

Muhammad asad

[Religion](#), [Islam](#)



Muhammad Asad (formerly Leopold Weiss) (1900—1992), was an Austrian Polish Jew who converted to Islam, and a 20th century journalist, traveler, writer, social critic, linguist, thinker, reformer, diplomat, political theorist, translator and scholar. Asad was one of the 20th century's most influential European Muslims. He spent several years in Saudi Arabia, where he befriended the royal family, and then moved on to British India and lived mainly in Lahore, Abbottabad, Srinagar and Dalhousie. Upon a suggestion of Allama Iqbal, he translated selections from Sahih Bukhari Sharif into English, the first such translation ever made. He wrote and spoke extensively on the subject of Islam and its conception of state and government and West's relations with Islam. He was particularly fascinated with the idea of Pakistan as a symbol of rejuvenation of the Islamic world. During the Great War the British interned him as enemy citizen. Upon independence he moved to Pakistan where he was picked up for the Foreign Service and served at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and at the Pakistan Mission to UN in New York, a job he resigned in 1952. He wrote several books most notable of which is 'The Road to Makkah' and the English translation of the Holy Quran. Today Pakistan has forgotten this 'intellectual co-founder of Pakistan.' In 1947, Asad was given Pakistani citizenship by the newly established Muslim state of Pakistan and appointed the Director of the Department of Islamic Reconstruction by the Government of Pakistan, where he made recommendations on the drafting of Pakistan's first Constitution. In 1949, Asad joined Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs as head of the Middle East Division and, in 1952, was appointed Pakistan's Minister Plenipotentiary to the United Nations in New York. Muhammad Asad is famously known for his

two publications - "The Road to Mecca", a biographical account of his life up to the age of 32, his conversion to Islam from Judaism and his journey to Mecca and his magnum opus, "The Message of the Qur'an", a translation and commentary of the sacred book of Islam, the Qur'an. Early years

Muhammad Asad was born "Leopold Weiss" on 2 July 1900 to a Jewish family in Lemberg, which until 1918 was part of Austria and afterwards until 1939 was part of the Second Polish Republic (present-day Lviv, Ukraine). When he was a child his family moved to the Imperial capital city of Vienna where he was raised and educated. Asad graduated from Vienna University specializing in History of Art and Philosophy. Years later, together with his Saudi wife and child, he migrated as a common refugee from Dalhousie in eastern Punjab and camped with hundreds of thousands of other refugees at Walton in Lahore. The restless soul that Asad was, he started his career as a correspondent for the Frankfurter Zeitung daily. At age 23, he went on a reporting trip to the Levant where he visited Syria, Lebanon and Egypt. His dispatches were published in book form in 1924 as *Unromantisches Morgenland*, which was translated into English in 2004 as *The Unromantic Orient*. In 1924-26 he made a second trip to the Middle East and this took him to Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia as well. Years later, he served as Director of Islamic Reconstruction Department set up by the government of Punjab in Lahore to advise the newly independent country on the requirements of a modern Islamic state. Weiss was a descendant of a long line of Jewish rabbis; however, his father, Kiwa Weiss, broke from tradition and became a lawyer. Leopold received a religious education and was proficient in Hebrew from an early age, as well as familiar with Aramaic.

He studied the Old Testament, the text and commentaries of the Talmud, the Mishna and Gemara, also delving into the intricacies of Biblical exegesis and the Targum. Born to a rabbi family and later to become an important twentieth-century Islamic thinker, theologian, linguist, translator, social critic, reformist, diplomat, political scientist, and theologian, as a young man he had little interest in theology and philosophy. "Action and movement and adventure" were his driving forces in life as he writes in his autobiographical *The Road to Mecca*. At the age of fourteen he ran away from home, signing up to the Austro-Hungarian army under a false name in Syria. His parents managed to save him from the battlefield just in time. After completing school, Leopold Weiss went to Vienna to study psychoanalysis. "In actual fact Freud's ideas intoxicated my young mind like strong wine," wrote Weiss. He spent countless evenings in the city's cafés, listening with baited breath to the discussions of Alfred Adler and other intellectuals. Yet the "intellectual arrogance" of this young science, which presumed to plumb the depths of the human mind, eventually repelled the young man. Weiss drifted aimlessly around 1920s Germany, working briefly for the expressionist film director, Fritz Lang (F. Murnau, according to *The Road to Mecca*). By his own account, after selling a jointly written film script, he splurged the windfall on a wild party at an expensive Berlin restaurant, in the spirit of the times. While working as a telephone operator for an American news agency in Berlin, Weiss obtained a coveted interview with Russian author Maxim Gorky's wife, his first published piece of journalism, after simply ringing up her hotel room. Weiss soon moved to Berlin, where he took on various jobs in the early 1920s, including as a scriptwriter and an assistant director to the master

expressionist Friedrich Murnau. It was here too that he got his first scoop as a journalist. The young Leopold Weiss was a go-getter and a pleasure-seeking bohemian, who got through life with chutzpah and audacity. Under the veneer of this exciting life, however, he was accompanied by a constant "civilizational discontent". His book *The Road to Mecca* was first published in the original English version in 1954. Dubbed by the author as "an autobiography of sorts", it describes a Europe between two world wars, suffering from "emptiness of the soul" and "moral instability". "Behind the Occident's façade of order and organization, the dominant force is ethical chaos," is Weiss' verdict. Later in his life, after retiring in Spain, he spent 17 years working on an English translation of the Quran which was first published in 1980. Many consider this to be one of the finest English translation of the Quran — some argue this is because he himself was fluent in bedouin Arabic which is closest to the Arabic in the Quran, others suggest that since he was himself a European and wrote in more understandable idiomatic English his translation is most accessible to non-Arabic speakers. Weiss in Arabia Weiss later moved to the British Mandate of Palestine, staying in Jerusalem at the house of an uncle (a disciple of Sigmund Freud who later founded the *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* in New York) psychoanalyst Dorian Feigenbaum, the son of a successful banker in Lviv, Menachem Mendel Feigenbaum. He picked up work as a stringer for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, selling articles on a freelance basis. His pieces were noteworthy for their understanding of Arab fears and grievances against the Zionist project. He was eventually contracted as a full-time foreign correspondent for the paper. Conversion to Islam As fate would have it, the young man's uncle, "a

student of Dr. Freud" who ran an asylum in Jerusalem invited him to Palestine. Here, Weiss came to know and love Arab and Bedouin culture. He describes its " free humanity" and its " quiet, proud affirmation of reality and one's own life". The Arabs, he enthuses, are " people who venerate one another and the simple things in life". His passion inflamed, Leopold Weiss converted to Sunni Islam in April 1927 — in Berlin Wilmersdorf, in Germany's first-ever mosque — calling himself Muhammad Asad from then on. He went on to travel the entire Arab world, exploring almost the whole of the Orient. Alongside his travels, he became one of the most renowned Middle East correspondents and experts in the German-speaking countries. Weiss's assignments led him to an ever-deepening engagement with and understanding of Islam, which, after much thought and deliberation, led to his religious conversion in 1926 in Berlin and adopting the Muslim name, Muhammad Asad. Asad spoke of Islam thus: " Islam appears to me like a perfect work of architecture. All its parts are harmoniously conceived to complement and support each other; nothing is superfluous and nothing lacking; and the result is a structure of absolute balance and solid composure." His travels and sojourns through Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan and the southern Soviet Republics, were viewed with great suspicion by the Colonial Powers. One English diplomat in Saudi Arabia described him in a report as a " Bolshevik" and he took a close interest in the many liberation movements that were active at this time with the aim of freeing Muslim lands from colonial rule. Asad in British India & Pakistan Asad left Arabia and came to British India in 1932 where he met South Asia's premier Muslim poet, philosopher and thinker, Muhammad Iqbal, who had

proposed the idea of an independent Muslim state in India, which later became Pakistan. Indeed, Iqbal encouraged him to write his book *Islam at the Crossroads* (published 1934); whose cover has the following testimonial from Iqbal: " I have no doubt that coming as it does from a highly cultured European convert to Islam, it will prove an eye-opener to our younger generation. " Muhammad Iqbal. Iqbal persuaded Asad to stay on in British India and help the Muslims of India establish their separate Muslim state. Iqbal introduced Asad to Chaudhry Niaz Ali Khan, a philanthropist and agriculturalist, who, on the advice of Muhammad Iqbal, established the Dar-ul-Islam Trust Institutes in Pathankot, India and Jauharabad, Pakistan. Asad stayed on in British India and worked with both Muhammad Iqbal and Chaudhry Niaz Ali Khan. When the Second World War broke out in 1939, Asad's parents were arrested and, subsequently, murdered by the Nazis during the Holocaust. Asad himself was arrested in Lahore in 1939, a day after the war broke out, by the British as an enemy alien. This was despite the fact that Asad had refused German nationality after the annexation of Austria in 1938 and had insisted on retaining his Austrian citizenship. Asad spent three years incarcerated in a prison, while his family consisting of his wife, Munira, and son, Talal, after being released from detention earlier, lived under the protection of Chaudhry Niaz Ali Khan at the latter's vast estate in Jamalpur, 5 km west of Pathankot. Asad was finally released and reunited with his family in Jamalpur when the Second World War ended in 1945. Asad supported the idea of a separate Muslim state in India and after the independence of Pakistan on 14 August 1947, in recognition for his support for Pakistan, Asad was conferred full citizenship by Pakistan and appointed

the Director of the Department of Islamic Reconstruction by the Government of Pakistan, where he made recommendations on the drafting of Pakistan's first Constitution. In 1949, Asad joined Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs as head of the Middle East Division and made efforts to strengthen Pakistan's ties with the Muslim states of the Middle East. In 1952, Asad was appointed as Pakistan's Minister Plenipotentiary to the United Nations in New York - He was sacked by the Pakistani Government after members of the mission plotted against Him. To avoid any criticism from any source, the Pakistani Government reported that he had relinquished his position a Year later. He then left the political stage to write his autobiography. Later years Towards the end of his life, Asad moved to Spain and lived there with his third wife, Pola Hamida Asad, an American national of Polish Catholic descent who had also converted to Islam, until his death on 20 February 1992 at the age of 92. Asad devoted the second half of his life to writing and publishing. He became one of the most significant Islamic authors of his time, writing books and numerous essays on the Islamic worldview, its law and philosophy. His opus magnum is a commentated English translation of the Qur'an. Towards the end of his life, however, Asad grew disillusioned by the state of the Islamic world, by its voluntary intellectual isolation and the intolerance of its extremists. He judged that "this wonderful religion" did not deserve its followers. His writing was burned in public during his time in Morocco — one reason for his return to Europe. Muhammad Asad died in Spain's Andalusia in 1992. He was buried in the Muslim cemetery of Granada in the former Moorish province of Andalusia, Spain. Children Asad had two sons, Heinrich, from his first German wife, Elsa Schiemann, and Talal Asad from his second

Saudi Arabian wife, Munira. Talal Asad is now an eminent anthropologist specializing in religious studies and postcolonialism. Publications Asad wrote several books. His autobiography, *The Road to Mecca* is an account of his Middle Eastern travels and his conversion, as well as his thoughts on the growing Zionist movement. He also wrote *The Message of The Qur'an*, a translation and commentary on the Muslim holy book based on his own knowledge of classical Arabic and on the authoritative classical commentaries. Considered one of the leading translations of the Qur'an, it has been criticised by some traditionalists for its Mutazilite leanings. He also wrote a translation and commentary on the *Sahih Bukhari*, one of the most authoritative collection of Hadith. In addition, he wrote *This Law of Ours* where he sums up his views on Islamic law and rejects decisively the notion of taqlid, or strict judicial precedent which has been accepted as doctrine by many Muslim sects, while being rejected by others such as the Salafis. He also makes a plea for rationalism and plurality in Islamic law, which he sees as the true legacy of the salaf or earliest generations of Muslims. In his book *Islam at the Crossroads*, he outlines his view that the Muslim world must make a choice between living by its own values and morality or accepting those of the West, in which case, they would always lag behind the West, which had had more time to adjust to those values and mores, and would end up compromising their own religion and culture. There are some playfully cryptic references to him in the recent bestseller *The Orientalist* by Tom Reiss (Random House 2005), and some slightly more sinister ones in the English translations of W. G. Sebald. List of publications Books: - 1. *Jerusalem in 1923: The Impressions of a Young European* (1923) - 2. *The*

Spirit of Islam (1934) - 3. The Concept of Religion in the West and in Islam (1934) - 4. The Spirit of the West (1934) - 5. Sahih Al-Bukhari: The Early Years of Islam (1935—1938) - 6. Towards a Resurrection of Thought (1937) - 7. What Arafat? (1946) - 8. The Outline of a Problem (September 1946) - 9. Is Religion a Thing of the Past? (October 1946) - 10. This Law of Ours (November 1946, December 1946, January 1947) - 11. Construction or Destruction? (February 1947) - 12. That Business of Imitation (April 1947) - 13. What do we mean by Pakistan? (May 1947) - 14. Notes and Comments (May 1947) - 15. Towards an Islamic Constitution (July 1947) - 16. Notes and Comments (July 1947) - 17. Calling All Muslims (September 1947) - 18. Islamic Reconstruction (March 1948) - 19. Islamic Constitution Making (March 1948) - 20. The Road to Mecca (1954) - 21. The Encounter of Islam and the West (1959) - 22. Islam and the Spirit of our Times (1960) - 23. The Principles of State and Government in Islam (1961) - 24. Islam and Politics (1963) - 25. Jerusalem: The Open City (1970s) - 26. The Meaning and Significance of the Hijrah (1979) - 27. The Message of the Qur'an (1980) - 28. The Principles of State and Government in Islam (1980) - 29. Sahih al-Bukhārī (1981) - 30. A Vision to Jerusalem (1982) - 31. Jerusalem: A City for all People (1982) - 32. A Tribe That Kept Its Name (1985) Journal: - Arafat: A Monthly Critique of Muslim Thought (1946—47) Documentary A documentary titled A Road to Mecca: The Journey of Muhammad Asad, directed by by Georg Misch, about the life of Muhammad Asad, was filmed in Austria, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, USA, Morocco and Spain. The documentary, released in 2008, was selected by the following film festivals, picking up a few awards: - 2009 Jerusalem Film Festival - 2009 Dubai Film Festival - 2008 FIDADOC Film Festival,

Morocco (Jury Award) - 2008 Diagonale Festival of Austrian Films (Best
Cinematography Award) - 2008 Hot Docs Canadian International
Documentary Film Festival - 2008 Vancouver International Film Festival