

HAJJ AMIN AL-HUSAYNI: ARAB NATIONALIST AND MUSLIM LEADER

Amin al-Husayni was born in Jerusalem during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Male members of his family had held the post of Mufti of Jerusalem since the end of the eighteenth century. This position authorized the incumbent to issue non-binding legal opinions (*fatwa*) based on Islamic law (*shari'a*), custom, and precedent.

In 1918, al-Husayni became president of the newly organized Arab Club (*al-Nadi al-'Arabi*), which advocated Arab unity, a union of Palestine and Syria, and an end to Jewish immigration into Palestine. He organized demonstrations in the winter of 1920 to denounce the 1917 Balfour Declaration (announcing British intention to permit the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine), to demand independence for Palestine, and to promote union with Syria. On April 4, 1920, the day of the *al-Nabi Musa* festival, Arab civilians initiated violent riots in the Jewish quarter of Jerusalem after listening to a number of speeches, including one given by al-Husayni, in which he called for the incorporation of Palestine into Syria. Four days of rioting and plunder left five Jews and four Arabs dead and 211 Jews and 33 Arabs wounded. Fearing arrest, al-Husayni fled to Syria. In late April, a British military tribunal convicted him in absentia for incitement to revolt and sentenced him to 10 years imprisonment. Al-Husayni was pardoned and returned to Jerusalem in autumn 1920.

Al-Husayni as Mufti of Jerusalem

Following his brother's death, Amin al-Husayni became Mufti of Jerusalem on May 8, 1921. This position carried overarching religious and moral authority throughout Palestine. On January 9, 1922, al-Husayni became president of the newly established Supreme Muslim Council (*al-Majlis al-Islami al-A'ala*), a position that controlled the *shari'a* courts, approved the content of education for religious schools and orphanages, and supervised religious financial advisory boards and the use of funds (*waqf*) for maintenance and renovation of religious sites and institutions, and for assistance to the poor. Control over these funds enhanced his authority within Palestine and among leaders of other Arab states.

The British Mandate authorities supported al-Husayni because they accepted his assurances that he desired to work with the British and that only he had the

nationalist credentials and family connections to keep Palestine at peace. They also miscalculated that their support for al-Husayni as the leader of the Muslim community would help Arab leaders accept a future Jewish homeland in Palestine. Al-Husayni understood that legitimization from the British authorities created the basis for his power and influence in Palestine and required that he maintain peace in Palestine, particularly in Jerusalem. To hold the allegiance of Palestinian Arabs against rival leaders, however, al-Husayni had to advocate for real and perceived Arab and Muslim interests, which included the demand for independence in Palestine and opposition to the establishment of a Jewish homeland there. In his speeches, writings, and actions, al-Husayni encouraged, or-at a minimum-anticipated violence against Jewish civilians and British officials. Regardless of whether he incited it, at times he benefited politically from the violence. If the mayhem slipped out of his control, however, the British authorities would withdraw their support, which was the basis of his political power. Whenever it served his political interests he discouraged violence and urged cooperation with the British authorities.

In August 1929, anti-Jewish violence again erupted in Palestine. On August 23, Arab crowds marched into the orthodox Jewish quarter of Jerusalem and initiated a wave of violence over access for Jews to the Western Wall, or Wailing Wall, in Jerusalem that degenerated into regional violence that left 133 Jews and 116 Arabs dead, and 339 Jews and 232 Arabs injured. Al-Husayni cultivated the perception that the demand of the Jews for free access to the wall (the holiest place for Jews) had threatened the very existence of the *al-Aqsa* and Dome of the Rock shrines (one of the holiest sites in Islam). He thus had exacerbated religious tension, infused the secular issues of Jewish immigration and land purchases with religious fervor, internationalized the political dispute by equating the Jewish presence in Palestine with an existential threat to the Muslim faith, and enhanced his own political position among the Palestinian Arab leaders. That al-Husayni explicitly encouraged or incited the violence is not documented; yet he did not do much to prevent it. After the riots, he presented himself as a preeminent defender of Islam and of Muslim rights in Palestine. He also admonished his radical followers that a violent confrontation with the British would not be in the interest of the Palestinians.

During the early 1930s, Al-Husayni developed and used his international renown and prestige to advocate more autonomy for Arab Palestine and more unity among the Arab states, and to vigorously oppose Jewish immigration into Palestine. Among the many groups in the Middle East with which al-Husayni established contact, was the Society of Muslim Brothers (Muslim Brotherhood), a fundamentalist Pan-Islamic group founded in Egypt. In August 1935, the Society dispatched two of its leaders on an official mission to Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. In Palestine, they met with al-Husayni, who welcomed their support, and later provided them with an introduction to the leader of the Syrian-based Islamic Guidance Association.

Tension and Violence over Jewish Immigration to Palestine

The Nazi assumption of power in 1933 triggered a massive refugee crisis as German Jews sought to find safe haven from persecution. Between 1933 and 1936, more Jews emigrated from Germany to Palestine than to anywhere else in the world. Around 154,300 Jews (including 34,700 from Germany) had entered Palestine legally and thousands more illegally, increasing the percentage of Jews in the Palestinian population from nearly 17 percent in 1931 to almost 30 percent in 1935. In the spring of 1936, tension over Jewish immigration and land purchases and the failure to establish a Palestinian governing body erupted into prolonged violence, often referred to as the Arab Revolt. When the Mandate government declared a state of emergency in response to a riot that left nine Jews dead and 57 wounded, Arab nationalist leaders formed a national committee for independence and called for a general strike. Al-Husayni, who had the most to lose from a break with the British, was initially non-committal, but then decided to assume the presidency of a newly established Arab Higher Committee. On April 25, the committee demanded that the British halt Jewish immigration to Palestine, ban the transfer of Arab lands to Jews, and establish an Arab national government. Despite al-Husayni's assurances to the British High Commissioner, the strike degenerated into violence in mid-May. By October, the violence had left 306 dead and 1,322 injured. 277 persons killed were civilians: 187 Muslims, 80 Jews, and 10 Christians. Intimidated by British military reinforcement and sobered by the extent of economic damage to Arab

businesses, the Arab Higher Committee negotiated an end to the general strike on October 12, 1936. Declaring that the "Arab nation" would "not agree...to the establishment of a National Home for the Jews in this Moslem Arab Holy Land," al-Husayni also assured the British that he was "actuated by keen and distinct desire to follow lawful means in asserting the nation's rights."

The British authorities sent the Peel Commission to Palestine to investigate and propose a political settlement. Al-Husayni's testimony before the commission implied that the safety of the Jews residing in an independent Palestine could not be guaranteed. In a statement dated January 6, 1937, the Arab Higher Committee demanded that the Mandate be dissolved and that Palestine be allowed to govern itself. When the commission report recommended partition on July 7, 1937, radicals escalated a new wave of violence. In a new statement under al-Husayni's signature, the Arab Higher Committee demanded a halt to Jewish immigration and land purchases and the establishment of a national democratic government in Palestine and promised to protect the "legitimate rights" of Jews.

On July 17, 1937, al-Husayni fled to the sanctuary of the Dome of the Rock to avoid arrest by the British authorities, who suspected him of subversion because of his efforts to seek financial and diplomatic assistance from sources in Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. As the widening insurrection spiraled out of al-Husayni's control, the Arab Higher Committee appealed one last time to the radicals for self-restraint on August 31. After insurgents murdered the District Commissioner for the Galilee on September 26, the British dissolved the Arab Higher Committee and arrested its members. They stripped al-Husayni of his positions of Mufti, President of the Supreme Muslim Council, and Administrator of the *waqf*. In mid-October 1937, al-Husayni, now fully committed to violent rebellion, fled to Lebanon. The British crushed the Arab Revolt in the autumn of 1938. The violence left 206 Jewish civilians, 454 Arab civilians, and 175 Mandate authority employees dead. In addition, British troops killed 1,138 armed Arab insurgents.

The British never unequivocally linked al-Husayni with the insurgency in 1936-1937. There can be little doubt, however, that the Mufti maintained contacts with the radicals, whom he clandestinely encouraged when he thought it opportune. He also tried to reduce the violence when it threatened his influence in

Palestine. After hosting futile negotiations between Arab and Jewish leaders in Palestine during the winter of 1939, the British government issued the White Paper of May 1939. It restricted Jewish immigration to 75,000 over the next five years before cutting it off entirely—thereby guaranteeing a two-thirds Arab majority in the country. It also restricted the transfer of land, and promised the creation of a Palestinian state within 10 years. Although the White Paper tilted the British government significantly towards the Arab position, Arab leaders, including al-Husayni from his exile in Lebanon, rejected it.

Al-Husayni's Early Contacts with Germany and Italy

As Mufti of Jerusalem, al-Husayni sought assistance from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany beginning in 1933. Nazi Germany's anti-Jewish radicalism and hostility to the western democracies (Britain and France) led the Mufti to perceive Germany to be a natural ally of Arab causes in Palestine. Al-Husayni approached German Foreign Office officials as early as 1933. By late 1938, he also had contacts with the German Armed Forces High Command (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht-OKW*) Military Intelligence Service (*Amt Auslands/Abwehr*, or *Abwehr*). Al-Husayni miscalculated, however, the level of German interest in the Arab world. Until the end of 1938, the Germans, who wished to maintain friendly relations with Great Britain, refused to support Arab independence or to provide material assistance to the insurgents. Arab insurgents received funds and weapons from Fascist Italy and from other Arab states at least as early as 1936.

Al-Husayni in Exile in Lebanon and Iraq

After World War II began, increased French surveillance in Lebanon forced al-Husayni to move to Iraq, which was nominally independent, but fell under British influence after France fell in June 1940. In Iraq, al-Husayni reportedly received funding from both the Allies and the Axis, as well as from the Iraqi government. Based in Baghdad, he established contact with the prominent Iraqi politician Rashid 'Ali al-Kailani and several pro-Axis officers in the Iraqi army. On April 1, 1941, they overthrew the pro-British Iraqi regime and formed a government with al-Kailani as Prime Minister and al-Husayni as the key contact to Germany and Italy. When the al-Kailani regime refused to permit transit rights through Iraq to

British troops from India, the British invaded Iraq. As British troops approached Baghdad, al-Kailani and al-Husayni, who had failed to secure significant Axis assistance, fled to Iran on May 29. That autumn, Italian authorities smuggled al-Husayni from Iran to Italy. He arrived in Rome on October 11, 1941.

While in Iraq, al-Husayni had sought a public declaration of support from the Axis nations for: 1) Arab independence from British and French rule; 2) the freedom for the independent Arab nations to unite in some form; 3) and for the elimination of the proposed Jewish homeland in Palestine. He also sought military and financial assistance for an Arab uprising that he promised he could unleash, though only in conjunction with the Axis declaration. The Germans engaged in a serious internal debate on these issues in early 1939. By the spring of 1941, they were prepared to provide assistance but remained wary of proposals for Arab independence. The Germans did not wish to antagonize the Italians, who considered North Africa and parts of the Levant (Lebanon and Syria) as within their sphere of influence. Nor did they wish to induce Vichy French colonial administrators to answer the call of General Charles de Gaulle's Free French movement. Despite al-Husayni's direct appeal to Hitler in the winter of 1941, the Germans did not issue the statement he requested.

In the spring of 1941, the German Foreign Office did approve use of al-Husayni's network for sabotage operations, and authorized the Abwehr to provide funding. If the Arabs were to rise against Britain, the Germans would provide direct military aid. The Germans were also prepared to send al-Husayni funds for his own maintenance. In response to desperate requests for military and financial assistance as British troops moved on Baghdad, the German Foreign Office supplied al-Husayni with the first major cash payments, for which he was supposed to "carry out a large operation in Palestine in the near future." On May 9, al-Husayni issued a *fatwa* on Baghdad radio, urging all Muslims to support Iraq in a Holy War against England. The British occupied Baghdad on June 2, 1941. Before the arrival of British troops, Iraqi civilians mounted a pogrom, known as the *Farhud*, against the Jewish population of Baghdad on June 1-2, 1941, that claimed the lives of 128 Jews and the destruction of almost 1,500 businesses and homes. Although al-Husayni later blamed the Jews for the defeat in Iraq, a connection linking his words or actions to the *Farhud* cannot be confirmed in available documentation. No uprising ever materialized in Palestine.

Critical Thinking Questions

What responsibilities do religious leaders have to their followers?

What responsibilities do religious leaders have to the nation in which they reside?

How can conflicts between religious leaders and secular leaders be resolved?