



***JPS* “Hidden Gems” and “Greatest Hits”: Fifty Years of Ottoman Studies of Palestine**

Salim Tamari

ABSTRACT

In this essay, emeritus sociology professor Salim Tamari surveys the study of Ottoman Palestine within the pages of *JPS*, identifying two groundbreaking articles: Beshara Doumani’s “Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine: Writing Palestinians into History” (1992) and Louis Fishman’s “The 1911 Haram al-Sharif Incident: Palestinian Notables versus the Ottoman Administration” (2005). Tamari argues that the two contributions have, in different ways, fundamentally shifted our understanding of a local Palestinian identity within the broader Ottoman-era region of Bilad al-Sham.

KEYWORDS

Ottoman studies; modernization; periodization; Palestinian identity; history from below

OVER THE FIFTY YEARS OF ITS EXISTENCE, the *Journal of Palestine Studies* (*JPS*) has published a number of notable contributions to the study of Ottoman Palestine. While limited in number, they made up in the quality of their content what they lacked in quantity. Thematically, the articles covered the peasantry, land and land tenure, demography, administration and governance, World War I, and residual Ottomanism in the post-war period. Almost without exception, they were retrospective and revisionist works on a subject long dominated by a legalistic and nationalist discourse. And they all contributed novel understandings of the recent past, in both Palestine and the Arab world, with a view to providing new interpretive schemas.

The search for an alternative history in Palestine arrived late in comparison to other regions of the Middle East that were already being reexamined by social historians. Subaltern studies—mainly focused on peasant and agrarian studies, and instigated by the theoretical work of Clifford Geertz, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and the neo-Marxists—were already well established in India, Latin America, and southern Europe but were still in their infancy in much of the Arab academy. British history from below, pioneered by Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, and E. P. Thompson, had invigorated and eclipsed the earlier work of the French *Annales* school. Ottoman historiography in particular was a field ripe with rediscoveries once the Turkish state opened up its extensive archives to a wider research public. European, Turkish, and Israeli scholars were the first historians to examine the status of Palestine in these records. Among Arab historians, Asad Rustum was an early forerunner of those who looked at Ottoman Syria and Palestine using what he called *al-usul*, or original archival sources.

By the early 1990s, the Turkish state was providing full access to the huge inventory of Ottoman administrative records for Syria and Palestine, as well as other regions of the sultanate, notably to the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivleri in Istanbul and the Devlet Arşivleri (state archives) in Ankara. At the institutional level, Adnan Bakheet of the University of Jordan made available shari’a court and Ottoman land records for Palestine and Jordan. A number of

research conferences organized by Bakheet on the history of Bilad al-Sham ended the scholarly isolation of Ottoman studies in the Arab world and introduced a large number of new, young historians to the field. In their forties and fifties, these in turn began producing a number of significant monographs on the Ottoman history of Bilad al-Sham.

Ottoman studies of Palestine has long been the purview of Israeli scholars, such as Amnon Cohen, Jacob Landau, and Gabriel Baer, who had access to the Ottoman records in Istanbul and Ankara when others did not. A new wave of critical Israeli Ottomanists, such as Iris Agmon, Dror Ze'evi, Yuval Ben-Bassat, and Haim Gerber, followed in their footsteps and impacted the work of Palestinian scholars in the Israeli academy. In the Arab world, Egyptian universities were the only ones producing Ottoman studies of Palestine, although these were mainly, if not exclusively, focused on the Syrian campaigns of Ibrahim Pasha. Within Europe, German scholars were the leaders in Ottoman studies. Scholars such as Wolf-Dieter Hütteroth, Gudrun Krämer, and Alexander Schölch introduced new social science paradigms (in historical geography, social history, and economic history) to reexamine the history of what was then referred to as the Holy Land. In the 1980s, Abdul-Karim Rafiq (in Syria) and a few Palestinian scholars such as Kamal Abdul Fattah and Butrus Abu-Manneh began utilizing Ottoman records for a new reading of the country's history. More recently, a second wave of scholars has made their imprint on the field, including Adel Manna, Mahmoud Yazbak, Mustafa Abbasi, Ahmad Amara, and *JPS* Editorial Board member Beshara Doumani.

Doumani's "Writing Palestinians into History"

Doumani's work on the rereading of Palestinian history, first published in the *Journal* in 1992, was pioneering in that it combined a rigorous reading of shari'a court records with archival material from landlord-merchant logs and accounts, as well urban oral history recounted by merchants, peasants, and urban craftsmen. Prefiguring his full-length book, Doumani's "Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine: Writing Palestinians into History" transcended social history's fixation on local elites and rural rebellion, perhaps also liberating the discipline in the process.¹

What was new in Doumani's work? In the first place, he challenged the periodization of notions of modernity in the Middle East that were predominantly based on the primacy of the Ottoman Tanzimat and were often situated—at least for the Arab East—in the Napoleonic conquest and Syrian campaign of Ibrahim Pasha. He showed that reforms had been rooted in an earlier dynamic involving a decentralized (and later centralizing) state and its rural revenue extracting process. His central thesis here is that the conception of modernity was almost always initiated by an intrusion from without—conquest, occupation, or technological import—while the modernist consequence was a traditional response or adaptation. By contrast, he reminds us:

The social formations in the Arab East, including Palestine, were not houses of cards easily collapsed from the outside. On the contrary, they were deeply rooted though flexible and dynamic networks that interacted with externally imposed changes and filtered them into the rhythms of everyday life. Hence, there is a need for a more flexible periodization of Ottoman Palestine that would take into account not only the long-term socioeconomic and cultural changes, but also the fact that these changes were often felt in an uneven and contradictory manner depending on factors of class, gender, and geographical location.²

Doumani questioned the traditional paradigm that viewed the Ottoman state as an exploiter of the peasantry, and he reinterpreted the urban-rural nexus, showing that the landed gentry were the main beneficiaries of revenue extraction rather than the state. Taxation under the Ottomans, according to Doumani, “was never as heavy nor as efficiently and regularly collected as under the British. On the contrary, much of the surplus expropriated from peasants in the form of taxes in cash and kind went into the coffers of local leading families, not the Ottoman state. . . . Until the late nineteenth century, most Palestinians enjoyed a great degree of self-rule.”³ For the duration of Ottoman rule, Nablus and its hinterland were ruled by native families from the region. Furthermore, Doumani shifted the political economy focus from one based on the integration of coastal trade with the European and global political economy to one that highlighted the previously ignored but rich economy of the interior, and of Jabal Nablus in particular. His work reinserted and made visible the silent and silenced contributions of urban craftsmen, peasants, rural women, and especially Bedouin producers, to the circulation of capital. He did this at a time when the bulk of subaltern studies in Palestine and much of the so-called third world were centered on rural resistance and peasant rebellion.

Doumani’s work benefited greatly from the use of sources that had not been utilized by previous scholars of the Ottoman period. This was particularly true of his creative use of the land records of local families, especially the Abdilhadi and al-Nimr families, as well as the records of the Nablus *majlis al-shura* (advisory council). Of special value, here, was his reintroduction of the work of Aref al-Aref and Ihsan Nimr—traditionally seen as mere chronicles. Of Nimr’s work, Doumani writes:

Nimr utilized oral histories, Ottoman court records, archives of the Nablus municipality, and an extensive knowledge of genealogies, people, and places. He also compiled a large number of private family documents ranging from letters of appointments and contracts with peasants to business and personal correspondence. His original research on all aspects of the Nablus region—politics, economy, culture, social life, and the physical environment—brought to light a wealth of information, and preserved the collective memory of an entire generation that experienced the transition from Ottoman to British rule. The key to his contribution, one can easily argue, was not the merit of his historical arguments, which were often weak, but rather his imaginative and resourceful utilization of a wide range of sources; just as important was his concern for details about all aspects of daily life. Moreover, Nimr was correct in proposing that Nablus, a town of the interior, witnessed a decline in power, prosperity, and independence after the Egyptian invasion—at least in contrast with the growing size and commercial importance of Beirut, Jaffa, Haifa, and other coastal cities.⁴

Five distinct themes emerge from Doumani’s “rediscovery” article that both mark its originality and set it apart from other works on the Ottoman period published in the *Journal*. These can be summarized as follows: challenging the traditional paradigm of Palestine’s modernity and its periodization; shifting the focus of Ottoman studies from an emphasis on the Mediterranean littoral to one based on the political economy of the interior; inserting the voices of subaltern elements such as peasants, craftsmen, and rural women in the historical account; systematically using local records as legitimate sources of historical knowledge; and lastly, positing a dynamic landlord-peasant relationship—at least as far as Palestine was concerned—that questioned the conventional view of the decentralized Ottoman state (mainly) as an exploiter of the peasantry. Doumani elaborated on these five themes of interpretive history in his celebrated *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus*,

1700–1900.⁵ The book appeared three years after the *JPS* article and was a cutting-edge work of scholarship that redefined Ottoman studies in Palestine and Syria with its subaltern approach and dynamic examination of class relations between the city and its hinterland.

Louis Fishman and the “1911 Haram al-Sharif Incident”

Fishman’s 2005 article on the protest movement triggered by British attempts to loot archaeological remains below the Haram al-Sharif compound (led by Captain Montague Parker, following in the footsteps of the Palestine Exploration Fund) shares with Doumani’s piece the historical uncovering of the emergence of a local Palestinian identity within a wider regional Syrian one.⁶ It differs from it in that it utilizes the investigation of one incident, the Haram al-Sharif protests of 1911, to examine the schism that was emerging between the local Ottoman administration and the Jerusalem notable elites who led the protests. The originality of this work lies in its highlighting of new vehicles for national protest in the form of ceremonial celebrations of the Nabi Musa pilgrimage and of the recently established free press, particularly the daily *Filastin*, in the wake of the 1908 constitutional revolution in Istanbul. The press in Palestine gave extensive coverage to the incident, exposing the corruption of the Istanbul political elite and enhancing the oppositional role of local elites led by Raghīb al-Khalīdī, the Jerusalem jurist and legal authority, and Aṣʿad Shuqayr, the Ottoman parliamentary representative from Acre.

The disturbances of 1911 played a role in redefining the relationship of the Jerusalem *mutasarriflik* (at the time an autonomous Ottoman district) and other districts of Palestine to the Sublime Porte. Of significance is the manner in which Fishman viewed local Palestinians as comparing their contemporary moment with the times of Saladin and the Crusades. “For the Palestinians,” he writes, “both the Zionist and European presence was equal to that of the Crusades.”⁷ However, he goes on to point out, they had to rely on their own resources since “[at] this stage of the conflict they began to come to terms with the fact that there was no Saladin on the horizon and that they would have to take on the challenge themselves.”⁸ The protest against the excavations took the form of religious-nationalist agitation and was not confined to Jerusalem but resonated in other regions, especially in Gaza, where local antiquities were the object of European plunder. For Fishman, the 1911 Haram incident was a harbinger of events that were to occur with increasingly greater frequency during the British, Jordanian, and Israeli periods of control over Jerusalem. “It serves,” he writes, “as a good example of how scholars, while concentrating on the Palestinian-Jewish conflict, have overlooked other important events occurring in Palestine. While Zionism was certainly of major concern to the Palestinians during this period, this event shows us that there were other incidents that united them.”⁹

Fishman’s article highlights the incident of the Haram excavations as the turning point in the emergence of a Jerusalem-based Palestinian identity rooted in a rupture between the interests (and vision) of Jerusalem notables and those of the Sublime Porte—a theme taken up by other historians,¹⁰ but either attributed to an earlier period or to a later one, namely the onset of the war period and the dictatorship of Ahmad Jamal Pasha in Syria.

About the Author

Salim Tamari is emeritus professor of sociology at Birzeit University.

Endnotes

1. Beshara B. Doumani, "Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine: Writing Palestinians into History," *JPS* 21, no. 2 (Winter 1992): pp. 5–28, <http://online.ucpress.edu/jps/article-pdf/21/2/5/163135/2537216.pdf>.
2. Doumani, "Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine," pp. 23–24.
3. Doumani, "Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine," p. 12.
4. Doumani, "Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine," p. 15.
5. Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
6. Louis Fishman, "The 1911 Haram al-Sharif Incident: Palestinian Notables versus the Ottoman Administration," *JPS* 34, no. 3 (Spring 2005): pp. 6–22, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2005.34.3.6>.
7. Fishman, "The 1911 Haram al-Sharif Incident," p. 19.
8. Fishman, "The 1911 Haram al-Sharif Incident," p. 19.
9. Fishman, "The 1911 Haram al-Sharif Incident," p. 19.
10. See Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2009).