

# Islam Assembled

The Advent of the Muslim Congresses

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## FOURTEEN

# CONCLUSIONS

**T**HE GREAT disappointment of the Muslim congresses was that they failed to merge in a single organization. The establishment of a permanent organization was the professed aim of every initiative. Each one made some provision for a permanent secretariat entrusted with the convening of periodic congresses. Yet none of the congresses succeeded in perpetuating itself long beyond adjournment. Was there a fundamental flaw in the very premise of the congresses, some chronic weakness in the Muslim body politic which thwarted every attempt to organize the sentiment of Muslim solidarity?

The congresses were grounded in the belief that the vastness of the Muslim world constituted a strength. In their numbers, and in their broad geographic dispersal, the Muslims represented a potentially formidable force. Were Muslims to express themselves as one, were they to define their political priorities, resolve their own disputes, and even mend doctrine, then their collective determination would serve to ward off their enemies. "If the Muslims were to organize themselves," wrote one congress sponsor, "all of the difficulties which afflict them would disappear immediately. Those [non-Muslim] states having Muslim populations could no longer permit themselves to treat their Muslim subjects as some of them do today."<sup>1</sup>

Yet the flaw lay in that same vastness of the Muslim world which the Muslim cosmopolitans counted as a strength, for it gave rise to sharp differences of perspective among them. A sense of subjugation to the West was the binding force of the congresses, yet the political conditions under which Muslims lived varied widely. It made some difference whether one submitted to British, French, Russian, or Dutch rule. It made still more difference whether one's land was occupied for strategic, economic, or colonizing purposes. It made a great deal of difference whether one was subjected directly to foreign rule, or enjoyed a measure of independence as part of the balance of foreign power. The calculations made separately by Muslims in different predicaments ruled out an unambiguous consensus.

The Muslims, then, did not constitute an effective political community, for their differences were too profound. These might have been

transcended by a visionary and charismatic leader, obsessed with the details of organization, and aware of the paramount importance of continuity and periodicity. But the Muslim congresses found no one prepared to work so methodically to bring Muslims together. The triumvirate of Rashid Rida, Shakib Arslan, and Amin al-Husayni did figure over the years in many of the initiatives and congresses. They shared a profound commitment to the cause of Muslim unity, and inspired others with the considerable force of their personalities. But as organizers, they lacked persistence, and were too deeply involved in political and literary controversies to serve as menders of Muslim divisions.

Had the congresses been convened near the seats of government of those foreign powers which ruled Muslim destinies, their participants might have felt compelled to display greater singleness of purpose. Under watchful foreign eyes, the moral compulsion to stem controversy might have fortified the congresses, and made a deeper impression upon world opinion. But with few exceptions, Muslim congresses met in Muslim settings, often removed from outside scrutiny. This preference stemmed from a conception of the congress as an essentially conspiratorial event, the proceedings of which had to be kept in confidence from the West. The avowed purpose was not to impress foreigners, but to plan common action against foreign oppressors; and was this aim not served best by secrecy? The notion was expressed perfectly by Kawakibi in *Umm al-qura*, the story of a Muslim congress that unfolded as a plot (see chapter 3). But the atmosphere in these settings was laden with Muslim rivalries and Muslim intrigues, and these permeated the congress preparations and proceedings. Divisive controversy was exacerbated by the lack of one great center in Islam. There was no single city, state, or body of theologians which enjoyed undisputed primacy in determination of Muslim priorities. Instead there were many figures who claimed to speak on behalf of authentic Islam, and who organized rival congresses in rival settings to demonstrate their authority.

Muslim cosmopolitans also failed to define a theme powerful enough to wilt the pretensions and pride which congress participants brought to the proceedings. The broad cause of Muslim independence was complicated by the fact that the aims and methods of foreign control differed widely across the expansive world of Islam. And so the congresses instead delved indecisively in religious reform, the caliphate, and the fate of the holy cities of Arabia. When these issues also failed to provide the foundation of a Muslim consensus, the Muslim congresses turned to the winning of Palestine. This purpose did concern all Muslims for religious reasons, but still failed to move them to spend their political

energies and material resources. The Muslim congresses lacked a well-defined cause for which Muslims were prepared to make sacrifices, and a vast chasm opened up between pledges and deeds.

Without inspiring leadership, ambiance, and purpose, Muslims in congress could not rise above their differences, hence the emergence of a broken pattern of congresses. The movement for unity was disunited, and failed to yield a single series of congresses and one representative organization. Instead, the congresses rivaled one another, and became arenas for other Muslim rivalries. The West was not intimidated by the alleged unity of Muslim purpose, and on no occasion did any foreign power yield to the demands of assembled Muslims. As an instrument for the liberation of Muslim peoples, the congresses proved utterly ineffective.

But the congresses did intensify the exchange of views among Muslims themselves. Congress organizers and congress participants boarded steamers and trains, then aircraft, for distant destinations, to establish a network of ties far more extensive than that which had prevailed in the Ottoman period. Some of the Muslim cosmopolitans even attended several of the congresses, compensating in some measure for the organizational discontinuity of the congresses themselves.

The simplest function of this network was to inform. In the previous century, much of the information which reached Muslims about the situation, opinions, and concerns of other Muslims came from suspect sources. Word of events in distant Muslim lands often reached other Muslim centers through non-Muslim media, censored publications, and plain rumor. The congresses, in providing opportunities for personal encounters, gave Muslims a much more vivid sense of the challenges faced by Muslims elsewhere. Participants returned home with more accurate impressions of developments in the wider Muslim world, and then were able to disseminate that information with more authority and conviction.

Yet the congresses did more than inform. The deliberations, and the network they created, demonstrated the tenacity of Muslim adherence to the concept of a united world of Islam. Despite the disintegration of the last great Muslim empire and the demise of the universal caliphate, the ideal of Muslim unity continued to move Muslims. This Muslim political allegiance was unwieldy in scope and in some respects anachronistic. Its adherents did not or could not articulate a clear and compelling program for its implementation. Yet Muslim nationalism had the singular quality of authenticity. It was not a modern contrivance, but drew on the traditional concept of the *umma*, the universal and

indivisible nation of Islam. The congresses represented a standing protest by Muslim cosmopolitans against the arbitrary division of the Muslim world by foreign powers, a division accepted so readily by pragmatic secular nationalists.

Buffeted by winds of change, that ideal of unity found shelter in the deliberations and doings of the Muslim congresses. There it reposed, a latent challenge to narrower nationalism and the breaking up of the Muslim world into dozens of states. For an interlude, the congresses were halted by a world war, and the leading Muslim cosmopolitans were discredited. But then followed the momentous partitions of India and Palestine, and a new and very different congress movement arose from these ordeals. This time its purpose was the establishment of an organization of Muslim states, many of which had just achieved their independence. That effort, drawn out over two decades, and deserving of separate study, ultimately succeeded. Thus was realized, in form if not in substance, the visions of those Muslims who had proposed and organized the first congresses, in the shadow of the West.

28. Erwin Ettl (Berlin) to Ernst Woermann, December 11, 1942, *GFO*, reel 392, frame 930/297977.
29. Mustafa al-Wakil to Ernst Woermann, [December 14, 1941], *GFO*, reel 392, frames 930/297960–61.
30. Abd al-Halim Naggar and Mansooruddin (Berlin) to Amin al-Husayni, December 14, 1942, *GFO*, reel 392, frame 930/297955.
31. Woermann (Berlin) to Kurt Prüfer, December 14, 1942, *GFO*, reel 392, frame 930/297958.
32. Minute of Bose-Ribbentrop meeting, October 14, 1942, *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik, 1918–1945*, ser. E, 4: 84–87; Reimund Schnabel, *Tiger und Schakal: Deutsche Indienpolitik, 1941–1943*, 277–78.
33. *Hamburger Fremdenblatt*, September 24, 1942.
34. Woermann memorandum, December 12, 1942, *GFO*, reel 392, frames 930/297968–69.
35. Wilhelm Melchers (Berlin) to Woermann, December 16, 1942, *GFO*, reel 392, frames 930/297948–50. On the incident, see also Grobba, *Männer und Mächte im Orient*, 308.
36. Islamische Zentralinstitut, *Die Rede Seiner Eminenz des Grossmufti Anlässlich der Eröffnung des Islamischen Zentral-Institutes zu Berlin*, in *GFO*, reel 392, frames 930/297941–45; *Völkischer Beobachter* (Berlin), December 19, 1942.
37. Amin al-Husayni to Hitler, [December 1942], *GFO*, reel 396, frame 930/304371.
38. For an account of this activity, see S. Wiesenthal, *Grossmufti—Grossagent der Achse*, 29–30.
39. Amin al-Husayni (Oybin) to Ribbentrop, November 12, 1944, Mufti Files, pp. 00187–88. The official was Wilhelm Melchers.
40. On these activities, see Ladislaus Hory and Martin Broszat, *Der kroatische Ustascha-Staat 1941–1945*, 154–61. It was this more consequential collaboration that led the Yugoslav government in July 1945 to place Amin al-Husayni on the United Nations' list of war criminals.
41. On the SS and Turkic Muslims, see Patrick von zur Mühlen, *Zwischen Hakenkreuz und Sowjetstern*, especially 139–69. On the Wehrmacht's efforts in this field, which preceded those of the SS, see Joachim Hoffmann, *Die Ostlegionen, 1941–1943*, especially 136–46 on religious guidance.
42. Amin al-Husayni (Berlin) to Japanese Foreign Minister, n.d. [1943], Mufti Files, pp. 00919, 00947–48.
43. *Ibid.*, June 22, 1944, Mufti Files, pp. 00917–18, 00949.
44. *The Testament of Adolf Hitler. The Hitler-Bormann Documents, February–April 1945*, 71.
45. Viceroy to Secretary of State, India Office, July 14, 1940, L/P&S/12/2118.
46. Minute by R. Peel, July 17, 1940, L/P&S/12/2118.
47. L. Baggallay (Foreign Office) to R. Peel (India Office), August 1, 1940, L/P&S/12/2118.
48. R. Peel (India Office) to Viceroy, August 4, 1940; Viceroy to Peel, August 5, 1940, L/P&S/12/2118.
49. For Maraghi's view of Amin al-Husayni, see M. P. Waters, *Mufti over the Middle East*, 9.
50. Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *Mudhakkirat fi'l-siyasa al-misriyya*, 2: 197.
51. Allan A. Michie, *Retreat to Victory*, 145.
52. On the mosque and the war, see A. L. Tibawi, "History of the London Central Mosque and the Islamic Cultural Centre 1910–1980," 197–204.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. El-Djabri, "Le Congrès Islamique d'Europe," 373.