

# THE GRAND MUFTI

## *Portrait of a Political Opportunist*

MOHAMMED AMIN EL HUSSEINI, Mufti of Jerusalem, is again in the news. Reuters reported the other day that the Arab League had asked Britain to allow him to return to Palestine, but that Britain was "unlikely to agree." The following profile, which appeared in the London "Observer" last year, may help to explain why.



MOHAMMED AMIN EL HUSSEINI

*Evasion became a habit*

**M**OHAMMED AMIN was born 51 years ago in Jerusalem, but his volatile nature, his ruddy-coloured beard, and foxy appearance make him seem much younger. British Intelligence officers during the war gave him the cover name Barbarossa, but now grey streaks dominate the red beard, and his lithe figure has assumed more ecclesiastical—if not more spiritual—outlines.

The Mufti's youth followed the classic pattern of an agitator's upbringing. A Turkish school, an impatient year at El Azhar University in Cairo, which he left without waiting to take the degree of Sheikh; then came the pilgrimage to Mecca, the short spell in the Turkish Army in the First World War, the job as customs official, and finally as teacher; the future Mufti's career had begun.

### Evasive Action

In 1920 he was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment for instigating the anti-Jewish riots of that year. He fled to Transjordan and sought the sanctuary of the Emir Abdullah. It was his first evasion of the British; it was to become a habit.

The following year the Mufti was to experience one of those curious strokes of good fortune which have marked his career. A Jewish High Commissioner in Palestine, the then Sir Herbert Samuel, sought to win the goodwill of the Arabs by a policy of conciliation and magnanimity. He pardoned the teacher, Amin el Hussein.

Sir Herbert decided on a further gesture of goodwill; against the advice of the moderate Arab families, he used his office to get Amin el Hussein elected as Mufti of Jerusalem. There is a Mufti for every Arab town: Islam has no priesthood and a Mufti is something less than a bishop.

But Moslem law certainly does not recognise a Grand Mufti; this title was arrogated to himself by Amin el Hussein exclusively and taken up by the Nazis.

Once established, the Mufti clearly saw what his mission was to be and devoted himself to it, with a single-mindedness that has few parallels in recent history. His cause was the furtherance of the ambitions of Amin el Hussein, and nothing was allowed to stand in its way. His good fortune—he might almost have called it his Star of David—held firm. His appointment as Mufti was followed by a further act of conciliation by the Jewish High Commissioner; the Mufti was appointed President of the Supreme Moslem Council.

### Open Rebellion

Now he became the possessor of real power. He had control over all religious funds, the Moslem courts, cemeteries and mosques; in short he was the dictator of all Moslem religious, educational, and social life.

The Mufti's ambitions grew. There were still powerful Arab families in Palestine, holding important positions, and opposing his advance.

But Hitler's coming opened a new phase. He soon established contact, and sending students to Germany received help in return. The stage was now set for the Arab rebellion of 1936, on which the Mufti was staking all. He had recruited mercenaries but found more sympathy than active support in the villages and from the ordinary Arabs; the Royal Commission estimated that only about 1,500 regulars sustained the battle. The Mufti therefore had recourse to other methods and set his men on to Arab rivals, who were accusing him of misusing more than £2,000,000 of the religious funds entrusted to him. Prominent Arabs and lesser men and women were assassinated and a warrant was issued for the Mufti's arrest. The Palestine Government deprived him of all his offices. He sought shelter in the Dome of the Rock, and from its sanctuary conducted operations—and trials of Arabs who did not obey him. Leading Palestine Arabs left the country for Egypt, to escape the Mufti's vengeance.

Finally, as the embers of revolt died down, the Mufti, dressed as an Arab woman, escaped from the Mosque and sought refuge in the Lebanon. The French did not arrest him when the war broke out, and the Mufti escaped their curiously inefficient surveillance and went to Bagdad. The Iraq Government voted him a credit of £18,000 and a monthly sum of £1,000 was paid to him from secret funds.

### Rising in Iraq

The Mufti immediately organised the many exiles in Iraq, resumed contact with Dr. Grobba, the chief German agent, and in April, 1941, with the Mufti's blessing, the revolt was proclaimed, the King and Regent fled, and in the following month the rebel Government declared war on Britain.

The revolt was short-lived. It ended with the massacre and looting of Jews and Christians in Bagdad, for which the

Iraq Government Commission subsequently blamed the Mufti. Although the revolt had collapsed, the Mufti's sun was still shining in Berlin, and there he went. He was received by Hitler and Ribbentrop, and began regular broadcasts in Arabic. A year later the British Desert Army was in full retreat towards Cairo and the significance of the thin khaki line at El Alamein was not yet history. So the Mufti issued a joyous proclamation hailing the great feat of Field-Marshal Rommel, and the final downfall of the British Empire, with that of the Jews and Bolsheviks; he concluded by calling on all Egyptians to co-operate with Rommel during his entry into Cairo and Alexandria.

It was not to be. The North African eclipse which followed included that of the Mufti. So he went south to Mussolini, and helped him organise the Albanian and Yugoslav Moslems into S.S. groups to fight Tito. He assisted in the organisation of the sabotage school in Athens and briefed Arab parachutists on their missions in Palestine and Iraq.

His return to active politics will not simplify Middle Eastern life. In 1942 the Emir Abdullah denounced him as a crook and a scoundrel. His colleagues in the Iraq revolt have been hanged by the Iraq Government. Rashid Ali is under sentence of death. The Mufti dare not return to Palestine. At least five of the leading Arab families have blood feuds with the Mufti for murders for which he is held responsible.

What he will do is not clear. He may seek to renew contact with his war-time friends and re-orient Arab politics towards greater violence. But one thing is certain. He will not bring greater unity to the Arab cause unless his star rises again and he can once more exercise pressure through terrorism.

There is little of the saintly fanatic about this shrewd, able—and lucky—Oriental political boss.