

# **HAJJ AMIN AL-HUSAYNI: WARTIME PROPAGANDIST**

# Collaboration with the Axis

During the war, the Nazi regime found many willing collaborators throughout the world who sought to advance their own political goals and extend Axis influence. A host of exiled political leaders—such as Indian nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose, Syrian guerilla rebel Fawzi al-Qawuqji, former Iraqi prime minister Rashid 'Ali al-Kailani, and former Mufti of Jerusalem Hajj Amin al-Husayni (Arab nationalist and prominent Muslim religious leader)—escaped to Berlin, where they broadcast appeals to their home countries in order to foment unrest, sabotage, and insurrection against the Allies. In exile in Europe from 1941 to 1945, al-Husayni's status was that of a prominent individual anti-Jewish Arab and Muslim leader.

Without any institutional basis for authority over Arabs anywhere in the Middle East, al-Husayni sought public recognition from the Axis powers of his status as leader of a proposed Arab nation. He also sought public approval from the Axis powers for an independent Arab state or federation to "remove" or "eliminate" the proposed Jewish homeland in Palestine. He made this declaration a condition for the awaited general uprising in the Arab world. The Germans, and Hitler in particular, repeatedly denied al-Husayni's request for legitimization. They were reluctant to initiate unnecessary disputes with Italy or Vichy France, harbored doubts about the extent of al-Husayni's actual authority in the Arab world, and had reservations about making long-term statements regarding areas of the world beyond the reach of German arms. When he received al-Husayni on November 28, 1941, a meeting covered in the German press, Hitler was sympathetic, but declined to give al-Husayni the public declaration of support that he sought. Despite Hitler's response, al-Husayni still collaborated with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in several ways. He broadcast anti-Allied and anti-Jewish propaganda by radio to the Arab world and to Muslim communities under German control or influence. He sought to inspire and to indoctrinate Muslim men to serve in Axis military and auxiliary units. Even after he realized that the Germans would not give him what he sought and intended to use his Muslim recruits without regard to his advice, al-Husayni continued to work with both Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany until 1945. The Germans provided shelter and funds to al-Husayni and used him wherever it seemed productive, but they

refused to make any commitments about the future of the Arab world, or about his position in that world. The Germans set up al-Husayni comfortably, even lavishly. He used a villa in Berlin-Zehlendorf for his office and residence and received a generous monthly stipend for expenses related to these quarters, his politics, and his entertainment.

In April 1942, al-Husayni and al-Kailani wrote joint letters to German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and Italian Foreign Minister Count Galeazzo Ciano requesting that the Axis issue a statement promising "all conceivable assistance" to the Arab world, recognition of the independence of the Arab nations and their right to unify, and a blessing for "the removal of the Jewish national homeland in Palestine." Hitler opposed a statement supporting Arab independence. In May, the Germans sent a letter to al-Husayni that stated that "the German government was prepared to recognize the independence of the Arab lands when they have won this [independence]." The letter, which al-Husayni was required to keep secret, contained no reference to al-Husayni, nor any wording that might legitimize his claim to represent the Arab world either in Germany or in the Middle East.

## **Axis Armies Move into Arab Lands**

Military events in the summer of 1942 appeared to offer al-Husayni the opportunity that Hitler had envisioned eight months earlier to "unleash the Arab action that he has secretly prepared." In the late summer of 1942, Axis armies poured into Egypt and penetrated the northern passes of the Caucasus Mountains. The Germans, however, expected to thrust through the Caucasus into Iran and Iraq and favored al-Kailani and Iraq as the staging area for a massive Arab insurrection. On July 17, al-Husayni proposed to the Ciano and the chiefs of German and Italian military intelligence that he establish a center in Egypt for the coordination of all facets of collaboration between the Axis and the "Arab Nation." The center would conduct propaganda through radio broadcasts, publications, and brochures. It would also establish Arab partisan units to conduct sabotage and incite uprisings behind British lines, and regular Arab military units that would fight "shoulder to shoulder" with Axis troops. Al-Husayni insisted that military units wear Arab uniforms, be commanded by Arab officers,

and speak Arabic as the language of command. Again, the Germans refused: Hitler remarked that he "wanted nothing from the Arabs." In late September 1942, al-Husayni proposed to found another pan-Arab center in Tunisia that would:

1. strengthen ties with Arabs in French North Africa
2. ship weapons, agents, equipment, and money to stiffen Muslim resistance in the event of an Allied landing
3. recruit and train Arab soldiers, who would stand prepared to defend North Africa "against any threat from the Allies, Bolshevism, and Judaism"

On November 8, 1942, 63,000 British and US troops landed in Morocco and Algeria in Operation Torch. Ten days later al-Husayni again tabled his proposal for a pan-Arab all-purpose center in Tunis, whose viability, he insisted, depended upon an Axis declaration of support for the independence of the North African Arab states. Neither the Germans nor the Italians were interested. Despite the propaganda broadcast by émigré Arabs over radio senders in Greece and Italy, no significant uprising occurred between the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf during 1942. On May 13, 1943, Axis forces surrendered in North Africa.

## **Al-Husayni's Wartime Propaganda Efforts**

During the war, the Axis regimes broadcast daily propaganda messages in more than a dozen languages via powerful transmitters in Berlin, Bari, Luxembourg, Paris, and Athens. Some figures, such as American-born William Joyce (Lord Haw-Haw) and modernist poet Ezra Pound, gained notoriety and audiences for their provocative addresses. From Asia to the Americas, Axis radio bombarded listeners with anti-Allied and antisemitic rhetoric in the hopes of encouraging isolationism in neutral countries, defeatism in enemy lands, and unrest in Allied-occupied territories. Along with other Arab broadcasters, al-Husayni disseminated pro-Axis, anti-British, and anti-Jewish propaganda from Berlin to the Middle East. In radio broadcasts, he called for an Arab revolt against Great Britain and the destruction of the Jewish settlements in Palestine.

Al-Husayni spoke often of a "worldwide Jewish conspiracy" that controlled the British and US governments and sponsored Soviet Communism. He argued that "world Jewry" aimed to infiltrate and subjugate Palestine, a sacred religious and cultural center of the Arab and Muslim world, as a staging ground for the seizure of all Arab lands. In his vision of the world, the Jews intended to enslave and exploit Arabs, to seize their land, to expropriate their wealth, undermine their Muslim faith and corrupt the moral fabric of their society. He labeled the Jews as the enemy of Islam, and used crude racist terminology to depict Jews and Jewish behavior, particularly as he forged a closer relationship with the SS in 1943 and 1944. He described Jews as having immutable characteristics and behaviors. On occasion, he would compare Jewishness to infectious disease and Jews to microbes or bacilli. In at least one speech attributed to him, he advocated killing Jews wherever Arabs found them. He consistently advocated "removing" the Jewish homeland from Palestine and, on occasion, driving every Jew out of Palestine and other Arab lands.

Al-Husayni described the British as facilitators for the Jews. He never forgave them for the Balfour Declaration, the partition plan, or even the White Paper, and accused them of betraying Arab interests after World War I. He warned Arabs that British (and US) promises of self-determination in World War II were deceitful, citing as proof perceived British abuses in Iraq and Syria and Anglo-American abuses in North Africa. He attributed actions of the US and the U.K. to the overpowering influence of the Jews.

Al-Husayni stressed in his speeches and writings the common interests of Germany and Italy with those of Arabs and Muslims. Nazi Germany was the natural ally of the Arab and Muslim world. Not only had Germany never imposed colonial rule on an Arab state, Germany and the Arab world also shared the same enemies: the Jews, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. Al-Husayni pointed out that Germany alone recognized the global threat of the "Jewish problem" and took steps to "solve" it globally.

Al-Husayni envisioned a broad Arab federation and eventual union that would emerge as a great power capable of defending the Arab people and the Muslim religion from exploitation by the colonial powers and from infiltration and enslavement by the Jews. He saw Palestine as a central and connecting link to

the diverse Arab lands. Absent the influence of the colonial powers and the Jews, al-Husayni's Arab union would flourish economically, culturally, and spiritually, restoring in a modern context the medieval power and splendor of the Muslim world. He expected the Arab nation to have close relations with Muslims in other lands: Iran, India, and the Muslim communities of the Soviet Union.

On December 18, 1942, Arab émigrés opened an "Islamic Central Institute" (Islamische Zentral-Institut) in Berlin, with al-Husayni as a senior sponsor and keynote speaker. In his speech, al-Husayni lashed out at the Jews, stating that the Koran judged the Jews "to be the most irreconcilable enemies of the Muslims." He predicted that the Jews would "always be a subversive element on the earth [and] are inclined to craft intrigues, provoke wars, and play the nations off against one another." Al-Husayni insisted that the Jews influenced and controlled the leadership of Great Britain, the United States, and the "godless communists." With their help and support, "world Jewry" had, he asserted, unleashed World War II. He called on Muslims to make the sacrifices necessary to liberate themselves from the persecution and suppression of their enemies. Nazi propagandists provided major coverage of the opening of the "Islamic Central Institute" and al-Husayni's remarks. The German news filmed his introductory remarks and the press published his anti-Jewish attacks. On December 23, 1942, the German Foreign Office broadcast his speech during a daily Arab-language newscast to the Middle East.

In the middle of 1944, al-Husayni agreed to serve on the organizing committee of and to speak at an International Anti-Jewish Congress planned by Alfred Rosenberg, the Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories, and the chief of the Nazi Party's Cultural Office. The purpose of the Congress was to have anti-Jewish speakers demonstrate that the Allies were fighting World War II exclusively on behalf of the Jews and to conduct follow-up international workshops to develop research strategies "for combating Jewry." Scheduled for July 11, 1944, in Kraków, the Germans had to cancel the Congress when German Army Group Center collapsed on the Eastern Front after June 22, 1944.

## **Efforts to Prevent Rescue of Jewish Children**

In the spring of 1943, al-Husayni learned of negotiations between Germany's Axis partners with the British, the Swiss, and the International Red Cross to transport thousands of Jewish children to safety in Palestine. He sought to prevent the rescue operations with protests directed at the Germans and Italians, as well as at the governments of Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. Demanding that the operations be scuttled, al-Husayni suggested that the children be sent to Poland where they would be subject to "stricter control." Although his preference that the children be killed in Poland rather than transported to Palestine appears to have been explicit, the impact of the letters was nil. None of the three governments that received the letters transported children to Poland. Moreover, the Germans foiled the rescue operations prior to and independent of al-Husayni's intervention.

## **Efforts to Recruit Arabs into Axis Armies**

To legitimize his claim to leadership of the Arab world, al-Husayni aimed to organize Arab refugees and members of the European-Arab communities of arms-bearing age into armed units under his control. These units would be deployed on Arab land to augment the uprisings that he planned to foment and would form the nucleus of the army of the future pan-Arab state. They would also guarantee the claim of al-Husayni, as their supreme commander, to the leadership of Arab lands.

From 1941 on, the Nazi regime attempted to recruit foreign contingents inside and outside Europe to fight alongside the Wehrmacht against the Allies. German propagandists played upon strong anti-Communist sentiments to inspire support for a "crusade" to save western civilization from "Judeo-Bolshevism" and to "liberate" the peoples of Soviet Union, and to denounce British, American, and Jewish "plutocratic" imperialism. As part of this recruitment campaign, by 1945 some 500,000 non-Germans joined Waffen-SS divisions. A month after the collapse of the Iraqi coup, in July 1941, the Abwehr established a German-Arab Training Department (*Deutsch-Arabische Lehrabteilung-DAL*) to train Arabs, mostly students and refugees residing in Europe, as soldiers in the Wehrmacht (German armed forces). After his arrival in Germany in autumn 1941, al-Husayni steered more recruits to the Training Department, including Arab soldiers in

Italian prisoner-of-war camps. Conceiving the unit as an Arab army, commanded by Arab officers and speaking Arabic as the language of command, al-Husayni quarreled with the German training officers, who aimed to create an Arab special operations unit within the Wehrmacht. Despite his demand that the Training Department be transferred to North Africa in 1942 to support his proposed pan-Arab operations center in Egypt, the Germans transferred the unit to Stalino (today: Luhans'k) in the east Ukraine on August 20. They envisioned the Arab volunteers moving south through the Caucasus and Iran and engaging against the British in Iraq. Only in early 1943 did the Germans transfer the Training Department to Tunisia, where its performance was disappointing. On May 13, 1943, the remaining soldiers surrendered to the Allies.

Upon request, the Reich Central Office for Security hosted members of the entourage of al-Husayni and al-Kailani for an elaborate, but insubstantial tour of the Oranienburg concentration camp in early July 1942. The commandant lectured the Arabs on the "educational" value of the camp experience for the prisoners; the visitors inspected household appliances and equipment made by the prisoners.

While there, the Arabs expressed interest in Jewish prisoners. Al-Husayni's first significant contacts with the SS as an institution developed in the spring of 1943. Prior to this time, his major institutional contacts in Germany were with the Foreign Office and the Abwehr. On March 24, 1943, the chief of the SS Main Office, Gottlob Berger, invited al-Husayni to attend a meeting held in preparation for an SS recruiting drive among the Muslim residents of Bosnia. Berger was so impressed that he arranged a meeting between al-Husayni and *Reichsführer-SS* (SS chief) Heinrich Himmler on July 3, 1943. Al-Husayni sent Himmler birthday greetings on October 6, and expressed the hope that "the coming year would make our cooperation even closer and bring us closer to our common goals."

When the SS decided in February 1943 to recruit among Bosnian Muslims for a new division of the *Waffen-SS*, SS Main Office Chief Berger enlisted al-Husayni in a recruiting drive in Bosnia from March 30 and April 11. On April 29, Berger reported that 24,000–27,000 recruits had signed up and noted that the "visit of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem had had an extraordinarily successful impact."

Both al-Husayni and the SS repeatedly referred to the success of the 13th *Waffen-SS* Mountain Division (also known as "Handschar"). Al-Husayni spoke to the military Imams of the division, stressing the importance of maintaining the principles of Islam and of "strengthening cooperation between the Muslims and their ally, Germany," and identifying common enemies faced by Muslims and the Germans: World Jewry, England and its allies, and Bolshevism. Nevertheless, the unit was generally ineffective and could not be deployed outside of Bosnia, where, taking advantage of the powerless Croat authorities, it assumed administrative and self-defense duties in the Muslim communities of northeastern Bosnia. When military events in the Balkans forced the German evacuation of the region in October 1944, nearly 3,000 13th Division soldiers deserted, and remainder mutinied, forcing Himmler to dissolve the division eight months after its initial deployment. The 13th *Waffen-SS* Mountain Division did not participate in the deportation of Jews, either in Bosnia or in Hungary. During its deployment in Bosnia from February until October 1944, the possibility that "Handschar" personnel participated in the capture and murder of individual Jews found in hiding or captured as partisans cannot be excluded. Such involvement cannot be documented, however.

Drawing subsidies from both the Foreign Office and SS, al-Husayni developed intelligence networks in Turkey, maintained contacts in Palestine and Syria, and plotted sabotage operations. Though funding was available until nearly the end of the war, it is difficult to judge whether its application offered much of value to the Nazi regime beyond subsidizing al-Husayni's contacts. During 1944, the *Abwehr* and the Security Service (*Sicherheitsdienst*; SD) of the SS attempted a number of commando missions in the Middle East. One mission involved a mixed German-Arab five-man commando that the SD dropped into the Jordan Valley with weapons, explosives, and German-Arab dictionaries in early October 1944. Captured by the British before they could do any harm, the commandos claimed under interrogation that al-Husayni had briefed each one of them personally before departure, had compared Islam with National Socialism, and had promised them that the Arab struggle in Palestine would help Nazi Germany.

Having learned that the British created a Palestinian Jewish Brigade, al-Husayni suggested to Himmler on October 3, 1944, that Nazi Germany announce the creation of an Arab-Muslim army that would "foil the Jewish-English plans" and

"participate in the common struggle at the side of the Greater German Reich." The Foreign Office issued the statement on the anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, November 2, but did not consult al-Husayni on the text. Al-Husayni complained to Ribbentrop that the statement was "not appropriate," that the word "Muslim" had been deleted, and that there was no reference to German endorsement for the proposed army. As the statement referred implicitly to Arab independence and unity, it represented the successful culmination of al-Husayni's policy.

## **Al-Husayni Postwar Activities**

On May 7, 1945, the day of the German surrender, al-Husayni flew to Bern, Switzerland. The Swiss authorities denied his appeal for asylum, detained him, and turned him over to French border authorities. French authorities placed al-Husayni under house arrest at a villa near Paris. Though the British initially wanted custody of al-Husayni, there were significant obstacles to obtaining a conviction against him before an international tribunal. Moreover, both Britain and France, seeking to reestablish their influence in the Arab world, saw serious liabilities in holding al-Husayni in custody. In late 1945, the Yugoslav government withdrew its extradition request for al-Husayni.

On May 29, 1946, carrying a passport issued to Ma'ruf al-Dawalibi, al-Husayni escaped from French custody and flew to Cairo, Egypt. In Cairo, he continued to oppose Zionist demands for a Jewish state in Palestine. He rejected the 1947 U.N. partition plan, and in 1948 the establishment of Israel, a goal against which he had worked his entire life. Al-Husayni devoted the remainder of his life to supporting Palestinian nationalism and to agitating against the State of Israel. He continued to produce and disseminate anti-Zionist, anti-Jewish, and anti-Israel propaganda. He died in Beirut, Lebanon, on July 4, 1974.