

Marginal Diplomacy: Alexander Knesevich and the Consular Agency in Gaza, 1905–1914

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Reading the history of the Ottoman Empire through the eyes of foreign consuls is a common practice among political historians. The accessibility, coherence, comprehensiveness, and, maybe most importantly, the language in which they are written make consular correspondence and reports extremely fruitful and frequently enjoyable sources for exploring Ottoman history. However, it has become a truism by now that in order to extract a truthful portrayal of the political, economic, and social realities on the ground from these sources, they better be taken by historians with more than a grain of salt.¹ When it comes to the Ottoman history of Palestine, in which Western religious and political aspirations tend to marginalize local narratives and views, this critique is even more appropriate.

With the advent of digitized archives and collections over the last decade, newly available sources allow historians to counterbalance and at times challenge traditional European perspectives on Ottoman political affairs. Newly discovered Ottoman archival documents, *shari'a* court records, and contemporary print journalism not only supply researchers with new data, but also demand a shift in the methods and approaches historians use to consult this data. As social and cultural histories gradually inherit the prominence enjoyed by political history, historians of the Ottoman Empire are exploring new meanings of concepts and institutions oft discussed, such as the consular court system, the capitulations regime, and even the *millet* system. Looked upon from the bottom up, through the eyes of the empire's inhabitants rather than through outsiders' eyes, historians are situating Ottoman affairs in a fresh and insightful context.

This is not to say that consular materials can be simply replaced or overruled in light of the variety of new sources accessible. On the contrary, now more than ever researchers are required to evaluate these sources candidly and synthesize them carefully with other existing materials in order to overcome their inherent biases. Such contextualization of consular documentation may suggest understanding consular activity as taking place not only within the sphere of high politics but also, and sometime foremost, within vernacular social settings. This article presents one way of going about this task, by shifting the gaze on consular activity from the center(s) of empire(s), typically characterized by extensive diplomatic bustle, to their fringes.

To this end, we shall delve into the experiences of a British consular representative situated at the overlapping of various marginal zones. First, within the consular hierarchy, our protagonist occupied the lowest diplomatic rank: the office of “consular agent.” While representing Britain and British interests, consular agents were somehow peripheral to the core of the consular service, not being necessarily British subjects or Britain-sent in first place. Consular agents were for the most part natives of their place of office and therefore, contrary to diplomatic representatives of higher echelons, also socially and culturally ingrained there. In 1914, the *Oxford Survey of the British Empire* explained the rationale of this system:

British commerce has found its way into almost every market in the world, and agencies for the protection of our trade and traders have in consequence been established in hundreds of town throughout many countries. In some cases, the importance of the interests involved has justified the appointment of a salaried consul or vice-consul, a British subject, selected by the Foreign Office; but in others, it has been found sufficient to appoint an official, often a foreigner, who receives no salary but a small fee or allowance for office expenses.²

One such “other” case stands in the center of our discussion. This is the town of Gaza in the southwest of Ottoman Palestine – the second margin we will be exploring. The consul-general in Istanbul and the consul in Jerusalem both attained their positions as yet another step in a long diplomatic career. By contrast, the consular agent in Gaza – a town of much lower esteem – Alexander Anton Knesevich, was a Gazan resident appointed ad hoc. As the passage above suggests, moreover, he did not even have to be a British subject to win this position. In the late Ottoman period, Gaza did not fit the consular stereotype of a Levantine port-city where statesmen and entrepreneurs socialized at lavish dinner parties. Nor was it a cultural or religious hub drawing tourists and pilgrims. Gaza was a modest outlet for grains situated in sufficient proximity to the Mediterranean shore, occasionally visited by trading ships. From an Ottoman perspective, Gaza was a peripheral town situated in an area that since the Ottoman re-conquest of Syria in 1840 through the 1882 British occupation of Egypt gradually became the empire’s frontier.

This intersection of geographical and political marginalities makes the British consular agent in Gaza a liminal figure both politically and socially. An avid border crosser,

Knesevich took advantage of his situation where edge and center constantly alternated and conceptual and physical borders collapsed and reemerged. Being both a long-time resident of Gaza and a British official enabled Knesevich to cross the real and imaginary boundaries between Egypt and Palestine, the British and Ottoman empires, the official and the unofficial, and the personal and the political. The hybrid character of the consular agent is an ideal subject for new Ottoman histories seeking both the richness of consular sources and the bottom-up perspective given by cultural and social contexts. The careers of figures like Knesevich demonstrate the entanglement of small-scale social consequences and large-scale political developments. During his short term in Gaza, between 1905 and 1914, Knesevich's personal needs, interests, and social relations tied him wittingly and unwittingly to some of the major controversies occurring at the time.

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In January 1905, Alexander Anton Knesevich was appointed as the first (and, ultimately, the last) British consular agent in Gaza. Beside Jerusalem, where Britain held an official consulate, three other cities in Palestine hosted similar low-ranking representatives at the time: Jaffa and Haifa, due to their economic importance, and Safad, where a large number of Jews enjoyed British protection.³ At the turn of the twentieth century, the British expected Gaza to rise to a status of economic importance similar to Jaffa and Haifa. Interestingly, this anticipated growth in Gaza's economic prominence coincided with its actual decline as an administrative center. In 1899, the Ottomans founded the town of Beersheba and the new eponymous sub-district on the expanse of vast territories formally under the authority of Gaza. This move marked the culmination of a half-century-old effort to sedentarize southern Palestine's nomadic population.⁴ While this process undeniably experienced vicissitudes, one of its stable features was the tribes' gradual shift from an economy based on supplying the annual Hajj caravans to one based on cash crop cultivation. The opening of the Suez Canal and the consequent shift of travel and trade from land to maritime routes pushed the tribes to shift their orientation accordingly. Looking westward, they found in Gaza a hungry market for their harvest. Gazan merchants exported the bedouin's grains to Europe, primarily to the British beer-brewing industry that needed barley, creating modest yet promising economic growth around the town. Concurrently, the Ottoman authorities, who were more concerned with enhancing their surveillance of tribal affairs, subordinated their territories to the authority of Beersheba, which was situated close to the tribes' encampments. The coastal town of Gaza was thus deprived from its former administrative position; yet, while its political status diminished, it became more attractive to merchants and shipping agents.⁵

"Ships," writes historian of diplomacy John Dickie, "in fact were the reasons why consuls came into existence."⁶ The appointment of Knesevich as a consular agent in Gaza was no different. It is difficult, however, to pinpoint the specific time when British ships first called at the coast of Gaza, and when the need for a consular agent first emerged. British "shipping intelligence" reports and Ottoman correspondences between the district of Jerusalem and the interior ministry indicate that maritime trade between Britain and

Gaza was already routine in the 1880s. In 1897, the British consular agent in Jaffa, Haim Amzalek, drew the attention of British consul in Jerusalem John Dickson to the fact that a growing number of British vessels were loading grains at the coast of Gaza. Also an agent for the insurance firm Lloyd's, Amzalek learned about the hardships that British merchants experienced in Gaza in dealing with local Ottoman authorities. He recommended, therefore, appointing a consular representative in the town.⁷ Amzalek even suggested that his son Joseph would take the job by traveling occasionally between Jaffa and Gaza, but Dickson preferred to find a more qualified candidate.⁸ In 1899, Amzalek presented his recommendation once again, and the following year the British shipping agent in Jaffa, Michel Berouti, further emphasized the need for a consul in Gaza, arguing that the grain trade in town, which comprised £120,000 annually, required that "the British flag shall have a better future" there.⁹ The Foreign Office was reluctant, however, to appoint a salaried official in politically negligible Gaza.¹⁰ Dickson thus sought a figure to take the lower position of consular agent. Unlike salaried diplomats, consular agents performed their duties voluntarily, for no official material gain. It was necessary for that reason to find a candidate that was not only acquainted with the local aspects of maritime trade, but also financially independent.

Alexander Knesevich was precisely this sort of person. Dickson first encountered him in Gaza in 1902. By then, Knesevich had worked for two decades as a dispenser for the British Church Missionary Society hospital in Gaza, and had recently started working as an agent for Lloyd's in town.¹¹ Oral traditions circulated among decedents of the Knesevich family suggest that Alexander first arrived in Gaza after his father, an Austrian medical doctor named Andrea Knesevich. Andrea moved there in order to work in the town's quarantine. Previously, the family had resided in Tripoli, Lebanon, where Andrea married Jday Zalzal, and in Beirut. Alexander and several of his siblings were probably born in Lebanon. This biographical background satisfied the British criteria for the consular agent post. Alexander knew both Arabic and Turkish, and was acquainted with several European languages; he resided in Gaza and had experience in the local maritime trade; and though he was not a British national, he was not ethnically Arab or Turkish either. Knesevich was an Austrian subject filling a British position situated in the Ottoman Empire – an ideal intersection to perform the intermediary role required from consular agents.

Although nominated for the post in 1902, the British Foreign Office only approved Knesevich's appointment at the end of 1904. The decisive factor here was probably a series of incidents wherein British subjects – members of the Jewish Arwas family – were involved in violent disputes, which required sending British delegates all the way from Jerusalem to Gaza.¹² The Arwas family, also newcomers to Gaza from the 1880s, was drawn to the town by the developing grain trade and most likely knew Knesevich before his official nomination. The British consulate in Jerusalem officially appointed him as consular agent in January 1905.¹³ The Ottoman foreign ministry responded by revoking the appointment, arguing that the British had not presented Knesevich to the Ottoman authorities in advance as a required. Following a re-filing of the procedural process, the Ottoman government finally approved Knesevich a month later.¹⁴

Although appointed to facilitate economic relations, Knesvich's first major task was political in nature. As we have seen, Knesvich's nomination was prompted by wide transformations across southern Palestine area: Ottoman initiatives to penetrate deeper into the desert, the arrival of steamships in the Mediterranean, and the opening of the Suez Canal. These developments influenced more remote desert areas as well. In 1905, the Ottomans began to establish a port in the town of Aqaba. Traditionally a junction connecting several ground routes, in the age of steam the Ottomans conceived of Aqaba as the meeting point of a steamship line traveling through the Red Sea with a future branch of the Hijaz Railway. By 1904, the Hijaz Railway, starting at Damascus, had reached the town of Ma'an in southern Transjordan, only some 70 miles from Aqaba. For the British, that meant a direct threat to the Suez Canal. Not only would Aqaba become a convenient outpost for gathering military troops for a possible onslaught on the canal, but the linkage between rail and sea in Aqaba could potentially compete against the monopoly of the canal over maritime circulation.¹⁵

This Ottoman challenge to British interests in the region was especially disturbing because there was no recognized border between British-ruled Egypt and Ottoman-ruled Palestine. For the Ottomans, the border ran along an imaginary line connecting al-Arish and Suez. This line left the lion's share of the Sinai Peninsula under Ottoman authority and allowed an Ottoman approach to the Suez Canal. This demarcation relied on the 1892 sultanic decree (*ferman*) crowning the Khedive of Egypt Abbas Hilmi, which in turn reiterated the inheritance decree given to Mehmet Ali Pasha in 1841. By contrast, the British recognized a borderline further east, connecting Rafah to the Gulf of Aqaba and making virtually all of Sinai Egyptian territory.¹⁶ They based this border on Lord Cromer's notes on the 1892 decree. Between 1892 and 1905, Egypt stationed guard posts in Sinai, ostensibly to protect the dwindling Hajj routes, while administratively Sinai remained Ottoman territory.¹⁷ Both sides, it seems, desired to avoid formalizing this issue to spare an overt dispute over an agreed-upon borderline.

Nevertheless, the 1899 Ottoman establishment of Beersheba made their ambitions in southern Palestine ever more apparent. The British in Egypt reacted by stationing more Egyptian troops in the area between Rafah and al-Arish.¹⁸ In 1902, British officers relocated two granite pillars that stood under a Sidra tree on a small mound named Khirbat Rafah, twenty-four miles east of al-Arish, and declared them the "official" northern marker of the Egyptian-Ottoman border (see figure 1).¹⁹ As this act did not directly interfere with their aspirations in Sinai, the Ottomans preferred to turn a blind eye to these unilateral measures. In January 1906, however, what started in the northern tip of the border spread to its southern end. In response to the Ottoman plans for Aqaba, Lord Cromer sent troops to erect military barracks along the Aqaba–Gaza road, the borderline alleged by the British. The Egyptian troops encountered an Ottoman force near Aqaba that prevented them from accomplishing their mission and ultimately banished them from the "Ottoman territory." During the following month, Ottoman troops seized the town of Taba, occupied nearby Umm Rashrash, and reinforced Aqaba militarily in order to prevent further incursions by Egyptian troops. In February, the Ottomans and the British entered a fierce diplomatic dispute. The British demanded that a border be fixed, but the



Figure 1. Ancient boundary line at Rafah, between Egypt and Palestine. G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Ottomans refused.²⁰ In March, with diplomatic negotiations in a deadlock, the front line moved northward again. Exactly one year into his tenure, Knezevich found himself in the front row, watching as Ottoman-British tensions culminated in what would be later be termed the 1906 Aqaba Crisis.

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Most accounts of the Aqaba Crisis pay little attention to the events happening between the clashes of January 1906 and their conclusion, the British ultimatum of 3 May that same year. However, as the rival empires exchanged telegrams and dispatched solemn officials between Cairo and Istanbul, events on the ground continued to shape this dispute's development. In March 1906, Knezevich could have sensed the tension growing around Gaza. Mid-month, rumors emerged from Rafah of an Egyptian-British aggression that occurred in the area of Gaza. Concerned by these rumors' potential effect in such a sensitive time, the Foreign Office sent Consul Dickson to the Ottoman governor in Jerusalem to inquire about them. The alarming case turned out to be a local tribal controversy that happened to erupt on the disputed borderline.²¹ Located in Gaza, only a few hours' walk from the border, Knezevich had access to more complete details. He reported to Consul

Dickson that the rumors had begun after an Ottoman official responsible of the sultanic personal lands (*memuru'l arazi*) around Gaza approached a tribal territory near Rafah escorted by armed soldiers and demanded that the local dwellers vacate what he claimed to be the private lands of the Ottoman sultan. The locals responded by notifying the official of the presence of a "British gentleman" in one of the nearby tents. Upon seeing him "in his own eyes," the official and his soldiers hastily departed for Gaza, where they declared that a British attack was on its way.²²

Negligible as this story was for the British consul in Jerusalem, Knesevich's point of view from Gaza helps understand how the Ottomans escalated the border dispute. The Ottoman Empire never accepted Rafah as the northern point of the border, insisting instead on al-Arish further west. The event described by Knesevich thus heralded an Ottoman effort to push the border westward, perhaps in order to change the facts on the ground, which might favorably shape a future settlement of the dispute. The Ottomans took decisive action in this direction the following month, sending troops to literally abrogate the border by pulling down the granite columns in Khirbat Rafah, smashing them to pieces, and uprooting the Sidra tree. "Now both columns and the tree have disappeared altogether, no trace of them could be found," Knesevich wrote in his 30 April report. This was no mere symbolic gesture. Knesevich added that the number of Ottoman soldiers between Khan Yunis and Rafah had increased from sixty-four to 102, and that another two hundred soldiers were yet to arrive from Jaffa.²³

This show of force buttressed the subsequent Ottoman offer of a borderline running from al-Arish to Ras Muhammad, which the British rejected.²⁴ On 2 May, Knesevich reported the arrival of another eighty soldiers and that "Turks substituted eleven of their own telegraph posts for eleven Egyptian ones, which they have removed."²⁵ A day later, the British halted these Ottoman preparations for potential ground operations. Lord Cromer gave the Sublime Porte a ten-day ultimatum to accept the British dictates or risk war in the Aegean Sea. During these ten uneasy days, Knesevich continued reporting the accumulation of Ottoman forces near the border and the stir of Ottoman officials in Gaza.²⁶ Yet on 16 May, the Ottoman sultan agreed to the British terms, virtually ending this volatile quarrel.

While forming a border agreement with the Ottomans, the British Foreign Office acknowledged Knesevich's contribution of a better understanding of the reality on the border. In a letter to Knesevich, Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey expressed "much satisfaction" with the consular agent's zeal and the intelligence he dispatched, "furnishing the embassy with early and accurate information during the recent Turco-Egyptian frontier question."²⁷ Recalling the *Oxford Survey of the British Empire's* definition of the consular service mission, Knesevich indeed fulfilled the role described there as "the eyes and ears of the state."²⁸ The *Oxford Survey* adequately encapsulates the significance of Knesevich's position in a "previously insignificant port or town [that] becomes the center-point of an international difference."²⁹ This depiction touches upon the exact reason why Grey cherished Knesevich's prompt reports. When a peripheral place like Gaza became overnight an axis in a political quarrel, such peripheral figures were invaluable in supplying accurate information about current developments.

Grey was probably also particularly thankful for another piece of information that Knesevich supplied. On 8 May, after the British presented their ultimatum but before the Ottomans replied, Knesevich experienced the more personal side of life on the fringes of the empire. In these alarming circumstances, Gaza's notables invited him to a secret meeting on the seashore, about three miles from town. "They said that they are very displeased with the dealing of the Turks, and the cup of their injustice is pouring over, and the burden is heavier than can be borne," Knesevich later wrote to Consul Dickson in Jerusalem. He informed Dickson that the Gazans suggested petitioning the British consulate in Jerusalem for protection. "They pray day and night that the Egyptian boundary may be again, to Ashdod as it originally was," Knesevich wrote. "If that is impossible, they are willing to go down to Egypt after disposing of all their property . . . those 'effendis' speak not only for themselves, but also for their people in town and the fellaheen and the Bedouins."³⁰

Was this secret address to Knesevich a candid request for British annexation of southern Palestine's coastal plains to Egypt, or a maybe a canny method of preparing the ground in case such an event was already being planned? The lack of external sources does not let us probe deeper than what Knesevich recorded. It is not clear either to what "original" boundary in Ashdod (the village of Isdud, about 22 miles north of Gaza) the Gazan notables were referring. Were they thinking of the rule of Ibrahim Pasha in the 1830s or maybe of the ancient Egyptians? Either way, however, this case highlights the special character of frontier towns like Gaza where inhabitants share a collective memory of shifting political pertinence and geographical flexibility. As their town abruptly turned from a frontier to a front, Gazans foresaw the prospect of a sharp reorientation (or re-orientation) of their political future. They knew that for a short while, Gaza stood at the center of imperial affairs rather than at the margin. In order for these events to ultimately turn in their favor, they had to make use of another liminal actor, Knesevich. They considered him an influential British official, but also a friend next door, a fellow merchant, with whom they could share their concerns, probably in their own language. The high-ranking British Foreign Office officials benefitted the most from these overlapping margins. The Gazans' statement against the Ottoman government, originating from the Egyptian–Ottoman fault line, enabled the Foreign Office to begin considering and assembling potential advantages for the next border struggle.³¹

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Knesevich's attendance at this future-oriented Gazan convention speaks to his established relations with the local Muslim elite. Yet this group was not the only one that tried to profit from his standpoint on the border between identities and geographies. Knesevich's nomination as a British official in Gaza coincided with ongoing Zionist efforts to lay down roots in the area. These efforts started in 1903, when a delegation representing the Zionist Congress arrived at Egypt to examine a proposal brought up few years prior for the establishment of a Jewish settlement near al-Arish. Although mostly arid land, in a Zionist framing this area seemed to enjoy multiple advantages. First, it was under de facto

Egyptian-British authority, presumably more compatible than the Ottomans with Zionist aims. Second, the Zionist delegation believed it to be peripheral, scarcely populated, and therefore not prone to potential land disputes. Third, they considered it to be within the boundaries of biblical Israel. The land's overlapping marginality of being situated between Palestine and Sinai thus constituted part of its allure for Zionist aspirations.³²

This 1903 visit ended with a British obstruction of Zionist ambitions. However, less than two years later, the newly appointed consular agent in Gaza, Knesevich, revived this hope. Together with two Gazan Jews also well ingrained in local politics, Knesevich addressed a group of Zionists in Jaffa with a suggestion to broker a land purchase with local tribal leaders in the area east of Rafah.³³ One of Knesevich's Jewish Gazan partners was the British national Musa Arwas, a son of the same family that required British protection in Gaza and eventually prompted Knesevich's appointment. It is probable that Arwas and Knesevich not only knew one another prior to Knesevich's nomination, but also recognized in advance the shared interest in supporting Zionist aspirations in the area. In his new capacity as a British consular agent, Knesevich turned especially useful for Zionist aims in the British-ruled land. A second delegation began surveying the proposed settlement area precisely as the Aqaba Crisis erupted in early 1906, and thus quickly abandoned the idea.

A year after the resolution of the Ottoman-British dispute, however, another group, this time of Jewish British subjects, pursued the settlement. The Jaffa-based "Anglo-Palestine Jews Club" sought to purchase land around Gaza to form a settlement of Anglo-Jews. The club saw no impediments to their initiative: they were British nationals, with a consular representative in town and a British-ruled state across a newly established border. Knesevich supported the project. "Your desire of forming a sort of colony of British Jews at Gaza or about the place is quite in place and time," he wrote to the club in June 1907:

and it is the thing that Gaza needs to develop its trade and commerce. I heartily invite you to take courage and be strengthened and begin at once. I promise you any help I can afford, and as the colonialists will mostly be British subjects I will have the right to protect them. I promise to cooperate for the establishing and the good of your proposed colony. Only I wish you could begin at once to execute your intentions.³⁴

The sense of urgency in Knesevich's words was justified, given the hardships he anticipated in obtaining Ottoman approval for the deal. Indeed, the following year, negotiations with the local authorities reached a stalemate, and Knesevich suggested shifting gears once again to the other side of the border.³⁵

This time, the process went well, due to a general British acquiescence. However, realization of the purchase was hindered this time at the buyers' end. Since 1907, several different Zionist companies, serving different Jewish diasporic communities, joined and left the project.³⁶ Finally, in 1910, approaching the deal's materialization more closely than before, Knesevich and his Jewish partners in Gaza signed a sales contract with six different Zionist representatives. In the meantime, however, British authorities in

Egypt reassessed the meaning of approving a Zionist settlement in Sinai. British Zionist newspapers publicized the approaching deal, describing it as a continuation of the efforts that started in the Zionist Congress back in 1903. Later reiterated in the *Times*, these reports put British authorities in Egypt in an inconvenient position, as if brazenly promoting the Zionist cause on Ottoman land. Almost concurrently, in 1911, Gazan notables petitioned Istanbul and complained of, among other things, local authorities' compliance with Zionist plans in the region.³⁷ Apparently, Knesevich was simultaneously striking deals for Zionist land purchases in the areas of Gaza and al-Arish, symbolically abrogating the Palestine-Egyptian border he had helped set a few years back.³⁸

Anxious not to worsen their relations with the Ottomans (who continued to formally own the lands in Sinai) and with the Muslim population of Egypt and Palestine, the British decided to withhold the deal. Knesevich had already borrowed vast amounts of money in order to buy the bedouin lands and tried to convince whoever he could that he had brokered the deal with assurances from the British governor of Sinai that Britain would not reject the project, but to no avail. Later, the British also determined that some of the lands Knesevich purchased from local tribal leaders were in fact unsaleable government land.³⁹ Despite Knesevich's intense efforts to bypass this determination, in 1913, Lord Kitchener insisted that the deal would not go through. Instead, he was willing to compensate Knesevich for his losses.⁴⁰

In this new context, Knesevich's enthusiasm to assist the Zionists while causing British embarrassment looked quite odd. Some Jewish publications mistakenly even assumed that he was a Jew or a convert.⁴¹ Yet when asked about his motives, Knesevich plainly explained that as an unpaid consular agent he was obliged to take care of his own livelihood.⁴² Brokering sales agreements for wealthy potential consumers was simply one way of doing so. Land sales formed an important source of supplementary income for Knesevich when the Gaza barley trade proved insufficient. Knesevich's balancing between the barley trade and land brokering was not officially part of, but most defiantly relied on, his capacity as a consular agent.

All of these activities complemented one another in the following manner. One of Knesevich's basic duties as consular agent was to submit an annual economic report to the British consul in Jerusalem (see figure 2). Collecting the data and preparing these reports while simultaneously participating personally in this economic system, Knesevich could sense what others overlooked. It is apparent from his reports that while the British perceived Gaza as an emerging economic hub, its actual growth rested on shaky foundations. Knesevich warned in his reports that while Gaza's trade relations seemed prosperous, a few arid winters in this drought-prone area would devastate the city's economy. Hence, while continuing to act as a shipping agent, he also constantly pursued alternative sources of income, many of which relied on the credibility he gained among buyers and sellers as a consular official.⁴³ In 1910, when Knesevich signed the fat contract with the Zionist representatives, the need for this source of income was especially grave. That year, Gaza suffered an overwhelming drought that almost completely destroyed its barely trade.⁴⁴ Losing the Zionist contract in 1913 was thus a serious blow to Knesevich. Luckily enough, for his last year in office, the barley trade fairly recovered. This materialistic reading of

Knesevich's work in Gaza does not suggest that we should rule out the prospect that he might indeed have sympathized with the Zionist efforts to establish themselves around Gaza. However, it does suggest that such sympathies, just like his consular activity at large, should not be considered in isolation from the way he understood his surrounding economic and social conditions. Most obviously, he could not foresee the political weight that would be attributed to such stances in hindsight.

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The ordeal Knesevich experienced as the First World War erupted epitomized the course of his career as a consular agent. The war caught Knesevich yet again between two worlds: as British consular representative, he was associated with the rival Entente powers, yet as a private person, he remained an Austrian national – that is, an Ottoman ally. This dual position brought trouble. Soon after the Ottomans entered the war in October 1914, the Ottoman army captured Knesevich and brought him to Damascus for interrogation, intending to send him onward to Istanbul. After a short while in detention, the Ottoman interior ministry received a request from their allies in the Austrian consulate in Istanbul to treat their aging subject respectfully.

The Ottomans released Knesevich and allowed him to travel around the city, but required him to appear when summoned.⁴⁵ It seems, however, that he did not stay in Damascus long. By the summer of 1915, he had begun sending letters to his son Emil from Egypt, where he had found asylum.⁴⁶ Having been interrogated earlier that year by the Ottomans, Knesevich should have known better. Ottoman intelligence promptly intercepted his letters and immediately arrested his son Emil in Gaza. They brought Emil before a military court and sentenced him to the gallows for espionage. Here again, however, external intervention – this time by the American consul in Istanbul – saved a life. His sentence was first converted to penal servitude and later cancelled altogether by no less than the minister of war himself, Enver Pasha.⁴⁷

While Knesevich father and son were no longer in their town, it gradually became battlefield. In March 1917, a clash between the British and the Ottomans neared, and the latter ordered a rapid evacuation of Gaza's entire populace. The frightened inhabitants were forced to abandon their homes, leaving their belongings and property behind to

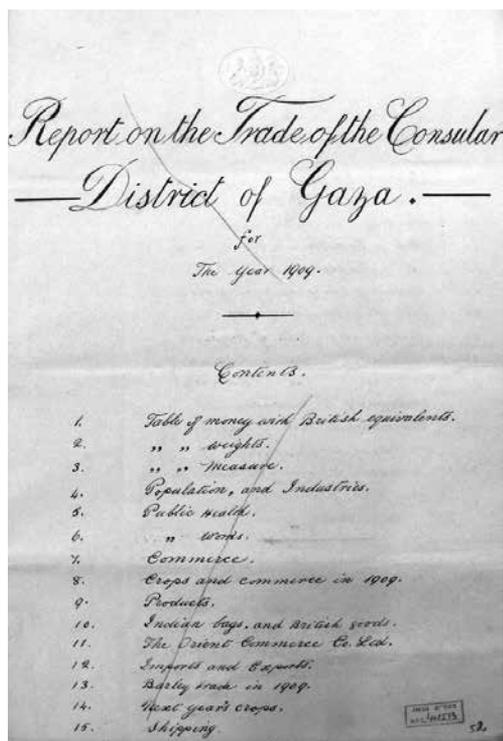


Figure 2. Front page of Knesevich's 1909 economic report, from the National Library of Israel Archives, ARC 4-1513.

be vandalized during many months of skirmishes. Upon the British conquest of Gaza in November 1917, an Australian officer found an intriguing object while roaming the desolated town: a book containing English-language documents. The officer took the precious finding with him as the Palestine campaign went on and eventually left it with a British woman in Jerusalem. He never came to reclaim this war booty and for unknown reasons the woman kept it for two and a half decades in her possession. Within this period, she relocated to San Francisco, where in 1941 she found the local British consul and passed the crumbling book on to him. The consul, in turn, sent the book to the British Public Record Office (today the UK National Archives), where its content was inspected and determined: it was the only vestige from what was probably the Gaza consular agency archive.⁴⁸ It contained registration certificates describing briefly the whereabouts of British subjects residing in or visiting the border town. Ironically enough, as Knesevich was never a British national, his name does not appear even once in the only surviving remnant from his consular agency.⁴⁹ In such instances, where it looks as though history conspires to marginalize places, figure, and events, what is left for the historian if not to explore and celebrate them?

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Endnotes

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- 10 John Dickson to the Marquess of Salisbury, 7 February 1899, TNA FO 78/5008.
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- 12 John Dickson to Walter Townley, 16 December 1904, TNA FO 195/2175.
- 13 Consul Dickson to the Foreign Office, 16 January 1905, in Eliav, *Britain and the Holy Land*, 290.
- 14 Grand Vizier to the Foreign Office, 6 February 6 1905, İ.HR.395.14.2, Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA).
- 15 John Burman, “British Strategic Interests versus Ottoman Sovereign Rights: New Perspectives on the Aqaba Crisis, 1906,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 37, no. 2 (2009): 280; Yuval Ben-Bassat and Yossi Ben-Artzi, “The Collision of Empires as Seen from Istanbul: The Border of British-Controlled Egypt and Ottoman Palestine as Reflected in Ottoman Maps,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 50 (October 2015): 26–27.

- 16 Gideon Biger, *The Boundaries of Modern Palestine, 1840–1947* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 25.
- 17 Biger, *Boundaries*, 29.
- 18 Biger, *Boundaries*, 31.
- 19 Biger, *Boundaries*, 33. The site was unofficially known since the days of Khedive Isma‘il as the approximate borderline. The khedive visited Sinai in one of his journeys in order to inspect the boundaries of the Egyptian territory. Upon finding the columns in Khirbat Rafah, he asked to erect them and to engrave the details of his visit there. See: Consular Agent Knesevich to Consul Dickson, 30 April 1906, TNA FO 371/63.
- 20 Burman, 280–281.
- 21 Consul Dickson to Sir N. O’Connor, April 6, 1906, TNA FO 371/63.
- 22 Consular Agent Knesevich to Consul Dickson, 30 April 1906, TNA FO 371/63.
- 23 Consular Agent Knesevich to Consul Dickson, 30 April 1906, TNA FO 371/63; Sir N. O’Connor to Sir E. Grey, 1 May 1906, TNA FO 371/61.
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- 27 Sir E. Grey to Anton Alexander Knesevich, 18 June 1906, TNA FO 369/44.
- 28 Barrington-Ward, “Foreign Office,” 75.
- 29 Barrington-Ward, “Foreign Office,” 76–77.
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- 40 Eliav, *Britain and the Holy Land*, 158–59.
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