

**A historical novel by Mr. "Al-Arabi Yazid" one of
the descendants of the Moriscos in Al-Andalus
Written by Professor : Monzer Mohammed Al-Hayek**

رواية تاريخية للسيد "العربي يزيد" أحد أحفاد الموريسكيين بالأندلس
بقلم الأستاذ الدكتور منذر محمد الحايك

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Abstract: Facts that oscillate between literature and history, where truth, in its strangeness, rises to the level of fiction. It tells the story of the author's encounter with one of the descendants of the Moriscos, who preserved their Andalusian identity in Spain for centuries. Even stranger, their nostalgia for their roots and their sense of connection to them remained undiminished by the Inquisition or the passage of time

Keywords: Levant. Homs. Andalusia. Seville. Moriscos.

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- **Monzer M. Al-Hayek:** A Syrian researcher, PhD in Islamic History. A university professor, with many published research papers, and many participations in international conferences. He has published many books, both authored and researched, on various aspects of history. Then he became interested in studying comparative religion, and was one of the first Arab writers to write in this field, and published many books in this field, including: a series of sacred books, a series of starting points for religious thought, and a series of sacred texts.

- **Yazid:** An Arab-Spanish "Morisco" descended from Andalusian Arabs. His family preserved, as much as possible, its Arab-Islamic heritage, while apparently integrating into Spanish Christian society.

I had a dream that kept recurring until it became part of my obsessions and daily daydreams. I saw myself wandering in alleys that narrowed and widened, with old yet beautiful houses, jasmine, and rose bushes spilling onto the road from their gardens. For a while, I thought it might be my city, Homs, whose popular neighbourhoods I used to wander through constantly, as if performing a holy pilgrimage in the presence of history. I would examine the black basalt stones of its buildings that glowed under the sun with a special brilliance, and I would count its ancient doors, each of which represented the address of the house it enclosed. This was my pleasure, and it brought me together with a friend who wanted to get lost with me in those twisting alleys.

We always ended our tour with a meal, so we would stand in front of Abu Hourî's oven at the end of the "Hashish Market." I don't think there is a scent in the world that matches the scent of fresh bread for the hungry. We would quickly eat two rosy loaves that we could barely carry and then turn west to the shop of "Al-Saffy," the most famous sweet seller in Homs. The smell of his sweets as he kneaded and polished them was overwhelming. He would place a large piece of Halawa Tahiniya for us to wrap in the loaf, and we would start to nibble before we even left the place, mixing the taste with the aroma.

But later, I dismissed the possibility that Homs was the city of my dreams and thought that it might have been Damascus, where I lived for an important part of my life. Although I did not live in its old neighbourhoods, I was fascinated by them. Its alleys were longer than those of Homs, and the white stone of its floors gave an impression of openness and joy. I continued to explore them, often accompanied by a friend familiar with the area. Our journey would begin at Bab Touma, towards "Hammam al-Bakri," and from there into the alleys of "al-Qaymariyah" towards the Umayyad Mosque.

On our way was the "Abu Sayyah" oven, one of the most famous in old Damascus, though it did not make regular bread. It specialized in making cakes and a type of bread called "ma'arook," decorated with sesame and black seeds. Even if you did not know this oven, the fragrant smell of its pastries would guide you to it from afar. We would get a loaf of "ma'arook" and carry it, as it only tasted good with tea. We would head west towards the al-Nawfara neighbourhood, which is dominated by the door of the Umayyad Mosque, "Giroun," and in its long courtyard surrounded by cafés, we would choose a shaded spot. Sitting on a simple wooden chair, with a small metal table in front of us that could barely hold a few cups of tea—the common drink there—we would start eating a bite of bread with each sip from a small crystal cup of tea that had a special shape and taste associated only with that place.

The dream kept repeating, and I remained confused. Over time, I stopped trying to identify the place of the dream, until fate led me on a tourist trip to Spain, where I found myself in the heart of the dream while fully awake. As for how the trip was arranged, coincidences played a big role in making it happen.

We visited several Spanish cities before heading to the Andalusia region, where our first stop was the city of Seville, or Homs as the Arabs of Andalusia called it. On tourist trips, there is usually time for free roaming and shopping for gifts and souvenirs. As soon as I began my tour around old Seville, the dream that had kept me awake for so long unfolded before my

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eyes. Yes, this is the city of dreams—these are the streets, these are the houses, and these are the flowers unlike any others.

As part of my dream was to wander aimlessly, I roamed its streets and enjoyed the beauty and harmony of its features, examining it like a poet scrutinizing his orphaned poem, comparing it to what I had seen in my dream. I walked through clean, paved alleys where the doors of most houses were open, allowing anyone to take a quick look inside. Many elderly women sat near the entrances, knitting and embroidering fabrics, some of which they displayed for sale. I was walking, captivated by the beauty of this old neighbourhood and the scent of jasmine that wafted through it. Sometimes I would get lost: Was I in my usual dream or awake? Nothing compares to walking in a place you have known in your dreams and lived in for many nights.

Suddenly, I found myself next to a high stone wall that stretched so far I could not see its end. I walked along it, wondering why it had no features, until I found a small door made of armoured wood that almost blended into the wall, their dark, aged colours being the same. When I stood in front of the strange door, I saw that it was slightly ajar. Curiosity urged me to open it and take a look, but fear of the unknown held me back. After hesitating, I moved the door gently, and darkness crept into my soul, making me almost retreat. But a voice, swaying as if reciting or chanting, drew me inside.

When my eyes, accustomed to sunlight, adjusted, I distinguished a dim light in a very spacious hall, and the voice continued to tremble, giving me more reassurance. I was at the back of the hall, whose width was limited only by a wooden façade decorated with brightly coloured pictures and shapes, so I realised I was in a church. The wooden pews and icons adorning the walls confirmed it. In front of the façade stood a dignified-looking priest, delivering a sermon to a simple audience, most of whom were elderly.

Although my entrance was quiet, so none of the worshippers turned towards me, the priest's stare was unsettling. Oh my God! Had I made a mistake by entering? I

thought to myself. This was not the first time I had entered a church as a Muslim. I had visited more churches than mosques. I had many Christian friends, and their occasions, both joyful and sad, often took place in churches. Also, as a history student, I had many relationships with Christian priests, with whom I shared cultural connections, friendships, and camaraderie.

I was thinking, and my gaze never left the priest, who perhaps sensed my fear and hesitation and looked away. I realised I was torn: should I leave or continue inside? But the smell of incense seemed to pull me in, so I took a few steps and sat in the nearest seat, convinced that leaving would be inappropriate. The prayer or mass—I wasn't sure—seemed to be near its end.

Indeed, the prayer did not last long, and the attendees began to move to leave. I don't know why I didn't leave quickly; I was gathering my strength to slip in with those leaving. I looked towards the door to make sure the way back was clear and that no one was heading towards it. I was about to get up, but I found myself rooted to the seat as the priest, with all his pomp and elegance in his priestly clothes, advanced towards me, holding the book he had been reading in one hand and placing the other on his chest.

Oh God, all my fears have come true. I am in a strange country whose language I do not know, and I do not know anyone here. This priest is certainly influential in his country. Does he consider me an aggressor against his church? Does he see me as an intruder? I will tell him that, yes, I am a Muslim, but I believe in all religions.

I was awakened from my reverie, which lasted a few seconds, as the priest approached my seat. I could make out his facial features despite the dim light. His features were so relaxed that one could only expect kindness from him. What increased my reassurance and prevented me from making the foolish mistake of running away was the small smile that appeared on his face. I decided to surrender and relax my alert body on the seat, waiting to see what would happen.

The priest stopped directly in front of me, still looking at me. He put his hand on the back of the seat in front of me,

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leaned towards me with his tall body—suitable for a medieval knight—and began to speak in a beautiful, calm, but incomprehensible voice. After saying several words, he realised that I was looking at him stupidly and did not understand his language. My appearance, which was similar to the Spanish, had deceived him at first; no one could distinguish us by appearance alone. He then added in very clear English:

“Are you a stranger?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

“How long have you been sitting here?” he asked.

“Just now, I just came in,” I said.

“Just came in? How so? I didn't see you come in,” he said.

I thought to myself: It's natural that he didn't see me; I entered from a dark area, and he was busy with his mass. I pointed to the door and said, “I came in from there.” The priest looked at me with an incomprehensible bewilderment as he examined me and glanced towards the door. Then he got over whatever was occupying his mind and said:

“Anyway... Where are you from?”

“I'm Arab,” I replied.

“Moro?” he asked.

Oh my God, Moro! Am I a Moro? I couldn't pinpoint exactly what he meant by this word. “Moro” originates from “Morocco,” referring to the Arabs of North Africa who had more contact with southwestern Europe. But here in Spain, the word “Moro” has another connotation, referring to the Moroccan soldiers who fought with General Franco, helping him secure his victory over the popular revolution. The Spanish do not have fond memories of them. I quickly answered in a decisive voice:

“No, sir.”

“Where are you from then?” he asked.

“I am from Syria,” I said.

Suddenly, his hand left the back of the seat and grasped my forearm near the elbow. He brought his face close to mine and said in a voice that seemed to come from the depths of his being:

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"Sham."

"Yes, Sham," I replied.

The priest looked around, then pulled me by the hand that he had not let go of and said:

"Come with me."

I got up like someone sleepwalking and walked beside him through the aisle between the seats. I was trying to lag behind to let him lead or be respectful, but the way he held my arm made it feel as if we were walking side by side like best friends. I expected him to stop at the wooden facade or behind it, but he continued walking and began climbing a small, old wooden staircase, still holding me. I didn't know, as we climbed, whether he was leaning on me or I was leaning on him. The staircase barely allowed us to move as we stood side by side in rhythm, and the wood creaked in harmony with our steps, increasing my fear and suspicion.

At the top of the stairs was a small room with a large window overlooking the church hall. It appeared to be the priest's office, containing simple furniture: a table with a chair behind it and two chairs in front. The priest led me to one of the chairs, then leaned behind the table and pulled out an old mosaic box from a drawer. He opened it with difficulty and extended it to me. There were a few dates inside. I took one and thanked him. He placed the box on the table and sat in the chair opposite me, his gaze never leaving me. I sat in anticipation, waiting for him to speak. What did he want? What would he say? I imagined many things, but what he was about to reveal was beyond anything I could have anticipated.

After waiting until my nerves were on edge, he finally spoke, saying something that made me tremble and sent my thoughts into a whirlwind of imagination, taking me back hundreds of years. He said: "You are from Sham, and I am from Sham."

At first, I did not grasp what he meant. I thought Sham could be the name of a town or village in Spain, or perhaps he was Lebanese and had been assigned here by his church. When he saw the confusion on my face, he continued:

"Yes, I am of Arab origin from Sham."

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My confusion, mixed with astonishment, had reached its peak. I looked between his wheatish features and the golden cross on his chest. He could see my bewilderment, so he continued, saying:

"It is a long story. Anyway, tell me about the situation in Sham, about life in Sham, and the people of Sham. Do any of them still remember Andalusia?"

I said, "Do you really not know that Andalusia still runs in the blood of the people of the Levant? We memorise its poetry and sing it; we teach its history at all levels of education. I have colleagues who specialise in the history of Andalusia. Personally, I am fascinated by its civilisation and believe that Europe's loss was greater than its gain in seizing it. The Spaniards, throughout their history, did not produce an encyclopaedic scholar like Ibn Hazm, nor a philosopher like Ibn Rushd, nor a physician like Al-Zahrawi, among many others. But for God's sake, explain to me: how can you be from the Levant while you are a Spanish priest?"

He replied, "The truth of the matter, my friend, is that we are an Arab Umayyad family who brought Andalusia during the time of the Umayyad Caliphate, and this is what is passed down among us in a non-public manner that fathers hand down to their sons. This secret was dangerous in the past, to the point that it could have led to our downfall, but today it is no longer so important. My last grandfather, who lived during the Arabisation of Seville, was the imam and preacher of this church when it was a mosque. He was the messenger of Seville when Ferdinand, King of Castile, besieged it on behalf of the Hafsid state in Tunisia, after the hope of rescue from the Almohad state in Morocco had been lost. His journey was long, arduous, and the results were uncertain, but it was the last hope after the failure of the Andalusian kingdoms and emirates, which were fearful for themselves and their inevitable fate. In fact, the forces of the Banu Nasr, the kings of Granada, participated and supported the Spanish forces in the siege of Seville.

In the absence of my Arab grandfather on his mission, the unexpected happened. The fortified castle that protected the

entrance to the city, which was supposed to hold out for years, fell. The siege tightened, and the city was strangled even on the banks of its river, the Guadalquivir. The ruler of Seville offered to surrender on the condition that the residents evacuate with all their possessions. Fernando agreed, granting him a month's grace period. This month was not enough for my Arab grandfather to return from Africa to arrange for his family to leave the city and liquidate its vast possessions, as he was unable to return until after the period had expired. He sought to meet King Fernando, whom he knew from several embassies he had sent to him. My grandfather requested the king to exempt him from the condition of the grace period and allow him to leave with his family. However, the king, needing him as an expert in the affairs of the remaining Arab kingdoms and in his correspondence with the kings, as well as his mastery of the Spanish language, had a different opinion. He explained to my grandfather the humiliation and displacement that had befallen the elite of his people after the migration, and offered him the option to stay in his home and possessions. If he accepted converting to Christianity, he would retain his religious position and become the Bishop of Seville, one of the courtiers close to him. After much thought and pressure from Fernando, my Arab grandfather agreed and chose Christianity over the humiliation of emigration and homelessness, out of compassion for his women and children.

The priest was speaking, and I was almost astonished, wondering if this was true or if he was testing me. Perhaps he noticed my confusion and continued saying: "This is not only our situation, but perhaps it is the situation of many in Spain today, though few of them are aware of their origins and preserve the memory of their Arabism as we do. Perhaps we are unique in many aspects, including our names, as my name within the family is Yazid, but in the church, it is 'Isadore', in reference to the famous Saint Isidore of Seville, and my father's name was Jalal al-Din, but in the church, it was 'Gelacio'."

Immediately, my thoughts turned to another aspect, so I asked the pressing question I did not know how to articulate: "You have preserved the appearance of your Arabism, but what

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about your Islam? Did it disappear while you were a Christian bishop? Or do you still have something of it?"

Yazid, or "Isdor," smiled widely and looked at me carefully and with interest. "Are you serious about this question?" Had he not said it kindly and affectionately, I would have thought I had accused him of abandoning Islam, and I began to stammer, trying to justify myself. But he quickly continued: "My brother from the Levant, religion, any religion, in our understanding—the understanding of Andalusia—is a tool for communicating with God. This God is the same in all religions. He is the one whom all people worship, and the one whom all people supplicate to, but each of them names Him according to their own language and addresses Him in their own style. As long as God is one, the rest is details, and as you know, the devil lies in the details. My Arab grandfather used to preach and pray here, and I hold mass and pray here. Our direction and glorification were purely for the one God, here and there, so what was different? Is God specific to a people alone? Does God not accept worship except in a specific language? You insult God if you think so. If we are sincere in intention and pure in soul, then we are all followers of one God, and our worship of Him, no matter how different it is, is one to Him."

I said, while covering my stutter and regret for my question, "What you say is absolutely true. I was proud to meet the descendant of the Arabs of Andalusia, but now I am proud to be in the presence of the descendant of humanity, who has realised the true meaning of religions and their one goal."

Meanwhile, voices began to echo from inside the church, as if there were preparations for a new mass. I realised I had to be polite and leave, so I stood up and said to him, "I was happy to meet you and your broad-mindedness; you gave me the most beautiful moments of my journey and indescribable happiness. Now I hope you will allow me to leave."

He replied, "I am the one who was happy to meet you, and before you leave, I hope you will allow me to embrace Damascus in you."

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He embraced me with the strength of his longing for Damascus, and the scent of incense intoxicated me in his priestly robe. I almost fainted; I do not know whether it was from the intensity of the incense's scent, from the wonders of what I had heard, or from the influence of this character, whom I did not expect to encounter even in dreams. Perhaps all of that converged, but what captured all my senses was a tear that fell between us as we distanced ourselves. In the state of ecstasy I was in, I did not know whether it fell from me or from him. I do not know why it occurred to me at that moment that it was the tear of Prince Abu Abdullah the Younger, which legend says he shed when Granada, the last Arab city in Andalusia, fell.

I left the office room and tried to say goodbye to him, but he insisted on accompanying me. When I reached the large hall, I shook his hand in farewell and headed towards the door through which I had entered, but Bishop Yazid stopped me and said, "Where are you going?"

I replied, "To the door where I entered."

He smiled and said, "There is no door here."

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With the insistence of the confident, I walked towards the door I had entered through, and Yazid walked with me. But there was no door! I looked closely and searched, but there was no door. I felt the stone wall in confusion and astonishment, but there was no door. Yazid smiled and asked me to accompany him towards a large door of the church in the other direction. He seemed to be reciting one of his secret prayers when he whispered to me, "My Syrian friend, only our family knows that in the past there was a small door here. The emir of the town opened it in honour of the old age of one of my Arab ancestors, who was the imam of the mosque. His house was on this side, so it was difficult for him to walk to the large door on the other side. But after the Spanish entered and turned the mosque into a church, the door was closed and the wall returned to how it was."