



THE “WESTERN WALL” RIOTS OF 1929: RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES AND COMMUNAL VIOLENCE

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This article analyzes the outbreak of the deadly 1929 riots in Palestine. Focusing on Jerusalem, Safad, and Hebron, the cities most significantly affected by the events, the article sees the violence as attempts to reinforce, redefine, or reestablish communal boundaries. It argues that patterns of violence in each city can help us understand how these boundaries had been established and evolved in the past, as well as the ways in which new forces, in particular the economic, political, and social influence of the Zionist movement and the rise of nationalist politics among the Palestinian Arabs, had eroded older boundaries.

THE DEADLY RIOTS that engulfed Palestine in August 1929, known today as the “Western Wall” or “al-Buraq” disturbances, marked a turning point in Arab-Jewish relations in the country. Erupting in Jerusalem, they quickly spread to Hebron and Safad. In less than a week—from 23 to 29 August—the official casualty counts listed 133 Jews killed and 339 wounded, mainly by Arab rioters, and 116 Arabs killed and 232 wounded, mainly by British security forces.¹ The unprecedented violence spawned three commissions of inquiry, forced the British Mandate authorities to reevaluate and temporarily suspend their policies, and revealed as never before the explosive depths of the emerging conflict.

The violence took place in the context of rising Palestinian frustration over the Mandate’s Jewish National Home policy and its consequences, especially increasing Jewish immigration and Zionist land purchases, with the economic pressures on the Palestinians exacerbated by natural factors, such as cattle plague and locusts. The immediate trigger, however, was access to and custody over the Western Wall/al-Buraq of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem, where the Zionists had been challenging Muslim control since the beginning of the Mandate, and especially since autumn 1928.²

On 15 August 1929, the Haganah and Revisionist Betar movements organized demonstrations at the Wall, prompting counterprotests by

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Muslim worshippers on 16 August. The following week, several violent incidents between groups of Jews and Palestinian Arabs and swirling rumors further fueled tensions. On 23 August, demonstrations after Friday prayers quickly turned violent and spread through Jerusalem's Old City and then into the suburbs, leaving seventeen Jews dead. The following morning, the violence spread to Hebron, where a concerted attack on the Jewish Quarter left more than sixty Jews dead and scores wounded. In the next few days, isolated clashes and attacks were noted in Haifa and Jaffa, and though the situation seemed to be calm by 27 and 28 August, on the afternoon of 29 August violence erupted once again, this time in Safad. Some forty-five Jews were killed or wounded in Safad before British police and military put down the riots there, effectively bringing this outbreak of popular violence in Palestine to a close.³

Strikingly, Jerusalem, Hebron, and Safad were home to three of Palestine's oldest Jewish communities, their Jewish inhabitants having lived for generations as a recognized component of Palestinian Arab society. These cities were also among Palestine's four Jewish holy cities (the fourth being Tiberias), and as such the religious Jews who populated them were largely (though not completely) disconnected from the growing Zionist presence in Palestine.

Most explanations of the 1929 riots follow one of two paradigms. The first sees them as the expression of Muslim fanaticism and Arab anti-Semitism, a particular instance of a continuous and constant ethno-religious conflict which, though at times held in check by political power, was constantly in danger of breaking out into open violence. The second places them in the context of the developing political conflict in Palestine, focusing either on the role of the British administration and its failure to anticipate or stave off the violence, or on the role of Haj Amin al-Husayni, the mufti of Jerusalem, who during this period emerged as the preeminent political leader of the Palestinians.

Each approach has flaws. The first assumes certain innate religious identities with essential characteristics (particularly Jewish vulnerability and Muslim violence) and conflates the 1929 rioting in Palestine with violence against Jews in medieval and modern Europe and elsewhere in the Arab world. At the same time, this paradigm tends to minimize the specific context of the event, thus offering a limited understanding of the causes without fully explaining why violence occurs at certain times but not at others. The second approach overemphasizes the role of immediate political events in the violence and ignores deeper social structures. Although it offers far greater insight than the first,⁴ its explanation of the 1929 violence solely as a product of recent political developments is also limiting.

This article approaches the communal violence of 1929 from a different angle. Instead of searching for “essential” core characteristics by which particular communities defined themselves, it sees communities

as most often defined by their boundaries, the points at which they come up against other communities. From this perspective, communal violence can be viewed as an attempt to reinforce, redefine, or reestablish boundaries marked in geographical space, including by signifiers such as clothing and language, and other practices.

More broadly, the article seeks to rescue the events of 1929 from essentialist or exclusively political interpretations and, in so doing, to restore to the notions of “religious” and “nationalist” the complexity that is their due. Neither religion nor nationalism exists as a unified, homogeneous, or static system; rather, each emerges and changes in keeping with the practices and discourses of those who claim them. To think of the 1929 riots in terms of “Muslims attacking Jews” or “Palestinians resisting Zionists” tells us little either about how the violence was intended or how it was interpreted by its perpetrators and its victims, all of whom saw themselves and the “other” in more complicated terms shaped by experiences and expectations developed over years or even generations. These experiences and expectations, based on lived daily life far removed from the realm of high politics, include notions of community and its boundaries, and are major factors in how individuals on all sides interpreted the events.

Throughout, I will use the term “communal” to avoid imposing exclusively religious or national identifications on the participants and observers. Exploring communal boundaries in Hebron, Safad, and Jerusalem prior to the events of 1929, and how these boundaries shaped and were reshaped by these instances of communal violence, will help to elucidate this complexity.

COMMUNAL BOUNDARIES BEFORE 1929

Hebron

Hebron has religious significance to Jews and Muslims (and also Christians) as the site of the tomb of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah. As a primary point of the intersection between religious communities, the Tomb of the Patriarchs/al-Haram al-Ibrahimi serves as a window to understanding communal boundaries in Hebron.⁵ Eric Bishop, writing in 1948, noted: “Hebron . . . in the relationship of the three monotheistic religions occupies an interesting position. The Muslims are in effect the stern guardians of a Christian building which, enlarged by Islam, is built over a cave which is the repository of the bones of the Israelite patriarchs.”⁶ The restrictions on Jewish worship indicate that Hebron Jews were a part of, but not fully integrated within, general Hebron society. In 1838, British traveler and writer William Thomson visited Hebron and observed that “Jews could get no closer than a small opening near the northwest corner of the mosque, where ‘they are obliged to lay flat on the ground’ to kiss and touch

a piece of sacred rock through a small opening."⁷ Ahmad al-'Alami also describes the well-defined regulation of access to various parts of the Haram complex, in which Jewish and Muslim worshippers entered through different entrances and had separate spaces designated for worship; Jewish worshippers were allowed to ascend "only a certain number of steps," this number being seven after 1930.⁸

The traditional Jewish community in Hebron, composed primarily of Sephardic Jews, traces its beginnings to the mid-fifteenth century.⁹ An eighteenth-century visitor, Moses Cassuto, estimated in 1734 that there were forty houses in the Jewish Quarter. In 1766, another visitor, Simon van Geldern, estimated that twenty or thirty families lived in Hebron's Jewish Quarter.¹⁰ Three censuses sponsored by Sir Moses Montefiore in 1855, 1865, and 1875 provide a wealth of information on the community, including its size, origins, and working life.¹¹ Hebron's Jews were divided into distinct Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities, with the former (traditionally significantly larger in Hebron) making up about 60 percent of the whole in 1875. Jerold Auerbach writes: "The Jewish community of Hebron was, in reality, a bifurcated community of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews, each with its own history, rituals, language, leadership, and communal services. . . . Cultural differences between the communities, vividly displayed in their style of dress (Sephardic Jews were virtually indistinguishable from local Arabs) and forms of synagogue worship, were noticed and recorded."¹²

By the early twentieth century, the Jewish community in Hebron had expanded, but was depleted somewhat during World War I: in 1929, Hebron's population comprised between 500 and 600 Jews, 16,000 to 17,000 Muslims, and about 100 Christians. The Jewish community in the 1920s was also considerably younger (due to an influx of yeshiva students) and increasingly influenced by Zionism. The relocation to Hebron of a community of Ashkenazi Jews from Safad in the nineteenth century and of a Lithuanian yeshiva in 1924 also greatly increased the Ashkenazi presence in the city. In contrast to the established Sephardic community and even the older Ashkenazi community, the younger yeshiva students, "as a general rule, looked like modern young men, especially as they dressed in British or American clothing."¹³ In addition to traditional Jewish institutions, such as a ritual bathhouse and kosher butcher, by the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century the Jewish quarter also housed the Beit Hadassah medical clinic, a number of guest-houses, the Anglo-Palestine Bank, and venues where alcohol could be purchased.¹⁴ The Jewish community had also begun to expand geographically beyond the traditional borders of the Jewish Quarter. These changes were to have a significant impact on the shape of violence in August 1929.

Safad

The Jewish community of Safad was established in the sixteenth century, and the 1871 Ottoman survey of the province of Syria lists 1,197

Jewish households compared to 1,395 Muslim households and only three Christian households.¹⁵ In this same period, the Ottomans

promoted Safad as an Islamic Sunni centre that was to counterbalance the religious minorities in the town and the region, especially the Shi'a to the north. It appears that the settling in the vicinity of the town of Algerian exiles at the end of the 1860s and of Circassian exiles in 1878 was not accidental. According to one interpretation, this was done to reinforce the Islamic character of the region and strengthen the Muslim community in the town.¹⁶

During the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, Muslims remained a majority, if a slim one, generally constituting 55 to 60 percent of the population. After World War I there was a significant decrease in the Jewish population, and as a result the Muslim percentage of the population increased and continued to do so under the British Mandate; the 1922 census (the last before 1929) counted 5,431 Muslims, 2,986 Jews, and 343 Christians in Safad.

Yassar al-'Askari writes that the Muslims of Safad "had ambiguous and conflicting feelings toward the Jews of Safad: On the one hand they were Easterners (Arab Jews) who blended socially with the majority of the residents," but on the other there were "manifestations of poverty and backwardness in the Jewish quarter itself, [and] memory reminds the Arabs of instances of clashes."¹⁷ Mustafa Abbasi notes that in 1860, "The Jews of Safad had to turn for protection to the youth leader, *shaykh al-shabab*. The Chief Rabbi of the town organized a banquet for forty Muslim youths, in order to win their protection."¹⁸ 'Ali Safadi, like 'Askari, describes the general impoverishment of the Jewish community, which lived "in an appalling condition . . . you see them making up the dirtiest and the poorest classes, and the lowest in this city."¹⁹ Though he writes that the Muslim community "sympathized with them and were tolerant of them," the situation could not be characterized as one of integration. Safad's Muslims "considered them [the Jews] a religious minority having no direct impact on their lives and they did not interfere in their affairs. And the Jews did not leave their small and delimited quarter that was surrounded by the quarters and neighborhoods of the city."²⁰

Safad's Jewish Quarter was divided into distinct Ashkenazi and Sephardic sections, the former sitting above the latter and closer to the main road. J. A. M. Faraday, the British policeman who reported on the 1929 disturbances, wrote: "Beyond the Jewish Quarter on the south side of it and contiguous with it lies the Moslem Souk and the better class Moslem residential quarter." The "lower class Moslem quarter," probably Harat al-Akrad, lay across a small valley from both.²¹ According to Abbasi, Harat al-Akrad was "mostly a working-class district inhabited by hired laborers." The other two neighborhoods that housed the majority of

the population were Harat al-Sawawin, “inhabited mostly by upper class and merchant families,” and Harat al-Wata, which was close to the Jewish Quarter and “housed shopkeepers and small traders.”²²

Relations between Jews and Muslims seemed to be formalized around religious holidays. ‘Askari describes the participation of the Safad Jewish community in the celebration of ‘Id al-Adha, during which “the Jews refrained from working and even cooking”²³ and were hosted by Muslim families. Safadi describes a similar ritual during Passover, “when it is forbidden for Jews to do any work, each Jew would receive from the people of Safad sufficient traditional food.”²⁴ In sum, although the Jews constituted an established community of Safad, it was not a community that was integrated into the daily life of the Muslim majority, existing rather as a largely separate group, interacting with the Muslim community in a ritualized way during religious holidays.

Jerusalem

A broader exploration of changes in Jerusalem in the decades preceding the 1929 riots is beyond the scope of this article, but by 1929 the physical space and demography of Jerusalem had been transformed by Zionist immigrants to a greater degree than in Safad and Hebron in this same period.²⁵ There persisted a Jewish Quarter and a traditional Jewish community that had lived in Jerusalem for generations before the advent of Zionism or the British Mandate, but Jerusalem had also witnessed an influx of European immigrants of significantly different religious and political identities than the older community and the construction of housing and entire neighborhoods outside the walls of the Old City in order to accommodate it. As a result, interactions between Jews, Muslims, and Christians were governed by new and shifting principles, and many of the boundaries that had delineated their relative positions (both physical and figurative) had been significantly altered, erased, or redrawn. Zionism’s impact on Hebron and Safad was less far-reaching during this period, although it was far from insignificant. With regard to Jerusalem, the discussion of these boundaries will be limited to the contest over the Western Wall/al-Buraq.

By all accounts, the violence of August 1929 was ignited by a dispute between Muslims and Jews over claims to the Western Wall/al-Buraq. Jews consider the Western (or “Wailing”) Wall the last remnant of the Jewish Temple of Jerusalem destroyed by the Romans in the first century. For Muslims, it is the site where the Prophet Muhammad tied his steed, al-Buraq, on his night journey to Jerusalem before ascending to paradise, and constitutes the Western border of al-Haram al-Sharif. The pavement in front of the Wall, where Jewish worshippers congregated, was also part of a Muslim *waqf* established for North African Muslims in Jerusalem (the Maghribi *waqf*). In its report, the Shaw Commission, which investigated the violence of August 1929, noted: “The Wall is, so

far as we were informed, the only Holy Place in Jerusalem in which both Moslems and Jews have a direct concern. In consequence, it is at all times a potential element of friction between, on the one hand, the Sheikhs of the Haram and the officials of the Mughrabi Waqf and, on the other, those who conduct Jewish devotional services at the Wall."²⁶

A set of norms, the "status quo," had over the years developed to minimize the possibility of violence at this point of friction. It gave Jews the right of access to the Wall in order to pray, while acknowledging the Wall itself and the pavement in front of it as Muslim *waqf* property.²⁷ Under Ottoman rule, disputes arose at times over the introduction of furniture on the pavement in front of the Wall:

The Muslims feared that if they acquiesced, the pavement would become an open synagogue and, therefore, a Jewish possession. The Jews would then be able to restrict the use of the pavement, which for some Muslims was the only access to their houses, and for most was part of the Haram. So the Muslims usually protested against Jewish innovations, and the Ottomans upheld the *status quo*.²⁸

At times, Jewish worshippers were able to get around the restrictions on appurtenances by arranging secret, informal agreements with the leaders of the Maghribi community, which often involved a financial element (that is, bribery).²⁹

Under British rule, despite the Mandate charter's commitment to upholding the status quo, Zionists began to challenge Muslim control of the Wall and the pavement in front of it. In 1925, Jewish religious officials attempted to use benches and seats during their worship at the Wall, but the British administration upheld Muslim objections and the Jewish officials acquiesced. In 1926, Zionists objected to Muslim actions affecting the Wall, including clearing weeds from the interstices of the Wall's stones, and requested that it be put under the control of the Government Antiquities Department.³⁰ Disputes over construction, repairs, and religious practices continued during the 1920s, and in September 1928 matters were inflamed when a British policeman provoked a confrontation by removing a screen erected to separate men and women during Yom Kippur services. Competing claims regarding rights and access to the Wall entered the public sphere as never before, and the British government issued a White Paper that, contradictorily, reaffirmed the British administration's commitment to the status quo while calling for the resolution of the disputes between Jews and Muslims through negotiation. As Mary Ellen Lundsten writes, "by December of 1928, the Muslim position on the Western Wall controversy depended on British officials to maintain the status quo despite the latter's predisposition toward a negotiated *modus vivendi* in which Zionist rights would be enlarged."³¹

The Wall issue was, in a strictly religious sense, one between Jews and Muslims. But such a binary is insufficient given the Wall's significance in

both Zionist and Palestinian nationalist discourses.³² Politics and religion were intertwined, playing on existing divisions and alliances. Regarding the controversy that broke out in 1928 over the attaching of a screen to the pavement in front of the wall, Philip Mattar notes that “the Muslims were notified [of this violation of the *status quo*], presumably by a Sephardic *shammash*³³ who was unhappy over the refusal of the Ashkenazi to split a tip with him.”³⁴ In his detailed description of the Revisionist-led demonstrations on 15 August 1929, Vincent Sheean, a journalist who arrived in Palestine shortly before, also noted the divisions between the European Zionist demonstrators and the worshipping Sephardic and Yemeni Jews (who “went on weeping and praying throughout [the demonstration]; they noticed nobody and nobody noticed them”),³⁵ also mentioning that one of the two “incidents” between the demonstrators and Palestinian Arabs arose when “a Christian Arab whom I did not see was accused of mocking at the services; I heard cries of ‘Notzri!’ [‘Christian’] and saw the Haluzim [Zionist ‘pioneers’] pushing, but the police took the man out safely.”³⁶ The Shaw Commission asserted that, following the dispute in September 1928, “the question of rights and claims in connection with [the Wall] ceased to be a religious issue,”³⁷ having become a political and racial question. However, it is clear that the Wall became a physical and symbolic boundary point of political, ethnic, *and* religious communities and, as such, an immediate point of conflict when questions of redrawing these boundaries came to a head.

The religious binary as applied to the 1929 violence is insufficient given the Western Wall’s significance in both Zionist and Palestinian nationalist discourses.

EXPLAINING COMMUNAL VIOLENCE

Leaving aside Jerusalem for a moment, previous analyses of the 1929 riots sought religious, political, and administrative explanations for the intensity of violence in Safad and Hebron. According to Yehoshua Porath, because the conflict was framed in terms of religious rights and threats to holy places, “it is no accident that the worst pogroms in which about 100 orthodox Jews of the ‘old community’ were murdered were those carried out by the most traditional Muslim communities—Hebron and Safad (there were no Jews in Nablus).”³⁸ Those involved in fomenting the conflict, too, held religious rather than political positions: “It was the SMC [Supreme Muslim Council], not the Palestinian AE [Arab Executive], that was the Arab element involved in this case.”³⁹

The Shaw Commission, meanwhile, sought to understand the violence by assessing the political geography of Palestine, divided largely between supporters of Haj Amin al-Husayni and his opponents. Through this lens, the commission largely acquitted the mufti of accusations that he had orchestrated the violence for political ends:

The main reason given was that the most violent disturbances outside of Jerusalem occurred in places such as Hebron, Safed, and Haifa where the Mufti's rivals were dominant, and that in the southwest of the country and other places where the Mufti's influence was strongest, the disorders were not as violent.⁴⁰

Martin Kolinsky, a British Zionist scholar, attributes responsibility for the shape of the violence in 1929 to the British administration: "The differences in outcome [in the various cities in Palestine] depended on the strengths of the police and military forces in various localities and on their anticipation of trouble. . . . The key to the scale of violence was the degree of security preparations (intelligence gathering, crowd dispersal, reinforcements), not the relative strength of the Mufti's influence compared to his rivals in various parts of the country."⁴¹ Kolinsky emphasizes the vulnerability of the newer Zionist Jewish colonies, writing, "A more inviting target could not have been consciously planned!"⁴² Yet, the most violent disturbances did not occur in Jewish colonies recently established by Zionist immigrants and geographically removed from Palestinian Arab communities, but in those cities that had the longest-established Jewish communities in Palestine, communities that were geographically and socially a part of the Palestinian Arab communities around them, at least in a limited sense.

Attributing cause to a single factor—religiosity, political affiliation, or administrative preparedness—ignores their interconnectedness. After all, it was the predominantly religious (rather than politically Zionist) nature of the Jewish communities in Safad and Hebron, resulting in a religiously ordered coexistence of Jews and Muslims within the cities, that was in large part responsible for the minimal British security presence there. The strength of political opposition to Haj Amin al-Husayni was connected to disputes over the administration of religious endowments and the relatively marginal penetration of Palestinian nationalist political parties in Safad and Hebron, both connected to the religiosity of the two cities.⁴³ Impossible as it may be to isolate these factors, by examining the patterns of violence in each city more closely, it may be possible to illuminate the ways these various factors interacted in different instances. Having earlier given some sense of where communal boundaries were drawn in Hebron, Safad, and Jerusalem, how did these boundaries shape the violence in these cities?

VIOLENCE TAKES SHAPE

In Jerusalem, the Western Wall/al-Buraq offered an initial religious geography to the violence. Violence had been a periodic feature of the dispute over access and claims to the Wall before the riots' outbreak in August 1929. Accusations of abuse were leveled against both Jews and Muslims. Muslim residents and worshippers were accused of throwing

stones at Jewish worshippers,⁴⁴ and among the issues raised by the Committee to Defend the Noble Buraq, established in autumn of 1928, was the case of “one of the Mughrabi residents who, they reported, was the target of abusive remarks as he passed near the Wall and was sentenced to six months imprisonment for assaulting those who had insulted him.”⁴⁵ On 3 August 1929, Husayni sent a letter to the British administration “protesting attacks on Moroccan Muslims who resided near the wall and preventing Moroccan residents from passing to their homes.”⁴⁶ Sheean recorded in his diary that the Wall remained a location of periodic conflict: “there were occasional incidents that caused one to wonder what it was all coming to—every Friday evening at the Wailing Wall, for instance.”⁴⁷

When violence erupted more seriously in mid-August 1929, the centrality of the Wall continued, in the first days, to give the violence a religious tone. During the demonstrations of 16 August, following the Zionist provocations of the day before, for example, Muslim worshippers emerged from al-Haram al-Sharif, and “The *Shamash* was beaten, and Hebrew prayer books were torn to pieces and burnt”⁴⁸ and “papers containing prayers and petitions lying in the crevices of the Wall were taken out and burnt.”⁴⁹ Evidently, the location, timing (after Friday prayers), and targets of violence (both persons and objects) had religious significance. Mattar also notes that the mufti, “failing to stop the demonstration, succeeded in keeping the demonstrators within *waqf* property.”⁵⁰ This underscores both Husayni’s apparent desire to stress the religious character of the issue in order to maintain his own authority and control over the situation, and the recognition of such religious boundaries not only by religious officials (such as the mufti) but also by the general Muslim population.

The violence soon spread beyond the *waqf* boundaries, and in so doing its contours merged religious and national notions of community. The director of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem reported: “The School and its occupants, among whom were a Jewish student and his wife, were untouched, the School being situated in an ‘Arab’ quarter.”⁵¹ As mentioned above, the coincidence of religious and geographical boundaries in Jerusalem was not always as clear as in Hebron or Safad. Especially outside the Old City, where wealth rather than religious affiliation had often been the boundary-defining factor, Jews and Arabs (especially Christians) often lived as neighbors. Catherine Nicault notes that French diplomats described that after “Arab rioters driven to a frenzy by Friday sermons stabbed to death Jewish passers-by who had the misfortune to cross their path and, to escape their retribution, Jerusalem’s Christians rushed, it is said, to affix the sign of the cross on their homes.”⁵² Colonel Frederick H. Kisch, the head of the Zionist Commission for the Jerusalem region and a key figure in Zionist efforts to assert control over the Wall area,⁵³ notes the same phenomenon in his *Palestine Diary*: “Walking in Jerusalem through those quarters which are

inhabited by a mixed population one today gets an ominous impression from the fact that the houses occupied by Christians are marked with a large cross, so that the Jewish houses are thus negatively indicated for Moslem attention."⁵⁴ Thus, Arab Christians, who sought to express their affiliation in ethnic terms—that is, as Palestinian Arabs—did so using markers of religious affiliation.

Zionist violence found its expression in religiously defined terms, too. In the worst instance of Jewish violence against Arabs, on 26 August, “the Imam of a mosque and some six other people were killed. On the 26th of August there also occurred a Jewish attack on the Mosque of Okasha in Jerusalem, a sacred shrine of great antiquity held in much veneration by the Moslems. The mosque was badly damaged and the tombs of the prophets which it contains were desecrated.”⁵⁵

Violence also followed a religious calendar. The Zionist demonstration on 15 August 1929 took place on Tisha b'Av, the day of fasting commemorating the Temple's destruction.⁵⁶ The following day, when Muslims demonstrated in response, was both a Friday and the eve of Mawlid al-Nabi, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. The concerns expressed by the high

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commissioner in September 1929 about the coming “Jewish Feast in October [i.e., Yom Kippur, which in 1929 fell on 14 October]” and the week-long Nabi Musa festival in April, “which in view of the recent trouble is likely to be a critical time,” also reflect that days of religious significance offered the greatest potential for further violence.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, the anniversary of the Balfour Declaration on 2 November “beyond a strike and general closing of shops . . . passed off quietly.”⁵⁸ The heightened security measures throughout Palestine in the wake of the August violence certainly should be taken into con-

sideration, but it is also worth noting that this political event was marked by political actions (strikes and shop closings) rather than by the violence occurring on religious dates.

Thus, even though Jerusalem was the seat of the British administration, the hub of Palestinian Arab nationalist and Zionist political networks, and home to large numbers of Jews, Christians, and Muslims whose lives were not organized religiously, the violence of August 1929 was consistently expressed along existing religiously defined boundaries and imposed new religiously demarcated communal boundaries where there had been none before (as where Christians lived alongside Jews). This is not to say that political and ethno-national divisions were not significant factors in both the turn toward violence and the communal boundaries that it sought to reinforce or redraw. Rather, it serves as a reminder that religious identities and boundaries remained powerful even as political actors and observers from various communities understood the violence

in “secular” terms (as expressions of anti-Zionism, Palestinian or Arab nationalism, revolt against the British Mandate, and so on).

In both Safad and Hebron, Palestinian rioters claimed that their attacks had been aimed at recent immigrants and not at the traditional Jewish communities. According to ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Sayyid Ahmad, Muhammad Jamjum—one of three men (including Fu’ad Hijazi of Safad and ‘Ata al-Zayr of Hebron) executed by the British for their participation in the 1929 violence—claimed: “Of those five Jews whom I killed (and he mentioned their names) all of them were foreign Jews [*al-yahud al-ghuraba*] who came to Palestine to displace its people and there was not one Arab Jew among them.”⁵⁹ Ahmad ascribes this same distinction to ‘Ata al-Zayr as well, noting that the three Jews he killed were all “foreigners” (*al-ghuraba*). This is a claim that violence took place along ethno-political rather than religious divisions (that is, against European immigrants who represented political Zionism rather than against Jews qua Jews).

However, Faraday, the British police officer in charge of Safad during the violence, recalls finding “the body of a man in the Jewish Quarter that both I and my Jewish and Arab officers decided was that of a Moslem which I immediately concealed. (It was not until the following day that it was established that this man was a Sephardic (Arab) Jew.”⁶⁰ This indicates that Arab Jews and Muslims in Safad were indistinguishable (at least to the British) in terms of their appearance and that the Arab Jews of Safad were not immune from attack.⁶¹ Faraday’s report also points to the geographical boundaries of the violence: the target of popular (as opposed to British state) violence was the clearly demarcated Jewish Quarter in Safad. Further, Faraday, anticipating violence in Safad, sought to ensure that “a separate site for a slaughter House for Moslems was also arranged for, in order to prevent any risk of friction between the butchers, a trade well known for its aggressiveness.”⁶² Rather than accepting the supposed aggressive nature of butchers, it may be more helpful to consider these slaughterhouses as sites where rituals of religious significance for both Jews and Muslims came into contact, and thus as potential friction points.

Turning to Hebron, the claim that European Jews and Zionists rather than Arab or Sephardic Jews were targeted seems better founded. Of the sixty-seven Jews killed, twelve were Sephardim and fifty-five were Ashkenazim, including a number of yeshiva students from Europe and the United States. It is worth mentioning here the specific case of Eliezer Don Slonim Dwayk, a leader of the Jewish community in Hebron, the only Jewish member of the municipal council, and son of the leader of the Sephardic community in Hebron. Dwayk thus represented the old Sephardic community and its interconnections with the Muslim population of Hebron. Leo Gottesman writes that Dwayk “knew the Arabs well and was on terms of best friendship with them. . . . the local Sheiks were accustomed to gather in Eliezer Don’s house, to talk, and play chess, and

drink black Arabian coffee.”⁶³ Yet, Dwayk’s wife was the daughter of immigrants to Palestine and she “had been brought up in Rishon L’Zion, a 100 [percent] Jewish colony.”⁶⁴

Dwayk was also the manager of the Anglo-Palestine Bank, founded to serve as the financial instrument of the Zionist Organization, involving itself in land purchases, imports, and obtaining concessions. Although Gottesman describes Dwayk’s position as its manager as one that should have engendered trust with his Muslim neighbors,⁶⁵ Edward Horne, a British policeman, wrote: “Many of the townspeople were in debt to Jewish merchants, which had long been the subject of resentment, so they now wreaked vengeance upon property.”⁶⁶ Dwayk thus embodies certain kinds of changes taking place in Hebron: the shifting boundaries between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews, the entrance of Zionism as an ideology among the Jews of Hebron, the expansion of the Jewish community out of a religiously defined role, and some Jews’ adoption of new kinds of commercial roles.⁶⁷ During the riots, a number of Jews came to Dwayk’s house to seek refuge from the violence, hoping that Dwayk’s prominence and traditional relationship with Hebron’s Muslim community would protect them. In the end, after the Muslim attackers called on Dwayk to hand over the “strangers” in his house and he refused, the mob entered and twenty-two Jews were killed (nearly one-third of the total).

BOUNDARIES, COEXISTENCE, AND SEPARATION

Characterizations of the violence of August 1929 in Jerusalem, Hebron, and Safad—in particular in the latter two cities—often stress the rupture between the pre-1929 era of tolerance and the brutality of the attacks. ‘Askari paints an idyllic picture of Safad before it was ruined by Zionism’s entrance:

The people of Safad knew the Jews socially as they knew themselves, because of the smallness of the city and the many common customs and traditions: clothing was similar and those who worked in villages even wore the *batta* and *‘iqal*, the traditional Palestinian headwear. Women’s clothing was modest and the language generally used among them was Arabic, and we called them Arab Jews.⁶⁸

Of ‘Ata al-Zayr, the Hebron rioter later executed, ‘Alami writes: “His neighbors were Jews and cooperation with them was common, without problems, as the Jews were peaceful in the beginning of the Mandate era.”⁶⁹ Yet, these narratives come up against the reality of massacres. This reality lent itself to opposing narratives of brutality and destruction, which were quickly mobilized by Zionists for political reasons. Kisch wrote: “There raged in Hebron what can only be described as a scene of massacre, when the Jewish community which had lived there peacefully since the earliest times, was literally decimated within two hours.”⁷⁰ Meanwhile, the French press and other accounts by foreign witnesses to

the Hebron violence and its aftermath “all stressed in particular the barbarity of the attacks, referring to women with breasts cut, unfortunates burned alive, further cases of throats cut, eyes gouged, etc.”⁷¹

To reconcile the violence’s intensity with its previous absence, many observers fell back on the fanaticism or irrationality of the Muslim attackers as an explanation. Regarding his decision not to arm Arab policemen, Faraday explained: “I felt that the whole Moslem population including the police was so infected with the spirit of fanaticism that there was a grave danger that at best the police would not use extreme measures against their co-religionists and fellow townsmen and at worst that they might in some instances even participate in offensive measures against the Jews.”⁷² Meanwhile, Horne described Hebron’s Muslim rioters as a “mob who were by now worked up into a pitch of blind and senseless rage at anything Jewish.”⁷³ This fanaticism was then read onto the past, as having always existed but lying dormant. At the time, High Commissioner John Chancellor reported that “the latent deep-seated hatred of the Arabs for the Jews has now come to the surface in all parts of the country. Threats of renewed attacks upon the Jews are being freely made and are only being prevented by the visible presence of considerable military force.”⁷⁴ These accounts draw on an older paradigm of understanding violence in Palestine. Based in large part on the frequent fights between different Christian denominations in the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, this model held that Middle Eastern Christians and Jews, as well as Muslims were afflicted by a sort of obscurantism and fanaticism.

The goal of examining the religious dimensions of violence in August 1929 here is certainly not a call to return to this kind of understanding. Rather, it is to try to unravel the layered meanings of violence in Jerusalem, Safad, and Hebron. In his study of religious minorities in medieval Europe, David Nirenberg argues that “violence was a central and systematic aspect of the coexistence of majority and minorities . . . and even suggests that coexistence was in part predicated on such violence.”⁷⁵ This approach, positioned against both “a rose-tinted haven of tolerance and a darkening valley of tears,”⁷⁶ can help make sense of the transitions and changes that were taking place in Palestine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The previous era of social coexistence had been predicated on restrictions on Jewish life, including their geographical segregation into Jewish quarters and restrictions on access to religious sites, including the Western Wall/al-Buraq and the Tomb of the Patriarchs/al-Haram al-Ibrahimi.

Violence was a *ritualized* element of coexistence. Regarding observers’ unpreparedness for the scale of violence that broke out in 1929, Nicault notes the prevailing view: “This violence, properly controlled and channeled, had always been circumscribed. Why, then, imagine the worst?”⁷⁷ Political, economic, and demographic shifts had all combined, however,

to make the continuation of this coexistence impossible. Porath argues that this would have been “conditional upon the indigenous Jewish residents’ identifying with Arab nationalism and being culturally Arab, or at the very least upon a continuation of the tradition of Jewish self-effacement as a tolerated religious community (*millet*) taking no part in administrative and public life.”⁷⁸

It was not simply a matter of Jewish rejection of continued “self-effacement,” however. The breakdown of the old social order among the Muslim and Christian communities is also evident. In Hebron, for example, notable Muslim families sheltered many Jews, but they were unable to control the contours of violence.⁷⁹ That many of the attackers were from villages outside Hebron also indicates the inversion of the traditional dominance of the urban over the rural.⁸⁰ Ussama Makdisi has illustrated how communal violence in nineteenth-century Lebanon was shaped by imperial power (Ottoman and European) and by local elites and nonelites, for whom sectarianism could be mobilized to challenge the existing social order.⁸¹ Makdisi also argues that the Ottoman state and local elites reacted to reestablish dominance in a way that produced a discourse of sectarianism that “masked a final restoration of an elitist social order in Mount Lebanon and marked the end of a genuinely popular, if always ambivalent, participation in politics.”⁸²

Regarding Palestine,

A paradigm of violence . . . was constructed, in common perception as well as among officials, as religious, undoubtedly primitive, but, because it is spontaneous and unorganized, easily controllable as long as the secular arm appears swiftly and firmly. . . . Unaware or purposefully ignoring everything of the often harmonious cohabitation between Jews and Muslims in Islamic lands, including in Ottoman Palestine, it was indeed common for many analysts to read interwar developments in light of an eternal conflict between them, thereby justifying colonial domination, presented as a peacemaker and not, needless to say, as a form of state violence.⁸³

The British thus refused to acknowledge that the violence of 1929 both drew on existing paradigms of ritual violence mapped onto religious boundaries and expressed the breakdown of these paradigms and their failure to maintain boundaries in the new social, political, and economic conditions of Palestine. Rather than address the factors that had led to this breakdown, British authorities saw the preservation of authority through the construction and enforcement of new boundaries that reflected Zionist imperatives: the full geographic segregation of Jews and non-Jews, secured through British state violence. Thus, events of 1929 help us to understand not only how British rule and Zionist encroachment threatened an older social order but also how the ground was laid for partition.

ENDNOTES

1. *Report of the Commission on the Palestine Disturbances of August, 1929* [hereinafter “Shaw Commission Report”] (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1930), p. 65. Arab casualties were likely significantly higher, as only those who sought treatment in hospitals were recorded.

2. See Philip Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), chapter 3.

3. See Shaw Commission Report, pp. 51–66.

4. See, for example, the most thorough and nuanced treatment of the events of 1929: Rena Barakat, “*Thawrat al-Buraq* in British Mandate Palestine: Jerusalem, Mass Mobilization, and Colonial Politics, 1928–1930” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2007).

5. Indeed, the Tomb of the Patriarchs/al-Haram al-Ibrahimi continues to be a flashpoint for communal tensions, a fact which the 1994 massacre perpetrated by the American-born Israeli settler Baruch Goldstein, who killed 29 Muslim Palestinian worshippers in the Haram and wounded a further 125, serves as a chilling reminder.

6. Eric F. F. Bishop, “Hebron, City of Abraham, the Friend of God,” *Journal of Bible and Religion* 16, no. 2 (April 1948), p. 98.

7. Jerold S. Auerbach, *Hebron Jews: Memory and Conflict in the Land of Israel* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), p. 53.

8. “There were two doors of the Haram—the north and the south. And there was a specific entrance to the Haram for Jews and only a certain number of steps they were allowed to ascend. Muslims entered from all the entrances while the northwest entrance was for Jews. Jews were prohibited from entering all areas. Since the days of the Turks there were designated places for Jews visiting and worshipping and other places for Muslims. And this situation continued during the days of the English, during which Jews entered their places and left without objection from anyone. And there were no conflicts in the first period of British rule.

It seems that after 1930—or after their departure entirely from residence in Hebron—they were able to go up only seven steps if they wanted to pray in the Haram.” Ahmad al-‘Alami, *Thawrat al-Buraq* [The Buraq Revolt] (n.p. [West Bank?]: n.p., n.d. [1999?]), p. 323.

9. Bishop, “Hebron, City of Abraham,” p. 97.

10. Auerbach, *Hebron Jews*, pp. 45–46.

11. Auerbach, *Hebron Jews*, pp. 55–57.

12. Auerbach, *Hebron Jews*, p. 57.

13. Leo Gottesman, “The Martyrs of Hebron: Personal Reminiscences of Some of the Men and Women Who Offered Up Their Lives During the Massacre of August 24, 1929, at Hebron, Palestine and of Some Who Were Spared,” 1930, New York.

14. Auerbach, *Hebron Jews*, p. 60.

15. Mustafa Abbasi, “The Arab Community of Safad, 1840–1918: A Critical Period,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2003), p. 52.

16. Abbasi, “The Arab Community of Safad,” p. 53.

17. Yassar al-‘Askari, *Qissat madinat Safad* [The Story of Safad] (n.p. [Lebanon?]: Al-munadhdhama al-‘arabiyya lil-tarbiya wal-thaqafa wal-‘ulum, n.d. [1988?]), p. 65.

18. Abbasi, “The Arab Community of Safad,” p. 54.

19. ‘Ali Safadi, *Sanawat al-diya’: Sirat Safad sha’ban wa tarikhan* [Years of Loss: The Story of Safad, Its People and History] (Beirut: Al-mu’assasa al-‘arabiyya lil-dirasat wal-nashr, 2000), p. 48.

20. Safadi, *Sanawat al-diya’*, p. 48.

21. J. A. M. Faraday, “General Report—Disturbances Safad S/District,” Box 1/2, Faraday Collection (GB165-0101), Middle East Centre Archive, St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford, p. 10. [1929?].

22. Abbasi, “The Arab Community of Safad,” p. 53.

23. ‘Askari, *Qissat madinat Safad*, p. 66.

24. Safadi, *Sanawat al-diya’*, pp. 48–49.

25. For a more complete analysis, see Barakat, “*Thawrat al-Buraq*,” pp. 208–29.

26. Shaw Commission Report, p. 28.

27. An international commission appointed after the 1929 riots thoroughly described the status quo and the specific Muslim-Jewish disputes over the Wall. *Report of the Commission appointed by His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom [sic] of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, with the approval of the Council of the League of Nations, to Determine the Rights and Claims of Moslems and Jews in Connection with the Western or Wailing Wall at Jerusalem, December 1930* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1931. Reprint [*The Rights and Claims of Moslems and Jews in Connection with the Wailing Wall at Jerusalem*], Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1968).
28. Philip Mattar, "The Role of the Mufti of Jerusalem in the Political Struggle over the Western Wall, 1928–29," *Middle Eastern Studies* 19, no. 1 (January 1983), p. 105.
29. Mattar, "The Role of the Mufti," p. 105.
30. Mary Ellen Lundsten, "Wall Politics: Zionist and Palestinian Strategies in Jerusalem, 1928," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 8, no. 1 (Autumn 1978), p. 10.
31. Lundsten, "Wall Politics," p. 21.
32. See Barakat, "Thawrat al-Buraq," chapter 2.
33. The beadle or sexton of a synagogue.
34. Mattar, "The Role of the Mufti," p. 105.
35. Vincent Sheean, "Holy Land 1929," in *From Haven to Conquest: Readings in Zionism and the Palestine Problem until 1948*, ed. Walid Khalidi (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1971), p. 291. (Originally published in 1934).
36. Sheean, "Holy Land 1929," p. 291.
37. Shaw Commission Report, p. 153.
38. Y. Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918–1929* (London: Frank Cass, 1974), p. 269.
39. Porath, *Emergence*, pp. 269–70.
40. Martin Kolinsky, "Premeditation in the Palestine Disturbances of August 1929?" *Middle Eastern Studies* 26, no. 1 (January 1990), p. 23.
41. Kolinsky, "Premeditation?" p. 23.
42. Kolinsky, "Premeditation?" p. 28.
43. See, for example, Porath, *Emergence*, pp. 234, 279.
44. "On several occasions police were called in to investigate Zionist charges that the Mughrabi residents were stoning and assaulting Jewish worshippers. The police investigations showed that on one occasion a stone had been thrown by a child from within one of the Mughrabi houses. On another it was learned that pigeons nesting in the crevices had dislodged fragments of stone." Lundsten, "Wall Politics," p. 11.
45. Lundsten, "Wall Politics," p. 19.
46. Taysir Yunes Jbara, "Al-Hajj Muhammad Amin al-Husayni, Mufti of Jerusalem, the Palestine Years 1921–1937" (PhD diss., New York University, 1982), p. 120.
47. Sheean, "Holy Land 1929," p. 278.
48. F. H. Kisch, *Palestine Diary* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1938), p. 250.
49. Sheean, "Holy Land 1929," pp. 293–94.
50. Mattar, "The Role of the Mufti," p. 113.
51. "The Troubles in Palestine," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 35 (October 1929), p. 22.
52. Catherine Nicault, "Diplomatie et violence politique: autour des troubles palestiniens de 1929," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* (1954–) 47, no. 1 (January–March 2000), p. 166.
53. See Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem*, pp. 40–41.
54. Kisch, *Palestine Diary*, p. 273. Kisch also includes a photo of a house marked by a cross: see photograph facing p. 274.
55. Shaw Commission Report, p. 65.
56. Technically, of the destruction of both the First Temple by the Babylonians in 587 BCE and the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE.
57. High Commissioner's Telegram no. 204 of 19 September 1929, attached as appendix to "Palestine—Situation In. Report by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee" (December 1929), CAB 24/209, National Archives, UK, p. 5.
58. Colonial Office memorandum, November 1929, attached as appendix to "Palestine—Situation In. Report by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee" (December 1929), CAB 24/209, National Archives, UK, p. 11.
59. 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Sayyid Ahmad, *al-Khalil: Sira' bayna al-tabwid wal-tabrir*

min intifada 1929 ila intifada 2000

[Hebron: A Conflict between Judaizing and Liberation, from the Intifada of 1929 to the Intifada of 2000] (Amman: Al-mu'assasa al-'arabiyya al-dawliyya lil-nashr wal-tawzi', 2001), p. 75.

60. Faraday, “General Report,” p. 10.

61. Kisch's *Palestine Diary* supports this (see p. 255), though emphasis on the violence against the old Jewish community of Safad must be read in light of Kisch's political role.

62. Faraday, “General Report,” p. 8.

63. Gottesman, “The Martyrs of Hebron,” pp. 21–22.

64. Gottesman, “The Martyrs of Hebron,” p. 25.

65. “Many and many were the favors he did for them [the Arabs], the loans he obtained for them.” Gottesman, “The Martyrs of Hebron,” p. 22.

66. Edward Horne, *A Job Well Done: Being a History of the Palestine Police Force 1920–1948* (Sussex, UK: The Book Guild, 2003), p. 143.

67. See Michelle Campos, “Remembering Jewish-Arab Contact and Conflict,” in *Reapproaching Borders: New Perspectives on the Study of Israel-Palestine*, eds. Sandy Sufian and Mark LeVine (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), p. 55.

68. 'Askari, *Qissat madinat Safad*, p. 66.

69. 'Alami, *Thawrat al-Buraq*, p. 324.

70. Kisch, *Palestine Diary*, p. 251.

71. Nicault, “Diplomatie et violence politique,” p. 167.

72. Faraday, “General Report,” p. 8.

73. Horne, *A Job Well Done*, p. 142.

74. High Commissioner's Telegram no. 204 of 19 September 1929, attached in appendix to “Palestine—Situation In. Report by the Chiefs of Staff Subcommittee” (December 1929), CAB 24/209, National Archives, UK, p. 5.

75. David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 9.

76. Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, p. 9.

77. Nicault, “Diplomatie et violence politique,” p. 164.

78. Porath, *Emergence*, p. 61.

79. See Campos, “Remembering,” p. 56; Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), p. 325.

80. On the development of popular politics and challenges to the urban elite in the context of the events of 1929, see Barakat, “*Thawrat al-Buraq*,” chapters 3, 4.

81. See Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), especially chapter 7.

82. Makdisi, *Culture of Sectarianism*, p. 147.

83. Nicault, “Diplomatie et violence politique,” p. 164.