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# THE MUFTI OF JERUSALEM AND THE POLITICS OF PALESTINE

Philip Mattar

**M**UHAMMAD Amin al-Husayni (1895–1974), the most powerful leader of the Palestinian national movement during most of the British rule over Palestine (1917–1948), portrayed himself in his post-1948 writings as one who vigorously opposed both British rule and the Jewish National Home. Arab contemporaries who were his supporters were eager to prove that al-Husayni, the mufti of Jerusalem who was also known as al-Hajj Amin, led revolts in the 1920s and 1930s but was frustrated by British and Zionist conspiracies.<sup>1</sup> His Zionist biographers on the other hand, have described him as a Muslim fanatic whose extremism and intransigence were largely responsible for the disaster that befell the Palestinians in 1948. Ironically, Arab and Zionist authors converge on two points: al-Husayni's political preeminence throughout the mandate, and his pivotal role in the political violence against the British and the Zionists.<sup>2</sup>

These interpretations contain a number of flaws. First, accounts on both sides are so partisan and polemical that the historical al-Husayni and the movement he led are scarcely discernible. That al-Husayni's political career has not received balanced and impartial treatment is, of course, not remarkable in view of the

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*The views expressed in this article are the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the Institute for Palestine Studies. The article is adapted from Mattar's biography of Muhammad Amin al-Husayni which will be published by Columbia University Press in spring 1988.*

1. Muhammad Amin al-Husayni, *Haqa'iq 'an Qadiyyat Filastin* (Truths Regarding the Palestine Problem), 2nd. ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi bi-Masr, 1957); Emile al-Ghuri, *Filastin 'abr Sittin 'Aman* (Palestine over Sixty Years), vol. II, (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1972).

2. Zuhayr Mardini, *Alf yawm ma' al-Hajj Amin* (One Thousand Days with al-Hajj Amin) (Beirut: Dar al-'Irfan, 1977); Moshe P. Waters, *Mufti over the Middle East* (London: Barber, 1942); Maurice Pearlman, *Mufti Over Jerusalem: The Story of Haj Amin el Husseini* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1947); Joseph B. Schechtman, *The Mufti and the Fuehrer: The Rise and Fall of Haj Amin al-Husayni* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1965).

passion his name has always inspired. Some Arab biographers have lauded him and his cause, seeking to absolve him of any responsibility for the 1948 disaster, while Jewish nationalists vilify him and discredit his movement.<sup>3</sup> The second flaw is the biographers' meager use of oral and unpublished sources. The Arab biographers, notably Zuhayr Mardini, were satisfied with interviewing al-Husayni and quarrying his memoirs; the Zionist biographers, especially Maurice Pearlman and Joseph B. Schechtman, rely on the Western press; they lack even an elementary familiarity with al-Husayni, Islam, the Arabic language, or Palestinian society and its politics.

The third problem is the ahistorical assumption by most authors that the Mufti's behavior and actions were unchanged throughout his political career. In particular, biographers and historians assume that al-Husayni's militancy after 1936 guided his policies during the earlier years as well. But an examination of British, Zionist, and Palestinian sources reveals a rather different portrait.

Far from being static, al-Husayni's career went through two distinct phases: the Palestine phase, between 1917 and 1936, when he was a cautious, pragmatic, traditional leader who cooperated with British officials while opposing Zionism; and the exile phase, after 1936, characterized by bitterness, inflexibility, and political alliances of dubious value or wisdom. This article will examine his role in the politics of Palestine and within the Palestinian national movement.

### *THE PALESTINE YEARS*

The fundamental explanation of al-Husayni's cooperation with the British until 1936 can be traced to his formative years. Indeed, al-Husayni's role in the politics of Palestine is incomprehensible unless we understand the politics of the patrician class from which he emerged. The Husaynis were the most prominent of the urban notable families who, as the ruling elite of the local Ottoman administration, dominated the politics of Palestine.<sup>4</sup> Their traditional influence, based on centuries of religious appointments, tax collection, and landholding, gave them a power base both in the countryside and within such cities as Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Nablus—local power bases through which the Ottomans were able to exercise their imperial authority.

3. Mardini, for example, reads like the memoirs of an official who made all the judicious decisions. Mardini tried to show that the Mufti and the Palestinians fought with tenacity and self-sacrifice; Waters (pseudonym, Maurice Pearlman) and Schechtman attempted to vilify him, discredit his movement, and blame him for the misfortune of the Palestinians. The jacket of Waters' book shows a drawing of a hook-nosed, grotesque man, ironically resembling an anti-Semitic caricature of a Jew, with blood dripping from his fingernails. Schechtman's book, which is the best known in English, contains in the frontispiece the photograph of a straggly bearded figure, with a turban, who is not al-Husayni, despite the claim of the caption.

4. Albert Hourani, "Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables," in William R. Polk and Richard L. Chambers, eds., *Beginning of Modernization in the Middle East: The 19th Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 45–46.

The Husaynis and other notables were, in general, the defenders of the political status quo and worked with the local and imperial government to guarantee or enforce stability in those cities or regions in which they exercised influence. Some of them represented their society's interests and demands within official Ottoman institutions in Istanbul. On occasion, they led protests against the government over local issues, but never for movements aimed at the overthrow of Ottoman rule in Palestine. They were, in essence, partners with their fellow Muslims in the imperial government.

The Husaynis represented the epitome of this kind of partnership with the ruling power, first with the Ottomans and then with the British, despite the fact that the British were considered foreigners. Their relations with the British began, significantly enough, with the capture of Jerusalem by British forces in 1917; it was Salim al-Husayni, mayor of Jerusalem, who handed the key of the city to General Edmund Allenby on December 9, 1917. Cooperation with the British Military Administration (1917–1920) continued under Amin's half-brother, Kamil al-Husayni, who had succeeded his father in the powerful position of mufti of Jerusalem, the office traditionally held by a religious scholar who provides legal counsel. Al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni also continued his family's policy of cooperation.

### *Al-Husayni as Nationalist Leader*

Shortly after returning from Turkey, where he had served in the Ottoman army during World War I, al-Husayni helped a British officer recruit 2,000 Arabs for the last stages of the war effort against the Ottomans, believing that once Palestine was liberated it would become part of an Arab state. He then became a clerk in the office of the British district governor of Jerusalem. It was because of this kind of cooperation, and the family name, that Sir Herbert Samuel, a prominent British Zionist and the first high commissioner for Palestine, considered Amin in April 1921 for the office of mufti to replace his recently deceased half-brother Kamil.<sup>5</sup> Norman Bentwich, another British Zionist and the first attorney general of Palestine, writes of a meeting between Samuel and Amin al-Husayni in which the latter declared "his earnest desire to cooperate with the government, and his belief in the good intention of the government towards the Arabs. He gave assurances that the influence of his family and himself would be devoted to maintaining tranquility in Jerusalem . . ."<sup>6</sup>

Al-Husayni was duly appointed mufti and, in January 1922, president of the Supreme Muslim Council, set up by the government of Palestine to manage Muslim affairs. This office gave him control over Muslim courts, schools, religious

5. Foreign Office, 371/5121/E9397/85/44, *Palin Report*, p. 4.

6. Norman and Helen Bentwich, *Mandate Memories, 1918–1948* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), pp. 191–92.

endowments (*awqaf*), mosques, and an annual revenue of Palestine £50,000. No persons were in better positions to know whether al-Husayni kept his promises than Bentwich, who felt that the Mufti maintained the peace throughout the 1920s, and Samuel, who considered him “a moderate man.”<sup>7</sup>

It is true that al-Husayni was already an avid nationalist, and in August 1922 he joined in opposing the formation of a Legislative Council proposed by Samuel. Palestinian leaders like the Mufti feared that acceptance of the Council was tantamount to acceptance of the British Mandate, which had been approved in July by the League of Nations, and support for the establishment of the Jewish National Home. In addition, they did not find the Council’s composition or its proposed powers fair. The Council reserved 43 percent of the membership—10 seats out of 23—for the Palestinians even though they constituted 88 percent of the population, and it forbade discussion of political matters. When the Council was rejected by the Palestinian leadership, Samuel proposed an Advisory Council with a similar composition and mandate. It, too, was rejected.

The Mufti’s opposition to these two proposals was not as significant in 1922 and 1923 as many historians assume. The political affairs of the Palestinian community were managed by the Palestine Arab Executive under the leadership of Musa Kazim al-Husayni, who had been the mayor of Jerusalem from 1918–1920. The Mufti was too new to his jobs and too busy with religious matters during the 1920s to have had much of an impact in the affair. It was not until 1929 that Amin al-Husayni became the political leader of the Palestinians.

### *Serving Two Masters*

Al-Husayni’s rise to leadership coincided with the decline of the Executive and with the perception that he had stood up to the Zionists during the 1929 Western Wall incidents; his role in that controversy, however, has been exaggerated by all sides. Arab historians, such as Izzat Darwaza, argue that the Mufti used the dispute to reactivate the national movement.<sup>8</sup> Israeli scholars, such as Yehoshua Porath, claim that the Mufti and his associates exploited what “seemed to them a Jewish provocation, in order to intensify the struggle against the Jews,” and that “his agitation . . . resulted in the disturbances of August 1929,” which took the lives of 133 Jews and 116 Palestinians.<sup>9</sup> This thesis fits nicely with the position of most Arabs, who believe that al-Hajj Amin aggressively resisted Zionism, and with the Zionist view that the Mufti was responsible for most of the violence in Palestine. The thesis is particularly attractive because the Mufti was

7. *Ibid.*; Eliahu Elath, “Conversations with Musa al-‘Alami,” *The Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 41 (Winter 1987), p. 44.

8. Muhammad Izzat Darwaza, *Hawl al-Haraka al-‘Arabiyya al-Haditha* (On the Modern Arab Movement), vol. III, (Sidon: al-Matba‘a al-Arabiyya, 1951), pp. 61–62.

9. Y. Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian National Movement, 1918–1929* (London: Frank Cass, 1974), p. 266.

the prime beneficiary of the violence. Palestinians began to view him not just as a religious dignitary but also as a political leader who articulated their national goals.

There is no solid evidence to indicate that al-Husayni was involved in organizing the outbreaks of August 23. That morning he delivered a speech at the Haram al-Sharif—the Temple Mount—to a crowd that had heard a rumor that Jews were going to attack the Haram, Islam’s third holiest shrine. Al-Husayni had asked the Friday speaker to instruct people to remain calm. After the sermon, the Mufti urged people to return to their villages, and he sent word to the British police that they should quickly increase the number of units at the Haram. When the crowds came out of Damascus Gate, al-Husayni himself tried to disperse them, and when violence spread later that afternoon, he issued an appeal for Arabs to arm themselves “with mercy, wisdom and patience, for (verily) God is with those who bear themselves in patience.”<sup>10</sup>

His actions on August 23 are not the only evidence that he did not organize the riots. The Shaw Commission, which investigated the violence, reached the following conclusions:

- The immediate cause of the violence was the revisionist Zionist demonstration of August 15, 1929.

- The violence was spontaneous—not organized by anyone.

- The violence took place in several towns, like Hebron, where the influence of the Mufti was weak, and did not take place in many towns where his influence was strong.

- A written appeal that he allegedly sent out for Arabs to come and defend the Haram was found to be a forgery, probably written by a non-Arab.<sup>11</sup>

From 1929 to 1936, the Mufti cooperated with the British while, at the same time, attempting to change British policy. He reassured John Chancellor, the third high commissioner, in October 1929 that he considered himself “one who was, in a sense, an officer of the State.” Chancellor reported:

The Mufti promised to help in the maintenance of order and to cooperate with the Government. He had always held this attitude and he held it still and should continue to hold it even if Government did not listen to his representation. He regarded this as his duty not only to the Government, to God, and the people but also to his own conscience.<sup>12</sup>

The Mufti told Chancellor that the Arabs were amicably disposed toward Great Britain both out of self-interest and because they believed in Britain’s tradition of

10. Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers, *Report of the Commission on the Disturbance of August, 1929 (Shaw Commission Report)*, Cmd. 3530, (London: HMSO, 1937), p. 78.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 73–78; For a detailed study of the Mufti’s role, see Philip Mattar, “The Role of the Mufti of Jerusalem in the Political Struggle for the Western Wall, 1928–29,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, (London), vol. 19, no. 1 (January 1983), pp. 104–118.

12. Commonwealth Office, 733/163/67013/II, Chancellor to Passfield, enclosure 2, October 12, 1929; 733/175/67411/II/2, Chancellor to Passfield, October 5, 1929.

justice. When a militant, Shakib Wahab, approached the Mufti with an offer “to organize bands for a guerrilla campaign,” al-Husayni rejected the offer, stating that he was seeking a political solution instead.<sup>13</sup>

The extent of the Mufti’s moderation during this period was indicated by his willingness to negotiate and accept compromise solutions. He was involved in indirect negotiations with H. St. John Philby in September and October 1929 from which emerged a draft settlement providing for the establishment of a parliament in which Jews and Arabs would be proportionally represented and by which Palestine would remain under the authority of a British high commissioner who would safeguard Zionist interests, including immigration. The Mufti accepted the draft proposal but, with the exception of Judah Magnes, the Zionist leaders—Chaim Weizmann, David Ben Gurion, and Pinhas Rutenberg—rejected the plan because it would have meant the continuation of their position as a minority in Palestine.<sup>14</sup>

It was also the Mufti who dispatched the secretary of the Supreme Muslim Council and the Palestine Arab Executive, Jamal al-Husayni, to London in December 1929 to meet with the colonial secretary. Jamal’s opening position was that Palestine have “some form of representative government,” an elected legislature based on proportional representation and over whose legislation the high commissioner would have a veto power. The colonial secretary, however, rejected the proposal. The Zionists were opposed to a legislature in which they would be a minority and through which the Palestinians could curtail the growth of the Yishuv, the modern Jewish community in Palestine. The British objected because they feared their authority in Palestine would be reduced. A few months after his first trip, Jamal returned to London with a Palestine Arab Executive delegation which offered a proposal similar to the previous one. It, too, was rejected by the British on similar grounds.<sup>15</sup>

In the Passfield White Paper of October 1930, the British did meet Palestinian demands on immigration and land purchases, but this was the result of the Shaw and Simpson commissions’ recommendations rather than the Mufti’s efforts. Zionist pressure on the minority government of Ramsay MacDonald, however, forced the government to withdraw these concessions in the MacDonald letter of January 13, 1931. Partly in response to the letter, the Mufti convened a General Islamic Congress in December 1931 to unite the Arabs and Muslims against the Zionists and to make London aware that British interests lay in the Muslim and Arab worlds, not with the Zionists. In the end, however, the effect of the congress on the British was negligible.<sup>16</sup>

13. *Ibid.*, 733/175/67411/III/583, Cabinet Paper 343, Police Summary for week ending September 21, 1929.

14. Neil Caplan, *Futile Diplomacy. Vol. 1: Early Arab-Zionist Negotiation Attempts, 1913–1931* (London: Frank Cass, 1983), pp. 87–88, 209–212; Y. Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement, 1929–1939: From Riot to Rebellion* (London: Frank Cass, 1977), p. 21.

15. Porath, *Palestinian Arab National Movement*, pp. 23–26.

16. See H.A.R. Gibb, “The Islamic Congress at Jerusalem in December 1931,” in *Survey of*

Indeed, a number of efforts by the Mufti and his colleagues were largely unsuccessful. A general strike and demonstration against Jewish immigration, held by the Executive in October 1933 while the Mufti was out of the country, resulted in 25 deaths. Political parties were formed, private and public protests were held, but all were ineffectual in halting immigration. In fact, Jewish immigration increased from 4,075 in 1931, to 9,553 in 1932, to 30,327 in 1933, to 42,359 in 1934, and to 61,854 in 1935. British High Commissioner Arthur Wauchope took notice of the Mufti's difficulties in January 1934: "I am confident that the Mufti likes me, respects me and is anxious to help me . . . but he fears that criticism of his many opponents that he is too British may weaken his influence in the country. The fact, however, that his influence is on the side of moderation is of definite value."<sup>17</sup> The political situation became even more difficult in 1935 as reflected in a British intelligence report of that year. Its authors predicted that the Palestinian political leaders "will find themselves forced to adopt an extremist policy" in order "to restore their prestige and prevent the leadership of the nationalist movement from passing out of their hands" and "to satisfy public opinion and try a new course of action, as all their previous efforts in protest, demonstrations, public meetings etc. had failed to attain their object."<sup>18</sup>

One might ask why, over the course of two decades, did the Mufti continue his dual policy of cooperation with the British and nonviolent opposition to the Zionists when the threat to Palestinian national existence (except for the period 1926–1928) became increasingly ominous. A number of fundamental reasons can be suggested.

First, the Husaynis, as discussed earlier, belonged to that patrician class in whom was deeply ingrained the practice of cooperation with the imperial power in order to guarantee stability and the political status quo. Al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni's statements to British officials, and his actions, indicated a constant awareness of his status as an official appointed by the Palestine government: if he were to challenge British discretionary power, he might lose the posts of mufti of Jerusalem and president of the Supreme Muslim Council.

Second, like others of his generation and despite his nationalist views, the Mufti admired what he saw as British fairness and sense of justice—personal qualities of British officials such as Herbert Samuel and Arthur Wauchope, with whom he met frequently. He repeatedly affirmed his allegiance to the British rulers on the basis of these personal qualities, even while he was aware that British officials, regardless of their personal preferences, were the instruments of what he considered an unjust policy. Third, al-Husayni believed that the British were too strong for the Palestinians to oppose successfully and that, in any case, Britain's presence in Palestine would be transitory, as it appeared to be in Egypt, Iraq, and Transjordan.

*International Affairs, 1934*, edited by Arnold T. Toynbee (London: Oxford University Press, 1935).

17. Commonwealth Office, 733/258, Wauchope to Cunliffe-Lister, January 5, 1934, cited in A.W. Kayyali, *Palestine: A Modern History* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1973), p. 176.

18. Foreign Office, 371/20018, Criminal Investigation Department Report, December 5, 1935.



Finally, he thought that Britain's pro-Zionist Balfour policy would change when the British realized that their interests lay with the Muslim and Arab countries and not with the Zionists. He further believed that the Palestinians, with the help of fellow Muslims and Arabs, might influence the British through petitions, delegations to London, protests, and demonstrations; he opposed political violence and preparation for revolutionary resistance. Indeed, he surreptitiously assisted the British authorities in defusing violent outbreaks. In short, he affirmed, by word and deed, a preference for nonviolent methods.

### *The Arab Revolt: A Turning Point*

From 1921 to 1936, the Mufti served two masters: the British and the Palestinians. He managed to pacify the first with pledges of loyalty and cooperation and the second with religious and political rhetoric. By the early 1930s, escalating events and an increasingly militant anti-British public attitude had begun forcing the Mufti into choosing between the two camps. In 1932, his moderate policies and leadership were challenged by the leaders of the *Istiqlal* (Independence), a newly emerging party. Unlike the leaders of the *Mu'aridun* (Opposition), who were suspected of opportunism and collaboration, leaders of the *Istiqlal* were seen as dedicated nationalists who articulated the emerging militant mood. They were perceived by a frustrated public as the alternative to the moderates. As such, the Mufti could not ignore them and therefore used his powerful position to undermine the *Istiqlal*, which had no political machinery, no money, and no press with which to fight back.<sup>19</sup>

Although the Mufti was able to fend off the *Istiqlal*'s challenge, he could not overcome the radical spirit that sustained it. This sentiment found expression in a secret religious organization led by 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam. A deeply religious shaykh and a man of integrity, social concern, and eloquence, he was also a dedicated revolutionary. In the mid-1920s he had demanded that *waqf* money be spent on arms rather than on mosque repairs, causing the Mufti to deny him employment as an itinerant preacher for the Supreme Muslim Council. Al-Qassam, however, went on to found a mosque in which to preach his revolution, and he practiced what he preached. He not only preached a *jihad* against the twin "infidels," the Jew and the Briton, but also began buying arms and recruiting workers and peasants in his northern Palestine power base.<sup>20</sup> In 1933, he sent a follower to the Mufti requesting him to start a revolt in the south, while he, al-Qassam, would start one in the north. The Mufti reportedly refused, affirming

19. Darwaza, *Hawl*, pp. 108–109; Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement*, pp. 123–126; Commonwealth Office, 733/219/97105/2/33, High Commissioner's dispatch to C.O., September 16, 1932.

20. Subhi Yasin, *al-Thawra al-'Arabiyya al-Kubra fi Filastin, 1936–1939* (The Great Arab Revolt in Palestine, 1936–1939) (Cairo: Dar al-Hana, 1959), pp. 19–21.

again that he was seeking a political rather than a military solution.<sup>21</sup>

By 1935 al-Qassam was unalterably convinced that the methods of the Palestinian leader were ineffective. Jewish immigration was increasing at an alarming rate, and it seemed only a matter of time before the Zionists would establish a Jewish nation in Palestine. On the basis of this, and perhaps the discovery of arms shipments to Jews on October 18, al-Qassam refused to wait any longer, and he and eleven followers left Haifa to encourage villagers to revolt. After a few encounters with security forces, a British police detachment gave chase on November 19. Instead of escaping from or surrendering to the British troops, al-Qassam resolved to fight to the end—an event that occurred on November 21, 1935.<sup>22</sup>

The news of al-Qassam's death sent a wave of grief and rage throughout Palestine. He became a symbol of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, embodying for the people the selflessness conspicuously absent among their leaders. His death also illuminated the futile tactics of the politicians, which is probably why they did not attend the funeral. But neither the Mufti nor leaders of the various parties could escape al-Qassam's shadow. Indeed, al-Qassam achieved more in death than he did during 15 years of preaching. He offered his people, hitherto largely peaceful and hospitable, a radical alternative—revolution. Throughout Palestine, radical youth groups formed to take up the mantle of al-Qassam, to fight Zionism and the British Mandate.<sup>23</sup>

When violence flared April 15–19, 1936 and a general strike began to spread, the public urged the Mufti to assume leadership of the protests, which were aimed against Jewish immigration and land purchase, and to press for the establishment of a national government. He resisted for 10 crucial days before his propensity for inertia and timidity gave way to political action.<sup>24</sup> Had he remained on the sidelines, with nothing to show but a record of failure, he would have been overtaken by events as well as by more militant leaders. Because of these prospects, the Mufti accepted the leadership of the newly organized Arab Higher Committee, which comprised all the political parties, and therefore became the leader of the general strike. This decision was the beginning of the end of his policy of cooperation, and it was also the beginning of the end of British confidence in him. He tried to contain the ensuing violence, but found that the revolt had a force of its own. Political violence, British suppression, destruction, and the rising death toll forced the Mufti to take hard-line positions.

Several events over the next few years served to radicalize the Mufti further. In 1937 the British submitted a plan to partition Palestine between groups that

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 21–27.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 21–27; Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement*, p. 135.

23. Bayan al-Hut, ed., *Watha'iq al-Haraka al-Wataniyya al-Filastiniyya, 1918–1939: Min Awraq Akram Zu'aytir* (Documents of the Palestine National Movement, 1918–1939: Selections from the Akram Zu'aytir Papers) (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya, 1979), pp. 396–402.

24. Darwaza, *Hawl*, p. 123.

many Palestinians saw as two outsiders: Zionists from Europe and Hashemites from the Hijaz. The Mufti, like most Palestinians, rejected partition, and he continued to lead the revolt. At that point, the British decided to strip him of his offices and arrest him for his part in the violence.

### *THE EXILE YEARS*

Al-Hajj Amin escaped to Lebanon in 1937 and continued to lead the revolt from Beirut and Damascus. By the summer of 1938, many cities, including Jerusalem, had been taken by the rebels. But it was only a matter of time before Britain, whose forces outnumbered those of the Palestinians 10-to-1, crushed the revolt. The Palestinians paid a high price for the 1936–1939 revolt in terms of their economy and their military and political structure. The British conservatively estimated that 3,074 Palestinians were killed, that 112 were hanged, and that in 1939 alone, 6,000 were incarcerated out of a population of 960,000. Considering the magnitude of the national calamity and the personal loss of many of al-Husayni's friends and relatives, it is no wonder that he had periods of depression and considered suicide in 1939, as reported by Gabriel Puaux, the French high commissioner for the Levant.<sup>25</sup>

Following the revolt, al-Husayni grew increasingly bitter and uncompromising in matters vital to the future of his people. His unwillingness to compromise is exemplified by his rejection of the 1939 White Paper, even though its terms—restricting Jewish immigration to 75,000 over five years, limiting land sales, and planning for an independent Palestine in 10 years with a Palestinian majority of two-to-one—were obviously favorable to the Palestinians. He escaped to Iraq in October 1939, having bribed the French chief of police of Syria and Lebanon, where he had been under close observation as the result of British pressures on the French. In Iraq, he sought to encourage a pan-Arab challenge to British control there and, ultimately, over Palestine.

The prospect of a revolt in Iraq alarmed three parties with vital interests in Palestine: the Zionists, the Hashemites, and the British. Pinhas Rutenberg, a Zionist representative who in January 1939 had been counseled by Amir Abdullah of Transjordan to eliminate al-Husayni, traveled to London in May 1940 in an attempt to urge the British to assassinate the Palestinian leader.<sup>26</sup> Because the Foreign Office was not in the habit of carrying out assassinations, it found the proposal unattractive and, in any case, impractical. Yet, five months later, the Mufti became such a grave threat to British interests that Winston Churchill approved a plan to have him assassinated.<sup>27</sup> Members of the Irgun, a revisionist Zionist underground movement,

25. Foreign Office, 371/23240/E7113/6/31, Havard (Beirut) to Foreign Office, October 22, 1939.

26. Commonwealth Office, 733/309/75872/51, Sir Harold MacMichael to Malcolm MacDonald, January 4, 1939.

27. Foreign Office, 371/24568/E2762/367/31, Leo Amery to Secretary of State, October 5, 1940. For more details, see Philip Mattar, "Amin al-Husayni and Iraq's Quest for Independence, 1939–41,"

were flown to Iraq in May 1941 to carry out the assassination with the help of the British army, but the mission was aborted when the group's leader was killed by strafing from a German plane. The Mufti escaped to Iran, and the revolt he had helped to initiate was put down by British and Hashemite forces.<sup>28</sup> The Mufti then fled to the Axis countries, first to Italy and then on to Germany.

### *The Mufti and the Axis Powers*

No period in al-Husayni's life is more controversial and distorted than that of the war years. Zionists were so eager to prove him guilty of collaboration and war crimes that they exaggerated his connections with the Nazis, while al-Husayni and other Arabs were so busy justifying his statements and actions that they ignored the obvious and overwhelming fact that the Mufti did indeed cooperate with one of the most barbaric regimes in history.<sup>29</sup>

In his only meeting with Hitler, in November 1941, al-Husayni stressed the need for a public statement by the Axis supporting full independence for the Arab world and rescuing Palestine from Zionism and British imperialism. In a secret pact in April 1942, both Italy and Germany agreed "to grant to the Arab countries . . . aid in their fight for liberation; to recognize their sovereignty and independence; to agree to their federation . . . ; as well as the abolition of the Jewish National Homeland in Palestine."<sup>30</sup> Once he had a commitment from the Axis, al-Husayni began to assist in the war effort: he issued appeals to the Arab world to revolt against the British, organized an Arab legion to fight the British in the Arab world, recruited Muslims to fight the communists in Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia, and coordinated sabotage expeditions to Palestine, Iraq, and Transjordan. His propaganda and military efforts, however, were either unsuccessful or were insignificant; calls for revolt, for example, were ignored, and the sabotage teams were either captured or killed.<sup>31</sup>

After the war, several Jewish groups sought al-Husayni's indictment and trial as a war criminal. The Jewish Agency in 1946 provided the British with evidence, consisting of unsigned letters (in draft form) from 1943 and 1944 and reprinted by the Agency, in which al-Husayni protests, to a number of countries under Axis

*Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 4 (Fall 1984), pp. 267–281.

28. For information of the Iraqi revolt of 1941, see Majid Khadduri, *Independent Iraq, 1932–1958* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960).

29. For Zionist works on the Mufti in Germany, see Pearlman, *Mufti over Jerusalem*, Schechtman, *The Mufti*, Lukasz Hirsowicz, *The Third Reich and the Arab East* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), and Elias Cooper, "Forgotten Palestinian: The Nazi Mufti," *American Zionist* (March–April 1978); for Arab works, see Amin al-Husayni's memoirs in the Egyptian daily *Akhbar al-Yawm* (1957–58), nos. 673–90, and Mardini, *Alf Yawm*.

30. Al-Husayni, *Akhbar al-Yawm*, January 4, 1958; Majid Khadduri, *Arab Contemporaries: The Role of Personalities in Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 78–80.

31. United States National Archives, R.G. 226, XL5487, December 27, 1944; XL5709, January 1, 1945.

control, the exchange of European Jews for Germans from Palestine. Such emigration, he proclaimed, benefited the Jewish National Home. In addition, the Zionists sent a statement to the British Foreign Office by Rudolf Kasztner, a leader of the Jewish Reserve and Relief Committee in Budapest, in which he quoted Adolf Eichmann as saying in response to a request for the emigration of Hungarian Jews to Palestine: "I am a personal friend of the Grand Mufti. We have promised him that no European Jew would enter Palestine anymore" and that he [Eichmann] "would be willing to recommend the emigration of a group of 1,681 Hungarian Jews, on condition that the group should not go to Palestine. They may get to any country but Palestine." Kasztner also quoted a colleague of Eichmann, Dieter Wisliceny, as saying: "According to my opinion, the Grand-Mufti who has been in Berlin since 1941 played a role in the decision of the German Government to exterminate the European Jews."<sup>32</sup>

The Zionists' documents, however, were not taken seriously by the British. In a minute for internal circulation, a Foreign Office official wrote: "The material in this paper is very vague and would certainly not be considered as decisive evidence against the Mufti for having participated in any atrocities against the Jews." Other officials wrote that the Zionists were using this meager evidence for propaganda purposes to discredit the Mufti and the Palestinians.<sup>33</sup> Since then, no evidence based on captured German documents has emerged in the many books on the Holocaust or from the 1961 Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, during which documents concerning contacts between the Mufti and the Germans were compiled,<sup>34</sup> to show that he had participated in war crimes. Until a more thorough and nonpartisan study is undertaken based on captured German documents on al-Husayni's role in Nazi Germany, it is safe to conclude that the Nazis wanted to use the Mufti against the British and the communists and that he cooperated with the Nazis believing that they would help the Arabs expel the British from the Middle East and keep the Zionists from dominating or displacing his people.

At the end of the war al-Husayni flew to Switzerland, but the Swiss turned him over to the French where he was put under residential surveillance for a year while the Allies decided what to do with him. In May 1946, however, he escaped from Paris just days before a possible assassination attempt by the Irgun and resurfaced that same year in Cairo to continue his struggle against the Zionists.<sup>35</sup> But the Mufti totally misjudged the balance of forces between the Arabs and the Zionists, so that when the UN General Assembly passed the partition resolution on November 29, 1947, he, like other Arab leaders, rejected the resolution because it awarded the Zionists 55 percent of Palestine even though they owned only 7 percent, and 400,000 Palestinians would have found themselves a minority in the Jewish state. Given the 1946–1948 secret agreements between the

32. Foreign Office, 371/52585/E1984/515/31, F.O. minute, October 6, 1946.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Israel State Archives, RG79, box A/3061/February 1961; ISA 79/9/A3024.

35. Schechtman, *The Mufti*, p. 178.

Hashemites and the Zionists to divide Palestine between themselves, it is doubtful that even had al-Husayni and the Arab countries accepted the partition that Palestinian nationalists, such as the Mufti, would have been allowed to rule the Arab state.<sup>36</sup>

After the 1948 war, which created about 750,000 Palestinian refugees who left to escape war conditions or were forced out by Jewish terrorism and the Israel Defense Forces, Palestinian allegiance gradually shifted from al-Husayni to a Gamal Abdul Nasser, who promised them the liberation of Palestine. Al-Husayni resided in Cairo until 1959, after which he moved to Beirut, where he spent the rest of his life as an Islamic religious leader, working especially with the World Islamic Conference and as head of the Arab Higher Committee, publishers of the magazine *Filastin* (Palestine). Initially he refused to relinquish his leadership of the Palestinian movement to the PLO in 1964, but with the emergence of Yasir Arafat as chairman in 1969 he reconciled himself to, and cooperated with, the new leadership of Palestinian nationalists, though he was uneasy about their revolutionary ideology. Palestinian nationalists, on the other hand, viewed him with ambivalence, with many rejecting his traditionalism, his use of religion in politics, his tight and undemocratic leadership of the national movement, and his uncompromising policies and attitudes. But despite their reservations, they admired the Mufti's dedication, incorruptible character, and efforts on behalf of the Palestinian cause.

## CONCLUSION

Al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni's policies during both phases of his career were failures and unwittingly contributed to the dispossession of the Palestinians. During the first period, even though he understood the ominous threat of Zionism to Palestinian national existence, the Mufti cooperated with the British administration in Palestine and rejected methods of national self-defense at a time when such methods might have helped his cause. He opposed the Balfour policy, but only through such ineffective methods as petitions, delegations, and strikes. To that extent, he did help awaken the national spirit, but he did not mobilize the Palestinian masses for action. Palestinian and Zionist claims to the contrary, he did not lead a single act of political violence between 1918 and 1936. The three riots that occurred in the 1920s were spontaneous acts of violence that did not result in any sustained policy changes. The Mufti was largely quiescent, and the Yishuv had two crucial decades of growth, increasing from 50,000 in 1917 to 384,000 in 1936.

36. Central Zionist Archives, S25/9036 cited in Caplan, *Futile Diplomacy*, vol. II, pp. 268–271, and CZA, S25/4004, pp. 277–279. For Hashemite-Zionist contacts see the works of Mary Wilson and Avi Shlaim.

The Palestinians were considerably weakened after the Arab Revolt was put down by the British, but instead of prudently recognizing this reality and accepting the relatively favorable 1939 White Paper, or compromising with the Zionists, the Mufti shifted to a policy of active and futile opposition and rejection. In short, moderation during the Palestine phase and rejection during the exile phase contributed to the ultimate defeat of the Palestinians.

Yet the overriding factors that frustrated Palestinian nationalism have less to do with the policies and actions of a single leader than with the balance of forces. It was British policy, backed by British military might and by international (i.e., European) support for the British Mandate and for Zionist colonization, that was primarily responsible for providing the Yishuv time to grow, through immigration and land purchases, and time to establish quasi-governmental and military institutions. The Palestinians were a weak, underdeveloped, agrarian society and never a match for the British army nor, after 1939, for the Zionist forces. Their power to influence the destiny of Palestine was secondary to that of the other three parties with strategic and territorial interests in Palestine: the British, the Zionists, and the Hashemites.

In short, the ultimate cause of the Palestinian tragedy was a process that began with the Balfour promise to the Zionists in 1917 and ended in disaster for them in 1948. British and eventually Zionist and Hashemite policies, actions, and forces overwhelmed a weak society that had a traditional and ineffective leadership and organization.

In response to Rutenberg's suggestion of assassinating the Mufti, the head of the Eastern Department of the British Foreign Office wrote an observation that may apply to the Mufti's entire career: "He [Rutenberg] is mistaken in thinking that the disappearance of the Mufti would make any difference. The Mufti is merely the man thrown up by the moment. If he had not been on the scene, someone else would have played his part,"—and the political outcome would have been the same.<sup>37</sup>



37. Foreign Office, 371/24568/E2083/367/31, minutes of Baggaley, June 7, 1940.