



Mufti 1

No. 5880

[Airmailed January 1952]

1,500 words

For Publication on or after February 18.

£.2.52.

DECLASSIFIED AND RELEASED BY  
CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
SOURCE METHOD EXEMPTION 3B2B  
NAZI WAR CRIMES DISCLOSURE ACT  
DATE 2006

THE EX-MUFTI OF JERUSALEM: A LEGEND THAT IS  
LOSING ITS FORCE.

PL

FROM: ROBERT STEPHENS.

Beirut.....

Although the Middle East from the NILE to the CASPIAN, is now convulsed by nationalist agitation, nations in the Western sense are something new to this area, a political invention copied from EUROPE. Until quite recent times, the Middle East was organised in the form of successive empires under which were religious and sometimes racial communities. The close association of Church and State under the BYZANTINE Empire was succeeded by the identification under the Arabs and later under the Turks of the CALIPH, the chief religious leader of ISLAM, with the Sultan, the head of the empire.

This inter-twining of politics and religion, due partly to the nature of Islam as an all-embracing religion affecting law and social behaviour as well as personal ethics, was partly diminished by the rise of modern ideas of secular nationalism. But nevertheless, Islamic religious leaders have continued to play a big part in modern Middle East politics and in its recent nationalist movements. In some cases, as with the Moslem Brotherhood which has taken an active part in the recent terrorist campaign against the British in Egypt, and with the Islamic extremists of AYATOLLAH KASHANI in Persia, nationalism is combined with a fanatical Islamic revivalism. In other cases, as with the ex-Mufti of Jerusalem, HAJ AMIN AL HUSSEIN, the veteran Palestine Arab rebel leader who has been a thorn in Britain's flesh in the Arab world for the last thirty years, religious influence is mainly important as a weapon for advancing the nationalist cause and is not primarily an end in itself. The Palestine Arab group which acknowledged the ex-Mufti's leadership included Christians as well as Muslims. The secretary of the party was a Christian Arab, EMILE CHOURY. See 2.

The prestige which the ex-Mufti enjoyed among the Palestine Arabs was due partly to his record as an early rebel, and partly to his belonging to one of the two leading and rival Muslim families, the Husseinis and the HASHASHIBIS, who were for Arab Palestine what the MONTAGUES and the CAPULETS were for VERONA. But there is also no doubt that his authority was greatly increased by his religious position as Mufti of Jerusalem - Jerusalem being Islam's third holiest city after MECCA and MEDINA, since it is from the rock now covered by the beautiful Mosque of OMAR that the prophet MOHAMMED is said to have taken off on his horse to heaven.

For Haj Amin's election to this position the British themselves were ironically enough responsible; still more ironically the chief responsibility was that of a British Jew, SIR HERBERT SAMUEL (now Lord Samuel) who was the first High Commissioner of Palestine when Britain was granted the mandate.

Born in 1899, Haj Amin had been educated in CAIRO, JERUSALEM and CONSTANTINOPLE, and in the First World War was a young officer in the Turkish Army. He deserted the Turkish Army to join in the Arab revolt led by EMIR FEISAL and T.E. LAWRENCE, and after (Field Marshal Lord) ALLENBY had driven the Turks out of Jerusalem in 1917 he became a recruiting officer for Feisal's Arab Army.

The publication by the British Government of the BALFOUR Declaration promising the Jews a National Home in Palestine, the revelation of the SYKES-PICOT agreement for the carving-up of the former Turkish possessions in the Near East between Britain, France and Russia, and the expulsion of Emir Feisal from Syria by the French Army, caused bitter disillusion among the Arabs, who had been led to believe that the Allies would give them their independence after the Turks had been driven out. The belief had also been encouraged by President Wilson's promises of "self-determination".

In Palestine there was growing agitation against the Balfour Declaration and the Zionist movement, culminating in 1920 in serious riots. For his part in instigating these riots, Haj Amin was arrested by the British military administration and condemned to life imprisonment.

When Sir Herbert Samuel became the first High Commissioner for Palestine, Haj Amin was released and Sir Herbert backed his election as Grand Mufti of Jerusalem in 1921. In the following year Haj Amin became head of the Supreme Muslim Council.

This body had under its control large funds from religious endowments for the use of which it was not obliged to give very detailed account to the Government. It was partly from this source that Haj Amin was able to finance his political activities during the following years.

He continued to be a bitter opponent of the Zionists and of the British administration for permitting continued Zionist immigration. Persecutions in Europe drove more and more Jews to take refuge in PALESTINE in the 'thirties. Arab agitation grew as the immigration figures mounted. Haj Amin was dismissed by the British from the Supreme Moslem Council, but was chosen chairman of the Arab Higher Committee in which rival Arab parties agreed to cooperate.

The Arab agitation flared into open revolt and there was guerilla war in the Palestine hills between the rebels and the British Army. The Arab High Committee was declared illegal and Haj Amin's arrest was ordered. But he escaped under the noses of the troops and police sent to arrest him and fled to DAMASCUS. He was granted refuge in SYRIA and then in the LEBANON, both still under French mandatory control, and continued to direct rebel activities in Palestine from exile.

Shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War, Haj Amin transferred his headquarters to BAGHDAD and took an active part in the German-inspired coup d'etat of RASHID ALI, which was crushed by British military intervention in 1941. From IRAQ he fled to PERSIA and later to GERMANY. During his period in Iraq and Persia he may have had contact with AYATOLLAH KASHANI, the Persian Islamic nationalist firebrand, originally an Iraqi who was expelled by the British for insurrectionary activities in the 'twenties and went to Persia. Their common hatred of the British might have compensated for the fact that they are leaders in rival sects of Islam, Kashani's being a SHI'IA and Haj Amin the more orthodox SUNNI Moslem.

The Germans and Italians had been making a vigorous propaganda effort in the Middle East in the years immediately before the war. The Palestine affair was their chief target and Axis arms and money are said to have helped keep the Arab revolt going. The Germans had obvious attractions as possible Allies, being both anti-British and anti-Jewish. The arrival of the Mufti in Axis Europe was a valuable addition to the war-time propaganda armoury of the Axis. His name was greatly used in Axis propaganda to the Arabs and he himself broadcast from BERLIN and BARI occasionally. He was also used by the Germans to assist the recruiting of BOSNIAN Moslem units to fight against TITO'S partisans in YUGOSLAVIA.

But even with the Mufti's name Axis propaganda achieved almost nothing among the Palestine Arabs during the war. The combination of British promises under the White Paper restricting Jewish immigration, and of comparative prosperity due to Allied military expenditures, kept the Palestine Arabs quiet and cooperative. But if the Mufti's exhortations to revolt were not followed, he still occupied even in exile a prominent place in the minds of the Arab peasantry.

After the collapse of Germany, the Mufti was next heard of as under house-arrest in PARIS in 1945. A year later he was back in the Middle East after an escape the method of which is still obscure. He somehow reached MARSEILLES from Paris and from there crossed the Mediterranean to BEIRUT and thence to EGYPT. According to one theory his escape was connived at by the French in order to embarrass the British in the Middle East as a revenge for British intervention in Syria which led to the withdrawal of the French from the LEVANT after the bombardment of DAMASCUS in 1945.

He was forbidden to return to Palestine, then still under British mandate, but he was made chairman in absentia of the revived Arab High Committee whose members would go down to Egypt to consult with him on important decisions.

In CAIRO he took his place among the other prominent Arab exiles, rebels and political adventurers, including another escapee, the famous Moroccan rebel leader ABD EL KRIM, gathered there under the patronage of Egypt and the Arab League.

The Palestine war in 1948 brought the disruption of the always shaky political organization of the Palestine Arabs. A conference of Palestine Arab representatives at JERICHO voted for the union of Arab Palestine with ABDULLAH'S Kingdom of TRANSJORDAN. But at the same time two other rival groups set themselves up as Palestine Arab "Governments" in DAMASCUS and GAZA. The Gaza Government had the support of the Mufti and of Egypt. The Egyptians saw in HAJ AMIN a weapon against King Abdullah's plans for expanding his Kingdom by the incorporation of Arab Palestine. Egypt resented Abdullah's challenge to her supremacy inside the Arab League and Egyptian nationalists hated him for his alliance with the British.

But Abdullah had his way and established his now enlarged kingdom of Jordan. The Damascus "Government" soon collapsed and the pro-Mufti Gaza Government continued to exist on paper only.

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King Abdullah ended Haj Amin's right to the title of Mufti - which till then he had never lost - by appointing a new Mufti of Jerusalem, a former Chief Justice of the Moslem religious courts, SHEIKH HUSEIN IARALIAN.

In Cairo, from his villa on the outskirts of the city, the Mufti continued his intrigues. Before long he had a new ally. A disgruntled Jordanian officer from Abdullah's Arab Legion named Colonel ABDULLAH EL TEL arrived in Egypt. He had been military governor of Arab Jerusalem and had resigned his commission after being denied a coveted promotion. He was drawn into the anti-Abdullah network.

In July last year came the climax of long secret plotting. As King Abdullah was leaving the EL AQSA Mosque in Jerusalem after prayers he was shot dead by an Arab gunman, a Jerusalem tailor. The six men who were later tried for the assassination included the ex-Mufti's nephew, MUSA EL HUSEINI, a young man prominent in Jerusalem society. The prosecution traced the plot back to Abdullah El Tel and by implication to the ex-Mufti. Musa El Huseini was one of the four accused condemned to death and hanged.

Although Haj Amin still has his supporters and agents in Arab Palestine, now Western Jordan, his name is a legend that is losing its force. His failure to provide any effective leadership during the Palestine war and the disastrous results of the Palestine affair for nearly a million Palestinian Arab refugees, have led to a decline in his influence. But in troubled times he may still be a force to be reckoned with. As it shown by his instigation of terrorist attacks on his Arab rivals as well as on the British and Jews in earlier days in Palestine, he is an unscrupulous, ruthless and fanatical man. Ruthlessness added to extreme ambition and also, it must be said, to a genuine enough nationalist ardour, makes a dangerous combination. If chaos comes to the Middle East, the ex-Mufti may yet, if ohly briefly, come into his own. OFNS COPYRIGHT

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