

Islam Assembled

The Advent of the Muslim Congresses



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New York Columbia University Press 1986

IN DEFENSE OF JERUSALEM

*The General Islamic Congress,
1931*

THROUGH THE Jerusalem Muslim congress of December 1931, that faction of Palestine's Arabs under the leadership of Amin al-Husayni (1897-1974) attempted to commit wider Muslim opinion to support for the cause of Muslim Palestine. The aim was to challenge the Western sanction accorded the League of Nations mandate and the projected establishment of a Jewish national home. The proposed congress, devoted ostensibly to the preservation of the Muslim holy places in Jerusalem, was ruled by British authorities to be of a religious nature, and while the mandatory power was out of sympathy with the aims of the congress, it thus did little to impede the efforts of the organizers. These were left to surmount only those obstacles raised by Muslim opponents at home and abroad. Such opposition, which was considerable, was either overcome or ignored, and the congress, once convened, endorsed a series of resolutions for the defense of the holy places against encroachment, and the preservation of the Muslim-Arab character of Palestine.

Because these resolutions entailed a number of ambitious and costly projects, such as the building of a Muslim university and the purchase of land, the participants went further, establishing a permanent secretariat and scheduling future congresses at two-year intervals. The permanent secretariat functioned for perhaps as long as five years, but with steadily diminishing results, and the congress was not reconvened. The failure of the secretariat to raise funds to effect the congress resolutions appears to have been the principal cause of the withering of this initiative. In 1937, with the flight of Amin al-Husayni from Palestine to an exile abroad, the organization finally ceased to function, although the network of political and personal ties which it created continued for years afterward to work on behalf of the Palestine Arab cause.

Because of the widespread interest in the conflict over Palestine and the conscious efforts of the organizers to seize the limelight, the congress

won coverage more extensive than that accorded any of its predecessors. In addition to the Palestinian press, which was consumed with the event, the Western and foreign Arab press showed a sustained interest in the proceedings. The prelude, proceedings, and aftermath of the congress were therefore amply covered in the open press, and it was a participating journalist, Muhammad ʿAli al-Tahir, who left one of the fullest accounts of events behind the scenes, written only six months after the congress.¹

As was to be expected, Rashid Rida's *al-Manar* also covered the congress, but from the narrow vantage point of his own contribution to its proceedings.² A fairly straightforward account in Arabic was written by the Palestinian Arab historian Muhammad ʿIzzat Darwaza, who had served as recording secretary to the congress.³ Later came other memoirs, the most interesting of these by ʿAjaj Nuwayhid.⁴

The desire to write about the Jerusalem proceedings while they were still fresh was also great for Western scholars and publicists. H. A. R. Gibb's account was the most influential of these several studies,⁵ all of which were superseded once British, French, Palestinian Arab, Zionist, and Egyptian archival materials became available. A number of documented historical studies then appeared, some more thorough than others.⁶

There remains an important source which has yet to reappear and fully illuminate the congress: the archive of the congress itself. The location of these documents was known as recently as 1955, when the papers were searched by an Azhar historian for a manuscript autobiography of Shakib Arslan. The material was then stored in a disorganized fashion in a room near al-Aqsa, but now cannot be located.⁷

The Palestinian Arab initiative for a general Muslim congress dated in a sense from the dispatch of an Islamic mission to the Hijaz in 1922. At that time, the delegation prevailed upon Husayn of Mecca to convene precisely this sort of gathering, and then actively participated (see chapter 8). Large Palestinian Muslim delegations also figured in the subsequent congress of 1926, organized under Saudi auspices (see previous chapter). Personal ties were forged at these encounters with the Indian Khilafat Committee leaders Muhammad and Shawkat ʿAli. Upon their disappointment with Ibn Saʿud's policies, these brothers were in search of an alternative Arab alliance, and in early 1929 Muhammad ʿAli first suggested the creation of a Supreme Islamic Council in Jerusalem composed of representatives drawn from throughout the Muslim world.⁸ The bond was sealed in early 1931 upon Muhammad ʿAli's death, when Amin al-Husayni wired Shawkat ʿAli asking him to inter his deceased brother in Jerusalem.⁹

From the interaction of Amin al-Husayni and Shawkat ʿAli on this occasion, the idea of a general Muslim congress in Jerusalem was reborn. Earlier, in 1928, when it became evident that the congress organizations established in Cairo and Mecca two years before had collapsed, Amin al-Husayni had convened in Jerusalem a "general" Muslim congress in defense of the holy places, but it had been attended only by delegates from neighboring territories.¹⁰ With the promise of cooperation from the Indian Khilafat Committee, a new Jerusalem congress was sure to attract far wider participation and attention. The Khilafat leaders, in turn, would then perhaps be in a position to forge that Muslim alliance which had repeatedly eluded them, most recently in their falling out with Ibn Saʿud.

A preparatory committee was established, which entered into widespread correspondence with influential Muslims abroad, while Amin al-Husayni and Shawkat ʿAli began to lobby in public and private on behalf of the projected congress.¹¹ Their themes were the defense of the holy places, and their concrete project was the establishment of a new Muslim university in Jerusalem. A third theme, the restoration of the Hijaz railroad to Muslim control, emerged with the sudden seizure of the Damascus station's premises by French authorities while the congress was in preparation. But the prelude to the congress was a round of confrontations with those who opposed the organizers personally or the idea of a Jerusalem Muslim congress generally. Both forms of opposition were either reconciled or defeated, but not without influence upon the congress itself.

Because Palestine was a territory under British mandate, it was first necessary to secure British acquiescence in the congress plans. There was much concern at the Foreign Office over the possible effects of the congress on British relations with certain states, and the banning of the congress was briefly entertained. The most worrisome of these considerations, to judge from the official correspondence, concerned Italian apprehensions about the congress. Italian forces had just crushed the last vestiges of Muslim resistance in Libya, and in September 1931 had captured and executed its leader, ʿUmar al-Mukhtar. A wave of revulsion had swept the Muslim world, and the Italian government greatly feared that it would be made the butt of the resolutions of any such congress. The Foreign Office was given to understand that were this to happen in Jerusalem, Anglo-Italian relations would suffer.¹²

But there were weightier considerations. It was the view of the Colonial Office that any step to ban the congress "might be so much resented [within Palestine] as to precipitate disorder possibly even on the scale of an Arab rebellion."¹³ A similar threat was seen by the India Office, which was informed by the Government of India that "Muhammadan feeling [in India] is very unsettled and disturbed," that

"causes of discontent to Muslims should be avoided so far as this is possible," and that "the proposal to prohibit the Conference be definitely abandoned."¹⁴ In the face of these reiterated appeals, the Foreign Office relented in its opposition, and the strength of these purely pragmatic arguments was then linked to a principle by a Foreign Office official: "I think there is so much to be said for maintaining our traditional attitude of non-intervention in such quasi-religious matters, that we had better adopt the line the C.O. [Colonial Office] suggest."¹⁵ That line finally prevailed.

The subsequent efforts of British authorities concentrated upon extracting various assurances from Amin al-Husayni, to the effect that issues liable to embarrass Great Britain or disturb public order would not be raised at the congress. Such assurances were readily given by Amin al-Husayni to the new British High Commissioner in Palestine, Sir Arthur Wauchope, who wrote advising that "prohibition of the congress should not be contemplated. It would cause deep resentment and would, in addition, be impossible to enforce, since even if Shawkat Ali and other intending participants were to be refused entrance into Palestine, local adherents of the Mufti would probably meet in [the] Haram area and go through [the] agenda of [the] congress."¹⁶ In any case, "I believe he will carry out his pledges and so he will go far to make me feel that we can work together when his word has once been given in the cause of law and order."¹⁷ The Secretary of State for Colonies replied to a pointed parliamentary question on the congress in this fashion: "As a result of inquiries made of the High Commissioner for Palestine, I am convinced that the Mufti [Amin al-Husayni], who has issued invitations for the congress, realises his responsibilities and is anxious to conduct the congress in such a manner as to cause no embarrassment to His Majesty's or the Palestine administration."¹⁸ At various stages, British authorities thus brought pressure to bear upon the organizers, but there was never any serious doubt that the congress would be permitted.

There were two parties in Palestine who were disquieted by British policy. The Zionists first had hoped that the congress would be banned outright.¹⁹ Once the British decision was made, they concentrated their efforts upon diminishing participation in the congress. Publicly it was declared the policy of the Jewish Agency to maintain "absolute silence with regard to the preparations for this conference. We consider this in the present case the more wholesome, I may say only useful, tactics, and I am glad that we have succeeded in winning the Hebrew press over to a similar attitude. Any interference on our part would have immensely strengthened the Mufti's position both in Palestine and abroad."²⁰ But the Agency did go so far as to secretly employ a minor

Arab journalist to conduct a covert campaign against the congress in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt, a service for which he was paid. The results of this effort were negligible.²¹

Another opposition group was that faction of Palestinian Arabs personally opposed to Amin al-Husayni. Their challenge was somewhat more effective.²² They suspected that Amin al-Husayni would use the congress as a tool for self-aggrandizement from which they, his rivals, were likely to suffer most. This faction, headed by the Nashashibi and Khalidi families of Jerusalem, first attacked the congress and its preparatory committee in a manifesto that claimed the entire effort to be unrepresentative of Palestinian Muslims on account of their own exclusion. They then called for a restructuring of the preparatory committee to include them.²³ The Husayni faction's newspaper retorted with a refutation, as did Amin al-Husayni himself, in a counter-manifesto to the Muslim world.²⁴ As a gesture, the preparatory committee then unilaterally announced that several new members—among them two Nashashibis—would be added to its ranks,²⁵ an offer that the opposition rejected. A last-minute mediation effort by Shawkat ʿAli and the president of the Young Men's Muslim Association in Egypt, ʿAbd al-Hamid Saʿid, then failed, and the Palestinian opposition opened a relentless campaign against the congress throughout its deliberations.²⁶ They went so far as to convene a counter-congress, attended by about 1,000 local notables and shaykhs, under the presidency of Raghīb al-Nashashibi.²⁷

The presence of so vocal an opposition to the congress among so many Muslims just beyond the congress hall not only made for bad press, but split the failed negotiators Shawkat ʿAli and ʿAbd al-Hamid Saʿid from Amin al-Husayni. "The *mufti* and his party would not allow the others to share in the planning of the Conference and the invitations to it," Shawkat ʿAli wrote to a friend. "I protested, and I must say that the opposition behaved nobly; they made it known that they were in sympathy with the Conference and willing to support the university-to-be, but they could not but oppose the *mufti*'s directing the whole affair. If the *mufti* would have followed my advice we should have obtained even better results."²⁸

Different results perhaps would have been obtained if Shawkat ʿAli himself had not spoken of the caliphate during the preparatory stages of the congress. To the distress of the Palestinian organizers, he made no secret of his continued allegiance to the deposed Ottoman caliph Abdūlmecid, then in exile in France. "Do the Muslims now have a caliph?" he was asked in an interview. "Yes," replied Shawkat ʿAli, "and he is an exile in Nice. In my heart and mind, he remains caliph; I accepted him and swore allegiance to him already in the past, and I cannot go back on what I have done."²⁹

The exiled Ottoman pretender apparently believed that the caliphate indeed would figure in the congress agenda, and through his secretary he reminded the Muslim world and the impending congress that the allegiance pledged to him upon his ascension in 1922 was still binding.³⁰ There were parties who made a connection and immediately feared that Shawkat ʿAli envisioned a restoration of Abdülmecid to the caliphate at the Jerusalem congress.

Egyptian circles were the first to respond with suspicion, since the Azhar committee which convened the Cairo caliphate congress of 1926 had expressly repudiated Abdülmecid's claim.³¹ The Azhar journal reminded Amin al-Husayni of the conclusions of this congress, in which delegates of his own faction had participated.³² Amin al-Husayni, who hoped for full Egyptian participation and had written King Fuʿad requesting the dispatch of official delegates,³³ was thus forced to deny to Egyptian authorities that the congress had anything to do with the caliphate, and maintained that rumors to the contrary were fabrications manufactured by the Zionists.³⁴ Finally, in an attempt to undo the damage Shawkat ʿAli had done, Amin al-Husayni traveled to Egypt a month before the congress, to reassure the king and other worried parties that the caliphate was not on the agenda.

Shawkat ʿAli's detailed comments on the role of the projected Muslim university in Jerusalem also had direct repercussions in Egypt. The university, as he imagined it, would have fulfilled many of those tasks coveted by al-Azhar.³⁵ Naturally the Shaykh al-Azhar, then Muhammad al-Ahmadi al-Zawahiri, was distressed, and told Amin al-Husayni so.³⁶ Rashid Rida believed that this response was unjustified, and that the proposed new university would not detract from al-Azhar's central role.³⁷ But the concern drew upon the justified sense of insecurity engendered by the Azhar-sponsored caliphate congress of 1926. This had revealed the frailty of al-Azhar's claim to primacy among Islamic institutions, which no reassurance could alleviate. Amin al-Husayni first retaliated, and his paper published a scathing attack on Zawahiri.³⁸ But Amin al-Husayni later apologized, and offered his assurances. He declared that the new Muslim university, planned on a modest scale, was intended only to counter the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and not to challenge al-Azhar.³⁹

These assurances, on both the issues of the caliphate and the university, were embodied in a letter from Amin al-Husayni to the Egyptian premier Sidqi Pasha, but King Fuʿad remained unconvinced of Amin al-Husayni's sincerity.⁴⁰ The fact that several members of the Wafd party, rivals to the palace, had accepted their invitations to Jerusalem further concerned Egyptian authorities, who asked that British consular authorities issue visas to these opponents only with the warning that

they behave themselves.⁴¹ All this had so unnerving an effect in official Cairo that no official delegation was dispatched from Egypt, although care was taken to covertly finance an unofficial delegation that would defend the royal palace's interests against the Wafd in the congress sessions.

The sons of Husayn of Mecca—ʿAbdallah, Faysal, and ʿAli—also required assurances on the question of the caliphate, for they too had an interest here, and while they now advanced no claim, it was certainly undesirable that some act of the congress exclude the possibility of a future claim on their behalf. Husayn himself had died earlier in the year, and Amin al-Husayni had been permitted by the sons to arrange for his burial in Jerusalem near Muhammad ʿAli. The Egyptian consul in Jerusalem felt certain that part of this understanding was a secret agreement with Amin al-Husayni to secure the caliphate, probably for Faysal of Iraq, at a future congress. For the existence of such a deal there is no other evidence, but Amman and Baghdad certainly did insist on guarantees similar to those given to Cairo, and these Amin al-Husayni made during a trip to Amman.⁴²

Saudi suspicions, on the other hand, could not be alleviated. There remained a profound distrust of Shawkat ʿAli, who had so incensed the organizers of the 1926 Meccan Muslim congress. And there was a general reluctance to see others succeed where ʿAbd al-ʿAziz Ibn Saʿud had not. Saudi annoyance was expressed to British diplomats,⁴³ and while Ibn Saʿud pleaded that the congress invitation sent to him by Amin al-Husayni simply had arrived too late, it is certain that a decision was taken against sending a representative to Jerusalem.⁴⁴ The Saudis furthermore threatened the Palestinian project by encouraging the circulation of a rumor that the Meccan congress first held in 1926 was about to be reconvened.⁴⁵

Among those consumed by rumors of a resurrected Ottoman caliphate were Turkish diplomats. They were particularly concerned lest Abdülmecid be admitted to Palestine as a participant in the congress, a possibility raised by Shawkat ʿAli. The deposed caliph resided at Nice, and so the Turkish ambassador to France personally applied to the Quai d'Orsay. Münir Bey explained that a new caliph inevitably would group around him all of the forces hostile to the Turkish republic, and that European powers with Muslim interests, including France, could not afford this permanent menace to their tranquility. The ambassador hoped that the French government would offer new proof to the Turkish government of its amicable disposition, and would abstain from facilitating the departure of the deposed caliph for Palestine. The French government was unreceptive. Münir Bey was told that Abdülmecid had always exhibited reserve and correct demeanor in France; the French

government neither could encourage nor impede his ambitions. The Turks were advised to take their problem to the British who, after all, held the mandate for Palestine.⁴⁶

This the Turkish foreign minister did. Tefvik Rüştü [Aras] informed the British ambassador at Ankara that a revived caliphate would constitute a "subversive force," a "focus of intrigue and rebellion" against the British Empire, and an instrument of reaction within Turkey. The Turkish government did not find Abdülmecid alarming; he was a harmless old gentleman. It was the institution, not the figurehead, which disturbed Tefvik Rüştü's government.⁴⁷ This time, the Turkish appeal struck a responsive chord. The Colonial Office asked Sir Arthur Wauchope, British High Commissioner in Palestine, whether "it would be practicable to refuse [Abdülmecid's] visa on grounds of public order should an application for one be received."⁴⁸ While awaiting Wauchope's reply, an interdepartmental meeting held at the Colonial Office agreed that once Abdülmecid was admitted to Palestine, it would be impossible to get him out, and so it was best to bar his entry. Until Wauchope's reply was received, passport authorities were asked not to issue Palestine visas to the deposed caliph or any of his entourage.⁴⁹ The eventual answer from Jerusalem was unequivocal: a visit to Palestine by Abdülmecid was undesirable, and any visa application should be refused.⁵⁰ On this recommendation, consular and passport control officers were instructed not to grant the deposed caliph a visa for Palestine without first consulting the Foreign Office.⁵¹ Amin al-Husayni himself was not unaware of the discomfort experienced by the Turks, distraught over the rumor of the Ottoman caliphate's revival, and announced that Abdülmecid would not be invited to the congress.

Having thus fulfilled the desiderata of the Turkish government on this point, Amin al-Husayni attempted to invite an official Turkish delegation, and approached the Turkish consul in Jerusalem with a request that the consulate forward an invitation to Ankara. The consul refused to accept any communication, and Amin al-Husayni was forced to send his message by ordinary post. Tefvik Rüştü did not intend to reply: the mufti held no representative office in Palestine which qualified him to invite the head of a foreign state to send official delegates to an unofficial gathering.⁵² At the same time, the Turkish foreign minister had hoped that the congress would be prohibited altogether, and "was distinctly disconcerted and somewhat cross and resentful" upon learning that British authorities intended to permit the gathering. "He thought it an easy matter to prohibit what purported to be a pan-Moslem conference summoned by a minor religious dignitary of a town of secondary sacred importance who had no standing for issuing invitations to Governments, and that the anti-British and anti-Jewish character of the