Shifting Ottoman Conceptions of Palestine

Part 2: Ethnography and Cartography

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The first part of this essay, which appeared in the preceding issue of Jerusalem Quarterly (Autumn 2011 – Issue 47) discussed the context in which the military manual, Filastin Risalesi, was compiled and published in 1915, and how it reflected a changing conception of Palestine and Syria during the administrations of the two Jamals—Ahmet Cemal Pasha, Governor of Syria, and Mersinli Cemal Pasha, Commander of the Eighth Army.

Besides its military logistic objective as a country survey, Filastin Risalesi is distinguished by its rich cartographic content, which includes separate political, topographical, and – very exceptionally – ethnographic charts. Most official maps of the Syrian provinces used the term Palestine as a designation for an amorphous region within the mutasariflik of Jerusalem, that is, for the area bounded to the north by Vilayat Beirut and to the East by Vilayat Surya, and to south by Sinai (Tih Sahra).

Filastin Risalesi identified Palestine as including the sanjaqs of Akka (the Galilee), the Sanjaq of Nablus, and the Sanjaq of Jerusalem (Kudus Sherif). Thus it clearly extends the borders of Ottoman Palestine to include a substantial section of the Beirut province, bounded by the Litani river. This resonates with European designations of the holy land, and to a lesser extent, with Jewish and biblical conceptions of Eretz Yisrael, which tended to cover a substantially larger area.

Ottoman cartography of Palestine and Syria has a rich history and resonance with both Islamic and European origins. The earliest sources showing detailed mapping
of the Syrian coast were based on actual navigational drawings by well-known geographer-travelers. The most important being Piri Reis (1465-1554) whose Mediterranean map in *Kitab al Bahriyyah* (1528), continues to be regarded as an artistic masterpiece; and Katip Celebi (1609-1657), whose *Tuhfat al Kibar fi Asfar al Bihar* (published 1729) constitutes the first detailed mapping of the Anatolian and Syrian provinces. Celebi’s work, moreover, contains elaborate descriptive and ethnographic material about these regions, drawn partly from his own travels. His work confirms the restoration in administrative boundaries those used in the early Islamic (Umayyad) administrative units of Jund Filistin, which in turn was based on Roman-Byzantine practices. Two Celebi maps from *Tuhfat al Kibar* are of relevance here: the first is the map of the Mediterranean which contains “Iyalat al Sham” and “Ard Filistin,” most likely the first such reference in an Ottoman map. The second is titled “Iqlim Jazirat al Arab,” and contains a more clearly marked *Arz Filisitin* extending northward for about half the Syrian coast. The text accompanying these maps describes the boundaries of Palestine, made up of the two sanjaqs of Gaza and Jerusalem:

In the southwest the border goes from the Mediterranean and al Arish to the Wilderness of the Israelites [Sinai]. In the southeast it is the Dead Sea [Bahar Lut] and the Jordan River. In the north it goes from the Jordan River to the borders of Urdun as far as Caesarea.

Celebi describes Palestine as the “noblest of the administrative divisions of Syria.” He devotes much of his commentary on the region, which he visited during his pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Mecca in the years 1633-1634, to a detailed description of the main urban centers, their populations, and their rituals. Gaza, Jerusalem and Hebron receive the greater part of his observations in Palestine. In Hebron he notes that the people are divided into two hostile factions “the Yemenis or Whites (*Aklu*) and the Qaysis or Reds (*Kizillu*). When they clash, the Reds shout “*ya lahu birr*” while the Whites cry “*ya al- ma’ruf*.” These parties have survived from pre-Islamic times and retain the “bigotry of ignorance” (*al-Jahiliyya*).6

Commercial and military needs brought about new standards in nineteenth-century Ottoman mapping. This can already be seen in Mahmud Raif Efendi’s 1803 *Cedid Atlas*, published by the Istanbul College of Military Engineering. This atlas became a landmark document in the new Ottoman reforms instituted by Selim III in the *Nizam-I
Cedid aimed at modernizing the Ottoman administration. Although based on European sources (mainly William Faden’s *General Atlas*), Cedid Atlas contains important Ottoman adaptations of geographic readings in the provinces, as well as a substantial introduction by Mahmud Efendi. Two maps of the Syrian districts contained detailed subsections of *Filastin* and *Ard Filastan* [sic] as part of Bar al-Sham.

Interestingly, in one of these maps (p. 18) Palestine is drawn to demarcate the region separating Ottoman Asia from Ottoman Africa. (This was, of course, before Muhammad Ali’s campaign in Syria).

With the close of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth, Ottoman maps become more functional with the objective of making them useful for troop movements and commercial activities. A good example is Anton Lutfi Beyk’s 1891 map, published by the Khedival Geographic Society in Cairo, which is a specialized map indicating railroads in Syria and Palestine.

After 1903 (1327 Rumi) the *Dairesi Matbaasinda* (government mapping department) began issuing their own specialized maps, among which was a 1904 highly stylized map of the Jerusalem sanjaq. By 1912 they had issued a series of...
such maps of the Syrian provinces at a scale of 1:200,000. These included two high quality maps of the Jerusalem and Nablus districts.11 Two years later, just before the Great War, the same department issued a separate map of the Jerusalem Governorate.12

In all of these maps, as noted above, the administrative boundaries of the Jerusalem sanjaq, and later governorate (mutasarrifligi), are not the same as the boundaries of the region of Filistin. The former were precisely delineated, the latter were fluid and undefined. The new expanded use of the designation Filistin by the Ottoman military authorities in Risalesi therefore, is novel, but not arbitrary. Ottoman official correspondence makes frequent use of the term Artz-i Filistin to designate the areas west of the River Jordan without confining it to the Sanjaq of Jerusalem.13 The Ottoman definition of the holy land to include the Galilee in fact originates in an earlier period – that of the Egyptian military campaign in Syria. In order to establish a unified command against the armies of Ibrahim Pasha in 1830 the Ottoman Porte had taken the unprecedented step of unifying the three Sanjaqs of Jerusalem, Nablus and Akka (i.e. modern Palestine) under the Governor of Akka, Abdallah Pasha (1818-1832).14 Both Butrus Abu Manneh and Alexander Scholch retrace to this seminal union the historical basis for the proposal made by the Sultan a decade later, in 1840, with European blessing, of naming Muhammad Ali governor for life of Akka and ruler of the southern Sanjaqs of Syria. This is seen as a preemptive measure most likely taken to ensure his reintegration into the imperial domain. Since the southern Syrian Sanjaqs stretched from Ras al-Naqura in the north to Rafah in the south, this would have effectively made Muhammad Ali khedive of Egypt and Palestine.

The European Powers pursued this plan for a separate Palestinian entity, and in 1872 succeeded briefly in gaining Ottoman consent to declare that “the sanjaqs of Jerusalem, Nablus, and Acre had been united to form…the province of Palestine”.15 Thuraya Pasha, then governor of Aleppo, assumed the governorship of the new province. But this plan was short-lived and was revoked by a firman from Istanbul, which cancelled the proposed changes and dissolved the new province of Jerusalem in July 1872, barely a month after Thuraya’s appointment.16 Both the new Grand Vizier and the government were afraid that the new formation would irresistibly tempt the European powers to intervene in order to control the holy land and place it under their protection. The Ottomans believed that dividing Palestine into two zones (Vilayat Beirut and the Sanjaq of Jerusalem) would diffuse European influence.17 Abu Manneh provides a different interpretation. His view is that Istanbul was still reeling from the shadow of Egyptian annexationist designs. Only three decades had passed since Ibrahim Pasha and his armies withdrew from Syria, and the High Porte believed that placing the province of Jerusalem under the direct rule of Istanbul would create a barrier against another attempt by the Egyptians.18 Whatever the reasons this division of Palestine remained in place until the beginning of WWI.
Ottoman Ethnographic Mapping

The Ottoman Imperial regime viewed Palestine, in ethnic terms, as part of the *Shami* (Syrian) territories, which at the turn of the century included the provinces of Beirut, Syria and the *Mutasariflik* of Jerusalem. In administrative terms the name Palestine as used on Ottoman maps of the period was equivalent to Kudus-u Serif *mutasarriflik*.\(^{19}\)

In narrative reports however *Filistin* was a rather amorphous term synonymous with the holy land, and often extended beyond the boundaries of the governorship, especially in its northern reach. Being the land of Haram al-Sharif, as well as Christian and Jewish holy sites, however, imparted special status to Palestine, which was augmented by the increasing presence of pilgrims from Europe (mostly Christians and Jews) as well as from North Africa and India (mostly Muslims).

In *Filistin Risalesi* the total number of Palestinians in 1915 (1331 Rumi) is assessed at “around 700,000,” which indicates that the anonymous authors of the treatise added the districts of Akka and Nablus to the Governorate of Jerusalem in their calculation.\(^{20}\) Here we encounter two striking conceptions of native ethnicities. In the narrative descriptions of the people(s) of the holy land, under the term “Population” (*ehalisi*), the natives are presented as a mixture of Muslims, Christians, and Jews, with various sects and denominations of each. In the ethnographic map...
that accompanies the text however, the population becomes an amalgamation of broad nationalities that dominate the scene, with pockets of overlapping sects, as well as ethno-religious groupings that overlap with the nationalities. The map covers the bulk of the Syrian coast and southern Anatolia. The “national” divisions include Turks, Turkmen, Arabs, and Syrians. The “Syrian” population covers all of the of Palestinian highlands, Mount Lebanon, the settled population of Tranjordan, and all the Syrian coast up to and including Iskandarun. The “Arabs” are the population east of Homs, Hamat, Damascus and the area south of Gaza. Equally intriguing in this map is the distinction between Turks and Turkmen. “Turks” are the settled population of western Anatolia, “Turkmen” is the term used for roughly Siwas and areas eastward. These major divisions of the Ottoman Levant into Turks, Turkmen, Arabs, and Syrians are then interspersed with pockets of Druze, Ismailis, Jews, Maronites, Nusseiris, Matawleh, and Rum (Greek Orthodox). How should we interpret these divisions?

Contrary to common perception the new Ottoman leadership did not divide Anatolia and the Syrian coast into Turks and Arabs. Rather it assumed that all the subject population belonged to the category of Ottoman citizens. The ethnic division was most likely made according to a perception of ethnicity that distinguished between settled people (Syrians and Turks) on the one hand, and tribal and semi-tribal ones (Turkmen, and “other Turks” (yakhoud Turki), who require a different military strategy.

Nationalism and ethnicity had come to dominate Ottoman discourse, sparking numerous debates in the Ottoman press both in Istanbul and in the Arab provinces after the constitutional revolution. Within Syria and Palestine the rising tide of nationalism focused on the issue of language and the use of Arabic in school curricula as well as in official correspondence (cf. Darwazah, Qadri, and Husari)\textsuperscript{21}. Unpublished war diaries indicate that soldiers and civilians were acutely aware of the identity of local governors and military commanders. “Arna’uti” (Albanian), “Suri,” “Hijazi,” “Bulghari” (Bulgarian), “Turki,” and “Bushnaqi” (Bosnian) were commonly made distinctions, although they did not necessarily carry any negative connotation.\textsuperscript{22} As the war progressed however, complaints against “oppressive Turks” and “the Ottoman yoke” were increasingly heard, even though they did not always mean exactly the same thing, since many protestors thought of themselves as Ottoman citizens.

The view from the imperial center, however, was different. In her review of the Ottoman revolutionary press Palmira Brummet throws significant light on ethnic stereotyping in the waning years of Ottoman rule. Only the Greeks, Bulgarians, and the map of Syria and Palestine in Filistin Risalesi, Military Press, Jerusalem 1915.
Albanians were ethnically cast in political caricatures (mostly through dress). Arab
were cast negatively only when the circle around Abdul Hamid’s corrupt advisors
(depicted as monkeys in political caricatures), were associated with the old reactionary
order. Otherwise the “Arabs” were often seen as the victims of Italian and British
imperialism (in Libya and Egypt), struggling to free themselves and (presumably) to
restore Ottoman rule.

This situation changed drastically after the 1916 Arab rebellion of Sherif Hussein
in Hijaz when Ahmad Cemal Pasha and his publicist Falih Rifqi (Atay) began to talk
about the “Arab betrayal” and the “stab in the back.” A distinction continued to be
made however between Syrians and Arabs, especially when Syrian soldiers had fought
valiantly in the defense of Anatolia in Janaq Qal’a and Gallipoli. Brummett, as well as
Kayali, notes that distinctions in the press were made on the basis of regional, rather
than ethnic affinities. In examining satirical cartoons Brummett notes that “…other
than in [the] anti-imperialist form, the ‘Arab’ is a bit hard to find in these Ottoman
cartoons. He does not appear as a rabid separatist, demanding an Arab nation from the new regime. He does not appear, as he will in a later era in the West, as a catch-all symbol of terrorism and trouble. Indeed, one can scan hundreds of Ottoman cartoons without finding a figure who can be irrevocably tagged as ‘Arab.’ For that matter, one can scan hundreds of cartoons without finding a figure tagged as a ‘Turk,’ except where ‘Turk’ stands as a synonym for Ottoman in general and particularly for an Ottoman as distinct from European.” But within a few years, during the war, the identification of the Ottoman with the Turk began to be made, starting a process of differentiation and exclusion that led to undermining the legitimacy of the term Ottoman as an all-inclusive concept.

Conclusion: Too Little, Too Late?

The publication of Filistin Risalesi (1915), as a country survey by the Eighth Army Corps almost one hundred years ago, calls for reflection and evaluation. This almanac is unique since it focuses on a region, Filistin, that did not constitute an administrative unit in the Empire. Palestine at that time encompassed the province of Jerusalem (which was a formal province) and substantial areas to the north (which were parts of another province, Beirut). The most significant aspect of this document is that it expanded the boundaries of Palestine to include the Galilee and parts of southern Lebanon, up to the Litani river.

The Ottomans were cognizant of the ideologically alluring aspect of the holy land in the eyes of the Allied forces. They were also aware, through their German and Austrian allies, of Western imperial interests even before the release of the terms of the Sykes-Picot agreement, in October of 1917. They certainly became alarmed, above all, by the Allied designs to turn the Arab provinces of the Empire into French, Italian, Russian, and British zones. Thus the redefinition of Palestine’s boundaries was aimed in part at pre-empting this segmentation.

The fact that Filistin Risalesi draws on, in much of its topographic and demographic data, on French and British military “country books” of the holy land, as well as other Levantine regions, does not make it “less Ottoman.” The strategic planners in the Eighth Army Corps command used this information in order to create a manual that was meant to serve specifically Ottoman objectives – both military and civilian. This can be gleaned from the survey of water, agricultural and road system networks; but more importantly from the manner in which the local population, its religious and social composition, as well as their traditions, were described and classified.

Risalesi suffers from a degree of orientalist imagery in its conception of religious and ethnic minorities, and in the way ethnicity and religion are overlapped. Beyond these conceptions, there is an assumption of Ottoman citizenship that sets apart this manual, and other similar salnameh type almanacs, from British and French army manuals of “enemy territories” discussed in the first part of this essay. The discussion of the ethnic composition of the native population in Palestine, therefore, is treated
here as an extension of social categories of Ottoman groups, one that existed also in Anatolia and Syria, though in a different population mix. A good example of this distinction is when the anonymous author of Risalesi refers to the Jews of Syria as being composed of local Israelites who were Arabic speaking, in contrast to Jews who were non-Ottoman pilgrims and migrants who spoke Yiddish and Russian.

As far as the Arab population is concerned the most important distinction made by the treatise is between Syrian (Suri) and Arab (Arep), with the former constituting the bulk of the coastal population including both urban Syrians and peasants. The term Arab was reserved for the “tribal” formations east of Salt and Hawran, and extending to the periphery of major urban centers in Iraq. Thus we have three categories of “Arabs” in Ottoman thinking during the war period: The Arabs of Hijaz and Iraqi tribemen who “betrayed” the Ottoman state by allying themselves with the English; the Arabs of Libya, Egypt and Morocco, who were seen as heroically resisting the Italians, French and British imperialists in order to join their Ottoman motherland; and the tribal Arabs, “‘urban” who lived east of Syria. An amorphous distinction was made between the Syrians (whose forces fought with the Ottomans in Gallipoli and Suez) on the one hand, and what might be called “generic” Arabs on the other, who were seen as savage and unreliable. Clearly this distinction was very largely an ideological category and did not always have conceptual coherence, since after the great Arab Revolt many “Syrians” joined the Arab rebellion under the banner of Arab nationalism.

Enough Syrians (including Lebanese, Palestinians, and Trans-Jordanians) however remained within the ranks of the imperial order to lend some legitimacy to this distinction. It should be added here that this ambiguity about “who is an Arab” was not peculiar to the Turkish political and military elite. The word “Arab,” indicating Bedouins and tribal formations was common to many, if not most intellectuals in Egypt and Bilad ash-Sham for much of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. From the perspective of the imperial capital (one hesitates to say “the Turkish side” since the Istanbuli intelligentsia were not entirely Turkish) the situation was equally complex. Despite Arab (as well as Greek and Armenian) nationalist attacks on the Turanic tendencies emerging within the ranks of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), the idea of Turkishness, for much of the earlier period, was problematic to the new Ottomans. As Sukru Hanioglou states “the young Turks refrained from formulating a nationalist theory involving race during the formative years of their movement…[t]here is little doubt that this was because, in the Darwinist racial hierarchy, Turks were always assigned to the lowest ranks.”

References to Anatolian peasants were infused by indications of backwardness in both the Arabic and Turkish lexicons. The contingencies of WWI changed all of this since the Ottoman state, under CUP control, began to use Islam as a mobilizing factor against the allies, as well as a motif to undermine the legitimacy of Hijazi challenges against the secularism of the Young Turks and the new constitution. It was in this period that Muslim identity became paramount in Ottoman public discourse as a marker of citizenship, and the ethnicity of minorities became recognized as an indicator of separateness. This was the prelude to the Republican construction of the
new secular Ottoman-Turkish citizenship having an Islamic core.

The political context of Filistin Risalesi was the attempt by the new Ottoman leadership to redefine its relationship to the Arab provinces, and to Palestine in particular. The failure of the Suez campaign, and the hardships inflicted by the war on the local population after 1915, including the impact of the coastal blockade against the Syrian provinces by the allied forces, produced a backlash among Ottoman Arabs. This galvanized the forces that sought autonomy within the empire, and encouraged secessionist forces to flaunt the idea of independence – with considerable French and British support. The ruthless behavior of the Fourth Army under Ahmad Cemal Pasha, as well as the brutal activities of Enver’s Special Forces (Teskilat Mahsusa) among Arab nationalists, who were a minority at the beginning of the war, were decisive factors in the slide towards separatism. We have witnessed here how the Ottoman leadership sought a reconciliation with the Arab population after 1916, first by appeasing the Hijazi rebellion under Sherif Hussein, and later by removing Ahmad Cemal and appointing Mersinli Mehmet Cemal in his place.

The style and content of Risalesi, which was drafted under the command of the Lesser Cemal (Kuchuk), indicate that Palestine was a paramount territory in Ottoman civilian and military strategy, and that the Ottoman leadership saw the province and its population as a core region in the empire. Contemporary writings by Arab writers in Beirut, Damascus and Jerusalem (soon to be forgotten and expunged) show that the appointment of Mersinli Cemal reflected a welcome shift in their attitudes towards Istanbul and Ottomanism, signaling the beginning of reconciliation, and a new era of Arab-Turkish relations. But, as already noted in the conclusion of the first part of this essay, Muhammad Izzat Darwazah – himself a veteran supporter and member of the CUP – astutely remarked, it was “the correct shift, executed too late.”

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List of Maps Consulted

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Endnotes
2 Filisitin Risalesi, 1-2.
6 Celibi, quoted in Bekir Karliga, p. 41.
7 Cedid Atlas, Tab’hane-yi Hümayunda (Istanbul, Turkey), William Faden, and Mahmud Raif Efendi. 1803. Cedid atlas tercümesi. [Istanbul].
8 Cedid Atlas, pp. 18 and 24.
9 Anton Yusif Lutfi Beyk, Kharitat al Sikak al Hadidiyyah Bil Mamlakah al Uthmaniyyah, 1891 (Khedival Society of Geography), Cairo.
11 Kudus, and Nablus, Harita dairesi matbaasinda tab edilmiştir. Sene-i ş. m. 1328.
15 Scholch, 13-14.
16 Scholch, 14.
17 Scholch, ibid.
20 This is close to the number arrived at by Justin McCarthy in his Ottoman Palestine. This is the number of Ottoman nationals, which excludes foreigners residing in the holy land at the time.
24 Brummett, 70, 322-32.
26 Brummett, 324-325.
28 Brummett, 324-325.