The Beginnings of Publishing in pre-1948 Palestine

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What happens to a printed text once it is out of the printer’s shop? How does it become public property and how is it consumed? After all, printing, an amazing device no doubt, is no more than a production implement and further processes are involved in turning written texts into consumer goods. Indeed, printing is a link in the chain of mechanisms by which ideas are transmitted from author to audience. Earlier links include the formulation of ideas as intelligible statements and rendering them as presentable manuscripts, and printing, in turn, is followed by publishing — advertising, distributing, and selling — which make the product accessible to the public. Where this last process ends another, equally complex process begins: consumption. Aside of reading in different modes, solitarily or collectively, quietly or vocally, the consumption of printed texts also entails their mental assimilation, sometimes debating their contents with others, and always a dialogue with the author, explicit or implied. The fate of a text once it is born thus forms a multi-phased and multicoloured tale.

Historians, sociologists, anthropologists and ethnographers have explored aspects of the production and consumption of written texts, mainly in Western societies. We already have a considerable corpus of scholarship on the history of printing and publishing in Europe and its cultural offshoots, on the evolution of libraries, bookstores, private book collecting and literary societies, as well as on who read what and how, the intercourse between writer and audience, and the formation of public opinion. In the Middle East, by contrast, work on such matters has barely begun. In cultural history, as in most other fields, the study of Arab societies still lags way behind that of Europe, not least when modern times are concerned, for reasons that are too well known to detain us here. In the pages below I propose to make a very

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1 The author acknowledges the support of the Israeli Science Foundation in the preparation of this article.
modest contribution to the study of Arab publishing, focusing on one individual case, that of the Arab community in pre-1948 Palestine. The confines set for this article allow no more than a quick glimpse at two limited sections of the scene: the advent of printing and the emergence of bookshops, two central links in the chain of the publishing trade at its inception. It may be noted in passing that this is a particularly difficult terrain to plough in the Middle East, since evidence is ever wanting; and that in Palestine the problem is all the more intricate, due to the devastating impact of the 1948 nakha on historical evidence. Still, testimonies do exist and, when creatively exploited, they permit us to tell a meaningful story.

The development of publishing in pre-1948 Palestine had two prominent features. First, the process was short and markedly intensive. While elsewhere in the region — primarily in Egypt and the Lebanon — a vivid cultural-literary blossoming had taken place from the mid-nineteenth century onward, Palestine had remained on the sidelines of this activity until much later. A handful of precursors aside, its cultural awakening and the concomitant emergence of publishing activity were telescoped into the half-century after 1900, especially the post-World War I decades, and then cut short rather abruptly by the mid-century crisis. Second, even when such an industry began to evolve in Palestine, it was overshadowed — and actually checked — by the dynamic ventures in its neighbourhood. By the time Palestine took its first step in this arena, Egypt and, to a lesser extent, Lebanon had already become lively regional foci of creativity, potent enough to constrict the growth of local publishing industries around them. Palestine, like most of the region’s other countries, thus remained a satellite of the Egyptian and Lebanese literary endeavours, whose written products were regularly consumed by the Palestinian educated class. We have few data on this influx of imported texts, but there is ample evidence to show that it was substantial, perhaps to the extent of dominating the market in Palestine, at least with regards to books.2

Under the circumstances, pre-1948 Arab Palestine made up a rather modest publishing arena. Of the humble yield of its products, the bulk was newspapers, a

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2 For a discussion of imported texts from Palestine’s neighbourhood, see Ami Ayalon, “Modern Texts and their Readers in Late Ottoman Palestine,” Middle Eastern Studies 38:3 (2002), 17-40, and idem, Reading Palestine: Texts and Audience, 1900-1948 (Austin forthcoming), Ch. 2.

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novel commodity whose history in the country began only after 1900.3 By the mid-1940s the Palestinian periodical press had reached a total circulation of perhaps 20,000, an impressive progress explainable by the growing public thirst for information, which, in turn, was generated by the rapid shifts in the country’s political landscape. Books, by contrast, addressed different (and less urgent) needs and there was a small demand for them that was met, in part, by imports. Local book making was therefore very limited. A full record of it is yet to be assembled, but available data seem to suggest that it did not exceed an annual output of 20 titles on average from 1900-48 (being more energetic at the end than at the outset).4 Notably, in some significant way book printing was a by-product of the journalistic enterprise, especially so in its early years, as we shall see.

In the discussion below we will be concerned mainly with non-periodical publishing, leaving aside the exciting story of Palestinian journalism, except when it affected the advent of the book industry. Basically, book production in Palestine represented collaborative efforts of two kinds: author-printer and author-bookseller. The former, born shortly after the introduction of printing into the country, was by far the most common type of operation until the end of the period. The latter, indeed a variation of the former, developed only in the wake of World War II.

Printing

A Jewish press had operated in Safad, northern Palestine, already in the late sixteenth century, turning out books in Hebrew for about a decade before it closed down. The country’s next press was another Jewish venture, set up in 1832 in the same town by Yisrael Bak and his son Nissan, who in 1841 moved their shop to Jerusalem. It was followed by several initiatives launched by Christian evangelical societies in Jerusalem. The earliest of these, and by far the busiest depot until the end of the century, was the one founded by the Franciscans in 1846 near the Old City’s New Gate. It printed scores of books and pamphlets in several languages, including Arabic,
dealing with a variety of subjects, from theology to geography. Anglican and Protestant societies and the local Greek-Orthodox and Armenian communities in the city subsequently founded presses that printed in Arabic, all in the nineteenth century, which put out books and leaflets dealing mostly with religious-educational matters. Some reports also point to the existence, alongside the missionary and communal enterprises, of several private presses in pre-1900 Jerusalem: al-Matbu’a al-Ma’ānîyya (1876), the Dumyan brothers press (1892), a printing shop owned by Martin Lasfu (1892) and al-Matbu’a al-Wataniyya, which Alfonse Antun Alonso ran from 1892-4. We know little about them beyond their names. Nor is there evidence to support an obscure reference in an 1898 official Ottoman publication, to similar activities taking place outside of Jerusalem. Further exploration is obviously needed before this scene is clear.

Yet another private printing shop that started operating around the same time was that of Jurji Habib Hananya, about which we know slightly more. Apparently a typical instance of the country’s nascent publishing projects, it would be worth our while to look at it more closely. Hananya (1857-1920), a Greek-Orthodox Jerusalemite, seems to have been employed for some time in one of the presses in that city before launching his own business. In 1894 he applied for a printing license. Such a request normally entailed protracted waiting in Hamidian times, and Hananya moved ahead to begin his activities anyway, acquiring Latin characters and buying printing time from presses in the city to perform freelance jobs during the tourist season. Resourceful and ambitious, he then imported Arabic and a simple leg- operated machine and put them to use secretly in his home, taking private assignments from Ottoman officials and others and handling them at night while carrying on with his other commitments during the day. Repeatedly quarrelling with the authorities, Hananya persisted in this difficult routine until February 1898, when he eventually obtained the desired printing license. The following year he applied for permission to publish a newspaper, an application he would subsequently repeat numerous times and back it with sizeable bribes but to no avail. Meanwhile, he made a living from printing ‘the circulars (dafatir) of all government departments’ as well as the local Ottoman official organ, Quds-i Shariʾîl-Quds al-Shariʾî, launched in 1903 and lasting for five years. More impressive, by the time the Hamidian censorship dam collapsed in summer 1908, Hananya’s business had to its credit — by his own account — a total of 281 books (kitab), among them 83 in Arabic.” Aside of Hananya’s own testimony, however, no evidence has yet come to light that would confirm these remarkable but somewhat questionable figures. Most likely, a yield of this scale, if true, comprised mainly small-size pamphlets, leaflets and perhaps single-sheet products rather than real ‘books’.13

Having gone through trial and error in rough times, Hananya was ready for the new opportunities offered under ‘the rising sun of freedom.’ Within six weeks of the changeover in the Ottoman capital, his semi-weekly newspaper al-Quds was out in the market — one of the country’s very earliest periodicals. It was among 15 Arabic newspapers and journals that appeared in a frantic outburst before the end of 1908, reflecting the new liberal spirit in the empire.11 The license to print prompted the

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5 M.T. Petrozzi, ‘The Franciscan printing press,’ Christian News from Israel, 20:26 (1971), 64-9. A bibliography of Arabic works printed in Palestine from 1847 onward lists 65 items produced by the Franciscan press during the nineteenth century and another 51 during the first half of the twentieth; see Rasim Ihaburu, Al-Hbiyughaziyya al-Arabiyya fi Filistin 1847-1947 (Tel-Aviv, Israel 1996), passim. Jhaburu’s list exists only in draft form, and I am grateful to the author for allowing me to consult it. Undoubtedly less than complete, it is nonetheless the most comprehensive record of this kind so far.


7 Sulayman, 77, quoting an Ottoman Salāmaḥ from 1316/1898, which refers to private Arabic printing activity ‘in the narrow alleys of old Jerusalem, Ḥaifa and Jaffa.’ This reference was first quoted by Sulayman in a study he had published in 1987 (probably adopted from Yehoshua, 7). In his 2001 article cited here, he notes that ‘since the publication of that book in 1987 until today, my extensive toiling and all forms of exploring and inquiring [into the matter] have led to no new information’ worth mentioning in this regard.

8 Yehoshua, Taʾrīkh, ibid.; Sulayman, ibid. Yehoshua also mentions two Jewish presses, that of Yitzhak Hirschenszen (1876) and that of Yitzhak Levi (1896), both of which were equipped with Arabic characters as well as Hebrew ones. Frequent discrepancies between the secondary sources regarding dates of foundation and other details suggest that the early development of printing in Palestine is still awaiting a more systematic study. For example, Yughli, relying on various sources, quotes impressive but somewhat dubious figures relating to the output of some pre-1900 presses in Jerusalem, for which no evidence is known to be extant. Ihaburu’s Bībiyughaṣīyya mentions a modest total of 14 items printed before 1900 by Jerusalem presses other than the Franciscan (and a few others without a date of publication printed between 1847 and 1948).

9 Opening article of al-Quds (Hananya’s paper), 5-18 September 1908, quoted in Yehoshua, Taʾrīkh, 41-4, and see also 10-11. On p. 10 Yehoshua erroneously indicates the date of the license as 1906, an error also adopted by Sulayman, 82.

10 Ihaburu’s bibliography lists only 5 works printed in Hananya’s press (also called Mafatūt l-Jisrāt al-Quds), only one of them before 1908 — see below. In addition, c. 20 other titles are mentioned as having been printed in Jerusalem until 1908, for which no printer’s name is given.

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emergence of presses, set up specifically for the purpose of publishing newspaper and voicing opinion. Such were the printing shops producing al-Insaf, al-Najah and al-Nadhir in Jerusalem, al-Akhbar, Sawt al-Uthmaniyya and Filastin in Jaffa and al-Karim in Haifa before 1914, all modest enterprises that used imported machinery, often second-hand, to manufacture the rudimentary organs authored by their editors. Others, eager to pronounce views but unable to buy the needed equipment, hired the services of existing presses (Hananya's own shop printed one other journal, or more, alongside his own al-Quds). But putting out newspapers was a small operation even for these humble businesses, and they looked for additional jobs, advertising such innovative products as commercial letterheads and envelopes, personal cards, wedding invitations and the like. They would gladly print books, if and when they were available for publication.

But books were slow to appear. Pre-World War I Palestine was overwhelmingly illiterate and the size of its book-consuming audience was Lilliputian. The number of authors was still tinier. Prior to the introduction of printing into the country, members of the small educated elite had subscribed to foreign journals and bought books from neighbouring provinces and Europe; while the handful of local writers went abroad to print their composed or translated works. Writing in Palestine was far too limited in scope to keep the machines of the newly launched presses rolling. Preceding the country's literary awakening, the development of printing thus had to rely mainly on publishing newspapers, a novel brand of commodity whose consumer market was yet to be formed. Hananya's business was illustrative of this activity. With a twice-weekly paper as its mainstay, the press constantly looked for more jobs but found little. 'Few as [presses in Jerusalem] are, there is no adequate work for them,' he complained.14 In 1900 he was hired to print the catalogue of the new Khalidiyya library, an 87-page, Spartan-looking booklet.15 Other Hananya-produced works that came down to us include a 28-page tourist guide in 1908 and three tracts on language from 1912, likewise skinny opuses of 60-70 pages each.16 There might have been a few more, of which we have no trace. This was probably characteristic of the scale of private printing efforts in pre-World War I Palestine. We know little on the manner in which such works were circulated; with few bookstores around before the War (see below), the dissemination of printed items must have been slow and cumbersome, and on the whole limited in scope. Hananya himself ran into financial difficulties, typically resulting from the unfriendly market conditions, and was forced to close his business, leaving the country for Alexandria in 1913 or 1914.17

So much for the printer's share. To view Palestine's early publishing from the author's angle, we may look at Khalil Baydas (1875–1949), owner of the literary weekly/monthly al-Nafa'i is al-'Asriyya.18 A Greek-Orthodox like Hananya and a graduate of Russian missionary schools in Palestine and Syria, Baydas had translated Tolstoy and Pushkin novels and published them in Beirut and Cairo for several years prior to 1908.19 In November of that year, three months after the Revolution, he launched his journal in Haifa, teaming up with a new local press called al-Matbût a al-Wataniyya. The following year he published a novel he had adapted from the Russian, hiring the same printer to bring it out.20 In 1910 Baydas moved with his journal to Jerusalem, where he continued to publish it regularly until the War, scoring remarkable success.21 Seeking to acquaint his readers with the treasures of Russian literature, he devoted a large portion of the journal to translations from that language, usually his own. But he also issued separate works, rendered from Russian and other tongues and often presented as riwayat, or short stories — apparently small-size chapbooks (as their modest price would suggest) — also more massive works.22 Both al-Nafa'i is al-'Asriyya and some of these separate literary items were produced

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12 Ibid., 7; Yehoshua, Ta'rikh, 78, 86.
14 Quoted in Yehoshua, Ta'rikh, 12.
15 Al-Matbût a al-Khalidiyya, Banamaj al-Matbût a al-Khalidiyya al-'Unumiyya (Jerusalem: Matbût a'zurj Habib Hananya, 1900).
16 Jabbara, al-DhibiyahalFilastin, see entries under Salim Iyad al-Qari (1908) and Muhammad Salim Ibn Qutayba (1912).
17 Yehoshua, Ta'rikh, 45-50.
18 Jan Daya, 'Al-Nafa'i is al-'Asriyya,' Suriyya al-Filastiniyya, 87-88 (February-March 1939), 168-80.
21 Daya, 'Al-Nafa'i is al-'Asriyya,' 170; Yehoshua, Ta'rikh, 94. While in Haifa the paper was entitled al-Nafa'i is al-'Asriyya; The name was expanded to al-Nafa'i is al-'Asriyya once it was restarted in Jerusalem.
22 Baydas's journal used to advertise such books and booklets. See e.g. Vol. 5, issue 1 (January 1913) and 4 (April 1913), back covers, featuring 19 and 20 items respectively. Most items sold for 1.50-2.50 francs each (equivalent to 6-10 Ottoman qirsh), a rather modest price.
in Jerusalem by Maṭba‘at Dar al-Ayyam, the Syrian orphanage press, an ambitious endeavour which by then had acquired a reputation as the country’s best. The initiative in this publishing operation was most likely the author’s, who selected the texts, prepared the manuscripts and then promoted the final products in his journal. Once again, with bookstores still in the future, the printed items were distributed directly by the author and potential customers were urged to order them through the management of al-Nafī‘is al-‘Arṣiyya in Jerusalem.

Palestine’s political, economic and educational wheels shifted to a higher gear after World War I and private printing shops proliferated quickly. A bibliography of Arabic works published in Palestine until 1947 mentions no less than 115 presses that were involved in their production in the post-War years, including 40 in Jerusalem, 35 in Jaffa, 22 in Haifa and the rest in Acre, Nazareth, Nablus, Bethlecem, Gaza, Ramallah, Lydda, Safad and Hebron. The majority of books and leaflets were produced through simple collaboration with the authors, usually initiated by the latter. Serving as his own editor and copyreader, the writer would hire the services of a press, which would also advertise the work in its own-printed or other newspaper. As for distribution, bookshops that emerged in Palestine after the War gradually became popular conduits for the purpose. Some of them also got involved in publishing, as we shall now see.

Books as Publishers

Data on the front cover of Ta’rîkh Filasîn, a volume published in Palestine in 1923, reveal the story of its production. ‘Its publication,’ it reads, ‘was handled (‘an bi-nashrihi) by Bulus and Wadi’ Sa‘īd, owners of Maktubat Filasîn al-‘Arṣiyya, and it was printed in Bayt al-Maqdis press in Jerusalem.’ Production was thus a dual process, representing a joint author-bookshop-printer venture. This was a rather rare kind of undertaking at the time, but it would become quite common in the 1940s.

23 Yaghi, Hayat, 79; W.D. McCracken, The New Palestine (London 1922), 262. The Syrian orphanage was founded in 1860 as a German Protestant project. Among the different vocations in which the children were trained was printing, an endeavour apparently begun around the turn of the century.
24 E.g., al-Nafī‘is al-‘Arṣiyya, Vol. 5, Issues 1 (January 1913) and 4 (April 1913), back covers.
25 Jabbana, al-bi‘ādiyyāt al-‘Arṣiyyya, pamsan.
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Thus, the Sa’id brothers’ company, expanding its trade to Jaffa (as well as to Cairo and Alexandria), carried ‘all scholarly and cultural books in Arabic and foreign languages, writing materials, school and business supplies,’ current periodicals, Arabic, English and Hebrew ‘Royal’ typewriters and even ‘Columbia’ gramophones.31

Such businesses became quite numerous during the mandate; by 1945, when a ‘union of Arab bookstore owners in Palestine’ was founded, no less than 51 of them had joined — from Acre to Jerusalem, from Tiberias to Gaza.32 More to the point, toward the end of the period some of the more enterprising businesses began to enter into publishing, cooperating with existing presses or buying their own printing equipment.

A closer look at one such venture would illustrate this development.33 Fawzi Yusuf, a young man from Jerusalem, moved to ‘fulfil an old dream’ in 1935 by opening a bookstore in the Old City, which he named Maktabat al-Andalus. He rented a small place, previously a shoe store, refurbished it and commenced his trade. The shop at first sold mostly writing materials, but Yusuf aspired for more. Identifying a rising demand for printed texts, he began to import Egyptian schoolbooks, literary works and journals. Within three years he already had his own bureau in Cairo, upgrading his services and acting as an agent of leading Egyptian periodicals, which he distributed through contracting shops in Jaffa, Haifa, Lydda and other towns. On the eve of World War II he introduced yet another innovative service, allowing his customers to borrow books for a monthly sum. The War cut the supplies from Egypt and forced Yusuf to close down his Cairo office. Resourceful and resilient, he moved to devise new projects that would keep him afloat on the rough waters. ‘We did not remain idle with our arms crossed,’ Yusuf recalled (speaking of himself in the first-person plural):

Rather, we sought new directions for our initiative and began thinking of printing schoolbooks locally ... The idea was crowned with success. A group of teachers prepared the texts needed for our schools, each in his field of specialization, and we had the books

31 Ash in al-Nahj in al-'Arsiyya, ibid, Filastin, 9 November 1921, 4, and 30 April 1929, 7.
32 Israeli State Archive, P126/630 — letter by the union’s secretary to Khalil al-Sakakini dated 11 March 1945. The letter also refers to several additional bookstores that had declined to join the union.

printed locally. We thereby fulfilled a precious desire: the writing and printing of books at home became a reality ... To guarantee continued production, we began importing the required [quantities of] paper directly from the mills.

Our store came to supply schools with the necessary texts ... The Department of Education encouraged this scheme, and sometimes bought quantities of them for its depositories. We also paid visits to schools and bookstores, offering them the books we printed.34

This was an exemplary case of a project born out of necessity. Yusuf combined forces with a well-known press, Bandali Mushahwar’s Matbu‘at Bayat al-Maqdis near the Old City’s Jaffa Gate (which, we shall recall, was the printer of Tarikh Filastin, mentioned above).35 He also came up with an assortment of original paper products carrying his shop’s logo, outwitting his competitors and helping his business to survive the dire circumstances. Once the war was over, Maktabat al-Andalus could resume its book dealings in full swing. By now it was experienced in production and in a position to become a small-size publisher, issuing school texts and children’s books.

Fawzi Yusuf’s story was replicated by other businesses of a similar kind that sprang up in mandatory Palestine. The bookstore-cum-stationery formula, the centrality of selling imported products, the marketing of school texts along with other works, were all features of the post-Ottoman era, which Maktabat al-Andalus shared with several other traders. The market of consumers developed tardily, and booksellers had to engage in diverse tactics to survive. The more creative among them became embryonic publishers, entering into book production toward the end of the period. Most active, aside of Yusuf’s shop, were al-Maktaba al-‘Arsiyya and Maktabat al-Tahir Ikhwani in Jaffa, both founded in the 1930s, and the Jerusalem Maktabat Filastin al-‘IImiyiya of the veteran Sa’id brothers.36 A growing share of the books appearing in the country during the later years of the mandate were, thus, not only distributed but also printed by these shops.

34 Yusuf, Shay’, 48; ibid, Khamsun ‘Aman, 30.
36 Of the two Jaffa shops, the former produced 20 books or more during the 1940s, the latter at least 16; the Sa’ids issued at least 7 recorded titles. Figures gathered from Jabbari’s bibliography, passim. See also Yaacov Shaimuni, Aravet-Erez Yiz’au (Tel Aviv 1947), 397-8.
By 1948, Palestine had made important strides toward developing its own publishing industry. Where a mere handful of presses had existed in 1900, dozens of them were now running. Where bookstores had been rare, scores of them were now engaged in lively trade countrywide. Other changes, not discussed in this paper, were equally vital in this development: the expansion of the periodical press, a promoter of books and a public trainer in reading; the emergence of social-cultural clubs, loci of literary activities; and, perhaps most important, the dynamic spread of education. These changes provided indispensable underpinnings for the publishing edifice. On the whole, however, the achievements were modest at that early stage, as reflected in the meagre local printed harvest (this was especially conspicuous when juxtaposed with the immeasurably richer output of the country’s smaller but better educated Jewish community at the time). Such limited accomplishments should be hardly surprising, given the very low point of departure and the mighty impact of literary activity in neighbouring countries. The fateful events of 1948 befall Palestine while still laying the foundations for its own publishing trade, cutting short what seemed to be a promising beginning.

37 Cf. the somewhat hasty but still telling comparison by Ishaq Musa al-Husayni between Arab and Jewish publishing in mandatory Palestine. Husayni contrasted the 209 Arabic books published between 1919 and 1946, which he had managed to trace, with 349 Hebrew books published in the country in one year, 1933-4. Ishaq Musa al-Husayni, Awdat al-Safina (Jerusalem 1945), 37-40. In the same vein, see E. Mills, Census of Palestine 1931 (Alexandria, Printed for the Government of Palestine by Whitchurch Morris, 1933), 1:214, 219.

The Emergence of the Public: Arab Palestinian Media in British Mandate Palestine 1929–1945: Arab Palestinian History and the Arab Press as a Neglected Subject

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Compared to the nearly endless literature on Mandate Palestine, studies dealing primarily with the political, economical, social and cultural history of the Arab community, and such studies making wide use of Arab primary sources in particular, are — with some remarkable exceptions — under-represented. This is not a new phenomenon and has arguably, apart from obvious practical explanations as the language barrier facing western scholars, a lot to do with political realities. In his famous book The Arab Awakening that was published in 1938, George Antonius complained that Arab sources were frequently disregarded in contemporary accounts of the Mandate Period. While writing about the Permanent Mandate Commission in Palestine he refers to the Arab newspapers in Palestine:

Even such sources as the Arabic Press of Palestine, which provide a valuable body of comment on the operation of the mandate as it affects the Arab population, are not used. Petitions and memoranda drawn up in Arabic have to be submitted at Geneva in translation. It requires more than mere transposition to turn good Arabic into readable English or French, and the Arabs of Palestine are so notoriously unskilled in the art of presenting their case in a foreign language that the rendering is usually a travesty. 1

The under-representation of Arab sources in different accounts of the period also concerns the later years of the Mandate and the period of the Second World War in Palestine; there is something like a tradition of excluding Arab experiences during the Mandate from historical accounts. While often obviously disregarded for political reasons, many sources were lost in the turmoil Palestinian Arabs were forced to live in after 1948. Years of occupation and displacement did not only handicap the