

The Demographic History of Palestine During the British Administration (1917-1948) based on the Official Records of Palestine Demography

Sejarah Demografi Palestin Era Pentadbiran British (1917-1948) berdasarkan Rekod-rekod Rasmi Demografi Palestin

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ABSTRACT

One of the physical transformations during the time of British Administration of Palestine occurred demographically, as a land that was once inhabited by a majority of Arabs was completely transferred into a Jewish dominated region in the space of only three decades and which had made possible the formation of the state of Israel. This paper will discuss different official records that provide information on the population of Palestine during the British Mandate and several matters pertaining to the sources of the selected data. This article will mostly be expository and focused on the historical records, while the related events warranted a more lengthy discussion and thus is beyond its scope. The method applied in this study is the historical method. The findings highlight some of the issues that exist within the scope of Palestine demographic study, particularly from the historical perspective.

Keywords: History of Palestine; British administration; Palestine demography

ABSTRAK

Satu daripada transformasi fizikal semasa tempoh pemerintahan British di Palestin berlaku secara demografi, bila mana satu kawasan yang didiami oleh majoriti Arab bertukar sepenuhnya kepada kawasan yang didominasi oleh Yahudi hanya dalam tempoh tiga dekad dan memungkinkan pembentukan negara Israel. Kajian ini membahaskan beberapa rekod rasmi yang menyediakan maklumat berkaitan populasi penduduk Palestin semasa Mandat British dan beberapa perkara berkaitan dengan sumber data-data tersebut. Artikel ini adalah berbentuk ekspositori dan berfokus kepada rekod sejarah, manakala peristiwa yang terlibat memerlukan perbincangan yang lebih panjang dan luar dari skop kajian. Metode yang diaplikasi dalam kajian ini adalah kajian sejarah. Penemuan kajian mendapati beberapa isu yang wujud dalam skop kajian demografi Palestin, terutama dari perspektif sejarah.

Kata kunci: Sejarah Palestin; pentadbiran British; demografi Palestin

INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant periods in the history of Palestine was when it was administered by Britain from 1917 until 1948. Britain took control of Palestine from the Ottomans in 1917 and proceeded to administer the land for the next three decades. Due to the historical background of Palestine itself and the vested interests that various parties had in the land, these years were particularly challenging for the rulers and its people. Many changes took place during this particular period, as British, Arab and Jews endeavoured with their respective ways and means to control the land of Palestine. Its eventual division as a land divided between the Jews and the Arabs in 1948

had been made possible by the events that took place within the particular period. The demographic aspect of Palestine in particular, offers a unique perspective in understanding the changes that took place during that time. While demographic changes had taken place even before 1917 as well as after 1948, the changes during the said period have been considered significant as the main events that led to the formation of Israel took place during this time.

For the purpose of this paper, the authors will discuss the study of the demographic history of Palestine during this period in several parts. The first part will describe the significance of studying this particular field in regard to the larger discussion on Palestine. Secondly, the historical account of the demography of Palestine when it was administered by the Ottomans and the issues that surround it. Next are the descriptions of the official records which provide

the information on the population of Palestine. A brief description on the actual Population of Palestine (the Arabs, Jews and other Minorities) is provided for the purpose of understanding what did the Palestine community consist of. This preceded the next part, which is the data on the population and their sources and related issues. A conclusion is provided at the end.

THE STUDY ON THE DEMOGRAPHY OF PALESTINE

First of all, what is demographic study and why would it be significance, particularly to the study of Palestine? Basically, demographic study is a study on the human population, especially in terms of size, composition and distribution, along with the reason for these characteristics and the consequences that they produce (McFalls 2007: n.p.). It is a scientific study (U.N. 1952: 3 in Lucas et al. 1980: 3), statistical and mathematical for the purpose of developing a body of theory to explain the events that it charts and compares (Bogue 1969: 1-2 in Lucas et al. 1980: 3). These characteristics are developed through various means which demographers have listed such as birth/fertility, death/mortality and migration.

Demographic history on the other hand concerns itself with the historical aspect of a population study, where it seeks, "...to describe past events in a coherent way, using population as its yardstick, and population changes as the events of main interest that other factors must explain". (Hollingsworth 1969: 39) The demographic data is being used to explain the various characteristics of populations in the past as well as to elucidate the causes and consequences of the said characteristics (Willigan & Lynch 1982: xi). Therefore this paper is an example of a demographic history as the study will focus on the more historical aspect, by paying attention to the events and situations of that time and is not solely concern on the numbers provided by the data alone, though the discussion on the numbers is an important part of this study.

What warrants the study of past population of Palestine? What is the significance of studying the population of Palestine, especially in the period of British administration? A study on demography can be a merit in itself, as pointed out by McCarthy:

The history of a place cannot be truly known without knowing who lived there, to which ethnic and religious groups they belonged, and how their numbers changed over time. To the student of population history, statistics on mortality and fertility also tells an absorbing tale of

what was most important in the lives of all the people. That knowledge is sufficient unto itself. However many other branches of history also rely on accurate demographic statistics (McCarthy 1998: xvii).

The branches of history referred to by McCarthy in the preface of his work include – but not limited to – various aspects of Palestine such as sociology, economy and politics; all of which are closely connected to the development of Palestine being transformed from Arab-majority into a land dominated by the Jews. All of these historical aspects are closely connected and require a holistic understanding so that the events that took place in Palestine during the selected period can be better understood. In fact, the authors believe that for those who grasp the significance of the studying this particular period will be able to not only understand Palestine while it was under the imperial power, but also the subsequent events, including the conflict of the current day. Thus this is only one of the many justifications for focusing on this particular topic and period. In fact, Abu Lughod even went as far as to point that demography is the centre of the entire struggle that have been going on. As she put it, "...policies which may appear accidental or irrational have deep grounding in a demographic struggle for the country, and that the seemingly scientific discussions over numbers often conceal a deeper agenda" (Abu Lughod 1986: n.p.).

Others studies on the demography of the Palestinians had also pointed out the significance of such study. A study of demography is just one of the many studies which has the potential of contributing towards understanding the potential of the Palestinian people, which for the Palestinians themselves, could had been a vital step during the years where they were slowly being misplaced in their own land. Edward Hagopian and A.B Zahlan gave the example of the absence of record on mortality rate, which resulted in the Palestinians being unaware of the disadvantage that they were in in terms of public health (Hagopian & Zahlan 1974: 32).

While Hagopian and Zahlan viewed that the Palestinians 'have rarely taken stock of their strengths and weaknesses', which include paying attention to their own demographic potential, Janet Abu Lughod in her article *The Demographic War for Palestine* believed that population is a 'major weapon' that had long been used by both sides – Arab Palestinians and Zionists – as a justification for their many claims. Such as the size of the Palestinian Arab refugee population created by the 1948 war, the national origins of residents, and other seemingly innocuous

figures as live births, illegal immigration, forced or voluntary outmigrations (Abu-Lughod 1986). It may be that prior to the Palestinian own dispersion, they may had not been able to see that advantages that they may gain through their demographic make-up, and it only became clearer to them much later (Khalidi 2007: xxix).

THE DEMOGRAPHY OF PALESTINE PRIOR TO THE BRITISH MANDATE

In terms of analysing the numbers of Mandatory Palestine, one has to take into account the period prior to that, which was the reign of the Ottoman Empire. For the Arabs, it had been used as a historical record of proving the existence of a substantial community with significant numbers. However, it is important to note that:

Ottoman registration of the population of Palestine began soon after the Ottoman conquest in 1516. As in other parts of the Empire, the purpose of registration was primarily fiscal. The Ottomans wished to know whom they could tax. Those who could not be taxed and those, such as the Bedouin, who could not be persuaded to submit to taxation was not counted. Although the surviving Ottoman registers from this early period can provide informative data on many aspects of Palestinian life and finances, they are of limited use as sources of demographic analysis (McCarthy 1998: 11).

However this article will not go into the particulars of the Ottoman records. Rather it will highlight several matters that had been discussed by various studies on the demographic aspect of the land during the Ottoman time. These can be summed up in the following points:

Although the Ottoman's registration of Palestine began soon after 1516, it was not until the time of Abdulhamid II (1876-1909) that the registration process was THE STUDY ON THE DEMOGRAPHY OF PALESTINE

1. considered effective. However it was not in the 'complete' sense as modern registrars might have understood, but nevertheless useful information on the make-up of the Ottoman Palestine can be obtained from these records. The information collected during that time was published in various *salname* (yearbook). Scholars have debated over the availability of these records, for example claiming that the data cannot be relied upon to tell the complete picture of Palestinian demography of Palestine due to the questionable methods and population of that time. (Isseroff n.d.) Others simply maintained that reliable data do not exist (Mandel 1976: xx).

2. Due to administrative changes relating to the borders of Palestine, the analysis of the population became somewhat complicated. For example, Palestine was initially included in the Syrian province. When Syria was divided into smaller provinces in 1886, the various borders also changed. However, the late 1880 also witnessed the stabilisation of borders into what was to become Palestine in the Mandatory period (until 1948). (McCarthy 1998:5) However, it should be noted that this 'stabilised' borders or boundaries "...were never precisely defined and were the subject of continual and occasionally acrimonious negotiation" (Marlowe 1959: 160).
4. The population of Palestine during the Ottoman period was made up of several groups, including Arabs (Muslims and Christians), Jews and other minority groups. Islamic conquest of Palestine in 638 A.D. had made possible gradual conversion of its inhabitant that by the Ottoman's time, they constituted the largest part of the Palestinian population.
5. Population changes attributed to Jewish migration had been taking place during the Ottoman's time. The year 1882 marked the beginning of migrations on larger scale than usual (Mandel 1976: 1) known as the First Aliyah or settlements and was to continue until 1903. Various Ottoman government policies were recorded, as response to this sudden influx of immigrants into the country. While Abdulhamid did see the advantage that the Jews may offer, especially in terms of economy, greater concerns in regard to large-scale Jewish settlement prevailed over his decision in accepting Theodor Herzl's offer to settle the large debt that the Ottoman's government had garnered. Mandel believed that there were two principal views that shaped the Ottoman Empire's attitude towards Jewish migration, that firstly, "...the Ottoman Government feared the possibility of nurturing another national problem in the Empire (the Arab nationalism movement was already in motion). Second, it did not want to increase the number of foreign subjects, particularly Europeans and nationals of Great Powers [Great Britain, France, Russia, Austro-Hungary, Germany and Italy], in its domains" (Mandel 1976: 1). However, to determine the actual number of people who migrated into Palestine from the Ottoman records does not seem possible, as no there is no known record, or any other Jewish records, which had rendered studies on this matter to the use of synthetic analysis (McCarthy 1998: 17).

It can be concluded that in discussing the period of British Mandate, considerable weight should also be given to the situations in Palestine while it was under the Ottoman administration. The Palestine that Britain had taken upon itself to administer had already within it the challenges that were further complicated by events of the Mandate years.

RECORDS ON THE POPULATION OF PALESTINE DURING BRITISH MANDATE

For the interim period of British Mandate administration, two official government censuses have been identified as the source of data on the demography of Palestine. These are the British Census of Palestine 1922 and British Census of Palestine 1931. Below are brief descriptions of each census.

BRITISH CENSUS OF PALESTINE 1922

The census of 1922 was compiled and reported under the supervision of J. B. Barron. It consists of 58 pages. For the years prior to 1922, the superintendent mentioned that he had made use of the Ottoman record for 1914 in terms of the population for the whole of Palestine, but McCarthy had noted that for the break-down of the population into their respective religions, Barron did not refer to the Ottoman figure, even though it was available. He had made use of Arthur Ruppin's figures instead (McCarthy 1998: 18), from the book *Syrien als Wirtschaftagebiet*. McCarthy considered this as a deliberate deception, as Barron was only referring to the number of Jewish population (McCarthy 1998: 18), as the numbers of Jewish population differed greatly when compared to the Ottoman figures, especially for the district of Jerusalem. However, the 1922 census has been widely used and unless researchers make note of this, it is somewhat hard to determine whether this error was known.

BRITISH CENSUS OF PALESTINE 1931

The second and final census was superintended by Major E. Millis. It consists of three parts:

1. Census of Palestine 1931. Population of Villages, Towns and Administrative Areas. Jerusalem, 1932
2. Census of Palestine 1931, Volume I. Palestine Part I, Report. Alexandria, 1933.
3. Census of Palestine 1931, Volume II. Palestine, Part II, Tables. Alexandria, 1933.

The census of 1931 was much more detailed and systematic, and also includes estimates for the years between 1922 and 1931. In terms of estimation, later day demographers such as McCarthy had provided what he termed as 'corrected figures', possibly due to considerations that can only be realised by modern-day researchers.

BRITISH MANDATE: A SURVEY OF PALESTINE 1946

In the period of 1917-1948, only two official censuses were carried out. A government survey was carried out in 1945 for the purpose of providing report on the situation in Palestine to an international committee, known as *A Survey of Palestine – Prepared in December 1945 and January 1946 for the information of the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry*. The survey mentioned that the post 1931 period had been punctuated by various events incidents such the disturbances in 1936 until 1939 as well as the second world war had prevented two the implementation of two other planned censuses, in 1936 and 1941 respectively (Shaw 1991: 160).

The survey had included in it the record of population from previous censuses and estimations for the years when official census was absent. It should be noted here that this particular record cannot be considered as similar to the censuses as the number of Palestine population were derived from estimates, from 1932 until 1946.

THE POPULATION IN PALESTINE DURING BRITISH ADMINISTRATION

THE ARABS

The Population of Palestine during British administration consisted of several groups. First there were the Arab population of Palestine which were made up of Arabic-speakers Muslims and Christians. Muslims were the vast majority (McCarthy 1998: 11). The Muslims had been the majority ever since the original population came under Islamic rule in 670 AD. According to E. A. Finn, the Ottomans had made a distinction of its indigenous population based on the following (Finn in Halbrook n.d.: 360):

1. *Bedaween*, who are the 'Arabs of the Arabs'; the nomads of the desert
2. *Fellahheen*, or the 'Ploughmen'; they formed the part of agriculture peasantry, and lives in villages, and the freehold owners of the soil which they cultivated
3. *Belladeen*, or the 'townsfolk'; they lived in the cities, generally in their own freehold houses.

In both censuses no such distinction was noted. Only their religion was mentioned specifically.

THE JEWS

The Jewish population has always existed in Palestine throughout the history. Under the Ottoman rule, they consist of Jews who took refuge when Spain was lost to the Muslims, and various pilgrims and students who came to settle in Palestine. Prior to 1880, Jewish immigrants to Palestine had no other aims except the religious and scholarly (Tibawi 1977: 16). It was after 1880 where increased Jewish immigration with more organisation and structured living began to arrive in Palestine. The pre-1880 settlers were identified as the Old Yishuv (Old Settlement) and were dispersed in several towns around Palestine. The New Yishuv (New Settlement) on the other hand was comprised of several groups with the first wave of immigrants arriving between 1882 until 1903. This first group was considered as the beginning of modern Jewish migration that constituted significant numbers as compared to the earlier settlers.

OTHER MINORITY GROUPS

In the censuses of 1922 and 1931, other minority groups were also tabulated, and these include Druses, Baha'is and Samaritans. However, their numbers were too small compared to the other two groups of Arabs and Jews.

As per mentioned, the categorisation in the official record had been made according to the religious affinity. In the 1922 Census, the Muslims were labelled as 'Mohamedans', followed by Jews, Christians and other minorities, which include Druses, Samaritans, Hindus and Sikhs among others. For the census in 1931, 'Moslems', Jews and Christians were used as the categorisation. Therefore, this paper will make use of the term Muslims, Jews and Christians in referring to the population; it being understood that Arabs would comprise of the Muslims and Christians.

The following part of the article will focus on the official data that can be found on Palestine.

DATA ON THE POPULATION OF PALESTINE DURING BRITISH ADMINISTRATION

DATA PRIOR TO 1922

According to the 1922 census, the following were the population of Palestine in 1914:

TABLE 1. The Population of Palestine, 1914

District	Population
District of Jerusalem	398,362
Nablus	153,749
Acre	137,164
Total	689,275

Source: 1922 Census

Barron mentioned that this was according to the 'Turkish sources' (Barron 1923: 2) However the actual numbers that were stated in the 1330 *Nufus* of the Ottoman government were as following (McCarthy 1998: 18):

TABLE 2. The Population of Palestine, 1914

District	Population
District of Jerusalem	328,168
Nablus	154,563
Acre	133,877
Total	616,608

Source: Ottoman's Official Record of 1330

The Ottoman government printed two public censuses. According to McCarthy, The first was the *Devlet-I Aliye-I Osmaniye'nin 1313 Senesine Mahsus Istatistik-i Umumisi* or General Statistics of the Ottoman Empire in the 1313H/1895-1896AD. The second part was from the final years of the Ottoman Empire, known as *Memalik-I Osmaniye'nin 1330 Senesi Nufus Istatistigi* or Statistics of the Ottoman Empire for the year 1330H/1914-1915AD (McCarthy 1998: 3). The difference from these two statistics were particularly noticeable for the Jerusalem district, which was "...a difference that could not be explained by scribal error or a slight different time of compilation" (McCarthy 1998: 18). Hagopian and Zahlan also noted that the total figures as in the 1922 censuses did not include 65,000 nomads in the southern part of Palestine, which would have added to the total a figure of 754,257 (Hagopian & Zahlan 1974: 36). If this was the case, the population of Palestine in the 1,330 *Nufus* should be at 681,608.

However, McCarthy did not ascribe the error made by Barron to the number of nomads, but rather to the Jewish population. Ruppin's statistics, which was the actual reference used by Barron put the number of Jewish population at 84,660. Moreover, Barron mentioned in the 1922 census that "It is difficult to obtain reliable figures regarding the division of this population..." (Barron 1929: 3) although the Ottoman record did provide tabulation by religions (McCarthy

1998: 18). Barron chose to go with Ruppin’s statistics instead, who did refer to the Ottoman figures, but made adjustments according to his own estimates. It is of course not possible to ascertain Ruppin’s motivation in doing so, it may be that he made the adjustment due to what he considered as the undercounting of Jews during the Ottoman period, but nevertheless, he did not convey the Ottoman data accurately (McCarthy 1998: 19).

For the years 1914 until 1922 onwards, the numbers of population in Palestine were mostly derived from various estimates or unofficial tabulation. For example, Justin McCarthy’s concentrated study on the Palestinian population provided the following number:

TABLE 3. Population of Palestine, 1918

District	Population
Muslims	618,528
Jews	58,728
Christians	70,429
Others	433
Total	748,128

Source: The Population of Palestine by Justin McCarthy (McCarthy 1998: 26)

Sir Herbert Samuel, the first High Commissioner of Palestine also made the following note in his record of the early years of British administration (1920-1921):

“... the Muslims constituted four-fifths of the population, the remaining fifth being almost equally divided between Christians (77,000) and Jews (76,000), or one-tenth for each community (Tibawi 1977: 22).”

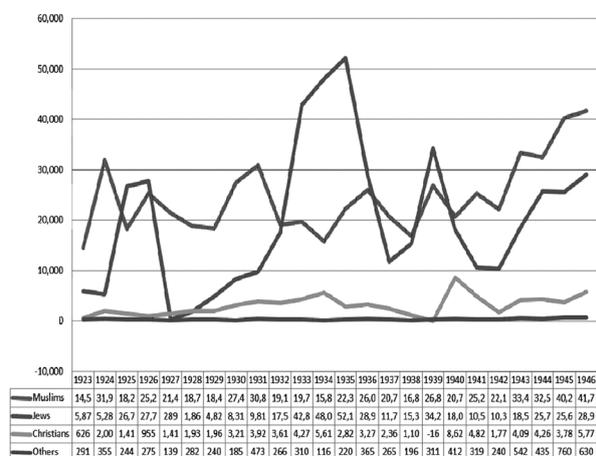


CHART 1. Growth of population in Palestine 1922-1946

For the purpose of this article, a Chart 1 demonstrating the population of Palestine will be provided based on the numbers *A Survey of Palestine*, where the numbers for 1922 and 1931 obtained from the official censuses. The population of Palestine was recorded until 1946. The data for 1947 however, was made available later from a projection made by demographers (Lubbard 2007: 5). As for 1948, the official numbers that have been made available were from the time when the state of Israel had been proclaimed in May of that year and not part of the British Mandate for Palestine.

Although detailed elucidation on the numbers in chart is beyond the scope of this paper, the authors will discuss selected parts in order to highlight the characteristics of Palestine population in this particular period. Evidences from various studies have shown that the trend in the population movement for both the Arabs and Jews especially were very much impacted with internal and external factors. The following are some of the examples that serve to illustrate the demographic situation in Palestine.

Based on the chart, it should be noted that for the years during the British administration, both the Arabs and Jewish communities had experienced increase in their population (with the exception of the Christian Arabs, where the decrease was recorded in 1939, although it was very minor). This means that increase in population was a constant pattern in the time of British administration. Even with the outbreak of the Second World War, Palestine was not as affected as it was during the previous world war that a large segment of the population was lost to war causes. This can be attributed to the reason that WWI took place closer to home, and the population was conscripted to serve in the Turkish army. This was not so during the WWII. More than anything, it was the refugees of war in Europe that brought about the demographic change in Palestine.

The patterns of the increase for the communities were also different each year, with both communities experiencing high and low increments at different times. As the highest contributor to Arabs’ demography was its natural increase, thus the Arab population had never experienced sudden leap and jump, which cannot be equated to natural increase. Natural decrease may then demonstrate such dramatic change, though it was not the case for Palestine, as their mortality rate during the British administration was low, contributed also by improved living conditions endeavoured by the administrators.

The Jewish numbers on the other hand very much depended on the migrations and hence the contrasting

pattern from the Arab, where sudden influx of immigrants contributed to the dramatic change not only within the Jewish community, but also to the whole of Palestine population. For example in mid-1924, the total population of Palestine for Muslim Arabs, Jews, Christian Arabs and other minorities were 709,938. The Muslims were still at 75% of the population, as were the Christians at 1.16%, while the Jews had increased slightly by 0.37% compared to the previous year. It was the following two years, 1925 and 1926 that saw a sudden change in the composition of Palestine demography with the Jews increasing dramatically, where another 26,780 to its numbers, which accounted for 22% of the Jewish total population and made it 16.09% of the total population in Palestine. It was the highest Jewish rise recorded in this period.

This was due to the fourth wave of Jewish immigrants between 1924/1925-1931 which became the addition to the Jewish population in Palestine. This rise of Jewish numbers can be attributed to events that played out outside of Palestine. Porath noted that the two major factors were the anti-Jewish economic legislation in Poland and a new immigration policy in the United States (Porath 1974: 18). Poland's hostility towards its Jewish minority brought about the Jewish Polish refugees to Palestine, of which '...they played a historic role if only because they so materially augmented the Jewish population of Palestine' (Sachar 1958: 380). United States newly formed policy in 1924 made the specifications that the earlier immigration policy did not have, that the immigration quotas will be based on the countries of origin of the immigrants and thus restricting the numbers of immigrants from Poland and the rest of Europe (Porath 1974: 18). The new immigrants concentrated mainly in cities, contributing much to the development of one its main cities, Tel-Aviv.

A similar pattern in the latter part of the British Mandate administration can also be detected, which was proved by the evidence of economic situations of the Arabs and the Jews. In the early 1940's for example, the following was noted by Smith in his discussion of the expansion of Arab and Jewish communities in Palestine (Smith 2001: 149):

1. By 1940, 300,000 of the total Jewish population were immigrants, who had mostly arrived in the 1930s.
2. In 1943, the non-Jewish communities, which included both Arabs and non-Arabs held between them 145,572 dunams of citrus, in comparison to 141,188 by the Jews. Dunam is a unit of land

area during the Ottoman Empire, define as 'forty standard paces in length and breadth. It represents the amount of land that can be ploughed in a day. 1 dunam = 1,000 square meters. Citrus cultivation was the sole area where the Arabs were able to flourish further than the Jews, though when one taken into account the disparity in demographic numbers, then perhaps it was not much of an advantage. Nevertheless, it was worth to note.

3. However in other areas such as industries, the Jews had a clear lead. In 1943, the Arabs and other non-Jews owned 1,558 industrial establishments, while 1,907 were Jewish-owned.
4. In terms of capital investment, slightly over £2 million was Arab's while the Jewish investment was worth £12.1 million. The Jews also paid £448,000 in rural and urban property taxes, compared to the Arabs who paid £351,000. Such gap in the value only served to demonstrate the 'divergent natures of both productivity and size of landholdings.'

CONCLUSION

In regard to the data on Palestine during the time of British Administration, there were two main sources; official census and estimations by demographers. The official censuses are considered as official data as they were issued by the official administration and were issued in 1929 and 1931. The population count for then onwards had to be derived from estimations. Considering the situation of that time, where a demographic war was taking place, it is perhaps rather surprising that the British officials did not deem that it was important to have official measure of the population. Admittedly, the events that took place during the time where census was supposed to take place (1936 & 1941) had occupied British majority concern. Had such a record existed, it would have proved to be an invaluable resource. However, researchers had been able to fill in the gap in the official data with estimations, which prove to be a vital means of understanding the demographic landscape in Palestine.

Studies in the area of demographic history of Palestine should be aware that various factors during that period had a direct influence on the data presented in the record and that the information that might be derived from such records had to be read in the light of the events that took place.

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