

Jerusalem under the British Mandate Confessionalisation and Division¹

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Abstract

The British Mandate of Palestine brought about major political, social and spatial changes in Jerusalem. The municipal council was slowly stripped of its power, particularly in urban planning, in favour of confessional representatives and British “experts”. At the same time, the organic growth of the city was stemmed, and what was once a fluid space was progressively divided through urban planning schemes into a sacred Old City oriented towards the past and a modern New City looking towards the future.

In his first public address in Jerusalem at the moment of the city's occupation by the British army in December 1917, General Edmund Allenby emphasised the need to uphold the status quo in the religious sphere and in the holy places. Conspicuously absent in his speech was any reference to the civic institutions of the city, notably, the municipality, which had already been in existence for half a century by then.

This reduction of Jerusalem to its religious character and disregard for the municipality had important repercussions for the nature of urban governance and the character of the city.

Jerusalem under the Ottomans

Jerusalem was one of the first cities in the Ottoman empire to establish a municipal council in the 1860s, following the promulgation in 1867 of the first Ottoman law calling for the creation of such councils. From the 1880s onwards, the city's municipal council was composed of nine to twelve members elected (through censitary male suffrage) for four-year renewable terms. The council members had to be Ottoman citizens. Muslims made up the vast majority on the council, which also always included Christian and Jewish members. The council's president (mayor) was chosen by the imperial government from among the elected members.²

The establishment of the municipality occurred at a turning point in Jerusalem's history, with the second half of the 19th century rife with important administrative, political, demographic and spatial changes. In 1872–3, Jerusalem, which had been under the jurisdiction of the province of Damascus, was brought directly under Istanbul as an autonomous sub-

¹ A version of this article was published earlier in French as “La dé-municipalisation de la gouvernance urbaine et de l'espace politique post-ottoman: le cas de Jérusalem”, in *Le carnets de l'Iipo*, 6 February 2017, and in English as “De-municipalization of Urban Governance: Post-Ottoman Political Space in Jerusalem”, in *Jerusalem Quarterly* 76.

² Johann Büssow, *Hamidian Palestine: Politics and Society in the District of Jerusalem, 1872–1908* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 73.

province (*mutassarifyya*). Thus, during that period, Jerusalem played an “interstitial role” between the imperial centre and the provincial periphery.³

The other important development of this period was the city’s spatial growth had demographic changes. As the population doubled between 1800 and 1870, it spilled out from the Old City into the periphery. By 1914, the population had grown to 70,000 inhabitants, divided equally between the Old City and the emerging city outside it.⁴

With this spillover, by the turn of the century, municipal services such as street lighting, sweeping and garbage collection had progressively been extended beyond the walls of the Old City. The municipality played an important role in the planning and development of the New City, which stretched westwards from Jaffa Gate (*Bâb al-Khalîl*) along Jaffa Street opposite the Old City. The New City was an extension of the commercial artery located inside the Old City, near Jaffa Gate, where the municipality owned many shops. In 1895, the municipal council took office on Jaffa Street. This move was both symbolic and practical: it demonstrated the municipality’s will to accommodate and manage the city’s growth and simultaneously located it at the heart of the city’s new business district.⁵ The municipality also established a municipal hospital and pharmacy and a municipal park nearby, giving the new city centre a civic character. In its approach to urban planning, the municipality thus emphasised the continuity between the Old and the New City, while allowing the new neighbourhoods to differ in form from the old heart of the city.

The British Mandate: Confessionalisation

The charter of the British Mandate affirmed in Articles 2, 6 and 11 the commitment of the British authorities to the creation of a “Jewish home” in Palestine and to facilitating the necessary conditions for Jewish immigration. Article 4 called for the recognition of a “Jewish agency” whose role would be to advise and collaborate with the Mandate administration in all matters related to the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The World Zionist Organisation quickly began to fulfil this role and became accepted as the Jewish Agency. While the British authorities would have liked to see a similar organisation take shape among the Arabs, the executive committee of the Arab Congress of Palestine refused to become the counterpart of the Jewish Agency since doing so would imply its recognition of the Mandate’s charter and the Balfour Declaration.

In 1921, the Mandate authorities established the Supreme Muslim Council, charged with the responsibility of administering all Muslim religious affairs, including religious endowments (*waqf*), funds for orphans, and the religious courts. Unlike the Arab Congress, which had Christian members, this council effectively excluded Christian Arabs.

Having established such communitarian bodies, the Mandate authorities went on to curtail the power of the municipality. The municipality was still tasked with providing public services but was no longer given any role in urban planning or even in collecting taxes.⁶ However, since the provision of services included supplying water, the municipality had significant power, which subjected it to several challenges. In fact, the municipality became a theatre for, and a stake in, the conflict between Palestinian nationalists and the Zionist

³ Jens Hanssen, Thomas Philipp, Stefan Weber, eds, *The Empire in the City: Arab Provincial Capitals in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Würzburg: Ergon in Kommission, 2002), 13.

⁴ Vincent Lemire, *Jérusalem 1900: La ville sainte à l’âge des possibles* (Paris: Armand Collins, 2013), 32.

⁵ Lemire, *Jérusalem 1900*, 162.

⁶ Michael Dumper, *The Politics of Jerusalem since 1967* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 27.

movement. The latter agitated for stronger representation of Jews at all levels of the municipality.⁷

The Municipal Corporations Ordinance of 1934 specified that the municipal council was to be composed of six Arabs and six Jews. The mayor had to be a Muslim, one of the deputy mayors, a Christian, and the other, a Jew. This was said to be according to the breakdown of the population, as established by the Mandate.⁸ In fact, in drawing up electoral districts at that time, the British engaged in gerrymandering, incorporating many new Jewish neighbourhoods within the boundaries of the Jerusalem municipality, while excluding several Arab villages.⁹

The municipality thus became a locus of confessionalisation and was politically marginalised.¹⁰ The municipality's loss of power between the end of the Ottoman era and the Mandate period was both a consequence of this process and a part of a colonial plan to check the political mobilisation of the Arab population.

The British Mandate authorities intervened repeatedly in municipal affairs, starting with the dismissal of Mayor Musa Kazim al-Husseini for participating in an anti-Zionist demonstration during the Nabi Musa festival in 1920.¹¹ In 1937, they exiled Mayor Husayn Fakhri al-Khâlidi for having played an active role in the Arab Revolt that had begun in 1936. By 1945, the conflicts within the municipality had become so paralysing that the British decided to dissolve the municipal council and appoint a municipal commission in its place.¹²

Urban Planning: Dividing the Old and New City

Long before the dissolution of the municipality, British authorities had usurped its roles in urban planning and in the enforcement of building regulations. Initially, in 1918, they set up the Pro-Jerusalem Society (PJS), tasked with preserving the city and its archaeological and historical sites as well as improving public spaces and cultural life. Ostensibly, a non-governmental body — apart from the mayor, the PJS included representatives from the Arab and Jewish communities and from the various Christian denominations — in reality, the PJS represented the interests of the Mandate: Military Governor Ronald Storrs was PJS president and his adviser Charles Ashbee served as its secretary. In 1921, the Town Planning Commission, established under the Palestine Town Planning Ordinance, took over from the PJS, with responsibility for defining the city's boundaries, zoning, and arranging eight new neighbourhoods in the New City.¹³ The commission also acquired the right to review all building permit applications submitted to the municipality¹⁴ and became the sole authority for receiving complaints about urban planning.¹⁵ The composition of the Town Planning Commission, in its first few years of existence, seems to have been fairly similar to that of the PJS: Storrs was its chairman and Ashbee its secretary.¹⁶ As Roberto Mazza

⁷ Vincent Lemire, *La Soif de Jérusalem: Essai d'hydrohistoire (1840–1948)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2010).

⁸ Eugene Bovis, *The Jerusalem Question* (Stanford, California: Hoover Press, 1971), 34.

⁹ Dumper, *The Politics of Jerusalem*, 27–28.

¹⁰ Salim Tamari, "Confessionalism and Public Space in Ottoman and Colonial Jerusalem", in *Cities and Sovereignty: Identity Politics in Urban Spaces*, ed., Diane Emily Davis and Nora Libertun de Duren (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2011), 81.

¹¹ Lemire, *La Soif de Jérusalem*, 485–7.

¹² Roza el-Eini, *Mandated Landscape: British Imperial Rule in Palestine, 1929–1948* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 67–8.

¹³ Charles Ashbee, *Jerusalem, 1920–1922: Being the Records of the Pro-Jerusalem Society* (London: J Murray, 1921), xv, 15–20.

¹⁴ Benjamin Hyman, "British Planners in Palestine, 1918–1936" (PhD dissertation, London School of Economics, 1994), 406–7.

¹⁵ Nicholas E Roberts, "Dividing Jerusalem: British Urban Planning in the Holy City", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 42, no. 4 (2013): 24.

¹⁶ Benjamin Hyman, "British Planners in Palestine", 362–3.

has pointed out, the commission was not a democratically elected institution and was composed of “officials, professionals and local representatives”.¹⁷

When Governor Storrs called for the development of a master plan for Jerusalem in the early 1920s, one of his stated objectives was to preserve the appearance and “atmosphere” of Jerusalem. But in carrying out this objective, Storrs and his planners were oblivious of some of the realities on the ground.

As noted earlier, during the late Ottoman period, the Old and New City were characterised by a spatial continuity, particularly around Jaffa Gate, that corresponded to the demographic, social, and administrative continuity existing between the two parts of the city. On the assumption that religion was the sole source of the Old City’s identity, the British set about stemming the organic growth of the Old City and its spillover outside the walls. Besides designating certain areas in the Old City as closed archaeological sites, preserving the presumed essence of Jerusalem for the British meant the prohibition of major commercial and industrial activity as well as prostitution, bars and cabarets in and around the Old City.¹⁸ To preserve the Old City and its view from the outside, the British established a green belt around the walls. They also rebuilt a section of the city’s walls that had been removed by the municipality in 1898.¹⁹

In short, the British prioritised the city’s historical and religious sites and past traditions rather than its residents and their current needs. Following the same logic of preserving the Old City as an unchanging historical monument, the British undid some of the modern development initiatives undertaken by the Ottomans. One of the most symbolically significant steps in this respect — undertaken despite protests from the municipality — was the demolition of the clock tower on Jaffa Gate, which had been built by the Ottomans in 1907.²⁰



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¹⁷ Roberto Mazza, “‘The Preservation and Safeguarding of the Amenities of the Holy City without Favour or Prejudice to Race or Creed’: The Pro-Jerusalem Society and Ronald Storrs, 1917–1926”, in Angelos Dalachanis and Vincent Lemire (eds), *Ordinary Jerusalem, 1840–1940: Opening New Archives, Revisiting a Global City* (Brill, 2018), 418.

¹⁸ Ronald Storrs, *The Memoirs of Sir Ronald Storrs* (New York: Putnam, 1937), 106, cited in Roberts, “Dividing Jerusalem”, 21.

¹⁹ Roberts, “Dividing Jerusalem”, fn. 23.

²⁰ Tamari, “Confessionalism and Public Space in Ottoman and Colonial Jerusalem”, 65.

²¹ American Colony Photo Dept, photographer. *Jerusalem El-Kouds. Jaffa Gate.* Jerusalem, none. [Between 1898 and 1914] Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mpc2004006752/PP/>.

Ultimately, the British approach to urban planning divided Jerusalem sharply into a predominantly Arab Old City that was religious in orientation and a modern and predominantly Jewish New City. The services offered to the Old City were mainly aimed at preserving its historical and architectural heritage, while those offered to the New City were meant to create a modern city in accordance with European criteria.

Admittedly, an economic and social dichotomy between the Old and New City had already begun emerging under the Ottomans, when the first neighbourhoods outside the walls were built and some of the residents, mainly the wealthy, began to move out, resulting in a more secular and modern city outside the walls and a more religious and less modern city within them. But British planners reinforced this division through their urban planning process.²² And, by doing so, they limited the opportunities for the various communities to come together in a shared urban space.

The British also undertook confessionalisation as a “social and spatial process”.²³ The Old City was now represented as comprising four confessional quarters — Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Armenian — entrenching religion as a marker of identity. This division actually ran contrary to the last Ottoman population census at the beginning of the 20th century (1905),²⁴ which documented the Old City as comprising largely mixed districts and with street names devoid of any confessional connotation.²⁵

Conclusion

The erosion of the municipality’s power, particularly in urban planning, seems to have been a deliberate plan on the part of the British to monopolise control of the city’s space, in both the physical and the political sense. The municipality’s political marginalisation was accompanied by the creation of competing institutions in which representatives from the main religious groups joined the regime of “experts” imposed by the mandatory authorities. The urban management of Jerusalem was thus largely entrusted to “experts” chosen by the mandatory governor and religious leaders in a dual movement of confessionalisation of Jerusalem’s local authority and patrimonialisation of the Old City. The latter enterprise involved recasting Jerusalem as a city sharply divided between a religious Old City, oriented towards the past, and a secular New City, looking towards the future, whereas the early development of the New City had by and large constituted an organic spillover with an important continuity with the old heart of Jerusalem.

About the Author

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²² Roberto Mazza, “The Preservation and Safeguarding”, 415.

²³ Tamari, “Confessionalism and Public Space”, 81.

²⁴ See Michelle Campos, “Placing Jerusalemites in the History of Jerusalem: The Ottoman census (*sicil-i nijus*) as a Historical Source”, in A Dalachanis and V Lemire (eds), *Ordinary Jerusalem 1840–1940* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 15–28.

²⁵ See Adar Arnon, “The Quarters of Jerusalem in the Ottoman Period”, *Middle Eastern Studies* 28, no. 1, January 1992, 1–65.