

The De-Municipalization of Urban Governance

Post-Ottoman Political Space in Jerusalem

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From the end of the Ottoman period, the Near Eastern municipalities were important witnesses to, and actors in, the transformations experienced in the region over the last 150 years. The municipal scale lends itself to an analysis of the social and political space of cities over the long term. In the case of Jerusalem, the analysis of this scale permits a more nuanced understanding of the political transformations driven by the arrival of British Mandate authorities.

In line with recent research on Ottoman municipalities, and taking a cue from Michel Foucault's call to consider cities as the model of the modern state in the nineteenth century,¹ this article considers the municipality of Jerusalem as an essential laboratory of policies implemented at the local level by the Mandate.

Jerusalem's Ottoman Municipality – the Blind Spot of Allenby's Policies

In his first public address in Jerusalem at the moment of the city's occupation by the British army in December 1917, General Allenby did not mention the civic institutions of the city, including the municipality which existed already for half a century. In his speech, he emphasized the upholding of the status quo in the religious sphere and in the holy places. This reduction of Jerusalem to its sanctity is apparent in all initiatives and institutions created by the Mandatory authorities. It had important repercussions on urban governance and planning and led to gradual erosion of the power of the municipality.

Jerusalem had been one of the first cities in the Ottoman Empire to create a municipal council in the 1860s, around the time of the promulgation of the first Ottoman law calling for the establishment of municipal councils in 1867.

From the 1880s onward, the city's municipal council was composed of nine to twelve elected members (through male censitary suffrage only) for a four-year renewable mandate. The council members had to be Ottoman citizens and could not be protectees of foreign consulates. Muslims were the predominant majority on the council, but there were Christian and Jewish members always included. In addition to the elected members, there were four *ex officio* members: the municipality's engineer, doctor, veterinarian and head of police. The council's president (and mayor) was chosen from among the elected members by the imperial government.²

The establishment of the municipality occurred at a turning point in Jerusalem's history, since the second half of the nineteenth century was rife with important changes on the administrative, political, and demographic levels. In 1872–3, the sub-province (*sanjaq*) of Jerusalem became independent of the province of Damascus and began to depend directly on Istanbul as an autonomous sub-province *mutasarrifate*. Thus during that period, Jerusalem as an Ottoman provincial capital played an "interstitial role" between the imperial center and the provincial periphery.³

The other important development of this period is the demographic growth of the city: the population doubled between 1800 and 1870 and reached about 70,000 inhabitants in 1914, divided equally between the Old and the New City.⁴ At the turn of the century, municipal services such as street lighting, sweeping, and garbage collection were progressively extended to the New City. In 1895, the municipal council took office on Jaffa Street, opposite the Old City. This move was symbolic and practical: it demonstrated the municipality's will to accommodate and manage the city's development and simultaneously placed it in the heart of the new business center of the city.⁵



Figure 1. Jerusalem's municipality building, 1917, in the photo: "Last celebration of the sultan's birthday in Jerusalem," 1917 (American Colony Photo Department, Matson Collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, [reproduction number, LC-DIG-matpc-11593], online at www.loc.gov/pictures/item/mpc2005003229/PP/).

The municipality played an important role in the development of the new city center of Jerusalem which stretched westwards from Jaffa Gate (*Bab al-Khalil*) along Jaffa Street. There the municipality established the municipal hospital and pharmacy, the municipal park, and its own offices. It thus took an active part in urban planning by conferring a civic aspect to this new city center, which became purposefully municipal with the presence of three municipal institutions. The new heart of the city was an extension of the commercial artery located inside the old City, near Jaffa Gate, where the municipality owned many shops. In its approach to urban planning, the Ottoman municipality of Jerusalem emphasized the continuity between the Old and the New City, while allowing the new neighborhoods to differ in their form from the old heart of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem Sanctified and Divided under British Mandate

The charter of the British Mandate affirmed in articles 2, 6, and 11 the commitment of the British authorities to the creation of a “Jewish home” in Palestine and of the necessary conditions for Jewish immigration. Article 4 of the charter called for the recognition of a “Jewish agency” whose role would be to advise and collaborate with the Mandate administration in all matters linked to the establishment of a Jewish home in Palestine. The Zionist Executive began quickly to fulfill this role and became the Jewish Agency. While the British authorities would have liked to see a similar organization take shape among the Arabs, the executive committee of the Arab Congress of Palestine refused to become the counterpart of the Jewish Agency, since that would imply recognition of the Mandate’s charter and the Balfour Declaration. In 1921, the Mandate authorities established the Supreme Muslim Council to have it administer all Muslim religious affairs, including the pious foundations (*waqf*), the funds for orphans, and religious courts. This council, contrary to the Arab Congress, entailed the *de facto* exclusion of Christian Arabs.

The Mandate authorities reinforced the community bodies while curtailing the power of the municipality, which was asked to provide public services, but no longer played any role in urban planning or even in collecting tax revenues.⁶ However, since the provision of services included water supply, the municipality had significant power that made it subject to challenges. It became a theatre for and a stake in the conflict between Palestinian nationalists and the Zionist movement which militated for a stronger representation of Jews at all levels of the institution.⁷

The Municipal Corporations Ordinance of 1934 specified the composition of the municipal council as six “Arabs” and six “Jews,” according to the categorization of the population established by the Mandate. The mayor had to be a Muslim, one of the deputy mayors a Christian, and the other, a Jew.⁸ The creation of electoral districts during this period incorporated many new Jewish neighborhoods, while excluding

several Arab villages, in a “gerrymandering” effort to manipulate election results.⁹

British mandate authorities intervened repeatedly in municipal affairs, starting with the dismissal of Mayor Musa Kazim al-Husayni for participating in an anti-Zionist demonstration during the Nabi al-Musa festival in 1920.¹⁰ In 1937, the city’s mayor – Husayn Fakhri al-Khalidi (elected in 1934) – was exiled for having played an active role in the Arab Revolt that had begun in 1936. Finally, in 1945, conflicts within the municipality became so paralyzing that the British High Commissioner decided to dissolve the municipal council and appoint a municipal commission to replace it.¹¹

Long before the dissolution of the municipality, British authorities assigned its former roles in urban planning and in enforcement of building regulations to other institutions. Military governor Ronald Storrs and his advisor Charles Ashbee took charge of these fields through the establishment of the Pro-Jerusalem Society as early as 1918. This society’s objective was the preservation of the city, its archaeological and historical sites, as well as the improvement of public spaces and cultural life. The Pro-Jerusalem Society brought together the mayor of Jerusalem, foreign consuls, and religious representatives of the Christian denominations with other representatives of the Arab, Jewish, and foreign communities in the city.

The Town Planning Commission, established in 1920 under the Palestine Town Planning Ordinance, took over from the Pro-Jerusalem Society.¹² It was responsible for defining the city’s boundaries, zoning, and arranging eight new neighborhoods in the New City.¹³ This commission also retained the right to review all building permit applications submitted to the municipality.¹⁴ According to the Town Planning Ordinance of 1921, it was the only body authorized to receive complaints about urban planning.¹⁵

When Ronald Storrs called for the development of a master plan for Jerusalem in the early 1920s, one of his explicit objectives was to preserve the appearance and “atmosphere” of Jerusalem. Thus the authors of the plan worked to preserve the Old City and its view from the outside by establishing a green belt around the walls. Many houses and shops in this area were consequently demolished.¹⁶ Following the same logic of preserving the Old City as an unchanging historical monument, the clock tower on Jaffa Gate, built in 1907, was knocked down, despite protests from the municipality.¹⁷ These drastic measures illustrate the logic of opposition between the Old City and the New City that drove the British approach to urban planning. In parallel, the Old City was now presented as a complex composed of four confessional districts: Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Armenian, whereas the last Ottoman population census at the beginning of the twentieth century documented the existence of mixed districts with names devoid of any confessional connotation.

Ultimately, these projects divided Jerusalem into a new predominantly Jewish city in the west, and an old eastern city, mainly Arab. The services offered to the Old City were mainly aimed at preserving its historical and architectural heritage character, while those offered to the New City were meant to create a modern city according

to European criteria. This approach was the opposite of the policies of the Ottoman municipality which had begun to provide lighting and cleaning services in the Old city before gradually meeting the growing needs created by the extra-mural extension. The spatial continuity between the Old and the New City, particularly around Jaffa Gate, had corresponded to the demographic, social, and administrative continuity at the end of the Ottoman era.

The municipality thus became a main locus of confessionalization as a “social and spatial process.”¹⁸ The municipality’s loss of power between the end of the Ottoman era and the Mandate period was both a consequence of this process and a colonial tool whose aim was to reduce the margins of political mobilization of the Arab population. One can therefore say that even if the municipality experienced great continuity *in form* since its foundation, *in substance*, its power was eroded during the Mandate period, particularly in the field of urban planning.

The municipality’s political marginalization was accompanied by the creation of competing institutions (the Pro-Jerusalem Society and the Town Planning Commission) in which representatives from the main religious groups joined the regime of “experts” imposed by the mandatory authorities. The urban management of Jerusalem was thus largely entrusted to “experts” chosen by the mandatory governor and religious leaders, in a dual movement of patrimonialization of the Old City and confessionalization of its local authority.

The erosion of the municipality’s power during the Mandate period gave free rein to the British administration’s plans. In this sense, Jerusalem’s de-municipalization seems to have been a deliberate choice to monopolize control of the city’s space, in both the physical and the political sense.

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Endnotes

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