

Islamist Partners *Insights into World War II*

In North Africa, the Axis powers had the support of Islamists in the fight against the Allies. As a result of that partnership, the Allies needed to respond. This article analyzes the historical interactions of different parties and provides a multifaceted picture of how the United States tried to engage Islamists. But they showed an alarming tendency of hatred for the Jewish people, such as in Baghdad’s al-Farhud pogrom, which was meant to show the Middle East how to drive Jews out.

O.S.S. Emblem Wiki



Abd al-Karim Wiki Foto



A year later, in mid-1942, as the Axis fought the British in Egypt, Jerusalem’s grand mufti Amin al-Husaini called on Arabs to kill Jews. Then, Americans debated how to win over Islamists such as Abd al-Karim of Morocco or Libya’s Idris as-Sanusi to make the Mediterranean safe for the Allies. The idea of recruiting them was not given to General Eisenhower before his North African invasion three months later.

Idris as-Sanusi Wiki Foto



The Joint Psychological Warfare Committee, briefly the Joint Committee, tackled this “Islamist case” in the U.S. Office of Strategic Services. The goal was to weaken the enemy’s hearts and minds to make the Allied invasion easier. Islamists became a target for cooperation in launching a guerilla warfare campaign. From 1913-26, they had fought against the French, Italian, and Spanish colonials.

In May 1940, Adolf Hitler invaded France, and within a month, it became clear that the French and Lowland countries, such as Belgium, would surrender too. Britain came within Hitler’s reach, as well as French Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. After the French armistice in mid-1940, the Nazis ruled de facto continental Europe to the Soviet border in ex-Poland and wanted to use Vichy’s colonies in the Middle East for plans to establish their empires.

Benito Mussolini moved troops from the Cyrenaica—since 1934 part of the Italian colony of Libya—to the British-held Egypt to seize the Sues Canal as main artery of the British Empire. In 1915, the Germans and Ottomans attacked the canal from the east via Sinai. In 1941, the Axis approached the canal from the west via the Libyan Desert. Twice, Islamists waged with Berlin jihad in Morocco, Tunisia and Libya as the Rif Mountain tribes of Abd al-Karim; Salih at-Tunisi; the as-Sanusi Brothers; and Hasan al-Banna’s Muslim Brothers.

The Fight for Victory in North Africa

Mussolini desired to use Islamists to strike the Sues Canal and Egypt, which he considered England’s soft spots. With Europe controlled by the Axis powers, England would perhaps have difficulties mounting a credible defense at the canal. The Arab role in this endeavor would be substantial. In exchange for their assistance, Mussolini promised in his meeting with al-Husaini full independence and self-rule. Rome would set up an Arab military center and welcome also Iraq’s ex-Premier Rashid Ali al-Kailani, who was on his way to Berlin.

Mussolini said that **Jews** were “our enemies” and had no place in Europe. Approximately 45,000 Jews out of 45 million residents lived in Italy (7,500 Jews were deported to Auschwitz). He confirmed to al-Husaini that Zionists had no historical, national, or other rights in Palestine, turned against Zionism and agreed with the grand mufti’s wish of annulling a Zionist home. Both were willing to serve Hitler’s **plans** in Europe and in the Middle East.

In mid-1940, Italy prepared to invade Egypt. While Hitler hesitated to fully fight the British, Mussolini attacked from Libya to Egypt. Early success turned to defeat near Tubruq. In early 1941, British, Australian, and Indian forces captured it. At this point, the Allies had decided to liberate North Africa before launching the European campaign. However, to avoid full defeat, Mussolini asked for Germany’s assistance. Hitler sent the German Africa Corps under Erwin Rommel. In 1942, he drove the Allies back to Egypt from Libya. Soon, in mid-June, he also retook Tubruq.

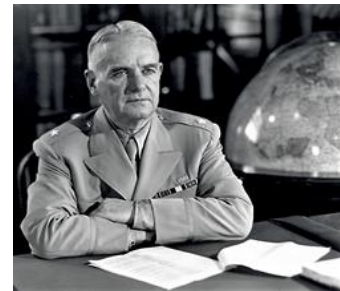
Allies: Tubruq [Australian War Memorial](#)



Throughout the North Africa campaign, the Allies debated the usefulness of cooperating with Islamists to defeat the Axis powers. The Joint Committee checked “Islamists as partners”: They waged jihad against colonials and could be turned against the Axis. Yet, Berlin’s ties to the Islamists dated back to World War I—as it built a similar committee 30 years prior in the Foreign Office with diplomats, academics and natives—Islamist groups had often more sympathy for the Germans, who were not colonials in the region. This was a joint feature of Germany and America, an ex-British colony.

On August 1, 1942, the Joint Committee forwarded a study on Abd al-Karim. In World War I, it says, Germany **spread discontent** among natives against the French and the Spanish. Islamists embraced the effort because Muslims resent non-Muslim rule. In and after the war, colonials went after Islamist leaders like Ahmad as-Sanusi, who fought against British and Italian colonizers. In 1916, Idris as-Sanusi headed this brotherhood, went into Egyptian exile and built a tacit alliance with London.

O.S.S. Chief William J. Donovan [Wiki](#)

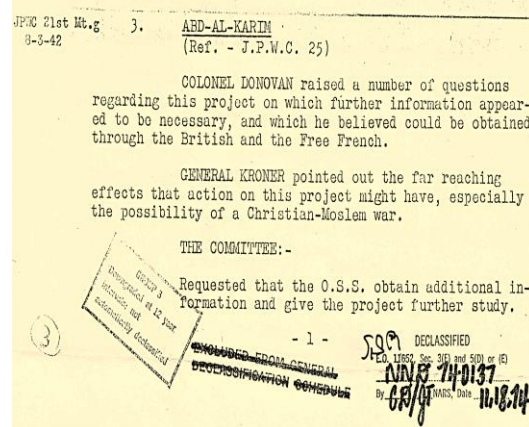


Since 1920, the study explains, Abd al-Karim, leader of the Berber tribes, waged jihad against the invaders, uniting the tribes for five years. The whole Rif area followed him, the study stressed, but in May 1926, the French army defeated him. Henri Philippe Pétain sent him into exile on Réunion off Madagascar. The study asks: Will Abd al-Karim be of use to the Allied war effort—or will his release be like that of a Jinnee out of a magic bottle? Thus, that idea was seen as risky since key Islamist goals were detrimental to a free society.

Furthermore, it argues that no other leader could unite all tribes for the Allies. His release from exile would show that old imperialism is gone; the Allies are waging this fight for the ideals of democracy; and nationalism will no longer be punished, but nurtured and guided along useful and peaceful lines. The study concludes: Idris as-Sanusi might pledge his support to the Allies against Italian excesses in Libya. He embodied the religious aspect of North African nationalism, while Abd al-Karim embodies its secular and enlightened leadership. These two could make the Mediterranean safe for the Allies. Equally vital is the influence that such a move would have within the Muslim regions. From India to the Atlantic, the Allies would receive the plaudits and the support of the faithful.

O.S.S. Summary of al-Karim Debate 08-03-1942

Allied officers debated what to do with the report, and the need for further study. O.S.S. head Colonel Donovan had his doubts for “it might be necessary to take the island of Réunion to free Abd al-Karim” (under Vichy’s control until November 30, 1942), and General Kroner pointed to the possibility of a Christian-Muslim war. So, the study was not shared with Allied leadership. General Eisenhower, who just planned the invasion of French North Africa, likely did not get this study on cooperating with Islamists. The Allies invaded on November 8 without news on al-Karim or as-Sanusi. So, this “Islamist case” appeared to have been closed.



The Axis Powers, Islamists and Nationalists

The Axis powers had their own debate about how to work with Islamists, but for them, it meant working above all with Amin al-Husaini. He lived in Berlin, steered a Europe-Middle-eastern network, and worked with Iraq’s ex-Premier Ali al-Kailani between Berlin, Rome, and occupied Europe raising troops. Both of these men completely bet on an Axis victory.

In 1942, as Rommel made progress in North Africa, Axis agents intercepted cables written by U.S. Military attaché Bonner F. Fellers on British tactics and forwarded the documents to Rommel. Then, some claimed this contributed to the British defeat at Tubruq. A year prior, Fellers’ cable defined al-Husaini and al-Kailani in 8 points, briefly summarized:

1. Jihad can only be called by a popular movement. It must be defensive. Partaking is imperative and death is noble.
2. Islamic authorities heighten enthusiasm in Iraq’s struggle. Al-Husaini wants free and united Arabs, while al-Kailani just a free Iraq.
3. Should al-Husaini declare jihad, it would not be for Egyptians. He is a big political figure and has caused more trouble for the British than any other Arab.
4. Al-Husaini was pro-British, but opposed a Jewish home in Palestine. He said no to Zionism and has sway in India, Egypt, and Iran.
5. The British see him as German asset, while Egyptians see him as the greatest leader alive also for his family claims of noble descent.
6. Egyptians have conflicting emotions for Iraq; the result is apathy. They offered no volunteers for the Arabs, Axis, or Allies.
7. Al-Husaini is in Iraq as a refugee. If he returns to Palestine, then he will be jailed as an Arab agitator against Jews and the British Empire.
8. If al-Husaini declares jihad, then it will be antisemitic, not a religious war. The mufti is a religious figure turned a political one.

In his cable, Fellers distinguished Islamists and nationalists as well. He did not use the original Arabic word “Islamist” (الإسلامي) though it became a self-definition. In other lands, the term was current before 1900, and since 1916 tied to a “theory of Islamism.” If Allies used “nationalism,” then it was in the Western sense. But Mideastern nation-building went other ways, often lead by tribes in young states with ancient cultures. Mosaics of faiths and life in artificial borders led to disunited lands where “nation” did not bear an enlightened Euro-American sense in the Roman traditions with pillars of citizenry and private property.

Fellers showed identities of both leaders with Islamist or nationalist layers, though their key identity remained being Muslim. To him, strong men drive a clear mindset. He did not like clerics to turn political, though Islam was a most political religion. Fellers paints a pattern: top clerical credentials by birth and education; leader of a movement or revolt; agreeable to call for jihad with a wide reach to mobilize the faithful; Islamic dogma in politics to unite the Muslims for the overarching higher pan-Islamist community, the global umma.

Other than grand mufti al-Husaini, Fellers saw al-Kailani as a nationalist whose aim was to free Iraq. He did not mention his belonging to the Iraqi al-Qadiriyya Brotherhood which indicated also his Islamist ties. Fellers believed the grand mufti to be 52 years old (born in 1897, he was actually 44), wise, subtle, capable, energetic, and determined. As with Abd al-Karim, there were dim chances that both would really offer their services to the Allies.

North African Insights

Obviously, the Office of Strategic Services and the Joint Committee were just set up in 1942 as tools to win the war. Insights into Islamists of the Great War were not readily available. Al-Karim, according to his memoirs, was in 1925 one of three Caliph candidates.

He left Réunion in 1947 via Cairo and retired in France. Al-Husaini worked with him and asked Berlin twice to get Vichy to set him free. He regarded al-Karim as a great jihad fighter, *المجاهد الكبير*, for anti-colonial liberation. On the other hand, Idris as-Sanusi became an exception. He went at the end of 1922 into Egyptian exile, aided the Allies in World War II, and in 1951 became the King of Libya with good ties to them—until a 1969 coup.

In America, weeklies reported about Islamists in great detail like al-Karim in *Time*. So, the German-Ottoman jihadization of Islamism in World War I was fairly known. However, often, American officers were reluctant to deal with other people's religions. Mostly, they were educated to see this as a private matter in the secular tradition of separating state and church. Then, in the North Africa campaign, they had to work with other cultures: religion as an everyday way of life with a tied unity of power and mosque.

Time Cover 1925



Regionally, imams, mufti, and mullahs were often held in high esteem. Some started to follow larger and pan-Islamic [causes](#). The Allied military power left only marginal roles for Islamists, if at all. The Allies won the battle in French North Africa and Egypt without them: A quarter million Axis troops capitulated in Tunis mid-May 1943. Nevertheless, hereafter it became advisable to pay attention to aspirations of nationalists and of Islamists.

A question remains about if and how this new U.S. direction of looking into Islamist affairs by leading officers was thereafter cultivated or became a stop-and-go story as needed?

The North Africa campaign and the Allied effort to coopt Islamists may provide insights in working with these Mideastern actors. So, they were partners for their short-term anti-colonial, later anti-Axis aims. But they could not be Allies, though there were exceptions like as-Sanusi. But the long-term social vision of Islamists did not lead to a free and modern society. Lastly, did fears of the Joint Committee prove prophetic: Was and is there a war ongoing against the ideology of Islamism?

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This analysis first appeared in the Middle East Program of the [Foreign Policy Research Institute](#) as [Islamists as Partners in World War II](#). Here updated, some photographs and links were added.