

Bedouin Petitions from Late Ottoman Palestine: Evaluating the Effects of Sedentarization

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Abstract

This article examines petitions sent to Istanbul at the end of the nineteenth century by Bedouin groups from the *kazas* (subdistricts) of Jaffa and Gaza, on Palestine's central and southern coast. The Bedouins' use of the petition process shows that many of them, especially those who had gone through a process of sedentarization, played according to the rules prevailing among the urban and rural populations in their vicinity. Their petitions also demonstrate vividly the extent to which they were involved in city politics and social life. Bedouins confidently put forward claims to landownership based on their own legal interpretation of their rights and, at times, even adopted the dominant discourse on good governance.

Keywords

Late Ottoman Palestine – Bedouins – Bedouin petitions – Petition writers – Subdistrict of Gaza – Subdistrict of Jaffa

Introduction

The term “Bedouin” is a constructed label that can refer to groups that differ considerably from one another. It is used to describe “both a nomadic way of life, and a group identity, which in many cases persists even among Bedouin who reside in urban environments today.”¹ The Bedouin population in late

¹ S.J. Frantzman and R. Kark, “Bedouin Settlement in Late Ottoman and British Mandatory Palestine: Influence on Cultural and Environmental Landscape, 1870-1948.” *New Middle Eastern Studies* 1 (2011): 1.

Ottoman Palestine, the focus of this article, was clearly not a monolithic group, as there were many kinds of Bedouin and differentiations within Bedouin groups. This is reflected, for instance, in the various designations the Bedouin used to identify themselves in petitions they submitted to Istanbul. In some instances they called themselves “tent dwellers” or “those residing in tents,” whereas in others they used the words *‘urban* or *‘aširet*; that is, tribe, and occasionally they defined themselves as “‘Arab,” a word that also signifies a tribe. These descriptions were not legal categories recognized by the Ottomans, as is clear from Ottoman censuses at that time, in which the nomadic populations were ignored and thus not counted. In official correspondence as well, there was no one term used to designate Bedouin, and they were called by various epithets (such as “tent dwellers” and “tribe”).

Frantzman and Kark wrote as concerns the sedentarization process of the Bedouin in late Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine that, “[w]e know, unfortunately, very little about what the Bedouin themselves thought about the changes going on around them in the Ottoman period.”² While this statement is correct in general, given that the Bedouin population did not have a developed literary tradition—as opposed to its oral traditions—there are still some ways to trace the literary evidence left by Bedouin. One of the most promising sources, which has so far not been commonly used by historians, is the petitions submitted by the Bedouin population to the central Ottoman authorities in Istanbul. This paper presents nine case studies of petitions submitted to the central Ottoman authorities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Bedouin, both sedentary and nomad, in the region of Jaffa and Gaza, on Palestine’s central and southern coast.

Most of the approaches to Istanbul by Bedouin from these regions, as shown by evidence preserved in the Ottoman archives, were submitted by sedentary Bedouin, whose petitioning patterns resembled those of the regular settled rural population. Sedentary groups of Bedouin were more prominent in the subdistrict (*kaza*) of Jaffa, although they did not, at that stage, have title to the land on which they resided.³ Only rarely do we come across petitions submitted by nomadic Bedouin. The latter were much more prominent in the subdistrict of Gaza, especially before the establishment of the subdistrict of Beersheba in 1900 and its separation from Gaza, which greatly reduced the number of nomadic Bedouin in the *kaza* of Gaza.

The Bedouin petitions show that the distinction and categorization often made in the literature between Bedouin, peasants, and the urban population

² Ibid.: 11.

³ Ibid.: 11, 12, 17, 20, 21.

needs to be reconsidered. This point is also supported by the themes raised in these petitions, such as Bedouin-peasant relations, land ownership, and relations between Bedouin and the central government. With regard to the latter point, the Bedouin petitions submitted to Istanbul should be assessed in light of Ottoman official policy vis-à-vis the Bedouin, and the frequent claims concerning mutual distrust between the two sides, which are challenged, to a certain extent, by the petitions.

1 Characteristics of the Bedouin Petitions

Two main groups occupied Palestine's rural regions at the end of the nineteenth century: peasants and Bedouin. These two groups, especially the latter, had a limited tradition of writing and documenting their activities. This makes it much more difficult to document and study their aspirations, whereabouts, concerns, and actions from first-hand accounts than is the case for more educated urban populations, which had closer contact with centers of government and left a variety of written evidence. Not surprisingly, peasants and Bedouin are often considered to be on the sidelines of events and secondary players in a game whose rules were dictated from the outside or above, particularly in an area such as Palestine, with its turbulent history in the modern era.

Research in the last few decades has shown that the rural sedentary population and the Bedouin were intertwined in dynamic relationships of both cooperation and conflict. The fact that splinter groups within the Bedouin population gradually went through a process of sedentarization blurred the line of demarcation with the sedentary population, to the extent that it is not always easy to identify who was a Bedouin at the time and what exactly was Bedouin about certain populations, other than their self-identification as Bedouin.

I have located a few dozen petitions submitted by Bedouin or concerning Bedouin activity, for the most part sedentary, from the *kazas* of Jaffa and Gaza during this period. Petitions by Bedouin now housed in the Ottoman archives in Istanbul make it possible to offset the shortage of primary sources representing the voices of the various Bedouin populations, who left few written records, and to study Bedouin contacts with the Ottoman authorities and their surroundings on the basis of documents left by the Bedouin themselves.⁴ Most of the Bedouin petitions located so far are not in their original form but are translations from Arabic into Ottoman Turkish made at the Translation Bureau

4 For more details on Bedouin petitions, see Y. Ben-Bassat, *Petitioning the Sultan: Protests and Justice in Late Ottoman Palestine* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013): chap. 5.

of the Foreign Ministry in Istanbul. There are only rare instances in which the original petition in Arabic sent by Bedouin has been preserved. Some of the Bedouin petitions may have been submitted first to the local authorities in the *mutasarrıflık* (district) of Jerusalem and only later to Istanbul, if the petitioners received no redress at the local level. Others, however, were submitted directly to Istanbul, without first seeking action at the local level, with the hope that interference from Istanbul would put pressure on the local authorities.⁵

Given, however, the likelihood that the Bedouin petitions were written by intermediaries and that Bedouin had little ability even to review what was submitted on their behalf, the issue of Bedouin's agency and their ability to negotiate with the Ottoman government needs to be taken into account. Furthermore, the Ottoman government often viewed Bedouin activity negatively and stereotypically, which raises the questions of how petitions by Bedouin were handled at the imperial center and, more fundamentally, why some Bedouin ever decided to approach Istanbul, which they often distrusted.

2 Demography and Characteristics

It is important first to define the population discussed in this article, given its diversity and the lack of precise figures about the numbers of Bedouin. It is estimated that the Bedouin population of Palestine, including the Negev, in the late 1870s consisted of 20,000 to 30,000 mostly sedentary or semi-sedentary Bedouin⁶ out of a population of fewer than half a million people.⁷ Distinguishing between semi-sedentary and nomadic Bedouin is admittedly often too schematic, as the reality on the ground was fluid, but, for the purpose of this article, some generalizations need to be made.⁸

5 For more details on the mechanisms for submitting petitions, see *ibid.*: 42-44, 135-140.

6 Y. Ben-Arieh, "ha-Nōf ha-yishūvī shel Eretz-Yisra'el 'erev ha-hityashvūt ha-Tsiyonit." In *The History of the Jewish Community in Eretz Israel since 1882*, ed. I. Kolatt (Jerusalem: Israeli Academy for Sciences and Humanities, 1989): 1: 77.

7 Using Ottoman censuses, Justin McCarthy concluded that Palestine's total population in the early 1880s was 462, 465. Bedouin, interestingly, were not included in the Ottoman census. See J. McCarthy, *The Population of Palestine: Population History and Statistics of the Late Ottoman Period and the Mandate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). Ben-Arieh cites a figure that is 20% lower than McCarthy's: 370,000-380,000. See Ben-Arieh, *ibid.*

8 The process of Bedouin sedentarization in Palestine during the late Ottoman period and the British Mandate led dozens of Bedouin groups to settle in specific localities, establish various forms of permanent villages, and cease their previous nomadic way of life, which had been based on pastoralism. Interestingly, even Bedouin who continued to roam, such as

The region between Gaza and Jaffa discussed here was home to several small Bedouin groups who did not, for the most part, possess title deeds to the land where they grazed or resided before the Mandate period. Their economy was based largely on grain farming and grazing.⁹ In the Gaza region, there were several seasonally migrant tent-dwelling Bedouin groups. Once every few years, especially during droughts, Bedouin groups from the desert moved north in search of pasturage for their herds, in so doing damaging the crops of the sedentary villages on their way, a problem the Ottoman authorities strove to eliminate.¹⁰

Nonetheless, the frequent claim that Bedouin were a major cause of the depopulation of large areas in the plains and valleys of Palestine before the nineteenth century is considered today by most historians and historical geographers as only a partial explanation;¹¹ the unsuitability of certain lands for traditional pre-modern agriculture was a significant factor that must also be taken into account.¹² The fact that one of the most densely populated regions in Palestine was the coastal area in the vicinity of Gaza—which was close

those in southern Palestine, were often engaged in various kinds of seasonal agriculture in specific localities and could thus be termed semi-sedentary. On the Bedouin process of sedentarization, see A. Meir, "Contemporary State Discourse and Historical Pastoral Spatiality: Contradictions in the Land Conflict between the Israeli Bedouin and the State." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32/5 (2009): 828-834.

9 See M. Freiherr von Oppenheim, *Die Beduinen* (Leipzig and Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1939-68, repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1983), 2: 55-64.

10 See, e.g., Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (henceforth BOA). DH. MKT., 1750/62, 26 Zilhicce 1307/13 August 1890 (the Ministry of the Interior asks the District of Jerusalem to explain why fourteen tribal leaders who were arrested in Gaza after clashes between the tribes were released from jail. The request was made following a complaint by the *serasker* [minister of war].)

11 See, e.g., H. Gerber, "A New Look at the Tanzimāt: The Case of the Province of Jerusalem." In *Palestine in the Late Ottoman Period: Political, Social, and Economic Transformation*, ed. D. Kushner (Leiden: Brill, 1986): 31; M. Maoz, *Ottoman Reform in Syria and Palestine, 1840-1861: The Impact of the Tanzimat on Politics and Society* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1968): chap. 9.

12 Y. Qarmon, "ha-Tna'im ha-fisyografiyim shel ha-Sharon ve-hashpa'atam 'al hitpathūtō ha-yishūvīt." *Bulletin of the Israel Exploration Society* 23/3-4 (1959): 118; D. Grossman, *ha-Ukhlūsiyyah ha-'aravīt vaha-ma'ahaz ha-yehūdī: Tifrūset u-tsifūt be-Eretz Yisra'el be-shalhe ha-tkūfah ha-otmānūt uvi-tkūfat ha-mandaṭ ha-brītī* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2004): 160-4; Y. Ben-Arieh, "Hebeṭīm ge'ografiyim be-reshit hitpathūtan shel ha-mōshavōt ha-'ivriyōt be-Eretz Yisra'el." In *The First Aliyah*, ed. M. Eliav (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1981): 1: 88; see also the contribution of Astrid Meier and Tariq Tell to this special theme issue.

to the desert, where considerable Bedouin populations resided, and did not have natural physical boundaries—calls into question the assertion that the Bedouin were responsible for the depopulation of Palestine's lowlands.

Bedouin, moreover, played an important role in the economic and social fabric of society and maintained complex relationships with its various sectors.¹³ They furnished city dwellers with products and services that only they could provide (e.g., transportation of goods, provision of meat and wool, protection on the road), and in return enjoyed services that were available only in the towns and cities.¹⁴ Bedouin were often part of local power alignments and participated in struggles between the villagers or joined coalitions headed by leading urban notables. This was the case, for instance, until the mid-nineteenth century in the mountainous regions of Palestine, where the entire population was divided into two historical coalitions, the Qays and the Yaman, whose origins were obscure and went back hundreds of years, in fact to the period of early Arab conquests. More recently, as will be discussed below, Bedouin aligned themselves with urban coalitions, especially in the region of Gaza, where the town's urban elite was split and in conflict. Bedouin also participated in social gatherings and events such as pilgrimages to local shrines, festivities, and the veneration of sages in their region of residence.¹⁵

3 Voices of the Bedouin Groups

Despite the reform of Ottoman institutions and other changes in the nature of the Ottoman state, the numerous petitions sent to Istanbul from the provinces during the second half of the nineteenth century suggest that the role and importance of petitioning did not diminish, but rather took on new importance and went through a process of revival and transformation due to technological progress as well as more fundamental institutional, bureaucratic, and legal changes. In Palestine, the petitioners, whether urbanites, villagers,

13 See, e.g., D. Ze'evi, *An Ottoman Century: The District of Jerusalem in the 1600s* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996): 87-114; A. Singer, *Palestinian Peasants and Ottoman Officials: Rural Administration around Sixteenth-Century Jerusalem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 114.

14 A. Meier, "Bedouins in the Ottoman Juridical Field: Select Cases from Syrian Court Records, Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries." *Eurasian Studies* 9/1-2 (2011): 193-194.

15 For more on the participation of local Bedouin in the Nabi Rubin celebrations, see T. Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine* (Ariel: n.p., 1927); T. Ashkenazi, *ha-Bedvīm be-Eretz Yisr'ael* (Jerusalem: Ariel, 2000): 296.

or Bedouin, as well as Ottoman officials and even foreign nationals and Jewish settlers, complained about such topics as unjust treatment and abuse of power by government officials and notables, the tax burden, dispossession, allegedly illegal changes in the status of land, misconduct by officials, new measures taken by the government, unjustified punishment of office holders, various moral issues, the conduct of rival individuals or coalitions, and even personal quarrels and business disputes.

Petitions submitted by Bedouin to the Ottoman imperial center reveal that Bedouin, despite their illiteracy, the generally limited resources at their disposal, and their alleged lack of social and political capital, often had considerable recourse to the process of petitioning Istanbul. The Ottoman archives contain a wealth of information about the Bedouin that has received insufficient scholarly attention.¹⁶

Petitions to the ruler can be viewed narrowly as informative solely about the rules of petition writing and the discourse authorized by the state and the rulers at a given time, rather than as reliable historical texts that convey authentic information or narratives.¹⁷ When it comes to illiterate subaltern populations who could not write petitions themselves or even review their contents, the unequal encounter between rulers and ruled embodied in the petition is even more complicated. Researchers such as John Chalcraft, however, adopt a more positive approach, arguing that “although elite languages helped constitute even the nature of the demands lodged by peasants, these languages were simultaneously filled out, colored, and defined by the concrete projects of peasants themselves.”¹⁸

The petitions discussed here were written not by the Bedouin themselves but by professional petition writers (*arzuhalcis*, literally those who write petitions, *arzuhal*s), who sat at the entrances to the Ottoman post and telegraph offices, in the markets, or in cafés and offered their services to the general public in return for a fee. The services they provided were well known to the public, and a wide variety of people paid to have their petitions professionally

16 Occasionally there were rich Bedouin, such as sheikhs who owned mansions in the town of Gaza, but this was the exception. See ‘A. Rāfiq, *Ghazza: Dirāsa ‘umrāniyya wa-ijtimā’iyya wa-iqtisādīyya min khilāl al-wathā’iq al-shar’iyya 1273-1277/1857-1861* (Damascus and Amman: s.n., 1980): 52.

17 N.D. Zemon, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

18 J. Chalcraft, “Engaging the State: Peasants and Petitions in Egypt on the Eve of Colonial Rule.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37/3 (2005): 308.

written. This allowed petitioners to express their claims in terms accepted by the Ottoman bureaucracy within the framework of the petitioning system.

The *arzuhalcis'* services notwithstanding, the Bedouin petitions contain a kernel of "authentic" narrative of events as the Bedouin saw them, which can yield important information and be compared with other sources. Today, we have abundant sources at our disposal from the end of the nineteenth century, such as newspapers, official documents, memoirs, diaries, maps, and pictures, which can help confirm or disprove some of the statements in the petitions and historicize their content. In most cases, the rural Ottoman population was able to submit petitions directly to Istanbul without fear and without hesitating to express their complaints,¹⁹ as long as they adhered to the rules of petitioning that would allow the petition to be considered properly at the imperial center.²⁰

Bedouin petitions were usually signed by the sheikh of the group, whose name and status are mentioned in the petition.²¹ Occasionally members of the group associated themselves with the petition and their names are found alongside the sheikh's name, in addition to their seals, which shows they were probably members of the leadership of the tribal group or relatives of the sheikh rather than ordinary members of the tribal group.²²

4 Petitions by Bedouin in the *kaza* of Jaffa

The petitions from the region of Jaffa that have been examined and that deal with Bedouin—submitted by Bedouin themselves or by others against them—

19 Chalcraft writes that "[p]etition writing against intermediaries was risky. Notables had significant local powers." See Chalcraft, "Engaging the State": 307.

20 Given the asymmetric nature of the relationships between ruler and ruled, the latter had to use specific jargon, flattery, ideal images, and various other motifs in their plea in order for it to be considered at all at the imperial center. See Chalcraft, "Engaging the State": 308-310.

21 See, for instance, BOA. DH. MKT., 1771/129, 1 Rebiyülevvel 1308/15 October 1890 (telegram to the *mutasarrıfluk* of Jerusalem from the Ministry of the Interior concerning a petition by Sheikh İbrahim Suṭrı from the *nahiye* of Ramla).

22 See the four names and seals in BOA. HR. TO., 395/32, 3 Kânunuevvel 1306/15 December 1890. One of the seals belongs to the *muhtar* of the tribal group that resided in Khirbat Dūrān. A *muhtar* was an elected headman of a village or a tribal group, an office that was introduced during the Ottoman reforms and in fact served as the lowest echelon of the Ottoman bureaucracy. The other three seals are smaller and show only the names of the petitioners. At the beginning of the petition, which is written in Arabic, it is stated that it was submitted by the *mukhtār wa-ikhtiyāriyyat 'ashīrat 'urbān Abū Haṭaba*.

concern several small sedentary Bedouin groups who resided in specific localities in this region and made their living from farming and grazing.²³ The issues they raise are related primarily to land, which has to do with the fact that these Bedouin groups resided in specific localities and farmed land that they did not legally own.

4.1 *'Arab Abū l-Faḍl versus Rehovot*

At times, as in the case of the group called 'Arab Abū l-Faḍl (Suṭriyyih)²⁴ located in Khirbat Dūrān, east of the colony of Rehovot, some twenty-five kilometers southeast of Jaffa, the Bedouin leased agricultural land on a yearly basis.²⁵ Even though the Bedouin in this case did not possess title deeds for the land, they were convinced that they had certain rights over this land, which they claimed to have occupied for many years. The Bedouin of Khirbat Dūrān claimed that they had first become tenants on land that they had previously held themselves when it was bought by an Arab absentee landowner from the nearby region. Later, they were asked to leave, when the colonists of Rehovot bought it from this landowner and became its legal owners.

To substantiate their claim, the Bedouin of Khirbat Dūrān state in their petition, which is written in Arabic and was submitted at the end of 1890, that their groups comprised about two hundred people, all loyal Ottoman subjects who had lived in Khirbat Dūrān for many years. They made their living by farming the *khirba*'s²⁶ land and had no other land at their disposal. At a certain point, the

23 Maps of the *Palestine Exploration Fund* (hereafter PEF), maps 13 (region south of Jaffa) and 16 (region north of Gaza) (drawn in the 1870s).

24 For more on this group, see W. Khalidi, *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington, DC: Institute of Palestine Studies, 1992): 356; D. Grossman, *ha-Kfar ha-'aravī u-bnōtāw: Tahalikhūm ba-yishūv ha-'aravī be-Eretz Yisra'el ba-tkūfah ha-'othmānī* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1994): 35; A.I. Abū Hajar, *Mawsū'at al-mudun wa-l-qurā al-filastīniyya* (Amman: Dār Usāma li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī', 2003): 1: 446; see also von Oppenheim, *Die Beduinen*, 2: 63-64.

25 E. Levin-Epstein, *Zikhronotai* (Tel Aviv: ha-Ahim Levin-Epstein, 1932): 240; *Mikhtavim mi-Eretz-Yisrael*, 19 March 1893: 3-4; see also BOA. DH. MKT., 1771/129; 1795/85, 15 Cemaziyülevvel, 1308/27 December 1890 (the Ministry of the Interior to Jerusalem about a petition by the Abū Haṭaba Bedouin group from Khirbat Dūrān); for the petition itself, see HR. TO., 395/32.

26 A *khirba* is an Arabic word generally designating a location that was occupied only seasonally, at times not far away from the main village. A *khirba* might eventually turn into a village on its own. Often it is located on ruins of earlier settlements. For more on this term, see G. Krämer, *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008): 136.

land was sold to absentee landowners who let the Bedouin remain as tenants, in return for payment. As in many other documented cases from this period, the absentee landlord later sold the land to Jewish colonists (*Isrā'īliyyīn*), with the help of a middleman from Jaffa named 'Alī Efendi Haykal, a member of the Administrative Council of the subdistrict of Jaffa.²⁷ The Jewish colonists, the Bedouin claimed, did not let them continue cultivating the land, treated them harshly, and asked them to leave the place where they were settled, even though they argued that they did not have any other place to go. Thus, the Bedouin asked for the sultan's intervention, citing their loyalty to the empire, their dire situation, the fact that they had no other place to go, and their belief that they had rights to the land based on their having occupied it for many years.²⁸

Zionist sources indicate that Rehovot clashed several times with the Bedouin of Khirbat Dūrān during the first years after its establishment. The first dispute between the two sides took place immediately after Rehovot was founded.²⁹ Eliyahu Levin-Epstein, the head of the colony of Rehovot at the time, wrote about this dispute as follows:

We understood that, after we had bought the land, paid its price, and received title deeds from the government, we were the land's sole owners, and no one else had a say [on this matter]. Thus, we did not want the Bedouin—they and their wives, children, and herds—to come and occupy our land. We planted vineyards and were afraid that their herds would destroy them. We asked them to leave the place, but they claimed that they had rented it for two years, had sown it only once [thus far], with summer crops, and therefore had the right to sow it once more with winter grain crops, harvest it, and thresh it, a task that would take the whole summer, and only then would they leave. . . . [Eventually] we compromised with the Bedouin: provided that they removed their tents from our land, they could come and cultivate the land they rented, until they collected the winter crops.³⁰

27 For more on this individual, see Y. Haykal, *Ayyām al-šibā: Šuwar min al-ḥayāh wa-ṣaḥḥāt min al-ta'rikh* (Amman: s.n., 1988): 216-8.

28 BOA. HR. TO., 395/32; see also DH. MKT., 1771/129; 1795/85.

29 See *Central Zionist Archive*, A 216/1, 29 February 1892, letter 19: 45-8 (E. Levin-Epstein, the head of Rehovot's managing committee to the *Menuha ve-Nahla* society in Warsaw, which supported the establishment of this colony); see also Levin-Epstein, *Zikhronotai*: 240-244.

30 Levin-Epstein, *Zikhronotai*: 240.

On the face of it, the conflict described above, during the first year of Rehovot, was resolved on good terms and did not lead to violence. A few years later, however, the colonists and the Bedouin again found themselves in a dispute over grazing, which, according to Moshe Smilansky, an author and popular historian from Rehovot who witnessed the events, was directly connected to the Bedouin's strong initial feeling that they had rights to the land on which Rehovot was established.³¹

Petitions of this kind submitted by Bedouin illustrate the disparity between the way they perceived land ownership, on the one hand, and state law and the government's official policy, on the other. Whereas the Bedouin considered that ownership rights (or at least the right to cultivate the land) were based on actual possession on the ground and inheritance from father to son (Tu. *aba 'an cedd*), the state stipulated registration of land and various land uses on the basis of completely different assumptions and rationales. With the promulgation of the Ottoman Land Law of 1858 and the Provincial Law of 1864, the government acted to register land in the name of its owners who enjoyed the right of usufruct (Tu. *taşarruf*).³² The state claimed its right "to assert its control over all land not clearly private freehold or religious-endowment land, sell and register usufructuary rights to this land, and collect taxes on the land's value and its produce."³³

Nevertheless, as we know from documented cases involving the implementation of the 1858 and 1864 laws, discourse and practice were often not coherent, and landownership remained a complex issue that was implemented unevenly in the empire's various provinces.³⁴ In Palestine's lowlands, for example, much

31 M. Smilansky, *Rehovot: Shishim shenot hayeha* (Rehovot: Municipality of Rehovot, 1949-50): 31-32.

32 H. Gerber, *Ottoman Rule in Jerusalem, 1890-1914* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1985): 199.

33 M.R. Fischbach, *State, Society and Land in Jordan* (Leiden: Brill, 2000): 21.

34 Prominent works discussing the complexity of the Ottoman land system in the second half of the nineteenth century and its uneven implementation in various Ottoman provinces include P. Sluglett and M. Farouk-Sluglett, "The Application of the 1858 Land Code in Greater Syria: Some Preliminary Observations." In *Land Tenure and Social Transformation in the Middle East*, ed. T. Khalidi (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1984): 409-421; M. Mundy, "Shareholders and the State: Representing the Village in the Late 19th Century Land Registers of the Southern Hawrân." In *The Syrian Land in the 18th and 19th Century*, ed. T. Philipp (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1992): 217-238; idem, "Village Land and Individual Title: Musha' and Ottoman Land Registration in the 'Ajlun District." In *Village, Steppe and State: The Social Origins of Modern Jordan*, ed. E.L. Rogan and T. Tell (London: British Academic Press, 1994): 58-79; idem, "Qada' 'Ajlun in the Late Nineteenth Century: Interpreting a Region from the Ottoman Land Registers." *Levant* 28 (1996): 77-95;

of the land made its way to absentee Arab landlords who lived in the urban centers of Palestine and the Levant, or to European citizens. Often, these landowners took possession of land at the expense of villagers—and, for that matter, also Bedouin—who became sharecroppers on land they had formerly held. Evidently, many peasants and Bedouin were reluctant to register their lands for fear of conscription, higher taxes, and the like, a phenomenon typical to many parts of the Ottoman empire. With the gradual integration of the empire, including its Arab provinces, into the world capitalist system, these lands became widely available for purchase on the free market. This process of commercialization favored the representatives of the first Jewish colonization societies in their effort to buy land for settlement in Palestine from the early 1880s onwards, as was also the case for Rehovot.³⁵ For the Bedouin discussed here, the fact that they had occupied a certain area of land and farmed it for many years was sufficient to grant them various rights over it. This accounts for their demand that the state force the colonists to compromise with them or grant them land comparable to that from which they had been evicted. In this regard, Frantzman and Kark write that Bedouin “[w]ere witnesses to the purchase and transformation by outsiders of lands they occupied. Those who acquired these lands sought to develop them as an investment, settled upon them, or received concessions to transform the environment. They viewed the Bedouin as nuisance, as a group whose lifestyle had to be curtailed or changed in order for the landscape to suit their new endeavors.”³⁶

4.2 *Arab Abū l-Faḍl and Others versus the Municipality of Ramla*

The same Bedouin of Khirbat Dūrān, together with a group named Ṭyūr (sometimes called also Ṭyūriyyih), were involved a few years later, around the time of the Young Turk revolution, in a similar dispute with the nearby Municipality of Ramla over a tract of land the municipality had sold but which they claimed they were farming. They apparently demanded that equivalent land be allocated to them and approached religious leaders in Istanbul to help them. For unknown reasons, Nazım Paşa, the “governor of Syria at the time, who was in Jerusalem,” was asked by the Ministry of the Interior to look into the matter,

H. İslamoğlu, “Property as a Contested Domain: A Reevaluation of the Ottoman Land Code of 1858.” In *New Perspective on Property and Land in the Middle East*, ed. R. Owen (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2000): 3-61.

35 G. Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989): 41-42.

36 Frantzman and Kark, “Bedouin Settlement in Late Ottoman and British Mandatory Palestine”: 10.

and he reported back on the case.³⁷ The Bedouin complained that Reşid Bey, the former *mutasarrıf* of Jerusalem, had authorized the sale of their land illegally at a low price and demanded the return of their land or compensation. They added that earlier complaints had gone unanswered and that pressure was being put on them to declare that they had no connection to the land. An investigation revealed that the land in question was two plots, one of six thousand *dönüms*³⁸ and the other of three thousand, which the municipality had sold. The Bedouin claimed that they had cultivated the second plot and thus demanded compensation.³⁹ This case also reveals the different perceptions of land ownership by the Bedouin and the state—that is, actual possession versus registration of landownership and holding title deeds. The Bedouin in this case were sedentary Bedouin who conducted themselves like the regular sedentary peasant population in similar situations when land they occupied and cultivated was transferred to various absentee landowners.

4.3 *Abū Kishk versus the mütevellis of waqf Sayyidna ‘Alī b. ‘Alī*

In the case of a group residing near Nahr al-‘Awjā’ (ha-Yarkon), some fifteen kilometers northeast of Jaffa, also known as ‘Arab Abū Kishk,⁴⁰ the Bedouin also occupied and farmed land on which they had resided for many years. In 1884 they argued that it was *miri* land (land whose holders had the right only of usufruct, because the land actually belonged to the state) and that they paid an annual tax for its use, and they furnished receipts as proof (*senadat*). They resented the sudden declaration of their land as *waqf* land (Tu. *vakıf*, a charitable endowment) whose management was in the hands of two brothers, named Sa‘īd and ‘Abd al-Hādī, and claimed that the latter treated them like tenants and that they were, as a result, unjustifiably and unlawfully asked to pay much higher taxes than previously. Their statements were translated from the original in Arabic (now lost) into Ottoman Turkish at the Translation Bureau at the Foreign Ministry in Istanbul:

37 See BOA. DH. MKT., 2729/89, 13 Muharrem 1327/2 February 1909; the Bedouin were possibly referring to Nazim Paşa, the former governor of Syria between 1897 and 1906.

38 A *dönüm* is equivalent to approximately a quarter of an acre.

39 DH. MKT., 2778/12, 17 Şubat 1324/2 March 1909 (Nazim Paşa reports to the Ministry of the Interior about his investigation on the ground). See also DH. MKT., 2753/71, 8 Şaban 1327/25 August 1909 (the Ministry of the Interior asks Nazim Paşa to investigate the Bedouin’s complaint again).

40 For more on this group, see von Oppenheim, *Die Beduinen*, 2:55-7, and *Palestine Remembered*, <http://www.palestineremembered.com/>. (These Bedouin founded a village, probably in the early twentieth century.)

As we presented recently and previously [to this petition], receipts (*senedat*) that we have in our hands prove that, until the year 1271 (1854-5), we paid the tithe of the two tax farms (*mukata'alar*) of Qūla and Za'farāniyya, which have been in our possession for many generations and which we legally own, directly to the imperial treasury. Even though there is no need to prove that this place is ours, two people from [the province of] Syria (*Şam ahalinden*), named Sa'īd and 'Abd al-Hādī, appeared, claiming that they were the descendants of Sayyidna 'Alī b. 'Alīl and that the above-mentioned lands were allegedly part of the endowment for the upkeep of the grave of their grandfather and had been left to them as such. However, the tithe from the above-mentioned two pieces of land was given in its entirety by the exalted government to cover the expenses of visitors to the Sufi lodge [at the place].

In the year [12]64 (1847/8) the government took over the management of these lands. In 1271 (1854/5) the two above-mentioned individuals submitted a petition to the Ministry of Endowments and to your exalted ministry [regarding the status of these lands]. An answer was sent to them upon discovering [in the investigation] that all the land in the two plots was *miri* land. In 17 Rebiyülevvel 1271 (8 December 1854) the exalted sultan, may his place be in heaven, 'Abdülmeccid Khan, God bless his grave, ordered that tithe income equals to fifty-five *irdabb* from the above-mentioned land, which is *miri* land, would be dedicated to the [maintenance of the] grave mentioned above.

When the two claimants died, their children, the efendis Salīm and 'Abd al-Laṭīf, upon receiving the endowment for the grave's management (*makam-ı tevliye*), took the entire income of the grave as their forefathers had done and spent it as they wished, but they were still not satisfied. [Thus] with the help of several corrupt officials, acting against the law, they started to use force to collect a fifth (*hums*) of our land's yields. In addition, they claim that all the tithe of the village of Jalīl (Ijlīl) in the [sub]district of Balqā, and a quarter of that of the village of Jarīsha, and three quarters of that of the village of Jammāsiyya (al-Jammāsīn) [both of] which belong to the [sub]district of Jaffa, are included in our *vakıf*. They divide between themselves the payment received from these places [as profits]. According to this calculation, the yearly income of the above-mentioned efendis Salīm and 'Abd al-Laṭīf is more than 1,500 liras, but they are still not satisfied with that. Due to their voracious greed, they claim that all the land we possess belongs to the *vakıf* of the Sufi lodge (*dergah*) and that we are renters. However, an exalted *firman* issued on

17 Rebiyülevvel 1271 (8 December 1854) proves and supports the claim that our land is not *vakıf* land but rather *miri* land.

The 1,500 tribal people who occupy the above-mentioned two plots of land earn their subsistence solely from this land. We have occupied it for many years, and we have [always] paid *miri* payments. Based on this, if we remain under these oppressive *vakıf* administrators (*mütevellıs*) it will bring us to the verge of extinction, as a result of such corruption. We beg you to grant us justice similar to [that granted to] villages in the same situation, such as Jalil (Ijlil), Haram, and Qalqilya, and give the necessary orders to those who need to act to levy from us only the tithe as before and abolish the *hums*.⁴¹

We can assume the Bedouin's complaint in this case arose from the revival of an old abandoned *waqf*, which they considered regular *miri* land—which was not endowed—and paid taxes accordingly. Thus, they were upset that they had to deal with the *waqf* administrators and pay higher taxes, especially in view of the latter's alleged misconduct. The fundamental issue behind the dispute, however, is again the fact that the Bedouin did not own the land they had occupied and cultivated for many years, in fact even much before the 1858 laws.⁴² In this case it was owned by a certain *waqf*, but in other cases we have seen, land used by Bedouin made its way to various new owners who acted to implement their full ownership rights.

4.4 *Sheikh Abū Rabāḥ and his Bedouin Followers*

Aside from land disputes, Bedouin in the vicinity of Jaffa were also involved in various social relationships with both the rural population in their area and urbanites from the region, a situation that was, at times, reflected in petitions. In one interesting case in 1899 involving Bedouin near Jaffa, petitions were

41 BOA. HR. TO., 389/104, HR. TO., 389/104, 12 Şaban 1301/7 June 1884 (a translation into Ottoman Turkish of a petition originally written in Arabic by the Bedouin of 'Arab al-'Awjā, Muḥammad Yūsuf Abū Kishk and two of his companions, concerning the classification of their land as *waqf* and the taxes demanded from them); see also HR. TO., 389/100, 12 Şaban 1301/7 June 1884 (a petition by the Bedouin of 'Arab al-'Awjā, Muḥammad al-Yūsuf Abū Kishk and several other people concerning the status of lands they cultivated and the taxes demanded from them); about the holdings of this *waqf*, see A. Granovski, *ha-Mišṭar ha-Qarqa'i be-Yisra'el* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1949): 138-139.

42 Ashkenazi, *ha-Bedvīm be-Eretz Yisr'ael*: 247 (Ashkenazi writes that in this case, the Abū Kishk took over the land they inhabited by force apparently early in the nineteenth century and that this land was, with time, treated as theirs).

submitted against the activity of one Ibrahim Abū Rabāḥ, a famous resident of Jaffa, who allegedly gathered his followers together in a location outside Jaffa and committed “various illegal activities.”⁴³ Among his followers were villagers as well as “Bedouin who resided in tents.”⁴⁴ The issue in question was probably Abū Rabāḥ’s activity in the Khalwatiyya Sufi order. Abū Rabāḥ, a graduate of al-Azhar University in Cairo, who served in the 1890s as the Director of Education in the *kaza* of Jaffa, belonged to a branch of the well-known Dajānī family. He is often cited in the sources for the way he used his considerable influence and connections to stir up anti-Christian feelings in Jaffa.⁴⁵ Interestingly, the accusations raised in the petition do not point solely to the Bedouin in the region of Jaffa; instead, the Bedouin are mentioned alongside the villagers. In the Gaza region, by contrast, various accusations concerning Bedouin activity by the sedentary population were much more common.

4.5 *Abū Kishk and Others versus Rishon le-Zion and Rehovot*

Finally, a striking petition concerning events that took place in July 1913 illustrates social and even political ties between Bedouin in the region of Jaffa and the rural population there. Representatives of dozens of villagers in the northern part of the *kaza* of Gaza sent a collective petition—together with the Abū Kishk tribal group mentioned above, which belonged to the subdistrict of Jaffa and whose seat was some twenty kilometers north of the villages concerned—against the activities of the two large Jewish colonies of Rishon le-Zion and Rehovot nearby (which belonged to the *kaza* of Jafa). The villagers and the Bedouin group wrote to the grand vizier that the Jewish colonies had treated them harshly, attacked travelers who passed near the colonies, hired Jewish

43 For more on this figure, see J. Büssow, *Hamidian Palestine: Politics and Society in the District of Jerusalem, 1872-1908* (Leiden: Brill, 2011): 370-372.

44 BOA. DH. MKT., 2242/27, 26 Rebiyülahir 1317/3 September 1899 (from the Ministry of the Interior to the District of Jerusalem concerning a petition signed by two individuals named Aḥmad Ḥamdī and Muḥammad Rafīq to protest the activities of Ibrāhīm Abū Rabāḥ [al-Dajānī], who pretended to be a holy man, attracted many followers from among the villagers and Bedouin, and was allegedly involved in seditious political activity). See also DH.MKT. 2303/54, 8 Şevval 1317/9 February 1900 (a request by the Ministry of the Interior from the Ministry of Justice for permission to take legal action against Abū Rabāḥ following information about his activities provided by the District of Jerusalem, including instigating false trials and bringing false witnesses to court).

45 Büssow, *Hamidian Palestine*: 370-372; in 1899, the *kaymakam* (head of a subdistrict) of Jaffa tried to dismiss Abū Rabāḥ from the post of Director of Education, and this petition may also have had to do with this event. Three years later, however, Abū Rabāḥ managed to buy his post back.

and foreign guards who behaved aggressively towards the rural population, and possessed illegal weapons. They argued, moreover, that a local court had issued summons to several Jews but that the colonies had replied that these individuals were out of the country.⁴⁶

Neville Mandel cites evidence that a similar petition had been submitted a few days earlier to the governor of Jerusalem by the same petitioners. It was apparently organized by sheikh Sulaymān al-Tājī, from Jaffa, the founder of the Ottoman Patriotic Party in that town, who was known to be a strong opponent of Zionist activity. He may have arranged for the villagers and the Abū Kishk Bedouin to meet and sign the joint petition against the Jewish colonies.⁴⁷ For our purposes, however, it is interesting that the semi-sedentary Bedouin near Jaffa were part of the rural alignment and associated themselves with the villagers' campaign in an act of political activity against the Jewish colonies.

5 Petitions by Bedouin Groups in the Vicinity of Gaza

In the subdistrict of Gaza, which bordered the Negev and Sinai deserts, Bedouin constituted a larger share of the population and played a more prominent role in society than in the area around Jaffa. There were more complaints against Bedouin outlaw activity in the region of Gaza than near Jaffa. Moreover, in Gaza, Bedouin were more often part of local power alignments or joined coalitions headed by leading urban notables. Some Bedouin even had ties to city dwellers through marriage or kinship and were thus involved in urban politics, sometimes siding with various rival groups. Each urban coalition tried to enlist support in the town and its hinterland, as can be seen in several of the examples cited below. However, Bedouin in the Gaza district were also all too often victims of the intense urban power struggles rife within the elites of the town of Gaza.

The main bone of contention was competition over offices in the local bureaucracy, such as that of mufti, and membership in the local administrative councils. Some of the local office holders targeted by petitions from rival groups were connected to members of the Jerusalem elite through country-wide alliances. Others were apparently associated with Ottoman officials in the local administration who were not natives of Palestine. The Bedouin and rural sedentary population often played a role in these urban coalitions.

46 BOA, DH. EUM. EMN., 30/5, 16 Temmuz 1329/29 July 1913.

47 N.J. Mandel, *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976): 174-175.

5.1 *Bedouin and the Struggle between Muḥammad Sāqallāh and Aḥmad Muḥyī l-Dīn*

In 1876, supporters of Muḥammad Sāqallāh,⁴⁸ “Islamic jurists, *muhtars*, respected elders and notables from Gaza”⁴⁹ objected to the practices of Aḥmad Muḥyī l-Dīn Efendi of the Ḥusaynī family,⁵⁰ the mufti of Gaza at the time, arguing that he had oppressed the people, engaged in inappropriate conduct, and maintained ties with the Bedouin at the expense of the local inhabitants. They demanded that he be replaced by Sāqallāh, who was a “respectful and honest man.” The incumbent mufti had arguably been dismissed twice before and exiled from Gaza but had been restored to office solely on the basis of petitions of support that people submitted purely out of pity.⁵¹

In a similar case, after Muḥyī l-Dīn al-Ḥusaynī had left office, several people complained that one of his sons was collaborating with Bedouin tribes in the region and with the *kaymakam* ‘Umar. The Bedouin, they argued, were encouraged to attack the farmers in the region and harass them solely for personal gain, and they meted out similar treatment to the people of Gaza, who all lived in fear.⁵²

The Bedouin’s involvement in Gaza politics can also be inferred from their own petitions. For instance, as in the petitions discussed above, Bedouin leaders in Gaza also complained about the former mufti and his son ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Ḥusaynī, who possibly joined forces with al-Ḥusaynī’s rivals. Two petitions by tribal people were submitted separately to the Sadaret (office of the grand vizier) and to the Ministry of the Interior, arguing that the Ḥusaynīs, together with their tribal allies, a member of the administrative council, and the *kaymakam*, ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām (who apparently collaborated with them), were stirring up unrest among the Bedouin tribes in the vicinity of the town of Gaza.⁵³

In a similar case a few years later, a petition in Arabic was submitted to the Sadaret by Bedouin in Gaza against Reşat Paşa, the governor of Jerusalem, and

48 For more on M. Sāqallāh, see ‘Ādil Mannā’, *A’lām Filasṭīn fī awākhir al-‘ahd al-‘uthmānī* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Dīrāsāt al-Filasṭīniyya, 1995): 199; ‘U. al-Ṭabbā’, *Itḥāf al-a’izza fī ta’rīkh Ghazza*, ed. ‘A. Abū Hāshim (Gaza: Maktabat al-Yazījī, 1999), 4: 275-285.

49 BOA. HR. TO., 461/83, 13 September 1876 [date assigned by archivists; in the translation of the petition it states that the original was undated] (from Gaza to Bab-ı Âli).

50 For more on Aḥmad Muḥyī l-Dīn Efendi, see Mannā’, *A’lām Filasṭīn*: 99.

51 BOA. HR. TO., 461/83.

52 BOA. HR. TO., 554/80, 6 Nisan 1293/18 April 1877 (a translation from Arabic into Ottoman Turkish of two petitions sent from Gaza to the *mabeyn* (the Secretariat of the Palace) and to the Ministry of the Interior, signed by five and ten people, respectively).

53 BOA. HR. TO., 554/56, 9 Şubat 1292/2 February 1877.

two notables from that city, Salīm al-Ḥusaynī and ʿArif Bey, who, along with al-Ḥanafī and his brothers, the sons of the former mufti of Gaza, had collaborated with their rivals among the Bedouin, persecuted them, and taken their horses and land. The petitioners ask for Istanbul's protection from the rival Bedouin and from the corrupt officials and notables who were working hand in glove with them.⁵⁴

5.2 *Tarābīn versus Local Government*

In the Gaza region, unlike in Jaffa, there are petitions by Bedouin who were apparently not semi-sedentary. For instance, the Tarābīn,⁵⁵ who “resided in tents in the district of Gaza,” petitioned in 1875, complaining about the attitude of Gaza's *kaymakam* and the local government's treatment of the tribe. The petition pleaded with Istanbul to send an officer to investigate their claims.⁵⁶

A similar complaint had been filed in 1874, when representatives of a tent-dwelling Bedouin tribe near Gaza applied to the Sadaret to complain about the governor's harassment. They threatened to emigrate to the Hijaz, if no measures were taken, and blamed Khalīl al-Shawwa, a notable from Gaza, for collaborating with the *kaza's* accountant to raise tensions among the tribes for personal gain while accusing the petitioners themselves of doing the same. The Bedouin claimed that the state coffers were being depleted over this issue and added that the *kaymakam* had lost control of the district, two arguments often made against Bedouin themselves by state officials and the sedentary population.⁵⁷

5.3 *Villagers of al-Masmiyya versus al-Wuḥaydāt*

There is considerable evidence that there was more conflict between Bedouin and the sedentary rural population in the region of Gaza than in Jaffa. This had to do with the much larger Bedouin population in the former than in the latter and with the fact that Gaza bordered desert regions where state control over the Bedouin population was much more limited.

To cite one example of conflict between Bedouin and the rural population in the Gaza region, in 1910 the village of al-Masmiyya, some twenty-five

54 See also 395/44, 23 Kânunuevvel 1306/4 January 1891.

55 For more details, see von Oppenheim, *Die Beduinen*, 2: 95-109.

56 BOA. HR. TO., 552/11, 19 Haziran 1291/1 July 1875 (a translation into Ottoman Turkish of a petition in Arabic addressed to the Şeyhülislam and signed by Manşūr, the *müdür* [chief official] of the tribe of Tarābīn, and Sheikh Ḥammād al-Şūfī).

57 BOA. HR. TO., 551/103, 22 Eylül 1290/4 October 4 1874.

kilometers northeast of Gaza,⁵⁸ and the Bedouin group of al-Wuḥaydāt⁵⁹ were fighting over a piece of land known as al-Mukhayzin.⁶⁰ The conflict led to a trial and the submission of dozens of petitions to Istanbul by both parties, but more by the villagers. In a nutshell, the villagers claimed that “they had farmed the land for hundreds of years,” whereas the Bedouin had taken possession illegally during the reign of Sultan ‘Abdülhamid II (1876-1909). Moreover, they claimed that the Bedouin, through their connections in Gaza, had obtained illegal title deeds to the land, which prompted the villagers to take the matter to court. Two aspects of this conflict are striking. The first is the way the villagers’ petitions vilified the ‘Abdülhamid era and identified their opponents with the old regime.⁶¹ The second is that the villagers repeatedly argued that unless the state and its legal institutions protected them, the land would eventually find its way into Jewish hands, as they alleged had often occurred during the despotic era (*devre-yi istibdad*) of ‘Abdülhamid II.

5.4 *An Urban Voice in Defense of the Gaza Bedouin*

Finally, as a result of their presence and involvement in urban politics, the urban population may have used the Bedouin in the region of Gaza as scapegoats. A petition submitted from Jaffa by a certain Aḥmad b. Muḥammad ‘Īsā al-Ḥalabī al-Luddī in 1910 claims that the Bedouin near Gaza have too often been blamed for every wrongdoing in the town. In his petition, which is, in fact, a manifesto in which al-Luddī expresses his opinion on a whole range of topics and advises the government on how better to manage its affairs, he claims that the real culprits were, in fact, the villagers in the region.⁶² We do not know what prompted al-Luddī to voice this opinion, but it is still of considerable

58 For more on this village, see Khalidi, *All That Remains*: 124-6. There were, in fact, two villages called al-Masmiyya, “the little” and “the big”; al-Ṭabbāʿ, *Ithāf al-aʿizza*, 2: 439.

59 Scattered information about this Bedouin group can be found in C. Bailey, “Dating the Arrival of the Bedouin Tribes in Sinai and the Negev,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 28/1 (1985): 20-49; ‘A. al-ʿArif, *Taʾrikh Bīr al-Sabʿ wa-qabāʾilihā* (Jerusalem: Maṭbaʿat Bayt al-Maqdis, 1353/1934).

60 For more information on this locality, some ten kilometers south of Ramla, see www.palestineremembered.com/al-Ramla/al-Mukhayzin/index.html#.

61 BOA. HR. TO., 401/58, 22 Kânunusani 1325/2 February 1910 (a petition from the village of al-Masmiyya to the Ministry of the Interior); see also 401/45, 22 Kanunusani 1325/4 February 1909 (a petition by a representative of the villagers of al-Masmiyya to the Ministry of the Interior); 401/37, 16 Kanunusani 1325/29 January 1910 (a similar petition).

62 BOA. DH. ID., 43-1/28, Zilhicce 1328/December 1910 (from al-Ḥalabī, who calls himself “Informer of Justice” to the Ministry of War).

interest that such ideas circulated. This may support the old cliché about the eternal enmity between Bedouin and the sedentary population.

6 The Empire's Bedouin Policy

The Ottoman government generally viewed Bedouin activity in southern Palestine, as elsewhere in the empire's Arab provinces, with disapproval. As part of its centralization strategy and efforts to regain control over the provinces and strengthen its rule on the periphery, especially in a border region whose strategic importance was increasingly critical, the government attempted to settle the Bedouin in permanent locations, stop their seasonal migrations, and tie them to specific areas of land by registering land ownership.⁶³ This involved the founding of Beersheba in the early twentieth century as an administrative-bureaucratic center around which the Bedouin tribes were to be settled; establishing the border town of 'Awjā' al-Ḥafīr and the new administrative subdistrict of al-Ḥafīr near the border between the Negev and Sinai; investing in infrastructure (telegraph lines, bridges, roads, railroads) in this region, whose strategic importance vis-à-vis the frontier with British-ruled Egypt was growing with time; reorganizing the region's administrative units; registering tribal land in the *tapu* registers and collecting taxes on these lands; appointing Bedouin to serve in the local Ottoman bureaucracy, especially in the newly established *kaza* of Beersheba⁶⁴ in an effort to co-opt the leadership of the Bedouin and strengthen their affiliation to the Ottoman state;⁶⁵ and

63 For more on the Ottoman effort to settle the tribes of Transjordan, see E.L. Rogan, *Frontiers of State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 82-94; see also BOA. DH. MKT., 1905/48, 24 Cemaziyülevvel 1309/26 December 1891 (the Ministry of the Interior orders the District of Jerusalem to act swiftly to finally implement previous decisions to end the land disputes between the Bedouin tribes in Gaza and incorporate the land into the *tapu* (title-deed) regime, the current situation must be resolved, as it leads to endless bloody quarrels; the order responded to a complaint by the Commander of the Fifth Army); DH. MKT., 1983/109, 13 Muharrem 1310/7 August 1892 (the Ministry of the Interior writes to the District of Jerusalem about the need to complete the *yoklama* [land-survey] in Gaza and act to settle the Bedouin in the region to protect state revenues).

64 In Beersheba, for instance, Ḥāj 'Alī al-Aṭāwna, a Bedouin, served as the mayor between 1900 and 1917.

65 For more on the state effort to garner Bedouin support and loyalty, see D. Kushner, *To Be Governor of Jerusalem: The City and District during the Time of Ali Ekrem Bey, 1906-1908*

establishing a committee of inquiry to settle disputes between the Bedouin in the *kaza* of Gaza.⁶⁶

The Ottoman authorities believed that the Bedouin's outlaw activity disrupted agricultural activities in settled areas, caused damage to crops and property, and undermined the collection of taxes for the state treasury by reducing agricultural production, disturbing the peace and requiring the deployment of considerable numbers of armed forces.⁶⁷ The policy of late Ottoman statesmen concerning the Bedouin was dictated in part by a desire "to bring civilization" to people who were considered savage and disobedient and were living a way of life deserving every possible contempt.⁶⁸ In the context of the Ottoman "civilizing mission," however, Bedouin were seen as a potential asset to the imperial government. Thus, along with the conventional negative image of nomadic life as a form of "savagery," as held by Ottoman officials, there were attempts by the central and local Ottoman authorities to gain Bedouin support for the empire and use them as allies against opposition forces.⁶⁹

(Istanbul: Isis Press, 2005): chap. 7; E. Rogan, "Aşiret Mektebi: Abdülhamid II's School for Tribes, 1892-1907," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28 (1996): 83-107.

- 66 BOA. ŞD., 2595/10, 10 Şevval 1309/8 May 1892 (the head of the Education Department in the District of Jerusalem was dismissed following complaints about him when he served on a committee of inquiry that was sent to the *kaza* of Gaza to settle disputes between rival Bedouin tribes. The investigation found him to be innocent, which led to an angry exchange of letters between Jerusalem, the Ministry of the Interior, and the Ministry of Education).
- 67 See BOA. I. ŞD., 41/2144, 12 Ramazan 1295/9 September 1878 (a decision by the Council of State concerning the salaries to soldiers sent to Gaza to subdue Bedouin activity, which damaged fields and trade and left the Bedouin, who were busy with internal strife, no time to farm); DH. MKT., 1897/17, 1 Cemaziyülevvel 1309/3 December 1891 (the Ministry of the Interior orders Jerusalem to investigate complaints about Bedouin attacks on nine travelers between Gaza and al-Majdal. The local authorities were accused of failing to give redress to the victims and even of supporting the accused, a situation that led to anarchy [*iğtişas*]. The order from Istanbul followed a complaint by the commander of the Fifth Army and the *komandan* of Jerusalem, who were probably approached by the victims and passed their petition on to the Serasker in Istanbul).
- 68 For more on the Ottoman perceptions of the desert and the Bedouin, see E. Ginio, "Presenting the Desert to the Ottomans during WWI: The Perspective of the *Harb Mecmuası*," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 33 (2005): 43-62; on the Ottoman "civilizing mission," see S. Deringil, "They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery': The Late Ottoman Empire and the Post-Colonial Debate," *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 45/2 (2003): 311-342.
- 69 For the most recent comprehensive study of Ottoman Bedouin policy and the state's complex relations with nomadic populations, see R. Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants and Refugees* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

In the region of Gaza, where the Bedouin presence was more obvious, the villages submitted many petitions complaining about Bedouin attacks, damage to fields and crops, and seizure of land.⁷⁰ The government's immediate response, when faced with outlaw Bedouin activity, was usually to send an armed detachment to deal with the unrest. The picture that emerges from correspondence between Ottoman officials is one of undesirable occurrences that were to be prevented in any way possible, in order to enable the rural population get on with its normal life and avoid losses to the state treasury.⁷¹ Consider the following quotation from a decision by the Şura-yı Devlet (Council of State) concerning the payment of salaries to troops sent to help pacify the tribal groups in the region of Gaza:

Bedouin tribes such as Tarābīn, Tiyaha, and others who live in tents in the subdistrict of Gaza are busy fighting each other and for a while now have stopped cultivating and plowing their land. These [Bedouin] naturally (*bi-l-ṭabʿ*)⁷² destroy the district's and the villages' agricultural lands and attack passengers and locals [on the roads].⁷³

The official policy towards the sedentary Bedouin populations in the regions of Jaffa and Gaza, as reflected in Ottoman correspondence, suggests that they were treated like the regular sedentary population. The government encouraged registration of land in the names of its possessors and thus, when Bedouin groups occupied land whose owners asked them to leave, the authorities did not see any real justification for intervening in favor of the Bedouin. This was true, for example, in the case of the 'Arab Abū l-Faql discussed above. We know from Hebrew sources that after a series of clashes between the colony of Rehovot and these Bedouin in the early 1890s, the latter were severely punished by the government and some of them relocated to a new area in the region.⁷⁴

70 BOA. HR. TO., 394/59, 8 Ağustos 1306/20 August 1890 (the *muhtars* of two villages near Gaza petition to protest the damage caused by Bedouin raids and loss of security).

71 BOA. BEO. 321/24021, 23 Cemaziyülevvel 1313/9 November 1895 (from the Sadaret to the Serasker about the need to prevent Bedouin attacks on the settled population in the district of Gaza).

72 This term might be an indication of an entrenched stereotype of the Bedouin.

73 BOA. I. ŞD., 41/2144; see also DH. MKT., 1905/48; 1983/109; 1897/17.

74 Levin-Epstein, *Zikhronotai*: 242-244.

7 Bedouins' Attitude to Istanbul

Dozens of Bedouin petitions from the regions of Gaza and Jaffa from the period discussed here have been found in the Ottoman archives in Istanbul, thus suggesting that various Bedouin groups did not believe it was pointless to contact the imperial center, perhaps in addition to taking other steps such as applying to local courts, administrative councils, and the like.⁷⁵ A partial explanation may lie in the fact that in the petitions so far found, most approaches to Istanbul by Bedouin in the Jaffa and Gaza regions were submitted by sedentary Bedouin ('Arab Abū l-Faḍl, Abū Kishk), whose petitioning patterns resembled those of the regular settled rural population. Although they had unique problems of their own, such as not possessing title deeds for the land which they occupied, these Bedouin were nevertheless playing by the rules that prevailed among the urban and rural population in their area.

What is clear from the petitions is the extent to which Bedouin were enmeshed in city politics—more in the Gaza region than near Jaffa. They maintained social and political ties with the surrounding population, despite the conflicts often described in the literature, which also appear in petitions, as was evident in the case of the struggle over the land of al-Mukhayzin. In Gaza, Bedouin groups came under the influence of leading urban families, who often led rival coalitions. Bedouin thus found themselves thrust into existing conflicts, to the dismay of opposing groups, who denounced their rivals' connections with the Bedouin. Moreover, as was the case with all petitions, the organization and submission of the Bedouin petitions took place in the urban centers and involved approaching the *arzuhalcis*, signing mass petitions, sending the petitions from the telegraph and post offices, and paying for them.

The Bedouin used intermediaries to submit petitions on their behalf, as seen in the case of the dispute between 'Arab Abū l-Faḍl and the Municipality of Ramla. This shows a certain degree of political savvy, connections, agency, and effective maneuvering. As far as we can tell, the Bedouin petitions were handled much like other petitions. This usually meant that their approaches were received in Istanbul and at least processed by the administration, which, for the most part, then referred the issue to Jerusalem with a request to investigate the matter.

What can be concluded regarding the Bedouin groups' relationships with Istanbul? As seen in the petition by the 'Arab Abū l-Faḍl from Khirbat Dūrān,

75 For instance, for more on Bedouin approaches to the administrative council of Jerusalem as a court of appeal for the administrative council of Beersheba, see Gerber, *Ottoman Rule in Jerusalem, 1890-1914*: 124.

the Bedouin appeared to manifest their complete loyalty, subordination, and faith in the sultan and his justice. This was, however, naturally part of the rules for submitting petitions and should not be given undue importance. The same is true with regard to the implicit threat that the Bedouin's loyalty to the sultan might wane if nothing was done to ameliorate their situation.⁷⁶ The important points, however, are the Bedouin's participation in the process of submitting petitions and playing by the rules of the game and their bewilderment when their attitudes and values were apparently disregarded. In particular, they expected the sultan to recognize their claims to rights on the land they occupied, despite the fact that this might clash with state policies promulgated by the sultan and the state bureaucracy.

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76 This implicit threat may mirror the frequent threats by peasants throughout Ottoman history to abandon their land, flee, and cease paying taxes, a situation which, if carried out on a large scale, could have led to the destabilization of the Empire's tax base and its ability to function properly.

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