched in London the magazine *Free Palestine*, the Palestinian resistance’s first foreign-

language magazine, serving as its first editor-in-chief [1] [5].

He was in the leadership of the Arab Liberation Front from its founding, chaired its first congress in 1972 and was elected its secretary-general [1] [5]. From 1974 to 1977 he was a member of the PLO Executive Committee and head of its Education and Culture Department, and a member of the Higher Political Committee for Palestinian Affairs in Lebanon [1] [5].

The historian: writing the history of modern Palestine

Al-Kayyali earned an MA in 1965 and a PhD from the University of London in 1970, with a thesis on Arab Palestinian resistance to colonialism and Zionism in the twentieth century [1] [5]. From this research came his most important book, *A History of Modern Palestine* [1] [2].

He wrote in Arabic and English; his works include *Zionist Expansionist Ambitions*, *The Kibbutz: Collective Farms in Israel*, *Palestinian Resistance and the Arab Struggle*, *Palestinian Studies and Readings* and *The Arabs, Imperialism and Racism* [1] [5]. In these works he dissected the Zionist colonial project and its expansionist ambitions, and chronicled the Palestinian people’s resistance to it.

Akhbar Al Khaleej describes him as the historian who preserved Palestinian memory through his encyclopedic works [4].

The publisher: the Arab Institute for Research and Publishing

In 1969 al-Kayyali founded in Beirut the Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, specialising in works of thought on the Arab world and above all Palestine; it opened branches in Cairo, Baghdad and London and pioneered encyclopedias of politics, military affairs and philosophy [3]. He was editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopedia of Politics*, founded the Arab Centre for Strategic Studies, which

published the *Military Encyclopedia*, and edited the journal *Qadaya Arabiya* from its first issue in 1974 [1] [5]. In 1979 he founded the Third World Centre for Research and Publishing in London [1] [5].

The institute kept working through Lebanon's civil war and still publishes about 150 titles a year from its offices in Beirut and Amman [3].

The assassination of Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali: Beirut, 7 December 1981

On 7 December 1981 Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali was assassinated in the Sakiyet al-Janzir district of Beirut [1] [2]. The LEILA project says he was killed in his Beirut office by "unidentified gunmen" [3]. His comrade Arabi Kaloub calls it "a cowardly assassination" [1] [2].

The available sources do not identify who carried out the killing [1] [2] [3]. It came in a Beirut that had become a stage for the assassination of Palestinian thinkers and leaders, from Ghassan Kanafani in 1972 to Majed Abu Sharar, killed in Rome in October of that same year, 1981.

Al-Kayyali's funeral was held in Beirut, where Abu Jihad gave a speech [6]. His body was taken the next day to Amman, where he was buried [1] [5]. His killing caused deep grief among the Palestinian resistance and nationalist forces [5].

Testimonies

Gen. Arabi Kaloub: "Dr. Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali fell a martyr at the height of his intellectual, cultural and militant giving," and "he was a man of letters, a writer, a historian, a political thinker and a fighter" [1].

Legacy

Al-Kayyali left a full library of books and encyclopedias, and a publishing house still alive more than four decades after his assassination [3] [1]. His *A History of*

Modern Palestine remains a reference for students of the Palestinian cause [4] [1]. His comrades recall him each year on the anniversary of his killing, as in Arabi Kaloub's articles of 2014 and 2019 [2] [1].

Video

The Reuters film archive holds footage of Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali's funeral in Beirut and Abu Jihad's speech [6].

Conclusion

From Jaffa, from which he was uprooted as a child, to the halls of the University of London and the publishing house that carried Palestine onto the shelves of Arab bookshops, Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali wrote his people's history while helping to make it. Assassins silenced his voice in Beirut, but his books remain.

Also in this series: Ghassan Kanafani, Majed Abu Sharar, Abu Jihad.

Frequently asked questions about Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali

Who was Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali?

A Palestinian historian, thinker and activist from Jaffa, author of *A History of Modern Palestine*, founder of the Arab Institute for Research and Publishing and a former member of the PLO Executive Committee.

What are Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali's best-known books?

A History of Modern Palestine, along with *Zionist Expansionist Ambitions*, *The Kibbutz* and *Palestinian Resistance and the Arab Struggle*.

When was Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali assassinated?

On 7 December 1981.

Where was Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali assassinated?

In the Sakiyet al-Janzir district of Beirut.

Who killed Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali?

The available sources do not identify the perpetrators; they say he was killed in his office by unidentified gunmen.

Where is Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali buried?

In Amman, where his body was taken the day after his assassination.

What is the Arab Institute for Research and Publishing?

A publishing house al-Kayyali founded in Beirut in 1969, specialising in thought, the Palestinian cause and encyclopedias; it still operates from Beirut and Amman.

Sources and references

Arabic-language sources are listed with translated titles.

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5. “Abdel Wahab al-Kayyali,” Mokhayyam.
6. “Lebanon: Funeral of Assassinated Palestinian Leader Al-Kayyali and Speech by Fatah Member Abu Jihad,” Reuters film archive, 1981.