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Hadhrami Arabs in Britain's policy towards Muslims in Malaya before the Japanese occupation, 1939-1941

Britain, fiercely striving to save its Empire, sought the support of Hadhrami Arabs, recognising the pivotal role they could play in rallying Malay Muslims in the event of an impending war. This was essential to counteract Axis powers' anti-British appeals to Malay Muslims, which could potentially incite protests – or even worse – fifth-column activities, writes Omar T. Nasr

During the Second World War, Axis and Allied powers vied for the support of Muslims worldwide. Imperial Japan's interest in leveraging Islam as a political tool deepened following the establishment of Manchukuo in 1932.^[1] Later, the Third Reich, which ruled over a significant Muslim population in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and briefly in North Africa due to Nazi imperialist expansions, drew upon previous interactions with Muslims during the Wilhelminian imperialist period.^[2] Alongside fascist Italy, which notoriously presented itself as 'the sword of Islam', Nazis employed Islam in their propaganda strategy to court and mobilize Muslims against the primary colonial powers, Britain and France, aiming at fostering internal destabilization.

While Axis policies towards Muslims have been meticulously studied over the past few decades, the Islam-related policies of the Allies remain an underexplored field.^[3] My doctoral project, "The British Empire and Islam during the Second World War," elucidates how Britain, which regarded itself as 'the Greatest Mohammedan Power' ruling over half of the world's Muslim population on the eve of the war, endeavoured to maintain Muslim support to save the Empire. An important aspect that the dissertation illuminates is the crucial role that Muslims played in the eventual Allied victory. This essay will focus particularly on the role Britain assigned specifically to Hadhrami Arabs in the Malay Peninsula within their broader imperial strategy towards Muslims in the war and their efforts to secure them as allies against the Axis powers.

As intelligence reports about would-be Axis powers Islamic propaganda piled up in Whitehall in the late 1930s, Britain realised that its grip over Muslims had significantly loosened since the end of the Great War. Alarmed by this perceived threat, the government introduced a number of propaganda and publicity measures. These measures were aimed at counteracting Axis propaganda and reminding Muslims of 'what Britain has done for Islam'.^[4] It was soon realized, however, that Muslims were suspicious of such propaganda efforts, and the need for Muslim intermediaries to help effectively disseminate propaganda became increasingly apparent.

In the Malay world they sought support from various people of influence, such as sultans, imams and penghulus – native chiefs who held sway over traditional regions in the Malay Archipelago. However, in matters related to Islam, Hadhrami Arabs played a particularly pivotal role. Hadhramis, often esteemed as affluent merchants and philanthropists, wielded significant religious authority as they were reputed to trace their lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad himself. The most renowned Arab families in the Malay Peninsula included the Alsagoffs, Alkaffs, Aljunieds, and Alattas, among others. Members of these esteemed families often bore the title "Syed," denoting their revered lineage.

Predominantly Yemenis from Hadhramaut, they arrived in the Malay Peninsula in the 16th century. Within two centuries they became an integral part not only of cultural and religious life and trade but also at court where they held authoritative positions in the Malay world. They interacted closely with the Malay people. Through intermarriage, a creole culture emerged over time, being a blend between Hadhrami and local Malay cultures. As Sumit Kumar Mandal demonstrated in his 2017 book *Becoming Arab: Creole Histories and Modern Identity in the Malay World*, Dutch and British colonialism led to a decline of creole culture and enforced 'race' differences between Hadhramis and Malays as a colonial instrument of rule. Over time, this practice eventually created the 'Arabs' as a distinct and perceived foreign social group in the Malay world.^[5] As such, they were viewed by colonial powers as a kind of Muslim elite in Malay society, or in more critical terms, they were regarded the "de facto Muslim leaders of the colony.", and "the natural spokesmen of the Islamic community as a whole."^[6]

Consequently, Britain, fiercely striving to save its Empire, sought the support of Hadhrami Arabs, recognising the pivotal role they could play in rallying Malay Muslims in the event of an impending war. This was essential to counteract Axis powers' anti-British appeals to Malay Muslims, which could potentially incite protests – or even worse – fifth-column activities.

Thus, during the establishment of the Far Eastern Bureau of the Ministry of Information in Singapore in 1941, Arabs were integral to the propaganda plans, warranting the creation of an "Arabic publicity" section.^[7] It was acknowledged that "Arab publicity in Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies held considerable importance due to the large Arab communities, their close ties with Hadhramaut, and their influence among Malays."^[8] The British observed that among Malays "the religious side is strong and the community is much influenced by imams who therefore

merit special attention.”[9] Sir Roland Evelyn Turnbull, a distinguished British colonial official of North Borneo and Resident of Brunei, eloquently encapsulated this sentiment in 1939: “The spirit of Arabia is the spirit of Islam, and Islam has permeated the very soul of Malaya.” Thus, he continued, Arabs “exercise a great influence on Islam throughout the Indies.”[10]

To enhance their efforts, the Malayan Department of Information planned to produce an illustrated Arabic magazine and to obtain copies of Arabic magazines from other parts of the Empire, such as India to be disseminated amongst Hadhramis. Additionally, the frequency of telegrams received from the Aden station, carrying news from Hadhramaut, was significantly increased to better cater to the Hadhrami community’s interests in events in the larger Arab world. Furthermore, the Malayan branch of the Department of Information distributed pamphlets, magazines, posters, pictures, and maps to “influential Arabs” throughout Malaya, Sarawak, British North Borneo, Brunei, and Labuan, keeping them informed about the war and expressing British support for Islam.[11] Daily talks in Arabic were broadcast from the Singapore broadcasting station, despite the limitations of poor broadcasting equipment and a low-powered transmitter.[12]

The Arabic broadcasts included for instance heroic reports on how the British General Wavell “destroyed the Italian Empire in Africa” and that he thus secured his place “in the front rank of Ghazi and Conquerors.” emphasising that he is particularly relevant for the Arab community in the Far East “for the debt owed to him by Islam and the Muslims, and by the Arab people in particular.”. He was portrayed as having “avenged the Arab martyrs whom the Grazianis and the Balbos murdered”, ending the broadcast with the proclamation that “Gen. Wavell is the Ghazi who destroyed a despotic empire” and asserted that “it is only by a British victory that the Arab peoples can attain their objects and realise their hopes.”[13]

Hadhrami Arabs in British Malaya contributed to the war effort in myriad ways. Some were enlisted when a “Listening Bureau” was created with the purpose of “studying anti-British propaganda from enemy countries and Japan so that the Ministry’s counter-propaganda efforts could be more effective.” To achieve this, Indian, Malay, and Arabic listeners were employed to observe enemy propaganda.[14] Others were enlisted as translators, to translate publicity material into Arabic.[15] However, there was a lack of qualified staff especially for the Arabic positions. In a 1940 report, it was lamented: “The Arabic listener for May has been the writer and announcer of the nightly Arabic broadcasts from Singapore. This man is the only Asiatic broadcaster who makes his own choice of facts from the Department of Information Bulletin and interpolates material ‘to make it suitable for the Arab listener’,” a situation, the report deemed “unsatisfactory.”[16]

Still, Britain had no choice but to rely on its sole Arab Listener while awaiting reinforcement. In response to the Berlin broadcasts, the Bureau suggested that the Arab Listener focus on themes such as the “Contributions of Arabs to European Civilisation” and the intertwined interests between “Arabic well-being and European affairs.” An important part of the broadcasts was the recitation of a “Koran verse suitably chosen to indicate the good Muslim line of conduct,” followed by “facts of

German contravention of this, winding up with the same Koran verse.” This strategy, however, was to be used “not more than twice weekly,” being conscious of potential suspicion. Another theme was to emphasise what implications Nazi “religious persecution and racial policy” would have on the Arabs.[17]

Yet, the most profound impact came from the influential Hadhramis who intrinsically supported the British cause. They wielded their authority to appeal directly to other Muslim leaders, offering perspectives on the war through a religious lens. Their voices were neither borrowed nor bought by Britain; rather they were genuine expressions of their belief that aligning with Britain against fascism was in the best interest of Muslims in the Malay Peninsula and globally.

A prime example of this is Syed Ibrahim Omar Alsagoff (d. 1975), a distinguished and articulate member of the esteemed Alsagoff family. Before the Japanese occupation, he served as president of the ‘All-Malay Muslim Missionary Society’. Born in Mecca, he carried an authentic connection to the birthplace of Islam, where he received his formal education. From a young age, he dedicated himself to bridging East and West and advocated for a better education for Malays. By the time of the war, he was a prominent and outspoken leader within the Malay religious community, particularly in Singapore, and renowned across the Malay Peninsula.

On September 4, 1940, he delivered a lecture titled “Islam’s View of Peace and War” to a diverse audience of Muslims, non-Muslims, and British officials. His address drew on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, condemning “acts of violence, aggression and breach of faith,” and asserting that Islam is “essentially a democratic religion where human brotherhood is emphasised,” though “tyranny and persecution may be opposed by force if necessary.” Concerning the impending conflict, he stated, “When the clouds of war gather, Islam enjoins that a peaceful solution be found and bloodshed avoided, and if the Muslim position is stronger, they are ordered to be merciful and accept any honourable compromise.” Sir Percy McElwaine, who was the British Chief of Justice of the Straits Settlement (Singapore, Penang and Malacca), expressed his appreciation for the lecture, noting in his response on behalf of the guests that “the British ideals of peace and human brotherhood were similar to those of Islam.”[18]

In a parallel effort, a member of the prominent Alkaff family delivered a lecture to “leaders and prominent members of Singapore’s Muslim community,” which led to the formulation of two resolutions regarding “the Muslim attitude in the war.” The resolutions affirmed “the local Muslims’ loyalty to the British Government” and extended their support in the “despatch of telegrams to Egypt and other Muslim countries,” conveying their sympathy and encouragement, urging resistance against Mussolini, “the ‘Arch Enemy of Islam,’” and his ally Hitler, and calling for support of the British Empire.[19] S.M. Alkaff underscored that it was the “duty of Muslims of the world ... to oppose as strongly as possible the enslaving and destroying policies of Nazism and Fascism.” Echoing the opinions of Alsagoff, he highlighted that Muslims are “democratic” like the British and that since “British policies are identical with those of Islam,” Muslims should ally with Britain to

combat the “devastating and dangerous policies of Nazism and Fascism.” He appealed to “Muslims in Malaya” to express their “brotherly feelings and sorrow for our Muslim brethren in other parts of the world who are being ill-treated by Mussolini and his partners in crime.”^[20]

With the Japanese invasion of the Malay Peninsula in December 1941, most Hadhrami Arabs vanished from the historical records. A few, conspicuously, collaborated with Imperial Japan and ascended within its administrative ranks, while others were imprisoned, and the majority remain lost to history. Initially, Japan’s policy towards Muslims was one of “non-interference in local cultural practices, giving due respect to Islamic and Malay customs.” However, after 1943, this policy significantly changed when “the faith, religious elites, and religious edifices were incorporated into the Japanese propaganda machinery.”^[21]

The essay illuminated how Britain placed immense value on the support of Hadhramis within their broader propaganda strategy towards Malay Muslims before the Japanese invasion. It also shed light on some ways in which Hadhrami Arabs got involved in British publicity efforts. The history of Hadhrami Arabs in the Malay world during both world wars remains an understudied field of research, meriting greater academic attention.

^[1] See: Kelly A. Hammond, *China’s Muslims & Japan’s Empire: Centering Islam in World War II, Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020). On Japan’s policy towards Malay Muslims during the Japanese occupation see: Abu Talib Ahmad, ‘Japanese Policy Towards Islam in Malaya During the Occupation: A Reassessment’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Volume 33, Number 1 (February 2002), pp. 107–22.

^[2] See: David Motadel, *Islam and Nazi Germany’s War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

^[3] For an exception on Russia’s Islam-related policy during WWII, see: Jeff Eden, *God Save the USSR: Soviet Muslims and the Second World War* (Oxford University Press, 2021). For a broader transimperial perspective, see: Xavier Bougarel, Raphaëlle Branche, and Cloé Drieu, eds., *Combatants of Muslim Origin in European Armies in the Twentieth Century: Far from Jihad* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

^[4] Stefanie Wichhart, “‘What Britain Has Done for Islam’: British Propaganda to the Islamic World During World War II, 1939–1942”, in Justin Quinn Olmstead (ed.), *Britain in the Islamic World* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), pp. 197–223.

^[5] Sumit Kumar Mandal, *Becoming Arab: Creole Histories and Modern Identity in the Malay World, Asian Connections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[6] Mandal, p. 163.

[7] "Organisation and Work of the Far Eastern Bureau of the Ministry of Information at Singapore", in: TNA, FO 930/280, Far Eastern Bureau. Operations in Singapore. Code FP 47/76, Aug 1940 – July 1941.

[8] TNA, FO 930/280, Far Eastern Bureau. Operations in Singapore. Code FP 47/76, Aug 1940 – July 1941.

[9] "Listening Bureau Report LB/6. Appeal Values in Malaya", in: CO 323/1743/2, Malaya, 1940.

[10] "Arabs' Influence on Culture & Life of Malaya", in: *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (1884-1942), 23 May 1939, p.6.

[11] "Department of Information, Malaya. An Account of its Functions and Activities", in: TNA, FO 930/280, Far Eastern Bureau. Operations in Singapore. Code FP 47/76, Aug 1940 – July 1941.

[12] "Department of Information, Malaya. An Account of its Functions and Activities", in: TNA, FO 930/280, Far Eastern Bureau. Operations in Singapore. Code FP 47/76, Aug 1940 – July 1941.

[13] "Arabic Broadcast on Gen. Wavell", in: Morning Tribune, 5 November 1941, p.3.

[14] „Far Eastern Bureau, Singapore: Staff“, in: TNA, FO 930/280, Far Eastern Bureau. Operations in Singapore. Code FP 47/76, Aug 1940 – July 1941.

[15] „Far Eastern Bureau, Singapore: Staff“, in: TNA, FO 930/280, Far Eastern Bureau. Operations in Singapore. Code FP 47/76, Aug 1940 – July 1941.

[16] "Counterpropaganda and the Singapore Listening Bureau", in: CO 323/1743/2, Malaya, 1940.

[17] "Counterpropaganda and the Singapore Listening Bureau", in: CO 323/1743/2, Malaya, 1940.
For a broader perspective on the complex relationship between Colonialism and the Qur'an, see: Omar Nasr, 'Colonialism and the Qur'an', in Jan Loop and Naima Afif (ed.) *The European Qur'an* (De Gruyter, 2024), 111–28.

[18] „Islam's View of Piece & War“, in: The Straits Times, 24 April 1940, p. 10. (Newspaper SG)

[19] „Mussolini & Hitler Our Arch-Enemies“, in: The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (1884-1942), 4 September 1940, p.5.

[20] „Mussolini & Hitler Our Arch-Enemies“, in: *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (1884-1942), 4 September 1940, p.5.

[21] Abu Talib Ahmad, 'Japanese Policy Towards Islam in Malaya During the Occupation: A Reassessment', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Volume 33, Number 1 (February 2002), p.107.

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Omar Nasr is a PhD candidate in the International History Department at LSE. Before joining LSE, he completed his master's degree in Near and Middle Eastern History at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and his bachelor's degree in History at the University of Vienna. His research currently focuses on colonial history and Islam; and the history of Muslims in Europe. His PhD thesis at LSE, titled "The British Empire and Islam in the Second World War," explores British policies towards Muslims vis-à-vis Muslim agencies during the Second World War. He has recently published an article on Muslims in interwar Vienna: the making and failing of a community and a chapter in an edited volume on Colonialism and the Qur'an.

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