The Development and Significance of the Jericho-Beit She’an Road in the Modern Era, 1800-1970

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Authors’ Note

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Unlike the research on ancient roads in Israel, the scholarly literature on modern roads, which were constructed or renovated in the course of the past two hundred years, is relatively recent and scant. The modern roads that received substantial scholarly treatment are for the most part those that connected large and important population centers, such as the Jerusalem-Jaffa road, which was constructed in the second half of the nineteenth century, or others associated with historical and national events of particular significance, such, for example, was the paving of the road between Tiberias and Tzemah. Constructed during the 1920s by Jewish laborers, members of Gdud HaAvoda (Labor Battalion), this road claimed myth-like status in the history and development of the Hebrew Labor movement (Ben-Arieh 1970, 122-130).

 The purpose of this study is to trace the development and transformations of the road that runs through the central Jordan Rift Valley—in its main section between Jericho in the south and Beit She’an in the north—from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth century by focusing on the various stages of the construction and formation of the road itself and by calling attention to the broader contexts relevant to the road and the geographical space surrounding it. These contextual frameworks include, among others, the urban development of the two settlements at each of the road’s ends; the military and security significance of the entire region over the years, particularly during the British Mandate period; and the shifting Zionist attitude toward the Rift Valley and its significance throughout the twentieth century. The focus on this specific section of the road, which thus far has not been methodically surveyed, aspires to fill an even broader gap in the research on modern roads in pre-state Israel pertaining to roads and routes in the eastern part of the country: while the modern northbound roads from Beit She’an or the roads from Jericho to Jerusalem and Nablus have been methodologically researched in the past, at least in a rudimentary manner (partly because they were constructed at a relatively early stage) (Ben-Arieh, 139-142) the construction of the Jericho-Beit She’an road occurred later and at a different pace, and therefore, the research on roads in modern Israel is practically non-existent. The sources employed in this study are for the most part primary: travel literature of Westerners who used the road and toured its vicinity from the beginning of the nineteenth century onward; documents from government and public archives in Israel and abroad; articles published in both Hebrew pre-state Israel newspapers and in English in British newspapers; and, of course, various maps of the area from the past one hundred fifty years. The information stored in these maps is of unique and substantial import for any attempt to delineate the road, and its development, over the years. Beyond these resources, we will also tap secondary and ancillary sources from which conclusions can be drawn regarding the road’s physical state and processes that impacted it at several points in time.

 Nonetheless, despite the availability of these diverse sources, our research on this particular portion of the road involved several unique methodological and historical challenges: first, the very fact of the road’s location in the Jordan Rift Valley, which itself has been the focus of few studies dealing with the modern era (Ilan 1973); and second, the paucity of studies on the construction and formation of modern roads in pre-state Israel, including during the British Mandate period, which is widely documented in other contexts (Itamar 2015). Other challenges included the complete obliteration of the Jericho and Beit She’an pre-War of Independence (1948) archives; the fact that part of the archival records on the road’s construction, currently held at the Israel National Archive, are still confidential given the security-sensitive information they contain; and the fact that the information on the road under Jordanian rule (1948-1967) is scant and based primarily on secondary sources. Notwithstanding these difficulties, however, it appears that the sources available to us are sufficient to outline the main stages in the development and improvement of the Jericho-Beit She’an road during the relevant period and to identify the factors underlying shifting attitudes toward it, on part of different factions, over the years.

**From imperial road to remnants on the wayside**

The first known road between Jericho and Beit She’an was built as part of the Roman empire’s road system constructed in the western region of ancient Israel during the second and third centuries BC. This road network was a defining factor in Rome’s pan-imperialist objective to strengthen its rule over the various parts of the country and improve military mobility between them. Indeed, during this period, the Roman empire constructed many roads, in relative terms, with a total length of hundreds of kilometers. Imperial milestones were erected alongside the roads indicating the distance to the nearest city and bearing the official titles of the emperor during whose reign the road was built. In this context, the term ‘Roman way’ refers to a road flanked by edge-stones and rain-water gutters and filled with potshards or rubble, upon which pave stones were laid (Roll and Benjamin 1976; Tsafrir et al. 1994).

 The section of the Roman road running through the Jordan Rift Valley, which is composed of several portions, was most probably part of the highway connecting the imperial centers in Aelia Capitolina and Damascus (Avi-Yonah 1963, 81-83). It is possible that road building in this area, which in some cases involved the construction of fortification systems, is associated with the Pharisee Jews’ (Transjordan) participation in the Bar Kokhba revolt and with the empire’s desire to improve mobility in intermediate regions between both sides of the Jordon River (Ben David 2009, 67). At the same time, it may also be the case that the road’s construction was not directly linked to events at the time of the revolt, and was mainly intended to connect between Roman military camps in Aelia Capitolina, Scythopolis, and Legio (Tepper 2004, 84; Benjamin and Roll 1982).

 The evidence we have of the Roman road that ran through the central Jordan Rift Valley includes illustrations, inscriptions, and archeological findings. Peutinger’s Tablet, a detailed illustration of the layout of the Roman Empire’s road network during the fourth or fifth century BC, including distances and way stations, distinctively marks the Roman Jordan Valley road (Finkelstein 1977; Albu 2005). Other maps outlining the road were produced in the course of a survey conducted by the Palestine Exploration Fund at the end of the nineteenth century (Survey of Palestine Sheets 9, 12 ,15,18). The survey’s written reports, and the ancillary maps, reveal that at the end of the nineteenth century remnants of the Roman road were still visible in the field: while in certain places the road was well preserved, in others, it was in a state of near ruin. It should be noted that in some areas, the surveyors found no tangible remnants of the road, although they could assume its location with relative accuracy (Conder et al. 1882, 232-233, 388).

 There is no evidence from the centuries between the road’s original construction and the late 1800s of any initiated reconstruction of it or of any other road on this route or the adjacent route. In contrast to the ongoing maintenance—on part of different government agents—of various roads spanning other areas of the country, the ancient roads in the central Jordan Rift Valley were virtually neglected (Ilan, 151). Thus, the original Roman road was used for hundreds of years until it ceased to exist and was replaced by provincial roads and rustic paths lacking any distinctive characteristics. In this context, it should be further noted that in some cases during the construction of the Jericho-Beit She’an road in the modern era, the Roman route was used, for instance in the section of the modern road (90) between Shadmot Mehola, Zubaydat, and Argaman, which to a large extent, runs parallel to the Roman route in this area (Ben-David 2018; Ilan, 148-151). Nevertheless, it seems that the very reliance on the Roman road, in the late twentieth century as well, can teach us, more than anything else, about the severe neglect this geographical area suffered under the governance of various rulers throughout most of the period.

**A route for the brave: the Jericho-Beit She’an road up to WWI**

After centuries of neglect, significant changes in the quality and diffusion of roads in pre-state Israel—especially those leading to and from the holy cities—could be sensed during the second half of the nineteenth century as part of the Ottoman Empire’s ventures in Ottoman Palestine and its environs. These measures were taken in response to the constant growth of the local population; the rising interest of many countries and religious factors, particularly in the West, in Ottoman Palestine, as well as the exponential growth in the number of pilgrims visiting it; and in light of internal changes in the empire itself, manifested in its desire to improve both its governance and mobility throughout the country and surrounding regions.

 Indeed, some of the roads were repaved—or substantially renovated—in the last decades of the nineteenth century in order to facilitate the expanding traffic of military forces, pilgrims, and citizens in these regions. The empire also repaired roads in preparation for visits by foreign rulers, such as the Austro-Hungarian emperor, Franz Joseph I (1869) and the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II (1898) (Ben-Arieh, 120-135). Among the main throughways built in this period (and up to WWI) were the Jaffa-Jerusalem-Jericho-Transjordan road, the Haifa-Nazareth-Tiberias road, and the Jerusalem-Nablus-Nazareth road (Yaffe 1983). Thus, it was reported that by 1895, in the Jerusalem region alone, roads spanning a total of 439 km had been constructed (Bussow 2011, 443-47).

 Notably, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the major roads built in Ottoman Palestine were dirt tracks paved with stones and covered with a layer of compressed earth. These roads were used mainly for the passage of pack animals and carts, not for motor cars, the first of which arrived in Ottoman Palestine at the end of the 1910s (Gafni 2011).[[1]](#footnote-1)

 The Jericho-Beit She’an road, however, was not paved or renovated by the Ottoman Empire during this period and although there had been an early initiative to build a railway through most of the Jordon Rift Valley, the plan failed to materialized (Ilan, 152). Thus, the few sources describing the road from the early 1800s onward are texts written by pilgrims, researchers, and travelers who traveled on it over the years. Notably, most of them—including those who toured both the Jericho-Jerusalem and Galilee-Beit She’an regions—testified that they did not use the Jericho-Beit She’an road but rather the Beit She’an-Jenin-Nablus-Jerusalem-Jericho road (Rix 1907, 12)[[2]](#footnote-2) or the Jaffa-Jerusalem-Jericho road. The preference for these alternative roads was based mainly on the poor state and lack of government authorities on the Jericho-Beit She’an road and its surroundings, and the overall sense of insecurity on the part of those using it in this period (Horne 1885, 164; DeHaas 1884, 278). Compared to the Rift Valley road, the road between Jerusalem and Jericho in the late 1800s, for instance, was much improved: travelers testified that it was well suited for travel by carriage between Jerusalem, Jericho, the Jordon River, and the Dead Sea (Rowland 1915, 271; Stewart 1899, 49); and it had been renovated in honor of the German Kaiser’s visit in 1898 (Slattery 1921, 39-41).

 From descriptions of travelers who, despite its condition, used the Jordan Rift Valley road, it becomes apparent that it was neither constructed nor paved, and considering that these travelers rode camels, horses, or donkeys, it was not at all suitable for carriages. It should be noted that the other roads in the Rift Valley were unpaved paths, which in many places crossed riverbeds and dense vegetation. Thus, British surveyors reported that their route through the Rift Valley ran mainly on the banks of the Jordan River, while at times they took other paths which often required the erection of temporary narrow bridges over ravines (Conder 1899, 227). At the beginning of the twentieth century, British traveler Aida Goodrich-Freer reported that although having planned to travel with friends from Beit She’an to Jericho by way of the Jordan River’s east bank, they were forced to use the road on the west bank. Noting that despite it being a much longer road, they preferred the eastern road over the rundown and dangerous road on the west. Like other travelers, Goodrich-Freer wrote that the Rift Valley was considered a dangerous area to pass through, a wild and lawless region, in which highway robbers were a palpable danger. Eventually, Goodrich-Freer and her friends hired an Ottoman soldier to escort them on the road between Jericho and Beit She’an. Given that the road was provisional, according to Goodrich-Freer, their guide was often forced to follow riverbeds and other landmarks, sometimes even losing his way in the dark (Goodrich-Freer 1905).

 The memoirs of David Yellin offer a completely different, and far more positive, account. Yellin claims that in the late 1800s pilgrims (Christian and Jewish) began travelling from Jerusalem to the Galilee via the Jordan Valley, rather than taking the more common route through Nablus: ‘And the road is straight, and there are no stone barriers and destructed paths, which travelers encounter of the Nablus road’ (Yellin 1972, 331). Given its variance from those of western travelers and the fact that it is the only positive description of the road, this account may have been derived from a secondary source, and therefore does not necessarily reflect the road’s actual condition in these years.

 It can be argued that the Ottoman empire’s neglect of the Jericho-Beit She’an road is quite understandable considering that during the second half of the nineteenth century both Jericho and Beit She’an were not perceived as actual residential centers. Prior to WWI, the population of Jericho—situated at the Southern end of the road— consisted of only a few hundred residents, mostly farmers, and its local infrastructures were particularly insufficient (Raz 2014, 22-25; Avramski, 1983, 28-30). In one account, travelers described Jericho as a ‘thieves’ den’ (Wilson 1908, 93). Beit She’an—situated on the northern end of the road—was as well (at least until the 1870s, and to a certain degree, later) a small village of a few hundred residents who worked in agriculture, commerce, and small industries, and who were governed, de facto, by several Bedouin tribes operating in the region (Shor 1991). Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that the central government chose not to invest in the road that connected them and to operate mainly in other areas.

 However, toward the end of the nineteenth century—and mainly at the beginning of the twentieth century—both towns experienced new momentum, albeit rather limited in scope, which entailed renewed investment and support from the government. This shift was part of the empire’s fresh perspective on the country’s eastern regions and its aim to improve its rule over them. Accordingly, in 1876 a significant part of the lands of Beit She’an, the Jordan Rift Valley, and Jericho were registered as Jiftlik lands (private lands of the Sultan, Abdul Hamid II). The purpose of this appropriation was not only to encourage and facilitate the agricultural development of these territories, but also to enhance the central government’s presence and improve security throughout the entire region. As part of this campaign, an Ottoman government administrative center was built in Beit She’an, and part of the [Haifa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haifa)-Damascus extension of the [Hejaz railway](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hejaz_railway) was inaugurated, and a station was built on the western outskirts of the town (Abassi 2015, 203-205; Gafni 2018, 8-17; Nir 1989; Miraz-Ben Nun and Biger 2005; Avramski 1983, 55-56; Raz 2014). Nonetheless, neither the improved status of Beit She’an and Jericho nor security advantages justified the dramatic investment required for the reconstruction of the road running through the entire Rift Valley. At the same time, as Goodrich-Freer recounts, during this period the government began providing escorts to part of the convoys traveling on the Valley Rift road (Goodrich-Freer...) and a government guard post was built adjacent to the junction between Wadi Al-Far’a and the Jordan Valley (Yarmeash and Kirk n.d.). However, even in light of these steps—which, as it happens, also occurred close to 1876 and to the government’s renewed activity in the region—significant measures were still necessary in order to render the road befitting of the times and to bring it closer to the status and condition of other roads throughout the country. This process was completed, as described below, only toward the end of WWI.

**WWI: The disintegration of the road system and the first construction of a road in the Jordan Rift Valley**

During WWI, and as a result of both the ongoing battles between Britain and the Ottoman empire and of the gradual relocation of the frontline from northern Egypt to pre-state Israel, the entire country’s infrastructure network was dramatically changed: first, by the Ottomans, and later—with shifts in the position of the frontline—by the British army as well.

 For example, already in the first years of the war, the Ottomans transformed the railway system by laying tracks between Nablus and Jenin and the central part of the country, and by extending the railway toward Gaza and the Sinai territories. Following the British occupation of the south in the second half of 1917, the new administration began laying new tracks and renovating sections of the Ottoman railway. One of these new lines was the Lod-al-Lubban line that was intended to facilitate the British forces’ deployment on the front, which was stabilized in late 1917 in Palestine’s central region. Like the railway system, the road network as well gained momentum and was developed by the Ottomans during the war: thus, for example, the Ottoman army re-paved the road running through the central mountain ridge, from Nazareth in the north to Beer Sheba and Sinai in the south, in addition to renovating the Gaza-Jaffa and Gaza-Beer Sheba roads. These roads, it should be noted, were dirt roads which were vulnerable to weather conditions, and required constant upkeep (Biger...). However, despite such maintenance challenges, the road system in Ottoman Palestine became far more complex than in the past, and for the first time, offered effective connectivity between urban centers of various sizes and prominent rural areas throughout most of the country )Sasson 2014, 158-162). As part of this process, during the war, the Ottoman army initiated works on the northern section of the road running through the Rift Valley. In this framework, the road from Wadi Al-Far’a to Jiftlik was paved and extended by way of two branches: one toward the Damia Bridge, which crossed over the Jordan River, and the other north bound toward Beit She’an. This paved road was probably the first one suitable for military motor vehicles (Wavell 1979, 185). After conquering Jericho in Feb. 1918, British army forces were positioned for many months along the ‘line of the two Aujas,’ which spanned the width of the country from the Jordan Rift Valley to the Yarkon River (Tirosh 2014, 34-37). In Sept. 1918, Beit She’an was also occupied by the British as part of their efforts to conquer the North and control the throughways to eastern Transjordan (Wavell, 180-185; DiMarco 2008, 330-331; Baly 2003, 251). Indeed, in a map issued by the British army in 1918, the Rift Valley road was classified for the first time as a road passable for all traffic in dry weather (Survey of Palestine, Sheet IX). This restrictive classification was obviously rooted in the fact that the Ottomans had built the road primarily for military purposes. Accordingly, it enabled passage only in certain weather conditions, and was not intended for civilian traffic. The assumption that the Ottomans took partial measures is supported by the fact that they renovated only the northern section of the road, while the southern section, between Damia Bridge and Jericho, most probably remained unpaved.

**Security, settlement, and politics: British measures to improve the road**

British rule in Mandatory Palestine, which began immediately after WWI, brought about prosperity and progress in many areas of life—both those directly related to the Jewish Yishuv and those involving the improvement of life conditions for the general population. Thus, as part of the responsibilities assumed by the British government in accordance with the Mandate for Palestine, public and government institutions were established; municipal and national legal systems were instituted; agencies for national and local infrastructures were founded; and throughout the country, the extant health, education, and administration systems were significantly improved. These measures also included substantial improvements in transportation infrastructures, including the construction of new roads, restoration of old roads, and major changes in the railway system: the Ottoman tracks were replaced by new and wider tracks, and new lines were added (Biger...). Despite the fact that in the first years of Mandatory Palestine, the British policy concerning road construction was not favorable—mainly for fear that it would have a negative effect on government railroad profits—many roads were indeed built, often for security reasons (Biger 1991, 30; Itamar...).[[3]](#footnote-3) Of the main roads constructed during this period were the Afula-Beit She’an road; the road adjacent to the northern border; the Tel-Aviv-Haifa road; the Tiberias-Tzemah-Rosh-Pina road; and the Afula-Nazareth road. The two latter roads were constructed partly by the Gdud HaAvoda (Hebrew Labor Battalion), and became, in the eyes of period contemporaries, a symbol of the conquest of labor by the Jewish Yishuv (Livneh 1958, 147-149; Shapira 1977, 18-20). Responsible for building the new roads during most of this period lay with the Public Works Department, which was founded in 1926, and was the first to use asphalt for paving local roads.

 As mentioned, the building of new roads and the reconstruction of old roads was largely motivated by the British government’s changing security needs and considerations. Given that in the years following WWI, military motor vehicles constituted the main traffic on the roads, the British government began to gradually upgrade the road system—which before the war was mostly suited for carriages—to accommodate this type of transportation as well. Thus, among the roads repaired during the 1920s predominantly for security reasons were the road connecting Jerusalem to Tiberias, which proceeded on to Syria; the Acre-Rosh Hanikra road; the Jaffa-Jerusalem-Jericho-Transjordan road. In addition, a new road was built between Rosh Pina and Metula as a result of the Druze revolt in Syria (Biger...).

Parallel to roads built for security reasons, roads were also constructed in the context of Jewish settlement and most often in response to pressure on the part of the Jewish Yishuv and its institutions. Among these roads were the Bayt Dajan-Rishon LeTzion road and the Petah Tikva-Haifa road, which was built after a period of indecision given the fear that it would compete with the railway line between Tel-Aviv and Haifa. As a result of the Palestine riots (1929), roads were also built between Jewish settlements in the Lower Galilee and northern inland valleys to facilitate the mobility of aid and reinforcement if they were attacked again (Biger...).

 The method of road building in this period was extensively recorded in the memoirs of members of the Jewish Yishuv, who often worked for the Public Works Department:

The gravel worker would break them [the stones] into small pieces with a hammer [...] and break the pieces into gravel [...] along the route [...] the laborers would set curb stones. On the surface between the curb stones they would lay hard limestones [...] and fill the gaps between the large stones with small pieces of stone. Once the soling was completed, the steamroller went over the surface [...] gravel is scattered over the soling [...] then it was the steamroller’s turn to level the gravel.

(Hasulami and Shulami 1195, 107-108).[[4]](#footnote-4)

 After several years during which roads were built or treated mainly in response to shifting local considerations, in 1928 the British administration formulated a comprehensive plan for the road system in Mandatory Palestine, which detailed the proposed classification of each new or repaired road. A First-Class Road, for instance, was defined as one that enables passage of all vehicles throughout the entire year, and it is therefore not surprising that most military roads were included in this category (Gross 1983, 143-45). A Second-Class Road was defined as less passable, more vulnerable to extreme weather conditions, and in need of constant maintenance. According to this plan, the Jericho and Beit She’an road was designated a Second-Class road.

 Until a final decision was made regarding implementation of the plan for the Jericho-Beit She’an road, its condition remained as it was after WWI and it was classified as a ‘road passable for all traffic in dry weather.’ Although the Public Works Department had already submitted a proposal for its renovation in 1926 (provide name for writer 1926), the works were delayed, most probably for budgetary reasons, and in the early 1930s, the government issued a distinct prohibition against travel on the Jericho-Beit She’an road during the winter months. It was also stated that driving on this road in winter may not only cause damage to the road itself, but also put travelers in danger (..., 1930). The government’s perception of the Rift Valley road as being of marginal significance was also demonstrated in their discarding of fences and road blocks from WWI on the roadsides (Eshbal 1974, 253). The fact that in 1925, after six years of British rule, these fences were still visible along parts of the Rift Valley road testifies to the lack of government presence and authority in the region, and in turn, points to the deficient investment in the road works. This situation was further exacerbated by the fact that during these years travel the road was still considered a security hazard, and therefore, travelers often required the escort of British soldiers, not unlike at the end of the Ottoman era (Eshbal,...).

 Indeed, a later and indirect reference from 1937 stated that while the road was a good summer route, if traveling in a convoy, motor vehicles would face a constant dust storm stirred up by the car in the lead (Ben-Dor 1937). In a map issued by the British in the late 1930s as well, the road was classified as ‘other road,’ an indication that at that point in time, the route had not been defined as a road, and certainly not as a paved road (Survey Beisan 1937). Other roads from this period with identical classification was the road between Afula and Tiberias and the road between Herzliya and Tel-Aviv. In contrast, the Jerusalem-Nablus and Jerusalem-Jericho roads were classified at the time as First-Class (Survey Motor Map 1938).

 The protracted neglected condition of the Jericho-Beit She’an road, at least up to the mid-1930s is rather surprising given the dramatic changes that took place on both its ends during those years. From the beginning of the 1920s, Beit She’an, for example, continued to develop rapidly, in terms of population growth and administrative development: regional British institutions (including court, post office, and police station) were built in Beit She’an and its population grew constantly. Likewise, schools were open in the town, organized medical services were provided, and its economic significance grew as it became a commercial center for the entire region to which merchandise flowed from distant markets by means of the railway (Abassi 2016; Biger and Miraz-Ben Nun 2005). At the southern end of the road, Jericho also experienced a revival and began growing rapidly in terms of its population and economy, which was based mainly on the developing agriculture within and around the city, including the installment of new irrigation systems (Raz, 23). Like in Beit She’an, the government built several public buildings in Jericho, including a police station and post office )Vilnay 1942, 275), but despite these improvements, the road connecting the two cities was not upgraded; most probably due to cost considerations, and given that the number of settlements between them was particularly scant. Other testimony to the fact that the road had still not been upgraded is the fact that unlike other inter-city roads in 1935, it did not constitute a route for a direct bus line between the two cities (Steimatzky 1935).

 The considerable change in the status of the road running through the Rift Valley, which involved actual attempts to improve and pave it all, were a result of the outbreak of the Arab revolt. The three-year revolt (1936-1939), which was directed against both the Jews and the British government, manifested in varying degrees of intensity throughout the entire country, while during part of this period, Arab forces were concentrated mainly in settlements located on the central mountain ridge (Eyal 1998; Eyal 2009). In this context, one of the challenges facing the government was the fact that up to that time, the country’s eastern and northern borders were considerably breached. This situation enabled the passage of fighters and weapons, which found there way to groups of Arab insurgents dispersed throughout the country. For example, during the first years of the revolt, Arab fighters entered Mandate Palestine by way of the northern border and the region under French mandate, and by way of the east bank of the Jordan River, which was also under British rule. Given these circumstances, the British government was forced to find a solution that would keep Arabs from Syria, Lebanon, and Transjordan away from western Palestine, mainly by fortifying the land borders in the West. On the northern border, British police officer Charles Tegart conceived the components of the solution which included fencing the border and qualifying the road running along its entire length to facilitate the mobility of military forces and enhance their presence in the area. Although initially a conquered dirt path, in 1939 tarring works began that would eventually render it a paved road (Kroizer 2006).

 As mentioned, fighters and weapons were smuggled via the East bank of the Jordon and across the Jordon Valley to settlements on the eastern slopes of the central mountain ridge. This spurned the need to fortify the passageways from the East bank of the Jordan to the West as well. The first step taken by the British was to transfer command of the Jordan Valley to the Transjordan Frontier Force and its reinforcement by a motorized company to provide better security in the region and improve the fighting forces’ operative efficiency. In addition, orders were given to block the danger-prone passageways adjacent to the Jordon River (Eyal 1998, 80, 140-141, 351, 377). It should be noted that already in the pre-revolt years the British perceived the Jordan Rift Valley as bearing significant strategic value given that it connected both parts of British ruled territories—in Transjordan and Mandatory Palestine—and was one of the air and land routes to Iraq and India. Considering this, prior to the revolt, Britain’s Royal Air Force (RAF) was appointed to maintain security in these areas and prevent the passage of nomad tribes from East to West Transjordan. Accordingly, two landing strips were built in the valley, one in the vicinity of Jericho and one nearby Jiftlik. However, despite these efforts, the RAF did not succeed in preventing armed groups from traversing the Jordan River during the revolt, and insurgents arrived in Samaria where they set up base (Yarmiash 2017a). Between 1937 and 1939 the RAF participated search campaigns for arms and artillery on both sides of the Jordan, while from early 1937, it cooperated with the Transjordan Frontier Force on patrolling the Rift Valley and northern Jordon Valley—from the Dead Sea to the Hula Valley (Yarmiash 2017b, 323-33). Despite these efforts, in 1938 the British faced groups of insurgents who had infiltrated Israel and damaged infrastructures and administration buildings in the Jericho area (Yarmiashb, 362).

 Due to the factors described thus far, improvement of the road running through the Rift Valley from North to South was no less than essential for effective passage of military forces, and prevention of the infiltration of armed insurgents and weapons from the East. Indeed, according to a document of the Transjordan Frontier Force stationed in the Rift Valley, and most probably in response to the Force’s petition, construction works began on the road began during the revolt. These works commenced after severe damage was caused to the section between Beit She’an and Jiftlik by torrential rains, which constrained the Force’s mobility (Yarmiash 2017b, 365; RAF report Nov. 1938, 14-15). In 1939, after particularly arduous efforts, the road was finally qualified as a road for passage of military vehicles in all weather conditions, thereby greatly improving operational capabilities of all the forces stationed in the area (Annual report, Trans-Jordan Frontier Force 1939, 12). Cartographic evidence of this appears in several maps drafted by British forces in the 1940s on which the entire Jericho-Beit She’an road is classified as a Second-Class road (Palestine Survey, Bardala 1941).

 After the revolt, in the early 1940s, the mandatory government was determined to continue efforts to improve the road’s condition. Accordingly, the High Commissioner’s office issued a document presenting a ‘five-year plan’ for the improvement of the British army’s capabilities by way of improving communication between police strongholds (known as Tegarts) and renovating roads facilitating the army’s operations. Among the roads mentioned in this document were the Gaza-Bayt Djaan, Karkur-Megiddo, and Nazareth-Sh’faram roads, as well as the Jericho-Beit She’an road, which was given first priority for renovation. Ostensibly, this is sufficient evidence of the road’s—and the entire region’s—importance for the British, at least during this period (Proposed Road Program 1939/1940, 40). In this document, the army referred to these roads as ‘military roads’ and demanded their construction and repair as fast as possible: ‘In Sept. 1940 the military authorities required nine roads constructed as soon as possible [...] these roads [...] were to be 3 meters wide, the standard of construction being soling, and a thin metal (but not bitumen treated) surface’ (Ref. no. F/323/39, High Commissioner of Palestine, Roads & Bridges, 3). One of the arguments cited in the document upon which the proposal for immediate renovation was based, was the fact that with the termination of the emergency military situation, the local British government would no longer be able to justify this expense and the renovations would not be carried out at all. Thus, several documents detailed the sections of roads requiring repairs, their current state, the manner in which they needed to be improved, and the estimated cost for repairs. In one document, the Jericho-Beit She’an road, which was recommended for repair as early as 1940, was described as crossing many wadis and as often being impassable (even after its initial renovation in 1939). In the proposal for its improvement, it was noted that the cost of upgrading the road to accommodate all weather conditions was ₤48,750 (Proposed Road Program 1939/1940, 40). Concurrent with the plan to repair the road, in 1941 a police station was built not far from the intersection between the Jordan Rift Valley road and the Wadi Fa’ara road, which connected between the Jordan River and Nablus. This station, which was a later and smaller version constructed as part of the ‘Tegart fortress’ scheme, was most probably built on the foundations of an Ottoman guard post and undoubtedly enhanced the security of those travelling the road. On the other hand, given its precise location, its construction was most probably intended, first and foremost, to secure the crossroad between Nablus and Transjordan, much less than the Beit-She’an-Jericho road itself (Yarmiash and Kirk; Kroiser 2011).[[5]](#footnote-5)

 Either way, notwithstanding the genuine and relatively urgent objective to renovate the road, other documents reveal that it was only in 1944-1945 that the works finally began. One indication of the renewed works is written communication between British officials and the Arab contractor hired to perform the repairs. From communications on part of both sides, it appears that although the government urged the contractor to complete the job as fast as possible, it did not provide him with enough explosives, and therefore the job was delayed once again (Jericho-Beisan Road Supply of Stones Nov. 1945).

 Based on what has been said so far, and taking into account overall British activity in the region, the reaction on part of the Zionists is particularly interesting. In an article published in *Haboker* newspaper in 1945 adamantly opposing the costly works, the writer notes that works on the Jericho-Beit She’an road were in fact part of the government’s plan to complete the road between Jerusalem to Zafed—which passed through Jericho, Beit She’an, and Tiberias—at the cost of ₤150,000. Although initially expenditures and coinciding plans were stated as main arguments against paving the road—’As is known, an excellent road already exists, and has for some years now, from Jerusalem to Tiberias and Zafed via Nablus, Jenin, Afula, and Nazareth’—it seems that the objection was rooted in other considerations. Not only did the Jordan Rift Valley lack a concentration of population that justified the building of a First-Class road at such a high cost, but more significantly, there was not a single Jewish settlement on the Rift Valley route: ‘Indeed, in all of this vast area, which is being considered here, there is not one city except Beit She’an [...] Is this luxury worthwhile [...] for the few Arab villages dispersed here?’ (Sraya 1945). This was not only a critical expression, albeit circuitous, against the fact that the British delayed their response to the Jewish Yishuv’s request to build the Tel-Aviv-Haifa road, but also evidence of the notion that the road’s future purpose was grounded in Britain’s desire to contribute to the developing Arab settlement: ‘What can one say about the new road—other than the assumption that its purpose is to benefit the sons of Ishmael?’ (Sraya 1945).

 Nevertheless, and unrelated to objections such as these, the works to upgrade the road to First-Class were not completed given Britain’s ongoing involvement in WWII followed by the burgeoning Jewish-British-Arab conflict in Palestine, which required financial investments in other areas and contexts. Thus, the road’s status remained Second-Class, that is, unpassable in torrential rain (name of writer 1947).

**The Jericho-Beit She’an road between 1948-1970**

The fate of the central Rift Valley road was obviously largely impacted by the 1948 War and the borders established at its end. Thus, at the end of the war, most of the road—from Jericho in the south to the international border in the north, some 15km south of Beit She’an—remained under the rule of the Hashemite Kingdom (Jordan), while only its most northern section, from the international border to Beit She’an, was now under Israeli rule. The treatment provided to these two sections of the road was undoubtedly influenced by the fact that they were governed by two different states. At the same time, as we will see, in the first years after the war, the state of the road in both sections remained much as it had been prior to the war.

 Indeed, under Jordanian rule, several sections of the road in the center of the Rift Valley were paved, mainly in the vicinity of bridges connecting both parts of Transjordan (Ilan 153). In addition, the Jordanians modified the road’s route in the Jericho area: while prior to the works, it ran east of the modern city—near Jericho’s ancient city and the Ein el-Sultan spring—the Jordanian authorities changed the route so that it would bypass the ancient city and arrive at modern Jericho directly from the North (Israel Survey, Jericho 1961). Regardless of these modifications, most of the road remained derelict under Jordanian rule most probably given that the local population remained particularly sparse after the 1948 war. At the same time, it should be noted that sources regarding Jordanian treatment of the Rift Valley roads in this period are not yet accessible to researchers, and that in the future we may be able to learn more about what occurred in this context in the years between 1948 and the Six Day War.

 Likewise, the northern part of the road, North of the international border and under Israeli rule, remained in its derelict pre-war condition for several years (Harari 2004, 138). In the first years after the war, it too was only partially covered in asphalt, and the gravel foundation laid during the British Mandate was damaged over time due to a lack of ongoing maintenance (Letter from Galilee Regional Director to Public Works Division, Dec. 1948). In several sections, the road remained nearly unpassable, especially in the rainy season, and due to dust clouds from the military vehicles which were visible from afar (Letter from Beit She’an Municipality to Haifa Region Engineer Dec. 1957). Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 1950s, three new Israeli settlements were founded—Revaya, Sdei Trumot, and Rehov—commonly referred to as ‘P’ronas’ corresponding to the name of the deserted Arab village P’rona on whose lands they were built (Nir 1989, 124-129; Oren and Regev 2008, 55). Yet even after the establishment of these settlements—and despite the fact that part of their agricultural lands were situated South, close to the international border with Jordan—the road’s condition was not dramatically improved, despite the residents and army’s appeals to the Israeli planning authorities to renovate and pave the entire road with asphalt (Letter from National Roads Company to Galilee Regional Engineer, Sep. 1952).

 In this context, it is interesting to note that despite the fact that these three small immigrant settlements were built adjacent to the historical road, given its poor condition, the planners did not take it into consideration when planning the settlements themselves. As a result, the road ran through the settlements and divided them, thereby disrupting daily routines. In time, with the growth of population in the settlements, on the one hand, and the regulation of military activity in the area adjacent to the border, on the other, the army demanded relocating the settlements and changing their internal planning so that the road would not pass through them. The residents requested that the route be entirely relocated, claiming that it had a detrimental effect on their lives and daily routines (Letter from Director of National Roads Company to Director of Ministry of Labor, Mar. 1954). However, despite these appeals, the route remained in its original location, crossing through Rehov and Sdei Trumot till today.[[6]](#footnote-6) In 1957, given the road’s poor condition, another request for repairs was submitted to the regional municipality, but apparently, despite the intensive development of settlements in the entire region, it was still not upgraded to First-Class (Letter from Elisha Multz to Reginal Engineer Dec. 1957). It was only in the 1960s that this section of the road was renovated in a more substantial manner.

 As a result of the Six Day War in 1967 and the institution of Israeli rule over the entire Jordan Rift Valley, the state began constructing military and civilian infrastructures in the valley region as early as six months after the war. The incentive for the establishment of the first Nahal (pioneer combatant youth) settlements in the region was the perception of the Jordan Rift Valley, on part of many in the Israeli leadership, as a partition zone of dramatic import. Accordingly, they viewed Jewish settlement in the region as separating between concentrations of Arab population in Samaria and the Hashemite Kingdom. Based on this notion, various proposals for Jewish settlement in the Rift Valley were submitted a few months after the war (Witz 2003, 93-95). Ultimately, Minister Igal Alon’s proposal was adopted—even if only by implication, and not by way of a binding government decision—which indeed brought about the founding of the first Nahal settlements in the Rift Valley and its surrounding areas (Pedhatzur 1996, 126; Admoni 1992, 133; Cohen, 1973). The establishment of these settlements during 1968-1969 also necessitated reassessing the condition of the road running through the valley and its improvement (Letter from M. Shachmi to S. Avni Mar. 1970). Thus, in this period the road was gradually widened from its original three meters to six meters (Eldor 1968). In this context, it is interesting to note that the laborers working on the road’s expansion and renovation in the years after the war were Arabs from Jericho and Gaza, the latter for whom transportation to and from Gaza, financed by the Israeli government, was provided on weekends (Department of State).

 From 1969, responsibility for the road’s maintenance was assigned to the National Roads Company of Israel in cooperation with the Israeli Military Governate which operated in the territories occupied in 1967 (writer’s name missing 1969). In this year, works on the road included the installation of road and traffic signs in the section between Jiftlik-Beit She’an, and the repair of dangerous turns along the entire road report (Military Governate bi-weekly report to Chief of Staff Dec. 1967). In the course of this renovation, the road was classified as a First-Class paved road, as indicated in maps issued at the time (Israel Survey, Jericho 1974).

**Conclusion**

The history of a road is rarely only that of the road itself, but rather it points to a myriad of broader events and processes—political, security, military, economic, and settlement-related—which are often intricately linked to it. In these terms, it appears that the history of the Jericho-Beit She’an road in the modern era reflects, to a large extent, the changing attitudes toward this geographical region since the mid-nineteenth century.

 Generally speaking, it is plausible that at least from the perspective of the changing governments in pre-state Israel, and in reference to roads in other regions, the main function of the modern Rift Valley road was, and remains, military-security, and the background for its recurrent repairs was the need to improve the operational and military capabilities of the factors assigned the responsibility of supervising and securing it and its surroundings. These motivations were not unlike those of the ancient era when the initial construction of the Roman road was based on imperialist-security, rather than civil or settlement considerations. The various stages of paving and improving the road throughout the nineteenth century as well—up to its classification as a First-Class road at the beginning of the 1970s—were grounded in these factors and not in the desire to accommodate the needs of the local population, which was (and remains) relatively sparse and predominantly Arab during the entire era.

 At the same time, it is interesting that, notwithstanding the consolidation of the recognition of the road’s importance as a security factor, the investment in its recurrent repaving remained quite limited, in relative terms, and that it was only after the Six Day War, with the beginning of civilian Israeli settlement in the region, that it was significantly improved. It is possible that these factors can be associated as well with the concurrent treatment of the Jerusalem-Nablus-Jenin road, which for many, was a better alternative to the road running through the Jordan Rift Valley. This route was preferred by the authorities and a significant part of the population, both at the end of the Ottoman period and the beginning of the British Mandate, as a route connecting between the country’s central and northern regions. Consequently, it became a First-Class road at a very early stage, compared to the Rift Valley road. It also appears that given this type of alternative, plans for repairs on the Rift Valley road were repeatedly delayed, and resuming security catalysts were required for their progression and execution.

 In addition to what has been said so far, it seems that the history of this road is testimony—even if only to a certain degree—to the status of the Jordan Rift Valley from the perspective of the Jewish Zionist society throughout the various periods. Thus, while other roads were built by Jews (under the supervision of the mandatory government), the Rift Valley road was never a focal point of Zionist settlement activity, and its construction even served as a conduit for Jewish criticism against the British government. It was only after the Six Day War, when large parts of the Israeli population began to perceive the Jordan Rift Valley differently, that events impacted the status of the road itself, which was granted significantly more and better treatment than it had before.

 Currently, the Rift Valley road faces new competitors, including the Trans-Israel Highway (6) and other bypass roads along its route, constructed during the past twenty years. However, the relationship between the Rift Valley road and these alternatives exceeds the purview of issues discussed in this paper.

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1. On the first motor vehicles to arrive in Ottoman Palestine, see for example: Gafni, R., ‘Not Yet Seen in the Holy Land: Charles Glidden and the First Car Arrive in Jerusalem.’ Et-Mol 217 (July 2011): 20–22. After Glidden, who brought the first car to Palestine in 1908, several others arrived in 1912, after which motorized transportation became prevalent during WWI. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For testimony on the condition of the Jerusalem-Nablus road, which was repaired in the early twentieth century by the Ottoman authorities, see: Rix, H. 1907. *Tent and Testament: A Camping Tour in Palestine*. London\_\_\_\_\_, 12. Wittingham wrote the following: ‘The road from Nablus to Jerusalem is excellent, one of the best in Palestine’ (Wittingham, G. N. 1921. *The Home of Fadeless Splendor: or, Palestine of Today*. London:\_\_\_\_\_, 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is interesting to note that during this period, the building of a railway alongside the Rift Valley road it was recurrently proposed, most likely by a private party (Ilan, 153). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also: Y. Erez. 1964. Sefer haaliya hashlishit I [The Book of the Third Aliya, I]. Tel Aviv, 247-48; 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For construction plans for this particular station, see גה’מ, מפה 47681 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)