

“Activities of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem”: Britain Says Releasing a 1941 Document About Palestine Might ‘Undermine Security’

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A two-part archive, labeled “Activities of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem” and dated 1940-1941, sits in Britain’s National Archives in Kew. This writer successfully had the first part declassified in 2014. The second part remains sealed. My 2018 attempt to have these ten pages declassified was refused on the grounds that the archive might “undermine the security of the country [Britain] and its citizens.”[1] None of its secrets are to be available until January, 2042; and if the paired file is any precedent, even in 2042 it will be released only in redacted form.

The ‘Grand Mufti’ in the archive’s heading is Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Palestinian leader whom posterity best remembers for his alignment with the Italian and German fascists; and the years 1940-1941 place him not in Palestine, but in Iraq — and if the second archive extends to late 1941, in Europe. What could possibly be hidden in a World War II document about a long-dead Nazi sympathizer that would present such a risk to British national security eight decades later, that none of it can be revealed? At present, only the UK government censors know; but the answer *may* have less to do with the fascists and al-Husseini than with British misdeeds in Iraq, and less to do with Britain’s national security than with its historical embarrassment.



When in 1921 votes were cast for the new Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husseini came in last among the four candidates. But votes in Palestine mattered as little then as they do now, and the British, Palestine’s novice replacement occupiers for the Ottomans, handed the post to al-Husseini. At first, he proved to be an asset to the British. But as the years passed, his opposition to Zionism, support for Palestinian nationalism, and ultimately his involvement in the 1936 Palestinian uprising, led to calls for his arrest.



Photograph labelled “Arab demonstrations on Oct. 13 and 27, 1933. In Jerusalem and Jaffa. Return of Grand Mufti from India. Met by hundreds of cars at Gethsemane, Nov. 17, 1933.” Library of Congress, LC-M33- 4218.

In mid-October of 1937, he fled from hiding in Palestine to Beirut. Two years later and six weeks after the outbreak of World War II, in mid-October of 1939, he slipped to Baghdad, where his sympathies for the Italian fascists further alarmed the British. Fast-forward another two years to late 1941, and al-Husseini is in Europe, meeting with Benito Mussolini

on the 27th of October, and on the 28th of November meeting with the Führer himself at the Reich Chancellery in Berlin.

Al-Husseini's motivation for embracing the Axis was likely a combination of selfish political opportunism and the belief that the alignment would help safeguard against the takeover of Palestine by the Zionists. The reasoning, however grotesque, was the same used by Lehi (the 'Stern Gang') in its own attempted collaboration with the fascists: Britain was the obstacle both to Palestinian liberation, and to unbridled Zionism, and for both the Mufti and Lehi, defeating that obstacle meant embracing its enemies. Even the 'mainstream' David Ben-Gurion had no moral qualms about taking advantage of Britain's struggle against the Nazis — a struggle for which his Jewish Agency was already conspicuously unhelpful — by exploiting Britain's post-war vulnerabilities.[2]

Posterity has treated Lehi's and the Mufti's flirtations with the fascists quite differently. Lehi, the most fanatical of the major Zionist terror organizations, was transformed into freedom fighters, and ex-Lehi leader Yitzhak Shamir was twice elected as Israeli Prime Minister. In contrast, Zionist leaders quickly seized on al-Husseini's past to smear not just him, but the Palestinians as a people, as Nazis.

The use of al-Husseini's unsavory history to 'justify' anti-Palestinian racism continues to the present day. Most bizarrely, in 2015 Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed that Hitler had not intended to exterminate the Jews — that is, not until al-Husseini planted the words in his ear — which translates as "got the idea from the Palestinians". A private citizen would likely have been arrested under German law for this attempt to rewrite the Holocaust.



The mufti of Jerusalem, Sayid Amin al Husseini, meets with Hitler, November 1941.

Iraq won limited independence in 1932, just before the Nazis came to power. When the Mufti ensconced himself in Iraq seven years later, the country was under nominally 'pro-British' Prime Ministers, and Regent 'Abd al-Ilah for the four-year-old king, Faisal II. This uneasy British-Iraqi equilibrium ended on first day of April 1941, when four Iraqi officers known as the Golden Square, wanting full independence (and similarly aligning themselves with the fascists in the foolish belief that doing so would help them get it), staged a coup d'état. It lasted two months. British troops ousted the coup on the first day of June — and as they did, anti-Jewish riots rocked Baghdad. An estimated 180 Jewish Iraqis were killed and 240 wounded in this pogrom known as the Farhud.

Why would the momentary power vacuum of the British takeover lead to anti-Jewish terror? While doing research for my 2016 book, *State of Terror*, I was intrigued by the claim of one Iraqi Jewish witness, Naeim Giladi, that these 'Arab' riots were orchestrated by the British to justify their return to power.[3] Indeed, the riots seemed unnatural in a society where Jews had lived for two and a half millennia, and the "pro-Axis" Golden Square takeover two months earlier had not precipitated any such pogrom. Yet it was also true that Zionism had created ethnic resentment, and Giladi did not question that junior officers of the Iraqi army were involved in the violence. The evidence provided by Giladi was compelling enough to seek out clues among British source documents that were not available to him.

And that, along with the hope of shedding new light on the Mufti's pro-fascist activities, brought me to the archive at issue and my qualified (redacted) success in getting the first

part declassified- officially titled, [CO 733/420/19](#). Not surprisingly, much of the file focused on legitimate worry over the Mufti's dealings with the Italian fascists. Some of the British voices recorded considered him to be a serious threat to the war effort, and a report entitled "Inside Information" spoke of the Mufti's place in an alleged "German shadow government in Arabia". Others dismissed this as "typical of the sort of stuff which literary refugees put into their memoirs in order to make them dramatic" and suggested that the Mufti's influence was overstated.

Whatever the case, by October 1940, the Foreign Office was considering various methods for "putting an end to the Mufti's intrigues with the Italians", and by mid-November,

it was decided that the only really effective means of securing a control over him [the Mufti] would be a military occupation of Iraq.

British plans of a coup were no longer mere discussion, but a plan already in progress:

We may be able to clip the Mufti's wings when we can get a new Government in Iraq. F.O. [Foreign Office] are working on this".

So, the British *were already working on* re-occupying Iraq five months before the April 1941 'Golden Square' coup.

A prominent thread of the archive was: How to effect a British coup without further alienating 'the Arab world' in the midst of the war, beyond what the empowering of Zionism had already done? Harold MacMichael, High Commissioner for Palestine, suggested the idea "that documents incriminating the Mufti have been found in Libya" that can be used to embarrass him among his followers; but others "felt some hesitation ... knowing, as we should, there was no truth in the statement."

But frustratingly, the trail stops in late 1940; to know anything conclusive we need the second part's forbidden ten pages: CO 733/420/19/1.

The redacted first part partially supports, or at least does not challenge, Giladi's claim. It proves that Britain was planning regime change and sought a pretext, but gives no hint as to whether ethnic violence was to be that pretext. Interestingly, Lehi had at the time reached the same conclusion as Giladi: its *Communique* claimed that "Churchill's Government is responsible for the pogrom in Baghdad".[4]

Does the public have the right to see still-secret archives such as CO 733/420/19/1? In this case, the gatekeepers claimed to be protecting us from the Forbidden Fruit of "curiosity": They claimed to be distinguishing between "information that would benefit the public good", and "information that would meet public curiosity", and decided on our behalf that this archive fit the latter.[1] We are to believe that an eight-decade-old archive on an important issue remains sealed because it would merely satisfy our lust for salacious gossip.



Photograph labelled "Visit of H.R.H. Princess Mary and the Earl of Harwood. March 1934. Princess Mary, The Earl of Harwood, and the Grand Mufti, etc. At the Mosque el-Aksa [i.e., al-Aqsa in Jerusalem]."

Library of Congress, LC-M33- 4221.

Perhaps no assessment of past British manipulation in Iraq would have given pause to the Blair government before signing on to the US's vastly more catastrophic Iraqi 'regime change' of 2003, promoted with none of 1940's hesitation about using forged 'African' documents — this time around Niger, instead of Libya. But history has not even a chance of teaching us, if its lessons are kept hidden from the people themselves.

Notes:

According to Giladi, the riots of 1941 "gave the Zionists in Palestine a pretext to set up a Zionist underground in Iraq" that would culminate with the (proven) Israeli false-flag 'terrorism' that emptied most of Iraq's Jewish population a decade later. Documents in Kew seen by the author support this. But to be sure, the Zionists were not connected with the alleged British maneuvers of 1941.

1. Correspondence from the UK government, explaining its refusal to allow me access to CO 733/420/19/1:

Section 23(1) (security bodies and security matters): We have considered whether the balance of the public interest favours releasing or withholding this information. After careful consideration, we have determined that the public interest in releasing the information you have requested is outweighed by the public interest in maintaining the exemption. It is in the public interest that our security agencies can operate effectively in the interests of the United Kingdom, without disclosing information that would assist those determined to undermine the security of the country and its citizens.

The judiciary differentiates between information that would benefit the public good and information that would meet public curiosity. It does not consider the latter to be a 'public interest' in favour of disclosure. In this case, disclosure would neither meaningfully improve transparency nor assist public debate, and disclosure would not therefore benefit the public good.

2. Ben-Gurion looked ahead to when the end of the war would leave Britain militarily weakened and geographically dispersed, and economically ruined. He cited the occupation of Vilna by the Poles after World War I as a precedent for the tactic.

For him, the end of WWII only presented an opportunity for the takeover of Palestine with less physical resistance; it also left Britain at the mercy of the United States for economic relief, which the Jewish Agency exploited by pressuring US politicians to make that assistance contingent on supporting Zionist claims to Palestine.

At a mid-December 1945 secret meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive, Ben-Gurion stressed that "our activities should be directed from Washington and not from London", noting that "Jewish influence in America is powerful and able to cause damage to the interests of Great Britain", as it "depends to a great extent on America economically" and would "not be able to ignore American pressure if we succeed in bringing this pressure to bear". He lauded Rabbi Abba Silver in the US for his aggressiveness on the issue, while noting that he was nonetheless "a little fanatical and may go too far". (TNA, FO 1093/508). The Irgun was more direct in 1946, stating that Britain's commuting of two terrorists' death sentences and other accommodations to the Zionists "has been done with the sole purpose to calm American opposition against the American loan to Britain". (TNA, KV 5-36). Meanwhile, in the US that year Rabbi Silver's bluntness on the tactic worried Moshe Shertok (a future prime minister). Although like Ben-Gurion, Shertok said that "we shall exploit to the maximum the American pressure on the British Government", in particular the pre-election period (and in particular New York), but urged "care and wisdom in this" so as not to give ammunition to "anti-Zionists and the anti-semites in general".

Shertok criticized Silver for saying publicly that “he and his supporters opposed the loan to be granted to the British Government”. (TNA, CO 537/1715)

3. Suárez, Thomas, *State of Terror: How Terrorism Created Modern Israel* [Skyscraper, 2016, and Interlink, 2017]; In Arabic, هكذا أقيمت المستعمرة [Kuwait, 2018]; in French, *Comment le terrorisme a créé Israël* [Investig'Action, 2019]

Giladi, Naeim, *Ben-Gurion's Scandals: How the Haganah and the Mossad Eliminated Jews* [Dandelion, 2006]

4. Lehi, *Communique*, No. 21/41, dated 1st of August, 1941

Update: This post originally referred to the “four-year-old Prime Minister, ‘Abd al-Ilah,” not the four-year-old King Faisal under Regent ‘Abd al-Ilah. Commenter Jon S. corrected us, and the post has been changed.

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