

Publishing Jerusalem's Ottoman Municipal Archives (1892–1917):

A Turning Point for the City's Historiography

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This article intends to provide a description of the archives of the Ottoman municipality of Jerusalem (1892–1917) and point to some of the main benefits that can be derived from this little known source for the historiography of Jerusalem. The archives of the Ottoman municipality are part of the Historical Archives of the Jerusalem Municipality, kept in the municipality building at Safra Square in the Musrara neighborhood.

The municipal council (*majlis baladiyya*, *meclis-i belediye*) of Jerusalem came into existence in the beginning of the 1860s.¹ Jerusalem was in fact one of the very first cities within the Ottoman Empire to form a municipality, which was further consolidated after the Ottoman law on municipalities in 1877.² From the 1880s onward, the municipal council was composed of nine to twelve members elected for a renewable mandate of four years: there were generally six Muslims, two Christians, and one or two Jews on the council (depending on the period), in addition to a maximum of four *ex officio* members. These were drawn from the city's professional ranks, and including such trades as engineer, doctor, and veterinarian, as well as the head of police. The Ottoman government chose the council president from among the elected members.³

The municipality thus differed in its composition from the administrative council (*majlis idarat al-liwa'*, *meclis-i idare-i liva*), which was mostly constituted of *ex officio* members and counted only four elected members.⁴ The governor (*mutasarrif*) was one of the *ex officio* members of the administrative council, which supervised all government activities in the district and was the “most

important decision-making body” on that level.⁵

The archives of the Ottoman municipality of Jerusalem offer a unique perspective into the urban development of Jerusalem and the workings of the administration in the last decades of Ottoman rule. Founded in the spirit of the centralizing reforms known as the Tanzimat, the municipality applied measures decided on the imperial level, but also responded to local needs and demands in a continuous tension between autonomy and dependence. The municipal archives thus provide a great wealth of information about social, economic, cultural, and political life during that crucial period of the city’s history and offer many glimpses of daily life issues in late Ottoman Jerusalem.

Aside from a few notable exceptions, these archives have not received much attention from historians. These include: Yasemin Avci’s work on the transformation of Jerusalem between 1890 and 1914, published in Turkish in 2004;⁶ a brief study by the Jordanian historian Mahmud al-Shunayq, published in Arabic in 2010;⁷ and a long article by Vincent Lemire and Yasemin Avci, published in French in 2005.⁸ For a long time, the only English-language article available about the Jerusalem municipality was Ruth Kark’s essay published in 1980.⁹ Recently, Johann Büssow published an important article re-situating this Ottoman municipal institution within the overall framework of urban government in the district of Jerusalem but, as he wrote, he himself “was unable to access the minutes of Jerusalem’s Municipal Council.”¹⁰

A Historiographic Turning Point

In the last few years, numerous historians have become adamant about the necessity of developing and deepening our understanding of the history of Jerusalem during the late Ottoman period. The hope is to avail ourselves of a “trivialized” history of the city, a history of the endogenous social and political dynamics of an urban system, that is not necessarily magnetized or oriented toward today’s great geopolitical and religious conflicts alone. In 1998, Michael Dumper pointed out that “the widest hole in the literature on Jerusalem is on how it is governed.”¹¹ Writing of the post-1967 period, Dumper’s observation was just as applicable to the centuries preceding Israel’s occupation. In just over ten years, however, research has evolved and things have changed.

In her book *From Empire to Empire*, Abigail Jacobson insists on the necessity of an alternative historiography of the Holy City that would reveal Jerusalem as “a mixed city in a process of change,” while at the same time emphasizing the difficulty of accessing local administrative sources.¹² Roberto Mazza, citing Issam Nassar, makes the same assessment when he gives an account of the existing bibliography: “These narratives are in constant competition, as they connect the city with those groups who share the same history, thereby *de facto* isolating the history of different communities from the overall history of the city.”¹³ To illustrate this major flaw in the historiography of Jerusalem, Mazza points out the problem of accessing local points of view: “How can one write a history of Jerusalem without Jerusalemites, whether they are Orthodox monks, local

businessmen or members of the Ottoman administration?”¹⁴

In order to put the urban and material facets of Jerusalem’s history front and center and to make a first attempt at a connected history of Jerusalem, the minutes of city council meetings from the late Ottoman period (1892–1917) are invaluable. They provide a fascinating glimpse into the inner workings of this mixed institution which ran the city’s day-to-day business. The 2005 publication in Berlin of an article offered an initial summary of the very first results of analyzing these sources,¹⁵ which subsequent publications on the history of Palestine or Jerusalem during the Ottoman era largely echoed.¹⁶ They emphasized how the utilization of these municipal archives might be a catalyst for a more nuanced view of a city traditionally presented as deadlocked, fragmented, and conflict-ridden.

The present article is linked with a new program making use of these documents. We are currently completing an exhaustive program to decipher, transcribe, translate into English, and publish these archives. Slated for completion in 2015, this program is part of a wider project entitled “Opening Jerusalem’s archives, for a connected history of ‘citadinité’ in the Holy City (1840–1940).” This five-year project was launched in 2014 and is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) and directed by Vincent Lemire (Université Paris-Est). With this ERC project, we aim to connect these municipal documents with the Ottoman administrative archives in Istanbul and with other archives in Jerusalem in order to evaluate how much autonomy existed for municipal action, between imperial dictates and local constraints.

Material and Paleographic Description

In terms of their material aspect, the archives of the Ottoman municipality of Jerusalem consist of a set of A4 format notebooks which are kept in one cardboard box in the municipal building. They are generally in a good state of preservation; very few pages are damaged. The only period for which these notebooks seem to have been preserved extends from 1892 until 1917, though there are a few gaps even within that fifteen-year period. Each notebook generally covers the period of one year, and the notebooks vary in size from a dozen pages to more than fifty pages. Concretely, we are dealing with seventeen volumes, more than 1,200 pages, 3,420 municipal decisions, for a total amount of 16,568 lines of handwritten text, of which forty-five percent are in Arabic and fifty-five percent in Ottoman. The script is generally difficult to decipher, since these notes were for the internal use of the council only. They were apparently not sent to Istanbul, but representatives of the imperial government, in particular officers from the Ministry of the Interior or the Ministry of Finance, occasionally inspected them. In the *Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi* in Istanbul there are many documents about the inspection of municipalities in order to assure their compliance with the rules of the Provincial Municipal Law of 1877. In the framework of those inspections, the municipal minutes were the most important documents and could constitute a piece of evidence in case of an official investigation.

Municipal Council decision number 7 of the year 1910 C.E. (1326 by the Ottoman Rumi calendar), concerning public bids for provisioning the army.

Municipal Council decision number 30 of the year 1910 C.E. (1326 by the Ottoman Rumi calendar), concerning the nomination of municipal inspectors.

Municipal Council decision numbers 31 and 32 of the year 1910 C.E. (1326 by the Ottoman Rumi calendar), concerning public bids for provisioning the municipal hospital (*al-mustashfa al-baladi*) with meat (decision 31) and the public sale of tax farming rights (decision 32).

In the notebooks, we find what are essentially the city council's minutes jotted down by the council's secretary. The minutes report the council's activities and decisions; there is also a large roster of building permits. These minutes vary in length, some consisting of two or three lines, whereas others cover three or four pages. The average

text, however, is between five and ten lines long. The texts open with a few words setting the framework, such as “It has been decided by the council,” or “According to the order (or information) received from the Ministry (or District).” Each text ends with the date on which it was written followed by the signatures of the council members. Very few are unsigned.

In linguistic terms, it is interesting to note the mixture of Arabic and Ottoman, with some terms stemming from nineteenth-century Palestinian dialect. The Arabic grammar is at times so faulty that it is possible to assume that some Arabic notes were written by non-native speakers. It is also relevant to mention that some Arabic minutes were preceded by a very brief Ottoman summary, and vice versa, which might mean that not all council members and employees of the municipality mastered both languages. It is not easy to interpret this alternation between Arabic and Ottoman text in a systematic fashion. We can, however, point out that it reveals the interweaving of an endogenous and an exogenous administration within the larger framework of an imperial administration which brought together local officials and officials coming from other parts of the empire and sent to Jerusalem by the central government. It is also possible to suppose – and this is not contradictory – that the elements written in Arabic were meant for internal use of the council, whereas the elements written in Ottoman were intended to be sent on to imperial administrative bodies. In any case, the linguistic complexity of these documents is an excellent lesson on the administrative complexity of the empire.¹⁷

Thematic Description

The issues dealt with in the municipal minutes provide a bottom-up perspective on Jerusalem’s development during this crucial period. Most items are standardized short texts indicating routine administrative procedures such as announcements of store lease agreements, public bids for civil administration and army needs (*munaqasa*), public sales of tax-farming rights according to the *iltizam* system (*muzayada*), and nominations of municipal staff. The municipality owned a large number of stores and several hotels in the city, which it rented out, generally on a yearly basis. Income-generating activities thus occupy an important place in the municipal minutes and the budget was obviously controlled tightly.

The vital role of income-generating activities notwithstanding, the minutes of the municipal council show that the breadth of issues it dealt with was vast: there are minutes concerning public works and infrastructure (including lighting, street repair, water, etc.), the regulation of bread prices, warnings about counterfeit money, organization of vaccinations campaigns, and the construction of hospitals.¹⁸ Furthermore, the Jerusalem municipality clearly dealt with issues outside of the city limits. There are numerous items about public services and tax-farming in other Palestinian cities. In terms of public bids for the army, there are many items pertaining to cities located in today’s Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.

When it comes to the actors involved, we can assert that Muslims, Christians, and

Jews of different origins appear on all levels of municipal life – on the council, in the administrations, in public service positions, and as beneficiaries of public service. We find many members of notable Jerusalem families (*'ayan*) on all levels of the municipal staff, not only at the top levels. But there are also many council members and high-ranking municipal officers who are neither Muslim nor members of those families.

As for the functioning of this administration, the minutes show that the municipal council reacted to needs voiced by citizens as well as to impulses given by the imperial administration. The council was in direct contact with the administrative council in Jerusalem and with various imperial ministries and directorates in Istanbul. It spearheaded important infrastructure projects in and around Jerusalem, such as the building of roads and the railway and the modernization of the water supply system.¹⁹ It was very active in the area of food safety, hygiene, and public health issues (including slaughter practices, food preservation, and vaccination campaigns). It applied the rules of urban planning and enforced them. It also appealed to legal bodies in case of conflicts.

Taking the municipal minutes as a starting point gives rise to questions that can probably be answered by consulting other primary sources, such as the *shari'a* court records (*sijillat mahkama shar'iyya*), the Ottoman yearbooks (*salname*), the local press, the Ottoman Imperial Archives, the archives of the various Christian patriarchates and convents in Jerusalem, the *waqf* archives, the archives of the chamber of commerce, consular archives, and private diaries.²⁰ For example, in order to assess the efficiency of the municipal council's activities, it is necessary to consult the petitions (*shakaya*, *şikaya*) concerning the municipality filed on the imperial level.²¹ Similarly, local press articles may show how Jerusalem's citizens reacted to the initiatives of the municipality. On another level, the archives of different ministries and directorates in Istanbul may provide more details about the way the municipality mediated imperial impulses, in particular with regards to the Tanzimat reforms, and how it represented local needs on the imperial level. The archives of the municipal council are thus an excellent starting point for a connected bottom-up history of late Ottoman Jerusalem seen within its Ottoman imperial context.

Linking the Local with the Imperial

In order to understand the functioning of the Jerusalem municipality, its role in local government, urban politics, and the significance for the city's inhabitants, it is indispensable to consult the documents of the central bureaucracy, which today are housed in the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi in Istanbul. There are many reasons why these documents are crucial, but the most important one is the new governmental structure constituted in the Tanzimat period.

Generally speaking, the Tanzimat reforms may be evaluated as a process of change and reorganization designed to establish a centralized administrative structure. The Tanzimat reforms created a form of a pyramid structure, extending between Istanbul (the center of Ottoman bureaucracy) and the provinces and *sanjaks*. This hierarchy required a chain

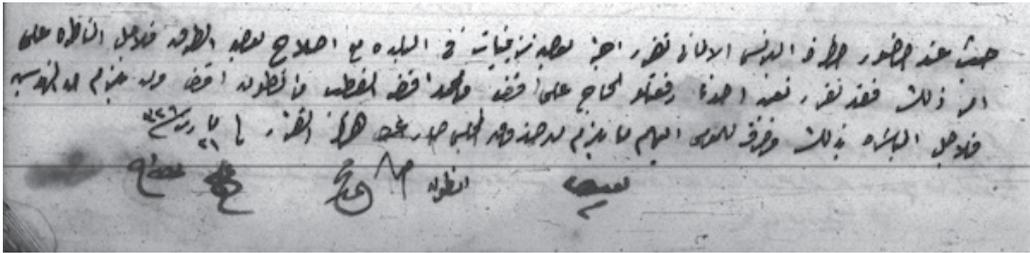
of decision-making and advisory councils at every level of government. The Ottoman municipality represents one of the links of this chain. In other words, the municipal council, standing at the bottom of this pyramid, was not established as an independent governing body with the primary objective to give the city's inhabitants an important say in local government, but as a means of connecting the municipal administration to the imperial center. Whatever the intentions behind the Tanzimat reforms, however, it is important to distinguish between the initial political intent and the actual application on the ground. In the Ottoman Empire as elsewhere, municipal authorities could at times nuance, circumvent, and even subvert this intention in their desire to assert different degrees of autonomy vis-à-vis of the imperial power structure.

It is true that the Jerusalem municipality functioned under the control of governmental authorities representing the central power at the local level. Indeed, from the beginning, the municipal council was theoretically subordinate to the Jerusalem governor (*mutasarrif*) and the administrative council. The fact that the mayor was elected by a limited electoral base and appointed to his position by the *mutasarrif* confirms that the central power wanted to involve itself and control the local authorities as much as possible. Nonetheless, there was some leeway, which could at times be widened, depending on the power relations that prevailed at different moments.

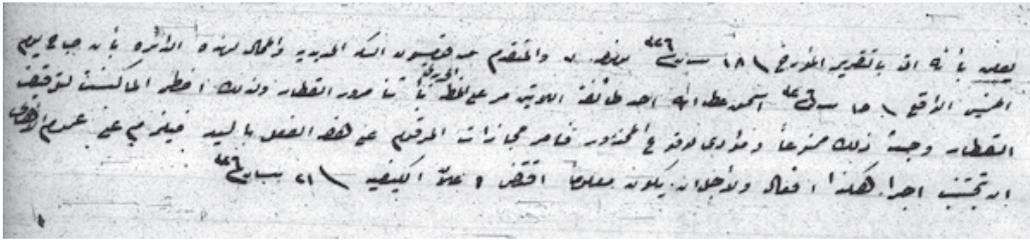
As we can see in the municipal council's minutes, the Jerusalem municipality had to act in concert with the *mutasarrif* and the other governmental bodies functioning in the province. In practice, provincial authorities and the administrative council had the task of supervising the activities of the municipality. Its budget had to be approved by the administrative council. The administrative council also kept a close eye on the way an approved budget was actually handled. Thus, theoretically, little was supposed to be undertaken without informing them and almost every resolution of the municipality required the approval of the administrative council or the governor. Moreover, in some cases, especially for projects requiring great expense, such as water supply, lighting, and electricity, the approval of the central government was also necessary.²² This is true until 1910, when the central government gave authority to the municipal council to carry out such projects.

In summary, it is difficult to affirm definitely that the municipal council was either dependent or independent within the wider imperial administration. It may be more useful to picture the relationship between the municipal council and the imperial power structures – on the local and on the central level – as a vacillating dynamic between moments of subordination and instances of autonomy. In any case, the interactions between the municipal council and the various levels of the imperial administration were constant, on the local level with the *mutasarrif* in Jerusalem as well as on the central level in Istanbul.

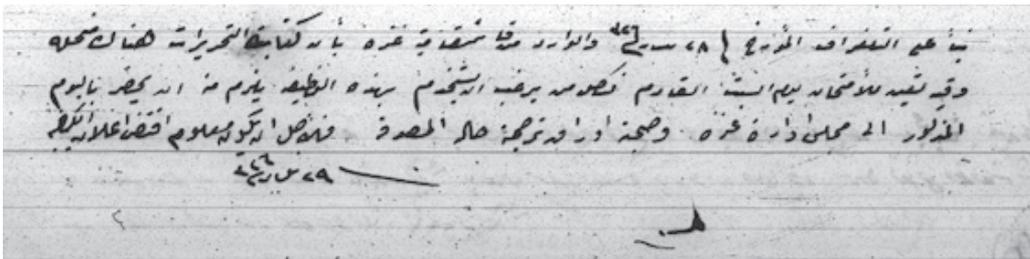
If the municipal council had to reach a decision crucial to Jerusalem's inhabitants, it discussed the matter and forwarded it to the administrative council or the *mutasarrif*. If it was a major issue that also exceeded the authority of *mutasarrif*, the issue went to the related bureau of central government, usually the Ministry of Interior or the Ministry of Public Works. Meanwhile, it is also worth noting that the *mutasarrif* of Jerusalem was



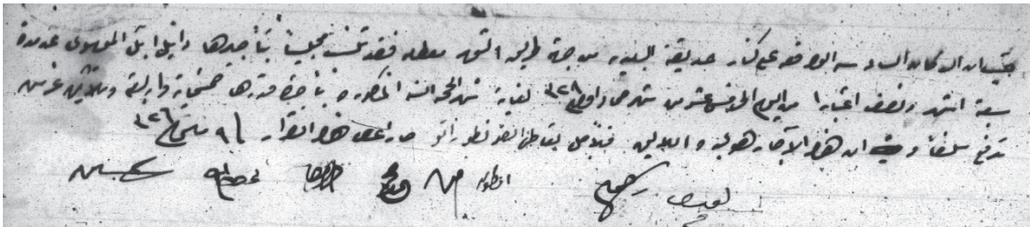
Municipal Council decision number 53 of the year 1910 C.E. (1326 by the Ottoman Rumi calendar), concerning street repairs in preparation for the visit of a German prince.



Municipal Council decision number 86 of the year 1910 C.E. (1326 by the Ottoman Rumi calendar), concerning the prevention of train accidents in the wake of an accident involving one Ishaq 'Atallah.



Municipal Council decision number 104 of the year 1910 C.E. (1326 by the Ottoman Rumi calendar), concerning the nomination of municipal inspectors.



Municipal Council decision number 120 of the year 1910 C.E. (1326 by the Ottoman Rumi calendar), concerning the upcoming examination in Gaza required of those seeking employment as scribes.

in a unique position because of the special status of the city and the related geopolitical issues. Nonetheless, at the end of Ottoman period, several *mutasarrifs* of Jerusalem proved themselves to be key players on the ground, whose roles were often stressed by foreign observers.²³

It is important to stress that while dealing with the municipal minutes, we have come across some gaps that blur the overall picture of municipal government. The most useful way to bridge the gaps may be to consult the documents produced by the

central bureaucracy. For instance, the minutes do not include information on municipal elections, the complete list of the members of the municipal council, and the full name of the mayors. These are crucial elements for establishing a solid framework to understand municipal government and urban politics. Last but not least, the Tanzimat period was an age of codification; in the minutes of the Jerusalem council we can see many references to new legal regulations such as the Building and Roads Code (*Ebniye Nizamnamesi*), the Vaccination Code (*Aşı Nizamnamesi*), the Property Expropriation Regulation (*İstimlak-ı Emlak Nizamnamesi*), and others. Thus the minutes reveal the relationship between imperial legal norms and the local realities.

Considering these matters together with the strict control intended by the central government, it is clear that the central archives become pivotal for an in-depth analysis of municipal affairs in Jerusalem. This is the reason that the ERC research project, which has emanated from our research on the municipal archives, will prioritize the cross-referencing of local sources (Jerusalem) and imperial sources (Istanbul).

Conclusion

The municipal archives of late Ottoman Jerusalem reveal aspects and features of the city's history which have so far been neglected, in particular its "ordinary" urbanity which makes the Holy City comparable to other Ottoman cities of this period. Furthermore, these archives are one of the rare bodies of municipal archives preserved from this period. As far as we know, comparable archives are only available for the cities of Nablus, Bursa, and Salonica. In this way, the municipal archives of Jerusalem add a significant element to our understanding of urban government in the Ottoman Empire during the late Tanzimat period in general.

With regard to the history of Jerusalem, it is clear that these documents are indispensable for historians working on the period ranging from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, which was a decisive period for later developments in the city. Henceforth, it is impossible to ignore them or treat them as of secondary importance. Our upcoming publication on the history of the Ottoman municipality of Jerusalem, conceived as a service to the scholarly community, will hopefully allow the city's historiography to make a decisive qualitative leap forward.

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Endnotes

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- 2 George Young, “Municipalités provinciales,” in *Corps de Droit Ottoman*, vol. 1 (Paris: n.p., 1905), 69–84.
- 3 Johann Büssow, *Hamidian Palestine: Politics and Society in the District of Jerusalem, 1872–1908* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 72–73.
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- 10 Johann Büssow, “Ottoman Reform and Urban Government in the District of Jerusalem, 1867–1917,” in *Urban Governance Under the Ottomans: Between Cosmopolitanism and Conflict*, ed. Nora Lafi and Ulricke Freitag (London: Routledge, 2014), 132 note 5.
- 11 Michael Dumper, “Jerusalem under Israeli Rule,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 27, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 97.
- 12 Abigail Jacobson, *From Empire to Empire: Jerusalem between Ottoman and British Rule* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 2.
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- 16 Gudrun Krämer, *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Catherine Nicault, *Une histoire de Jérusalem, 1850–1967* (Paris: CNRS, 2008); Pierre-Yves Saunier and Shane Ewen, eds., *Another Global City: Historical Explorations into the Transnational Municipal Moment, 1850–2000* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Mazza, *Jerusalem*.
- 17 Johann Strauss, “Diglossie dans le domaine ottoman. Évolution et péripéties d’une situation linguistique,” *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée* 75–76 (1995): 221–255.
- 18 This has also been pointed out by Mahmoud Yazbak for the Ottoman municipality of Nablus: Mahmoud Yazbak, “The Municipality of a Muslim Town: Nablus 1864–1914,” *Archiv Orientalni: Journal of African and Asian Studies* 67 (1999): 339–360.
- 19 Vincent Lemire, *La soif de Jérusalem: essai d'hydrohistoire (1840–1948)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2010).
- 20 The interconnection of these different pools of documentation is precisely the scope of our ongoing ERC project “Opening Jerusalem’s archives, for a connected history of ‘citadinité’ in the Holy City (1840–1940).” For more details, see openjlem.hypotheses.org.
- 21 Nora Lafi, “Petitions and Accommodating Urban Change in the Ottoman Empire,” in *Istanbul as Seen from a Distance: Centre and Provinces in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Elizabeth Özdalga, M. Sait Özervarli, and Feryal Tansug (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute, 2011), 73–82.
- 22 Lemire, *La soif de Jérusalem*, 291–353.
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