

Conflict and Conciliation: Elite Mobilisation and Competition in Mandate Palestine (1918-1934)

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Abstract

Why do some elites mobilise and participate in national politics while others do not? Scholarship on colonial rule and authoritarian power-sharing has produced valuable insights into elite cooptation and mobilisation, but consistently treats elites as passive recipients of colonial favour. This paper inverts this framing by emphasising elite agency in coloniser-colonised relationships. Drawing on Palestine under the British Mandate, I ask why only two Jerusalemite families—the Husaynis and the Nashashibis—rose to political prominence while historically significant rivals did not. Extending Bourdieu’s theory of capital and field to contexts of field rupture, I argue that the Ottoman-to-Mandate transition filtered elite capital: locally rooted forms survived while capital tied to the Ottoman state apparatus collapsed. However, structural positioning alone is insufficient. Contingent openings created by early British institutional decisions had to be recognised and exploited by actors whose habitus, forged through decades of Ottoman factional politics, disposed them to do so.

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Introduction

Colonial conquest reshapes the rules of political competition. The institutional frameworks through which elites accumulated influence, built networks, and exercised authority are redrawn, creating winners and losers. Yet not all elites lose equally, some navigate the transition and entrench themselves under the new order, while others, no less prominent beforehand, are marginalised. What explains this divergence?

Prevailing studies of colonial indirect rule—the predominant form of late colonial administration—diverge in their analysis of how colonial rule disrupted and redistributed power among local elites. On the one hand, some scholars highlight that indirect rule was often accompanied by a preservation of pre-colonial institutions. Rather than dismantle these pre-existing institutions, colonial powers simply wrested ultimate control of these institutions from pre-colonial elites (Gerring et al. 2011; Müller-Crepon 2020). By contrast, historians and interdisciplinary scholars have argued that indirect colonial rule often led to a redrawing of pre-colonial power structures. Rather than simply co-opting local elites, indirect rule was accompanied by the reinvention of the elite class (Mamdani 2018). Colonial rulers possessed immense power to exercise favouritism and elevate pliant local elites over more stubborn or oppositional elites, thereby leading to compositional changes within the elite class (Hartnett and Saleh 2025).

Yet, while these findings are important and illuminative, I posit that the role and agency of colonial rulers in these theorisations is overspecified. While colonial rulers certainly possessed outsized influence in artificially determining winners and losers among local elites, this was not a one-way process. Local elites were not powerless pawns to be moved around by colonial elites; they played important roles in determining their own future and success during these critical junctures of the transition to colonial rule. As Sara Berry (1993, 2000) posits, the advent of colonial rule created conditions of intensified negotiation over resources, authority, and status, wherein local actors competed using the resources they had.

I argue, therefore, that attention must be placed on the quantity and nature of resources that local elites commanded prior to the advent of colonial rule. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of capital (1986, 1990, 1996), I posit that any conceptualisation of the resources that local elites held must take into account the myriad different forms of capital that local elites might have possessed. Importantly, however, moments of colonial transition represent a rupture in the field—the social arena wherein these forms of capital count. As such, it is necessary to focus on which forms of capital are the most portable across field ruptures. In so doing, I argue that elites who structurally possessed more economic and social capital—capital rooted in local institutions, land, and inter-communal networks—were better positioned to dominate the new field. By contrast, elites who possessed more cultural and symbolic capital—that which was tied to the specific state apparatus of the *ancien regime*—tended to fall with the demise of the old regime.

While capital portability explains which elites were structurally positioned to survive the transition, elites still had to recognise the new field’s logic and grasp on to emerging opportunities in a manner which was often quite contingent. Families had to possess a *habitus* that disposed them to recognise and act on contingent opportunities during this transitional period. Such a *habitus*, in

turn, may have been shaped by a family's prior experiences navigating regional political dynamics. Additionally, families who managed to secure access to the incoming power during the colonial transition increased their chances of being the recipients of colonial favouritism.

To test this argument I use process tracing to examine the case of Palestine under the British Mandate, a period underscored by what Albert Hourani (2004, 87) refers to as "the politics of the notables." Palestine during this period was dominated by groups of elite families known as the notables or *a'yan*, with each city and region falling under control of several different families. When the Ottoman Empire collapsed and British Mandatory rule began in Palestine, this pattern of elite competition largely collapsed, resulting in the monopolisation of Palestinian national politics during this period by two families: the Husaynis and the Nashashibis. Puzzlingly, while the former was a dominant force during the late-Ottoman period, the latter was a relatively minor player. By contrast, other notable Jerusalemite families, such as the Khalidis and the Alamis, held prominent positions in the late Ottoman period. Alongside this, elite families in the port cities of Jaffa and Haifa accumulated significant wealth during the late 19th century as Palestine became linked to global trade routes.

In the remainder of this piece, I trace the evolution of these different elite families between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Temporally, I restrict myself to this period as the onset of the 1930s witnessed the rise of new forms of Palestinian politics and the inclusion of new actors in the political process. The rapid urbanisation of the preceding decades had by this point led to the creation of a small, but politically active, middle- and intelligentsia-class which began to form nationalist political parties, most notably the Istiqlal Party. These parties came to threaten the monopoly that Palestine's notables had enjoyed over political representation throughout the last century. Concomitant to this, figures such as Sheikh Izz al-Din al-Qassam additionally began to mobilise elements of the peasantry as well. Both trends would culminate in the 1936-1939 Arab Revolt, which marked the distinct end of the period of "the politics of the notables".

This article makes several contributions to the study of pre-colonial elites and the effects of colonial rule. First, I complicate pre-existing assumptions in the literature that indirect rule either preserved precolonial elite structures or reinvented them. My analysis demonstrates that while colonial powers possessed outsized influence on the composition of local elites, this was not a one-way process. Rather, periods of colonial transition created moments of intensified negotiation over authority and status, wherein which local elites competed using the resources they possessed. By doing so, I imbue local elites with agency which they have arguably been stripped of in current analyses.

Second, I extend Bourdieu's theoretical framework to contexts of field rupture by introducing the concept of capital portability—the distinction between capital forms that survive the destruction of one political order and those that do not. While Bourdieu's framework excels at describing changes in the importance of different forms of capital in contexts of gradual field evolution, it struggles to account for what happens to different forms of capital when fields are destroyed and reconstituted.

Theories of Elite Politics

Studies of colonialism within political science have tended to focus on the choice between direct and indirect rule, focusing on the factors driving this choice and the structural outcomes associated with it. In their seminal work on colonial rule, Gerring et al. (2011) tie the nature of colonial rule to the level of development of a pre-colonial state. For them, pre-colonial polities with more developed state institutions tended to face indirect colonial rule due to the fact that removing and replacing these institutions, a strategy necessary for direct rule, represented a costly endeavour for colonial powers. Müller-Crepon (2020) lends credence to this hypothesis, demonstrating that more centralised states in Sub-Saharan Africa were more likely to be subject to indirect colonial rule. In turn, indirect rule was associated with an increase in the longevity of pre-colonial ruling elites.

Yet, historical and interdisciplinary scholarship on indirect rule presents a challenge to these findings. A significant body of work has highlighted the outsized influence that colonial rulers possessed to redraw pre-colonial power structures and reinvent the associated elite class (Batatu 1978; Khoury 1983). For colonial rulers, manipulating pre-colonial institutions represented an important mechanism through which to artificially elevate specific local elites while making them dependent on colonial administrators (Boone 2014; Herbst 2000; Mamdani 2018). For example, Batatu meticulously details how British land policies in the aftermath of the First World War reversed the decline of Iraq’s tribal sheikhs, creating a “newly born artificially isolated structure of vast semi-feudal estates, where the enfeebled Shaikh of a few decades earlier now ruled practically unchallenged as landlord” (1978, 78). Importantly, for colonial rulers, as evinced in Batatu’s (1978) example, spatial politics represented a key prism governing the logic of elite cooptation. Scholars of indirect rule have examined how colonial rulers used local elites and institutions to exert control over peripheral regions in their empires (Baldwin 2014; Boone 2003; Gerring et al. 2011).

To help address these inconsistencies, I follow Hartnett and Saleh (2025) in drawing on insights from the scholarship on authoritarian power-sharing. As the authors note, this literature argues that authoritarian power-sharing represents a strategy designed to minimise the threat of elite revolts and maximise regime survival (Buckles 2019; Holdo 2019; Kavasoglu 2022; Ketchley and Wenig 2025; Svolik 2009; Woldense and Kroeger 2024). By engaging in such coopting and power-sharing, regimes can undercut any opposition by “effectively signalling to others in opposition that they too might be coopted” (Arriola et al. 2021, 1360). Hartnett and Saleh argue that colonial regimes should be conceptualised in a manner akin to authoritarian regimes: both face threats from below and both make use of power-sharing by coopting members of the elite class (2025, 1725).

In contrast to the literature on colonial rule, which largely treats elites as a homogeneous class, scholarship on authoritarian power-sharing additionally helps to elucidate why *specific* elites might be coopted. By coopting elites, rulers hope to gain the compliance of a targeted subsection of the population (Arriola et al. 2021; Broman 2022). Elites who are more authoritative and possess greater influence over a population, therefore, represent more valuable targets for cooptation (Broman 2022). In religious contexts, this often takes shape via the cooptation of religious elites and institutions due to their position as important wielders of influence and moral authority in society (Fox 2008; Koesel 2017). Hartnett and Saleh (2025), focusing on how British indirect rule

led to the redistribution of political power among Egyptian pre-colonial elites, argue that elite cooptation by the colonising power is dependent on two main factors. The first is how pliant and ameliorative an elite class is—what they term “political congruence.” The second is how supportive an elite class is of the coloniser’s broader strategic objectives—what they term “strategic congruence.” By coopting elites in this manner, colonial rulers are able to isolate oppositional elites and reduce the likelihood of successful anti-colonial mobilisation, since oppositional elites will be dependent on the support of some members of the comprador class.

While these works provide valuable insight into why specific elites might be coopted by colonial rulers, their conceptualisation remains decidedly one-sided. Elites remain passive recipients of colonial favour, an analytical outcome resulting from the fact that this literature over-emphasises the role and agency of colonial rulers. While colonial power certainly provided outsized influence in determining winners and losers among local elites, this was not a one-way process. Instead, relations between local elites and colonial rulers were often underpinned by constant negotiation—a process, in turn, at least partially dependent on how local elites positioned themselves and the power at their disposal.

To address this gap, I turn to Bourdieu’s (1986, 1990) theory of capital, which offers a systematic way of disaggregating the sources of a local elite’s power. For Bourdieu (1986), capital could take on four primary forms: economic, representing material resources such as land or wealth; cultural, encompassing education, religious knowledge, and embodied dispositions; social, comprising networks, alliances, and communal ties; and symbolic, encapsulating prestige, honour, and recognised legitimacy. I argue that elite families possessed different forms and balances of capital. For example, mercantile families tended to possess comparatively greater levels of economic capital while *ashraf* families, those claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad, tended to possess greater levels of symbolic capital. These elites, and the forms of capital that they possessed, in turn exist within a field—the structured social arena in which local elites compete and which contains its own rules regarding which form of capital is the most important. Within a given field, capital forms can be exchanged and converted, but at unequal and field-dependent rates. For example, economic capital can be converted into social capital through patronage, while cultural capital can be converted into symbolic capital through institutional position. Moreover, for Bourdieu (1990), how elites interact and respond to structural developments in the field additionally comes down to their habitus. This describes the internalised dispositions of elites, which are shaped by accumulated experience and social position.

Nevertheless, while Bourdieu provides an important framework through which to disaggregate and study the evolution of elite power, his framework works best in contexts of field evolution, where gradual shifts result in slow changes to which forms of capital dominate. Transitions to colonial rule, however, were decidedly not gradual and instead symbolise moments of field rupture. The advent of colonial rule brought with it a re-invention of the pre-colonial field and a reformulation of which forms of capital now mattered. I argue, therefore, that in such instances of field rupture it is crucial to distinguish between forms of capital that are *portable* and forms of capital that are *field-apparatus-bound*. The former—comprising economic and social capital I argue—exist independently of any specific state apparatus and can, therefore, survive the transition to colonial

rule. By contrast, the latter—encompassing cultural and symbolic capital—are much more tied to the institutional architecture of the old pre-colonial regime and therefore loses most, if not all, value during the transition to colonial rule.

To elucidate this further, it is useful to turn to Bourdieusian analyses of pre-colonial elite mobilisation and cooptation. Sara Berry’s (1992, 1993) analysis of the transition to British colonial rule in Africa highlights several useful conceptual and theoretical points. Firstly, as denoted by the title of her work “hegemony on a shoestring”, Berry (1992) argues that a lack of administrative capacity forced colonial states to rely on local intermediaries. When doing so, however, the state did not simply recognise pre-existing authority structures. Instead, it formalised them in ways that fundamentally altered their character, turning fluid and negotiable social relationships over land and labour into fixed institutional categories (Berry 1992, 336–37). In a sense, this captures how the transition to colonial rule brought about a rupture in the field.

Yet, these colonial institutions were not perfectly mapped onto local realities, which left room for contestation and negotiation between local elites and colonial rulers over how to interpret them. As Berry (1992, 1993) notes, relations between coloniser and colonised were dynamic and ever evolving, with local elites investing heavily into maintaining access to multiple, overlapping systems of legitimation—colonial law, customary authority, market relations, kinship networks. To reframe this in a Bourdieusian way, colonial rule created a new field of contestation in which pre-colonial and colonial forms of capital both possessed value. For elites, converting between these forms capital under this system of ambiguity was the best way to engage with the local colonial administration. While this differs from my own argument, it still does well to capture the fluidity of elite capital and the dialogic nature of coloniser-colonised relationships.

Bourdieu’s concepts of capital and field provide useful avenues through which to capture which elites were structurally positioned to survive the transition to colonial rule. However, elites also still had to recognise the new field’s logic and grasp on to emerging opportunities in a manner which was often quite contingent (Zhang and Shi 2024). I argue that elites had to possess a habitus that disposed them to recognise and act on contingent opportunities during this transitional period. For these elite families, such a habitus may have been shaped by a family’s prior experiences navigating regional political dynamics or by previous access to the incoming colonial power.

My theory has two main implications. First, I expect elite families who possessed more economic and social capital to be positioned to dominate the new colonial field. These elite families should, therefore, be over-represented among mobilised elites during the colonial period. By contrast, elite families who possessed more cultural and symbolic capital should tend to fall with the demise of the old regime, even if they were important players in the pre-colonial period. These elites should largely vanish from the political stage during the colonial period. Second, while the forms of capital may predict which elites maintain an important position under colonial rule, I argue that agency and contingency will play a much more important role in determining whether a specific elite family becomes co-opted by a colonial power.

The findings of much of the literature imply a contending, alternative explanation that undoes my theory of elite capital (Batatu 1978; Boone 2014; Hartnett and Saleh 2025). Given that colonial rule is associated with a field rupture and a reinvention of the political order, it is also possible that elites

actually play a relatively passive role throughout and that colonial agency is actually the most important factor in determining elite mobilisation and elite cooptation. Under such an alternative explanation, the forms of capital that would be most important would be quite different. For example, while social capital would be prized, given the associated ability of elites possessing this capital to gain the compliance of their networks, so too would symbolic capital as it would similarly confer on to elites the ability to influence targeted populations. By contrast, we would expect economic and cultural capital to be of lesser importance. Indeed, elites possessing significant material wealth might actually be targeted by colonial rulers due to their perceived ability to marshal more resources against colonial rule.

Palestine in the late-Ottoman Empire

Palestine in the 19th century lay at the heart of a whirlwind of major political and socio-economic activity. Divided up primarily between the *vilayets* (Ottoman province or governorate) of Beirut and Damascus (see Figure 1), Palestine represented a never-ending battleground between the Sublime Porte and ambitious Ottoman officials who sought to carve out their own independent administrative fiefdoms.¹ At the same time, buoyed by a sense of terminal decline resulting from its defeat in a succession of Russo-Turkish wars as well as the Greek War of Independence, the Ottoman Empire sought to undergo significant rounds of reforms aimed at modernising the Empire and returning it to a competitive position on the international stage. These reforms, termed the *Tanzimat* reforms, created significant socio-economic structural changes in Palestine, with important implications for Palestine’s notable families. Under these reforms property laws were codified, transport infrastructure was built, and new administrative systems and positions were created, all of which resulted in new avenues for Palestine’s elites to boost their own standing.

Importantly, Palestine during this period was not politically or discursively united (see Figure 1). While Jerusalem would come to dominate Palestinian politics by the early 20th century, during this period it was but one of three important regions in Palestine—the other two being Nablus and its surrounding areas and the port cities of Haifa, Jaffa, and Acre. Each region and area contained its own ensemble of notables and local elites. Thus, the city of Jerusalem contained the Husaynis, Khalidis, Alamis, Dajanis, and Nashashibis, while the countryside surrounding the city was largely controlled by the Abu Ghosh, the Darwish, the Malha, the 'Ariqats, and the Barghuthis. In Nablus, the two main notable families were the Tuqans and the Abdel Hadis. Jaffa’s most prominent families were the Saids and the Bitars, while in Haifa there were the Mahadis, the Tahas, the Khayats, and the Khalils. This section will attempt to trace developments across these three regions and identify the standing, strength,

¹Examples include Dahir al-Umar, a local Palestinian Sheikh who had become the governor of Galilee in the mid-18th century and then proceeded to carve out an independent fiefdom encompassing the entire area west of the river Jordan, save for Jerusalem and its neighbouring villages (Philipp 2001; Pappe 2010). Likewise, in the early 19th century control over Palestine was fought over between the governor of Gaza, Muhammad Abu Maraq, and the new governor of Acre, Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar (Pappe 2010). Finally, and most famously, the Levant figured prominently in the perennial conflict between Mehmet Ali Pasha and Ibrahim Pasha—the Ottoman viceroys and *de facto* rulers of Egypt—and Sublime Porte.

and sources of capital among the notables of each region on the eve of colonial rule.

The Families of Jerusalem

Jerusalem at the turn of the 18th century was far from being the political juggernaut that it would become about a century later. Indeed, many Western travellers to the city were often shocked to discover that it was “small and rundown, covering less than a square kilometre and housing fewer than ten thousand people” (Kimmerling and Migdal 2009, 69). The city’s primary importance and power derived from its religious significance to the Abrahamic faiths. In turn, Jerusalem’s notable families also drew their influence from associated sources of cultural and symbolic capital. For these families, as for large parts of the Arab peninsula, this primarily manifested itself through a focus on *nasab* (pedigree) and *hasab* (associated inheritable traits) (Shryock 1997, 240–41). The most prestigious form of pedigree was that of the *ashraf* families, who claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad, and this includes prominent families such as the Husaynis, Khalidis, and Alamis. The Khalidis, for example, were considered to have a very reputable and well-established *ashrafian* lineage, which formed a particular source of pride and prestige as well as a point of attack against other families with less reputable pedigrees. Pappe (2010) notes that these sources of cultural and symbolic capital were so important that the early forefathers of the modern-day Husayni family may have even appropriated the name and lineage of another clan to increase their standing. Utilising Adel Manna’s (2008) detailed genealogy of Jerusalem’s elite families, Pappe argues that the early Husayni family were actually called the Ghudayyas, a family of local importance but non-prestigious genealogical pedigree, who under their scion Abdel Latif Ghudayya adopted the name “al-Husayni” in the mid-18th century (2010, 26). This name was based on an older Jerusalemite noble family, the Wafa’i Husaynis, who had arrived in Jerusalem in the early 14th century and possessed an *ashrafian* heritage, but whose fortunes had largely declined by the early 18th century (Pappe 2010, 26–27). Other important families, such as the Dajanis, derived symbolic and cultural capital from similarly prestigious pedigrees—the Dajanis claimed descent from King David (Chorev-Halewa 2019, 31). Cultural and symbolic capital, therefore, formed the key source of power for Jerusalem’s elite families during this period and reflected the city’s religious importance.

Possessing such symbolic and cultural capital had significant implications on the political and material standing of elite families. In early 19th century Ottoman Palestine, Hourani’s “politics of the notables” was significantly more akin to a politics of *ulama* (religious clergy). Religious standing and education mattered, and this was clearly exemplified by the two most coveted positions in Jerusalemite local politics: that of the *naqib al-ashraf* (the “leader” of the *ashraf* families), and the *mufti* (Islamic jurist) of Jerusalem (Baer 1986; Pappe 2010). Both positions came with specific administrative and arbitral duties but, more importantly, also included oversight over the disbursement of funds from specific *awqaf* (Islamic charitable endowments). Control over these key administrative and political positions, whose ownership was often inherited in a hereditary manner, was therefore associated with the ability to amass significant profits for a family—economic capital—and establish patronage networks through which



Figure 1: Administrative Boundaries in the late-Ottoman Empire (1887)

to expand the family’s interests—social capital. Gabriel Baer (1986, 111) notes that by the early 19th century, the Husaynis were in charge of the largest share of *awqaf* (roughly half) and were founding the largest share of new *awqaf* (about one third). Pappe (2010, 15) additionally notes that the Khalidis and Dajanis were two other families who amassed significant wealth through their control of *awqaf* through holding important positions in religious institutions, such as the Sharia judicial system.

Given the importance of controlling these positions, a family’s standing during this period was often heavily dependent on the religious quality and seniority of its figures. For example, Pappe describes how the Husayni family’s political ascent in the late 18th century “would have been impossible to sustain ... without recourse to Hassan [al-Husayni]’s religious status” (2010, 38). Hassan al-Husayni’s education at al-Azhar, the premier institution of religious learning in the Islamic world, and his concomitant position as *Mufti* of Jerusalem gave him significant power through which to manage internal and external threats facing the Husayni family. Thus, Pappe notes that “whenever it seemed that the rulers of Damascus ... were plotting against the Husaynis, it fell to Hassan to tackle the problem” (2010, 38). Likewise, the Husayni family’s brief decline in the early 19th century came about largely due to the rise of a rival Khalidi family member within the Ottoman religious-judicial hierarchy, having attained the position of chief religious judge of Anatolia—a post second only to the Grand *Mufti* of the Ottoman Empire (Pappe 2010, 39). For Jerusalem’s elite families, therefore, ensuring a sound religious education for their children represented an important means through which to guarantee continued access to cultural and symbolic capital, which in turn gave them access to economic and social capital.

Yet, by the mid-19th century the winds of change were very firmly sweeping through Palestine, bringing with them important adjustments to the field within which Jerusalem’s elite families were operating. In response to foreign policy and military failures abroad, the Ottoman Empire sought to undertake a process of modernisation, termed the *Tanzimat* reforms. These sought to transform the Empire and help it regain its status as one of Europe’s prominent and powerful imperial polities. As part of these reforms, the Sublime Porte sought to expand and standardise its administrative system, especially after the passage of the Vilayet Law in 1864 (Büssow 2011, 62–63). In the process, new administrative positions became available to the Empire’s local elites and these gradually came to supplant the more traditional positions, such as the *naqib al-ashraf* (Chorev-Halewa 2019, 34; Gerber 1987, 130–33). The most important of these was the establishment of a municipality in the city in 1863, which created the position of municipal mayor.

These administrative reforms were additionally bolstered by the growing importance attached to Jerusalem within the Ottoman Empire, the result of which saw the creation of the *sanjaq* of Jerusalem—with the districts of Gaza, Haifa, and Nablus all placed under its command (Pappe 2010, 80). This was followed by the establishment of the Jerusalem *mutasarriflik* (independent district) in 1872, which removed Damascus’s direct oversight over the city and caused it to report directly to Istanbul (Chorev-Halewa 2019, 25). Much of this was spurred by Europe’s growing interest in the city, which saw it as an important religious site. Indeed, across the mid-19th century more than ten European countries would establish foreign consulates in the city (Chorev-Halewa 2019, 24). Importantly, this brought Jerusalem’s elites into (albeit limited) contact with several of the

great European powers, experiences which would prove important following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire for several reasons. First, such diplomatic and administrative contact provided Jerusalemite families with a unique opportunity to gain experience dealing with European powers and European officials. Much of this early contact was not exactly the most positive. Pappe notes that there often existed a great deal of hostility between British consuls and the local notables, described by William Tanner Young, the first British consul to Jerusalem, as “a group hostile to his country’s interests and to himself personally” (2010, 85). As Pappe argues, the Husaynis specifically came to realise that the best way to combat and deal with the, often nefarious, influence of consuls was through the usage of their “wealth and their political standing” (2010, 86). However, by the 1870s relations had improved between the Husayni family and the British consulate, to the point where they deemed him a family friend and relied upon him for help in the face of hostility from the Ottoman governor (Kushner 1986, 316; Pappe 2010, 97). In this way, it can be argued that this early contact with European powers helped to develop the *habitus* necessary to recognise and act on contingent opportunities during the later colonial period. Moreover, as Pappe notes, this early contact also may have helped sow the seeds for Britain’s future relations with the Husayni family under the British Mandate.

Alongside this, the arrival of European powers, as well as the *Tanzimat* reforms writ large, brought with them important changes to the educational goals of Jerusalem’s elites. The importance of more religious institutions, such as the *naqib al-ashraf* and the *mufti*, had yielded a focus on religious education, with Jerusalemite elites often sending their children to study at al-Azhar. The gradual secularisation of the Ottoman administrative system, however, necessitated a shift in focus. Recognising the importance of success in positions such as the municipal council, as well as the value of joining the burgeoning Ottoman bureaucracy, Jerusalem’s elites began to prioritise a more modern and Western education for their children. For example, Umar Fahmi al-Husayni was one of the first of Jerusalem’s elites to study at the new Ottoman bureaucratic schools, which later resulted in his appointment as the chief of the land registry in Jerusalem in 1872 (Pappe 2010, 92). For this position, Umar Fahmi received generous kickbacks for every registered land transaction, which formed a useful source of rents for him and his family. Alternatively, the Jerusalemite elites made use of the growing European presence in the city by sending their children to private Christian schools, such as the Anglican Zion School for Boys, established in 1853 (Pappe 2010, 94). While Husaynis were first-movers in this sphere, being “among the first to attend European schools,” by the late-19th century and early-20th century it was common for the children of Jerusalem’s elite to attend schools like St George’s school (Pappe 2010, 109).

While the *Tanzimat* reforms provided Jerusalem’s elites with the opportunity to contest new political and administrative positions, they additionally brought with them ample opportunity for personal self-enrichment. As part of these reforms, trade with Europe became an important objective for the Sublime Porte. While the effects of this were primarily felt in Palestine’s coastal cities, they also travelled into the country’s interior, buffeted by the establishment of new infrastructural links between cities such as Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Nablus.² Due

²Between 1867 and 1889, new roads were established between these three cities, which brought with them an expansion of mercantile activity. Additionally, in 1892 the Jerusalem-

to its growing importance—Jerusalem’s population would more than double over the period of the reforms—the city came to enjoy growing economic activity and prosperity. This had important implications for the composition of Jerusalem’s elite class. Specifically, veteran merchant families, most important of which were the Nashashibis, began to grow in stature and status (Chorev-Halewa 2019, 32; Nashashibi 1990, 2). As outlined, the growing secularisation of political and administrative life meant that sources of symbolic capital, such as a family’s status as an *ashraf*, had ceased to be as important as they had been at the beginning of the 19th century.

In parallel, the *Tanzimat* reforms additionally brought about significant changes in the balance of power between Jerusalem’s urban and rural elites. The establishment of the Ottoman land code in 1858, designed primarily to expand the Ottoman state’s fiscal reach and do away with the ancient practice of collective land ownership (*musha*), created ample opportunities for Jerusalem’s urban elites to make use of their new-found mercantile wealth (Lapidus 1987, 641). Fearful and suspicious of the Ottoman state, many Palestinian peasants preferred to sell their official rights to the land to local notables, while continuing to cultivate it themselves (Chorev-Halewa 2019, 29–31; Swedenburg 1988, 173–74).

Jerusalem’s elite families reacted to these gradual changes in the field with varying speeds. At the local administrative level, the Husaynis were slow to react to the changing rules of the game. Instead, it was the Dajanis and Khalidis who adapted to these changing circumstances the fastest. Indeed, it took until the 1880s, almost two decades after the creation of the position, for the Husaynis to even put forward a candidate of their own for municipal elections (Pappe 2010, 88). Likewise, the Husaynis failed to grasp the importance of the creation of the Ottoman parliament and lost the contest for the parliamentary seat for the Jerusalem district to Yusuf Daya’ al-Khalidi in 1876 (Pappe 2010, 96). By the early 20th century, however, Jerusalem’s parliamentary seats had come to be divided between the Khalidis, Nashashibis, and Husaynis and the mayoralty had largely fallen into the hands of the Husaynis—they would control the position almost continuously between 1880 and 1920 (Chorev-Halewa 2019, 34; Nashashibi 1990, 3).³

At the economic level a more mixed picture emerges. While the Husaynis, Dajanis, and Alamis benefited greatly from the economic changes that the city underwent during the mid- to late-19th century, emerging as large landowners and merchants, the Khalidi family failed to organisationally adapt. As Chorev-Halewa notes, the Khalidis “remained a family of intellectuals and clergymen, although several members had obtained positions in the Ottoman administration” (2019, 35). A Jewish contemporary of both families, Yitzhak Rokah, described the Husaynis as much more pragmatic and adaptable than the Khalidis, noting that the former “have grown accustomed to learning, and appreciate that there is a world outside of the boundaries of Islam” (Pappe 2010, 98). As such, despite possessing some important administrative positions, the Khalidi family failed to expand their sources of capital in light of shifts within the Ottoman field away from cultural and symbolic capital. This additionally highlights important differences in habitus between Jerusalem’s leading families. While the Husaynis

Jaffa railway was opened which likewise boosted the links between Palestine’s coast and Jerusalem. See Chorev-Halewa (2019) and McCarthy (1990) for more details

³The Nashashibis succeeded in getting Osman Nashashibi elected to the Ottoman Parliament in 1912 (Nashashibi 1990, 3).

had been slow to react to some of the shifts brought on by the Tanzimat reforms, they had crucially managed to adapt by the end of the Ottoman period. By contrast, the Khalidis, their historic rivals, had been early movers in response to Ottoman administrative reforms but had largely failed to adapt to other concomitant socio-economic changes. Importantly, as Chorev-Haleva notes, the decline of the Khalidi was not just because of their inability to adapt, but also because this failure to adapt led to a direct reduction in social capital. By failing to expand their wealth by acquiring land or engaging in trade, the Khalidis failed to cultivate and sustain networks with “rural sheikhs, government sheikhs and anyone who might impact [their] business directly or indirectly” (2019, 35–36). Over successive generations, these networks would grow beyond the original interests under which they were created and come to benefit the families possessing them in increasingly important ways.

For Jerusalem’s elites, as for elites in many parts of the Ottoman Empire, a vital aspect of local politics was the establishment and maintenance of local, regional, and imperial alliances. Competing over positions in the public and religious establishment, Jerusalem’s elite families had to ensure they possessed good ties with important figures in three arenas: the imperial metropole of Istanbul, the regional metropole of Damascus, and the surrounding towns and villages of Palestine. At the imperial and regional level, ties were often very personal, and therefore often quite volatile. For example, in the 1840s the Husayni family underwent a brief fall from grace after the removal of Najib Pasha, a senior Ottoman official, from his position. As a result of this, the Husaynis lost the position of *mufti* and *naqib al-ashraf* to the Alami family. The family only managed to regain the latter position after the intervention of Hikmat Arif, the head of the Ottoman religious administration at the time and a family friend whom they had befriended in 1816 when he served as the religious judge of Jerusalem (Chorev-Halewa 2019, 36; Manna 2008, 112). Likewise, Jerusalem’s elites had to remain up to date with political manoeuvres in Damascus and many established long-term and durable relationships with several of Damascus’s notable families—the Husaynis, for example, maintained friendly relations with the famous al-Azm family (Khoury 1983, 2014; Pappe 2010). Managing these core-periphery relations, I argue, would prove to be important for several reasons. Firstly, expanding a family’s networks in this way—social capital—brought with it important assurances of a family’s success within local politics, which in turn allowed a family to expand its sources of economic and symbolic capital. Secondly, these experiences of managing interests at the regional and imperial level, and the associated skills and habitus, would come to be very important in the transition to colonial rule, when Jerusalem’s families would have to deal with new imperial interests and powers.

At the local level a similar ethos was at play. For Jerusalem’s urban elite families, especially in the aftermath of their becoming large landowners in the mid-19th century, relations with elites in other cities and rural areas of Palestine were a crucial means through which to expand their influence and protect their own material and political interests. Underpinning this logic of alliance-making was a focus on the enduring pre-Islamic kinship myths of *Qays* and *Yaman*, the primordial tribes of the northern and southern Arabian Peninsula (Swedenburg 1988, 171). Thus, the Khalidi family—the leader of the *Qays* families in Jerusalem—formed alliances with the *Qaysi* Barghuthi family in rural Jerusalem. By contrast, their *Yamani* rival, the Husayni family, established

connections with the *Yamani* families of the Tuqans in Nablus, the Tamimis in Hebron, and the Abu Ghosh and Darwish in rural Jerusalem ([Abu Manneh 1986](#); [Chorev-Halewa 2019](#)). In a marked contrast to their later antagonistic relationship under the British Mandate, the *Yamani* Husayni and Nashashibi families in the mid-19th century existed in an alliance following the marriage of Suleiman Nashashibi, the head of the family, to a member of the Husayni family ([Nashashibi 1990, 17](#)). Thus, despite broader trends of secularisation, forms of symbolic and cultural capital such as this remained important sources of power for families and structured their actions in Palestine’s political and social arenas.

To summarise, the story of Jerusalem over the course of the 19th and early-20th centuries is one of growing political and economic importance. Jerusalem’s leading notable families, therefore, stood to gain from these changing circumstances. At the onset of the First World War, the Husayni family had largely established themselves as Jerusalem’s pre-eminent notable family, possessing vast sums of wealth, social networks, prestige, and control over key administrative and religious institutions. To reframe this in Bourdieusian terms, the family possessed significant sources of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital, all of which had been translated into substantial political success. By contrast, the Khalidis, the historic rival of the Husayni family, had failed to grow at the same rate. Instead, they maintained significant sources of cultural and symbolic capital, which had yielded them intermittent control over key religious and administrative positions. For the Alamis and Dajanis, their early political success in the mid-19th century had largely evaporated by the early 20th century. Nevertheless, they had managed to use this success, as well as their historic sources of symbolic capital, to increase their material wealth through investments in mercantile ventures and land and continued to possess some important administrative and bureaucratic positions.⁴ Finally, the Nashashibis, largely absent over the course of the 19th century, had used their sources of economic capital as merchants to overcome deficits in cultural and symbolic capital. In the process, they managed to develop useful networks and begin to assert themselves on Jerusalem’s political stage.

Nablus: From Bread Basket to Decline

If the story of Jerusalem is one of ascendancy and growth, then that of Nablus is one of decline and contraction. At the turn of the 18th century the Jabal Nablus area represented the economic and political heart of Palestine ([Swedenburg 1988, 171](#)).⁵ The town and its surrounding hills were the agricultural and economic base of the country, and this lent the local notables, the Tuqans and Abdel Hadis, significant political power. The region, additionally, was at the forefront of political developments during this period, forming the centre and backbone of the 1834 revolt against the agricultural reforms of Muhammad Ali Pasha and Ibrahim Pasha ([Kimmerling and Migdal 2009, 8–11](#)).⁶ In the short-term, such

⁴A member of the family was made inspector of the harvests for Gaza, Jaffa, and Beersheba ([Kimmerling and Migdal 2009, 74](#))

⁵The town of Nablus in the 1830s contained 10,000 people and was surrounded by about 200 villages that contained a further 100,000 people ([Kimmerling and Migdal 2009, 7](#)).

⁶Chorev-Haleva describes how the elite families of Nablus resolutely fought any attempts to subsume them under the political control of external actors, resisting the efforts of Daher al-Omar in the 1770s and the Ottoman Governor of Acre Abdullah Pasha in the 1830s.

political insolence led to quite drastic changes in the composition of the region's elites. For example, the Abdel Hadis's choice to support Ibrahim Pasha had led to their dramatic political ascent, while rural elites such as the al-Ahmad family, who were among the leaders of the revolt, were beheaded and largely disappeared from the political scene. The Abdel Hadis, in turn, would feel the wrath of the Ottomans for their disloyalty after they returned to the region in 1859, although they would manage to reverse their fortunes by the 1860s ([Chorev-Halewa 2019, 53](#)).

As in Jerusalem, the economic developments of the mid-19th century affecting the Ottoman Empire had important implications for Nablus. The city had historically occupied a significant role as regional commercial hub for northern Palestine and Transjordan, gaining fame for its production of olive oil, soaps, and other artisanal goods ([Scholch 1982, 48–51](#); [Rogan 1999, 98–101](#); [Chorev-Halewa 2019, 52–54](#)). The initial expansion of infrastructure connecting Nablus with Jerusalem and Palestine's coastal cities helped to boost the economic prosperity of the region. Crucially, this prosperity led to dramatic shifts in the composition of the Nabulsian elite class. In contrast to Jerusalem, where the city's urban elites were able to expand their commercial activities and grow in importance, the Nabulsian landed elites underwent significant decline over the mid- to late-19th century. Scholars argue that this decline was largely tied to their dependence on agricultural income and associated land tax collection revenues ([Chorev-Halewa 2019, 54–55](#); [Doumani 1995](#); [Gilbar 1998](#)). Such revenues, in turn, were heavily tied to patterns of rainfall and, therefore, prone to large swings. As a result, the region witnessed a political shift toward mercantile families, as many landed elites sold off their land to these emerging merchants. For the Nabulsian political scene, this meant a fragmentation and decentralisation of power between various alliances of merchants and landed elites.⁷ For example, after the establishment of the Nablus municipality in 1869, there were several instances where the mayoralty did not belong to the Tuqans or the Abdel Hadis ([Chorev-Halewa 2019, 56](#)). This trend was largely the opposite to Jerusalem where the city's urban elites centralised control of the city and surrounding rural areas. Such fragmentation largely prevented any of the Nabulsian elites, either landed or mercantile, from forming durable social networks and sources of symbolic capital.

Unfortunately, this economic prosperity would prove to be temporary and would largely fade over the course of the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. While early infrastructural expansion had boosted the city's connectivity with Jerusalem and Jaffa, later infrastructural developments reversed this trend. The completion of extensions to the Hijaz railway between 1904 and 1906, connecting Deraa with Haifa via Beisan and Affula, effectively bypassed Nablus by linking Transjordan directly to Haifa and Damascus through new trade routes ([Graham-Brown 1982, 111](#)). This led to a loss of trade for Nablus and its surrounding villages as well as a loss of political importance. At the same time, the expansion of international trade between the Ottoman Empire and Europe through the Levant's port cities shifted Palestine's economic centre of gravity away from inland towns such as Nablus toward the coastal cities of Haifa and Jaffa. This was accompanied by a shift after the 1870s toward the production of lucrative cash crops, most notably citrus, for which the Jabal

⁷Prominent families included the Abdel Hadis, Tuqans, Khamash, Tamimi, Ashur, Khayat, Zu'ayter, Anabtawi, Kana'an, Shak'a, Nabulsi, Hanbali, Nimr, Shaf'i, and Shurabis ([Chorev-Halewa 2019, 56](#); [Doumani 1995](#)).

Nablus area was much less suited in comparison to Palestine's coastal plains (Graham-Brown 1982, 91; Swedenburg 1988, 174).

Alongside these broader shifts in economic and political power, the region's connection to the capitalist world economy created significant disruptions for Palestine's peasantry. Successive Ottoman land reforms led to increased interest on the part of urban notables and merchants in the land possessed by Palestine's peasants. As noted earlier, many peasants signed away the rights to their land by registering ownership of the land in the name of local notables. This, combined with the harsh practices of tax farming, resulted in most Palestinian peasants existing in a state of severe and chronic indebtedness (Graham-Brown 1982; Swedenburg 1988). Over the last few decades of the Ottoman Empire, this process resulted in the gradual dispossession of peasants from their land and the emergence of a trend of rural-to-urban migration across Palestine.⁸ For the Nabulsian elites, who were significantly more dependent on rural agriculture for economic and social capital, this trend helped to accelerate their general political decline.

In summary, while Jerusalem grew in importance over the course of the 19th and early-20th centuries, this was far from the case for the area of Jabal Nablus. While the region had been a political and economic powerhouse in Palestine during the early-19th century, the expansion of global trade in the mid-19th century had resulted in the fragmentation of the Nabulsian political sphere and the decline of its landed notables. As a result, while Nablus would continue to play an important political role under the British Mandate—it was the centre of the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939—its elites would largely become subservient to those of Jerusalem.

The Coastal Cities: A Story of Mercantile Riches

Economically, the trend of the coastal cities, such as Jaffa and Haifa, mirrored that of Jerusalem over the course of the 19th century. However, for various reasons, its political trends differed markedly. In comparison to Palestine's interior, the coastal cities were significantly more exposed to the political machinations of ambitious local Ottoman officials. For example, in the early-19th century control for Palestine was fought over between Muhammad Abu Maraq, the governor of Gaza, and Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar, the governor of Acre. These conflicts, alongside Napoleon's invasion of coastal Palestine in the late-18th century and that of Mehmet Ali Pasha and Ibrahim Pasha in the early-19th century, led to the widespread devastation of Palestine's coastal cities (Swedenburg 1988, 171). This resulted, as has been noted, in a general shift in the political centre of gravity toward the Palestinian highlands of Jerusalem and Nablus.

The expansion of trade with Europe, alongside improved infrastructural connections with the rest of the region, led to a reversal of these economic fortunes following the 1870s. Buoyed by an agricultural turn toward cash crops, most famously oranges, cities such as Jaffa saw their exports more than double between the late 1850s and early 1880s (Scholch 1981; Graham-Brown 1982,

⁸This process would accelerate dramatically under the British as Palestinian peasants faced twin pressures from Zionist settlement expansion and regressive British taxes. As a result, by 1930 around 30% of Palestinian peasantry were landless and almost 80% "held insufficient land to meet their subsistence needs" (Swedenburg 1988, 182). Such peasant grievances were an important driver in the start of the 1936-1939 Arab Revolt in Palestine.

91; Gilbar 1986; Kimmerling and Migdal 2009, 47). Such economic growth, in turn, spurred significant migration toward the coast. Towns such as Haifa and Jaffa, which had possessed populations of about 3,000 and 5,000 respectively in 1850, grew to become major industrial cities with populations of over 20,000 and 50,000 by the start of the First World War (Kimmerling and Migdal 2009, 47). Using planimetric data, Ruth Kark describes how Jaffa’s built-up area grew from 108 *dunams* (roughly equivalent to about 1000m²) in 1842 to 1,550 *dunams* by 1917, which represents an approximate 15-fold increase in area (Kark 1986, 46). Such population growth was accompanied by a significant increase in local mercantile activity, with about 400 shops being opened between 1880 and 1910 in Jaffa (Kark 1986, 47).

Yet the political effects of this economic growth were less straightforward. While the socio-political landscape of the coastal cities operated in a similar manner to the rest of Palestine, with notable families dominating municipal and social affairs, the composition of these notables differed. Local elite families such as the Saids and the Bitars played prominent roles, but the expansion of infrastructure also enabled notable families from other cities—particularly Jerusalem—to extend their influence into the coastal towns. Spurred on by the increased connectivity to the regional and global economy, families such as the Dajanis and the Husaynis established connections and satellite operations in cities such as Haifa and Jaffa (Büssow 2011, 171–73; Chorev-Halewa 2019, 33). Likewise, a member of the Alami family was made the inspector of harvests for Gaza, Jaffa, and Beersheba. As Haim Gerber notes, “these and similar cases are particularly interesting because they enabled the Jerusalem elite to lay the foundation for their later influence in other parts of the country” (Gerber 2010, 44).

Several factors account for this divergence in political developments between Palestine’s hinterlands and its coastline. First, as noted above, Palestine’s hinterlands were significantly more shielded from the warfare that afflicted other areas of the Levant during the 19th century. While coastal towns like Gaza, Jaffa, and Acre were subject to repeated sieges and destruction by invading armies, inland towns such as Jerusalem were markedly less affected. This meant that the composition of Jerusalem’s elite remained more stable, allowing them to develop their various forms of capital within a comparatively undisrupted field. Second, because Palestine’s inland towns were more shielded from warfare and imperial interference, they were subject to less imperial intrusion and intervention. Whereas coastal towns like Acre and Haifa possessed much more active Ottoman governors—notably Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar, the governor of Acre (Philipp 2001)—Jerusalem was able to avoid much of Ottoman political intrigue, thereby again providing its notable families with a more stable field under which to operate.

The story of Palestine’s coastal towns, therefore, is one of economic growth and a lack of political ascendance. Subject to the punitive whims of various Ottoman political figures, the towns’ elites were unable to fully capitalise on the expansion of trade flowing through Palestine in the latter half of the 19th century. In turn, this gave the opportunity for members of Jerusalem’s elites, buoyed by their burgeoning property wealth and increased infrastructural connections to the coast, to establish a foothold in the coastal economy. This helped to cement the political primacy of Jerusalem and its elites over the rest of Palestine.

From Ottoman to British Colonial Rule

The conclusion of the First World War brought with it the end of about four centuries of Ottoman rule over the Middle East and the establishment of new colonial overlords in its stead. Imperial intrigue between Britain and France, culminating in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, had led to the fracturing of the region into newly drawn nation states (see [Barr 2012](#) for more information). For Palestine, the end result was the creation of a formally unified Palestinian polity under the colonial administration of the British. Kimmerling and Migdal (2009) summarise this new state of affairs, noting that “the war now cut [Palestine’s elites] off from their political and religious centre” (2009, 76–77). While Kimmerling and Migdal’s (2009) framing overstates the rupture—implying that Palestinian elites were defined primarily by their Islamic identity and were suddenly unmoored by the British arrival—the underlying point has some merit. As the preceding sections have shown, the decline in the importance of religious sources of capital, such as the *ashraf* pedigree and the role of the *mufti*, had been underway for decades. The arrival of the British, therefore, accelerated and finalised this process rather than initiating it.

For Palestine’s elites, the arrival of the British would naturally have important political and economic implications. While the British generally sought to maintain the status quo in the country, looking to affirm existing institutions and their composition, this was not always accompanied by the preservation of these institutions, as some scholars have argued ([Gerring et al. 2011](#); [Müller-Crepon 2020](#)). Thus, Ronald Storrs, the first British military governor of the Palestinian Mandate, describes how his administration sought to maintain the religious composition of the municipality—maintaining its Muslim majority ([Storrs 1937](#)). However, this formalisation, as [Berry \(1992\)](#) notes, often leads to fundamental alterations in the socio-political order. Thus, the British chose to make Jerusalem the official political and administrative centre of the Mandate, formalising a state of affairs which had largely been *de facto* under the Ottoman Empire. Naturally, this engendered the importance of Jerusalem’s elites over the rest of the country.

The remainder of this section traces the developments within two sets of Jerusalem’s elite families. First, I will examine the growing rivalry between the Husaynis and the Nashashibis, the two premier Jerusalemite notable families under the British Mandate. These form our two positive cases of elite mobilisation under the British Mandate. Second, I will examine the cases of the Khalidis, Alamis, and Dajanis, who form our negative case studies. I will attempt to chart why it is that only the former two families were mobilised into national politics, while the latter three failed to play an active role on the national stage. My sole focus on Jerusalem is motivated by the fact that it represented the most important part of Palestine under the British Mandate. As I charted in previous sections, by the end of the Ottoman Empire the Nabulsian and coastal elites, for various reasons, had failed to compete with Jerusalem’s families and had, thus, largely accepted ancillary roles in the national ecosystem of Palestinian notable families.

Positive Cases: Husaynis and Nashashibis

Prevailing analyses of the Mandate period have often highlighted the outsized role played by the British in artificially elevating certain elites ([Lesch 1979](#);

[Khalidi 1997](#); [Black 2017](#)). For proponents of this view, the duopoly that the Husaynis and Nashashibis enjoyed over Palestinian political life can largely be ascribed to the British deployment of the old colonial tactic of “divide and conquer”. This view was even present among Palestinians during the Mandate. For example, following riots in Jerusalem during the Nabi Musa celebration of 1920, for which several members of the Husayni family were held responsible, the new High Commissioner of Palestine, Sir Herbert Samuel, sought to begin his tenure with a gesture of peace by pardoning those members of the Husayni family. Upon learning of the pardon, Izzat Darwaza—a prominent Palestinian nationalist figure who would play an important role in the 1936-1939 revolt—suggested to the Husayni family that Samuel’s decision was strategic, speculating that the High Commissioner feared that “with al-Hajj Amin absent, their rivals the Nashashibis, who had already obtained the post of mayor, would grow too strong” ([Pappe 2010, 223](#)). Actions such as this—as well as the elevation of the *Mufti* of Jerusalem, traditionally a Husayni-held position, to Grand *Mufti* of Palestine, the appointment of Hajj Amin to this role, and the installation of Ragheb Nashashibi as Mayor of Jerusalem—are all pointed to as clear-cut examples of British policy reshaping the balance of power among Jerusalem’s elites to suit colonial objectives. Such an explanation, on the face of things, would appear to complement Hartnett and Saleh’s ([2025](#)) theorisations of political and strategic congruence very well.

Yet a deeper analysis of these events highlights important faults within this narrative of colonial agency as the determining factor in elite composition. On the eve of the arrival of the British in Jerusalem in December 1918, the Husaynis held both of the premier positions in Jerusalem: Kamil al-Husayni was the *mufti* and Hassan al-Husayni was the mayor, although he would pass away only a few weeks later and be succeeded by his older brother Musa Kazim al-Husayni. Following his arrival in the city, Ronald Storrs, the new military governor of the city, sought to meet with both officials and succeeded in doing so. As Storrs recounts in his memoirs, upon meeting with Mayor Hussein al-Husayni he was surprised to find that the mayor spoke fluent English. The mayor replied that he had lived “on his suitcases” during the final years of the Ottoman Empire because the latter had been aware of his pro-British sympathies ([Storrs 1937, 278–90](#); [Pappe 2010, 179](#)). More importantly, Mayor Hassan additionally emphasised to Storrs that the Husaynis held the position of Hanafi *mufti* in the city, and that this position was “the only one approved by the Ottoman religious authorities” ([Storrs 1937, 278–90](#); [Pappe 2010, 179](#)). Storrs would later advise the local British administration to declare “that this would be the only recognised post of *mufti*” ([Storrs 1937, 278–90](#); [Pappe 2010, 179](#)). This statement carried with it important political implications, as Mayor Hassan likely knew and Ronald Storrs did not, for the under the Ottoman Empire each Muslim school of jurisprudence operated through its own judiciary. While Jerusalem’s Muslim population was primarily Hanafi, there existed a significant Shafi’i minority which was headed by the Dajani family ([Pappe 2010, 34, 179](#)). Mayor Hassan’s statement, therefore, exemplifies Berry’s ([1992, 1993](#)) point on relations between coloniser and colonised being dynamic, ever-evolving, and open to contestation and negotiation.

Analysing the position of Grand *Mufti*, and Hajj Amin al-Husayni’s election to this position, reveals similar dynamics. It is certainly true that the initial idea of creating a position of Grand *Mufti* of Palestine sprang out of British policy.

Utilising their experiences of ruling over Egypt, where the religious establishment had been headed by a Grand *Mufti* of Egypt from the Ottoman times, the British elevated *Mufti* Kamil al-Husayni, then the *Mufti* of Jerusalem, to this position of Grand *Mufti* of Palestine. As Pappe aptly puts it, “no longer was he the *mufti* of one school but of all Muslims, and not only of Jerusalem but of all of Palestine” (Pappe 2010, 180). Alongside this, as Pappe notes, the British bestowed upon him several other religious positions, such as head of the Sharia court of appeal and guardian of all Muslim religious property in the city, much to the annoyance of members of other elite families, such as the Khalidis, who had historically held these positions (2010, 180–81). These positions brought with them significant sources of prestige and monetary wealth for *Mufti* Kamil and the Husayni family, thereby allowing them to expand their political position vis-a-vis the rest of the country.

Despite this, it would be wrong to portray British relations with Jerusalem’s elites as a one-way system. Indeed, following the death of Kamil al-Husayni, the family would play a pivotal role in forcing the British to appoint his younger brother, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, as the new *Mufti* of Palestine. Following Kamil al-Husayni’s death in March 1921, in line with tradition it fell to a council of religious scholars to vote on who should become the next Grand *Mufti*. While in the past the position would have most likely been retained by the Husaynis, due to their familial prestige and pedigree, the preceding decades of institutional reform had eroded the political weight of such symbolic capital. Instead, in a sign of the vicious rivalry that would come to exist between both families, the Husaynis put forward Hajj Amin as their candidate while the Nashashibis put forward their own rival candidate from the Jarallah family—a family of some prominence in 18th century Jerusalem. After the votes were counted in April 1921, it was revealed that the Nashashibi candidate had come first, while Hajj Amin had come in last place (Pappe 2010, 230–32). Immediately, the Husayni family would deploy their extensive network of contacts and allies to try to overturn this result. The campaign produced hundreds of petitions from across the country, alongside supportive letters from heads of the Christian community, Emir Abdullah of Transjordan, and Emir Faysal of Iraq (Pappe 2010, 232). Their argument for overturning this result rested primarily on two things: first, that the choice of *mufti* concerned the entire country and should therefore be open to a popular plebiscite; and second, that the post should go to a family who had historically held the position (Pappe 2010, 232). These arguments, interestingly, blended appeals to hereditary nature with the language of national representation in a manner which echoes Berry’s (1992) points on elites converting between pre-colonial and colonial forms of capital. In the end, despite the personal antipathy of High Commissioner Samuel toward Hajj Amin, the latter prevailed and the British cancelled the vote for Grand *Mufti* of Palestine and personally appointed Hajj Amin al-Husayni to the position. These events demonstrate the significant room for agency that local elites possessed in negotiations with colonial powers.

The rise of the Nashashibi during the early part of the British Mandate exemplifies similar trends. The family, as has been noted, had been a relatively late arrival on the Jerusalemite political stage, having only really risen to prominence during the early-20th century. As a merchant family, their wealth had expanded greatly during the latter half of the 19th century, but it had taken the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 for them to finally translate this economic

capital into political representation (Pappe 2010, 187–88). Thus, the Nashashibis succeeded in getting Osman Nashashibi elected to the Ottoman Parliament in 1912—the first member of the family to hold such a position—followed by the election of Ragheb Nashashibi in 1914, a seat he would hold until 1918 (Nashashibi 1990, 3). Ragheb Nashashibi would later be appointed Mayor of Jerusalem in 1920 after Musa Kazem al-Husayni was dismissed by the British for his alleged involvement in the Nabi Musa riots of that year. While this would again seem to point toward the outsized role played by the British in playing different elite families off against one another, a more detailed examination of the events leading to Musa Kazem al-Husayni’s dismissal highlights the important role that Ragheb Nashashibi himself played in creating the conditions for the former’s dismissal and the latter’s appointment. Occurring in April 1920, the Nabi Musa celebrations had often been the site of religious riots and unrest. However, the celebrations of that year had gained additional prominence because they coincided with the Orthodox Christian celebration of Good Friday as well as Passover. British accounts of the riot posit that the crowd of Muslims, after being inflamed by passionate speeches delivered by Hajj Amin and Musa Kazem al-Husayni, came across a group of armed Jewish men led by the revisionist Zionist Ze’ev Jabotinsky. A fight then broke out between both groups and quickly devolved into widespread rioting (Pappe 2010, 210–16). Ronald Storrs would hear descriptions of these events from several different British eyewitnesses. Alongside this, he heard Ragheb Nashashibi’s account of events, who vividly described how *Mufti* Kamil, Hajj Amin, and Mayor Musa Kazem had all individually done their best to inflame the crowd of Muslims (Pappe 2010, 216). Following this, Mayor Musa Kazem al-Husayni would be deposed and Ragheb Nashashibi would become the new mayor of Jerusalem. Ragheb Nashashibi’s manoeuvre illustrates how there was ample opportunity for local elites to capitalise on political opinions and shape existing narratives.

Underlying all three cases is a pattern of local elites negotiating their dynamic positions vis-a-vis the British, utilising their capital to strengthen their hands in negotiations, and seizing upon contingent opportunities to further their own interests. Doing so, I argue, required these specific elites to possess a *habitus* that disposed them to recognise and act on contingent opportunities. Mayor Hussein al-Husayni’s misrepresentation of the religious composition of the city, Hajj Amin al-Husayni’s pressure campaign to secure his appointment as *mufti*, and Ragheb Nashashibi’s negative portrayal of the Husaynis during the Nabi Musa festivities all represent clear examples of such a *habitus*. In the case of the Husaynis, this *habitus* would have been built up through the decades of experience that the family possessed dealing with regional and imperial politics under the Ottoman Empire. Additionally, the family’s interactions with the British consulate, dating back to the mid-19th century, would have likewise helped the family to develop strategies through which to deal with foreign powers. For the Nashashibis the picture remains less clear due to a dearth of source material. However, their mercantile background—requiring constant navigation of commercial networks and shifting market conditions—plausibly cultivated a *habitus* attuned to recognising and exploiting economic and political opportunities. Importantly, while each family’s portable sources of capital—specifically economic and social capital—were crucial in allowing them to solidify their pre-eminent positions within the local political hierarchy at the end of the Ottoman Empire and the beginning of the British Mandate period, it is this

ability to seize upon contingent political opportunities that engendered their success and marginalised other potential rivals.

Negative Cases: Alamis, Dajanis, and Khalidis

The establishment of British rule coincided with the mainstream adoption of Arab nationalism across much of the Levant by Arab elites, catalysed in part by Emir Faysal's attempts to establish an Arab state in Syria (see [Antonius 1938](#); [Khalidi 1991](#); [Khalidi 1993](#) for more information on the rise and development of Arab nationalism). Jerusalem's elites responded by forming nationalist organisations—such as the Arab Club, the Literary Club, and the Muslim-Christian Association—through which to pursue political goals now framed in national rather than religious or sectarian terms. This shift had significant implications for the relative value of different forms of capital. While older forms of symbolic capital, such as *ashrafian* heritage, retained some importance, they were no longer sufficient to guarantee political appointment or success. This is perhaps best epitomised by the election for Grand Mufti of Palestine. Husam Jarallah won the clerical vote on the strength of cultural and symbolic capital—his age, his al-Azhar credentials, his institutional experience—forms of capital that had been of premier importance under the Ottoman order. Yet the Husayni family's mobilisation of social capital and quasi-national arguments ultimately compelled the British to set aside the result and appoint Hajj Amin instead. For families such as the Khalidis, who had been overly reliant on these forms of capital, the decisiveness of this shift solidified their general decline and positioned them as ancillary members of Palestine's national elites. The Khalidis would, in fact, form an alliance with their Ottoman rivals the Husaynis during the Mandate period ([Pappe 2010, 139](#)).

The trajectory of the Muslim-Christian Association illustrates how these politico-institutional vehicles were only as effective as the capital backing them. Founded in Jaffa in May 1918 by Ragheb Dajani—a fact itself emblematic of the degree to which Jerusalem's elites had come to dominate coastal politics by this point—the Muslim-Christian Association represented one of the first instances of an association built on the basis of national rather than religious identity ([Pappe 2010, 189](#)). By the end of the year, branches of this association had begun to appear all over Palestine and the association held its first general conference in Jerusalem in 1919 under the leadership of Arif Dajani ([Al-Hout 1986, 87–100](#)). The choice to hold the first general conference in Jerusalem rather than Jaffa, where the Muslim-Christian Association was founded, demonstrates the political significance of Jerusalem by this point in Palestine. Notably, despite attending the conference, the Husaynis failed to leave a mark on the conference's proceedings and were likewise noticeably absent from both of the delegations that the conference chose to send to attend the Paris Peace Conference and to Damascus ([Pappe 2010, 190–91](#)).

Yet, despite founding the association and leading its early congresses, the Dajani family lacked the economic and social capital necessary to consolidate control over it. As a family whose influence had waned in Jerusalem over the preceding half-century, they did not possess the country-wide networks or landed wealth required to bind delegates from across Palestine to their leadership. This, in turn, created an opening for the Husayni family at the third Palestinian

Congress in December 1920.⁹ When delegates held a secret ballot to elect a nine-member executive committee, only Musa Kazim al-Husayni won a seat among the Husayni contingent, receiving 26 of 36 votes. Arif Dajani topped the ballot with 33 of 36 votes. Yet Musa Kazim was nonetheless elected chairman of the newly titled Arab Executive Committee in recognition of his seniority and political influence—a position he would hold until his death in 1934 (Al-Hout 1986; Pappe 2010, 224–27). This outcome reflected the pre-eminent status the Husayni family had attained by this point, representing one of the largest landowning families in Palestine with over 12,500 acres under their possession. Such wealth bred a large and powerful clientelist network of subsidiaries and allies throughout the country within which other elite families would become subsumed. Thus, for example, the Husaynis would form alliances with the Abu Laban in Jaffa, the Tamimi and Anabtawi in Nablus, and the Bakri, 'Abadi and Tamimi in Hebron (Chorev-Halewa 2019, 76).

While the Husaynis possessed enough economic capital to expand these networks on their own, they additionally utilised contingent political openings to expand their sources of economic capital. In 1920, High Commissioner Samuel asked a group of Muslim clerics, led by *Mufti* Kamil al-Husayni, to begin working on a proposal through which to transfer the administration of Muslim religious affairs to the Muslim clerics (Pappe 2010, 240). Echoing their ability to seize upon contingent political opportunities, the Muslim clerics, under the direction of *Mufti* Kamil, proposed the establishment of a Supreme Muslim Council, to be elected by members of Palestine's elites (Pappe 2010, 240–41). In 1921, the British administration would accept this proposal and the new *Mufti*, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, would be elected president of the Supreme Muslim Council in March 1922, despite fierce opposition from the Nashashibis (Kimmerling and Migdal 1993, 85; Pappe 2010, 241). This once again demonstrates the important role that elite agency had over shaping even the institutional architecture of the British Mandate.

Winning control of the Supreme Muslim Council brought with it significant economic rewards. The council possessed an annual budget of £P50,000-60,000, and Hajj Amin quickly put that to use to increase his own influence, and that of the family, throughout Palestine.¹⁰ Over the course of the 1920s, Hajj Amin would exchange positions in the religious establishment for support from notable families across Palestine (see Figure 2). Indeed, the Supreme Muslim Council would quickly grow to become one of the largest employers in the Palestinian economy, employing around 1200 people (Kupferschmidt 1987, 58–61, 63; Chorev-Halewa 2019, 74). This network would become known as the *majlisiyyun* (“council members”).

However, these political manoeuvres would slowly result in a crystallisation of political opposition to the Husaynis under the leadership of the Nashashibis. The latter, through their extensive economic capital and burgeoning social capital, coalesced around the figure of Mayor Ragheb Nashashibi and would enlist the help of elite families who had lost out due to the Husayni-led restructuring of political networks in Palestine (Chorev-Halewa 2019, 76). Erstwhile allies of the Husaynis such as Arif Dajani, whose family had been unable to sustain independent

⁹The Muslim-Christian Association would rename their general conference to the Palestine Congress following its first edition in 1918.

¹⁰Information on this can be found in *High Commissioner to Secretary for the Colonies*, 24 February 1934, TNA, CO, 733/250/8 (n.d.)

leadership of the Muslim-Christian Association, now aligned themselves with the Nashashibis. This group, known as the *mu'aridun* (“opposition”), would resign from the Arab Executive Committee in late 1923 and form the National Muslim Association. When this body collapsed after expected financial support from the Zionist movement failed to materialise, the group established the National Palestinian Arab Association (Pappe 2010, 247).¹¹ As Chorev-Halewa notes, at the core of this conflict was a competition over economic and social capital (2019, 73). The municipal elections of 1927 in Palestine would be bitterly contested between both groups, and both would seek to deploy their extensive sources of economic and social capital. The Nashashibis, for example, utilised their excellent connections with the owners of Palestine’s nascent newspapers, such as *Mirat al-Sharq* and *Al-Karmil*, to attack the Husaynis (Pappe 2010, 251).¹² The end result would be the victory of the Nashashibis with Ragheb Nashashibi being re-elected as Mayor of Jerusalem and the Nashashibi candidate winning in Jaffa (Pappe 2010, 251). Families lacking sufficient economic and social capital of their own were drawn into the orbit of whichever dominant family offered the most advantageous alliance, resulting in families switching back and forth between both camps—Arif Dajani was the Husayni candidate for Mayor of Jerusalem in the 1927 elections despite having aligned with the Nashashibis only years earlier (Pappe 2010, 249).

As such, the institutional politics of the early Mandate period confirms the importance of portable forms of capital, in line with my theoretical expectations. The political vehicles that came to define Palestinian national politics—the Muslim-Christian Association, the Arab Executive Committee, and the Supreme Muslim Council—were shaped less by their formal structures and more by the portable capital that flowed through them. Families possessing extensive social and economic capital, the Husaynis and the Nashashibis, were able to capture and instrumentalise these institutions, while those lacking such capital were reduced to junior partners in factional alliances they could not control.

Conclusion

This paper has asked why, among a crowded field of historically prominent notable families, only the Husaynis and Nashashibis came to dominate Palestinian national politics under the British Mandate. Against prevailing accounts that foreground colonial agency as the primary determinant of elite composition (Batatu 1978; Khoury 1983; Gerring et al. 2011; Hartnett and Saleh 2025), I have argued that more attention must be placed on the actions and power of local elites in navigating and managing relationships between themselves and the colonial power. Drawing on Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of capital (1986, 1990), I posit that three specific mechanisms determine the success of elites in the transition toward colonial rule: first, capital portability across a field rupture;

¹¹The opposition, led by the Nashashibis, tended to adopt a more moderate and ameliorative program for dealing with the British and the Zionists. During the 1936-1939 Revolt, the opposition formed groups of thugs, called “peace bands”, who assisted the British in repressing pro-revolt activity.

¹²It must be noted that these newspapers were primarily consumed by Palestine’s elites during this period, who overwhelmingly represented the educated class within Palestine (see Najjar 1975 for an in-depth examination of Palestine’s newspapers during the Mandate Period)

second, contingent access to the incoming colonial power; and, third, a habitus disposed toward recognising and exploiting political openings.

The Ottoman-to-Mandate transition constituted a field rupture that filtered elite capital. Families whose power rested on locally rooted economic and social capital—land, commercial wealth, and inter-communal networks—carried these resources into the new order. By contrast, families whose standing derived disproportionately from cultural and symbolic capital tied to the Ottoman state apparatus found that these assets had lost much of their value. Exemplifying the former pattern, the Husaynis had by the end of the Ottoman period accumulated vast landholdings, extensive patronage networks stretching across Palestine, and experience managing relationships with imperial and regional centres of power. The Nashashibis, though latecomers to the Jerusalemite political stage, had leveraged their mercantile wealth to build social networks and secure political representation by the early-20th century. The Khalidis, by contrast, remained reliant on intellectual prestige and religious credentials—forms of capital whose political currency depreciated sharply over the last few decades of the Ottoman Empire and the transition to the British Mandate. The Dajanis and Alamis occupied an intermediate position, possessing some economic capital but insufficient social networks to project influence beyond their immediate environs.

Yet, structural positioning alone was insufficient. The early Mandate period was marked by a series of contingent institutional decisions—the creation of the position of Grand *Mufti*, the establishment of the Supreme Muslim Council, and the reshuffling of the Jerusalem mayoralty—that created openings for those alert enough to exploit them. Crucially, these institutions were not simply imposed by British fiat. As the cases of Mayor Hussein al-Husayni's strategic misrepresentation of Jerusalem's religious landscape, Hajj Amin's lobbying campaign to overturn the election for Grand *Mufti*, and Ragheb Nashashibi's shaping of the Nabi Musa narrative all demonstrate, local elites actively shaped the institutional architecture of the Mandate and manoeuvred within it. This required a habitus—forged through decades of navigating Ottoman imperial politics, managing core-periphery relations, and, in the case of the Husaynis, dealing directly with European consular officials—that disposed these families to recognise and act on fleeting opportunities that other families either could not see or could not exploit.

The institutional politics of the early Mandate period help to outline this factor. The Muslim-Christian Association, the Arab Executive Committee, and the Supreme Muslim Council were shaped less by their formal structures than by the capital that flowed through them. Thus, while the Dajanis were able to form the Muslim-Christian Association, they were unable to sustain control over it and lost out to the Husaynis. The Husaynis and Nashashibis, in turn, could utilise their extensive economic and social capital to capture such institutions and instrumentalise them, thereby extending their political influence. Families lacking sufficient sources of portable capital, such as the Dajanis and the Khalidis, were reduced to ancillary partners whose loyalties oscillated between the two dominant camps depending on political expediency.

This paper makes two contributions to the literature. First, it complicates prevailing accounts of colonial elite formation by demonstrating that local elites were not passive recipients of colonial favour. Instead, they were active agents who shaped their own political fortunes through negotiation, strategic positioning, and the marshalling of their resources. In so doing, I draw attention to important

role of elite agency in explaining processes of elite mobilisation and formation. Second, this paper extends Bourdieu's theoretical framework to contexts of field rupture by introducing the concept of capital portability—the distinction between capital forms that survive the destruction of one political order and those that do not. While Bourdieu's framework handles contexts of gradual field evolution well, it lacks a systematic account of what happens when fields are destroyed and reconstituted. The concept of capital portability helps to identify which elites are positioned to thrive in the aftermath of a rupture in the field.

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