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Identities and Migrations: a Borderless Middle East's Perspective

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New sources have been recently released fostering the thesis according to which a significant percentage of the Palestinian Arabs were originally immigrants from Egypt and other neighbouring countries. Their histories, as highlighted by some scholars, are largely unknown and continue to be ignored. This article aims to shed light on these aspects, assessing them from a borderless Middle East's perspective. The aim is to show the process through which a local complex reality has been simplified and denied in its continuity.

Introduction

In a recent academic article published by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, professor Gideon M. Kressel (Ben-Gurion University) and the late Middle East historian Reuven Aharoni (Haifa University) argued «that a significant portion of the Palestinian Arabs came from Egypt» and that the histories of «immigrants who have arrived in Palestine from its neighboring Middle Eastern lands are largely stored in families' memorials», or mentioned in documents that «have been left to yellow in unexamined archives» (Kressel, Aharoni 2013, 36).

The two authors developed their study starting with a brief survey of

existing written evidence regarding the emigration of Bedouin and peasants from Egypt and the trail they left leading to Palestine. Face-to-face meetings in homes enabled them to view first-hand early family photos of immigrants in their initial homes in various areas of the region. They opened and concluded their work asking «why was documentation or even mention of this migration process, which transformed so many Egyptians into Palestinians, so paltry in recent generations?» (6).

Aharoni and Kressel's findings are not new. For instance, through an analysis of migratory processes registered throughout the course of the 1800s and in the period of the British mandate, Joan Peters's *From time immemorial* (1984) depicted the Arabs of Palestine as «foreigners» coming from «outside areas» (Peters 1985, 249). In line with what had been published few years earlier by Arieh L. Avneri¹, Peters tried to demonstrate that Palestine was a semi-desert land and that the inhabitants the first Zionists encountered were nothing but «travelers» attracted by the Jewish immigration. Many other works, with similar claims, have been published in more recent years.

Yet, Aharoni and Kressel's study is particularly relevant in two respects. First, it reflects a growing interest among Israeli and international scholars on these issues: it would be therefore a mistake to underestimate their theses, or to confine them to a negligible circle of 'provocateurs'. Second, it is based mainly on several little known sources (oral narratives collected among Palestinian families and documents produced mainly by Israeli and British organizations).

Despite what has just been argued, their research tends to ignore a wide range of sources and arguments. This article aims to provide a different understanding on the topic of identities and migrations in late Ottoman times. The first paragraph provides the historical regional context

¹ Avneri's book was published in Hebrew in 1980. It was translated to English in 1984: «The few Arabs who lived in Palestine a hundred years ago when Jewish settlement began, were a tiny remnant of a volatile population, which had been in constant flux [...]» (Avneri 1984, 11).

in which Aharoni and Kressel's claims can and should be evaluated. The second part is focused on the issue of immigration and emigration in late Ottoman Eastern Mediterranean. The third paragraph turns the attention on the «symptoms» of a Palestinian proto-national awareness in the context of a borderless region, while the fourth one analyzes the specific case of the «Southern Syrian claim». The conclusions linger on the risks of using «Western lens» while approaching and analyzing non-Western contexts.



Local inhabitants harvesting olives in the Nablus area, late 19th century (C.E. Raven, Palestine in picture, Heffer, Cambridge 1929).

A fluid region: setting the stage

Unlike Medieval societies, characterized by a sum of particularisms, the era of the nation-states tended toward the homogenization of diversities. What in modern Europe was often indicated as a “nation” (from the latin *natus*, to be born) presupposed in fact a feeling of belonging to a defined community that differed, as a result of “mutual contact” between distinct groups, at a linguistic, cultural and territorial level. It

presumed, in other words, a cleavage between “us” and “them”². Such a «border» was much more nuanced in the Eastern Mediterranean. In many documents of the 1700 and 1800s it is possible to find a distinction between *ibn ‘Arab* (Arab son) and *ibn Turk* (Turkish son). This means that often the local populations considered the non-Arabic-speaking Turks as foreigners. At the same time, the origin from a certain village, the *hamūla* (clan) of belonging and the local customs were all factors which marked a certain distinction between the proto-nations present in the region. As Jacob L. Burckhardt (1818-1897) noted in 1822, «it would be an interesting subject for an artist to portray accurately the different character of features of the Syrian nations [...] a slight acquaintance with them enables one to determine the native district of a Syrian, with almost as much certainty as an Englishman may be distinguished at first sight from an Italian or an inhabitant of the South of France» (Burckhardt 1822, 340-341).

And yet, external dangers, which are very often the basis of the need of a people to define itself in a clear-cut way, were largely missing until the growing Western encroachment on the region. Even in the European context, *mutatis mutandis*, it was for instance the anti-Napoleonic mass mobilization that contributed to transform Russia into a nation that was no longer simply identifiable with the Tsar’s rule. In Germany, in the year of the French Siege of Mainz (1793) Goethe (1749-1832) turned to the German *Volk* (Bayly 2004) and no longer to the Holy Roman Empire. The nation-state of the modern era should thus be considered as a phenomenon that had its origin and destination mainly, but of course not only, in «the defence of the community from potential external aggression» (Archibugi, Voltaggio 1999, XVI).

² Edward Said argued that «the development and conservation of every culture requires the existence of an *alter ego* different and in competition with it. The construction of identity [...] implies the construction of opposites and of ‘others’, whose present is always subject to continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of that which differentiates them from us» (Said 1994, 331-332).

Until a relatively recent past, the local populations were not in need of borders that could divide their *Heimat* – which in German does not refer to one's country or nation, two abstract ideas that are too far-reaching and distant, but rather to a place in which our most profound memories are rooted. On top of this, the relatively recent introduction in the region of concepts such as “refugee”, “smuggler”, “contraband”, or the minority/majority dichotomy, so fraught with meaning today, are very much the result of newly-created mental and physical divisions. But these arguments should not be pushed too far. In other words, they should not suggest or imply that the various local fluid regional and religious identities were deprived of peculiar characteristics, or that they and their states are simply “Western artificial creations”. The history of the region is indeed one of variegation, multiplicity and localisms: many of the modern states in the Eastern Mediterranean are rooted in peculiar historical legacies. To overlook these aspects would mean to simplify, once again, the complex history of the region.

Emigration versus immigration

The claim, implied in Kressel and Aharoni's work and other studies, that high Arab population growth came predominantly from hidden immigration rather than natural increase was considered problematic already at the time of Mandatory Palestine. As elaborated in 1946 by the Anglo-American Survey of Palestine:

That each [temporary migration into Palestine] may lead to a residue of illegal permanent settlers is possible, but, if the residue were of significant size, it would be reflected in systematic disturbances of the rates of Arab vital occurrences. No such systematic disturbances are observed. It is sometimes alleged that the high rate of Arab natural increase is due to a large concealed immigration from the neighbouring countries. This is an erroneous inference. Researches reveal that the high rate of fertility of the Moslem Arab woman has remained unchanged for half a century.

The low rate of Arab natural increase before 1914 was caused by:

- (a) the removal in significant numbers of men in the early nubile years for military service in other parts of the Ottoman Empire, many of whom never returned and others of whom returned in the late years of life; and
- (b) the lack of effective control of endemic and epidemic diseases that in those years led to high mortality rates (Anglo-American Committee Of Inquiry, 1946-47).

Several cases of Arab migratory movements within Palestine – aiming at settling in areas with a Jewish majority – were registered in the 1920s. These areas guaranteed more concrete development opportunities. 1937's Peel Commission noted that «the Arab population shows significant growth starting from 1920, and it had a correlation with the increase of prosperity in Palestine [...]. In particular, the Arabs benefitted from the social services which could not be provided in a broad sense without the income generated by the Jews»³. Such demographic growth was accompanied by a reduction in average mortality – placed well below the 40 years in the first decade of the twentieth century – prompted mostly by the innovations introduced by the Jewish component of the population. Until the 1850s there was no “natural” increase in numbers among Arabs; this changed when modern medical treatment was introduced and modern hospitals were established by Christian missionaries, members of the *Old Yishuv* as well as newly arrived Jewish immigrants, and the Ottoman authorities. «The number of births», as argued by Yehoshua Porath, «remained steady but infant mortality decreased. This was the main reason for Arab population growth. [...] No one would doubt that some migrant workers came to Palestine from Syria and Trans-Jordan and remained there. But one has to add to this that there were migrations in the opposite direction as well» (Porath 1986). Porat's standpoint is accurate also in reference to later phases of the

³ See ch. 5 of the Peel Commission, 1937.

Mandate. In the second half of the 1930s, for instance, due to a state of public disorder, Palestine registered also a substantial outward movement of Palestinian Arabs. Not only in direction to Syria and Lebanon, but also to Latin America, that hosts the largest Palestinian presence outside the Arab world.

Emigration and immigration were natural phenomenon. Among the groups that immigrated to Palestine in the decades preceding the British Mandate there was a group of Egyptians, which settled in Palestine when the region was under Muhammad Ali's rules. Soon after, a limited number of Bosnian, Algerian and Circassian immigrants arrived; they settled primarily in the Galilee (their presence today is seen in the villages of Rehaniya and Kfar Kama) and near the present-day border with Lebanon. In general, unlike those arrived in later decades during the Second and Third *aliyot* — the latter, through practices such as the above mentioned «Jewish Labor», opted largely for exclusion and therefore the non-integration with the local Arab population — the aforementioned groups went soon, or in other cases gradually, to integrate with the local majority. The exceptions to this general trend, registered for instance in the areas inhabited by the Bedouins in the Negev, were connected to social rather than nationalistic issues.

Most of the Arab Palestinians that Peters, Kressel, Aharoni and several other scholars⁴ depicted as «foreigners», or «former invaders», were, in large majority, people deeply rooted in what Khayr al-Dīn al-Ramli (1585–1671), an influential Islamic lawyer from Ramla, defined in the seventeenth century «*Filastīn bilādunā*» («Palestine our country»);⁵ the fact that it was not a separate political and administrative entity did not make al-Ramli's «*Filastīn*» less real.

As for the relevant majority of those whose origins were from other

⁴ See prof. Raphael Israeli in Shragay 2014.

⁵ Al-Ramlī, *Al-fatāwā al-Khayriyya li-naḥ al-bariyya* [*Consolatory Legal Response in favor of the Creation*], v. 2, (Dār al-Ma'rifa, Cairo n.a.), 151-160.

areas, they lived in the context of a fluid region. Kressel and Aharoni have correctly noted that in the southern coastal plain, in Wādi ‘Arā, Palestinian families «called Tantāwi (or Tamtāwi) hailed from the area of the city of Tantā in the Nile Delta» (Kressel, Aharoni 2013, 25). Similar claims can be made also for other family names such as Masrī, Dumyātī, Sa‘īdī and Jabālī. These aspects, however, have little meaning if evaluated outside of their peculiar regional context. In Damascus as well as in several other cities in the region it is still possible to encounter plenty of local families with names whose origins show clear links to areas in present-day Israel and the Palestinian territories. This further proves that considering the movements within the broader region as migratory processes among reciprocally «foreign» populations, is a simplistic way to define a reality that was anything but simple. The Palestinian context, in other words, was an integral part of the Arab world without erasing for this its peculiarities. In Adel Manna’s words:

A Palestinian who moved to south Lebanon or a Lebanese who moved to Palestine – or a Syrian or a Jordanian, for that matter – is surely not a foreigner because he is part of the culture of the society of Bilad-al-Sham, or Greater Syria, where there were no borders between countries. [...] It was common and natural for a Palestinian to go study in Al Azhar for instance, and remain there; or for a Hebronite merchant to go to Cairo and live there; or go to Damascus or other places, whether to study or to live [...] This was a natural phenomenon. (Scham et al. 2005, 34).

Symptoms of awareness in a borderless region

The image of a fluid and borderless region should not suggest that the Eastern Mediterranean was deprived of “protonational bonds”. This paragraph and the one that follows aim to shed light on these aspects, without whom the issue of identities and migrations in the Palestinian context and the broader region would remain incomplete.

It is noteworthy that for its large Muslim majority *Filastīn* – a word rooted in its cognate-word *Pelishtim* (Philistines)⁶ and thus, like most of the names of the local cities⁷, part of a millenary past – had been an easily circumscribed land for centuries. This was due to its acknowledged uniqueness. Numerous classical Islamic sources, including the *tafsīr* (exegesis) of the Qur'an written by Tabarī (838–923)⁸, identified it as *Al 'Ard al Muqaddasa* («The Holy Land»). The awareness that Palestine, perceived as *Al 'Ard al Muqaddasa*, was a special area and therefore distinct from Syria and Lebanon, is supposed to have always been present in the Arab conscience. No doubt that the history of the previous millennia – including the ancient Canaanite worship site and the Israelite temples that stood on the present-day Haram al-Sharīf – played a relevant role in shaping these perceptions.

⁶ The *Pelishtim* were a tribe numbered among the «Sea Peoples» which, in the twelfth century BCE, settled in the southern coastal area of the region (between modern day Tel Aviv and Gaza). The Philistines, like the Sumerians in Mesopotamia (present-day southern Iraq), were a non-Semitic population. Starting from c.1150 BCE the word *Peleset* was mentioned in numerous Egyptian documents. The Assyrian king Sargon II (?–705 BCE) called the same area *Palashtu*. In the Greek culture of Herodotus's days (484–425 BCE) the term *Palaistinē* was used in reference to a broader area which included also the Judean mountains and the Jordan Rift Valley. Already in pre-Roman times the toponym Palestine was thus utilized for indicating a wider area, inclusive of Judaea, Samaria, and Gaza.

⁷ 'Asqalana ('Asqalān in Arabic, Ashqelon in Hebrew), 'Akka (Akkā in Arabic, 'Akko in Hebrew), Gaza (Ġazzah in Arabic, 'Azza in Hebrew), 'Ariḥa (Arīḥā in Arabic, Yeriḥo in Hebrew), as well as Jerusalem – a name of Canaanite origins composed by the prefix «Uru» («founded by») and «Shalem» (a Canaanite God) – Bethlehem – quoted in the Amarna Letters of the fifteenth cent. BCE as «Bit-Lahmi» – and many other local cities and villages, can trace their origins and names to a past much more remote than biblical times; it is to this ancient past that the Arabs of Palestine have often turned to for the names of the cities they populate. This is confirmed by the fact that the Arabic names of the cities mentioned in this text, as well as of dozens of other symbolic places such as Majiddu (Megiddo) or the Naqab (Negev) Desert, are much more similar to the original names found in the four thousand years old Egyptian hieroglyphics, as well as in the Amarna Letters, than to the place names used in Western languages, or in Hebrew.

⁸ See Tabarī 2001.

«The Holy Land [Al ‘Ard al Muqaddasa]», Moroccan philosopher Abū Sālim Al-‘Ayyāshī (1628–1679) noted in 1663, «is the closest place to the Paradise on the heart»⁹. For some, this uniqueness was so evident to the point that it could «compete» with Mecca and Medina, the first two holy cities in Islam. «The Qur’ān», Amir Ali (1937–2005), founder of the *Institute of Islamic Information & Education*, pointed out, «calls only Palestine ‘holy’ or muqaddasah. We have three ‘harams’ but only one holy land. I have never found in the Qur’an or Hadith the word muqaddas being used for Makkah or Madina»¹⁰.

A further confirmation of this specificity, supported by more precise geographical references, can be found in a significant number of sources produced over a long period of time. An Islamic text from the eighth century, attributed to the Medieval scholar Abū Khālid Thawr Ibn Yazīd al-Kalā‘ī (764–854), a proud sustainer of the idea that women should have the right to serve as *imām* (spiritual guide), argued that «the holiest place [*al-quds*] on Earth is Syria; the holiest place in Syria is Palestine; the holiest place in Palestine is Jerusalem [*Bayt al-maqdis*]»¹¹. Detailed references to Palestine, not necessarily of a strictly religious nature, can be found in the *Kitāb al-Buldān* («Book of Countries») by the Shiite historian Al-Ya‘qūbī (?–897)¹² and in *Kitāb al-masālik wa al-mamālik* («The Book of the Routes and Realms») by the Persian geographer al-Istakhri (?–957). «Filastīn», al-Istakhri wrote, «is the most fertile among the Syrian provinces [...] In the province of Filastīn, despite its narrowness, there are around twenty Mosques [...] At its maximum extension [Filastīn goes] from Rafh [Rafah] to the edge of al-Lajjūn [Legio], a traveler would need two days to travel across its entire length; and [this is also] the time [necessary] to cross the provin-

⁹ See Al-‘Ayyāshī 2006, 189.

¹⁰ See also Fahīm Gabr 1983.

¹¹ Cit. in Ess 1992, 89–90.

¹² See Al-Ya‘qūbī 1892, 330. Translated into French in Wiet 1937.

ce across its breadth from Yāfā [Jaffa] to Rīhā [Jericho] [...]»¹³. Similar contents are also present in the *Kitāb Sūrat al-'Ard* (*The book of the Earth's features*)¹⁴ by the Baghdad merchant Ibn Hawqal (tenth century), in the *Ahsan at-Taqasim fi Ma'rifat il-Aqalim* (*The best division for understanding the regions*) by the Jerusalem geographer Al-Muqaddasi (946-1000), and more in general in large part of the Arabic literature from the Late Middle Ages. Particularly relevant is the literary genre of the "Merits of Jerusalem" (*Fadā'il al-Quds*), composed halfway through the eleventh century and rich with material from the seventh and eighth centuries. In the *Fadā'il al-Quds* the beauty of *al-Quds* (Jerusalem) and of the holiest places in the region were, once again, praised (Livne-Kafri 1995). In virtue of these considerations, it is not surprising that also in later periods there was among its inhabitants a more or less defined perception of Palestine. A detailed analysis of the texts of the aforementioned Khayr al-Dīn al-Ramlī confirms for example that already in the seventeenth century the concept of *Filastīn* was more than an abstract idea (Gerber 1998, 563). Such was a common feeling expressed also in earlier works such as *al-Uns al-Jalil bi-Tārīkh al-Quds wa'l-Khalīl* (*The glorious story of Jerusalem and Hebron*), which is considered one of the most popular classics in the history of Medieval Jerusalem. In the pages of the manuscript, written around 1495, its author, the qadi of Jerusalem Mujīr al-Dīn (1456-1522), made systematic use of the terms '*Ard Filastīn* (the Land of Palestine)¹⁵. The expression "Southern Syria", on the other hand, was never mentioned.

Once again it should therefore not be surprising that *Arz-i Filastīn* (the Land of Palestine), coinciding with the area to the west of the Jordan, was the name used in the nineteenth century in the official correspondence by Ottoman authorities when referring to Palestine. *Arz-i Filastīn*

¹³ See also Strange 1890, 28.

¹⁴ See Ibn Hawqal 1967, trans. in French in Kramers, Wiet 1964.

¹⁵ See Mujīr Al-Dīn 1968, 66-73.

was not a politically independent area, even if it held, in popular as well in the official use, a non-secondary peculiar meaning. The «Arz-i Filistin ve Suriye [Land of Palestine and Syria]» formula was frequently utilized in the official Ottoman correspondence¹⁶, as well as in the maps printed in 1729 in Istanbul by Ibrahim Müteferrika (1674–1745)¹⁷. It was thus not by chance that the central Ottoman government established an administrative entity «with borders practically identical to those of mandated Palestine on three brief occasions during the nineteenth century: 1830, 1840, and 1872» (Doumani 1992, 9–10). The latter, incidentally, was the same year in which the consul Noel Temple Moore wrote a dispatch commenting the «recent erection of Palestine into a separate Eyalet» (a decision which was greeted with jubilation by the local population), stressing the fact that «many British travellers and explorers visit *the country east of the Jordan* [italics added]»¹⁸.

Within this context it is possible to understand why Ottomans, Protestant missionaries, Arabs and early Zionists, though none of them having the same perception regarding the exact perimeter of Palestine, came to use this toponym (Palestine). A meeting of the LJS, chaired by G.H. Rose and taking place in London on 4 May 1838, advocated, for instance, «the diffusion of the Holy Scriptures and of the knowledge of the Gospel throughout the whole of Palestine and the adjacent countries»¹⁹. The program of the Zionist movement adopted in 1897 «spoke (in German) of a home ‘in Palestine’ for the Jewish people»; moreover «the first Zionist institution created in the country was the ‘Anglo-Palestine Company’» (Mandel 1976, XX).

¹⁶ BOA I.HUS 140/43. 12 Feb. 1906.

¹⁷ For a reproduction of the map see Matar 1999, 134.

¹⁸ ISA RG 160/2881-P. Moore to Elliot, Jerusalem, 27 July 1872.

¹⁹ BOL – CMJ – C. 61. Rose, 4 May 1838.

The «Southern Syria» claim

Various documents exist which seem to disprove what has just been claimed. The London Convention of 1840, for instance, referred to the Acre area indicating it as «the southern part of Syria» (Hertslet 1840, 548). The *Encyclopedia Britannica*, published in 1911, clarified that Palestine «may be said generally to denote the southern third of the province of Syria» (Chisholm 1911, 600). Furthermore, also the twenty-eight Palestinian delegates who from 27 January to 9 February 1919 participated in the first *Mu'tamar al-'Arabī al-Filastani* («Palestinian Arab Congress») in Jerusalem, issued a declaration defining Palestine as part of Syria. *Suriyya al-Janubiyya* («Southern Syria») was for that matter also the name of a newspaper published in Jerusalem starting in September 1919.

However, these and other similar examples do not contradict what has been argued thus far. The fact that the area under analysis was identified sometimes as Palestine and other times as «Southern Syria» by European bears no particular value. It would have mattered had the local majority identified itself as originary from «Southern Syria». This, however, was not the case. Excluding some isolated cases which were driven by explicit political calculations²⁰, no documents have been produced by the local majority, prior to 1918 or after 1920, which put aside Palestine and all it represented in favor of the concept of «Southern Syria». Also the episode of the Palestinian delegates in 1919 is understandable only in its specific historical context, which lasted for two years. The choice to «shelve» Palestine was then nothing more than a tactical move taken in order to get rid of the yoke of London and to oppose the growing Zionist ambitions. «A united and independent Syria», Herbert Samuel (1870–1963) clarified in April 1920, «is regarded as the only means of

²⁰ See the case of the future founder of the OLP Ahmad ash-Shuqayri (1908–1980) in Pipes 1988.

combating Zionism»²¹. It was therefore in every respect a tactical move dictated by that specific historical period. In the summer of the same year the episode was finished.

Conclusions

Manichean temptations have always been harbingers of misrepresentations, as well as of great suffering. The black-or-white approaches according to which Palestine was a fully defined geographical unit, or simply a «modern geographical term», or that Palestinians were a fully defined nation, or «nothing but Arabs» that «came because of the Jews» and that could for this relatively easily be relocated in other Arab countries, are long-standing inaccuracies in the literature about these issues. They do not only contribute to further radicalize the present day history of the region, but also continue to foster the long-established attempt of simplifying a complex local milieu.

Archives

BOA – *Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi – Istanbul.*

BOL – *Bodleian Library – Oxford.*

ISA – *Israel State Archives – Jerusalem.*

TNA – *The National Archives – London.*

²¹ TNA 371/5139. Samuel to Curzon. Jerusalem, 2 April 1920.

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