

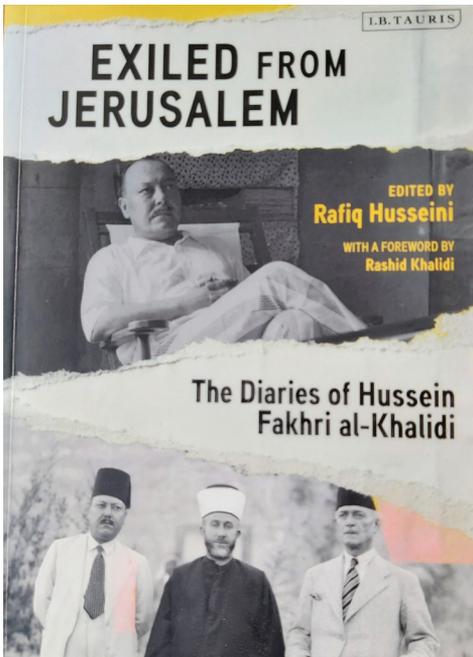
BOOK REVIEWS

Island Exile

Hussein Fakhri al-Khalidi in the Seychelles

Rafiq Hussein, ed., *Exiled from Jerusalem: The Diaries of Hussein Fakhri al-Khalidi*. With introduction by Rashid Khalidi. 376 pages. London: I.B. Tauris, 2020. £81.00 hardcover. £26.09 paper.

Review by Laila Parsons



Abstract

Hussein Fakhri al-Khalidi was a Palestinian doctor and a leading figure in Palestinian politics during the British Mandate period. He served as mayor of Jerusalem from 1934–37, helped to found the Reform Party, and represented that party in the Arab Higher Committee. In 1937, the British government exiled him to the Seychelles for his political activities, and eventually released him in spring 1939. While in exile, al-Khalidi wrote a daily diary in English. Edited by Rafiq Hussein, and including an introduction by Rashid Khalidi, the diary has now been published for the first time. What follows is a review-essay on this important new historical source.

Keywords

Colonialism; Palestine; exile; Arab Higher Committee; Palestinian Revolt; Palestinian leadership; British Mandate of Palestine.

On 30 September 1937, Hussein Fakhri al-Khalidi had an especially long day at work. As mayor of Jerusalem, he prepared the agenda for an important meeting of the municipal council and then chaired the meeting from the late afternoon into the night. When he finally reached home at eleven in the evening, he stayed up chatting with his wife Wahideh before finally going to bed at midnight. Early the next morning, his ten-year-old daughter Leila crept into her parents' room to say that a British police officer was knocking at the door. Flanked by two constables, the officer

told al-Khalidi that he was under arrest. Al-Khalidi was given fifteen minutes to pack his bag and say goodbye to his wife and children. From his home, he was taken to the port of Haifa. There he was placed on board the battleship *HMS Sussex*, which would take him on the first stage of the long journey to exile and imprisonment in the Seychelle Islands, 1,500 kilometers off the East African coast, far away in the Indian Ocean (9–12).

Al-Khalidi's arrest and deportation were part of a sweep of arrests carried out by the Palestine Government after Palestinian rebels assassinated Lewis Andrews, the British District Commissioner of the Galilee, on 26 September 1937. In the wake of the assassination, the government detained over 100 people in the Nazareth area, and British troops marched into the city to impose a curfew. These government actions marked a new escalation of harsh British counter-insurgency measures against Palestinians. Rural communities bore the brunt of these measures. Over the following months, the government rounded up thousands of ordinary Palestinians, destroyed hundreds of houses, and executed a number of rebels. The government also targeted the Palestinian leadership. They declared the Arab Higher Committee, of which al-Khalidi was a member, an illegal organization. Fu'ad Saba, Ahmad Hilmi, and Ya'qub al-Ghusayn, were all arrested on the same day as al-Khalidi and joined him on *HMS Sussex*. (The government added the banker Rashid al-Haj Ibrahim to this small group bound for the Seychelles, even though he was not a member of the AHC). Haj Amin al-Husayni, the leader of the Arab Higher Committee, had already taken refuge in al-Haram al-Sharif and later managed to evade British guards and escape to Lebanon. Jamal al-Husayni, who was close to Haj Amin and represented the Palestine Arab Party in the Arab Higher Committee, also evaded arrest and fled to Beirut. Awni 'Abd al-Hadi and Izzat Darwaza were out of the country and remained in exile. Ragheb Nashashibi, head of the National Defence Party and an opponent of Haj Amin, had resigned as a member of the Arab Higher Committee just a few weeks before, and was not arrested.¹

Not as well-known as the infamous Andaman Islands, in the Bay of Bengal, where Indian nationalists were exiled and imprisoned following the 1857 Rebellion, the Seychelles served as the island prison for leading nationalist figures from the Arab Middle East. In the 1920s, the British government exiled members of the Egyptian Wafd Party there, including Sa'ad Zaghlul and Mustafa Nahas Pasha. Yemeni leaders also spent years of exile in the Seychelles in the 1920s and 1930s. Hussein Fakhri al-Khalidi's diary, written while he was there, is the first detailed account we have by an exiled prisoner in those islands. It is also the first account of the particular experiences of the five Palestinian exiles in the Seychelles from 1937–1939. Their deportation is mentioned in passing in histories of Palestinian nationalism, but the full story of this episode has never been told.²

Edited by Rafiq Husseini, the diaries are supplemented by copious footnotes that provide details about the people, places, and events that al-Khalidi mentions in his daily jottings. There are also two useful historical introductions, one by the editor, the other by Rashid Khalidi. The Seychelles diaries, which were written in English,

differ from Hussein Fakhri al-Khalidi's Arabic memoirs, which were published in 2014. Written in the years immediately following the Nakba, the Arabic memoirs are a comprehensive and compelling account of al-Khalidi's public life. As such, the Arabic memoirs are certainly a key source for understanding the major events of the Mandate era and the Nakba itself. But the English Seychelles diaries convey an intimacy that is not present in the Arabic memoirs. We learn about the rhythms of his relationships with his fellow prisoners, his longing for his wife and children, his reading habits, and his fears. The diaries also provide a vivid sense of the depth of his anger towards the British, and the complexity of his feelings toward fellow Palestinian leaders, including key figures such as Haj Amin al-Husayni and Ragheb Nashashibi. Al-Khalidi's choice to write the Seychelles diaries in English rather than in Arabic is not difficult to understand. He had been educated in English at St George's School in Jerusalem, and later at the Syrian Protestant College (today's American University of Beirut). He had written another diary and some other short pieces previously in English. In addition, his captors were, of course, all English-speaking, and he was closely monitored by British officials on the island. Writing the diaries in English rather than Arabic would have drawn less scrutiny from the authorities. Finally, he had always been committed to persuading an English-speaking audience of the justice of the Palestinian cause. He may well have thought that his diaries might one day be published, and that an English account of the mayor of Jerusalem's banishment would be especially compelling.³

The historiography on Palestinian elites of the 1920s and 1930s is surprisingly limited. During the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, political historians often viewed Palestinian political life of the Mandate period through the prism of "factionalism," reducing a highly complex story to what was presented as clannish competition between prominent families, such as the Husaynis and Nashashibis. Historians have recently turned away from the political history of elite leaders in the Mandate and instead produced scholarship on other aspects of this important period. These include works on the more radical *Istiqlal* party, on rural rebel leaders, and on economic or cultural life. With the notable exception of Bayan al-Hout's 1981 Arabic magnum opus, *Al-Qiyadat wa al-mu'assasat al-siyasiyya fi Filastin, 1917–1948*, we do not possess a detailed political history of the Palestinian leadership that shows a minute understanding of their worldview, and that includes an account of the subtle fluctuations and tensions that informed their day-to-day decision-making as they struggled to push back against the British occupation and Zionist settlement. Al-Khalidi's diaries thus provide us with an opportunity to gain a deeper insight into this important generation, and to understand these men on their own terms.⁴

The five Palestinian exiles arrived in the Seychelles on 11 October 1937. The government confined them in two small bungalows on Mahé, the largest island of the archipelago. Hussein Fakhri al-Khalidi shared a bungalow with Fu'ad Saba and Ya'qub al-Ghusayn. Ahmad Hilmi and Rashid al-Haj Ibrahim stayed in a separate bungalow, just a few yards away. The living quarters were comfortable but not luxurious. A photograph taken shortly after they arrived shows al-Khalidi reading in a spare and simply furnished bedroom (figure 1). The five Palestinians could also walk

around in the small bungalow gardens and could visit one another, but they were not permitted to visit anyone else on the island, nor to receive visitors, except of course for the British officials overseeing their imprisonment.

In spite of these restrictions, the conditions of the five men cannot be compared to those endured by Palestinian prisoners back home in Palestine. The years 1937 and 1938 saw British round-ups of thousands of Palestinians who were incarcerated in prisons in 'Akka and Jerusalem, and in detention camps in Atlit and Latrun. al-Khalidi was aware of the relative privilege of their life in Mahé. He had served as a doctor in the Ottoman trenches during the British advance through Palestine during World War I, so he knew what genuine physical hardship looked, felt, and smelled like. But the loneliness and desolation caused by the distance from home suffused his days. He worried about his family so far away, about events in Palestine, and about what the future held for the five exiles, who had never been told how long their exile would last.⁵



Figure 1. Hussein Fakhri al-Khalidi reading in his bedroom in the Seychelles. Rafiq Husseini (the editor of the diaries) kindly shared the photo upon request.

Al-Khalidi desperately missed his wife Wahideh and his four children. He waited impatiently for their letters, which often took weeks to arrive, and were censored buffoonishly by British officials. On one occasion, he received a telegram from home saying that his daughter Leila would be singing for him on the radio as part of the Palestine Broadcasting Station's weekly show, *Children's Arabic Corner*. He struggled

and failed to tune the bungalow's radio to the right frequency so that he could catch a sound of Leila's voice. On other occasions, he expressed his dislike of the food on the island and his longing for the tastes of home. This longing was sometimes satisfied by jars of *tahini* and *labnah* that Fu'ad Saba's wife sent to the Seychelles' prisoners. Al-Khalidi struggled with desolate thoughts that the five men had been forgotten by their colleagues back home. The exiles received only a few telegrams of concern, and they searched the radio frequencies for accounts of their arrest and for news of what had happened to other members of the Arab Higher Committee. Radio Bari, the Italian Arabic Service, broadcast on the easiest radio frequency for them to tune in to. The five men caught snippets of information from Radio Bari, while they laughed at its cartoonish propaganda efforts to win the Arabs over to Fascism. The hot humid weather on the island, and the boredom and exasperation that arose from spending day in and day out with his fellow exiles, grated on al-Khalidi's nerves. As their stay lengthened, he spent more time alone in his bedroom reading books that he was permitted to borrow from the local library. He read voraciously, particularly the works of American authors such as Pearl Buck, Eugene O'Neil, and Margaret Mitchell.⁶

Al-Khalidi often wrote in his diary about his feelings towards Haj Amin al-Husayni, leader of the Arab Higher Committee. He was furious when Haj Amin issued declarations on behalf of the Arab Higher Committee without ever mentioning the four members of the committee – al-Khalidi, Saba, Hilmi, and al-Ghusayn – stuck in exile in the Seychelles. When Haj Amin made a public statement in November 1938, after the Woodhead Commission deemed the partitioning of Palestine to be unfeasible, al-Khalidi was appalled by the grandiosity and detachment of Haj Amin's statement, writing that it was as if:

he was victorious and dictating terms to a defeated enemy – when instead Palestine is being overrun and screwed by dozens of British battalions arresting, hanging, routing and demolishing houses and the country is simply going to the dogs. I told my friends that the Mufti has no right to go and publish a statement on behalf of the AHC [276].

It is nevertheless clear from al-Khalidi's diary entries that in spite of his reservations about some of Haj Amin's decisions, he saw the two of them engaged in, and deeply committed to, a shared political struggle. When the four AHC members were finally allowed to leave the Seychelles in early 1939, they travelled straight to Haj Amin's new base in the Lebanese village of Zouk. There, the Arab Higher Committee reconvened to discuss strategy for the upcoming Saint James Conference. And when al-Khalidi argued with his fellow exiles on Mahé about Haj Amin's decisions, these arguments took the form of debates about tactics. They did not come close to disloyalty or to a fundamental mistrust.⁷

Al-Khalidi's attitude towards Ragheb Nashashibi was another matter entirely. The British did not arrest Nashashibi when they rounded up those Arab Higher Committee members who remained in Palestine in late September and early October 1937. For al-Khalidi, this was a clear sign of Nashashibi's closeness to the government. Al-

Khalidi exploded in fury at radio reports that Nashashibi had made public statements representing himself as the leader of the Palestinians. As the revolt intensified towards the end of November 1937, al-Khalidi heard on the radio that Nashashibi had issued a *bayan* in the Egyptian press repeating Palestinian demands for independent government. That night he wrote wryly that: “Nashashibi is trotting the stage all alone and wants to prove at least outwardly that he is a patriot. If this is the case, why don’t they get him to the Seychelles?” (78). During his exile, al-Khalidi also read H.J. Simson’s 1937 book, *British Rule and Rebellion*. Simson served as a British army officer and the book detailed the British military’s campaign against the Palestinian rebels. Al-Khalidi was shocked to find in it so much information about the Arab Higher Committee and the role of Haj Amin in directing the revolt. He was convinced that Simson’s source was none other than Nashashibi, who, according to al-Khalidi, met often with British staff officers in the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. The Nashashibi family has long been cast in the historiography as pro-British. What al-Khalidi’s diaries indicate is that Palestinian leaders such as himself, whom later historians cast as being softly supportive of the British, clearly saw themselves standing on the other side of a wide gulf from the Nashashibis.⁸

Hussein Fakhri al-Khalidi’s daily jottings reveal his hostility towards the British system. But there was something deeper than hostility on display when he mused about British power. He understood the intricate mechanics of how the British actually ruled, particularly the way that British procedures and bureaucracy acted to cloak the raw violence of British guns. He was proud of the bravery shown by the armed rebels in Palestine, but he saw that they could never overpower the British army, however courageously they fought. At the same time, he was entirely convinced of the futility of Palestinian efforts to confront British rule through diplomatic means. Drawing on the writings of the American writer Pearl Buck, who had described diplomatic protests without gunfire as nothing more than “eyewash,” al-Khalidi wrote:

The Arabs have been protesting for twenty years. Nay we have submitted two or three memos and three or four telegrams of protests to the Palestine [Government] since we came to Seychelles. Did we have any reply? No – why? Because the authorities concerned know that we can’t back our protests with gunfire; and that’s the end of it. I can imagine our memos and telegraphs tucked away in neat files at the Secretariat at Govt. Offices with a “P.A.” on them and a date followed by some initial of a junior Assistant Secretary.⁹

As a colonized Palestinian, al-Khalidi was aware of the magnitude of the power stacked against him as well as the hollowness of British notions of “fair play” and the rule of law. Even so, he pushed relentlessly against the British system. He sent repeated enquiries to the Secretary of State for the Colonies concerning the law under which the five Palestinians were deported. He also hired a lawyer on Mahé to challenge the restrictions that the five men were placed under. He knew that acts such as these were almost certainly futile, but he persevered nonetheless, writing in his diary, “If it has,

or has no, effect, or if he replies or not, is not so important. My intention is to put things like these on record and in writing” (220). He adopted the same attitude with regard to his medical treatment on the island. Among the few visitors allowed by the government was the local British doctor, Dr. Lanier. Al-Khalidi, himself a physician trained in Paris and Istanbul, grew to despise the amateurish ministrations of this local doctor, as their exile on Mahé lengthened and al-Khalidi’s health deteriorated. He refused to be placated by Lanier, who consistently downplayed al-Khalidi’s symptoms. For al-Khalidi, Lanier’s refusal to take al-Khalidi’s health concerns seriously mirrored the British refusal to recognize Palestinian political rights. After one particularly humiliating session with Lanier, when al-Khalidi was again treated like a child rather than as a fellow physician, he wrote in his diary, “Have we got to give sworn evidence [to Lanier] before we can be believed?” (222).

Of course, Khalidi, in fact, had given formal evidence to a panel of British officials. Just a few months earlier, in January 1937, when he was still in Palestine and still mayor of Jerusalem, he had served as a member of the Palestinian delegation that gave public testimony to the Peel Commission. In his Arabic memoirs, he discusses that testimony in great detail, analyzing the tactical mistakes made by the Palestinian delegation, and identifying exactly how the commission could never have been a place of genuine political possibility for the Palestinians. In the Seychelles diaries, where Khalidi appears as an ailing patient whose symptoms were dismissed by a British “expert,” we see how he suffered the same testimonial injustice that he suffered at the hands of the British commissioners during the Peel Commission hearings.¹⁰

Al-Khalidi used his declining health to push for the British authorities to allow him to return home. He understood that medical issues were a way for him to pressure the government to grant a concession, because any action the government took could be cast as humanitarian rather than political. Genuinely fearing that he had throat cancer, but also using that fear as a strategy, he went on hunger strike with the intention of forcing the government to send a medical expert from off-island to examine him. Eventually, the British authorities relented, sending a specialist from Zanzibar to conduct a proper medical examination. The specialist did not find any cancer but al-Khalidi’s strategy worked nevertheless: a few weeks later, the five deportees received the news that they would be released. They were offered the chance to return to Palestine as long as they did not engage in politics. Al-Khalidi refused to accept this condition, opting instead to go to Beirut, where he could be as close to Palestine as possible, and where his wife and children would be able to join him. He continued to serve as a member of the Arab Higher Committee, and he attended the Saint James Conference in London in the spring of 1939.¹¹

Readers looking for insider information concerning political events in Palestine between October 1937 and the spring of 1939 will not find them in al-Khalidi’s Seychelles diaries. He was himself an outsider during this period, struggling constantly to obtain news about what was happening back home. The last few pages of the diaries do cover his time at the Saint James Conference, but these pages are somewhat disappointing, dealing briefly with where he had lunch and the few tourist sites that

he visited in Britain and France. His Arabic memoirs are a much richer source for his role in Palestinian political life during the Mandate in general, and for his view of the decision-making process within the Arab Higher Committee in particular. But it is only the Seychelles diaries that provide a deep account of his inner emotional life. Far from home, confined to his bungalow and its garden, he poured his heart out to his diary every night. His immediate feelings determined what he wrote about. His fluctuating attitudes towards his fellow detainees, his health, the weather, rebel campaigns back home in Palestine, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, his children's successes in school – all of these are jumbled together. But every entry vibrates with rage at the colonial power that had occupied his country and banished him from it. This fury sometimes consumed him. One hot moonlit night, before going to sleep, he wrote:

I am not going to write anymore tonight, it being a full moon. The more you look and gaze and stare into the face of a full moon, the madder you become; and this lonely sojourn on this island is about driving me mad. I am craving for my wife and my dear four children. I had a last look at the moon; and look at him! He is smiling, the beggar, and showing his tongue: 'Who are you to oppose Great Britain! We have armies – warships – aeroplanes – poison gas etc. etc. And you [are] only a handful of Arabs' [77].

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Endnotes

- 1 For the assassination of Lewis Andrews, see Matthew Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine: The British Army, the Colonial State and the Arab Revolt, 1936–1939* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 102. For an account of Jamal al-Husayni's escape from British arrest, see Serene Husseini Shahid, *Jerusalem Memories* (Beirut: Noufal, 2000), 111–22.
- 2 For details of the Egyptian deportees, see Husseini, *Exiled from Jerusalem*, 262. For more on the Andaman Islands, see Satadru Sen, *Disciplining Punishment: Colonialism and Convict Society in the Andaman Islands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- 3 *Wa-mada 'ahd al-mujamalat: Mudhakkirat Husayn Fakhri al-Khalidi* (Amman: Dar al-Shorouq, 2014). For al-Khalidi's choice to write in English, my thanks to Rafiq Husseini and Rashid Khalidi for a helpful email discussion on this issue.
- 4 For examples of older books in English that employ factionalism as a frame, Yehoshua Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion* (London: Frank Cass, 1977); and Issa Khalaf, *Politics*

- in Palestine: Arab Factionalism and Social Disintegration, 1939–1938* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991). For examples of more recent scholarship, Weldon C. Matthews, *Confronting an Empire, Constructing a Nation: Arab Nationalists and Popular Politics in Mandate Palestine* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2006); Sherene Seikaly, *Men of Capital: Scarcity and Economy in Mandate Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016). Rashid Khalidi's *The Iron Cage* is a history of the Palestinian search for a state over the long arc of the twentieth century. It shows the challenges that Palestinian leaders faced during the Mandate, but it is not a detailed political history of that leadership: *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2006), 31–139.
- 5 For al-Khalidi's appraisal of their conditions on Mahé and his time in the trenches at Gaza, see Hussein, *Exiled from Jerusalem*, 104.
 - 6 For missing his family and letters from home, see Hussein, *Exiled from Jerusalem*, 34, 210; for feeling forgotten by colleagues, see 71; for trying to listen to Leila's voice on the radio, see 111; for his love of American authors, see 110–11; and for the taste of labnah sent from Palestine, see 240.
 - 7 For the visit to Haj Amin's headquarters at Zouk, see Hussein, *Exiled from Jerusalem*, 302; for arguments with his fellow exiles about Haj Amin, see 46–47. Rashid Khalidi also discusses al-Khalidi's attitude towards Haj Amin in his introduction, x–xi.
 - 8 For his account of reading Simson's book, see Hussein, *Exiled from Jerusalem*, 147. The diaries of Khalil Totah, the well-known Palestinian educator and headmaster of the Quaker Friends School in Ramallah, contain a similar account of Fakhri Nashashibi (Ragheb's nephew): Thomas Ricks, ed., *Turbulent Times in Palestine: The Diaries of Khalil Totah 1886–1955* (Jerusalem and Ramallah, Institute for Palestine Studies, 2009), 244. It is well documented that the Nashashibi family were behind the pro-British Palestinian "Peace Bands" established in the final months of the revolt to help the British army crush the rebels: Matthew Hughes, "Palestinian Collaboration with the British: The Peace Bands and the Arab Revolt in Palestine, 1936–39," *Journal of Contemporary History* 51/2 (2015): 291–315.
 - 9 Hussein, *Exiled from Jerusalem*, 103. Rashid Khalidi also discusses his attitude towards the British in his introduction, xi–xii.
 - 10 *Wa mada 'ahd al-mujamalat*, 230–41.
 - 11 For his departure from the Seychelles and the entries on the Saint James Conference, see Hussein, *Exiled from Jerusalem*, 284–325.