

Regional cooperation among the rural population of Palestine's southern coast as reflected in joint petitions to İstanbul at the end of the nineteenth century

Yuval Ben-Bassat

Abstract

The issue of regional connections and cooperation among the rural population in different parts of Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century has thus far not received adequate attention. This article presents case-studies of several villages in the sub-district of Gaza, which submitted joint petitions about common concerns to the Grand Vizier in İstanbul. It examines the significance of these petitions and discusses their characteristics, uniqueness, and historical context. It then moves on to discuss other forms of regional cooperation and nuclei of regional identification among the rural population, which in part had previous roots, and explores their repercussions for the development of regional identity alongside more commonly known identities concomitantly held by Palestine's population at the time. The submission of joint petitions to İstanbul, it is argued, was one of the key manifestations of a tendency toward greater regionalism in some regions of Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century, an occurrence which was less likely to happen prior to the *Tanzimat* reforms. While the literature has primarily focused on the activity of the urban educated circles in the process of regionalization, this article presents a unique bottom-up perspective that underscores the everyday experiences, practices and mechanisms of cooperation in a rural region which is rarely investigated.

Keywords: *Late-nineteenth-century Palestine, regional identity, Gaza, petitions, regionalism*

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Introduction

Regional aspects of relationships among the rural population in nineteenth-century Palestine are usually discussed in the framework of the Qays/Yaman division which cut across Palestinian society, especially in the mountainous region of central Palestine, and brought together urbanites, villagers, Bedouins, and even people of different religious beliefs.¹ Notwithstanding this division, which lost much of its importance in the final decades of the nineteenth century and anyhow did not have much influence on Palestine's coastal region,² there is ample evidence that various manifestations of regional connections and cooperation existed among the rural population in different parts of Palestine, a topic which thus far has not received much attention.³

Archival material from the end of the nineteenth century indicates that the rural population in various regions in Palestine, at times even dozens of villages together, submitted joint petitions (*arz-ı mahzar*) to the Grand Vizier in İstanbul and other offices and officials in the Ottoman capital. These joint petitions shed new light on the combined efforts by the rural population to promote their shared interests and place the issue of inter-village networks, regional cooperation, and even the development of regional identity at the forefront. These regional ties were not always intense and did not necessarily create a close-knit socio-economic network, but they nevertheless deserve examination, especially given that the bulk of the population at the time was rural and that we know much less about it than about the urban elites.

This article describes the case-studies of several villages in the region of Masmīyya-Qaṣṭīna in the sub-district (*kaza*) of Gaza in the *mutasarrıflık* (the independent province governed directly by İstanbul) of Jerusalem, which throughout 1891 submitted several successive joint petitions to the Grand Vizier by mail and telegraph, signed by their *muhtars* (the village heads). These petitions, which only varied slightly in terms of the number of villages associated with each petition and their wording, all formulated a request to reduce what the villagers perceived

1 On this division, see Miriam Hoexter, "The Role of the Qays and Yaman Factions in Local Political Divisions: Jabal Nāblus Compared with the Judean Hills in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," *African and Asian Studies*, no. 9 (1973): 249-311; Alexander Schölch, *Palestine in Transformation 1856-1882: Studies in Social, Economic and Political Development* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1993), 191-192.

2 *Palestine in Transformation*, 192.

3 Some reference is made in the existing literature to the division of the mountainous regions of Palestine into *nahiyes*, sub-districts ruled by influential sheikhs, before the advent of the Ottoman reforms in the second half of the nineteenth century. For instance, see Gabriel Baer, *Fellah and Townsman in the Middle East: Studies in Social History* (London: Frank Cass, 1982), 82-83.

as excessive *vergi* (in Arabic *wirko*, in Hebrew *verko*),⁴ the Ottoman land and property tax (see Appendices A and B).⁵

This article examines the significance of these (and similar) petitions and discusses their characteristics, uniqueness, and historical context. It then moves on to discuss other forms of regional cooperation and nuclei of regional identification among the rural population in the sub-district of Gaza in the post-*Tanzimat* period. Finally, it draws attention to some possible repercussions of these modes of cooperation and identification for the development of a regional identity, alongside other more commonly known identities concomitantly held by Palestine's population at the end of the nineteenth century, which are often mentioned in the literature. My main argument is that the submission of joint petitions to İstanbul by *muhtars* of a varying number of villages was one of the key manifestations of a tendency toward greater regionalism in some regions of Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century, an occurrence which was less likely to happen prior to the *Tanzimat* reforms and the changes they brought about. The term *regionalism* (regionalization being the process), or *regional integration*, refers to the functioning of a certain region as a defined administrative, economic, and social/cultural unit *vis-à-vis* other regions. As far as the rural population, the main focus of this paper, is concerned, regionalism refers to the way in which this population perceived their proximate environment in their everyday practices, interactions, and habits, as opposed to other more remote geographical spheres.

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- 4 The *arazi ve müsakkafat vergisi* (better known as *vergi*, not to be confused with the modern meaning of this word in Turkish, which simply means "tax") was the annual tax introduced as part of the *Tanzimat* reforms on all immovable goods, including agricultural land and buildings. The issue of the *vergi* as it appears in the petitions discussed here has not received enough attention in the literature where it is predominantly assumed that the *öşr* (tithe) was the main tax which preoccupied the rural population at the time. One of the reasons for the burden the *vergi* caused was that it was always paid in cash and never in kind. On the burden of the tithe in Gaza, see Johann Büssow, *Hamidian Palestine: Politics and Society in the District of Jerusalem. 1872–1908* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 265–269.
- 5 See *Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi* (hereafter BOA), HR. TO., 395/60, Kânunusani 29, 1306 [February 10, 1891] (a petition in Arabic sent by mail to the Grand Vizier and signed by 16 *muhtars* in the region of Gaza to reduce their *vergi*); HR. TO., 395/61, Şubat 5, 1306 [February 17, 1891] (see Appendix B) (the same issue, a petition in Arabic sent by telegraph, bearing the signature of four *muhtars*); HR. TO., 395/104, Zilhicce 1, 1308 [July 8, 1891] (the same issue, a petition in Arabic sent by mail, bearing the signature of 27 *muhtars*); HR. TO., 396/79, Rebiyülâhır 18, 1309 [November 21, 1891] (see Appendix A) (the same issue, a petition in Arabic sent by mail, bearing the signatures of 20 *muhtars*). As we learn from the Ottoman archives, throughout the years villagers sent dozens of joint petitions concerning taxes from the *kaza* of Gaza to İstanbul. For an earlier example, see HR. TO., 390/2, Safar 1, 1302 [November 20, 1884] (a translation of a petition in Arabic into Ottoman Turkish made at the Translation Office at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the petition, whose original copy we do not possess, was submitted by mail by 47 villages in the region of Gaza to reduce their *vergi*, which they claimed amounted to 1/7 of their crops, probably referring to the *öşr* as well); the issue of how these petitions were organized is discussed at length below.

As recent research has indicated, the tendency toward greater regionalism was, among others, the result of developments such as the Ottoman administrative bureaucratic reforms, the growing influence of the urban elite in several important towns in Palestine over the hinterlands of their localities, and economic changes such as the penetration of a cash-crop economy into the rural regions.⁶ Nonetheless, while the literature has primarily focused on the activity of the urban educated circles, this article presents a unique bottom-up perspective that underscores the everyday experiences, practices and mechanisms of cooperation in rural regions, and explores its possible contribution to the crystallization of regional identity in a region which is rarely the focus of research. The sending of joint petitions can teach us about the tendency toward greater regionalism because it reveals shared interests, mobilization in the name of a common cause, and efforts to improve the villages' financial situation.

Joint petitions and their evaluation

To set the stage, I would like to discuss first the nature of the petitions on which this study is based. In November 1891, several villages in the *kaza* of Gaza jointly petitioned the Ottoman Grand Vizier in İstanbul:

...your servants, the people of the villages of the sub-district of Gaza [...] are weak and poor and have suffered a great injustice due to the *vergi* imposed annually on our land. Because of the exaggerated value of the *vergi*, and according to the just orders issued to abolish injustices imposed on every exploited person, and with the hope of obtaining the mercy of the exalted state, we ask you to abolish the injustice which we suffered and treat us comparably to others in our situation and to our neighbors. In 1306 [1888/9] the value of our land [s *vergi*] was re-evaluated and it was lowered [...] We were subjected to a collective [*sharaki*] imposition [*murtabat*], according to the corrected value. After we paid our registered debt in accordance with the collective arrangement [...] suddenly a telegraph order arrived from the Ministry of Finance not to accept the changes and to collect the taxes from us as before. This was done only based on false unreliable information provided by several corrupt people [...] [t]he situation in this sub-district does not need further explanation. According to this order, all the remaining sums were collected from us by force and im-

6 Büssow, *Hamidian Palestine*, 303-304.

prisonment, and by the oppression [*muḏayaqa*] of the mounted gendarmerie. When the situation of your subjects became too difficult, we decided to approach the Grand Vizierate to present the situation. We all came together and begged you to consider us with mercy and justice. A high order was issued to the district [of Jerusalem] to investigate the truth of the injustice done to us [...] Until now, however, it has not borne fruit. Thus we decided to ask for mercy through the telegraph as well as by submitting a petition [letter]. However, we have not received any relief since our tax collectors demand the former imposition which we cannot pay, other than by a great effort by borrowing money and selling our possessions and supplies, which are kept in order to buy food for our children and families and develop our agriculture, a step that is contrary to your justice [...] The proof [of our claims] can be found in the previous decreases [in the value of the land] which were made in the past and still take place today. Moreover, the vacant lands [in Arabic, *al-araḏi al-mahlula*] in one of our sub-district's villages, Zarnuqa, were sold at a public auction by the exalted state to its demanders. When one looks carefully at its exact registered value in the *vergi* [files] and the value of its sale at the public auction the issue becomes clear [...] What also proves this is the lands which were sold to the Jews in the village of Qaṭra⁷ and in Biyyar Ta'abiyya [?] as well as to others from among the influential people in the above mentioned sub-district [...].⁸

The question arises as to whether villagers' petitions, such as the one above, can be considered an authentic representation of their aspirations, deeds, worldview and general situation, given that they almost certainly were illiterate and could not write the petitions themselves. The fact that there are many reoccurring themes, writing styles, motives and modes of reasoning in all the petitions and that a specific jargon is used clearly suggests that they were written by professional petition writers (*arzuhalciler*), who offered their services to the public in return for a fee. These petition writers sat in the marketplace or at the entrance to the post and telegraph offices, similarly to the document writers one can still encounter today at the entrance to courts and government buildings in various states in the Middle East, including Turkey. The services they

7 The villagers are referring here to the small Jewish colony of Gedera which was established in 1884 by members of the *BILU* organization, with the help of the *Hovevei Zion* movement. The colony was established on 3,000 *dunams* which were bought from a Frenchman named Philbert and had previously belonged to the adjacent Arab village of Qaṭra, which lost some of its lands due to debts.

8 BOA. HR. TO., 396/79 (I was not able to identify the other place mentioned by the villagers).

offered were known to many, as reflected in the variety of people who approached them and used their services.⁹

The *arzuhalciler* served as intermediaries between the authorities and the petitioners and allowed the latter to express their voice. They wrote according to a rigid stylistic code accepted and sanctioned by the Ottoman bureaucracy, a situation which brings to the forefront the possibility that the petitions are in fact no more than literary compositions which are informative about the rules of petition submission and the accepted discourse between the rulers and their subjects, but cannot be analyzed as historical texts that faithfully reflect the petitioners' words and world-view. Oftentimes, the petitioners did not even have the basic skills to review the contents of the petition, a fact which certainly impeded their ability to fully and accurately present their case. Another issue is that at times petitions were orchestrated by parties who sought to promote their goals and personal or group interests. Hence, the rural population could have been recruited or even forced to send petitions in the name of urban notables or rural strongmen and did not necessarily send petitions that were an accurate depiction of their needs.¹⁰

The above reservations notwithstanding, it is plausible to argue that the petitions still contain a kernel of truth from which historians can glean important information. The petition writers took the salient facts from each episode as presented to them by those who hired their services and turned them into a formal codified presentation, using specific literary formulations and authorized jargon that emphasized certain details supporting the case while omitting others that undermined it. Our ability as researchers to identify these formulas, literary formulations, and special jargon and to verify or contradict some of the claims made in the petitions through other sources can serve to evaluate better the historical accuracy of a certain petition. In this regard, Chalcraft commented the following about petitions submitted by Egyptian peasants to the *khedive* in the second half of the nineteenth century:

By and large, they [the peasants] used an officially authorized language of complaint in a heavily power-laden context, where a wrong word could cost them their case, their livelihoods, and even their lives. In other words, social interests expressed were not pre-constituted in

9 See Yuval Ben-Bassat, "In Search of Justice: Petitions Sent from Palestine to Istanbul from the 1870's Onwards," *Turcica*, no. 41 (2009).

10 On the petition writers in Palestine, see Rev. G. Robinson Lees, *Village Life in Palestine: A Description of the Religion, Home Life, Manners, Customs, Characteristics and Superstitions of the Peasants of the Holy Land, with Reference to the Bible* (Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905), 191-192.

some authentic peasant space. However [...] although elite languages helped constitute even the nature of the demands lodged by peasants, these languages were simultaneously filled out, colored, and defined by the concrete projects of peasants themselves.¹¹

Another interesting point is that villagers sent petitions directly to İstanbul even at the end of the nineteenth century, in fact in growing numbers, while using a traditional Islamic-Ottoman institution which had existed in this form or another throughout Ottoman history and had earlier variations under different Islamic states (such as the Abbassids, Ayyubids, Mamluks, and others). The massive reforms and efforts at modernization gradually undertaken in the Ottoman Empire during the second half of the nineteenth century gave it certain characteristics of a modern bureaucratic state despite the lingering effects of the previous patrimonial system. Under such circumstances, it would be logical to assume, at least at a surface level, that the institution of petitioning the ruler would lose its importance if not vanish completely and give way to more modern means of pursuing justice and redress from the state, its representatives and institutions.¹² Among these new key legal and administrative reforms were: the establishment of *nizami* courts, including higher and lower appeal courts, in the Empire's provinces and their differentiation from the *shari'a* courts, the introduction of the Ottoman civil code that was based on a codification of the *shari'a* law as of 1869 and throughout the 1870s (the *mecelle*), the establishment of modern-style state ministries, the operation of administrative councils in the provinces on several levels which dealt locally with petitions on issues such as the assessment and collection of the *vergi*,¹³ and even the short-lived

11 John Chalcraft, "Engaging the State: Peasants and Petitions in Egypt on the Eve of Colonial Rule," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2005): 308.

12 To date, there are no major studies dealing with petitions to the sultan from the nineteenth century, in contrast to the considerable number on this institution in previous centuries. For several major examples, see Suraiya Faroqhi, "Introduction," in *Coping with the State: Political Conflict and Crime in the Ottoman Empire, 1550-1720*, ed. Suraiya Faroqhi (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1995); "Political Initiatives 'from the Bottom up' in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Ottoman Empire: Some Evidence for Their Existence," in *Coping with the State: Political Conflict and Crime in the Ottoman Empire, 1550-1720*, ed. Suraiya Faroqhi (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1995); Michael Ursinus, *Grievance Administration (Şikayet) in an Ottoman Province: The Kaymakam of Rumelia's 'Record Book of Complaints' of 1781-1783* (London: Routledge, 2005); Faroqhi, "Political Activity among Ottoman Taxpayers and the Problem of Sultanate Legitimation (1570-1650)"; for a study of petitions submitted to the *khedive* of Egypt, which *de jure* was still part of the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century, see Chalcraft, "Engaging the State"; Haim Gerber, *State, Society, and Law in Islam: Ottoman Law in Comparative Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), chapter 5.

13 Many cases of petitions to the administrative council of the district of Jerusalem are cited in *Ottoman Rule in Jerusalem, 1890-1914* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1985).

parliament and constitution of the mid-1870s. Nevertheless, as the Ottoman archives teach us, numerous petitions were still sent to İstanbul from the provinces during this period—for instance, from the *kaza* of Gaza studied here—and in fact, in larger numbers than in the past.¹⁴ These were often appeals against various administrative decisions taken on the provincial level and in various Ottoman governmental bureaus. The abundance of petitions from this period proves that the institution of petition to the Ottoman ruler did not lose its importance or relevance. On the contrary, it took on new importance and experienced a process of revival, change and transformation. In part this process was assisted and facilitated by new technologies and means of communication (that is, post offices, telegrams, railroads and steamboats), which overcame geographical and physical barriers and allowed every Ottoman subject to contact İstanbul quickly and easily and demand redress, a process which previously had been much harder physically because it involved travel, huge expenses and other difficulties.¹⁵

Another factor was the unprecedented strength of the central government in İstanbul since Mahmud II (r. 1808-39), the result of subduing various elements which had previously restricted and challenged its power, such as the Janissaries and certain segments of the *ulema* corps. The *Tanzimat* reformers tried to restrict the sultan's power by introducing new measures which guaranteed the right to life and property, but succeeded only partially. Naturally, when the Empire was led by strong sultans who headed a centralized state, the subjects perceived them as the address for their complaints and expected them to give them redress. At the same time, however, this process also had to do with changing relationships between the state and its subjects. The reforms and the state's efforts to achieve greater centralization led to much greater interference in its subjects' lives than in the past. The state started penetrating areas which it had previously neglected, partially or completely (for example, by means of censuses, conscription, registration of lands, tax surveys and tax collection, education, health, the election of *muhtars* who were part

14 About this increase, see Roderic H. Davison, "The Advent of the Electric Telegraph in the Ottoman Empire: How Morse's Invention Was Introduced at the Time of the Crimean War," in *Essays in Ottoman and Turkish History, 1774-1923: The Impact of the West*, ed. Roderic H. Davison (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), 148.

15 For more on the Ottoman post and telegraph service in Palestine, see Norman J. Collins and Anton Steichele, *The Ottoman Post and Telegraph Offices in Palestine and Sinai* (London: Sahara Publications, 2000); for the influence of the telegraph in Ottoman Syria, see Eugene Rogan, "Instant Communication: The Impact of the Telegraph in Ottoman Syria," in *The Syrian Land: Processes of Integration and Fragmentation, Bilād Al-Shām from the 18th to the 20th Century*, eds. Thomas Philipp and Brigit Schaebler (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998).

of the bureaucracy, and the like). The state's activities and the changes it brought about encouraged its subjects to perceive it as directly responsible for resolving their complaints. Hence, they increasingly expected the state (headed by the sultan) to provide redress for their concerns, as reflected in their petitions.

Finally, the personality of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1908/9), an autocrat who ruled in a very centralized manner, is another factor to be considered with regard to the multiplication of petitions and the revival of the institution's importance. During the reign of Abdülhamid II, the institution of petitioning the ruler gained importance and was considered another means of control and legitimization of the kind that this sultan deployed. Abdülhamid II even established a special office called the *Maruzat-ı Rikâbiyye Dairesi* in the Yıldız Palace to handle petitions, and his representatives collected petitions from subjects during Friday prayers and on religious holidays.¹⁶ It was a tool in the hand of this suspicious (some would even say paranoid) sultan, to legitimize his rule and boost his image as a just ruler at a time of a crisis of legitimacy in the Empire,¹⁷ to maintain direct contact with his subjects over the head of the administration and bureaucracy, to supervise their activity closely, and to gather valuable information and intelligence on the whereabouts of various officials, office-holders, and local leaders.

Regional aspects of relationships among the rural population

The population in the *kaza* of Gaza at the end of the nineteenth century, the focus of this study, was by no means a monolithic group. Rather, it was divided along several lines into urban and rural, semi-Bedouins and sedentary population, landowners and tenants, relative newcomers¹⁸ as opposed to villagers whose forefathers had settled on the land many generations earlier,¹⁹ and villagers originally from Egypt as opposed to villagers who migrated within Palestine itself.²⁰ Moreover, internal

16 Tahsin Paşa, *Abdülhamit: Yıldız Hatıraları* [Abdülhamid: Yıldız Palace Memories] (İstanbul: Ahmet Halit Kitaphanesi, 1931), 31; Hakan T. Karateke, *Padişahım Çok Yaşa! Osmanlı Devletinin Son Yüzyılında Merasimler* [Long Live the Sultan! Ceremonies in the Ottoman Empire During Its Last Century] (İstanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2004), 119-121.

17 Selim Deringil, *The Well Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1909* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1991), 8-11.

18 Philip Baldensperger, *ha-Mizrah ha-Bilti Mishthane / the Immovable East: Studies of the People and Customs of Palestine* (Tel-Aviv: Misrad ha-Bitahon, 1982), 175; David Grossman, "ha-Yishuv ha-Kafri be-Mishor Pleshet uva-Shefelah ha-Nemukha / Rural Settlement in the Southern Coastal Plain and the Shefelah, 1835-1945," *Cathedra*, no. 45 (1987): 65-68, 75, 85-86.

19 For instance, see Wolf-Dieter Hütteroth and Kamal Abdulfattah, *Historical Geography of Palestine, Transjordan and Southern Syria in the Late 16th Century* (Erlangen: Palm and Enke, 1977), 142-156.

20 On the Egyptian settlement in this area, see David Grossman, *ha-Ukhlusiya ha-'Arvit vaha-Ma'ahaz*

conflicts were common among the rural population, in many cases for reasons similar to those that led to confrontations with the first proto-Zionist colonists (such as land, grazing, and water).²¹

The southern coastal plain to the north-east of Gaza was populated by dozens of villages whose economic base was mainly grain farming.²² The region's western part, on the Mediterranean consisted of sand dunes and no populations were present there other than a few semi-sedentary Bedouin groups.²³ The core of the region included dozens of relatively small to moderately sized villages, mostly built of mud brick.²⁴ These were the villages that submitted the joint petitions discussed here.

Aspects of regional cooperation

The above-mentioned internal divisions and tensions among the rural population notwithstanding, several factors contributed to bringing the villages together and enhancing cooperation between them. These possibly even led to the development of a shared sense of regional identity, as will be demonstrated in this article. Some of these factors were new, whereas others had existed before, but were ascribed new meanings. One of the most important factors was the villages' inclusion in the same administrative entity, particularly given the reformed nature of the local Ottoman administration and its reorganization. Beyond the conscious influence of being part of the same administrative entity, this inclusiveness often necessitated cooperation between the villages *vis-à-vis* the local Ottoman authorities on issues such as taxes, conscription, and development plans. In addition, the headmen of the villages often met in Gaza, where they negotiated with the local authorities, exchanged information, and interacted socially. The joint petitions discussed here, which

ha-Yehudi: Tifroset u-Tsifjut be-Eretz-Yisra'el be-Shalhe ha-Tkufa ha-'Otmanit uvi-Tkufat ha-Mandat / Arab Demography and Early Jewish Settlement in Palestine: Distribution and Population Density During the Late Ottoman and Early Mandate Periods (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2004), 54-65; see also Gideon Kressel and Reuven Aharoni, "Masa'e Ukhlusim mi-Mitsrayim la-Levant ba-Me'ot ha-Tesha' 'Esre vaha-'Esrin / Egyptian Immigrants in the Bilad Al-Sham," *Jama'a*, no. 12 (2004).

21 On these clashes between villages, see James Reilly, "The Peasantry of Late Ottoman Palestine," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 10, no. 4 (1981): 89.

22 Grossman, "Rural Settlement," 57-59.

23 *Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF)*, "Maps 13 and 16," (prepared between 1872 and 1877); see also Seth J. Frantzman and Ruth Kark, "Bedouin Settlement in Late Ottoman and British Mandatory Palestine: Influence on Cultural and Environmental Landscape, 1870-1948," *New Middle Eastern Studies*, no. 1 (2011): 12.

24 C.R. Conder and H.H. Kitchener, *The Survey of Western Palestine: Memoirs of the Topography, Orography, Hydrography, and Archaeology*, vol. II (London: The Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund, 1883), 407-414; Victor Guérin, *Te'ur Ge'ografi, Histori ve-Arkhi'ologi shel Eretz-Yisra'el* [Geographical, Historical, and Archeological, Description of the Land of Israel], translated from French by Hayim Ben-'Amram, vol. I-II (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1982 [1868]), 18-28, 213; vol. II, 231-270.

were signed by the representatives of several villages and at times even dozens of them,²⁵ were organized in Gaza when the *muhtars* went there to handle village matters and meet socially, perhaps in coffee houses.²⁶

This activity can be perceived as a sign of greater regionalization, which as far as we can tell from the archives did not exist to such an extent before. First, the means to send the petitions, such as the telegraph and post, did not exist in the Gaza region prior to the mid-1860s. Moreover, the position of the *muhtar*, the head of the village, was introduced only following the reforms in the provinces in the mid-1860s. The emergence of the major towns as the center of the reformed sub-districts and as the headquarters of local government in their hinterlands was also a development of the late *Tanzimat* period and the reforms it brought about. Finally, the topics raised in the joint petitions were directly connected to the efforts to achieve regularization and standardization of the tax collection system, as opposed to past practices.

As indicated, the joint petitions by several villages I was able to locate mostly deal with administrative issues or the evaluation of taxes such as the *vergi*. The *muhtars*²⁷ signed in the name of the villages they represented (see Appendices A and B). Unlike the situation among the urban population, it is rather rare to find petitions which were signed by individual villagers. This is not surprising given the status of the *muhtar* as the official representative of the Ottoman bureaucracy in the provinces, despite being at the lowest junior rank. For the most part the *muhtars* came from families that controlled village life and had greater financial-administrative clout. They depicted themselves in the petitions as representing their communities (*ahali*) as a whole, and although this should not be taken at face value, many issues raised in the petitions indeed concerned the entire community. The villagers, moreover, were for the most part illiterate and lacked the political-administrative-financial wherewithal to organize a petition alone.

Another major factor which brought the local population together and contributed to the process of regionalization was the pivotal role

25 For instance, see BOA. HR. TO., 390/2.

26 On these unofficial meetings of the *muhtars* from the villages in the region of Jaffa in this town, see the memoirs of David Niman, *be-Reshit Baroh [...] Zikhronotav shel David Niman* [In the Beginning {...]: The Memoirs of David Niman] (Tel-Aviv: [Private Publication], 1962/3), 46; for more on the importance of coffee houses for the dissemination of information and knowledge in Palestine, as well as about their social importance, see Ami Ayalon, *Reading Palestine: Printing and Literacy, 1900-1948* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), 103-104.

27 Some villages had more than one serving *muhtar*. The chief *muhtar* was called "first *muhtar*" (in Arabic, *mukhtar awwal*), whereas the *muhtars* next in rank were called the "second *muhtar*," "third *muhtar*," and so on. The latter often signed petitions together with the members of the "village council," as can be seen in HR. TO., 396/79.

played by the town of Gaza as the economic, administrative-bureaucratic, cultural-social and political center for its hinterland. The town of Gaza lost much of its role as an important economic center on Palestine's coast in the second half of the nineteenth century and was gradually eclipsed by other coastal towns such as Jaffa and Haifa, which benefitted from growing economic connections with Europe. Nevertheless, Gaza remained a very important center for the region's rural population, including the Bedouins in its vicinity, and was located at the crossroads of major land routes. Moreover, it benefitted from the rising demand for grains in Europe, especially barley, which the rural area around the city could provide in large quantities earlier in the season than other places; thus, it became an important "entrepot of its fertile hinterland, connecting the region to the rapidly expanding networks of world trade."²⁸

As Baer pointed out, there was a considerable difference in urban-rural relationships across various regions in Ottoman Syria and Palestine, a fact which makes it difficult for historians to make broad generalizations about them.²⁹ In general, however, the bureaucratic, social and economic processes taking place in Palestine in the second half of the nineteenth century were accompanied by a strengthening of the connections between the rural and urban populations.³⁰ In this regard Campos writes:

Palestine was very much a part of Ottoman administrative reforms as well as of the economic trends of the nineteenth century—the commercialization of agriculture, the incorporation of province and

28 Büssow, *Hamidian Palestine*, 273.

29 Baer, *Fellah and Townsman*, 88-89.

30 Kark and Oren-Nordheim provide a good description of this relationship for the region of Jerusalem during the Late Ottoman period and the Mandate: "Despite the lack of cohesion between Jerusalem and the villages around it, the influence of the Ottoman authorities in the city was felt increasingly in many aspects of country life. The power of the central government in Jerusalem was manifested even more during the British Mandate. The ties between the city and the villages were strengthened by land registration and agrarian reforms, changes in the taxation laws, and by involving village mukhtars in the administrative system and posing government officials in rural areas." See Ruth Kark and Michal Oren-Nordheim, *Jerusalem and Its Environs: Quarters, Neighborhoods, Villages, 1800-1948* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 289; Baer pointed out that even within the hilly region of Palestine itself there were differences between Nablus and Jerusalem in terms of the relationships with their rural hinterland. In Jerusalem, whose population was more diversified than Nablus and had a country-wide influence due to its religious and administrative importance, relationships with the rural hinterland of the town were not as strong as in Nablus. There, a group of rural families who moved to the town itself vied for control and influence over the entire region of Jabal Nablus. See Baer, *Fellah and Townsman*, 86-87; Büssow, in a recent study, has found in the region of Jerusalem a greater tendency towards regionalization and strengthening of urban-rural relationships at the end of the nineteenth century, as opposed to the region of Hebron where no such developments took place. See Büssow, *Hamidian Palestine*, chapter 3.

empire into the world economy, the rise of coastal trade, and the commoditization of land. These economic changes precipitated several important social developments, namely, the emergence of a large landowning class with strong patronage and other ties to rural hinterlands and the rise of minority merchant communities in the cities.³¹

Petitions from Gaza dealing with issues related to the rural population demonstrate the extent to which the rural population was entangled in the competition among the urban elite that dominated the urban hinterland of the town at the time, as in other places in Palestine. In Gaza, members of several prominent families acquired large tracts of land in the Gaza sub-district and exerted their influence there. They maintained networks of alliance with leading Bedouin sheikhs and village leaders, including social and cultural ties.³² They used their dominance in the administrative council of the sub-district and the fact that Gaza was far away from the Ottoman regional ruling center in Jerusalem to carve out *iltizams* in the sub-district and benefit economically from their influence. They also promoted the penetration of cash-crops into the hinterland of Gaza and gave loans and credit to poor peasants at high interest rates. The tithe collection in the Gaza sub-district was also in the hands of several urban *efendis* who controlled their towns' hinterland and manipulated auctions held in Gaza, the administrative center of the sub-district.³³ Büssov has remarked that this "administrative regionalization

31 Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 11-12.

32 The connections between leading Gazan families and elements in the town's rural periphery were also expressed in complaint petitions submitted by rival Gazan families and their allies. For instance, see BOA. HR. TO., 554/56, Şubat 9, 1292 [February 2, 1877] (a translation from Arabic into Ottoman Turkish of two petitions that were submitted separately to the *Sadaret* and to the Ministry of the Interior by tribal leaders in Gaza against the former mufti from the al-Husayni family and his son 'Abd al-Hai, who together with their tribal allies, a member of the administrative council, and the *kaymakam* 'Omar 'Abd al-Salam stirred up unrest among the Bedouin tribes near Gaza); HR. TO., 554/80, Nisan 6, 1293 [April 18, 1877] (a translation from Arabic into Ottoman Turkish of two petitions sent from Gaza to the *Mabeyn* [the secretariat of the Yıldız Palace] and to the Ministry of the Interior with the signatures of five and ten persons, respectively). They complained that the son of mufti Ahmad Muhi al-Din al-Husayni, named Hussein, collaborated with the Bedouin tribes in the region of Gaza, with whom the Husaynis were said to have kinship ties, and with the *kaymakam* 'Omar, who was their relative. The Bedouins, they claim, were encouraged to attack the farmers in the region and harass them as well as the people of Gaza, who thus lived in fear; HR. TO., 395/44, Kânunuevvel 23, 1306 [January 4, 1891] (a petition in Arabic which was sent to the *Sadaret* by Bedouins in the *kaza* of Gaza against the governor of Jerusalem, Reşat Paşa, and two notables from this town named Salim al-Husayni and 'Arif Bey who, together with the sons of the former mufti of Gaza from the Husayni family, collaborated with their rivals among the Bedouins, and persecuted them).

33 Büssov, *Hamidian Palestine*, 266 (based among others on the writings of Avraham 'Ets-Hadar, a Jewish colonist from Beer-Tuvia).

might have helped consolidate the domination of urban overlords over the countryside.”³⁴

The urban elite’s growing influence over the hinterland of Gaza served as a key component in the process of regionalization. In this regard, however, it must be recalled that the emergence of the class of urban landowners and tax-collectors who spread their influence to the rural regions concomitantly created new tensions and conflicts over issues such as borders of plots and the registration and status of certain lands, the collection of various land taxes, accumulating debts, granting of loans, and the like.

Several other factors that brought the rural population in the *kaza* of Gaza together, such as revering notables, visits to holy places, and marriages between villagers, were not necessarily new phenomena. However, there are indications that these were more common in the second half the nineteenth century, given the better security conditions, the improved means of transportation, the development of regional markets as a result of enhanced economic activity, and similar developments. All these extended the villagers’ scope of interactions with their peers beyond the immediate locality where they lived, as well as with the population of the city of Gaza itself. These preexisting factors were incorporated into other new manifestations of regionalism and thus were ascribed new meaning.

One key element was the prestige and influence of prominent individuals who resided in the region and were revered by the local population. For example, one such prominent person was a sheikh from the village of Qaṭra in the northern *kaza* of Gaza, who was known as an important religious authority in the region. His funeral in 1886 was attended by many villagers from the vicinity, and apparently also includ-

34 Ibid. Büssov has also noted that “according to numerous outside observers, among them Ottoman officials, Christian missionaries, social scientists and Zionist settlers, the peasants of the Gaza region were victims of exploitation by the urban notables from Gaza city”; for an analysis of the ways in which the leading urban notables gained influence, positions, and prestige, see Haim Gerber, *Remembering and Imagining Palestine: Identity and Nationalism from the Crusades to the Present* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 46-47; and Salim Tamari, *Mountain against the Sea: Essays on Palestinian Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 4-7. Tamari has written about the urban-rural relationships that “[t]he social basis of clan power seems to have been associated with two interrelated features. The first was the number of men that clan notables could mobilize on their side in factional struggles—a factor that was dependent, as far as peasants were concerned, on the amount of land under control by the clan head and the intricate system of patronage he maintained with his sharecroppers and semiautonomous peasants, which in turn was influenced by his ability to act as their creditor in an increasingly monetized economy. The second feature was the access that the clan head and his relatives and aides had to public office, and thus his ability to extend services to his clients in return for their support in factional conflicts.” See also Büssov, *Hamidian Palestine*, chapter 6.

ed a Sufi ceremony. Consider the following passage by Haim Hissin, a young colonist from nearby Gedera who attended the funeral:

A while ago I had the opportunity to witness how the Arabs bury an important person. Such a large ceremony is rarely attended by a European. In Qaṭra lived an old respected man, a member of a family considered holy by the Arabs. He had much authority among the villagers, who considered him a holy man. In all the towns and villages in the area, the most common oath was "I swear in the name of al-Qaṭrawi." Arabs came to him from faraway places to settle disputes, get advice and blessings [...] Soon processions came to Qaṭra from different places. From every village a ceremonial delegation arrived. The flag of every village was carried at the head of the procession, followed by musicians who drummed and played musical instruments, and at the back marched the elder sheikhs and the most observant men in the village singing dirges.³⁵

Notables and respected people in the region often mediated in confrontations among the rural population itself, as well as between the latter and the proto-Zionist colonists by drawing on their good relationships with both sides.³⁶

Pilgrimages to local shrines and holy graves which existed in the region and were revered by the local population were yet another important preexisting nuclei of identification.³⁷ In the city of Gaza itself there were several important holy places, primarily the place believed by locals to be the grave of Sayyid Hashim, the great-grandfather of the Prophet Muhammad. Both a mosque and an Islamic *madrasa* were constructed nearby.³⁸ In larger circles, the annual celebrations held at Nabi-Rubin,

35 Haim Hissin, *mi-Reshumot Ehad ha-Biluyim / Memoirs and Letters of an Early Pioneer* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1990), 139-140. On the presence of Sufis in the rural area in Palestine, see Ya'aqov Shim'oni, *Arve Erets Yisra'el* [The Arabs of Eretz-Yisrael] (Tel-Aviv: 'Am Oved, 1947), 73; see also Frederick de Jong, "The Sufi Orders in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Palestine: A Preliminary Survey Concerning Their Identity, Organizational Characteristics and Continuity," *Studia Islamica*, no. 58 (1983).

36 For instance, see *Mikhtavim mi-Eretz-Yisrael*, March 26, 1893 [1/1 1893], (mediation between Rehovot and the Bedouins of Sitriyya by an Arab notable from the region after a severe clash between the two parties in 1893).

37 Vilnay, for instance, has written about the importance of Nabi Ganda near Rehovot for the Arab population in the area, a place where according to their tradition Gad, the son of Jacob, is buried. See Zeev Vilnay, *Toldot ha-'Aravim voha-Muslemim be-Eretz-Yisra'el* [The History of Arabs and Muslims in Eretz-Yisra'el], vol. II (Tel-Aviv: A.L. Stiebel, 1932); see also Shim'oni, *Arve Erets Yisra'el*, 71 (about attendance at a grave of the Prophet's companion Abu Huraira in Yibna southwest of Rehovot).

38 See BOA. HR. TO., 390/70, Muharrem 9, 1303 [October 18, 1885] (The sons of the mufti of Gaza from the al-Hussayni family appealed to the Ministry of the Interior against the *mutasarrif* of Jerusalem,

some 15 kilometers south of Jaffa near the Mediterranean shore, and Nabi-Şalih in Ramle served as cores of regional identification for the population in their vicinity, although they also attracted large crowds from further away, including the region examined here, which demonstrates the fluidity of the process of regionalization and the possibility of belonging to different networks which in part overlapped.³⁹

Marriages between villagers from different localities also constituted a manifestation of regional relationships among the rural population in the region of Gaza at the time. This phenomenon clearly had a history, but one can assume that it was reinforced in the second half the nineteenth century due to the developments discussed above.⁴⁰ Based on an analysis of the Ottoman census of 1905, Büssov has mentioned women who married villagers from the village of Qaşına in the *kaza* of Gaza, stating that "more than half of them came from other villages in the Gaza region [...] marriages were arranged in connection with social and market relations, which all centered around Gaza. The important markets that were held in the city might have been used to arrange marriages as well as to strike business deals."⁴¹

Finally, despite being beyond the main focus of this study, it is still important to mention the activities of the Jewish colonies as of the early 1880s, in particular the joint aspects of their policies, which at times united the rural population and added a new dimension to the issue of regionalism. The Jewish influence over the rural population was naturally stronger in regions where Jewish settlement activity was more intensive and where the colonies developed a close-knit network of relationships which influenced their attitudes and policies toward the Arab rural population in their vicinity.⁴² In the *kaza* of Gaza, even though

claiming that the *vakıf* they administered had been taken from them and handed over to their rivals, a situation which brought the Hashim mosque which the *vakıf* supported to the verge of collapse. The mosque had been repaired by Sultan Abdülmecit [r. 1839-1861], but was once again in ruins as a result of the governor's decision). See 'Uthman al-Tabba', *Ithaf al-A'izza fi Ta'rikh Ghazza* [Presenting the Notables in the History of Gaza], ed. 'Abdullatif Z. Abu-Hashim, Vol. 4 (Gaza: Maktabat al-Yaziji, 1999).

39 About the Nabi-Rubin festival, see Tamari, *Mountain against the Sea*, 27-31. Based on the work of Rema Hammami, Tamari wrote on local shrines that: "Ritual celebrations surrounding shrines of saints, relating to both the agricultural cycle and seasons as well as to life events such as marriage, births, and deaths, were a primary activity through which collective village identities were constructed throughout Palestine. Since each region's collective identity was connected to a specific saint, such ritual practices tended to be nontransferable."

40 For instance, see Jamal 'Abd al-Rahim al-Qaşrawi, *Qaşra: Al-Huwaiyya wal-Ta'rikh* [Qaşra: Its Characteristics and History] (Gaza: National Center for Studies & Documentation, 2000), 135-136 (on marital relationships between Qaşra and adjacent villages).

41 Büssov, *Hamidian Palestine*, 263.

42 For more details, see Yuval Ben-Bassat, "Proto-Zionist-Arab Encounters in Late Nineteenth Century

Jewish settlement activity at the end of the nineteenth century was rather limited, it is nevertheless mentioned in the villagers' petitions discussed here. The villagers demonstrate an awareness of developments taking place in their vicinity, including specific details regarding Jewish activity, which prompted them to make collective demands for equal treatment and rights.⁴³ Moreover, information concerning clashes between the Arab rural population and the Jewish colonies in their vicinity rapidly spread among the rural population and at times led to the mobilization of the villages to act together *vis-à-vis* the Jewish colonies in the region. The most prominent example I was able to find, which vividly demonstrates this claim, is a joint petition submitted by representatives of dozens of villagers in the *kaza* of Gaza to complain about the activities of the two large Jewish colonies of Rishon le-Zion and Rehovot to their north, in the adjacent *kaza* of Jaffa, following a severe clash between the village of Zarnuqa and the guards of Rehovot.⁴⁴ The petition is written in the name of the villagers of Zarnuqa, but dozens of *muhtars* from the *kaza* of Gaza added their seals in an act of solidarity. This negative encounter with people considered by the local rural population to be foreigners obviously reinforced the crystallization of a shared identity among the villagers in the region, who defined themselves in opposition to the colonists, the "others." Thus there was a mobilization of villager representatives in the name of a common cause within the framework of the *kaza*, which was similar to the petitions concerning the *vergi* discussed above.⁴⁵

Palestine: Socioregional Dimensions," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 38, no. 2 (2009); on the agency of the peasants, see Rashid Khalidi, "Palestinian Peasant Resistance to Zionism before World War I," in *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question*, eds. Edward Said and Christopher Hitchens (London: Verso, 2001).

43 BOA. HR. TO., 396/79 (see Appendix A).

44 Zarnuqa was located in the northern part of the *kaza* of Gaza, whereas the adjacent colony of Rehovot was located in the southern part of the *kaza* of Jaffa.

45 See BOA, DH. EUM. EMN., 30/5, Temmuz 16, 1329 [July 29, 1913] (The villagers wrote to the Grand Vizier that the Jewish colonies had treated them harshly, attacked travelers who passed near the colonies, hired Circassian [*çerkez*] and other foreign guards who behaved very aggressively towards the rural population, and possessed illegal weapons. They argued, moreover, that the local court had issued summons to several Jews, but the colonies had replied that these individuals were out of the country. Jewish sources indicate that the immediate cause of the petition was a violent clash between the colony of Rehovot and the adjacent Arab village of Zarnuqa, which took place a few days prior to the submission of the petition, on July 23, 1913. The event started as an argument over accusations of theft from vineyards owned by Jewish farmers located between the colonies of Rishon le-Zion and Nes-Zionah, some 15 and 20 kilometers, respectively, southeast of Jaffa, and quickly deteriorated into fights between Rehovot and the nearby village of Zarnuqa, where the presumed thieves had fled and found refuge. The immediate incident left an Arab and a Jew dead and resulted in tremendous enmity between the two sides, even though eventually reconciliation [*sulh*] was officially organized by an Arab moderator. The fact that a Jewish guard in Rehovot was found dead a few days later under dubious

Conclusion

It is rather difficult to imagine the submission of collective petitions, bearing the signatures of representatives of up to several dozen villages, in the name of a common cause of the kind discussed in this article prior to the period of Ottoman reforms. The usage of the telegraph and the postal service; the ability to contact İstanbul quickly, easily and cheaply; the function of the village head, the *muhtar*, who signed the petition in the name of his community; the stronger Ottoman presence in the provinces and the major towns as the hubs of the sub-districts; the emergence of towns as the administrative centers for their respective hinterlands; the efforts to achieve regularization and standardization of tax collection as opposed to the past, despite all the unresolved problems, these all were outcomes of the reforms and are well reflected in the petitions. Not surprisingly, it is very hard to locate joint petitions of the kind discussed here from previous periods in the Ottoman archives, and previously submitted joint petitions are different in nature.

As seen in this paper, the submission of joint petitions and collective activity in the name of shared interests were only a few of the manifestations that brought the rural population together. If we combine these manifestations of regional cooperation with the nuclei of regional identification, which in part already existed but were ascribed a new meaning (holy places, revering prominent figures, and incorporation into the zone of influence of Gaza and its elite), the premise of the development of regional identity is warranted. This identity, to the extent that it developed, was surely not exclusive but rather existed alongside, and partially overlapped with, other identities concomitantly held by the Arab population, which could also include Ottoman, Arab, Muslim or Christian, local, familial, and occupational identities and at times those based on place of origin outside the region,⁴⁶ all of which tended to be overlaid and complemented rather than clashed with each other.⁴⁷

The issue of regional identity among the rural population is particularly important given the lack of research on the topic and the negative image of nineteenth-century Arab villages in the literature. The latter is largely influenced by the descriptions of the Arab villages by the first

circumstances, possibly as an act of revenge, contributed to the turmoil. Dozens of villages signed a petition against the Jewish colonies days after the events took place, which is indicative of the event's wide-scale influence).

46 Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 65, 84; Beshara Doumani, "Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine: Writing Palestinians into History," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 21, no. 2 (1992): 9-10.

47 Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, 65, 84; see also Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*, 143. Campos talks about "concentric circles of overlapping affiliation."

Zionist colonists and various European travelers and observers at the time, who tended to see them as poor, "primitive," and ugly localities, operating in isolation from each other and governed by despotic sheikhs who ruled over a passive and subordinate population.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, in various parts of Palestine regional identity was an important characteristic of the population at the time, a feature which must be given more consideration and due weight in research. Today, historians have at their disposal abundant sources that can teach us a great deal about the existence of regional modes of cooperation among Palestine's rural population and its implications, as seen in the petitions discussed in this study.

Moreover, the agency of the rural population and the ability of the villagers to act alone to represent their shared interests in the reformed administrative Ottoman system tend to indicate that villagers were not merely puppets of strong urbanite families, as is too often suggested in the literature on Late Ottoman Palestine. In this regard, given Baer's observation about the different nature of urban-rural relationships in various parts of the Levant and Büssov's claim that the process of regionalization was not uniform and had varying characteristics, it is important to compare joint petitions sent from different regions in Palestine in future studies. For instance, thus far I have not been able to locate many collective petitions sent by *muhtars* of villages in the *kaza* of Jaffa, when compared to the prevailing situation in the Gaza sub-district. Nevertheless, the Jaffa region was the source of many collective petitions signed by people of the same social status and class, such as landowners, orchard owners, *vakıf* administrators, and the like, a difference which awaits further examination and explanation. Moreover, since the period discussed here overlaps with the beginning of proto-Zionist settlement activity in Palestine, it would be useful to delve more deeply into the influence of the relationships with the first colonists on regional connections among the rural population, as briefly referred to above, including patterns of petition-writing against the Jewish activity.

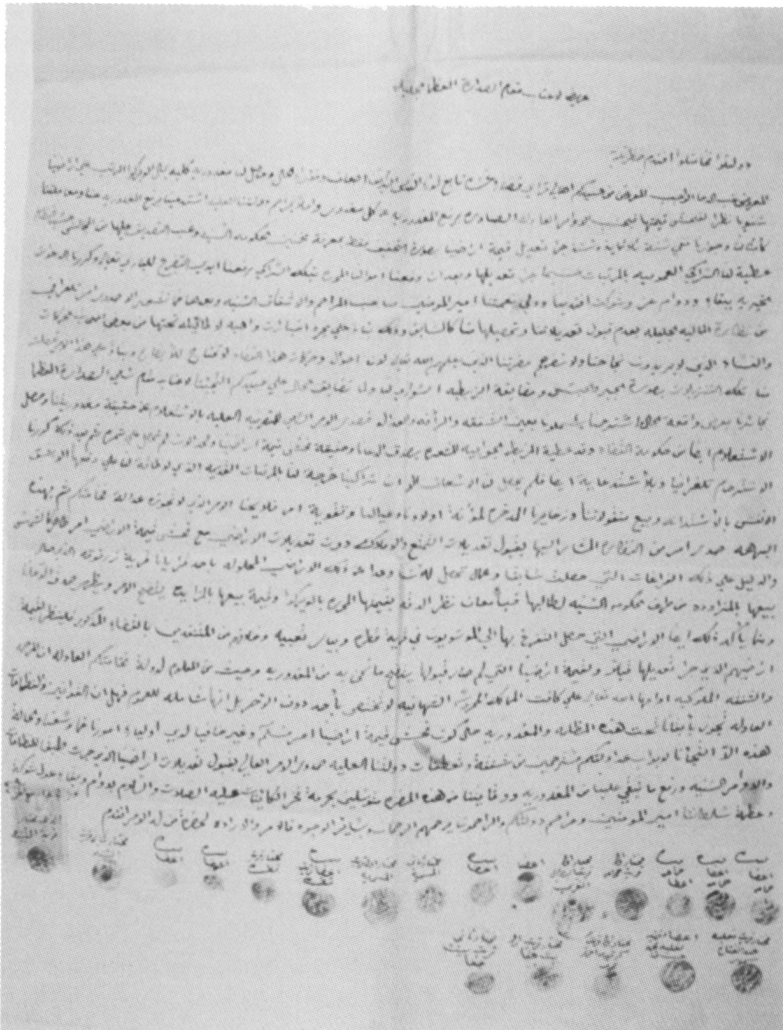
Finally, the situation in Palestine should be compared to other regions in the Ottoman Empire where to a certain extent a similar picture can be assumed. The influence of the Ottoman centralizing reforms in the provinces, the introduction of new means of transportation and com-

48 For instance, see Eliyahu Levin-Epstein, *Zikhronotai* [My Memoirs] (Tel-Aviv: ha-Ahim Levin-Epstein, 1932), 239-240. Levin-Epstein was the head of the colony of Rehovot in the 1890s; consider also the quote below from Lees' *Village Life in Palestine*: "The peasant who has yet had no connection with Europeans is dull and slow, apparently incapable of understanding anything outside the life of his village. He is stolidly indifferent towards any movement that might interfere with his old-fashioned ideas and conservative principles. In some things he is as simple as a child," 65.

munication, the growing control of the authorities over the rural areas, as well as the changing interconnections between the urban and rural populations deserve to be examined when discussing regional identities.

Appendix A: BOA, HR. TO., 396/79, 18 Rebiyülâhır 1309 [21 November 1891]

A letter with 20 personal seals by the *muhtars* and members of the councils of eight villages in the *kaza* of Gaza concerning the rate of the *vergi* demanded from them. The letter, which was written by a professional petition-writer, is addressed to the Grand Vizier in İstanbul. It is written in Arabic on special stamped paper.



Translation: BOA, HR. TO., 396/79, 18 Rebiyülâhır 1309 [21 November 1891]

A petition to the threshold of the exalted Grand Vizierate,
 To our distinguished honorable master,
 Presented to you are the dutiful prayers of your servants, the people of the villages of the sub-district of Gaza which belongs to the district of Jerusalem, who are weak and poor and have suffered a great injustice due to the *vergi* imposed annually on our land. Because of the exaggerated value of the *vergi*, and according to the just orders issued to abolish injustices imposed on every exploited person, and with the hope of obtaining the mercy of the exalted state, we ask you to abolish the injustice which we suffered and treat us comparably to others in our situation and to our neighbors. In 1306 [1888/9] the value of our land [*s vergi*] was re-evaluated and it was lowered, with the knowledge of the government's assessors, and it was approved by the councils according to the law. We were subjected to a collective [*sharaki*] imposition [*murtabat*], according to the corrected value. After we paid our registered debt in accordance with the collective arrangement, we prayed to the Creator and multiplied our prayers to keep and preserve the strength and status of our master, the owner of our livelihood, *amir al-mu'minin*, the distinguished arbiter of exalted mercy and compassion. After that suddenly a telegraph order arrived from the Ministry of Finance not to accept the changes and to collect the taxes from us as before. This was done only based on false unreliable information provided by several corrupt people who do not want our success and do not care about the damage caused to us which are known by God. However, the situation in this sub-district does not need further explanation. According to this order, all the remaining sums were collected from us by force and imprisonment, and by the oppression [*muzayyqa*] of the mounted gendarmerie. When the situation of your subjects became too difficult, we decided to approach the Grand Vizierate to present the situation. We all came together and begged you to consider us with mercy and justice. A high order was issued to the district [of Jerusalem] to investigate the truth of the injustice done to us. And there was also an investigation by the government of the sub-district in response to our petition and an answer was sent that confirmed our claims and confirmed the exaggerated value of our land. Until now, however, it has not borne fruit. Thus we decided to ask for mercy through the telegraph as well as by submitting a petition [letter]. However, we did not receive any relief since our tax collectors demand the former imposition which we cannot pay, other than by a great effort by borrowing money and selling our possessions and supplies, which are

kept in order to buy food for our children and families and develop our agriculture, a step that is contrary to your justice.

At the same time an order was issued from the above-mentioned ministry to accept the reassessment of [tax on] luxuries [*tamatu'*] and city [private] property [*emlak*] without correcting the [value of our] land despite its exaggerated evaluation which is so clear. The proof [of our claims] can be found in the previous decreases [in the value of the land] which were made in the past and still take place today. Moreover, the vacant lands [in Arabic, *al-arađi al-mahlula*] in one of our sub-district's villages, Zarnuqa, were sold at a public auction by the exalted state to its demanders. When one looks carefully at its exact registered value in the *vergi* [files] and the value of its sale at the public auction, the issue becomes clear and the validity of our claims emerges. What also proves this is the lands which were sold to the Jews in the village of Qađra and Biyyar Ta'abiyya [?], as well as to others from among the influential people in the above-mentioned sub-district. If one examines the value of their lands, whose value was changed previously, and the value of our land whose [change of] value was not accepted, he will see the injustice. It is known to your highness that the mercy and compassion of the ruler, may God save him, is given to all the dominions of the Empire and does not discriminate one over the other, but encompasses all. Is it possible that the just rules and orders will let us continue to suffer from this injustice and unfairness? At the same time, the high value of our lands is a clear issue and not a secret known [only] by those responsible for our concerns. We have nothing else to do in this situation but to contact your gates of justice with a request to receive your mercy and the benevolence of our exalted state. Hence we ask for the issuance of an imperial order to accept the change in the value of our land, which took place according to the exalted regulations and directions, to abrogate what was imposed upon us out of injustice, and to protect us from this damage. We appeal to the honor of the most respectful of human beings [the Prophet], may he rest in peace, for ensuring the justice, and strength and greatness of our sultan, *amir al-mu'minin*, and the mercy of your state, and those who give mercy enjoy mercy from God and from the people, and the decision is in the hands of the one who has authority, our master.

[Names, positions, and seals]

Translation: BOA, HR. TO., 395/61, 5 Şubat 1306 [17 February 1891] (1)

To the exalted Grand Vizier,

Your slaves are from the sub-district (*kaza*) of Gaza. The people of our villages are poor. The [assessed] value of our property is very excessive. As your Excellency has long been aware, the *vergi* payments have caused our impoverishment [and therefore] our weakened situation makes it an absolute need to clarify the issue of transferring and renting of property [in Arabic, *al-faraghat al-ijara*], and especially land [defined as] *mahlul* [empty/unoccupied]. [For example, the value of the land of] the village of Zarnuqa which was sold by the government in a public auction supports our claim [regarding oppression] that justice has not been done. A sultanic order was recently issued to the [appropriate] ministry to examine the claims [that the value of the land] was excessive and to adjust the value of the land to its real value. [Hence] we rushed to the gates of justice and submitted a petition. When our claim was proved to be right, the value of our land was adjusted by a reduction, in an accurate way which was approved by the councils according to the regulations and orders. After we received the titles and the separate [payment] documents [that is, the invoices], we paid the money. Suddenly [however] we were surprised to learn that an order was issued not to accept the change and to collect it [that is, the original value] from us, again based on false information [provided by those] whose only aim is to ruin us and confuse the views of the government, because the [destitute] situation of this district is obviously known. Indeed the justice and mercy of your Excellency that are known throughout the land will not tolerate denial of what our master, *amir al-mu'minin* ordered, [namely] to revoke this clear injustice. We have dared to present the case and beg you to treat us with justice by reassessing the value of our land at its true value. [By doing so] you will gain our benevolent prayers for the exalted sultan. Those who show mercy, God will give them mercy. Our master.

[Signatures]

Mukhtar of the village of al-Masmiyya, Ibrahim

Mukhtar of the village of al-Maghar, Hussein

Mukhtar of the village of [?], 'Abd al-Rahman

Mukhtar of the village of al-Tina, Ayyub

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