Palestinian national identity arose during the period of British rule (1917–1948). The Nabi Musa (Prophet Moses) festival — mawṣal al-Nabi Musa — provides us with an example of how religious rituals celebrated within a colonial context shaped nationalist ideas. Rituals, such as festivals and pilgrimages serve as arenas for the interaction of various social groups. One of which possesses its own agendas and discourses on questions of order in society. In British-ruled Palestine, powerful social groups such as the Palestinian political leadership and the British colonial authorities used the Nabi Musa festival to promote a conservative version of Palestinian nationalism, one which restrained anti-Zionist sentiments.

During the period of Ottoman rule, the Nabi Musa festival was held annually in Hebron, a major pilgrimage destination. The Muslim ritual was a means for improving the relationship between the Ottoman rulers and the Muslim pilgrims, at times rejected by the British to undermine criticism of their contentious policies. For example, in 1918, the British governor was nevertheless eager to be invited for their attendance at a pavilion erected by Herbert Samuel in May 1921, arguing that a British-sponsored band in the festival could raise Britain’s prestige.

The festival evolved into an active and productive element in the formation of Arab elite and British colonial versions of Palestinian nationalism. This was due to the chronic relationship which members of Palestine’s Arab elite families forged with their British counterparts. The high-ranking officials who held these Arab-elite offices in the colonial administration, or the status the British granted them, successfully promoted cooperation with British officials, explicitly assuring them that the violence of the 1920 Nabi Musa festivities would not be repeated.

At the 1918 festival, the first to be celebrated under British rule, on the first Friday of the month of Rajab, the British governor of Jerusalem greeted the shaykh of the villages surrounding Jerusalem at the Government House (the main British administrative building). The shaykh presented him with the banners of the Prophet, two banners of Da’ud (Prophet David), and two of Al-Haram al-Sharif. In this segment of the mosque ceremonies, new, British governors of the city, by officially receiving the banners, assumed the duties of the former Ottoman counterpart. Even though this ceremony involved a religious component, in the form of the shaykh leading this delegation reciting a prayer over the banners, the British governor was nevertheless eager to participate, by saluting the banners after the prayer.

The festival took on greater political importance after Muslim pilgrims rioted during the celebrations in April 1920. Four Muslims and five Jews were killed; 251 Arabs and Jews were wounded. These riots confirmed the British notion of Islamic extremism, in which Islamic rhetoric, themes, and rituals could be used to mobilize an anti-colonial resistance, a fear prevalent throughout British colonial rule over Muslim populations. The British authorities stressed that Arab political leaders had to prevent any further outbreaks or eruptions at the festival. That is most likely why in 1921 the British appointed Al-Haj Amin al-Husayni as mufti of Jerusalem, bestowing upon him the new and esteemed title of mufti al-Andar (Grand Mufti). In 1922 they secured his election as the president of the Supreme Muslim Council (Al-Majlis al-Islami al-Wali), the most important Islamic body in Palestine. So eager were the British to appoint a member of a leading Arab family to the post of mufti, the first British High Commissioner to Palestine, Herbert Samuel (1921–1925), even pardoned Al-Haj Amin for his involvement in the riots. Al-Haj Amin promised to cooperate faithfully with British officials, explicitly assuring them that the violence of the 1920 Nabi Musa festivities would not be repeated. As the leading religious figure in Palestine, Al-Haj Amin was responsible for organizing the festival and leading the ceremonies, becoming an important player in attempting to erase conflict between the Arab Muslim community and the British colonial rulers. A report on the political situation in Palestine for April 1922 expounded on the importance of his role:

(Th)e advice given prior to the Nabi Musa celebration by the president [Al-Haj Amin] of the [Supreme Muslim] council contributed not a little to preventing disturbances, and the obviously sincere spirit in which the president lent his cooperation as is in itself a sign that the establishment of the council has been a means of improving the relationship between the government and representative Muslem opinion.

Promoting British rule

A further example of how the Arab elite employed the festival to promote British policy manifested in an invitation to the mayor of Jerusalem, Rabbi Bek al-Nashashib, extended to the British governor of Jerusalem, to other Arab notables, and to leaders of all religious denominations, calling for their attendance at a pavilion erected just outside the Old City, which pilgrims customarily passed as they marched through the shrine. The newspaper Filastin reported that these invitations were printed in all three official languages: Arabic, English, and Hebrew. Even though the Arabs of Palestine were troubled by the British adopting Hebrew as an official language, regarding it as an encroachment on their identity, a prominent and politically influential member of a notable Arab family was able to use the Nabi Musa festival to diffuse this language issue in particular, and the question of British support for Zionism in general, by recognizing the value of the Arab festival ceremony at this popular Islamic celebration.

But the inclusion of a British military band (with pipes and brass instruments) became one of the most visible examples of British participation in the festival. An argument for the necessity of a British band at Nabi Musa festivities was earnestly put forward by Herbert Samuel in May 1921, arguing that a British-sponsored band in the festival could raise Britain’s prestige. The according of a Band for the occasion constitutes no precedent for there is no other religious festival in Palestine comparable with it... The Moslem population expects that the British government whose respect for the Government of Great Britain is so well known, shall adopt a not less favourable attitude towards the Muslims of Palestine than the latter enjoyed under the late Turkish regime.

He concluded by pleading that [T]he matter is of greater importance than may be at first sight appear.” From Samuel’s words, the Nabi Musa festival allowed the British rulers to present themselves as the guardians of Islam in Palestine, by inviting the former Ottoman Muslim rulers as models to be replicated. The British employed this image to undermine criticism of their contentious support for Zionism.

Palestine’s Arab political and religious leadership was willing to collude with the British aspirations to be involved with the Nabi Musa ceremonies. One British official alluded to the importance of this alliance at the festival as follows:

[I]t is usual at this season, when feasts important to all the religious communities take place...[I]n Easter, Nabi Musa] that there should be in the minds of many a feeling of nervousness. Rumours of impending trouble are discussed, and, among the general public of Jerusalem, there is a good deal of anxiety. Among the Arab notables, however, there is both a hope that no outbreak may occur and a desire to prevent it.

An important element in how the Arab elite incorporated British participation in the festival was by evoking the festival’s Islamic nature, which, in effect, artificially sanctified the official status of the festival at this popular Islamic celebration.

Notes
3. CO.173/20/49559, ‘Report on the Political Situation in Palestine during the Month of April 1921, May 1921, 2.
4. Filastin, 26 April 1921, 2.
5. CO.733/2/24068, Letter from High Commissioner for Palestine, Herbert Samuel, to Winston Churchill, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 30 April 1921, 3.
6. CO.733/20/19429, Political Report for March 1922, from High Commissioner for Palestine, Herbert Samuel, 10 April 1922, 2.

Awad Eddie Halabi is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Toronto, Canada.

E-mail: ehalabi@utoronto.ca