

# The Sea Sight of Istanbul: A Description from Rūḥī al-Khālidī's (1864–1913) Notebook<sup>1</sup>

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## Keywords:

Istanbul, Rūḥī al-Khālidī, Voyage by Boat, Late Ottoman, 1908 Revolution

## Cite this article:

El Ali, Mariam. "The Sea Sight of Istanbul: A Description from Rūḥī al-Khālidī's (1864–1913) Notebook". *Keshif: E-Journal for Ottoman-Turkish Micro Editions* 1/2 (Summer 2023): 32-39.

Available under <http://doi.org/10.25365/kshf-23-02-06>

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Article DOI <http://doi.org/10.25365/kshf-23-02-06>

Published online November 15, 2023

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<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by The Orient-Institut, Beirut (OIB) where I served as a postdoctoral fellow (September 2022–2023), yet the findings herein presented are solely my responsibility.

## Context

A prominent Ottoman Arab diplomat and writer, Muḥammad Rūḥī al-Khālīdī (1864–1913) was born into the scholarly Khālīdī family of Jerusalem. Along traditional learning at al-Aqṣā Mosque in his birthplace, his advantaged upbringing enabled him to attend modern educational institutions in Lebanon and Palestine, before he joined the prestigious *Mekteb-i Mülkiye* in Istanbul in 1887. He later made it to Paris in 1894, and capped his educational pursuit in the *École libre des sciences politiques* the institutional “ancestor” of today’s *Sciences Po*; then in *Sorbonne*, where he accomplished his degrees in political science and in Islamic philosophy and Oriental literature consecutively. Since that time, he was actively involved in academic circles that put him in close touch with distinguished orientalist of the era, while he also initiated an extended writing career that went on until his premature death. His *Tārīkh ‘ilm al-adab* (1904)<sup>2</sup> is an exemplary piece of the Arab *Nahḍa* or Awakening literature. Rūḥī assumed the office of Consul General of the Ottoman State in Bordeaux for ten years (1898–1908), and soon after the proclamation of the Ottoman constitution, he returned to Jerusalem and was elected to be one of its representatives in the Ottoman Chamber of Deputies (*Meclis-i Mebusan*) twice in 1908 and 1912, and he became the Chamber’s deputy speaker. In 1913, following a typhoid infection, Rūḥī died in Istanbul at the age of 49 and was buried there.<sup>3</sup>

The present facsimile is extracted from unpublished fragmentary drafts, in which Rūḥī, apparently inspired by his recurrent sailing trips to the city, describes Istanbul.

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<sup>2</sup> Rūḥī al-Khālīdī, *History of the Science of Literature among Europeans and Arabs, and Victor Hugo* [Tārīkh ‘ilm al-adab ‘ind al-ifranj wa-l-‘arab wa-fiktūr Hükü], trans. Tarif Khalidi (2020), Khalidi Library Website, <https://www.khalidilibrary.org//public/files/server/1.3%20Ruh%20Tarikh%20%60ilm%20al-Adab%20Translation/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> For the most recent detailed sketch of his biography, works, and overall cultural profile in late Ottoman Palestine see Mariam Saeed El Ali, ed., introduction to *Muḥammad Rūḥī al-Khālīdī al-Maqdisī (1864–1913): Kutubuhu wa-maqālātuḥu wa-muntakhabāt min makhṭūṭātihi* [Muḥammad Rūḥī al-Khālīdī al-Maqdisī (1864–1913): Books, Articles, and Selected Manuscripts], 2 vols (Beirut and Jerusalem: IPS and Khalidi Library, 2021), 3–68. The appended bibliography of secondary sources on Rūḥī is particularly useful too, see *ibid.* 69–72. A classic introduction to his life and works in English is also Khairieh Kasmieh, “Rūḥī al-Khālīdī 1864–1913: A Symbol of the Cultural Movement in Palestine Towards the End of the Ottoman Rule,” in *The Syrian Land in the 18th and 19th Century*, edited by Thomas Philipp (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992), 123–146.

This definitely rings a bell with those acquainted with his writings, as he also penned his experiences of other places, such as his voyage to Andalusia, Spain and his lengthy visits to the National Library of Paris.<sup>4</sup> Featured in Rūḥī's private papers collection, these unfinished drafts are preserved in the Khalidi Library, Jerusalem under 'KHD\_Rwhi Kh\_Tr\_02'.<sup>5</sup> The manuscript of a total of 16 pages jointly encloses multiple drafts, each paginated separately, as following: 7–9 [pages 1–3], 5–10 (starting with 10 and decreasing backwards) [4–9], 4–8 (starting with 8) [10–14], 4 [15], and a final sheet with no pagination number [16].

Fragmentary though they are, the cultural importance of these descriptions lies in the fact that they record splendid personal real-time experience, not otherwise accessible to us today. How else could we —modern readers— acquire the information that Rūḥī embarked on this journey at least 14 times, and that his shortest travel duration [from Yafa Port] to Istanbul was 72 hours?<sup>6</sup>

Rūḥī's text presents a sweeping panoramic portrait of Istanbul that emphasizes the iconic buildings of the city and the surrounding fascinating green vistas. It is a piece that captures the sentiment of a loyal Ottoman subject, rather than a 'foreign' Arab traveler. One can feel his profound sense of belonging to the Empire when reading his comparison of the broader landscape of Constantinople [al-Qusṭantīniyya], capital of the Ottoman Empire, to Paris; when he notes that the former 'tops Paris and even every European capital in size and urban stretch' (*tafūq bārīs bal wa-jamī' al-'awāšim al-'ūrūbāwiyya fī al-masāḥa wa-l-imtidād*).<sup>7</sup> For a graduate of the *École libre des sciences politiques* who had resided in France for over fifteen years, Europe was no doubt an expected 'civilizational' reference and constitutional model, too. This short description

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<sup>4</sup> See Mariam El Ali, ed., 2/971–1036; 1069–1083.

<sup>5</sup> The Khālīdī family papers, including Rūḥī's, have been partially digitalized and catalogued. The papers feature court documents, official letters of appointment of family members, personal correspondences, and other writings. Selected papers are accessible on the Khalidi Library website, but the full collection may only be consulted at the Library in Jerusalem. The most recent introduction to the library's history and collections is Walid Khalidi, *The Khalidi Library in Jerusalem, 1720–2001* (Beirut: IPS, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> KHD\_Rwhi Kh\_Tr\_02, page 14.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, page 13.

of Istanbul likely dates back to before the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 which marked the restoration of *Mebusan*, formerly dismissed by Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1878.

The Ottoman Jerusalemite *effendi* yearns for ‘the old days when the Ottoman Nation had deputies and senates’ (*ayyam kān li-l-umma al-‘uthmāniyya nuwwāb wa-a’yān*), those who used to assemble in the serail of the Ministry of Justice near Aya Sophia, clearly referring to the first constitutional era (1876–1878).<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, as he mentions the inauguration of the Ottoman General Assembly (*Meclis-i Umumi*) in *Dolmabahçe* Palace which took place in 1877, while remarking that the famous serail ‘still hosts the ceremonies of allegiance and Eid salutation’,<sup>9</sup> one can again identify his aching for the more ‘democratic’ past of the Empire, combined with a longing for a change at his present moment. This is to be fully expounded in his enthusiastic *Asbāb al-inqilāb al-‘uthmānī* (1908)<sup>10</sup> where his bold Ottomanist persuasion is evidenced.

Rūḥī’s enchantment with Istanbul can be perceived as yet another facet of his staunch faith in the Ottoman “system”. It is in a garden of *Taksim* overlooking the Bosphorus where his friend Ibrāhīm Salīm Najjār sought in vain to convince him to leave the *İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (The Committee of Union and Progress, CUP), increasingly swayed by its Turkish national element. Their lengthy discussions ended at the point where Rūḥī proposed to the Arab deputies to form an independent group, not affiliated with any political party, which he then would be a part of, or that they all join CUP, as one sub-group, to influence its strategy from within, but the Arab deputies refused.<sup>11</sup>

Rūḥī’s unique political perspective thus proves to have been challenging to embrace from as early as his own days. A concise note, which mentions Rūḥī by name in

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., page 11.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., page 7 transcribed and translated below.

<sup>10</sup> Rūḥī al-Khālīdī, *The Ottoman Revolution and the Young Turks* [Asbāb al-inqilāb al-‘uthmānī wa-turkyā al-fatāt], trans. Tarif Khalidi (2020), Khalidi Library Website. <https://www.khalidilibrary.org/public/files/server/1.1%20Ruh%20Inqilab%20Translation/index.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibrāhīm Najjār, “Rūḥī Bik al-Khālīdī mab‘ūth al-quds al-sābiq: ḥayātuh, siyāsātuh, akhlāquh” [Rūḥī Bey al-Khālīdī the Ex-Deputy of Jerusalem: Life, Politics, and Morals], *al-Ahrām*, August 9, 1911.

an issue of the Beirut newspaper *al-Mufīd*, dating back to 1912, expresses as much. Co-edited and co-owned by none other than ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-‘Uraysī (1897–1916), the pioneering dynamo of the then emerging Arab nationalist movement, *al-Mufīd* does not hesitate to warn the people (*al-ahlūn*) of Syria of the CUP intrigue (*al-dasīsa al-ittihādiyya*) of sending Rūḥī to Syria on its behalf to propagate for the election of pro-CUP deputies under the pretext of supporting Arab nationalism (*taḥt ism al-qawmiyya al-‘arabiyya*).<sup>12</sup> Slowly but decisively, holding by the Ottoman national umbrella became more burdensome to maintain, just before the Ottoman Empire itself was on the verge of crumbling and leaving the former Arab subjects to their fate—times Rūḥī would never live to see.

## Transcription

*wa-kāna al-bābūru yataqaddamu binā ruwaydan ruwaydan naḥwa madīnati Ghalāṭa (Ġalāṭa) ma ‘Bik[-] ‘Ūghlī (Begoġlı) wa-hiya mabniyyatun ‘alā safḥi jabalin murtafi ‘in irtaṣafat dūruhā wa-quṣūruhā fawqa ba ‘dihā al-ba ‘di ṭabaqatan ta ‘lū ṭabaqatan min qimmatī al-jabali ilā sāḥili al-baḥri wa-irtafa ‘a[t] bayna tilka al-ṭabaqāti ma ‘ādhinu al-jawāmi ‘i wa-ashjāru al-sarwi wa-fī dhurwati al-jabali sarāyātu al-sufarā ‘i al-ajnabiyyati wa-manāratu al-Ghalāṭa (Ġalāṭa) wa-fī asfalīhi al-ṭūbkhāna (Ṭobḥāne) wa-hiyā sarāya wa-ma ‘malun kabīrun li-l-madāfi ‘i wa-ālāti al-ḥarbi wa-l-madīnatu tastaṭīlu li-dākhili al-būsfūri wa-tattaṣilu bi-Qabā[-]ṭāsh (Kabaṭaş) wa-Bishk[-]ṭāsh (Beşiktaş) wa-fīhi sarāya Bishk[-]ṭāsh (Beşiktaş) allatī hiya akbaru sarāyāti al-Asitāna wa-atqanuhā ṣun ‘an wa-aḥsanuhā manẓaran amara bi-binā[‘i]hā al-sultānu ‘alā sāḥili al-baḥri fī madkhali al-būsfūri mina al-rukhāmi al-abyaḍi wa-iftutiḥa bihā al-majlisu al-‘umūmiyyu al-‘uthmāniyyu wa-lam yazal yajrī fīhā rasmu al-bay‘ati wa-l-mu‘āyadati wa-bi-jānibihā wa-amāmahā sarāyātun ukharun laṭīfatu al-manẓari ka ‘annahā mabniyyatun ‘alā wajhi al-baḥri wa-bi-jānibihā dūrun faqīratun ḥaqīratun wa-akwākhun wa-‘arāyishu ka ‘annahā qāmat bi-janbi al-uwali li-tuzhira baḥjatahā wa-ubbahatahā wa-yatakhallalu*

<sup>12</sup> *Al-Mufīd*, 5, 9, 1912, page 2, East View Global Press Archive (GPA), <https://gpa.eastview.com/crl/mena/newspapers/amufiq120905-01.1.2> (Last Accessed: 11 07 2023).

*jamī`a dhālika al-rayāhīnu wa-l-ashjāru al-kabīratu wa-l-ma`ādhinu wa-l-quşūru al-mukhtalifatu al-alwāni al-rafi`atu al-bunyāni.*

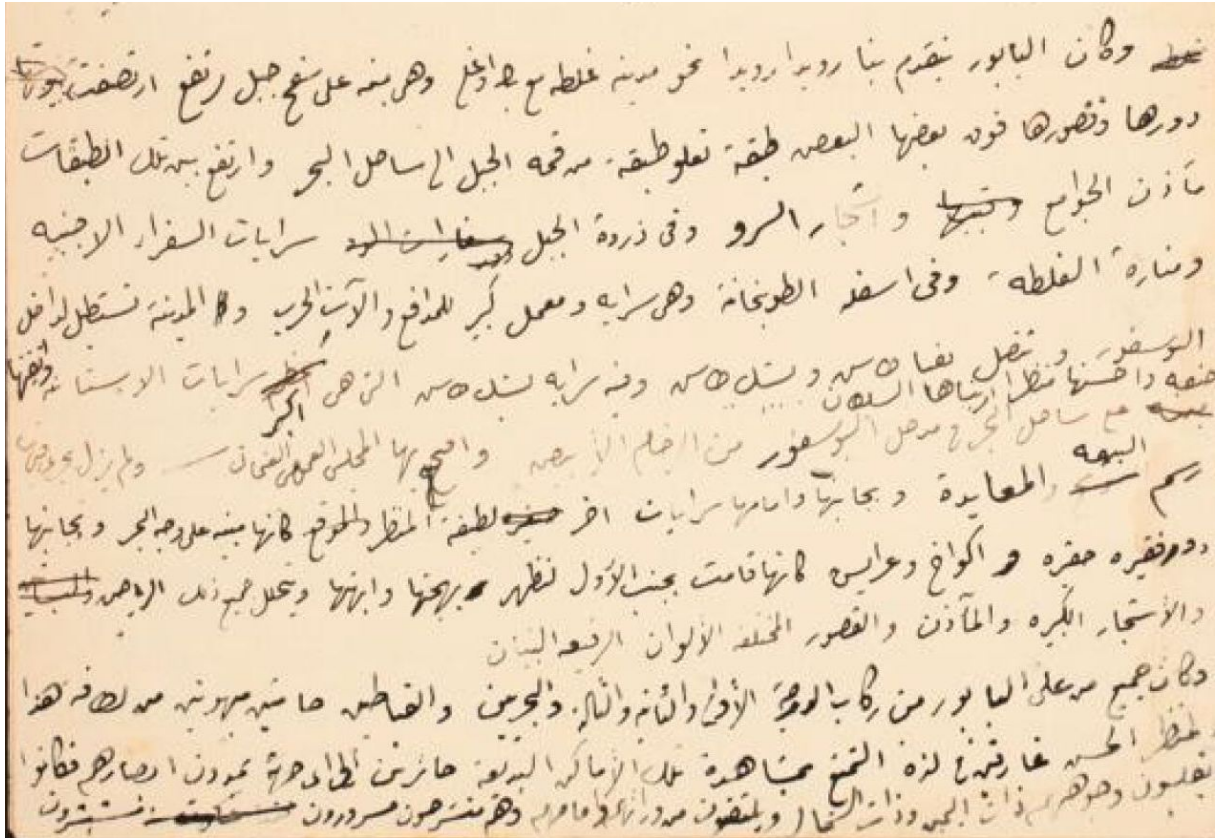
*wa-kāna jamī`u man `alā al-bābūri min rukkābi al-darajati al-ūlā wa-l-thāniyati wa-l-thālithati wa-l-bahriyyīna wa-l-qabāṭīni şāmitīna mabhūtīna min laṭāfati hādhā al-manẓari al-ḥasani ghāriqīna fī ladhdhati al-tamattu`i bi-mushāhadati tilka al-amākini al-badī`ati ḥā`irīna ilā ayyi jihatin yamuddūna abşārahum fa-kānū yuqallibūna wujūhahum dhāta al-yamīni wa-dhāta al-shimāli wa-yaltafitūna min warā`ihim wa-amāmahum wa-hum munshariḥūna masrūrūna mustabshirūna.*

## Translation

The ship was steadily propelling us towards Galata and Beyoğlu, erected at the slope of a lofty mountain, its residences and castles piled up on top of each other layer upon layer from the summit of the mountain to the shoreline of the sea; mosque minarets and cypress trees reigned between the layers. Atop the mountain are situated the palaces of foreign ambassadors and the Galata tower, and to its foot lies the *Tophane*, a serail and grand factory for cannons and war apparatus. The city stretches into the Bosphorus where it joins Kabataş and Beşiktaş, home of Beşiktaş Serail [*Dolmabahçe Palace*], Istanbul's greatest, most finest, and loveliest palace, made of white marble at the behest of the Sultan by the sea on the Bosphorus opening where the Ottoman General Assembly (*Meclis-i Umumi*) was inaugurated [in 1877], and it still hosts the ceremonies of allegiance and Eid salutation. Other regal palaces stand close by, seeming to emerge from the sea, adjoined by modest and destitute dwellings, cabins, and cottages as if the latter were built to flaunt the extravagance of the adjacent palaces. Everything was permeated with blossoms, towering trees, mosque minarets, and elegant castles of variegated shades.

Everyone on board including passengers in first, second, and third class, sailors, and captains were just hushed by the breathtaking view, immersed in the pleasure of beholding the views of these magnificent places, at a loss as to where to look, swiveling their heads right and left, glancing both backwards and forwards, while evidently joyous, delighted, and blissful.

## Facsimile



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