

# Why is Ahmad Hilmi Pasha ‘Abd al-Baqi Absent from the History of the Palestinian National Movement?

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## Abstract

Ahmad Hilmi Pasha ‘Abd al-Baqi was one of the most prominent Palestinian personalities of the first half of the twentieth century. He was not only an eyewitness but also an active participant in the events that absorbed the Arab world during this period. In 1948, the year of the Nakba, he played an important role defending Jerusalem against Zionist attacks, particularly on the Old City. Throughout the spring, Ahmad Hilmi was the only member of the Arab Higher Committee present in the city, which led many who sought guidance and leadership to rely on him. However, most people link his name only with the short-lived All-Palestine Government in Gaza. While the Palestinian collective memory preserves an esteemed position for Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husayni in leading the national movement, Ahmad Hilmi Pasha’s role is mostly unknown to intellectuals, let alone the general Arab readership. What is behind the eclipsing of the economic, political, and military roles of one of the most prominent figures of the Palestinian elite, played over two decades of British rule and the Nakba? What is behind the neglect of the role of this man who chose Palestine as his homeland and spent most of his life defending its cause? This essay, which is based on the author’s unpublished biography of Ahmad Hilmi Pasha, makes an attempt to answer these questions that are relevant not only to past Palestinian history but also to contemporary accounts of the national leadership.

## Keywords:

Ahmad Hilmi Pasha; biographical accounts; Nakba; Hajj Amin; All-Palestine Government; Jerusalem; Palestinian elite; Arab Higher Committee; Arab Bank.

Ahmad Hilmi Pasha ‘Abd al-Baqi (1882–1963) was among Palestine’s most prominent personalities in the first half of the twentieth century, his rich life and varied career encompassing political, economic, cultural, and military roles (the latter in Iraq during World War I and in Palestine in 1948). He was an eyewitness and, more importantly, an active participant in the events that absorbed the Arab world during this period. He played a leading role in the area of Arab development and finance, and a political role in the Palestinian national movement, including, in 1948, the defense of Jerusalem, particularly the Old City, against Zionist attacks. Throughout the spring of that year, Ahmad Hilmi was the only member of the Arab Higher Committee present in the city, which led many who sought guidance and leadership to rely on him.

Despite his distinguished achievements, Ahmad Hilmi Pasha has remained a little known figure, unjustly inconspicuous in the historical literature of Palestine. Even during his lifetime, he remained largely out of the political spotlight. He was not a polarizing Palestinian leader like Hajj Amin al-Husayni or his opponent, Raghib al-Nashashibi, nor was he the leader of a political party or faction seen as contributing to the fragmentation of the national movement, rendering it unable to confront its enemies who fought to turn Palestine into a “Jewish national home.” To the extent that he is remembered, most people link his name with the All-Palestine Government in Gaza, established in autumn 1948 but short-lived in the face of tripartite British-Zionist-Hashemite hostility.<sup>1</sup>

While Palestinian collective memory holds in high esteem Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husayni as leader of the national movement during its struggles against colonialism and Zionism, Ahmad Hilmi Pasha ‘Abd al-Baqi’s role is barely known to intellectuals, let alone the general Arab readership. What is behind the underplaying of the economic, political, and military roles of this prominent figure of the Palestine elite over two decades of British rule and during the Nakba? Why has this man, who consciously chose Palestine as his homeland and spent most of his life defending its cause and preserving its identity and independence, been so neglected? Before trying to answer these questions, let us examine Ahmad Hilmi’s position among the top echelons of the national movement and the diversity of his activities before and after the Nakba.

Ahmad Hilmi ‘Abd al-Baqi’s biography is the story of a man in the Palestinian elite who led the national movement and transformed along with it. He cast aside his supranational pre-World War I Ottoman identity into which he was born and adopted an Arab one, finally settling on a Palestinian national identity with which to defend the “Arabness” (*‘uruba*) of the homeland and its independence. His biography sheds light on aspects of the history of the Palestinian national movement, from its beginnings in the early 1920s until the Nakba and its aftermath, while the network of social and economic relations woven by this self-made man, a newcomer to Jerusalem (with its already well-established political elite), enables us to reassess the performance of the leadership of the national movement.

This essay briefly traces the turns of Ahmad Hilmi’s life, placing them in their historical context and reevaluating them in light of the social environment of the time, and thus chronicling the achievements of this unique personality and through him the

Palestinian elite to which he belonged.<sup>2</sup> Ahmad Hilmi's recognition and importance as a public figure is made clear in the Mandate-era press, which covered his activities (especially in the economic realm), as well as the memoirs and autobiographies of his contemporaries. This material compensates for the relative paucity of material that he himself wrote – not to mention material that was certainly lost with Palestine in 1948.

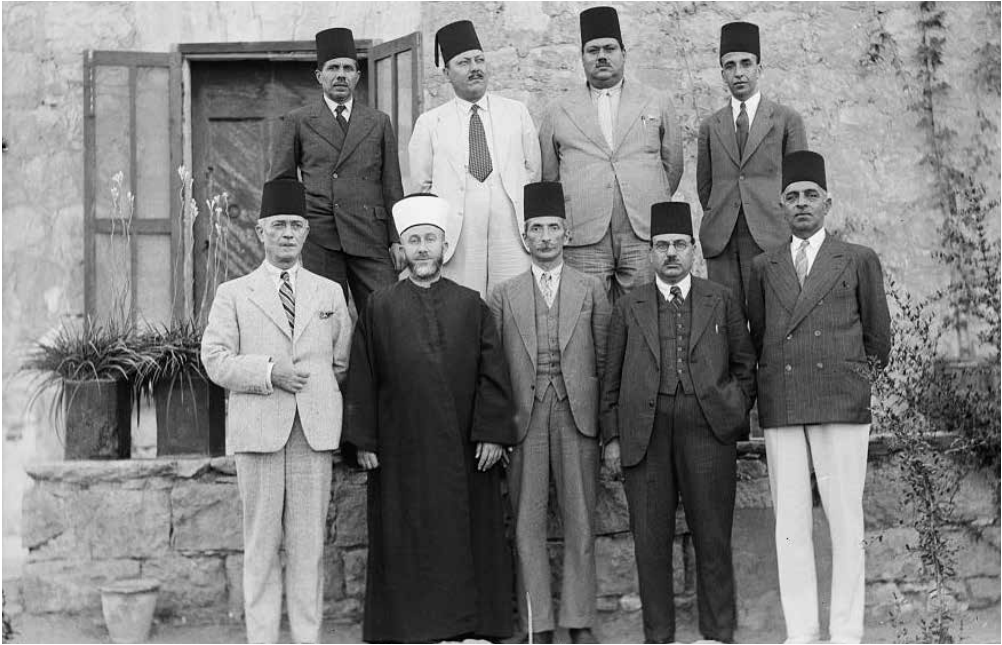


Figure 1. "Palestine disturbances 1936. Members of the Arab Higher Committee. Front row from left to right: Ragheb Bey Nashashibi, chairman of the Defence Party, Haj Amin eff. el-Husseini, Grand Mufti & president of the Committee, Ahmed Hilmi Pasha, Gen. Manager of the Jerusalem Arab Bank, Abdul Latif Bey Es-Salah, chairman of the Arab National Party, Mr. Alfred Roke, influential land-owner. Back row: Jamal eff. el-Husseini, chairman of the Arab Party and leader of the unofficial Arab Commission to London. Dr. Hsein Khaldhi, Mayor of Jerusalem. Ya'cub Bey el-Ghusein, President of the Arab Youths Committee. Mr. Fuad Saba, Secretary of the Arab Higher Committee." From Library of Congress. online at [www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/matpc.18173/](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/matpc.18173/) (accessed 3 February 2025).

## An Early Life and Career in the Ottoman Shadow

Ahmad Hilmi Pasha 'Abd al-Baqi is in a sense a classic tragic hero. His birth in 1882 coincided with Egypt coming under British rule and Zionism beginning its colonial settlement project in Palestine. His mixed patrilineal origins (no information is known about his mother or his wife) were a circumstance of the Ottoman Empire's control of a vast region: he was born in Sidon, in the Levant, where his father was an employee of the Ottoman Treasury; his father himself had been born in Tulkarm and his father's father was Albanian.<sup>3</sup> The Ottoman Empire underwent tumultuous times internally and externally throughout Ahmad Hilmi's childhood and early education

when instability in the area and work opportunities forced his father to move the family several times. But his experiences deepened his integration into this region and its Arab culture. Ahmad Hilmi's early career gave indications that he would follow in his father's path as an employee with the Ottoman government. He at first supported the Young Turk Revolution that brought to power the Committee for Union and Progress in 1908, but, like many of his Arab contemporaries, he soon became disappointed. Nevertheless, he continued to serve and defend the Ottoman Empire until its demise after World War I.

Throughout his life, Ahmad Hilmi's ideas and projects reflected a transition from an Islamic Ottoman identity to supporting Arab unity, and ultimately Palestinian nationalism. When the storms of World War I blew, sweeping away Ottoman rule, they brought new options and possibilities. The collapse of the state in which he grew up had immediate consequences on the geopolitics of the world to which he belonged. His horizons shrank from a transcontinental transnational empire to a few confining nation-states, whose borders were drawn by European colonialism and whose kings and rulers were crowned by European generals. Ahmad Hilmi would find himself at similar crossroads many times in his life. In such circumstances, he made bold decisions and was forced to accept their consequences.

In Arabia, Sharif Husayn, who had been promised Britain's support to establish an independent kingdom in the Arab East, found himself abandoned by his ally, and forced to abdicate the Hijaz to his son 'Ali. In 1918, Ahmad Hilmi felt that he was "destined" to work first with the government that Faysal, son of Husayn, Sharif of Mecca and figurehead of the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans during World War I, established in Damascus. In 1920, Ahmad Hilmi and others who had flocked to join Faysal's government in Damascus experienced its bitter fall after the Battle of Maysalun in July 1920, and the division of the Arab East into mandate territories under British or French colonialist rule. In 1922, he joined Husayn's son 'Abdallah in Amman, where he was appointed financial counselor to the nascent Hashemite Transjordanian government. He would go on to serve Sharif Husayn in 1924 and 1925, earning the title of pasha around this period. But Ahmad Hilmi became disheartened by the postwar fate of Husayn and, especially, with Faysal and 'Abdallah, who secured for themselves a kingdom in Iraq and an emirate in Transjordan, respectively, by compromising with the British.

After spending the immediate postwar years in Damascus, Amman, Cairo, and the Hijaz, Ahmad Hilmi decided on Jerusalem as a home for his family and on the Arabism of Palestine as the cause to defend against the danger of the Zionist colonial project, to which Britain had pledged its support by the Balfour Declaration in 1917. After the failure to establish a unified Arab kingdom over the whole Levant, Ahmad Hilmi directed his independent spirit toward economic and political roles that served and defended the Palestinian cause.

Perhaps his independent nature, and the fact that he had not headed a party nor was from an influential family, led to his marginalization in the works on Palestine's modern history and its national movement.<sup>4</sup>

## Finding a Footing in Jerusalem

Most of the political class involved in the Palestinian national movement in the aftermath of World War I grew up during the late Ottoman era, and some (such as Ahmad Hilmi) had played a role in serving and defending the empire. This elite were largely from the families of Jerusalem notables (effendis) who inherited their roles and functions from their fathers and grandfathers. Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husayni and his family are good examples; accustomed to the role of notables, they were the traditional intermediaries between the ruling state and the people.<sup>5</sup>

When Ahmad Hilmi Pasha ‘Abd al-Baqi arrived in Jerusalem in 1926, he became the third political leader in the city to hold the Ottoman honorific title of pasha, alongside Musa Kazim Pasha al-Husayni (1853–1934) and ‘Arif Pasha al-Dajani (1860–1930).<sup>6</sup> The Dajani family, who were associated with the shrine of the Prophet David, was one of the largest and wealthiest families of the Jerusalemite elite. Like many members of his family, ‘Arif Dajani held high administrative positions during the Ottoman period. After World War I, he became patriarch of the Dajani family and headed the Muslim-Christian Association in Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> In general, he remained one of the active political figures in the national movement in the 1920s, until his death in 1930.<sup>8</sup>

Musa Kazim al-Husayni was mayor of Jerusalem from 1918 to 1920 and, as head of the executive committee of the Palestine Arab Congress, served as official leader of the Palestinian national movement from 1922 to 1934. His son, ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni (1908–48), became a well-known symbol of sacrifice in defending Palestine during the 1936–39 revolt and especially after his martyrdom in the battle at al-Qastal on 8 April 1948.<sup>9</sup> Musa Kazim’s grandson, Faisal al-Husseini (1942–2001), inherited some of his father’s and grandfather’s qualities and did everything he could to preserve the Arab identity of Jerusalem after the Israeli occupation of the city in June 1967. The Husayni family’s status was bolstered by their inheritance of leading religious and administrative positions in the Ottoman and British eras, as they were able to place relatives in important positions.

By contrast, Ahmad Hilmi Pasha, was a self-made man: he could not fall back on the wealth or security provided by an aristocratic family, nor was he satisfied to accept the reality of colonialism and join in its service. Ahmad Hilmi Pasha became friends with Hajj Amin when he arrived in Jerusalem in 1926 and worked alongside him in the Supreme Muslim Council, where Ahmad Hilmi served as inspector-general of Islamic waqf properties until 1930. Ahmad Hilmi Pasha consolidated his leadership position among the Palestinian elite by drawing on his relations with Hajj Amin and his rich experience in Ottoman administration and service to the Arab cause. The fez he wore and his title of pasha were indicators of his social standing when he and his family settled in Palestine in 1926. He was distinguished also by his diverse interests as a civil servant, finance expert, businessman, investor, and banker, at a time when such skills were desperately needed to boost the Palestinian economy.

## Ahmad Hilmi Pasha and ‘Abd al-Hamid Shuman

Ahmad Hilmi’s position among the elite was strengthened by connections forged through marriage. In 1929, his daughter Saniyya married ‘Abd al-Hamid Shuman, the founder of the Arab Bank. That year ‘Abd al-Hamid Shuman had returned from New York after achieving financial success in the United States.<sup>10</sup> A widower since 1913, ‘Abd al-Hamid had been in Jerusalem only a few months when he began looking for a suitable bride. He asked his friend Riyadh al-Sulh (1894–1951), later to become Lebanon’s first prime minister, to find him an “Arab Muslim girl from a conservative family who knows English” because he planned to travel with her to America.<sup>11</sup> Shuman adds in his memoir, *al-‘Isami* (Self-made man), that after waiting a long time for al-Sulh’s response, he approached his friend Fayyad al-Khadra, who proposed the idea of marrying a Jerusalemite girl.<sup>12</sup> Khadra suggested that one of Ahmad Hilmi Pasha’s daughters might be a good wife for him. Shuman asked Khadra to broach the subject with Ahmad Hilmi, who agreed on Shuman’s marriage to his daughter, Saniyya. Shuman adds that he sent a telegram to Riyadh al-Sulh that read: “You were very late in answering me, so it turned out that I was destined to be married to the daughter of a mutual friend, Ahmad Hilmi Pasha.”<sup>13</sup>

In 1937, Ahmad Hilmi’s only son, Muhammad ‘Abduh, married the daughter of Rashid al-Hajj Ibrahim, a Palestinian nationalist leader from Haifa.<sup>14</sup> In 1946, ‘Abd al-Majid Shuman, ‘Abd al-Hamid’s son from his first marriage, married Ahmad Hilmi’s youngest daughter, Naila, further solidifying the bonds between the two families. In his memoirs, ‘Abd al-Hamid says that he was performing *‘umra* when ‘Abd al-Majid decided to get married, prompting a congratulatory telegram that read: “Our son, ‘Abd al-Majid. Many congratulations. Your brother-in-law, Hajj ‘Abd al-Hamid.”<sup>15</sup> The connections between the two families were renewed in the next generation when Khalid, son of ‘Abd al-Hamid Shuman and Saniyya ‘Abd al-Baqi, married Suha ‘Abd al-Baqi, daughter of Muhammad ‘Abduh, in 1974.

Was the intermarriage between the families in 1929 purely coincidental? And had ‘Abd al-Hamid Shuman not thought himself about marrying a suitable Jerusalemite bride? Was it because of his rural origins (from Bayt Hanina village) and the snobbery of the families of Jerusalem’s scholars and notables toward the people of the neighboring villages? (Even decades after the Nakba many Jerusalemite families and their counterparts in Nablus and other Palestinian cities continued to refuse to allow their girls to marry “sons of peasants.”) Such questions related to the history of social relations in Jerusalem, and other cities of Palestine, require separate research. In any case, the meeting and cooperation of the two “outsiders” in 1929 resulted in more than just a marriage between the families – it produced the first Arab banking institution in Jerusalem, the Arab Bank.

After two decades in the United States, ‘Abd al-Hamid Shuman returned to Palestine with a considerable fortune accumulated from business endeavors in real estate, business, finance, and philanthropy, and ready to invest in economic development in his homeland. Ahmad Hilmi ‘Abd al-Baqi had arrived in Jerusalem three years before

Shuman, with considerable banking experience from the Ottoman Agricultural Bank and high administrative and financial positions he had held in Iraq, Damascus, Amman, and with the Hijaz Railway, for which he was recognized with the title of pasha. In Jerusalem, as manager of the Supreme Muslim Council's finances, he oversaw major projects in the Haram al-Sharif and construction of the Palace Hotel, which gave him local experience in finance and business management. However, neither Ahmad Hilmi nor 'Abd al-Hamid could draw on family lineage like the Jerusalemite families who had inherited and competed over eminent leadership positions for centuries. The cooperation between Shuman and 'Abd al-Baqi was in many ways a natural alliance that helped both to succeed through social and political mobility.

In 1930, Ahmad Hilmi Pasha became the first chairman of the board of directors of the Arab Bank, newly founded with 'Abd al-Hamid Shuman, which opened branches in Palestinian cities and abroad in the following years. We do not know whether 'Abd al-Hamid Shuman approved his father-in-law's chairmanship of the board because of his long experience in banking or for other reasons. A major factor may have been that Shuman intended to return to the United States to pursue his business interests in New York. In any case, Ahmad Hilmi's participation in the establishment of the Arab Bank and his work there marked an important turning point in his transition from a civil servant at the Supreme Muslim Council to the role of a well-known businessman and banker at the national level. He later was a founder of the Agricultural Bank which provided credit to landed farmers, the Arab National Bank in Cairo, an organizer of the Arab Fair, and head of the Arab National Fund (*Sanduq al-Umma*), created by the joint Muslim-Christian Arab Executive Committee in 1932 to raise funds to keep Palestinians on their land. The increase in his financial wealth and importance also paved the way for him to join the political elite in leading the national movement.

## Exile and Return

From the 1930s, there was growing frustration and criticism of the Husayni-Nashashibi schism in Jerusalem, and many young educated men joined the ranks of the Istiqlal (Independence) party to try to influence the agenda of the national movement and its attitude toward the British authorities. Meanwhile, Ahmad Hilmi Pasha, who had expanded his banking business and economic projects, joined the Arab Higher Committee in the spring of 1936, remained close to the mufti and supported his leadership of the national movement. Although he showed a clear affinity for the Arab anti-colonialist ideology represented by the Istiqlal, he and the mufti remained close until their arrest and exile – along with a number of the members of the Arab Higher Committee – to the Seychelles in 1937.

Eventually, Ahmad Hilmi and some of his exiled comrades were released, and he returned to Cairo in 1938, and from there went on to Beirut. At the beginning of 1940, he was the first of the exiles to return to Palestine, having agreed to the British government's condition not to engage in any activity that "threatened security."<sup>16</sup>

Ahmad Hilmi Pasha's explanation for accepting this condition was "the breakdown of the financial and economic institutions he managed and supervised," which "may collapse or deteriorate" if his "absence from the country is prolonged."<sup>17</sup> He arrived in Haifa at the end of January 1940, and *al-Difa* ' newspaper expressed its "hope that the Arab economic movement will benefit from his well-known efforts and endeavors," and noted that he "spent last night at the home of his in-laws, the al-Hajj Ibrahim family."<sup>18</sup> Rashid al-Hajj Ibrahim himself was not there to receive the pasha in Haifa, since he was kept in exile for another few months, returning to Palestine later in 1940. Britain did not allow some other members of the Arab Higher Committee, especially supporters of the mufti such as Jamal al-Husayni and 'Izzat Darwaza, among others, to return to Palestine until years later.

Ahmad Hilmi returned to Jerusalem just a few months after the outbreak of World War II. Meanwhile, the opposition led by Raghīb al-Nashashibi exploited the extended absence of Hajj Amin and many of his supporters from Jerusalem after 1937, and strengthened their position, showing greater readiness to cooperate with Britain politically and even militarily. After the outbreak of the war, some, including members of the Istiqlal party who had fought Britain and seen it as a major enemy of Palestinian interests, were now ready to cooperate with it. British authorities in Palestine, for their part, worked to win allegiance and prevent Arab public support for the Axis powers.

Ahmad Hilmi Pasha distanced himself from politics upon his return and turned his attention to economic matters. Had his trust in the mufti's wisdom faltered after he and his comrades were exiled far from home, with plenty of time to contemplate the situation in Palestine in the last year of the revolt? Was his confidence shaken after seeing Hajj Amin in action, imposing his views on the leaders of the national movement? Was the rejection of the White Paper in May 1939, despite the important British "concessions" it contained for the Arabs, considered a misjudged decision? In the absence of diaries or memoirs, we are left to speculate about Ahmad Hilmi's return to Jerusalem after exile and his initial reluctance to engage in politics.

Whatever the case, Ahmad Hilmi Pasha's absence from the country for more than two years had left an impact on the Agricultural Bank and on his partnership with his son-in-law 'Abd al-Hamid Shuman at the Arab Bank. In his memoirs, Shuman writes that after Ahmad Hilmi's return to Jerusalem, they faced the sensitive issue of recovering funds that had been borrowed by political leaders.<sup>19</sup> Ahmad Hilmi tried to postpone the issue, but Shuman was determined to recover the money, which represented a significant part of the Arab Bank's cash liquidity. Ahmad Hilmi Pasha became angry and severely reprimanded his son-in-law, but Shuman insisted on his position. In the end, the matter was only resolved when Shuman replaced Ahmad Hilmi as chairman of the Arab Bank.<sup>20</sup> Ahmad Hilmi, meanwhile, turned his attention to reviving the activity of the National Fund after 1943 and established a committee to aid victims of the drought in Palestine in 1947. The last stop in his career, however, was to be in Cairo as a representative of Palestine (after Palestine itself had been lost) in the Arab League.



## After the Nakba

In July 1948, the Arab League proposed to set up a Palestine government in Gaza, ironically to recognize Palestinian agency over Palestine, in order to preempt Jordanian plans to take control of the West Bank. In late September 1948, Ahmad Hilmi Pasha, together with other former members of the Arab Higher Committee, launched a government-in-exile in Gaza, called the All-Palestine Government, as a nascent state structure envisioned in the UN partition resolution. Headed by a divisive Hajj Amin al-Husayni, Ahmad Hilmi Pasha was selected to be prime minister of the government, in what he may have seen as the apex of his political life and the start of the last chapter of his half century of activity on Arab issues. However, the short-lived All-Palestine Government was fraught from its largely symbolic inception and plagued by competing Arab interests and Palestinian divisions.

Like other Palestinian leaders, Ahmad Hilmi Pasha lost much of his political and economic influence after 1948. He spent his final years, 1949 to 1963, in Cairo, initially as the All-Palestine Government representative to the Arab League, and then in tireless work that failed to achieve political and economic independence for the homeland he was devoted to. Like the rest of the Jerusalemite elite, the loss of Palestine and the transformation of the Zionist-Palestinian conflict into an Arab-Israeli conflict for more than a decade undermined his political position. Disagreements between the Arab regimes after the Nakba (as before it) overshadowed any attempt at joint action in the 1950s and 1960s. After the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, Ahmad Hilmi lost most of what remained of his role as the representative of Palestine and its cause in the Arab League. Even the Arab National Bank, which he established and continued to manage from Cairo, was nationalized in the late 1950s. Yet the decline and eventual disappearance of the Palestinian elite laid the foundations for revolutionary leaderships that focused on the importance of the Palestinians restoring their role in their own struggle. One of the major steps toward this development, the foundation of the Palestine Liberation Organization, took place a short time after Ahmad Hilmi's death in 1963.

In many ways, Ahmad Hilmi's life and work embodied the Palestinian tragedy. He was an active witness to this tragedy, from his position in the political and economic leadership and through his close ties to the ruling Arab elites. He bore witness to the success of the Zionist colonial project despite significant struggles and sacrifices made by the Palestinians during the 1920s, and even more so throughout the years of the Great Revolt (1936–39). He and his comrades in the national movement expended huge effort to avert the Nakba before it happened. But the causes of the disaster were stronger and greater than any conceivable individual effort, no matter how sincere.

From 1936, Ahmad Hilmi Pasha became one of the leading men of the Palestinian national struggle, playing a major political role in the Arab Higher Committee and later in the Arab League. However, reducing his life and work during the Mandate period to his political activities does not do him justice. Ahmad Hilmi's tireless work in the fields of banking, development, and economics – including his involvement in major

institutions such as the Arab Bank, the Agricultural Bank, the Arab National Bank, and the National Fund – are as important as his political activities, and made him a prominent figure. In Egypt, he was able to witness the fall of the Khedival dynasty, through which the descendants of Mehmed ‘Ali Pasha (an Albanian originally sent to Egypt by the Ottoman government) ruled Egypt and Sudan until the Free Officers’ revolution of 1952.

## Conclusion

The fate of the Palestinian historian, whose people lost so much of their intellectual and spiritual wealth during and after the Nakba, is to produce scholarship to reinstate Palestine into the historical narrative. Ahmad Hilmi Pasha left us no memoir or autobiography. In some cases, oral testimonies make up for lost archives and manuscripts, but Ahmad Hilmi’s contemporaries passed away some time ago, foreclosing this possibility. We do, however, have access to some of their memoirs and diaries, to which we can add papers and family correspondence, the Arab and foreign press, published Arab documents, and other archives in Palestine and abroad that can shed light on some aspects of Ahmad Hilmi’s life.

In writing the (as yet unpublished) biography of Ahmad Hilmi Pasha that is the basis for this essay, it took some effort to understand the absence of Ahmad Hilmi’s name from the Palestinian collective memory and historical literature. I can offer no definitive explanation for this absence, given the sources available. However, it has also led me to consider the scarcity of biographies among the Arabic-language historical literature of the modern Arab world. There are very few good biographical books written by Arab researchers about leading figures who left their mark on the history of the Middle East in the twentieth century. Those available suffer from two shortcomings that weaken their credibility and academic value. The first is the absolute inclination toward glorifying the subject of the biography, especially when they are a “legendary” or symbolic king or leader. In such cases, researchers have failed to submit their subjects to critical historical methodology. The other flaw found in Arab biographies of twentieth-century figures is a tendency to collect information about an individual’s life and works but not place it in its historical context or employ rigorous analysis, explanatory reasoning, or comparison. Without such tools, a biography may entertain, but it lacks historical value. Is the answer to the question that motivates this essay related to the scarcity of good biographical works more broadly in Palestine and the Arab states?

Whatever the case, it is important to raise questions even if it is not possible to provide definitive answers to them: this is, after all, at the heart of academic inquiry in the social sciences and humanities. Did Ahmad Hilmi’s non-indigenous roots and his late arrival in Jerusalem affect his leadership position under Hajj Amin al-Husayni? Or was Ahmad Hilmi Pasha’s dour personality and lack of charisma the reason why his role in the national movement is not more conspicuous? Did the early death of his only son, Muhammad ‘Abduh, who passed away only six months after Ahmad

Hilmi Pasha did, play some part in obscuring Ahmad Hilmi's role in the national movement? Raising questions about the absence of material is by necessity a way to deal with the uncertainty resulting from the lack of texts and documents upon which a historian relies.

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### Endnotes

- 1 On the All-Palestine Government, see Muhammad Khalid al-Az'ar, *Hukumat 'umum Filastin fi dhikraha al-khamsin* [The All-Palestine Government on its fiftieth anniversary] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1998).
- 2 This essay is based on my draft manuscript of a biography of Ahmad Hilmi Pasha 'Abd al-Baqi, for forthcoming publication.
- 3 Ahmad Hilmi's friend, 'Ajaj Nuwayhid, wrote in his obituary: "Mahmud, father of Hilmi Pasha, was a noble and generous man. I learned that he came from Albania and was involved in the military affairs of the state." 'Ajaj Nuwayhid, "al-Rahilun: Ahmad Hilmi wa rifaquhu" [The departed: Ahmad Hilmi and his companions], *Nahdat al-'Arab*, 13 December 1963.
- 4 There is not enough space here to mention all of the relevant books in Arabic and English, so I will restrict myself to a few telling examples: Ahmad Hilmi's name is completely absent from Rashid Khalidi's rich and important study *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) as well as his book *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006). The same is true of an important book *Tarikh al-Filastiniyyin wa harakatihim al-wataniyya* [History of the Palestinians and their national movement] (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2018) by Maher Charif and Issam Nassar.
- 5 On the Husayni family and its role during the Ottoman era and later in leading the Palestinian national movement in the twentieth century, see Ilan Pappé, *The Rise and Fall of a Palestinian Dynasty: The Husaynis, 1700–1948* (London: Saqi Books, 2010).
- 6 There is a short biography of 'Arif Pasha al-Dajani in my book *A'lam Filastin fi awakhir al-'ahd al-'uthmani (1800–1918)* [Palestinian figures in the late Ottoman era, 1800–1918] (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1995), 174–76. Yoni Furas recently published a biography of Musa Kazim in Hebrew, based on his MA thesis at Tel Aviv University: *Tirshom! Anahnu umah: Musa Kazim al-Husayni, biografiyah politit* [Write down! We are a nation: Musa Kazim al-Husayni, a political biography] (Tel Aviv: Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2017). This leading figure is still waiting for someone to write a complete biography about him in Arabic.
- 7 For a short period, he was also the head of the association's administrative committee and later its vice-president.
- 8 In popular memory and imagination, Hajj Amin al-Husayni is seen as leader of the national movement throughout the British Mandate, but Musa Kazim was the head of its executive committee until his death in 1934. Bayan Nuwayhid al-Hout, *al-Qiyadat wal-mu'assasat al-siyasiyya fi Filastin, 1917–1948* [Leaderships and political institutions in Palestine, 1917–1948] (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1986).
- 9 The Dayr Yasin massacre, the day after the death of 'Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni, had a major impact on Palestinians in Jerusalem in particular, and throughout the country.
- 10 Upon his return, Shuman met several Jerusalemite figures, including Hajj Amin al-Husayni, at the Supreme Muslim Council building. This may have been where he

first encountered Ahmad Hilmi Pasha. See ‘Abd al-Hamid Shuman, *al-‘Isami: siratuhi ‘Abd al-Hamid Shuman, 1890–1974* [Self-made man: ‘Abd al-Hamid Shuman’s autobiography, 1890–1974] (Beirut: al-Mu’assasa al-‘Arabiyya, 1982), 119.

- 11 Shuman, *al-‘Isami*, 140.
- 12 Fayyad al-Khadra worked in the Supreme Muslim Council in Jerusalem, where, it seems, he met Ahmed Hilmi Pasha and his family.
- 13 Shuman, *al-‘Isami*, 142. This information about the friendship with Riyadh al-Sulh, also born in Sidon and who became the first prime minister of Lebanon after independence, confirms the close relations that continued to connect Ahmad Hilmi Pasha with prominent figures in the Arab political elite.
- 14 The marriage took place on 14 May 1937 in Haifa, according to contemporary Palestinian newspapers.
- 15 Shuman, *al-‘Isami*, 318.
- 16 Rashid al-Hajj Ibrahim mentions in his memoirs that Ahmed Hilmi Pasha met with Hajj Amin during his stay in Beirut (in the presence of Jamal al-Husayni) and “the telegram was discussed and the solutions agreed upon with Muhammad Mahmoud

Pasha were denounced. The Mufti denied he had approved them, but Jamal argued the contrary, which proved that the Mufti had actually issued the approval.” Rashid al-Hajj Ibrahim, *al-Difa’ ‘an Haifa wa qadiyat Filastin* [The defence of Haifa and the Palestine issue] (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2005), 194.

- 17 Muhammad ‘Izzat Darwaza, *Mudhakkirat Muhammad ‘Izzat Darwaza, 1305 h.–1404 h. (1887-1984.)* [Memoirs of Muhammad ‘Izzat Darwaza, 1305 AH–1404 AH (1887 CE–1984 CE)] (Tunis: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1993), vol. 4, 74–75; Husayn al-Khalidi, *Wa mada ‘ahd al-mujamalat* [The era of compliments has passed] (Amman: Dar al-Shuruq, 2014), vol. 1, 405–6.
- 18 Ahmed Hilmi Pasha was the first of those deported to the Seychelles to return to Palestine. “‘Awdat ‘atufat Hilmi Basha ila al-Quds” [His Grace Hilmi Pasha’s Return to Jerusalem], *al-Difa’*, 31 January 1940, 1.
- 19 See Sreemati Mitter, “Bankrupt: Financial Life in Late Mandate Palestine,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 2 (May 2020): 289–310.
- 20 Shuman, *al-‘Isami*, 237.