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Husayn ibn Ali, King of Hejaz

By Tariq Tell

al-ʿAwn, *Husayn ibn Ali*

Politician; Leader of the Great Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule

Born c. 1853 in Istanbul

Died 04 July 1931 in Amman, Transjordan

Husayn ibn Ali launched the Arab Revolt in alliance with Great Britain. His relations with his European allies remained uneasy and deteriorated further when a unified Arab state under his rule failed to materialize after the war. Ibn Saʿud's conquest of the Hejaz drove Husayn into exile in 1925.

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Between Mecca and Istanbul

Husayn ibn Ali, King of Hejaz's (c.1853-1931) loss of Mecca to [Ibn Saʿud, King of Saudi Arabia \(c.1880-1953\)](#) in 1925 brought to an end a dynasty whose rule stretched back through the 16th century. Husayn was born in Mecca a generation after Egyptian forces restored the Abadillah section of the Hashemite clan to the emirate of Mecca. Husayn's adult life was spent shuttling between Mecca and genteel incarceration in Istanbul, a function of the perpetual struggle for the post of Grand Sharif of Mecca between the Dhawi ʿAwn and the competing Hashemite clan of the Dhawi Zeid.

After the upheaval brought by the 1908 constitutional revolution in Istanbul, and faced with the liberalizing bent of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) that now dominated government, Sultan [Abd al-Hamid II \(1842-1918\)](#) invested Husayn with the Emirate of the Hejaz. Having ascended unexpectedly to the post of Emir of Mecca late in life (he was fifty-four when appointed in 1908), Husayn viewed his appointment as the last repository of the traditional legitimacy of the Ottoman state. On returning to the Hejaz, he worked assiduously to achieve an autonomous Hejazi sphere. He was aided by local resistance to the centralizing bent of the CUP and the threat this posed to the ancient privileges of the Hejaz. Husayn was also prepared to align himself with the imperial authorities, supporting Ottoman efforts to reign in Abd al-Aziz Ibn Sa'ud in Qasim, and Istanbul's campaigns against the Idrisis in 'Asir in 1910-1911.

Husayn and the Great Arab Revolt

On the eve of the First World War, Husayn's policies towards Ibn Sa'ud and his support for the Ottomans in 'Asir had set him against mainstream Arabist opinion, and the Sharif justified the Arab Revolt that he launched in June 1916 in traditional religious terms. Husayn's proclamations and the editorial content of his mouthpiece *al-Qibla* called for the preservation of the historic rights of the Hejaz and accused the CUP of betraying the Islamic basis of the Ottoman state. The Sharif nonetheless deployed the rhetoric of Arab nationalism when dealing with European powers (as during the famous [Husayn-McMahon Correspondence](#)), and as a means of recruiting followers from the Arabist secret societies active in Syria and Iraq.

Whatever his real view of Arabism, Husayn's decision to revolt against Ottoman rule was rooted in the material realities of the wartime Hejaz. The onset of war had curtailed the Muslim pilgrimage on which the economy of the province depended (the number of Hajj arrivals in the Hejaz fell from a pre-war high of 300,000 in 1912 to some 60,000 in 1916). The allied naval blockade of the Red Sea coast ended contact with Egypt and disrupted food imports – grave matters in a region chronically dependent on Egyptian subsidy and grain. Britain's wartime treaties with Husayn's Arabian rivals, Ibn Sa'ud and the Idrisi imposed additional geopolitical pressures. Finally, the discovery of a CUP plot to replace him with a member of the rival Dhawi Zeid clan convinced Husayn of the necessity of alliance with Great Britain to preserve his rule.

Husayn declared himself "King of the Arabs" in October 1916 (although he was only recognized as King of the Hejaz by his European allies). In December 1917, the Sharif put forward an ambitious scheme for ruling Arabia (north of Aden, which he recognized as a British preserve) and the Fertile Crescent as the first among equals of an Arab confederacy. His revolt took the form of a traditional Arabian "chieftaincy" rather than that of a modern nationalist movement. British-supplied guns, grain, and gold were used to construct a ladder of Bedouin support that extended into southern Syria after the capture of Aqaba in July 1917. Husayn's forces failed to take Medina (which held out until January 1919) or to progress north of Ma'an before the Ottoman collapse in November 1918 opened the way for their triumphal entry into Damascus – an occasion that Husayn marked by annexing

Ma'an and its hinterland (including Aqaba) to the Hejaz.

The Fate of Husayn's Revolt

The Arab movement was a loose one, and proved fragile even under wartime conditions when British gold flowed freely. Many of Husayn's tribal clients defected once his forces passed beyond their territories. Held together by a temporary influx of British gold, Husayn's movement proved even more fragile once external support began to drain away in the aftermath of war. Bereft of financial means, Husayn's Hashemite chieftaincy proved less durable than that forged out of Wahhabi Islam and the zeal of the fearsome Ikhwan by Ibn Sa'ud. In May 1919, a dispute over the town of Khurma on the border between Najd and the Hejaz escalated into an armed conflict that saw the destruction of Husayn's army by the Ikhwan at the battle of Turaba. The Saudi victory paved the way for the slow "crawl" of Wahabism into the hinterlands of the Hejaz and Ibn Sa'ud's eventual destruction of Husayn's kingdom in 1925. Despite the installation of his sons, [Abdullah, King of Jordan \(1882-1951\)](#) and [Faysal I, King of Iraq \(1885-1933\)](#), as rulers of Transjordan and Iraq under British Mandate tutelage, Husayn spent the rest of his life in exile in Cyprus, returning to die in Amman.

Having launched his uprising against Ottoman rule with British prompting, Husayn ended up as the chief victim of a [postwar settlement](#) that saw Britain renege on the promises of Arab independence held out by his correspondence with McMahon. A later generation of Arabs came to condemn the movement he launched as a reactionary affair that had, in practice, delivered the Fertile Crescent to colonial rule. Yet while there may be some grounds for leveling this accusation against Husayn's sons, the record shows that Husayn refused to adapt to the European order that emerged from the wreckage of the [Ottoman Empire](#). In particular, he refused to recognize the [British Mandate in Palestine](#) as the price of protection from the menace of Ibn Sa'ud. Having sacrificed a millennium of Sharifian rule over Islam's two most holy shrines on a matter of principle, it is perhaps apt that Husayn was buried in Islam's third most holy place in Jerusalem, in the grounds of the Dome of the Rock, his grave a standing reproach to the imperial power that used and then abandoned him.

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