



# **A Short Surrender to Nationalism. The Arab Workers' Strike in the Haifa Port, August 1936**

*Matthijs van der Beek MA*

Name: Matthijs van der Beek  
Student number: 911617181  
E-mail: [matthijsvanderbeek@gmail.com](mailto:matthijsvanderbeek@gmail.com)  
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Teacher: Dr. Na'ama Ben-Ze'ev  
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## Introduction

On the eve of the general strike that launched the Arab Revolt in April 1936, the Haifa port in Mandatory Palestine was the main gateway for the British Empire to the Middle East. With the completion of the deep-water harbor in the mixed Arab-Jewish city of Haifa in 1933, the trade volume of the port almost doubled in three years from about 470,000 to 930,000 tons by 1935 and 1936 (see table 1).<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, ten thousands of Jewish immigrants from Nazi-Germany and Eastern-Europe reached Palestine via Haifa, which caused further resentment among the Arabs against British rule.<sup>2</sup> When the Arab-Palestinian leaders declared the general strike on 20 April 1936, which would last for six months, it was therefore of utmost importance for them to shut down the Haifa port in order to force the British mandate government to concede to their national demands. These included the immediate cessation of Jewish immigration to Palestine, the prohibition of further Arab land transfer to Jews, and the establishment of an Arab national government. Despite the strong efforts of the Arab-Palestinian leadership, it never succeeded to fully close the port in Haifa. Unlike the old Arab port in Jaffa, which was closed during the entire strike period, it proved to be much more difficult to force the Arab dockworkers in the Haifa port, who faced competition from Jewish laborers, to cease working for the sake of the Arab national struggle. Only in August 1936, they gave in to the threats and intimidations of local militant groups and shortly went on strike.<sup>3</sup>

Although historians generally saw this short partial strike in the Haifa port as just a minor event in the chain of more successful Arab strikes in the same period, I would argue instead that this particular strike can shed light on the complex situation of the Arab dockworkers in Haifa and help to better understand their socio-economical position and the specific impact of the Arab Revolt on the mixed Arab-Jewish town of Haifa. Their months-long refusal to join the nationwide strike, along with workers in other sectors, indicated the failure of the Arab-Palestinian leaders to unite all Arabs in Palestine under the same flag of nationalism,

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah S. Bernstein, 'The Haifa Port – Entering the Gateway', in: Deborah S. Bernstein, *Constructing Boundaries: Jewish and Arab Workers in Mandatory Palestine* (New York, 2000) 142, 148.

<sup>2</sup> Yehoshua Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion, 1929-1939* (London, 1977) 141; Wasif F. Abboushi, 'The Road to Rebellion Arab Palestine in the 1930s', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 6:3 (1977) 26-8.

<sup>3</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab national movement*, 166-7; Bernstein, 'The Haifa Port', 152; Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies : Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906-1948* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1996) 128-9; David De Vries, *Strike Action and Nation Building: Labor Unrest in Palestine/Israel, 1899–1951* (New York and Oxford, 2015) 61.

especially in the case of Haifa, where the strike “never became universal.”<sup>4</sup> This essay therefore aims to analyze the temporary Arab strike in the Haifa port in the context of the Arab Revolt and Arab-Jewish labor relations. Questions that need to be answered include: Why did the Arab dockworkers exactly go on strike and why did they return to work so soon? How did the British authorities react? What were the effects of the Arab workers’ strike on Jewish labor in the port? And finally, why was the situation in Haifa so different from other major cities in Palestine? To answer these questions this essay is divided into four sections. The first section deals with Arab-Jewish labor relations in Haifa prior to the Arab Revolt. The second part looks at the division of labor and the composition of the Arab and Jewish labor force in the Haifa port. Thereafter, the impact of the outbreak of the Arab Revolt and the launch of the general strike on Haifa are discussed. The last section analyzes the causes and effects of the Arab workers’ strike at the Haifa port in August 1936.

### **Arab-Jewish labor relations before the outbreak of the Arab Revolt**

By the early 1930s, Haifa had already become the main industrial and economic center of Palestine. The road to economic prosperity was paved by the British administration, which due to Haifa’s strategic location initiated large-scale projects that included the development of the port, railway system<sup>5</sup> and oil refinery plants. The modern infrastructure allowed Haifa to expand its activities in trade, commerce and industry, which in effect created plenty of opportunities for Arab and Jewish workers.<sup>6</sup> As Haifa became the haven for employment, the city’s population doubled from about 25,000 in 1922 to 50,000 in 1931. This tremendous growth stemmed mostly from the influx of three groups of migrants. Among them were Arab rural and urban migrants from the northern district of Palestine, Arab immigrants from the mountainous Houran region in southwest Syria (known as Houranis), Egypt, Lebanon and Transjordan, and Jewish immigrants from Europe, who upon arrival in Palestine tended to stay in Haifa. Between 1922 and 1931 the size of the Jewish community sharply increased from 6,200 to 15,900 residents, constituting a third of the total urban population. Meanwhile, the Arab population in Haifa almost doubled from 18,200 to 34,100. The demographic change had a major impact on

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<sup>4</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab national movement*, 166; May Seikaly, *Haifa : Transformation of an Arab Society, 1918-1939* (New York and London, 2001) 249-52.

<sup>5</sup> The railway development already started during the reign of the Ottoman Sultan Abdel Hamid II with the construction of the Dar’a (Syria) – Haifa line, which was officially opened in October 1905. This railway line connected Haifa to the Istanbul – Hijaz railway and enabled the transport of crops and products from the Houran provinces in Syria to Europe via the Haifa port. See: Johnny Mansour, ‘The Hijaz-Palestine Railway and the Development of Haifa’, *Jerusalem Quarterly* 28:5 (2006) 5-7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, 17-8.

the city's economy, which was boosted by further industrialization and fierce competition on the labor market. At this early stage, it was already clear however that the extent of inter-communal Arab-Jewish labor relations was confined by the growing segregation in the dual economy that had come into existence.<sup>7</sup>

Since the early 1920s, the Jewish industrial sector in Haifa grew rapidly due to the strong support of the British administration and availability of financial resources that were both absent in the Arab sector. The British policy was based then on the biased assumption that the exclusive development of the Jewish industry would lead to modernization and strengthen the whole Palestinian economy, while it in fact prevented further Arab industrial development. Whereas Jewish entrepreneurs in Haifa established successful major industries, which included the electrification plant, the Shemen oil factory, the Grand Moulins flour mills and the Nesher cement factory, Arab attempts to develop small projects in light industry, ranging from ice, oil and liquor to shoes, nightwear and bed factories, often resulted into financial loss. The only Arab factory that enjoyed governmental protection was the cigarette factory, which became the largest in Palestine. Without backing from the mandatory government, it was very difficult for the Arab sector to compete with the Jewish enterprises that took over areas that were previously controlled by Arabs. One example was the profitable cereal trade which through the Zionist land-purchasing policy in the cereal-producing villages in Marj Ibn 'Amir near Haifa shifted during the 1920s from Arab into Jewish hands. Arab merchants diversified their business hence to labor-intensive areas of transport, textiles and building materials, while Jewish traders began instead to dominate imports in modern commercial activities.<sup>8</sup> While the exploitation of cheap Arab labor in the Jewish-owned industries remained limited due to the ever-growing Jewish labor force in Haifa, the best opportunities to develop closer relations between Arab and Jewish workers were to be found in the Jewish industries that required unskilled labor and the large public-works projects in the port, railways and oil refinery plants.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Seikaly, *Haifa : Transformation of an Arab Society, 1918-1939*, 47-50; Mahmoud Yazbak, 'The Arabs in Haifa: From Majority to Minority, Processes of Change (1870-1948)', *Israel Affairs* 9:1-2 (2002) 132-3; Mahmud Yazbak, 'Arab Migration and Immigration to Haifa: A Quantative Analysis to Sijil Records, 1933-1948' (unpublished paper), University of Haifa, Colloquium on 'Palestine 1840-1948 : Population and Immi-gration', 9-11 June 1986.

<sup>8</sup> Seikaly, *Haifa : Transformation of an Arab Society, 1918-1939*, 81-94; Yazbak, 'The Arabs in Haifa', 133-6.

<sup>9</sup> Jacob Metzer and Oded Kaplan, 'Jointly but Severally: Arab-Jewish Dualism and Economic Growth in Mandatory Palestine', *The Journal of Economic History* 45:2 (1985) 341; Zvi Sussman, 'The Determination of Wages for Unskilled Labor in the Advanced Sector of the Dual Economy of Mandatory Palestine', *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 22 (1973) 102. By the end of 1935, the Histadrut estimated that the 12,000 Arabs employed in the Jewish sector in Palestine constituted only 15 percent of the total labor force.

In those industries and areas where both Arab and Jewish workers were employed, it still remains questionable to what extent they established intercommunal relations or class solidarity on the work floor, which may have influenced their behavior alongside the nationalist attitudes during the general strike of April-October 1936. One of the obstacles to build bridges between the two communities was that “[v]ery few Jews in Palestine, including even those like the railway workers who were in daily contact with Arabs, took the trouble to learn Arabic, familiarize themselves with the ways of Palestine’s indigenous majority, or develop personal relationships with Arabs.”<sup>10</sup> This language barrier also enhanced stereotypes among Jewish workers of their Arab coworkers, who were thought of being passive and backward subjects who were unaware of modern virtues of unity, cooperation and class solidarity.<sup>11</sup> Other constraining factors were that Arab and Jewish workers competed for the same jobs and were paid differently; the 1928 Wages Commission set the Jewish minimum wage at least one third higher than that of the Arabs on the ground that Jewish workers were accustomed to a higher living standard.<sup>12</sup> The lowest wages were for Houranis and rural migrants who earned even less than Arab urban workers. They lived in shantytowns that sprang up around Haifa or in temporary encampments near the work sites for the duration of their stay in the city. By 1935, about 11,000 Arab laborers lived under very poor conditions in hut-dwellings in Haifa. Although the Local Town Planning Commission eventually initiated plans to provide them proper housing in other parts of the city, those attempts largely failed when the Arab Revolt broke out.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the various obstacles, it was in Haifa that the first initiatives were taken to organize union activities on some sort of intercommunal basis. In January 1930, a few months after the violent events during the August 1929 riots, the Palestine Arab Workers Society (PAWS), founded in 1925 among Arab railway workers, organized the first national congress in Haifa to set up an Arab labor movement for all Arab workers in Palestine. Although the PAWS was unable to expand its influence outside Haifa and Jaffa, its strong anti-Zionist character alarmed some leaders in the more powerful Zionist labor union Histadrut. They felt

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<sup>10</sup> Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies : Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906-1948* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1996) 72.

<sup>11</sup> Idem.

<sup>12</sup> Seikaly, *Haifa : Transformation of an Arab Society, 1918-1939*, 134, 140.

<sup>13</sup> Tamir Goren, ‘Efforts to Establish an Arab Workers’ Neighbourhood in British Mandatory Palestine’, *Middle Eastern Studies* 42:6 (2006) 918-23; Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies*, 122; Issa Khalaf, ‘The Effect on Socio-economic Change on Arab Societal Collapse in Mandate Palestine’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29:1 (1997) 100-1. The pressing need for housing among those who settled in Haifa did also affect the Jewish immigrants, but to a lesser extent. According to the estimate of a Jewish district officer of the 2,100 huts in Haifa in 1933, 1,600 belonged to Arabs and 500 to Jews. See also: Tamir Goren, ‘The Judaization of Haifa at the Time of the Arab Revolt’, *Middle Eastern Studies* 40:4 (2004) 136-40.

the urgent need to establish closer ties with the Arab workers that were employed in the Jewish sector in Haifa. In May 1932, the Histadrut created the Palestine Labor League (PLL) to organize Arab workers in a separate body under its own auspices. The PLL was led by Eliyahu Agassi, an Iraqi-Jew who was well acquainted with Arab culture and devoted to his work, which gave him respect in the Arab workers' community. As an instrument run by the Histadrut, the PLL rather served Zionist than Arab interests as it was primarily aimed to increase the share of Jewish labor in the Palestinian economy. For that purpose, Deborah Bernstein noted, the Histadrut used the PLL to raise the poor working standards for Arab workers in the Arab and Jewish sector, so as to reduce competition for the more expensive Jewish workers.

Any attempt to establish a truly joint Arab-Jewish union was thwarted by both the Histadrut and the rival PAWS. This meant that Arab workers in the PLL were prevented from becoming full and equal members of the Histadrut, although they still used its services for their own benefit. They hoped the PLL could help them to improve their pay and working conditions or to find employment.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, Zach Lockman claimed that "Arab workers possessed a capacity for agency, for making their own sense of complex situations, and for acting to further their interests as they saw them, though their perceptions and actions did not necessarily coincide with those of middle- or upper-class nationalists."<sup>15</sup> Despite the fact that hundreds to some thousands of Arab workers from Haifa approached the PLL to request aid between 1932 and 1936, the small union was in most cases powerless to impose agreements on Arab and foreign employers nor was it empowered by the Histadrut to employ them in the Jewish sector.<sup>16</sup> In the wake of the Arab Revolt it was almost impossible for Arab workers to remain tied to the Zionist labor union since radicalization became paramount. The rising unemployment in the Arab sector and growing disparity in wages and working conditions between Arab and Jewish workers, which were seen as direct consequences of the pro-Zionist policies, had sharpened the political consciousness of the lower strata of the Arab society in Haifa and shattered dreams of any form of intercommunal class solidarity.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Deborah S. Bernstein. 'From Split Labour Market Strategy to Political Co-optation: The Palestine Labour League', *Middle Eastern Studies* 31:4 (1995) 757-60; Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies*, 97-100, 103-12, 120-4; Mark LeVine, *Overthrowing Geography: Jaffa, Tel Aviv, and the Struggle for Palestine 1880-1948* (Berkeley, 2005) 90-3.

<sup>15</sup> Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies*, 108.

<sup>16</sup> Bernstein. 'From Split Labour Market Strategy to Political Co-optation', 758-60, 762.

<sup>17</sup> Seikaly, *Haifa : Transformation of an Arab Society, 1918-1939*, 223-6.

## **The labor force of the Haifa port**

The decision of the British administration to build the modern deep-water port in the mixed city of Haifa, rather than in Jaffa or Acre, had tremendous influences on urban development, economic activity, and employment at the Haifa port. The deepening of the port allowed large vessels to enter the port, while on the reclaimed area of land from the Mediterranean Sea new roads were paved and railways were extended through the new Haifa Central Station to facilitate the approach to the port. On the same area all necessary facilities were built, including storehouses, bonded warehouses, transit sheds, custom and travel agency offices, banks, businesses and shops, which in effect became an integral part of downtown Haifa. Since the construction of the modern port started in 1928, the question on the allocation of dock labor became more prominent. As the Haifa port was under British authority, hundreds of cheap laborers from Syria and Egypt were brought in out of cost-saving considerations. In April 1934, nearly two-third of the regular and casual porters employed by customs contractors and three-quarters of those employed by Arab subcontractors were Houranis. They outnumbered the Egyptian and local Arab dockworkers, while only ten percent of the work was allocated to Jewish immigrants (see table 1). The main objective of the Histadrut was to secure a “fair share” of jobs for Jewish workers at the port, for which purpose Aba Hushi (1898-1969), the secretary of the Haifa Workers’ Council (HLC)<sup>18</sup>, recruited highly experienced Jewish portering and stevedoring groups from Thessaloniki. Since the government refrained from mechanization, there was fierce competition for the mainly physical labor between Arabs and Jews as well as within the ranks of Arab and Jewish workers. The Arab domination in the Haifa port continued however until the Arab Revolt broke out when Zionist efforts to break into the dock labor market finally paid off due to the changing political circumstances. By 1939, the Jewish workers even constituted the majority of the dock labor force.<sup>19</sup>

As most of the work at the port was that of loading and unloading, the basic requirement for dockworkers was to exert physical labor for long working-hours at the docks under the blazing sun, while only a minimum of equipment was available. This favored the experienced Arab workers over the Jewish immigrants, who initially were less willing to carry out hard physical work under the difficult conditions and for the miserable wages that the government

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<sup>18</sup> The HLC was the local branch of the Histadrut in Haifa. In each of the major cities the Histadrut set up such local workers’ councils to employ and assist the Jewish workers.

<sup>19</sup> Bernstein, ‘The Haifa Port’, 140-5, 148, 151, 155; David De Vries, ‘Nationalism and the making of dock labour in British-ruled Palestine’, in: Sam Davies (ed.), *Dock Workers: International Explorations in Labor History, 1790-1970* (London, 2000) 237-8, 246; Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress : Palestine in the Age of Colonial Development, 1905-1948* (Oxford, 2013) 123-4.

offered, even though the Histadrut tried to convince kibbutzniks to come to the port.<sup>20</sup> The work at the port was also dangerous and unstable. Health hazards, work accidents, job irregularity and employment insecurity were part of the dockworkers' reality, while they did not get health or social insurance. Most work was available during the busy months of the citrus export from November to April, which after 1930 largely went through Haifa rather than Jaffa, when almost twice as many workers were employed than in the quiet summer season. The survival of individual dockworkers under this harsh and uncertain climate depended not only on their own working experience and physical capabilities, but also on their performance and status within the various dockers' groups. The majority of the labor force was employed in the logistic chain of transferring the cargo and goods between the ships and the docks.<sup>21</sup> David De Vries explained that "[t]he small groups of lightermen setting out to unload the ships, the stevedores handing over to the porters at the docks the cargo materials, and the warehouse workers – all developed forms of group-work and solidarity that affected the performance of work and social relations at the docks."<sup>22</sup> This group culture could strengthen the position of individual dockworkers *vis-à-vis* the foremen and contractors who hired them, with whom the Arab workers in Haifa had sometimes very good relations. While Arab subcontractors first attracted cheap labor from the Houran region, they also employed friends and family members, which made the entry of more Jewish workers also difficult. A Jewish seaman, named Yitzhak Pesach, who was fluent in Arabic, remembered that his Arab coworkers could afford themselves to take longer breaks during work or visit prostitutes and parties after with no fear of being fired.<sup>23</sup>

The close proximity of Arab and Jewish dockworkers enhanced more than in other sectors the opportunity to develop intercommunal relations. When the modern port was still under construction, hundreds of them worked side by side as stevedores, porters, and seamen, while within few years competition, segregation and the national conflict would soon drift the two communities apart. By the early 1930s, the small groups of Jewish workers did not pose any threat yet to the Arab domination in the port, which probably might have eased the working relationships. At this time they were even paid less than their Arab coworkers, although David Hacoen (1898-1984), director of the Histadrut Contracting Office, stated in a meeting with Sir

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<sup>20</sup> Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies*, 104.

<sup>21</sup> Bernstein, 'The Haifa Port', 142-3, 149; De Vries, 'Nationalism and the making of dock labour in British-ruled Palestine', 237-42; David De Vries, 'The construction of the image of dock labour', in: Sam Davies (ed.), *Dock Workers: International Explorations in Labor History, 1790-1970* (London, 2000) 687-90.

<sup>22</sup> De Vries, 'Nationalism and the making of dock labour in British-ruled Palestine', 238.

<sup>23</sup> Lina Dar, 'The Attempt of the Jewish-Arab 'Joint Organization' at the Haifa Port in 1932', *Measef* 14 (1984) 62-3. (in Hebrew)

John Hope Simpson from the Shaw Commission<sup>24</sup> in July 1930 that this was quite unfair since the Jewish workers worked longer and were more productive. He demanded equal rights, better working conditions and more work opportunities for the Jews, who would be less influenced by the recent Arab riots, but Simpson was not really impressed. Hacoheh was probably much too critical, as he accused the British government for creating tensions between the Arab and Jewish dockworkers who both could barely make a living from their work.<sup>25</sup> Confrontations between Arab and Jewish workers occurred frequently indeed as they quarreled over the distribution of the limited amount of work or the preferred working hours, but they also established close ties with each other. The Jewish workers of the left-wing Zionist-Marxist youth movement *Hashomer Hatza'ir* (The Youth Guard) who came from Poland to Palestine to fulfil their socialist ideals were undoubtedly the most strongest advocates of Arab-Jewish cooperation, equality and class solidarity. The young kibbutz members who were drafted to work in the Haifa port were eager to learn to know their Arab coworkers, with whom they built close friendships. The Arab workers on their part teased them sometimes about the fact that as intelligent well-educated Jews they carried out such heavy work, but they also showed their sincere interest into kibbutz life and communism.<sup>26</sup>

At one of the rare occasions that the Arab seamen shortly went on strike in April 1932 to protest against the major contractors' attempts to demote them from monthly to daily workers after the citrus season ended, the Jewish seamen declared their full support for the strike and laid down their work as well, even though the main contractor Abdullah Abu Zaid threatened to replace the Arab workers with Jews. This example of joint Arab-Jewish action was not only unique for the fact that the Jewish workers supported the Arab cause, but also because the ports in Palestine seldom saw organized contention. De Vries argued that the seasonal nature of dock labor, the fragmentary social make-up of the Arab dockworkers, the weakness of the Arab labor unions, and the general fear for the British authorities prevented the use of strikes as means to settle labor disputes. When the PAWS in this case was unable to help the Arab workers, they

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<sup>24</sup> After the Arab riots of 23-29 August 1929, the British government in London established two committees of inquiry. The first commission headed by Sir Walter Shaw investigated the main causes of the recent outbreak of violence, while the second commission appointed Sir John Hope Simpson to visit Palestine to find solutions for the problems that had been identified, mainly those relating to Jewish settlement in Palestine. The Hope Simpson Report was published in October 1930 and recommended to limit Jewish immigration based on the economic absorptive capacity of Palestine. See also: Mark Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2009) 236.

<sup>25</sup> Interview of David Hacoheh with Sir John Hope Simpson, 14 July 1930, Haifa Municipal Archives (HMA), 2695 (in Hebrew). While the meeting was planned for half an hour, due to Hacoheh's critical remarks the conversation already finished after twenty minutes.

<sup>26</sup> Bernstein, 'The Haifa Port', 151, 161-2; Dar, 'The Attempt of the Jewish-Arab 'Joint Organization'', 54-8, 62-5.

approached the influential local Histadrut leader Hushi, who accepted their request to mediate with the contractors he knew well. Although Hushi did not obtain clear commitments from the contractors' side, the Jewish assistance to the Arab striking seamen heralded the formation of the Harbor Workers' Union, which became the first cell of Arab workers in the PLL. While the Jewish seamen saw this as the perfect timing to establish a joint Arab-Jewish union, Hushi turned their proposal down as it was against the Histadrut policy of separation along national lines. This missed opportunity of forging closer relations between Arab and Jewish workers through a unified body would have important consequences for the nearby future, when hundreds of Jewish immigrants filled the ranks at the docks, but were less committed to reach out to their Arab coworkers.<sup>27</sup>

**Tabel 1. Cargo and Employment in the Haifa port, 1930-1939**

Year	<u>Cargo (in 1,000 tons)</u>		<u>Labor force (during busy season)</u>				
	Unloading	Loading	Arabs	Jews	Total	% Arabs	% Jews
1930	174.8	61.4	-	-	-	-	-
1931-1932	-	-	520	58	578	90	10
1932-1933	401.4	71.6	625	96	721	87	13
1933-1934	589.2	99.7	1,503	168	1,671	90	10
1934-1935	787.3	138.4	1,980	320	2,300	86	14
1935-1936	756.7	165.0	2,355	478	2,833	83	17
1936-1937	698.4	296.4	1,147	729	1,875	61	39
1937-1938	502.8	291.4	850	1,000	1,850	46	54
1938-1939	653.1	343.1	1,000	1,300	2,300	43	57

Source: Bernstein, 'The Haifa port', 148. The figures present the cargo during the whole year from January to December and the employment during the busy season, beginning in November of one year through April of the next year.

The Jewish penetration to the dock labor market in Haifa was achieved through the deliberate policy of the Zionist leadership and Histadrut since the late 1920s, but gained momentum only after the deep-water port was opened, when the labor force rapidly expanded due to the advanced infrastructure. High Commissioner Sir Arthur Wauchope emphasized well

<sup>27</sup> Bernstein, 'The Haifa Port', 161-4; Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies*, 104-5; De Vries, 'Nationalism and the making of dock labour in British-ruled Palestine', 247-8; David De Vries, 'Drawing the Repertoire of Collective Action: Labour Zionism and Strikes in 1920s Palestine', *Middle Eastern Studies* 38:3 (2002) 98.

the future importance of the modern port in his speech at the official opening ceremony on 31 October 1933:

“Before this harbour was built, Haifa had only an open roadstead: ships calling at Haifa were obliged to anchor a kilometre from the shore and transport passengers and cargo to and from the quay by lighters. In stormy weather discharge was frequently interrupted and the damage and loss of goods was considerable. (..) We have now here a magnificent asset, an area of 3,000 acres of sheltered water which ships of large tonnage can enter; a harbour which can provide all the facilities required for a rapidly expanding export and import trade: a harbour too, which is capable of expansion as that trade expands.”<sup>28</sup>

Whereas the Jewish community welcomed the development of the Haifa port, the Arab elite was much more reserved. There were great concerns that the Jewish immigrants would enjoy the benefits and take over Arab labor, while the Arab community would bear the burden of the repayment of the loan with which the port would be constructed. These concerns were not entirely unfounded. Unlike the Jewish workers, whose interests were served by the Histadrut, the majority of Arab-Muslim workers stood relatively weak as they were largely unorganized and dependent for their work on some Christian and Muslim merchant families involved in portage services.<sup>29</sup>

In 1930-1931, the HLC already booked one of its first successes when an agreement was concluded with two large Jewish-owned citrus exporting companies from Jaffa, Pardess and the Syndicate of Jaffa Oranges, by which 40-50 percent of their citrus portage was allocated to Jewish workers. Another strategy to compete with the cheap Arab labor was the controlled migration of Jewish dockworkers from Thessaloniki, for which Hushi made multiple trips to Greece. During the early 1930s, about two hundred Jewish families came to Haifa, who received special immigration permits despite the tight restrictions formulated in the Passfield White Paper of 1930. They were employed through the newly established Manoff, a Jewish firm which contracted out work in portage, stevedorage and lightering. Although Hushi carefully selected his candidates, the first groups that arrived in Haifa found it hard to catch up with their Arab counterparts who were better accustomed to the heavy work and long working hours. When he went again for nine days to Saloniki in September 1933 to recruit new workers,

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<sup>28</sup> *The Palestine Post*, 1 November 1933.

<sup>29</sup> Bernstein, 'The Haifa Port', 146-7; De Vries, 'Nationalism and the making of dock labour in British-ruled Palestine', 140-1; Seikaly, *Haifa : Transformation of an Arab Society, 1918-1939*, 120.

he interviewed and closely observed the stevedores to ensure himself that they were able to carry on their backs the 350-400 kilogram loads required for the work at the Haifa docks. Throughout the period of 1933-1936, the Jewish labor force had due to the efforts of the HLC significantly increased from 96 to 478 workers. Yet the growth of the number of Arab workers was much higher, which indicates that the British authority and their Arab and Jewish sub-contractors still preferred to keep the costs as low as possible. In sum, the considerable shifts in the composition of the dock labor force during the first half of the 1930s, with the influx of hundreds of Jewish workers, did still not really challenge the Arab domination, but rather limited chances for intercommunal cooperation at the port since Arabs and Jews became increasingly separated from each other. According to Bernstein, the different labor unions, contractors, dockers' groups, equipment, storehouses and gates of entry reinforced the "existing barriers" between Arab and Jewish dockworkers, which shaped the ground of future tensions when the national conflict flared up again.<sup>30</sup>



A group of porters carrying citrus crates from the train carriage to a barge in the Haifa port, circa 1933. Photo by Ze'ev Wilhelm Aleksandrowicz (1905-1992) / The National Library of Israel.

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<sup>30</sup> Bernstein, 'The Haifa Port', 147-51, 158-9, 164-5; Norris, *Land of Progress*, 123-32.

## **The road to the Arab general strike in Haifa**

Since the Arab riots in the Palestinian major cities in August 1929, it was especially in the northern region of Haifa and the rural countryside in the Lower-Galilee that Arab nationalist sentiments intensified and that militant groups emerged in the years before the outbreak of the Arab Revolt. This was no coincidence since it was in the mixed city of Haifa that the Arab society encountered the direct effects of the Zionist policy on Jewish immigration, settlement and labor. Arab neighborhoods in downtown Haifa became almost completely surrounded by Jewish quarters due to the influx of thousands of Jewish settlers. Most urban development took place in the largest Jewish neighborhood Hadar Hacarmel, while the local municipality lacked sufficient means to build enough schools, roads and proper housing in the impoverished Arab neighborhoods. The Zionist land-purchase policy and prolonged drought in the Galilee in the early 1930s drove many Arab tenant farmers to Haifa, where they came to live under extremely poor conditions. By 1936, the District Commissioner reported that between seven and eight thousand Arabs slept in the streets or lived in shanty-quarters of the old city in hovels and huts without running water, electricity and basic facilities. While both the national and local Arab leadership failed to improve those conditions in Haifa or to press the British government to stop further Jewish immigration, grassroots religious-nationalist organizations emerged on the scene which found widespread support among the lower strata in the Arab society. As these organizations distrusted the elites, they established armed groups and called for the direct confrontation with the British authority and Jewish settlers. The growing Arab-Palestinian nationalism in Haifa manifested itself in numerous street demonstrations, strikes, boycotts of Jewish shops and factories, and preventive actions by Arab sea coast guards against Jewish illegal immigrants that occurred before the situation really escalated in April 1936.<sup>31</sup>

One of the key figures in the emerging local resistance movement was Sheikh 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam (1882-1935), an eloquent Muslim preacher who settled in Haifa after he was forced to escape from Syria in 1920 where the French court sentenced him to death *in absentia* for his leading role in the guerilla warfare against the French occupation. He soon became a teacher at the Islamic school in Haifa and in 1925 he was appointed by the Supreme Muslim Council (SMC) as the imam of the newly built Istiqlal Mosque. As Al-Qassam devoted himself in his teachings to moral reform, he encouraged Muslims to adopt a pious lifestyle with daily prayers and to live in accordance with *Shari'ah* standards. Among his followers were mostly

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<sup>31</sup> Seikaly, *Haifa : Transformation of an Arab Society, 1918-1939*, 217-25; Goren, 'Efforts to Establish an Arab Workers' Neighbourhood in British Mandatory Palestine', 918-20.

poor uneducated and illiterate men from the working classes, including stevedores, railroad and construction workers, artisans and shopkeepers, to whom he felt most strongly connected. They joined his Friday sermons and formal lessons he taught in the mosque and he visited them in their homes for further discussions. Al-Qassam learned them to read the Quran and to practice the *jihad* or dual struggle against Islam's enemies and against themselves in order to become good Muslims. These circles of devoted Arab-Muslim workers constituted the core of the segment of the Arab society in Haifa that embraced the Arab-Palestinian nationalism with the major focus on Islamic identity as opposed to more secular groups of nationalists.

By the mid-1920s, Al-Qassam already started to promote his idea for armed resistance against the British Mandate and the Jewish National Home in Palestine. When he founded the Young Men's Muslim Association (YMMA) with the Arab banker Rashid al-Hajj Ibrahim in Haifa in May 1928, which was established in reaction to its Christian counterpart, he toured around the Galilee to set up local branches and to spread his ideas. As a marriage registrar appointed by the SMC at the *Shari'ah* court in the greater Haifa district, Al-Qassam was provided even greater opportunities to visit villages in Northern Palestine to recruit more followers and fighters.<sup>32</sup> Those rural Arab militants launched in 1931-1932 the first series of terror attacks on Jewish settlements in the Jezreel Valley using guns and homemade explosives. Before the Arab Revolt there were already about eight hundred volunteers who joined the paramilitary units of Al-Qassam.<sup>33</sup> As other more secular groups, such as the Youth Congress, the Arab Boy Scout organization, and the local branch of the Istiqlal Party ('Independence Party'), were established in Haifa they soon aligned with the Arab nationalist, anti-British ideology of the YMMA, which even attracted young Christian men.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, the British authority was not able to halt the radicalization of the Arab community in Haifa, where the political tensions only increased after the death of Al-Qassam, who was killed by the British police near Ya'bad on 21 November 1935. Thousands of Arab nationalists and followers attended Al-Qassam's funeral the day after in Haifa which turned into a mass demonstration of national unity confirming his status as martyr and symbol of resistance. The Arab areas of Haifa went on total strike and some of the crowd threw stones at police stations and cars expressing their anger and frustrations against the British government.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, 241-6; Porath, *The Palestinian Arab national movement*, 133-9; Abdullah Schleifer, 'The Life and Thought of 'Izz-Id-Din Al-Qassam', *Islamic Quarterly* 23 (1979) 69-76.

<sup>33</sup> Ghada Hashem Talhami, *Syria and the Palestinians : A Clash of Nationalisms* (Gainesville, 2001) 14-8.

<sup>34</sup> Seikaly, *Haifa : Transformation of an Arab Society, 1918-1939*, 226-9.

<sup>35</sup> Weldon C. Matthews, *Confronting an Empire, Constructing a Nation : Arab Nationalists and Popular Politics in Mandate Palestine* (New York, 2006) 246.

In this tense atmosphere, leaders of the Istiqlal Party and YMMA in Haifa discussed plans by March 1936 to organize a general strike in Palestine for as long as it would take to force the British authority to concede to the Arab demands. The idea for the national strike was not new as they were inspired by Syrian revolutionaries who adopted the same strategy to get rid of the French colonial rule in the preceding months. Although those plans were still not concrete, they were soon implemented after the situation escalated in mid-April 1936 which marked the beginning of the Arab Revolt. On 15 April, an armed group of Arabs revenged the death of Al-Qassam by killing two Jewish settlers on the road between Tulkarm and Nablus. When in retaliation some members of the Haganah Bet killed two Arab workers near Petah Tikva, violent clashes broke out during their funeral's procession in Jaffa on 19 April whereby Arabs attacked many Jews and murdered nine of them. While violence continued the following day in Jaffa and Tel Aviv, the Arab quarters of Jerusalem and Arab towns of Jaffa, Nablus and Tulkarm went on full strike. At a public meeting in Nablus young Arab nationalists decided to continue the strike until Arab demands were satisfied and to establish in each major town a National Committee to coordinate and direct the strike. In Haifa this strike committee was led by some prominent Muslim merchants and senior politicians, such as Hajj Tahir Karaman, Ibrahim al-Khalil, Hajj Khalil Taha and Al-Hajj Ibrahim. Despite the fact that for the merchants among them the strike was certainly against their own economic interests, they were persuaded to compel to the hardline policy of the militant younger generation. The local leaders of the Istiqlal Party in Haifa even urged the Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husayni in Jerusalem to support this grassroots initiative. Although Al-Husayni was unwilling to put his position as head of the SMC at risk, he had no choice but to give in to the strong pressure and agreed to serve as the president of the Arab Higher Committee (AHC), which was the supreme authority of the national strike movement. However, the local National Committees did not necessarily follow the instructions of the AHC, since it was much more reserved on issues of the use of violence, the non-payment of taxes and the compensation that those workers who went on strike received.<sup>36</sup>

From the beginning of the Arab general strike, the Haifa National Committee (HNC) exerted strong pressure on the Arab community in Haifa to join the strike by using propaganda, direct threats and intimidations, and patrolling scouts in the streets. The strike movement leaders started to visit the Arab neighborhoods and to force shopkeepers to close their shops, although this was not always effective. The Hebrew newspaper *Davar* reported in the first days

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<sup>36</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab national movement*, 159-66; Seikaly, *Haifa : Transformation of an Arab Society, 1918-1939*, 246-7.

that Christian shop-owners refused to join the strike, while in Nesher a certain leader named Alif nur-Allah was kicked out by the elders after he threatened the villagers. Young teenagers were influenced at schools since they were most likely to help to enforce the strike. Schoolboys who wanted to express their nationalist feelings warned or attacked shopkeepers who did not close their stores, while the HNC also hired men for that purpose. British soldiers and policemen were deployed in the city to watch over the mosques where the Friday sermons were believed to be used for incitement.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, Arabic newspapers published names of strikebreakers, but also of those wealthy citizens who donated to the strike fund, from which Arab workers who agreed to go on strike received compensation.<sup>38</sup> Arab women in Haifa set up special committees to collect money and jewelry for the fund.<sup>39</sup> The members of the HNC did not refrain from using force though against strikebreakers, while they also announced to hinder the replacement of strikers by offering every man who volunteered to work, whether he was Arab or Jew, his full day loan or even an extra bonus. An exception was made for businessmen who provided vital services to the Arab community; the HNC allowed them to continue their work.<sup>40</sup>

After the first weeks it proved however still difficult to enforce the strike on the entire Arab community or to paralyze the major Jewish industries. A few hundred Arab workers who stayed away from work in the Haifa port and the Nesher cement factory in late April 1936 returned to work within no more than a few days as they would otherwise be replaced by Jewish workers.<sup>41</sup> This half-hearted attitude was also present in the higher echelons of merchants, landowners and government employees, both Muslim and Christian, who refused to join the strike and fled to Lebanon and Syria when their business or safety was at risk.<sup>42</sup> According to Hushi, the strike remained restricted to the eastern part of the city, where the bazar and shops closed, while the work continued as usual in the other areas.<sup>43</sup> By May 1936, the situation in Haifa heavily deteriorated when radical groups carried out a series of bomb attacks. One of those attacks was directed at the Arab mayor Hassan Bey Shukri who unlike some councillors from the municipality did not join the HNC and had criticized its creation from the beginning. As he had also expressed his concerns on the thousands of Jewish refugees who escaped the

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<sup>37</sup> *Davar*, 25-26 April 1936.

<sup>38</sup> Hillel Cohen, *Army of Shadows : Palestinian Collaboration with Zionism* (London, 2008) 98-100.

<sup>39</sup> Secret report from the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) to the Chief Secretary, 18 August 1936, British National Archives (BNA), FO371/20018.

<sup>40</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab national movement*, 167.

<sup>41</sup> Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies*, 128-30; *The Palestine Post*, 29-30 April 1936.

<sup>42</sup> Seikaly, *Haifa : Transformation of an Arab Society, 1918-1939*, 249.

<sup>43</sup> Aba Hushi, 'The Strike in Haifa and the Work in the Port', 3 November 1936, Central Zionist Archives (CZA), S25/10537 (in Hebrew).

violence in the lower city of Haifa to Hadar Hacarmel, the Arabic press and local citizens depicted him as a traitor. In early June, the Arab councillors forced Shukri to resign with them from the municipal council if the British government would not accept within ten days the Arab political demands. On 16 June the resignation of the Arab councillors came into effect.<sup>44</sup> The events during the first months of the general strike proved that the situation in Haifa had become very politicized due to the activities of the strike committee and radical groups, but that it was still more difficult than in other exclusive Arab-Palestinian towns to convince the Arab elites and those working in the mixed workplaces to give up their work for the national cause. This can partly be explained by the fact that nationalist attitudes differed between Arab-Muslims and Christians, the first being more loyal than the latter, and between the lower strata, the middle class and the higher echelons in the Arab community.<sup>45</sup> In addition, the Arab workers already faced strong competition and job irregularity in both the Arab and Jewish sector before the Arab Revolt, while when the 'indefinite' strike began it was less sure that the HNC could support them in their livelihood for the entire period. Lastly, the harsh methods used to enforce the strike may have turned those strikebreakers who were still in doubt away from the radical nationalists.

### **The Arab workers' strike in the Haifa port, August 1936**

One of the main causes for the failure of the general strike in Haifa was that the port remained open for the entire period, which demoralized workers in other areas to join the strike. Although the strike was launched after the citrus season ended in April, the Arab leadership understood that the planned closure of the Haifa port would paralyze the international trade and even more importantly, would halt the Jewish immigration. While the Arab port in Jaffa joined the strike from the very beginning, numerous attempts by the strike leaders and local radical groups to persuade and force the Arab dockworkers in Haifa to stop their work just failed. This raises the questions why the situation in Haifa was so different from that in Jaffa and how the port

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<sup>44</sup> Tamir Goren, 'Hasan Bey Shukri and His Contribution to the Integration of Jews in the Haifa Municipality at the Time of the British Mandate', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 33:1 (2006) 27-30.

<sup>45</sup> Seikaly, *Haifa : Transformation of an Arab Society, 1918-1939*, 227, 231, 244-7, 251-2; Noah Haiduc-Dale, *Arab Christians in British Mandate Palestine : Communalism and Nationalism, 1917-1948* (Edinburgh, 2013) 138-9, 146-57. Haiduc-Dale claimed that Arab-Christians generally played an active role in the Arab Revolt and helped to perpetuate the general strike, but their nationalist attitudes were also affected by anti-Christian sentiments among the more radical Arab-Muslim nationalists and existing fears for intercommunal violence. In Haifa the situation was more complex due to its mixed Arab-Jewish population and the presence of a variety of radical Arab groups. Seikaly contended that as a minority the Arab Christians in Haifa had to conform themselves to the Muslim consensus, for instance through tacit approval of militant tactics adopted by the rebels.

management and those parties involved in employing Arab and Jewish workers in the port succeeded to continue the work at the port, even during the partial strike in August 1936. No less important to understand is the dilemma the Arab dockworkers faced and the choices they made for themselves, but since we lack egodocuments telling their stories, we need to rely on available newspapers and some Hebrew and British archival sources. National daily newspapers, whether they were in Arabic, Hebrew or English, did not pay much attention to the large, but short strike in the Haifa port in August 1936. Each newspaper pursued of course its own agenda, but even the major Arabic newspapers from Jaffa, *Filastin* and *Al-Difa*, that served as propaganda tools for the strike movement rarely reported on the various events during the port strike in Haifa.<sup>46</sup> Haifa was already seen as the Palestinian town where the majority of the Arab community betrayed the national movement for not taking part in the strike, which might explain their limited interest. The most detailed reports I found on the strike and its wider context were written by HLC leader Hushi and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), which was part of the British police force in Palestine. Their reports are not completely unbiased, as both the Histadrut and the British government were against the strike, but they give at least some impressions of the troubled situation of the Arab dockworkers at this time and the measures that were taken to bring the port strike to an end.

Rumors about the upcoming Arab general strike in Palestine and the plan to close the Haifa port spread around well before the outbreak of the Arab Revolt. By March 1936, Arab workers informed Hushi on this matter, who since then would play an important role in putting pressure on the dockworkers not to listen to the calls of the Arab nationalist factions. As he understood that he needed to take immediate action, he brought Arab and Jewish dockworkers together for a meeting to discuss how they could prevent the strike together. The atmosphere of the meeting was tense. Some Arab dockworkers, who were already exposed to the anti-Zionist propaganda of the Istiqlal Party or the religious-nationalist incitement at the mosques, called the incoming Greek-Jewish workers who threatened their jobs at the port “sons of death,” meaning those that deserve to die, while the Jews reacted that they indeed needed to worry of

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<sup>46</sup> These newspapers are the only Arabic daily newspapers from Palestine available in the library of the University of Haifa, while the microfilm collection of the biweekly local Haifa newspaper *Al-Karmiel* is limited to 1932. The editions of the *Filastin* newspaper can be viewed online: <http://www.jewishhistory.com/FALASTIN/1936.html> (accessed on 1 September 2015). For Hebrew and English newspapers see: <http://web.nli.org.il/sites/JPress/English/Pages/AllJPressPage.aspx> (accessed on 1 September 2015). For an assessment of the role of *Filastin* during the general strike see: Mustafa Kabha, ‘The Palestinian Press and the General Strike, April-October 1936: “Filastin” as a Case Study’, *Middle Eastern Studies* 39:3 (2003) 169-89. The newspaper took a leading role in creating a unified body of Arab newspapers to support the strike, while it called upon the Arab leadership to act against the Mandate government and to identify more strongly with the strike.

them. Despite such existing tensions, it seems that most Arab workers were still on good footing with their Jewish coworkers and wanted to continue their work once the general strike was officially launched.<sup>47</sup> On 30 April 1936, some 100 of the 250 Arab porters went on strike, but Abu Zaid quickly replaced them by Jewish and Hourani workers, while the non-striking Arab porters were put under close supervision.<sup>48</sup> In addition, Hushi even forced all Arab and Jewish dockworkers to come to the port on May 1st, which is known as the annual International Workers' Day. One of them, Yosef Cohen, remembered that the Jewish workers faced a real ideological dilemma, but as they understood the necessity of Hushi's call, they came to work along with the Arab workers who had not given in to the provocations of the agitators.<sup>49</sup>

The refusal of the Arab dockworkers to comply to the official strike orders was of great concern for the Arab national leadership. On 13 May, the AHC sent a delegation to the Haifa port to exert strong pressure, through promises and threats, on the Arab lightermen, stevedores and porters to join the strike. As they still refused, the local strike committee arranged another meeting in the next week. The HNC promised to pay the full wage of every worker who went on strike each day in advance, as well as to compensate the contractors and foremen in the same way. If they remained disobedient, the committee would not shun away from using force against strikebreakers and would implement its plan of the closure of the gates and approaches to the port, and the initiation of disorders at Kingsway and the commercial center in order to frighten away Arab and Jewish dockworkers by a thousand men strong unit.<sup>50</sup> For the majority of the workers that wanted to continue, the situation became indeed more unsafe, and Hushi repeatedly requested the British authorities to deploy soldiers near the port to protect the non-striking labor force, but it seems that they did not really take his concerns serious yet.<sup>51</sup> Notwithstanding Hushi's zealous efforts to prevent the strike, another important figure that let the Arab workers stayed at work was his close Arab friend Abu Zaid, who envisioned that if they would go on full strike, this would only be at the advantage of Jewish workers who would take over the labor in the port.<sup>52</sup> His significant role was well described by the British politician James de Rothschild, the eldest son of Baron Edmond de Rothschild, in his interview with *The Palestine Post* in late June 1936:

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<sup>47</sup> Hushi, 'The Strike in Haifa and the Work in the Port', 3 November 1936, CZA, S25/10537.

<sup>48</sup> Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies*, 128.

<sup>49</sup> Zadok Eshel, *Aba Hushi – Man of Haifa* (Jerusalem, 2002) 71 (in Hebrew).

<sup>50</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab national movement*, 167; Bernstein, 'The Haifa Port', 152; Secret Report from Haifa, 20 May 1936, CZA, S25/3236.

<sup>51</sup> Hushi, 'The Strike in Haifa and the Work in the Port', 3 November 1936, CZA, S25/10537.

<sup>52</sup> Dar, 'The Attempt of the Jewish-Arab 'Joint Organization' at the Haifa Port in 1932', 75-6.

“The Arab leader of the Haifa harbour workers [Abu Zaid, MB] refused demands and offers of bribes made to him by the mufti to induce him and his men to go out on strike. The Arab leaders wanted the boatmen and lightermen to come out on strike but those Arab workers said that they had been working on good terms with their Jewish fellow workmen at Haifa that they would not come out on strike although they were offered higher wages as strike pay than the wages which they were receiving. The leader of those workers was accused of a betrayal but he said he had lived in friendship with the Jews, that he had come there as a poor man and was now well-to-do and that he was not going to lead his men into a strike. That was a very significant event and more significant still is the fact that the Arab porters at Jaffa, who struck, have migrated to Haifa where they are now employed.”<sup>53</sup>

From mid-May to September 1936, the countrywide strike in Palestine developed more into an open revolt that saw numerous attacks on the British police and Jewish settlements and quarters, which in Haifa were mainly carried out by the Qassamite fighters. The approach of Arab nationalists against strikebreakers, who were seen as collaborators and betrayers, also changed during this period. By August, when the terror campaign reached its peak they were not just exposed to intimidations and physical violence, but they even received death threats, while some were actually murdered.<sup>54</sup> Hushi wrote that about ninety percent of the Arab dockworkers continued to work until the situation escalated despite the various means of pressure that they endured. Radicals sent them blood letters and used graffiti to mark their houses or to write their names on the wall of the mosque in the city. Thus the Arab workers that wanted to continue to work in the port were actually outlawed. Under these circumstances, it was understandable that they reconsidered their options, so that the incitement drifted them apart. An important event was the flee of Abu Zaid to Lebanon after he was informed by a friend about a planned assassination on his life. Some of his most loyal Arab workers joined him because they saw no better option for themselves. Hushi reported that the Arab workers were so afraid that as they felt no longer safe some of them stopped working the next day on Saturday 8 August 1936, which marked the beginning of the strike. Subsequently, rumors spread that workers who did not join the strike would be hanged, although this was not confirmed by the British government. The death of Ahmed Naif, an Arab policeman who was shot dead in the city center by

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<sup>53</sup> *The Palestine Post*, 26 June 1936.

<sup>54</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab national movement*, 178-80; Seikaly, *Haifa : Transformation of an Arab Society, 1918-1939*, 248-9.

some terrorists the week before, was nonetheless used as an example by the Arab nationalists to show the fate of those who remained at work. Even more frightening was the bomb attack near the port on Sunday, which caused the life of one worker.<sup>55</sup> The Arab-nationalist newspaper *Filastin* emphasized instead the cohesion among the Arab workers who held a meeting together to decide who would go on strike in the following days to share the burden, despite counter-measures that were taken by the British authorities.<sup>56</sup> They directly dispatched military forces to protect the strikebreakers at the port and at other affected areas, since the Arab workers of the Palestine Railways, the Iraq Petroleum Company and Shell were also on strike. The British police carried out checks around churches and mosques, while dockworkers that were suspected of incitement were arrested. About two hundred Houranis were sent back to Syria. They were replaced by Arab strikebreakers who were already approached by Agassi, the Histadrut's chief organizer of Arab labor in the PLL, before the strike broke out. In addition, about 130 Jewish workers were drafted by Hushi and Pesach from the nearby kibbutzim and got the same salary as the former Hourani workers. As they were only since two weeks in Palestine, they were helped by the Greek-Jews but also by Druze workers.<sup>57</sup>

Throughout the partial strike the number of Arab strikers steadily increased from 300 up to 600-700, but from 17 August onwards Arab workers already came back to the port, while others continued to strike for a few more days. By then, it might have become more safe for them, whereas strikebreakers in the previous days even slept in the port as it was too dangerous to return home in the evening. According to Hushi's estimations, about seventy percent of the total Arab dock labor force of about 1,000 workers laid down their work when the strike reached its peak, although it must be noted that various groups of Arab dockworkers went on strike at different times.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, the swift reaction of both the British authorities and Histadrut

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<sup>55</sup> Hushi, 'The Strike in Haifa and the Work in the Port', 3 November 1936, CZA, S25/10537; Secret report from the CID to the Chief Secretary, 18 August 1936, BNA, FO371/20018; Eshel, *Aba Hushi*, 71-2; Dar, 'The Attempt of the Jewish-Arab 'Joint Organization' at the Haifa Port in 1932', 75-6. The CID reported that the Muslim authorities ordered that Ahmed Naif should not be given religious rites at his funeral since he was seen as a traitor who had helped the British to chase Qassamite fighters. A special guard looked over his grave for 48 hours to prevent desecration. It seems that in these days the position of Arab policemen was in grave danger as another detective was murdered in the Old City of Jerusalem a day after Naif was shot.

<sup>56</sup> *Filastin*, 10 August 1936. It must be noted here that the *Filastin* also reported that the HNC wanted to restore law and order following the bomb attacks in Haifa and had sent a letter to the High Commissioner on this matter.

<sup>57</sup> Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies*, 128-9; 'Kibbutz members in action against Arab efforts to shut down the Haifa port', 27 August 1936, HMA, 4123 (in Hebrew); Dar, 'The Attempt of the Jewish-Arab 'Joint Organization' at the Haifa Port in 1932', 75.

<sup>58</sup> Hushi, 'The Strike in Haifa and the Work in the Port', 3 November 1936, CZA, S25/10537; *The Palestine Post*, 17 and 26 August 1936; Bernstein, 'The Haifa Port', 143. There are no exact figures on the number of Arab workers in this period, but since Bernstein noted that the total labor force of both Arabs and Jews during the summer season was 1,100 and about 50-150 of them were Jews (after the strike had come to an end *The Palestine Post* reported that 150 Jews worked at the port) some 950-1,050 were Arabs.

bodies was crucial to let the Haifa port remain in function, although some shippers diverted to the Beirut port because of the disturbances.<sup>59</sup> Compared to the situation in Jaffa, the British authorities did not succeed there to appease the area around the port which was under control of Arab rebels in the Old City even after demolition operations were carried out.<sup>60</sup> The more patriotic behavior of the dockworkers in Jaffa can also be explained by the fact that the southern harbor city was much closer than Haifa to the center of the Arab-Palestinian national leadership residing in Jerusalem. This certainly limited their possibilities to refuse to join the strike. The urgency to reopen the Jaffa port was less present when in May 1936 High Commissioner Wauchope approved the construction of a small Jewish harbor near the Hayarkon River in Tel Aviv, which was opened in December. Moreover, most of the cargo that was previously handled through the Jaffa port was now distributed via the Haifa port (see table 2).<sup>61</sup> At the end of the summer of 1936, the Haifa port handled even more cargo than before the strike. Although the short strike had made no serious impact in economic terms, the government was warned that the radical methods of the Arab national movement could affect hundreds of workers who previously had succeeded to resist nationalist pressures.

**Tabel 2. Cargo movement in the Jaffa, Tel Aviv, and Haifa ports, 1933-1939 (in 1,000 tons)**

Year	Jaffa port		Tel Aviv port		Haifa port	
	Unloading	Loading	Unloading	Loading	Unloading	Loading
1933	348.8	96.9	-	-	401.4	71.6
1934	486.8	121.0	-	-	589.2	99.7
1935	402.3	171.8	-	-	787.3	138.4
1936	135.5	115.3	27.5	1.9	756.7	165.0
1937	126.8	152.4	97.3	26.8	698.4	294.4
1938	113.0	147.8	139.4	57.0	502.8	291.4
1939	112.7	153.9	161.8	48.2	653.2	343.2

Source: De Vries, 'Nationalism and the making of dock labour in British-ruled Palestine', 250.

By late August 1936, the AHC national strike leaders understood that the strike could no longer be maintained, not just because they lacked the financial means to continue, but rather because they had lost any control over the radical armed groups. They knew that the British mandate government was not willing to make any concessions, but would instead crush the

<sup>59</sup> Dar, 'The Attempt of the Jewish-Arab 'Joint Organization' at the Haifa Port in 1932', 75.

<sup>60</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab national movement*, 180.

<sup>61</sup> LeVine, *Overthrowing Geography*, 88-9, 100-4; Tamir Goren, 'The Struggle to Save the National Symbol: Jaffa Port from the Arab Revolt Until the Twilight of the British Mandate', *Middle Eastern Studies* 51 (2015) 1-7.

strike by force to restore law and order. Therefore, they sought help from Arab rulers from the neighboring states to end the strike. After the general strike in Palestine was finally called off on 10 October 1936, due to their joint appeal to the Arab-Palestinian population, the issue that emerged was the reemployment of the Arab custom workers that had been on strike in Haifa.<sup>62</sup> Since the government refused to reinstate them, some of them were really struggling to make a living and to take care of their families. Therefore, Ahmed Ali 'Akasheh and Amin Badawi, members of the Customs Labour Society (CLS), started a petition campaign and negotiated on their behalf with the various authorities. They argued that it was unfair that local workers that had been working for up to eighteen years in the port and had been forced to join the strike would be replaced by Jewish immigrants who had just arrived in Palestine. They requested their reemployment at transit shed number five, which was specially built for the newly arrived Jewish workers. When the director of the Customs Department K.W. Stead interviewed the Arab workers in December 1936, they were told that the government was "prepared to reemploy them at daily wages amounting to 160 mils in place of 280 mils as before." They claimed in response that these wages were "not sufficient to meet the expenses of their families, and that they should not be considered equal to the Houranis who are much below them in skill and in standard of living." On their behalf the CLS sent a letter of appeal to the High Commissioner to ask him to have sympathy with them and reemploy them "at their former wages, and if reduction [was] inevitable, that such reduction may not exceed 20-30 mils."<sup>63</sup> By February 1937, the British port manager F.O. Rogers finally decided to compromise upon their return under the conditions that if the porters would work satisfactorily for 160 mils in the first two weeks, they would thereafter be paid 200 mils a day. He justified his decision by claiming that even though the local Arab workers were more experienced and physically stronger than the Houranis, they needed to be punished for their past conduct.<sup>64</sup> Whether they had gone on strike voluntarily or by force was not taken into account. The port management could still use these experienced workers, although much more Jewish workers would eventually benefit from the Arab port strike. The Histadrut's contracting company Solel Boneh succeeded to conclude an agreement with the Customs Department that introduced Jewish workers to the customs portage, while also the private import of cattle transferred to Jewish labor. The bitter reality

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<sup>62</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab national movement*, 209-15, 300.

<sup>63</sup> Letter of Customs Labour Society (CLS) to Chief Secretary John Hathorn Hall, 14 January 1937, Israel State Archives (ISA), M22/40 (in Arabic); Letter of Haifa's Muslim Society to Chief Secretary Hall, 16 January 1937, ISA, M22/40; Note on petition of CLS, 28 January 1937, ISA, M22/40; Letter of CLS to High Commissioner Wauchope, 1 February 1936, ISA, M22/40 (in Arabic); Bernstein, 'The Haifa Port', 156.

<sup>64</sup> Letter of F.O. Rogers to K.W. Stead, 15 February 1937, ISA, M22/40.

for the Arab dockworkers was that they paid a heavy price for the strike that they were forced to join after the prolonged campaign of threats and intimidations. They lost their jobs to the Jewish workers, who became to constitute the majority of the dock labor force in Haifa.<sup>65</sup>

## **Conclusion**

For the leaders of the Arab general strike in Palestine in April-October 1936, the closure of the Haifa port ranked high in their plans to force the British mandate government to relinquish their pro-Zionist policy, which most notably allowed large-scale Jewish immigration, but contravened Arab-Palestinian nationalist aspirations to establish their own future state. By the time of the outbreak of the Arab Revolt, the mixed Arab-Jewish city of Haifa had become the main industrial center of Palestine, due to the modern infrastructure built by the British, but also because of the entrepreneurial spirit of Jewish immigrants who along with Arab rural migrants settled in the town. Backed by the British government the Jewish sector in Haifa developed rapidly in the early 1930s and began to dominate the major industries at the expense of the Arab sector. Although the Hebrew “conquest of labor” precluded future tensions, Arab workers still benefitted from the new job opportunities created in the Jewish and public sector. Some of them even became members of the Arab section of the Histadrut, the Zionist labor union, in search for work. This initiative was launched after dozens of Arab dockworkers who shortly went on strike in April 1932 had joined the Harbor Workers’ Union, which was in fact the first section of the Histadrut’s Palestine Labor League. The situation in the Haifa port was harmonious for most of the time, although the growing number of Jewish laborers would lead to more competition, tensions and further separation between Arabs and Jews.

Yet the Arab domination in the port was never really challenged in the period leading up to the Arab Revolt. This may have been an important reason why there was no immediate interest among Arab dockworkers to join the general strike. Moreover, port strikes during the mandate period were a rare phenomenon in Palestine, due to the seasonal and irregular character of the dock labor and the fragmented ties between urban, rural and foreign Arab dockworkers. As those workers were the breadwinners of their family and could easily be replaced if they would go on strike, they did not have much choice but to refuse the orders of the national strike movement and to ignore the threats of Arab militant groups active in Haifa. In addition, the experienced dockworkers were dedicated to their work and less interested to commit themselves to the national cause of the strike leaders and radical factions, such as the Istiqlalists, Scouts or

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<sup>65</sup> Bernstein, ‘The Haifa Port’, 156-61.

Qassamite fighters who systematically intimidated them. However, there are indications that some Arab dockworkers were influenced by the growing Arab-Palestinian nationalism, for instance those stevedores who had been educated by 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam. To what extent they put pressure on their coworkers to go on strike when the situation heavily deteriorated in August 1936 is unknown, but they tried at least to share the burden by going on strike at different days.

The outbreak of the port strike coincided with the climax of the terror campaign which by then was directly aimed at the strikebreakers after more peaceful attempts to enforce the strike had proved to be unsuccessful in the preceding months, partly due to the strong efforts of figures like Aba Hushi and Abdullah Abu Zaid, who both enjoyed a good reputation among the dockworkers. The fact that the strike was ended so soon was mainly the result of the strong pressure exercised by the Histadrut, which quickly employed kibbutzniks to keep the port open, and the reinforcements sent by the British authorities to protect the non-striking labor force. This also enabled most Arab dockworkers to return to work within ten to twelve days, while for some it was less easy to get reemployed. The direct consequence of the Arab strike in the Haifa port was that the Jewish share of the dock labor force steadily increased to the point that the Jews even became to constitute the majority by the end of the Arab Revolt. Nonetheless, the unique case of the Arab dockworkers in Haifa has shown that the large majority of them only surrendered to nationalism and terror during the general strike when their safety was not guaranteed anymore.

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