

# From Provincial Town to Metropolis

Jerusalem in the Nineteenth Century



By Issam Nassar

The nineteenth century was a time of great transformation in Palestine, in general, and Jerusalem, in particular. To be more precise, what is meant by the nineteenth century in our case is the period that spans from the attempt

of Napoleon to conquer Palestine in 1799, to the collapse of Ottoman rule in the country in 1918. During this period, Palestine was transformed from a backdrop in the empire to a vibrant region with a growing economy, complex administration, and sophisticated cultural life. From defending northern Palestine against the French occupation to the demise of the Egyptian rule in 1840, the country changed hands internally and externally. Its population doubled from 350,000 around the turn of the nineteenth century to close to 700,000 just before the start of the Great War in 1914. The population of Jerusalem at the turn of the century was only around 8,000, but by its end, it grew to close to 60,000; a growth rate that points to the amazing increasing significance of the city.

The long century opened with the victory of the *wali* (governor) of Sidon, the Bosnian Ahmed Pasha al-Jazzar – which means the butcher – who ruled Palestine from Acre until his death in 1804. Another significant event that took place early in the century was the revolt by the tribal leader Ibrahim Abu Ghosh against the *wali* of Damascus, Mustafa Pasha, who planned to garner extra taxation on the pilgrimage caravans that went through Palestine. In 1826, the notables of Jerusalem led a revolt that was suppressed by the authorities in Damascus and Istanbul. In 1831, the Egyptian forces under the leadership of Ibrahim Pasha arrived in Bilad al-Sham, including Palestine. The decade of Egyptian rule brought some modernizing steps and opened up Palestine to foreign interests, but it also faced serious opposition from local landed leaders starting around 1834. By the time the Egyptian control of Palestine came to an end, the country had its first European consulate – the British consulate in 1838 – and a more tolerant attitude towards the Christian religious communities prevailed.

When Palestine reverted to Ottoman rule in 1840, the empire was in a process of reorganization, known as the *tanzimat*. During this period that lasted until 1876, new laws were being implemented, including a new land law in 1858 (that is still applicable today), a citizenship law in 1869, a constitution, and a parliament. In 1867, Jerusalem was among the first Ottoman cities to form a municipal council.

Still, an important milestone in the situation in Palestine was connected to the interference of the European powers. This became apparent during the Crimean War (1853–56) that was fought between Russia and the Ottomans, and supported by the French and the British, which was one, but perhaps not the most important, of the reasons for that war. The conflict arose over the Sultan granting rights to France's Napoleon III over holy sites in Palestine that were under the control

**Between Napoleon's attempt to conquer the Holy Land and the beginning of WW I, the population of Palestine doubled from 350,000 to 700,000, whereas the number of Jerusalem's inhabitants grew from 8,000 to 60,000.**

of the Orthodox Church. Conflict arose in Jerusalem and Bethlehem over the two historical churches of the Holy Sepulcher and the Nativity. The Russian Tzar Nicholas I "retaliated by sending a mission to recover the Greek Orthodox rights."<sup>1</sup> When the conflict broke out in the Black Sea between the Russians

■ Jaffa Gate, Jerusalem, in the nineteenth century. Photo courtesy of Munir Alawi.



and the Ottomans in 1853, the issue of the holy sites in Palestine was heavily exploited by Russia, which had assumed the role of the protector of the Orthodox Christian subjects of the empire through a broad interpretation of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca of 1774. France claimed a similar right, as a defender of the Catholics in the empire,

based in Jerusalem and under the direct control of the central government in Istanbul. The new mutessarifat of Jerusalem included the subdistricts of Jaffa, Gaza, Hebron, and Bir Saba', Nazareth being added at a later date. The subdistricts of Nablus and Acre were not included but were placed as part of the mutessarifat of Beirut.

result. As Omar es-Saleh observed when he moved to Jerusalem in 1898: "I saw horse-driven carriages for hire, driving in broad avenues asphalted and leading to Nablus, Jaffa, Hebron and Jericho."<sup>iii</sup> The economy of Palestine was growing with the influx of tourists and visitors from Europe, thanks to the steamships, arriving at the ports of

**The Tanzimat Reforms of the Ottoman Empire brought new laws and regulations, some of which are still in effect today.**



■ A panoramic view of Jerusalem in the nineteenth century. Photo courtesy of Yasser Barakat Gallery.

based on its capitulation agreements with the sultanate. Hence, changes in the rights and duties regarding church property and custodianship were quick to become an international issue after the Catholics placed a Latin star in the manger in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, thus challenging the Orthodox claim to the site. To this day, the Status Quo agreement regarding holy places is in effect and continues to be observed.<sup>ii</sup> However, the significant point relates to the fact that the internal affairs of Palestine were now an issue with France, Russia, and Britain, which were directly involved in what ought to be seen as local matters. Meanwhile, on the internal Ottoman level, a process of reorganizing and modernizing the administration of the empire was at its peak with the various Tanzimat Reforms mentioned above. The new centralized system of administration weakened the traditional landed rulers of Palestine, but at the same time the land law strengthened their hold on lands at the expense of the peasantry. The new administrative structure removed Palestine from being part of the *villayet* (district) of Damascus and created an independent administration

Part of the reorganization was the redrawing of district boundaries. In the case of Palestine, more specifically the district of Jerusalem, placing it under the direct authority of the Sublime Porte in Istanbul allowed for more effective decision-making while also providing the chance for European empires to exert influence on the internal affairs of Palestine. Still, the new status of the mutessarifat increased its internal organization. Jerusalem would be second to Istanbul to form a municipal council around 1874, and when the constitution was introduced in 1876 and a parliament (*majlis al-mabouthan*) was established, the city sent one of its citizens to represent the district: Yusuf Dhia' al-Khalidi (1842–1906), Jerusalem's first mayor. However, the sultan was quick to dissolve the parliament and suspend the constitution in its infancy. Still, the elevated status of the district of Jerusalem, along with the influx of European pilgrims and tourists in the second half of the century paved the way, partially, for the development and expansion of cities, especially Jerusalem. Paved lit streets, sanitation, and a booming economy were the

Jaffa and Haifa. This gave rise to the transportation economy that fascinated Omar es-Saleh, and brought about major growth in the tourist industry and in the sale of religious paraphernalia, souvenirs, and postcards from the Holy Land. New hostels were built to accommodate tourists, and road safety increased between cities and towns. The opening of a railroad line between Jerusalem and Jaffa in 1892 – through which the traveler could connect to Istanbul or the Hijaz – only added to the

sense of safety among the travelers. The pilgrims and tourist markets were not limited to the main cities, but even small villages joined in to reap the benefits. As Wasif Jawharriyeh noted in his memoirs:

The Russian pilgrims went around the Holy Land on foot, for example walking from Jerusalem to Jericho to the River Jordan and back, although some of them were over eighty or ninety years of age. Wherever they happened to arrive, they would sit to drink tea on the side of the main roads. Many families in our country depended on these pilgrims for their living, selling them tea, sugar, bread, cheese, and meat, earning large sums of money which sufficed them for the whole year.<sup>iv</sup>

■ Jaffa Road, heading towards Jaffa Gate, Jerusalem. Library of Congress.





■ Jerusalem in nineteenth century, Photo courtesy of Munir Alawi.

Despite the despotic rule of Sultan Abdulhamid II in the last quarter of the century, the pace of life was changing in dramatic, and perhaps exciting, ways. Palestine was entering the age of modernity, albeit slowly. Jerusalem moved from a small provincial town in the early years of the century to a metropolis, being a center of government, learning, and diplomatic activities by the end of the century. Jaffa was transformed into an important port city with a large number of steamers arriving each year – 242 in 1882 alone. The city witnessed major growth in the production of oranges, which were exported to Anatolia starting in 1840, and later on

**Increased centralization in the mid-nineteenth century weakened the role of traditional rulers while strengthening their hold of the land at the expense of the peasantry.**

to Europe. Various investors from other cities in Palestine, such as Nablus and Jerusalem, opened branches of their businesses in Jaffa.<sup>v</sup> Public schools also opened in various parts of the empire, including Palestine, alongside the earlier missionary schools that had existed for decades. In 1900, the municipal council of Jerusalem was composed of five elected members, three Muslims, a Christian, and a Jew, according to one consular report, thus representing the city's three religious communities. When the constitutional revolution took place in the Ottoman Empire in 1908, Palestine celebrated the news as well, with huge ceremonies in Jerusalem and Jaffa. Jawhariyeh noted in his memoirs, "When the Ottoman coup d'état took place in Istanbul in July 1908, there was much jubilation among government officials, and more so amongst Arab people who labeled it the 'Coup of Freedom' that would bring them 'freedom, justice, and equality.'"<sup>vi</sup>

At the same time, after decades of Zionist Jewish immigration to Palestine, the Palestinians became more aware of the Zionist plans for the future of Palestine. Jerusalem's mayor, Yousef Dhia al-Khalidi, even exchanged letters with the founder of political Zionism, Theodor Herzl, in 1899 in which he demanded that Herzl leave Palestine

to its people. Concerns about Jewish immigration were apparent in the writings from the time, including newspaper editorials. Tensions between Palestinians and Jewish immigrants were building mostly in the countryside, with conflict over land purchased by the colonies from absentee landlords that was leading to the eviction of the peasantry.<sup>vii</sup> The seeds of the conflict to come were being sown at the time.

The last decade of the long century was hard on Palestine internally. The Ottomans were at war from 1911 until 1918. Starting with the Balkan Wars (1911–1913), through the Libyan War (1913), and ending with the Great War (1914–1918). The Ottoman economy suffered greatly as a result of the wars, and productivity was low. Being part of the Ottoman world, Palestine was affected as well. With the entry of the Ottomans into WWI in 1914, the economic condition in the country deteriorated, especially in light of the war economy. Young men (the working force) were conscripted into the army to fight abroad, and deforestation due to the need for wood to run the trains, heavy taxation, and famine were the order of the day. The great famine during the war resulted partly from the French and British blockade of the

**Jerusalem became head of a mutessarifat (district) in the 1870s, forming a municipal council in 1874. It introduced a constitution and formed a parliament in 1876 – soon after to be suspended and dissolved by the Ottoman sultan.**

east Mediterranean waters, but also coincided with the untimely arrival of the locust in 1915 that devastated the agriculture of the entire Syrian region. Needless to say, the war years were harsh and remain the population's last memories of Ottoman rule to this day.

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<sup>i</sup> Andrew Lamber, "The Crimean War: The Vienna Settlement," BBC History, available at [https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/crimea\\_01.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/crimea_01.shtml).

<sup>ii</sup> Conflicts over control of the Christian holy sites, particularly in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, had arisen repeatedly. In 1757, an Ottoman firman (decree) addressed the issue, outlining rights and responsibilities, followed up by confirmations in the early and mid-nineteenth century. The Treaty of Berlin, however, made the earlier agreement international, as one article in the agreement explicitly reaffirms it.

<sup>iii</sup> Cited in Salim Tamar, "The Last Feudal Landlord in Palestine" (in Arabic), *Majalat al-Dirasat al-Falastinyeh*, 54 (Spring 2003), p. 97.

<sup>iv</sup> Wasif Jawhariyeh, Salim Tamari, and Issam Nassar, eds., *The Storyteller of Jerusalem: The Life and Times of Wasif Jawhariyeh, 1904–1948* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Olive Branch Press, 2014), p. 80.

<sup>v</sup> For further information, see Mahmoud Yazbek, "Jaffa Before the Nakba," in *Majalat al-Dirasat al-Falastinyeh*, 93 (Winter 2013), pp. 36–49.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70.

<sup>vii</sup> Alan Dowty provides many examples of conflict between the colonists and the peasants, particularly in chapter four of *Arabs and Jews in Ottoman Palestine*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019.