

Viewing the Tanzimat from Tulkarm

Palestine and the Decline of the Ottoman Empire: Modernization and the Path to Palestinian Statehood, by Farid al-Salim. London: I. B. Tauris, 2015. ix + 206 pages, notes, bibliography, and index to 260. \$110.00 cloth.

Reviewed by Ahmed H. Ibrahim

The Ottoman Empire began its rule in Palestine in 1517 and prevailed almost continuously until the end of the First World War in 1918. The literature on Palestine under Ottoman rule is vast and ranges from comprehensive accounts to specific case studies. Recent works have focused on the impact of nineteenth century Ottoman reforms efforts – or Tanzimat, as they are known in Ottoman history – which represented an overall reorganization in every institution of state and society. The reforms targeted tax collection, military conscription, education, and the legal system. The reforms aimed at reasserting central control within the empire and forestalling further European encroachment.

Farid al-Salim's *Palestine and the Decline of the Ottoman Empire* highlights the role of the Ottoman administrative system and the new social structure in Palestine in the final decades of Ottoman rule. The book is mainly concerned with the impact of the late Ottoman reforms effort on the new administrative centers and countryside of Palestine. The author examines the history of the district of Tulkarm between 1876 and 1918 as a case study of a small village in central Palestine that was transformed into a center of administrative reforms. The key argument in this book is that, as the Ottoman Empire approached its final years, the reforms that the empire initiated during the 1839–1876 period contributed significantly to forming the administrative foundation of the modern Palestinian entity.

The book consists of nine chapters and a conclusion. The introduction chapter lays out the primary goal of the book in exploring the missing history of modern Palestine, namely its provincial history. The

choice of Tulkarm as a case study is because, as the author states:

Tulkarm represented a town in which all Ottoman concerns for modernization converged and, therefore, provided a unique opportunity for understanding the development of modern Palestine. (5)

The chapter also provides a useful literature review covering a vast array of primary and secondary Arabic, English, and Ottoman Turkish sources. The second chapter discusses Ottoman efforts to reform the empire during the second half of the nineteenth century. In a painstaking analysis, the author devotes chapters 3–9 to searching the provisional history of late Ottoman Palestine with a focus on the district of Tulkarm.

The Tanzimat reformers sought to establish a centralized government with an executive branch directly controlled by the sultan's prime minister. The reformers formulated new policies for restructuring of taxation, particularly on land ownership. Military conscription was also reformed, and secular public schools with emphasis on technical and vocational education were established. All these reforms intended to revive the empire and prevent it from falling too far behind its European counterparts, who had endeavored for centuries to undermine it. Most scholars contend that the reforms, including those introduced in the short-lived constitution in 1876, did not transform the empire substantially. Although the reforms did not prevent the inevitable collapse of the empire, there is evidence, including that documented in al-Salim's book, that the reforms did effect real change in the case of Palestine.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Ottoman Palestine was divided between two administrative units: the district of Jerusalem and the province of Beirut, which included areas of northern Palestine, namely Nablus and Acre. Istanbul governed the city of Jerusalem directly due to its religious importance. Instead of focusing on the main Palestinian districts, the author shifts attention to examining the political, social, economic, administrative, and judicial reforms in Tulkarm, in an attempt to show the extent to which a peripheral village in Palestine was transformed over time into a town with central administrative functions. According to the author, Ottoman administrative infrastructure in most of its Arab territories, including the case study of the village of Tulkarm, rested on a system of *waqf* endowment:

Whole villages, large amounts of agricultural land, and numerous commercial establishments were endowed to provide income for social and religious institutions and public works projects. The goals were to increase the authority and legitimacy of Ottoman rule, to invigorate economic development, [and] to tie the province closer to the center of power in Istanbul. (44)

The author discusses in detail key Ottoman reforms that affected land ownership, specifically the land reform laws of 1858 and 1867. The laws required Arabs in Palestine, as elsewhere, to register land that was held by the state to their names for the first time.

According to al-Salim: “The 1858 land code changed the social pyramid and the economic structure of Palestine” (77). Also:

The new land law had many legal and social implications for Palestinian peasants. For the first time, the fellaheen had the rights of private ownership with legal documentation . . . the Land Code granted peasants not only title deeds to the land but also the right to live on it, cultivate it and pass it on to heirs, which had formerly been inalienable. (91)

It is not clear in this book what percentage of peasants were able to obtain title deeds. The Ottoman land reform laws projected to widen the tax base to generate more revenues. While this is true, it is equally true that many were discouraged from attempting to register their land. Furthermore, the additional land reforms laws that passed in 1867 granted foreigners the right to own land as long as they paid taxes on it to the Ottoman state. These laws adversely affected Arab Palestinians because they granted, for example, Russian Jews to enter Palestine and buy land with the sole purpose of fulfilling their goal of establishing a Jewish homeland in historic Palestine, which paved the way for an influx of more Jewish immigrants from the 1880s on.

In the late nineteenth century, Arabs formed an important part of the structure of the Ottoman Empire. The proclamation of the new Ottoman constitution in 1876 paved the way for the first Ottoman parliamentary elections in which many candidates from the Arab provinces, including Palestinians, were elected. The 1908 “Young Turks” Revolution that restored the 1876 constitution elevated Arab and Palestinian expectations to seek greater autonomy from the central government in Istanbul. Again, representatives from Arab and Palestinian territories were elected to the Ottoman parliament in 1908 and 1912. Despite these developments, internal opposition and rising sentiment in Ottoman provinces that encouraged the establishment of nationalist movements – often backed by European powers – hindered Ottoman reform efforts. Additionally, the Ottoman Empire’s decision to enter the First World War on the side of the German-led Central Powers further contributed to the empire’s disintegration. Did the Arab provinces maintain their Ottoman administrative structure as they came under the Anglo/Franco mandatory rule? It is not clear if al-Salim addressed this question adequately. Instead, he states that his main argument is to “challenge the old theory and cherished beliefs that consider the idea that Tanzimat to have been a failure, and economic growth and development to have occurred in Palestine due to the presence of European colonists there” (193). Although this argument may be relevant in the case of some areas in Palestine, it is not necessarily sufficient to refute the findings of authoritative scholars such as Sati‘ al-Husri, George Antonius, and ‘Abd al-Karim Rafeq whose accounts point to a failed Tanzimat effort.

One should question al-Salim’s assertion that after the end of Ottoman rule in Palestine, the education systems, taxation, and bureaucracy that were left behind formed the foundation of the modern Palestinian entity. British mandatory rule over Palestine, which began in 1922 and continued to 1948, coupled with the continuous influx of Jewish immigrations may have undermined and eroded such a foundation. Al-Salim does not

provide any details on whether or not the foundation of the Palestinian entity or authority that emerged in Gaza and the West Bank in 1993 has any traces left of the nineteenth-century Ottoman reforms.

It is worth noting that the book does not have any maps of the Ottoman Empire, Palestine, including Tulkarm, or the proximate region in which it exists. While scholars of the modern Middle East may find this book challenging, the general reader may find it difficult to read.

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