

Divided We Fall: Husayni-Nashashibi Factionalism

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Orient_House.jpg: Picture of the Orient House

In East Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, there is a house. In its long history, it has been many different things; at one point it was the Jerusalem headquarters for the PLO, at another a base for UNRWA, and at yet another it served as a luxury hotel.¹ Now, it is empty - Israel forcibly closed this "Orient House" in 2001. But before all of this, before two wars and two intifadas, the Orient House was a home, for a family. That family was the al-Husayni clan.

In the same neighborhood, facing the Husaynis' former home, stands a different house.² Today, it serves as a research library, housing centuries-old manuscripts from pre-Ottoman times. Yet, just like the Orient House, it used to be a home, for a family. That family was the al-Nashashibi clan.

The story of these two families is the story of Palestine, and how their tribal interests managed to triumph over those of the nation. It is the story of how a rivalry between two families led to the destruction of thousands of others.

¹ Sabbagh, Mahdi. "The Husayni Neighborhood in Jerusalem." *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 72, winter 2017, www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/Pages_from_JQ_72_-_Sabbagh_0.pdf. Accessed 17 July 2022.

² "Resources: Archives and Libraries of Jerusalem." *Palestinian American Research Center*, parc-us-pal.org/resources/jerusalemArchives.htm#fourteen. Accessed 17 July 2022.



<https://www.loc.gov/item/2019696343/>: Arab protest delegations, featuring Raghib al-Nashashibi and Amin al-Husayni in the front-left

The Husayni family, which claims to be descended from the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), first came to Jerusalem between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.³ The Nashashibis, likely of Kurdish or Circassian descent, arrived around the same time in the fifteenth century. By the late nineteenth century, both families had become wealthy urban effendi - the Husaynis owned over 10,000 acres of profitable plantations and land in the Jericho area, and the Nashashibis had taken several important political positions in the empire.⁴ As key families in the highest socioeconomic class, both were entitled to many powerful political and religious positions within the empire.⁵ Husayni tribesmen were recognized as the muftis of

³ Muslih, Muhammad Y. *Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*. 1988. p. 27.

⁴ Hassassian, Manuel. "The Emergence of the M'uarada (Opposition) in the Palestinian Nationalist Movement (1920– 1928)." *Bethlehem University Journal*, vol. 5, 1986, www.jstor.org/stable/26444512. Accessed 20 July 2022.

⁵ Krämer, Gudrun. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 2008. p. 54.

Jerusalem and the Nabi Musa Shrine custodians. The Nashashibis, in turn, could boast of Raghib al-Nashashibi as an Ottoman parliament deputy and of Is'af al-Nashashibi as an Arabic literary icon.⁶

These families (in particular the Husaynis, whose roots and economic resources were older and stronger) wielded a remarkable amount of local political influence - for example, in the Peasants' Revolt of 1834, the Husaynis led a coalition of notable families to unite in solidarity against the Egyptian occupation. After coordinating with influential village sheikhs and encouraging rural areas to rebel, the efforts of the Husaynis and other wealthy families yielded thousands of additional soldiers for the war effort.⁷ Nearly a century later, certain elite notables would find themselves once again campaigning against a foreign power: the Young Turks. The most famous notable to engage in anti-Ottoman activity is most definitely Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the future Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, who cooperated with British Officer C. Dunbar Brunton to recruit Palestinian troops for the Arab Revolt. He was observed to be "very pro-English" by the officer, making him a favorite of the British for some years.⁸ Nashashibis also moved against the Young Turks in this time period.⁹

This cooperative relationship between the Husaynis and Nashashibis would fundamentally change when the British took control of Palestine. Because the Ottomans were out of the picture, the question of who was to rule Palestine after the British was at hand. Previously,

⁶ "Raghib al-Nashashibi." *Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question*, www.palquest.org/en/biography/9863/raghib-al-nashashibi; "Isaaf al-Nashashibi." *Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question*, www.palquest.org/en/biography/9849/isaaf-al-nashashibi.

⁷ Pappé, Ilan. *The Rise and Fall of a Palestinian Dynasty: The Husaynis 1700–1948*. Saqi Books, 2010.

⁸ *Palin Report*. 1920. *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: An Interactive Database*, ecf.org.il/media_items/1492.

⁹ "Jemal Pasha Orders the Public Hanging of Arab Nationalists from the Levant." *Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question*, www.palquest.org/en/overallchronology?sideid=21475.

both families had operated in mutual recognition of the Ottoman Empire (albeit with significant personal autonomy). Now, both families began to actively carve out personal power bases in competition with the other. The British, fearing a united Arab front, actively accelerated this rivalry by appointing Husaynis and Nashashibis to rival positions.¹⁰

Naturally, this led to intense conflict between the Husaynis and Nashashibis, in which the Husaynis initially dominated. At the Third Palestinian Arab Congress in 1920, Raghib al-Nashashibi led a boycott against the congress for their appointment of a Husayni as head of the Arab Executive.¹¹ When the time came to appoint the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, the Nashashibis were enraged when the British chose Amin al-Husayni (in large part because of his pro-English attitude), despite the fact that their candidate had actually won the election.¹² Another Husayni victory came in the form of Amin al-Husayni's appointment to the head of the Supreme Muslim Council, despite a bitter smear-campaign launched by the Nashashibi faction.¹³ Such a string of Husayni political triumphs inspired much fear in the other elite families, pushing them to band together in common opposition parties, such as the 1923 Palestine Arab National Party.¹⁴

Such opposition did not differ from the Husaynis in their basic beliefs. Both the Husaynis and the Nashashibis were committed to opposing Zionism and Jewish immigration; there was, however, a difference in how they approached their goals. The Nashashibi faction, as a product

¹⁰ Hassassian, Manuel. "The Emergence of the M'uarada (Opposition) in the Palestinian Nationalist Movement (1920– 1928)." *Bethlehem University Journal*, vol. 5, 1986, www.jstor.org/stable/26444512. Accessed 20 July 2022.

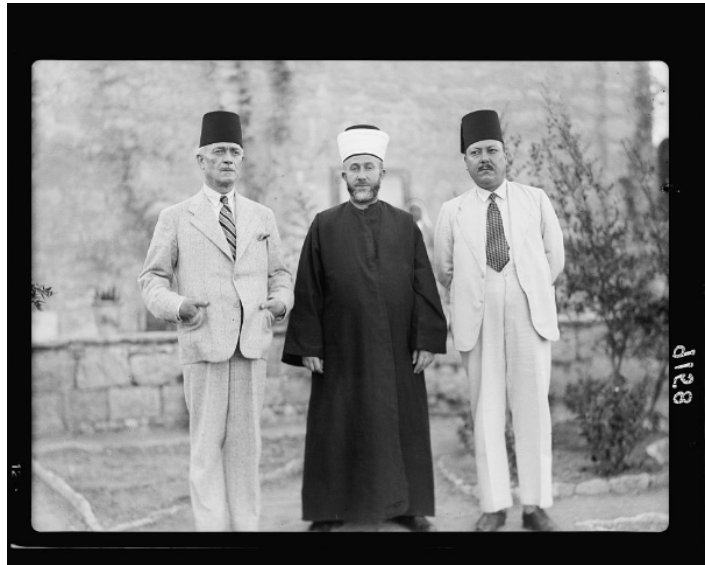
¹¹ Dietrich, Roger. *Factionalism and the Traditional Palestinian Arab Leadership's Resistance to British and Jordanian Political Policy (1920-1967): A Reconsideration*. 1993. Simon Fraser University, MA thesis. summit.sfu.ca/system/files/iritems1/5592/b15197037.pdf. p. 7.

¹² Pappé, Ilan. *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*. 2nd ed. p. 85.

¹³ Dietrich, Roger. *Factionalism and the Traditional Palestinian Arab Leadership's Resistance to British and Jordanian Political Policy (1920-1967): A Reconsideration*. 1993. Simon Fraser University, MA thesis. summit.sfu.ca/system/files/iritems1/5592/b15197037.pdf. p. 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 12.

of their weakened political position, favored a moderate stance, desiring more cooperation with the British in order to achieve their long-term aims.¹⁵ The Husaynis, in contrast, became hard-liners who pushed their agenda more aggressively.



<https://www.loc.gov/resource/matpc.18174/>: Three of the most influential clan leaders in Palestine (left to right): Raghib al-Nashashibi, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, and Dr. Hsein Khaldhi

This emerging factionalism quickly crippled the efficacy of the Palestinian national movement. Negotiations with the British over the establishment of a Legislative Council halted after 1922 due to partisan in-fighting among the Palestinian delegation.¹⁶ As Zionist immigration increased by the year and as their political power grew at an alarming rate, the Palestinians delayed the Seventh Palestinian Arab Congress for four years, from 1924 to 1928, as the Husaynis and Nashashibis argued over the appropriate representation for each family. By 1935, the Palestinian national movement had fractured into so many divergent factions that productive

¹⁵ Nashif, Taysir. "Palestinian Arab and Jewish Leadership in the Mandate Period." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4, summer 1977, www.jstor.org/stable/2535781. Accessed 18 July 2022.

¹⁶ Dietrich, Roger. *Factionalism and the Traditional Palestinian Arab Leadership's Resistance to British and Jordanian Political Policy (1920-1967): A Reconsideration*. 1993. Simon Fraser University, MA thesis. summit.sfu.ca/system/files/iritems1/5592/b15197037.pdf. p. 13.

cooperation became almost impossible; the National Defense Party (Nashashibi) and Palestine Arab Party (Husayni) ruthlessly opposed the initiatives of each other, effectively paralyzing Palestine as a whole.¹⁷ The founding of parties not based on inter-family rivalry, such as the Independence Party, only polarized Palestinian politics further.

Their infighting came to the head in the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939. Though the Palestinians had had a brief moment of unity in the form of the Arab Higher Committee (AHC), comprising the heads of all the major clans, the situation soon deteriorated. Upon the withdrawal of the Nashashibi's National Defence Party (NDF) from the AHC, Hajj Amin al-Husayni began ordering the assassinations of several prominent Nashashibis.¹⁸ High-ranking NDF cadres were slaughtered, and Raghib al-Nashashibi himself barely survived several attempts on his life. In response, the Nashashibis and other opposition parties formed militias ("Peace Bands") in coordination with the British to fight the mufti's forces. Civil war had broken out in the Palestinian nation, precisely at the time where a united front was most necessary.

The national movement had been sterilized, at least for the time being. At the London Conference of 1939, one of the last chances for Palestinian leaders to have any positive effect on the future of their country, the two Palestinian delegations sent were so intransigent that an independent Briton observed that a "fued between the two families" hindered them from any effective political action.¹⁹ The newly-formed Arab League completely cut-off the Palestinian

¹⁷ Nashif, Taysir. "Palestinian Arab and Jewish Leadership in the Mandate Period." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4, summer 1977, www.jstor.org/stable/2535781. Accessed 18 July 2022.

¹⁸ Dietrich, Roger. *Factionalism and the Traditional Palestinian Arab Leadership's Resistance to British and Jordanian Political Policy (1920-1967): A Reconsideration*. 1993. Simon Fraser University, MA thesis. summit.sfu.ca/system/files/iritems1/5592/b15197037.pdf. p. 27.

¹⁹ Nashashibi, Nasser Eddin. *Jerusalem's Other Voice: Ragheb Nashashibi and Moderation in Palestinian Politics, 1920-1948*. Ithaca Press, 1990. p. 155.

leadership from negotiations and strategy deliberations in 1948 for their obvious, crippling factionalism.

The influence of the two families was greatly reduced in the wake of the Nakba. Despite their fall from grace, these two families are still relevant; to a much more limited extent, both the Husaynis and Nashashibis continue to operate in Palestinian politics, with some of their tribesmen having held influential positions in the PLO and PA.²⁰ Indeed, as the Hamas-Fatah divide rages on, as Israeli settlements increasingly erode what is left of Palestine, and as the international Arab leadership abandons the Palestinians, these two houses still face off in East Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood.

²⁰ "Index: Individuals." *Mapping Palestinian Politics*, European Council on Foreign Relations, ecfr.eu/special/mapping_palestinian_politics/introduction/.

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