

DIVIDED WE FALL: HUSAYNI-NASHASHIBI FACTIONALISM IN PALESTINE

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In East Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, there is a house. As part of its long history, it has been many different things: the Jerusalem headquarters for the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), a base for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), and even a luxury hotel.¹ Now, it is empty—Israel forcibly closed this “Orient House” in 2001. Before all of this, before two wars and two intifadas, however, the Orient House was a home, for a family. That family was the al-Husayni clan.

In the same neighborhood, facing the Husaynis' former home, stands another house.² Today, it serves as a research library, housing centuries-old manuscripts from pre-Ottoman times. Just like the Orient House, it also used to be a home for a family. That family was the al-Nashashibi clan.

The story of these two families is the story of Palestine and how their tribal interests managed to triumph over those of the nation. It is the story of how a rivalry between two families led to the destruction of thousands of others.

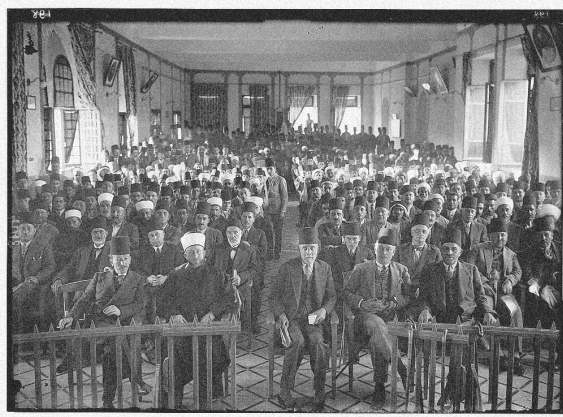
The Husayni family, which claims to be descended from the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), first came to Jerusalem between the 14th and 16th centuries.³ The Nashashibis, likely of Kurdish or Circassian descent, arrived around the same time in

the 15th century. By the late 19th century, both families had become those of wealthy urban effendis, each with extraordinary foundations of sociopolitical power; the Husaynis owned over 10,000 acres of profitable plantations in the Jericho area, and the Nashashibis in Jerusalem had a history of partnership with the Ottomans.⁴

As a result of these foundations, both families were entitled to many powerful political and religious positions within the empire.⁵ Husayni tribesmen were recognized as the muftis of Jerusalem and the custodians of the Nabi Musa Shrine, while the Nashashibis could boast of the Ottoman parliament deputy Raghīb al-Nashashibi and of the literary icon Is'af al-Nashashibi as their scions.⁶ Both families therefore wielded remarkable political influence, with the Husaynis in particular dominating Palestinian affairs. In the Peasants' Revolt of 1834, the Husaynis led a coalition of notable families to unite in solidarity against the Egyptian occupation; after coordinating with influential village sheikhs and encouraging rural areas to rebel, the efforts of the Husaynis and other wealthy families led to the expansion of the campaign against Ibrahim Pasha's army.⁷ Nearly a century later, they would find themselves once again campaigning together against another foreign power: the Young Turks. The most prominent notable who engaged in this anti-Ottoman



Arab protest delegations, featuring Raghib al-Nashashibi and Amin al-Husayni in the front-left.



activity was Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the future Grand Mufti of Jerusalem who cooperated with the British to recruit troops for the Arab Revolt. The Nashashibis also resisted the Young Turks, which led to the execution of Ali Omar Nashashibi, a founder of one of the earliest pan-Arab nationalist societies.⁹ Throughout this period, their combined efforts were perhaps the defining force driving political developments in Palestine.

This cooperative relationship between the Husaynis and Nashashibis fundamentally changed after World War One, however; with the Ottomans out of the picture, the question of who was to rule Palestine after the British quickly arose. Previously, both families had operated in mutual recognition of the Ottoman Empire, albeit with significant personal autonomy. Now,

both families began to actively carve out personal power bases in competition with one another. The British, fearing a united Arab front, actively accelerated this rivalry by appointing Husaynis and Nashashibis to rival positions.⁴

Naturally, this led to intense conflict between the Husaynis and Nashashibis, with the Husaynis initially gaining the upper hand in a string of successive victories. At the Third Palestinian Arab Congress in 1920, the representatives appointed a Husayni as head of the Arab Executive, compelling Raghib al-Nashashibi to lead a boycott against the Congress.¹⁰ The Nashashibis were further enraged when the British appointed Amin al-Husayni as the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem (largely due to his pro-British attitude), despite the fact that their candidate had actually won the

election.¹¹ Yet another Husayni victory came in the form of Amin al-Husayni's appointment to the head of the Supreme Muslim Council, despite a bitter smear campaign launched by the Nashashibi faction. These successes inspired much fear among the other elite families, pushing them to band together in opposition parties such as the 1923 Palestine Arab National Party.¹⁰

Despite their mutual struggle against Zionist settler colonialism, the two families developed a difference in political tactics. The weakened Nashashibi faction began to favor a moderate stance, desiring more cooperation with the British in order to achieve their long-term aims.¹² In contrast, the Husaynis became hard-liners who pushed their agenda without compromise, hoping to capitalize on their initial victories. These strategic differences only served to worsen the factional division that was emerging.

Soon, the Husayni-Nashashibi rivalry crippled the Palestinian national movement. In 1922, negotiations with the British over the establishment of a Legislative Council came to a halt due to partisan infighting among the Palestinian delegation.¹⁰ Again in 1924, arguments over the appropriate congressional representation for each family caused the Palestinians to delay the Seventh Palestinian Arab Congress for four years. By 1935, the emergence of countless political parties along

either the Huysani or Nashashibi axes fractured the Palestinian national movement almost entirely—productive cooperation became impossible. The National Defense Party (Nashashibi) and Palestine Arab Party (Husayni) ruthlessly opposed each other's initiatives regardless of their content, destroying any potential of a unified struggle.¹² The establishment of additional parties by other groups, such as the Independence Party, only further polarized Palestinian politics. Meanwhile, Zionist immigration and the political power of Zionist militias increased each year.

This infighting peaked during the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939. Though the Palestinians previously had a brief moment of unity in the form of the Arab Higher Committee (AHC), which comprised the heads of all major clans, the situation soon deteriorated once again into factional conflict. Upon the withdrawal of the Nashashibi's National Defense Party (NDF) from the AHC, Hajj Amin al-Husayni began ordering the assassinations of several prominent Nashashibis.¹⁰ His allies began murdering high-ranking NDF cadres; even Raghib al-Nashashibi barely survived several assassination attempts. In response, the Nashashibis and other opposition parties formed militias in coordination with the British to fight the mufti's forces. Civil war broke out in Palestine, precisely at the time where a united front was most necessary.

As a result, the national movement



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was rendered completely ineffective. At the London Conference of 1939—one of the last chances for Palestinian leaders to have any positive impact on the future of their country—the two Palestinian delegations sent were so intransigent that an independent Briton observed that a “feud between the two families” hindered them from any effective political action.¹³ In 1948, on the eve of the *Nakba*, the newly formed Arab League completely removed the Palestinian leadership from negotiations and strategy deliberation. Their impotence had become apparent to all; the Husaynis and Nashashibis had failed the people they claimed to represent.

1948 came and the *Nakba* raged on, until countless Palestinians were ethnically cleansed and permanently displaced from their homeland to make way for the Israeli state. As the dust settled, hundreds of local

homes were either destroyed or stolen by Israeli settlers. The Oriental House and the al-Nashashibi Library, however, remained standing. Today, if one has proper clearance from the Israeli government, these houses can be seen in East Jerusalem as they have stood for centuries.

Though the Husaynis and the Nashashibis were greatly weakened in the wake of the *Nakba*, they still stand today. Albeit to a much more limited extent, both of the families continue to operate in Palestinian politics, with some of their tribesmen holding influential positions in the PLO and PA.¹⁴ Indeed, as the Hamas-Fatah divide deepens, Israeli settlements increasingly erode what is left of Palestine, and the international Arab leadership abandons Palestinians, these two houses still face off in East Jerusalem’s Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood.