Sanagan, Mark. *Lightening through the Clouds: ʿIzz Al-Din Al-Qassam and the Making of the Modern Middle East.*

*Lightening through the Clouds* is a welcome scholarly publication that sheds light on the life and times of the Muslim freedom fighter of Palestine ʿIzz Al-Din Al-Qassam (1883–1935). The book speaks to the political, economic, and religious traumas the region was undergoing between 1880 through 1939, fleshing out the complex correlations of “place, power, and religion” (8). This brief review cannot do justice to the extensive details the book offers, but it will highlight the leadership attributes of Al-Qassam.

*Lightening through the Clouds* comprises nine chapters, with an introduction and a conclusion, and helpful maps and figures. The introduction lays out the historical status of the Muslim cleric among Palestinians and the few available biographies about his life and achievements. Chapters one through three tell of the birth of Al-Qassam in Jabla, a small village in northern Syria; his education in Islamic legal orthodoxy at home and at Al-Azhar University; the shaping of his faith and nationalist feelings; and the coexistent conflicts within the Ottoman Empire during this epoch. Al-Qassam’s faith and practice seem to have been a synthesis of Sufism and Muslim orthodoxy, i.e. Salafism.

Sanagan clarifies how nationalism in the Balkans, the Greek War of independence, and pressure from western powers gave rise to the reforms of Tanzimat (reordering) by the Ottomans. These secular, centralized reforms turned many Muslim ulama’ in the Middle East towards Salafism. Al-Qassam’a early awareness of Muslim-Arab nationalism and political activism against the French occupation in Syria were instrumental. They afforded him experience in recruiting and organizing activists and in honing his military and leadership skills. He fled a death sentence by the French, with some of his supporters, choosing exile in Haifa, in Mandate Palestine. What were al-Qassam’s leadership skills, ideas, and practices that played into his becoming the hero-martyr of the Palestinian cause? Chapters four through eight detail his legendary activities at mobilizing supporters in Haifa where he stationed himself for the next fifteen years.

Haifa was a significant place for al-Qassam. Since the late decades of the 19th century, the city was experiencing a major transformation politically, economically, and socially. The British Mandate government was keen on industrialization, especially with the construction of the Iraqi oil pipeline and the expansion of
the Haifa port, which created a large labor force in the city. The port also became the landing site for Jewish migrants. Furthermore, the growing land sales for Jewish settlers, the increase in the number of landless Palestinian peasants, and drought drained the local economy. These factors were exacerbated by the global depression of the 1930s. Al-Qassam was able to tap into the local grassroots resources and mobilize the frustrated, poor populace for the national cause.

Moreover, Haifa’s notable families were more politically engaged, unlike Jerusalem’s notables. To counter the presence of Christian missionary schools, the Islamic Society of Haifa founded its own schools. With a teaching position and an appointment of imam-khaṭīb of al-Istiqlal Mosque, al-Qassam established his social connections and leadership reputation. His Friday sermons promoted ethical Muslim conduct and focused on opposition to the Mandate policies and Jewish settlements, all of which were instrumental in gathering supporters for the struggle against the colonists. The gatherings in the largest center-mosque enabled al-Qassam to connect with workers’ and laborers’ unions, among other active organizations. The ideological differences notwithstanding, the Muslim leader worked with diverse organizations to improve the general welfare of all Palestinians (70). By the late 1920s, many Palestinians were protesting, rioting, and actively resisting the Mandate and Zionism, actions that resulted in massacres of both Jews and Palestinians, as well as the killing of one British soldier. Three Palestinians were hung as a result. These events lingered in the cleric’s memory and surfaced in his Friday sermons. Al-Qassam’s piety and tolerance, respected and charismatic character, and ethical standing and rhetorical abilities (79) strengthened his interrelations with a wider audience. Thus when he decided to take to the hills and launch what he called a revolution, many heeded his call.

Mark Sanagan’s choice of narrating the social history of ʿIzz Al-Din Al-Qassam as the representative of resistance in the modern Middle East offers a valuable contribution to both the biography of the iconic hero and the historiography of Mandate Palestine during its middle period. The study would benefit scholars and students of history, religious studies, and Middle East and cultural studies.


The scope of Jeffrey D. Sachs’ study is panoramic. With the intersectionality of geography, technology, and institutions, Sachs presents an insightful analytical framework for conceptualizing human development from the Paleolithic Age through the