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The Zionist—Arab incident of Zarnuqa 1913: a chronicle and several methodological remarks

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Since the inception of Zionist colonization activity in Palestine in 1882, incidents between Jewish colonists and the Arab rural population over the demarcation of plots, water and grazing rights, theft and other similar issues were very common. 1 Such incidents took place almost on a daily basis, even years after the initial Jewish colonization activity had started, even though the parties involved learned to know each other quite well and developed various modes of cooperation and exchanges. The Zarnuqa incident which took place on 23 July 1913 between the Jewish colonies, southeast of Jaffa, and the Arab rural population in their vicinity and started over simple accusation of theft of grapes from a Jewish-owned vineyard, became much more than a local incident. In fact, this incident which exposed several layers of the developing Jewish-Arab binational conflict in Palestine, was the culmination of a series of daily confrontations and tensions between the two sides in the previous months. 2 The incident, with its deadly results, political implications and repercussions, and changes in the established order, we argue, was a milestone in the annals of Zionist—Arab relations and thus deserves our attention as historians. Previous incidents between Jews and Arabs in the rural regions of Palestine which received political overtones, such as the al-Fula incident in 1911 in northern Palestine, came no closer to having the effects, magnitude and repercussions of the Zarnuqa incident. 3

The incident left an Arab and two Jews dead and resulted in tremendous hostility between the two sides. This number of casualties and the involvement of hundreds of people in the brawl were unknown in the history of Zionist encounters with the Arab population until then. On the Jewish side, the incident exposed a rift in the colony of Rehovot between the moderate first ‘aliyah colonists and the ideologically motivated young hot-headed second ‘aliyah guards of ha-Shomer association who demanded a stern response towards the village of Zarnuqa. Ha-Shomer’s guards, whose organization later received legendary status in Zionist historiography, played a major role in the deterioration leading to the incident, as will be discussed below. They described the incident in a nationalistic rhetoric of blood, pride and courage, which attributed to it a whole new meaning, beyond a local incident. On the Arab side, the coming together of dozens of Arab heads of villages (muhtars) from the region to protest against Jewish activity was also unprecedented.
Moreover, Arab political urban circles were involved in organizing the villagers’ protest, and the event was widely discussed in the emerging Arab press. The latter, which started operating in Palestine after the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, paid growing attention to Zionist activity and it increasingly described it as a threat to Palestine’s Arab population.

When dealing with the history of early Zionist–Arab encounters, it is very rare to find narratives representing all the parties involved. This is especially true when it comes to the rural Arab population who was mostly illiterate and left very few written documents behind. The Zarnuqa incident is strikingly different in this sense as there are detailed narratives by several of the parties that were directly involved as well as by broader circles exposed to the event. We have, for example, the narrative of the villagers in the form of a petition they sent to the Ottoman imperial capital Istanbul, reports in the nascent Arab press, several narratives from the Jewish sides (the colonists, the guards of ha-Shomer, the Hebrew press), as well as the recollections of several Dutch travellers who happened to be in Rehovot at the time and left a very interesting description of the events.

The aim of this article is thus to present the various narratives available to researchers today, starting with the various Jewish sources, then examining the Arabic sources and finally the Dutch. We will then analyse each of the sources and draw general conclusions about the sources available for historians who study the period of early Zionist–Arab encounters. The different narratives provide a multidimensional perspective on these encounters and on Zionist–Arab relationships in general. Our aim is not to determine whose narrative is closer to historical reality (which would certainly be elusive), or to find out who started the fight and who is to be blamed for the violent confrontation. Rather, our goal is to present the different narratives, what the narrators chose to emphasize and what to omit. The article illustrates the difficult task facing historians dealing with the period of the early Zionist–Arab encounter and conflict, especially given that often the sources available were written years after the events they describe and were influenced by later agendas and political circumstances.

**Jewish sources**

**ha-Shomer’s version**

The ha-Shomer organization occupies a place of honour in Zionist historiography. Much has been written about its activities and its struggle to protect the Hebrew community. The literature tends to glorify ha-Shomer members and to praise their contribution to consolidating the Yishuv. Most studies, however, are based on the memoirs of ha-Shomer members which were published long after the organization had already been dismantled and were influenced by the events of the time in which they were written. The three editions of Kovtzei ha-Shomer (ha-Shomer anthologies) that appeared during the 1930s and 1940s together with Sefer ha-Shomer: Divrei Haverim (The Book of ha-Shomer: Tales of the Members) and Sefer Toldot ha-Haganah (History of the Haganah) that appeared during the 1950s are the main sources used to learn about ha-Shomer during the second ‘Aliyah. The reason for the paucity of primary documents and sources has to do with the disappearance of the ha-Shomer archive during the First World War. Nothing was preserved from the protocols of the annual meetings, the ledgers, the lists of the guarded districts or
the correspondence. Below are quotes about the Zarnuqa incident as it appeared in Kovtez ha-Shomer:

When ha-Shomer took guard duty upon itself in one of the colonies, it was well aware of the responsibility it was taking on and that utmost care was needed, since any minor incident could cause havoc in its ranks and in the colony in terms of its property and threaten the wellbeing of its people for whom it was responsible...Ha-Shomer always carried out its work prudently, to avoid upsetting the local traditions of the people of the land and with the labyrinth of the Turkish court. But at the same time there was a need to take a stern stance to preserve the honor of the Hebrew guard.

...a guard ran toward me, pale and upset and told me that on the way a convoy of camels had passed through and a few people had entered vineyards to steal grapes. He hurried towards them, threatened them with his stick, but they outnumbered him and laughed at him. One Arab approached him from the side and grabbed his stick, which led him to consider taking out his pistol, and did so, but with the opposite results than what he was expecting. The Arabs, when they saw that he was about to fire his weapon, encircled him, attacked him, and stole his weapon and then ran away with their camels. I chased the convoy and got there a few minutes later...But when I approached them the Arabs formed a group and threatened me with big sticks. I immediately asked them, warned them, and then threatened them to give me back the stolen rifle but my words fell on deaf ears...I decided to go back to the colony to call the other horsemen for help. I galloped to the colony and soon afterwards was joined by three other men on horseback. We all chased the band, who meanwhile had moved away. We caught up with them after Nes-Ziona...

...Riders from Rehovot galloped to the scene of the fight. We learned that the camel [owners] were from the village of Zarnuqa and we tried to decide whether to go to the village to demand the stolen weapon be given back or to stop. While we were talking horsemen rushed towards us from the village followed by people on foot...While the horsemen from Zarnuqa were speeding towards us the guards who had come by foot from Rehovot and Rishon le-Zion to help started to arrive. The people of Rehovot arrived as well. We immediately climbed the nearby hill, positioned ourselves on it, and were ready to face the assailants. They galloped, shouting and screaming, their swords glinting in the sun, and the shots ripped through the air. The noise of the shootings, the people screaming, the horses galloping, the clash of the swords, and the savage attack on the hill — made it look like a battlefield...The group of guards went down the hill, slowly accompanying the wounded. They bandaged their wounds with kafiyas, and at dusk they entered the colony...The number of wounded from among the [Arab] neighbors had been exaggerated and the people expected a mass attack on the colony...[S]hocking news came out of the blue: a guard had been found dead near Nes Ziona...[T]he deceased was Friedman, who had rushed to the site of the clash from his guard post in the remote vineyards of Rishon le-Zion. Near the orchards of Nes-Ziona he encountered horsemen from Zarnuqa...who assaulted him, tortured him, and stabbed him with knives. This is what the Bedouins who witnessed the event from far away told us, [although] they may have also taken part...

Hebrew press

Ha-Po‘el ha-Tsa‘ir

Ha-Po‘el ha-Tsa‘ir was the mouthpiece of the party bearing the same name established in Palestine in 1905. Its first issue came out in 1907 as a monthly. Between 1909 and 1912 it was published (mostly) twice a month, and from 1913 on, it was published as a weekly. It
stopped appearing during the First World War, but was reissued again in 1919 as a weekly. Yet, the newspaper fulfilled all the functions of a daily: it had a long news section, a literary section and an opinion page. During the second ‘aliyah ha-Po‘el ha-Tsa‘ir served as a major arena for debates that involved the entire yishuv and particularly the workers. In its issues there was a great deal of information about the workers’ experiences and their hardships. Throughout the years, the newspaper represented the values of the labour movement, including the conquest of labour and land and the revival of Hebrew:

...[C]amels loaded with goods were making their way from Jaffa alongside the vineyards of Rishon le-Zion and two [of the camel riders] entered the vineyards and stole grapes. One of the Hebrew guards...saw the thieves and started to shout and chase them. The thieves left the vineyard quickly on camelback, but the guard soon caught up with them. The thieves stole the guard’s weapon and ran away. The guard shouted and chased the thieves and several other Hebrew guards from RL [Rishon le-Zion] joined him including one guard on horseback who went through WH [Wadi Hanin, the colony of Nes Ziona] and called on the guards of Rehovot for help. When the warning bell sounded in Rehovot, several riders, workers, and citizens assembled and went to Wadi Hanin. Several camel riders, when they realized that the Jews would soon catch up with them, unloaded the goods and ran away to tell the people of their village Zarnuqa what happened but the other laden camels were hidden among the Bedouin living in tents between Wadi Hanin and Zeituna. When the group from Rehovot along with the guards from Rishon le-Zion reached the Bedouin tents, all the Bedouins including the women and children rushed out and attacked them with sticks and stones, shouting ‘kill the Jews of ‘le-Z[Uyun Qara, Rishon le-Zion], and dozens of armed horsemen in addition to many on foot surged up from Zeituna, thus outnumbering the Jews. One worker for Mr. [Yosef] Moyal who farms his land among the Arabs of Zarnuqa, knew the villagers and approached them to talk with them as though he was speaking with old friends, but his acquaintances beat him hard, and the rest of the Jews who witnessed what happened went to help him and saved him from his attackers. A few shots were fired into the air and one arrow hit the horse of an Arab horseman, which fell to the ground, and the Arabs became a little confused and started withdrawing but suddenly a new group of people from Zarnuqa came and started shooting the Jews. Two guards were injured, one lightly but the other was hit by a bullet in his back. Light injuries but not from bullets were also inflicted on a carpenter from Rehovot and a Dutch Christian who worked in Wadi Hanin (Nes-Ziona) and rushed to help the Jews.

... At the same time several Hebrew laborers returned to the colony and reported that on the other side from the lands of WH [Wadi Hanin, the colony of Nes Ziona], on the road to Gedera there was a Hebrew casualty...There have been quite a few fights with Arabs recently in Ben-Shemen and in Merhavia as well and lately there were also victims, but in those places the Hebrew workers and guards knew in advance that they were fighting and sacrificing their lives for the sake of a Hebrew cause in every sense of the word. But here, for whom do they put their lives at risk? For what purpose do they volunteer to be a target for the bullets of death? Will all the sacrifices they make help to purify the colony [of Rehovot] and establish Hebrew labor there? Didn’t the Arabs of Zarnuqa work in the fields of Rehovot the next day?6

**Ha-Ahdut**

This newspaper was first issued in 1910 as the mouthpiece of the Po‘ale Zion movement in Eretz-Yisra‘el after replacing the weekly Yiddish magazine Der Unfang (‘the beginning’). The newspaper was identified with ha-Shomer and promoted the ideals of ‘conquest of labour and protection’. The newspaper closed down in 1915:
On Tuesday afternoon several Arabs with their camels were making their way from Jaffa. On their way they entered one of the vineyards to steal grapes. The Hebrew guard who was responsible for this vineyard started chasing them away. The thieves fled and the guard chased them down. A fight broke out between them. The thieves took the guard’s weapon and ran away. The guard called for help and several more Hebrew guards responded and chased the thieves and even managed to notify Rehovot about the event. The Arabs realized that the Jews would soon catch up with them, unloaded their merchandise from the camels and quickly fled to Zarnuqa (a village adjacent to Rehovot). The villagers of Zarnuqa went out armed to face the Jews and started beating them with sticks and shooting at them. The Jews protected themselves. In the end one Jewish guard was injured by a shot and one colonist from Rehovot was hurt with a stick (the condition of the injured person has improved). Afterwards the guards were told that on the way from Rishon le-Zion a Jew was killed. They hurried to the site and found the Hebrew guard Shmu’el Friedman dead. Eleven bullets had been fired at him, and after he lost his life his face was cut and disfigured and his body mutilated. He was murdered next to the camp of the head of the Arab guards in Wadi Hanin. Reliable sources say that several Wadi Hanin colonists saw from afar how Friedman was being attacked, but did not dare to come to his aid. From Eqron and Hulda people rushed up when they heard about the attack. The one place no one came from was Wadi Hanin. From Rishon le-Zion a few people came in addition to the laborers and the guards...On Thursday at dusk Friedman’s funeral was held. The guards carried the victim’s body and all the members of the colony accompanied them with candles...The day after, on Friday, the villagers of Zarnuqa occupied the vineyards of Rehovot. This angered the workers and the guards. The workers gathered and demanded that the colony’s committee summon a general meeting to decide [how] to take this spot from the colony away. The committee rejected their demand with various excuses and refrained from summoning a general meeting. It also refrained from ordering the colonists not to provide work for the people who spelt our blood, at a time when the blood is still boiling. This made the laborers even angrier and they decided unanimously that if the colony’s committee did not fulfill their demands they would all leave the colony together with the guards. One of the laborers addressed the meeting and made the following important statement: If we are here to make calculations perhaps there is nothing we can do, other than remain in the colony and grind our teeth. If we were to look at Rehovot, or any other colony, as if it were the property belonging [only] to the owners of the houses who reside there, we wouldn’t have to stay in this swamp even one hour. If so, there is nothing for us to do not just in Rehovot but anywhere else in this country. But we overcome our disgust with life in the colonies and their spirit and we treat them as part of the Hebrew Yishuv, like any other place in the land of the nation that we are about to conquer for ourselves.

Ha-Tzfira

Unlike ha-Po’el ha-Tsa’ir and ha-Ahdut which were published in Palestine, ha-Tzfira appeared in Eastern Europe and was the first Hebrew newspaper in Poland. Its founder and editor was Zelig Slonimasky. Its first issue came out in 1862 in which the editor emphasized four principles that were important to him, namely publishing new orders and edicts concerning Jews, the destiny of the Jews in other countries, scientific articles and stories, and news from around the world including scientific items. In the early 1880s, Nahum Sokolow, who later served as the head of the World Zionist Congress, became its acting editor and he turned the newspaper into a daily.
The incident in Rehovot,

We do not have all the details but the key points as we were told are the following: some nine Arabs and their camels entered a vineyard between Vadi Hanin and Rehovot, and stole grapes in the middle of the day. The Hebrew guard confronted them, and the Arabs surrounded him and stole his weapon. Members of ha-Shomer and colonists quickly chased them on foot and on horseback. The Arabs shot at them frequently and the Hebrews responded with gunfire as well. And given that the Arabs are from the village of Zarnuqa, the villagers went out en masse, on foot and on horseback and attacked the small group of Jews, who numbered fewer than ten, caught one of them, a young person, and took him into custody. It was announced that the Arabs were about to enter Rehovot too and the alarm was sounded in Rishon le-Zion, Rehovot and Vadi Hanin, and people rushed to help from all over. Meanwhile the brawl between the small group of Jews and the Arab mob continued. Only after a Jew fell victim, a worker from Vadi Hanin who heard the commotion and innocently rushed to the scene, and three others were injured, the Arabs retreated to their village, and the governor accompanied by soldiers arrived from Ramle. They also say that one Arab died and two were injured…

The colonists’ version

The contemporary Jewish writer and amateur historian from Rehovot Moshe Smilansky provides yet another version of the events in Zarnuqa which was somewhat critical of ha-Shomer’s role in the clash:

The ha-Shomer organization also took guard duty upon itself in Rishon le-Zion. One day, during the harvest, two of the gangsters of Zarnuqa, the sons of wealthy people, passed through the vineyards of Rishon le-Zion with their loaded camels and stopped to take some grapes. One of the guards, a guy from Jerusalem, who was still ‘green’ [new to the region], approached them, but was beaten by the Arabs who mocked him, took his pistol, and beat him, after they realized that this guy was not brave. The Arabs left and the guard called for reinforcements. A mounted guard came and chased them until he caught up with them far away from the colony. These Arab guys were courageous and held heavy bats, whereas the guard had only a pistol since in public no weapons were to be displayed to avoid the ‘evil eye.’

The Arabs defended themselves with their bats, and did not let the guard get close to them, and he could not take them back to the colony or get back the pistol they had stolen. The guard got angrier and he called to his friends for help. The Arabs, who felt they were being chased, unloaded the camels and fled to the village. At the same time, a feast was being held at the house of the local sheikh, a family gathering. The guys came and told the guests that the Jews of Rishon le-Zion had maltreated them, beat them, and killed a Bedouin who was walking with them. The people were upset, and the younger ones cried out ‘death to the Jews!’

Arab sources

The petition of the Arab villagers to Istanbul

A few days after the Zarnuqa incident, representatives of dozens of villagers in the kaza of Gaza sent a collective petition, together with a tribal group located in the kaza of Jaffa near al-ʿAwja (ha-Yarkon) River, protesting against the activities of the two large Jewish colonies of Rishon le-Zion and Rehovot. The villagers wrote to the Ottoman Grand Vizier in Istanbul that the Jewish colonies had treated them harshly, attacked travellers who
passed near the colonies, hired Jewish and foreign guards who behaved very aggressively towards the rural population and possessed illegal weapons. They argued, moreover, that the local court had issued summons to several Jews but the colonies had replied that these individuals were out of the country. The fact that dozens of villagers signed a petition against the Jewish colonies very rapidly after the events took place (the petition was sent to Istanbul within a few days of the event) is indicative of the event’s wide-scale influence. The petition was apparently organized by Shaykh Sulayman al-Taji from Jaffa, the founder of the Ottoman Patriotic Party in this town, who was known as a strong opponent of Zionist activity:

To our master the honorable great Grand Vizier,

It is well known that the exalted state works continuously for the welfare of the people and the numerous decrees it issues clearly testify to this. The state does not discriminate when applying justice and conferring mercy between poor and rich, peasant and townsman, Muslim, Christian and Jew. However, the above-mentioned Jews attacked the people of our village, robbed and looted our belongings, killed, and even violated our families’ honor, all this in a way which we cannot find words to describe. If this oppression will continue we will have to emigrate from our land despite our love and loyalty to it.

One example of their attacks is that they appointed Jewish and foreign Çerkes [Circassian] guards and put them on duty armed with various weapons, including illegal ones such as Martins [guns], Mauzners [pistols] and knives, to ride with their horses on the public roads. They catch every villager who travels along the public road, beat him, and take his clothes and money. They kill whoever opposes them. They also shoot passersby on the public road, and murder them.

At first, the guards of ‘Uyun Qara [Rishon le-Zion] attacked two camel owners who were transporting iron. They wanted to take their clothes, money, and camels, but they refused to hand over their camels and fled from ‘Uyun Qara with their camels, while protecting each other [in order to find refuge] with the people of justice. But unfortunately, they had to walk for three hours in the lands of the Jewish colonies [of Rishon le-Zion, Nes-Ziona, and Rehovot] and another hour in the land of the village of Kubayba in the sub-district of Gaza [before they reached their village Zarnuqa]. Meanwhile the guards of ‘Uyun Qara had time to call the guards of Duran [Rehovot] who opened fire on the above-mentioned camel convoy, injuring five servants (qawas) and a horse which they shot. One person from among them was sentenced by the local government in Gaza and Jaffa which examined the scene of the crime.

Given that the prosecutor’s report on this matter is filed today at the local court in the kaza of Gaza we beg the issuance of your order to investigate this matter. Each time that we approach the local government with a request to summon them [the Jewish colonists] to court according to the rules, the Jews reply to the court official that the wanted persons are not present since they have travelled to Russia or to Europe. With the help of money, they do whatever they want as if they have a little government of their own inside the country. Therefore, we the poor peasants submit this petition to confiscate the illegal weapons they carry [with them] and possess in their villages such as the Martins and the Mauzners. If you investigate their complaints and the lies they tell about the camel owners mentioned above you will find that we are right and will punish them according to the law. At the end the decision is yours.11
The Arab press

After the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the lifting of the notorious Hamidian censorship, the Arab press in the Levant blossomed and dozens of newspapers and journals appeared overnight. Some of them were short-lived and did not have much influence. Others, however, such as the Jaffa-based Filastin, which was published by the Greek Orthodox Issa al-Issa and his cousin Yousef, had a much broader influence and continued operating for years. Newspapers such as Filastin led the ensuing struggle against Zionist activity in Palestine and reported extensively on the various clashes taking place between the rural Arab population and the Zionist settlers. This was also the case after the Zarnuqa incident, which was widely reported in Filastin. In the months following the event, the Jaffan Filastin dedicated more than a dozen articles to it and its repercussions. Thus, in an age when newspapers were able to freely operate in Palestine, the incident in Zarnuqa took on a completely different dimension which gave it a much broader influence than previous local incidents that occurred before the Revolution. In particular, the political overtones describing the incident are striking as is the very strong anti-Zionist rhetoric used.

…The extremism and exaggeration of the Israelites, who are proud of themselves, their values, and occupation, and the way they hurt their brethren in the homeland, the original sons of the homeland and its real owners, has intensified. And so did their ungrateful behavior, disregard of property rights, lack of respect of hospitality rights and contempt for living creatures who God created in one creation at several intervals, who together constitute parts of the same creation. But they quickly kill that soul as punishment for plants uprooted or grapes that were picked, or as a way to abuse the simple peasant who acted in ignorance. And the government neglected to protect him so he became a victim. It would have been better if he had been a victim of a meaningful event or a big risky crime, but these are the measures that the Israelites pursue when looking for an easy target and a mode of action. They chase the locals like wild animals chase their prey, killing them whenever they find them and wherever there are [by luck], leaving them no other option but exile from which they cannot return or turn back, Oh God almighty, how big is this lie!…Faris al-Na’ame

…What is intriguing about the foreign Jews who reach us after being expelled, humiliated and despised, is how they quickly turn, thanks to the lenient nature of the local population, into our masters who are stronger than us and who look down on us with a look full of contempt and scorn. Later when we want to teach our children to be aware of the risks awaiting us, they throw it back at us saying that we behave barbarically, with jealousy and hatred, and they announce in their newspapers to European eyes and ears that we encourage disgust for them among the people and incite against them and that we want them to be massacred. Isn’t it similar to the fable of the wolf and the sheep?14

Report by non-locals

Interesting evidence for the reasons that led to the outbreak of the violent confrontation with the residents of Zarnuqa was provided by a Jewish-Dutch tourist, Abraham Mossel, who happened to be in Rehovot when the incident occurred. On 16 July 1911, three young Dutch men and a young woman set out on a backpacking tour around the world. The four — Abraham Mossel, Frans Van Der Hoorn, Gerard Perfors and Marie Zwarts — who were vegetarians and socialists, reached Palestine at the end of March 1913.15 They
travelled the length and breadth of the country and when their money ran out they went to Rehovot and worked in the farmhouses. Mossel wrote a travel diary in which he devoted a special chapter to the ‘battle with the Arabs of Zarnuqa’. His diary was published in Dutch in 1918 immediately after the First World War, several years after the Zarnuqa incident took place, under the title Als Daglooner in het Heilige. It was translated into Hebrew in 2002. Mossel did not witness the initial incident, but reported what he heard from his Dutch friend Van Der Hoorn, who himself was injured during the brawl:

Near the large settlement of Rishon Le-Zion…six camel riders dismounted from their animals and began to harvest the vineyard. This in itself was not serious, but none of them had asked permission to do so, and if they were allowed to behave in this way then any passerby would feel free to steal fruit without protest. Very soon a young guard approached them and ordered the poachers to leave, and when they did not respond he lifted a stick and began striking right and left.

But one has no chance against six. The man was badly beaten and his rifle was stolen. The guard…whistled and called his friend. He arrived but was also beaten like his peer. Then a mounted armed guard arrived, and the thieves ran away.

But it was not a happy ending. For the sake of honor, and to prevent the locals from celebrating, at least the stolen rifle must be taken back. The armed mounted guard pursued the escapees, passing on the way through a field in which a group of Jewish workers were working, including Van Der Hoorn, and asked them to follow him and give a hand to render justice. It was not an easy task, most of them were barefoot and their only weapon was the hoe in their hands. But they followed him…motivated by the thrill of the chase.

…The horseman, who was ahead of all the others, called out to the camel riders to stop, and was answered with a shot. He then fired a warning shot in the air, which led all the people of Zarnuqa to go towards him, while the thieves disappeared in the maze of the village alleys. The horseman saw that he was alone against many and turned back towards the group of workers who were marching nearer, and with them some braver young guys from the colony, armed and mounted, and they all stormed the hill on which the Arabs were standing.

…From here on, opinion was divided whether to continue the chase or not, and some thought that it was a matter for the Turkish authorities.

…A moment of wisdom arrived, and several of the colonists started approaching the sons of Zarnuqa whom they knew personally in order to negotiate. But at the same time a new wave of armed horsemen burst in from the outskirts of Zarnuqa. They saw some of the Jews running away to call for reinforcements to secure the site, and assumed that they were the enemy fleeing, started shouting, and started chasing them while firing.

Instantly two of the Jews were injured and they started firing back. In this confusion of gunfire, battle cries in Arabic and women’s screams that punctuated the pandemonium, it seemed as though the end of all mankind was nigh…

All this was told by Van Der Hoorn, who only had his heavy hoe, and upon the counsel of those who were armed moved away and watched the events from a distance.
Critique of the sources

Every historian of Ottoman Palestine who deals with the late nineteenth—early twentieth centuries and the first signs of the Jewish—Arab conflict need to tackle the issue of sources, their biases and their shortcomings. Each one of the sources discussed above has certain weaknesses and disadvantages when used as sources to better understand the reasons behind the violent clash between Zarnuqa and Rehovot. Clearly, all memoirs, newspapers from this period and other testimonies by the various sides involved in the events suffer from one type of bias or another.

Critique of the Jewish sources

Ha-Shomer

Ha-Shomer does not aspire to battle or enjoy fights. On the contrary, it educates its members to be prudent in their attitude toward their Arab and Bedouin neighbors… [T]hey have made great efforts to get to know the Arab environment and its customs, its language and its tendencies, and the movement strives to nurture a relationship of respect and peace with the villagers and tribes among whom it operates.18

On 12 April 1909, the founders of ‘Bar Giora’ gathered in Kfar Tavor in Lower Galilee with the intention of expanding the ranks of their secret organization that had been founded a year and a half earlier, and to set up a new, legal organization called ha-Shomer (The Guardian). Its members wanted to create the right preconditions for the development of protection of the community and to provide the guards with the necessary training to cope with the expected challenges. From the moment it was established, ha-Shomer achieved considerable success and within three years had managed to gain a foothold in the colonies. Its members replaced the Arab guards in the colonies and took up their positions in vineyards, fields and wherever they were needed. In so doing, they aimed to reduce the colonies’ dependence on the local population and take responsibility for the fate of the Yishuv.

The policies of ha-Shomer’s guards, however, soon resulted in clashes with the colonists of the first ‘aliyah, whose approach was more moderate and less confrontational vis-à-vis the rural Arab population, with whom they had a long tradition of cooperation despite numerous confrontations and sources of friction. This was the case in Rehovot as well after the Zarnuqa incident which led to the termination of ha-Shomer’s activity in this colony and to a great deal of bad blood between the two parties. Whereas the guards claimed they were protecting Jewish property and fulfilling their duties, the colonists thought they were provoking unnecessary confrontations with the rural population, doing more damage than good, and threatening the future peaceful existence with the Arab rural population.

Various contemporary sources paint a more complex picture of the events leading to the Zarnuqa incident than the one incorporated in the ha-Shomer anthology. For example, on 25 June 1913, a month before the violent Zarnuqa incident, Semmy Tolkovsky, a colonist from Rehovot sent an angry letter to the settlement committee in which he voiced a strong complaint concerning the behaviour of the guard Lazar (Eliezer) Finkelstein, towards his Arab worker:
It is my duty, as a man and as a resident of Rehovot, to strongly protest against a certain phenomenon that has recently prevailed in our colony that has not only endangered our prestige, but above all constitutes a serious crime against humanity. I wish to draw your attention to the unforgivable violence of certain ha-Shomer guards who have used the whip against workers in the most trivial circumstances and sometimes without any reason at all, as if they were dogs and not human beings. We Jews have suffered from persecution and mistreatment for thousands of years, we Jews in particular, whose backs are bent by the blows of nations, must retain a measure of humanity and not whip unarmed and innocent people out of sheer caprice. An Arab worker owed a few ‘bishlik’ to the guard Lazar Finkelstein. Since he would not or could not pay him, Finkelstein fell upon him two weeks ago and struck him cruelly with a whip which was more suited for wild animals than for human beings. At least this is what I was told…[I] understand as well as the ‘ha-Shomer’ the need for discipline and to what extent it is important that the Arabs not only respect us but also learn to be afraid of us. But discipline does not mean rudeness, cruelty, lack of humanity and savagery. What an example for our children! What better means to turn the whole world against us!

Tolkovsky’s letter to the colony committee reflected the position of many colonists. There are other testimonies kept in Rehovot’s archive that challenge what was written in ha-Shomer anthology on education in restraint and respect of the Arabs. Beating Arab workers, blocking main roads, imposition of fines, punishment of Arab workers and vandalism were apparently a routine part of the lives of Rehovot colonists and their Arab workers at the time. When ha-Shomer entered Rehovot and signed an agreement with the colony, the access roads to Rehovot were blocked and Arabs were no longer allowed to pass through them without the appropriate pass. The new laws that the ha-Shomer introduced into the daily lives of the colonists and the Arabs caused considerable friction. The Zarunuqa incident should be seen in this context. This was not merely an incident over the theft of grapes, but rather a much wider struggle that involved blocking of roads, passes and changes in the established order.

The primary sources in the archive in Rehovot document unflattering and violent behaviour by members of ha-Shomer vis-à-vis the Arab population. This behaviour contrasts sharply with the memoirs written by members of ha-Shomer years later as well as what is written about this organization in Zionist historiography. Cases of mistreatment of the Arab rural population by the guards are scarcely mentioned in Kovtzei ha-Shomer and misrepresent the events. This demonstrates the problematic nature of memoirs in general, and those of ha-Shomer guards, which were written some 25 years after the events and in the midst of the Great Arab Revolt of the late 1930s, which polarized and radicalized Jewish—Arab relationships. Thus the era in which these memoirs were written impacted the way the events of 1913 were depicted.

**Critique of the Jewish press and the colonists’ version**

What is striking in the Jewish press is the ideological positions of the newspapers, which affected the way in which they reported events. Even Ha-Po’el ha-Tsa’ir, which represented the workers’ circles but was less extreme than Po’ale Zion criticized the colonies for employing Arabs instead of Jews and doubted their commitment to the Jewish national cause. On the other hand, it hailed the workers and the guards for their sacrifice and wondered whether all the efforts were worth it given the attitude of the colonies towards the issue of Hebrew labour and guarding.
In *ha-Ahdut* as well, as in *ha-Poʾel ha-Tsaʾir*, the ideological party line of unwavering support of Hebrew labour and expulsion of Arabs from the colonies was evident. The arrival of Arab labourers to work in the fields of the colony elicited enormous anger on the part of the Jewish labourers and guards of *ha-Shomer* who clamoured to expel the Arabs from the colony. As seen above, it was reported that a worker gave a speech in favour of Hebrew labour and against employing Arabs. In this case as well there is a disparity between what was written in the newspaper and the other archival materials which depict a different reality.

The worker who gave a speech at the workers’ meeting in the colony was most probably the guard Michael Av-Ner Shpal, who was one of the leaders of the struggle with the committee of the Rehovot. He organized demonstrations against the houses of colonists who supported expelling the guards from the colony, distributed flyers, delivered speeches and even established a terror cell called ‘the Grandchildren of Pinhas’. In a flyer he distributed, he threatened to throw bombs on the houses of colonists who opposed Hebrew labour. His gestures are not mentioned in *ha-Ahdut* but in the labour movement archive the speech he delivered in the colony is preserved, in a version that differs considerably from the one published in the newspaper:

> We always aspire to raise our national values, to demonstrate and prove to our neighbors that there is no ‘walad el mot’ [child of death, a title the local Arab population often used to describe the Jews] facing them. And today we can say confidently that, in terms of our own responsibilities, we have fulfilled our duty in the fullest sense of the word, and what have we received in return?…that the theft of an animal or even of a bunch of grapes in the vineyard of a Jewish settlement is regarded by our neighbors as a matter of real danger — the danger of death.19

The equation that the *ha-Shomer* suggested was harsh and uncompromising: a thief who is caught in the vineyards of the settlement is given the death penalty. Stealing a bunch of grapes from the vineyard was in fact not only theft from the farmers of the colony but also — and perhaps mainly — from the fruits of labour of the Jewish people.

If Shpal had stopped with the content of his speech alone it might be possible to claim that his words corresponded very well — both rhetorically and thematically — to the criticism voiced by the pioneers of the second ‘aliyah against the colonists of the first ‘aliyah. But Shpal went one step further and set up a terrorist cell and distributed flyers threatening the farmers with murder.20 Even though no bombs were thrown, the rhetoric of blood, land, treason, murder and national honour raised the Jewish—Arab dispute from a local clash between Jewish and Arab farmers to national and even nationalistic levels.

**Critique of the Arabic sources**

**The villagers’ petitions**

The institution of petitioning the Ottoman Sultan by the Empire’s subjects has extensive historical roots which go back as far as the Empire’s early days. Theoretically, every Ottoman subject, even the simplest peasant in the most remote province, had the right to submit a petition to the Sultan and beg for justice, in person, through a representative, or by sending a petition.21

At the end of the nineteenth century, it made sense to assume that the importance of the traditional institution of petitioning the ruler would decrease considerably if not
vanish completely and give way to other means of pursuing justice and redress from the state, its representatives and institutions. Despite the existence of the reformed Ottoman institutions and the real change in the nature of the Ottoman state, the numerous petitions sent to Istanbul from the provinces at this time suggests that the institution’s role and importance did not diminish. Apparently it took on new importance and went through a process of revival and transformation due to both technological progress as well as more fundamental institutional, bureaucratic and legal changes.

In the numerous petitions from Palestine dating back to the last decades of the Ottoman period in the central Ottoman archives in Istanbul, Zionist activity occupies a fairly minor place and is mentioned as only tangentially impacting other developments, processes and activities that preoccupied Palestine’s population at the time. This perhaps reflects the relatively limited scope of Jewish activity other than in several specific regions where the Jewish presence was concentrated. Yet, in almost every new case of Jewish settlement activity, petitions were submitted to Istanbul by the rural population and the Bedouins in the vicinity who were affected, either directly or indirectly, whether by dispossession, conflict over borders of plots, the loss of grazing grounds, water rights, ‘cultural misunderstandings’ and the like. The petitions constituted a way for the rural population to express their dissatisfaction and resentment over the arrival of the newcomers whose settlement usually involved some kind of friction with the local population.

The petitions provide a glimpse into the views held by the rural population and allow a unique grassroots view of the Zionist—Arab encounters, which is sometimes described in the literature but rarely from first-hand accounts. Despite the intermediary of the petition writers, who voiced the complaints on paper and served as the spokesmen for the rural population, the documents still provide a valuable glimpse into the petitioners’ aspirations, perceptions, concerns and actions.

Soon after the Revolution of 1908, the intensified ongoing Jewish—Arab clashes in fact constituted a new relational era between Jews and Arabs, as reflected among other things in petitions. The daily clashes between Jews and Arabs in rural Palestine, which as said, accompanied Zionist colonization activity from its very beginning, soon took on political overtones: they were on the agenda of Arab members of the Ottoman parliament and the nascent political parties, the booming press dealt with it intensively, and larger urban-educated Arab circles were attentive to its repercussions and warned of the effects of ongoing Jewish activity.

In the case discussed in this article, it is clear from the villagers’ petition that it corroborates some of the allegations concerning the ha-Shomer guards by the Jewish colonists, and in particular that their attitude towards the rural Arab population exacerbated tensions in the region and was counter-productive in terms of Jewish—Arab relationships. Some of the allegations mentioned in the petitions, however, such as murdering passers-by for no good reason, or violating families’ honor are not supported by other evidence. Note that this petition was composed by a professional petition writer who used the terminology and style appropriate to such approaches to the imperial centre and should thus be interpreted with caution. It should also be recalled that a political activist from Jaffa was involved in putting this petition together. The petition also does not mention the theft which started the Zarnuqa incident.
The Arabic press

What is clear from the Arabic press that dealt with the Zarnuqa incident is its polemical, political nature. *Filastin* perceived this incident as much more than a local one. It emphasized the threats to the local population from the continuation of Zionist colonization activity and the attitude of the Zionists towards it. In its view, the incident was not about a minor issue of picking some grapes in Jewish-owned vineyards without permission, but rather about the future of Palestine’s population. For months the incident was discussed on the pages of this paper, which kept its readers updated about the investigation, efforts to reach reconciliation and the like, and at the same time also provided commentary on the event and its more far-reaching repercussions. It even published a version of the events as described by the Jewish lawyer David Moyal of Jaffa, who said he was alarmed by earlier articles about the event, the accusations made against the Jews and the inflammatory tone of the texts. *Filastin* announced that it had decided to publish Moyal’s letter even though his narrative was erroneous in many ways, because it showed the newspaper’s openness and diversity of opinion: ‘We took this article and presented it immediately for publication in the name of protecting freedom and freedom of the press. We do not criticize it, and when anyone of them [the Jews] wants to write he is free to do so, and we will not prevent anyone from doing so in the columns of this paper.’

Conclusion

The violent clash between the colonists and guards of Rehovot and the Arab villagers from Zarnuqa was a turning point in Jewish—Arab relationships in Ottoman Palestine in the early twentieth century. Reports in the newspapers at the time, both in Arabic and in Hebrew, the petition sent to Istanbul by the mukhtars of the villagers in the region, the point of view of the Dutch tourists who witnessed the event and the memoirs written many years later about the clash, all show that the Zarnuqa incident was much more than a local event. In this article, we have not tried to trace the ‘historical truth’ or attempted to assign blame. Rather, our aim was to examine the narratives and the way they were presented and to point to the methodological difficulties the historian faces when reading and trying to understand sources dealing with the Zarnuqa incident.

The Hebrew press, particularly outlets representing the labour movement, discussed the violent incident extensively. The reports and the way the affair was covered raise a very difficult methodological question, namely that of the ideological line of newspapers that refrained from criticizing the guards or questioning the implications of the idea of ‘conquering labour and guarding’ on Jewish—Arab relationships.

The primary sources dealing with the Zarnuqa incident retrieved from the archives do not coincide on all points with contemporary newspaper accounts. The documents and letters found in the archive in Rehovot testify to the brutal behaviour of members of *ha-Shomer* towards the Arab rural population which is not mentioned anywhere in the Hebrew press. There is also a disparity between the speech of *ha-Shomer* guard as it was cited in *ha-Ahdut* and his speech as preserved in the archive of the labour movement, a fact which again points to the problematic nature of a newspaper governed by ideological beliefs. This may also be the reason why there is no mention in the labour movement newspapers of the threats by the terrorist cell ‘the grandchildren of Pinhas’ to murder...
colonists who employed Arabs and the humiliation Arab workers experienced at the hand of the guards.

The memoirs written many years after the Zarnuqa incident when the Jewish–Arab conflict was already an integral part of daily life in Mandatory Palestine also testify to the problematic and selective nature of these sources and particularly Kovtzei ha-Shomer which were published during the Great Arab Revolt. The diary of Abraham Mossel which was written during the events themselves may thus be a relatively accurate description of the developments since the writers were outsiders who wrote while the events took place. Moreover, one can argue that the fact that the writer and his friends arrived from Europe and to a large extent were outsiders, allowed them to write about their experience without being too emotionally involved and without letting ideology influence them.

The incident received a great deal of attention in the Arab press and involved political bodies. In the case of the villagers’ petition, an activist from Jaffa apparently helped put the petition together and send it to Istanbul, and Filastin was known for its support of anti-Zionist ideology. It should be noted that this type of Arab response was almost impossible before the 1908 Young Turk Revolution when no Arab newspapers were authorized to be published in Ottoman Palestine and no political activity authorized.

From all the evidence and references to the Zarnuqa incident, both Jewish and Arab, the root cause of the tension between Jews and Arabs in the summer of 1913 appears to have been the ideological nature of the two labour parties that supported the ‘conquest of labour’ and the ‘conquest of guarding.’ In concrete terms, this involved the replacement of Arab labourers and guards in the colonies by Jewish ones. Implementing this idea in the context of the atmosphere and political changes in the post-1908 Revolution,24 had far reaching implications as regards the two populations living in Ottoman Palestine at the time. The guards and the labourers of the second ʿaliyah made stringent demands to the colonists to give precedence to Jews at the expense of the Arabs. They ignored the political and economic implications of expelling the Arabs from the colonies, which deepened the rift between the two sides and led to conflict. The colonists’ reaction to the labourers’ demands and their refusal to yield in such a key issue shows that there were segments within the yishuv that grasped the necessity and importance of preserving the delicate relationship with the rural Arab population.

Overall, the sources discussed above demonstrate the potential of sources dealing with the early Zionist-Arab clashes, as well as their limitations. Even when dealing with such a key event in the early annals of the conflict, there are conflicting narratives. Our task as historians of this conflict, which has become one of the most contested and disputed conflicts worldwide is not to determine who is right and who is wrong or whose narrative is more accurate. Rather we present the complexity of the events and the possibilities provided by the sources to study this formative period. Numerous scholars from different disciplines have dealt with the history of the early Zionist-Arab conflict. Often their work is based on one specific kind of historical material written in one language (newspapers, memoirs, diaries and so on). The association of researchers from different fields who specialize in different languages and are accustomed to working with varied kinds of sources, as we have tried to demonstrate in this article, may provide a new perspective on the early Zionist–Arab encounters, better problematize the debate, and present a more complex and nuanced picture.
Disclosure statement

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Notes


2. About the importance of this incident, see Mandel, The Arabs and Zionism before World War I, Chapter 8.

3. al-Fula incident took place three years after the Young-Turk Revolution and symbolized the initial politicization of the Jewish—Arab conflict and the involvement of the Arab urban circles. al-Fula was a village located in Marj Ibn ‘Amer (the Jezreel valley). The Sursuk family from Beirut bought large segments of the valley from the Ottoman government in 1872. In 1910, Ilias Sursuk sold the land of al-Fula, some 3500 dunams, to a Zionist organization called the Jewish National Fund (JNF). The JNF’s attempt to exercise its ownership rights and settle colonists there led to tensions and eventually to a clash between the villagers of al-Fula, who had been tenants on Sursuk’s land, and the Jews who settled there. The former were encouraged by the kaymakam of the subdistrict of Nazareth, Shukri al-‘Asali, as well as by the generally negative attitude towards Zionist activity that had spread in the empire and in Palestine after the Revolution, including in the press.

4. When the war broke out, the ha-Shomer was outlawed by the Ottoman authorities and its members were forced to stop guarding the Jewish colonies. Most of them assembled together at Tel ‘Adash in the Jezreel Valley, bringing with them the archive of the association. After the exposure of the Nili spying network and because of fears that the Ottoman soldiers would search for incriminating documents, it was decided to burn the archive. The documents that were not burned were buried in Poriah, but until today no one knows exactly where. On the disappearance of the ha-Shomer archive, see N. Rogel, ‘Ma Karah le-Archion ‘ha-Shomer’? [What has happened to the ha-Shomer Archive?], Archion: Mikra’ot le-Archيونut vele-Te’ud, 6 (1993), pp.47—51. On the attempts to find it just before the writing of the History of the Haganah, see the Haganah Archive, Section 124, file 21.

5. Kovtez ha-Shomer: Te’udot, Zikhronot ve-Divre Ha’aracha Ktuvim beydei Vatikey “ha-Shomer” (Tel-Aviv: Archiyon ha-’Avoda, 1938).

6. ha-Po’e’el ha-Tsa’ir, 23 July 1913.

7. [Without author], ‘Rehovot,’ ha-Ahdut, 1 August 1913, 40, pp.6—7.


11. Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, DH, EUM, EMN., 30/5, 16 Temmuz 1329 (29 July 1913).


15. Frans van der Hoorn married Zila Cohen from Metulla and their descendants live today in Israel; Gerard Perfors and Marie Zwarts married, were long-lived, and remained until the end of their lives in Holland; Abraham Mossel returned to Holland and was murdered by the Nazis near Auschwitz.


20. The workers press referred to the violent event between the Arabs of Zarnuqa and the people of Rehovot and its implications. It did not go into detail but censured the use of Arab workers in the settlements. See, for example, Tmidi, ‘Inyanei ha-Sha’ah’ (Matters of the Moment), *ha-Po’el ha-Tza’ir*, 27 Tammuz, 5673 (1 August 1913), 41, pp.1—2.


22. For a study of *ha-Shomer*’s attitude towards the rural Arab population in the region of Rehovot and its criticism by the colonists, see G. Alroey, ‘The Servants of the Settlement or Vulgar Tyrants? A Hundred Years of the Hashomer Association: A Historical Perspective,’ *Cathedra*, 133 (2009), pp.84—94 [in Hebrew].
