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Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī, the “creation” of a leader

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Studi e ricerche

Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī – the «Grand Muftī of Jerusalem» – is often portrayed as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in the first part of XX century. Due to his collusion with Nazism, such a position implies that the Palestinian people are, at least in principle, responsible for their own tragic destiny. This study challenges that assumption and sheds light on how and why the Grand Muftī was imposed on the Palestinian people by London. Analyzing the rise to power of Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī and the means granted to him is crucial for understanding the ways through which the British authorities related to the local realities in post-World War I Palestine and to what extent these practices have marked the subsequent development of Palestinian society.

Introduction

There is an aspect in the historiographical debate on the almost three decades of the British Mandate in Palestine that still exerts a special interest. It revolves around one of the most controversial figures in the recent history of the Middle East: the «Grand Muftī of Jerusalem», otherwise known as the «Grand Muftī of Palestine» or «Grand Muftī of Jerusalem and the region of Palestine».

These functions are by now familiar to many, as is the name of the person who held this position between 1921 and '48, Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī (1895-1974), of-

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ten transliterated as Haj Amin al-Husseini. The latter imposed himself as a champion of the Palestinian cause until the 1940's, although his efforts were "soiled" by his collaborating and sympathizing with Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) and Nazism¹:

*Arab nationalists express their utmost gratitude to Your Excellency [Adolf Hitler] for having brought up the issue of Palestine on many occasions. [...] I take this opportunity to delegate my Private Secretary to the German Government in order that, in the name of the largest and strongest Arab organization and in my name, he can begin the negotiations required for sincere, loyal cooperation in all fields [...].*²

Al-Ḥusaynī's negative influence is today acknowledged almost universally, in the West as well in the Arab world [‘Abd al-Gham 1995, 326-334].³ He is often called «Hitler's Mufti» [Dalín and Rothman 2008] or «Hitler's Jihadist Stepchild» [Patterson 2011, 108], just to mention two recent books. However, already since a few decades, and peaking in the last one, a significant percentage of the studies produced on the subject has gradually moved beyond. One example among many is represented by «The Case for Israel». The latter, published in 2003 by Harvard jurist Alan Dershowitz, is often cited in academic works (over one hundred citations on Google Scholar) and represents one of the major international bestsellers published in recent years on the contemporary history of the Holy Land. In one of its main passages, aimed to demonstrate the argument that between the twenties and the forties of the last century al-Ḥusaynī was an acknowledged representative of the Palestinian people, Dershowitz strengthened his point of view by proposing

¹ The connivance of Hajj Amin with Nazism should be read in an anti-Zionist perspective, infused with anti-Semitic prejudices (he did not hesitate to cite on several occasions «The Protocols of the Elders of Zion»), as well as in anti-British outlook. His intransigence towards the Jews had deep roots. To them, according to various sources, Hajj Amin did not recognize, *inter alia*, the right to pray at the «Kotel Moravi» (Wailing Wall), but only to visit it, as the place was/is also holy to Muslims («al-Burāq ash-sharīf») [Kayyali 1968, 119-126]. Haim Gerber pointed out that there were numerous documents written by Zionist leaders in which the desire to demolish the buildings on the Temple Mount to make way for a new Jewish Temple buildings was clearly expressed. Alfred Mond (1868-1930) and other investigators also pronounced Zionist speeches of the same tenor: «It is in this light – Gerber clarified – that we may understand Amin Husayni's objection to any compromise with the Zionists over the Buraq/Wall» [Gerber 2008, 178].

² Al-Ḥusaynī to Hitler, 20 Jan. 1941. The following year al-Ḥusaynī congratulated the «Führer» for his victories in North Africa, speaking on behalf of the entire Arab world: «Das arabische Volk wird daher an Ihrer Seite gegen den gemeinsamen Feind bis [zum] endgültigen Sieg weiterkämpfen [The Arab people will continue to fight by his side against the common enemy until the final victory]». CZA L35/59-4. Berlin, 4 July 1942. The position of al-Ḥusaynī is even serious in view of the fact that he himself wrote in his private diary the intentions outlined by Hitler in the course of their meeting held on November 21st, 1941: «The objectives of my fight – Hitler noted – are clear. Primarily, I am fighting the Jews without respite [...] I am resolved to find a solution for the Jewish problem, progressing step by step without cessation». JMA – Box 7005 – Mishpacha Ḥusaynī («Ḥusaynī Family»).

³ Some isolated cases that go in the opposite direction to what was just claimed can be found in Jaddū 'Ubaydī and Nawfal 1985, 134-135 and Jarrar 1987, 218-236.

the following passage: «Even Professor Edward Said believes that [Dershowitz begins to quote Said] “Hajj Amin al-Hussaini represented the Palestinian Arab national consensus, had the backing of the Palestinian political parties that functioned in Palestine, and was recognized in some form by Arab governments as the voice of the Palestinian people”» [Dershowitz 2003, 56].⁴ Dershowitz expressed no doubts: Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī was «the official leader of the Palestinians».⁵ Dershowitz, although being well known in the academic world, is not a historian, and his writings are notoriously controversial as well as apologetic in regard to Israel. Nevertheless it would be a mistake to underestimate his thesis and confine them to a negligible circle of “provocateurs”. The consultation of any search engine confirms that through the publication of articles, illustrations and books, a very large number of scholars – some well, others less known – continues to convey similar messages: «The leader of the Palestinian Arabs (who were on the side of the Nazis), Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī, the Mufti of Jerusalem, spent the war in Berlin with his entourage where they broadcast Hitlerian propaganda to the entire Middle East» [Seltman 2010, 148; Sharan and Bukay 2010, 37].

The implications of such an analysis are obvious. As the «official leader» of the Palestinian people, the latter automatically become, at least in principle, responsible for their own destiny. In other words, the Palestinians have a moral debt to be served [Mallmann and Cüppers 2010, 14 and 43]. A moral debt before whom their historical claims should (or could) be read in a different light.

As will become clearer in the following pages, the interpretations just mentioned are highly questionable from a historical and political point of view. Nevertheless, the rise to power of Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī⁶ and the means granted to him remain needed tools for analyzing the way in which the authorities in London related to the local realities in the post-World War I and in order to comprehend to what extent these practices have marked the subsequent development of the Palestinian society.

⁴ David Meir-Levi went even further: «Edward Said praised al-Husseini, former partner with the Nazis in their crimes against humanity, as “the voice of the Palestinian people”» [Meir-Levi 2007, 12].

⁵ Dershowitz claimed the following: «The Palestinian leadership with the acquiescence of most of the Palestinian Arabs actively supported and assisted the Holocaust and Nazi Germany and bears considerable moral, political, and even legal culpability for the murder of many Jews» [Dershowitz 2003, 54].

⁶ Al-Ḥusaynī was responsible for the formation of the *Handschar*, a Nazi division created in collaboration with Heinrich Himmler (1900-1945) on Feb. 10, 1943. It consisted of Bosnian and Serbian Muslims, with the addition of a small minority (2800) of Catholic Croatians. The following is an excerpt from a speech given by al-Ḥusaynī to the division on 25 Jan. 1944: «Many common interests exist between the Islamic world and Greater Germany, and these make cooperation a matter of course». CZA – L35/59-2.

«Imperium in imperio»

For the purposes of this study it is not necessary to linger on an evaluation of the historical figure of Hajj Amīn.⁷ If only due to the fact that many historians have already scrutinized his strategies: he is a character that, although still relevant from an academic point of view, has been «condemned by history», as happened with all the historical figures colluded with Nazism.

Other matters are of interest in this context. The first one revolves around the position of «Grand Muftī of Palestine». The latter was in fact created “in the image and likeness” of the future British Mandatory power. The function of Muftī of Jerusalem was already known before His Majesty’s Government direct involvement in Palestine. However, it was clearly bound only by geographical and authority issues to the city of Jerusalem,⁸ which had reverted to an independent *mutasarriflik* (district) in 1864 and was required to report directly to Constantinople.⁹ Such role traditionally guaranteed prestige,¹⁰ due to the meaning attributed to the Holy City, but never power of one muftī over another one.

Under the direct British responsibility, the office went from a local (Jerusalem) to a decidedly wider sphere of influence (Palestine). In other words, what once was the muftī of Jerusalem became in the years following WWI the «Grand Muftī of Palestine», or «Grand Muftī of Jerusalem and the region of Palestine». Such change had among its consequences that of relegating all the other religious figures to marginal roles: «The British military administration – Elie Kedourie (1926–1992) remarked – must have found it inconvenient in many ways to deal with this, so to speak, acephalous society, and hit upon the idea of considering the mufti of Jerusalem as the head of the Muslim community in Palestine and of giving him the title of Grand Mufti» [Kedourie 1984, 58].

It is in the aforementioned context that should be seen the decision of His Maje-

⁷ Edgal Ansel Mowrer (1892–1977) noted that «in truth he [Hajj Amīn] is no Husseinī. An undistinguished ancestor called el-Aswad (“the Black” – from the Yemenite origin of the family), living in the village of Deir Sudan in Palestine, married a Husseinī woman. Against all Moslem custom, the el-Aswads first added the genteel “Husseinī” to their name and then gradually dropped the “el-Aswad” that betrayed their menial origin». CZA L35/59-5.

⁸ As noted by Mattar, «the mufti of Jerusalem remained subordinated to Shaykh al-Islam in Istanbul, and restricted in jurisdiction to Jerusalem until the British occupation of Palestine in 1917-18» [Mattar 1988, 22].

⁹ Many Ottoman dispatches indicate 1872 as the year in which Jerusalem was actually subject to a «müstakil idaresi» («self-government»). BOA A.MKT.MHM 443/82 1289.L.14 (15 Dec. 1872).

¹⁰ From time to time the charge was listed under the name of *Muftī al-Diyār al-Qudsīyya* («Muftī of the Holy Land»), a testimony of its recognized importance. However, in these isolated cases as well, it did not imply an overwhelming role in relation to other religious figures active in the region.

sty's authorities to guarantee to the «Grand Muftī» a much higher salary than that paid to his counterparts in the other cities of the region as well as to the muftīs of the Ottoman era. According to functionaries in London, motivated purely by convenience, «the Mufti of Jerusalem is generally regarded as the Head of the Moslem Community in Palestine».¹¹ For such reason, as the Governor of Jerusalem Ronald Storrs (1881-1955) noted, given that the Bishop of London received more money than the one in Chichester, it should have followed that the muftī of Jerusalem could count on a higher salary than the muftīs in other cities of the region: «Seeing Palestine through a British prism – Efrat Ben-Ze'ev pointed out – may be termed anglicization» [Ben-Ze'ev 2011, 30].

The role conferred on the new office was therefore in many ways at odds with Islamic tradition. Even extending the analysis to include other offices in Islam, the contrast is evident. Islamic jurisprudence specifies, for example, that the *qāḍī* (judge) and the muftī shall have complementary roles: the *qāḍī* judges, whereas the muftī counsels. However, it is common knowledge that the opinion of the latter is not binding on the former, just as we know that in the Ottoman Empire the *qāḍī* held a prominent position. In spite of this, the British Government reorganized the entire system, triggering a mechanism that Rashīd Khālīdī explained as follows:

In the Ottoman and every other Islamic system, the post of mufti was always clearly subordinate in power and prestige to that of the qadi (or judge). The qadi was appointed by the Ottoman state from the ranks of the official Ottoman religious establishment, and almost never came from a local family. The mufti, as well as the qadi's deputy, the na'ib, who was also chief secretary of the shari'a court, were by contrast always local officials. This existing system was completely restructured by the British, who effectively placed the mufti above all other religious officials in Palestine [Khalidī in Shlaim and Rogan 2001, 22].

The position of muftī of Palestine, conferred on Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī by means of a simple oral communication [Arnon-Ohanna 1981, 38-40 and Elath 1968, 26-35] on May 8, 1921, had an impact that was anything but marginal.¹² Yet the reader will have noticed that at the beginning of this chapter reference was made

¹¹ ISA – RG2 10/12-M. E.T. Richmond (1874–1955). Jerusalem, 20 Oct., 1921.

¹² An editorial published the same month and headed «About the speech of Herbert Samuel» complained that «we are really not sure» about the actions and the words of the High Commissioner, concluding that «we are starting to feel deeply paranoid in our hearts». MDC – «Filastīn», 29 May 1921. It is interesting to note that such feelings were in strong contrast with the sensations expressed in that same historical phase by Samuel himself: «The state of Palestine continues quite tranquil – Samuel wrote on September 12th, 1920 – and there is a marked tendency towards better feeling among the various sections of the people». ISA – 649/7-P.

to another “function” usually associated with the name of Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī, that is the one of «Grand Muftī” (*al-muftī al-akbar*). This also – resulting from an atavistic desire to interpret the reality of the place with a *forma mentis* more familiar to the European context – was a creation introduced *ex-novo* by London. Specifically, the addition of the suffix «Grand» before the title of muftī, perhaps inspired by a precedent recorded in Egypt, was thought up by the government of His Majesty to underline the same preponderance that, as we have seen, was in many ways contrary to Islamic tradition.

This additional new “title” was coined as early as 1919, therefore two years before Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī took office. By means of this addition the British Government aimed to reward Kāmil al-Ḥusaynī (1867-1921), Hajj Amīn’s stepbrother and muftī of Jerusalem from 1908 to 1921, for his conduct [Khadduri 1973, 137]. It was in fact the entire Ḥusaynī *hamula*, or a large section of it, to be invested with «a plethora of offices and titles without precedent in Palestinian history» [Cohen 1987, 69]. More specifically, Kāmil al-Ḥusaynī had to be rewarded for proving to London that he was reliable. This is precisely why the Ottoman authorities fought hard (unsuccessfully) to have him removed from office during the First World War. In the eyes of the Porte the charge was one of the most incriminating: collaborating with the British and the Zionists.¹³

Although also Kāmil had therefore the opportunity to enjoy a position which had no precedent in the history of the region, as well as in almost any corner of the Islamic world, his prestige and coercive power over the local population were never in any way comparable with those of his successor. After the election of Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī, which we will see was anything but standard, further instruments of power were offered to him. The improvised leader used them to reward his supporters¹⁴ and for posing himself as the “defender” of holy Islamic sites present on the spot. And even more often, for repressing anyone who attempted to oppose his plans.

This applies, for example, to the creation of the Supreme Muslim Council (*al-*

¹³ An important meeting between Kāmil al-Ḥusaynī and the future first president of the State of Israel, Chaim Weizmann (1874-1952), who on the occasion stated that his objective was not «to found something that looks like a Jewish state or a Jewish government at the end of the [First World] War», took place on 22 April 1918. The same year Kāmil al-Ḥusaynī participated also in the ceremony to lay the first stone for the Hebrew University, when «over 10.000 persons, including local inhabitants» were present. CHIR 13/22/6,2/40.

¹⁴ One of the many documents that over the years denounced this conduct was signed by Muhammad Khulusi, President of the *Moslem Youth Association* of Gaza. In a letter mailed on 9 Feb. 1933 to the British High Commissioner, he complained that the SMC «is still influenced in its activities by partisan inclinations. It has recently appointed an inefficient and unqualified person, who was known for his misconduct during the seven years he was headmaster of a national school as Mamour of Awqaf». ISA 293/3-M.

Majlis al-Islami al-A'ala; SMC), a body for which there was no precedent in the history of the region nor, because of its numerous ramifications, in the history of Islam. It was formed at the end of twelve months' "incubation"¹⁵ on December 20, 1921; therefore, as in the case of the appointment of Hajj Amīn, before the League of Nations actually granted Great Britain the mandate of Palestine. It was founded by Herbert Samuel, the first British High Commissioner for Palestine, a figure greatly disliked by the Palestinian population for his Zionist "leanings" as well as for his Jewish origins: «The appointment of Sir Herbert Samuel [as British High Commissioner] – wrote 'Āref al-'Āref (1891–1973) – one of the Zionist leaders, as High Commissioner for Palestine, is of great interest for the Arab nation and deeply significant for the inhabitants of the region who since the beginning of the occupation have continued to declare that they refuse to entrust their business to greedy foreigners».¹⁶

The new body was to provide a degree of representational autonomy to the local Muslim majority¹⁷ so as to balance the institutions accorded by London to the Zionist counterpart and to stop a growing discontent: «We have no means – protested Abdallah Sa'id El-Danaf and Abdel Rahman El-Danaf in August 1921 – to obtain our rights as long as the Justice of the British Government rules».¹⁸ In addition to this the British authorities needed an «imperium in imperio»,¹⁹ that is, a sort of «government within the government» with which to interact. However, as was predictable in a context marked by obvious power vacuums and the absence of any sort of legitimate representation, it soon acquired such an overpowering role that the results of this did not take long to make themselves felt: «The present administration of Palestine – lamented the representatives of the Palestine Arab Delegation in a letter to British public opinion in 1930 – is appointed by His Majesty's Government and governs the country through an autocratic system in

¹⁵ On Nov. 9, 1920 a meeting was organized at the British Headquarters in Jerusalem to discuss the matter. Kāmil al-Ḥusaynī and seven other Muslim representatives were invited and Samuel, Storrs and six other British officials were present. Yet again, the authorities in London decided who the eight representatives would be, not the Palestinians. But Samuel had no doubts, «That the members of the Conference fully represented Moslem opinion is unquestionable». ISA – 649/7-P. Samuel to Curzon (1859–1925), 14 Nov., 1920.

¹⁶ ISA – RG2 1/7. 25 Jun., 1920.

¹⁷ «The Mandatory authorities chose to deal with the Palestinian Arabs not as Arabs but as Muslims [...] the "Muslims" did not so much want a Supreme Muslim Council as much as they wanted a representative government» [Ghandour 2010, 131].

¹⁸ CHIR – 13/21/6, 1/40. Abdallah Sa'id El-Danaf and Abdel Rahman Rashid El-Danaf («servants of the Holy Rock» of Jerusalem) a Wyndham Deedes. Jerusalem, 10 Aug., 1921.

¹⁹ An expression used by the Peel Commission in 1937 to refer to the Jewish Agency and the SMC.

which the population has no say».²⁰

More precisely, the SMC, legally bound to the mandatory power, permitted to the person appointed by Samuel, Hajj Amīn himself, to preside over it,²¹ and to oversee *sine die* the control of the enormous flows of funds from Islamic public donations (the public *awqaf*).²² The latter, which were quantifiable when Hajj Amīn took office in 100.000 British sterling per year, had previously been supervised by Constantinople. However, as noted already in 1935 by the London scholar Beatrice Erskine (1860-1948), resident in Haifa during the years of the Mandate, with the introduction of the new body those resources became completely uncontrollable:

The head office of the Wakf, or Religious Bequests, was in Istanbul in Turkish times, and the great wealth attached to it was administrated there under Government supervision. After the [First World] War the British Government handed over the funds to the Moslems free of all control, and instituted the Moslem Supreme Council [...]. [It] manages eighteen religious courts, with a staff of two hundred and fifty assistants; superintends six wakf departments, in which five hundred and ninety-two men are employed; controls ten schools and a theological college, having a total of one thousand six hundred and fifty students [Erskine 1935, 160].

Beside being able to dispose of enormous sums of money at his own discretion, the new office enabled al-Ḥusaynī to propose and elect judges, local muftīs and the administrators of the *waqf* (sing. of *awqāf*), and to lay off and hire functionaries in the Sharī'ah Court.²³ All these positions were distributed by the neo *ra'is al-'ulamā* («head of Muslim scholars»)²⁴ to people he deemed unconditionally loyal to him: «Many petitions and complaints – read an official protest sent from

²⁰ ISA – RG65 1054/1-P. Protest signed by the *Palestine Arab Delegation* on 19 May 1930.

²¹ The term “appointment” is to be preferred to the term “election”, although Hajj Amīn never missed an opportunity to remind that «the President [he himself] was elected by Muslim representatives and was not appointed» (ISA 195/18M. 26 May, 1936). Hajj Amīn was “elected” on 9 Jan., 1922 – according to the wishes and with the endorsement of Herbert Samuel – by 56 ex grand electors of the last Ottoman parliament. It is interesting to note that as early as on 24 August 1921, when those same 56 local notables were invited by Samuel to discuss the issue at the Government House, «Hajj Amīn was named as their leader» [Jabārah 1985, 47]. This confirms that, as Uri Kupferschmidt remarked, «Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī's election as *Ra'is al-'Ulamā* was a foregone conclusion since he already held the position of *al-Muftī al-Akbar*» [Kupferschmidt 1987, 20].

²² From the dispatches of British functionaries it appears that they believed it possible, if not probable, that Hajj Amīn would be chosen for President of the SMC. ISA – RGW 10/12-M.

²³ The attempt to deprive Hajj Amīn of the control of the Sharī'ah Court became the main focus of the efforts of the Nashāshībī clan over time. TNA – CO 733/222/7. A.G. Wauchope to P. Culiffe-Lister, Jan. 30, 1932.

²⁴ This was an additional title “granted” to Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī. Although it is true that starting from the XVII century various *'ulamā* were called – due to their acknowledged authority – «*ra'is al-'ulamā*», it is also true that such a “title” never obtained any official recognition [al-Muḥibbī 1966, 43-44].

Hebron and signed by several local sheiks – were submitted by the inhabitants of Palestine to the [British] Secretariat against the President of the Supreme Muslim Council [Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī] and the improper manner in which he administers the Awqaf, Orphan funds and the Sharia Courts. [British] Government's reply to the majority of such petitions was that it cannot interfere with Waqf and Sharia affairs. Such policy cannot be concealed from ignorant people (Shepherds) as Government has actually interfered with the Supreme Moslem Council, by appointing the members of the Council. Such an attitude is, indeed, inconsistent with the terms of the Palestine Mandate and casts reflection on the administration of a civilized power, such as Great Britain». ²⁵

The unprecedented Council – whose influence helped, between 1921 and 1929, to keep a period of relative calm in Palestine [Pappé 2011, 222] – basically became a mere tool used to cement the status of the «Grand Muftī» himself. Thus the religious power of Hajj Amīn achieved unchallenged political supremacy in Palestinian society, preventing and impeding it from forming its own national representational institutions and also playing a decisive role in the balance between Christian Palestinians and Muslim Palestinians.

Not only the local Muslim population paid a price for the decision to centralize all the Islamic institutions in Palestine under the authority of Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī; the Christian population did as well. Although the latter had always been a segregated minority, in the years immediately following the fall of the Ottoman Empire (1917) it had gradually acquired a more central role. In fact, it was considered a “natural bridge” to Europe in an era when the Old Continent was the political centre for all decisions concerning Palestine. As evidence of the renewed focus on the Arab Christians and the desire to concentrate on a “balance” between the two religions, the first of a long series of Muslim-Christian associations, *al-Jam'īya al-Ahlīya* («Local Association») was created at Jaffa. In June 1918 it was re-baptized in Jerusalem with the name *al-Jam'īya al-Islāmīya al-Masīḥīya* («Muslim-Christian Association»), and adopted as its symbol a flag with the cross and the half-moon held by a woman wearing the traditional black veil (*ḥijāb*). The purpose was to underline that the Palestinian struggle in those years was not limited solely to the efforts of Muslims or men. The movement, deemed essential in order to oppose the Zionist threat effectively, immediately

²⁵ ISA – 293/3-M. Hebron, 5 Feb. 1934. The dispatch, sent to the then High Commissioner Wauchope was signed by Tawfiq Tahhub, Hajj Mohammad Badr and others. Two years before 17 local notables had written to the British authorities denouncing that Hajj Amīn «had appointed 25 persons, all members of his family, at different posts, thus putting at their disposal the revenues of the Moslem Wakfs as well as our own ones which they conjointly spent for their personal upkeep». ISA – 293/3-M. Jerusalem, 11 Aug. 1932.

became so popular that many organizations with the same name were formed in Nablus and other cities as well. Most of the leaders of this movement, one of whom was the Greek Orthodox intellectual Khalīl Sakānīnī, were careful to avoid any explicit definition of Arab nationalism in Islamic terms. The SMC and the powers awarded to Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī were a deciding factor that relegated Christians to a minority status again; it was no coincidence that from 1922 on local leaders appealed increasingly frequently to the religious sentiment of ordinary people.

The «Grand Muftī» of Great Britain?

On May 9, 1921, the day after the appointment of Hajj Amīn to the position of «Gran Muftī di Palestina», a crowd of *mukhtar* (village leaders) and notables from villages near Jerusalem brought the following considerations to the attention of the British High Commissioner Herbert Samuel:

Your Excellence is no doubt aware that every Moslem is individually interested in the Muftiship. That is why we see all Moslems turning their eyes towards this exalted position. The Muftiship is in great need of a man with proper legal qualifications, because the occupier of this position will be the final authority to any good ideal, to learning and scholarship.

Your Excellency, this position is not hereditary but is conferred upon competent people and preference is given to him that is most learned. The Government is certainly anxious to give positions to people who are worthy of them. We therefore beg to request you to look into the matter and not to pay attention to whatever intrigues that are made by interested people who wished to subvert the legal elections held.²⁶

Although, as stressed by the mukhtars, the «Muftīship» was not hereditary, immediately after the death (March 31, 1921) of his stepbrother Kāmil al-Ḥusaynī, Hajj Amīn began growing a beard, wearing a 'amamah (turban) and conducting himself as though the position was already his. This attitude was first of all the result of what the High Commissioner Herbert Samuel had implied to him from the beginning: that he would be the next muftī.²⁷ But it was also the result of a

²⁶ ISA – RG2 10/12-M. The letter was signed among others by Samara Abu Kias and Mohamed Sa'īd Mohamed.

²⁷ «When I was mourning over my brother Kamil, – Hajj Amīn reminisced subsequently – Sir Samuel visited us [...] and I asked him whom do you prefer, a candid adversary [i.e. he himself] or a renegade friend [the legitimate winner Jārāllah]? He answered 'a candid adversary' and on the basis of that came my appointment as the Mufti of Jerusalem» [Taggar 1936, 23].

well-planned family strategy. During that period in history the Ḥusaynī clan had in fact already dismissed the possibility of supporting two other legitimate candidates. That of Fakrī al-Ḥusaynī, younger brother of Hajj Amīn who – by an irony of destiny – was set aside because he was not considered an *‘ālim* (a scholar of religious matters). And that of Tahir al-Ḥusaynī, the eldest of the four children of the «Grand Muftī» Kāmil al-Ḥusaynī, who, although very determined to succeed his father, was impeded from doing so by his family who perceived him as «eccentric» and «authoritarian».

Independently of Hajj Amīn’s attitude and the available options, in order to be appointed to the aforementioned office it was necessary to obtain approval from Samuel, who had arrived in Palestine on the first of July of 1920. Samuel had in fact inherited the authority of *mutasarrif* (governor) of Jerusalem, who, according to Ottoman law, could select the muftī from a list of three candidates chosen by a council consisting of *‘ulamā*, *imam* and local notables. In reality the election was anything but regular; not only because from the beginning it was obvious that the other candidates had greatly superior experience and education than the then 26-year-old Hajj Amīn, but above all because he did not obtain the necessary votes. In fact, he was last with 9 votes, in a shortlist that contrary to established tradition consisted of four candidates. Basically, he should have been automatically excluded from the competition.²⁸

Hussam al-Dīn Jārāllāh (1884-1954), the candidate who had obtained the greatest number of votes (19) and enjoyed the support of the majority of the *‘ulamā* of Jerusalem and the *Mu’aridun* (the opposition to the Ḥusaynī embodied by the Nashāshībī clan, who enjoyed wide consent «amongst Moslems of moderate political view»),²⁹ was, however, “convinced” by Herbert Samuel to withdraw and was later on rewarded with prestigious appointments. The second most voted (17 votes), Khalīl al-Khālīdī (1863-1941), a man of acknowledged experience who immediately after the death of Kāmil al-Ḥusaynī had acted as muftī while the position was vacant, was one of the many who objected unsuccessfully to the British strategies. The forced withdrawal of Hussam al-Dīn Jārāllāh in fact allowed Hajj Amīn to be included anew in the shortlist of the three candidates

²⁸ The supporters of the Ḥusaynī clan started a tough campaign to oppose to the elections’ result: «A meeting was held last night at the house of Jamil Bey al Husseini and was attended by a large number of Ulamas and notables. The election of Grand Mufti [the reference is to the legitimate winner Jārāllāh] was contested on the ground that all Moslems had not cast their votes. It was decided to organise a deputation of townspeople and villagers, representing all classes of the Moslem Population to call on the High Commissioner and protest against the election». ISA – RG2 10/12-M. Document produced by the British authorities on April 15, 1921.

²⁹ TNA – CO 733/222/7. Wauchope to Culiffe-Lister, 30 Jan., 1932.

permitted (third place had gone to the *sheikh* Mūsā al-Budairi, with 12 votes), and he was selected shortly afterwards by the High Commissioner to hold the coveted office.³⁰ The repêchage was, therefore, the result of planned, self-serving manipulation, surely facilitated by the predictable strategies contrived by the Ḥusaynī clan to boycott the result of the elections.

From an “external” viewpoint, the decision to support Hajj Amīn could cause considerable perplexity; if for no other reason than the fact that he had been sentenced in absentia to ten years in prison by a British military tribunal because of the active role he had played in the bloody uprisings that broke out in Jerusalem in 1920, during which five Jews were killed and many others were wounded. It was only thanks to an amnesty Samuel granted him at the behest of the Governor of Jerusalem, Ronald Storrs, that Hajj Amīn was able to return to Palestine from the country where he had chosen to seek refuge (today’s Jordan). It should be noted that also in this case several Palestinians objected to the choice.³¹

From an “internal” viewpoint, like that of the local population, the British insistence on proceeding with this appointment could appear – at least to people not directly involved in the matter – even more questionable. It will suffice to mention that, despite having spent some time studying³² at the *Dar al-Da‘wa wa al-Irshad* («House of prayers and guidance») in Cairo under the influential guidance of Rashīd Ridā (1865-1935) and before that, receiving a basic education at two schools in Jerusalem – *rushdiyya*, or primary school, and *i‘dadiyya*, secondary school – Hajj Amīn never completed a programme of religious studies at any institute: «The President of the Supreme Moslem Council – admonished one of the countless protests received over the years by the British – does not possess the necessary religious qualifications which will qualify him to hold this office».³³ The protests were in no way unfounded. Indeed, Hajj Amīn never earned a diploma of any kind: «The only religious qualification that he achieved in his life – underlined the ambassador Zvi Elpeleg, author of the best known biography of the

³⁰ From the dispatches of British functionaries it appears that they believed it possible, if not probable, that Hajj Amīn would be chosen for President of the Supreme Muslim Council. See the dispatches dated October 1921 in the ISA file – RGW 10/12-M.

³¹ Al-Ḥusaynī visiting a village in Galilee on 23 Apr., 1947. Source: IDFA.

³² According to sources in the CZA, Hajj Amīn studied in Cairo for «only one year». CZA – S25/10499. During this time he attended some courses at the al-Azhar University as well.

³³ ISA – 293/3-M. The letter, signed by a series of local notables, does not bear a date; however, from the content it appears that it refers to the early Thirties. It continues with these words: «Even at the previous elections he [Hajj Amīn] failed to obtain the necessary votes and was appointed as a head of this Moslem institution without any lawful justification although Moslem religion does not allow of the appointment of such person as a spiritual head».



Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī visiting a village in Galilee on 23 April 1947. Source of the photo: Israel Defence Forces Archives.

muftī – was that of *Ḥāḡḡī* [pilgrim], which any Muslim who goes to the Mecca is entitled to [he went in 1913]. The truth of the matter is, political considerations were given precedence over considerations of a religious nature».³⁴

From the beginning of his political career Hajj Amīn, who was therefore neither a *sheikh* (an accredited religious leader) nor an *‘ālim* (a scholar of religious matters), was regarded with suspicion by a large segment of Palestinian society. This distrust was traceable early on within the clan of the Ḥusaynī themselves and their supporters (known as *Majlisiyyūn*), who feared the exuberance of the young Amīn’ and were aware that even within their own family there were candidates who were more suitable (or less ill-suited) to hold the position of muftī. But the diffidence that the future «Grand Muftī» soon aroused in ordinary people³⁵ and in some of the local “notables” was far more meaningful. In this regard it is worth noting a dispatch sent on May 13, 1921 by Captain Chisholm Dunbar Brunton

³⁴ Interview with the author. Tel Aviv, 16 May, 2010. During the meeting with Elpeleg, at the ambassador’s residence (he served in Turkey from 1995 to 1997), he referred several times to the concept of an «Arab mentality»: «If you are familiar with the concept of *taqiyya* – the Ambassador explained – you know what the Arab mentality is like. They are in the habit of concealing their real opinions. Usually the concept of *taqiyya* is applicable when a grave and imminent risk to someone’s personal safety and faith exists. To avoid an obvious danger, caused by their religious beliefs, they are ready to dissimulate all their opinions. They bow their heads until the “tide has changed”. Then they take action and reveal their real intentions». *Ibid.*

³⁵ Among the population’s protests that were sent to the British authorities over the years denouncing Hajj Amīn’s conduct, some bore thousands of signatures. The weekly paper «al-Karmil» («The Carmel») for example, contained a protest signed by 1500 people. MDC – «al-Karmil», 5 Sep., 1925.

(1887-?) reporting to the «General Staff Intelligence» stationed in Palestine:

In Jerusalem the chief topic of interest has been the election of the New Mufti [Hajj Amīn]; opinion has been divided as to who should succeed Kāmil Effendi al-Ḥusaynī [...] Learned opinion, represented by the Law Courts, has not favoured the popular candidate al Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī.³⁶

Among the «learned opinions» referred to by Brunton, that of the qāḍī of Jerusalem, Muhammad Abu S'ud el 'Uri stood out especially. In December 1921 he protested vociferously with the British authorities. In his view Ḥusaynī «was not worthy» of holding the offices assigned to him by the mandatory power. At most, suggested the qāḍī, it would have been better if London had managed Islamic affairs directly.

All of the above obviously does not mean that the British authorities didn't receive many petitions in favour of Hajj Amīn's candidacy. In fact, it is common knowledge that a minority considered him a sort of hero by virtue of the role he had played in the aforementioned protests in the 20's, when he appeared to be the first leader up to challenging both the Jews and the British. It has been even more clearly ascertained that the powerful Ḥusaynī clan launched a massive campaign to have imams, qāḍīs, mukhtars and Bedouin sheiks speak up in favour of electing the «chosen one». It was no coincidence that telegrams received by the British authorities in March and April 1921 in support of Hajj Amīn were in many cases not signed by ordinary people; a large percentage of them came from 'ulamas, imams and well-known notables who were often closely involved with the Ḥusaynī family.³⁷

To suppose that the British authorities distorted the outcome of the elections for fear of alienating that part of the local populace would mean to interpret history superficially. Otherwise it is difficult to explain why they didn't show the same qualms when imposing other strategies – for example the Balfour Declaration, or immigration policies – which, unlike the legitimate appointment of Hussam al-Din Jārāllah, were objected to by almost the entire Palestinian society: «I was responsible – Herbert Samuel proudly clarified in the House of Lords on December 8, 1938 – for his [Hajj Amīn] appointment, and, looking back over the

³⁶ TNA – CO 33/13.

³⁷ The following is just one of many examples: «We Moslems of Jerusalem [...] – as it is argued in a letter sent among others by Abdul Rahman El Alami – have elected Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī [...] as Mufti of Jerusalem, as he is a descendant of a well known family and enjoys a very good reputation». ISA RG2 10/12-M. As well as Abdul Rahman El Alami, who belonged to a family related to the Ḥusaynī by the marriage of Nimati El Alami (sister of Musa El Alami; 1897–1984) with Jamal al-Ḥusaynī (1893-1982), the document, dated 21 March 1921, was signed by «150 others».

circumstances of the case, I have no doubt that the appointment was a right one» [House of Lords official report 1939, 426].³⁸

The reason for an appointment

There are obviously many reasons why the British authorities embarked on the solution of appointing Hajj Amīn. Two of them turned out to be decisive.

The first was traceable to subjective assessments expressed by the High Commissioner Herbert Samuel and the Governor of Jerusalem Ronald Storrs following several meetings – some of which were attended by two diehard Zionists such as Norman Bentwitch (1883-1971), legal consultant to His Majesty's government and a family member of Samuel's, and Wyndham Deedes (1883-1956), Samuel's principle secretary – held with Hajj Amīn just before the "elections". During one of them, held on April 9, 1921, he not only impressed them with his charisma, but also appeared to be reliable as to his promise to use the prestige of his clan to further the interests of the mandatory power which, only 15 years earlier, had labeled him a «deep-seated enemy of Great Britain».³⁹ On April 11, 1921 Samuel summed up the crucial meeting with the following words:

*I saw Haj Amin Husseini on Friday and discussed with him, at considerable length, the political situation and the question of his appointment to the office of Grand Mufti. Mr. Storrs was also present. In the course of conversation, he declared his earnest desire to co-operate with the Government, and his belief in the good intentions of the British Government towards the Arabs. He gave assurances that the influence of his family and himself would be devoted to maintaining tranquillity in Jerusalem.*⁴⁰

On the one hand Samuel – and even more so Storrs and the aforementioned Ernst Richmond (Councillor for Arab Affairs) – were persuaded that they would be able to manage a young man like Hajj Amīn fairly easily. Besides being «blackmailable»,⁴¹ he had little experience and preparation. On the other hand, an

³⁸ The quotation just mentioned would seem to exclude the theory expressed by Zuhayr Mardini, according to whom Samuel also thought that Hajj Amīn was too young for the office of «Grand Mufti». Z. Mardini, *Alf Yawm Ma'a al-Haj Amin* [One Thousand Days with Hajj Amīn], al-'Irfan, Beirut 1980, 44.

³⁹ CZA – L35/50-1. William Ormsby-Gore (1885–1964). House of Lords, 8 Dec., 1938.

⁴⁰ ISA – RG100 649/8-P.

⁴¹ «Samuel was presumably convinced that a man who had a bad record due to the 1920 demonstrations would remain on good terms with the British officials» [Jabārah 1985, 44].

agreement was reached which implicitly established that the Ḥusaynī clan would not impede the mandatory power's designs, and would in return receive power and unprecedented status.

But beyond these considerations, the choice was motivated by underlying political factors. In Palestine the "divide and conquer" strategy represented, as it did in a large portion of the British colonial empire, one of the cornerstones on which to base the mandatory government's hegemony. Fomenting discord among great local family clans, who were often unaware that they simplified strategies for London, became a valuable instrument for control. Very soon great *hamulas* such as the Ḥusaynī, Nashāshībī, Khālidī, Dajānī, Nusseībeh and the Jārāllah found themselves competing against each other for the favour of the British leaders.

The decision to bet on Hajj Amīn was part of this approach. In particular, it was in the best interest of His Majesty's authorities to maintain the balance between the major Palestinian families of Jerusalem: the Ḥusaynī and the Nashāshībī. Mūsā Kāzim al-Ḥusaynī (1850-1934), oldest member of the Ḥusaynī clan and the main source of worry for London, had been removed from the office of Mayor of Jerusalem by Storrs following the clashes that occurred in the city in 1920; this decision had weakened the Ḥusaynī clan considerably.⁴² Rāghib al-Nashāshībī was installed in his place, to the great relief of the local Jewish community.⁴³ The result of this appointment was that it became necessary to balance the power held by the various factions, so that the Palestinian community's sphere of action would be «circumscribed by British interests and policies» [Milton-Edwards 1999, 25]. In his *The Iron Cage*, Rashid Khālidī went so far as to maintain that the appointment of Hajj Amīn was a strategy to undermine the legitimacy of Mūsā Kāzim and foment a lesser version of the divide and conquer strategy within his family itself. His theory is plausible, although debatable. There can be no doubt, however, as to the scars left by this method of exercising power over the local populace during the following decades: «The British – explained Manuel Hassassian – exploited almost every aspect of the demographic and social cleavages existing in Palestine. They encouraged the establishment of "peasant" type of political par-

⁴² Although it continued to be very influential, the Ḥusaynī clan was weakened after Mūsā Kāzim was removed. In addition, other members of the same family lost some important positions during the same phase. One of them was Hajj Amīn's uncle, Sa'īd al-Ḥusaynī, who had to resign from the office of Minister of Foreign Affairs, which he obtained for a short while under King Fayṣal.

⁴³ Already in 1918 Vladimir Jabotinskij (1880-1940) wrote to Weizmann that «this Mayor [Mūsā Kāzim] proved to be not a neutral but a militant. Just try to imagine what would have happened if a Jewish Mayor, mutatis mutandis, appointed by the British to keep peace and represent all races, had acted in an analogous way against Moslems». JIA – Mictavim [letters], n. 2, 1914-1919. Jabotinsky to Weizmann, 12 Nov., 1918.

ties hoping such political organizations would prevent the union of the rural and urban elites into what might become a viable and genuine national movement» [Hassassian in Scham 2005, 97].

Towards a «New Palestinian Historiography»

Ironically, the passage from which Alan Dershowitz extrapolated the sentences of Edward Said, quoted at the beginning of this article, comes from a book called, «Blaming the victims». At this stage of the present analysis it is appropriate to clarify that that quote was the result of manipulation. Said's opinion has been distorted to support a theory that he would not have agreed with: «This committee [the Arab Higher Committee], – this is the complete sentence written by Said – chaired by Palestine's national leader, Hajj Amin al-Hussaini, represented the Palestinian Arab national consensus, had the backing of the Palestinian political parties that functioned in Palestine, and was recognized in some form by Arab governments as the voice of the Palestinian people» [Said and Hitchens 1988, 248].

The subject of the sentence, therefore, was the *Arab Higher Committee*, not Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī. The Arab Higher Committee, created in 1936 without an election and with «shallow roots among the population» (Uri Avnery dixit), represented «the political voice of the Palestinian people» to a limited extent, inasmuch as it was composed of representatives from several local families (Ḥusaynī, Khālīdī, Nashāshībī, Ghusayn, Hādī, Salāḥ and others). If Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī, who not coincidentally was the mind behind the initiative, was elected to lead this committee, it was only thanks to the aspects analyzed in this article. At that point, no other leader would have had the strength and political weight required to oppose such a choice or aspire to that office.

Regardless of its «error of form», or perhaps precisely because of it, the quote from Alan Dershowitz is in any case important to the extent that it pinpoints a gap that, despite some attempts, has still to be filled.

Today dozens of studies continue to put forward inconsistent historical factors in an attempt to portray Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī as a «natural representative» of the Palestinian people. One of the more blatant aims for example to “prove” this theory by underlining the fact that in September 1948 he was appointed president of the new created *All Palestine Government*. Any expert in the subject matter, however, can easily demolish that argument by explaining that the All Palestine Government was nothing but an Egyptian initiative to frustrate the ambitions of

King Abdullah of Transjordan (1882-1951): «It was – in the words of Moshe Ma'oz – a mere tool to justify Cairo's occupation of the Gaza Strip. Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī and his clan were instrumental for the purpose».⁴⁴

It was the British Government that considered Hajj Amīn to be «the official representative of the Palestinian population» [Porath 1974, 202], not the majority of the local population. If this historical figure – imposed upon the natives – managed over the years to acquire increasing power within Palestinian society⁴⁵ by using power and violence, it was due to growing political worries about the present and future of Palestine, and even more to many years of uninterrupted use of the functions and “instruments” granted him. Functions and “instruments” that had little or nothing to do with the traditions and desires of the Palestinian people: «Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī was definitely a product of the West – declared the Palestinian intellectual Sari Nusseibeh – but if we think about it all of us here in this land [Palestine/Israel] are in some fashion a product of the West; that is, a product of how the West perceived us. What we need today is to see the birth of a “new Palestinian historiography” that critically analyzes controversial protagonists such as Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī from a Palestinian point of view».⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Interview with the author. Jerusalem, Truman Institute, 7 Jun., 2010.

⁴⁵ For some people, as Sheikh Faiq Al Ansari, Hajj Amīn was «[our] sole leader». ISA 295/27-M, 20 May, 1939.

⁴⁶ Interview with the author. Jerusalem, al-Quds University, 5 Jun., 2010.

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