

Building to Survive: The Politics of Cement in Mandate Palestine

Nimrod Ben Zeev

“These people are really committing suicide . . . why [they] deprive us and themselves of cement baffles me.”

Emile Boutagy
26 February 1941

“[I]f the subject of this letter (the vexed question of cement) does not come within your schedule, would you pass it on, with my apologies, to the officer who deals with the affairs of this mournful commodity.”

Ivan Lloyd-Phillips
14 December 1946

“Oh cement, oh beloved
you are always on my mind”

Islam Ayoub

“The Cement Song (Longing, Oh,
Beloved),” Gaza, 2014

Portland cement, a hydraulic cement first patented in England in the early nineteenth century produced by fusing limestone and aluminosilicates, has played a crucial role in Palestinian history for almost a century. From the first sacks unloaded in Jaffa in the 1890s to those clandestinely transported into the besieged Gaza Strip through tunnels from the Egyptian border area since 2007, cement has stood at the center of two of the defining experiences of Palestinian society: modernity writ-large and the encounter with Zionism.¹ Cement, and concrete for which it is a key constituent, have had far-reaching impact on infrastructure, the built environment, and the building professions globally.² However, cement, in presence and absence, has also intertwined in unique ways with Palestinians’ everyday lives and political horizons: Its abundance has defined the changing landscapes

of Palestinian towns and, after 1948, refugee camps; its scarcity – the product of Israeli restrictions – has caused contemporary Gaza’s constant state of disrepair; its malleability has shaped the experiences of Palestinian construction workers in Israel and the settlements; and its solidity has wrought the separation wall.³

In this article, I focus on the period of British rule (1918–48), which I argue was the formative stage of cement’s Palestinian biography.⁴ During this period construction was a central component in both the Zionist and the Palestinian nation-building projects. In the process, the consumption and production of cement became indexical of the ability to construct not only modern buildings but also communities. While tracing cement consumption became one method of quantifying “the movement of construction” (Arabic: *harakat al-bina*’; Hebrew: *tnu’at ha-binyan*), its production was understood as crucial to the prospect of economic independence and liberation from colonial domination.⁵ As part of a broader narrative that posits construction and construction work as central pillars of the structures of inequality and domination in twentieth-century Palestine/Israel, the article illuminates cement’s role in the formation of these structures and in the strategies of struggle and survival Palestinians would deploy in their shadows. The first two sections follow the failed attempts to make cement and concrete an exclusive object of Hebrew labor through specialization and expertise, which coalesced with British racial ideologies and foreshadow the central role Palestinian men would eventually come to play in constructing the Jewish state.⁶ The subsequent sections examine the formation of the Nesher cement company’s monopoly over cement production, abetted by British support, and the thwarted attempts of Palestinian capitalists to establish an Arab cement company during the Mandate. These developments set the stage for Nesher’s ability to maintain its monopoly, largely unabated, well beyond 1948. The struggle over cement production also presents new questions regarding the history of corporations and race in Mandate Palestine. The paper’s final section binds together these layers. The accumulation of cement’s various significances meant that in times of scarcity, such as during World War II and in its aftermath, cement emerged as an object eliciting intense emotion, intimately connected to life itself and to the possibility of survival.

It Has No Other Experts

The significance of construction materials is never intrinsic to physical properties alone; rather, it is derived from how they have been employed historically and from the contexts that undergird their use – what architectural critic Or Alexandrovich calls a “politics of building materials.”⁷ Early Zionist efforts to transition from the “traditional” construction materials of Palestine, such as gravel and limestone, to “modern” materials, in particular cement and cement bricks, were an essentially political transition linked directly to the idea of Hebrew labor (*’avoda Ivrit*).⁸ Focusing on the construction of the first “modern” Hebrew neighborhood, Ahuzat Bayt, just north of Jaffa in 1909, Alexandrovich describes an emerging consensus in Zionist circles whereby Palestinian

construction workers were considered more skillful, indeed “naturally inclined,” toward construction in local materials and methods. They were imagined as having known the local stone “for generation upon generation,” making them “greatly preferable” to Jewish laborers.⁹ Zionist contractors and entrepreneurs viewed the construction of Ahuzat Bayt as an opportunity to introduce a new set of building materials and methods to unsettle this hierarchy of expertise. The material chosen to foster this shift by the neighborhood’s contractor, Akivah Aryeh Weiss, and his business partner, David Arber, was the concrete brick (also referred to as a “cement brick”), to be made of imported Portland cement in Arber’s new factory.¹⁰ Their goal was to ensure that Jewish hands would construct Jewish houses.¹¹

Weiss’s and Arber’s foray into replacing local stones and local workers was unsuccessful. In Alexandrowich’s telling, it was only after World War I, with the mass production of silicate (sand lime) bricks starting in 1922, that a serious contender to stone and masonry emerged.¹² However, the underlying logic of Weiss’s initiative – the suggested affinities among specific kinds of labor, materials, and race – continued to resonate strongly in Zionist circles. As the use of cement and concrete proliferated, the materials themselves were incorporated into competing visions of the land’s future. Like Hebrew labor and “building the land” (*binyan ha-aretz*), cement and concrete held a unique place in idealized visions of building. This is captured in Nathan Alterman’s “Morning Song” (1932), for example, where dressing the land “in a gown of concrete and cement” becomes central to performing the love of the land.¹³

In this climate, the idea that Jewish laborers were more adept at work in modern materials, particularly concrete and cement, took on additional weight. British racialized conceptions of the different capacities of Jews and Palestinian Arabs further bolstered this line of thought. In 1929, the British high commissioner John Chancellor weighed in on the increasingly contested matter of the unequal division of labor in Palestine, arguing that “the rivalry between the Jews and Arabs [in the matter of the division of labor and wage inequality],” was “mitigated by the fact that the two races tend to become naturally segregated in different kinds of labor.”¹⁴ Juxtaposing the “superior physique” of Arabs to the “greater intelligence” of Jews, he used concrete work, among other things, as a case in point for this contradiction-riddled racial ideology, stating that

By reason of their greater intelligence and manual skill the Jews are economically superior to the Arabs in some of the more modern forms of skilled and semi-skilled work, such as *reinforced concrete*, care of machinery and electrical work. [emphasis mine]

Champions of Hebrew labor seized upon these distinctions, effectively mirroring earlier frustrations with the inadequacy and disadvantages of Jewish hands working in local Palestinian stone. In place of the Palestinians’ “natural” or “traditional” affinity, Jewish labor offered expertise and specialization. The right-wing newspaper *Do’ar ha-Yom* reported with unconcealed glee that, following the devastation of the 1927 earthquake, Arab employers increasingly saw Hebrew construction, particularly in concrete, as

more durable. As a result, the paper stated, Arab contractors in the Jerusalem area increasingly employed Jewish laborers. Prior to the earthquake “a small number of [Jewish] professionals in concrete work had worked . . . for Arab employers.” Now, it was in concrete work in particular, “which among the Arabs has no specialists,” that Arab contractors in and around Jerusalem sought to employ Jews.¹⁵ Opportunities to celebrate Jewish dominance of concrete work were found even when bemoaning the hardships of the Hebrew labor struggle. In March 1929, the left-leaning *Davar*, identified with mainstream Labor Zionism, complained that due to Arab laborers’ low salaries, Jewish workers were entirely blocked from the Jerusalem Electric Company’s works. The article took some solace however in “a small concrete work [as part of the electric company’s projects] that employs several Jews, since it has no other experts.”¹⁶

Jewish mastery of cement was frequently juxtaposed with Arab failures to do so. In 1931, *Davar* complained that the Jerusalem municipality hired an Arab contractor to build the city’s new refuse incinerator and slaughterhouse. The contractor was “of course employing only Arab laborers in all simple labors.” However, *Davar* remarked, his attempt to boycott Hebrew labor “in the professional work as well” proved unsuccessful: the quality of the incinerator’s walls, “cast” – indicating they were made of concrete – initially by Arab laborers, was so poor, that Jewish laborers were hired to rebuild them.¹⁷ A striking example of this trope is found in a book dedicated by the Construction Workers Union to one of the Jewish construction industry’s pioneers, Chaim Flexer, celebrating his seventieth birthday. In an undated speech before the Construction Workers Association in Jerusalem, Flexer reminisces of his days working in the city, first in stone masonry, then in concrete: “As I passed the Shaykh Jarrah neighborhood, I was reminded of the Mufti – Hajj Amin al-Husayni – who invited Jewish laborers in 1934 to fix the concrete ceiling that had collapsed in his office, immediately after it was cast by Arab laborers.”¹⁸ The crux of Flexer’s recollection, apocryphal though it may be, is clear: that a nationalist figure of al-Husayni’s standing invited Jewish laborers to fix the shoddy workmanship of his compatriots is ultimate testimony to what the discourse of Jewish expertise rendered an almost “natural” Jewish superiority in cement and concrete work. Flexer’s memory may have already been tinged by the widespread association in Jewish Israeli culture between “Arab labor” and poor work, but it might also point us toward its origins.¹⁹ This neat narrative of exclusive Jewish expertise in cement and concrete and the corresponding depiction of Palestinian construction as always falling apart, fell apart readily itself. Throughout the Mandate period, Palestinian contractors and laborers carried out projects, large and small, that made extensive use of concrete and cement.²⁰

The idea that Portland cement and its products could restructure the building trade was not unique to Palestine: from the early nineteenth century, part of what made these materials appealing to capitalist and socialist visionaries alike was their potential to do just that. In both Europe and the United States, construction in concrete was supposed to facilitate a redistribution of skill within the building trades. However, rather than fostering a new class of expert laborers, it was perceived as circumventing established building crafts, permitting cheaper, “unskilled” labor to engage in the manual work of

construction, while emphasizing the skills of engineers and other technical experts.²¹ From the perspective of labor, Hebrew or otherwise, the introduction of cement and concrete as materials of expertise was fraught to begin with. Working in a “deskilling” material, most Jewish construction workers seem to have had very little actual advantage over their Palestinian peers. At the same time, despite the capacity of Palestinian contractors and workers to incorporate the new materials into their repertoire, the introduction of cement and concrete on a large scale had considerable adverse impact on Palestine’s established building crafts. As early as 1930, the Hope-Simpson report noted that Palestinian stonemasons and stone dressers were severely hurt by the expanding use of “cement, reinforced concrete and silicate brick, all manufactured by Jews.”²²

Cement transformed construction work in Palestine, but not in the ways the Hebrew press or Zionist entrepreneurs imagined. Its wide-scale introduction succeeded in weakening the standing of Palestinian craftbuilders. That in itself could not guarantee Zionist dominance in construction. Labor, however, was not the only area in which the ability to construct in Palestine was contested. Attention to Zionist preoccupations with material acts of building as part of a nation-building project, studied from perspectives as diverse as literature, political philosophy, and architecture,²³ may have occluded the importance Palestinian anticolonial projects conferred upon construction, evident already during the Mandate. In the press, in their interactions with the British, and in business correspondence, Palestinians articulated visions of national futures bound together by cement. These visions came up against a considerably more substantial obstacle than Zionist claims for labor specialization, however, shaped in no small part by British policy: the Jewish monopoly over cement production.²⁴

Cementing Monopoly

The Neshet Portland Cement Company, founded in 1923 by the Russian-born industrialist and entrepreneur Michael Pollak, maintained throughout the Mandate and beyond a monopoly over cement production. The Neshet factory’s establishment was the realization of plans laid by a group named the Palestine Portland Cement Syndicate. By the time Michael Pollak became involved, the syndicate, led by several prominent British Jews, had already selected land near the town of Yajur, southeast of Haifa, for the factory and its quarries. Once conditions of the land’s purchase were agreed upon, Pollak registered the new “Portland Cement Company ‘Neshet,’ Ltd.” in London, so a viable legal entity could make the purchase. London remained the center of Neshet’s financial operations until Pollak sold his stake in the company and its London holdings were liquidated in 1945.²⁵

Neshet’s increasing profits and the company’s strengthening hold over Palestine’s cement market, beginning in the late 1920s, coincided with a steady increase in the use of cement in the land. In 1922 and 1923, cement imports into Palestine – approximating consumption in the absence of local manufacture – totaled roughly thirty thousand tons annually. By 1929, consumption was estimated at nearly sixty-two thousand tons.²⁶

Although British ideologies of racial and civilizational hierarchy contributed to the Mandate administration's more favorable view of Jewish industrial endeavors than Arab ones, Neshet's ability to maintain its status as a monopoly seems also to have been rooted in its management's ability to navigate British local and imperial interests and discourses.²⁷ Pollak's efforts in the summer of 1925, immediately before beginning production, to institute duty-free admission for raw materials for exporting industries were instrumental to the company's success. Here, the reasoning Pollak provided was entirely local: without concessions, the company risked collapse, resulting in loss of jobs.²⁸ However, earlier that year, Pollak had attempted to convince the British to raise the tariff on imported cement to protect Neshet's product using a more "imperial" argument. Unlike imported European cement, Pollak contended, Neshet's production would rely solely on British coal, thus contributing to the Metropole. When authorities formed a committee to discuss the tariff on cement in May 1926, Pollak again justified protection not only because the firm employed "250 Jewish workers and 100 Arab workers," but also because it provided a living for "about 200 English workers in coal mining and transport. [And] England is now in dire need of exporting coal."²⁹

The decision to employ Palestinians in the company's quarry, despite the protests of the advocates of Hebrew labor, was in line both with economic considerations, given the wage discrimination between Arabs and Jews, and with the ongoing prevalence of ideas regarding the suitability of certain bodies for certain forms of labor and materials. Yet Pollak's outward reasoning also brought together political expediency and economy, demonstrating attention to British and regional sensitivities and to the struggle over cement's identity. The employment of Arabs, he argued, was intended to prevent accusations by consumers in Palestine and beyond that Neshet's cement was "Jewish." Furthermore, a company registered in England should rightly employ both peoples.³⁰ Whether or not Pollak's reasoning was genuine, Norris notes that for the British, the makeup of Neshet's workforce was a decisive factor in directing the Haifa harbor's construction to utilize Neshet's cement.³¹

Cement: To End Colonial Domination

Despite the profound differences between a settler movement and an indigenous one, the objective of "building the land" in a material sense and as part of a national project – for so long perceived as a uniquely Zionist project and concern – was also shared by Palestinians. Palestinian capitalists, builders, and others took note of cement's growing popularity. By the late 1920s, they began to see the material not only as an economic opportunity, but potentially an important factor in economic and national emancipation. Discussions about Palestinian access to cement, the prospects of "Arab cement," and Neshet's stranglehold over the local market emerged alongside increased attention to the act of building itself. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the Palestinian press frequently covered the "movement of construction" (*harakat al-bina*) in various Palestinian cities, reported on the changing costs of construction

materials and labor, featured articles about construction methods and the economics of construction, and closely followed governmental building schemes, the availability of housing, and the granting of building permits.³²

The records and correspondence of Palestine's Chambers of Commerce and the contemporary Arabic press prove key sources for unearthing Palestinian visions of national futures. These sources further reveal the centrality of construction, and in particular of cement – a material which became identified with modernity and national liberation – to these visions. The chambers, as an increasingly important hub for the activities of Palestine's "men of capital,"³³ were often closely involved in initiatives to introduce "Arab cement" into the Palestinian market, either through regional cooperation or through local manufacture. The press, meanwhile, served as a platform for highlighting cement's centrality, benefits, and emancipatory potential. Newspapers also placed Neshet at the center of their critiques of British protection of Jewish industry and sought to encourage alternatives. Opposition to the government's preferential treatment of Neshet seems to have emerged forcefully toward the end of 1929. Neshet's success after initial difficulties, the sharpening contours of conflict in the wake of the violent clashes of summer 1929, and the British decision (succumbing to Neshet's pressures) to raise the tariff on imported cement to 850 mils per ton all likely played a role in the timing. Furthermore, the establishment of the Syrian National Cement Manufacturing Company in Damascus in early 1930 meant that there was now a self-styled Arab national alternative to Neshet, and the Syrian company's founders specifically courted Palestinian investors through the press.³⁴

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the emphasis on cement and concrete as decidedly "scientific" materials at the time, one of the earliest written responses to this call for Palestinian investors was a two-part article describing the benefits of cement "from the chemical perspective."³⁵ Its author, Majdi al-Shawa, a Gazan doctor of chemistry, specifically stated his objective was not to comment on whether Palestinians should invest in the Damascene firm, since "all were convinced of the necessity of cooperating in and assisting the national economy." Rather, he provided readers with a history of cement's evolution, Portland cement's invention, the differences between natural and industrial cements, and between non-hydraulic and hydraulic cements. The article's second installment discussed the benefits of cement in the face of structural threats, focusing on earthquakes and drawing on examples from concrete construction in Japan – no doubt a pertinent focus given the disastrous impact of the 1927 earthquake still fresh in the local memory. Despite his initial claim not to opine on investing in the Syrian factory, Shawa concluded this second part by clarifying that initiatives like the Arab cement factory were crucial for the Arab lands' economic independence, and that its founders sought no less than to end colonial domination.

Shawa's writing stands out among other contemporary discussions of cement in its materials science approach. However, the tone of much of the discourse, particularly among those Palestinians calling for tariff reform and the end of preference for Jewish industry, was often framed as scientific in a different fashion: it was anchored in economic calculations. In December 1929, *Mir'at al-Sharq* estimated that the tariff

on imported cement cost Palestine's government fifty-two thousand pounds a year, accounting for the customs lost on imports, the losses of shipping, and of portage income at the ports.³⁶ In February 1930, the prominent Palestinian accountant Fu'ad Saba sent the acting chief secretary of the Mandate administration an evaluation of the government's cement tariff policy in light of Neshet's 1927 and 1928 financial reports. Saba concluded that given Neshet's already "very fair return" in 1928 there was no justification for the 1929 tariff increase. Saba's evaluation, of which his firm kept a copy in a folder titled "Government Neglect of Arab Industry" (*ihmal al-hukuma lil-sina'a al-'Arabiyya*), included calculations that demonstrated that Neshet's "heavy protection" was not economically viable, but rather part of a pattern of neglect and preference, accorded to Arab and Jewish industries respectively.³⁷

The press continued to follow the progress of the Damascus factory, and to critique the tariff policy on cement throughout 1930–31.³⁸ In one article, a "prominent" Haifa merchant told *Filastin* that the degree of Neshet's "tyranny" could be revealed by posing different questions: instead of asking why European cement is so expensive in Palestine, the merchant suggested, one should ask how Neshet could sell its own cement in Syria at a lower price than in Palestine, despite additional transportation costs. The tariffs, in the merchant's view, encouraged precisely this sort of behavior, since they meant that Palestinian consumers had little alternative to Neshet. To combat this, he continued, the Arab Executive and the other national bodies should demand the government force Neshet to sell its produce in Palestine at the same prices as in Syria. Failing this, the alternative was simple – the same national bodies should call for the establishment of a national cement corporation. Supporters and investors were sure to approach immediately, since cement "was a necessary material, and the profit in it was without doubt." He added, "Palestine's people have had their fill of meetings and statements, it is time for action."³⁹

Perhaps here the idea of a Palestinian Arab national cement factory was born. By early 1935, reports appeared of Arab and Jewish initiatives to compete with Neshet. The coincidence of initiatives by "a group of people from Bayt Jala who had recently returned from America" to establish a cement factory in the Nablus area, and a Jewish entrepreneur who established a company named the Shimshon Cement Company in the 'Artuf area west of Jerusalem, indicates that it was likely the economic boom of 1934–35 was motivating both.⁴⁰ The Bayt Jala initiative seems to have dissipated quickly. Shimshon would remain in a perpetual state of commencing operations "shortly" for two decades.⁴¹

For Palestinian consumers, the 1936 general strike seems to have made appeals to products' "Arabness" particularly attractive and concerns that products were secretly benefitting Jewish investors more grave. Two articles from *al-Difa'* and an advertisement for Syrian cement, all published in January 1937, demonstrate this. The first *al-Difa'* article discusses the rising enthusiasm of Arab consumers for Arab goods and its impact on Neshet, whose sales were increasingly threatened by the Syrian National Cement factory in Damascus and the Chekka factory near Tripoli.⁴² In the second article, the same Chekka factory responded to rumors that the company

was owned by Jewish investors by affirming that Chekka was a pure (*sarifa*) Arab company, its cement made by Arab hands (*masnu'a bi-ayadi 'Arabiyya*), and that among its five hundred workers and its shareholders “there is not a single Jew.” In an advertisement in *Filastin*, Chekka’s Damascene competitor used similar language, stating that the company’s cement was made “entirely by Arab hands” and of “good Arab soil,” and that all company shares were owned by Arabs. Ownership of capital, the laboring bodies involved in production, and the soil from which the cement was made all played a role in defining it as properly Arab.⁴³

Also in early 1937, the first Palestinian Arab initiative to gain considerable momentum toward establishing a cement factory took shape. This plan likely sought to capture some of the revolt’s energy, but it was the revolt that would ultimately undo it.⁴⁴ A group of prominent Palestinian capitalists, including Ahmad Hilmi Pasha of the Arab Bank and later the Arab National Bank, Hajj ‘Abd al-Rahim al-Tamimi, Fakhri al-Nashashibi, Elias Gelat, and George Khader led the initiative. Having struck a partnership with the German MIAG firm, the new company began conducting scientific surveys of suitable sites in the Nablus, Jerusalem, and Haifa areas, eventually settling on a site near ‘Artuf – where the Shimshon company had also planned its location. However, the arrest and exile of Ahmad Hilmi and others during the revolt put an end to the project, and all its documentation was lost when Fakhri al-Nashashibi was murdered in Iraq in 1941.⁴⁵

The Binds of War

The severe economic downturn in the latter part of the revolt seems to have stymied Palestinian initiatives, while the Histadrut took advantage of these circumstances to gain a foothold in Neshet’s quarry. The quarry’s Arab workers were pushed out completely in 1938 by David Hacoheh of Solel Boneh, the Histadrut’s contracting firm, who two years prior had replaced Musbah Shaqifi – the contractor who operated the quarry since its establishment.⁴⁶ If British enthusiasm toward Neshet’s product was, initially at least, due in part to its employment of both Jews and Arabs, the revolt and the eruption of World War II changed British calculations dramatically. As safe shipping routes became fewer and other regions in the empire consumed their local cement production entirely, the British became dependent on Neshet.

During World War II, Palestine was transformed into Britain’s second-largest military base in the Middle East, generating unprecedented demand for materials, produce, and goods.⁴⁷ Palestine’s manufacturing industry grew rapidly, mainly to satisfy British military demands, and unemployment was considerably reduced.⁴⁸ At the same time, severe inflation dramatically curtailed the purchasing power of Palestine’s inhabitants. To combat this and to assure sufficient supplies for the military stationed in Palestine and beyond, authorities installed an austerity regime, with price control and rationing measures on manufactured goods and produce. This regime failed to prevent scarcity, however, in goods from foodstuffs to building materials, and cement in particular.⁴⁹

The war also spurred unprecedented government construction, and Nesher became the exclusive source of cement for British military needs in Palestine. Between 1942 and 1943, it sold 80 percent of its cement to British forces, and throughout the war the government was required to approve all civilian purchases.⁵⁰ Dependency spawned intense government cooperation and coordination with Nesher. This included instituting monthly coordination visits at the factory, setting production quotas, intervening on Nesher's behalf with suppliers of oil and coal in order to meet quotas, and having Nesher's representatives advise the general headquarters in Egypt.⁵¹ The war proved immensely profitable for Nesher, even though cement was throughout a controlled material, its price fixed and its civilian use prohibited, generating a severe housing shortage.⁵²

Many Palestinians felt that Nesher, like other large Jewish-owned firms, was profiteering, granting preference to Jewish needs, and neglecting and exploiting Palestine's Arab population.⁵³ Furthermore, the war had cut off Palestinians from neighboring countries, circumscribing the regional visions that animated earlier calls to turn to Syrian cement instead.⁵⁴ Limited by British wartime control policies, the Arab Chambers of Commerce requested that the government either allocate some of Nesher's product for civilian needs, drastically reduce the tariff, or allow import from neighboring countries once again.

As the war in Europe drew to a close, Nesher's workers embarked on a lengthy strike, protesting the prices they paid while the company profited. In November 1945, after several months of negotiations and deliberations, Pollak sold the company to the shared ownership of Solel Boneh, and a coalition of industrialists and contractors organized as the Central Palestine Company for Trade and Investment.⁵⁵ The 50–50 split between the trade union's contracting firm and private capitalists was framed as an ideological decision.⁵⁶ For Palestinians, it meant that what little claim Nesher ever had to having been a disinterested party was now completely gone. Under the joint ownership of Zionist workers and contractors, the newspaper *al-Sha'b* stated, the company had become entirely subservient to the conquest of labor and colonization.⁵⁷

The war's end brought little economic respite. The housing shortage, which resulted in immense crowding and even plague, continued.⁵⁸ The shortage itself, according to British sources, lasted until December 1947, when Nesher's production finally began catching up with post-war reconstruction.⁵⁹ Throughout, and despite countless appeals, the government maintained the 850 mills tariff on imports.⁶⁰ The urgent need for construction, Nesher's inability to produce sufficient cement to satisfy demand, and the continued sense that the company and its agents were actively granting preference to Jewish needs, led to what became known in the Arabic press as the "cement crisis" (*azmat al-asmant*).⁶¹

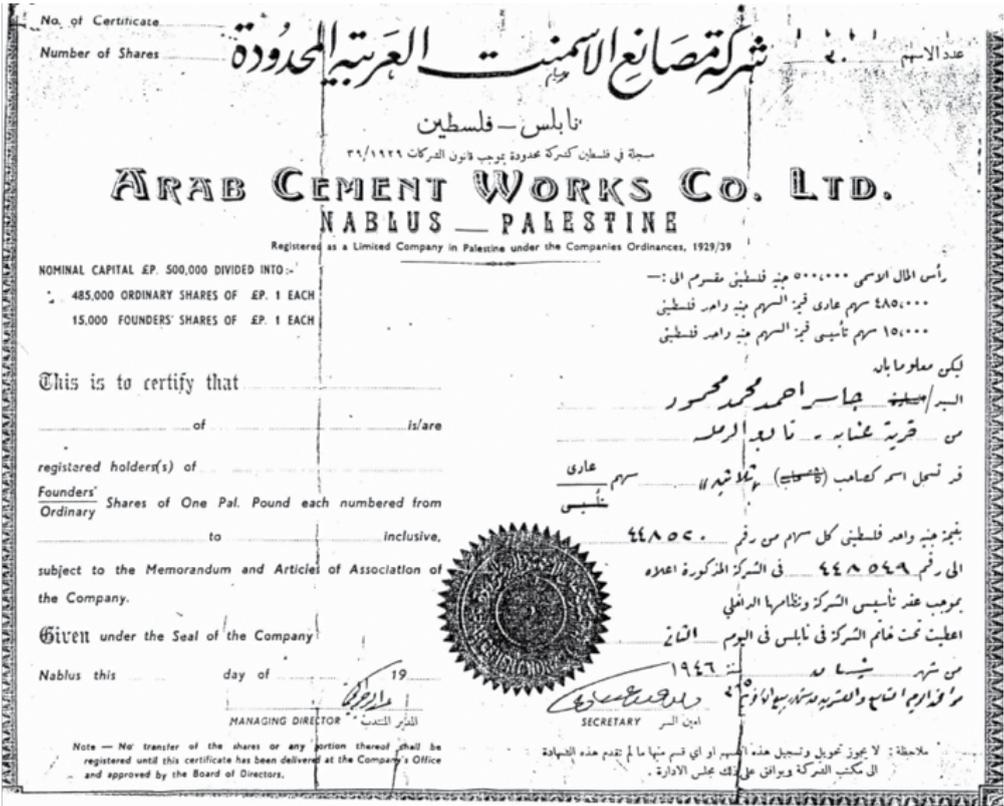


Figure 1. Certificate of shares in the Arab Cement Works, ‘Innaba, 1946, Birzeit University Research Center.

“It Is Impossible for a Company to Possess Race”

Out of this crisis emerged the Arab Cement Works (ACW). According to a memorandum by the Jerusalem Chamber of Commerce, the cement works grew out of two competing initiatives (figure 1). The first was centered in Nablus and led by ‘Abd al-Rahim al-Tamimi, who had also been involved in the 1937 initiative. The other was headed by ‘Abd al-Hamid Shoman of the Arab Bank. Realizing that “the Nablus scheme” was progressing rapidly, Shoman threw his support (but not his finances, the memorandum states) behind Tamimi’s initiative, and the ACW was incorporated in Palestine on 22 June 1945.⁶² Even before official incorporation, *Filastin* had written of “peak enthusiasm” (*hamasa yablugh al-dhurwa*) among investors for the initiative, which received the support of both of Palestine’s Arab banks, and *al-Difa* had reported that the project was garnering interest in Transjordan as well.⁶³

During the first year of its operation, the company appointed a board and auditors, reached an agreement with a machinery manufacturer to supply all necessary equipment, and selected land for purchase. In purchasing machinery, the ACW initially pursued a

strategy not dissimilar to Michael Pollak's in Nesher's early days. It began negotiations with the British Danish FL Smidth company, due to ACW's "initial desire to give priority to British Manufacturers." Smidth's supply schedule proved slow, however, prohibiting even partial fulfilment in the 26-month period ACW had set for beginning production. In a letter to the Controller of Heavy Industries (CHI), the company explained that despite their preference for British machinery, they were forced to sign an agreement with the U.S. Kennedy company. Given Palestine's urgent need for cement, the speedy launch of operations was a priority. At this stage, all that stood in the ACW's way appeared to be an import license for the machinery and the release of U.S. currency to fund the purchase. The company applied to the CHI for both on 31 October 1946, and began searching for a director and an office near al-Ramla.⁶⁴ By late spring 1947, those who followed the ACW's progress in the press had reason to be optimistic. On 28 May, *Filastin* reported that "after mighty efforts" the company had secured an import license for the machinery and the U.S. currency to pay for it. With this news, the value of the company's shares rose.⁶⁵ Sixteen years since a Palestinian national cement factory was first suggested, and after a series of unrealized initiatives over the previous decade, this "great national economic project" seemed to finally be getting off the ground.

Behind the scenes, however, it was the ground that was the problem. In December 1946, the Jerusalem Chamber of Commerce reported that the ACW had purchased plots of land between 'Innaba and Jimzu in al-Ramla district, after "experts from the Hilwan Cement Works of Egypt" examined the soil and recommended its suitability.⁶⁶ A January 1947 letter from 'Abd al-Rahim al-Tamimi to the High Commissioner reveals that the purchase of the lands was done "in trust" by "some members of the Board of Directors as a temporary measure." Tamimi explained that the administrator general had responded positively to the ACW's request to purchase the lands in its name according to the Companies Ordinances of 1929/39. Difficulties arose when the ACW applied to register them with the Registrar of Lands.⁶⁷ Ya'qub 'Atalla of the Registrar of Lands had confirmed that the company was eligible to purchase the lands in accordance with the Companies Ordinances. Under the Land Transfer Regulations of 1940, however, "the transfer of any land from a Palestinian Arab to a non-Palestinian person in Area A is forbidden." Since race was one of the "assumed qualifications" (*al-quyud al-mafruda*) of the regulations, it was these, not the Companies Ordinances, that prohibited the ACW from registering the lands. Regardless of the owners of the company, 'Atalla explained, "It is impossible for a company to possess race" (*la yumkin li-sharika an taktasib al-jinsiyya*).⁶⁸

The registrar's reasoning, upheld by the high commissioner on two separate occasions, raises multiple issues. First, it seems to run counter to the purpose of the 1940 Land Transfer Regulations. The British had presented these regulations, put into place following the publication of the 1939 White Paper in the context of the 1936–39 revolt, as a measure to protect the Palestinian population from the increasing threat of landlessness. That is, restrictions on the transfer of lands from Palestinian Arabs to "anyone other than a Palestinian Arab" – understood to mean Zionist settlers, first and foremost – was intended to ensure that "'the rights and position' of the Arab population

be duly preserved.” In certain areas (referred to as “Zone A” in the regulations, and including the area between ‘Inabba and Jimzu where the ACW had conducted surveys and where its board members had purchased lands in trust), Palestinians’ rights were accounted the strictest protections and the transfer of land therein would be prohibited “save in exceptional cases.”⁶⁹

The registrar had correctly anticipated that the ACW would claim that the fact that it was “100 percent Arab in Capital and in Membership,” should suffice to exclude the company from being considered “non-Arab.” When the ACW appealed, the office of the acting secretary general suggested that the company apply for consideration again through the district commissioner.⁷⁰ Although the company’s second application is missing from the file found at the Israel State Archives, the July 1947 response from the office of the general secretary states once again that a company is “not a ‘Palestinian Arab’” within the definitions of the Land Transfer Regulations. The High Commissioner, it adds, rejected the application since he “has no power to grant permission for the transfer.”⁷¹

The Mandate administration’s reasoning – that “it is impossible for a company to possess race” – further raises questions about the scope of corporate personhood and the applicability of race as a category in the Palestinian context. If the legal notion that corporations are persons, widely accepted in British law by the second decade of the twentieth century and enshrined in the 1922 Palestine Order in Council, still makes us somewhat uneasy, then the very question of whether a corporation can possess “race” can seem altogether dumbfounding.⁷² In the United States, race has been intricately linked to the legal history of corporate personhood. These links began with *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) and extend through the long history of corporations basing claims to legal rights on the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution – introduced during Reconstruction, partially as a corrective to the *Dred Scott* decision, to ensure the citizenship rights of freed black American slaves.⁷³ In the British Empire, however, such links appear to have been less pivotal, or at the very least have been less well documented and researched.⁷⁴

In Palestine, links between race and corporate personhood seem to have first arisen directly in relation to the Land Transfer Regulations. The regulations mention companies only in their capacity as potential mortgage holders. However, Amendment 16D to the Palestine Order in Council, put forward on 25 May 1939 to facilitate the Land Transfer Regulations, introduced the category of “bodies of persons corporate or unincorporated” as separate from the categories of Arab and Jew.⁷⁵ This in itself hardly suffices to interpret race as the operative category here. Shira Robinson has rightfully noted the “slippery boundaries” that existed between race, culture, nation, and people in international law, within the Mandate system, and in British Mandate Palestine specifically.⁷⁶

Yet the Land Transfer Regulations seem to have inspired British officials to employ systematic racial thinking. In May 1940, roughly three months after the publication of the Land Transfer Regulations, the British chief secretary issued directions for the submission of land transfer applications, noting that for each “transferee and transferor

[in each application] should be included race, nationality and where habitually residing.”⁷⁷ The inclusion of race as a category quickly spurred questions and doubts as to how British officials should classify different Palestinians racially. Within months, the director of land registration for Jerusalem and the district commissioners of Jerusalem and Haifa raised questions of whether Palestinian Druze and Palestinian Armenians should be considered Palestinian Arabs under the regulations. The chief secretary opined that “Druzes are Arabs who profess the Durzi creed. [Therefore] I think that a Palestinian Durzi is a Palestinian Arab in the sense of the . . . Land Transfer Regulations.” Regarding a potential Armenian transferee, the chief secretary decidedly stated that, “[h]e may be regarded as ordinarily resident in Palestine; but he is not an Arab. Ethnologically he belongs to the Aryan race.” The regulations seemed to have awoken the inner race-scientist in some.

By the time the problem of determining the race of corporations arose several years later, the idea that the terms Arab and Jew in the regulations were first and foremost racial categories was firmly ingrained. In a March 1945 letter seeking legal advice regarding the regulations’ application to companies, the director of land registration expressed his understanding that “the fundamental principles of the Regulations are based on race and residence and whilst a company may enjoy the latter, the former does not reside in it.” Several months later, the acting chief secretary affirmed the legal opinion of the attorney general, without mentioning race specifically. Rather, he returned to the distinctions made in Amendment 16D to the Palestine Order in Council between Arabs, Jews, and “bodies of people corporate or unincorporate [*sic*].” The attorney general explained that

having regard to the express reference in Article 16D to bodies corporate, it seems to me that the words “Arab” and “Jew” therein, do not include corporations. “Person” is nowhere mentioned in the article (except as “bodies of persons”) and accordingly one cannot introduce the definition of the word person, in conjunction with the word “Arab.”⁷⁸

This legal opinion shaped the application of the regulations for the remainder of the Mandate.

British approaches to the Land Transfer Regulations’ application to companies were not limited to legalistic argumentation regarding corporate personhood or ideas about race. There were those among the British authorities who argued that companies be excluded from the regulations to better fulfill the “spirit of the White Paper” – that is, to safeguard the *fallahin* in danger of becoming landless against potential Zionist attempts to subvert the regulations. In November 1945, the Land Transfer Inquiry Committee, appointed earlier that year to investigate alleged contraventions of the regulations and make recommendations regarding their implementation, issued its final report. Among other issues, the report addressed proposals to exclude Arab companies from the ruling that no company is a Palestinian Arab. The committee argued against such an exclusion, “since a nominal Arab company might in reality be controlled, either in

the present or in the future, by Jews.”⁷⁹ In the same breath it recognized that, “under the present ruling the development of legitimate Arab companies is frustrated by inability to acquire necessary land.” Accordingly, they recommended the exclusion be temporary, to be removed following “the provision of adequate safeguards.” The fate of the Arab Cement Works demonstrates that no such safeguards were ever put in place.

An article which appeared in *Filastin* on 28 March 1948, when war was already raging in the land, described the ACW’s annual company meeting held in Nablus the morning prior. The company, at least as a business entity, seemed to have survived the registrar’s decision. However, the article made no mention of machinery en route from America, nor of the progress of the company’s plant construction. The registrar’s decision was likely a death blow, the last in a series of events which over fifteen years stymied any Palestinian attempts to challenge Nesher’s monopoly. Whether the logic behind the registrar’s decision was that of limiting corporate personhood, as Ya‘qub ‘Atalla’s original letter implied, or of upholding the spirit of the White Paper, against the specter of “nominally Arab companies” potentially “controlled by Jews,” the results were the same. The very measures designed to protect Palestinian land rights were turned against a venture that, for nearly two decades, many Palestinians saw as crucial to their ability to build their futures.⁸⁰

A Mournful Commodity

In late February 1941, Palestinian capitalist Emile Boutagy wrote heartfelt letters to five of the most powerful British officials in Palestine. All five letters dealt with the abrupt cancellation of an import license for one thousand tons of cement from Syria, obtained by two businessmen, Malas and Budayr. More striking than the details of the transaction’s cancellation, whose reversal Boutagy sought, is the language Boutagy used to write about cement. The letters offer variations on the same theme: because Nesher’s produce was entirely consumed by the war effort and importing cement from overseas was impossible, cement had become, in Boutagy’s words, “a matter of life and death,” which “would be a God send for those hungering for [it].” It was, after all, a material which “no country in the world



Figure 2. Letter of Emile Boutagy to George As‘ad Khader, 28 February 1942, Israel State Archives.

can exist without.”⁸¹ Boutagy’s writing was often flowery and dramatic, even when arguing for the necessity of gramophone records to lift up British troops’ morale during the war, or of original Kiwi shoe polish as opposed to “monstrous imitations.”⁸² None of Boutagy’s writing elsewhere, however, matches the existential tone of his writing about the cement shortage. In a more informal letter to George As’ad Khader, secretary of the Arab Chamber of Commerce in Jerusalem (figure 2), Boutagy wrote of the British decision to cancel the import license: “These people are really committing suicide.”

Boutagy was not alone in equating the ability to build – and specifically to build in cement – and the preservation of life itself. The discourse of the “cement crisis” after World War II also was rife with portrayals of cement as a provider of jobs and shelter, as a commodity linked to “the welfare of the country,” the supply of which was part of “safeguarding the rights of the public.”⁸³ An “incessant flow of appeals and grievances” led the Haifa Chamber of Commerce, for example, to write to the British chief secretary of the crisis having “detrimental bearing on the vital nourishment of building projects.” Cement, more than any other material, became synonymous with the capacity and necessity to build in order to survive.

Although the press and the chambers of commerce may be seen as stirring up emotions for the benefit of commercial interests, there is some evidence that the link between building materials and the capacity to build held similar emotional significance for others as well. In 1942, for example, Sitt Amina al-Khalidi, left an endowment (*waqf*) for the establishment of a new hospital in Jerusalem’s Shaykh Jarrah neighborhood. That summer, the executors of Khalidi’s will appealed to the British to approve the hospital’s location and release the necessary building materials for its construction. Progress on the location seemed to be made quickly, but Khalidi’s trustees apparently sensed that the issue of building materials might require additional pressure.⁸⁴ Thus, in mid-November, a coordinated series of petitions with over three hundred signatories were sent from multiple locations in Palestine to the high commissioner, to pressure the government to release the materials necessary for construction. While some of the petitions requested the British to facilitate the construction of the hospital more broadly, others explicitly referred to the release of building materials. Many of the telegrams used distinctly emotional, even heartrending appeals. They described the facilitation of the hospital’s construction – that is, the release of building materials – “as a measure of reducing the tortures of which humanity is suffering,” “a contribution toward the alleviation of the sufferings of the poor,” and “a measure of service to humanity.”⁸⁵ The capacity to construct, reduced to access to building materials, meant the world.

The multiple facets of cement’s history endowed the seemingly drab material with emotional resonance.⁸⁶ Within the discourse of Hebrew building expertise in cement and concrete, Palestinian structures made of these materials were always ready to collapse, their disintegration inevitable and imminent. The ideal materials for building the Jewish homeland anew were imagined as somehow beyond the grasp of Palestinians. Of course, from the point of view of skill, of capacity, of initiative, they never were. Yet, the Yishuv garnered advantages elsewhere. The political and economic order that developed during the Mandate, solidifying Neshet as a monopoly, seemed to withstand

any challenge thrown its way. Time and again, British interests appeared to coalesce with those of the company. What Palestinians lacked during the Mandate then was neither expertise nor skill; rather, empire and its legal structures, not labor, ended up structuring the political economy of cement.

At the same time, these very materials became intertwined not only with visions of the national future cultivated by economic and cultural elites, but more importantly, with tangible, concrete needs. The prolonged “cement crisis” transformed cement’s absence into something that was *felt* by countless Palestinians every day. As the notion of crisis circulated, cement, more than any other building material, became an object of desire and longing – the key to the capacity to build and to live. It was, as Ivan Lloyd-Phillips from the Gaza district commissioner’s office described it, “a mournful commodity.”⁸⁷

These configurations did not suddenly cease to exist with the catastrophe of 1948. Dreams and nightmares of cement and concrete continued to haunt Palestinians well beyond the Nakba, taking different yet eerily familiar forms. Seemingly defying their own physical properties, cement and concrete traveled alongside those who were forced to leave and sat heavy on those who remained, somehow always maintaining a fleeting sense of promise, echoed in 2014, with a bitter smile, by Gazan artist Islam Ayoub: “Oh, cement, oh, beloved/you are always on my mind.”⁸⁸

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Endnotes

1 “Concrete in Palestine,” *Cement Age* 10, no. 5 (May 1910): 371; Jon Donnison, “Gaza Tunnel Trade Squeezed by Egypt ‘Crackdown’,” *BBC News*, 21 August 2012, online at www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19320135 (accessed 17 July 2019). For simplicity’s sake, I refer to Portland cement as “cement” throughout.

2 See: Amy E. Slaton, *Reinforced Concrete and the Modernization of American Building,*

1900–1930 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2001); Rudolf Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Rudolf Mrázek, *A Certain Age: Colonial Jakarta through the Memories of Its Intellectuals* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010); Adrian Forty, *Concrete and Culture: A Material History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012); and

- Diana Jean Sandoval Martinez, "Concrete Colonialism: Architecture, Infrastructure, Urbanism and the American Colonization of the Philippines" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2017).
- 3 See: Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007); Yosef Jabareen and Hakam Dbiat, *Adrikhalut ve-Orientalizm ba-Aretz* [Architecture and Orientalism in the Country] (Haifa: ha-Merkaz le-Heker ha-'Ir ve-ha-Ezor, 2014), especially chapter 6; Nasser Abourahme, "Assembling and Spilling-Over: Towards an 'Ethnography of Cement' in a Palestinian Refugee Camp," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 39, no. 2 (March 2015): 200–217; and Kali Rubaii, "Concrete and Livability in Occupied Palestine," *Engagement*, 20 September 2016, online at aesengagement.wordpress.com/2016/09/20/concrete-and-livability-in-occupied-palestine/ (accessed 17 July 2019).
 - 4 See Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 17, 34–36; and Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *Social Life of Things*, ed. Appadurai, 64–91.
 - 5 Yehoshua Ziman, *Binyan ha-Aretz, 1882–1945* [Building the Land, 1882–1945] (Jerusalem: Defus R. H. Cohen, 1946), 87.
 - 6 This reversal is even more remarkable when one considers that "wet jobs," work in cement and concrete, would become those most identified with Palestinian laborers in the Israeli construction industry. Leila Farsakh, *Palestinian Labor Migration to Israel: Labor, Land, and Occupation* (London: Routledge, 2005), 108–9, 114–15, 146–47, 170–71.
 - 7 Or Alexandrovich, "Kurkar, Melet, 'Aravim, Yehudim: Eikh Bonim 'Ir 'Ivrit" [Gravel, Cement, Arabs, Jews: How to Build a Hebrew City], *Te'orya u-Vikoret: Bamah Yisre'elit* 36 (Spring 2010), 62.
 - 8 In early twentieth-century Labor Zionism, "Hebrew labor" was considered a crucial component in the creation of a "new Jew," able-bodied, masculine, and wholly antithetical to the frail "diaspora Jew." It also had a more concrete economic role. Zionist institutions pushed for the exclusive employment of Jews by Jewish employers, to create a separate, independent Jewish economy. See: Michael Gluzman, *ha-Guf ha-Tziyoni: Leumiut, Migdar, u-Miniut ba-Sifrut ha-'Ivrit ha-Hadashah* [The Zionist Body: Nationalism, Gender and Sexuality in Modern Hebrew Literature] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2007); Anita Shapira, *Ha-Ma'avak ha-Nikhzav: 'Avoda 'Ivrit, 1929–1939* [Futile Struggle: The Jewish Labor Controversy, 1929–1939] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1977); Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labor, and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996 [1989]); Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906–1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and Deborah S. Bernstein, *Constructing Boundaries: Jewish and Arab Workers in Mandatory Palestine* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000).
 - 9 Alexandrovich, "Kurkar, Melet," 68–69. Alexandrovich quotes Arthur Ruppin, then director of the Palestine Office of the Zionist Organization and a key operative of the Zionist movement.
 - 10 Alexandrovich, "Kurkar, Melet," 76–77.
 - 11 This went well beyond the need to supply Jewish workers with employment and the economic goals generally identified with "Hebrew labor." Weiss employed a discourse of sanctity and impurity regarding builders' bodies and touch in the construction process. In his memoirs he describes his home, built solely by "Hebrew hands," and "untouched by a foreign finger" as being "constructed wholly sacred." Alexandrovich, "Kurkar, Melet," 77–79.
 - 12 Alexandrovich, "Kurkar, Melet," 83–85.
 - 13 Eric Zakim, *To Build and Be Built: Landscape, Literature, and the Construction of Zionist Identity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 169–175. An example of the rapidly growing importance of cement in construction in Palestine during the period is the contemporary measurement of the tons of cement used annually to gauge the growth of Jewish construction in: Ziman, *Binyan*, 87.
 - 14 The National Archives (United Kingdom), Colonial Office (CO) 733/165/2, 91.
 - 15 *Do'ar ha-Yom*, 28 August 1927.
 - 16 *Davar*, 18 March 1929.

- 17 *Davar*, 18 November 1931.
- 18 Biletzki, *Chaim Flexer* (Tel Aviv: Hotz'at Histadrut Po'alei ha-Binyan, 1972), 124.
- 19 I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for calling my attention to the similarities between Flexer's story about the collapsed roof in al-Husayni's house and the contrasting narratives about the collapse of the roof of the Neve Tzedek Girls' School in 1908. The 1908 incident, which Or Alexandrovich also recounts, placed the school building's contractor, Jaffa-native Yosef Eliahu Chelouche, opposite an inquiry committee formed to investigate the collapse. The committee found that the collapse was a result of what they described as the negligence of Chelouche's Palestinian Arab builders. Chelouche himself – who understood the committee as exonerating him entirely – placed the blame on the inexperienced Jewish carpenters he was forced to hire. Here too, then, structural integrity and questions of builders' skill were politicized and racialized. It is also possible to see Flexer's recollections as a retort of sorts to Chelouche's: an assertion of the advances made by "Hebrew labor" in the two and a half decades which separate the narratives. Yosef Eliyahu Chelouche, *Parashat Hayai* [Reminiscences of My Life] (Tel Aviv: Babel, 2005 [1931]), 117. Cited in Alexandrovich, "Kurkar, Melet," 66–68.
- 20 The multiple files of the Palestinian contracting firm Aboussouan and Nassar in the Israel State Archives are full of examples of such projects. See also: Mahmoud Yazbak and Yfaat Weiss, "A Tale of Two Houses," in *Haifa Before and After 1948: Narratives of a Mixed City*, ed. Mahmoud Yazbak and Yfaat Weiss (Dordrecht: Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation and Republic of Letters Publishing, 2011), 11–42; and Waleed Karkabi and Adi Roitenberg, "Arab-Jewish Architectural Partnership in Haifa During the Mandate Period: Qaraman and Gerstel Meet on the 'Seam Line'," in *Haifa Before and After 1948*, 43–68.
- 21 Forty, *Concrete and Culture*, chapter 8; Slaton, *Reinforced Concrete*.
- 22 Sir John Hope-Simpson, *Palestine: Report on Immigration, Land Settlement and Development* (London: HMSO, 1930), 133. The eventual near extinction of the *mu'allim al-bina'*, the Palestinian master-builder, whose specter haunts the stone houses of 'Ayn Hud/ Ein Hod in Susan Slyomovics' work can perhaps also be traced to this process: Susan Slyomovics, *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).
- 23 Zakim, *To Build and Be Built*; Eyal Chowers, *The Political Philosophy of Zionism: Trading Jewish Words for a Hebraic Land* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), chapter 3; and Yael Allweil, *Homeland: Zionism as Housing Regime, 1860–2011* (New York: Routledge, 2017).
- 24 The company's ability to secure protective tariffs on imported cement and duty-free import of raw materials for exporting industries has served, alongside the granting of the consignments of the Dead Sea potash works and the Electric Company to Jewish entrepreneurs, as evidence for British intervention favoring Jewish industry. See Barbara Smith, *The Roots of Separatism in Palestine: British Economic Policy, 1920–1929* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 166–71; and May Seikaly, *Haifa: Transformation of an Arab Society, 1918–1939* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 86–88. For the history of the electric company, see: Ronen Shamir, *Current Flow: The Electrification of Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); and Fredrik Meiton, *Electrical Palestine: Capital and Technology from Empire to Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018). For the Dead Sea potash works (PPL), see Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress: Palestine in the Age of Colonial Development, 1905–1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), especially chapters 1 and 4. More recent engagements with Mandate Palestine's economic and development history also touch upon Neshet, attesting to its centrality as an industrial and economic endeavor. See, for example: Sherene Seikaly, *Men of Capital: Scarcity and Economy in Mandate Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Norris, *Land of Progress*. Neshet as an employer (of both Arabs and Jews) and a site of workers' struggles has drawn considerable attention from labor historians of Palestine. See: Deborah Bernstein, "Yehudim ve-'Aravim be-Mif'al 'Neshet'" [Jews and Arabs in the Neshet Factory], *Cathedra* 76 (1995): 82–102; and David De Vries, "Ma'avakei 'Avoda u-Samkhit be-Kerev Po'alei ha-Ta'asiya

- be-Eretz Yisrael: Po‘alei Beit ha-Haroshet ‘Nesher’ be-Shnot ha-‘Esrin” [Struggles of Labor and Authority among Industry Workers in Eretz Yisrael: The Workers of the Nesher Factory in the Twenties], *Yahadut Zmanenu* 8 (1993): 177–215; Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies*, 85–88, 207–10.
- 25 Moshe Ben-Ner, Menachem Aviram, and Menachem Levi, eds., *ha-Melet ve-Yotzrav: Ha-Ra‘ayon u-Mimusho, 1923–2001* [Cement and its Makers: The Idea and Its Fulfillment] (Haifa: Nesher Mif‘ale Melet Yisre‘elim, 2002), 19–23, 66. Nesher’s contemporary publications in Hebrew and English attempt to trace the company’s establishment directly to visions of Theodor Herzl, the Zionist ideologue often described as the “visionary of the State” (*hoze ha-medina*). Both Nesher’s Hebrew and English webpages cite a passage supposedly taken from his highly influential 1902 utopian novel, *Altneuland* (*Old New Land*). The passage cited, “[t]he plan for building a homeland for the Jewish people must take into consideration the founding of a Hebrew cement factory as well,” is, however, nowhere to be found in the novel. Indeed, even its prescriptive tone is at odds with the narratorial voice of the novel. Herzl does make positive mention of plans to establish a cement factory in Haifa in the novel (alongside a new kind of brick kiln), as one among many components of a narrative of general industrial progress and prosperity told by Joe Levy, the general director of the Department of Industry. Levy’s speech is heard by the novel’s protagonists in the form of a phonograph recording intended for posterity, played back during a Passover Seder meal. The fabrication is particularly curious given that other early twentieth-century Zionist ideologues such as Arthur Ruppin and the industrialist Nahum Wilbushevitz did in fact offer such prescriptive visions. “Introduction,” Nesher Israel Cement Enterprises, n.d., online at www.nesher.co.il/en/history-nesher/ (accessed 17 July 2019); and Theodor Herzl, *Old-New Land* (*Altneuland*), trans. Lotta Levensohn (New York: Markus Weiner Publishing and the Herzl Press, 1987 [1941]) 217–18; “To Manufacture Cement in Palestine,” *American Jewish Chronicle* 2, no. 4 (1 December 1916): 127.
- 26 B. S. Binah, *Industrial Palestine: A Survey of Recent Undertakings and Future Possibilities* (London: W. Speaight & Sons, 1924), 28; Department of Statistics, *Statistical Abstract of Palestine 1943* (Jerusalem: Government of Palestine, 1944), Table 135. It is highly likely that British building policies and preferences also contributed to the increased consumption of cement already during the first decade of the Mandate. However, the most prominent example of British construction policies’ impact during this period, Ronald Storrs’ Jerusalem stone – or white stone – regulation, meant that at least in the vicinity of Jerusalem’s Old City, a wide-scale transition towards cement and concrete was effectively prohibited. The regulation, which mandated the use of local limestone in all new construction in the area, also engendered prohibitive costs, considerably restricting who could and could not build new structures or renovate existing ones. See: Roberto Mazza, “‘The Preservation and Safeguarding of the Amenities of the Holy City without Favour or Prejudice to Race or Creed’: The Pro-Jerusalem Society and Ronald Storrs, 1917–1926,” in *Ordinary Jerusalem, 1840–1940: Opening New Archives, Revisiting a Global City*, ed. Angelos Dalachanis and Vincent Lemire (Leiden: Brill, 2018): 403–422; and Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007), 28–37.
- 27 Norris relates this British tendency to a conception of Jews as ideal “colonial middle men,” while Smith attributes it to British concepts of Jewish settlers as Europeans who were thus more “civilized” and “modern” than the Arab “natives.” Both explanations, despite different emphases, boil down to British racial and civilizational hierarchies. See: Norris, *Land of Progress*, 75–91; and Smith, *Roots of Separatism*, 7, 53.
- 28 Smith, *Roots of Separatism*, 166–68.
- 29 Ben-Ner, Aviram, and Levi, *ha-Melet*, 53, 67.
- 30 See: Bernstein, “Yehudim ve-‘Aravim,” 94; Ben-Ner, Aviram, and Levi, *ha-Melet*, 65; and Lavon Institute Labor Movement Archive (LMA), IV208-1-258-A, Y. Marminsky, “Report of My Actions at Nesher 17,” September 1929.
- 31 Norris, *Land of Progress*, 121–22.
- 32 See, for example: *Mir‘at al-Sharq*, 4 June 1930; *al-Difa‘*, 5 November 1935; *Filastin*, 29 April 1937; *al-Wahda*, 26 January 1946; *al-Ghadd*, 7 June 1946; and *Filastin*, January 16, 1947. Two articles published in *Mir‘at al-Sharq* in April and May 1933 described

- a housing bubble in Jerusalem, scorning Jerusalem's Palestinian capitalists for ignoring "true economic principles" (*qawa'id iqtisadiya sahiha*) and misinterpreting the impact of the unfolding global financial crisis. According to the author, in their zeal to construct housing, perceived as a "safe" investment in tumultuous times, Palestinian capitalists transformed the city: "Ten years ago [one] searched by lamp and wick for a house," in Jerusalem; now "you find hundreds of houses . . . [but] no one to rent them." It was the responsibility of these capitalists to amend this situation by ceasing to build housing recklessly and adopting proper economic reason. *Mir'at al-Sharq*, 29 April 1933; *Mir'at al-Sharq*, 3 May 1933.
- 33 Seikaly, *Men of Capital*.
- 34 *Al-Yarmuk*, 8 October 1929; *Mir'at al-Sharq*, 29 December 1929; *Filastin*, 23 February 1930.
- 35 *Filastin*, 8–9 April 1930. The centrality of the scientific approach is demonstrated by the sheer volume of reports on cement and concrete issued by the Technion's Building Materials Testing Laboratory and others. Central Zionist Archives (CZA) J15/4084. See also: Slaton, *Reinforced Concrete*; Forty, *Concrete and Culture*, especially introduction, and chapter 1.
- 36 *Mir'at al-Sharq*, 29 December 1929.
- 37 "Re: Interview of Arab Executive on the subjects of Taxation and Protection," 18 February 1930, Israel State Archives (ISA), ISA-NonGovernment-ArabExecutiveCommit-000678h.
- 38 *Mir'at al-Sharq*, 9 April 1930; *Filastin*, 30 July 1930; *Filastin*, 5 November 1930; *Filastin*, 3 December 1930; *Filastin*, 29 March 1931; *al-Difa'*, 9 September 1931.
- 39 *Filastin*, 6 October 1931. A similar claim regarding Neshet having "dumped" cement in Syria in the past, underselling local produce, was later raised in an appeal by the Jerusalem Chamber of Commerce to the Department of Customs, Excise and Trade. "Imports of Cements," 6 December 1940, ISA-NonGovernment-ArabCommrcChambJer-000zt5k.
- 40 *Mir'at al-Sharq*, 23 February 1935; *Mir'at al-Sharq*, 13 March 1935; *al-Iqtisadiyyat al-'Arabiyya* 1, no. 7 (1 April 1935): 25; *Statistical Abstract of Palestine 1943*, Table 135. *Al-Iqtisadiyyat al-'Arabiyya* identifies the rise in consumption as what motivated Menn of the Shimshon initiative.
- 41 The factory faltered initially due to funding issues and questions potential investors posed as to the trustworthiness of its founder, Nachum Menn. Construction began multiple times, but production began only in 1955. In 1969, Neshet purchased Shimshon to become once again a production monopoly. *Correspondences and Reports regarding the Cement Industry in the Land, 1926-1938*, CZA S8\1062; and Ben-Ner, Aviram, and Levi, *ha-Melet*, 175–79.
- 42 *Al-Difa'*, 21 January 1937.
- 43 *Al-Difa'*, 25 January 1937; *Filastin*, 12 January 1937. The advertisement in *Filastin* is mentioned in Deborah Bernstein and Badi Hasisi, "'Buy and Promote the National Cause': Consumption, Class Formation and Nationalism in Mandate Palestinian Society," *Nations and Nationalism* 14, no. 1 (2008): 142. While outside the scope of this paper, the question of what (capital, labor, land) renders a product "appropriately national" demands further inquiry.
- 44 For several perspectives on the history of the strike and the revolt see: Ted Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt: The 1936–1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Mahmoud Yazbak, "From Poverty to Revolt: Economic Factors in the Outbreak of the 1936 Rebellion in Palestine," *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 3 (July 2000): 93–113; Charles Anderson, "From Petition to Confrontation: The Palestinian National Movement and the Rise of Mass Politics, 1929–1939" (PhD diss., New York University, 2013).
- 45 *Al-Difa'*, 28 April 1937; *Filastin*, 14 May 1937, 3; "The Palestine Arab Cement Scheme," 4 December 1946, ISA-NonGovernment-ArabCommrcChambJer-000zy9l.
- 46 Shaqifi was notorious for the poor conditions and harsh treatment his employees received. This made the quarry the site of some of the most frequent and lengthy Arab workers' strikes during the Mandate period. See Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies*, 207–10; and Bernstein, "Yehudim ve-'Aravim," 97–101.
- 47 Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 2.

- 48 Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 28; Jacob Metzger, *The Divided Economy of Mandatory Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 9. This led to the emergence of what Sherene Seikaly has termed “the politics of basic needs.” Seikaly’s work on the war and its aftermath has focused on the elements of this new politics which related to food supply, agricultural produce, and emergent concepts such as the calorie and cost-of-living. See Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, chapters 3 and 4.
- 49 Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, chapters 3 and 4.
- 50 Ben-Ner, Aviram, and Levi, *ha-Melet*, 97–98.
- 51 For some particularly interesting examples of these connections, see: *Controller of Heavy Industries (Formerly Director of Public Works) (Competent Authority) March 12, 1942–April 30, 1943*, Collection of David Ferentz: “Meeting on 11-3-1942 to arrange for the maximum possible output of cement from Portland Cement Co. Nesher Ltd.,” 11 March 1942; Director of Public Works to the Shell Company of Palestine, 14 March 1942; Portland Cement Co. Nesher to the Director of Public Works, 15 March 1942; Director of Public Works to the Portland Cement Co. ‘Nesher,’ 20 March 1942; Director of Public Works to Portland Cement Co. ‘Nesher,’ 26 March 1943.
- 52 *Al-Difa’*, December 30, 1942; Gead (Jad) M. Suidan to Chief Secretary, 15 February 1944, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryCommerce-000lqk3; Ben-Ner, Aviram, and Levi, *ha-Melet*, 100; Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 131; Nachum T. Gross and Jacob Metzger, “Palestine in World War II: Some Economic Aspects,” in *The Sinews of War: Essays on the Economic History of World War II*, ed. Geoffrey T. Mills and Hugh Rockoff (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press), 74–76.
- 53 Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 117–18, 170; *Cement – Various, 10/1940-2/1944*, ISA-NonGovernment-ArabCommrcChambJer-000zt5k.
- 54 Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 118; Secretary of the Conference of the Arab Chambers of Commerce of Palestine to the Economic Advisor, November 28, 1938, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatMisc-000y6tb.
- 55 Ben-Ner, Aviram, and Levi, *Ha-Melet*, 115–21.
- 56 Ben-Ner, Aviram, and Levi, *Ha-Melet*, 115–21.
- 57 *Al-Sha’ab*, 19 December 1946.
- 58 *The Fight against the Plague*, 18 August 1944 – 3 April 1946, Haifa Municipal Archive 6050 00311/22. The fight waged in Haifa against the plague was also dependent on the ability to secure cement to seal openings in structures which could potentially house rats.
- 59 Acting Commissioner for Commerce and Industry to Chief Secretary, 7 January 1948, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryCommerce-000m8p3.
- 60 Acting Commissioner for Commerce and Industry to Chief Secretary, 7 January 1948, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryCommerce-000m8p3.
- 61 *Filastin*, 13 December 1945; *al-Sha’b*, 19 December 1946; *al-Difa’*, 23 January 1947; Anis Nasr, Vice President of the Haifa Chamber of Commerce to Chief Secretary, 24 February 1947, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryCommerce-000m8p3. Several reports indicate in fact that the removal of the controls regime on 15 September 1946 had in fact lessened cement’s availability dramatically, fostering additional profiteering. District Commissioner’s Office, Gaza to Acting Chief Secretary Dalgleish, 14 December 1946 ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryCommerce-000m8p3; *Filastin*, 11 December 1946; *al-Sha’b*, 19 December 1946.
- 62 “The Palestine Arab Cement Scheme,” 4 December 1946, ISA-NonGovernment-ArabCommrcChambJer-000zy9l. In late July 1944, the solicitor Anton (Antun) ‘Atalla, sent the British chief secretary a proposal on behalf of the newly formed Riad Building Company and Arab Building Company to establish a cement factory. Initially refused by the British due to inability to import the necessary machinery due to the war, ‘Atalla sent a second proposal after hostilities in Europe concluded and was granted a meeting. This time, the government was willing to permit the companies import machinery after the end of 1945. I was unable to find evidence of any further actions taken by either company. *Arab Cement Factory (1945)*, ISA-Privatecollections-ArabLawyers-001081p.
- 63 *Filastin*, 24 May 1945; *al-Difa’*, 17 July 1945.
- 64 “The Palestine Arab Cement Scheme,” 4 December 1946.
- 65 *Filastin*, 28 May 1947.
- 66 “The Palestine Arab Cement Scheme,” 4

December 1946.

- 67 Abdul Raḥim Tamimi to High Commissioner, January 29 1947, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryLand-000nji2.
- 68 The translation of *jinsiyya* as “race” is not an obvious one. However, as will become evident below, the ambiguity of the Arabic term is amply clarified by how other British officials discussed the regulations. Ya’aqub ‘Atalla, Department of the Registrar of Lands to President of the Board of Directors, AWC, 20 January 1947, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryLand-000nji2.
- 69 “Land Transfer Regulations, 1940,” *Official Gazette Extraordinary*, 27 February 1940, no. 988, Supplement No. 2, 337–39.
- 70 E. Matta, on behalf of the Chief Secretary to the AWC, 9 February 1947, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryLand-000nji2.
- 71 E. Matta, on behalf of the Acting Chief Secretary to the District Commissioner, Lydda District, 31 July 1947, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryLand-000nji2.
- 72 *Palestine Order in Council*, 1922, article 2; Peter Stein, “Nineteenth Century English Company Law and Theories of Legal Personality,” *Quaderni Fiorentini* 11/12, no. 1 (1982–83): 503–19.
- 73 Austin Allen, “The Political Economy of Blackness: Citizenship, Corporations, and Race in Dred Scott,” *Civil War History* 5, no. 3 (2003): 229–260; John A. Powell and Caitlin Watt, “Corporate Prerogative, Race, and Identity under the Fourteenth Amendment,” *Cardozo Law Review* 32, no. 3 (2011): 885–904.
- 74 Brenna Bhandar’s work on the Canadian, Australian and Palestinian/Israeli contexts argues for the “conjoined articulation” of private property relations and racial formations in settler colonial context. Joseph R. Slaughter’s work, meanwhile, traces the evolution of corporate personhood in international law (and indeed of the very idea of persons as subject to international law and human rights) to the safeguarding of nineteenth century imperial charter companies’ territorial and trade interests in Africa. Taken alongside one another, such works indicate that perhaps here too, as in the US instance, property served a crucial mediatory role between the categories of race and the corporation. See: Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Joseph R. Slaughter, “However Incompletely, Human,” in *The Meaning of Rights: The Philosophy and Social Theory of Human Rights*, ed. Costas Douzinas and Conor Gearty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 272–97.
- 75 “Part II: Executive,” *English text of the Consolidated Palestine Orders in Council, 1922–1927*, Article 16D.
- 76 Shira Robinson, *Citizen Strangers: Palestinians and the Birth of Israel’s Liberal Settler State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 15–18.
- 77 ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryLand-000mppd: Chief Secretary to Assistant District Commissioners, 30 May 1940; Jerusalem District Director of Land Registration to Chief Secretary, 24 August 1940; Haifa District Commissioner to Chief Secretary, 14 September 1940; Jerusalem District Commissioner to Chief Secretary, 5 October 1940; C.S.O. Minute Paper, 27 September 1940 and 15 October 1940. A later case saw the Director of Land Registration issue a detailed explanation of the racial and social standing of Circassian Palestinians. Responding to an inquiry from the chief secretary regarding a potential Circassian transferee, the director stated that Circassians “may be said to form part of the Arab community.” However, in terms of race he found that he was “able to discover very little regarding the origin of the Circassians . . . One theory connects them with the Goths.” He then concluded that “the Circassian communities are undoubtedly an established and accepted part of the population, but on the other hand they are racially entirely foreign to the Arabs.” Director of Land Transfer to Chief Secretary, “Land Transfer Regulations 1940. Circassians,” 18 February 1948, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryLand-000mtyn.
- 78 ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryLand-000mtyn: Director of Land Registration to Chief Secretary, March 6, 1945; C.S.O Minute Paper, 19 June 1945; Acting Chief Secretary to Director of Land Registration, June 29, 1945.

- 79 “Report of the Land Transfer Inquiry Committee,” November 1947, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryLand-000m79.
- 80 The establishment of a Palestinian cement factory has, in fact, remained an unfulfilled goal, still frequently cast in nationalist, even anti-colonial, terms. A 1998 report authored by Mahmoud Abu Rob of al-Najah University set out to explore the prospects of founding a cement factory in the West Bank at the time. Abu Rob mentions two previous attempts, the first in Hebron (al-Khalil) in 1978 and the latter again in Nablus in 1993. Mahmoud Abu-Rob, *Afaq sina ‘at al-asmant fi Filastin* [Establishing a Cement Factory in Palestine] (Nablus: al-Da’ira al-iqtisadiyya, markaz al-buhuth wa-l-dirasat al-Filastiniyya, 1998), 114–15. More recently, the Sanad Construction Resources Company, a subsidiary of the Palestinian Authority’s Palestine Investment Fund, announced plans to establish the Palestine Cement Factory in the Bethlehem area. The decision was officially announced in October 2016, but local communities near the selected site, primarily the people of ‘Arab al-Rashayda, have shown considerable resistance to the plan, citing concerns for their livelihoods. See: “West Bank Cement Factory,” *Environmental Justice Atlas*, last updated 15 April 2019, online at ejatlas.org/conflict/gaza-cement-factory-palestine (accessed 26 April 2019); and Andrew Ross, *Stone Men: the Palestinians who Built Israel* (London: Verso, 2019), 191–98.
- 81 ISA-NonGovernment-ArabCommrcChambJer-000zt5k: Emile Boutagy to British Commercial Agent, 25 February 1941; Emile Boutagy to Director of Public Works, 25 February 1941; Emile Boutagy to Chief Secretary, 25 February 1941; Emile Boutagy to JCD Cox Esq., Barclay Bank, Haifa, 25 February 1941; Emile Boutagy to High Commissioner, 28 February 1941.
- 82 ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryCommerce-000m3p9: Emile Boutagy to Chief Secretary, 14 June 1942; Emile Boutagy to Colonial Secretary, 21 August 1944.
- 83 Samaan Abdo (Sam’an ‘Abdu), Secretary of the Arab Tile & Cement Products Factory Owners Association to the Chief Secretary, 10 December 1946, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryCommerce-000m8p3.
- 84 Initial reports of progress securing the land were overly optimistic. Beginning 18 November 1942, only days after the first petitions on building materials were sent, a dispute arose between Amina al-Khalidi’s heirs and those she had charged with the *waqf*. The hospital was never completed. Ahmed Samih al-Khalidi on behalf of the Trustees of Sitt Amineh Khalidi’s Hospital to H. Kendall Esq., Town Planning Adviser, 22 July 1942, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandateHealth-000zbow; *Waqf of Amineh bint Bader el-Khaldi* (sic), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryMuslims-000tdej.
- 85 *Building Materials for the Construction of a Moslem Hospital in Jerusalem: Late Amineh al-Khaldi* [sic], ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryCommerce-000lp5q.
- 86 The work of cultural theorist Sara Ahmed is useful in understanding how an object like cement can become so emotionally charged. Ahmed defines an affective economy, as the economy-like circulation of subjects or objects and the discourses related to them which generate positive or negative emotional attachments. In other words, “a theory of passion not as the drive to accumulate . . . , but as that which is accumulated over time.” Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 117–39. While Ahmed centers her work on the affective economy of fear as an emotion which “sticks” to the racialized bodies of immigrants, others have already extended the concept to “mundane” objects. See, for example, Alev P. Kuruoğlu and Güliz Ger, “An Emotional Economy of Mundane Objects,” *Consumption Markets & Culture* 18, no. 3 (2015): 209–38.
- 87 I. Ll.-Phillips, District Commissioner’s Office, Gaza to Acting Chief Secretary Dalgleish, December 14, 1946, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryCommerce-000m8p3.
- 88 Islam Ayoub, *Misthaq ya-Ghali/Mishtaq Ashufak*, online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=DAokpPN9yw4 (accessed 17 July 2019).