



Jerusalem Calling: The Birth of the Palestine Broadcasting Service

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On the last day of March 1936, as Jerusalem was moving from winter into spring, the Palestine Broadcasting Service (PBS) began radio broadcasts from the new transmitter in Ramallah, with broadcasting offices located near the center of Jerusalem. The inaugural broadcast was attended by an array of dignitaries and Mandate government figures, with High Commissioner Arthur Wauchope – the governor-general of Mandate Palestine and highest representative of British power there – himself giving one of the opening speeches. “For some years I have been greatly impressed by the benefits that a well directed Broadcasting Service can bring to the mind and spirit of any people who enjoy its advantages,” he stated in a speech later reproduced in full in the *Palestine Post*, as part of a multi-part article titled “Palestine Broadcasting Begun”. He added

May 1941 photograph showing the PBS' male Arab staff. *Source: Library of Congress.*

that in Palestine “Broadcasting will be directed for the advantage of all classes of all communities.”¹ Wauchope’s comments about advantages fit neatly within mid-1930s European understandings of radio broadcasting, and particularly reflected bureaucratic conceptions of radio as a public good intended to benefit listeners. Yet as his comment about “all communities” indicated, his speech was delivered not to a group of European broadcasters or bureaucrats, but in the highly charged political context of Mandate Palestine – a context in which people took great interest in radio broadcasting, as the *Palestine Post*’s coverage suggested. What advantages could radio broadcasting provide for listeners in this context, and how would a government-operated radio station address the religiously inflected nationalist tensions of Palestine’s two primary communities?

In his speech, Wauchope stated that the station would not cover politics, but would focus on “knowledge and culture”. With this statement and what followed, he laid out both the promise and the limitation of radio broadcasting in Mandate Palestine. At the same time, he gave voice to the British bureaucratic perspective on the territory and its biggest challenges: how to bring its rural Arab “peasant” population into the twentieth century while providing sufficient cultural stimulation for its urban Jewish “professional” population. He made only an oblique, brief reference to what Palestinians might have considered their biggest challenges – the political and religious contestation over the nature and identity of the mandate territory – suggesting the bureaucratic “modernization first” perspective brought about by the temporary calm of the mid-1930s. Wauchope’s speech suggested that modernization would inherently resolve the problem of Palestine, somehow harmonizing the competing aims of its two populations. To do so, the station would focus on two groups.

While assuring listeners that the station would reach out to all people in Palestine, Wauchope described two groups that he hoped the station would reach: farmers and music lovers. “We shall try to stimulate new interests and make all forms of knowledge more widespread,” he promised, citing these two groups as examples “in both of which I have deep interest.” He continued:

There are thousands of farmers in this country who are striving to improve their methods of agriculture. I hope we shall find ways and means to help these farmers and assist them to increase the yield of the soil, improve the quality of their produce, and explain the advantages of various forms of cooperation.

There are thousands of people in Palestine who have a natural love of music, but who experience difficulty in finding the means whereby they may enjoy the many pleasures that music gives. The Broadcasting Service will endeavor to fill this need and stimulate musical life in Palestine, so that we may see both Oriental and Western music grow in strength, side by side, each true to its own tradition.

Why these two groups above others? Wauchope’s focus on them suggested both



One of the PBS Arabic section's "Oriental" music groups, featuring three ouds. Notice the professional dress: each musician is dressed in a suit, and all wear a tarboush. *Source: Library of Congress.*



One of the Arabic section's smaller music groups, likely playing dance or other "light entertainment" pieces. Tangos, foxtrots, and other dance pieces were often listed on PBS daily program guides. *Source: Library of Congress.*

the Mandate government's focus and some of its blind spots. In part echoing the British Empire's experience in India and in part connecting with broader urban-rural trends, Mandate government officials (with support from British officials) saw rural Palestinians as a backward population that needed modernizing. Without modernization, officials worried, farmers – more often described as “peasants” – might serve as a dangerous, destabilizing force.

While farmers were described in Wauchope's speech as benefiting from pedagogical broadcasts explaining cooperative farming or soil yield, music lovers were described as a discriminating audience expecting sophisticated programming. Wauchope suggested that for them the crucial issue was not improving their work productivity but the quality of leisure pursuits. For them, the station would provide a more “stimulating” musical culture, encouraging “Oriental” and “Western” musical traditions to flourish – but would do so separately. Wauchope's image of two traditions developing “side by side” rather than in conversation with one another is a striking illustration of how deeply embedded the narrative of “East” and “West” had become. What is equally striking about the groups Wauchope highlighted was their ostensibly non-sectarian nature. While Wauchope spoke only of farmers and music lovers, those listening to his speech would have recognized these two groups as religiously and ethnically marked. Farmers would have been understood as Arab “peasants” – cited in newspaper and government accounts as the paradigm of backwardness in Palestine, and later targeted with specific PBS radio programs and free radio sets. Music lovers would have been understood as the Zionist immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe, whose numbers included a high percentage of amateur and professional classical musicians, and who later complained effusively about the quality of the music (recorded and live) that the PBS broadcast. Together, these two groups – and Wauchope's focus on them – foreshadowed two primary concerns of PBS programming.

Wauchope closed by reading a congratulatory message from the Chairman of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), thanking the Postmaster General and other government departments. In his closing, he expressed confidence that the PBS, “founded upon the solid rocks of high aim and public interest, will play an increasing part in the social life and entertainment of the people.” Wauchope's mention of the BBC and other Mandate officials signaled the formative relationship between the BBC and the PBS in its early days, as well as the close intertwining between government branches when it came to station operation and governance. At the same time, the extensive coverage given Wauchope's speech in Palestinian newspapers highlighted the importance of the station to various Palestinians' national aspirations, as well as its importance to the Mandate government.

With Wauchope's speech, the PBS began broadcasting, going on air as the national, state-run radio station of British-controlled Mandate Palestine. Modeled on the BBC, the PBS was a non-commercial public station that enjoyed a broadcasting monopoly in Palestine. It was funded primarily by government allocations, with additional revenues coming from the annual license fees required of radio set owners; and its programming



The PBS' Arabic section included several music groups. This photo shows PBS Arabic section musicians with a boy and girl at the microphone. *Source: Library of Congress.*

was intended to “educate and elevate” listeners as citizens, rather than to entertain them as consumers. The inauguration of the PBS also connected Palestine to a much broader set of developments, stretching from Europe through Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The early 1930s had been a golden era for state-run radio throughout Europe. By the mid-1930s it was becoming a golden era for Middle Eastern and North African state radio as well, as the European states that governed from Morocco to the Gulf claimed frequencies on behalf of their colonies and mandate territories.² Radio was the premier mass medium of the early- and mid-twentieth century, and people and governments alike believed in its power. State-run stations like the PBS engendered a mixture of anxiety and excitement for both officials and citizens, who enthused about the possibilities and worried about the influence of broadcasting.

Mandate radio: colonial propaganda or national institution?

By the late 1930s, the Levant had a number of government-operated broadcasting stations, including Radio Damascus, the Egyptian State Broadcasting Service (Radio Cairo), Beirut’s Radio Orient, and the Palestine Broadcasting Service as well as an intermittently broadcasting station in Mosul. Yet to the extent that scholars have considered these stations, they have dismissed them as vehicles for government

propaganda – and unsuccessful ones at that. They assume that radio sets' high cost combined with a popular perception of the stations' "taintedness" as colonial mouthpieces discouraged most people from ever tuning in. Yet historical evidence says otherwise. Period documents, personal memoirs, and newspapers from Palestine all suggest that people *were* listening – that the PBS and, by extension, other stations became an integral part of Levantine life, particularly in urban spaces.

Although the mandate government exercised tight control over news broadcasts, locally hired staff at the PBS enjoyed great autonomy in developing the musical, theatrical, ethical, children's, and women's programs that comprised 70-80 percent of broadcasting hours. These programs reflected and reinforced post-World War I cultural developments spreading throughout the Arab world: changes in musical composition, the popularity of "foreign" dance tunes like the tango and foxtrot, emergent theatrical forms, new pedagogies, and discussions of culture, ethics, and national identity. When they tuned in, listeners heard the sounds of a particular urban modernity, featuring locally prominent lecturers, regionally famous *firqas*, new takes on familiar *taqasims*, and women from local elite families discussing "The Arab Mother" or "The Muslim Woman during Ramadan." Without making a laborious argument about the role of radio in producing national identity, this work highlights the PBS' influence in giving Palestinians an image of what kind of persons, culturally speaking, they should be.

The birth of the PBS

Why did British mandate government officials become interested in establishing a broadcasting station in Palestine in the early 1930s? Their decision reflected a broader trend in radio broadcasting evident throughout the world: a move toward state control of frequencies and broadcasting apparatuses and an emerging idea of radio as a scarce public good, both of which intersected with Britain's purported responsibility to lead its mandate territories toward self-governance. The early 1930s witnessed a key moment in the development of radio broadcasting: the creation of government-operated state radio stations throughout Europe and European colonies around the world.³ The introduction of state radios marked the end of the "golden age" of amateur wireless broadcasting, which in the 1920s had peppered the world's airwaves with numerous privately owned and operated stations.⁴

However, the very freedom that initially encouraged amateur broadcasters ultimately undermined them: the popularity of amateur broadcasting and the ease of getting "on-air" had produced airwave congestion. Station interference became an increasingly common problem – irritating amateur broadcasters, and arousing the concern of governments using radio broadcasts for military communications. In addition to military communications, governments were increasingly aware of the powerful new possibilities radio offered them to shape the consciousness and behavior of national communities through news, education, and entertainment programming. In the 1920s few governments had seen these possibilities, or considered them worth

the technical headaches. By 1930, technical advancements and an increased awareness of the “power of radio” to reach and influence people had turned governments around the world into eager players, ready to transform broadcasting into a vehicle for serving state objectives.

The Palestine Broadcasting Service was a product of this period, when government bureaucrats around the world looked to harness the power of broadcasting to shape their citizens in particular ways. In Palestine, the Mandate government initially seemed to welcome private radio stations, issuing a medium-wave broadcasting license to Mendel Abramovitch in 1932. Radio Tel Aviv, Abramovitch’s station, conducted its first broadcast at the government-sponsored Levant Fair.⁵ However, the Mandate government soon began plans to establish its own station. These plans coincided with a broader international initiative to clean up Europe’s crowded airwaves, which left Palestine only one broadcasting frequency. The Mandate government soon revoked Abramovitch’s license, despite his protests; Radio Tel Aviv went off the air in 1935, as planning for the Palestine Broadcasting Service intensified.

International governance

The idea of international governance for communications media dates back to the nineteenth century, when disagreements over telegraph procedures (such as language of transmission, secrecy, and rates) were resolved through a series of international conferences. These conferences produced international governing bodies with the authority to manage conflicts and punish violations.⁶ Starting in the mid-1920s, radio was handled in a similar manner. To address the problem of crowded European airwaves, in May 1933 the International Broadcasting Union met in Lucerne. Broadcasting interference complaints had increased since the previous conference, held in Prague in 1929 – as had the number and reach of European stations. Stations now outnumbered available wavelengths; the phenomenon of unrestricted broadcasting, which had worked well in radio’s early days, had produced a free-for-all in which stations broadcast with little regard for their potential to disrupt, interfere, or overpower other stations using the same frequency. The Lucerne Conference resolved the interference issue by assigning specific wavelengths to each country, and by assigning shared wavelengths only to countries sufficiently distant to preclude interference.

For Palestine and the rest of the Middle East, the Lucerne conference’s most significant decision was geographical. The conference was intended to address issues relating to European broadcasting. However, Lucerne included Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and all of North Africa in what it defined as the “European Zone” because – depending on transmitter strength and weather conditions – any station broadcasting within this zone was likely to be heard elsewhere within the zone. In other words, because a station broadcasting from Palestine could cause interference if broadcasting on the same wavelength as an Italian or other European station, Palestine

was included in the European zone. (The Arab Gulf, Iraq, and Trans-Jordan were at the time considered unlikely to start radio broadcasting, and so were neither discussed nor assigned wavelengths.)

The extension of “Europe” to the Middle East was a concession to technological limitations, not a statement of equality. In fact, including the Middle East worsened the situation, for it increased the number of entities fighting over slices of the same wavelength pie. Further, allocating wavelength by country placed mandate territories and colonies on the same plane as their French and British custodians, granting them the same right to a wavelength and a national broadcasting station. At the same time, the list of conference participants made it evident who held the reins of power in these territories: the Mandate government’s Postmaster General (and Lieutenant Colonel) William Hudson, for example, represented Palestine.⁷ As a result, wavelengths became tools for colonial powers like Britain and France to use in protecting their own broadcasting interests, and broadcasting stations could be understood as vehicles for extending colonial control.

While Mandate officials claimed a wavelength for Palestine, support for a national radio station began building at home. Why did Palestinians of various backgrounds and political commitments support the idea of a broadcasting station? This article suggests that it reflects a general understanding of radio stations as symbols of sovereignty – that radio stations in the 1930s should be considered one of the twentieth century’s “signs of statehood.” Assessing nation-states and other politico-territorial entities for signs of statehood is an analytic approach used by historians, political scientists, journalists, and others. The signs used to scrutinize modern states have generally been internal, including such domestic concerns as: a head of state, a national anthem, a functional political system operative throughout the territory, one or more national languages, a functional national currency, manned borders, and immigration control. Establishing a radio station in Palestine was at once a visible sign of progress toward the mandatory goals, which the British government could claim to the League of Nations’ Mandates Commission in its annual report, but which Palestinians themselves could similarly use to argue for greater autonomy or independence. While rarely phrased in such stark terms, this contrast should serve as a useful reminder of just how powerful radio broadcasting – in its content and as a symbol – was in this period.

Establishing the Palestine Broadcasting Station

Although the British home government supported Palestine’s right to a wavelength, it did not take an active role in planning the anticipated broadcasting station. Mandate government officials drove the creation of the Palestine Broadcasting Service. After the Lucerne Conference, Postmaster General Hudson drew up a proposal for the station, laying out several of its ultimate characteristics. For example, he recommended that the station broadcast in the mandate’s three official languages –

Arabic, Hebrew, and English – excluding none, but allotting hours proportionally to the population groups. The government then established a broadcasting committee, whose members included Hudson, Jerusalem District Commissioner Michael (M. F.) Abcarius, Director of Education Humphrey Bowman, and Assistant Treasurer J. E. F. Campbell, to review Hudson’s proposal and estimate the costs involved. In other words, the station was government supported from the beginning, and its contours were shaped by British Mandate officials.

The Broadcasting Committee’s report, submitted in December 1933, envisioned a station modeled closely on the BBC: a non-profit station, funded by government subsidies and radio receiver license fees, with programming intended to improve as well as entertain the listening public. It presumed a ready interest among urbanites, particularly European Jews and British subjects resident in Palestine. It forecast rising Arab interest in radio, stemming from the inauguration of the Egyptian State Broadcasting Service in early 1934 and Lebanon’s planned Radio Orient. It anticipated that rural listening would increase as electrification made it possible to operate electric radios. To encourage Arab listening, the committee recommended that the station broadcast on medium wave, as medium-wave radio sets were less expensive than short wave.

The report proposed one hour’s broadcasting each day in each language, with Arabic in the earliest slot and English in the latest, from late afternoon to early evening. In the later evening, an “international program” would provide entertainment accessible to all, regardless of language. To minimize production costs, the committee suggested incorporating news and entertainment relays, including gramophone recordings, from the BBC – avoiding more expensive live broadcasts. The committee described recent improvements in recorded music as a crucial factor in making the station financially feasible. “The transmission of gramophone records has been so improved that the quality is now indistinguishable from direct production,” it reported. “Thus orchestral and vocal musical items and, in fact, whole programs are now largely produced from gramophone records,” which, it noted, “can be readily and cheaply obtained” from the BBC and similar sources. (The committee here appears to have meant European music and programs, as the BBC did not broadcast in Hebrew or in Arabic in the early 1930s.)⁸

While entertainment, even recorded, would seem to have been a pleasant subject, the Broadcasting Committee’s report closed on a solemn note. 1933 had been a relatively quiet year in Palestine, but the committee stressed that the station should not exacerbate existing tensions. “Controversial opinions and biased views should be eschewed, especially on political and religious subjects,” it stated, outlining what would become a policy of favoring entertainment broadcasts while limiting news broadcasts and prohibiting political discussions. Further, it suggested, radio broadcasting could play an important role in uplifting spirits around the region. “Much could be done to widen interests and to add to the gaiety of life, in order to counteract a morbid outlook which appears to be endemic in the Near East,” the committee stated. In its members’ views, radio’s importance in Palestine was not its ability to

convey news but its ability to add cheer.⁹

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the report was the recommendation to proceed with plans for the station, considering the small numbers of projected listeners. The report itself noted that only 2,313 radio licenses were issued in 1933, with 3,500 estimated for early 1935. Each license presumably served more than one person, and the number of licenses was increasing. However, the listening audience was still a tiny percentage of the population, estimated at just over one million in 1931.¹⁰ For most Palestinians, radio listening at this time had been an occasional if not rare activity, still very far from a habitual or regular practice. Palestine Broadcasting Service planned to make radio a much more important part of people's lives.

Press interest

News of the proposed station reached most Palestinians several months after the Broadcasting Committee's report, meeting an enthusiastic reception in the English-language, Jewish-owned *Palestine Post* in summer 1934, with a slower response from the Arabic papers. The major paper of the time, *Falastin*, was located in Jaffa and perhaps less focused on what at the time may have seemed one of many small government initiatives. *Al-Difa'*, which would later become the largest-circulating Arabic paper in Palestine, only started publishing in April 1934 and suffered a number of start-up challenges that may have detracted from its focus on new government projects. Often critical of the Mandate government, the *Post's* editorial staff waxed rhapsodic about its foresight in establishing a broadcasting station. "The Palestine Government in announcing the early establishment of a Broadcasting Service is conferring upon the country what may be a veritable boon . . . By introducing this very modern amenity, the Administration deserves the gratitude of the public."¹¹ It praised radio's capacity to bring news and entertainment from around the world, and to reach out to rural and urban inhabitants alike.

In late 1934, the *Palestine Post* published the first of a three-part series assessing the new station's structure, organization, and programming. (The Arabic papers began covering the station with smaller articles, although the numerous advertisements for radio sets make it clear that publishers were not unaware of their readers' interest in radio.) Staff editor E. D. Goitein's "This is Jerusalem Calling" focused on language, suggesting that the station broadcast Arabic lessons in Hebrew and vice versa and praising its potential to foster a standard, modern version of both languages.¹² His second article, "Free Expression of Opinion," asked that the Palestine station, like the BBC, be made an independent entity rather than a sub-department of the Post Office. He advocated freedom of expression, with limits on inflammatory language but not on the opinions expressed. He asked the station to "build up a picture of Palestine bigger than Jewish Palestine or Arab Palestine," each community including the other, envisioning the station as breaking down rather than reinforcing the separatism that other Mandate departments facilitated.¹³ Goitein's third piece, "A Well-Run



High Commissioner Arthur Wauchop delivered one of the opening speeches at the inauguration of the Palestine Broadcasting Service on March 30, 1936. *Source: Library of Congress.*

Broadcasting Station: Music, Drama, and Entertainment,” emphasized the importance of entertainment programming. He praised local Jewish classical music, theater, and music-hall groups, encouraging the use of local talent and of Arab ensembles. He endorsed the use of broadcasting for entertainment rather than pedagogic purposes, noting that listeners might turn their sets off – or tune in to another station – whenever the Palestine station grew didactic.¹⁴

While public figures like Goitein expressed their vision of the station, government preparations continued – with little evidence to suggest their incorporation of these visions. By mid-1935, preparations were well underway. In July, the government released a communiqué describing construction progress and outlining the station’s programming. The station would broadcast for five hours each evening, with programs in Arabic, English, and Hebrew, and entertainment intended for general interest provided by relays, gramophone recordings, and local productions. The communiqué highlighted Mandate officials’ assumption that community would follow language: Arabs would listen to the Arabic section, Jews would listen to the Hebrew section, and everyone would enjoy light classical music. With no public outcry, it appeared that Palestinian communities accepted the linkage of community, language, and listening hours. This was one of the station’s most lasting impacts on Mandate Palestine: the use of language to reinforce the idea of two separate communities, rather than to promote

the development two inter-penetrating and inter-connected communities.

The communiqué closed with a paragraph on “loud speakers for villages,” indicating the importance that the government assigned to rural broadcasting and its anxieties about Palestine’s rural populations:

His Excellency the High Commissioner is particularly anxious that the benefits of broadcasting shall be enjoyed by the rural, as well as by the urban population and is therefore arranging for the experimental installation of loud speakers of special design at 100 villages and settlements. The programs of the Jerusalem station will contain items (e.g., short talks on agriculture, education, health, etc.) intended to be of practical value to rural listeners.¹⁵

Practicality for rural listeners and entertainment for urbanites: government officials imagined rural and urban listeners as discrete communities. Palestine’s listening public was divided first by language and second by location. Like the language division, this reflected other assumptions: “rural” listeners were often described as peasants, uneducated and Arab. They were described in Mandate and British home officials’ correspondence as a potential source of danger if not carefully managed, educated, and domesticated – a task that the Palestine station could now undertake.

Meanwhile, public interest in radio listening appeared to be growing, with 5,900 radio licenses issued throughout the territory by mid-1935. The more Palestinians owned sets, the larger a potential audience the Palestine station would have. As the *Post* noted, this equated to 5.7 sets per 1,000 people (roughly one for every 175 inhabitants), on par with “Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Spain,” less than Great Britain’s 147.45 per 1,000 but far more than Egypt’s 0.73 per 1,000 ratio.¹⁶ Undaunted, the Egyptian State Broadcasting Service had recently begun operations; its success in attracting listeners lent credibility to the idea that a Palestine station could be successful. At the same time, Radio Cairo reminded Mandate officials that Palestinians with radio sets already had a number of broadcasting stations to choose from – some of which might be broadcasting news and opinions hostile to British interests. Tuning in to a Palestine station would mean not tuning in to a station broadcasting German, Italian, or other unfriendly views.

BBC connections

The hiring patterns of the Palestine station reinforced its British flavor. Several BBC administrators were seconded to Palestine to see the station through its early stages. The most prominent was R. A. “Tony” Rendall, BBC West Regional Programme Director, who was named PBS Director in September 1935.¹⁷ The BBC provided the station with administrative staff through the late 1930s; not until the early 1940s was the station director chosen in-country. Stephen Fry, who came from BBC Outside Broadcasts, succeeded Rendall as Director, and was replaced by Crawford McNair,

Deputy Conductor of the BBC Northern Orchestra, in 1938. (McNair served until October 1941, when wartime restrictions changed the PBS' administrative structure.)¹⁸

Most of these "BBC men" were relatively young and not yet at the peak of their careers, making a stint in Palestine perhaps more appealing. That they were seconded rather than hired outright suggests the degree of BBC involvement in the new station: indirect but substantial. Seconded staffers brought a BBC sensibility to Palestine, while PBS administrative staff members were also sent to the BBC for training during summer holidays.¹⁹ Yet it is not entirely clear from extant station documents that BBC personnel were able to successfully execute their own vision for the station. Mandate government documents suggest a general dissatisfaction with Fry and McNair in particular – one supported by the often-critical tone that local newspapers took when discussing the station. The BBC in the 1930s enjoyed a much greater degree of independence from the British government than the PBS did from the Mandate government, which may have made the situation more difficult for BBC personnel working at the PBS.

British staffers filled the station's top administrative posts; there was no discussion of Palestinians of any background serving as Director or Deputy Director. However, the station did make numerous local hires at the section head level and below. Evidence from memoirs and newspapers suggests that the selection of local Palestinians to head the Arabic, Hebrew, and Music sections was a delicate process. Mandate government officials wanted section heads of sufficient stature to lend credibility to the broadcasting station; at the same time, officials feared that well-known figures would use the station for their own purposes. In December, Eliezer Lubrani and Karl Salomon, recently arrived from Germany, were hired as sub-directors of the Hebrew and Music sections, respectively;²⁰ the well-known poet Ibrahim Tuqan was hired to head the Arabic section in mid-February 1936.²¹ Lubrani had worked as an editor at the Hebrew-language *Davar*; Salomon was a well-respected conductor. Only Tuqan had a reputation as a nationalist agitator and, like many Palestinian men of his generation, had an arrest record.

Early days on air

At the inaugural broadcast of the Palestine Broadcasting Service in March 1936, High Commissioner Wauchop included one further caveat in his speech. "The Broadcasting Service in Palestine will not be concerned with politics," he stated. "Its main object will be the spread of knowledge and culture," he continued, adding: "nor, I can assure you, will the claims of religion be neglected."²² While Wauchop mentioned only two groups – farmers and music lovers – in his description of those who might benefit from the station's programming, here he outlined the station's primary features: an avoidance of politics; a focus on education and entertainment; and a tempered willingness to respect the "claims" of religion. These features affected programming in various ways. Practically speaking, the broadcasting day consisted

of parallel programming, divided by language. Each included two news broadcasts, with music, theatrical works, educational talks (“The History of the Arabic Printing Press,” and “Folk Culture Among Yemeni Jews,” to cite two examples), children’s hours, women’s programs, and the occasional scriptural reading. Most programs lasted either 15 or 30 minutes, with language programming in blocks – two Arabic programs followed by two Hebrew programs, for example. The Arabic section received the most on-air time, with the Hebrew section receiving slightly less and the English section roughly half the on-air hours allotted the other sections.

The opening of the Palestine Broadcasting Service marked a tremendous development for Palestine. Yet beneath the welcoming words and visions of progress lurked tremendous potential for controversy. Within weeks, the station was caught up in a larger crisis: the beginning of the three-year Arab revolt.

The PBS and the General Strike

Tensions between Palestinian Arabs and Zionists had been escalating throughout 1935, forming a two- and three-way field of contestation with British authorities. In mid-April 1936, followers of Izz al-Din al-Qassam, a charismatic Syrian fighter killed in late 1935 during a shoot-out with British soldiers, ambushed a group of Palestinian Jews near Tulkarm. On April 19, nationalist uprisings broke out in Jaffa – 25 miles southeast of Tulkarm – and, despite British attempts at containment, soon spread, with leadership committees forming in Jaffa and other cities. On April 24, the Jaffan committee called for a general strike – the closure of shops and businesses to be observed across all industries, with the goal of paralyzing Palestine’s economy. While the strike caught most Palestinian elites – the historic leadership class – off guard, Grand Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husseini moved to found the Arab Higher Committee, claiming control over the revolt and ensnaring it in many of the factional power-struggles characteristic of Palestinian elite politics.

The general strike began three years of uprisings and “disturbances” in urban and rural areas alike – known to history as the Arab Revolt.²³ The strike itself lasted until mid-October, ended by a combination of heavy British military suppression and the diplomacy of a Saudi, Egyptian, Iraqi, Jordanian, and Yemeni delegation.²⁴ Yet as the Mandate government reneged on negotiated promises and ordinary Palestinians pushed the leadership to focus on the British rather than the Zionists, non-urban Palestine became the site of a general armed revolt. With the strike and boycott together hurting the Arab economy, guerilla fighting throughout Palestine, and great animosity towards the Mandate government expressed by Jewish and Arab Palestinians, it was not an auspicious time for a government broadcasting station to begin broadcasts.

Or was it? The Permanent Mandates Commission met for its annual examination of the mandatory progress reports in May 1936, one month into the strike.²⁵ During this meeting, the British representative argued that the PBS was providing a vital and

appreciated public service by providing reliable information during the chaos. “Since the disturbances, regular use has been made of the Broadcasting Service to broadcast all official communiqués, and different sections of the population are reported to have expressed appreciation of this method of issuing authoritative statements of fact,” he said.²⁶ Back in Palestine, a Mandate government committee in October praised the PBS and described it as offering political benefits during crises. “The political value to Government of a well-established service in time of crisis as well as in times of normal development has been made abundantly clear,” the report stated.²⁷ The radio could reach people when newspapers and communiqués, blocked by road closures or guerilla warfare, could not. And when it did, it provided them with the government’s point of view.

The PBS’ broadcasts during the general strike reflected the possibilities and limitations of a government station in this situation. On the one hand, the Mandate government tightly restricted news broadcasts during this period, and Mandate officials criticized the BBC Arabic service for broadcasting news of violence and government reprisals. On the other hand, the government tried to use the station to reach out to listeners and calm the situation. High Commissioner Wauchope himself made several broadcasts in 1936. The *Palestine Post* described his July broadcast as “obviously directed to the villages,” with Arabic translation, and noted: “though he was addressing peasants, and addressing them over the heads of a leadership which had lost the way, there was no condescension.”²⁸ Yet in speaking to Arab “peasants,” Wauchope signaled that the Mandate government had given up on the possibility of reaching an accord with the Palestinian leadership. He had previously used the PBS to address them; now, the newspaper suggested, Wauchope “tried to translate the disaster into terms which would bring the damage home to the peasant,” mentioning higher taxes and ruined harvests.²⁹ As he had mentioned during the station’s inauguration, Wauchope continued to hope that the PBS could influence Palestine’s rural Arab population.

Conclusion

Wauchope’s broadcasts appear to have done little to persuade rural Palestinians to lay down their arms; what persuaded them was three years of increasingly severe British military repression. Yet the general strike marked a definitive moment in the early history of the Palestine Broadcasting Service. The station could have fallen into irrelevance or seen its budget re-appropriated for military exercises. Instead, it continued broadcasting despite many challenges – logistical, technical, political, and more. Surviving the Arab revolt allowed the PBS to become a crucial institution and a crucible in which ideas of national and cultural identity, religious affiliation, and rural-urban distinctions were forged.

The story of the PBS continued through the end of the Palestine mandate, yet its importance has been little appreciated in subsequent scholarship. As a Mandate

government radio station, the story of the PBS is that of a semi-colonial institution. But it is also the story of a station whose broadcasts in mandate Palestine produced an important set of social effects. These effects impacted the development of the Arab community both internally and in its relationships with the Mandate state and the Zionist community. Paying more attention to the PBS helps reframe the narrative of the Palestinian mandate, placing debates about political determination, cultural identity, religious practice, and gender relations in the context of the most powerful mass medium of the interwar era.

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Endnotes

- 1 “Palestine Broadcasting Begun,” *Palestine Post*, March 31, 1936, 8. All further quotations from Wauchope’s speech are taken from this source.
- 2 The Berne-based International Broadcasting Union (Union Internationale de la Radiodiffusion), which held several regulatory conferences in the 1920s and 1930s, assigned frequencies. See *Documents de la conférence européenne des radiocommunications Lucerne* (Berne: Bureau International de l’Union Télégraphique, 1933).
- 3 This transition towards state-owned radio stations largely excluded the United States, whose radio broadcasting policies developed along a different trajectory. Canada and the Latin American states, however, did develop extensive and deeply rooted state broadcasting systems. See for example Joy Elizabeth Hayes’ *Radio Nation: Communication, Popular Culture, and Nationalism in Mexico: 1920-1950* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000).
- 4 The 1920s saw the establishment of small, one-man stations all over the world – not only in Europe and the United States. Most broadcast musical recordings or news and commentary provided by their operators, with limited broadcasting hours. While numerous, they were often short-lived. Of the more than one hundred amateur stations operating in Egypt during the 1920s, for example, most had ceased broadcasting by 1930, leaving space for the Egyptian State Broadcasting Service to begin broadcasting in 1934. See Douglas Boyd, *Egyptian Radio: Tool of Political and National Development* (Lexington, KY: Association for Education in Journalism, 1977), 3.
- 5 According to Derek Penslar, Abramovitch obtained his license after trying for eight years (1926-1934) with the government either ignoring or rejecting his request. Derek Penslar, “Transmitting Jewish Culture: Radio in Israel,” *Jewish Social Studies* 10.1 (2003): 1-29. The Yishuv and the British mandate government clashed throughout the mandate over the issue of short-wave broadcasting to Jewish communities in Europe, which the Zionist leadership hoped – and the government feared – would draw larger numbers of Jewish immigrants.
- 6 For the telegraph’s impact on the Ottoman Empire, see Roderic Davison, “The Effect of the Telegraph on the Conduct of Ottoman Foreign Relations,” in *Decision-Making and Change in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Ceasar Farah (Kirkville, MO: Thomas Jefferson University Press at Northeast Missouri State University, 1993), and Eric Rogan, “Instant Communication: the Impact of Telegraph Communications at the Syrian Periphery,” in *The Syrian Land: Processes of integration and fragmentation: Bilād al-Shām from the 18th to the 20th century*, ed. Thomas Philipp and Birgit Schäßler (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1998). For the impact of the telegraph on European foreign policy, see Stephen Kern, *The Culture*

- of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).
- 7 William Hudson to the President of the Radiocommunications Conference, May 26, 1933. *Documents de la conférence européenne des radiocommunications Lucerne, Mai-Juin 1933*, p. 355.
 - 8 Report of Broadcasting Committee, December 23, 1933, CO/733/266/7.
 - 9 Report of Broadcasting Committee, December 23, 1933, CO/733/266/7.
 - 10 The 1931 census gave the total population at 1,033,314. See Edward Hagopian and A. B. Zahlan, "Palestine's Arab Population: the Demography of the Palestinians," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 3, no. 4 (Summer 1974), 32-73.
 - 11 "Harnessing the Air," *Palestine Post*, July 5, 1934, 2. The *Post* credited the original idea of a Palestine broadcasting station to C. F. Strickland and an unnamed "Jewish journalist" who had floated the idea in 1925.
 - 12 E. David Goitein, "This is Jerusalem Calling: Desiderata for a Palestine Broadcasting Corporation," *Palestine Post*, December 28, 1934, 5.
 - 13 E. David Goitein, "Free Expression of Opinion: Desiderata for a Palestine Broadcasting Corporation," *Palestine Post*, January 6, 1935, 3.
 - 14 E. David Gotein, "A Well-Run Broadcasting Station: Music, Drama, and Entertainment," *Palestine Post*, January 9, 1935, 3.
 - 15 "Broadcasting Station Opening in November: Government Announces Program Schedule," communiqué published in the *Palestine Post*, July 7, 1935, 1.
 - 16 "Palestine is on the Air: What the New Broadcasting Service Will Do," *Palestine Post*, July 12, 1935, 3. Given Egypt's much larger population (roughly 14.5 million), the low ratio still translated into roughly 10,600 radio receiver licenses.
 - 17 See "BBC Officer for Palestine/Adviser on Program Broadcasts," *Palestine Post*, September 4, 1935, 1. Rendall's secondment was intended to be temporary.
 - 18 See "Mr. C.B. McNair, PBS Director," *Palestine Post*, January 19, 1939, 6, and Colonial Office internal memo dated 6.16.41, CO 733/442/2.
 - 19 Arabic section staff members were also sent to Cairo for training. 'Azmi Nashashibi traveled to Cairo to study the station's operations after World War II.
 - 20 "Sub-Directors Chosen for Radio Station," *Palestine Post*, December 24, 1935, 5.
 - 21 "Appointment to the Broadcasting Service," *Palestine Post*, February 14, 1936, 8.
 - 22 "'Jerusalem Calling' in English, Arabic, Hebrew: Palestine Broadcasting Began: High Commissioner Outlines Aims of PBS," *Palestine Post*, March 31, 1936, 1. *Falastin* also reported approvingly on the station's inaugural broadcast, but its brief article focused almost exclusively on the Arabic broadcasts.
 - 23 For a thoughtful, oral history-based anthropology of this period, see Ted Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt: the 1936-1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003). For an analysis of the long-term impact of the general strike and the revolt on the Palestinian nationalist movement, see Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).
 - 24 See for example "The Condition of Palestine on the Radio: Intercession of Arab Monarchs and Martial Law," *Falastin*, October 1, 1936, 1. The negotiations ended the general strike, which facilitated the uprisings' subsequent diffusion through the countryside.
 - 25 The Permanent Mandates Commission was the League of Nations body charged with overseeing the progress of all mandate territories, which it did primarily by requiring mandate powers to submit annual reports and to participate in annual review meetings.
 - 26 League of Nations Permanent Mandates Commission Minutes of the 29th Session, Geneva, May 27 - June 12, 1936, Report of the Commission to the Council, *League of Nations Publications VI.A, Mandates 1936*, p. 62.
 - 27 *Report of the Committee on the Development of the Palestine Broadcasting Service*, Government of Palestine, October 20, 1936, p. 3. The ISA holds a copy of this report in its PPI (Palestine Publications Index) files (no number).
 - 28 "Man to Man," *Palestine Post*, July 6, 1936, 6.
 - 29 "Man to Man," *Palestine Post*, July 6, 1936, 6.