PART 2

Imperial Allegiances and Local Authorities

Introduction

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Producing histories of “Ordinary Jerusalem” from 1840 to 1940, as this volume sets out to do, challenges prevailing public and academic discourses on modern Jerusalem. Why? First, because Jerusalem is a symbolically saturated and religiously overdetermined place in the global imaginary. For residents, visitors, scholars, and rulers, there is nothing ordinary about God’s City. In their minds, it looms larger than history and stands above human machinations. How can Jerusalem be narrated when its biblically-infused temporal scale is measured in millennia rather than centuries or decades? Second, because the 1840–1940 period is historiographically overdetermined as the era of western-inspired modernity. Most narratives in the three academic fields of study in which modern Jerusalem is nestled – Ottoman, Middle Eastern, and Palestine/Israel studies – revolve around a series of ruptures that constitute the fabled “long nineteenth century”: the encounter with the West as the beginning of history, top-down reforms (Tanzimat) of the centralizing state as the institutional embodiment of modern governance, and the violence of colonialism/nationalism as the handmaiden of the transformation from empire to states. How can Jerusalem be narrated in ways that transcend stories about the external impact of western hegemony? Third, 1840–1940 lives in the shadows of two traumatic historical moments that are the narrative bookends of knowledge production about Jerusalem: the 1831–40 military conquest and occupation of Bilad al-Sham by Mehmet Ali Pasha’s Egyptian army, conventionally viewed as a rupture akin to Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt; and the catastrophe (*Nakba*) of 1948, which witnessed the erasure of Palestine and the ethnic cleansing of the majority of its native population. A powerful narrative logic operates in these shadows: the inevitable destruction of Jerusalem’s peaceful, tolerant, multicultural, and global character by colonial forces. How can Jerusalem’s long-term inhabitants, inasmuch as they were a local demos (*ahālī*) under Ottoman and British imperial rule, be written into history as agents rather than as hapless observers or victims?

One way to address all three questions is to normalize Jerusalem between 1840 and 1940 by framing its history in terms of a mutually constitutive relationship between the *ahālī* and the state. Hence the title of Part 2, “Imperial Allegiances and Local Authorities.” The word “allegiance” troubles the state/society binary by suggesting that the state is co-opted, but also inhabits, the *ahālī*. Likewise, the phrase “local authorities” could mean the primacy of

the local and, at the same time, the transforming presence of imperial authority. The chapters in Part 2 are not equally successful in walking this fine line, but they all strive to render Jerusalem “ordinary” by analyzing how empire-wide institutions and practices of governance – police stations, petitions, shari‘a courts, and municipalities – were instantiated and transformed in the specific historical context and social formation of the city. Like all other chapters in this volume, they do so by introducing new archival sources and/or new research that shed light on actors, events, and relationships that have hitherto been erased and marginalized. The purpose of these chapters is not to come up with a new metanarrative, but, rather to suggest fresh lines of inquiry respectful of and firmly grounded in the messiness and complexity of the social life of the city itself.

It is in this spirit that Noémi Lévy-Aksu speaks of the “forgotten” and “cacophonic” voices of Jerusalem that come to life when one examines less the institution of police as a modern form of governance (which, ironically, can serve to reify conventional binaries) and more the on-the-ground practices of policing that shaped Jerusalem’s urban culture. Focusing on the relationship between police staff and the *ahālī* through a social history of institutions, Lévy-Aksu argues that “state-society and central-local oppositions are less relevant to the discussion of *citadinité* than a careful analysis of the patterns of alliances and exclusion that legitimized some actors and practices while marginalizing others.”

The same spirit animates Yasemin Avcı, Vincent Lemire, and Ömür Yazıcı Özdemir’s study of collective petitions by the *ahālī* of Jerusalem and its environs in the late nineteenth century. Combining discursive and quantitative approaches to an analysis of over two hundred petitions, the authors map out who sent petitions to whom, why, how, and in what languages and styles. The advent of the telegraph in 1860 and the introduction of new administrative institutions, they argue, increased the number of petitions and expanded the range of social networks that resorted to them. Beyond reinforcing a large body of literature about petitions as vehicles for both local agency and imperial authority, the authors open new windows on the transformation of political culture and regional identities in Jerusalem during the last decades of Ottoman rule.

It is difficult to think of greater institutional contrast in Jerusalem than between the shari‘a court and the Russian consulate. The former, whose rich and voluminous archives date back to the first decade of Ottoman rule in the early sixteenth century, is the symbol of a communally embedded state institution central to all aspects of daily life from property to kinship relations. The latter symbolizes the European appropriation of Palestine as a geostrategic

Holy Land. In their study of Register No. 324 (1839–40) of the Jerusalem shari'a court, Abū Muḥtadī and Falestin Nā'ī seek to trouble the notion of rupture. They show, counterintuitively, that the new protomunicipality advisory council (*majlis al-shūrā*) founded by the Egyptian authorities was kept intact by the Ottoman government, but subordinated to the qadi of the shari'a court. Irina Mironenko-Marenkova and Kirill Vakh, in a thorough study of scattered archival sources relating to the Russian consulate since its founding in 1858, nuance the geostrategic argument by showing that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs showed little interest in the consulate. Rather, it was other Russian institutions, especially the Ecclesiastical Mission and its focus on land purchase, that dominated the Russian presence in Jerusalem.

Land and real estate are the measure of power and faith in Jerusalem, and, arguably, the most important factors in understanding the inner life of the city and its relationship to the outside world. This is especially true for the 1840–1940 period, which witnessed major transformations in land relations. In his chapter, Konstantinos Papastathis asks what happens when the largest private landowner – led by a corrupt religious establishment beholden to a foreign country – faces bankruptcy, a highly disgruntled native congregation, a new imperial power after four centuries of Ottoman rule and a European settler-colonial movement obsessed with land purchase. Skillfully employing a wide range of previously untapped sources, he tells the dramatic story of how the British colonial authorities solved the financial crisis of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate by managing the sale of large tracts of land to the Jewish Agency, while keeping in check Palestinian nationalist aspirations that resonated strongly with the Arab Christians of Jerusalem.

When it comes to imperial allegiances and local authorities in the era of reforms, no institution symbolizes the contested modern more than the municipality. Mahmoud Yazbak is keen to distinguish between the notion of public services, which, he argues, is a long-established Islamic and Ottoman practice, and the institution of the modern municipality, which he recognizes as having a strong influence on urban political culture and modes of governance. More importantly, perhaps, his comparative study of the municipal archives of Nablus, Haifa and Nazareth shows that the nature of this influence is far from clear or uniform. Rather, the workings of each municipality, the social composition of the council members, and its local role varied depending on the social structures and political economies of regional social spaces and the imperial strategies in play.

But is it enough to demonstrate the inevitable blind spots, erasures, double standards, and ideologically driven constructions of the past by the big “isms” – such as orientalism, nationalism and colonialism? As Jens Hanssen

argues, the circling of the wagons approach of cultural defensiveness and a provincial nostalgia leaves history in the hands of the victors. Rather, the “task at hand is to produce historical theory and method out of the Palestinian experience.” That is more than an academic exercise for theorists. Decolonizing knowledge production about the past is, ultimately, a cultural mobilization project for building a different future. Inspiration here comes from the fact that the formation of modern municipalities was rooted in global crises of cities undergoing rapid growth and transformation, and in an insurgent urban democratic ethos by their respective *ahālī*. Jerusalem, Hanssen rightly notes, is still living in a settler-colonial present and the current struggles of its *ahālī* draw on the not-so-distant past of late Ottoman urban democracy.