

Muftis, *Niqabat al-Ashraf*, and Mayors of Jerusalem

The Husseinis



By Khalid
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he southwestern part of Syria – known since the twentieth century as the political entity Palestine, with Jerusalem as its heart – is blessed by its location at the intersection of continents, civilizations, and faiths.

But this pronounced location also proved to be a misfortune, as Palestine has been the subject of competition for possession and control among both regional and global imperial powers. Nineteenth-century Palestine, a prized part of the Ottoman Empire, witnessed many threatening and destabilizing events. The century started with local actors reorganizing and reshuffling power relations once the invading French forces had retreated. In 1806, Palestine was used as a base and pathway to reclaim Mecca from Wahabi control. In 1808, during instability and a power struggle at the imperial capital of Istanbul, a large part of the Church of Holy Sepulcher was damaged in a fire. In 1809, the Janissaries revolted in Jerusalem. Between 1817 and 1823, a rivalry took place between various political and feudal families. Violent in some instances, the events of this rivalry started in the Nablus area and then spread to the rest of Palestine and took the form of a conflict between Qaysi (also known as Adnani or Arabs of northern origins) and Yemeni (also known as Qahtani or Arabs of southern origins) tribes. Between 1825 and 1826, the Christians, Muslims, urban, and rural people of Palestine united in their revolt against the local Ottoman government and set up self-governance. Between 1831 and 1840, Palestine was occupied and ruled by the Egyptian army, in defiance of the Ottoman Empire, as Palestinian reaction to this rule was mixed. Between 1840 and 1878, the Ottoman government applied the *tanzimat*, imperial reform laws and regulations that significantly impacted the political, social, and economic life in Palestine while European foreign influence increased greatly. During the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876–1908), Palestine enjoyed special attention, and development in infrastructure and services progressed.

In nineteenth-century Palestine – although it was geographically not quite defined at the time – administrative lines changed several times, but it was divided mainly into two parts. At the end of the century, the southern part was consolidated in the Jerusalem district that included, in addition to the city and its environs, Jaffa, Hebron, Bir Saba', Jericho, Bethlehem, and Gaza. The Jerusalem district was attached to the Province of Syria and eventually became an independent district, directly administrated by the central government in the capital Istanbul, known as the Sublime Porte. The northern part comprised the Nablus

one of the Ottoman Empire's pillars, the grand mufti (supreme Islamic authority figure of the empire), known as Sheikh al-Islam, appointed a local mufti for each district as an extension of his authority. Another influential state institution in the Ottoman Empire was the Syndicate of the Descendants of the Prophet (*Naqabat al-Ashraf*), and the local heads of this institution in each district were appointed by Istanbul.

The level of Ottoman government centralization in nineteenth-century Palestine varied depending on the conditions and events that took place. It is safe to conclude that this



■ Kaiser Wilhelm II's visit to Jerusalem in 1889 as a guest of Sultan Abdulhamid II. He was hosted by the Husseinis notables who took him for a visit to the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The photo shows the Mufti Taher Mustafa Hussein and Ismael Musa Hussein.

and Akka districts and part of the province of Beirut. Each province was ruled by a governor, appointed by the imperial head of state, the sultan, and reported to the Sublime Porte. Each district was governed by a *mutasarrif*, an appointed administrator. Imperial armed forces served the governors and administrators to keep law and order. Since religion was not separated from state, and Islam was

period witnessed a higher level of autonomy than the previous century. It became standard to appoint the three significant local positions and other local posts of social, political, religious, and economical nature from among local Palestinian personalities who became known as the notables. Security and administrative posts, including tax collection, remained to a large extent with commanders and

bureaucrats from other areas of the Ottoman Empire, at least until the later part of the century. This class of notables not only acted as mediators between the people in Palestine and the authorities in the capital Istanbul, thus promoting decentralization and advancing local population interests, but also set the stage for Palestinian nationalism in the twentieth century. Notables also contributed to the blurring of administrative lines and defined Palestine, as known in the British Mandate period.

Similar to most imperial hierarchies around the world, including in the Ottoman Empire, that were based on lineage in addition to achievement, diligence, and intellectual abilities, the Palestinian class of notables rose from local, urban, scholarly achievers with noble lineage. Notable families developed from individuals when major positions became hereditary. Several Palestinian urban families joined the notable class, such as the Alami, Hussein, Abu al-Saud, Jimai, and Khalidi families in the Jerusalem district. In addition to the urban notables of Jerusalem, a class of rural notables rose to positions of power and prominence, such as the Touqan, Abdulhadi, Nimer, Jarar, Al-Ahmad, and Madi families in the north and the Samhan, Abu Ghosh, Amer, Amleh, and Azzeh families in central and southern Palestine. The chieftains of large Bedouin tribes, mainly in the Negev, such as the Azazmeh, Tayaha, Tarabeen, Jbarat, Wahaidi, and others were also part of the notable class and played important roles in the management, development, and governance of Palestine. The relationships between the various notable families, whether rural or urban, were complex and included competition, rivalry, alliances, and cooperation.

The Ottoman Empire appointed locals to hold the secular administrative posts of governor and mutasarrif (district supervisor) and the religious posts of mufti (judge of religious courts) and naqib al-ashraf (supervisor of the descendants of the prophet Muhammad).

During the early 1820s, the Greeks separated from the Ottoman Empire, and local officials and officers in Jerusalem launched an unprecedented campaign of harassment, intimidation, and incitement against the Greek Orthodox community, in particular, and Christians in general, and the threat of a massacre was real. The Jerusalem notables, led by Mufti Taher Hussein and *Naqib al-Ashraf* Omar Hussein, took a strong stand against the Ottoman officials and issued a public statement defending the Christians and condemning the Ottoman officials and military. This incident increased the animosity of the rulers of Damascus who demanded additional taxes and penalties from the Jerusalem district. The population resented this request for payment as much as they objected to the behavior of the foreign Ottoman troops stationed in the city. Eventually, Governor Mustafa arrived with his army, stormed Jerusalem, and took Omar

Hussein as prisoner, along with his ally Abdurrahman Abu Ghosh, a rural notable from Al-Annab village near Al-Khalil (Hebron). In a camp outside Jaffa Gate, they found the head of the Greek Orthodox monastery of Mar Saba being tortured in plain sight. A Jewish community leader was also held hostage. This event prompted Mufti Taher Hussein to call for a large meeting that was attended by Jerusalem notables, the heads of the Christian communities, rural leaders from near and far, and representatives of the Nablus notables. The revolt

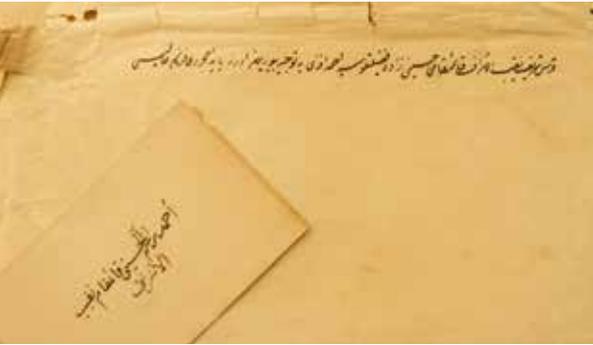
in Palestine as an emerging national entity, the Hussein clan was an exceptional phenomenon in that class during that transitional century. During the nineteenth century, the Husseins managed to hold the highly contested and powerful position of mufti, with the exception of short periods, starting with Hassan Abdulatif Hussein (1778–1809), followed by his nephew Taher Abdulsamad Hussein (1809–1834), his son Mustafa (1834–1865), and his son (Taher 1865–1908). The position of *naqib al-ashraf* was also almost



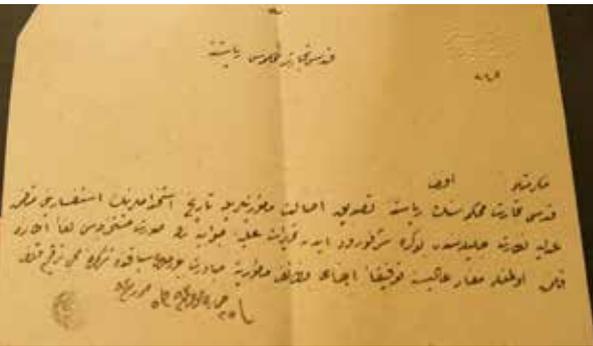
■ The house built by Ismael Musa Hussein in 1896 as his residence. After hosting emperor Wilhelm II in 1898, the building became the center of political and social activities throughout the twentieth century, better known as the Orient House. Photo by Ayman Hussein.

of 1924, in which Jerusalem was bombarded with cannon fire for the first time in history, started that day as a direct result of this meeting.

As all the members of the notable class played vital roles in the social, economic, and political developments



■ An envelope addressed (in Ottoman Turkish) to Ahmad Rasem Al-Husseini, using the title Naqib al-Ashraf, with his business card in Arabic.



■ An official letter to Ahmad Rasem Al-Husseini from the president of the trade court in Al-Quds.

Whereas appointees to local administrative posts were chosen partly based on personal merit, such as achievement, diligence, moral values, and intellect, the families of these individuals also rose in esteem and standing. As in many societies worldwide, a class of notables developed in Ottoman Palestine, and many such posts became hereditary.

a monopoly for the Hussein family, as it was held by Omar Abdulsalam Hussein (1800–1834) and his son Mohammad Ali Omar Hussein (1834–1875), Rabah Mohamad Ali Hussein (1875–1886), and later by Rasem Saed Hussein when the position lost its significance. In addition to the two top traditional posts in the pre-reform years of the nineteenth century, the Husseinis held several key modern positions in the last three decades of the century. Musa Taher Hussein held the positions of chairman of the trade council, was a senior member of the administrative district council, and served as head of the commerce courts as well as mayor of Jerusalem. Omar Fahmi Hussein also held the mayor's position, as did Saleem Hussein Hussein

(1884–1897). In addition to these local positions, other members of the family held several senior administrative positions in various provinces of the empire.

The success of the Husseinis in dominating the political scene in such an intricate and fluid environment and during such changing and challenging times can be attributed to several combined reasons. Many families in Palestine, including the Husseinis, had an honorable lineage as descendants of the prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and nephew Ali. This was a very important advantage in public life, as they were revered by both the state and the people. But lineage on its own would not be sufficient to achieve their status and accomplishments. The Husseinis consistently pursued the highest level of education possible at the time. By maintaining consistent access and connections to all levels of the state, sustaining cordial working relationships and the ability to build coalitions with the other notable families, attaining popularity and earning the trust and respect of the masses, the family was able to maintain its power position even under dire circumstances. Keeping peace and solidarity within the family also proved useful to maintain their privileges. Although the Husseinis were not a feudal family and started from economically humble beginnings, they managed to acquire a significant fortune through investing their high income in agricultural land, commercial rental properties, and industries, which gave them the significant advantage in politics of independent wealth. The Hussein family employed and reasonably applied religious and moral values to governance and leadership, such as fairness, humility, loyalty to the



■ Ahmad Rasem Al-Husseini, the last naqib al-ashraf, who died in 1899.

state, standing up to tyranny, social justice, moderation, and tolerance. In addition, the Husseinis kept strong connections to other areas and capitals of influence in the empire, such as Cairo, Beirut, and Damascus.

The Ahmad Rasem Al-Husseini photos are courtesy of Sa'ïd Hussein.

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