



Ever since the founding of the Zionist movement,¹ supporters of Zionism have downplayed the fact that historic Palestine had always had a healthy indigenous population. As early as the 19th and early 20th century,² Zionists and their supporters repeated the myth widely: “A land without a people, for a people without a land.” While this slogan encouraged Jewish emigration to historic Palestine, it also paved the way for one of the largest dispossessions of an ethnic group in modern history. Both the demographic statistics themselves, as well as the history of Jewish emigration to Palestine in the 1930s tell an entirely different story.

Demographics of Palestine under the Ottomans

Modern Zionism was a movement born in Europe in the 19th century, but the Ottoman Empire controlled historic Palestine during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Starting in the 19th century, a number of disparate Jewish groups in Europe had begun cooperating to begin modest agricultural settlement in historic Palestine. These and other groups first came together formally in 1897 for the first Zionist Conference in Basel, Switzerland.³

The population of Ottoman “Palestine” is difficult to estimate because:

- 1) There was no administrative district of Palestine. Ottoman census figures were for various districts, e.g. the Jerusalem, Acco and Nablus districts. The Acre district included areas in Lebanon, outside the borders of historic Palestine;
- 2) Both Arabs and Jews avoided the Turkish census for three reasons: a) to avoid taxes, b) to avoid military conscription, and c) to avoid questions of illegal residence;
- 3) The census figures didn’t include Bedouins (likely numbering over 100,000⁴) and foreign subjects (i.e. individuals with foreign citizenship, without Ottoman residency status) of which there were about 10,000 Jews.

Nevertheless, the Ottoman census of 1878 indicated the following demographics for the Jerusalem, Nablus, and Acre districts:⁵

Census Group	Population	Percentage
Muslim	403,795	85.5
Christian	43,659	9.2
Jewish	15,001	3.2
Jewish (Foreign-born)	Est. 10,000	2.1
Total:	472,455	100.0

Palestinian Demographics under the British Mandate Government

Jewish emigration to historic Palestine grew over the first decades of the 20th century, especially during the 1930s. As the Jewish population in Palestine increased, the indigenous Arab population put pressure on the British government to control the immigration. Thus, in the 1920s, the British restricted Jewish immigration by fixing quotas and authorizing certain Jewish organizations to distribute immigration certificates as they saw fit. Nevertheless, with increased persecution of Jews in Europe, many Jews were not willing to wait years for immigration certificates. Thus, in 1934, the Vallos became the first chartered immigration ship to arrive in Palestine, carrying 350 Jews. By the time WWII had begun, tens of thousands of Jewish immigrants had arrived illegally in Palestine by ship. This illegal shipping of immigrants continued well into the 1940s. While the British intercepted some of the ships, almost all of the immigrants were eventually able to settle in Palestine.⁶

The Jewish community found other ways to emigrate to Palestine, exploiting loopholes in the Mandatory government’s immigration regulations. Students were not required to have immigration certificates to study in Palestine, so many enrolled at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and then remained in the country. Young women entered the country claiming fictitious marriages to Palestinian residents. Others

arrived as tourists, and never returned to their former countries. In 1935 alone, almost 5,000 Jews entered the county illegally through these various means.⁷

In 1939, concerned with the rising tensions in Palestine due to the massive Jewish immigration – both legal and illegal – the British government issued Parliamentary Document 6019 (a.k.a the White Paper of 1939), slated to limit the Jewish population in Palestine to no more than one third the total. If economic capacity permitted, 75,000 Jews would be allowed to come to Palestine, after which “no further Jewish immigration will be permitted unless the Arabs are prepared to acquiesce to it.”⁸

Emigration Statistics to Historic Palestine during the British Mandate

The below are British estimates of the emigration to historic Palestine between 1920 and 1945, including people who entered as tourists and subsequently registered as immigrants. Most figures as of Dec. 31 of each year.

Net Emigration to Palestine ⁹					
Year	Jews		Non-Jews		Total
	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	
1920	5,514	96.47%	202	3.53%	5,716
1921	9,149	97.97%	190	2.03%	9,339
1922	7,844	96.51%	284	3.49%	8,128
1923	7,421	92.87%	570	7.13%	7,991
1924	12,856	94.86%	697	5.14%	13,553
1925	33,801	97.58%	840	2.42%	34,641
1926	13,081	94.04%	829	5.96%	13,910
1927	2,713	75.47%	882	24.53%	3,595
1928	2,178	70.58%	908	29.42%	3,086
1929	5,249	79.94%	1,317	20.06%	6,566
1930	4,944	76.85%	1,489	23.15%	6,433
1931	4,075	73.65%	1,458	26.35%	5,533
1932	9,553	84.62%	1,736	15.38%	11,289
1933	30,327	94.84%	1,650	5.16%	31,977
1934	42,359	95.96%	1,784	4.04%	44,143
1935	61,854	96.43%	2,293	3.57%	64,147
1936	29,727	93.86%	1,944	6.14%	31,671
1937	10,536	84.46%	1,939	15.54%	12,475
1938	12,868	84.31%	2,395	15.69%	15,263
1939	16,405	89.00%	2,028	11.00%	18,433
1940	4,547	81.04%	1,064	18.96%	5,611
1941	3,647	85.41%	623	14.59%	4,270
1942	2,194	71.89%	858	28.11%	3,052
1943	8,507	86.22%	1,360	13.78%	9,867
1944	14,464	87.79%	2,012	12.21%	16,476
1945	12,032	86.04%	1,952	13.96%	13,984
Total	367,845	91.70%	33,304	8.30%	401,149

Population Statistics of Historic Palestine during the British Mandate

The below estimates are based on the reports of the British Mandate for Palestine and the Mandatory censuses, conducted only in 1922 and 1931. All figures following 1931 are estimates; most figures as of Dec. 31 of each year.

Total Population in Palestine ¹⁰									
Year	Total	Muslims		Jews		Christians		Others	
		Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Total	Percent
1922	752,048	589,177	78.34	83,790	11.14	71,464	9.50	7,617	1.01

1931	1,033,314	759,700	73.52	174,606	16.90	88,907	8.60	10,101	0.98
1931	1,036,339	761,922	73.52	175,138	16.90	89,134	8.60	10,145	0.98
1932	1,073,827	778,803	72.52	192,137	17.90	92,520	8.61	10,367	0.97
1933	1,140,941	798,506	69.99	234,967	20.59	96,791	8.48	10,677	0.94
1934	1,210,554	814,379	67.27	282,975	23.38	102,407	8.46	10,793	0.89
1935	1,308,112	836,688	63.96	355,157	27.15	105,236	8.04	11,031	0.85
1936	1,366,692	862,730	63.13	384,078	28.10	108,506	7.94	11,378	0.83
1937	1,401,794	883,446	63.02	395,836	28.24	110,869	7.91	11,643	0.83
1938	1,435,285	900,250	62.72	411,222	28.65	111,974	7.80	11,839	0.83
1939	1,501,698	927,133	61.74	445,457	29.66	116,958	7.79	12,150	0.81
1940	1,544,530	947,846	61.37	463,535	30.01	120,587	7.81	12,562	0.81
1941	1,585,500	973,104	61.38	474,102	29.90	125,413	7.91	12,881	0.81
1942	1,620,005	995,292	61.44	484,408	29.90	127,184	7.85	13,121	0.81
1943	1,676,571	1,028,715	61.36	502,912	29.99	131,281	7.83	13,663	0.81
1944	1,739,624	1,061,277	61.01	528,702	30.39	135,547	7.79	14,098	0.81

¹ Penslar, Derek and Kaye, Alexander, "Zionism from Its Inception to 1948," Oxford Bibliographies, June 23, 2021, accessed June 10, 2022 at <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199840731/obo-9780199840731-0006.xml>

² MacDonald, Robert L. "'A land without a people for a people with a land': Civilizing mission and American support for Zionism, 1880s-1929," Ph.D. Dissertation, Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University, December, 2012, accessed June 10, 2022 at https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_etd/send_file/send?accession=bgsu1352321143&disposition=inline

³ Maor, Moshe, "Israel Studies An Anthology : The History of Zionism," Jewish Virtual Library, May, 2009, accessed June 10, 2022 at <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/israel-studies-an-anthology-the-history-of-zionism>

⁴ "Palestinian Bedouins," Institute for Palestine Studies, accessed June 10, 2022 at <https://oldwebsite.palestine-studies.org/resources/special-focus/palestinian-bedouins>

⁵ A number of sources provide comparable analyses: See Mendel, Yonatan. "The Creation of Israeli Arabic: Security and Politics in Arabic Studies in Israel." 5 October, 2014, Palgrave Macmillan UK. p. 188. See also Mark Tessler, "A History of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict," 994, Indiana University Press, 1994, pp. 43 and 124, or Dowty, Alan. "Israel / Palestine. Polity," 16 April 2012, p. 13.

⁶ Lapidot, Yehuda, "Immigration to Israel: The Irgun's Role in Clandestine Immigration," Jewish Virtual Library, accessed June 10, 2022 at <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-irgun-s-role-in-illegal-immigration>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ For an overview of the White Paper of 1939 and its context, see "White Paper of 1939," Wikipedia, accessed June 10, 2022 at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Paper_of_1939

⁹ "A Survey of Palestine: Prepared in December 1945 and January 1946 for the information of the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry. Volume 1," Printed by the Government Printer, Palestine, 1946, p. 141, accessed June 10, 2022 at https://www.bjpa.org/content/upload/bjpa/a_su/A%20SURVEY%20OF%20PALESTINE%20DEC%201945-JAN%201946%20VOL%20I.pdf

¹⁰ "A Survey of Palestine: Prepared in December 1945 and January 1946 for the information of the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry. Volume 1," Printed by the Government Printer, Palestine, 1946, p. 185, accessed June 10, 2022 at https://www.bjpa.org/content/upload/bjpa/a_su/A%20SURVEY%20OF%20PALESTINE%20DEC%201945-JAN%201946%20VOL%20I.pdf