

Rifts in Time: Israel-Palestine 1911-2011

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The academic event „Rifts in Time: Israel-Palestine 1911-2011“ convened by Hans-Lukas Kieser and held at the University of Zurich brought together scholars from Switzerland, France, Germany, Israel, Palestine and the United States. The focus was on Palestine in the late Ottoman period, particularly the 1910's, i.e. the last decade of the empire. The event consisted of a workshop, a public panel discussion and two public lectures. The participants were mainly historians specialized on the late Ottoman period, but also included Joel Beinin, who works extensively on post-WWI Middle Eastern History, Raja Khalidi, economist at the UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) in Geneva, as well as experts on missionary and Zionist agencies in the late Ottoman empire.

In the course of the workshop, recent research on different groups and individuals in late Ottoman Palestine, as well as visions and utopias of coexistence engendered by the 1908 Young Turk Revolution were presented. The papers put forward for the workshop revealed fascinating insights regarding the issue of coexistence, both on a macro-level as well as on a micro-level. Thus, on the political level, the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the reimplementation of the Constitution sparked a sense of euphoria and optimism among intellectuals belonging to the various ethnic and religious communities on the ground. The Young Turk Revolution saw the close cooperation of the Armenian Dashnak party with the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) that later was to embrace a Turkist ideology and under whose rule the Armenian genocide was to happen. During and in the immediate wake of the revolution, however, these two parties worked hand in hand to implement the constitution in the provinces of the Empire.

Moreover, the sense of optimism also

spread to mainly European Zionist activists who hoped to implement their vision of a Jewish home in Palestine within the new framework of a constitutional Ottoman Empire. Thus, In 1911, David Ben Gurion – originally David Gruen, an immigrant to Palestine from tsarist Poland in 1906 – moved to Ottoman Saloniki in 1911, then to Istanbul to study law, hoping to become an Ottoman deputy for Palestine. ABIGAIL JACOBSON (Boston) talked extensively on the idea of Ottomanization, the vision of a common Ottoman identity shared by equal citizens. On a micro-level, the much more ancient, day-to-day realities of coexistence were discussed. MICHELLE CAMPOS (Gainesville) in her paper wrote on neighbourhood relations in late-Ottoman Palestine. Using demographic sources, she analyzed the ethno-religious composition of the various neighbourhoods of the city, revealing a remarkable degree of diversity and of intermingling between the different groups. By way of illustrating the numeric evidence, as it were, she presented rare video footage of everyday-life in Ottoman Jerusalem, which conveyed the impression of a bustling, highly diverse community.

More problematic aspects of inter-ethnic relations came to the fore in YUVAL BEN-BASSAT's (Haifa) presentation on Arab reactions to Zionist activity in Palestine before and after the Young Turk Revolution. The aim of the paper was to establish how the ordinary, predominantly rural population of Palestine reacted to the colonizing activities of Jewish settlers. For this purpose, Ben-Bassat analyzed a corpus of previously neglected sources, i.e. petitions sent by rural Palestinian communities to the central government in Istanbul. Although predominantly illiterate, the rural inhabitants of Palestine were capable of petitioning the central government in Istanbul by employing so-called *arzuhalçiler*, professional petition writers who offered their skills for hire outside post offices and at Bazaars. Thus, the petitions present an invaluable source that helps counterbalance the focus on literate, urban elites. The petitions reveal that conflict between Jewish settlers and the rural population arose mainly due to different conceptions of landowner-

ship. Thus, whereas the former bought the land, received legal title deeds and wanted to fully exercise their ownership, the latter often acted on the basis of notions of traditional rights, norms and practices that had existed for generations. As far as they were concerned, occupying a place and cultivating or grazing there for generations granted them ownership rights for all matters and purposes.

The participants unanimously stressed the dangers of painting too rosy a picture of the pre-War Ottoman Empire and warned against nostalgia. Not only did the clashes between Arab peasants and Jewish settlers already reveal serious areas of conflict. The situation in Palestine needs to be seen in context with the realities elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire. Thus, in Anatolia, relations between the Muslim majority and Ottoman Christians were and for a long time had been much more troubled. Above all however, World War I. put an abrupt end to the myriad visions and utopias of coexistence that emerged in the brief era of constitutional government.

Whereas the workshop afforded the participants „the academic priviledge and pleasure of exploring historical topics and a period in their own right“ (Kieser), the public panel discussion as well as the two public lectures aimed to apply the insights gained about late-Ottoman Palestine to the current political situation. On the whole, a bleak picture emerged. Not only does the late Ottoman period offer an example of the disastrous failure of visions of multi-ethnic and multi-religious coexistence. Moreover, the post-War period saw the success of the exclusivist ethno-national paradigm, with the 1923 Lausanne treaty which sanctified forced population „exchange“ in high numbers. This paradigm does not offer any acceptable perspective for Israel and Palestine. Therefore it is difficult to see how the conflict can be resolved as long as ethnic and religious categories paralyse political thinking. As most of the participants stressed, the past century offers few indications of a shift in tendencies.

RAJA KHALIDI (Geneva) proposed an innovative parallel-state model that in some ways harkens back to the Ottoman idea of a-territorial autonomies. He also saw the newly

acquired self-confidence of the Republic of Turkey on the international stage – a tendency recently described as Neo-Ottomanism – as a possible cause for optimism. As he pointed out, Turkey offered a model to the Arab World that actually worked, a model of how Islam, democracy and modernity can be reconciled, whereas none of the ideologies embraced in the past had proven feasible. Moreover, he pointed out that Prime Minister Erdogan struck a chord with the majority of people in the Arab World by confronting Israel with regard to the Gaza blockade and the settlement issue, by supporting the democratic aspirations in the Arab World, and by condemning the violence of autocratic rulers. However, as Hans-Lukas Kieser remarked, the Republic of Turkey, still has its own home duties to resolve, notwithstanding major improvements. First and foremost, these comprise the implementation of a new constitution that allows for the inclusion of ethno-religious minorities. These duties again are firmly rooted in the Ottoman 1910s, which, accordingly, deserve a thorough revisiting. Future events of this kind will hopefully permit to take up the issues and questions raised at the conference.

Conference overview:

Introduction

Why the Ottoman/ post-Ottoman 1910s?
Hans-Lukas Kieser (University of Zurich)

The European dimension of the early XXth century

Dominique Trimbur (Centre de recherche français de Jérusalem): Palestine-Israel in the eyes of French clericals and diplomats (1910s)

Jakob Eisler (PH Ludwigsburg): The contribution of the German Templers to the Jewish Movement in Palestine before and during World War I

The late Ottoman dimension

Yuval Ben-Bassat (Haifa University): Arab reactions to the Zionist activity in Palestine before and after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 as reflected in Petitions to Istanbul

Michelle Campos (University of Florida): Living together, living apart: Neighborhood relations in Ottoman Jerusalem.

Abigail Jacobson (Brandeis University, Boston): Practices of Ottoman citizenship and loyalty: the Ottomanization movement as a case study

Projection of the future, retrospectively

Dan Tamir (University of Zurich): Neither „Arabs“ nor „Jews“ : The Emergence of the Hebrew Option, 1911 - 1920

Joel Beinin (Stanford University): Late Ottoman roots of contemporary Israeli issues

Panel „From where to where? Palestine-Israel 1911–2011“

Chair: Hans-Lukas Kieser

Public panel discussion with Joel Beinin, Michelle Campos, Raja Khalidi, Abigail Jacobson, and Lucien Palser

Public lectures

Raja Khalidi (UNCTAD, Geneva): Arab-Jewish economy in Palestine: what future against the background of a century?

Joël Beinin (Stanford University): Arab revolutions of 2011 against the backdrop of the 1908 Young Turk Revolution – and Israel

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