

## AL-HAKIMI, ABDULLAH ALI (c. 1900 - 1954), Muslim leader

**Name:** Abdullah Ali Al-hakimi  
**Date of birth:** c. 1900  
**Date of death:** 1954  
**Spouse:** Miriam Al-Hakimi (née Abdullah)  
**Child:** Raffe'a Abdull El Allaouia  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Muslim leader  
**Area of activity:** Religion  
**Author:** Abdul-Azim Ahmed

Abdullah Ali al-Hakimi (occasionally spelt el-Hakimi) was born in a village near Taizz, Yemen, around 1900. His parentage is unknown, and the earliest years of his life remain shrouded in uncertainty. He is known to have spent his formative years in Yemen, before at some point in the 1920s meeting Sheikh Ahmed al-Alawi, the spiritual leader of the Alawi Sufi fellowship, in North Africa. He became a student of Sheikh al-Alawi, and in the 1930s he obtained the title of Sheikh, a leader within the order, and was given ijaza, or permission to teach.

In 1936 he arrived in Britain with the objective of providing religious instruction to the nascent Yemeni Muslim communities in the port cities. Reports indicate that he was active equally in Cardiff and South Shields, but spent the bulk of his time initially in South Shields. He sought to establish a centre for the fellowship and mosque in both cities, and his organisational capacity, personal zeal and drive, as well as no doubt a considerable charisma, meant he succeeded to various degrees in both endeavours.

While in South Shields, al-Hakimi married Miriam Abdullah, the daughter of a late Yemeni sailor and his British wife, who was nineteen at the time. Subsequent to the marriage, which was conducted as an Islamic ceremony but not registered by British law, he took Miriam's younger siblings into his custody from a care home. This was subsequently disputed by the children's mother, who insisted on the return of her children, and who argued there was no legal right for al-Hakimi to take responsibility for her children. The case was seemingly resolved with the children returning to the mother, however there are reports that indicate Miriam's younger brother, Norman Abdul Ali, achieved the status of a hafiz (someone who has memorized the entire *Quran* in Arabic) in 1937 at the age of fourteen, and later received a scholarship from the Alawi fellowship to study Islam at Al-Azhar University in Egypt. In December 1937, Miriam died giving birth to al-Hakimi's daughter and was buried together with the baby in South Shields. The funeral received extensive coverage due to crowds of local onlookers who gathered to see the Muslim procession, with the *Shields Daily Gazette* reporting that 'prominent citizens' had offered their condolences and apologies to Sheikh al-Hakimi for the disruption caused.

In 1937 he moved permanently to Cardiff and began fundraising for a mosque in the city. In 1938, he opened a mosque in converted stables on Bute Street in the now famous Tiger Bay docklands of the city. Through the Alawi fellowship he had also purchased three terraced properties to convert into a mosque on Peel Street. During this time he was supported in his efforts by his deputy, another leader within the Alawi fellowship, Sheikh Hassan Ismail. Before he had moved to Cardiff he was successful in securing a space for Muslim burials in Western Cemetery in 1936. Prior to this, Muslims were buried in the nonconformist sections of cemeteries in the locality, and with little regard for Muslim norms. Western Cemetery remains in use by Muslims to this day.

With the outbreak of World War II, al-Hakimi divided his time between Britain and his native Yemen, though very few details of his travels are available. We know that in January 1941, the Bute Street properties were bombed during a German bombing raid, and it was his deputy, Sheikh Hassan Ismail, who was leading the prayers at the time. Miraculously, as covered in both regional and international press, all the worshippers survived.

In 1943, a temporary mosque was opened on the site of the destroyed buildings, named Noor al-Islam Mosque. The opening received substantial coverage, but al-Hakimi was not present for this re-opening, proceedings being led by his deputy Hassan Ismail. When funds became available after the war in 1947, the mosque was rebuilt in a more permanent structure that stood until 1988 when it was demolished and rebuilt a third time. The redevelopment of Cardiff Bay during this period meant that the mosque ceased to be located on Peel Street and instead now lies on Maria Street. Comparison of maps between these periods shows that the mosque remains largely, though not exactly, in the same area as where it was founded. Noor al-Islam is the first recorded purpose-built mosque in Wales, and while not the first mosque in Britain, it was amongst the earliest established overall and would go on to be a significant Muslim institution.

Post-war Cardiff presented new problems for al-Hakimi, as he faced challenges to his leadership, in part due to his absence during the war (with local communities more closely aligned with Sheikh Hassan Ismail), but also due to his criticism of Imam Ahmad bin Yahya (the ruling monarch of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen). During his time away, Sheikh Abdullah al-Hakimi had witnessed the repressive and isolationist policies of the Imam, and had become part of a movement of politically reformist campaigners. The diasporic communities, for a variety of reasons both religious, social, and political, remained staunchly pro-Imam. The fracturing was unresolved even following a court case and arbitration from Muslims in London associated with London Central Mosque. Ultimately, Sheikh Abdullah al-Hakimi continued operating Noor al-Islam Mosque, while Sheikh Hassan Ismail established his own mosque, which would go on to become the South Wales Islamic Centre.

Al-Hakimi returned to Yemen in 1952. Just two years later, in early August 1954, he went into hospital suffering from a suspected kidney infection, and died on 4 August 1954. As Mohammed Seddon remarks, many considered it likely that he was poisoned by the ruling Imam of Yemen, and had he survived, that he may have gone on to become the first President of a post-monarchy Yemen. This activism put him at odds with other Yemenis in Cardiff, leading to the aforementioned dispute. Somewhat poignantly however, by 1962 when the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen fell, and the Yemen Arab Republic was founded, the tide of opinion had shifted amongst Yemenis in diaspora. Unfortunately al-Hakimi did not live to see himself vindicated.

In Cardiff, his legacy continues through both Noor al-Islam and the South Wales Islamic Centre, the Muslim cemetery he opened, and a vibrant and active Muslim civil society. His deputy and subsequent opponent, Sheikh Hassan Ismail, would adopt Said Ismail, who would go on to become the longest serving Imam in Britain prior to his death in 2011.

Al-Hakimi was a pioneer and innovative Muslim leader, who was ahead of his time in terms of his vision for his own role as a Muslim leader in Britain. News reports shed light on his activities which range from attending civic functions, including the funeral for George VI in St John the Baptist City Parish Church in Cardiff (potentially the first Muslim to be included in such a ceremony in Britain), organizing luncheons with dignitaries such as the Lord Mayor of Cardiff, hosting international visitors (including Yemeni royalty), and a confident media-savvy relationship with journalists that ensured a regular coverage of Cardiff's Muslim community. Comparable leadership would not emerge amongst Welsh Muslims until the post 9/11 period.

Al-Hakimi was one of the most influential Muslims of Wales, and he can also be seen as the leader of a Welsh religious revival, though one emerging from the Muslim population rather than Christian. He was highly successful in recruiting individuals to his fellowship, instilling a deeply held religiosity amongst the Muslims in Cardiff.

Al-Hakimi married again in Yemen, presumably during the war, though confirmed details are sparse, and is survived by grandsons and great-grandsons.

### Author

Abdul-Azim Ahmed

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