

Hi,

As an introduction to the talk “*Turkey, the Middle East, and the Ottoman Past*” by Professor Christine Philiou, October 3<sup>rd</sup>, where she presented the final century of Ottoman history (1821-1922), the role of non-Muslim communities in it, and the ways a complex and fraught empire was first buried and then selectively resurrected in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the following historical outline pertaining to the Ottomans role in Jewish history is offered, a period which can be separated roughly into two:

- The first began with the arrival of Jewish exiles from the Iberian Peninsula who found a safe haven there in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, no small feat if we remember the British, French and the Americans empires refusal of to offer even temporary relief to Jews fleeing Nazis in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- The second period began with Ottoman four centuries-long rule over the Near East. This intro will focus primarily on the Ottoman authorities’ impact on the Jewish Zionist settlement in *Eretz Yisrael* which began in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The term "Eretz Yisrael" is the official Hebrew name of British Mandatory Palestine, when the word פלשתינה (Palestina) was followed always by the two initial letters of "Eretz Yisrael", "א" (Aleph-Yod). The boundaries are loosely understood to be the area West of the Jordan River with a northern natural border being the Litani River in South Lebanon.

It is worth noting that there are many holy sites, and grounds, around the globe, but the only land in the world that is defined as ‘Holy Land’ to the three monotheistic religions has no determined borders.

Thanks

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The Ottoman Empire which lasted some 600 years was created by Turkish tribes in Anatolia. It became the most powerful empire in the world by the 15th and 16th centuries. At its height, the empire encompassed most of southeastern Europe to the gates of Vienna, including present-day Hungary, the Balkans, Greece, parts of Ukraine, portions of the Middle East expanding west to Algeria, and as far south as the Arabian Peninsula.

Sultan Mehmed II who ruled 1451–81 encouraged Jews from central and western Europe where they were being subjected to increasing persecution to seek refuge under his protection. Their loyalty was unquestioned since Jews of Byzantium who suffered long-standing persecution by the Greek Orthodox Church and its followers, supported and assisted the

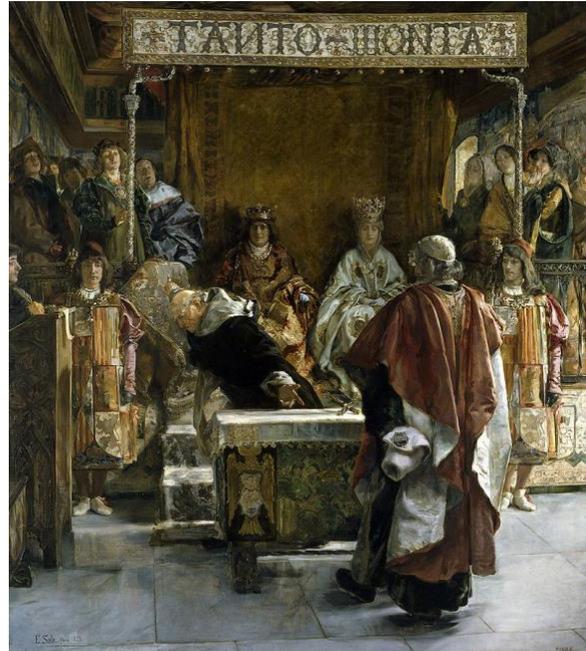
Ottoman conquests thus demonstrating their allegiance to the Sultan. Constantinople has been the primary seat of the Eastern Orthodox Christian patriarchy for more than 15 centuries.

The peak of Ottoman power and wealth came after Mehmed II reign in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Ottomans dominated southeastern Europe extending their domain well into central Europe and throughout the Arab portion of the old Islamic caliphate.

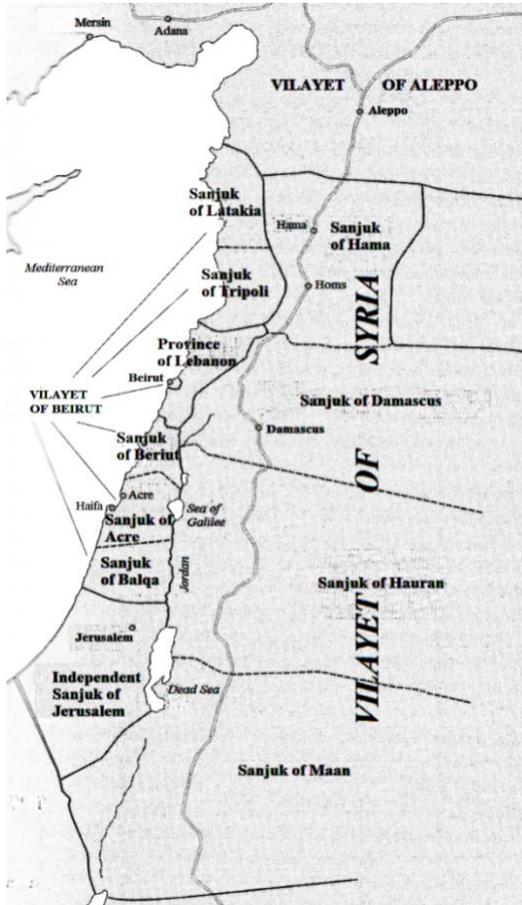
***Torquemada offers The Edict of expulsion of the Jews from Spain to the Catholic Monarchs. 1492***

With this expansion economic growth to sustain the empire became paramount, and to that end, Jews expelled from Spain during the summer of 1492 were offered a safe harbor by the Ottoman Empire first in Constantinople, Thessaloniki, Greece, and Edirne (e'deer nu). Later on, Jews settled in the Balkans, Bulgaria, and Hungary, where they enjoyed a golden age that lasted well into the 17th century.

The Spanish Jews carried with them Ladino, an original Judeo-Spanish dialect that was widely spoken as they spread throughout the Ottoman sphere. Today Ladino is very nearly extinct, as those whose mother tongue is Ladino are few and dwindling.



In August 1516 the cannons of Ottoman Sultan Selim I overpowered the Egyptian Mameluke armies at the Battle of Marj Dābiq, north of Aleppo (Hallab), bringing an end to the Mameluke Sultanate of the Middle East. This was followed by four centuries of Ottoman domination.



Ottomans divided *Eretz Yisrael* into the northern districts (*Sanjuk*) of Nāblus and Acre, both of which were linked with the province (*Vilayet*) of Beirut, while the central part became the autonomous district (*Sanjuk*) of Jerusalem, and the Negev belonged to the province (*Vilayet*) of Syria. (The term Palestine and *Eretz Yisrael* will come into use after the British take control of the area at the end of WWI).

For the first three-and-half centuries, 1516 to 1880, few Jews made their home in *Eretz Yisrael*, which became a backwater of the Ottomans, neglected, desolated and depressed.

The Jews formed religious orthodox communities in Jerusalem, Hebron, Tsfat (תּצַפַּת), and Tiberias living in abject poverty. Some Jews came to the land to die and get buried there. By 1850, only 14,000 Jews resided in the Land of Israel, constituting only 4% of the population.

The most striking new phenomenon of Jewish life was the 19th-century Jewish secular movements of the 'Ingathering of exiles' (*Kibbutz Galuyot*) the return of

Jews to Zion. Anti-Jewish pogroms in the Russian Empire prompted the formation, beginning in 1881, of a variety of organizations commonly known as '*Hovevei Zion*' (Likers of Zion) to embark on the First Aliyah wave of 1882 to 1903.

The Zionist movement was preceded by the *Haskala* – enlightenment - during which Hebrew became the language of writers and Hebrew schools appeared all over the Russian 'Pale of Settlement.'

The First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland in 1897, gave birth to Political Zionism and prompted the Second Aliyah wave that ended on the eve of WWI, 1914. During this period approximately 35,000 Jews immigrated into Ottoman-ruled *Eretz Yisrael*, and the number of Jews reached 90,000 (12% of the population) where roughly 13,000 of these new immigrants lived in Jewish agricultural settlements.

As the Ottomans entered WWI on the side of the Central European Powers, approximately half the Jews in *Eretz Yisrael* were now considered to be citizens of enemy regimes, Russia, Britain, and France and many of them were either deported or fled to British occupied Egypt.

***Preparation of bran soaked in arsenic to fight the locust, 1915***



Jamal Pasha, one of the triumvirate of governors who controlled the Ottoman Empire (and its navy minister) was commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> Army, ruler of the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, *Eretz Yisrael*, Jordan, and the Hijaz), and one of the architects of the Armenian genocide. He outlawed Zionism and ordered a mass deportation of all inhabitants from Tel Aviv and Jaffa. Some 1,500 of the deported Jews perished mostly of hunger and disease due to the expulsion. German diplomatic and military officers assigned to the Ottoman army intervened and

helped foil his plans of additional forced evacuations. It was thanks to the strident intervention of Germany that the danger of annihilation faced by the shattered and desperate *Yishuv* was avoided.

To make matters worse, a locust epidemic hit the crops of the *Yishuv*, causing widespread famine. Upon hearing the plight of the *Yishuv*, then U.S. Ambassador to Turkey, Henry Morgenthau, Sr. contacted New York banker Jacob Schiff. Schiff, in turn, founded the Joint Distribution Committee (**JDC**), also known as the **Joint**, the first Jewish American group to provide international relief which is still operating today. JDC distributed funds to save the *Yishuv* from starvation.

During those war years, calamity struck the *Yishuv*. More *Eretz Yisrael* Jews died during The Great War than subsequently died in all the wars of the State of Israel combined. In four years beginning at the start of World War I, the community shrank from 90,000 to approximately 50,000. Half the Jews who died were residents of Jerusalem – a third of the city's Jewish population.

Revisionist Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky and Joseph Trumpeldor both Russian expatriates convinced the British Army to form a military unit of Russian Jewish émigrés from *Eretz Yisrael* that would join the fight against the Ottoman Empire. A volunteer transport unit the **Zion Mule Corps** (*Gedud nahagi HaPridot*) was established and deployed from Alexandria to the ill-fated Gallipoli peninsula campaign in May 1915.

Jabotinsky left for London where he formed a 5000-member Jewish Legion - (*Ha-Gedudim ha-Ivri'im*, 1917–1921) - an unofficial name used to refer to five infantry battalions of Jewish

volunteers assigned to the 38th to 42nd British Army Royal Fusiliers regiments, to fight the Ottoman Empire. Each battalion comprised of soldiers from different countries: Britain, *Eretz Yisrael*, North America.

The Legion saw action in Jordan and participated in the Battle of *Megiddo* in northern Israel 100 years ago, September 1918, that ended 400 years of Ottoman Rule.

Though most members of the Jewish regiments were discharged immediately after the war, some, including David Ben-Gurion settled in Palestine to realize their Zionist aspirations. In late 1919, the Legion was reduced to one battalion renamed First Judaeans and awarded a distinctive cap badge, a menorah with the Hebrew word *Kadima* (forward) at the base.

Many of the discharged Jewish Legionnaires went on to join one of the three Jewish undergrounds operating in British Mandate Palestine that fought the Arabs and later on the British occupation itself. Those undergrounds formed the Israel Defense Force (IDF) core combat units after Israel gained independence in May of 1948.

Meanwhile on the eastern side of the 'mighty' Jordan River a 4000-strong Bedouin army led by the Hashemite crown prince pushed the Ottomans out of Hejaz in the Arabian Peninsula, moving north through the Red Sea port city of Aqaba, to Amman, finally taking over Damascus, 1 October 1918, giving birth to the Arab National movement dream of establishing an Arab Sunni Islamic caliphate spanning Arabia, Jordan, Syria, and Mesopotamia.

A few months earlier on 11 December 1917 General Edmund Allenby commander of the British Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) had dismounted his horse and entered on foot through Jerusalem Old City Jaffa Gate. Thus delivering "a Christmas present" to the soldiers stuck in the trenches of the Western Front, by having a Christian flag fly over Jerusalem once again after nine centuries.

In Israel today apart from some physical structures, the legacy the Ottoman left is of corrupt, cruel, and incompetent administration. During the war deportations, draconian taxation and abuse of Jews in the country were carried out under the same doctrine of punishment and repression that the Ottoman regime imposed throughout its disintegrating empire. Coercive enlistment, expropriation of food and property, mass deportations and starvation were used to threaten the *Yishuv* existence.

These heavy-handed methods were imposed by the empire on national minorities suspected of disloyalty, and included massacres of Christian Assyrians and Greek communities; the Armenian genocide was, indeed, carried out in the same way.

The word *Bakshish*, paying off the Ottoman administrators (without which nothing could be accomplished) became synonym with bribe,





and The Israeli 'Office of Land Management and Deeds' is unofficially to this day referred to by its Ottoman-era name 'Taabou.'

After numerous delays, the high-speed railway to Jerusalem has finally opened on September 2018. Construction began 2003, it takes the high-speed train to reach Tel-Aviv in just half an hour, and only a short 20-minute rail ride from the international airport to the capital. It used to be an hour and 40 minutes slow ride.

It is somewhat embarrassing to admit that the Ottomans constructed the Jaffa- Jerusalem railway, which was an engineering challenge and an enormous logistical undertaking, in just about three years.

The line was inaugurated in 1892.

The crown jewel of the Ottomans was the Hejaz Railway, between Damascus, and Medina, completed in only eight years in 1900–08, apparently to transport Muslim pilgrims to the holy cities of Meccan and Medina, but in fact also to strengthen Ottoman control over its distant provinces.

The main rail line traversed 820 miles and had a major branch line, 100 miles long, from Dar'ā, Jordan to the port city of Haifa on the Mediterranean coast which was completed in 1905.

Today Israel Railways has a line from Haifa to the Jordan Valley which runs along the same tracks as the Ottoman rail to Jordan, and will be extended to the Lake of Galilee in the future.

By the 1930s passengers could travel from the English Channel to Cairo. From Haifa and Damascus to Medina. Now the tracks that joined continents lie in wreckage.

### ***The first Jaffa–Jerusalem train arriving in Jerusalem. 1892***

The train left Haifa daily at 0830, steamed south to the Mediterranean port of Gaza by lunchtime, turned west into Sinai and arrived in the Egyptian capital by 22:30. "Direct and quickest route to Damascus, Beyrout, Baalbek and Aleppo," read



a Palestine Railways brochure advertising the connections from Haifa.... "From Jaffa station you could commute across the Arab world."