

# 1 A Bird's-Eye View of Gaza's Economy, Population, and Geostrategic Position

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In 1912, the Arab journalist Yusuf al-'Isa from Jaffa published an editorial in *Filastin* ("Palestine") in which he declared it the duty of a journalist to be cognizant of the state of the different cities of the country, and especially their relative "civilizational progress." 'Isa then went on to relate that he sailed 60 kilometers south to Gaza, the third-largest city in the District of Jerusalem, to survey it. When approaching the city from the coast, his first impression was gloomy. Gaza's infrastructure was derelict. The main road connecting the small port to the city center was not wide enough for carriage traffic, and in winter, he learned, the road was practically impassable. The sandy coastal areas around Gaza were put to the collective use (*musha'*) of the locals to collect firewood. Despite appeals to register this land as *mahlula* (uncultivated state-owned land that could be reclaimed based on usage), open it up for farming, and sell it off to private individuals, no steps had been taken and it was left undeveloped. Gaza's architecture was dull, wrote 'Isa, as is common in the "Oriental cities" (*al-mudun al-sharqiyya*), with its typical narrow alleyways bordered by "miserable, convoluted buildings" (*al-abniya al-haqira al-mutarakiba*).

'Isa only found two positive features in Gaza: the new hospital, albeit still under construction, and the good quality of the local water. Gaza's notables, 'Isa noted, had recently asked the city's municipality to install new pipes to supply clean running water to the inhabitants. 'Isa's usage of a Biblical quote from the Prophet Zephaniah about Gaza's abandonment, which was reproduced here in the Introduction, gave the report a decidedly apocalyptic cast. "Abandonment" for modern Gaza meant that the city had been "left to its own devices by the government, isolated from the world, abandoned by God."<sup>1</sup> 'Isa's alarmist tone was clearly a rhetorical device by a journalist who saw it as his mission "to alert public opinion" through

<sup>1</sup> "Gaza," *Filastin*, September 7, 1912; the first part of the report on Gaza appeared on August 31, 1912.

trenchant commentary.<sup>2</sup> However, his description of Gaza as a stagnant backwater of the Ottoman Empire, a marginal location with considerable economic potential but only faint hopes for future development, sometimes associated with clichés of the “Oriental” city<sup>3</sup> and negative Biblical associations about the land of the Philistines, was part of a larger discourse that pervaded many other contemporary texts dealing with Gaza.

Popular historians of Gaza in the twentieth century took up certain features of this discourse.<sup>4</sup> Decline diagnoses have a long pedigree in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies.<sup>5</sup> Despite much scholarly criticism of various “decline paradigms,” this notion still appears in public and scholarly discourse with remarkable frequency on what today is called the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, this chapter seeks to establish an alternative framework that should allow for a more balanced assessment of Gaza’s development in various fields, especially its economy, population growth, and geostrategic position.

Nevertheless, there are reasons to consider Gaza as something of an outlier among the cities located along the Palestinian coast during the late nineteenth century. Despite its considerable size, Gaza was often overlooked by travelers and was not on the main pilgrimage routes of the Holy Land. It had no major port facilities, unlike those built elsewhere on the Eastern Mediterranean, which had led to a surge in the development of other services, the construction of new buildings and neighborhoods, and rapid modernization. It boasted no settlement or colonization activity by foreigners and had no sizeable Christian or Jewish populations that would attract European investments. It was further marginalized as a caravan city after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which led to the rerouting of trade and pilgrimage land routes to easier and faster maritime itineraries. All these factors contributed to the erroneous image of Gaza by historians of this period as a city on the fringes of Ottoman Palestine of no particular importance. To rectify this perspective, this chapter examines the major trends in Gaza’s economic development, its geostrategic situation, and its cross-

<sup>2</sup> “Fi nisf al-sana,” *Filastin*, July 15, 1911, p. 1; August 2, 1911, p. 1 (editorial). For more on *Filastin*’s tendencies, see Dierauff, *Translating Ottoman Modernity in Palestine*.

<sup>3</sup> Claude R. Conder, *Tent Work in Palestine: A Record of Discovery and Adventure*, 2nd ed. (London: The Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund, 1889), p. 284.

<sup>4</sup> Filiu, *Gaza: A History*, pp. 26–33; Ibrahim Khalil Skeik, *Ghazza ‘abra l-tarikh* [Gaza across History], vol. 3 (*al-tarikh al-‘uthmani*) (Jerusalem: al-Matba‘a al-‘Arabiyya al-Haditha, 1980–2001) [in Arabic], preface by the author (no page numbers).

<sup>5</sup> See Donald Quataert, “Ottoman History Writing and Changing Attitudes towards the Notion of ‘Decline,’” *History Compass* 1 (2003), pp. 1–9.

<sup>6</sup> For criticism of the decline approach, see for instance, Syrinx von Hees (ed.), *Inhabit – The Decline Paradigm: Its Influence and Persistence in the Writing of Arab Cultural History* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2017).

border connections. It does not deal with the dramatic events of WWI, which led to Gaza's partial devastation, since these constitute a distinctive, short, and very traumatic period that deserves treatment in its own right.

Within the Ottoman system of provincial administration, as it was structured after the end of Egyptian rule in the 1840s and reformed by the 1864 Vilayet Law and subsequent regulations, Gaza as the center of a subdistrict exercised its control over a sizable part of the Palestinian region that included 59 villages.<sup>7</sup> The Ottoman presence in Gaza, however, was fairly limited and is not well documented to date. The *salname* of Syria of 1286/1870 provides a glimpse into this administrative reality at the beginning of the period discussed here.<sup>8</sup>

In the section on the southern Palestinian region, Gaza is mentioned in second place, after Jerusalem but before Jaffa. Only five posts are mentioned in the *kaza* administration: the subdistrict governor (*kaymakam*) 'Abdallah Efendi, the chief judge (*na'ib*), Mehmed 'Ali Faqih al-Din Efendi, the *mufti*, Muhyi al-Din Efendi [al-Husayni], a financial director (*mal müdürü*), Yusuf Efendi Bulad, and the chief scribe (*tahrirat katibi*), Jurays Efendi. Judging by their names, all probably had an Arab, possibly Palestinian background, with the possible exception of the *kaymakam*, 'Abdallah Efendi. Seven members of the local Administrative Council (*Meclis-i İdare ve-du'avi a'zasi*) are listed. As members of the council, they were very likely locals, but none had last names that can be related to local families, except Khalil al-Shawwa (1818–1884), a politically active businessman whom we will meet again in Chapter 4. One can be identified as Christian by his name of Danyal.

A statistical table prepared by the District of Jerusalem during WWI gives an overview of the *kaza*'s territorial organization at the end of the period discussed here. It lists four rural districts (*nahiyes*): Gaza itself (with 15 associated villages), Majdal (with 27 villages), Faluja (with 15 villages), and Khan Yunis (with only two villages).<sup>9</sup>

### *Economic Change*

Gaza and its surrounding region underwent profound transformation from the 1860s onwards, which impacted the foundations of its

<sup>7</sup> BOA. DH. UMVM., 145/49, 22 Teşrinisani 1332 [December 5, 1916], lef 4. Jerusalem scribal bureau [Kudüs-i Şerif Tahrirat Kalemi] to the Interior Ministry [Dahiliye]; for more on the administration of the District of Jerusalem, see Gerber, *Ottoman Rule*.

<sup>8</sup> İSAM, Istanbul. There is little detailed or systematic information on the Ottoman administration of Palestine since from 1873 onwards the best sources for this topic, the Ottoman provincial yearbooks (*salnames*), stopped covering the District of Jerusalem.

<sup>9</sup> BOA. DH. UMVM., 145/49.

economy. The decline of caravan routes between Syria and Egypt was at least partially offset by the growing export of barley, the region's main cash crop through Gaza's small port, which took on renewed importance.

The main constant in Gaza's history from Antiquity to the late Ottoman period was caravan trade. Its location at a major crossroads at the southern tip of the Eastern Mediterranean made this oasis-like city important and sustained dense urban life. Gaza was a hub for people, goods, and ideas on the ancient overland route (the *Via Maris*) that connected the Syrian lands with Egypt and was known during the Ottoman period as *al-Tariq al-Sultani* (the Sultanic road, see Figure I.3). A second route led from Gaza to 'Aqaba on the northern shore of the Red Sea via 'Awja, in the border region between the Negev and Sinai. A third led southeast from Gaza towards the northern Negev, where Beersheba was built from scratch by the Ottoman government in 1900. A fourth route led east from Gaza towards Hebron, in the southern part of the Judean Mountains. Numerous other local small roads branched out from Gaza towards nearby villages in the Subdistrict of Gaza.<sup>10</sup>

As early as the Abbasid period, Gaza was indirectly affected by the Hajj, the great annual pilgrimage to Mecca. During the Ottoman period, pilgrims (together with their companies of soldiers, merchants, and merchandise) came in large caravans from Damascus southwards via Transjordan and onwards to the Hijaz via 'Aqaba or further east via Tabuk, on what was known as the Syrian Hajj Route (*darb al-hajj al-shami*). A smaller caravan route extended from Cairo eastwards via the Sinai Peninsula and was known as the Egyptian Hajj Route, which crossed the Sinai Desert from Suez to 'Aqaba (*darb al-hajj al-misri*). None of these pilgrimage routes passed directly through Gaza,<sup>11</sup> but a secondary travel and pilgrimage route went through the city itself, and was used mostly by pilgrims from southern Palestine. Pilgrims who used it would provision themselves in Gaza's markets and travel southwards to 'Aqaba via 'Awja. An Ottoman map drawn up during the 1906 border negotiations with Britain following the 'Aqaba incident clearly depicts this route and the Egyptian Hajj Route (see Figure 1.1).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The governor (*mutasarrif*) of the Province of Jerusalem in early 1914, Ahmed Macid, whose territory included Gaza, toured the province extensively and wrote a detailed description of the main roads and settlements, including Hebron, Beersheba, Gaza, and Jaffa. See BOA. DH. ID., 59/72, 25 Kanunuevvel 1329 [January 7, 1914].

<sup>11</sup> See Suraiya Faroqhi, *Pilgrims and Sultans: The Hajj under the Ottomans, 1517–1683* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1994), pp. 32–34, 61–62.

<sup>12</sup> Detailed information on the availability of water along this route can be found in a German military map drawn up in 1916, ISA, "Kartographische Abteilung des stellvertretenden Generalstabs der Armee (unter Benutzung von Routenaufnahmen des Hauptmanns von Ramsay)," 1:250,000, sheet 2 of 4 (1916).

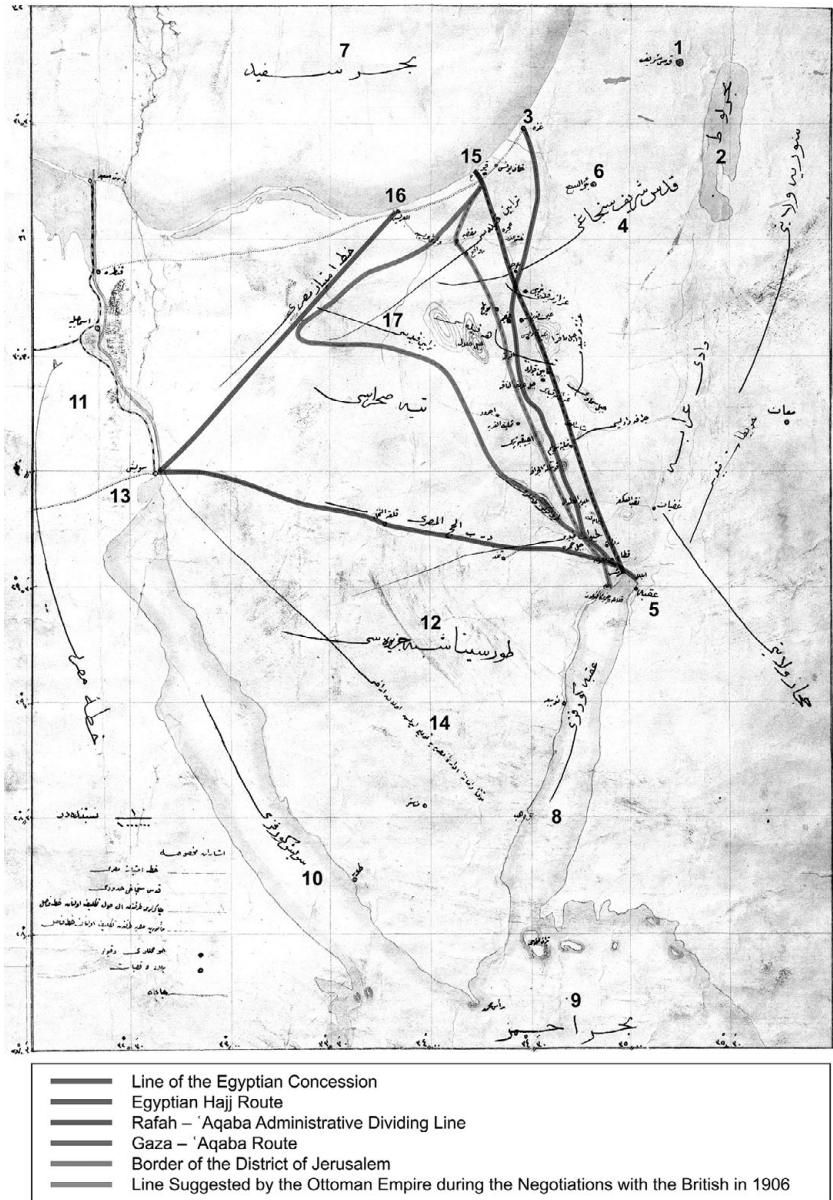


Figure 1.1 An Ottoman map of Sinai drawn after the ‘Aqaba Incident of 1906 with added captions. The map shows possible locations of the Sinai–Palestine administrative dividing line between the Mediterranean and Red Seas. Map legend: (1) Jerusalem, (2) Dead Sea, (3) Gaza, (4) District of Jerusalem, (5) Aqaba, (6) Beersheba, (7) Mediterranean Sea, (8) Gulf of Aqaba, (9) Red Sea, (10) Gulf of Suez, (11) Province of Egypt, (12) Sinai Peninsula, (13) Suez, (14) “region given to Egyptian rule as a temporary deposit,” (15) Rafah, (16) Al-‘Arish, and (17) Tarabin tribe. Source: BOA. HRT. 660.

Gaza's commercial role in the Hajj provision is often overlooked in research, even though the city was connected to the pilgrimage in many ways. Some of Gaza's governors served as leaders of the Damascus caravans (*amir al-hajj al-shami*),<sup>13</sup> and Gaza played an important role in provisioning the Hajj caravans with grain, which was collected in the region and relocated to granaries along the routes, as recorded in correspondence between Ottoman officials. One of the major structures in Gaza's government compound was a large grain depot (*'anbar*) located immediately adjacent to the government building (*saray*) and the army barracks.<sup>14</sup> A cluster of private storehouses (*hawasil*) at the southern end of the city, near the roads towards al-'Arish and 'Aqaba, is likely to have housed more grain.<sup>15</sup> There were two markets for beasts of burden close by, which were also probably connected to Gaza's role as a caravan city: the Donkey Market (Suq al-Hamir) near the road to al-'Arish and the Camel Market (Suq al-Jimal) right on the road to 'Aqaba.<sup>16</sup>

The opening of the Suez Canal put a dent in Gaza's importance in supplying the Hajj caravans, as a crossroads for a secondary Hajj route, and in its income from trade in general. From then on, virtually all the goods that had been traded on the caravan route went on steamers, as did the pilgrims on the Egyptian route who took boats to Jeddah instead of crossing the Sinai Desert on foot.<sup>17</sup> In the absence of documentary evidence, the consequences for the inhabitants of Gaza and its region

<sup>13</sup> Dror Ze'evi, *An Ottoman Century: The District of Jerusalem in the 1600s* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 40; Haggai Etkes, "Nomads and Droughts, Challenges to Middle Eastern Economic Development: The Case of Early Ottoman Gaza (1516–82)" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2008), pp. 41–42; Faroqhi, *Pilgrims and Sultans*, pp. 61–62.

<sup>14</sup> Gatt, "Legende zum Plan von Gaza," pp. 149–159; see also Gatt's Map (Figure I.5). On Gaza's government compound, see Johann Buessow, "The Municipal Compound in Late Ottoman Gaza: Local Appropriations of a Tanzimat Institution and Their Visual and Material Communication," in Ben-Bassat and Buessow (eds.), *From the Household to the Wider World*, pp. 179–194.

<sup>15</sup> See Gatt's Map (Figure I.5). As in the famous Midan neighborhood of Damascus, these storehouses might have been used for trade as well as for the provision of the Hajj pilgrimage. See, for instance, Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 291. A comparison of Gatt's 1888 Map to the aerial photograph of 1918 suggests that these facilities had been expanded, perhaps due to the grain boom before WWI. See Bavarian State Archive (BayHStA), BS-Palästina, 463–464.

<sup>16</sup> The designations are taken from Gatt's Map (Figure I.5). The boundaries can be gleaned from a British map of Gaza from 1937 (where the plots where the two markets were previously located are clearly identifiable). See ISA, "Gaza," 1937, 1:2,500, Survey of Palestine, Jaffa.

<sup>17</sup> On the Suez Canal and its role for the population in its vicinity, see Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

remain largely speculative. However, it must have affected the livelihoods of a large number of people from different walks of life, including grain producers, merchants, artisans, and the Bedouins who provided animals for the convoys.<sup>18</sup> The decline of caravan trade in Gaza is well reflected in comments by the Archduke of Austria, Ludwig Salvator, who visited the Sinai Peninsula and southern Palestine in 1879 to examine the possibilities for future development and infrastructure projects:

[S]ince the opening of the Suez Canal, the greater part of the traffic between Syria and Egypt is carried on by the short water route *viâ* Jaffa and Port Said, in consequence of which the old highway, formerly so frequented by caravans, travelers, and pilgrims, is now deserted and forgotten. Even the cattle-dealers now prefer to send their stock by steamer from the great export harbour of Jaffa to Alexandria, so that only a few camel-drivers are to be met with on the once favourite route.<sup>19</sup>

Importantly, Salvator also notes that the traffic on the road from Syria to Egypt, although it dropped tremendously, did not come to a complete halt.<sup>20</sup> The economic loss for Gaza might have been somewhat mitigated by the fact that the Damascus caravans continued to operate until the completion of the Hijaz Railway in 1908.<sup>21</sup> Thus, not surprisingly, the 1905 Ottoman census for Gaza still lists numerous occupations that were traditionally identified with the caravan trade, such as traders of beasts of burden, porters, camel-eers, and the like. However, another economic trend provided Gaza with new opportunities: the unprecedented rise in grain exports.

Since Antiquity, the coastal lands around Gaza had been one of the breadbaskets of the Eastern Mediterranean. As Faruk Tabak has shown, the idea of grain production as a perennial feature of a cohesive Mediterranean culture is a cliché. In fact, the production and trade of this most basic food staple experienced significant and sometimes dramatic changes over the centuries. From the seventeenth century onwards, a combination of factors, including climate change, the weakening of Ottoman state control, and the growing nomadic population caused grain production to drop, whereas animal husbandry and orchards in the mountain regions offered alternative livelihoods.<sup>22</sup> Roger Owen and other economic historians have argued that only the increased

<sup>18</sup> For more on trade and transport-related professions in Gaza, see Chapter 2.

<sup>19</sup> Ludwig Salvator (Archduke of Austria), *The Caravan Route between Egypt and Syria* (London: Kegan Paul, 1881), pp. viii–ix.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13–15.

<sup>21</sup> For more on the Hijaz Railway, see Murat Özyüksel, *The Hijaz Railway and the Ottoman Empire: Modernity, Industrialisation and Ottoman Decline* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Faruk Tabak, *The Waning of the Mediterranean, 1550–1870: A Geohistorical Approach* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), chapter 4.

security and the settlement of nomads in the plains of Bilad al-Sham after 1840 made large-scale grain growing possible again.<sup>23</sup>

Increased maritime transportation, in particular after the introduction of steamships, allowed for relatively cheap export to Europe. The lifting of the British Corn Laws in 1846, which nullified the high tariffs on imported cereals, added an additional impetus. Meanwhile, declining returns from other industries prompted merchants in Beirut, the Eastern Mediterranean's economic capital, to invest in what was increasingly becoming a "grain economy,"<sup>24</sup> starting primarily in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Grain exports, sometimes complemented by other local cash crops such as cotton from the Adana-Mersin region<sup>25</sup> or Jaffa oranges<sup>26</sup> became the driver of massive urban development in a number of coastal cities.<sup>27</sup> The entire complex of economic, architectural, and cultural features became known as "the Eastern Mediterranean port city" that also led to the rise of the middle classes, more opportunities for members of the Christian and Jewish communities, liberalism, cosmopolitanism, cultural hybridization, and a new culture of leisure and sociability.<sup>28</sup> These trends emerged in the imperial capital Istanbul, Smyrna/Izmir, and in Salonica beginning in the 1850s, and were felt somewhat later in Bilad al-Sham, mainly in the four decades preceding WWI. They introduced new and dynamic economic and cultural models into the urban landscape of Bilad al-Sham, which could then compete with the old commercial and political centers of the interior, such as Aleppo and Damascus.<sup>29</sup> The latter were eventually also

<sup>23</sup> Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy 1800–1914* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993), pp. 167–173.

<sup>24</sup> Schatkowski Schilcher, "The Grain Economy."

<sup>25</sup> Toksöz, *Nomads, Migrants and Cotton in the Eastern Mediterranean*; Filiz Yenişehirlioğlu, Eyüp Özveren and Tülin Selvi Ünlü (eds.), *Eastern Mediterranean Port Cities: A Study of Mersin, Turkey – From Antiquity to Modernity* (New York: Springer, 2019); Chris Gratien, *The Unsettled Plain: An Environmental History of the Late Ottoman Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

<sup>26</sup> For more on Jaffa oranges, see Buessow, *Hamidian Palestine*, pp. 220–221; Nahum Karlinsky, *California Dreaming: Ideology, Society, and Technology in the Citrus Industry of Palestine, 1890–1939*, translated from the Hebrew by Naftali Greenwood (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2005), pp. 94–109; Mustafa Kabha and Nahum Karlinsky, "The Lost Orchard: The Palestinian-Arab Citrus Industry up to the Nakba," *Zmanim* 129 (Winter 2015), pp. 94–109 [in Hebrew].

<sup>27</sup> For an overview of the literature, see Dotan Halevy, "Being Imperial, Being Ephemeral: Ottoman Modernity on Gaza's Seashore," in Ben-Bassat and Buessow (eds.), *From the Household to the Wider World*, pp. 225–241.

<sup>28</sup> For more on this topic, see Malte Fuhrmann, *Port Cities of the Eastern Mediterranean: Urban Culture in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> See examples of this rivalry between Beirut and Damascus in Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut*, pp. 35–52.



transformed by the new economic and cultural trends, as reflected, for example, in the modification of existing urban structures or the construction of new suburbs.

This is the general backdrop for the evaluation of the development of any city in this region and period. Gaza was part of this general process, but in its own way. Natural conditions in the greater region of Gaza, including the vast plains of the northern Negev, and the dry and salty lands with their annual precipitation of less than 200 mm on average especially in the areas further southeast, made Gaza a difficult and less suitable terrain for growing wheat. By contrast, unlike other varieties of grain, barley and millet were perfectly suited to these conditions. There was also considerable expertise among the local population on optimal methods to exploit small but well-watered locations such as the beds of seasonal streams (*wadis*) for growing barley, even far into the arid Negev lands. Geographers describe this method as “patchy dry farming.” Traditionally it yielded enough grain to supply the Bedouins for bread-baking, feed their cattle and sheep in the summer, and supply caravans that passed through Gaza on their way to Egypt, Syria, and the Hijaz. The American geographer Ellsworth Huntington noted his impressions of Bedouin (“Arab”) agriculture, when he traveled through the plains south of Beersheba in April 1909, after a period of rainfall:

Here and there a few Arabs were tented beside heaps of earth like huge beehives six feet high, under which much straw and a little grain was stored. Every mile or two we came upon the strange sight of a camel drawing a plough, perhaps with a baby camel running alongside. Or else we passed a group of three or four Arabs coming down from the north with primitive wooden ploughs swung on the sides of their slow-stepping beasts. The news of the rains of the past few days had already reached the nomads near Hebron and Jaffa, and they were hastening back to plant a little millet, in the hope of having something to eat next winter aside from the products of the flocks and herds. Furrows are ploughed about three or four feet apart, and in these the seed is planted. Millet will grow in the driest land, provided water is abundant at the start and the sun is warm enough to promote rapid growth.<sup>30</sup>

As the adjectives “strange,” “primitive,” and “little” suggest, Huntington probably underestimated the capacity of local agriculture. He also overlooked the importance of barley. However, he noted himself that around Tall al-Hasi, in the more fertile lands east of Gaza, Bedouin landowners employed peasants to grow grain: “The land here, being close to the dry Negeb, belongs to wandering Beduin [...]; but on the hilltops small houses are scattered about, the homes of the Fellahin servants who till the land for their wandering masters.”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Huntington, *Palestine and Its Transformation*, p. 119.      <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

It required no permanent attendance by peasants, as local customary law (*'urf*) guaranteed protection of these cultivated patches, as well as the mudbrick storage facilities mentioned by Huntington.<sup>32</sup> After 1880, the rising value of land appears to have initiated processes of territorialization and land privatization. Tribal grazing territory was divided into individually sown fields, and wells were privatized. This was accompanied by a series of inter-tribal agreements on land use. As of the 1890s, the Ottoman government adopted these newly negotiated tribal boundaries in its attempt to increase its control over the Negev.<sup>33</sup> As can be seen in Figure 1.1, such tribal boundaries also served the Ottoman Empire in making claims for territorial control vis-à-vis British-controlled Egypt (note item 17 on the map, the Tarabin tribe, whose presence served as an argument for Ottoman territorial claims over a large part of the northern Sinai).

Since the 1870s, Gazan merchants had exported their growing surplus of barley from the greater Gaza region to Europe, where demands were on the rise.<sup>34</sup> The growth in exports from the port of Gaza was largely due to the export of barley to Britain, where it was needed for the beer industry, particularly for producing the lighter beer that became more popular in the mid-century. The barley grown in the meagrely rain-fed northern Negev plains could be exported to Britain in the early spring, before barley from other places was ready to harvest, which constituted a major advantage on the international market.<sup>35</sup> In the Negev itself, better security conditions, the Empire's increased regulation and control of this region, and its policy that encouraged sedentarization of Bedouin groups and the cultivation of their land, in addition to a rare sequence of exceptionally rainy years, all led to increased cultivation of barley, especially by Bedouins.<sup>36</sup>

In 1898, John Dickson, the British consul in Jerusalem, estimated that 600 tons of sorghum, 4,000 tons of wheat, and 30,000 tons of barley, three-quarters of southern Palestine's total barley exports, were shipped

<sup>32</sup> Frank Stewart, "The Contract with Surety in Bedouin Customary Law," *UCLA Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law* 2 (2003), pp. 163–280.

<sup>33</sup> Avinoam Meir, "Contemporary State Discourse and Historical Pastoral Spatiality: Contradictions in the Land Conflict between the Israeli Bedouin and the State," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32/5 (2009), p. 835. For a detailed case study of the parceling of land, see Gideon M. Kressel, Joseph Ben-David, and Khalil Abu Rabi'a, "Changes in the Land Usage by the Negev Bedouin since the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Nomadic Peoples* 28 (1991), pp. 28–55.

<sup>34</sup> Buessow, *Hamidian Palestine*, pp. 272–273.

<sup>35</sup> See Rubinstein, *Mabat 'al ha-qehila ha-yehudit be-'Aza*, pp. 38–40; Halevy, "Drinking (Beer) from the Sea of Gaza."

<sup>36</sup> Halevy, *ibid.*

to Britain from Gaza onboard British steamers. Only a small fraction was exported to the markets of Jaffa and Egypt.<sup>37</sup> The average value of Gaza's barley exports to Britain alone was nearly twice the average of Jaffa's famous oranges.<sup>38</sup> Bringing this voluminous and precious load safely aboard the trading vessels required considerable logistic efforts and suitable port facilities. This was Gaza's weak point, since it did not have a natural deep-water port.

As shown in the aerial photo of Gaza and its environs in the Introduction, contrary to common wisdom,<sup>39</sup> during the Ottoman period, Gaza was a caravan and not a port city. It only had a small wharf located some four kilometers west of the city, inland from the extensive sand dunes.<sup>40</sup> Since Gaza had no natural harbor, large steam ships could not dock there. Thus, they had to unload relatively far from the shore and place their goods on small boats that shuttled between the coast and the ships anchoring in deep waters.<sup>41</sup> The geographer Huntington provides a vivid depiction of this situation:

Gaza [...] is harborless. Down by the beach, and separated from the city by nearly a mile of sand dunes, a whitewashed custom-house mounts guard over a small wooden wharf and a few sailboats. Occasionally a steamer calls to carry away barley in exchange for a load of iron or cloth for sale to the Beduin; but ships large enough to go to sea must anchor a mile from shore, and can discharge their loads in lighters only in calm weather.

Needless to say, this was an expensive, complicated, and inefficient process that led to considerable damage to goods, as well as to the boats themselves. Given that the commercial potential of Gaza's port at the time was mainly associated with specific commodities and its potential to serve as a major regional port was limited, the Municipality of Gaza, together with the Ottoman imperial authorities, searched for ways to resolve the predicament of the port and raise funds to finance

<sup>37</sup> Nu'man al-Qasatli, *al-Rawda al-Nu'maniyya fi siyhat Filastin wa ba'ad al-Buldan al-Shamiyya* [al-Nu'man Travels in Palestine and some of the Syrian Lands] (Irbid: Mu'assasat Hamada li-dirasat al-Jam'iyya wal-Nashr, 2011), p. 200 [in Arabic].

<sup>38</sup> TNA, FO 195/2106, Dickson to O'Connor, May 20, 1901; *Ibid.*, Blech to O'Connor, December 21, 1907; Gerber, *Ottoman Rule*, p. 237; see also Marwan R. Buheiry, "The Agricultural Exports of Southern Palestine, 1885–1914," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 10/4 (1981), pp. 61–81.

<sup>39</sup> Bruce Masters, "Gaza," in Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Masters (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Facts on File, 2009), p. 228.

<sup>40</sup> On Gaza's port, see Duncan Mackenzie, "The Port of Gaza and Excavation in Philistia," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 50/2 (1918), pp. 72–87.

<sup>41</sup> According to the newspaper *Filastin*, the Municipality of Gaza invested the princely sum of 2,000 liras in a fleet of wooden boats to facilitate the process, but this effort was deemed insufficient. See *Filastin*, August 31, 1912, p. 1.

construction works at the site.<sup>42</sup> After years of deliberations that started as early as 1893, the Ottoman State Council finally approved a plan to construct a pier in Gaza in 1905 and to levy a special tax on products imported and exported from the port which was earmarked to be used to construct a hospital in the city and to upgrade its infrastructure. Historian Dotan Halevy notes:

In March–May 1905, the State Council and a subsidiary “special committee” approved the final plan for the port. In order to start construction on the pier and pave a road to it, the municipality of Gaza was instructed to take out a loan of 2,000 Turkish pounds. According to this plan, once the pier was completed, local authorities could start collecting duty from merchants, which in turn would cover interest on the loan, the pier’s maintenance costs, and finally the building of the long-awaited hospital. Parceling and auctioning the sand dunes would be put off to a later phase in order for their price to appreciate after the new infrastructure was built. This iteration of the plan once again incorporated the hospital and tax collection into the same scheme. An addendum to the State Council’s approval specified which import and export items would henceforth be taxed. They included cereals, oranges, rice, sugar, luggage, liquids, finished goods, domestic animals, pack animals, cattle, as well as passengers.<sup>43</sup>

The pier was finally constructed in 1906, a dozen years or so after it was first discussed. It was 60 meters long and 8 meters wide, but it did not provide a solution to the problem for which it was intended in the first place; that is, the lack of a natural deep-water harbor. In addition, it did not last long because in the absence of a breakwater, the waves quickly caused corrosion and damage. Moreover, it was impossible to safely navigate next to the pier, so lighter boats that were loaded with goods to be carried out to ships anchoring in deeper waters avoided using it in the first place and preferred the previous system.<sup>44</sup>

Gaza’s partial transition from a caravan city to a port city was incomplete and entailed high risks, given the dependency on a single product, barley, as the main export that was subject to severe fluctuations in demand, weather, and precipitation.<sup>45</sup> The residents of Gaza and its region had to adapt to these changes whether they wanted to or not, and make the best of the situation to maintain their sources of livelihood. Two decades of exceptionally good rain and rich harvests created the

<sup>42</sup> See Halevy, “Being Imperial, Being Ephemeral”; see also Roza el-Eini, *Mandated Landscape: British Imperial Rule in Palestine, 1929–1948* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 230–237.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* For a map of the port of Gaza as it developed until WWI, see Mackenzie, “The Port of Gaza.”

<sup>45</sup> Halevy, “Drinking (Beer) from the Sea of Gaza.”

illusion that the “barley bonanza”<sup>46</sup> would only be the beginning of sustainable economic growth with steady returns for producers, merchants, and the Ottoman state.<sup>47</sup> British observers also envisioned great development plans for Gaza given the impressive growth in barley exports, including a railway link to Transjordan that would increase British access to grain growing regions, and allow Gaza to be a regional hub for grain exports.<sup>48</sup> However, in the end, Gaza’s barley became yet another example of a number of Eastern Mediterranean monocultures that led to a severe economic downturn when local, regional, and global circumstances deteriorated.<sup>49</sup>

Yet, looking back on the four decades since the opening of the Suez Canal, there was no all-out decline in Gaza’s economy. This assessment is also borne out by the available estimates of the city’s population, which all point to a slow but steady population growth during this period.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, the city and its region had to adapt to several successive shocks. Two of these, the cholera epidemic of 1902 and the end of the “barley bonanza” were particularly severe. Thus, despite partially successful adaptation to the changing economic circumstances of the previous decades, on the eve of WWI Gaza found itself in a major economic crisis.

It remains unclear how these transformations impacted the population of Gaza or how they were perceived in the memories of past generations. From the historical records available for the Ottoman period from its beginnings in 1517 up to the 1850s, changing fortunes, the vagaries of rainfall, migration, and conflicts over resources, for example, between Bedouin herders, farmers, and the tax authorities, were characteristic of everyday life.<sup>51</sup> The period of Ottoman rule started with a rebellion of Gaza’s population, which was quickly put down.<sup>52</sup> In the mid-seventeenth century, the Ottoman government was able to reduce the power of the local Ridwan Dynasty that controlled the southern part of

<sup>46</sup> Shachar, *The Gaza Strip*, pp. 40–41.

<sup>47</sup> Halevy, “Being Imperial, Being Ephemeral”; the governor of the District of Jerusalem at the time, Ekrem Bey, pondered the idea of purchasing automobiles for grain transport to Gaza’s port from the northern Negev. See TNA, FO 195/2287, Blech to Barclay, June 29, 1908.

<sup>48</sup> *The Times*, November 2, 1898, p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> For a comparison to cash-crop products in other locations in the Middle East that were exported to specific countries overseas, see Roger Owen, *Cotton and the Egyptian Economy, 1820–1914: A Study in Trade and Development* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); Philipp, *Acre*, Chapter 3; Kais Firro, “Silk and Agrarian Changes in Lebanon, 1860–1914,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 22/2 (1990), pp. 151–169.

<sup>50</sup> Ben-Arieh, “The Population of the Large Towns.”

<sup>51</sup> For example, on sixteenth-century Gaza, see Etkes, *Nomads and Droughts*.

<sup>52</sup> Ze’evi, *An Ottoman Century*, p. 2.

Palestine by sending their dominant leader Husayn Pasha to Istanbul where he was murdered in 1662/1663.<sup>53</sup> Later on, catastrophic events also took their toll: the invasion of French troops in 1799, in the context of Napoleon Bonaparte's Egyptian campaign and his push towards Acre,<sup>54</sup> and about a generation later, the decade of Egyptian rule between 1831 and 1840.<sup>55</sup> All these events reshuffled the economic and social opportunities in Gaza.<sup>56</sup>

### *The Egyptian Factor*

Throughout its history, Gaza engaged in vast, complex relationships with Egypt. From the early nineteenth century, these were decisively shaped by the fact that the Ottoman province of Egypt was ruled by the family of Mehmed (Muhammad) 'Ali who maintained tense relations with Istanbul. Vital links between the populations of Gaza and Egypt had been established through trade, the settlement of Egyptian peasants around Gaza, and emigration from the Gaza region in the opposite direction. It also included the presence of Gazan students and 'ulama' in al-Azhar college, Bedouin tribes that roamed between the Negev and Sinai regularly, Sufi *tariqas* that established institutions on both sides, and patronage relationships of some of Gaza's elite families with the Khedive of Egypt. Some of these ties were anathema to Istanbul, which had doubts as to the peaceful intentions of the house of Mehmed 'Ali that had conquered Palestine and Syria in the 1830s and brought the Ottoman Empire to the brink of collapse. Fears that Egypt would once again become a threat to the Empire were revived after the British occupied Egypt in 1882, which gradually turned the Gaza region into a political and military frontier zone.

Gaza's relationships with Egypt were pervasive and visible in everyday life. The Baedeker travel guide emphasized the visibility of Egyptian cultural influences in Gaza when writing, "Gaza is a town of semi-Egyptian character; the veil of the Moslem women, for example, closely resembles the Egyptian. The bazaar, too, has an Egyptian appearance."<sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57–59.

<sup>54</sup> Henri Laurens, *L'Expédition d'Égypte, 1798–1801* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1997), pp. 182–198.

<sup>55</sup> Probably drawing on local history, the historian 'Arif al-'Arif writes that the decade of Egyptian rule was especially disruptive for Gaza and led to large emigration from the city. See 'Arif, *Tarikh Ghazza*, p. 250.

<sup>56</sup> Johann Buessow, "Gaza," *EF*<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>57</sup> Karl Baedeker, *Palestine and Syria: With Routes through Mesopotamia and Babylonia and the Island of Cyprus, Handbook for Travelers* (Leipzig: Karl Baedeker, 1891), p. 120.

Rafeq, when analyzing the remnants of the Shari‘a court records from Gaza, mentions that the terms *wikala* for trading house and *khatt* for street indicated the strong Egyptian influence in everyday vocabulary.<sup>58</sup> Examining the extant Gaza *sijill* records from the 1850s shows the degree to which the Egyptian involvement was strong in Gaza: numerous people bore the *laqab* al-Misri, “the Egyptian,” better known in its colloquial form “al-Masri,” which in the 1905 census appears as a frequent last name.<sup>59</sup> In other cases a place of origin in Egypt is mentioned when people appeared in the court. Payments registered in the surviving court records were often made in Egyptian silver coins (*fidda misriyya*).

There is evidence of repeated waves of immigration of Egyptian agricultural workers and Bedouins who settled in the Subdistrict of Gaza,<sup>60</sup> but also the reverse trend when people left the subdistrict for Egypt because of declining economic opportunities or acute crises. Leaving Gaza for Egypt was obviously used as a threat when complaining to the central authorities in Istanbul. This threat was a common tactic in negotiations between the central government and populations in the Empire’s provinces throughout Ottoman history as part of the idea of the “Circle of Justice” that Ottoman political thought adhered to.<sup>61</sup> According to this notion, all components of society and governance depend on each other and if one of them is out of balance, the whole structure of the state and society is in jeopardy. For instance, if there is no justice, peasants will run away or rebel and stop paying taxes. In this case, the state coffers will be emptied and there will be no way to support the bureaucracy or finance the army, thus putting the ruler’s hold in danger.<sup>62</sup> However, in the case of Gaza, there may have been more than a conventional rhetorical device at stake. The number of people who stated in petitions to Istanbul that they were ready to leave Gaza are certainly rounded upwards and perhaps provide only rough estimates of the magnitude of the phenomenon. Other specifics in these complaints, however, seem so concrete that they can be taken at least as credible indications of where people from Gaza might have gone if they planned to leave.

<sup>58</sup> Rafeq, *Ghazza*, pp. 12, 54.

<sup>59</sup> In 445 cases in the database, households went by the last name al-Misri, representing some 3,000 people; that is, more than 10 percent of the population of Gaza in 1905.

<sup>60</sup> Kressel and Aharoni, “Egyptian Immigrants.”

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Canay Şahin, “The Rise and Fall of an Ayân Family in Eighteenth Century Anatolia: The Caniklizâdes (1737–1808)” (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation: Bilkent University, 2003), pp. 15–16; Ben-Bassat, *Petitioning the Sultan*, pp. 29–30, 59; Linda T. Darling, *A History of Social Justice and Political Power in the Middle East: The Circle of Justice from Mesopotamia to Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 127–163, 171–181.

<sup>62</sup> Darling, *Ibid.*

For example, petitioners in 1895 stated that “five hundred households” of peasants or agricultural workers (*fallahin* in colloquial Arabic) were about to leave for either Egypt or the Syrian region of Hawran.<sup>63</sup> The mention of the latter region is particularly interesting since compared to Egypt the Hawran was farther away and less well connected to Gaza and was often subjected to violent conflicts.<sup>64</sup> However, it was a major grain-growing region in the midst of an economic boom and as such would have provided grain-growers from the Gaza region with familiar conditions. Another petition goes as far as saying that “ten thousand people have already left the region of Gaza and moved to the Hawran and to Egypt,” a number which must have been inflated for rhetorical purposes by the petitioner, who defines himself as a “loyal (subject) who loves the state.”<sup>65</sup>

Another wave of emigration from Gaza and its region was caused by the cholera epidemic, which hit the region hard in 1902. Reports indicate that some 18,000 people may have left the region and some 3,000 to 4,000 people may have died from the disease.<sup>66</sup> The epidemic reached Gaza from Egypt, which led to the closure of Gaza’s port in mid-October 1902 and to unsuccessful Ottoman attempts to prevent people and goods moving north of al-‘Arish where a quarantine station was set up in the summer of 1902 in the direction of Gaza. The Bedouins, we are told, refused to comply: people paid bribes to officials to be able to pass and the authorities hesitated to act.<sup>67</sup>

Five years later, a mass emigration of rural producers seems to have taken place not so much for political but mainly for climatic and economic reasons. In 1907, after a very dry winter and dramatic crop failures, the British consul in Jerusalem estimated that as many as 5,000 of the Gaza region’s 40,000 inhabitants had left the region, probably for Egypt.<sup>68</sup>

### *Al-Azhar and Elite Networks*

A large number of the prominent Gazan scholars, religious leaders and administrators graduated from al-Azhar in Cairo. Studying at this most

<sup>63</sup> BOA. HR. MTV., 716/56\_2/1, Temmuz 1311 [July 1895] (‘Abd al-Jawad al-Bayoumi to the Grand Vizier).

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Birgit Schaebler, *Aufstände im Drusenbergländ: Ethnizität und Integration einer ländlichen Gesellschaft Syriens vom Osmanischen Reich bis zur staatlichen Unabhängigkeit, 1850–1949* (Gotha: Perthes, 1996); Buessow and Safi, *Damascus Affairs*, pp. 126, 132–135.

<sup>65</sup> BOA. HR. MTV., 716/38\_2/1, 11 Muharrem 1313 [July 4, 1895] (a petition to the Grand Vizier by “Sadiq Muhibb al-Dawla [Sincere Lover of the State]”).

<sup>66</sup> Barel, *An Ill Wind*, pp. 79–83. <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 105–106.

<sup>68</sup> TNA, FO 195/2255, Blech to O’Conor, June 19, 1907.



prestigious Islamic college provided aspiring young men from Gaza with a first-rate education in Islamic law and related disciplines. It qualified them for important and well-paid positions in the religious sector, local government, or in one of the municipal or district councils. No less importantly, it also provided graduates with a social network in Egypt, which many maintained throughout their lives. Biographical data on Gaza's political elites of the period illustrate the importance of al-Azhar graduates in the city's public life.

For example, one of the most prominent al-Azhar graduates was Ahmad Muhyi al-Din al-Husayni (1808/1809–1878). During his lifetime, he held all three of the highest Islamic religious offices in Gaza: that of the Hanafi *mufti*, the supreme judge (*kadi*), and the preacher (*khatib*) of the Grand Mosque (al-'Umari Mosque), the city's main mosque.<sup>69</sup> He also initiated the construction of a new mosque and *madrasa* on the site of the tomb of al-Sayyid Hashim (Jami' Sayyidina Hashim), Gaza's most revered local saint, during the time of Sultan 'Abdülmeccid (1839–1861), who partially financed the project.<sup>70</sup>

Muhammad Saqallah, who served as the *mufti* of Gaza one short term in the mid-1870s, was also a graduate of al-Azhar. He was born in Gaza in 1227 (1812), started studying at al-Azhar in 1249 (1833), and stayed there for a period of seven years. After moving back to Gaza, he taught in the Grand Mosque of Gaza, practiced Islamic jurisprudence, and concomitantly worked in commerce.<sup>71</sup>

The scholar-cum-Sufi Shaykh Ahmad Busaysu was a highly important graduate of al-Azhar who lived in Gaza. Tabba' purports that over his lifetime he personally initiated 20,000 *murids* and students to the Khalwatiyya Bakriyya Sufi order.<sup>72</sup> Busaysu grew up in Shuja'iyya neighborhood. He became a member of the Khalwatiyya Bakriyya *tariqa*,<sup>73</sup> and enrolled in al-Azhar in 1845. In 1854/1855 he returned to Gaza and was allocated a room in the Sayyida Ruqayya Mosque<sup>74</sup> where he worked and taught. He was also employed as the *katib* (clerk) of the Shari'a court in

<sup>69</sup> For a brief description of Gaza's mosques, see Moshe Sharon, *Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum Palaestinae (CIAP)*, vol. 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 31–41; for more on the Grand Mosque and its library, see Tabba', *Ithaf*, vol. 2, pp. 105–126.

<sup>70</sup> On the genealogical associations between Sayyid Hashim, the great-grandfather of the Prophet Muhammad, and Gaza, see Buessow, "Gaza"; Tabba', *Ithaf*, vol. 2, pp. 160–3; Sharon, *CIAP*, vol. 4, p. 34.

<sup>71</sup> Tabba', *Ithaf*, vol. 4, pp. 275–285. <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 296–309.

<sup>73</sup> For more on this *tariqa*, see F. de Jong, "The Sufi Orders in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Palestine: A Preliminary Survey concerning their Identity, Organizational Characteristics and Continuity," *Studia Islamica* 58 (1983), pp. 149–181.

<sup>74</sup> On the Ruqayya mosque, see Sharon, *CIAP*, vol. 4 (2009), p. 36; Tabba', *Ithaf*, vol. 2, p. 176.

Gaza and as the *imam* of the Ibn ‘Uthman Mosque (Jami‘ ‘Uthman Shihab al-Din) and became the head of the Education Council of Gaza in 1898/1899. Tabba‘ calls him the “head of the ‘*ulama*’ in Gaza” and “*shaykh* of the Sufi orders in Gaza,” two probably informal titles that indicate his prominence among his peers. He often journeyed back to Egypt after his return to Gaza from al-Azhar,<sup>75</sup> which led his local opponents from among the supporters of the Husayni family to level accusations about his connections in Egypt and his repeated visits there.<sup>76</sup> In particular, they claimed that he was pretending to be a Sheikh of a Sufi *tariqa*, was “leading people astray,” and had inflated the number of his followers.<sup>77</sup> Ahmad Busaysu and some of his relatives were important allies of the Husayni family, whom they supported until 1893. Later on, however, the Busaysus, together with the Shawwa family turned against the Husaynis in 1895.<sup>78</sup> They broke away from Gaza’s dominant political faction and entered into an alliance with the imperial authorities and its most important local representative, the governor of Jerusalem Mehmed Tevfik Bey (1897–1901), who took office in November 1897.<sup>79</sup>

Another prominent al-Azhar graduate was Yusuf Sharrab (b. 1254/1838 in Khan Yunis, d. 1330/1912 in Cairo). Unlike the aforementioned personalities, he did not belong to the local political elite. He serves in fact as an interesting example of a first-generation scholar from an upwardly mobile family with a rural background whose members lived on both sides of the emerging Ottoman–Egyptian border. Yusuf Sharrab’s family originally came from the small town of Khan Yunis, some 25 kilometers south of Gaza. According to Tabba‘, it was a “big family with many branches in Khan Yunis,”<sup>80</sup> as well as in Gaza and in al-‘Arish in northern Sinai.<sup>81</sup> The 1905 census, for example, lists 21 Sharrab households in Khan Yunis. In terms of profession, 14 persons in these households were classified as peasant or farmer (*çiftçi*), some were shop owners (*bakkal, dükkancı*), and one was member of the local Administrative Council (*müdüriyet meclisi a‘zası*), which was a relatively senior post, especially given the modest occupations of most of the other family members.<sup>82</sup> In Gaza there were only five Sharrab households,

<sup>75</sup> Tabba‘, *Ibid.* <sup>76</sup> *Dialogue.* <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> BOA. BEO., 651/48815, Lef 12, 21 Mart 1311 [April 2, 1895].

<sup>79</sup> For more on Mehmed Tevfik Bey, see David Kushner, “Jerusalem in the Eyes of Three Ottoman Governors at the End of the Hamidian Period,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 35 (1999), pp. 83–102.

<sup>80</sup> Tabba‘, *Ithaf*, vol. 3, p. 259. <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 386.

<sup>82</sup> ISA, Nüfus Register no. 240, pp. 177–196.

although some male family members who had more education moved there from Khan Yunis and climbed the social ladder.

Yusuf's father, Shaykh Salim b. Muqbil b. Salim Sharrab, moved from Khan Yunis to Gaza where he worked in trade. He died there in 1285 (1868/1869). The family was upwardly mobile by capitalizing on higher education and commercial success. Its family tree drawn by Tabba' shows that between c. 1850 and 1910 there were a large number of *shaykhs*, *efendis*, state officials, merchants, a teacher and a poet among his children and grandchildren, in Gaza, Khan Yunis and al-'Arish.<sup>83</sup> Shaykh Salim had five sons: along with Shaykh Yusuf, the scholar and the family's most renowned scion,<sup>84</sup> there were al-Hajj Muhammad (a petition and letter writer, an *arzuhalci*), Mustafa, Shakir (d. 1320/1903–4),<sup>85</sup> and Ahmad Efendi (d. 1320/1902–1903), who was a *muhafiz* (governor) of al-'Arish in Sinai, whose very successful and wealthy children continued to live and do business in caravan trade in this city.<sup>86</sup>

Shaykh Yusuf Sharrab, who was blind, moved to al-Azhar from Gaza in 1280 (1863/1864) and studied there for nine years, after which he taught at the institution for 12 years. He got married in Egypt but was extradited in 1882 for supporting the 'Urabi Revolt. Thereafter, he returned to Gaza and taught in several local institutions, in addition to serving as the *imam*, *khatib*, and *mudarris* at the Katib Wilaya Mosque in the Zaytun neighborhood.<sup>87</sup> Tabba' writes that his scholarly fields were jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Prophetic tradition (*hadith*), and Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*). He had excellent relations with leading scholars at al-Azhar, was a member of the Shadhiliyya Sufi order, and went to Mecca for the pilgrimage in 1319 (1901/1902).<sup>88</sup> Ahmad Busaysu writes that Yusuf Sharrab was a "meticulous" jurist and a "clever" scholar, although he was "difficult to get along with and liked to quarrel and to meddle in affairs that did not concern him."<sup>89</sup> Abu Hashim, who edited Tabba's book, writes that in 1904 Yusuf Sharrab was "*shaykh al-'ulama*" of Gaza, using the epithet that was also ascribed to Ahmad Busaysu. Abu Hashim, probably drawing on oral history accounts, also highlights Yusuf Sharrab's function as a gatekeeper for Egyptian-Gazan

<sup>83</sup> Tabba', *Ithaf*, vol. 3, pp. 259–261.

<sup>84</sup> A biography of Yusuf al-Sharrab can be found in Tabba', *Ithaf*, vol. 4, pp. 379–389; see also 'Adel Manna', *A'lam Filastin fi awakhir al-'ahd al-'uthmani* [The Notables of Palestine during the Late Ottoman Period] (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya, 1995), p. 221 [in Arabic].

<sup>85</sup> Tabba', *Ithaf*, vol. 3, p. 259. <sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> On the Katib Wilaya Mosque, see Sharon, *CIAP*, vol. 4 (2009), p. 34; Tabba', *Ithaf*, vol. 2, pp. 135–136.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 385. <sup>89</sup> Busaysu, *Kashf al-niqab*.

professional social networks, saying that Yusuf collaborated with “the notables and scholars” of Gaza in resolving the affairs of the “returnees from al-Azhar (*shu'un al-'a'idin min al-Azhar*).”<sup>90</sup>

*The Khedive and the British-Controlled Government of Egypt*

The personal networks of some Gazan notables included connections in Cairo, up to the level of the Khedive of Egypt. These ties provided them with political clout and staying power to resist Ottoman efforts to control southern Palestine. These relationships, in particular between the Husayni family and the Khedive, were looked upon quite negatively by Istanbul.

As of 1866, Gaza became the seat of a salaried Ottoman subdistrict governor, and the appointed governors tried hard to assert their authority over the networks of the strong local elite. When tensions with the governor erupted, the Husaynis appealed for help from their friends and supporters in the scholarly hierarchy in Istanbul, Cairo's al-Azhar, and the court of the Egyptian viceroy.<sup>91</sup>

In the *Dialogue*, the issue of relationships between Gazans, the Khedive in Egypt, and the British who controlled Egypt at the time comes vividly to the fore.<sup>92</sup> The text is a polemic in the form of a fictitious dialogue written for the Gazan Husayni faction. It begins with an exchange in rhymed prose (*saj'*) between three imaginary figures: Wa'iz ibn Nasuh, the narrator, and two young men named Sadiq ibn Amin and Nashid ibn Rashid whom he encounters while strolling along the shores of Gaza. The three men's names are symbolic and characterize their specific roles in the *Dialogue*. The narrator's name Wa'iz ibn Nasuh translates as “the warner [whistle-blower], son of the provider of good advice.” The name of Nashid ibn Rashid, the Egyptian visitor, means “the seeker of truth, son of the rightly guided,” characterizing him as a sound inquirer. Finally, the name of Sadiq ibn al-Amin, the young Gazan, means “the sincere, son of the trustworthy,” which characterizes him as a reliable source of information.

While resting in a garden near the port of Gaza (see Figure I.2), the three imaginary figures engage in a lengthy conversation that provides a unique window into political discourse in late Ottoman Gaza. Despite the fictional framework, the personalities mentioned and the events discussed are familiar from historical records and events. The overall objective is to praise the Husayni family in Gaza while bashing their

<sup>90</sup> Tabba', *Ithaf*, vol. 4, p. 379.      <sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 252, 256–258.      <sup>92</sup> *Dialogue*.

opponents in this city and beyond, including the mayor Ahmad al-‘Alami, representatives of powerful local households and families, as well as their allies from the Khalidi family in Jerusalem, the *kaymakam* of Gaza and the *mutasarrif* of Jerusalem.<sup>93</sup> Among other accusations it is claimed that the Hasaynis’ opponents betrayed the Ottoman Empire through cooperation with the British to facilitate the purchase and transfer of tribal lands near Gaza to Egypt, which was under British control at the time. At the climax of the *Dialogue*, Sadiq, the young Gazan formulates this accusation:

SADIQ: There is one case that can prove everything. It involves the fact that the *kaymakam* ceded parts of the subdistrict lands to the Egyptians as a part of the planning for a major future intrigue.

NASHID: How can this be, my brother? Are not there borders separating Egypt and the Subdistrict of Gaza?

SADIQ: Yes, there are borders, and in particular a natural border composed of sandy Egyptian land that is not suitable for agriculture. Therefore, Bedouins from Egypt bought [the farming rights for] lands belonging to the Gaza Bedouins, farmed them and paid the tithe to the tribe they bought it from. And this is how the *kaymakam* intervened: He prevented the collection of the tithe from the Egyptian Bedouins and made the sellers [i.e., the Bedouins from Gaza] pay it. He took it from them several years without objection. His plan is that later on, when he sees an opportunity, he will tell the [Gaza] Bedouins to ask for their accumulated tax rights with their swords.” This would then be an opportunity for other parties to get involved. That is his intention, without doubt.

The mere fact that such accusations were made shows the delicate nature of Ottoman relationships with Egypt at the time, the level of mistrust in Ottoman circles as to Egyptian intentions, and the rising importance of Gaza as a border region. The file in which this text was found contains numerous other complaints to Istanbul about intrigues on the part of various officials and individuals in Gaza and in the Province of Jerusalem, all said to be in cahoots with the British in Egypt. For example, the *kaymakam* is accused of holding secret meetings at night with the governor of al-‘Arish to plot against the Empire.<sup>94</sup> Sultan ‘Abdülhamid II

<sup>93</sup> For more on the factionalism in Gaza at the time, see Chapter 4.

<sup>94</sup> See, for instance, BOA. BEO., 651/48815\_18 (*Dialogue*), a letter from Bâb-ı ‘Ali to the Ottoman High Commissioner of Egypt, Ahmed Muhtar Paşa, translating a complaint that arrived on 7 Cemaziylâhır 1312 [August 19, 1896], from a resident of Gaza named ‘Abdallah, about the *kaymakam* Hasan Bey Bedirhanpaşazade’s intrigues with the British in Egypt, together with several local notables and office holders in Gaza, which was designed to facilitate a British takeover of the region and the dispatching of troops there: “Gazze kazasının ve belki bütün livanın İngiltere hükümeti tarafından işgal edilmesini teshil için dahil-i kazada şurış ve fesad ıka’ etmek teşebbüsünde bulunuyorlarki maksadları ıslah-ı ahval için buraya İngiliz askerinin sevkine sebebiyet vermektir (in order to make it easier for

(r. 1876–1909) had his senior representative in Egypt (*Misir Fevkalade Komiseri*, the Ottoman High Commissioner in Egypt), at the time Ahmed Muhtar Paşa, keep an eye on these delicate matters. In fact, the High Commissioner himself was the person who sent Istanbul a copy of the anonymous *Dialogue* discussed here.<sup>95</sup>

In 1906, when the administrative division line between Egypt and the Ottoman Empire was drawn up under heavy British pressure, the British consular agent in Gaza, Alexander Knesevich, wrote to the British Consul in Jerusalem that he had been contacted by several Muslim notables in Gaza who asked for a confidential meeting on the beach near the city. Knesevich reported that they claimed to speak in the name of the entire local population, from various backgrounds and walks of life, and had openly asked for British “protection” over Gaza by moving the border northwards to Isdud (Ashdod), where they claimed it was located in the past.<sup>96</sup> A border near Isdud would have been advantageous to Gaza’s elite families, as it would have left most of their sphere of influence under the same political entity (compare Figure 3.1 for the boundaries of the Subdistrict of Gaza during the period). The petitioners stated that they were “willing to go down to Egypt after disposing of all their property,”<sup>97</sup> a threat whose sincerity is questionable, although it resembles the tone taken by Gazan farmers who threatened to leave for Egypt if local conditions deteriorated. The local notables may have wanted to enter into negotiations to increase their political importance. Interestingly, at the same time, the German consul in Jaffa reported that a Bedouin group from the Subdistrict of Gaza sent a delegation to meet British representatives in Egypt and threatened to emigrate *en masse* to Egyptian territory.<sup>98</sup>

After the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, numerous petitions to Istanbul from Gaza contained complaints about Zionist activity and aspirations in the city and its surroundings, which were first brought up in the mid-1890s.<sup>99</sup> In the spring of 1911, for example, it was argued that the Zionist movement had tried to establish a stronghold in the Subdistrict of Gaza, which was close to the Egyptian border. The

the British government to occupy the Subdistrict of Gaza and even the entire province, they are making deliberate efforts to raise havoc in the subdistrict to provide the British army with a pretext to be sent to the region to restore order”).

<sup>95</sup> BOA. BEO., 651/48815\_29. <sup>96</sup> See Buessow, *Hamidian Palestine*, pp. 505–506.

<sup>97</sup> FO 195/2225, Knesevich to Dickson, Gaza, May 12, 1906.

<sup>98</sup> ISA, German Consulate, R157 III F, 25, Politische Berichte, 1902–1909, Vice Consul Murad in Jaffa, December 8, 1906.

<sup>99</sup> See, for instance, BOA. HR\_MTV., 716/7\_2\_1, 15 Zilhicce 1312 [June 9, 1895] (*mufiti* Muhammad al-Husayni complains about the *kaymakam* of Gaza and members of the Administrative Council with allegations that *waqf* land was sold to the “Jews”).

petitioners from the Abu Khadra, Fayyad, and Surani families accused their rivals in the city, including the governor, the mayor, the former *mufti*, and members of the Administrative Council of collaborating with the Zionists and the British, as well as with corrupt individuals in other cities in Palestine.<sup>100</sup> The British in Egypt were thus perceived by the petitioners as protecting Zionist immigration and settlement activity in Palestine.<sup>101</sup>

Further evidence of the strong relationships between Gazan notables and the Khedive of Egypt emerges from the case of Yusuf Sharrab discussed above, who wanted to return to Cairo after being exiled in 1882 after the 'Urabi crisis. He approached the Khedive 'Abbas with a praise poem while the latter was visiting al-'Arish in 1904, the city where his late brother Ahmad Sharrab had served as the governor. The Khedive indeed arranged for a teaching post to be given to him at al-Azhar, where he remained until his death in 1912.<sup>102</sup>

### *Egyptian Villages*

Besides elite relations, the Egyptian influence made itself felt in the Gaza region through immigration and settlement of Egyptian peasants. As said, the Arabic *nisba* or last name al-Masri, "the Egyptian," was very common in the 1905 census of Gaza and to date this family name is still often found in the Gaza Strip. Over the course of the nineteenth century, various groups of Muslim immigrants settled in Palestine, including Bosnians, Circassians, Kurds, and Maghrebis (mostly Algerians). They were outnumbered by the arrival of Egyptian peasants throughout that century, but particularly during the occupation of Palestine by the Egyptian army in the 1830s.<sup>103</sup> The Egyptians settled in various parts

<sup>100</sup> Cited in Louis Fishman, *Jews and Palestinians in the Late Ottoman Era, 1908–1914: Claiming the Homeland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), pp. 113–114.

<sup>101</sup> In the early twentieth century, the Zionist leader Theodor Herzl promoted the al-'Arish plan to settle Jews in Northern Sinai as a first step towards the colonization of Palestine. His plan was vehemently opposed by the Egyptian government and the British authorities in Egypt and became a dead letter. For more details, see Zvi Ilan, "Tokhnit el-'Arish" [al-'Arish Plan], *Et-Mol* 53 (1984), pp. 11–13 [in Hebrew].

<sup>102</sup> Manna', *A'lam Filastin*, p. 221; a similar example of a poem written to the Khedive of Egypt by a Gazan notable dates to 1283/1866–1867 when Ahmad Muhyi al-Din al-Husayni approached the Khedive Isma'il with a request for assistance. The Khedive, in return, intervened with the Sultan at the time, 'Abdül'aziz (r. 1861–1876) who restored al-Husayni to the post of the *mufti* of Gaza. See Tabba', *Ithaf*, vol. 3, pp. 104–105.

<sup>103</sup> Grossman, *Arab Demography and Early Jewish Settlement in Palestine*, pp. 54–65; for two recent studies on the settlement of Egyptian immigrants in the rural area north of Gaza, see Avraham (Avi) Sasson and Roy Marom, "'Asqalān al-Jadīda: Egyptian Rule and the

of the country but particularly in the coastal plain stretching between Gaza and Jaffa, including on the outskirts of these two cities. Some of the villages in the Subdistrict of Gaza such as Burayr, Kawfakha, Muharraqa, and Simsim were established by Egyptian immigrants,<sup>104</sup> who contributed significantly to agricultural production, particularly barley.<sup>105</sup> They also helped promote the development of the citrus and the weaving industry in the region.<sup>106</sup> In other villages such as Bayt Hanun, Dayr Sunayd, Hamama, Hiribya, Isdud, al-Jura, Majdal, Qastina, and Yibna, there was an Egyptian presence alongside the native population.<sup>107</sup> In Hamama, the Egyptians lived in a separate neighborhood called *al-falatiyya*; that is, “the outcast.”<sup>108</sup> In Isdud as well, local memory as manifested in oral history and village memories has it that they were landless, poor, and outcast.<sup>109</sup> According to many sources, the Egyptians were poorer than the other villagers, usually did not own their own land but rather worked as tenants, and were looked upon with contempt by the rest of the rural population who refused to intermarry with them.<sup>110</sup>

### ***The Establishment of Beersheba and the Creation of the Southern Border***

After 1882, when the British occupied Egypt and later when they forced an administrative dividing line between Ottoman Palestine and Egypt in 1906, the importance of the border region between the Negev and Sinai deserts increased considerably. This encouraged the Ottoman Empire to strengthen its hold over the region.<sup>111</sup> Ottoman countermeasures against

Settlement of Egyptians in the Vicinity of Ashkelon, 1831–1948,” in Rafael Y. Lewis et al. (eds.), *Ashkelon – Landscape of Peace and Conflicts: Studies of the Southern Coastal Plain and the Judean Foothills* (Tel-Aviv: Resling, Ashkelon Academic College and Israel Antiquities Authority, 2022), pp. 255–290 [in Hebrew]; Roy Marom, “Arabic Toponymy Around Ashkelon: The village of Hamama as a Case Study,” in *Ashkelon – Landscape of Peace and Conflicts*, pp. 369–410 [in Hebrew].

<sup>104</sup> Kressel and Aharoni, “Egyptian Immigrants,” p. 210.

<sup>105</sup> Grossman, “Rural Settlement in the Southern Coastal Plain,” pp. 65–68, 75, 85–86; Philip Baldensperger, *ha-Mizrah ha-bilti mishtane* [The Immovable East] (Tel-Aviv: Misrad ha-Bitahon, 1982), p. 175 [in Hebrew].

<sup>106</sup> Sasson and Marom, “‘Asqalān al-Jadīda,” pp. 283–285. <sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 282–283.

<sup>108</sup> Marom, “Arabic Toponymy,” p. 372.

<sup>109</sup> Sasson and Marom, “‘Asqalān al-Jadīda,” p. 286.

<sup>110</sup> Baldensperger, *ha-Mizrah ha-bilti mishtane*, p. 115; Baldensperger, “The Immovable East,” *Palestine Exploration Fund: Quarterly Statement*, 38/3 (1906), p. 196; Baldensperger, “The Immovable East,” *Palestine Exploration Fund: Quarterly Statement*, 49/4 (1917), p. 161; Shmuel Avitsur, *Daily life in Iretz Israel in the XIX Century* (Tel-Aviv: Am Hasefer, 1972), p. 176 [in Hebrew].

<sup>111</sup> For more on the creation of the border in 1906, see Ben-Bassat and Ben-Artzi, “The Collision of Empires.”



the perceived British threat made the Gaza region a particularly sensitive area. Gaza could have been the focal point of Ottoman intervention in the area, but the imperial authorities did not trust Gaza's political elite at all and were frustrated by the non-cooperative attitude of the dominant political faction in the city that gravitated around the Husayni family. Under the administration of Mehmed Tevfik Bey, a forceful governor of Jerusalem and a confidant of the Ottoman Sultan 'Abdülhamid II, Ottoman involvement in the area increased. This included the exiling of leading members of the Husayni family in 1898; the establishment of Beersheba as the seat of a new subdistrict in the northern Negev Desert; the construction of the border town of 'Awja al-Hafir near the border between the Negev and Sinai deserts;<sup>112</sup> investment in infrastructure, such as telegraph lines, bridges, roads, and railroads; and a reorganization of the region's administrative units along with efforts to register tribal land, including the creation of the *nahiye* of al-Hafir and the establishment of the Subdistrict of Beersheba.

The town of Beersheba was officially founded in 1900 by the Ottoman government in the northern part of the Negev Desert according to predefined plans. It grew gradually over the next decade and a half to slowly become a real town, with both public and residential buildings.<sup>113</sup> The Subdistrict of Beersheba was created around the town of Beersheba, which thus detached the region from Gaza to which it had been previously subordinated. Both subdistricts were part of the Province of Jerusalem.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the elite of Gaza was deeply divided among itself and competed for power and influence over the rural population in the region as far afield as the northern Negev, which the government considered detrimental to its regional interests. A major factor reinforcing the importance of the region was the presence of partially nomadic Bedouin tribes together with their large herds. Since the Bedouins

<sup>112</sup> Among the major sources on the Ottoman policy are the minutes of both the Administrative Council of the District of Jerusalem (housed in the Israel State Archives) and the Municipal Council (housed in the Jerusalem Municipal Archives, now available online at Open Jerusalem, <https://openjlem.hypotheses.org>). Important evidence on the Ottoman goals and perceptions of the area comes from Ottoman administrative exchanges. For instance, see a report to the Grand Vizier (Sadaret) at BOA. BEO., 1082\_81116, 1 Şubat 1313 [February 12, 1898], as well as the memoirs of Mehmed Tevfik Bey and his wife Naciye Neyal. On the latter, see Buessow, *Hamidian Palestine*, pp. 366–367 and passim.

<sup>113</sup> For more on the creation of Beersheba, see Luz, "The Re-Making of Beersheba"; Nimrod Luz, "The Creation of Modern Beersheba: An Imperial Ottoman Project," in Yehuda Gradus and Esther Meir-Glizenstein (eds.), *Beer Sheva: Metropolis in the Making* (Beersheba: Ben Gurion University Press, 2008), pp. 163–178 [in Hebrew]; Avci, "The Application of *Tanzimat* in the Desert."

constituted an economic and military asset, although largely out of the Empire's reach, the government was determined to establish an administrative center for them in the region to better control them, win them over as new allies in its modernization policies, and release them from the grip of several Gazan elite families and their deleterious politics and influence.

The imperial elite aimed to demonstrate that the Empire was a modern state with an urban civilization on a par with that of the leading powers of its time. In their minds, the Ottoman state was endowed with a civilizing mission towards groups they regarded as less advanced on their imaginary ladder of progress.<sup>114</sup> In this process, unruly elements had to be "disciplined" or "contained."<sup>115</sup> However, in the case of Beersheba, the main "unruly elements" targeted by the Ottoman discourse were the several Gazan notables who maintained independent relations with the Bedouins. Curtailing what was perceived as their detrimental influence may have been a sufficient reason in itself for the establishment of Beersheba.<sup>116</sup> Sectors of the Bedouin population were also considered troublemakers, especially during tribal feuds. The Bedouins as a whole, however, were usually portrayed as "still savage" (*henüz çok vahşi*, in the words of governor Mehmed Tevfik)<sup>117</sup> but with the potential to become loyal and productive Ottoman citizens. Ekrem Bey, the governor of Jerusalem from 1906 to 1908, viewed the new city of Beersheba as a place where Bedouins could be educated and socialized into the Ottoman community and from where "civilization" would "gradually" spread throughout the region.<sup>118</sup> He thus portrayed Beersheba as a purely Ottoman initiative, exclusively directed at the Bedouin population and detached from the allegedly "corrupting" influence of Arab notables.<sup>119</sup>

Eventually, the Ottoman measures succeeded in reducing the influence of the Gazan elite over the Bedouins of the northern Negev, but did not eliminate it entirely. Gazan merchants continued to control the export of barley grown by Bedouins in this region through the port of

<sup>114</sup> Selim Deringil, "'They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery': The Late Ottoman Empire and the Post-Colonial Debate," *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 45/2 (2003), pp. 311–342.

<sup>115</sup> Maurus Reinkowski, *Die Dinge der Ordnung: Eine vergleichende Untersuchung über die osmanische Reformpolitik im 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2005), pp. 103–114, 246–249.

<sup>116</sup> Ben-Bassat and Buessow, "Urban Factionalism," pp. 616–617.

<sup>117</sup> Mehmed Tevfik Bey, *Mehmet Tevfik Bey'in Hatıraları* [The Memoirs of Mehmed Tevfik Bey], ed. Fatma Rezan Hürmen, 2 vols (Istanbul: Arma, 1993), p. 113 [in Turkish].

<sup>118</sup> Kushner, *To Be Governor of Jerusalem*, pp. 193–194. <sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 231–232.

Gaza,<sup>120</sup> were involved in land transactions,<sup>121</sup> and maintained social and familial ties with the Bedouins.

### *The Impact of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908*

The Husayni family, who had a major fallout with Sultan ‘Abdülhamid II in 1898 when the leadership of the family was exiled to Ankara, welcomed the 1908 Young Turk Revolution with open arms, since it placed limits on the rule of the Sultan and soon led to his dethronement in the spring of 1909. Not surprisingly, shortly after the news of the revolutionary events in the imperial capital reached Gaza, the Husaynis and a group of their allies, some of whom from families who had previously bitterly opposed them, sent a petition to the Grand Vizier in which they used the new language of the post-revolutionary and constitutionalist era to demand that the government officials in Gaza be replaced because they were agents of the former “tyrannical” regime.<sup>122</sup> Such language became very common in petitions after the Revolution, which instead of glorifying the Sultan, demanded civil and constitutional rights, the implementation of the constitution, freedom, and equality before the law.<sup>123</sup> In a demonstration of “fluid factionalism,”<sup>124</sup> out of the 19 signatories to the Husayni petition two were members of the Saqallah family, their former arch-opponents, who obviously felt equally sidelined by the successful rise of the Shawwa-Busaysu faction as of the mid-1890s. The petitioners stated:

Despite the proclamation of the Constitution, the officials have remained almost the same as in the era of tyranny (*zaman al-istibdad*) [...] and the local population still suffers from poor security [...]. This prompts them to seek equal treatment [...] and relief from the oppressive grip (*makhalib jawr*) of unjust and arbitrary individuals.<sup>125</sup>

The Husaynis, who were back in the game after 1908, were partially able to counterbalance the power of their local rivals when Ahmad ‘Arif

<sup>120</sup> Sa‘id al-Shawwa (1868–1930) had considerable influence in Bedouin circles and dealt in barley grown on Bedouin land. See The Arab Bureau, *Personalities of South Syria*, vol. 1, pp. 9–10; Elqayam, *Arba ‘im shmot yishuv Yehudi be-‘Aza*, p. 148.

<sup>121</sup> Emanuel Beška, “The Lands of As-Sirr Affair in 1914: Its Reflection in the Contemporary Palestinian Press,” *Asian and African Studies* 27/1 (2018), pp. 1–20.

<sup>122</sup> BOA. HR.MTV., 740/6\_2, 29 Eylül 1325 [October 12, 1909].

<sup>123</sup> See Yuval Ben-Bassat, “The Ottoman Institution of Petitioning when the Sultan No Longer Reigned: A View from Post-1908 Ottoman Palestine,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 56 (2017), pp. 87–103.

<sup>124</sup> For more on this concept, see Chapter 4. <sup>125</sup> BOA. HR.MTV., 740/6\_2.

al-Husayni (d. 1916), the grandson of Ahmad Muhyi al-Din al-Husayni, who stood behind the Husaynis' rise to power in Gaza in the nineteenth century, was appointed *mufti* of the city in 1909, although at this point the post had lost much of its prestige and influence.<sup>126</sup> He still held the post of Gaza's *mufti* during WWI, when the governor of Syrian front, Cemal Paşa, put him to death together with his son Mustafa, for alleged collaboration with the British and the Hashemite family in the context of the Arab Revolt.<sup>127</sup>

Finally, there was stronger emphasis on economic and infrastructural development in the local administration of Gaza after the Revolution of 1908, and the Municipality of Gaza acquired more power. This dovetails with what is known about the development of infrastructure in Palestine and the region as a whole during the Young Turk period.<sup>128</sup> This trend was manifested in the ability of the Municipality to finally start the construction of the long-awaited municipal hospital in 1911, even though it was not completed before WWI, due to lack of funds.<sup>129</sup>

A concise overview of the political agenda in Gaza on the eve of WWI, as well as the debates fueling Ottoman and local circles can be found in the report filed by the governor of Jerusalem at the time, Ahmed Macid Bey, during his inspection tour in May and June 1913.<sup>130</sup> At the same time, a reporter from the newspaper *Filastin* published his own impressions of this tour that stressed the ceremonial and public aspects of the visit. Strikingly, *Filastin's* reporter makes no reference to the newspaper's editor Yusuf al-'Isa's 1912 apocalyptic evaluation discussed above, but rather embroiders on what he apparently perceived as a fruitful dialogue between representatives of the Ottoman government and the local population.

According to the reporter, during his four-day tour of Gaza, governor Ahmed Macid paid visits to leading local politicians. The sequence of these visits clearly confirmed the hierarchy of Gaza's notables and elite families at the end of the Ottoman period. On day one, Macid Bey visited

<sup>126</sup> An article in *Filastin* stated that Ahmad 'Arif was very popular and had a good reputation. See *Filastin*, August 9, 1911. A year later, this newspaper's editor, Yusuf al-'Isa, portrayed him as an immensely influential, shrewd politician and a savvy networker. See *Filastin*, May 8, 1912.

<sup>127</sup> Pappe, *The Rise and Fall of a Palestinian Dynasty*, p. 156.

<sup>128</sup> See Yasemin Avci, "Jerusalem and Jaffa in the Late Ottoman Period: The Concession-Hunting Struggle for Public Works Projects," in Yuval Ben-Bassat and Eyal Ginio (eds.), *Late Ottoman Palestine: The Period of Young Turk Rule* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), pp. 81–102.

<sup>129</sup> Halevy, "Being Imperial, Being Ephemeral."

<sup>130</sup> BOA. DH. İD., 59/72, Lef 3, Governor Ahmed Macid Bey to the Minister of the Interior Talat Bey, 25 Kanunievvel 1329 [January 7, 1914].

mayor Sa' id al-Shawwa; on day two he dined with *mufti* Ahmad 'Arif al-Husayni, while on days three and four he met with members of the Khayyal<sup>131</sup> and 'Alami<sup>132</sup> families.

The visit ended in style with the governor's visit to Gaza's only state primary school, in the presence of a large number of local representatives. Characteristically, it was one of Gaza's "returnees" from al-Azhar college, Shaykh Muhammad Sa' id Murad,<sup>133</sup> who took on the role of spokesperson for the local population with a speech in Arabic in which he detailed Gaza's wants and needs. The governor responded with a speech in Turkish, in which he acknowledged the existence of severe "misery and distress (*bu's wa-shaqa'*)" in the subdistrict, pointed to the general lack of education as the central cause, and promised the speedy completion of Gaza's second primary (boys') school, which had been promised but delayed, as well as the founding of an agricultural school in Gaza. He then announced plans to resurface the road to Jaffa and the installation of an engine-driven water supply network. He stressed, however, that although Gaza's needs were indeed pressing, he had seen similar conditions during his earlier terms in office in six different Anatolian districts. Therefore, Gazans should not consider themselves to be the exception but rather part of the general struggle by the empire to "make progress." The speech was followed by a town-hall style debate, during which leading notables had the opportunity to address the governor directly. Again, it was Shaykh Muhammad Sa' id Murad who attracted most attention when he zeroed in on the three most important political issues in his city: allowing local initiatives to found private schools, more consistent reform policies irrespective of the relatively short terms governors remained in office, and what he termed the "appetite of foreigners and colonists (*matami' al-musta'mirin wa-l-ajamib*)" for residential and agricultural lands in Gaza that should be rebuffed.

The farewell to the last Ottoman governor to visit Gaza in peace-time was a poetry reading by local students while the governor laid the

<sup>131</sup> The Khayyal family's wealth and importance derived from Husayn Efendi Khayyal (d. 1348/1930), who hailed from a family of Tripolitanian (Maghrebi) descent and held important government offices in Gaza and Jaffa. See Tabba', *Ithaf*, vol. 3, pp. 158–161.

<sup>132</sup> The 'Alami family in Gaza formed part of an extensive and prestigious lineage which built up a social network across several cities in Ottoman Palestine, most notably Jerusalem. The family's Gaza branch derived its importance from this network and several important office holders, including Ahmad al-'Alami who was the city's mayor (*ra'is majlis al-baladiyya*) until his death in 1323/1905–1906. See Tabba', *Ithaf*, vol. 3, pp. 316–322.

<sup>133</sup> 1292/1875–1876—1346/1927, a leading scholar who acted as *kadi* in various Ottoman provinces. Tabba' devotes an extensive biography to him. Tabba', *Ithaf*, vol. 4, pp. 417–424. On the Murad family, see *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 426–427.

cornerstone for the new school building and a sheep was slaughtered, as customary in Ottoman state ceremonies.<sup>134</sup>

What did the last peace-time governor convey to Istanbul about Gaza? Macid Bey's own report confirms that of the newspaper, but leaves out the ceremonial and public aspects of the visit, and focuses instead on the city's history and future prospects. He starts with some general geographic information and his impressions of the city, whose narrow winding streets reminded him of Hebron. He adds a brief summary of the Islamic merits of the city as the birthplace of Hashim, and notes, apparently with some amazement, that Gaza once had been a more important Ottoman administrative center than Jaffa.

Consistent with the spirit of the Young Turk era, the remainder of the report focuses on questions of infrastructure, where matter-of-fact descriptions alternate with interesting personal remarks and value judgments. As in his speech, the issue of schooling received top priority. He indicates there are one middle (*rüşdiye*) school, two primary (*ibtidai*) schools, one of them still under construction, and four elementary (*sıbyan*) schools for boys in addition to one primary school for girls (*inas ibtidaisi*), and complains that the completion of the second primary school has been delayed. He calls the British hospital "excellent," mentions the local efforts to build an "Islamic" hospital "in response" as well as the practical problems involved and makes an altogether optimistic assessment that these problems can be overcome and that the barley export from both Gaza and Beersheba will continue to bring prosperity to the city. In the final passages, he singles out three major challenges to Gaza's future development: creating incentives for the local population to erect bulwarks against the sand dunes that he experienced personally when his own carriage got stuck in the sand on the way to the beach, building a water supply grid, and establishing the agricultural school.

Interestingly, governor Macid appears to have come away with a generally positive image of Gaza and concludes his report on the city with strong support for the agricultural school project. He voices some disagreement with his predecessors in Jerusalem who apparently favored Beersheba as the location for the school. He notes that its construction in Beersheba is "still a story (*hikaye*)" while people in the area are being deprived (*mahrûm*) of their right to study and are struggling to escape their "state of Bedouinism (*hal-i bedavet*)."<sup>134</sup> He then goes on to say that a school "in a central location (*vasat bir mevkiide*)" was needed, to enable as many people as possible to benefit from this endeavor in this subdistrict that was "extremely suitable for

<sup>134</sup> *Filastin*, May 31, 1913, appendix (*mulhaq*).

economic development (*terakkiyat-ı iktisadiyyeye fevkalade müsait olan bu livada*)” and concludes that the school should be built in Gaza.

### Conclusion

In 1914, Gaza’s municipal hospital, the institution that was meant to be the grandest public building ever erected in Gaza during the Ottoman period, a towering structure with an imposing symmetrically shaped façade, was still a work in progress. Like its successful counterpart, the municipal hospital in Jerusalem (established in 1891),<sup>135</sup> it promised to embody the very essence of decades of Ottoman reform. The Ottoman state and the urban community of taxpayers, represented by the *belediye*, were to work together in pursuit of the well-being of all the local inhabitants. The endeavor was to be financed by what seemed to be a reliable surplus generated by Gaza’s successful integration into the globalized market economy. However, barley exports had dwindled recently, and the construction of the hospital was proceeding very slowly. Nevertheless, the Ottoman government, while acknowledging Gaza’s “distress,” did not seem particularly alarmed, but rather took this as one of the predictable kinds of setbacks characterizing the generally uncertain circumstances of the period.<sup>136</sup> All this is indicative of Gaza’s status on the eve of WWI as an Eastern Mediterranean hub in the midst of profound transformations, which was experiencing steady demographic growth but facing many imponderables as to its economic and political future.

Simultaneously, Ottoman administrators, in tandem with local builders and entrepreneurs, were overseeing the construction of even more imposing structures in Beersheba, about 40 kilometers inland from Gaza. In the end, Gaza was sidelined by the establishment of Beersheba, even though Gazan merchants were still active there. The overriding geostrategic priorities of the Empire were addressed through the new city, while Gaza once again was left to play by its own rules (see Chapter 4). Yet Gaza was not only a center of traffic and trade, and an important hub of information and Islamic learning, as discussed in this chapter, but also drew on the strengths of its rural connections, as discussed in Chapter 3. For now, however, we turn to life in the city itself and the life-worlds of its inhabitants.

<sup>135</sup> For more on the Jerusalem municipal hospital, see Yoni Furas, “‘What Did the Ottomans Ever Do for Us?’ Modern Medicine and Administration in Late Ottoman Jerusalem,” in Ben-Bassat and Buessow (eds.), *From the Household to the Wider World*, pp. 254–265.

<sup>136</sup> BOA. HR. İD., 269/59/7, August 30, 1913 (Note Verbal 62), cited in Halevy, “Being Imperial, Being Ephemeral,” p. 239.