

The Opening of Consulates in Jerusalem

The Case of Italian Diplomacy

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Abstract

The opening of consulates in Jerusalem from the mid-19th century mirrored the increased European interest in the region. The consuls derived their authority from the capitulatory regime negotiated with the Ottoman empire and enjoyed an extensive range of freedoms. This article discusses the widespread influence enjoyed by some of the consulates and their attempted interference in the social, economic and political life of Jerusalem and Palestine until the outbreak of the Second World War before focusing on the establishment and activities of the Italian consulate.

The establishment of consulates in Jerusalem from the mid-19th century onwards was a response to the increase in foreign economic, social and religious activities in the city and surrounding areas. The British consulate was the first to be established. This was in 1839. It was followed by the German consulate (1842), the consulates of France and the Kingdom of Piedmont and Sardinia (1843), the Austrian consulate (1849) and the Russian consulate (1858). The Americans opened their consulate in 1844 but it became fully functional only in 1856.¹ Other, smaller consulates opened in the early 20th century.

The consuls derived their authority from their respective countries' capitulations with the Ottoman empire, which granted them extraterritorial status: freedom of movement, trade and settlement for the consuls and their protégés. The consuls usually dealt with all aspects of the personal status of the individuals under their protection. Furthermore, consulates were the seats of consular courts, which dealt with all civil and criminal cases involving foreign subjects. Consuls also presided over mixed courts which adjudicated cases involving Ottoman and foreign subjects.² By the outbreak of the First World War, there were six general consulates in Jerusalem whose consuls were directly answerable to the foreign affairs ministries of their respective countries rather than to their ambassadors in Istanbul. There were also a number of regular consulates and consular agents operating in the city.³

Paramount among the European powers which developed interests in Jerusalem from the mid-19th century were Britain, Germany, France and Russia. Britain was looking after its strategic, economic and political interests in the eastern Mediterranean.⁴ Germany was keen to establish itself on the Ottoman scene as an emerging nation. From the 1840s, the Prussian state, and subsequently, Germany, supported the Ottoman empire and favoured the settlement of its citizens, both Jews and Christians, in the region.⁵

¹ M Eliav, "The German and Austrian Consular Archives in Jerusalem as a Source for the History of Palestine and its Population in the Late Ottoman Empire", in *Palestine in the Late Ottoman Empire*, ed D Kushner (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1986), 372–373.

² M Eliav, *Britain in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1997), 15–16.

³ The six consulates were France and Russia (1893), Persia (1901), Greece and Italy (1902), Germany (1914). C Nicault, "Retour à la Jérusalem Ottomane", in *Jérusalem 1850–1948: Des Ottomans aux Anglais*, ed C Nicault (Paris: Ed Autrement, 1999) 89–90.

⁴ AL Tibawi, *British Interests in Palestine, 1800–1901: A Study of Religious and Educational Enterprise* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 29–57.

⁵ M Eliav, "German Interests and the Jewish Community", in *Palestine in the Late Ottoman Empire*, ed D Kushner (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1986), 426–427.

France, through its role as the traditional protector of Catholics in the Holy Land, was looking to maintain its influence in the region and among the local population. Meanwhile, the Russian government continued its protection of the Orthodox Church by trying to weaken the Ottoman empire further after the Crimean War.⁶ At the turn of the 20th century, the United States was not interested in politics or strategic positions, and the American consulate mainly promoted American economic interests and assisted American travellers, pilgrims and scholars.⁷ After the unification of Italy in the 1860s, the Italians expanded their interests in Palestine and Jerusalem in particular, where they competed with the French government for the right to protect Catholics.⁸ Spain, which had opened a consulate in 1854, was another player keen on catering to the different Catholic institutions of the city and competing with France and Italy for the protection of Catholics.

As representatives of their governments, consuls had to deal with both the Ottoman authorities and the local population. Their most important relationship was with the *mutasarrıf* (governor) of Jerusalem. Given the frequent rotation of Ottoman officials, the consuls were always careful and thorough in their assessment of the officials appointed to the governorship of Jerusalem. The main preoccupation of the governor in dealing with the consuls was attempting to circumvent the capitulations through the enforcement of measures restricting the free movement of foreigners or imposing special taxes on foreign businesses.⁹ Usually, the consuls had the upper hand in revising their capitulatory rights. Only on a few occasions did the governors win their legal cases against the consuls.¹⁰ For instance, in 1905, the governor, Reşid Bey, managed to impose a municipal tax on street lighting and sanitation on foreign residents outside the walls notwithstanding great dissent from the consuls.¹¹

Key source of friction

One particular issue which caused friction between the Europeans and the Ottoman empire was Jewish immigration to Palestine, fostered by the former. The Ottomans attempted to counteract Jewish immigration through strict laws prohibiting the movement of Jews and by placing limits on their purchases of land and houses. In October 1913, Istanbul ordered the local Ottoman authorities in Palestine to stop the system of issuing “red papers”, which granted Jews entering Palestine permission to visit for a limited period, as long as they surrendered their passports.¹² Despite instructions from the authorities, Ottoman governors often succumbed to consular pressure and continued issuing red papers.¹³ The consuls were, in general, highly critical of the Ottoman administration and dismissive of the local government, as was reflected in a statement from the Italian consul in 1896: “It is general opinion that the Ottomans will not obtain any efficient result from the reforms [referring mainly to the issuing of red papers] ... the new administrative system will upset the population. The reforms are likely to be delayed.”¹⁴ Although the consuls were critical, ultimately, owing to some degree of genuine respect for Ottoman authority, they generally accepted the final decisions of the Ottoman rulers while often finding it easier to blame local authorities when things turned negative. In 1906, the governor of Jerusalem, Ali Ekrem Bey, wrote to Istanbul complaining that in a country where more than half of the population was

⁶ D Kushner, “The Foreign Relations of the Governors of Jerusalem Toward the End of the Ottoman Period”, in Kushner, *Palestine in the Late Ottoman Empire*, 301–311.

⁷ Kark, *American Consuls in the Holy Land, 1832–1914* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1994), 236.

⁸ S Minerbi, “Italian Economic Penetration in Palestine 1908–1919”, in *Studies on Palestine during the Ottoman Period*, ed M Ma’oz (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 466–482.

⁹ Kushner, “The Foreign Relations of the Governors of Jerusalem”, 312.

¹⁰ Kushner, “The Foreign Relations of the Governors of Jerusalem”, 312–313.

¹¹ See *Ministère des Affaires étrangères* (MAE), Nantes, « *Ambassade Constantinople* », *Série D, Carton 15*.

¹² The National Archives: Public Records Office (TNA: PRO), Kew, UK, FO 195/2452, “William Hough to McGregor, Jaffa, 27 October 1913”.

¹³ See A Hyamson, *The British Consulate in Jerusalem*, Vol 2 (London: E Goldstone, 1941) and in Eliav, *Britain in the Holy Land*.

¹⁴ Kark, *American Consuls in the Holy Land*, 143; Kushner, “The Foreign Relations of the Governors of Jerusalem”, 313; *Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri* (ASDMAE), *Ambasciata d’Italia in Turchia*, Busta 239, “Italian Consul in Jerusalem to the Italian Ambassador in Istanbul, Jerusalem, 26 November 1896”.

foreign, it was impossible to treat foreigners as though they did not exist where matters relating to the local administration were concerned.¹⁵

The consuls also tried to influence relations between the local authorities and the European firms that managed the city's public services.¹⁶ There was great competition among the consulates to win concessions from the Ottoman administration. Early in 1914, for instance, after fierce competition between a number of European companies, a large contract was granted to the French Parisian bank Périer to construct a tramway line, install pipes to bring potable water to the city and expand and electrify street lighting. However, the project was halted by the outbreak of the war.¹⁷ Under this contract, the municipality of Jerusalem would have acquired control of both services and infrastructure only after a period of 10 or 15 years.¹⁸ The municipality was thus trapped in a vicious circle of dependency created by the capitulatory system, which greatly favoured the penetration of foreign capital.

It is difficult to assess the relationship between the consuls and the local population. The consuls often dealt with local entrepreneurs and members of notable families but, occasionally, they also dealt with ordinary citizens. In official correspondence this relationship was rarely discussed. Indeed, some consuls might have chosen to be completely isolated from the local scene, although, being residents of the city, they could not ignore its environmental problems, such as the lack of water or periodic epidemics.

The Italian Consulate

An Italian presence has been visible in Jerusalem for centuries in the form of clergymen and pilgrims. However, echoing the relative unimportance of Italy on the international stage, the size of this community was not matched by its political relevance, which was overshadowed by that of the British and French consulates and communities. In the only work dedicated to Italian diplomacy in Palestine,¹⁹ Lucia Rostagno was right to suggest that, from Italy's perspective, Palestine was far away and not included in the colonial dreams of the new Italian state and certainly not seen as a destination for Italian migrants. At the end of the 19th century, Italian interest in Palestine was mainly devotional.²⁰ Italy had no connection with the local Eastern Catholic churches — a field left to the French. Italian governments saw indigenous Catholics in Palestine as a channel for promoting and defending the Italian character of the Latin Patriarchate and the Custody of the Holy Land (both the Patriarch and the Custos were, in fact, Italian subjects).²¹ But, Italian politicians and diplomats were still far removed from the scene.²²

In 1843, Consul Luigi Lenchantin from the Kingdom of Piedmont and Sardinia was sent to Jerusalem to protect the interests of the kingdom's subjects and to challenge the French protectorate over the Catholics.²³ When his successor left Jerusalem in 1849, the position of consul remained vacant and was filled only a decade after the Italian unification process was completed. The newly created Kingdom of Italy could not afford a wide and sophisticated diplomatic network. However, members of the Italian

¹⁵ Israel State Archives (ISA), RG 83/28, "Ekrem Bey to Istanbul, 15 November 1906",

¹⁶ TNA: PRO, FO 368/1139, "McGregor to Foreign Office, 29 January 1914", 16.

¹⁷ NA: PRO, FO 368/1139/6143, "McGregor to Foreign Office, Jerusalem, 29 January 1914"; V Lemire, "L'Eau, le consul et l'Ingénieur", in *France and the Middle East: Past, Present and Future*, ed M Abitbol (Jerusalem, 2004), 136–137.

¹⁸ Lucia Rostagno, *Terrasanta o Palestina? La Diplomazia Italiana e il Nazionalismo Palestinese (1861–1939)*, (Rome: Bardi, 1996), 12.

¹⁹ TNA: PRO, FO 368/1139/6144, "McGregor to Foreign Office, Jerusalem, 29 January 1914".

²⁰ Lucia Rostagno, *Terrasanta o Palestina? La Diplomazia Italiana e il Nazionalismo Palestinese (1861–1939)*, (Rome: Bardi, 1996), 12.

²¹ It is important to highlight that although Italians were not interested in relocating to Palestine, attention to the Holy Land was voiced through the Vatican's publications.

²² See Andrea Giovannelli, *La Santa Sede e la Palestina: La Custodia di Terra Santa tra la fine dell'impero ottomano e la guerra dei sei giorni* (Rome: Studium, 2000).

²³ Simonetta della Seta, "La Presenza e l'Opera dei Salesiani in Palestina", *Storia Contemporanea* 20, no. 1 (1989): 81–101.

²⁴ ASDMAE, *Consolato Gerusalemme, Pacco 1*, note written in 1897 with a short history of the consuls in Jerusalem. Information on Lenchantin can be found in ed Federico Adamoli, *Cronache Marinare di Giuseppe Alessando Piola Caselli (1843–1883)*, accessed 16 December 2016, www.piolacaselli.altervista.org/cronache-marinare/Cronache%20Marinare%20con%20Indice.pdf.

parliament were convinced of the necessity of opening a consulate in the holy city.²⁴ Eventually, an internal agreement was reached, and Vice-Consul Alessandro de Rege di Donato was elevated to consul in Jerusalem on 15 November 1871. Neither Di Donato nor his seven successors until the outbreak of the First World War had deep knowledge of the region or its languages, religions and peoples. It was only in 1911, with the impending Italian invasion of Libya, that an Italian Orientalist, Leone Caetani, passionately petitioned the Italian parliament and the foreign ministry to support the Oriental Institute in Naples as a place to groom young diplomats to serve in the East.²⁵

A major change occurred with the appointment of Carlo Senni as Italian consul in May 1907. Although not an Orientalist, the young consul was a careful observer, and in his reports gathered increasing amounts of information about the local communities,²⁶ while also offering suggestions on how to engage them. Some of his comments may seem naïve or poorly informed as he did not possess deep knowledge of local politics. However, the fact that he was not involved in any major local dispute or scheme to control one or more groups gives his perspective of local dynamics some degree of objectivity.²⁷ Senni's information about Jerusalem during the First World War was also invaluable to the Italian government because he remained in the city until the spring of 1915, reporting on a variety of subjects.²⁸ With his long tenure in Jerusalem, it is possible to say that he contributed significantly to making the Italian presence in the region more relevant and at the same time brought Jerusalem and Palestine closer to Italy and the Italians.

With the end of the war, Senni returned to Jerusalem for a short time, but the situation had changed completely. Now, the British were in control and the Italian government was involved in the major powers' efforts to redraw the Middle East. But, despite Italy's increased diplomatic efforts in Palestine, it was marginalised by both the British and French, who saw Italy more as a nuisance than a challenge.²⁹ Italian diplomacy, in fact, was unable to react quickly to the changes occurring in Palestine. Between 1919 and 1926, seven different consuls led the Italian consulate. Copies of the reports they sent to Rome show the lack of diplomatic initiative and a generally superficial understanding of events unfolding in Palestine and Jerusalem, including the emerging nationalist struggle between Arabs and Zionists. This diplomatic weakness was a reflection of Italian politics as the fascist regime was in the process of establishing itself. It was only in 1926, with the appointment of Mario Zanotti Bianchi as consul, that Italian diplomatic efforts became more substantial and visible.³⁰

Heightened Italian Activity

The Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's dream of making Italy an empire included extending Italian influence over the Mediterranean. Thus, Jerusalem and Palestine soon became a battleground for Italian efforts to counter British influence in the region.³¹ One of the most interesting Italian consuls whose role has yet to be fully analysed is Orazio Pedrazzi, appointed in February 1927. A journalist rather than diplomat by profession and an expert on Middle Eastern politics, Pedrazzi may have had a direct line to Mussolini. During his short tenure, he emphasised the necessity of working with the Zionists as he believed they were going to dictate the future of Palestine. Although he was an anti-Zionist and an Arabophobe, his main concern was challenging British rule and thus he lost his job rather quickly, as the British pressured Mussolini to remove him. After Pedrazzi left, on the eve of the Wailing Wall riots of

²⁴ Rostagno, *Terrasanta o Palestina*, 22–23.

²⁵ Rostagno, *Terrasanta o Palestina*, 27.

²⁶ Biographic information on Carlo Senni can be found on the historical website of the Italian Parliament, accessed 21 March 2017, notes9.senato.it/web/senregno.nsf/d973a7c868618f05c125711400382868/ea6b98faa6aaa56a4125646f0060866f?OpenDocument

²⁷ ASDMAE, *Consolato Gerusalemme, Paco* 8, "Local and Foreign Religious Communities".

²⁸ ASDMAE, *Consolato Gerusalemme, Paco* 10, various written exchanges in relation to the outbreak of the First World War.

²⁹ Andrea Gabellini, *L'Italia e l'assetto della Palestina (1916–1924)* (Firenze: Società per gli studi sul Medio Oriente, 2000).

³⁰ Rostagno, *Terrasanta o Palestina*, 136.

³¹ Nir Arieli, *Fascist Italy and the Middle East, 1933–40* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

1929, Mussolini changed direction, and his support for the Arab–Palestinian cause became more visible in terms of Italian propaganda and the help lent to local Palestinian elites. But, Italian–Zionist relations did not cease altogether, and it would be interesting to find out the extent and quality of this relationship using the archived documents of the Italian consulate, which have only recently been made publicly available.³²

The man who helped bring some local Arabs to the Italian side was Mariano De Angelis. Appointed consul in 1932, De Angelis served until 1936 and worked publicly and secretly to transform the anti-Italian sentiments among the Arabs into feelings of sympathy. At the same time, De Angelis looked with favour upon the Zionist hardliner Ze’ev Jabotinsky and his colleagues. Although Mussolini never met Jabotinsky, it would be interesting to find out whether he was influenced by De Angelis’s positive views of the Zionist leader.³³ Many works have dealt with the emergence of an alliance between Mussolini and the mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husayni, which clearly compelled Mussolini to adopt different policies in Libya — including halting violence and repression — to show a stronger commitment towards the Arabs and Muslims in order to gain the mufti’s friendship and transform anti-Italian sentiments in Palestine. By 1933, De Angelis had a good relationship with the mufti and the documents now available in Rome may provide more details on the ways in which the shift in sentiments towards the Italians occurred. De Angelis also wrote extensively about the possibility of an agreement between the Arabs and the Zionists and how he hoped that Mussolini would become a peacemaker.³⁴

De Angelis left Jerusalem on the eve of the Arab revolt against the British Mandate, which lasted from 1936 to 1939. He was succeeded by Quinto Mazzolini until the consulate was closed with the outbreak of war between Italy and Britain. Italian support for the Palestinian cause was strong throughout the Arab revolt. However, Italian propaganda played hardly any role in turning the Palestinians against the British.

About the Author

Dr Roberto Mazza holds a PhD from SOAS, University of London and is currently a lecturer at the University of Limerick. His works include two books published by IB Tauris, *Jerusalem from the Ottomans to the British* (2009) and *Jerusalem in World War I: the Palestine Diary of a European Consul* (2011). An editorial board member of the *Jerusalem Quarterly*, Dr Mazza has edited several issues of the journal and also contributed articles to it. He has also edited a special upcoming issue of the journal *Contemporary Levant* dedicated to the centennial of the British Mandate in Palestine. He is currently working on a major project discussing the urban planning of Jerusalem between 1917 and 1926 and a smaller project discussing Italian cultural diplomacy in Palestine from the late Ottoman era to 1948.

³² Arielli, *Fascist Italy*, 20–21

³³ ASDMAE, Ap, Palestina, Busta 13, Roma, 4 November 1935. Jabotinsky’s efforts to meet Mussolini were rebuffed several times. However De Angelis wrote a memo suggesting that it was important to support Zionist revisionism.

³⁴ ASDMAE, Ap, Palestina, Busta 8, “Gerusalemme”, 21 March 1934.