Palestine

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# The Nabi Musa Festival under British-Ruled Palestine

**Palestinian national identity arose during the period of British rule (1917–1948). The Nabi Musa (Prophet Moses) festival – *mawsim al-Nabi Musa* – provides us with an example of how a religious ritual celebrated within a colonial context shaped nationalist ideas. Rituals, such as festivals and pilgrimages serve as arenas for the interaction of various social groups, each of which possesses its own agendas and discourses on questions of order in society. In British-ruled Palestine, powerful social groups such as the Palestinian political leaders and the British colonial authorities used the Nabi Musa festival to promote a conservative version of Palestinian nationalism, one which remained anti-Zionist but which avoided expressing popular discontent regarding British occupation.**

PHOTO: SARAH GRAHAM-BROWN, *PALESTINIANS AND THEIR SOCIETY 1880–1946* (LONDON: QUARTET BOOKS, 1980)

**Muslim, Arab, and British dignitaries watching the Nabi Musa procession in 1933.**

During the period of Ottoman rule, the Nabi Musa festival emerged as the largest Islamic festival in the region, consisting of a one-week celebration and pilgrimage to Moses' tomb located seven kilometres southwest of Jericho, culminating in a gathering at the shrine on the Friday preceding the Greek Orthodox Easter weekend.

The festival evolved into an active and productive element in the formation of Arab élite and British colonial versions of Palestinian nationalism. This was due to the synchronic relationship which members of Palestine's Arab élite families forged with the British rulers. The high-ranking posts these Arab élites acquired in the colonial administration, or the status the British granted them as officially recognized political leaders, ensured that this close familial relationship would strengthen colonial rule. British participation in the festival evolved beyond the formal, official role as state observers of a civilian, religious ceremony and acquired an obliquely religious character, as rightful participants in the ceremonies.

At the 1918 festival, the first to be celebrated under British rule, on the first Friday of the festival, known as the Friday of the Banners (*jumᶜat al-aᶜlam*), the British governor of Jerusalem greeted the shaykhs of the villages surrounding Jerusalem at the Government House (the main British administrative building). The shaykhs presented him with the banners of the Prophet, two banners of Nabi Da'ud (Prophet David), and two of Al-Haram al-Sharif. In this segment of the Moses ceremonies, the new, British governor of the city, by officially receiving the banners, assumed the duties of his former Ottoman counterpart. Even though this ceremony involved a religious component, in the form of the shaykh leading this delegation reciting a prayer over the banners, the British governor was nevertheless eager to participate, by saluting the banners after the prayers.[1]

The festival took on greater political importance after Muslim pilgrims rioted during the celebrations in April 1920. Four Muslims and five Jews were killed; 251 Arabs and Jews were wounded. These riots confirmed the British notion of 'Islamic extremism', in which Islamic rhetoric, themes, and rituals could be used to mobilize an anti-colonial resistance, a fear prevalent throughout Britain's colonial rule over Muslim populations. The British authorities stressed that Arab political leaders had to prevent any further violence from erupting at the festival. That is most likely why in 1921 the British appointed Al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni as mufti of Jerusalem, bestowing upon him the new and esteemed title of *mufti al-akbar* (Grand Mufti). In 1922 they secured his election as the president of the Supreme Muslim Council (*al-Majlis al-Islami al-Aᶜla*), the most important Islamic body in Palestine. So eager were the British to appoint a member of a leading Arab family to the post of mufti, the first British High Commissioner to Palestine, Herbert Samuel (1921–1925), even pardoned Al-Hajj Amin for his involvement in the riots. Al-Hajj Amin promised to cooperate faithfully with British officials, explicitly assuring them that the violence of the 1920 Nabi Musa festivities would not be repeated.[2] As the leading religious figure in Palestine, Al-Hajj Amin was responsible for organizing the festival and leading the ceremonies, becoming an important player in attempting to erase conflict between the Arab Muslim community and the British colonial rulers. A report on the political situation in Palestine for April 1922 expounds on the importance of his role:

> *[The] advice given prior to the Nebi Musa celebration by the president [Al-Hajj Amin] of the [Supreme Muslim] council contributed not a little to preventing disturbances; and the obviously sincere spirit in which the president lent his cooperation is in itself a sign that the establishment of the council has been a means of improving the relationship between the government and representative Moslem opinion.*[3]

## Promoting British rule

A further example of how the Arab élite employed the festival to promote British policy manifested in an invitation which the mayor of Jerusalem, Raghib Bek al-Nashashibi, extended to the British governor of Jerusalem, to other Arab notables, and to leaders of all religious denominations, calling for their attendance at a pavilion erected just outside the Old City, which pilgrims customarily passed as they marched to the shrine. The newspaper *Filastin* reported that these invitations were printed in all three official languages: Arabic, English, and Hebrew.[4] Even though the Arabs of Palestine were troubled by the British adopting Hebrew as an official language, regarding it as an encroachment on their identity, a prominent and politically influential member of a notable Arab family was able to use the Nabi Musa festival to defuse this language issue in particular, and the question of British support for Zionism in general, by recognizing the official status of Hebrew at this popular Islamic celebration.

But the inclusion of a British military band (with pipes and brass instruments) became one of the most visible examples of British participation in the festival. An argument for the necessity of a British band at Nabi Musa festivities was earnestly put forward by Herbert Samuel in May 1921, arguing that a British-sponsored band in the festival could raise Britain's prestige:

> *The according of a Band for the occasion constitutes no precedent for there is no other religious festival in Palestine comparable with it. […] The Moslem population expects that the British government whose respect for the Religious Customs and Ceremonies of their Moslem subjects in other parts of the British Empire is so well known, shall adopt a not less favourable attitude towards the Moslems of Palestine than the latter enjoyed under the late Turkish regime.*

He concluded by pleading that '[t]he matter is of greater importance than may at first sight appear.'[5] From Samuel's words, the Nabi Musa festival allowed the British rulers to present themselves as guardians of Islamic identity in Palestine, by invoking the former Ottoman Muslim rulers as models to be replicated. The British employed this image to undermine criticism of their contentious support for Zionism.

Palestine's Arab political and religious leadership was willing to collude with the British aspirations to be involved with the Nabi Musa ceremonies. One British official alluded to the importance of this alliance at the festival as follows:

> *[I]t is usual at this season, when feasts important to all three communities take place [i.e., Passover, Easter, Nabi Musa] that there should be in the minds of many a feeling of nervousness. Rumours of impending trouble are discussed, and, among the general public of Jerusalem, there is a good deal of anxiety. Among the Arab notables, however, there is both a hope that no outbreak may occur and a desire to prevent it.*[6]

An important element in how the Arab élite incorporated British participation in the festival was by evoking the festival's Islamic nature, which, in effect, artfully sanctified Britain's role in Palestine's Islamic, religious culture. This approach appears in an appeal by Musa Kazim al-Husayni, a relative of Al-Hajj Amin and president of the Palestine Arab Congress, issued a year after the 1920 riots and printed on the front pages of many Arabic newspapers. In this message, entitled 'A Message to the People of Noble Palestine', Al-Husayni wished Palestinians a joyous celebration in the upcoming holidays (i.e. Nabi Musa and Easter), but urged that these be conducted peacefully, claiming that, 'the government of Great Britain […] will not fail the trust of the people because what the people want is what God wants.'[7] Incorporating the British into Islamic religious discourse became a powerful method to deflect widespread, public resentment against British rule.

## Popular responses

Nevertheless, less-powerful groups, such as the Muslim pilgrims, at times rejected and at other times reinterpreted these messages, transforming the festival into an arena of alternate discourses on the question of Palestinian nationalism and British colonialism. Folk songs sung at the festival became the most vocal and unequivocal expressions of this group's own ideas and social agendas. During the 1920 riots, authorities noted that pilgrims modified the music of a British-regiment band accompanying the procession by inserting their own lyrics of 'Long Live King Faysal' and 'Down with Every Nation which Helps the Jews'.[8] Similarly, the worshippers from Nablus replaced their traditional, religious songs celebrating the Prophet Moses and their pilgrimage to his shrine with boasts of their steadfastness against British colonialism: 'We are the children of Jabal al-Nar (Nablus)/ We are a thorn in the throat of the occupation.'[9] These messages contradicted the conciliatory tone of the discourses presented by Arab élites and British authorities at the festival.

**Notes**

1. FO 371/339/92045, 'The Nebi Musa Pilgrimage', from Chief Political Officer, Egyptian Expeditionary Force, to Foreign Office, 2 May 1918, 2.
2. Philip Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 26.
3. CO/733/20/24595, 'Report on the Political Situation in Palestine during the Month of April 1922', 10 May 1922, 2.
4. *Filastin*, 26 April 1921, 2.
5. CO 733/2/24586, Letter from High Commissioner for Palestine, Herbert Samuel, to Winston Churchill, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 30 April 1921, 3.
6. CO 733/20/19426, 'Political Report for March 1922', from High Commissioner for Palestine, Herbert Samuel, 10 April 1922, 1.
7. *Bait al-Maqdas*, 18 April 1921, 1.
8. FO 371/5118/E3928, Letter from Col. Meinetrzhagen, General Head Quarters, Egyptian Expeditionary Force to Colonial Office, 14 April 1920, 2.
9. Kamil Jamil al-ᶜAsali, *Mawsim al-Nabi Musa fi Filastin: Ta'rikh al-Mawsim wa'l-Maqam* (Amman: University of Jordan, 1990), 192.

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