

Beyond National Historiographies: Reflections on the Ottoman Background of Proto-Zionist-Arab Encounters in *Fin de Siècle* Nineteenth-Century Palestine

Yuval Ben-Bassat

Similar to other cases of national historiographies in some of the dozens of states inheriting the areas previously ruled by the Ottoman Empire – especially during their formative classical periods – the proto-Zionist¹-Arab encounters in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century are still mostly examined through the paradigms, frameworks and periodizations set by the national discourses – either Zionist or Arab/Palestinian – and analysis is greatly influenced by later national and political agendas.² Hence, 1882, the year in which the proto-Zionist colonization 'officially' started in Palestine, is usually depicted as the point of departure for discussion, and events thereafter are interpreted as stemming from and relating to this point.³ Classical Zionist historiography, for example, largely views the course of events from 1882 onwards in a teleological sense as inevitably leading to the creation of a separate Jewish national entity in Palestine in 1948, and tends to examine events retrospectively and interpret them as stages along an allegedly linear path of development (the various '*aliyot* – waves of 'ascendancy', i.e. immigration). Arab historiography, too, ironically accepts the importance of 1882, and often treats the unfolding of political events in Palestine in the twentieth century, particularly the *nakba* in 1948, as the inevitable outcome of developments that began at the end of the Ottoman era. Thus, the sources are read retrospectively in light of particularistic perceptions.

As a consequence, the late Ottoman era is often described in both historiographies as a period of oppression led by a corrupt regime that consistently violated natural national rights. Zionist historiography focuses on the Ottoman

¹ *Methodological remarks*: The original dates of the documents examined in this study were given in both the *hicri* and the Ottoman *mali* calendars. When converting them into the Gregorian calendar a difference of one day can sometimes occur. I use the term proto-Zionist rather than Zionist because officially the Zionist movement was established only in 1897 and because Jewish colonization activity in this period was predominantly spontaneous and not part of an organized movement.

² Maurus Reinkowski, 'Late Ottoman Rule over Palestine: Its Evaluation in Arab, Turkish and Israeli Histories, 1970-90', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 35/1 (1999): 90-91.

³ For several key examples, see A. L. Tibawi, *A Modern History of Syria, Including Lebanon and Palestine* (London: Macmillan, 1969); Neville J. Mandel, *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); A. W. Kayyali, *Palestine: A Modern History* (London: Croom Helm, 1978); Yosef Gorny, *Zionism and the Arabs, 1882-1948: A Study of Ideology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); Anita Shapira, *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881-1948* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

restrictions on Jewish immigration and colonization activity in Palestine, which are considered sheer repudiation of the Jews on the part of the Ottoman authorities. By contrast Arab historiography often argues that the Ottomans, by allowing Jewish immigration and settlement activity to materialize in the first place, were responsible for the initiation of the conflict in Palestine.⁴ However, these approaches do not fully account for the historical context in which the proto-Zionist - Arab encounters unfolded and tend to treat events as isolated from earlier complex social and economic processes that had lasting influence at both the local and imperial levels. Moreover, because of the overemphasis on the later development of the Jewish-Arab political conflict, especially during the Mandate period and onwards, analyses of the two populations' interactions in the late Ottoman era and events in the Ottoman period in general are marginalized and in many cases only serve as a prelude to considerations on other issues. Hence, the Ottoman period, despite being a formative period in time in the relations between the two populations, is often encapsulated in a brief introduction or an information chapter based on secondary sources, and simply functions as background information for the discussion of other topics and later periods.⁵

Moreover, much of the fast-growing body of studies on Palestine during the late nineteenth century focuses on political, ideological and diplomatic dimensions, and research has predominantly concentrated on elite groups, especially when examining Arab responses to Zionist activity.⁶ With relatively few exceptions, however, the social, cultural and economic dimensions related to the proto-Zionist-Arab encounters and their intricate ties to the political conflict later on are seldom discussed.⁷ This obviously runs counter to dominant trends

⁴ Beshara Doumani, 'Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine: Writing Palestinians into History', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 21/2 (winter 1992): 10-13.

⁵ For instance, see Tibawi, *Modern History*; Yehoshua Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929* (London: Frank Cass, 1974); Gorny, *Zionism*; Muhammad Y. Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Kayyali, *Palestine*; Shapira, *Land and Power*; Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001). The one exception is the period after the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, which has received more attention in research because it is perceived as the seedbed for the bi-national political conflict in Palestine. For instance, see Mandel, *The Arabs and Zionism*. Most of the book focuses on the period between 1908 and 1914, although it deals with the period between 1882 and 1914; for an interesting attempt to embed the discussion on the Jewish-Arab conflict in deeper historical roots, see Barukh Kimmerling and Joel Migdal, *Palestinians: The Making of a People* (New York: Free Press, 1993); Schölch decided to focus on the period preceding 1882 and did not continue into the period of the proto-Zionist-Arab encounters because in his opinion the situation in Palestine completely changed after this year. See Alexander Schölch, *Palestine in Transformation 1856-1882: Studies in Social, Economic and Political Development* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1993).

⁶ Mandel, for example, writes in the introduction to his book that he decided to focus 'almost entirely on the reactions of the political elite among the Arabs to Zionism, because in the long run it was their response and not that of the peasant masses, which was significant'.

⁷ For instance, see Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies:*

in Middle East historical studies since the 1970s which give more weight to social and economic factors over ideological and political ones, in part because of more frequent use of neglected archival materials which reveal the importance of local voices.⁸

In this chapter I argue that ongoing processes, whose roots predate the beginning of proto-Zionist colonization in 1882, and were related to broader developments taking place in the Ottoman Empire at the time, such as the efforts to achieve better centralization and governmental control over the state's resources, register ownership over land and reorganize the tax collection system, had a crucial influence on and ramifications for the development of relations between the two populations and must be taken into consideration when analyzing this subject. The same is true with regard to the Ottoman administration of the regions constituting Palestine and the government's attitude regarding the status of the 'Holy Land', in particular vis-à-vis various manifestations of foreign involvement there, issues which are all too often neglected.

Examining what can be generally defined as the 'Ottoman background' of the proto-Zionist-Arab encounters at both the micro and macro levels makes it possible to expand the debate beyond its customary confines, while negating some of the most common arguments (and stereotypes) in the national historiographies and bypassing the dominant paradigms and periodizations they perpetuate. Concomitantly, such an approach helps delve into frequently neglected bureaucratic, social and economic issues, as well as the question of centre-periphery relations, which all have considerable bearing on later events. Finally, it serves to better contextualize and historicize the discussion by embedding it into its larger (Ottoman) imperial setting, as opposed to more commonly used prisms through which this period is usually researched (e.g. national concerns, European involvement in the 'Holy Land', and the discourse on European colonialism overseas). In this context, it should be recalled that at this time Palestine did not constitute a separate geo-political entity or a recognized, well-defined national state, as is often mistakenly implied in research. Rather, above all it was an Ottoman territory with shifting administrative borders. In the north and the centre it consisted of the *sancaks* of Acre and Nablus, respectively, both part of the *vilayet* of Beirut. In the centre-south it included the independent *Mutasarrıflık* of Jerusalem, lying to the south of the Jaffa-Jerusalem line, which was established in 1872 and was directly governed from Istanbul.

Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906-1948 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

⁸ One of the sources most commonly used today to examine social, legal and economic developments in the Ottoman provinces is the records of the *shari'a* courts. For several examples illustrating the usage of this source in the study of the history of Palestine, see Amnon Cohen, *Jews in the Moslem Religious Court: Society, Economy and Communal Organization in the XVIII Century: Documents from Ottoman Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1996); Mahmoud Yazbak, *Haifa in the Late Ottoman Period, 1864-1914: A Muslim Town in Transition* (Leiden: Brill, 1998); Iris Agmon, *Family and Court: Legal Culture and Modernity in Late Ottoman Palestine* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006).

New archival sources

The picture described above is reflected as well in the nature of the sources used. For the most part, research on the proto-Zionist-Arab encounters and the history of Palestine in general during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, is still largely based on various proto-Zionist and Zionist sources or on European ones. Arabic sources are much more rarely used, in part because of a shortage of primary sources in Arabic about many of the regions where the early encounters between the two populations took place, the result of the destruction of hundreds of Arab villages in 1948 and the dispersal of their population, the fact that the rural Arab population was mostly illiterate and left very little written evidence for future generations,⁹ and the lack of organized Palestinian national archives to date.¹⁰ With regard to Ottoman sources, however, there is still no in-depth research on the context of the proto-Zionist-Arab encounters, their social and economic significance, or their effects on later developments in the relations between the two populations. Also missing is a comprehensive attempt to embed research on Palestine into the larger Ottoman picture, including a broader look at the Ottoman considerations vis-à-vis the 'Holy Land' as well as comparison with other cases of immigration and settlement in the Empire at the time.

For instance, documents from the collections of the Prime Ministerial Ottoman Archive in Istanbul, the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA), such as official correspondence between Ottoman officials and functionaries, can shed new light on Ottoman considerations regarding developments in Palestine as well as bureaucratic and administrative dealings. Similarly, they provide a basis for comparison of the case of Palestine with the general policies of the central government regarding immigration and settlement, and thus contribute to exploring the Ottoman perspective on the events.

Other Ottoman documents, such as petitions submitted to the central Ottoman government by all segments of the Arab population and the correspondence between the Ottoman bureaus concerning these petitions, reveal the transformations this population experienced in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, starting well before the proto-Zionist colonization, transformations that greatly influenced the nature of the encounters between the two populations. The petitions furnish clues to modes of behaviour and capture sentiments and attitudes of the Arab population in regions where massive Jewish colonization later took place as of the early 1880s, such as the coastal plain south-east of Jaffa.¹¹ The petitioners, Bedouins,

⁹ On the literacy rate of the Palestine population at the end of the nineteenth century, see Ami Ayalon, *Reading Palestine: Printing and Literacy 1900-1948* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), ch. 1.

¹⁰ For further details, see Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 89-93.

¹¹ The petitions examined here were sent from the sub-districts, *kazas*, of Jaffa and Gaza in central-southern Palestine, both part of the independent *Mutasarrıflık* of Jerusalem. The two coastal towns of Gaza and Jaffa numbered some eighteen thousand and ten thousand residents respectively in 1880. Jaffa emerged

villagers and urbanites alike, complained about unjust treatment and abuse of power by government officials and influential people, asked for a reduction in their tax burden and demanded redress against dispossession, nullification of alleged illegal changes in the status of land, and equal treatment to that granted to other populations, such as the early Jewish colonists.

While this chapter is by no means an attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the proto-Zionist-Arab encounters in *fin de siècle* nineteenth-century Palestine, its aim is to open up new avenues of research based on relatively neglected Ottoman archival sources which enable both 'bottom-up' as well as 'top-down' perspectives.

Official correspondence

The first kind of documents examined here consists of official correspondence between Ottoman officials regarding Jewish immigration to and colonization activity in Palestine. These include memoranda and official letters, in particular correspondence between the Ministry of the Interior (*Dahiliye Nezareti*) and the *Mutasarrıflık* of Jerusalem, whose area of jurisdiction covered the regions of Jaffa and Gaza in Palestine's central-southern coastal plain. The former coordinated much of the activity of the Ottoman bureaus vis-à-vis the latter, acting on orders from the Sultan, the Grand Vizier and the Council of State, either in response to specific inquiries or based on the spirit of previous decisions.

At the end of the nineteenth century, following several decades of reforms in the Ottoman Empire at both the imperial and provincial levels, many of the general features of a modern bureaucratic state were gradually introduced with varying

as of the mid-nineteenth century as Palestine's major port and its main gate to Europe. It experienced a rapid process of expansion, modernization and development, including the settlement of foreigners in and around the city and the inauguration of numerous new infrastructure projects. Gaza, on the other hand, lost its prominent position as a leading economic center on Palestine's coast in the second half of the nineteenth century and development mostly passed it by. It remained a regional center for its agricultural hinterland but had no real importance in terms of connections with Europe or the other provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Excluding its southern part, most of the region from where the petitions studied in this chapter were sent was not heavily populated. Its western part, along the Mediterranean shore, consisted of dunes and did not include permanent settlements. A few larger villages and towns such as Ramle, Yibna, Isdod and al-Majdal were located on the region's fringes. The heart of the region was home to dozens of small- to moderate-sized Arab villages, consisting mostly of mud brick buildings, whose source of livelihood was subsistence agriculture. Besides Arab villagers, several small semi-sedentary Bedouin groups, who did not possess title deeds to the land where they grazed or resided, were present in the area. Eventually some of them underwent a process of sedentarization. The southern part of the region was exposed to occasional infiltration of Bedouin groups from the Negev desert which often caused great damage to the villages' agricultural crops. About a dozen absentee landlords, in many cases Christians from Jaffa, owned property in Jaffa's vicinity. The region southeast of this city witnessed considerable colonization activity in the last quarter of the century, mainly by proto-Zionist groups. Six Jewish colonies, the 'Judean colonies', were established there between 1882 and 1890, turning it into the region with the most intensive Jewish colonization activity in Palestine at the time.

levels of success to the Empire's Arab provinces, including those which later constituted Mandatory Palestine. As a result, the Ottoman Empire, particularly its bureaucracy, was radically transformed and from a patrimonial system it slowly and gradually developed into a more professional, elaborate, differentiated and institutionalized system, with a clearer division of labour between its branches, rational regulations and greater loyalty to the Sultanate and to office rather than to an individual sultan or patron. The traditional patrimonial aspects of the old bureaucracy did not disappear overnight, and in fact they never completely vanished from the Empire until its final collapse, but they were diminished considerably. Hence, at the practical level, among other things, the reforms led to a clearer division of labour between the military and civilian authorities, a more centralized and stratified bureaucracy, a somewhat more standardized system of tax collection, an agrarian reform, the election of representative bodies in some of the Empire's provinces and cities and the establishment of *nizami* courts with several divisions.

In Palestine as well the reforms led to significant administrative and political changes. After the termination of the short-lived Egyptian occupation in 1840, the Ottoman army gradually subdued all the local warlords and Bedouin tribes that controlled the region's hinterland and periphery.¹² This process was mostly completed by the early 1860s, although in some areas, such as the Negev desert and southern Transjordan, it continued even years later, up to the end of the Ottoman era. Hence, security and order were noticeably improved, and a higher degree of centralization in running governmental affairs was achieved.¹³ This development, which was in part facilitated by investment in infrastructure and means of communication and control (e.g. roads, bridges, telegraph lines, outposts), led to rapid expansion of the settled area and enhanced economic activity.¹⁴ Concomitantly the country witnessed considerable settlement activity by Europeans as of the late 1860s, first by the German Templers and other Western groups and later by proto-Zionist immigrants. *Nizami* courts with several divisions were established in the main towns to replace most of the jurisdiction of the *shari'a* courts, which gradually concentrated on personal and familial issues (e.g. marriages, divorce) and inheritance cases. Administrative representative councils which aided the governors were established in the main towns as well as at the level of the province of Jerusalem.

¹² Schölch, *Palestine in Transformation*, 197-240; Haim Gerber, 'A New Look at the Tanzimāt: The Case of the Province of Jerusalem', in David Kushner, ed., *Palestine in the Late Ottoman Period: Political, Social, and Economic Transformation* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 31.

¹³ For instance, the government tried in the early twentieth century to settle the Bedouins of the Negev and to strengthen its control over Palestine's southern border by establishing the city of Beersheba, the new sub-district of Hafir and the *nahiye* of Maliha, see David Kushner, *A Governor in Jerusalem: The City and Province in the Eyes of Ali Ekrem Bey, 1906-1908* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1995), 105-111 (in Hebrew).

¹⁴ Schölch, *Palestine in Transformation*, 253-266.

These changes notwithstanding, even after the long period of reforms, the Empire still retained some of its earlier features which were poorly adapted to a modern bureaucratic state. In particular, there was a widening gap between normative/declarative policy and practice on the ground. This meant that governmental decisions were only arbitrarily implemented, bribes were still common and personal connections at both the local and imperial levels often made a difference in decision-making processes. Moreover, governmental authority still had limited influence on the daily lives of much of the rural population in many regions of the Empire. In Palestine, for instance, even at the end of the nineteenth century, despite the introduction of modern means of oversight, transportation and communication, there were few governmental agents in rural areas. Representatives of the Empire were positioned in the major cities and towns, but usually did not visit the rural areas except when they accompanied tax collectors, conscripted men into the army, searched for wanted people, acted to prevent the spread of epidemics or investigated crimes. The rural population generally had dealings with governmental officials through the intermediary of the head of the village, the sheikh, and later, towards the end of the Ottoman period, the elected *mukhtar*, and not directly. The latter was in fact considered a government official, the lowest-rank civil servant in the reformed chain of control and command.¹⁵

The nature of the Ottoman administration in Palestine, as reflected in the Ottoman documents, resembled that of a 'split bureaucracy' or rather one that was Janus-like. On the one hand, the Ottoman administrative apparatus operated in a modern, efficient fashion. For instance, investigations were initiated against officials and officers who violated explicit imperial orders and allowed Jews to immigrate to Palestine, purchase land and settle there in return for bribes. Some officials were dismissed or assigned to other positions, while others were even accused of treason against the state (*vatana ihanet*);¹⁶ demolition orders were issued in cases of illegal construction;¹⁷ the Jewish colonists were required to submit detailed blueprints to obtain building permits and each request went

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 238-239.

¹⁶ For examples of investigations of Ottoman officials, see BOA, ZB, 443/40, 18 Muharrem 1313 [11 July 1895] (an order to the *Mutasarrıflık* of Jerusalem to investigate allegations raised by a former police officer who served in Jerusalem concerning several local officials in Palestine who were accused of allowing Jews to disembark in the port of Jaffa despite the prohibition, in return for five liras per person); DH. MKT., 1953/87, 29 Şevval 1309 [26 May 1892] (an order from the Ministry of the Interior in Istanbul to the *Mutasarrıf* of Jerusalem to investigate accusations against Jaffa's *Kaymakam*, Mustafa Hikmet Efendi, who let Jews settle in his district despite clear orders not to do so. More evidence is required in order to be able to fire him since the evidence provided thus far is not enough).

¹⁷ For example, see BOA, DH. MKT., 1362/5, 28 Zilkade 1303 [28 August 1886] (a letter addressed to the Grand Vizier from the Ministry of the Interior, as part of a previous exchange of letters, with regard to illegal Jewish construction work in the vicinity of Jaffa on *miri* land, for which demolition orders were issued. The suggested decision was not to demolish these houses as long as the Jews were made to pay the equivalent amount of tax lost from tithe and land tax, and not to allow any further illegal Jewish construction work on *miri* land).

through a chain of approval at both the local and imperial levels;¹⁸ taxes were levied on each plot of agricultural land on which construction work was planned in order to determine compensation for the loss of agricultural revenues;¹⁹ and lands were designated for specific purposes, which was strictly enforced.²⁰

On the other hand, the Ottoman bureaucracy still left considerable room for intermediaries and informal connections; decisions were almost always open for renegotiation and subject to change, and various leverages were available to pressure the government to make decisions in favour of interested parties. The proto-Zionist colonists and colonization organizations, in particular the administration of Baron Edmond de Rothschild which had intensive dealings with the Ottoman authorities, took advantage of this duality and the ability to influence Ottoman policy through various formal and informal contacts at both the imperial and local levels. The Ottoman documents testify to the vast network of relations that Rothschild himself and his chief administrator in the region, Elie Scheid, established and nurtured with Ottoman officials.²¹ These connections allowed the Rothschild administration to promote the interests of the Jewish colonies, including those which were not directly run by it, represent the colonists to the Ottoman authorities, and exert its influence in cases of conflict between the

¹⁸ For instance, see BOA, I. DFE., 9/1318-B-03, 5 Recep 1318 [29 October 1900] (a proposed decision sent by the Grand Vizier to the Sultan concerning Rothschild's request to set up storage depots for wine from the winery in Rishon le-Zion).

¹⁹ For instance, see DH. MKT., 1489/109, 15 Cemaziyülâhır 1305 [27 February 1888] (a letter to the *Defter-i Hakani* from the Ministry of Interior as part of an extensive correspondence between the Ottoman bureaus regarding a request to erect agricultural buildings in the village of Sarafand al-'Amar by Pir Bin Ibrahim al-Najjar and seven of his friends, Jewish by name, and the evaluation of the taxes levied on this land).

²⁰ For instance, see I. AZN., 19/1313-Z-11, 8 Zilhicce 1313 [21 May 1896] (a draft of a decision prepared by the Council of State and addressed by the Grand Vizier to the Sultan about approving the construction of three synagogues in the Rothschild colonies in the area of Jaffa); see also DH. MKT., 1445/10, 19 Zilhicce 1304 [7 September 1887] (a letter to the *Mutasarrıf* of Jerusalem from the Ministry of the Interior about a request to establish a school in Rishon le-Zion on *vakıf* land and the need to settle the issue of the land status first); DH. MKT., 1484/77, 27 Cemaziyülevvel 1305 [10 February 1888] (a letter from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of the *Evkaf* and to the Ministry of Justice about the same school and the need to pay compensation for the land).

²¹ BOA, DH.MKT., 1530/17, 29 Zilkade 1305 [7 August 1888] (an order to Jerusalem's *Mutasarrıflık* from Istanbul, following a petition by Elie Scheid, to allow Jews who settled before the prohibition on settlement activity came into effect and who accepted Ottoman citizenship, to build their houses, in accordance with the orders of the Sultan); BOA, HR.TO., 531/40, 20 October 1887 (a letter from Elie Scheid to the Grand Vizier, asking him to order the governors of Damascus and Jerusalem to let Jewish colonists who became Ottoman citizens and who were loyal subjects of the empire, buy land and build houses and to stop creating obstacles, in accordance with the Sultan's promises that all the subjects of the Empire deserve equal rights. Scheid also enumerates the benefits the Empire would derive from the Jewish settlement); BOA, DH. MKT., 1475/47, 21 Rebiyülâhır 1305 [6 January 1888] (a letter sent from the Ministry of Interior to the Grand Vizier concerning building permission for local and foreign Jews who came to the 'regions of Syria and Jerusalem' as part of a long correspondence between the Ottoman offices, which started following a petition by Elie Scheid).

colonists and the local Arab population.²²

Similar means of protection were provided to the Jewish colonists by representatives of the European Powers in Palestine, based on various privileges European citizens were entitled to as part of the capitulation agreements. Many of the Jewish immigrants enjoyed the protection of the European Powers under the capitulations, either because they came from Europe or because the European consuls in Palestine took them under their wing as part of their effort to increase their influence in the 'Holy Land'. Hence, the local Ottoman authorities were *a-priori* restricted in their ability to confront the Jewish immigrants, limit their activity or enforce Ottoman law.²³

The colonists took advantage of their privileged status to promote their interests and the colonization project. They used loopholes in the Ottoman administrative system, the connections of several Jewish activists and colonization associations in the Ottoman bureaucracy, and bribes.²⁴ Eventually, despite official opposition to their activities at both the imperial and local levels, the colonists were able to pursue their colonization endeavour, although at a slower pace than they might have desired.²⁵

Still, the correspondence between various Ottoman ministries dealing with the Jewish colonization activity in Palestine reveals the ways in which it is erroneously portrayed in Zionist historiography. There it is often simplistically claimed that the Ottoman authorities were hostile to the first Jewish colonists and violated their basic rights arbitrarily.²⁶ The Ottoman bureaucratic system,

²² Ran Aaronsohn, *Rothschild and Early Jewish Colonization in Palestine* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), 279-281.

²³ For instance, see BOA, DH. MKT., 1458/100, 12 Safar 1305 [30 October 1887] (from the Ministry of the Interior to the Grand Vizier about the difficulty of prohibiting Jewish immigration and settlement activity in Palestine. The English consul, for example, was told by his embassy in Istanbul not to accept any restrictions on Jews who were subjects of England); see also 1505/53, 20 Şaban 1305 [2 May 1888] (a request from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to express its opinion about measures to be taken against illegal Jewish immigration in light of the refusal of the foreign consuls to cooperate with the government on this matter).

²⁴ Interestingly, a few years ago the Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet* published an article about the sources of the conflict in Palestine, including a few documents taken from the Ottoman archives, in which it claims that all the problems there started because Ottoman officials took bribes from two Russian Jews in 1888. See *Hürriyet*, 15 September 2004 ('Filistin Sorununun İlk Sorumluları, 1888'de İki Rus Yahudisi'nden Rüşvet Yiyen Osmanlı Bürokratlarıdır').

²⁵ Many of the colonists gradually decided to accept Ottoman citizenship, rationalizing their decision by their interest in obtaining building permits more easily and avoiding confrontation with the authorities. This phenomenon has not received enough attention in the literature. The prevalence of Ottomanization is mentioned in Ottoman documents as well. For example, see BOA, DH. MKT., 1475/47 (based on information provided by the *Mutasarrıflık* of Jerusalem in 1888 there were 117 Jewish families in the *kazas* of Gaza and Jaffa, consisting of 628 persons, of whom 523 were Ottomans. Possibly the number of Ottoman subjects is inflated. The numbers most probably refer only to the population of the Jewish colonies, and exclude the cities).

²⁶ For instance, see Shulamit Laskov, *The Biluim* (Jerusalem: ha-Sifriyah ha-Tsiyonit, 1979), 241 (Laskov uses the word *gzerot*, which has the connotation of draconian measures, to describe Ottoman policy).

moreover, is simply portrayed as deeply corrupt, malfunctioning and inefficient; one which obstructed the Jewish efforts for no good reason other than the desire to receive more bribes. To a large extent, however, especially given the limited means of control at the Empire's disposal and the large territories under its jurisdiction, the Ottoman bureaucracy functioned in a rather efficient and professional manner. It had certainly improved a great deal and developed into a more modern and well-functioning system compared to the start of the reforms. Thus, Ottoman officials who abused their power and acted in violation of imperial orders were investigated, and those found guilty were punished and dismissed from office, a clearer division of labour was set up between the offices and functionaries dealing with the Jewish immigration and settlement activity, and a hierarchical chain of command was put in place.²⁷

The land-registration files, too, despite the rapid changes in land ownership, the great uncertainty regarding the status of certain lands, and cases of fraud, were relatively well maintained and regularly updated.²⁸ Permissions were required to build new houses and facilities, especially in cases when the land was previously classified as designated for other purposes, for instance, *vakıf* or agriculture, and certain annual revenues were expected from it.²⁹ Hence, Ottoman officials who refused to issue building permits to Jewish colonists or for that matter ordered the deportation of Jews who overstayed their permit in Palestine acted according to regulations and followed instructions given to them down the chain of command, starting at the Empire's highest echelons.³⁰

In this respect, the intervention of official Ottoman representatives in cases of confrontations between Jewish colonists and the Arab population should be examined in light of the often tense relations that prevailed between the Arab rural

²⁷ For instance, see BOA, DH. MKT., 1858/5, 6 Muharrem 1309 [12 August 1891] (the Ministry of the Interior writes to the Grand Vizier about a report it received from the ministry responsible for the Gendarmerie about difficulties in enforcing existing restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine. Permission is required to implement new and better measures since the existing situation will cause problems in the future).

²⁸ For instance, see Israel State Archive (ISA), 83.0/2/376, 1888-1918 (land ownership registrar).

²⁹ For instance, see the extensive correspondence between the various Ottoman ministries regarding the establishment of a few buildings in Rishon le-Zion on land designated as *vakıf*, and the need to reevaluate the taxes on this land. BOA, DH. MKT., 1489/109; 1473/87, 16 Rebiyülâhır 1305 [1 January 1888] (the Ministry of the Interior asks the Grand Vizier about permission to construct buildings on the *vakıf* land); BOA, DH. MKT., 1445/10; 1484/77; 1475/21, 4 Ramazan 1303 [7 June 1886] (Jerusalem is asked to provide information about the construction of villages and a school by foreign Jews near Jaffa).

³⁰ For instance, see BOA, DH. MKT., 1981/45, 8 Muharrem 1310 [2 August 1892] (the Ministry of the Interior notifies various offices about a sultanic decision regarding Jewish immigration to the Empire. Foreign Jews already in the Empire should not be given permission to go to Palestine but they can settle in other places in the Empire where there is a massive Jewish presence. Future immigration should be prevented. The decision was sent to the Grand Vizier and from there to the Ministry of the Interior).

population and the Ottoman government.³¹ In many cases when severe disputes erupted between Jews and Arabs, entire Arab villages or Bedouin groups were punished by the authorities following complaints by the colonists or one of the Jewish colonization organizations.³² The Ottoman authorities were definitely not as hostile towards the Jewish colonists as is often portrayed in Zionist historiography. In fact, more often than not, the Arab population was the one that paid a heavy price when the authorities intervened.³³

Finally, the official Ottoman policy regarding the question of Jewish immigration and settlement activity in Palestine was not to let non-Ottoman Jews settle there.³⁴ Ottoman Jews, on the other hand, were for the most part allowed to do so freely as long as they promised not to facilitate illegal activity by non-Ottoman Jews.³⁵ The Empire's main concern, as expressed by Ottoman officials, was not to create a new national problem in Palestine, similar to the one existing in other parts of the Empire. In this context, the Armenian problem was occasionally mentioned.³⁶ Another important consideration, which is tied to the first, was not to create tensions with the majority of the population of Palestine, which was demonstrating signs of opposition to Jewish activity. Finally, the Empire feared European involvement in the 'Holy Land', which was expected to rise if more Jews arrived. It was more open, however, to the idea of letting Jews settle in central

³¹ About these tense relations against the backdrop of conscription, see Philip Baldensperger, 'The Immovable East', *Palestine Exploration Fund: Quarterly Statement* (1906): 16-18.

³² See Yuval Ben-Bassat, *Local Feuds or Premonitions of a Bi-National Conflict? A Reexamination of the Early Jewish-Arab Encounter in Palestine at the End of the 19th Century*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 2007, chapter five.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ For instance, see BOA, MV 101/14, 19 Cemaziyülâhır 1318 [14 October 1900] (a decision regarding the purchase of 'Artuf's land by five Ottoman Jews who wanted to buy land owned by British citizens). The purchase was authorized by the government after a long correspondence between its various ministries to guarantee that foreign Jews would not settle there. The land was supposedly registered under the name of five local Jews who held Ottoman citizenship; 101/15, 19 Cemaziyülâhır 1318 [14 October 1900] (a decision by the Council of Ministers, *meclis-i vükela*, regarding a petition by Yosef Moyal to allow him to register land in the sub-district of Gaza under his name. Moyal had to guarantee that he would not let foreign Jews settle on this land so as to be able to complete the transaction).

³⁵ BOA, MV 101/14; 101/15.

³⁶ At the official level, the Ottoman Empire was clear about its opposition to the immigration and settlement of Jews in Palestine, openly stating its fear of the creation of a new political problem there. The Sultan reiterated this policy repeatedly in numerous orders he issued when petitions were submitted to him regarding this matter. For instance, see BOA, ID., 868/69421, 1 Muharrem 1300 [12 November 1882] (an imperial decision not to let Jews settle in the land of Syria because of the political damage it would cause and a statement that this policy had already been made clear in the past. The order probably came in response to a question from Jerusalem regarding the arrival in Jaffa of a ship with 180 Jews, which is mentioned there). About officials in the Empire who warned that Jewish activity in Palestine would create a problem similar to the Armenian situation, see BOA, Y. PRK. AZJ., 30/37, 24 Cemaziyülâhır 1312 [22 December 1894] (a letter sent to the Sultan in 1894 by an unknown Ottoman official, complaining about the Grand Vizier, Cevat Paşa, whose subordinates allegedly assisted Baron de Rothschild and Jewish activity in Palestine. The letter warns of the dire consequences of Jewish activity in Palestine for both the Empire's political goals and the local population there).

Anatolia, far away from the borders of Palestine, and realized the advantages of such a policy in terms of international support, increased revenue from taxes, cultivation of free land and the like.³⁷

Petitions to Istanbul

The second kind of Ottoman documents examined here consists of petitions sent by the Arab population to the central Ottoman authorities in Istanbul starting in the mid-1860s. The petitions revolve around several related issues such as the status of land, the evaluation and collection of land tax and the tithe, dispossession, and cases of injustice and abuse of power by officials and influential people. Jewish immigration and colonization activity as of the early 1880s, it must be stressed, is not mentioned very often directly in the petitions, perhaps because it was still rather limited in its scope, but nonetheless there is much information on the climate in which the early encounters took place.

The issue of tax collection was one of the most common complaints in the petitions. The villagers claim that the evaluation of the property and immovable property tax, defined generally as *vergi*,³⁸ they are asked to pay was too high and unrealistic, a situation which has forced them to take loans with very high interest rates,³⁹ or sell all their movable belongings and yields in order to cover the *vergi* expenses.⁴⁰ In other petitions, landowners in the region of Jaffa who claimed they possessed title deeds for their land, complain that they were asked to pay the tithe tax (*öyr*) rather than only the *vergi* tax as in the past.⁴¹ In several of these petitions it is claimed that foreigners in a similar situation are allegedly exempt from this

³⁷ On the attempt to settle Jews in Anatolia, see Siren H. Bora, 'Alliance Israélite Universelle in Osmanlı Yahudi cemaatini tarım sektöründe kalkındırma çalışmaları ve İzmir yakınlarında kurulan bir çiftlik okul: "Or Yehuda"' (Development Efforts in the Agricultural Sector by the Ottoman Jewish Society Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Agricultural School Established Near Izmir: 'Or Yehuda'), *Çağdaş Türkiye Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 1/3 (1993): 387–400.

³⁸ The *Arazi ve Müsakkafat Vergisi* was an annual tax which was introduced during the Tanzimat reforms and was based on 4 per thousand of all immovable belongings, including agricultural land and buildings.

³⁹ BAO, HR. TO., 395/104, 1 Zilhicce, 1308 [8 July 1891] (a joint petition to the Grand Vizier by several villages in the northern Gaza sub-district to get a reduction in the *vergi* tax they were asked to pay).

⁴⁰ BAO, HR. TO., 396/79, 18 Rebiyülâhır 1309 [21 November 1891] (a complaint submitted jointly to the Grand Vizier by the *mukhtars* of eight villages in the area of Masmiyya about the collection of the *vergi* tax from their villages).

⁴¹ For instance, see BOA, HR. TO., 551/81, 14 Temmuz 1290 ([26 July 1874] (a petition by three administrators of *vakıf* land in Ramle to the Grand Vizier against the tax collector who acted against imperial orders and allegedly had ties with the governor of Jerusalem. The petitioners claim that previously the tithe remained in the hands of the *vakıf*'s supervisors); HR. TO., 461/54, 19 Cemaziylâhır 1293 [12 July 1876] (a petition by forty-six orchard owners in the vicinity of Jaffa against the decision to start collecting tithe from them in addition to the *vergi* tax, a decision which, they claim, brought them to the brink of bankruptcy. The issue involved here was probably the government's decision to treat the land in Jaffa as *miri* instead of *mülk*, ignoring the practice which took hold de facto over the years); HR. TO., 557/83, 25 Teşrinievvel 1296 [7 November 1880] (a petition by five people who owned poor quality soil in Jaffa about the decision to collect tithe from their land which was allegedly registered in the *tapu* and for which they claimed they had title deeds on top of the *vergi* tax which they had been paying).

new measure.⁴² Hence, the petitioners ask to change this practice in order for justice to prevail and demand to pay only land tax as in the past.⁴³ Citrus-grove owners from Jaffa also petitioned repeatedly to change a decision to collect tithes from them as opposed to past practices when, according to their claim, they paid only the *vergi* tax.⁴⁴

Changes in the status of lands, which led to higher levies and often exposed the villagers to mistreatment by tax collectors, were another recurrent theme in many of the petitions. Some claims revolve around the contested decision to declare *miri* lands as *vakıf*, while transferring their management to the interested parties.⁴⁵ Others concern changes in the status of *vakıf* lands which were accompanied by associated higher taxes or claims by different parties to have the right to collect the tithes.⁴⁶ In Jaffa dozens of landowners were angered by an attempt on the part of the head of the *tapu* office in Beirut, Zekati Efendi, to use a new land survey as a pretext to change the status of *miri* lands in the town which de facto had gradually become private lands (*mülk*) back to their original status, and hence submitted numerous petitions.⁴⁷

Some of the petitions deal with ownership claims by Bedouin groups who argued that they were dispossessed from lands they had owned and cultivated.⁴⁸ A

⁴² For instance, see BOA, HR. TO., 557/83.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ BOA, HR. TO., 461/54.

⁴⁵ For instance, see BOA, HR. TO., 389/104, 12 Şaban 1301 [7 June 1884] (a petition by a Bedouin group called Arab al-'Awja, located near the Nahr al-'Awja [ha-Yarkon] river against the classification of their land as *vakıf* whose income belongs to the 'Abdulhadi family. The petition was submitted by the sheikh of the group, Muhammad Yusuf Abu Kishk, and two of his companions); and HT. TO., 389/100, 12 Şaban 1301 [7 June 1884] (a petition by the same Muhammad al-Yusuf Abu Kishk, 'the sheikh of Arab al-'Awja and Sawalim[a]', sent together with nine other people. The issue involved here was probably a revival of an old *vakıf* which had laid dormant for many years, to the dismay of the petitioners).

⁴⁶ BOA, HR. TO., 387/61, 29 Rebiyülevvel 1296 [23 March 1879] (the villagers of Sarafand al-Kubra [al-'Amar] complain to the Grand Vizier about the tax collector from Jerusalem named Rabah Efendi [al-Husayni]).

⁴⁷ BOA, HR. TO., 397/24, 24 Nisan 1308 [6 May 1892] (a collective petition to the Grand Vizier signed by dozens of landowners in Jaffa); see also DH. MKT., 1952/58, 26 Şevval 1309 [23 May 1892] (a letter to the *Defter-i Hakani* with an attached petition by the residents of Jaffa against the change in the status of their land and the decision to treat it as *miri* land); HR. TO., 397/86, 24 Temmuz 1308 [5 August 1892] (a petition by Jaffa's *Nekib-ül Eşraf*, together with twenty-five other people, to prevent a new land survey from being conducted. The government wanted to cause lands in Jaffa which over the years had status of *mülk* lands to revert back to their original status as *miri* lands, a move which upset the local landowners); HR. TO., 396/16, 17 Temmuz 1307 [29 July 1891] (a petition sent to the Grand Vizier by fifty-eight landowners in Jaffa about the changes in the status of their land).

⁴⁸ BOA, DH. MKT., 1771/129, 1 Rebiyülevvel 1308 [15 October 1890] (a telegraph to the *Mutasarrıflık* of Jerusalem from the Ministry of the Interior to investigate accusations raised in a petition submitted by Sheikh Ibrahim Sutry from the *nahiye* of Ramle); HR. TO., 395/32, 3 Kânunuevvel 1306 [15 December 1890] (a petition by four members of the Bedouin Abu-Hataba group whose seat is in Khirbat Duran); DH. MKT., 1795/85, 15 Cemaziyülevvel 1308 [27 December 1890] (a letter from the Ministry of the Interior to the *Mutasarrıflık* of Jerusalem about a petition by the Abu Hataba tribe from Khirbat Duran, signed by Hamid Ibn Abu Hataba and his companions).

group of Bedouins from Khirbat Duran, where the Jewish colony of Rehovot was established in 1890, for instance, wrote the following:⁴⁹

Based on this, and since we are from among the Bedouins who reside in these ruins [Khirbet Duran] for many generations and we have nowhere else beside it and no other land to cultivate, and since we have always been from among the most sincere and loyal Bedouins to the exalted and eternal Ottoman state which is responsible for our livelihood without any expectations for returns, and based on its famous justice...and with the hope that we alone will not be from among those who do not receive its justice...we have no other choice but to submit this petition begging... for the issuance of an exalted verdict to leave us in our place of birth [*watana*] and residence according to the current arrangement and not let these Israelites chase us away and prevent us from cultivating the land in a manner which will fulfil their needs and ours, or [else] to issue a verdict to give us a plot of land from the imperial possessions which will be sufficient for our existence and for the livelihood of our families and children.

Many petitions express complaints about illegal takeovers of land and dispossession of the rural population which were facilitated by the alleged cooperation of the local Ottoman authorities, injustices and wrongdoings on the part of tax collectors and corruption at the bureaucratic level with regard to the tax collection system.⁵⁰ In this regard, the petitions often deal with perceived disparities between the orders of the central government regarding issues such as the status of land and tax rates, and their actual implementation on the ground by the local Ottoman authorities. The latter, it is claimed, often refrained from implementing previous orders from the central government, and at times even took opposite measures.⁵¹ Moreover, both the local authorities and the tax collectors did not hesitate to use force to carry out their policy, all tactics which caused great frustration among the rural population.⁵²

Finally, at times, especially in the *kaza* of Gaza, villages joined together to submit petitions about shared concerns. In one highly instructive case, the villagers in the region of Qastina-Masmiyya petitioned together for a reduction of their land tax, and pointed to three recent examples of land transactions in their region which allegedly demonstrated the real value of their land. The first

⁴⁹ BOA, HR. TO., 395/32.

⁵⁰ For instance, see BOA, HR. TO., 387/61; 396/79; 461/54; see also HR. TO. 388/54, 14 Mart 1297 [26 March 1881] (a petition submitted to the Ministry of the Interior by a person named Muhammad al-'Atar regarding the taxes paid by the village of Sarafand al-'Amar in the sub-district of Jaffa. The petitioner claims that whereas in the past the village paid only *vergi* tax now the tax collector takes a fifth of the crops by force); and HR. TO., 551/81.

⁵¹ For instance, see HR. TO., 389/20, 4 Mayıs 1298 [16 May 1882] (a petition by sheikh Faris Abu al-Kishk together with all the farmers of Kaputa and Zağferanya lands).

⁵² For instance, see HR. TO., 388/54; see also HR. TO., 396/79.

case was vacant land (*mahlul*) in the Arab village of Zarnuqa to the north which was sold at an auction (*miizayede*).⁵³ The second was land bought by the Jewish colony of Gedera, also in the vicinity. The third was land bought by rich people whose identity is not disclosed. In all cases, the villagers claimed, the land sold was evaluated at much lower prices than theirs, although the price of these lands should have been similar.⁵⁴ These joint petitions clearly demonstrate the villagers' awareness of developments which were taking place in their vicinity, including specific details regarding Jewish colonization activity. In this regard, it is interesting to see how the villagers phrase their demand for justice from the Sultan:

The owners of land and property in our district, including the Jewish community [*al-taife al-museviyye*] which owns land in this district, were granted an adjustment in the value of their land to the right extent and this was accepted without any hesitation. And is it possible at all that justice will prevail for some and for others? The justice and mercy of our great Sultan, may God bless him, and the mercy of your state includes all the inhabitants of the imperial region equally and this is written in all its just laws.

Analysis of the petitions

Even though the petitions dealt with a variety of topics, as discussed above, in most cases they were directly connected to broader processes taking place in the Empire at the time, such as the efforts to systemize and reorganize the collection of taxes and the land system. During the second half of the nineteenth century, as part of the general reforms in the Ottoman Empire and the effort to revive and strengthen the hold of the central government over the provinces, a series of new bureaucratic, fiscal and administrative measures were carried out in a lengthy process that was implemented unevenly in various parts of the Empire. One key measure was 'the registration of all lands in the land registry office, in the name of the actual possessors of the right of usufruct (*tasarruf*). A no less important consideration was the wish to consolidate the state's rights and privileges over the land, which legally, of course, belonged to it as *miri*-land'.⁵⁵ Other measures included a reorganization of the tax collection system and various administrative changes aimed at strengthening governmental control and making it more efficient. In Palestine the reforms dramatically transformed the lives of

⁵³ BOA, HR. TO., 395/104; see also 396/79; 395/60, 29 Kânunusani 1306 [10 February 1891]; 395/61, 5 Şubat 1306 [17 February 1891] (a group of four petitions jointly submitted by villages in the Gaza sub-district to the Grand Vizier to reduce the amount of the *vergi* tax they were due to pay. Interestingly, although the petitions are clearly related to each other there are still differences in the number of villages submitting each petition).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Haim Gerber, *Ottoman Rule in Jerusalem, 1890-1914* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1985), 199.

the agriculturally based population and the nature of its interaction with the state. The latter was working to restore and tighten its control over the 'Holy Land' in light of the growing international attention after the reinstatement of Ottoman rule in the early 1840s.

The petitions from Palestine provide us with a unique opportunity to examine how the Ottoman reforms and efforts at centralization influenced Palestine's rural population and how it perceived and reacted to them. The petitions portray a society in the midst of a vast process of transformation, which was largely dictated from above (and outside), and was accompanied by considerable misconduct on the part of the local Ottoman bureaucracy and influential individuals who at times flaunted the government's official policy and took advantage of their power and influence. Moreover, they demonstrate the widespread social tension that was prevalent among the Arab population, that encompassed all its segments. Following the new Ottoman land law of 1858 and the effort to register the usage of state land under the name of specific owners, at a time of rapid commercialization of the land which increasingly became a commodity with a market value, a new group of landowners emerged in the Levant. They were able to acquire large tracts of land, often in dubious ways at the expense of the rural population. The various hardships which the rural population encountered are clearly reflected in the petitions, particularly conflicts with influential city dwellers who often served as tax collectors or held various positions within the Ottoman bureaucracy. The rural population repeatedly complained about the conduct of these influential people, who abused their power in collaboration with the local Ottoman authorities. Consider, for example, the next quote:⁵⁶

In 1292 [1875], after an imperial order concerning the collection of the tithe was received, fixing the rate that our villages had to pay at twenty [thousand] kuruş, and even though the [land of the] this village is a *vakıf* land administered by the state [*evkaf-ı mazbuta*], a member of the Meclis-i Temyiz [Court of Appeal]⁵⁷ of Jerusalem, Naqib Zada Rabah Efendi [al-Husayni], claimed that he had received [the right to collect taxes] from the administrator [*mutevveli*] of *vakıf* Sinan Paşa may God bless him. Based on his claim, the district of Jerusalem granted him the collection of the tithe but despite this decision this person was not content and collected from your slaves another tithe so that the total collected from us reached a fifth [of our income]. Due to the fact that the person discussed is from the ranks of the influential [people] and his relatives serve in governmental offices, each time that we submitted a petition to the district of Jerusalem against him, they hid it and moreover sent the police to chase us out of Jerusalem.

⁵⁶ BAO, HR. TO., 396/79.

⁵⁷ The reference here is probably to the district's *nizami* court in its capacity as a court of appeal for lower instances.

The petitions also help broaden the confines of the classic debate in the literature on the proto-Zionist-Arab encounters as to whether or not dispossession of the Arab rural population by the first Jewish colonists indeed took place.⁵⁸ Even though direct cases of dispossession were very rare at the time,⁵⁹ the rise of a group of large landowners in Palestine in the second half of the nineteenth century played an important role in facilitating the Jewish settlement enterprise as of the early 1880s. In most cases these landowners were those who sold land to the first Jewish colonists.⁶⁰ The land on which the six Judean colonies southeast of Jaffa were established, for example, was mostly purchased from landowners residing in Jaffa (for instance, the al-Dajani and Rok families). The petitions shed light on the processes that contributed to the emergence of this group of landowners and allowed it to gain possession of large tracts of land in Palestine's lowlands at times at the expense of the rural population. The latter's inability to pay the *vergi* tax and repay the money it had to borrow to cover its expenses, abuse of power by influential people, corruption, arbitrary decisions and mistreatment by the local authorities, disparities between the orders of the central government and the local authorities and between various Ottoman bureaus, and the government's ignorance or indifference towards longstanding local practices and its insistence on carrying out the written law to the letter, eventually all led the rural population to lose much of its lands. These lands became the property of the newly emerged group of landowners, in many cases urbanites from prominent families who resided in the region's major towns such as Jaffa and Jerusalem, whereas the former owners often continued cultivating the land as tenants until it was later sold.⁶¹

In this regard, the Jewish colonists who became part of the complex social fabric of the region as of the early 1880s, arrived at a time when changes in the agrarian system were already well underway, as reflected clearly in the petitions. At times the colonies needed to cope with the effects of these ongoing changes, which left many issues contested and unresolved (e.g. ownership of land, borders of plots, rights to use resources such as water and grazing grounds). Thus, some of the Arab rural population's objections regarding them were exacerbated by ongoing developments and processes whose roots went back a decade or two earlier. Many of the daily clashes between the two populations during the early years of Jewish colonization over issues such as borders of plots, grazing and water rights, and even cases of theft and intentional damage to fields must be interpreted against this backdrop rather than being merely viewed as 'cultural

⁵⁸ For one important example, see Arieh Avneri, *The Claim of Dispossession: Jewish Land-Settlement and the Arabs 1878-1948* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1984).

⁵⁹ Kimmerling and Migdal, *Palestinians*, 23.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 15-17; Ruth Kark and Michal Oren-Nordheim, *Jerusalem and Its Environs: Quarters, Neighborhoods, Villages, 1800-1948* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 219-220.

misunderstandings'.⁶²

At the same time, the petitions do not conform to the stereotypical picture found in the literature of the Arab rural population of Palestine as passive, 'primitive' or lacking the ability to protect and promote its interests and cooperate with other factions, as though each village was an autonomous entity. The massive submission of petitions, as well as their content and persistent demand for justice from the central government demonstrates that the leaders of the Arab rural population (*mukhtars*, sheikhs, village notables and officials such as local imams) were not passive at all. With the help of professional petition writers, *arzuhalçiler*, whose services they hired, they acted vis-à-vis the central government, presumably in the name of larger groups, using the methods at their disposal to protect their rights and attempt to change their situation. The petitioners, moreover, did not hesitate to complain to the central Ottoman government in Istanbul about the conduct of the local authorities in Palestine,⁶³ and did not fear their reprisal.

Another striking feature of these petitions is the existence of inter-communal connections among the Arab rural population, as mentioned above. These connections, which have thus far received only scant scholarly attention, are crucial for understanding later developments in the relations between the Arab rural population and the first Jewish colonists who settled in the region.⁶⁴ Villages which came together to sign joint petitions also regularly exchanged information through previously existing social networks about the Jewish colonization activity in the region and the various clashes they had with the Jewish colonists, as seen in the case of the land of the colony of Gedera which is mentioned in one of the joint petitions.⁶⁵ Thus, the oft-made claim in the literature, especially in Zionist classical historiography needs to be reexamined, in particular that the local clashes between the two populations during the early years of Jewish colonization stemmed simply from cultural misunderstanding or quarrels over natural resources such as land,

⁶² For instance, the Arab village of Qatra and the Jewish colony of Gedera clashed several times in the years following the colony's establishment in 1884. The immediate cause of these clashes was damage to the colony's fields by herdsmen from the village. However, an examination of the history of the land on which the colony was established reveals that a few years earlier the village had lost around 3,000 Ottoman *dönüms* – one *dönüm* equals 0.9193 metric dunam – due to debts. These ended up in the hands of a Frenchman named Philbert, who later sold land to the Jews. Until the arrival of the colonists, the villagers continued to cultivate their former land as tenants and for all intents and purposes still viewed it as theirs. This fact largely explains their opposition to the arrival of the Jews and the underlying reason behind the clashes between the two groups.

⁶³ For instance, see 387/61.

⁶⁴ See Ben-Bassat, *Local Feuds or Premonitions of a Bi-National Conflict?*, ch. 6.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

water and grazing rights, and were devoid of any regional implications.⁶⁶

By the same token, the petitions further contribute to our understanding of later developments in the Jewish colonies and the complex and ambivalent relations they developed with the Arab rural population in their vicinity, especially during the early years of colonization, relations which included many aspects of cooperation alongside numerous cases of confrontation.⁶⁷ To cite just one particularly illuminating example, the tithe of one plot of land located in the centre of the colony of Rishon le-Zion, some fifteen kilometres southeast of Jaffa, was attributed to Sinan Paşa *vakıf* and its revenues supported a school (*medrese*) in Damascus.⁶⁸ The colony did not receive a permit to build a school and a synagogue on this land despite extensive correspondence with the Ottoman authorities. As a result, Rishon le-Zion's development was delayed until a solution was found for the status of the land.⁶⁹

An examination of the history of this plot reveals that the adjacent village of Sarafand al-Kubra submitted petitions to the Grand Vizier in 1879, in which it complained about the change in the status of Sinan Paşa *vakıf* in the village and about Rabah Efendi (al-Husayni), an influential person from Jerusalem, the son of the city's *nakibüleşraf* (who himself served in this post) and a member of the district's court of appeal, who abused his power and claimed he had been authorized to collect the village's tithe.⁷⁰ The villagers claimed that on top of the *vergi* tax they were paying, they were also forced by the tax collector to pay a fifth of their crops (*khums*), i.e. two tithes, a situation which led some of the villagers to flee their homeland (*vatan-ı aslımı terk*) and go elsewhere (*diyar-ı ahara firar etmek*), and turned the rich people of the village into paupers who were in need of charity:⁷¹ 'The rich people in our village have become utterly poor and they need alms, and for the same reason some of the people of the village have even had to leave their original place of birth and flee to other lands'.

⁶⁶ For several representatives of this view, see Yaakov Ro'i, 'Jewish-Arab Relations in the First Aliyah Settlements', in Mordechai Eliav, ed., *The First Aliyah*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1981), 245-268 (in Hebrew); Yosef Lamdan, 'ha-'Arvim vaha-Tsiyonut, 1882-1914' (The Arabs and Zionism, 1882-1914), in Israel Kollat, ed., *The History of the Jewish Community in Eretz-Israel since 1882*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Israeli Academy for Sciences and Humanities, 1989), 216-218 (in Hebrew); Shapira, *Land and Power*.

⁶⁷ See Ben-Bassat, *Local Feuds*, chs. 4, 5.

⁶⁸ Ya'aqov Shim'oni, *The Arabs of Eretz-Yisrael* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1947), 86-90; see also ISA, 83.0/2/19 (*vakıf* revenues Jaffa: *vakıf* of Sarafand al-'Amar and 'Uyun Qara).

⁶⁹ BOA, DH. MKT, 1484/77 (correspondence between the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Endowments regarding the establishment of a school on *vakıf* land in Rishon le-Zion); DH. MKT., 1445/10 (regarding the difficulty of establishing a school on *vakıf* land in Rishon le-Zion); see also I. AZN., 19/1313.Z.11.

⁷⁰ BOA, HR. TO., 387/61.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*; for an analysis of these terms, see Haim Gerber, "'Palestine" and Other Territorial Concepts in the 17th Century', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 30 (1998): 563-572.

Interestingly, the villagers note that they tried to approach the governor of the Jerusalem district to complain about their mistreatment by the influential tax collector, but the police forced them to leave the city.⁷² Eventually, a few years later, part of the land of Sinan Paşa *vakıf* made its way to the hands of the Jewish colonists who established the colony of Rishon le-Zion in 1882.⁷³ The colonists, however, could not build on this land until they successfully completed the long and complicated process of changing its status, and paid compensation for the loss of agricultural land.⁷⁴

Conclusion

In order to embed the discussion on proto-Zionist-Arab encounters in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century into a broader historical context, it is important to examine the Ottoman framework in which Jewish-Arab relations unfolded, a framework both Arab and Zionist historiographies often fail to address. One cannot understand these encounters without dwelling on the huge transformation in the Ottoman bureaucratic and agrarian systems in the second half of the nineteenth century, since the processes and developments which started years before 1882, at both the imperial and local level, had a crucial impact on them. Failing to do so may lead to research which lacks the necessary historical roots. Such an approach is particularly important in order to detach debate from the national narratives and paradigms and help avoid a teleological interpretation of the events under study, as though they were part of a linear path of development necessarily leading to a certain outcome.

Concomitantly, it is useful to situate the debate in terms of more global developments taking place in the Empire at the time. For instance, much can be learned from comparing the proto-Zionist-Arab encounters with other cases of immigration and settlement in the Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth century, such as the Circassian settlement in Transjordan, the Houran and the Golan Heights.⁷⁵ The Circassian case resembles Jewish settlement activity in Palestine in many ways, while considerably diverging from it in others. Future research should explore the differences between these two groups that settled in the Ottoman Empire in this period, one with the government's support and approval and one against its will, and determine whether this feature made a difference in the relations which they developed with the local population in their vicinity.

Finally, the survey presented in this chapter highlights the abundance of understudied Ottoman materials available for researchers examining the proto-

⁷² BOA, HR. TO, 387/61.

⁷³ Most of the land purchased by Rishon le-Zion's colonists during the early years of colonization was bought from Musa and Mustafa al-Dajani, two Arab brothers from nearby Jaffa, who took possession of large tracts of land in the region.

⁷⁴ For instance, see BOA, DH. MKT. 1445/10; I. AZN. 19/1313-Z-11.

⁷⁵ See Ben-Bassat, *Local Feuds*, ch. 7.

Zionist-Arab encounters in the Ottoman context. Beyond the issue of newly studied sources, there is a great need to integrate different fields of research on this topic (i.e. the history of the Ottoman Empire and its provinces, Jewish and Arab histories, and the vast literature about the Yishuv). Combining insights from different disciplines and approaches could help reveal the complexity of events and contribute to a broader and more nuanced understanding of the early encounters and their implications for future developments.

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1445/10, 19 Zilhicce 1304 [7 September 1887]

1458/100, 12 Safar 1305 [30 October 1887]

1473/87, 16 Rebiyülâhır 1305 [1 January 1888]

1475/21, 4 Ramazan 1303 [7 June 1886]

1475/47, 21 Rebiyülâhır 1305 [6 January 1888]

1484/77, 27 Cemaziyülevvel 1305 [10 February 1888]

1489/109, 15 Cemaziyülâhır 1305 [27 February 1888]

1505/53, 20 Şaban 1305 [2 May 1888]

1530/17, 29 Zilkade 1305 [7 August 1888]

1771/129, 1 Rebiyülevvel 1308 [15 October 1890]

1795/85, 15 Cemaziyülevvel 1308 [27 December 1890]

1858/5, 6 Muharrem 1309 [12 August 1891]

1952/58, 26 Şevval 1309 [23 May 1892]

1953/87, 29 Şevval 1309 [26 May 1892]

1981/45, 8 Muharrem 1310 [2 August 1892]

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387/61, 29 Rebiyülevvel 1296 [23 March 1879]

388/54, 14 Mart 1297 [26 March 1881]

- 389/20, 4 Mayıs 1298 [16 May 1882]
 389/100, 12 Şaban 1301 [7 June 1884]
 389/104, 12 Şaban 1301 [7 June 1884]
 395/32, 3 Kânunuevvel 1306 [15 December 1890]
 395/60, 29 Kânunusani 1306 [10 February 1891]
 395/61, 5 Şubat 1306 [17 February 1891]
 395/104, 1 Zilhicce, 1308 [8 July 1891]
 396/16, 17 Temmuz 1307 [29 July 1891]
 396/79, 18 Rebiyülâhır 1309 [21 November 1891]
 397/24, 24 Nisan 1308 [6 May 1892]
 397/86, 24 Temmuz 1308 [5 August 1892]
 461/54, 19 Cemaziyülâhır 1293 [12 July 1876]
 531/40, 20 October 1887
 551/81, 14 Temmuz 1290 [26 July 1874]
 557/83, 25 Teşrinievvel 1296 [7 November 1880]

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- ID., 868/69421, 1 Muharrem 1300 [12 November 1882]
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- 101/14, 19 Cemaziyülâhır 1318 [14 October 1900]
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443/40, 18 Muharrem 1313 [11 July 1895]

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