

**The Arab
Development
Society
Brief Historical
Notes**

Musa Alami was born in 1897, the Alamis being one of the oldest and most influential families in Jerusalem. His father had been a deputy in the Ottoman Parliament, but when, after the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the British occupied Palestine Musa was sent to Cambridge University (Trinity Hall) where he took an honours degree in law.

Musa was called to the Bar through the Inner Temple in 1923, by which time the mandate for Palestine had been allotted to Britain. He joined the legal department of the Palestine Government, rising to be Government Advocate. He was also for a time Private Secretary and Adviser on Arab affairs to the High Commissioner, General Wauchope.

Musa's time as a government servant came to an end in 1937. By then the Arab population of Palestine was in revolt against the policies of the British Government, which were permitting a great increase in Jewish immigration. This was inevitably—and, as events were to prove, correctly—seen as a direct threat to the continued existence of the Arab majority in Palestine. While Musa was in London in 1938 he was approached by the Colonial Secretary, Malcolm MacDonald, and discussed with him ways of settling the Palestine problem. As a result of assurances he received from Mr. MacDonald Musa returned to Palestine, where he was persuaded by leading Arabs to become part of the Palestine delegation which, with delegations from other Arab countries, was invited to the abortive conference on Palestine in St. James's Palace which was opened towards the end of 1938.

As the Second World War was ending practical steps towards the attainment of the old dream of Arab unity began to be taken. A preparatory conference, which led to the setting up of the Arab League, was held at Alexandria in 1944, and for this Musa was nominated by all the existing Palestine Arab parties as the sole delegate representing Palestine.

In 1945 the Arab League Economic Committee, as a result of Musa's urging, decided to set up an Arab Development Society, with the aim of helping the peasants of Palestine who, because of their poverty and lack of technical ability, had often been forced to mortgage their lands to money-lenders, through whom the lands passed into the hands of the Zionists. The initial capital of the society was to be £5m., but only Iraq paid up its contribution—£250,000. However, with this a start was made, helping the villagers to pay off their debts and improve methods of cultivation, setting up clinics, campaigning against illiteracy, training women in crafts and household management etc.

Then came the catastrophe of 1948. Following Britain's withdrawal from Palestine, fighting broke out between Arab and Jewish forces. The state of Israel was set up in a large part of Palestine. More than a million Palestine Arabs fled from their homes, which were now under alien occupation, and became refugees.

Musa Alami was determined that something practical should be done to help the refugees. He still had £160,000 of A.D.S. money, which he supplemented with some of his own derived from the sale of family land. In 1949 he approached the Jordan

Government for permission to enter a 5,000 acre tract of waste land on the west bank of the River Jordan, a little way north-east of Jericho, and to dig for water on it. All the international experts said that no water was to be found in the Jordan valley or, if there was any, that it would prove brackish. But Musa, who had a home in Jericho and knew the region well, was convinced that the experts were wrong.

Unable to buy or hire drilling equipment, Musa and a small band of helpers set to work digging by hand. This was in August 1949 when, in this arid wilderness, the temperature was often over 120 degrees fahrenheit in the shade. Five months later, in January 1950, sweet water was found. Cultivation was started with wheat, barley, and turnips. This was so successful that it was decided to turn the land into an experimental farm.

By 1951 the farm was a going concern. Many new crops were started, and another successful addition was the poultry farm—the first to be seen in this part of the world. What was to be the next step? Musa had always thought that once his point about the water had been proved his own involvement would end. But now he found himself responsible for a large farm—and a farm that was bringing in a good income. How should the income be spent? Musa's thoughts turned to the orphan children running wild in their ruined villages or scattered throughout the countryside. There were 84,000 of them, and they were not looked after by the United Nations Relief Agency (UNWRA) because it only dealt with heads of families. So Musa decided to set up on the same site as the farm a Vocational Training Centre for orphan refugee boys,

where they would be able to learn not only farming but also skills such as electrical engineering, metal work, carpentry, etc., for which there was always a big demand in the Arab world. He thought this pioneer project would draw the attention of the world to the plight of the orphans, and that when this had been done he could withdraw. But he has been in Jericho ever since.

In 1953 a contract was signed with the Arabian-American Oil Company (Aramco) for the regular supply by air of fresh vegetables and fruit from the farm to the company's base in Dahrán. The Ford Foundation gave a three-year grant totalling \$149,000 for development of the training centre. New classrooms and dormitories were built.

By 1955 it had been proved that large-scale cultivation and chicken farming were possible in the hitherto derelict spaces of the Jordan valley. Many private individuals were following Musa's example. But in November the "Baghdad Pact riots" swept Jordan. Thousands of refugees from nearby camps poured into the farm and training centre, destroying and looting.

Musa decided to rebuild. Thanks to an immediate grant from the Ford Foundation and loans from Arab banks, both farm and training centre were back in operation in a short time. The farm was even expanded. New out of season vegetables and fruit, such as celery, head lettuce, and cantaloup melons were grown for Aramco and sold in special shops in Jerusalem, Amman, and Beirut. A dairy farm, with Friesian cattle fed on alfalfa, was started and grew into one of the most successful departments of the farm. Musa also found time to branch out in

a completely new direction—helping the frontier villagers whose livelihood had been ruined by the 1948 armistice lines which cut them off from their lands. With a grant of \$500,000 from the Ford Foundation wells were repaired, cisterns built, the rearing of chickens and rabbits started, and girls taught handicrafts.

In 1961 the ending of Aramco's contract resulted in an immediate financial crisis. An appeal launched in Britain brought in generous contributions from Christian Aid, Oxfam, the Dulverton Trust, oil companies, banks, and from hundreds of individual well-wishers. A permanent committee of Friends of the Arab Development Society was set up in Britain and registered as a charity. A similar body in the United States (The Musa Alami Foundation of Jericho, U.S.A.) has been vigorous in collecting funds and aid of every sort for the Jericho project.

By 1967 the project was flourishing as never before and Musa was able to look optimistically to the future. There were 160 boys in full-time training. He had the active support of King Hussein and the Jordan Government. The Ford Foundation had promised to finance the expansion of the dairy herd with a grant of \$430,000, and the herd already numbered 350 with 80 calves on the way. Plans for increasing the annual production of chicks from 50,000 to 2,000,000 had begun to be implemented. There was good reason to believe that within a few years profits from the farm would be sufficient to meet the entire cost of the training centre, and even to enable the number of boys in it to be increased.

Then came the Six Days War and the Israeli occupation of the west bank.

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