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Palestine's Railway System

The Palestine railway system, as it exists to-day, is very largely the result of War-time developments. Before the War there was a metre gauge line between Jaffa and Jerusalem, which had been constructed in 1892, and was owned by a private French company. In addition there was the Hijaz Railway, with termini at Haifa and Acre, which joined up with the railway from Damascus which ran through Transjordan to the Hijaz, and there was a branch line from Afule to Nablus. The Hijaz Railway, as would naturally be imagined, had at its primary object the conveyance of pilgrims. Incidentally, this line has the unusual gauge of 105 c.m., the result, so it is said, of a mistake in manufacture of the first steel sleepers supplied to Damascus.

During the War the Turks constructed a 105 c.m. gauge line from Nablus to Tulkarm, where it now provides a connexion with the main line of the standard gauge railway. The Nablus-Tulkarm line now forms part of the Hijaz Railway. The Turks also converted the Jaffa-Jerusalem metre gauge line to 105 c.m. gauge so that the Hijaz Railway rolling stock could be used and also with a view to a railway extension southwards. The Jaffa-Jerusalem line was subsequently converted to standard gauge by the British Army. After the War the Palestine Government acquired this line by paying compensation to the French Company which originally owned it.

Before the War there was no railway in Sinai. The Kantara-Haifa standard gauge line was constructed by the British Army during the War. The British forces also constructed a branch line of the standard gauge from Rafa to Beersheba, but this has since been taken up.

The Railway System.

The following table shows the kilometrage of lines exclusive of sidings, at present operated by the Palestine Railways Administration:—

(a) In Palestine	4 ft. 8½ in.	Kilometres.	105 c.m. gauge. Hijaz Railway.
Rafa-Haifa	226	.. —	.. —
Jaffa-Jerusalem	87	.. —	.. —
Ras El Ain-Petah Tikvah	6.5	.. —	.. —
Sarafand Line	4.5	.. —	.. —
Beit Nabala Line	5	.. —	.. —
Haifa-Samakh	—	.. —	.. 88
Haifa (junction at kilo. 2)-Acre	—	.. —	.. 18

	Nablus-Tulkarm	..	..	—	..	—	..	38
				—				—
				329				144
(b)	In Sinai—							
	Kantara-Rafa	..	..	203	..	—	..	—
(c)	In Transjordan—							
	Nassib-Amman-Maan	..	..	—	..	—	..	323
				—				—
	Total length of system			532				467

Difficult Country.

As illustrated in the above table, the system operated traverses three states—Egypt, Palestine and Transjordan. The country served differs very widely in character. In Sinai there is the long length of dune sand desert, and the problem of maintenance as regards that stretch of line is one of the most difficult with which any railway has to contend. In Palestine itself there are first of all the alluvial plains where the foundation consists of treacherous clays and black cotton soil. Then there is the mountainous country of the Judæan hills, through which Jerusalem, which stands 2,468 feet above sea-level, is approached through steep and narrow valleys. Difficult conditions are also presented by the valleys of the western slopes of the Jordan cleft through which the Hijaz Railway descends to 824 feet below sea-level. Then there are the rocky highlands and plateaux of Transjordan on the way to Amman and Maan, and the desolate sandy clay wastes through which the line runs along the western fringe of the desert of Arabia. Truly a varied range of conditions with which to deal.

The way in which the system has come into being has some obvious drawbacks. Thus the operation for commercial purposes of the lines constructed for military ends is disadvantageous from the railway point of view. Naturally the location of the line is not the most suitable for commercial purposes, as some important traffic areas are not adequately served. Further, much of the rolling stock, materials used in the track, and many of the locomotives were not new when they were imported during the War. They met with hard usage in the War, and have been unduly costly in maintenance.

Operating Results.

The increasing prosperity which Palestine has been enjoying in recent years has naturally been reflected in the results obtained by the Palestine Railways, and the last administration report, covering the year ended March 31 last, showed a considerable increase in receipts on all the lines except the Hijaz Railway. The Palestine Railway's receipts were £573,614, yielding a surplus over the ordinary working expenditure of £284,787. But against that amount there was the liability in respect of debt charges and sinking fund of £157,140, while extraordinary works and renewals represented an expenditure of £133,653. There was thus a deficit on the year's working of £6,006, which compares with one of £15,660 for 1933-34 and one of £116,673 for 1932-33. As the following summary of the operating results for 1935, as compared with 1934, shows there has been a further improvement in results in the current year, and the next report should show a substantial surplus instead of a small deficit.

		Year ended December 31.			
		Gross Revenue.		Working Expenses.	
		1935.	1934.	1935.	1934.
		£	£	£	£
Palestine Railway	..	637,028	513,719	508,217	423,437
Kantara-Rafa Railway	..	124,046	111,826	94,501	90,840

Hijaz Railway	..	99,451	98,791	104,560	98,505
Petah Tikvah Railway	..	2,797	2,770	840	840

Features of Year's Working.

As was to be expected, in view of developments in Palestine, there was a substantial increase in the goods traffic, the freight handled totalling 1,114,744 tons, as compared with 942,731 tons for the year ended December 31, 1934. The building activity in the country is reflected by the fact that cement headed the list of commodities carried with 241,523 tons, while other building materials came second with 144,578 tons, oranges occupying the third place with 123,718 tons. The next places in the list are occupied by kerosene with 80,262 tons and coal with 70,509 tons. There was an increase in the traffic in cement of 77,631 tons, while other building materials were up by 65,733 tons. The other principal increases in tonnage were in coal, 36,263 tons, and oranges, 31,554 tons. Large decreases were recorded in respect of manure, which was 30,404 tons down at 35,789 tons, and stone, which declined by 23,173 tons.

Traffic Receipts.

The following table shows the receipts from goods traffic:—

			1935.	1934.	+ or -
		£	£	£	£
Palestine Railway	..	..	373,366	289,197	+84,169
Kantara-Rafa Railway	..	..	36,979	34,660	+ 2,319
Hijaz Railway	..	..	59,386	63,854	- 4,268
Petah Tikvah Railway	..	..	2,737	2,739	- 2
			<u>472,468</u>	<u>390,250</u>	<u>+82,218</u>

There was also a substantial increase in the passenger traffic, the passengers carried numbering 2,402,000 as compared with 1,929,107 in 1934. The receipts from passenger traffic were as follows: —

			1935.	1934.	+ or -
		£	£	£	£
Palestine Railway	..	..	219,251	182,126	+37,125
Kantara-Rafa Railway	..	..	84,625	74,804	+ 9,819
Hijaz Railway	..	..	33,636	26,936	+ 6,700
			<u>337,510</u>	<u>283,886</u>	<u>+53,644</u>

As regards the outlook for the Palestine Railways for 1936, it is obvious that much depends on the speedy resolution of the present international problems, for the smooth continuance of Palestine's prosperity cannot fail to be governed by the development of world conditions. Given an improvement in the general position, the impetus to economic progress in Palestine that will be given by the Levant Fair will naturally be reflected in a further expansion of the traffic and passenger receipts.