Chapter 12
Comparing Ottoman Municipalities in Palestine: The Cases of Nablus, Haifa, and Nazareth, 1864–1914

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It has been suggested that the European presence in Ottoman cities and the subsequent pressure on the Ottoman administration led to the creation of Ottoman municipalities. This theory implies that local Muslim societies were stagnant and lacked the required resources for social and urban change.¹ Based upon findings from three Palestinian Ottoman cities: Nablus, Haifa, and Nazareth, this chapter claims that urban services had been established long before the foundation of the municipalities or the presence of Europeans in Palestine. In this respect, the law regarding municipalities and their establishment was not a true innovation. When they were created, Ottoman municipalities took on public services that had been present many years before. However, at the local level, the institution of the municipality, which was part of the overall reform process, produced new systems of social and political change.²

Until the 1870s, the presence of Europeans in Haifa and Nazareth was too limited to exert serious pressure on the Ottoman authorities. Nablus was the main town in the mountainous region of central Palestine, and it served as a hub for the commerce, manufacturing, and administration of its hinterland. Culturally, Nablus remained largely unaffected by the rising commercial, cultural, and missionary ties that allowed Europe to penetrate into Palestine in the 1850s. With a predominantly Muslim population of 20,000, the town was inhabited by just a few hundred Christians and Samaritans. Nablus remained largely stable; it was unaffected by immigration, and preserved its autonomous cultural identity long after the mid-nineteenth century. It had succeeded

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² In this chapter, I do not discuss at length the urban services provided by the municipal council, a theme I deal with in “Municipality of a Muslim Town,” 348–59. Among other aspects, that article discusses the municipal budget and municipal services such as town planning, sanitation and lighting, supervision of markets, police and security and other aspects of services.
in maintaining autonomous rule to a large extent, and Nablus’ elite resisted changes that could have altered its traditional social structures.³

Haifa was rebuilt in the 1750s, and continued to develop until the 1830s. It had a suitable anchorage for steamships, and it became the main port of northern Palestine and the Hawran. In 1905, when the Ottoman government made it one of the central stations of the Hijaz Railroad, Haifa’s port became second in importance to Beirut. The population of Haifa grew from about two thousand in the mid-nineteenth century, to about twenty thousand at the turn of the century. Muslims made up half of the population; the rest was made up of Christians and other religious minorities. Since the town was too young to have a well-established traditional elite, it proved easier for new immigrant families in Haifa to become part of the elite than in older towns such as Nablus.⁴

Nazareth is located in a strategic point in the southern Galilee Mountains, overlooking the Esdraelon valley. It came to life in the 1750s, when it became a government base. Its prominent and powerful governor, Dahir al-ʿUmar, gave permission for four churches to be built in the town: Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Maronite, and Latin. This encouraged general settlement in Nazareth and led to further regeneration in the area. Dahir’s successors continued his policy, and its population grew to about four thousand in the 1850s, and to ten thousand in the 1880s.⁵ Since it was one of the holy places for Christianity, Nazareth began to attract many missionary societies during the second half of the nineteenth century. In less than fifty years, forty-four missionary establishments had been set up in the town.⁶ Muslims made up

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