

Jacobson, Abigail: *From Empire to Empire. Jerusalem Between Ottoman and British Rule*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8156-3255-9; 262 S.

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Jerusalem never possessed any strategic importance, neither militarily nor economically speaking. Its importance derived strictly from its assumed holiness. In the 16th century, the Ottoman Sultan Sulayman the Magnificent financed a new wall around the city out of reverence for it, but Jerusalem nevertheless became soon a backwater. Until the early 19th century its population was less than that of Acre, while it flourished, and probably less than that of Nablus, too. Only with the Crimean War, Jerusalem reappeared in the consciousness of the European powers and it became – via interference with various Christian communities – the object of international relations. Zionist immigration complicated the picture further. The city's population grew to more than 40'000 at the eve of World War I.

This study focuses on a very few but fateful years in the long history of Jerusalem, from the Balkan Wars in 1912 to the establishment of the British Mandate in 1920. It was a period of great uncertainty, with the Ottoman Empire fading away and the British stepping very cautiously, not sure how to avoid antagonizing the population and their own allies, while the war economy, hunger and recruitment for the Ottoman army played havoc with the lives of the inhabitants.

Jacobson's choice to study these few years makes a good point. Even though the Turkish army left the city one day and the British moved in the next, transitions are never that neat. Described by the conventional historical narrative as a rupture, the author's aim is to challenge that description through a close look at the various communities, living in Jerusalem at the time. Connected with that is her aim to provide a more differentiating picture of three presumably monolithic monotheistic communities or the simplistic dichotomy „Jews vs. Arabs“. She does that mainly by looking at the internal political dis-

cussions within each community and ethnicity.

With the defeat of the Ottomans in the Balkans the question had arisen whether they were at all able to hold the empire together and it became possible to think also about other options. The shifting of the political balance of power forced people to make adjustments and forge new alliances. Jacobson approaches this process with what she calls a „relational model“, describing and analyzing the changing relations between the various ethnic and/or religious communities, inhabiting the city. As power shifted, these groups took new positions and with that found also new allies. Jacobson's analysis is not only inter-communal but also intra-communal, regarding different groups within one community, which might arise from different geographical origins, different periods of arrival in the city, different social and legal status etc.

Not surprisingly one of the first issues, debated early on in the war, was how to get donations of food and money into Jerusalem, which had neither an agricultural hinterland nor an industry worth mentioning. Control over distribution of donations was another issue. Jacobson's analysis is usually well founded and impressive. She uses very dexterously several memoirs and autobiographies as a major source of information. Sometimes the reader would wish for more of a historical background. The hostility between Arab Christians and Jews, for instance, did not arise only with the Zionist issue but was the result of the loss of old trade routes and commercial connections by the Jews throughout the 19th century and a concomitant ascent of some Christian communities in local trade and new export trade in raw materials. Muslim commerce underwent a decline similar to that of the Jews, while European merchants were advancing and with them the Christian Arabs, hence a certain alliance between Muslims and local Jews.

Internal differences in politics within the Jewish community and in the relations to the Arabs are discussed in the third chapter. It throws new light on an aspect that the typical Zionist-Arab narrative is not aware of. At issue is the position of local and usually young Sephardic Jews who enjoyed a modern sec-

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ular education, knew a variety of languages, including Arabic and Hebrew, and supported the Zionist movement in Jerusalem. But this support never let them become oblivious of the need to foster good relations with the Muslim Arabs and seek their support. There were influential Sephardic communities in other cities, especially in Aleppo, but this group in Jerusalem seems quite unique. They actively – through a newspaper, articles, speeches, and meetings with the Muslims – tried to seek their support or at least their understanding. At the same time they again and again pointed out to the immigrant Zionists that the Arab population had to be considered in their plans.

A major issue for the local Sephardic community was „Ottomanism“, a concept that especially after the Young Turk Revolution had become very appealing for the educated and secular classes. The assumption was that in the post-revolutionary empire, based on a constitution and representative government, all ethnicities would be treated as equal. Jacobson shows how this sentiment expressed itself in the writing and debates of the Sephardic group, appealing to the immigrant Zionists to acquire Ottoman citizenship while at the same time furthering the use of Hebrew by the Jews. A very close parallel could be drawn here to the new educated classes among the Arabs, who renewed the Arabic language and forged it into a tool useful for modern society but insisted that Ottomanism was the best political solution for all. Citizenship was not an issue for the Arabs but quite a number of the educated ones demanded that all citizens, without exception, should learn Turkish as a means to integrate the „Ottoman community“, just as the Sephardim demanded that Jewish immigrants should learn Arabic (p. 104). Here it might have been helpful to discuss and analyze the membership of a major player, Nissim Malul (Nasīm Ma'lūl), in the Decentralization Party and to ask whether other Jews were members of it or of other associations, e.g. Free Masons, Young Turks, etc. The internal contradictions of these positions shared the inability to imagine a political order for the Middle East other than the Ottoman one, in spite of the nascent nationalisms promoted

by all these groups. Jacobson traces well these contradictions and the difference to the position of the Ashkenazi Zionists who, coming from outside, did not share this sentiment and assumed early on that the days of the Ottoman Empire were counted. That being the case, neither Ottoman Turkish nor Arabic was needed.

Jacobson's relational model proves its usefulness also for the period after the Balfour Declaration when a rapprochement between Muslim and Christian Arabs occurred against a newly strengthened Zionism, while the Sephardim Zionist position lost ground between the hardening fronts.

The book reads well. It is a very subtle study of shifting grounds in a crucial period of the history of Jerusalem. It is a must for any scholar interested in the late Ottoman period and recommended to those generally interested in the modern Middle East.

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