

Inhabitants of 'Palestine' during the Ottoman Empire and the British Mandate

The identity and origins of the inhabitants of Palestine are often unknown or ignored, yet this information is of importance for those who want to understand the Arab-Israeli conflict. By referring to statements by independent witnesses and official documents from 1517-1948, it is possible to clarify who many of the inhabitants are today.

The Ottoman (Turkish) Empire (1517-1917)

After a number of consecutive Muslim Caliphate rulers, the territory came under the control of the Ottoman Empire. For the Ottomans (Turks), the area was merely an unimportant and distant outpost of the Empire and, while ensuring that each area was governed by Turkish officials, they did not maintain or invest in it and, according to many independent travellers, the land had for centuries been barren and sparsely populated. For example:

"The land in Palestine was lacking in people to till its fertile soil".

Thomas Shaw, British Archaeologist, 'Travels and Observations', London, 1767

"Palestine is a ruined and desolate land".

Count Constantine François Volney, French author and historian, 'Travels Through Syria and Egypt in years 1783, 1784, 1785', London 1788, vol. 2, p142

"The country is in a considerable degree empty of inhabitants and therefore its greatest need is of a body of population".

James Finn, British Consul, Report to Foreign Office, 1857

"Above all other countries in the world, [Palestine] is now a land of ruins. In Judea it is hardly an exaggeration to say that...for miles and miles there is no appearance of present life or habitation".

Cook's Tourist Handbook for Palestine and Syria, Thomas Cook & Son, Ludgate Circus, E.C, 1876

"A desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life and action. We never saw a human being on the whole route".

Mark Twain, American author and humorist, 'Innocents Abroad', 1869

When the Ottomans gained control of the area in 1517, the sparse population consisted of: Jews whose ancestors had never left, some who had returned after the expulsions, some who had gradually settled in the country, and some who had returned more recently. In 1492 a small number of refugees from the Spanish Inquisition were allowed in; Muslims, some of whom arrived or converted during the spread of Islam in the 7th century, and others who came later from other parts of the Empire; Samaritans, Christians whose ancestors may have been Jews, and others. Most of the inhabitants, Jews and others, lived in five towns: Jerusalem (where some historians say Jews were the majority since at least Turkey's first census in the first half of the 19th century), Safed, Jaffa, Tiberias, and Haifa.

As the Ottoman Empire began to lose territory, Muslims from the conquered areas arrived in Syria and southern Syria (the area now known as 'Palestine'). In 1802 two million Circassians fled Bulgaria and Rumeliaⁱ. Today many inhabitants of three villages in Israel claim Circassian ancestry: Abu Gosh, Rehaniya and Kfar Kama. They maintain their own culture, and are a tourist attraction.

During the late 18th century 3000 Albanians recruited by Russia were settled in Acreⁱⁱ, and in 1856 Algerians expelled by the French occupation settled in Syria and Palestineⁱⁱⁱ.

Between 1831-1840 thousands of Egyptians who refused to serve in the Egyptian military fled to what is now northern Israel, and thousands of Sudanese immigrants followed. In 1850 Egyptian soldiers were brought in to defend the borders, and a small number of Jews – Hovevei Zion – were also permitted to settle from 1850 onwards^{iv}.

Between 1838-1880 Armenians, Greeks and Italians joined Jewish merchants in Jaffa port^v.

Small numbers of Druze, Sudanese, Persians and those from the east of the river Jordan also arrived, encouraged by large land-owners who sponsored colonisation by encouraging peasants and semi-nomadic tribesmen to work their land. Land in Palestine was granted to Muslims from Bosnia and Herzegovina^{vi}. By 1878 the Jezreel Valley was a sanctuary for Bedouin from east of the Jordan .

During the 19th century, some villages became populated wholly by settlers from other parts of the Turkish Empire^{vii}. In 1872 the Turks put Circassians in what later became the capital of Jordan: Amman.

However, it was not until the 1880s that substantial immigration occurred: as the Ottoman Empire began to lose land in wars, Muslim refugees from these areas were permitted to settle in large numbers. Immigration was encouraged from Arab countries for building infrastructure, for example the Jaffa-Jerusalem railway in 1892.

By 1914 half the Muslims in Safed were from Algeria and the rest were immigrants from Syria and Bedouin from the Jordan Rift Valley^{viii}.

This large immigration is confirmed by Palestinians who, for example, today say *“There are no differences between Jordanians, Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese. We are all part of one nation. It is only for political reasons that we carefully underline our Palestinian identity...yes, the existence of a separate Palestinian identity serves only tactical purposes. The founding of a Palestinian state is a new tool in the continuing battle against Israel”*.

Zuheir Muhsin, late Military Dept leader of PLO and member of its Executive Council, Dutch daily Trouw, March 1977

In 1881 a small number of Jews were also allowed in. Edmond James de Rothschild bought land from absentee Turkish, Lebanese and other landlords, land which was of little use to them as it had become barren and malaria ridden, in areas deemed later, according to maps produced by the Mandate, to be uninhabitable. Using modern farming methods, the Jews began to work the barren land and, as Churchill said, to ‘Make the desert bloom’.

British Mandate

In 1920, the League of Nations allocated what is now Israel, Gaza, the West Bank and Jordan to the British Mandate: *“Recognition has hereby been given to the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine and to the grounds for reconstructing their national home...The Administration of Palestine, while ensuring that the rights and position of other sections of the population are not prejudiced, shall facilitate Jewish immigration under suitable conditions and shall encourage, in cooperation with the Jewish agency referred to in Article 4, close settlement by Jews on the land, including State lands and waste lands not required for public purposes”*.

League of Nations Mandate for Palestine, Article 6

The area was known as Judea and Samaria from Biblical and Roman times until 1920.

The British Mandate handed over 78% of the territory to Trans Jordan (later Jordan), while renaming the remaining area – that is, the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the river Jordan, ‘Palestine’, and all its inhabitants ‘Palestinians’. The Jews accepted but the Arabs living there refused: *“There is no such thing as ‘Palestine’ in history, absolutely not.”*

Prof. Philip K. Hitti, distinguished Arab historian, author of the authoritative book "The Arabs", testifying at the 1946 Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry).

In a televised address in March 2012 Hamas Minister of the Interior and of National Security, Fathi Hammad stated: *“Every Palestinian...throughout Palestine can prove his Arab roots, whether from Saudi Arabia or Yemen or anywhere...personally, half my family is Egyptian, we are all like that.”*

The British described the inhabitants as follows: *“For the sake of convenience it is usual to speak of the Moslem population as ‘Arabs’, though the actual Arab element in the blood of the people is probably confined to what is really a landed aristocracy”.*

Report of the Court of Inquiry by Order of H.E The High Commissioner and Commander in Chief 12th April 1920. Pages 1 and 2

“The people west of the Jordan are not Arabs, but only Arab speaking.... In the Gaza district they are mostly of Egyptian origin; elsewhere they are of the most mixed race.”

Handbook published by the British Foreign Office 1922

In 1920, I.Kligler, a Jewish scientist arrived in Palestine to, as he said ‘come to grips with malaria’ which was by now endemic. For example, Petach Tikvah, one of the first new Jewish villages, was abandoned as most of its inhabitants became ill or died, as did many Arabs in the area. *“The villagers (of Samaria Village in the Beisan Area) state not one child out of ten born in the village ever reaches maturity. (Malaria) carries them off before they are 10 years of age^{ix}.*

Report of ‘Malaria in Samaria Village’, 9/12/1922.

Dr. Kligler’s methods were simple: to keep stagnant water moving where possible, to drain swamps, and above all, to educate the inhabitants – Jews, Arabs, and even itinerant Bedouin. He engaged the help of the British authorities, and world maps today show that his methods were successful, and Palestine is now an oasis of malaria-free land.

“Much of the land [where Jews had settled] now carrying orange groves [was] sand and uncultivated when it was purchased. The shortage of land is due less to the amount of land acquired by Jews than to the increase in the Arab population.”

Peel Commission Report, July 1937

The British began to restrict Jewish immigration, while stating that they were unable to prevent people from neighbouring areas from entering the region:

"This illegal [Arab] immigration was not only going on from the Sinai, but also from Transjordan and Syria, and it is very difficult to make a case out for the misery of the Arabs if at the same time their compatriots from adjoining states could not be kept from going in to share that misery”.

Palestine Royal Commission Report, London, 1937

As a result by 1946 there were about 543,000 Jews, and 1,267,037 non-Jews in Palestine (attracted by the enhancement of the land by the Jews and by increased job opportunities afforded by the British). This latter figure included mostly Muslims as well as Christians, Druze, Circassians, etc.

A British Partition Plan was rejected by the Arab League in 1938, and in 1947 the UN voted for partition of the land west of the Jordan River and the creation of two states, one for the those referred to as the Arabs of Palestine, and the other for the Jews. This led to the creation of Israel in May 1948. However, the Arab League invaded, Jordan annexed roughly the area designated for a state for the Arabs, and the state was not established.

Jews claim that, even though the League of Nations and the United Nations have permitted Jews from all over the world to return to their homeland, it is in any case the place from which they were originally expelled, and that no-one else has ever had a state there or their capital in Jerusalem. The Palestinians claim their ancestors have always lived in the land, from long before Moses brought the Jews from Egypt, and that they, themselves, were expelled in 1948-9. However, although there were indeed expulsions, many Palestinian leaders and witnesses denied this:

“The Arab armies entered Palestine to protect the Palestinians...but, instead, they abandoned them, forced them to emigrate”.

Abu Mazen, Member of PLO in “Al-Thaura”, official publication of PLO, March 1976.

“The Arab High Command asked us to leave the country. They told us: ‘A cannon cannot tell the difference between a Jew and an Arab. Leave the country for two weeks and you will come back victorious’”.

Salim Joubran, Arab citizen of Israel, February 1962

A large number of Jews were forced out of the Arab world after the establishment of the State of Israel, and many of them and their descendents now comprise about 50% of Israel’s inhabitants. Unique in the Middle East, the Christian population in Israel continues to grow.

The unification of the disparate Arabic-speaking inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza began in 1967, when Yasser Arafat announced:

“The Palestinian people have no national identity. I, Yasser Arafat, man of destiny, will give them that identity through conflict with Israel”.

Alan Hart, ‘Arafat, Terrorist or Peace-maker?’, Sedgewick Jackson, Ltd, 1984.

This unification has finally been achieved, and they have become an internationally recognised people, the Palestinian people.

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Based on research by Anton Alexander

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i

↑ **“The Circassians of Palestine”** Adeeb Asfoura, Palestine, Issue No 112, August 2007

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↑ **Encyclopaedia Britannica**”, 11th edition, vol.XX, p604

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↑ **“Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict 1882-1914”**, G. Shafir, University of California Press

iv

↑ **The Circassians of Palestine”**, Adeeb Asfoura, Palestine, Issue No 112, August 2007

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↑ **“Reise nach Palestina, etc 1749-52”**, p598, Hasselquist F, Rostock, 1762

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vi

↑ **“Bosnia – Motherland of Palestinians”**, Manfred Lehman

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↑ **Whose Land”**, James Parkes, p212, Pelican 1949

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↑ **“The Arab Community in Israel”**, Mustafa Abbasi, Palestine Quarterly, 17/2/2003

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↑ **“Malaria in Rural Settlements in Palestine”**, Kligler J.L., Journal of Hygiene, vol XXIII, no 3, pp300-

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