How did the social groups in the District interact with each other? How did they protect their interests? How did they use the political institutions in place, and to what extent did they mobilise various communal identities? There are many policy areas that could be studied through our sources. Promising fields of investigation might be, for example, security, education, infrastructure, health and immigration. But these are beyond the scope of this study. The following is a description of two cases of crisis management in the District of Jerusalem which are comparatively well-documented and which set in motion the institutions portrayed in the previous sections. The first illustrates local political attempts to deal with a number of crises and disasters that occurred in the wake of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–1878, and concerns what probably constituted the most controversial domestic political problem during the whole Hamidian period, namely the practices related to military conscription.

*Crisis Management during the Russo-Ottoman War (1877–1878)*

During the war years of 1877 and 1878, a number of events culminated in a general crisis that threatened the stability of Ottoman government in the District: a drought, food shortages, lack of agricultural workers following the conscription of peasants, unstable prices, general insecurity, feuds between Bedouin groups, and inter-confessional tensions. The emergency brought to the surface local political tensions that were otherwise less visible, and contemporary reports show that there were attempts at peaceful conflict resolution.

Droughts in the Syro-Palestinian region were often very local phenomena: it might happen that there was a good agricultural year in one area, while people in a neighbouring region suffered hardship from poor harvests. In 1877, for instance, while rainfall in Jerusalem reached a seven-year low, rainfall in Beirut were reported to be
abundant. In most cases, the effects of such local droughts could be alleviated by local trade and sometimes by the transport of grain within a framework of government relief measures. The lack of rainfall in the winter of 1876/77 occurred before the outbreak of hostilities on the Russian front, but its effects were exacerbated by war-time conditions, which hampered local agriculture and transportation in various ways – for example, by the recruitment of local peasants and workers into the army and the requisitioning of pack animals, and by a worsening security situation on the roads as a result of the reduced military presence.

In 1878, the economic crisis worsened even more, even though rain fell in abundance in Jerusalem and there were good harvests. While thousands of soldiers from Palestine lost their lives on battlefields in the Balkans, considerable tracts of agricultural land could not be sown for lack of manpower and because of Bedouin raids. Jerusalem was most vulnerable in this situation because the city did not have a grain-producing hinterland and was dependent on supplies being brought by caravan. In 1878, wheat could not be transported to Jerusalem in the usual quantities because Bedouins had stolen the peasants’ pack animals. The city therefore began to experience a shortage of grain, even though, as the German newspaper Die Warte reported, great quantities of cereals were stored in the cisterns of Transjordan and the coastal plains. In this situation, the municipality of Jerusalem took the initiative and put forward the idea of banning the export of wheat so that the merchants on the plains would accept the difficulty of leading caravans to Jerusalem for lack of an easier alternative. Prioritising the interest of the capital city over that of the coast, the central government endorsed this idea. Once in place, however, the export ban started to create new problems, one of which related to taxation: the government reported unusual difficulties in farming out the collection of the tithe in the grain-producing areas of the coastal plains and in Transjordan. According to Die Warte, the government could not find enough tax farmers who wanted to accept the difficult security situation, especially as the ban on wheat exports kept grain prices

---

1 Rev. E.W. Rice, ‘Rainfall in Palestine’, Journal of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, 6 (2) (1886), 112; Appendix One, below.
2 Die Warte, 4 May 1877, cited from Carmel, Palästina-Chronik, vol. 1, 252-253.