

Inter-Arab Rivalry and the All-Palestine Government of 1948

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On 30 September 1948, an assembly of Palestinian political leaders met in Egypt-controlled Gaza to declare a Palestinian state. The assembly elected a president and voted on a number of resolutions naming Jerusalem as the capital, using the flag from the 1916 Arab revolt, and adopting a provisional constitution. It further instated an army, created a delegation to send to the United Nations, and issued fourteen thousand passports.¹ The All-Palestine Government, as it was called, had the trappings of an emerging nation-state in the post-Mandate period. However, this government existed only nominally for mere weeks before it was dismantled. Internal Palestinian disunity and inter-Arab politics in the wake of Israel's declaration of statehood precluded the possibility of a new Palestinian state. In other words, "It was all farce."²

The All-Palestine Government, officially sanctioned by the Arab League in October 1948, never held the sufficient political or military power to be its own state. It was the instrument of inter-Arab state conflict, which Fawaz Gerges describes as "a magnet for rivalry between Egypt and Transjordan and deepened suspicion and mistrust within Arab ranks during the war and afterwards."³ Egypt's recognition of the Palestinian governmental body contrasts sharply with Transjordan's active opposition to it. An examination of the historical context and creation of the All-Palestine Government illuminates the regional dynamics and colonial factors that shaped Palestinian nationalism, and further reasons why it could not ultimately manifest in a governing body. This piece looks at the British mandatory period in Palestine, Palestinian national activity, and inter-Arab rivalry, clarifying both why the All-Palestine Government was created and reasons for its failure soon after its inception.

The conflicting and shifting interests that defined the regional politics of the Middle East in 1948 characterized the existence and failure of the All-Palestine Government. There may have been some genuine concern for the fate of the Palestinians, but Egypt's and Transjordan's relationships with the All-Palestine Government are a better indication of their own interests. While Egypt and other Arab League states supported the *idea* of a Palestinian state, their decision to support the All-Palestine Government was motivated more by blocking Transjordan's claims to represent the Palestinians than by a fundamental desire to realize Palestinian national aspirations. King Faruq of Egypt did not need Gaza as much as King Abdallah of Transjordan needed the West Bank for political gain, and this difference informed the two countries' contrasting approaches to the question of a Palestinian government. Historian Avi Shlaim writes, "Ostensibly the embryo for an independent Palestinian state, the new government, from the moment of its inception, was thus reduced to the unhappy role of a shuttlecock in the ongoing power struggle between Cairo and Amman."⁴

A number of factors shaped the political environment in which the All-Palestine Government was created. British policies in Palestine from 1922 to 1948 subverted Palestinian national ambition, preventing the development of national institutions that might have actualized a future state. King Abdallah's close ties to the British and his collusion with the Zionists, with the aim of keeping the West Bank for his new kingdom, alienated other members of the Arab League and cemented their support of the new Palestinian government. Palestinian leadership was factious, led by the Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, Jerusalem's mayor Raghīb al-Nashashibi, and Istiqlal party leader 'Awni 'Abd al-Hadi. Quandt elaborates on this disunity: "The main political parties were based on this structure [of clan networks], the parties of the particularly influential Husayni and Nashashibi families having ties throughout the country. However, this structure made it difficult to unify the national movement."⁵ While the political dynamics were more complex than the dichotomy that Quandt depicts, the disharmony of the Palestinian leadership impacted the efficacy of the national movement.

Hajj Amin al-Husayni faced opposition that weakened his eventual leadership of the All-Palestine Government. He had been a key figure in nationalist activity, especially during the Palestinian revolt of 1936–1939, after which the "Palestinians began a disorienting period of transition during which they lost control over their own fate."⁶ Having maintained close ties to the British until the revolt and having been unable to steer the uprising in a fruitful direction, Husayni's credibility as a representative of the Palestinians was over. Hajj Amin's rivalry with Raghīb al-Nashashibi, who became allied with Abdallah,⁷ mirrors Egypt and Transjordan's rivalry over Palestine. In the early 1930s, Husayni clashed with the Istiqlal party, which was officially formed in 1932 as a leftist alternative to the Husayni-Nashashibi domination of Palestinian politics and which advocated for "active opposition" to both the Zionists and the British Mandate, calling for "parliamentary Arab rule in Palestine."⁸ Additionally, he faced opposition from the Qassamites, an Islamist group led by 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam, who called for revolution in contrast to Husayni's more moderate approach.

Husayni's commitment to Palestinian statehood was genuine, but his actions ultimately proved ineffectual. Notably, the strike that began the revolt in 1936 came out of a decision made by a coalition of Palestinian groups,⁹ but Husayni and his Palestine Arab party only supported the strike when it became clear there was no other viable political option. Mattar writes of this decision, "The fact is that [Husayni] was still serving two masters, the British and the Palestinians, and was now being forced to choose."¹⁰ He struck a precarious balance that was politically untenable. Because of his vacillating positions,¹¹ Husayni became a controversial figure for the Palestinians as well as the British mandatory powers, ultimately contributing to the unviability of the All-Palestine Government itself. Given a plethora of other obstacles, the new Palestinian government was unlikely to survive.

Hajj Amin al-Husayni's presence as a potential leader of a Palestinian government was also not palatable to regional actors and prompted strong opposition from those with power, including the British, Transjordan, and the Zionists.¹² Indeed, Husayni met with both Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler in 1941 to appeal for support for an independent Palestinian state, an unpopular move that further isolated him.¹³ Husayni's inability to articulate and implement an effective national movement opposite the Zionists secured his political downfall. Adding to this, as historian Ilan Pappé writes:

The Nakba – the Palestinian catastrophe – happened while the Husayni family was leading the national movement. The dreadful stories about the expulsion and massacres reached the Husayni leaders, and their failure to raise an outcry about it would cost them and the other notables a heavy political price. They would no longer have the trust and support of their society.¹⁴

Indeed, the failure of the All-Palestine Government ended Husayni's already dwindling political career. Pappé elaborates: "These were al-Hajj Amin's last days of grace, though in fact he was functioning in an imaginary reality unrelated to the disaster on the ground."¹⁵ But his political missteps are not sufficient to explain the All-Palestine Government's downfall.

The war between Israel and the Arab states in 1948 further inflamed inter-Arab rivalry, contributing to a decisive Arab defeat and undermining the All-Palestine Government when it was declared in the fall of 1948. Motivated by the United Nations' passage of Resolution 181 on 29 November 1947, which recommended the division of British Mandate Palestine into two separate states, the Arab populace rose up in protest of a Jewish state in Palestine. Arab leaders outside Palestine fought to maintain it as an Arab entity.¹⁶ Following Israel's declaration of independence from the British on 14 May 1948, disjointed Arab attacks were no match for the recently established Israel Defense Forces. Indeed, as Gerges writes, Arab rivalries appeared to define the conflict for Arab players perhaps even more than anti-Israel sentiment: "Neither [Egyptian king] Faruq nor [Transjordanian king] 'Abdullah seemed to appreciate the seriousness of the war against Israel. They appeared to be more concerned about their respective strategic positions than

that of Israel.”¹⁷ This disunity among Arab states illustrates a dynamic that would play directly into the ill-fated creation of the All-Palestine Government.

Support for the All-Palestine Government came largely in opposition to partition of historic Palestine and as an attempt to preserve Arab unity. But by the time it was created, it epitomized the tensions that existed among newly independent Arab states. Shlaim writes, “Abdullah’s loyalty to Britain was increasingly equated with disloyalty to the Arab cause.”¹⁸ However, the commitment to the overarching idea of Arab unity eventually caused Arab states to abandon the All-Palestine Government. Shlaim writes, “As events progressed, [Arab leaders] were anxious not to escalate the conflict with Abdullah and risk the breakup of the Arab League.”¹⁹ Before further discussion of this volte-face, however, the sections that follow will look at the effect of British mandatory policies on the Palestinian national movement and trace the events in the second half of 1948 that surrounded the formation of the All-Palestine Government.

Absence of Palestinian Agency during the Mandate

The realities in Palestine during the decades prior to the creation of the All-Palestine Government deprived Palestinians of structural power and agency that might have allowed them momentum to create a lasting government of their own. The structure of the British Mandate for Palestine (1922 to May 1948) precluded Palestinian statehood. While the British mandatory powers fostered the national ambition of the Zionists, they suppressed Palestinian institutions, effectively delegitimizing the Palestinian leadership and national movement during these crucial years.

Looking at the development (or lack thereof) of Palestinian national activity under the Mandate gives appropriate context for the creation of the All-Palestine Government and adds considerable explanation for its failure. Historians have outlined the systematic subversion of Palestinian agency during the British mandatory period. There were “external institutional obstacles to the political unification of the Arabs [in Palestine] resulting from British policies which hindered the development of permanent, structured organs to articulate the Arab viewpoint.”²⁰ Rashid Khalidi further outlines a significant disregard for Palestinian national ambition:

the Palestinians had no international sanction for their identity, no accepted and agreed context within which their putative nationhood and independence could express itself, and their representatives had no access whatsoever to any of the levers of state power.²¹

In contrast to the Jewish community in Palestine (the Yishuv), and Arab national groups outside Palestine, Palestinian national aspirations could not flourish with the hope of evolving into a state apparatus due to British mandatory policy and practice.²²

During the mandatory period many regional political factors contributed to the inability of Palestinians to create lasting institutions that could serve as a springboard

for a Palestinian state. Edward Said writes:

Palestinian society was organized along feudal and tribal lines; this is not to say, however, that it did not have its own coherence. It did, but its national integrity could not easily cope with the three powerful strains placed on it mainly after World War I: the British mandate, the Zionist colonial effort, and the beginning of modernization.²³

This combination of external factors, supplemented by internal disunity, converged to undermine the Palestinian national movement. The British mandatory power, the highest authority in Palestine during this time, failed to recognize the Palestinians as a national group – as it did the Yishuv – contributing to the inability of the Palestinians to actualize their national ambition.²⁴ Khalidi describes the Palestinians under the Mandate as “a new polity emerging without being allowed any of the attributes of stateness.”²⁵

British mandatory policy in Palestine functionally favored Jewish national rights over those of the Palestinians. The League of Nations Mandate for Palestine, granted in July of 1922, mentions “Palestine” as a place, but does not refer to “Palestinians” as a people.²⁶ And while it provides for the development of “self-governing institutions” with reference to a Jewish state, it does not do the same for Arabs.²⁷ The Mandate addresses individual rights, such as religious, civil, and legal rights, for all inhabitants but not collective rights for Arabs, referring to them only as “non-Jewish communities” or “natives.”²⁸ Khalidi reflects on the symbolic absence of naming the Palestinians in the Mandate, writing, “As far as Great Britain and the League of Nations were concerned, they were definitely *not* a people.”²⁹ The Mandate itself set the stage for the next 26 years until Israel’s founding in 1948 (and arguably after as well), during which time the Palestinians were unable to set up institutions that would bolster a state of their own.

The Mandate included not only reference to the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which supported a Jewish home in Palestine, but also a less commonly discussed stipulation from the League of Nations’ Covenant. The twenty-second clause of this document “bestowed upon Britain the ‘sacred trust of civilization’ to help Palestine achieve full independence.”³⁰ However, this clause was used to refer generally to all mandatory territories at the time, and does not provide explicitly for an *Arab* state in Palestine.³¹ Beyond the rhetoric of the various documents surrounding British presence in Palestine, competing national claims of the Palestinians on one hand and the Zionists on the other were difficult to reconcile. “It was not possible to bridge the gap as the Jewish leadership in Palestine ‘would consider no solution other than partition’ while the Arab leadership ‘would settle for nothing less than immediate independence in the whole of Palestine.’”³²

British policies and practice in Palestine reflected the tone of the Mandate itself. Khalidi points to the fact that Arabs in Palestine were treated differently than other populations categorized under the same Class A mandate. The Class A mandates included previously Ottoman territory that would become the independent states of Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Transjordan, and Israel. What distinguished these mandatory territories from those labeled Class B and Class C (which were mostly territories in Africa) was the assumption that

the Class A mandates would soon transition to become independent states. The League of Nations Covenant defines the Class A mandates in the following manner:

Certain communities formerly belonging to the Turkish Empire have reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognized subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone.³³

While these mandatory territories had *amirs*, kings, prime ministers, or presidents in addition to their British or French high commissioners, Khalidi notes that in Palestine “the British high commissioner was the highest, indeed the sole, source of authority in the land (although the Jewish Agency had a status guaranteed by the Mandate itself).”³⁴ While the end of the British mandate in 1948 ultimately resulted in a Jewish nation that could “stand alone,” it ignored the national interests of the Arabs in Palestine.

Because of the unique political reality of Zionist claims to historic Palestine, the Palestinians missed out on many of the state building activities that Britain fostered in other Class A territories. Superficial British attempts to set up Palestinian bodies were met with resistance from Arabs in Palestine because they were not truly representative and had little authority.³⁵ While in mandatory Syria, Lebanon, and Transjordan, “many of the trappings of power were in Arab hands,” the British mandatory efforts in Palestine went to building the future Jewish state.³⁶ Political authority granted to the Yishuv had lasting power and ultimately laid the groundwork for the state of Israel. By the end of the 1920s, the Jewish Agency, whose establishment had been authorized by a British cabinet ruling in 1920, had turned into the veritable government of the Yishuv. The agency had departments dealing with political affairs, economic affairs, immigration, settlement, and other matters.³⁷ By contrast, Palestinian institutions that did exist were devoid of political agency and failed to provide any structural foundation for potential successor bodies, including the All-Palestine Government.

This lack of British-sanctioned Palestinian institutions meant that Palestinians were not able to coalesce into a united group to actualize their nationalist desires. Quandt writes, “there was no legislative council in Palestine to provide a constitutional forum to air grievances or to allow legitimate communication with the British rulers.”³⁸ However, national aspirations among the Palestinians during the Mandate period were widespread, fomented in part by British and Zionist activities in Palestine. These ambitions were expressed by political organizations and community groups such as the Arab Higher Committee and the Muslim-Christian Association. However, the British mandatory powers would not recognize the Arab Higher Committee, which initially formed in 1936, because mandatory policy said that “an Arab assembly would only be considered ‘representative’ by the British if it did not issue resolutions contrary to the mandate, which included the Balfour declaration.”³⁹ This policy fundamentally undermined Palestinians’ right to self-determination in that at its core it prioritized another national group’s statehood over that of the Palestinians. Khalidi asserts that these British policies also inhibited cohesiveness

among Palestinian political leaders that would have come with access to state structures like education and media. He writes, “This lack of even a minimal level of cohesion by comparison with other Arab elites, resulting in some part from the systematic British denial of access to power over a state mechanism, would long continue to plague the Palestinian leadership, even after the catastrophe of 1948.”⁴⁰

British manipulation of the Palestinian political leadership further compromised the potential for an independent Palestinian governing body. A notable case of this is the British placing Hajj Amin al-Husayni in the position of Mufti of Jerusalem in the early 1920s. As a result, the Palestinian elite were dependent on the British for what authority they had, creating a holding pattern for the Palestinian national movement: “those leading Palestinian figures who accepted such posts were obliged to refrain from openly opposing the Mandate, its commitment to support a Jewish national home, and the concomitant denial of Palestinian self-determination.”⁴¹ This lasted until the Arab revolt in 1936, but by that point Husayni and other Palestinian leaders had little legitimacy in the eyes of many Palestinians. Relying on the British had been necessary to maintain some semblance of power, but ultimately detracted from Husayni’s authority. In reference to the Palestinian leadership, Khalidi writes, “This is a crucial question . . . of refusing to separate themselves from the British until they had no choice, and by then it was probably too late.”⁴² The failure of an articulate Palestinian national claim to materialize from the British mandatory period combined with external Arab influence to ultimately undermine the implementation of the All-Palestine Government in 1948.

Creation of the All-Palestine Government

The All-Palestine Government was declared in a frantic attempt to preserve Palestine as Arab in the wake of Israel’s establishment. In July of 1948, the Arab League made a decision to set up a government in Palestine less than two weeks after UN mediator Count Bernadotte recommended that Transjordan absorb the Arab parts of Palestine. Pappé characterizes this action in the following way: “When Palestine had still been in one piece and al-Hajj Amin wished to establish such a government, he had been rebuffed. Now the League defied the harsh reality with a meaningless act of desperation.”⁴³ Reacting to the changing facts on the ground, the Arab League was attempting a last ditch effort to maintain a foothold in Arab Palestine. Israeli forces had already occupied central Palestine, and by the fall would take the northern part of historic Palestine as well.⁴⁴ Shlaim writes, “With strong opposition from King Abdullah, and only half-hearted support from the AHC [Arab Higher Committee], the new body never got off the ground.”⁴⁵

In early September, a meeting of the Arab League political committee resulted in the formal announcement of the establishment of a Gaza-based Palestinian government. Even the name “All-Palestine Government” is symbolic of the Egyptian strategy to lay claim not only to the territories of Gaza and what became Israel, but also to the West Bank, which Abdullah was claiming to represent. Two days after this formal announcement, on 22 September, the Arab Higher Committee put out a statement declaring the Palestinian

state and the All-Palestine Government as its government, citing “their natural right to self-determination.”⁴⁶ Hajj Amin al-Husayni left his exile in Egypt and arrived in Gaza on 27 September in order to be part of the new government.⁴⁷ By the end of the month, however, there was already tangible opposition from Transjordan.

Transjordan immediately and effectively sabotaged the legitimacy of the All-Palestine Government concurrent to its declaration. In late September, the All-Palestine Government’s Palestine National Council gathered in Gaza to elect Husayni president and establish its constitution, flag, and its capital as Jerusalem. Other Palestinian notables from Gaza and the West Bank took part in the meeting and were given positions in the government, including Hajj Amin’s brother Jamal al-Husayni who became the foreign minister. By no coincidence, Transjordan’s First Palestinian Congress assembled in Amman on exactly the same day, swearing allegiance to King Abdallah and denouncing the All-Palestine Government, asserting that Transjordan and Palestine should be a unified territory.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the Nashashibi-led opposition to Husayni and the All-Palestine Government held a conference in Jericho, proclaiming “Abdallah as King of Palestine and Jordan.”⁴⁹ Abdallah selected Raghib al-Nashashibi as military governor of the West Bank, further illustrating a split among the Palestinians and foreshadowing Transjordan’s eventual annexation of that territory in 1950.⁵⁰

As mentioned in the introduction, the All-Palestine Government had created an army, organized a UN delegation, and issued passports in an attempt to instill legitimacy in the new government.⁵¹ However, these nominal efforts to create a functional government were immaterial, for the All-Palestine Government lacked all necessary military, political, and diplomatic power to function as a viable state. Pappé writes of these initial actions by the Palestinian National Council: “All that this futile exercise left behind were phrases and symbols.”⁵² Indeed, two days later, British and Transjordanian forces dismantled the armed wing of the All-Palestine Government in Gaza. Only after the All-Palestine Government’s army was dismantled did Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia officially endorse the government. However, by this point the support was purely symbolic. Shlaim argues that Arab support for the All-Palestine Government was superficial at best, and disingenuous at worst, in that official backing came only when it was clear it would not last: “Nothing is more indicative of their half-hearted support than the fact that by the time they gave formal recognition the game was over and the government was an empty shell.”⁵³

While Transjordan and the British were actively opposing the establishment of the All-Palestine Government in Gaza, Pappé notes that Egypt solidified the Palestinian government’s downfall.⁵⁴ Shortly after the initial meetings of the All-Palestine Government, Egypt forced Hajj Amin al-Husayni back into exile in Cairo. Pappé writes, “With al-Hajj Amin’s political demise, the government fell apart.”⁵⁵ Without its leadership physically present in Palestine itself, the All-Palestine Government had no platform from which to even nominally claim legitimacy. Furthermore, the Egyptians were defeated in Gaza by the Israeli military in October 1948 and could no longer prop up the All-Palestine Government.⁵⁶ This confluence of events made for an impossible situation. The various regional political factors that contributed to the deterioration of this nominal Palestinian

government must be explained further. The ensuing sections of this piece will explore in greater depth the political motives of Arab states (specifically Egypt and Transjordan) with respect to the All-Palestine Government.

Egypt's Balancing Act

The United Nations partition plan in 1947 presented an opportunity for the emerging state of Transjordan to exert influence on the West Bank, prompting Egypt and other Arab League states to attempt to balance against King Abdallah.⁵⁷ Support for the All-Palestine Government was a way for these Arab states to retain influence in a turbulent part of the region whose future was largely unknown. Shlaim emphasizes the rivalry that defined Egypt's motivation for creating the All-Palestine Government: "Whatever the long-term future of the Arab government of Palestine, its immediate purpose, as conceived by its Egyptian sponsors, was to provide a focal point of opposition to 'Abdullah.'⁵⁸ Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria stood to lose regional influence if Transjordan claimed leadership of a Palestinian state.⁵⁹ However, Arab support for the All-Palestine Government was ineffectual and ultimately insufficient.

In a sense, these Arab states took action on behalf of the All-Palestine Government only when they had no other choice. Shlaim writes, "To thwart 'Abdullah's ambition, the other members of the Arab League, led by Egypt, decided in Alexandria on 6 September [1948] to approve the establishment of an Arab government for the whole of Palestine with a seat in Gaza. This was too little and too late."⁶⁰ The potential consequences of inaction in opposition to Transjordan's attempts to fill a power vacuum in Palestine pushed Arab League members to follow suit in supporting the All-Palestine Government.⁶¹ Ian Bickerton writes:

King Farouk of Egypt would rather not have fought at all, but his fear of domestic unrest and the increase in influence of his rivals in the Arab world – the Hashemite kings of Transjordan and Iraq – would gain if they fought and he did not drive him to enter the conflict. . . . Syria wanted the Arab areas of Palestine, and neither Syria nor Egypt wanted them to fall into the hands of Transjordan.⁶²

Arab support for Palestinian nation-building was tenuous and unreliable, largely because other Arab states had their own nation-building to do. The recent independence of Arab states such as Syria and Egypt contributed to a relatively unstable regional system in which many states had to look out for their own interests rather than support a Palestinian government in opposition to the British.⁶³ Khalidi writes, "Most frequently, if spoken for at all, [the Palestinians] were spoken for by the Arab states, each of which had its own considerations and calculations, all of which were weak, and some of which . . . had only just won a precarious independence."⁶⁴ The inability of Arab states to candidly support Palestinian national activity contributed to the failure of a Palestinian state structure to

emerge following Israel's declaration of independence.⁶⁵

The competing claims as to who would represent the land of Palestine drove regional Arab politics in 1948. While Transjordan represented for some Palestinians a more stable government body, the Husayni leadership had to rely on Egypt to sustain their national ambitions for a Palestinian state. Pappé writes, "The only way Jamal and al-Hajj Amin could counterbalance Hashemite ambitions was to stick to Egypt."⁶⁶ However, even Egyptian support for the All-Palestine Government was unsustainable as the 1948 war evolved and the Israeli military defeated Egypt within weeks of the All-Palestine Government's declaration.

Abdallah's Ambition

King Abdallah acted with an eye toward solidifying his position as a forceful player in the evolving Middle East. Abdallah's membership in the Hashemite dynasty explains this ambition, in part. Palestine represents a piece of greater Syria, where Hashemite influence had been compromised when the French expelled Abdullah's brother Faysal after his short reign as king of Syria. The Hashemite role in fighting the Ottomans on behalf of preserving the land for the Arabs perhaps gave Abdallah credibility in maintaining influence in Arab Palestine vis-à-vis Hajj Amin al-Husayni. More crucially, however, British and Zionist players preferred Abdallah to Husayni when it came to Arab control of the West Bank.

Abdallah sought to annex Arab Palestine, alienating himself from other Arab countries in the process by colluding with the British and the new state of Israel.⁶⁷ Mark Tessler writes, "Abdullah was eager to expand the borders of his country, and thereby his own power and prestige, and his designs for Palestine were well established even before the outbreak of the 1947–48 War."⁶⁸ The territorial shake-up of the war in 1948 created an opening for Abdallah to exercise his desire for annexation.⁶⁹ As the Arab League deliberated over creating the All-Palestine Government, Abdallah was well on his way to annexing the West Bank into his own kingdom. Pappé writes, "King Abdullah swore to oppose this government to the end, and the British government instructed all its representatives in the region to do all they could to destroy it."⁷⁰ Abdallah's opposition to Egypt and his ambitions for Transjordan combined to undercut the All-Palestine Government at every turn. Much like British policy during the Mandate, Abdallah largely ignored the Palestinians as a distinct entity, treating them as a group to be absorbed into another Arab state. Tessler writes that he "was motivated by a view that those parts of Palestine allocated to the Arabs should and eventually would be incorporated into neighboring states."⁷¹ Indeed, the British supported Abdallah's motives for annexation.⁷²

Abdallah strategically positioned himself relative to the British, the Zionists, and other members of the Arab League. He cooperated secretly with the Zionists in order to secure support for his annexation of parts of Arab Palestine.⁷³ Of the war in 1948, Benny Morris writes, "Abdullah was far from confident of Arab victory and preferred a Jewish state as his neighbor to one run by the ex-Mufti."⁷⁴ Abdallah's collaboration with the Zionists

illustrates the conflict between Transjordan and other Arab states. For example, Tessler quotes Abdallah as having said to the Israelis in secret talks about Gaza: “Keep it, or give it to the devil – so long as you don’t leave it for the Egyptians.”⁷⁵ The All-Palestine Government, which existed entirely under the auspices of Egypt, was clearly not in line with Abdallah’s plans for the Palestinians.

The All-Palestine Government existed from its inception as a political game piece of the Arab states, shaped by British and Zionist positions toward the land of Palestine. In 1950, after the fall of the All-Palestine Government and the retreat of its leadership to Cairo, Transjordan became the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan after unifying the West Bank with Abdallah’s state. Khalidi writes of this time, “Abdullah was doing more than annexing the largest remaining Arab piece of Palestine. He was also laying claim to representation of the Palestinians.”⁷⁶ Jordan’s annexation of the West Bank solidified the failures of the All-Palestine Government and indeed the Palestinian national movement for a period of time. The aftermath of 1948 saw the transfer of control of Arab Palestine from the British to various non-Palestinian actors. Tessler writes, “Israel had seized most of the territory proposed by the UN for a Palestinian Arab state, the Egyptians had thereafter installed themselves in Gaza, and the West Bank had now been swallowed up by Jordan.”⁷⁷ The following section will examine in greater detail further implications of the All-Palestine Government’s failure.

Failure of the All-Palestine Government

From a practical standpoint, the All-Palestine Government never had the foundations of an effective governing body. Illustrating this, Gerges writes, “the contrast between the pretensions of the All-Palestine Government and its capability quickly reduced it to the level of farce. It claimed jurisdiction over the whole of Palestine, yet it had no administration, no civil service, no money, and no real army of its own.”⁷⁸ However, this does not adequately explain why the government ultimately failed. Shlaim looks at the All-Palestine Government as a pawn that was manipulated from all sides for political gain:

For although it was projected as the nucleus of Palestinian self-government, it was a phantom deliberately created by the Arab states, with Egypt at their head, to meet their publics’ opposition to partition and to challenge Transjordan’s claim to the residue of Arab Palestine. It was for their own selfish reasons that the Arab states created the All-Palestine Government and it was for their own selfish reasons that they abandoned it.⁷⁹

The failure of the All-Palestine Government reflected the failed pan-Arab unity its Arab League “supporters” ostensibly sought. Supporting the All-Palestine Government allowed Arab states to relinquish responsibility for the territory of Palestine while creating a positive discursive narrative that “empowered” Palestine as a distinct entity.⁸⁰

The fate of the All-Palestine Government was clear: it would fail. The British used this as a reason to not support the All-Palestine Government, as Shlaim writes: “In British eyes a Palestinian state was equated with a Mufti state, and the rationale against a Mufti state was that it would . . . very likely be taken over by the Jewish state.”⁸¹ Jordan, too, cited the All-Palestine Government’s likely failure when opposing it: “To Mahmud Naqrashi, the Egyptian prime minister, [King Abdallah] said quite bluntly that he had no intention of allowing a weak Palestinian government to take charge of the Arab part of Palestine when it had no army to protect it from Jewish attacks.”⁸² Interestingly, other Arab states used the same logic to support the All-Palestine Government, knowing that their official backing would likely be temporary. Iraqi prime minister Muzahim al-Pachachi, “unable to declare open antagonism towards the Mufti, used the argument with Abdullah that the new government would fail and Arab Palestine would be bound to go to Transjordan ultimately.”⁸³ The Arab states supported the All-Palestine Government knowing that it would not be a long-term commitment.

In this assessment, they were not incorrect. Pappé writes, “this government vanished in history’s oubliette as abruptly as it had appeared.”⁸⁴ However, the short existence of the All-Palestine Government is significant not only as a lens into the regional political rivalries of the Middle East that existed in 1948, but because of its tangible effects on the Palestinian national movement afterward. Historians point to the years 1947 and 1948 as watershed moments. Much of the Palestinian population was now living in diaspora as a result of the Nakba in 1948, further inhibiting and dispersing Palestinian national activity. The creation of the All-Palestine Government was a genuine setback for the Palestinian national movement because it further disenfranchised the leadership and gave false hope to the Palestinians still in Palestine. With the All-Palestine Government’s failure, much of the Palestinian leadership was now in exile in Cairo, effectively erasing what nominal toehold it had in Palestine.⁸⁵ In its wake, Egypt tamped down Palestinian national activity in Gaza⁸⁶ and Jordan did the same in the West Bank.⁸⁷

At its core, inter-Arab rivalry in 1948 exacerbated obstacles to a collective Palestinian national movement while also shaping it. While the All-Palestine Government itself has largely been forgotten, the critical historical moment in which it briefly arose is part of an evolving Palestinian national narrative that is as much shaped by external forces as it is by internal factors. Ironically, events surrounding the All-Palestine Government both impaired tangible Palestinian national activity and served to solidify Palestinian identity. It is clear that the regional political climate would not support a Palestinian state at the time, nor perhaps was Palestinian leadership capable of governing such an entity. There was, however, a new sense of “Palestinian-ness” that congealed in the drastically different political landscape that emerged after 1948.

Shlaim asserts that the All-Palestine Government was a “cul-de-sac of political evolution that led the Palestinians nowhere.”⁸⁸ As noted above, Pappé writes that the All-Palestine Government simply left behind “phrases and symbols.”⁸⁹ However, the phrases and symbols of the All-Palestine Government feature quite prominently in the Palestinian national narrative. The flag of the All-Palestine Government was adopted directly from the flag used to represent Palestine the 1916 Arab Revolt, a slightly modified

version of which took its place in 1964 and remains in use today.⁹⁰ The rhetoric used by the All-Palestine Government has also reappeared at subsequent moments in more recent history. Pappé notes that the exact words used in the opening session of the All-Palestine Government – “Based on the natural and historical right of the Palestinian Arab people to freedom and independence, we hereby declare . . .” – “would remain the central motto of all the Palestinian documents up to the Palestinian Declaration of Independence in 1988.”⁹¹ Shlaim’s assertion that the swift failure of the All-Palestine Government was a dead-end disregards the broad implications it had for Palestinian national identity afterward. This contention that the All-Palestine Government led the Palestinians nowhere deserves further critique.

While the immediate result of the fall of the All-Palestine Government was further disintegration and stagnation of Palestinian national activity and no development of lasting state-like institutions, this piece of Palestinian history represents the cementing of an identity after having been manipulated by Arabs, British, and Zionists alike. Khalidi writes, “If the Arab population had not been sure of their identity before 1948, the experience of defeat, dispossession, and exile guaranteed that they knew what their identity was very soon afterwards: they were Palestinians.”⁹² In other words, the Palestinians became more defined as a discrete entity in their diaspora and failure than by unifying under an independent nation-state. In this formative time, Palestinians witnessed the All-Palestine Government being used as an instrument of competing Arab interests, against the backdrop of British mandatory policy and Zionist ambition. However broken and factionalized the Palestinians found themselves at this juncture, a more refined and coherent sense of national identity took hold, reinforcing Palestinian consciousness that they could only depend on themselves.

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Endnotes

- 1 Avi Shlaim, “The Rise and Fall of the All-Palestine Government,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 20, no. 1 (1990): 42–43.
- 2 Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881–2001* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 222.
- 3 Fawaz Gerges, “Egypt and the 1948 War: Internal Conflict and Regional Ambition,” *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948*, eds. Eugene L. Rogan and Avi Shlaim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 164.
- 4 Ilan Pappé, *The Rise and Fall of a Palestinian Dynasty: The Husaynis, 1700–1948* (London: Saqi Books, 2010), 43.
- 5 William B. Quandt, Fuad Jabber, and Ann Mosely Lesch, *The Politics of Palestinian Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 17.
- 6 Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Boston: Beacon, 2006), 124.
- 7 Quandt, Jabber, and Lesch, *Politics*, 18.
- 8 Philip Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 66.
- 9 The coalition included Istiqlalists, followers of Qassam, and Young Men’s Muslim Associations, among others. See Mattar, *Mufti*, 69.
- 10 Mattar, *Mufti*, 70.

- 11 The British “felt for him an animosity that was partly explained by a sense of betrayal on the part of leading British officials by a figure who for many years had had their full confidence.” Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 116–17.
- 12 “The British, the Hashemites, and the Zionists all objected strenuously to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, believing that it would become the ‘*mufiti’s* state’. Thus al-Hajj Amin ended up as the *bête noire* of the three most powerful factors in the struggle for Palestine.” Pappé, *Palestinian Dynasty*, 330.
- 13 Mattar, *Mufti*, 102.
- 14 Pappé, *Palestinian Dynasty*, 335.
- 15 Pappé, *Palestinian Dynasty*, 339.
- 16 Mark Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 2d ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 263.
- 17 Gerges, “Egypt and the 1948 War,” 164.
- 18 Shlaim, “Rise and Fall,” 45.
- 19 Shlaim, “Rise and Fall,” 44.
- 20 Quandt, Jabber, and Lesch, *Politics*, 20.
- 21 Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 38–9.
- 22 “None of them grew into the kind of structure that might have served as the nucleus of a state, or as an alternative to the mandatory state.” Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 63.
- 23 Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 177.
- 24 According to Quandt, “the Arab community lacked institutions recognized by the British rulers, unifying communal organs, and a role in a wider representative forum.” Quandt, Jabber, and Lesch, *Politics*, 21.
- 25 Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 38.
- 26 League of Nations, *Mandate for Palestine*, 12 August 1922, accessed 18 May 2015, online at unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/2FCA2C68106F11AB05256BCF007BF3CB
- 27 *Mandate for Palestine*, article 2.
- 28 *Mandate for Palestine*, articles 2 and 9.
- 29 Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 33.
- 30 Ilan Pappé, *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: 1947–51* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1992), 4.
- 31 League of Nations, *Covenant of the League of Nations*, 28 June 1919, accessed 24 May 2015, online at avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp.
- 32 Pappé, *Making*, 14.
- 33 *Covenant of the League of Nations*.
- 34 Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 38.
- 35 “[British high commissioner for Palestine Herbert] Samuel in October 1923 tried to set up an Arab Agency as a counterweight to the representative Zionist bodies. But the Arabs rejected the opportunity, partly because the members were to be nominated by Samuel himself.” Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 109.
- 36 Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 39.
- 37 Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 109.
- 38 Quandt, Jabber, and Lesch, *Politics*, 21.
- 39 Quandt, Jabber, and Lesch, *Politics*, 21.
- 40 Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 44.
- 41 Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 58.
- 42 Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 47.
- 43 Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 339.
- 44 Pappé, *Palestinian Dynasty*, 339.
- 45 Shlaim, “Rise and Fall,” 39.
- 46 Shlaim, “Rise and Fall,” 41.
- 47 Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 222.
- 48 Shlaim, “Rise and Fall,” 43.
- 49 Mattar, *Mufti*, 112.
- 50 Mattar, *Mufti*, 112.
- 51 “The sporadic displays of popular support did not blind the Mufti and his colleagues to the need to endow the new government with real legitimacy and substance.” Shlaim, “Rise and Fall,” 42.
- 52 Pappé, *Palestinian Dynasty*, 340.
- 53 Shlaim, “Rise and Fall,” 48.
- 54 According to Pappé, “it was the Egyptians who gave it the *coup de grâce*.” Pappé, *Palestinian Dynasty*, 340.
- 55 Pappé, *Palestinian Dynasty*, 341.
- 56 “Most of the little land that was nominally under its control (that is, the area of Palestine held by the Egyptian army) was overrun in mid-October by the IDF.” Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 222.
- 57 As Gerges asserts, “In this context, [Egyptian Prime Minister] Nuqrashi made it clear to UN mediators that any settlement that resulted in Transjordan’s annexation of Arab Palestine would destroy the Arab balance of power.” Gerges, “Egypt and the 1948 War,” 164.
- 58 Avi Shlaim, “Israel and the Arab Coalition in 1948,” in *The War for Palestine*, ed. Rogan and Shlaim, 97.
- 59 “In the Arab League, this opposition [to Transjordan] was led by Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, all of whom feared that an increase in Jordanian political influence would be at their expense.” Tessler, *History*, 277.
- 60 Shlaim, “Israel and the Arab Coalition,” 96.
- 61 “King Abdullah’s . . . claim that the Transjordanian delegates rather than the AHC represented the Palestinians inside the Arab League antagonized the other member states, especially Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. Britain’s support of Abdullah’s

- claims further fuelled the Arab League's anti-Abdullah forces." Shlaim, "Rise and Fall," 40.
- 62 Ian J. Bickerton and Carla L. Klausner, *A History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 6th ed. (Saddle River: Pearson Education, 2010), 98.
- 63 "Neither the Syrian nationalist leaders, who hoped for British support in their dealings with the French, nor the ruling Wafd Party in Egypt, which had enough problems with the British as it was, could afford to alienate London over the Palestine question." Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 110.
- 64 Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 125.
- 65 "Even the Arab states, while generally hoping that the Palestinians would not be overwhelmed by the Zionists, were often most concerned about how the endgame of the Palestine Mandate would affect their relations with Britain and the other great powers, the other Arab states, and the Jewish state that was gradually emerging." Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 126.
- 66 Pappé, *Palestinian Dynasty*, 331.
- 67 King Abdallah's "undeclared aim was to partition Palestine with the Zionists and to annex the Arab part to his kingdom." Shlaim, "Rise and Fall," 38.
- 68 Tessler, *History*, 276.
- 69 "This new post-1948 world first manifested itself in the struggle over who would 'represent' the Palestinians. King 'Abdullah immediately acted to further his own dynastic and nation-state interests, his army having retained the largest part of Palestine that had not been incorporated into the new state of Israel." Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 135.
- 70 Pappé, *Palestinian Dynasty*, 340.
- 71 Tessler, *History*, 276.
- 72 "Abdullah's attitude toward Palestine was also encouraged by the British, who agreed that Jordanian forces should occupy areas of the country that had been designated for an Arab state." Tessler, *History*, 277.
- 73 "Abdullah would stay out of the territory of the Jewish state, and in return the Jewish state would let him annex large chunks of Palestine." Pappé, *Palestinian Dynasty*, 329.
- 74 Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 221–22.
- 75 Tessler, *History*, 277.
- 76 Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 135.
- 77 Tessler, *History*, 279.
- 78 Gerges, "Egypt and the 1948 War," 97.
- 79 Shlaim, "Rise and Fall," 50.
- 80 According to Shlaim, "the decision to form an Arab government of Palestine and the attempt to create armed forces under its control furnished the Arab League members with the means for divesting themselves of direct responsibility for the prosecution of the war and of withdrawing their armies from Palestine with some protection against popular outcry." Shlaim, "Rise and Fall," 40.
- 81 Shlaim, "Rise and Fall," 41.
- 82 Shlaim, "Rise and Fall," 43.
- 83 Shlaim, "Rise and Fall," 46.
- 84 Pappé, *Palestinian Dynasty*, 340.
- 85 "From this point onward and for many decades, most Palestinian political activity would take place outside Palestine rather than inside it." Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 136.
- 86 "The Egyptian military authorities, in control of the Gaza strip at the end of the war, allowed only limited Palestinian activity, and none that could jeopardize Egypt's armistice agreement with Israel." Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 136.
- 87 "The Jordanian authorities saw virtually any independent Palestinian organization as subversive and as a threat to the unity of the kingdom, and ruthlessly combated political activity of most kinds, making the West and East Banks of Jordan highly inhospitable for independent Palestinian political action." Khalidi, *Iron Cage*, 136.
- 88 Shlaim, "Rise and Fall," 50.
- 89 Pappé, *Palestinian Dynasty*, 340.
- 90 The green stripe is now on the bottom, rather than in the middle.
- 91 Pappé, *Palestinian Dynasty*, 340.
- 92 Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, 194.