INTRODUCTION

When Sultan Abdülhamid II’s accession to the throne was proclaimed in Jerusalem in September 1876, it was hardly foreseeable that this event would mark the beginning of a new period in the history of Palestine. The general mood in the city reportedly oscillated between sobriety and pessimism.¹ Not only was this already the second change of imperial ruler within a few months – just about three months before, Sultan Abdülaziz had been replaced by Murad V in a bloodless coup d’état – but the inhabitants of the city and the surrounding district were also besieged by a number of pressing problems.² First, the combination of a severe drought and a decline in international trade had led to a serious economic crisis. In addition, Serbia had declared war against the Ottoman Empire, followed by Montenegro, and the government had conscripted soldiers from Palestine, who were being trained in the Jerusalem barracks. Having lived through decades of conflict and political instability, Palestinians were afraid of becoming embroiled in another military conflict.

Against all the odds, Sultan Abdülhamid II ruled for over three decades, until 1909.³ As Palestinians had rightly feared, the first phase of his government was overshadowed by wars. While the war in the Balkans in 1876 was a grave challenge, the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877–1878 brought the Empire to the verge of collapse and led to a severe humanitarian crisis. It is possible that more Palestinians lost their lives in this war than in any conflict in the twentieth century.⁴ In the war’s aftermath, the Congress of Berlin in 1878 established a new order, which helped to prevent major wars during the coming decades, but which also made the European powers a permanent factor in Ottoman interior politics. The most powerful reminders of this situation

¹ Die Warte, 12 October 1876, cited from Alex Carmel, Palästina-Chronik, vol. 1: Deutsche Zeitungsberichte vom Krimkrieg bis zur ersten jüdischen Einwanderungswelle, 1853–1882 (Ulm, 1978), 230–231.
² Ha-Maggid, 13 September 1876, p. 3.
³ For a biography of Abdülhamid II, see François Georgeon, Abdülhamid II: Le sultan caliphe (Paris, 2003) and idem, art. ‘ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd II (ʿAbdülḥamīd II)’, in EP.
were perhaps the regular visits of European warships to Levantine ports, which were ostensibly meant to preclude violence against Christian communities, and the ever-increasing presence of European institutions such as missionary schools or post offices. Unable to change this situation, Abdülhamid II skilfully made use of the international environment by balancing the interests of the various powers so that their interventions often neutralised each other. With the help of a large security apparatus, he clamped down on all oppositional movements and restricted free speech. At the same time, he managed to appease Muslim public opinion by underlining the Islamic character of the Ottoman Empire. These successes enabled Abdülhamid II to embark on a series of policies which marked the lives of his subjects to such a degree that today we can speak of a ‘Hamidian period’ (1878–1908),\(^5\) similar to the Victorian era in Britain (1837–1901) or the Wilhelmsian period in Germany (1890–1918). In Palestine, a substantial proportion of the local population benefited from political stability and economic growth during these three decades. Attracted by an expanding labour market, a large number of immigrants came to the country. In retrospect, the Hamidian period, together with the remaining years before the First World War, stands as the longest phase of peace and prosperity that Palestine has known throughout its modern history.\(^6\)

However, two Palestinian authors writing at the beginning of the 1920s, ’Umar al-Šāliḥ al-Barghūthī and Khalīl Ṭūtah,\(^7\) presented a two-sided picture of the Hamidian period. On the one hand, echoing the revolutionary rhetoric of the Young Turk period, they portrayed Abdülhamid II as a ruler who had been raised to the throne by reform-minded politicians, but who had soon betrayed their hopes and those of all ‘progressive Ottoman youth’ by instituting a regime of ‘autocracy and terror’.\(^8\) On the other, Barghūthī and Ṭūtah described the Hamidian period as a time during which their country acquired new prominence and underwent crucial societal and political transfor-

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\(^5\) In the last year of Abdülhamid II’s rule, 1909, the Young Turks dominated the political agenda.

\(^6\) For a similar analysis, see Henry Laurens, ‘La Palestine hamidienne, une société levantine’, in idem, Orientales III, 105–111. For a chronology of events, see Appendix One.


\(^8\) Barghūthī and Ṭūtah, Ṭārīkh, 241.