

The Rise and Fall of the All-Palestine Government in Gaza

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The All-Palestine Government established in Gaza in September 1948 was short-lived and ill-starred, but it constituted one of the more interesting and instructive political experiments in the history of the Palestinian national movement. Any proposal for an independent Palestinian state inevitably raises questions about the form of the government that such a state would have. In this respect, the All-Palestine Government is not simply a historical curiosity, but a subject of considerable and enduring political relevance insofar as it highlights some of the basic dilemmas of Palestinian nationalism and above all the question of dependence on the Arab states.

The Arab League and the Palestine Question

In the aftermath of World War II, when the struggle for Palestine was approaching its climax, the Palestinians were in a weak and vulnerable position. Their weakness was clearly reflected in their dependence on the Arab states and on the recently-founded Arab League. Thus, when the Arab Higher Committee (AHC) was reestablished in 1946 after a nine-year hiatus, it was not by the various Palestinian political parties themselves, as had been the case when it was founded in 1936, but by a decision of the Arab League. Internally divided, with few political assets of its

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own, the new AHC was unable to pursue an independent policy or to act decisively. Consequently, the Arab League became the principal forum for determining the all-Arab policy on the political disposition of Palestine.

Within the Arab League, however, there was no consensus on the future of Palestine. Most members, at least at the declaratory level, stood for an uncompromising policy in the fight against Zionism. They denounced the United Nations partition plan of 29 November 1947 as illegal, impracticable, and unjust, as did the AHC. The Arab League was fully behind the Palestinians in opposing partition, and from the time it was founded in March 1945 until Britain confirmed its decision to withdraw from Palestine in the autumn of 1947, there was consistent support for creating a unitary and independent Palestinian state.

After that, however, there were conflicting views concerning the positive policy to adopt on the future of Palestine. On the one hand there was Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the Mufti of Jerusalem, who pursued a maximalist program for an independent and sovereign Palestinian state over the whole of Palestine.¹ On the other hand there was King Abdullah of Transjordan, whose undeclared aim was to partition Palestine with the Zionists and to annex the Arab part to his kingdom.²

After Britain's September 1947 announcement of its intention to withdraw from Palestine, the AHC appealed to the Arab League for support in setting up a Palestinian government to fill the power vacuum that was going to be created.³ But most members of the League were reluctant to extend active support to a government that would be headed by the Mufti, or to entrust him with the leadership of the Arab war effort in Palestine. At the meetings of the Arab League Council in Aley, Lebanon, in October 1947 and in Cairo in December 1947, the Mufti pleaded passionately for the establishment of a shadow government under the aegis of the AHC. His pleas fell on deaf ears, however, as did his warnings against deploying in Palestine the armies of the neighboring Arab states. In February 1948, the League not only rejected the Mufti's demand for the establishment of a Palestinian government-in-exile and for the appointment of Palestinian military governors for the country, but declined even to extend a loan to the AHC to cover its administrative expenses. During March, April, and the first half of May, the AHC kept up the pressure for the establishment of a government to manage the affairs of the country, but the Arab League persisted in its negative stand. The Mufti and his colleagues were progressively marginalized during this unofficial but critical phase of the struggle for Palestine. By 15 May 1948, when the State of

Israel was proclaimed, only one solitary member of the AHC, Ahmad Hilmi Abdul Baqi, remained in Palestine.⁴

Thus, when the regular Arab armies marched into Palestine the following day and the official phase of the war began, the Arabs of Palestine—in sharp contrast to the Israeli side—did not have a responsible government, an administrative regime, or a unified military command. The Palestinian community was decimated and pulverized in the course of the fighting and successive waves of refugees were expelled or left the country. At the time the first truce was declared on 11 June, the Israeli Defense Forces were in control of areas beyond what had been assigned to the Jewish state under the partition plan; the Egyptian army held onto the coastal strip to about 14 miles above Gaza; the Iraqi forces held the mountainous region constituting the northern part of central Palestine; and King Abdullah's forces were in control of the central part of Palestine including East Jerusalem, the Hebron hills, and Lydda and Ramle in the coastal plain. When Count Bernadotte, the UN mediator, recommended in his initial proposals on 27 June that the Arab parts of Palestine be attached to Transjordan, King Abdullah's opponents within the Arab League decided to act.

On 8 July 1948, the Political Committee of the Arab League met in Cairo and reached a decision to set up a temporary civil administration in Palestine that would be directly responsible to the League. This decision, which marked a partial reversal of the League's previous policy of rejecting any solution that would give a prominent place to the Mufti, was based on a compromise that failed to satisfy either of the two principal claimants. Out of deference to King Abdullah, the decision spoke not of a Palestinian government but of a temporary administration with jurisdiction only in civic affairs. Nevertheless, the King, with British encouragement, remained implacably hostile to the whole idea. The AHC, on the other hand, had serious reservations about the proposed body both because it would be dependent on the Arab League and because of the threat it was expected to pose to its own position.⁵ With strong opposition from King Abdullah, and only half-hearted support from the AHC, the new body never got off the ground.

The Creation of the All-Palestine Government

King Abdullah's increasingly overt use of the Arab Legion to make himself master of Arab Palestine and his claim that the Transjordanian

delegates rather than the AHC represented the Palestinians inside the Arab League antagonized the other member states, especially Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. Britain's support of Abdullah's claims further fuelled the Arab League's anti-Abdullah forces. Led by Egypt, these Arab states began to maneuver for the creation of an Arab government for Palestine.

The proposal for turning the "temporary civil administration" that had been agreed upon in July into an Arab government for all Palestine was placed at the top of the agenda of the Arab League's Political Committee meeting, which opened in Alexandria on 6 September and lasted for ten days. Jamal al-Husayni, the Mufti's cousin and a prominent member of the AHC, visited several Arab capitals, including Amman, to mobilize support for this proposal. After a series of meetings, the Political Committee, despite the doubts expressed by the Transjordanian delegates, reached an agreement on the establishment of an Arab government for Palestine with a seat in Gaza. A formal announcement of this decision was issued on 20 September. To forestall Transjordanian objections that the decision implied Arab acceptance of partition and of the State of Israel, the new body was called the Government of All-Palestine, or the All-Palestine Government (APG).⁶

The motives for this major Arab League decision were diverse and contradictory but, in more than one way, they were antagonistic to Transjordan. The desire to placate Arab public opinion, critical of the governments for failing to protect the Palestinians, was one consideration. Another was the determination to safeguard the Arab claim to sovereignty over the whole of Palestine by providing an alternative to international recognition of Israel and by preventing any Arab government from recognizing the Jewish state. But at the same time, the decision to form an Arab government of Palestine and the attempt to create armed forces under its control furnished the Arab League members with the means for divesting themselves of direct responsibility for the prosecution of the war and of withdrawing their armies from Palestine with some protection against popular outcry.⁷ Whatever the long-term future of the proposed Arab government in Palestine, its immediate purpose, as perceived by its Egyptian sponsors, was to provide a focal point of opposition to Abdullah and serve as an instrument for frustrating his ambition to federate the Arab regions of Palestine with Transjordan.

Britain had been lending discreet support to King Abdullah's plan for a Greater Transjordan because this held out the best hopes of safeguarding its own strategic interests following the termination of the mandate over Palestine. Hostility to the Mufti and to the idea of a Palestinian state

under his leadership was a constant and important feature of British policy in 1948, and it goes a long way to explain Britain's attitude towards the Egyptian-led initiative. In British eyes a Palestinian state was equated with a Mufti state, and the rationale against a Mufti state was that it would be "a hotbed of ineffectual Arab fanaticism" that would very likely be taken over by the Jewish state.⁸

The Foreign Office therefore exerted heavy pressure in Arab capitals to prevent the proclamation of the All-Palestine Government, arguing that such a move would be ill-timed and likely to serve the interests of the Mufti. Azzam Pasha, the Secretary-General of the Arab League, downplayed the significance of the Mufti issue and told a senior British diplomat that if the Palestine problem could be solved within six months, he would join those who wanted to "cut the Mufti's throat," but since it would not be solved for at least ten years, the Mufti could still be useful. Azzam added that the Mufti would remain in Egypt and that he would be able to exercise influence over Palestine only indirectly, from Cairo.⁹

Although Britain's concern about the role of the Mufti was widely shared in Arab political circles, he and the AHC in fact played a major part in the formation of the new government. The government was headed by Ahmad Hilmi Abdul Baqi, who had recently left the AHC by accepting King Abdullah's offer to become military governor of Jerusalem, and was now being lured away from the King by the Mufti and the Egyptians.¹⁰ Hilmi's cabinet consisted largely of followers of the Mufti but also included representatives of the other factions of the Palestinian ruling class and a number of prominent Palestinians who had previously supported Abdullah. Jamal al-Husayni became foreign minister, Rajai al-Husayni (the former head of the Arab office in Jerusalem) became defense minister, and Michael Abcarius, (a senior civil servant in the British administration) finance minister, while Anwar Nussaiba, (a former judge), became secretary of the cabinet. There were twelve ministers in all, most of whom had also been members of the "temporary civil administration" of the previous July. They were living in various Arab countries and now headed for Gaza to take up their new positions.

On 22 September a communiqué was issued in the name of the AHC about the formation of the All-Palestine Government. Whereas the Arab League announcement had spoken modestly of the decision to turn the Palestinian civil administration into a Palestinian government, the AHC resoundingly stated that "the inhabitants of Palestine, by virtue of their natural right to self-determination and in accordance with the resolutions of the Arab League, have decided to declare Palestine in its entirety. . . as

an independent state under a government known as the All-Palestine Government which is based on democratic principles."¹¹

In addition to this official communiqué, an appeal was broadcast to the Arabs of Palestine calling on them to rally around their national government and help with the liberation of their homeland.¹² Word was sent out to the supporters of the Mufti to assemble in Gaza, while Egyptian troops were sent to Bethlehem to distribute small arms to anti-Hashemite elements. Most of the Palestinians, and especially the refugees, received the news with great joy. For the first time in their lives they heard of a Palestine government and it sparked in them a ray of hope amidst all the gloom and doom of the previous year. When the Mufti, who had been living in Cairo, the most recent stop in his eleven-year exile, defied the Egyptian authorities and turned up in Gaza, he was welcomed by local inhabitants in a display of great excitement and jubilation.

The sporadic displays of popular support did not blind the Mufti and his colleagues to the need to endow the new government with real legitimacy and substance. During the first week of its life in Gaza, the All-Palestine Government revived the Holy War Army (*Jaish al-Jihad al-Muqaddas*), the Mufti's irregular forces which had played a major part during the unofficial phase of the Palestine war, and began to mobilize with the declared aim of liberating Palestine. On the diplomatic front, the new government sought international recognition, and even designated a delegation to represent it at the United Nations even though the world body had not acknowledged it. Finally, any member of the Palestinian people was declared eligible for a Palestinian passport, and within a short period some 14,000 of these documents were issued, mostly to notables and businessmen from the Gaza Strip.

Given the Arab League's increasingly ambiguous stand and King Abdullah's repeated claims that the APG had been set up against the will of the Palestinian people, the new government decided to convene a constituent assembly aimed at securing a more broadly-based and legitimate source of authority and at refuting Abdullah's claims. Accordingly, invitations were sent to Palestinian representatives from all parts of the country, including the members of the AHC, the mayors and heads of local councils in Palestine, heads of chambers of commerce and trade unions, Palestinian members of the National Committees, leaders of political parties, and military commanders.¹³

The Palestinian National Council convened under the chairmanship of the Mufti in a semi-derelict school building in Gaza on 30 September 1948. Only half of the 150 delegates who had been invited made it to

Gaza, partly because of the restrictions on travel imposed by the Transjordanian and Iraqi armies which were in control of central Palestine. Nevertheless, a mood of elation and even euphoria permeated the deliberations of the Council. First, Hajj Amin al-Husayni was unanimously elected as President of the Council. Second, the Council passed a vote of confidence in the government headed by Ahmad Hilmi and endorsed its plans for the liberation of Palestine. Then a long series of resolutions was passed, including the adoption of a provisional constitution, the original flag of the Arab Revolt of 1916, and Jerusalem as the capital. Finally, a declaration of independence was signed by the delegates and issued to the press. It asserted the right of the Palestinian people to a free, sovereign, and democratic state with borders defined as "Syria and Lebanon in the north, Syria and Transjordan in the east, the Mediterranean in the west, and Egypt in the south."¹⁴

But the contrast between the pretensions of the All-Palestine Government and its capability quickly reduced it to the level of farce. It claimed jurisdiction over the whole of Palestine, yet it had no administration, no civil service, no money, and no real army of its own. Even in the small enclave around the town of Gaza its writ ran only by the grace of the Egyptian authorities. Taking advantage of the new government's dependence on them for funds and protection, the Egyptian paymasters manipulated it to undermine Abdullah's claim to represent the Palestinians in the Arab League and in international forums. Ostensibly the embryo for an independent Palestinian state, the new government, from the moment of its inception, was thus reduced to the unhappy role of a shuttlecock in the ongoing power struggle between Cairo and Amman.

King Abdullah's Maneuvers and the Role of Arab Politics

From Amman King Abdullah pursued his campaign against the All-Palestine Government with renewed vigor. At the time of its proclamation, he had not only refused to recognize it, but had sent angry telegrams of protest to Ahmad Hilmi and Azzam Pasha. Abdullah soon served notice that the All-Palestine Government would not be allowed to operate in any of the areas occupied by the Arab Legion. To Mahmud Nuqrashi, the Egyptian prime minister, he said quite bluntly that he had no intention of allowing a weak Palestinian government to take charge of the Arab part of Palestine when it had no army to protect it from Jewish attacks.¹⁵ And while waging this open campaign, King Abdullah also took practical

steps to formalize Transjordan's authority over the areas it held to the west of the Jordan River and to organize his own Palestinian supporters in opposition to the government in Gaza.¹⁶

Thus, on 30 September 1948, the very same day that the Mufti's Palestinian National Council issued its declaration of independence in Gaza, the rival "First Palestinian Congress" convened in Amman, its several thousand participants swearing allegiance to the Hashemite monarch. The Amman Congress denounced the formation of the Gaza government as being contrary to the wishes and interests of the Arabs, declared that Transjordan and Palestine constituted a single territorial unit, and resolved that no Arab government should be set up for Palestine until the entire country had been liberated.¹⁷

Popular support for the high-sounding but largely illusory All-Palestine Government had never developed into a groundswell, and it began to dwindle after the two rival Congresses were held. Many of the Arab towns and villages in Palestine sent delegations to Amman to pledge their loyalty to the King and to give him power of attorney to solve the Palestine problem as he saw fit. In some cases these delegations were the result of local political initiative; in others it was the Transjordanian military governors who helped in collecting the signatures and dispatching the delegations to Amman.¹⁸ The Transjordanian regime also used bribery to induce some of the supporters of the Mufti's government to transfer their loyalty to King Abdullah.

Outside Palestine, the Gaza government was largely unsuccessful in its efforts to gain international recognition as the representative of the Palestine people. London, of course, had no intention of recognizing "this so-called government," and most other members of the United Nations followed the British example in ignoring it.

Meanwhile, intense negotiations were taking place within the Arab camp concerning the stance to adopt on the All-Palestine Government. On the one hand, the Arab leaders almost without exception were prepared for purely local ends to sacrifice Arab interests in Palestine. The Arab reluctance fully to back the new body was increased by the continuing and general aversion to the Mufti; indeed, the prominence of his role in directing events in the APG had given them second thoughts concerning the entire process leading up to the Arab Palestine Government that they themselves had unleashed to check King Abdullah's annexation of Arab Palestine. As events progressed, they were anxious not to escalate the conflict with Abdullah and risk the breakup of the Arab League. Az-

zam Pasha had even tried, unsuccessfully, to stop the proclamation of the government.¹⁹

On the other hand, the Arab regimes had to consider domestic public opinion, which across the Arab world cared passionately about Palestine and was adamant in its opposition to partition. At the same time, opposition to Abdullah ran high, and preventing the expansion of his kingdom was almost on a par with opposition to partition as one of the few goals behind which nearly all the Arab states could rally. Abdullah's loyalty to Britain was increasingly equated with disloyalty to the Arab cause. The knowledge that he had been in contact with Jewish leaders added to suspicions that he had from the outset been prepared to compromise the Arab claim to the whole of Palestine in order to acquire part of it for himself. Abdullah's position in the Arab world was not helped by the mismanagement that characterized his handling of the Palestinian population that came under his control. From being a hero a few months previously for heeding Palestinian calls for help and going to the rescue, Abdullah had sunk almost to the level of pariah among his brother Arabs. A more pragmatic reason for the other Arab regimes' opposition to Abdullah was his usefulness as a scapegoat for the failure of their own Palestine policy.

Thus, the need to protect their Arab nationalist credentials combined with their antipathy to Abdullah and ultimately took precedence over their misgivings regarding the Mufti. Once the APG was declared, the Arab states began, however half-heartedly, to rally behind it. Predictably enough, Egypt, which after all had sponsored the new government, was its chief backer. Riad al-Sulh, the Lebanese prime minister who was savagely critical of King Abdullah, also played a leading role in pressing the Arab League's Political Committee to give its blessing to the All-Palestine Government.²⁰

Much of the diplomatic activity concerning the All-Palestine Government centered on Iraq, whose position was particularly crucial since it held the northern half of central Palestine (the West Bank). Iraqi cooperation with the Egypt-sponsored body would have made Transjordan's position very difficult. King Abdullah therefore called his nephew Abd al-Allah, the regent in Baghdad, to ensure that this did not happen but was not given a clear reply.²¹ Less than a week later, Jamal al-Husayni, soliciting Iraqi support for the All-Palestine Government on a visit to Baghdad and in an effort to circumvent opposition deriving from the Mufti's prominence in the project, suggested that the Mufti might be gotten rid of later and went so far as to suggest that if Palestine were saved for the Arabs the throne could be offered to King Abdullah.²²

Despite the dynastic considerations that generally allied Iraq with Abdullah to form the Hashemite bloc within the Arab League, and despite a deep aversion to the Mufti stemming from his involvement in the anti-Hashemite Rashid Ali coup in 1941, Iraq had good reason to support the APG. The Palestine problem was the litmus test of commitment to pan-Arabism, and the Regent had worked hard to establish his Arab nationalist credentials by taking a strong stance against partition and by sending troops to Palestine. Siding with Abdullah, whose prestige among the masses in Iraq and elsewhere in the Arab world was at a low ebb, could compromise the measure of domestic credibility the regime had thus acquired. For various reasons, then, the Regent of Iraq joined in the general campaign of vilification against his uncle; his criticisms were heartily reciprocated, and the relationship between them became so sour that they could no longer have a sensible discussion about Palestine.²³

But Iraq, mindful of the risks Abdullah was running vis-à-vis his own public opinion, continued to exert efforts to bring Abdullah into line with the common Arab stance. The Iraqi prime minister, Muzahem al-Pachachi, advised Abdullah to go slowly²⁴ and with the tacit support of the Regent did his utmost to induce the King to recognize "temporarily" the All-Palestine Government. Al-Pachachi, unable to declare open antagonism towards the Mufti, used the argument with Abdullah that the new government would fail and Arab Palestine would be bound to go to Transjordan ultimately. The King countered that recognition would merely implement the partition of Palestine before it was known what the United Nations was going to decide.²⁵ Meanwhile, the Foreign Office pointed out to the prime minister and the Regent the dangers of going along with Egypt in encouraging the Mufti to extend his influence in Palestine. To the Regent in particular, it was emphasized that any growth of the Mufti's influence would necessarily be dangerous to the Hashemite house. The Regent was told, in what amounted to a rebuke, that he could not sit back and allow attacks on the position of King Abdullah without danger to himself. Whatever the Regent's own views on the matter, the British view was that a strong and enlarged Transjordan was in the interest of the maintenance of stability in Iraq and of the position of the Regent and the royal family.²⁶

So overwhelming was Arab resistance both to Transjordan's enlargement and to appearing to endorse partition that the British argument that a weak Palestinian government would facilitate Jewish expansion over the whole country made no impression. A major stumbling block in the way of the British policy of following Bernadotte's suggestion of assigning the

West Bank and the Negev to Abdullah was thus Arab opposition to a plan that would reduce Arab Palestine to nothing. Paradoxically, as one British official observed, "although the primary Arab objection to the Bernadotte plan is that its acceptance would involve partition, there are clear signs that, in their hearts, all but the most rabid fanatics, like Hajj Amin, realize that the existence of the State of Israel will have to be accepted sooner or later." What the Arabs could never agree upon was the partition of what was left of Palestine.²⁷

The Disintegration of the APG

While the Arab states were prevaricating over whether or not to recognize the APG and to what extent they should support it, events on ground conspired to make all these tractations meaningless.²⁸

First came the dismantlement of the Mufti's Holy War Army by Glubb Pasha, the fiercely anti-Palestinian commander of Transjordan's Arab Legion. The Mufti's forces had been carrying out attacks on UN observers²⁹ and Israeli troops which seemed designed to embroil the Arab Legion in the fighting and gave the impression of attempting to create disturbances in the areas occupied by Transjordan, especially in and around Jerusalem. Glubb and King Abdullah feared that these activities would endanger their own control in Arab Palestine and decided to nip the growth of the Mufti's army in the bud.³⁰

Towards the end of September, then, Glubb instructed colonel Abdullah al-Tall to disband the Holy War Army and seize its arms, but al-Tall balked. His reasons, enumerated in his memoirs, are probably fairly representative of Arab sentiments at the time and hence worth mentioning here: the Jerusalem area was in a state of war with the Jews and the Arabs needed every man who could bear arms to defend the Holy City; the Holy War Army consisted of Palestinians who had defended their country before the entry of the Arab armies, and thus should not be demobilized and disarmed when the Arab states had failed to save their country; and there was need for cooperation among all the armed forces in Palestine against the common enemy.³¹

Given al-Tall's refusal and the likelihood that other Arab officers would be similarly unwilling to carry out so unpatriotic a task, when Glubb received on 3 October 1948 a written order from the defense minister laying down that all armed bodies operating in the areas controlled by the Arab Legion were either to come under its orders or be dis-

banded,³² he turned to British officers. The order was carried out promptly and ruthlessly. The various units of the Holy War Army were surrounded and forcibly disarmed. The operation brought the Arabs to the brink of internecine war when they were supposed to be cooperating against the common enemy. But it effectively neutralized the military power of Abdullah's Palestinian rivals and checked the growth of public sentiment in favor of an autonomous Palestine state.

Shortly thereafter, on 15 October, Israel broke the second truce by launching a fierce offensive against the Egyptian army in the south, splitting it in three and forcing it to retreat along the coast down to Gaza. Such was the hostility between Transjordan and Egypt that the Arab Legion remained neutral when hostilities were renewed. Glubb Pasha privately expressed the hope that the Jewish offensive "may finally knock out the Gaza government and give the gypies [sic] a lesson!" In a letter to the British commander of his First Brigade, he explained that "if the Jews are going to have a private war with the Egyptians and the Gaza government, we do not want to get involved. The gypies and the Gaza government are almost as hostile to us as the Jews!"³³

Ironically, it was at about that time, in mid-October, that the Arab states finally got around to recognizing the All-Palestine Government, with Egypt being the first to grant formal recognition, Iraq coming next, and Syria, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia following suit three days later. Nothing is more indicative of their half-hearted support than the fact that by the time they gave formal recognition the game was over and the government was but an empty shell.

It was Israel's victory in the war with Egypt that in essence marked the end of the Gaza government. Destroying the embryo of a Palestinian state had not been the primary aim of the operation, but that was the effect. This was a classic example of the politics of unintended results. Until this war broke out, the Palestinians were divided, with some looking to King Abdullah for protection and others looking to the Mufti for a lead. Although the Arab Legion controlled the West Bank, some Palestinians still pledged their loyalty to their traditional leader. As a result of the Egyptian defeat, however, the Mufti's government lost its last and exceedingly tenuous physical toehold on Palestinian soil, its weakness was exposed for all to see, its prestige slumped, and its authority was undermined.

Indeed, by the end of October no members of the All-Palestine Government remained in Gaza. The Mufti himself, who had greatly annoyed Egypt's King Farouk when he went to Gaza on 27 September without

royal permission after having entered the country as a political refugee,³⁴ had been ordered back to Cairo by Egyptian Prime Minister Mahmud Nuqrashi on 6 October. When he refused, an officer was dispatched to bring him back by force. In Cairo the Mufti was kept under a strict police supervision that fell just short of house arrest; his freedom of action was so curtailed that he was not even allowed to visit the Palestinian refugee camps in Gaza.³⁵ Ahmad Hilmi and the members of his cabinet had remained in Gaza beyond the Mufti's forced departure, but following the renewal of hostilities in mid-October the Egyptians insisted that they move to Cairo as well on the pretext that the Gaza Strip was a military zone in which there was no room for a government to operate. Once in Cairo, the ministers held a number of talks with the Mufti but they were unable to carry out their duties, especially in the political realm. In fact, as Anwar Nusseiba later recalled, there was very little for them to do and their stay in the Egyptian capital was both boring and frustrating.³⁶ The secretariat of the Arab League also cold-shouldered them, thereby accentuating their sense of isolation and helplessness. Symptomatic of this attitude on the part of the original sponsors of the All-Palestine Government was the refusal to extend to it any financial assistance or even to pass on contributions from Arab and Islamic countries, leaving the government-in-exile without funds to pay salaries or defray its administrative expenses.³⁷

Even without these humiliations, the All-Palestine Government ceased to be a political force with its departure from Palestine. Palestinian opinion shifted perceptibly in favor of merging the Arab parts of Palestine with Transjordan. Among the more educated Palestinians, dislike and mistrust of King Abdullah persisted. But the political trimmers in Palestine concluded that the prospects of an independent Arab state were receding, while union with Transjordan appeared more probable and perhaps more profitable.³⁸

Indeed, the situation was such that the Palestinian ministers, led by Ahmad Hilmi and Jamal al-Husayni, were led to seek a rapprochement with their greatest opponent, King Abdullah. Jamal al-Husayni made the extraordinary statement that "the Palestinian government is willing to transfer its territory to Transjordan if Abdullah will cooperate with the other Arab states in ridding Palestine of the Zionists."³⁹ With the approval of their colleagues, the foreign minister accompanied the prime minister on a visit to Amman to talk with the King, but no progress was made in reaching an understanding. The following weeks witnessed the resignation of some of the ministers while others simply ceased to take

part in its meetings.⁴⁰ Ahmad Hilmi, a banker by profession, devoted more time to his business affairs than to the shadow cabinet of which he remained the nominal head. Other members of his cabinet gradually drifted to various Arab capitals; some went to Amman in response to royal gestures of pardon or to take up lucrative positions, openly switching their allegiance to King Abdullah.⁴¹

The high-sounding Government of All-Palestine thus slowly fell apart under the weight of its own impotence, ending up four years later as a "department" of the Arab League. Formally it retained its shadowy existence, but politically it went into steep decline and even its petitions and publications began to appear under the name of the Arab Higher Committee. The All-Palestine Government continued to exist in name only, issuing the occasional statement from its headquarters in Cairo, until President Nasir finally closed its offices in 1959. Power to represent the Palestinians had long passed to the Arab states and their leaders.⁴²

With the All-Palestine Government reduced to powerlessness, King Abdullah was in a much stronger position to proceed with his plan to annex what was left of Arab Palestine. The second Palestinian Congress, held in Jericho on 1 December 1948, was an important landmark on the road to annexation. Attended by some 3,000 delegates, including the mayors of Hebron, Bethlehem, and Ramallah; military governors of all the districts controlled by the Arab Legion; and former supporters of the Mufti, the Congress purported to reflect the will of the people, but the initiative and direction had clearly come from the King. The assembled notables duly proclaimed the union of Palestine and Transjordan and acknowledged Abdullah as the King of the united country.⁴³

Conclusion

In retrospect, the experience of the Government of All-Palestine appears interesting and instructive, but in the final analysis it was a cul-de-sac of political evolution that led the Palestinians nowhere. The government's fall was no less swift than its rise had been. The government's origins go a long way towards explaining its ultimate failure. For although it was projected as the nucleus of Palestinian self-government, it was a phantom deliberately created by the Arab states, with Egypt at their head, to meet their publics' opposition to partition and to challenge Transjordan's claim to the residue of Arab Palestine. It was for their own selfish reasons that the Arab states created the All-Palestine Government

and it was for their own selfish reasons that they abandoned it. True, in the first three weeks of its short life this fledgeling government did represent a genuine attempt by the Palestinians to assert their independence from their dubious sponsors and to assume firm control of their own destiny. But time had run out on it. Born of inter-Arab rivalries, it rapidly and inexorably foundered on the rocks of inter-Arab rivalries. For the Palestinian cause the Arab states, individually and collectively, turned out to be a broken reed. Consequently, if there is one lesson that stands out from this calamitous phase of Palestinian history, it is the need for self-reliance and, above all, for defending the Palestinian cause against control and manipulation by the Arab states.



1. For a revisionist biography of the Mufti that stresses his essential moderation in the period up to 1937, see Philip Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
2. For two recent studies see Mary C. Wilson, *King Abdullah, Britain and the Making of Jordan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Avi Shlaim, *Collusion Across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
3. Muhammad Amin al-Husayni, *Facts About the Palestine Question* [in Arabic] (Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, 1956), pp. 22-23. For a comprehensive and well-documented survey of the deliberations of the Arab League on the Palestinian question, see Walid Khalidi, "The Arab Perspective" in Wm. Roger Louis and Robert W. Stookey, eds., *The End of the Palestine Mandate* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1986), pp. 104-136.
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