

# Mrs. Peters's Palestine: An Exchange

To the Editors:

It has become open season on Joan Peters's *From Time Immemorial: The Origins of the Arab-Jewish Conflict Over Palestine*, although Yehoshua Porath's review [NJR, January 16] is one of the more restrained of the attacks upon it made in the past fifteen months or so. Mrs. Peters has brought this upon herself to a large extent, for, as I wrote in my review of the book in *The New Republic* of April 23, 1984, "many of its valuable points are buried in passages of furious argumentative overkill," and too much of its more than 600 pages is given over to very conventional polemics. Since then, some patient researchers have found numerous examples of sloppiness in her scholarship and an occasional tendency not to grasp the correct meaning of a context from which she has extracted a quotation. All in all, her book is marked—and marred—by an over-eagerness to score a huge and definitive polemical triumph, which has caused her too often to leave prudence and responsibility behind.

But the fact remains that there is an original and significant argument at the heart of her book, and this has scarcely been dealt with by critics, apart from Mr. Porath, who only weakly challenged it. He writes:

Much of Mrs. Peters's book argues that at the same time that Jewish immigration to Palestine was rising, Arab immigration to the parts of Palestine where Jews had settled also increased. Therefore, in her view, the Arab claim that an indigenous Arab population was displaced by Jewish immigrants must be false, since many Arabs only arrived with the Jews.

This is a correct summary of her main point, which, as Mr. Porath justly recognizes, stands on very problematical terrain—the demographic history of modern Palestine, a subject that "cannot be summed up briefly," according to Mr. Porath, who adds however that "its main features are clear enough and they are very different from the fanciful description Mrs. Peters gives." But except for mentioning one widely criticized statistic of Mrs. Peters's regarding Palestine demography in the 1890s—which I shall deal below—Mr. Porath does not go on to demonstrate any significant difference between her view of that history and his own. On the contrary, he joins her in accepting clear indications of what the British Mandatory authorities deemed an "abnormally high (and possibly unprecedented)" rate of increase in the Arab population in modern times. The difference between them lies simply in the reason assigned for this growth. Mr. Porath agrees with the British authorities in attributing it to "natural increase" at a rate greatly accelerated by improvements in health facilities, whereas Mrs. Peters insists it can only be accounted for in full by the immigration factor.

Unfortunately, the British, while keeping thorough records of Jewish immigration, did not keep any for Arabs migrating overland into the country, so Mrs. Peters has had to resort to circumstantial evidence, inference, and deduction to make her case. As Mr. Porath puts it, "she has apparently searched through documents for any statement to the effect that Arabs entered Palestine." And it must be granted that she has achieved ample results, though, of course, the statements she has collected are impressionistic and have no statistical value. Mr. Porath therefore maintains that "even if we put together all the cases she cites, one cannot escape the conclusion that most of the growth of the Palestinian Arab community resulted from a process of natural increase." But he goes no further than this flat assertion of his opinion against hers in challenging Mrs. Peters's main argument.

Yet neither he nor any of the detractors I have read has taken on the most striking of her demonstrations in favor of her case, dealing with the phenomenon she calls "in-migration"—that is, the movement of Arabs from other parts of Palestine into the main areas of Jewish settlement. She shows that in the years 1893 to 1947, while the Palestinian Arab population slightly more than doubled in areas where no Jews were settled, it quintupled in

the main areas of Jewish settlement. How can this difference be accounted for without including Arab migration as a factor?

This particular demonstration, it should further be pointed out, is in no way affected by the debate that has arisen over Mrs. Peters's use of a source on Palestinian population in the 1890s that some have found questionable (including Anthony Lewis, in a woe-filled misquotation of the relevant passage, in *The New York Times* of January 13, 1986). Still, it is worth dwelling on that matter for a moment, since Mrs. Peters's approach to the problem had more merit than her critics have allowed. Pursuing her case back to the earliest significant example for which there was evidence, Mrs. Peters states that in 1893 about 92,000 non-Jews were living within the main areas of Jewish settlement, alongside a Jewish population that she gives as just under 60,000. If correct, these figures would indicate that, as far back as 1893, the Jews not only were already far from being a small minority in the areas where they had settled, but were even—if one divides the non-Jewish population into Muslim and Christian—the largest single group there.

But here is the problem. Whereas her figures for non-Jews in this passage are based on the



official Ottoman census of 1893, which is generally considered by scholars to be reliable with certain qualifications, her Jewish population figure does not come from that source—which counts only 9,817 Jews in all of Palestine. Instead, she has turned for her Jewish figure to a French traveler and geographer of that era, Vital Cuinier, whose statistical estimates have undergone some severe scholarly criticism in our own time. Yet Mrs. Peters offers instances in which Cuinier's figures are not far from those of the Ottoman census, and the only serious discrepancy between the two sources regarding the material she uses is in the Jewish population count. Why, then, in this one instance, has she considered it permissible to eschew the Ottoman statistic in making her case?

Obviously because, in this instance, the Ottoman figure is patently absurd. A good deal of responsible, if impressionistic, counting of the Palestine population had been done by that time, and the general consensus among Western observers was that the Jewish population of Jerusalem alone was something more than double that of the official Ottoman figure for the Jewish population of the whole country. But how could such a huge discrepancy have come about? Mrs. Peters offers an explanation, quoted in all fairness by Mr. Porath, that makes a good deal of sense: "The Ottoman Census," she writes, "apparently registered only known Ottoman subjects; since most Jews had failed to obtain Ottoman citizenship... a representative figure of the Palestinian Jewish population could not be extrapolated from the 1893 census." It is a pity that Mrs. Peters has buried this sound bit of reasoning in an obscure part of her book—as a footnote within an appendix—so that her unheeded switch in the main text from the Ottoman figures to Cuinier's has the look of a suspect sleight-of-hand maneuver, which has therefore generated a good deal of hostility. I can only add in this connection that, even if Cuinier's figure for the Jewish population of

Palestine in the mid-1890s is not the last word, it is at any rate much closer to correct than the Ottoman one.

But the only place at which I find Mr. Porath's otherwise fair-minded review descending into the kind of imbalance that has been displayed by Mrs. Peters's more vehement detractors is in his remarks about "references to the Arabs surrounding them everywhere in Palestine" made in the writings of early Zionist settlers. In the first place, Mrs. Peters has not overlooked Asher Druyanov's collection of some of these writings, as Mr. Porath suggests she has; she quotes from it on page 252, with full citation in the end notes. But, what is far more important, Mr. Porath's image of "Arabs surrounding them everywhere" is tendentious. Let me quote two relevant passages from the memoirs of one of those early Zionist settlers, Rachel Yinnait Ben-Zvi. Describing her first arrival in Palestine in 1908, she writes of walking through the utterly Arab port town of Jaffa:

The stream of pedestrians pushed us into the main street. Up the street strode a camel, stretching its neck, its nostrils quivering, sniffing, its hump heaving and falling. A Beduin led it on a rope. I felt like greeting the man of the desert because our forefathers had been so like him.

So much for Arab-filled Jaffa and many smaller communities besides. Now here she is a few days later, on the train from Jaffa to Jerusalem, just past the Ramle station:

Desolate stretches of uncultivated fields spread all the way to the horizon, up to the far off Samaritan hills visible through a bluish haze. The sight of all the barren ground filled me with a kind of joy—joy that fate had kept the soil of Judea uninhabited and unworked.... In my mind's eye I saw it brought back to life by the hands of Jews returning from far away.

In the light of richly human observations like these, it seems fatuous to depict a Palestine at the turn of the century either empty of Arabs or covered all over with them, depending on the position one takes in the debate about Mrs. Peters's findings.

Ronald Sanders

New York City

To the Editors:

Joan Peters's *From Time Immemorial* has, broadly speaking, been received in two ways at two times. Early reviews treated her book as a serious contribution to the study of the Arab-Israeli conflict and late ones dismissed it as propaganda. Coming almost two years after the book's publication, Professor Yehoshua Porath's review in your January 16, 1986 issue probably closes the second round. As one of those who reviewed the book when it first appeared—and who was referred to for this reason in Professor Porath's review—I should at this time like to comment on the debate.

The difference between the two rounds is not hard to explain. Most early reviewers, including myself, focused on the substance of Miss Peters's central thesis; the later reviewers, in contrast, emphasized the faults—technical, historical, and literary—in Miss Peters's book.

I would not dispute the existence of those faults. *From Time Immemorial* quotes carelessly, uses statistics sloppily, and ignores inconvenient facts. Much of the book is irrelevant to Miss Peters's central thesis. The author's linguistic and scholarly abilities are open to question. Excessive use of quotation marks, eccentric footnotes, and a polemical, somewhat hysterical undertone mar the book. In short, *From Time Immemorial* stands out as an appallingly crafted book.

Granting all this, the fact remains that the book presents a thesis that neither Professor Porath nor any other reviewer has so far succeeded in refuting. Miss Peters's central thesis is that a substantial immigration of Arabs to Palestine took place during the first half of the twentieth century. She supports this argument with an array of demographic statistics and contemporary accounts, the bulk of which have not been questioned by any reviewer, including Professor Porath.

Nonetheless, Professor Porath dismisses her argument as "fanciful." He says that "the main reason" for Arab population growth is that Arab births remained steady while infant mortality decreased. He concludes that the movement of population was not significant in comparison with natural increase.

Now, there can be no question that improvements in medical conditions contributed to the increase in Arab population. But it is not immediately clear that declining infant mortality was more important than immigration. Professor Porath asserts this but he does not provide the evidence necessary to convince a reader.

The disproof of Miss Peters's thesis requires a detailed inquiry into birth and death records, immigration and emigration registers, employment rolls, nomadic settlement patterns, and so forth. She may be wrong; but this will be proven only when another researcher goes through the evidence and shows that immigration was unimportant. The existence or absence of large-scale Arab immigration to Palestine has nothing to do, of course, with Miss Peters's motives or the obvious shortcomings of her book. The facts about population change will not be established by heaping scorn on Miss Peters, only by going back to the archives.

Faulty presentation notwithstanding, Miss Peters's hypothesis is on the table; it is incumbent on her critics to cease the name-calling and make a serious effort to show her wrong by demonstrating that many thousands of Arabs did not emigrate to Palestine in the period under question.

Until such happens, what is one to think? Is there reason to accept Miss Peters's version of events? I believe so: even though *From Time Immemorial* does not place Arab immigration to Palestine in a historical context, it is not hard to find a rationale for their movement. The Arabs who went to Palestine sought economic opportunity created by the Zionists. As Europeans, the Zionists brought with them to Palestine resources and skills far in advance of anything possessed by the local population. Jews initiated advanced economic activities that created jobs and wealth and drew Arabs. Zionists resembled the British, Germans, and other Europeans of modern times who settled in sparsely populated areas—Australia, southern Africa, or the American West—and then attracted the indigenous peoples to themselves.

There is really nothing surprising in all this; and because it makes such good sense, I put credence in the argument that substantial numbers of Arabs moved to Palestine. I will adjust my views, of course, should compelling evidence be found to show otherwise. But this will require that Miss Peters's critics go beyond polemics and actually prove her thesis wrong.

Daniel Pipes

Naval War College  
Newport, Rhode Island

Yehoshua Porath replies:

In reply to Mr. Sanders, I am sorry to have overlooked the one reference in Mrs. Peters's book to Druyanov's collection. It is, however, characteristic of her to have ignored all the many passages in his two volumes referring to the presence of Arabs living in the areas where Jews had settled.

That is of course a minor point. Much more significant, as Mr. Sanders rightly notes, is Mrs. Peters's demographic argument. I did not want to devote a large part of my review to discussing the 1893 statistics on the numbers of Muslims, Christians, and Jews living in all of Palestine or in the areas where Jews settled. Unlike other reviewers I preferred to argue with Mrs. Peters's basic concepts, explanations, and methods. However, Mr. Sanders's fair-minded letter requires some comment on demographic issues. As he notes, Mrs. Peters's claims about Arabs entering Palestine "are impressionistic, and have no statistical value." Mr. Pipes apparently believes they do but he gives no specific evidence of a "substantial migration of Arabs to Palestine." I will therefore consider what Mr. Sanders calls "the most striking of her demonstrations in favor of her case"—her claim that between 1893 and 1947 the Palestinian Arab population quintupled in the main areas of Jewish settlement,



contrary to the statistics in the Ottoman census.

I never claimed, however, that the 1893 Ottoman census figure of the number of Jews living in Palestine (9,817) is correct; nor do I accept that the Ottoman figure for the Muslims (371,959), also cited by Mrs. Peters from an article by K. Karpat,<sup>1</sup> is correct. As all students of Ottoman history know, only after 1909 did the "Young Turks" government begin to draft Christian and Jewish subjects of the Ottoman Empire into the army. Therefore, until that date, it was mainly the Muslims who had good reason not to register their names with the census authorities or, for that matter, with any other official authorities, since registration made them easy prey for the draft officers. The same fear prompted them to avoid the land registers too—with disastrous results for their property rights.

As a result the official Ottoman figure for the Christian population (42,689) looks fairly accurate, whereas the figure for the Muslims is underestimated. The Jews were certainly undercounted in that census, since all the Jewish newcomers were foreign nationals who cherished their privileged status under the capitulatory regime and would have refused to have anything to do with the census authorities.

We do have plausible estimates of the population in Palestine in the very thorough analysis by A. Ruppin of the economy and society of Syria and Palestine on the eve of World War I (*Syrien Als Wirtschaftsgebiet*, Berlin, 1917 and 1920). Professor Ruppin was an outstanding demographer and sociologist and the head of the Palestine Office of the World Zionist Organization in Palestine. No one could accuse him of superficial work or of anti-Zionist bias. His figure for the population of all Palestine (the three districts of Acre, Nablus, and Jerusalem) is 689,275, as against 425,802 in the 1893 Ottoman census, the number presented in Karpat's article. Ruppin and all other Jewish sources I am aware of agree that the number of Jews living in Palestine just before World War I was between 80,000 and 85,000.<sup>2</sup> That makes the number of non-Jews living in Palestine a little more 600,000, as against the Ottoman census figure of about 415,000.

The main flaw in Mrs. Peters's arguments, which Mr. Sanders seems to accept, is her statement (in Mr. Sanders's words) "that in 1893 about 92,000 non-Jews were living in the main area of Jewish settlement; alongside a Jewish population that she gives as just under 60,000." By 1947, she argues, the number of non-Jews in those areas had quintupled while in other areas of Palestine it only slightly more than doubled. This difference, in her view, can be accounted for only by the factor of Arab migration. But how did Mrs. Peters arrive at the number of the non-Jews in "the Jewish-settled areas" of Palestine for 1893? Her claim that there were about 92,000 non-Jews is made on page 250 of her book and the reader is referred there for the source to Appendix V. However, in the appendix no source is given. Only in the next appendix devoted to methodology does she claim that she used "Turkish census figures" (p. 427). But in the footnotes to chapters 10-12, where the composition of the Palestine population during the nineteenth century is discussed, no reference is made to the Ottoman archives where Mrs. Peters would, if she had consulted them, have found the returns of the Ottoman censuses of 1893 and 1915 that she uses in Appendix V.

The Ottoman census returns, in fact, were never published. Therefore Mrs. Peters could use them only by referring to a secondary source based on research in the Ottoman archives. And indeed that is the case with the article by Kemal Karpat quoted by Mrs. Peters and cited above. Karpat's figures are given, presumably as they appear in the Ottoman census returns, according to subdistricts (*kaza*). It is impossible to ascertain from the figures he cites which of the Ottoman sub-

districts of Palestine correspond to what Mrs. Peters defined as "the Jewish-settled areas" of Palestine. But one does find such a characterization of Ottoman subdistricts in the work by Vital Cuinet mentioned in Mr. Sanders's letter. And if one consults Cuinet's book to find where in Palestine, in 1893, 59,431 Jews (the number quoted by Mrs. Peters on page 251 of her book) were living, one finds that exactly the same number is given for the aggregate of Jews living in the seven subdistricts (*kaza*) of Acre, Haifa, Tiberias, Safed, Nazareth, Jaffa, and Jerusalem. Consequently, we now know precisely what Peters defines as "the Jewish-settled areas"; she is evidently referring to the seven Ottoman subdistricts mentioned by Cuinet.

Now we must consider the number of non-Jews living in those areas. According to Mrs. Peters (again on page 251), and apparently Mr. Sanders accepts her view, they numbered about 92,300, of which nearly 38,000 were Christians (making the number of Muslims about 54,300). But the Ottoman census figures in Karpat's table (pages 262 and 271 of his article) give the number of Muslims as 158,379 and of the Christians as 39,884, making a total number of 198,263 non-Jews in "the Jewish settled areas." If we use Cuinet's own figures we still do not get an estimate of the non-Jewish population that brings us much closer to the number of non-Jews claimed by Mrs. Peters. According to Cuinet's data on the seven Ottoman subdistricts comprising "the Jewish-settled areas" we have 124,686 Muslims and 61,964 Christians, a total of 186,263 non-Jews.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, these figures are more than double the figure of 92,000 non-Jews given in Mrs. Peters's book. One could argue that the actual area defined by Mrs. Peters as "the Jewish-settled areas" is smaller than the total area covered by the seven subdistricts listed above, and the map published on page 246 of her book indicates such a possibility. But if this were the case, nowhere in her main text or in the methodological appendices (V and VI) did Mrs. Peters bother to explain to her readers how she managed to break down the Ottoman or Cuinet's figures into smaller units than subdistricts. As far as I know no figures for the units smaller than subdistricts (*Nahia*, the parallel of the French *commune*), covering the area of Ottoman Palestine, were ever published. Therefore I can't avoid the conclusion that Mrs. Peters's figures were, at best, based on guesswork and an extremely tendentious guesswork at that.

I would add that even a superficial glance at Cuinet's figures should make any serious historian recoil from using them. While the official Ottoman figures for the Muslims are underestimated for the reasons I earlier explained, Cuinet's are much more so. As far as his figures for the Christians are concerned, their main flaws are not only their inflated character but also the distortion in the estimates he gives for the various Christian communities. First, Cuinet found hardly any Greek Orthodox Christians living in Palestine (450 in the Haifa subdistrict and 169 in the Jama'in subdistrict of the Nablus district). But by all other accounts, this community was the largest single Christian community living in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century; indeed, it is still the largest such community in the combined territory of present-day Israel, the occupied West Bank, and the Gaza strip.

Secondly, Cuinet claimed that substantial numbers of Syrian Orthodox Christians (about seven thousand) were living throughout Palestine, whereas in fact this Christian community was hardly to be found in Palestine at all. Its only presence in the country was a small monastery in Jerusalem. And thirdly and most absurdly, Cuinet claimed that precisely five thousand Maronites, who amounted to 10 percent of the population of the district, were living in the district of Nablus. But as everyone knows Maronites were to be found in the Middle East only in Mount Lebanon. The only exceptions were a cluster of villages in Cyprus and one village and half a village in the uppermost Galilee in northern Palestine (Bir'am and

Jish in Israel of today), a direct extension of the Lebanese stronghold. No Maronites were to be found in the Nablus district and no other writer claimed that they were. Cuinet's mistakes were deliberately made in order to prove that Palestine, as much as Lebanon and Syria, should be put under French protection. His attitude is well known and requires that his material be used with great caution.

Since we are left with no sound basis for Mrs. Peters's figures for the population in the "Jewish-settled areas" in 1893, there is no need to account for the supposed quintupling of the Arab population in those areas by 1947; so dramatic an increase did not take place. It is true nevertheless that during the Mandatory period the Arab population of the coastal area of Palestine grew faster than it did in other areas. But this fact does not necessarily prove an Arab immigration into Palestine took place. More reasonably it confirms the very well-known fact that the coastal area attracted Arab villagers from the mountainous parts of Palestine who preferred the economic opportunities in the fast-growing areas of Jaffa and Haifa to the meager opportunities available in their villages.

The coastal area had several main attractions for the Arab villagers. They found jobs in constructing, and later working in, the port of Haifa, the Iraq Petroleum Company refineries, the railway workshops, and the nascent Arab industries there. They also took part in the large-scale cultivation of the citrus groves between Haifa and Jaffa and found jobs connected with the shipment of citrus fruits from the Jaffa port. Contrary to what Mr. Pipes claims, all these developments had almost nothing to do with the growth of the Jewish National Home. The main foreign factor that brought them about was the Mandatory government. The Zionist settlers had a clearly stated policy against using Arab labor or investing in Arab industries. At the same time, the natural increase in the Palestinian Arab population I referred to is made clear in the statistical abstracts and quarterly surveys published by the Mandatory government in the years following the census of 1931.

As for the evidence quoted by Mr. Sanders from Rachel Yannait Ben-Zvi's reminiscences, it should be enough to say Mrs. Ben-Zvi was a founding member of the Greater Israel Movement. Mrs. Ben-Zvi could hardly be expected to recall any positive impression the Arabs made on her, all the more so if one remembers that she published her memoirs during the 1960s when the Israeli-Arab conflict had become intense.

<sup>1</sup>K. Karpat, "Ottoman population records and the Census of 1881/82-1893," *JMES*, Vol. 9 (1978), pp. 237-274.

<sup>2</sup>See pages 14 and 15 of Ruppin's book and also, for example, Alex Bein, *The History of the Zionist Settlement* (Tel-Aviv, 1954), pp. 34-35 and Y. Slutsky et al., *The History of the Haganah*, Vol. 1 (Tel-Aviv, 1960), p. 315 (both in Hebrew).

<sup>3</sup>V. Cuinet, *Syrie, Liban et Palestine* (Paris, 1896), pp. 100, 106, 110, 114, 117, 627, and 663.