Pages of Unity and National Identity:
The Role of the Palestinian Press during the 1936 Great Strike

By Alec Lazenby

Supervised by Martin Bunton

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All Palestinian Arabs are united in their hearts, with no political or ethnic differences. If an individual or group suffers for the good of the homeland, the entire homeland suffers with them.

'Issa al- 'Issa
Editor, *Filastin*
October 7, 1937[1]

INTRODUCTION

The "Great Strike" of 1936 has proven to be a critical juncture in the history of the Palestinian people. The spontaneous uprising of the peasantry against Jewish encroachment on their lands and the British colonial structure that oversaw such developments, caught the landed elite by surprise and left the traditional leadership led by the Husayni and Nashasibi families scrambling for control. Despite the sudden creation of the Arab Higher Committee (AHC) to oversee the initial general strike and later armed conflict, a unified command proved elusive.[2] The main success of the revolt was in its ability to form a national consciousness among Palestinians. For centuries, class, local, and religious identities had been influential throughout the region with people identifying themselves as Muslim or as a resident of their local village when asked about themselves.[3] During the early years of the mandate period (1923-1948), regarding oneself as a former Ottoman subject was more common than identifying as a Palestinian.[4] By October 1936, a cessation of the strike was being negotiated between the Arab

[1]Cited in Mustafa Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion 1929-1939: Writing up a Storm*. London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2007, 209.

[2] Matthew Craig Kelly, "The Revolt of 1936: A Revision," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 44, no.2 (2015): 28-42, DOI: 10.1525/jps.2015.44.2.28, 28-42

[3] Mahmoud Mi'ari, "Transformation of Collective Identity in Palestine," J*ournal of Asian and African Studies* 44, no.6 (2009): 579-598, DOI: 10.1177/0021909609343410, 579-598.

[4] Ibid.

Higher Committee and the British, mediated by the rulers of neighbouring Arab states.[5] This would result in the launching of the Peel Commission, led by Lord Peel whose final report on the causes of the General Strike would be issued in 1937.[6] This commission was an important diplomatic initiative that, while its findings would prove disappointing and the demands of Palestinians would not ultimately be met, forced the British to take stock of the situation in Palestine and bring an end to the mandate.[7] The airing of Palestinian grievances around Jewish immigration and the dispossession of their lands also set the stage for the implementation of the 1939 White Paper.[8] But, Britain's refusal in 1937 to accede to Palestinian demands, namely an independent Palestinian state with its own constitution and the prevention of Jewish immigration and land purchase, resulted in a renewal of hostilities in October 1937, in what is often referred to as the second stage of the Arab Revolt, which ended in 1939.[9]

While historians such as Jacob Norris and Matthew Hughes have recounted the British response to the strike, and the methods of repression, it is important to also focus on the consequences the strike had for national identity in Palestine.[10] While it is true that Palestinian society was severely divided prior to and following the Great Strike of 1936, as much due to British divide and rule tactics as traditional rivalries, the strike saw a temporary truce between factions in order to present a united front. This paper examines the role of the Palestine press in

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[5] Tom Bowden, "The Politics of the Arab Rebellion in Palestine 1936-39," *Middle Eastern Studies* 11, no. 2 (1975): 147–74, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4282565, 147-74.

[6] Shaul Bartal.,"The Peel Commission Report of 1937 and the Origins of the Partition Concept," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 28, no. 1/2 (2017): 51–70. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44510475, 51-70.

[7] W. Peel, "Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," *UNISPAL*, 1937, http://unispal.un.org/pdfs/Cmd5479.pdf, 193-214.

[8] Bartal, "The Peel Commission Report of 1937 and the Origins of the Partition Concept," 51-70.

[9] Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017*. New York: Picador, 2020 pg. 42-54.

[10] Jacob Norris, "Repression and Rebellion: Britain's Response to the Arab Revolt in Palestine of 1936–39, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36, no.1 (2008): 25-45, DOI: 10.1080/03086530801889350; Matthew Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine: The British Army, the Colonial State, and the Arab Revolt,* 1936–1939, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 35-77.

facilitating the development of Palestinian unity, and the continual, if hesitant, repression inflicted upon it by the British authorities during these important months. Though the press too was divided on the basis of loyalties, religion, and class, it also formed an antidote for factionalism and division during this time.

The Palestinian press in the 1930s consisted of roughly 40 papers, encompassing every type of subject matter, from literary reviews to in-depth political analysis.[11] While many papers tried to make a go of it as daily publications, the lack of available funding and staff forced many editors to scale back their ambitions and publish on a weekly or bi-weekly basis.[12] Likewise, due to widespread illiteracy outside the urban centres of Jerusalem, Haifa, and Jaffa, the readership of these papers was limited to the urban elite, although some attempts by papers such as *Filastin* to reach rural audiences met with a modest amount of success.[13] As a disproportionate number of wealthy urbanites tended to be Christian, so too were many of the early newspaper editors, although the proportion of Muslim editors had improved by the time of the strike.[14] The main time period examined will be between the outset of the revolt in April 1936 and the outbreak of the second stage of the conflict in October 1937. Although the press remained influential

[11] Giora Goodman, "British Press Control in Palestine during the Arab Revolt, 1936—39," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 43, no.4 (2015): 699-720, DOI: 10.1080/03086534.2014.982413; Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine*; Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as a Shaper of Public Opinion*; Rashid Khalidi, P*alestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997; Muhammad Y. Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988; Peel, W. et al., "Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," *UNISPAL*, 1937, http://unispal.un.org/pdfs/Cmd5479.pdf; Robert Harry Drayton, "Press Ordinance 1933," In *The Laws of Palestine: In Force on the 31st Day of December 1933*, 2nd ed, 1214-1238, London: Waterlow & Sons, 1934; Ted Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt: The 1936–1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past*, 1 ed., Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003.

[12] Kabha, *The Palestinian Pres as a Shaper of Public Opinion*, 155-197.

[13] Mark Levine, "The Palestinian Press in Mandatory Jaffa: Advertising, Nationalism, and the Public Sphere," Chapter, In *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture*, edited by Rebecca L. Stein and Ted Swedenberg, 51-76, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005; Mustafa Kabha, "The Arabic Palestinian Press between the Two World Wars," Chapter, In *The Press in the Middle East and North Africa, 1850–1950: Politics, Social History and Culture*, edited by Anthony Gorman and Didier Monciaud, 99–125, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.

[14] Khalidi, P*alestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness,* 119-145

throughout the revolt until its conclusion in 1939, its impact was at its height during the general strike and the Arab state-sponsored ceasefire.[15] During this time, the press helped to provide a feeling of unity amongst the Palestinian people and to force the traditional Husayni and Nashashibi blocs to band together. It was at this time that Palestinian national identity solidified against the threat posed by British imperialism and Jewish immigration. The British repression of the Palestinian press is better analyzed during the strike than during the subsequent revolt, when armed bands dictated the actions of Palestinian journalists through fear and coercion. One of the main arguments of this paper is that British repression in fact played a key factor in the success of the press, by cementing it as a symbol of national identity and resistance.

Recent studies of the Palestinian press shine an important light on the development of the Palestine press and its role during the "Great Strike." Giora Goodman's study of British repression of the Palestinian press during the Arab Revolt provides invaluable insight into the use of press ordinances across the British Empire as a way not only for the British to assert their control in a way that wouldn't face widespread oversight at home, but also to save face as the cracks in the facade of British power and influence began to show in the lead up to the Second World War.[16] As this study will examine, the mechanisms used to control the press predated the mandate regime. These include examples of fines and censorship which were drawn from colonies as politically and culturally different as Nigeria, India, and Cyprus, as well as regulations previously imposed by the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire to limit any information that might call his rule into question, particularly as nationalist sentiments began to spread within the Balkan and Arab parts of the empire. Meanwhile, Palestinian authors Mustafa Kabha and

[15] Goodman, "British Press Control in Palestine," pg. 699-720.
[16] Ibid.

Rashid Khalidi have brought the language of the Palestinian press, mainly written in Arabic, to an English audience. This is critically important, as without these sources, the writings of the Palestinian press would not be available to English-speaking scholars.

Throughout this study, I will argue the repression of the Palestinian press played a key role in the revolt and in the formulation of a distinct Palestinian identity. Scholars such as Matthew Hughes and Jacob Norris have argued that the ability of the Palestinian press to influence public opinion was minimal and, further, that what minimal influence they exercised was due only to the failure of the British to fully repress newspapers. A similar conclusion had also been reached by the 1937 Peel Commission Report. But primary accounts by British officers and administrators tell a different story. British colonial office reports consistently articulate their fear of how the Palestinian press risked deepening the revolt. Likewise, repeated acts of suppression only served to galvanize and unify the population, who were able to set aside some of their divisions for the span of the strike. The press played a key role in this by facilitating and furthering the strike while providing Palestinians with a sense of common identity through their opposition to British colonialism and Jewish immigration.

In Chapter One, I provide an overview of the history of the Palestinian press beginning with the introduction of the printing press to the Middle East at the end of the 18th century and carrying through the creation of the first propaganda papers and theological journals in Palestine during the Ottoman period. I then give a brief overview of the British mandate and the 1933 Press Ordinance which was meant to provide the British with justification and means to suspend and fine the Palestinian press for criticizing mandate authorities or inciting Palestinians to

protest. The Ottoman state in part provided the framework that made the British repression of the Palestinian press possible through a framework the British could build off of.[17] Lastly, I introduce the beginnings of the conflict in Palestine during the Mandate period and analyze how these events shaped the development of the Palestinian press.

Chapter Two opens with an examination of the British policies which aimed to repress journalism, and of how the implementation of these policies was disrupted by internal disagreements and a fear of public opinion. It will then examine how the Palestinian press was able to withstand this repression as well as grow its popularity and influence as a result. The last section will discuss the Peel Commission's findings on the role of the press during the strike and its lasting implications for Palestinian national identity.

By placing the spotlight on the Palestinian press during the "Great Strike" of 1936, I aim to explore the important role that journalism plays in building national identity and unity in places where political freedoms are either circumscribed or even absent altogether. Journalism also plays a critical role in keeping elites honest and accountable to the people they purport to represent. This analysis is especially important at the present time, when press freedoms around the world are increasingly under threat and misinformation disseminated through social media clouds the judgement of citizens around the world.

Methodologies

[17] Gül Karagöz-Kızılca, "News Publishing as a Reflection of Public Opinion: The Idea of News during the Ottoman Financial Crises," Chapter, In T*he Press in the Middle East and North Africa, 1850–1950: Politics, Social History and Culture*, edited by Anthony Gorman and Didier Monciaud, 31–57, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017, 31-57.

Any study of colonialism from the perspective of a Western post-secondary education needs to be careful in approaching subject matter from a position of privilege and not letting the author's own biases and worldviews create preconceived notions about the truth in a given account. Due to my own limited knowledge of the languages used by the Palestinian press, namely Arabic but also Hebrew, Persian and Turkish, I am reliant on English sources, which means that I have had to take additional steps to make sure this study is free from errors of translation or misrepresentation grounded in ignorance. This includes a vast survey of the available literature and use of secondary sources that incorporate primary source material from Palestinian newspapers.

Likewise, in focusing on the 1936 "Great Strike" it is important to remember that the struggle for Palestinian nationhood and autonomy did not begin or end during this timeframe. The foundations of Palestinian nationalism date back to the late 19th century with the reforms and centralizing of control within the Ottoman Empire and the beginning of Jewish aliyahs to Palestine in 1883 which accelerated after the First Zionist Congress in 1897. The arguments about the press expressed within this thesis must be made with the consideration that the work of Palestinian journalists during the "Great Strike" was just one, albeit important, of many influences on the Palestinian national movement.

Finally, conclusions about the nature of British repression and the reaction of the Palestinian press are reliant on British colonial office reports retrieved from the National Archives in Kew through Center for Research Libraries (CRL). These papers are primarily from the years 1936 and 1937. They encompass a wide variety of reports, notices, and correspondence

between officials in Palestine and the government in London. I also consulted secondary sources by English-speaking authors. This precludes a full picture of the reaction of the Palestinian press. However, Rashid Khalidi and Mustafa Kabha help fill in the gaps with a detailed account of the actions of the press and its editors, including translations of editors statements and editorials.

Chapter One: The Palestinian Press: Symbol of Unity, Division, and National Identity

The Formation of the Palestinian Press

In colonial administrations, the freedom of assembly and freedom of speech are not protected or valued in the same way that those of us in liberal democracies take for granted.[18] Assembly and protest occur in the face of enormous repression as people fight for a better future for them and the generations that follow. People look to something to organize and urge them forward when all seems hopeless and insurmountable. This usually takes the form of strong leadership, whether that be one person who rises above all others, or a group of people able to provide a unity of thought and organization.[19] For Palestinians under British rule, this function came partly to be served by the press during the Great Strike of 1936, when the traditional leadership faltered and remained divided over personal quarrels and lack of political will.[20] However, for the press to become an important tool of not only resistance but also Palestinian identity and unity, it needed some assistance from the very type of European imperialism it would soon fight against. The tradition of public discourse and protest may have begun when

[18] Ora John Reuter, and Graeme B. Robertson. "Legislatures, Cooptation, and Social Protest in Contemporary Authoritarian Regimes," *The Journal of Politics* 77, no. 1 (2015): 235–48. https://doi.org/10.1086/678390, 235-248.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Bowden, "The Politics of the Arab Rebellion in Palestine 1936-39," 147-74.

the Gardens of Babylon were still providing wonder for those living between the Tigris and Euphrates,[21] but the origins of the Palestinian press are rooted in a form of writing that can be traced back to the 1798 invasion of Egypt by the French.

Napoleon's armies brought suffering, death, and imperialism to Egypt. Napoleon did not bring the revolutionary ideals of *liberté,* égalité, and *fraternité*, but he did bring something that gave people a new ability to broadcast feelings and viewpoints.[22] Carried over on French vessels, a printing press assembled in Cairo by Napoleon's men was the first such instrument in the Middle East outside of Istanbul.[23] While writing had existed in the region since clay steles and papyrus were first used to provide records of supplies and transactions, it had always been done painstakingly by hand.[24] Once the Ottomans, with the assistance of the British, drove out the French, an Albanian officer named Muhammad Ali set about making Egypt his own personal fiefdom.[25] Along with expansive military and agricultural reforms, Muhammad Ali established the first newspaper in the Ottoman Empire, called *al-Waqa'l al-Misriyya,* in 1828 in order to provide his subjects with propaganda extolling his accomplishments.[26] It would take almost thirty years before the Ottoman government noticed the value of using such propaganda in its other provinces.

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[21] Todd Charpin, *Writing, Law, and Kinship in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia,* Translated by Jane Marie Todd, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, 1-24.

[22] Juan R. Cole, *Napoleon in Egypt: Invading the Middle East,* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 148.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Barry P. Powell, *Writing: Theory and History of the Technology of Civilization*, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2012, 1-24.

[25] Khaled Fahmy, *Mehmed Ali: From Ottoman Governor to Ruler of Egypt*, London: Oneworld, 2008.

[26] Kabha, *The Palestinian Pres as a Shaper of Public Opinion*, pg. xiii

During the reign of Abdul Hamid II, the first papers established in Palestine, known at the time as the vilayets of Beirut and Jerusalem, were used much like in Egypt to disseminate propaganda amongst citizens, however there were some independent papers that sprouted up in opposition to the Ottoman state.[27] At the turn of the 20th century, nationalism was becoming a potent force throughout the Ottoman Empire which led to the loss of territory in the Balkans, as imperial subjects began to feel more affinity to others that shared their history, religion, and culture than the sultan and his court in Istanbul.[28] This was facilitated by members of the press who began to criticize Istanbul for its neglect of regional issues, the Tanzimat reforms, and the empire's weakening economy. The newspapers also paid attention to marginalized groups and local communities in ways that the large government-run papers did not. Thus, they gained a wide audience amongst the reading public who wished to see themselves and their communities represented. In turn, their representation helped establish their positionality as a member of their immediate community rather than merely a subject of the empire. This success in community building was notable because of the strict directives placed on them through the Ottoman Press Law.[29] These included making matters of the Sultan's health a top priority, forbidding the use of exclamation marks and ellipses, and censoring any news of government corruption, or foreign unrest.[30] Established in 1876, and edited by the Ottoman government official Shaykh 'Ali al-Rimawi after 1903, *al-Quds al-Sharif* and *al-Ghazal* were the first papers in Palestine and functioned largely as government mouthpieces following the example of Ali's *al-Misriyya.*[31] Missionary papers were also popular during this early period following the publication of

[27] Karagöz-Kızılca, "News Publishing as a Reflection of Public Opinion: The Idea of News during the Ottoman Financial Crises," 31-57

[28] Benjamin C. Fortna, Katsikas, Kamouzis Stefanos, Dimitris, and Paraskevas Konortas, eds. *State-Nationalisms in the Ottoman Empire, Greece and Turkey: Orthodox and Muslims*, 1830-1945. London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012, 1-12.

[29] Kabha, *The Palestinian Pres as a Shaper of Public Opinion*, pg. xiii-xxiii.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

Majmou'at Fawa'id in Beirut by the American Mission there beginning in 1851.[32] It would take a few more years, and an upheaval in the imperial capital, before independent papers could establish themselves in Palestine.[33]

The fall of Abdul Hamid II and the rise of the Young Turks in 1908 led to a brief, and critical, liberalizing of press restrictions which allowed for the founding of a new generation of newspapers focused more on the needs of the population than the whims of Istanbul.[34] In fact, two of the most important Palestinian papers, *al-Karmil* (1908) and *Filastin* (1911), were founded during this period.[35] Many of the early papers became increasingly antagonistic against Jewish settlement in the region and understood that success for Zionism meant the creation of a Jewish state that would push Palestinian Arabs to the margins of public life.[36] This perceived threat helped contribute to the development of a national consciousness amongst the people of Jerusalem, Haifa, and Jaffa that was separate from the sense of themselves as Ottoman subjects.[37] While early readership was small, a little over 2,000 issues per publication cycle, and centred on the literate elite, increased education levels in the provinces along with distribution efforts by the papers themselves, gradually expanded the papers' reach amongst Palestinians.[38] *Filastin* pioneered the method of driving papers out to individual villages where literate members of society would gather in a cafe or public square and together read the week's news aloud.[39]

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[32] Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness,* 119-145.

[33] Mustafa Kabha,"The Arabic Palestinian Press between the Two World Wars," Chapter, In *The Press in the Middle East and North Africa, 1850–1950*: Politics, Social History and Culture, edited by Anthony Gorman and Didier Monciaud, 99–125, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017, 99-125.

[34] Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, 119-124

[35] Ibid, pp. 124-144

[36] Khalidi, *The Hundred Years War on Palestine*, 1-17

[37] Ibid.

[38] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as a Shaper of Public Opinion*, 1-20

[39] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as a Shaper of Public Opinion*, 1-20; Khalidi, Palestinian identity, 124-144.

Although *Filastin* was a daily paper, logistics meant copies of the paper could only be distributed to the villages once a week.[40] *al-Karmil,* meanwhile, appealed to the largely Muslim villages with its emphasis on Jewish dispossession of Arab peasants, simple writing style, and Muslim ownership in a media climate dominated by Christian Arabs.[41]

The British Mandate and the 1933 Press Ordinance

The First World War, and the Balfour Declaration of 1917, made it clear to Palestinians that the Zionist threat now had a powerful backer in the British Empire, a behemoth that at one point ruled over one-quarter of the world's land. To counter, Palestinian papers upped the rhetoric against Jewish settlements and began pressing for a stronger show of force.[42] This rhetoric put the press not only on a collision path with the new British overlords after 1918, but also with traditional Palestinian politics characterized by the disunity and infighting of the powerful Husayni and Nashashibi families of Jerusalem.[43]

Palestinian society had long been governed by patronage networks overseen by wealthy land-owning families who served as middlemen between the Ottoman state and the Palestinian population.[44] The Nashashibi and Husaynis of Jerusalem, as the most prominent of these families, had long had an intense and bitter rivalry.[45] Upon their arrival, the British quickly began

[40] Fred H Lawson, "Falastin: An Experiment in Promoting Palestinian Nationalism through the English-Language Press," Chapter, In *The Press in the Middle East and North Africa, 1850–1950: Politics, Social History and Culture*, edited by Anthony Gorman and Didier Monciaud, 126–50, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017, 126-50.

[41] Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, 124-126

[42] Ibid.

[43] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as a Shaper of Public Opinion*,1-20

[44] Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*, 24-37

[45] Ibid.

dividing Palestinians between the Husayni and Nashashibi camps.[46] The Husaynis were granted both the position of mufti, who oversaw the newly created Supreme Muslim Council, and the mayorship of Jerusalem.[47] Infighting between those who supported the Husaynis and those who supported the Nashashibis would keep many Palestinians preoccupied for the next decade while the Zionist Organization, in sharp contrast, cemented itself as the representative of the Jews in Palestine, and immigration raised the Jewish minority to 18.5% of the total population by 1933.[48]

British divide and rule tactics would exacerbate tensions by further dividing power: for example, they granted the position of Mufti to the Husaynis, and the mayorship of Jerusalem to the Nashashibis.[49] This separating of positions would be the first of many divisive incursions by the British into the internal politics of Palestinians, which would put added pressure on the need for a unifying force amongst Palestinians. It was the Palestinian press that, for a time, would try to fill this vacuum and provide a sense of unity despite British repression.

For Britain, whose rule would be confirmed under the new League of Nations Mandate system in 1923, the spoils of oil-rich Iraq, the Jordan desert, and geopolitically important Palestine allowed it, if only for a moment, to be optimistic about a new golden age for the Empire. While the newly-formed League of Nations was a nuisance to British imperial authorities, full of questions and time-consuming yearly reports, it also served as a veneer of

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[46] William M. Mathew, "The Balfour Declaration and the Palestine Mandate, 1917–1923: British Imperialist Imperatives," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no.3 (2013): 231-250. DOI: 10.1080/13530194.2013.791133, 231-250.

[47] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as a Shaper of Public Opinion,* pp. 175-190

[48] W. Peel et al, "Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," 113-125.

[49] Samih K. Farsoun, and Naseer H. Aruri, *Palestine and the Palestinians: A Social and Political History* (2nd ed.), London: Routledge, 2006, 21-56.

legitimacy and accountability over what was unmistakably a colonial venture.[50] However, the emergence of nationalist ideologies and the ethos of self-determination made imperial rule increasingly untenable around the world.[51]

Under the Mandate system, the British were supposed to prepare the people of Palestine for independence.[52] However, unlike other mandates laid out for Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Transjordan, the mandate for Palestine specifically included the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine as a key responsibility of the British. The Balfour Declaration was thus cemented in international law and the fulfillment of its promises became a key indicator of British success and failure.[53] Arab Palestinians, meanwhile, were dismissed rhetorically as the "other inhabitants of Palestine" and the rights afforded to them were simply that their civil and religious rights were to be respected.[54]

Besides divide and rule, Britain set about implementing a wide array of legal tools meant to punish dissent and to prevent organization of a unified resistance.[55] One of these tools was press censorship. Although the press in Britain remained free to criticize the government, a freedom guarded zealously by both parliament and the public, British policy in the colonies was to allow the press to have editorial autonomy only so much as it didn't criticize the British or

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[50] John Strawson, *Partitioning Palestine: Legal Fundamentalism in the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict,* London: Pluto Press, 2010, 42-70; Report, 1933, Report by his Majesty's Government for the year 1933; Report, 1936, Report by his Majesty's Government for the year 1936; Report, 1937, Report by his Majesty's Government for the year 1937.

[51] D. K. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 45-66.

[52] Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

[53] Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 45-66.

[54] League of Nations, Council. The Palestine Mandate. 24 July 1922. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/palmanda.asp.

[55] Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine*, 35-77

incite unrest.[56] In places such as Cyprus, India, Nigeria, and Ghana, criticism and unrest were met with swift fines, suspensions, and sometimes imprisonment against the press and its editors.[57] For example, the Indian Press Act of 1910 was installed following a period of unrest, repealed in 1922, only to be reinstalled in 1930 during Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedience campaign.[58] In Cyprus, a press law imposed pre-publication censorship between 1931 and 1937 following Greek nationalist riots on the island in 1930.[59] Similar pre-publication censorship was installed in Ghana (the Gold Coast) and Nigeria during the 1930s.[60] Although these press laws sometimes faced scrutiny back home, none of these laws ever caused enough uproar in Britain to cause their repeal.[61]

In Palestine, initial efforts at controlling the press centred on forcing papers to register with the mandate government. For the most part British authorities at first left the Palestinian press to develop on its own.[62] Indeed, Ottoman era restrictions were removed and it seemed as if a new time of liberal freedoms was coming to the press in Palestine.[63] This did not last long however as by the middle of the 1920s, Palestinian newspapers began facing fines and suspensions that led to the closure of those papers lacking the financial capabilities to survive, and others missing regular publication cycles.[64]

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[56] Drayton,"Press Ordinance 1933," 1214-1238.
[57] Goodman, "British Press Control in Palestine During the Arab Revolt, 1936-39," pg. 699-720.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine,* 35-78.
[62] Khalidi, *The Hundred Years War on Palestine,* 17-55.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as a Shaper of Public Opinion*, pg. xxi-xxii

The main document that would come to dictate the experience of the Palestinian press was the Palestinian Press Ordinance of 1933.[65] Under the British colonial system, Palestine was ruled by a High Commissioner who reported to the Colonial Office and the Crown.[66] The High Commissioner also chaired the all-British executive council in charge of passing legislation for the colony, and thus exercised unrestrained power over Palestine.[67] Although the Palestine Press Ordinance was introduced during a series of revolts responding to increased Jewish immigration after 1933, the legislation had been in development since the 1929 Western Wall riots.[68] Under the terms of the Ordinance, papers could be suspended or fined for spreading false information, inciting unrest, and refusing to publish official communiques.[69] All suspensions were to be published in the Palestine Gazette, the British paper of record in Palestine.[70] Each newspaper was also required to present two copies of each issue to the local District Commissioner prior to publication.[71] Although this ordinance was put in place as a bulwark against press incitement and meant to be used as a lever to control the press, British hesitation in implementing it to its fullest extent would limit its ability during the 1936 Great Strike to prevent the press from influencing the population.

The Beginnings of Revolt and Repression

The General Strike began as a series of reprisals between Palestinian Arabs and Jews. On April 15, 1936, two Jews were murdered by followers of the late cleric Izz ad-Din al-Qassam, the leader of a Palestinian armed band.[72] al-Qassam had been killed by British forces on

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[65] Drayton, "Press Ordinance 1933."
[66] Hughes, 2019, 35-77
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Drayton, "Press Ordinance 1933."
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine*, 1-11

November 20, 1935 and was declared a martyr by Palestinians.[73] Palestinian leaders, however, initially distanced themselves from al-Qassam and depicted him as a terrorist.[74] Combined with the increase in Jewish immigration and British denial of Palestinian representation within the mandate government, the death of al-Qassam and subsequent lack of action by Palestinian leadership was the tinder for a full-scale revolt by the Palestinian population. The General Strike would commence two days later on April 19.[75] Although the early period of the 1936-39 Arab Revolt, from April 1936 until October 1936, is understood as being primarily a strike against Jewish immigration and British rule, violence also started very early in the countryside.

One important aspect of the revolt is the tension between those who wanted to peacefully demonstrate their grievances through a civil disobedience campaign and those who saw taking up arms as the only way to take their land.[76] For the press, primarily operated by urban elites, armed bands were a threat to their interests and seen as backwards and primitive.[77] Although some members of the press would later support certain armed bands following the failure of the General Strike and the disappointing recommendations of the 1937 Peel Commission Report, in the initial months the energy of the press was directed at helping the General Strike succeed.[78] It was during this process that the influence and unity of the press began to rise in the face of ever-increasing British repression.

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[73] Ibid.

[74] Bowden, "The Politics of the Arab Rebellion in Palestine 1936-39," 147-174.

[75] David de Vries, *Strike Action and Nation Building: Labor Unrest in Palestine/Israel, 1899-1951*, New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2015, 46-66.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Mustafa Kabha, "The Palestinian Press and the General Strike, April-October 1936: 'Filastin' as a Case Study," *Middle Eastern Studies* 39, no. 3 (2003): 169–89, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4284312, 169-189.

[78] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as a Shaper of Public Opinion,* 201-236.

During the first couple weeks of the strike, local grassroots committees popped up around the country, some led by journalists such as Akram Zu'aitir of the popular *al-Difa* and the oppositional *Istiqlal* political party.[79] Other members of the press such as 'Issa al-'Issa of *Filastin,* allied at the time with the Nashashibi opposition, also took to criticizing the mufti, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, for his lack of leadership and initiative.[80] Despite the concentration of activism among newspapers supporting the oppositional al-Nashashibi faction, even Raghib al-Nashashibi was criticized for failing to direct the strikers and call out the mufti for his failings.[81] Although al-Husayni and al-Nashashibi would put aside (if temporarily) their differences to form the Arab Higher Committee five days after the beginning of the revolt, they would never really gain control of the General Strike.[82] Instead, it would be Palestinian journalists that would serve as a loudspeaker for striking Palestinians. The Palestinian press at this point was conspicuous by its unity, something that had not had been the case for much of its history, with editors previously divided in their support for either the al-Husaynis or the al-Nashashibis.[83] At a meeting organized by 'Issa al-'Issa on May 27, 1936 at the Ramle residence of Sheikh al-Farouqi, a prominent lawyer and member of the opposition, the top Palestinian papers, supported by the Husayni supporting *al-Liwa* (although it did not attend), came up with a series of resolutions meant to guide the strike and foster unity amongst the press.[84] These included such measures as holding a three-day protest strike in support of those in the streets, publishing a unified statement about current conditions, and refusing to publish formal government announcements.[85] Although only

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[79] Mustafa Kabha, "The Palestinian Press and the General Strike, April-October 1936: 'Filastin' as a Case Study," 169-189.

[80] Tom Bowden, "The Politics of the Arab Rebellion in Palestine 1936-39," 147-174.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ted Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt: The 1936–1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past*, 1 ed., Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003, 45-65.

[83] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion*, pg. 160-168.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Ibid.

four of the ten resolutions were carried out by the organizer of the conference, *Filastin,* the coming together of prominent papers demonstrated a level of unity and collaboration that was missing at the top levels of leadership.[86]

The AHC meanwhile was continuously wracked by disorganization and disagreement, and as such was never able to provide an overarching leadership for the localized grassroots committees.[87] In fact, the more critical a paper was towards the authorities, the more popular it became with the youthful activists of the strike.[88] *Filastin*, known for its inflammatory language toward the AHC during the general strike, ended up having to appeal to readers to return finished copies as demand had outpaced supply.[89] The Peel Commission would later estimate that circulation of certain newspapers reached as high as 6,000 copies, almost triple what it had been during the early years of the mandate.[90] Likewise, although the press as a whole increased in popularity during the general strike, papers not connected to or critical of the al-Husaynis saw the biggest increase.[91] While *al-Liwa* saw a circulation of 3,000-4,000 copies during this period, *Filastin* and *al-Difa* were able to produce between 4,000 and 6,000 copies per issue.[92]

In the initial days and weeks, the British pressured the newly-formed AHC to call off the General Strike which, although it was causing havoc in the countryside, was so far proving to be more of a headache than a threat to the Jews and their British patrons.[93] However, as the strike

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[86] Ibid.

[87] Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt: The 1936–1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past,* 44-66.

[88] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion*, 162-168

[89] Ibid.

[90] W. Peel et al, "Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," 132-133.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Norris, “Repression and Rebellion: Britain's Response to the Arab Rebellion of 1936-39,” 25-45; Kelly “The Revolt of 1936: A Revision,” 28-42.

wore on and violence rose in the countryside, the British turned to tactics of collective punishment and asserted a vast military presence across the country.[94] In accordance with the terms of the 1933 Press Ordinance, pre-publication censorship was imposed on newspapers that called for a continuation of the strike, including al-Farouqi's *al-Jami'a al-Islamiyya.*[95] Even nominally pro-Zionist members of the Palestinian press did not escape the censor as Ilya Zakka and his paper *al-Nafir* soon discovered when they were suspended for breaking censorship guidelines.[96] Likewise, British censors threatened, with fines and suspension, any paper that deviated from the official narrative of events, such as arrests or armed conflict, which usually left out details of British collective punishment and downplayed the popularity of protest actions. A Colonial Office report on the state of the Palestinian press between November 1935 and April 1936 expressed fear that, if left unchecked, the press could not only push what had started as a general strike into a full-scale rebellion but also unify a divided Palestinian public.[97] This helps explain repressive measures that harsh press coverage of the British authorities received. Suspensions for critical articles could last up to two weeks while charges of incitement often led to indefinite suspensions with no fixed end date.[98] Although initially intended as a temporary closure, the suspension of the al-Husayni mouthpiece *al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya* was later made permanent for its repeated inflammatory statements by the High Commissioner under emergency regulations put into place at the beginning of the General Strike.[99] As will be discussed in the next chapter, the British repression of the press was harsh, but also hesitant to take measures that would lead to its shutdown. The hesistancy of British authorities was due to fears that the lack of

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[94] Ibid.

[95] Goodman, "British Press Control in Palestine During the Arab Revolt, 1936-39," 699-720; Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as a Shaper of Public Opinion*, pg. 173-186.

[96] Kabha, T*he Palestinian Press as a Shaper of Public Opinion*, 173-186.

[97] British Colonial Office: Palestine, Original Correspondence, "Colonial Office Report on Press in Palestine," CO 733/346, pg. 3.

[98] Drayton, "Press Ordinance 1933," 1214-1238.

[99] Ibid.

a functioning press would lead to wild rumours spreading amongst the population. At the same time, repressive measures only made the press more popular and helped it solidify its ability to be a significant focal point of leadership as well as the vanguard in the emerging Palestinian identity.

CHAPTER TWO: British Repression of the Palestinian Press: A Study in Hesitation

Hesitation and Anxiety

As mentioned in Chapter One, the British Empire relied heavily on an imperial playbook that melded military force with a wide array of legal orders and tools. In most colonies, the British parliamentary and legal systems were imported, and established some representation and limited self-rule for locals often based on divisive constructions of race or religion.[100] At the same time, executive power was concentrated in the hands of the High Commissioner, who, along with a small council, made the final say on ordinances and other legislation.[101] While local populations were granted very little actual power, they were granted limited social and political rights that could be used both as a carrot and as a stick by the colonial authorities, as well as a way for Britain to say, as a way to justify their presence, that they were granting liberty to the indigenous population.[102] While British criminal law often replaced local laws and customs within the realm of criminal prosecution, local laws were kept in place for civil cases where

[100] Matthew K. Lange, "British Colonial Legacies and Political Development," *World Development* 32, no.6 (2004): 905-922, DOI: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2003.12.001, 905-922.
[101] Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine*, 35-77
[102] Norris, "Repression and Rebellion: Britain's Response to the Arab Rebellion of 1936-39," 25-45

possible, particularly where religion was concerned.[103] During times of unrest, emergency measures would be put in place that heavily circumscribed rights and invested even more power in the hands of the High Commissioner and his legal and military institutions.[104]

In Palestine, the High Commissioner and the military worked in tandem to craft laws and institutions that could be put into action immediately if unrest erupted amongst the population.[105] At that point, courts were simply expected to provide legal legitimacy to the actions of the authorities and a vessel to prosecute those deemed a problem by colonial authorities.[106] During the Great Strike of 1936, however, the plodding bureaucratic nature of the courts, as well as the sympathy of many judges towards the victims of state repression, frustrated the military.[107] Moreover, courts were wary about granting the military powers reserved for situations of martial law.[108] The military wanted to have unreserved authority to quash the General Strike and the emergence of armed bands by any means necessary, including violent military engagement.[109] However, due to concerns about a possible loss of control under martial law, the courts refused, for the time, to grant this power and the military had to content itself with reactionary measures of collective punishment such as house demolition, looting of valuables, and arrests of villagers. Extrajudicial punishment, including executions of rebels, was also carried out, though at first without the permission of the courts or civilian authorities.[110] This internal division eventually led to the sidelining of civilian courts by emergency regulations and the expansion of the use of

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[103] Barakat, "Criminals or Martyrs? Let the Courts Decide!-British Colonial Legacy in Palestine and the Criminalization of Resistance," 84-97.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine*, 35-77

[106] Barakat,"Criminals or Martyrs? Let the Courts Decide!-British Colonial Legacy in Palestine and the Criminalization of Resistance," 84-97

[107] Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine*, 35-77.

[108] Ibid.

[109] Norris, "Repression and Rebellion: Britain's Response to the Arab Rebellion of 1936-39," 25-45.

[110] Khalidi, *The Hundred Years War on Palestine*, 17-55

military courts.[111] Extrajudicial punishment only came into effect in November, 1937 during the second half of the revolt.[112] In the meantime, arrests and temporary detainment were carried out frequently. For their part, fines, suspensions, and censorship remained the main tactics used to deal with increasingly influential Palestinian papers.[113]

Between April and June of 1936, members of Britain's Executive Council in Palestine remained wary of instituting large-scale pre-publication censorship in fear that this would lead to a strike by Palestinian papers and thus drive the populace towards dangerous rumours in their absence.[114] Dismantling the press, officials believed, would only serve to incite further acts of violence against Jewish villages and British officers.[115] This careful treatment of the press is in stark contrast to the protestors themselves who were often treated harshly.[116] At the same time, fines and suspensions were used liberally against papers deemed to have urged Arabs to strike or take up arms against the state.[117] As violence intensified, suspensions became more and more frequent, making it difficult for papers to maintain their news cycles and distribution to far-flung villages.[118] However, by suspending and fining the press while still allowing it to function, the British increased its influence amongst the Arab population through providing the newspaper coverage with an aura of resistance against colonial occupiers.[119] According to the Peel Commission, Palestinians saw in the press a reflection of the hardships they were facing in their

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[111] Barakat, "Criminals or Martyrs? Let the Courts Decide!-British Colonial Legacy in Palestine and the Criminalization of Resistance," 84-97

[112] Ibid.

[113] Goodman, "British Press Control in Palestine During the Arab Revolt, 1936-39," 699-720.

[114] Minutes of Executive Council Meeting, 4 May 1936, CO 814/32, TNA.

[115] Ibid.

[116] Norris, "Repression and Rebellion: Britain's Response to the Arab Rebellion of 1936-39," 25-45.

[117] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion,* 155-201

[118] Ibid.

[119] W. Peel et al, "Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," 193-214.

own communities.[120] Likewise, collective punishments carried out by British soldiers were well known throughout the territory and the suspension of papers for publishing information about such events only served to substantiate pre-existing knowledge.[121] Goodman makes the point that in trying to protect their reputation as benevolent rulers, British authorities, in fact, increased the popularity of the revolt.[122] The Peel Commission would also find that suspensions had no effect on papers such as *Filastin* or *al-Difa* which would continue to print articles criticizing the British and depicting colonial excesses following their reinstatement.[123] Despite the High Commissioner's office having the power to permanently close a newspaper or revoke an editor's license, this step was rarely taken with *al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya* the only paper closed permanently during the Great Strike.[124] Between June and October, pre-publication censorship was fully implemented and from that point on Palestinian papers were required to publish all official notices and undergo thorough checks by the Office of the Censor prior to publication.[125] Any reporting of events to do with the revolt were prohibited, including both attacks by Palestinian bands and British counter-insurgency tactics.[126]

The British Press Bureau in Palestine was highly anxious about Arabic language papers in Palestine and the degree to which they were able to influence the Palestinian population.[127] One report submitted by the Palestine government to the Peel Commission accused the Arabic press of spreading false rumours about British fighter pilots dropping candies laced with poison

[120] Ibid.
[121] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion,* pg. 155-201
[122] Goodman, "British Press Control in Palestine During the Arab Revolt, 1936-39," 699-720.
[123] W. Peel et al, "Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," 193-214
[124] Kabha,T*he Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion*, 184-185
[125] Goodman, *British Press Control in Palestine During the Arab Revolt,* 1936-39," 699-720.
[126] Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine*, 35-77
[127] W. Peel et al, "Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," 193-214

on Palestinian villages and stated that it was actively "aiming to agitate the strike movement."[128] By 1937, the British were wondering whether setting up an Arabic paper owned and operated by the mandate authorities would be a good idea. However it was eventually decided that it would be seen immediately for what it was and would never gain the trust of Palestinians.[129] This had been observed in the reception of the *Palestine Gazette* during the early months of the mandate, when the British Press Bureau attempted to counter the rhetoric of Palestinian papers by increasing the volume and distribution of official accounts with very little impact.[130] Although Palestinian newspapers did indeed exert substantial influence over the Great Strike in the countryside, the British exaggerated the extent to which the revolt was due to incitement by Palestinian journalists.[131] At its root, the Great Strike of 1936 was still a spontaneous peasant revolt brought about by anger over Jewish immigration and land dispossession, as well as anti-British sentiment. The Palestinian press was mostly successful in providing a platform for these grievances to be heard, and in so doing, to help formulate and increase affinity for a sense of Palestinian nationhood.

A Lasting Influence

At the outset of the Great Strike, Palestinian journalists were sharply divided into three camps: those who sided with either the al-Husaynis and al-Nashashibis and those who tried to maintain a measure of independence.[132] The al-Husaynis were especially prolific in establishing

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[128] Quoted in Kabha,*The Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion*, 183.
[129] 'Goodman,"British Press Control in Palestine During the Arab Revolt, 1936-39," 699-720.
[130] Ibid.
[131] W. Peel et al, "Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," 193-214.
[132] Farsoun, and Aruri, *Palestine and the Palestinians: A Social and Political History* (2nd ed.), London: Routledge, 2006, 21-56.

newspapers to espouse their views, with *al-Liwa* serving as the most prominent.[133] Divisions also surfaced between papers with Christian editors – which made up the majority of well-established papers, such as Issa-al-Issa's *Filastin* and Najib Nassar's *Al-Karmil* – and papers run by Muslims, such as Ibrahim al-Shanti's *al-Difa.*[134] These divisions would never be fully overcome but would indeed be softened by the need for a united front in the face of British repression and a dearth of leadership by the Arab Higher Committee.[135]

British censorship and suspensions forced members of the press to band together to continue providing Palestinians with a reliable news source. For example, it was members of the Palestinian press that published the strike notice drawn up by the local committees and young leaders of the emerging Palestinian national movement.[136] Journalists such as Ibrahim al-Shanti of *al-Difa* not only gave space for organizers to print their messages but also actively helped organize the strike.[137] Directives banning the publication of such notices as well as accounts of events on the ground were ignored with the knowledge that should one paper be banned for an account of a certain event then another paper would take up coverage.[138] The first Arab Journalists' Congress on May 27, 1936, in Ramle (mentioned briefly in chapter one), tried further to bring the separate papers together.[139] It established a ten-point plan for cooperation between the newspapers as well as a framework for assisting the strike. While most of these resolutions, including for the amalgamation of all the separate papers into a unified press, failed to gain any traction and the papers themselves remained divided over their perception of the

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[133] Kabha, T*he Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion*, 155-201
[134] Ibid.
[135] Farsoun, and Aruri, *Palestine and the Palestinians: A Social and Political History* (2nd ed.), London: Routledge, 2006, 21-56.
[136] Kabha, 2003, pg. 169-189.
[137] Khalidi, *The Hundred Years War on Palestine*, 17-55
[138] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion*,156-168.
[139] Goodman,"British Press Control in Palestine During the Arab Revolt, 1936-39," 699-720.

national leadership and what a future Palestinian state should look like, they were united in their support for the strike and fostering of a Palestinian nation.

Palestinian journalists were essential in the naming and shaming of Arab landlords selling or planning to sell their property to Jews, either directly or through organizations such as the Palestine Land Development Company.[140] Without these sales, the formation of a Jewish state in Palestine would have been much more difficult to accomplish.[141] While many of the Arab families who sold land resided outside the territory defined after the First World War as Palestine, most prominently in the new French mandates of Syria and Lebanon, many were Palestinian and most commonly cited lack of economic opportunities as the reason for selling.[142] Journalists would often go visit the potential seller and try to persuade them against selling to Jewish immigrants.[143] They would then recount their visit with the landlord and call for others to take up the work of drawing him away from selling.[144] By doing this, journalists hoped to prevent the further accumulation of land by Jewish agencies, keep Palestinian peasants on the land, and prevent acts of violence against the potential sellers.[145] This was seen as especially important during the strike when tensions were high and calls for retribution against those rumoured to be selling to Jews was frequent.

Newspapers in Palestine were also critical in the very creation of the Arab Higher Committee, through their own editorials and the discussions they facilitated with the traditional

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[140] Kenneth W Stein, "The Jewish National Fund: Land Purchase Methods and Priorities, 1924-1939," *Middle Eastern Studies* 20, no. 2 (1984): 190–205, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4282996, 190-205

[141] Ibid.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion*, 156-168.

[144] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion*, 156-168.

[145] Ibid.

leadership.[146] Although it would never exert full control over the strike, much to the dismay of the British, the AHC was able to develop further sympathy and support for the strike amongst the middle and upper classes of Palestinian society.[147] By October, 1936, the Arab Higher Committee was also in negotiations for a cessation of the strike and the setting up of the Peel Commission. According to Kabha, without the pressure exerted on the Arab Higher Committee by the Palestinian press, it is doubtful that any commission into the strike and revolt would have represented the Palestinian point of view in the same way.[148]

Overall, the press's impact on Palestinian identity can be seen in two key areas: the bringing together of Palestinian Christians and Muslims under the banner of Palestinian nationalism, and maintaining the fragile alliance between the wealthy urban elite and struggling rural peasants. By portraying the British and the Jews as a common enemy, Palestinian journalists helped obscure and alleviate fractious identity politics.[149] *Filastin* in particular was a consistent proponent of Muslim-Christian cooperation and solidarity.[150] Despite being a Christian run paper, it reported widely on the actions of Muslim run organizations such as the Haifa Islamic Society.[151] It was also instrumental in the formation of the Arab Iron Company, a combined Muslim-Christian enterprise designed to provide some economic autonomy for the Arab population of Palestine.[152] While it failed in this aim, it did open up avenues for cooperation that didn't previously exist.[153] It also helped foster a sense of identity that was

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[146] Ibid.
[147] W. Peel et al, "Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," 193-214.
[148] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion,* 155-201
[149] Khalidi, Khalidi, *Palestinian identity*, 119-145
[150] Kabha,"The Arabic Palestinian Press between the Two World Wars," 169-189.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt: The 1936–1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past*, 44-66.

neither Muslim nor Christian but Palestinian.[154] In terms of the relationship between the urban centres and rural villages, the success of the press must be viewed in more limited terms.[155] Many middle and upper-class Palestinians were hesitant in their support of the Great Strike and there was never complete buy-in from wealthy landlords or business owners, some of whom remained open throughout.[156] However, the idealistic image of Palestinian peasants revolting against the colonial state depicted in the press was a powerful symbol held up, even by urban elites, as the basis for Palestinian identity.[157] It is interesting that the Peel Commission would choose to frame the standpoint of the press in such terms as it indicates a shift in British policy away from the lack of recognition of a distinct Palestinian nation in the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate for Palestine. In fact, the Peel Commission serves as a key source for understanding British reactions to the Great Strike and the role the Palestinian press played throughout.

Cessation of Hostilities and the 1937 Peel Commission

A closer examination of the Peel commission report can help us understand the ways in which the eventual British victory over the strike did not lead to a resumption of strong control and how in trying to limit the impact of the Palestinian press, it in fact furthered its ability the influence of the press and Palestinian national identity.[158]

The British authorities in Palestine had hoped that the mandate could become part of a new strategic center in the Middle East along with their holdings in Egypt, Transjordan, Iraq, and

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[154] Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*, 155-211.
[155] Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine*, 35-77
[156] Ibid.
[157] Peel et al, "Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," 193-214.
[158] Ibid.

the emirates on the Arabian coast.[159] A prolonged strike began to change this calculation as governorship over a mandate — espoused following the First World War as a charitable way to develop the local population for statehood and self-determination — became increasingly untenable.[160] Likewise, the Great Strike forced the British to reevaluate what their promise of a Jewish state in Palestine entailed and how, if at all it could be implemented in a way that would prevent further conflict.[161]

The Peel Commission found that while authorities had inflated claims that the Palestinian press instigated the 1936 strike, it did find that newspapers helped "fan the flames."[162] This was accomplished through the covert distribution of newspapers that was difficult for the British authorities to control.[163] Palestinian journalists also were on the ground in Palestinian villages giving residents the latest updates when papers were either suspended or unable to be distributed.[164] The Peel Commission stated that the "Arab press indulged in unrestrained invective against the government."[165] This included the claim that British airplanes had dropped poisoned sweets into villages.[166] The commission came to the conclusion that the powers of suspension and fines given to the British authorities by the 1933 Press Ordinance were not used widely enough.[167] It did, however, also acknowledge that actions against the press, in fact, helped alleviate financial pressure of newspaper owners, gave them a free source of advertising, and

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[159] Mathew, "The Balfour Declaration and the Palestine Mandate, 1917–1923: British Imperialist Imperatives," 231-250.
[160] Bartal, "The Peel Commission Report of 1937 and the Origins of the Partition Concept," 51-70.
[161] Peel et al, "Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," 193-214.
[162] Ibid.
[163] Kabha,"The Palestinian Press and the General Strike, April-October 1936: 'Filastin' as a Case Study," 169-189
[164] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion*, 170-173
[165] Peel et al, "Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," 193-214.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Ibid.

increased their popularity.[168] Papers regularly saw improved circulation following the conclusion of a suspension.[169] Lord Peel and his fellow investigators called for the imposition of a cash deposit, to be confiscated in the event of infractions, and a renewed threat of imprisonment.[170] However, as Norris notes, due to the paralysis of the courts for much of the strike period, the charging and jailing of journalists had been unlikely to happen on a large scale.[171] Only after the military took over the court system in 1937 would such punishments have been possible. In conclusion, the commission reached its own conclusion that the strike would have ended much sooner had British authorities taken stronger actions against the press.[172] Investigators believed that, particularly in Haifa, the press were responsible for the continuation of the strike and that punishments were not severe enough to get them to back off on their incitement of the population.[173]

The findings of the Peel Commission confirm the influence that the press exerted on Palestinians, as acknowledged too by the British army officials.[174] At the same time, the commission acknowledged the failings of British authorities to counter that influence.[175] However, it is unclear how British authorities could have adequately stunted the power of the press in such a way without dismantling the press entirely. Such a radical step might have fulfilled British fears that leaving Palestinians without a press would make them susceptible to "wild rumours."[176] These fears of course reveal the racial belief that Palestinians were somehow

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[168] Ibid.
[169] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion*, 173-186
[170] Peel et al, "Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," 193-214.
[171] Norris, "Repression and Rebellion: Britain's Response to the Arab Rebellion of 1936-39," 25-45.
[172] Peel et al, "Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," 193-214.
[173] Ibid.
[174] Kabha, "The Palestinian Press and the General Strike, April-October 1936: 'Filastin," 169-189.
[175] Peel et al, "Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," 193-214.
[176] Goodman, "British Press Control in Palestine During the Arab Revolt, 1936-39," 699-720.

less developed than the colonial forces and that they would have been inherently unable to accurately distribute information without the press.[177] Yet, much of the information about British actions during the revolt, such as collective punishments, were provided to journalists by citizens on the ground.[178] Thus, it is likely that citizens would have found a way to convey information even without the availability of a functioning press. This is because of the relative newness of the press to the region and the continued functioning of information corridors throughout Palestine.[179]

Of course, as history shows, the outcome of the Great Strike was not a stable and long lasting peace but rather a temporary cessation of hostilities while the Peel commission did its work. Upon the publication of the Peel report, in the fall and winter of 1937, armed bands took up arms against the British for failing to grant a Palestinian state out and reduce or stop Jewish immigration.[180] These armed bands prefered violence over negotiation and used tactics of intimidation to keep the press compliant with their own methods of combat and propaganda. Journalists, including 'Issa al-'Issa, were forced to flee Palestine between 1936 and 1939 over their refusal to aid the armed bands.[181] This had the result of greatly limiting the power of the press as those journalists who remained in the country did so in relative silence.[182] However, the legacy of the Palestinian press would live on until the end of the revolt and the publication of the 1939 White Paper, which did bring about the very limitation of Jewish immigration and land

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[177] Nimrod Ben Zeev, "Palestine along the colour line: race, colonialism, and construction labour, 1918–1948," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44, no.12 (2021): 2190-2212, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2021.1885723, 2190-2212.

[178] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion*, 156-197.

[179] Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East: A History,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, 11-27.

[180] Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine,* 78-111.

[181] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion,* 156-197.

[182] Ibid.

sales that journalists had been calling for since the early 1920s.[183] The more lasting impact of the press however was the role it played in helping forge the feeling of Palestinian identity in a post-Ottoman world. As this paper has sought to explore more fully, not only did journalists do their best to fill the leadership gaps left by the traditional leadership during the General Strike, British repression expanded the microphone and influence.

Conclusion

The Palestinian press was at the forefront of the 1936 Great Strike in Palestine. Papers such as *Filastin* and *al-Difa* proved critical in knowledge dissemination and in facilitating political pressures towards the Arab Higher Committee. At the same time the rhetoric used within the pages helped in the development of a Palestinian identity. It has been well-established in the literature that media can instill a sense of belonging within members of community and help create what Anderson calls an "imagined community."[184] This is done through portraying a shared sense of identity and creating evocative imagery that people reading the same paper at the same time can relate to. Anderson's work helps ground this study by showing how newspapers ingrain national fictions into people through imagery and representation. In Palestine, this sense of identity was defined by a long-standing relationships to the land as well as resistance to British imperialism and Jewish settlement. As the Peel Commission concluded, without the influence of the press, the strike was unlikely to have lasted as long as it did due to the ability of Palestinian journalists to rally people around the fight for Palestinian autonomy and identity.[185]

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[183] Khalidi, *The Hundred Years War on Palestine*, 17-55.

[184] Benedict R. Anderson O'G, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. and extended ed. New York: Verso, 1991

[185] Peel et al, "Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," 193-214.

Left without a functioning leadership to unite the population, it was up to the press to provide direction and keep the public informed. Without British hesitation in administering the stipulations of the 1933 Press Ordinance, Palestinian journalists would have been unable to exert such a degree of influence over the Great Strike. On the one hand, the delay in installing pre-publication censorship and reluctance to fully close papers allowed for them to use both covert and overt methods of keeping the strike going and infiltrate the population far outside of their bases in urban areas.[186] On the other, the repressive methods of the British, including collective punishments of villagers along with fines and suspensions against the press, formed a sense of solidarity between Palestinian journalists—who frequently called out the harsh treatment of rural villagers—and the striking Palestinian peasants who saw the press fighting for their rights.[187] This in turn furthered the growing sense of Palestinian identity amongst a people who came to be defined not only by language, centuries-long customs, and a way of life situated on the Mediterranean coast but also in opposition to the Zionist project and colonial occupation.

At the same time, the Peel commission reached the conclusion that British efforts to repress the efforts of Palestinian journalists through fines, pre-publication censorship, and suspensions only increased their popularity.[188] The 1933 Press Ordinance gave the authorities the ability to impose these punishments as well as close papers altogether for repeated violations. Despite the enthusiasm in 1933 with legislating censorship measures, when push came to shove in 1936, the British worried that a heavy-handed approach and mass closure of newspapers would lead to misinformation and wild rumours amongst the population.[189] This is unlikely as

[186] Goodman, “British Press Control in Palestine During the Arab Revolt, 1936-39,” 699-720.
[187] Peel et al, "Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," 193-214.
[188] Goodman, “British Press Control in Palestine During the Arab Revolt, 1936-39,” 699-720.
[189] Minutes of Executive Council Meeting, 4 May 1936, CO 814/32, TNA.

Palestinians were long used to distributing information amongst themselves without the support of the press. To the contrary, the press drove the strike forward by telling stories of strikers and influencing the actions of people across the mandate with their evocative rhetoric describing British repressive actions.[190]

The significance of these findings by Peel is that at one and the same time they believed that the British authorities weren't harsh enough on the Palestinian press and that any actions against the press only served to increase its popularity and influence amongst the populace. These contradictions indicate that Lord Peel and his investigators were just as confused about what to do with the press as British authorities in Palestine, and really had very little idea for an adequate solution. It also indicates the difficulties liberal democracies face in colonial ventures whereby repression is a necessary tool, but one that officials are hesitant to use. This can be viewed throughout the British Empire from India to Burma where British officials attempted to implement repressive measures but, with an eye always on the need to justify their colonial presence, also offered concessions.[191]

Although the influence of the press would wane after October 1936, as a result of the failure of the commission to create sufficient changes in the lives of Palestinians and of the takeover by armed bands which took to dictating press actions with threats of violence, the contributions Palestinian journalists made to Palestinian identity, society, and politics would be long lasting. Their ability to help keep the Great Strike going for as long as it did, forcing Palestinian elites and the British to enter into negotiations resulting in the forming of the Peel

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[190] Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion*,155-201.

[191]Thomas R. Metcalf, Ideologies of the Raj, The New Cambridge History of India. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521395472, 28-65.

Commission, eventually also played a significant role in the limits imposed on Zionism by the 1939 White Paper.[192]

This study of the Palestinian press during the Great Strike of 1936 is critically important for contemporary discussions of press freedoms and popular protests. Around the world, it is becoming harder for journalists to do their jobs free from threats of violence or state censorship. Throughout the Middle East, press freedoms are severely limited with any criticism of the ruling elite banned. Journalists such as Saudi Arabia's Jamal Khashoggi have been killed for speaking out. Many popular protests now rely on social media and other tools of the digital age to organize and disseminate information. However, a free press is still a key indicator for success against corruption and authoritarian tendencies. Social media can be used by state actors to spread disinformation and can end up harming protest movements rather than help them. The members of the Palestinian press are a key example of how a well-established press can influence decision making and help create a narrative for protests to rally behind. Despite constant repression, the press was able to keep its doors open for the duration of the strike and in doing so brought about lasting impacts on Palestinian politics and society.

[192] Bartal, "The Peel Commission Report of 1937 and the Origins of the Partition Concept," 51-70

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