

Fair Competition? The Arab Fair in Mid-1930s Palestine

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Abstract

This article explores the Arab Fair that took place in Jerusalem in 1933 and in 1934 from the economic and political perspectives. It foregrounds the reasons and results of the absence of a continuously held international trade fair by Arabs in Palestine within the schema of Mandatory Palestine in particular and of the post-Ottoman Balkans and Middle East in general. Although it was successful in bringing businesspeople from various parts of the Arab World together, the lack of official support, broad participation, international recognition, and promotional efforts abroad, as well as strong Zionist propaganda campaigns against it, adversely affected the progress of the Arab Fair, and it did not take place after 1934. Unlike most other post-Ottoman states where collaboration between business groups and political elites gave rise to international fairs in the interwar period, Palestinian Arabs could not enjoy any official endorsement from the British to organize and sustain such a business gathering. In contrast with the Arab Fair, the Levant Fair in Tel Aviv in the same period grew in size and popularity and evolved into an international spectacle thanks to the contribution of Zionist leaders, enterprises, business associations, and journalists in and outside Palestine and the considerable support of the British and other colonial governments.

Keywords

Mandatory Palestine; Arab Fair; Levant Fair; Zionism; pan-Arabism; British Mandate; trade fairs; chambers of commerce; colonialism.

This article navigates the tensions surrounding transnational commercial gatherings in interwar Palestine by investigating the Arab Fair, held in Jerusalem in 1933 and 1934, in relation to the Zionist-organized Levant Fair. As with many other aspects of life, trade fairs reveal the multi-layered and complicated economic situation in interwar Palestine. The origins of the Arab Fair lay in the rivalry between Arab and Jewish national representations of “Palestine” in trade fairs. Arab producers participated in Zionist-organized exhibitions and fairs in the 1920s.¹ By 1932, Palestine’s Arabs – led by a call from members of the General Islamic Conference that had convened in Jerusalem in December 1931 – boycotted the Levant Fair: a manifestation of “passive resistance” that reflected the political discontent brewing in Palestine, exacerbated by the Great Depression.² This decision resonated with the press, and nationalist newspapers called on all “honorable” Arabs to boycott the fair and warned Arab businesses against taking part in it.³ Trade fairs continued to reflect the tension between Zionists and Arab nationalists in Palestine until the outbreak of the Great Revolt in 1936, which made the organization of a trade fair by either group impossible.

Scholars have displayed a lively interest in the Arab Fair in recent years. Nadi Abusaada’s comprehensive account of the little-understood Arab Fair, based on several Palestinian periodicals, explained its organization and operation in 1933.⁴ Nisa Ari compared the Levant and Arab fairs from artistic and cultural perspectives.⁵ Indeed, even if the Arab Fair was not successful from an economic or political perspective, it could be considered an achievement from an artistic viewpoint.⁶ Yet, the Arab Fair – like the Levant Fair – was first and foremost an economic effort, whose patrons were businesspeople seeking close connections to foreign capitalist classes and powers. Although, as will be discussed below, the cultural and propaganda aspects of these fairs cannot be divorced from their economic aims, this article centers on the economic dimensions of these fairs, situating them within colonial, regional, and global economic relations.

Beyond comparing the Arab and Levant fairs, this article also places them in a transnational and regional context. Fairs held throughout the Balkans and Middle East were seen as economic engines, helping cities grow economically, generating revenues for businesses, and providing opportunities for local and foreign enterprises to connect and build relationships. Beyond countering the Zionist-organized Levant Fair and displaying Palestinian Arabs’ productivity, this would have been the economic vision of the Arab Fair’s organizers: to build a thriving national economy that would put Jerusalem on the region’s economic map. The discontinuation of the Arab Fair thus speaks to the economic future foreclosed by the British Mandate and, eventually, the Nakba.

The Economy of Trade Fairs

Historically, exhibitions and fairs in the United Kingdom and the United States were organized by private entrepreneurs, whereas fairs in continental Europe were arranged by a partnership of public and private enterprises.⁷ In the first model, although there was a close collaboration between fair managers and government authorities, especially

to facilitate foreign participation, government intervention in administrative issues was minimal. In the second model, local and national governments bore the fairs' financial burden, such as the costs of construction, operation, electricity, publicity, and other incidental costs. Taking place under British rule, both the Arab and Levant fairs followed the first model.⁸ Their patrons sought to raise money by forming chartered corporations and selling shares in them. In the absence of official financial backing and the possibility of compensation for any loss by local and central governments, managers sought to profit by renting pavilions to local and foreign enterprises and selling tickets to visitors. If attendance measured up to organizers' expectations and revenue exceeded expenses, the fair became a financial success and its organizers had sufficient money to pay employees and shareholders and accumulate resources to continue these meetings.

The Arab Fair was less successful than the Levant Fair in terms of participation and longevity, with significantly fewer visitors, exhibitors, and foreign countries represented. Attendance in the Levant Fair even in 1924 (eighteen thousand visitors) was higher than that in the Arab Fair in 1934.⁹ The Levant Fair had more space for exhibits and attractions. Due to domestic and foreign demand, the size of the Levant Fair's exhibition area grew over time, from 25,000 square meters in 1929 to 130,000 square meters in 1936.¹⁰ In 1933, the organizers of the Arab Fair had initially wanted to hold it in Jaffa.¹¹ After consideration, however, they decided that it was "impossible" to hold the fair in Jaffa and settled for renting a single floor in Jerusalem's Palace Hotel instead.¹² Whereas exhibitors had their own pavilions and stands at the Levant Fair, firms displayed their products collectively at the Arab Fair. The international level of the Arab Fair likewise failed to meet that of its counterpart. Even in 1936 when the Great Revolt curtailed the number of foreign attendees, the Levant Fair was among the Middle East's leading international commercial meetings.¹³ The international scope of the Arab Fair, however, was very low. All these factors contributed to the business success of the Levant Fair, strengthening its draw to foreign firms and investors.

Table 1. Comparison of the Levant Fair and the Arab Fair, 1934

Criteria	Levant Fair	Arab Fair
Exhibitors	2,821	182
Visitors	600,000	13,000
Exhibit area	100,000 m ²	Palace Hotel
Foreign countries represented	31	5

A major reason for the difference in commercial success between the two fairs can be seen in the contribution of business associations and groups. The Palestine Exhibitions and Fairs Corporation, the organizer of the Levant Fair, was an international enterprise that pooled the capital of Jewish enterprises from Europe, Palestine, and the United States. By 1926, the company had an authorized capital of one million

dollars.¹⁴ The company increased its capital over time with the involvement of companies, cooperatives, and industrialists from different parts of the world.¹⁵ In the 1930s, the organizing committee of the Levant Fair began to include more individuals and enterprises, such as chambers of commerce, leading banks, and other economic bodies based in Palestine and abroad.¹⁶ The Arab Fair, meanwhile, was organized by a corporation whose capital was five thousand pounds (somewhere between fifteen and twenty-five thousand U.S. dollars in 1933, depending on the month), only £1,825 of which was fully paid.¹⁷ This illuminates the relative collective power of Arab and Jewish private enterprises, a discrepancy that becomes clearer when looking at the institutional bases of the fairs.

The Levant Fair brought together an increasing number of Jewish business associations. For example, the vice presidents of the organizing committee included the general managers of Anglo-Palestine and Barclays Banks, as well as presidents of the Tel Aviv and Jaffa Chamber of Commerce, the Palestine Manufacturers' Association, and the Jaffa Citrus Exchange.¹⁸ The Levant Fair also facilitated collaboration among various enterprises and organizations. For instance, the Anglo-Palestine Bank and the Tel Aviv Chamber of Commerce worked together to form a Special Information Center for Trade and Industry where foreign spectators could make commercial inquiries.¹⁹ Other Jewish chambers of commerce took active parts and opened pavilions that showcased the industrial and trade capabilities of their respective members.²⁰

Chambers of commerce had been reorganized soon after Britain established colonial rule in Palestine²¹ to serve as advisory committees for colonial authorities in "all matters of trade and commerce."²² Although membership was open to any businessperson, the representatives of British firms, Zionist-owned joint-stock companies, and members of Arab notable families dominated these associations. After the Jaffa riots in 1921, Arab and Jewish businesspeople in Palestine began to form separate chambers.²³ The 1929 uprisings further divided business groups along ethnoreligious lines. By 1931, the Jerusalem Chamber of Commerce was the only chamber in Palestine composed of different nationalities and ethnicities.²⁴ Jewish chambers advanced the interests of their members by serving as an institutional connection between economic elites and colonial authorities.²⁵

In contrast, the Arab Fair received only limited support from the Jerusalem Chamber of Commerce. Although the Arab members of the chamber supported the Arab Fair, British businesspeople and firms dominated this chamber's administration.²⁶ Indeed, Edgar Shelley, the president of the Jerusalem Chamber of Commerce, was a member of the organizing committee of the Levant Fair, and A. P. S. Clark, the Jerusalem chamber's vice president, was also a vice president of the Levant Fair organizing committee. Even though the Arab press urged the Jerusalem chamber to boycott the Levant Fair, it did not take any such action.²⁷ Instead, most foreign banks and members left the chamber in protest of the Arab boycott of Jewish businesses in 1936.²⁸ This led to the establishment by Arab merchants of their own chamber of commerce in Jerusalem under the presidency of Ahmed Hilmi Pasha.²⁹ This chamber worked with other Arab chambers of commerce in 'Akka, Gaza, Haifa, Jaffa, Nablus, and Nazareth,

holding conferences to facilitate connections between Arab businesspeople within and outside Palestine and presenting their concerns to the British high commissioner, but with little effect.³⁰ Thus, Arab business associations lacked the political power to continue the Arab Fair throughout the Mandate.

Official Support

One major reason why the Arab Fair ceased to operate was the absence of official support. Despite claims that the government “supported” both the Arab and Levant fairs, a close assessment of the historical record presents a remarkably different picture.³¹ As this section reveals, the British authorities clearly favored Jewish enterprises and the Levant Fair and made only negligible contributions to the Arab Fair.

The British endorsement of the Levant Fair was vital to its success and Meir Dizengoff, the mayor of Tel Aviv, played a key intermediary role between the fair and the British. As a politician, businessperson, shareholder of the fair company, and head of the fair committee, Dizengoff devoted considerable energy to obtaining official support for this meeting, especially after his reelection as mayor in 1927.³² He actively interacted with colonial authorities in Palestine and went to London to meet British politicians and businesspeople and secure the participation of British firms.³³ Dizengoff’s efforts were not fruitless: from its emergence in 1922 to its final stage in 1936, the Levant Fair was held under the patronage of the high commissioner of Palestine. High Commissioner Arthur Wauchope laid the cornerstone of the new fairground in 1933, and opened the fair in 1934 with “official state ceremonies” that featured “all the heads of Palestine Government Departments.”³⁴ British official involvement was not only ceremonial: Wauchope and other colonial authorities held frequent meetings with the fair committee and paid visits to the exhibition area.³⁵

Wauchope’s support and actions were more than a symbolic gesture. Although the Levant Fair was a private enterprise, the Palestine government officially participated in the fair in the 1930s.³⁶ The scope of official involvement increased yearly, raising revenue for the fair organizers.³⁷ The officially endorsed Palestine pavilion featured hundreds of exhibits from a variety of official and semi-official institutions and organizations, including: the Department of Customs, Excise, and Trade; the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries; the Department of Police and Prisons; the Department of Posts and Telegraphs; the Palestine Railways; and Haifa Harbor.³⁸

Colonial authorities abroad, meanwhile, enthusiastically supported the Levant Fair. Pro-Zionist British politicians such as Barnett Janner and Robert Morgan put pressure on the British government to officially take part in the Levant Fair, increase the Palestine government’s participation, and assist the organizers of the fair.³⁹ Philip Cunliffe-Lister (secretary of state for the colonies), Walter Runciman (president of the Board of Trade), and John Colville (secretary of the Overseas Trade Department) became honorary presidents of the fair in 1934.⁴⁰ British officials who could not attend the fair in person delivered speeches in England and sent congratulatory messages to

the organizing committee that were broadcast to the British public via the BBC and to thousands of attendees in Tel Aviv.⁴¹

Undoubtedly, the self-interest of British politicians and firms guided policy toward trade fairs in Palestine. By transferring scores of exhibits, firms, and visitors to the Levant Fair, the British not only realized the ambitious dreams of the Zionist leadership but significantly contributed to the business success of this spectacle. With the support of their government, a large number of British firms participated in the Levant Fair and erected a “General British” pavilion after it became an international meeting in 1929.⁴² The Federation of British Industries and other business associations sponsored the pavilion, which included goods from British firms that operated in Palestine, the rest of the Middle East, and Europe.⁴³ In his opening speech in 1936, High Commissioner Wauchope stated: “The British Pavilion and the Palestine Government Pavilion stand as symbols of the important economic connections between Palestine and Great Britain.”⁴⁴ Although the fair was not a British colonial but a Yishuv-led initiative, the British saw the fair as beneficial in allowing colonial capital to penetrate into new markets. Unsurprisingly, British support pleased the Levant Fair organizing committee.⁴⁵ The alignment of the Levant Fair with colonial expansion, whether in the form of British business expansion in the region or in articulating Jewish settlement “as a modern Western colonial project in the East,” was thus a win-win situation for British colonialism and the Yishuv.

Like the Levant Fair, the Arab Fair was the result of a close and complex collaboration between businesspeople and politicians. The Istiqlal Party in particular played a key role in the Arab Fair’s formation.⁴⁶ In stark contrast to the Levant Fair, however, there were virtually no British-sponsored incentives for the Arab Fair. High Commissioner Wauchope and Private Secretary Christopher Gilbert Eastwood, together with other colonial officials, visited the Arab Fair in 1933, but neither news of their visit nor speeches of Arab leaders were broadcast in England or covered by the British press.⁴⁷ According to the British, the lack of official support was due to the exclusion of Jews from the Arab Fair. In 1934, the British consented to cooperate with Arabs on the Arab Fair on the condition that Jews would be invited.

The Arab press criticized the British for their discrimination, since their endorsement of the Levant Fair was unconditional.⁴⁸ In *International Affairs* in 1936, Emile Ghuri, general secretary of the Palestinian Arab Party, called out the double standard of British policy toward the competing trade fairs:

The Arabs thought of having an exhibition in Jerusalem. We had one in 1933 and one in 1934. We pleaded for government help. The Government gave us a deaf ear, as we say in Arabic. The Jews had an exhibition in Tel-Aviv, and that was more than helped by the British Government, not only by the British Government in Palestine but here also.⁴⁹

Further, the Arab press argued that the British had not only failed to facilitate, but had actually attempted to thwart the Arab Fair. According to Iraqi newspapers, the British Consul in Iraq did not grant visas to Iraqi journalists who wished to travel to

Jerusalem “apparently by instructions of the British government.”⁵⁰ The Jerusalem-based newspaper *al-Jami‘a al-‘Arabiyya* published an editorial that derided the British government and requested an official explanation for the refusal of visas.⁵¹

Although the British practically played no role in the organization and operation of the Arab Fair, they took credit for it in the League of Nations as if they had given solid support to Arabs.⁵² The hypocrisy here echoed British and international claims to “neutrality” despite the structural marginalization of Palestine’s Arabs and support for Zionism. As Michael Provence has observed, neither the British nor the League of Nations officially recognized the Palestinian Arab Congress and its product, the Arab Executive, whereas they assigned an official representation to the Zionist Executive (later the Jewish Agency).⁵³ The Levant Fair’s success thus mirrored and was legitimized by the League of Nations’ mandate system: while Zionists used the Levant Fair to cement their relations with colonial authorities, the Arab Fair only further alienated Palestine’s Arabs from the British.

International Participation

International participation was vital to the economic success of trade fairs because the arrival of buyers and sellers from other countries increased the profits of fair organizers and facilitated mercantile activity between host cities and foreign markets. Foreign enterprises made purchases from local producers who mailed their goods to different countries during and after the fair.⁵⁴ The organizing committee of the Levant Fair advertised for, and solicited, the participation of foreign governments and business associations to gain a larger international presence.⁵⁵ As a result, foreign exhibits formed the preponderant feature of the fair, opening up new markets and forging durable partnerships for Jewish entrepreneurs throughout the 1930s (see table 2).

Table 2. Geographical Origins of Firms Participating in the 1936 Levant Fair⁵⁶

Country	# of Firms	Country	# of Firms	Country	# of Firms
Palestine	698	Romania	78	Finland	15
England	180	Switzerland	64	Lebanon	9
Czechoslovakia	179	Holland	60	Sweden	8
United States	135	Norway	43	Egypt	6
Belgium	130	Austria	40	Latvia	6
France	122	Hungary	28	Lithuania	5
Poland	118	Yugoslavia	26	Estonia	4
Turkey	86	Cyprus	20	Canada	4
Bulgaria	78	Denmark	16	Others	21
Total					2,179

By contrast, international participation in the Arab Fair was very low. By definition, it was an “Arab” meeting. The fair administration did not invite Jews and Jewish exhibits were ineligible for the fair.⁵⁷ While the Levant Fair pulled exhibitors and visitors from a much wider area, almost all of the companies with stalls at the Arab Fair were from the Arab Middle East. The key nexus between the Arab Fair and the outside world was pan-Arabism. The fair administration sent a guide of the exhibition to Arab newspapers that included the history of Arab countries.⁵⁸ Arab countries prepared for the fair by forming committees, which created forums for dialogue for businesspeople and politicians from different parts of the Arab World.⁵⁹ There were about 150 firms among exhibitors from Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, and Trans-Jordan in 1933.⁶⁰ The number of enterprises only rose to 182 the next year.⁶¹ There were only two non-Arab exhibitors: Karakashian and the German Schneller Orphanage. All brochures, captions, and catalogs were in Arabic, which generated little publicity for potential foreign customers; at the Levant Fair, all captions, speeches, and publications were given in Arabic, English, and Hebrew, which made the comprehension of content by foreign audiences easier. All these factors hampered international attendance at the Arab Fair. Further, the economic development of participant countries in each fair differed markedly. In addition to Zionist enterprises, non-Jewish industrialists from economically developed countries outside the Middle East hired pavilions in Tel Aviv and sent samples to be displayed. The participation of the nascent industries of Arab countries could not render the Arab Fair a success.

The degree of official Arab support for the Arab Fair varied considerably. Syrian businesspeople and politicians were most visible. Several leaders of the National Bloc, including Shukri al-Quwatli and Jamil Mardam Bey, a former minister of finance and a future prime minister of Syria, respectively, came to the inauguration ceremonies.⁶² The aspirations of Syrian attendees were not only political but also economic. The Syrian business community felt threatened by the rise of Zionist enterprises and the growth of the port of Haifa at the expense of that of Beirut in the 1930s.⁶³ The competition from Jewish textile sectors in Palestine and the smuggling of Jewish-produced goods into Syria further jeopardized the interests of Syrian industrialists.⁶⁴

Other countries showed less support. In 1933, Iraq did not officially take part in the Arab Fair due to “lack of time.”⁶⁵ Ibn Sa‘ud, the king of Saudi Arabia, and his sons sent a letter and two books to the organizers of the fair, wishing them success and promising to encourage participation from Hijaz.⁶⁶ The state-controlled Saudi newspaper *Sawt al-Hijaz* promoted both Arab fairs.⁶⁷ There was, however, no visible Saudi participation at the fair itself. In 1933, Egypt officially participated in the Arab Fair and the Egyptian Department of Commerce and Industry sent Egyptian products to Jerusalem.⁶⁸ Its participation, however, was private and smaller in scale in 1934. Economic and political elites from other Arab countries supported the Arab Fair, albeit in different ways and to different degrees. Nevertheless, their efforts were not enough to help it match the splendor and influence of the Levant Fair, nor to sustain it after 1934.

The Arab leadership and press in Palestine not only encouraged other Arab countries to participate in the Arab Fair, but also called on Arab governments and businesspeople not to attend the Levant Fair.⁶⁹ Outside Palestine, this call was only faintly heard. Iraq participated in the Levant Fair in the early 1930s.⁷⁰ When Haifa-based *al-Karmal* heard that the Egyptian government was planning to attend the Levant Fair in 1932, it called Egyptian Prime Minister Isma‘il Sidqi Pasha a “dictator.”⁷¹ This did not stop him from coming to the opening of the fair, nor did such protests prevent Egypt from officially participating in 1934.⁷² While Palestinian Arab exhibitors and visitors opted out, a number of commercial visitors from Egypt and Syria were present at the fair in 1936.⁷³ British colonial economic and political influence in these countries helps explain their reluctance to abstain from the Zionist-led and British-supported Levant Fair.

Outside the British sphere of influence, Lebanon exemplified the limits of the Arab call to boycott the Levant Fair. From the 1920s, Lebanese officials attended the fair and, unlike the press in other Arab countries, Lebanese newspapers promoted the benefits of Lebanese participation.⁷⁴ In 1934, the Lebanese government granted free visas to any Lebanese merchant who wished to display their items at the Levant Fair.⁷⁵ More strikingly, in 1936, when the other Arab governments did not take official part in the Levant Fair and Arab nationalist papers in Lebanon protested it, the Lebanese government sent a collective display to the fair.⁷⁶ The Lebanese president intended to travel to Tel Aviv for the inauguration of the fair but had to cancel his visit because of the outbreak of the Great Revolt.⁷⁷ Lebanon’s official attitude to trade fairs in Palestine was in part related to the disinterest of many Lebanese Christians in the idea of Arab unity.⁷⁸ Moreover, Jewish and non-Jewish merchants in Lebanon had close commercial relations with Jewish producers in Palestine and sought to formalize ties with the Yishuv in this period.⁷⁹ By 1938, Palestine became the “most important export market” of Lebanon.⁸⁰

The Battle of Propaganda

Trade fairs became a propaganda battlefield between Arabs and Jews in Palestine and abroad. Zionists used the Levant Fair as a media opportunity to highlight the achievement of Jewish colonization.⁸¹ The battle of propaganda intensified after the inauguration of the Arab Fair. Although the Arab Fair served as a better demonstration of Arab producers’ role in the national economy, Zionist journalists used the exclusion of Jews from it as a propaganda tool.⁸² They claimed that the exclusion of non-Arab participants from it gave rise to a “poor” representation of Palestine.⁸³ When *Filastin* criticized Jewish journalists for not devoting space to the Arab Fair in their columns, the latter replied hastily.⁸⁴ The *Palestine Post* sarcastically asked its Arabic counterpart how Jews could write about an event to which they were not invited.⁸⁵ At the same time, the Zionist press claimed that the Arab boycott of the Levant Fair did not hold back the international progress on display there, and reported the arrival of hundreds of Arab visitors from Palestine and surrounding countries despite the boycott.⁸⁶

Arabs faced a struggle regarding Western media outlets, which attracted a far broader audience than local periodicals and publications in the Middle East. Speeches that glorified the Levant Fair were broadcast in several European countries, including Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Switzerland.⁸⁷ Western media unreservedly promoted the Levant Fair, while most newspapers provided no coverage of the Arab Fair. The few accounts that mentioned the Arab Fair generally found it regressive and unmodern. According to the *Times*, Arab exhibits were “by their modesty a pathetic contrast with the startlingly grandiose display” at the Levant Fair.⁸⁸

One of the few Western countries where the Arab Fair was portrayed in a positive light was Italy. Italy held its own Levant Fair (*Fiera del Levante*) in Bari beginning in 1929; in 1934, as part of these proceedings, Radio Bari gave a favorable appraisal of the Arab Fair, reflecting the Italian desire to appeal to Palestinian Arabs to carve out its sphere of influence in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁸⁹ Several Arab merchants and politicians from Palestine visited the Italian fair in the 1930s.⁹⁰ Still, Italy had stronger relations with Palestine’s Jewish population through trade fairs. Scores of Italian firms sent their samples and hired stands in the Levant Fair in the 1930s. Jewish producers from Palestine also took part in Italian fairs and the Zionist movement established a Palestine Pavilion at the Bari Fair, which Benito Mussolini visited in 1934 and “displayed deep interest” in its exhibits.⁹¹ Italian papers likewise commended the pavilion. According to *La Stampa*, it “documented the effort of the rebirth of the ancient land.”⁹² King Victor Emanuel III inaugurated the Palestine Pavilion at the same fair the following year.⁹³ The Italian government continued to invite Jews from Palestine to trade fairs in Italy for the remainder of the decade.⁹⁴ Even in the countries where the press and officials did not overlook and undervalue the Arab Fair, it seems that Arabs were not able to counter the Zionist claims of supremacy in the realm of trade fairs.

The propaganda battle had far-reaching implications when it came to the business world. As Anat Helman put it, the Levant Fair was not only a tool of public relations but also possessed economic value.⁹⁵ Its organizers skillfully promoted their scheme abroad by establishing bureaus in foreign countries, sending delegations to business associations and political organizations, and publishing catalogs in different languages.⁹⁶ These bureaus and delegations contacted enterprises in their respective countries and secured the participation of national pavilions at the Levant Fair.⁹⁷ The economic potential of the fair formed an integral part of propaganda outside Palestine. The official brochure of the Levant Fair in 1936, for instance, advertised Tel Aviv as “the commercial and industrial hub of Palestine and the most modern and rapidly developing city of the Middle East.”⁹⁸ Zionist newspapers translated news items and articles that appeared in American and European presses to prove the economic value of this gathering.⁹⁹

As the Levant Fair offered business circles insight into the Yishuv, foreign audiences came to perceive it as an auspicious international meeting. U.S. senators and politicians such as Royal S. Copeland, Warren Robinson Austin, and Daniel Oren Hastings wrote that the Levant Fair “promises to do for Palestine what Leipzig does

for Germany and what Nizhni-Novgorod used to do for Russia once – to serve as a mart for far-flung traders.”¹⁰⁰ Thus the patrons of the Levant Fair enlisted foreign public figures in the Zionist propaganda campaign.

This campaign bore real economic fruit. The success of propaganda drew an increasing number of foreign merchants, investors, and entrepreneurs to Tel Aviv seeking to exploit the opportunities that the fair offered. Even the Soviet Union, the only socialist power at the time, actively took part in the fair to boost its commercial relations with Palestine. The managers of the Soviet Pavilion met representatives of the Tel Aviv and Jaffa Chamber of Commerce several times to achieve this purpose. The Soviet leadership considered their participation a commercial success, as the pavilion generated sales of Soviet products that amounted to more than one hundred thousand pounds.¹⁰¹ The meetings between the Soviet delegation and Jewish chambers of commerce during the fair also gave a push to the marketing of oranges and manufactured goods from Zionist enterprises to the Soviet Union.¹⁰²

The Arab Fair in Comparison

The Arab Fair was unique among fairs in the post-Ottoman world at the time, since it took place without royal and governmental patronage. The crowned and elected heads of states played a key role in the establishment and expansion of international fairs in the rest of the post-Ottoman world. For example, King Faysal I of Iraq, King Fu’ad I of Egypt, and the Crown Prince Paul of Greece opened the Baghdad, Cairo, and Thessaloniki fairs, respectively.¹⁰³ The organizing committee of the Cairo Fair operated under the chairmanship of King Fu’ad I of Egypt.¹⁰⁴ Queen Mary of Yugoslavia “honored” the Ljubljana Autumn Fair with her visit, and spectators celebrated the tenth anniversary of King Alexander’s accession and the crown prince’s birthday with public ceremonies in 1931.¹⁰⁵ The Arab Fair, however, did not benefit from any royal or official endorsement.

Although such involvement might be dismissed as merely ceremonial, it served several purposes. First, it served to legitimize and glorify those in political power. Importantly, especially in newly independent states, international trade fairs served as emblems of sovereignty and economic strength and assertions of a bright future ahead. The experiences of Iraq and Cyprus demonstrate the relationship between trade fairs and political independence. Iraq, as soon as it gained its nominal political independence, set about organizing an international fair in Baghdad under the auspices of King Faysal I that drew thousands of local and foreign visitors.¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile, when Cypriots intended to organize an agricultural and industrial exhibition in the late 1920s and the early 1930s, British authorities and anti-colonial resistance on the island prevented its realization.¹⁰⁷ Having been officially recognized by the British and the League of Nations, the Jewish Agency for Palestine overcame its nominal political dependence to organize an international trade fair, while the country’s Arab majority, denied a similar institution, struggled to compete on the same terms.

Beyond the symbolic resonance of such fairs, political leaders hoped that they

might secure economic benefits and important revenues for host cities and countries. The money that flew into Tel Aviv during the Levant Fair in 1929 exceeded £150,000.¹⁰⁸ The business transactions at the same meeting increased to £175,000 in 1932 and £500,000 in 1934.¹⁰⁹ Likewise, the business transactions exceeded £106,666 at the Thessaloniki Fair in 1929.¹¹⁰ An important source of revenues came from foreign fairgoers. For instance, international customers spent £160,256 at the Izmir Fair in 1937.¹¹¹ Trade fairs further boosted municipal revenue. For instance, the Izmir Fair created an additional £744,736 for the Izmir municipality in 1939.¹¹²

The continuation of fairs elsewhere also facilitated commercial and cultural links between the post-Ottoman countries, while Turkey showed a keen interest in fairs in surrounding countries to increase its sphere of influence in the Middle East in the mid-1930s.¹¹³ Turkish participation fostered bilateral economic and diplomatic relations between Turkey and host counties. For instance, the Turkish delegation met politicians and business representatives at the Levant Fair and secured the participation of the Jewish Agency for Palestine in the Izmir Fair in 1936.¹¹⁴

Unlike its better-funded and officially supported counterparts, the Arab Fair came about through the efforts of a handful of merchants who put up their own money to finance the venture, but their economic power was not enough to keep the fair alive. As an avenue to build links across the new borders of the post-World War I Middle East, the Arab Fair struggled to secure participation from other Arab states, lagging behind other regional fairs. The Damascus Fair in 1936, for example, brought official attendance from Egypt, Lebanon, Iran, and Turkey.¹¹⁵

Table 3. Number of Visitors to the Izmir Fair, 1928–38¹¹⁶

Year	1928	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938
# of Visitors	86,908	240,000	286,500	311,009	361,000	608,000	727,000

A transnational analysis of trade fairs in the post-Ottoman countries further suggests that Arab businesspeople in Jerusalem and the rest of Palestine could have benefited from the continuation of the Arab Fair even though it was not a financial success in the first two years. Annual commercial gatherings elsewhere in the region were not necessarily successful at the beginning. Thanks to the persistence of businesspeople and the support of politicians, however, they were able to survive. Like the Arab Fair, the international scope of the Cairo, Izmir, Plovdiv, Tel Aviv, and Thessaloniki fairs was initially very limited – only after several unsuccessful attempts did they become commercially successful.¹¹⁷ For example, the Izmir Fair was suspended in 1928 because of financial issues and the Great Depression, but was revived as a national fair in 1933 and entered a golden era as an international meeting point in the mid-to-late 1930s (see table 3). Likewise, the international fair in Plovdiv dated back to 1892 but the political turmoil in Bulgaria, the Balkan Wars, and World War I interrupted it. In collaboration with the Plovdiv municipality, state departments, and other business

associations, the Plovdiv Chamber of Commerce and Industry revived this meeting in 1933. Although the first meetings were national in scope, the Plovdiv Fair grew to be an international gathering by the middle of the decade (see table 4).¹¹⁸ Like the Arab Fair, the number of exhibitors and visitors was low at the beginning. Unlike the Arab Fair, however, the Plovdiv Fair continued to expand in size and scope in 1935 and 1936. Likewise, the Cairo Fair had its origins in the late nineteenth century but was interrupted in 1917 by World War I. The initiative of Fu'ad I and the Wafd party revived it in 1925. Although there were a handful of foreign exhibitors that year, the Cairo Fair became a financially successful venture in the next decade, with the active participation of state actors and private enterprises.¹¹⁹

Table 4: The Progress of the Plovdiv Fair, 1933–36¹²⁰

Year	Buildings	Pavilions	Space (m ²)	# of Exhibits	# of Visitors
1933	1	–	3,150	434	120,000
1934	3	3	8,050	880	150,000
1935	7	3	17,000	1,400	180,000
1936	10	4	21,000	1,700	200,000

Conclusion

From an economic view, the Arab Fair paled in comparison with the Levant Fair. The Arab Fair's limited funds, governmental support, preparations, and publicity undermined its grand vision. The real strength of the Levant Fair lay in the support it received from British authorities and the international networks and propaganda campaigns of the World Zionist Organization. By comparison, international media showed relatively little interest in the Arab Fair – what international coverage it did receive was often negative, coming from anti-Arab Western journalists. Palestinian Arabs struggled to combat the idea that Jews were implicitly in a better position to hold trade fairs. However, it is important to view the Arab Fair not only through the lens of the Palestinian struggle against Zionism, but within a broader regional context in which trade fairs were a core performance of legitimacy and sites of business.

When contrasted with fairs in other Arab countries and in post-Ottoman countries in general, one can appreciate the relative importance of governmental support for the success of international trade fairs. Unlike other Arab countries in the region, the interwar years did not lead toward political independence for Palestine's Arabs.¹²¹ Other states in the region – even those under European control – saw the emergence of institutions by politicians, bureaucrats, and military officers who had gained experience in the Ottoman Empire, but Palestine's Arabs lacked a similar apparatus.¹²² While the Yishuv formulated its own social and political institutions, Palestinian Arabs were prevented by the British from initiating similar institutions.¹²³ The limited political power of the Palestinian nascent bourgeoisie cannot be disconnected from its economic

weakness.¹²⁴ As elsewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean, the interwar period saw the rise of new middle classes from the Arab population of the country. The acceleration of Zionist colonization, British colonial policies, the crushing of the Great Revolt, and World War II undermined their power.¹²⁵ As a result, they were in no position to revive the Arab Fair. Placing them in comparison not only with the Levant Fair, but with regional trade fairs, helps illuminate both the Palestinian Arabs' attempts to build the economic structures that, throughout the region, came to symbolize independence and international recognition, and the ways in which Palestine remained distinct from the post-Ottoman states and the colonial mandates surrounding it.

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