

Mass petitions as a way to evaluate 'public opinion' in the late nineteenth-century Ottoman empire? The case of internal strife among Gaza's elite

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Abstract

This article evaluates collective petitions (*arz-ı mahzars*) sent to Istanbul from Gaza at the end of the nineteenth century as a way of assessing the political mood of the elite in Ottoman provincial towns. Gaza was the theatre of considerable tension, cleavages, and rivalry among its elite. One of the key questions in this context is the implications of sending collective petitions from towns such as Gaza to the imperial centre given the political censorship and the absence of free press at a time when there was nonetheless greater communication between the centre and the provinces, and an altered relationship between the state and its subjects. Thus more than ever before collective petitions represented local political alignments and what could be very cautiously defined as 'public opinion' among the elite in provincial Ottoman towns such as Gaza.

Keywords

Gaza; petitions; *arz-ı mahzars*; public opinion; Ottoman empire

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, dozens of collective petitions (*arz-ı mahzars*) were sent from the town of Gaza on Palestine's southern coast to the imperial centre in Istanbul. These collective petitions were signed by any number of petitioners ranging from several and even up to hundreds, usually from the ranks of Gaza's Muslim elite. Given the size of this town at the time and the illiteracy rates among its inhabitants these are very considerable numbers which include much of this town's elite. The main bone of contention reflected in these petitions was competition over offices in the local bureaucracy such as the post of the local *mufti*,

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membership in the local administrative councils and other positions in the newly reformed provincial administration.

During this period many more collective petitions of this kind appear to have been sent by the urban elite of Gaza than from other towns in Palestine such as Jaffa, suggesting that the internal struggles and cleavages within this city's elite were severe and intensive, as described in the literature as well.¹ In Jaffa, for instance, mass petitions were largely sent by groups with shared interests such as landowners, merchants and cultivators but not in the framework of cleavages within the town's elite.²

One of the key questions in this context is the implications of sending such a considerable number of collective mass petitions to the imperial centre from a town the size of Gaza. This in itself was not a new phenomenon in Ottoman lands. The mechanism of petitioning the Ottoman sultan directly over the head of the local administration and bureaucracy (*şikayet*) existed throughout Ottoman history. Nonetheless, petitions were sent at a time when the Hamidian regime had imposed severe political censorship, leading to a lack of free speech and curtailed freedom of political activity. At the same time, however, it must be remembered that the imperial centre was much more approachable than previously for its subjects, whose status was gradually changing to that of citizens of a modern state.

The main argument developed here is that given the nature of the Ottoman regime and in light of the altered relationship between the state and its subjects, collective petitions - perhaps more than ever before - represented what could be cautiously seen as 'public opinion', a concept that needs to be carefully defined due to its complexity, ambiguity and multifaceted nature. Thus, although collective petitions were for the most part orchestrated by interested parties within the town's elite, who enlisted support for their cause and most probably also exerted direct or indirect pressure on the urban population to sign them, they still provide a glimpse into the main forces shaping the town's politics, the alignments of coalitions, their modes of operation, as well as the major trends, proclivities and attitudes within the elite. These documents are hence one of the best tools at our disposal for understanding attitudes at the time among the elite in provincial towns such as Gaza in the absence of polls, surveys or free media. In

¹ Büsow, Johann, *Hamidian Palestine: Politics and Society in the District of Jerusalem, 1872–1908* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), pp. 258–301; al-Tabba', 'Uthman, *Ithaf al-a'izza fi ta'rikh Ghazza* [Presenting the Notables in the History of Gaza], Vol. I–IV, ed. 'Abdullatif Abu-Hashim (Gaza: Maktabat al-Yazijii, 1999).

² See Ben-Bassat, Yuval, *Petitioning the Sultan: Protests and Justice in Late Ottoman Palestine, 1865–1908* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), chapter 3, forthcoming.

other words, given the prevailing circumstances petitions were used by the elite as its mouthpiece, and reflected its mood and way of thought. They gave the elite an opportunity to state its claims and were a legitimate tool to express its opinion without paying an undue or overly risky price. This, however, was neither general public opinion nor one that is comparable to current day modes of expression.

Public opinion

There is no consensual definition among researchers of the term public opinion that is valid across time and geographical space. Although there are various kinds of public opinion, generally speaking it is the outcome of a collective behaviour in which participants discuss an issue known to a wider audience. It is associated with “transformations in social structure, economic and political reform, and technological advances” of given societies in different times.³

Can mass petitions sent to the imperial centre in Istanbul from the empire's provinces be considered as reflecting the public's political mood (what we would define today as ‘public opinion’) in specific localities given the political situation in the empire at the time? Cengiz Kırılı, who discusses the role of information gathered by government agents from informers in café houses in Istanbul in the mid nineteenth century, argues that definitions of the term public opinion by historians and social scientists are for the most part based on European examples and do not fit the Ottoman case.⁴ He notes that in the Ottoman empire “it makes little sense to make a clear-cut distinction between mere opinions and public opinion [...]. Every individual opinion articulated in a public setting incited comment from others, then was further disseminated through word of mouth and ultimately contributed to the formation of public opinion”.

Sociologist David Zaret, who analyzed petitions dating back to the Glorious Revolution in England in the late seventeenth century, argued that “communicative rules for petitioning permitted expression of grievance

³ Herbst, Susan, “On the disappearance of groups: nineteenth and early twentieth-century conceptions of public opinion”, in *Public Opinion and the Communication of Consent*, ed. Theodore L. Glasser and Charles T. Salmon (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1995), p. 92.

⁴ See Kırılı, Cengiz, “Coffeehouses: public opinion in the nineteenth-century Ottoman empire”, in *Public Islam and the Common Good*, ed. Armando Salvatore and Dale Eickelman (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), pp. 95–6.

[...] only in a restricted form that has little in common with modern conceptions of the public sphere as a forum for free and open debate over conflicting political goals”.⁵ He considers that collective petitions, under certain conditions, can be perceived as indicators of public opinion.⁶

Nevertheless it would be erroneous to use the term public opinion in the Ottoman empire before the final decades of the nineteenth century. At that time, developments such as the expansion of secular education, more rapid circulation of ideas and information, the influence of western-liberal concepts of citizenship, liberty and equality, the expansion of printing and the founding of newspapers and printed media (despite the heavy censorship and other limitations), the brief experience of constitutionalism and parliamentary regime, and the introduction of new means of communication and transportation, all contributed to fostering changes in the expression of public opinion, at least as far as the empire's urban centres were concerned. This change was concretized in different modes of petitioning.

In particular, Gazan collective petitions no longer adhered to the traditional pattern of appeals in a secrecy mode from subjects to ruler. Rather, given the nature and the content of these petitions that applied to groups of individuals, their organization necessitated an intensive level of campaigning and convincing to obtain signatures. In addition, the demands put forward in these petitions were far removed from traditional pleas for justice, protection and the mercy of the ruler or appeals for his benevolence. Previous petitions were much more formulaic and adhered to very strict modes of expression and codes of flattery. Here, despite paying the necessary lip service, the petitions were more political and argumentative in nature.

Yet other than very rare cases these collective petitions were not published given that for all intents and purposes the press hardly existed in Palestine prior to the Young Turk Revolution and the lifting of censorship and the ban on political activity it brought about.⁷ Thus, submitting mass

⁵ Zaret, David, “Petitions and the “invention” of public opinion in the English Revolution”, *American Journal of Sociology*, 101/6 (1996), p. 1517.

⁶ Zaret, “Petitions”, pp. 1541-2; recent research has demonstrated how printed petitions were used to mobilize public opinion in regions which had just gained independence from Ottoman tutelage, and how these affected Greek populations remaining within Ottoman borders during the early Tanzimat period. See Papataxiarchis, Evthymois, “Reconfiguring the Ottoman political imagination: petitioning and print culture in the early Tanzimat”, in *Political Initiatives 'From the Bottom Up': Halcyon Days in Crete VII, A Symposium Held in Rethymno 9-11 January 2009*, ed. Antonis Anastasopoulos (Rethymno: Crete University Press, 2012), pp. 191-226.

⁷ On the absence of newspapers in Palestine during the Hamidian regime and the rapid emergence of dozens of new newspapers after the 1908 Revolution all over Greater Syria, see

petitions was one of the best – and least risky – mechanisms at the urban population's disposal at the time to express its views and convey its messages to Istanbul. Petitions, as an age-old tradition that was highly familiar and widely used by Ottoman subjects were now utilized for new purposes and agendas. The ability to contact Istanbul quickly and relatively cheaply through mail and telegraph, the fact that Ottoman subjects were no longer a mass of unspecified *reaya* but rather increasingly acted as subjects of a modern state (*tebaa*), and the growing presence of the modernizing state in its subjects' lives whose reforms undermined centuries-long traditions and practices, were largely responsible for this difference. The age of the Tanzimat thus led to a growth in petitioning activity because there were both more possibilities to petition as well as more reasons to petition. The flooding of the system with petitions, many of them collective, also represented a quantitative change facilitated by the access of the Ottoman subjects to postal and telegraph services. All these, one can argue, have brought petitions closer to a reflection of 'public opinion'.

Some of the petitions discussed here refer or revolve around the growth of the new media venues that shaped public opinion, such as newspapers and journals⁸ or concerned the functioning of various newly elected or semi-elected organizations/individuals whose activity was criticized. Thus, the petitions - despite their pre-organized and constructed nature - have tremendous importance for historians as a mirror of important ideas, beliefs and attitudes in given localities.

Urban petitioning practices

The range of topics broached by the urban population was enormous. As opposed to the rural populations who mainly submitted shared petitions,

Khalidi, Rashid, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New-York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 53-9, 120-1.

⁸ For instance, see *Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi* (henceforth BOA) HR. TO., 554/30, January 28, 1877 (archival given date) (Muhammad Saqallah, the *mufti* of Gaza, applied to the *Sadaret* to examine allegations against him which appeared in the newspaper *al-Jawa'ib*, and demanded a government inquiry into the running of this newspaper, hinting that the preceding *mufti* and his supporters were behind this publication); see also BOA, HR. TO., 554/40, 4 Şubat 1292 (February 16, 1877) (a telegraph by six people from Gaza claiming that their signatures were forged by the former *mufti* and his son who published a fake letter in the newspaper *al-Jawa'ib* against the current *mufti* of the town); about this weekly newspaper which first appeared in Istanbul in the early 1860s on the initiative of the Lebanese intellectual Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq with the backing of the Ottoman empire, see di Tarrazi, Filib,

urbanites submitted both personal petitions about specific matters that concerned them as individuals as well as collective petitions about issues affecting groups of people. The common thread between urbanites - the segment of the population who submitted most of the petitions at the time - was that they were relatively educated people, who had considerable financial means, political awareness, and the wherewithal to protect their interests.

Frequently - as will be seen below - petitions were used in the framework of internal strife and power struggles and to settle accounts. This is not surprising given the fights over influence, power, jobs and resources in a changing administrative-bureaucratic and economic environment. The political game was largely played out in the major cities and towns where the centres of state power and its representatives were located and where economic activity was concentrated. To a great extent petitioning became a tool in the hands of the urban population to conduct its affairs with the government and negotiate with it, convey messages, and leverage its interests. The pattern of petitioning the sultan was by no means only motivated by legal issues and grievances in that it had increasingly clear political overtones.

Prominent among the urbanites who submitted petitions were members of the traditional urban Muslim elites.⁹ In Ottoman Palestine politics was dominated by several Muslim families, mostly from Jerusalem, who enjoyed country-wide prestige and influence. Families such as the Husaynis, whose power in terms of resources and influence was unmatched, the Khalidis, al-'Alami, and al-Dajani were respected families with social standing that had a long tradition of religious learning and had held religious and administrative posts in the Ottoman system for generations. In the nineteenth century they adjusted to the new conditions brought about by the Tanzimat reforms and preserved their privileged status in the Ottoman system despite attempts at centralization and the strengthening of the government's power over local elites. They dominated the activity of the newly established administrative councils within the limits set by the government. This gave them tremendous power and influence, but at the same time led to infighting and contestation.

A new source of wealth for Palestine's elite came from landholding following the introduction of the 1858 Ottoman Land Law and the process of

Ta'rikh al-sahafa al-'arabiyya [The History of Arab Press], Vol. I (Beirut: al-Matba'a al-Adabiyya, 1913), pp. 61-4.

⁹ See Abu-Manneh, Butrus, "Jerusalem in the Tanzimat period: the new Ottoman administration and the notables", *Die Welt des Islams*, 30/1 (1990), pp. 1-44.

the commercialization of land, which enabled them to acquire large plots of land, particularly in the coastal plain and the low regions. The mayors elected in the main cities also usually came from among the ranks of the leading families, as did many officials in the local bureaucracy and the *muf-tis* of the major towns in Palestine. Members elected to the first Ottoman parliament in 1876 and to the second in 1908 were also members of Palestine's limited circle of notables, mainly from Jerusalem.

Minority groups who enjoyed a higher degree of economic and social mobility due to the reforms, as well as the newly emerged bourgeoisie (which in part was composed of minorities), also submitted a sizeable number of petitions. This new elite which emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century included entrepreneurs, bankers, tradesmen, and merchants. They often lived in the booming coastal towns of the Levant, and took advantage of growing economic ties with Europe and the better security conditions in the country to accumulate large plots of land as a commodity that could be marketed for profit.

The collective petitions analyzed in this article were sent from the coastal town of Gaza - the centre of a sub-district (*kaza*) bearing the same name - in the *mutasarrıfluk* of Jerusalem, on Palestine's southern coast. In the 1880s Gaza had a population of some 18,000 residents, almost all of whom were Muslims.¹⁰ In the second half of the nineteenth century it lost much of its prominence as one of the Levant's main leading economic centres and largely remained outside the massive development and expansion processes experienced in towns such as Jaffa and Haifa that benefitted from growing trade connections with Europe. Nonetheless, it still remained a very important regional centre for its agricultural hinterland and for the Bedouin population, and was also the hub of a number of main roads, including the pilgrimage route from Egypt to the holy places in the Hijaz.¹¹ Yet, in terms of its connections with Europe and the other provinces of the Ottoman empire it played a rather modest role, aside from its profitable grain trade with England.¹²

¹⁰ Ben-Arieh, Yehoshua, "ha-Nof ha-yishuvi shel Eretz-Yisrael 'erev ha-hityashvut ha-tsiyonit" [The settlement landscape of Eretz-Yisrael on the eve of Zionist colonization], in *The History of the Jewish Community in Eretz Israel since 1882*, ed. Israel Kolatt, Vol. I (Jerusalem: The Israeli Academy for Sciences and Humanities, 1989), p. 77 (the numbers are approximations).

¹¹ Ben-Arieh, "ha-Nof ha-yishuvi shel Eretz-Yisrael 'erev ha-hityashvut ha-tsiyonit", pp. 88-90.

¹² Ben-Arieh, "ha-Nof ha-yishuvi shel Eretz-Yisrael 'erev ha-hityashvut ha-tsiyonit", pp. 88-90; Kark, Ruth, "The rise and decline of coastal towns in Palestine", in *Ottoman Palestine, 1800-1914: Studies in Social and Economic History*, ed. Gad Gilbar (Leiden: Brill, 1990), pp. 74-80; Büssow, *Hamidian Palestine*, pp. 272-3.

In Gaza, the operation of the sub-district council, local politics, and the influence and jockeying by local notables somewhat limited the influence and involvement of the District of Jerusalem's administrative council which was dominated by several of the above mentioned Jerusalemite families with country-wide influence. Thus, Gaza's administrative council was more exposed to manipulations and attempts at extortion by several local urban families such as the al-Shawwa, Saqallah, Abu-Khadra, Abu-Sha'ban, Ghusayn, and above all the Husayni family.¹³ These families, which had various sources of wealth and clout, dominated town life and exerted their influence over the hinterland and sub-district. These are also the families who submitted most of the Gazan petitions discussed here, alone or with the support of larger urban circles.

Case studies

Several case studies reflecting the nature of collective petitions from the town of Gaza at the end of the nineteenth century are presented below. At stake, it seems, were administrative-bureaucratic and religious positions in the local Ottoman provincial system, which gained more importance and prestige during the Tanzimat than pure economic issues such as landownership, trade, concessions and the like.

For example, contenders for the job of Gaza's *mufti*, one of the key positions that triggered power struggles within the town's elite, were the targets of numerous petitions, both in favour of and against their candidacy and each side tried to obtain as many signatures as possible. Some of the local officeholders named in petitions from rival groups were connected to members of the Jerusalem elite through countrywide alliances. Others

¹³ Gerber, Haim, *Ottoman Rule in Jerusalem, 1890-1914* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1985), pp. 168-9 (particularly as regards the Gaza region); Büssow, *Hamidian Palestine*, pp. 283-301; at the provincial level the administrative councils approved the provincial budgets, initiated infrastructure projects and held tenders for implementing them, supervised the activity of the various governmental offices in the provinces, made decisions regarding the ownership of land, conducted land surveys to evaluate property tax (*vergi*), supervised the collection of land taxes in the provinces including bids for the tithe tax, dealt with various issues concerning endowments, addressed appeals from lower-instance councils, and supervised the movement of people in and out of the district in addition to conducting censuses. Lower instances of the administrative councils dealt with similar tasks to those carried out by the administrative council at the provincial level. They were dominated by powerful families in Palestine's secondary towns, at times in concert with the Jerusalem elite. See Gerber's *Ottoman Rule* (particularly pp. 123-30, and elsewhere throughout the book).

were apparently associated with Ottoman officials in the local administration who were not natives of Palestine such as the local *kaymakam* or even the *mutasarrıf* of Jerusalem himself.

For instance, in 1876 an unspecified number of “Islamic jurists, *muhtars*, respected elders and notables from Gaza” sent a joint petition to protest the practices of the *mufti* of Gaza at the time, Ahmad Muhyi al-Din Efendi, of the Husayni family (1808/9–1878). They argued that he had oppressed the people, conducted himself in an unseemly manner, and maintained ties with the Bedouins at the expense of the local inhabitants. The *mufti* had allegedly been fired twice before and exiled but had returned to office after people sent petitions supporting him out of pity. They demanded his replacement by Muhammad Saqallah (1812–1896) who was “a respectful and honest man”.¹⁴

The opposing group counteracted with a petition signed by nineteen Islamic jurists and notables asking the government to dismiss *mufti* Muhammad Saqallah for “lack of religious knowledge and general incompetence”. They claimed that they had already presented the issue and demanded the reinstatement of Ahmad Muhyi al-Din Efendi to the post of *mufti*.¹⁵

The struggle between the two groups also reached the nascent press. A group of some 20 people from Gaza claimed in a petition to Istanbul that the former *mufti* Muhyi al-Din and his son published a fake collective petition in the newspaper *al-Jawa'ib* against the current *mufti* of the town. They claimed that they were misled by the former *mufti* who collected their signatures, and asked to investigate the newspaper and to banish the former *mufti* and his son from the town.¹⁶ The new *mufti* himself, Muhammad Saqallah applied to the *Sadaret* to examine allegations against him which appeared in *al-Jawa'ib*, and demanded a government inquiry into the running of this newspaper, hinting that the preceding *mufti* and his supporters were behind this publication.¹⁷

Petitions continued to pile up against Ahmad Muhyi al-Din al-Husayni and his family even after he completed his term in office. In one case, several people complained that Husayn (b. 1841/2), the son of Muhyi al-Din, collaborated with the Bedouin tribes in the region of Gaza with whom the Husaynis were friends, and with the *kaymakam* 'Umar. They claimed that

¹⁴ BOA, HR. TO., 461/83, September 13, 1876 (from Gaza to Bab-ı Ali).

¹⁵ BOA, HR. TO., 553/88, 7 Teşrinisani 1292 (November 19, 1876).

¹⁶ BOA, HR. TO., 553/97, 30 Teşrinisani 1292 (December 12, 1876).

¹⁷ BOA, HR. TO., 554/30.

the Bedouins were encouraged to attack the farmers in the region and to harass them as well as the people of Gaza, who thus lived in fear. Moreover, they stated that in the year 1287 (1870/71) the former *mufti* and his sons had already been expelled from Gaza.¹⁸

A few years later the issue surfaced again when members of the Husayni family submitted a series of petitions concerning several of their rivals in Gaza whom they accused of collaborating with senior Ottoman officials in Palestine to undermine their family's influence and sources of power. They pointed out that they had already submitted petitions and stated that Yusuf Diya Efendi al-Khalidi¹⁹ from Jerusalem (1829–1907), who was an opponent of their late father, the former *mufti* of Gaza, Ahmad Muhyi al-Din al-Husayni, incited the *mutasarrif* of Jerusalem Muhammad Ra'uf Paşa (r. 1877–1889)²⁰ against them. Moreover, together with the Husayni's rival in Gaza, Khalil Abu-Khadra (d. 1887/8), they allegedly brought about the resignation of Muhammad al-Hanafî al-Husayni (d. 1902/3)²¹ from his post as head of education in Gaza and excluded 'Abd al-Hayy Fa'îq al-Husayni (1849/50–1912)²² from membership in the administrative council of Gaza.²³ In another similar petition signed by the four and sent a few days later they raised similar accusations and blamed al-Khalidi for undermining their

¹⁸ BOA, HR. TO., 554/80, 6 Nisan 1293 (April 18, 1877) (a translation from Arabic into Ottoman of two petitions sent from Gaza to the *Mabeyn* and to the Ministry of the Interior with the signatures of five and ten people respectively); see also HR. TO., 554/56, 9 Şubat 1292 (February 21, 1877) (two petitions that were submitted separately to the *Sadaret* and to the Ministry of the Interior by 14 tribal leaders in Gaza against the former *mufti* and his son 'Abd al-Hayy, who together with their tribal allies, a member of the administrative council, and the *kaymakam*, 'Umar 'Abd al-Salam stirred up unrest among the Bedouin tribes near Gaza).

¹⁹ For more on this figure who obtained empire-wide recognition, see Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, chapter four; Manna', 'Adil, *A'lam Filastin fi awakhir al-'ahd al-'uthmani* [The Notables of Palestine during the Late Ottoman Period], second edition (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya, 1995), p. 146; Schölch, Alexander, *Palestine in Transformation 1856–1882: Studies in Social, Economic and Political Development* (Washington, D.C: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1993), chapter nine; see also throughout Devereux, Robert, *The First Ottoman Constitutional Period: A Study of the Midhat Constitution and Parliament* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1963).

²⁰ For more details on this figure, see Kushner, David, "The Ottoman governors of Palestine, 1864–1914", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 23/3 (July 1987), pp. 276–7, 283, 287.

²¹ On this figure, see Manna', *A'lam Filastin*, p. 99.

²² On this figure, see al-Tabba', *Ithaf al-a'izza*, IV, pp. 357–73.

²³ BOA, HR. TO., 390/56, 22 Zilkade 1302 (September 2, 1885) (a petition to the *Sadaret* signed by 'Abd al-Rahman Shafiq al-Husayni, 'Abd al-Hayy Fa'îq al-Husayni, Muhammad al-Hanafî al-Husayni, and Husayn al-Husayni); see also HR. TO., 390/70, 9 Muharrem 1303 (October 18, 1885).

friendly relationships with Khalil Abu-Khadra, and for inciting their rival ‘Abdalla al-Ghusayn²⁴ to submit slanderous petitions against them, and convincing the *mutasarrıf* of Jerusalem to take steps against the Husaynis.²⁵

In the early 1890s the Husaynis in Gaza were yet again involved in a struggle with their rivals over the post of the *mufti*. At the time, the town’s *mufti* was Muhammad al-Hanafi Efendi al-Husayni, the son of the former *mufti* Ahmad Muhyi al-Din Efendi discussed above. The Husaynis claimed that the former *mufti* of Gaza Muhammad Saqallah, who was “dismissed a month after taking office for incompetence and malpractice”, took steps together with the *kumandan* (military commander) of Jerusalem, Rüstem Paşa against the serving *mufti*. They filed various complaints and encouraged other individuals to follow suit. They stressed the family’s loyalty to the empire, its tradition of religious learning, and the harm done to it by the lies and trumped up complaints of its rivals. Moreover, they claimed that Muhammad Saqallah had been appointed *mufti* only due to the intercession of the former *mutasarrıf* of Jerusalem Fa’iq Bey,²⁶ whom they claimed was dismissed as well because of his implication in this affair.²⁷

The struggle over the position of the *mufti* of Gaza during this time also involved the above-mentioned Muhammad Saqallah. The latter and his followers, on the one hand, and Muhammad al-Hanafi Efendi al-Husayni and his followers on the other, continued squabbling over this position for several years. Each side tried to garner supporters and tarnish the name of its rivals. The Husaynis and their followers in two mass petitions signed by almost a hundred people claimed that Saqallah and his followers ‘Abdallah al-Ghusayn, Salih al-Shawwa and Ramadan Abu-Khadra submitted fake petitions to get Muhammad al-Hanafi Efendi dismissed and replaced by Saqallah.²⁸

²⁴ For more about this figure, see Manna’, *A’lam Filastin*, p. 312; al-Tabba’, *Ithaf al-a’izza*, IV, p. 310.

²⁵ BOA, HR. TO., 390/74, 7 Zilhicce 1302 (September 17, 1885) (a petition to Şakir Paşa, who is designated in the translation of the petition into Ottoman as “the brother of the Grand *vezir*”, signed by ‘Abd al-Rahman Shafiq al-Husayni, ‘Abd al-Fa’iq al-Husayni, Muhammd al-Hanafi al-Husayni, and Husayn al-Husayni).

²⁶ About this figure, see Kushner, “The Ottoman governors of Palestine, 1864-1914”, p. 277 (the governor was fired in 1877 due to allegations regarding oppression and corruption as well as the dismissal of his patron in Istanbul, the former grand *vezir* Mahmud Nedim Paşa [1818-1883]).

²⁷ BOA, DH. MKT., 2013/130, 10 Rebiyülahır 1310 (November 1, 1892) (a petition to the Ministry of the Interior signed by ‘Abd al-Hayy Fa’iq al-Husayni and Husayn Tawfiq al-Husayni).

²⁸ BOA, HR. TO., 399/3, 9 Nisan 1309 (April 21, 1893) (a petition to the *Sadaret* signed by 91 notables and religious scholars from Gaza); see also a similar petition sent on the same day to the Ministry of the Interior, DH. MKT., 28/17.

In what has all the trappings of an election campaign run through petitions, supporters of Muhammad Saqallah in Gaza also submitted mass petitions in his favour and against *mufti* al-Hanafi that criticized his family's history and attitude towards the local population. They even put forward a claim that in the year 1294 (1877/8) members of his family were forbidden to hold the office of *mufti* in Gaza.²⁹ At a certain stage, Saqallah was offered the office of *kadi* in Jaffa, and petitions in his favour and against *mufti* al-Hanafi were also sent from there, probably after hearing about the offer he received. Jerusalem, however, reported that the behaviour of *mufti* al-Hanafi was perfectly acceptable, a situation which made his firing impossible. Nonetheless, complaints against him kept on piling up.³⁰

Given that *mufti* al-Hanafi's term in office continued to elicit controversy, and collective petitions for and against him with up to 150 signatures were sent to Istanbul (see Appendix),³¹ the matter was eventually referred to the *şeyhülislam* with a *mazbata* (decision) from the District of Jerusalem praising his good services.³² *Mufti* al-Hanafi himself complained in the mid-1890s in a petition to the Ministry of the Interior that his relationships with Hasan Bey, the *kaymakam* of the *kaza* of Gaza, were strained after he had protested five months earlier about the misconduct of the *kaymakam*. The latter, it was claimed, collaborated with the *mufti*'s rivals in Gaza. They filed complaints against the *mufti* and convinced many others to do likewise, a situation which led to several investigations.³³ A few years later *Mufti* al-Hanafi, his son, and his brother were exiled by the central government to

²⁹ BOA, HR. TO., 394/67, 2 Eylül 1306 (September 14, 1890) (a petition to the *Sadaret* signed by 42 people from Gaza against the possible appointment of al-Hanafi, the son of Ahmad Muhyi al-Din, as the *mufti* of Gaza instead of the current *mufti* Muhammad Saqallah); see also HR. TO., 395/44, 23 Kanun-u evvel 1306 (January 4, 1891) (a petition to the *Sadaret* submitted by Bedouins in Gaza against the governor of Jerusalem, Reşat Paşa, and two notables from this town named Salim al-Husayni and 'Arif Bey who, together with al-Hanafi and his brothers, the sons of the former *mufti* of Gaza, collaborated with their rivals among the Bedouins, and persecuted them); and HR. TO., 398/53, 26 Teşrin-i sani 1308 (December 8, 1892) (a petition to the *Sadaret* signed by 64 people from Gaza in favour of Saqallah).

³⁰ BOA, BEO. 144/10734, 12 Kanun-u sani 1308 (January 24, 1893) (the *şeyhülislam* was asked to relate to complaints against al-Hanafi Efendi. Saqallah is cited as saying he would not feel comfortable about being nominated to the position of Jaffa's *kadi*).

³¹ For instance, see BOA, Y. MTV., 77/140, 10 Nisan 1309 (April 22, 1893) (a collective petition sent from Gaza with the signatures of 150 people in support of the *mufti* al-Sayyid Muhammad Hanafi Efendi al-Husayni).

³² BOA, DH. MKT., 54/14, 15 Zilkade 1310 (May 31, 1893) (the Ministry of the Interior refers the matter of the *mufti* to the *şeyhülislam* for its decision, including the related material).

³³ BOA, DH. MKT., 359/26, 23 Recep 1312 (January 20, 1895).

Ankara. From there the three sent petitions and begged to be pardoned and be allowed to go back to Palestine.³⁴

Interestingly, I did not come across many other collective petitions from Gaza other than the ones discussed above. One could have perhaps expected to find petitions about matters such as the town's development, grain trade,³⁵ and the like, as was the case in other places, but so far research in the archives has revealed no such documents. One striking collective petition from the time after the Young Turk Revolution I did come across, however, shows inter-faith mobilization in Gaza. Dozens of notables and leaders of the town's communities including Jews, Christians and Muslims sent an interfaith petition to the *Sadaret* in support of Mustafa Efendi (the former official responsible for registering state land in the sub-district). They also castigate in their petition the period of the dethroned Sultan Abdülhamid II.³⁶

Conclusion

As seen in the collective petitions discussed above, the provincial town of Gaza on Palestine's southern coast witnessed considerable tensions and rifts among its elite at the end of the nineteenth century, mainly over the issues of positions in the local administration and religious apparatus, but in fact over influence and prestige. These were manifested in collective petitions sent by coalitions of notables to the central authorities in Istanbul. In light of the difficulty to freely express their desires and concerns or to act politically, the Gazans reverted to the well-known institution of petitioning

³⁴ BOA, DH. MKT., 2193/104, 16 Zilhicce 1315 (April 27, 1899) (the Ministry of the Interior to the *Sadaret* about a request by *Mufti* al-Hanafi and others to be sent to Jerusalem and be tried with the *kaymakam* of Gaza and his supporters who, it is claimed, persecuted them; an approval is needed for a decision by the Council of Ministers on this matter); Y. PRK. AZJ., 40/89, 22 Haziran 1316 (July 5, 1900) (a petition to *Mabeyn* submitted by Muhammad al-Hanafi Efendi, his brother 'Abd al-Hayy and his son 'Arif to be pardoned and, it is implied, allowed to go back to their home from exile in Ankara where they had resided for three years); about this affair see also Büssow, *Hamidian Palestine*, pp. 292-3.

³⁵ For an example in which the issue of grain does come up in an individual's petition in the framework of struggles among the town's elite, see BOA, BEO, 507/37962, 18 Teşrin-i evvel 1310 (October 30, 1894) (a request from Jerusalem to examine a petition by 'Abd al-Hai al-Husayni against Gaza's *kaymakam* and the *kaza*'s accountant who for personal gain allegedly allowed poor-quality wheat to be authorized for shipment even though they were told in advance it would be rejected, and thus they caused great damage to state coffers).

³⁶ BOA, HR. TO., 400/8, 11 Temmuz 1325 (July 24, 1909).

the ruler. This allowed them instant communication with the imperial centre.

Nonetheless, unlike the original aims of the institution; namely to complain about injustices and abuse of power by low to middle-level officials and bureaucrats, such petitions were now used to conduct local politics through the imperial centre, settle accounts, and attempt to shift the balance in internal struggles. Thus, even though such collective petitions were for the most part pre-organized by interested parties - who perhaps even put some pressure on people to sign them - they provide a good view of the cleavages within Gaza's elite, the power alignment within this town and the shifting coalitions.

Can all these be considered the public opinion of the Gazan elite at the time or even that of the people of Gaza more generally? Or were these only manifestations of the old "politics of notables", to use Albert Hourani's well known phrase? Given the absence of a free press and the ability to organize politically, on the one hand, and the changing status of the subjects in the empire's provinces and their altered relationships with the imperial centre on the other, collective petitions of the kind discussed here clearly emerge as one of the best tools to evaluate attitudes in a provincial town such as Gaza, as in other places in the empire at the time. In terms of Herbst's definition, in the case of Gaza expression of public opinion was indeed associated with advances in technology (i.e., the ability to send telegraphs and letters quickly and cheaply directly to Istanbul), and economic and political reforms (i.e., the struggle over the town's leadership and for positions in the newly reformed provincial administration, and the strengthening of the town's influence over its hinterland). Possible transformations in the social structure, however, were not deep seated in Gaza at this time and should be largely excluded.

The collective petitions by rivalling coalitions in Gaza - even when being pre-organized by interested parties - were a manifestation of a collective behaviour which led to discussions among participants of issues known to wider circles in this town. The signatories, because they were members of the urban elite in Gaza and entangled in this town's politics were certainly aware of the competition for positions, influence, and power among the leading urban families who solicited them, and may themselves have benefitted from entering into the fray.

Appendix

A collective telegraph petition with the names of some 150 people supporting the *mufti* of Gaza, al-Sayyid Muhammad Hanafi Efendi al-Husayni

Source: BOA, Y. MTV., 77/140, 10 Nisan 1309 (April 22, 1893)

This petition deals with the intense squabbles over the post of *mufti* in Gaza between the Husaynis and their rivals from the Saqallah family. It was signed by some 150 supporters of the serving *mufti* in Gaza among the town's elite and was most probably not spontaneous. Note the intermediary through which the petition was addressed to the sultan and the wide use of Islamic figures of speech, vocabulary and symbols throughout the petition.

To the distinguished great gazi, Field Marshal Derviş Paşa,

After praying to God to save the power of our master, *Amir al-Mu'minin* [the Ottoman sultan], some of the *'ulama*, *ashraf* and merchants of Gaza beg, in the sacred name of the Prophet and in the name of our master *Amir al-Mu'minin*, may God give him victory, that you transmit our petition to the threshold of the sultan. Like others, the people of our sub-district, with God's blessing, enjoy the sultanic policy of justice, they are living in comfort like brothers without the deceit or intrigue [that exists] in other places, and they pray continually to our merciful ruler.

[However] currently, Muhammad Saqallah, together with three people like him who are known for their bad reputation, have plotted since about a year ago against our most learned and pious *mufti*, al-Sayyid Muhammad Hanafi efendi al-Husayni, who is known for his dedicated service to the state, as did his forefathers, to nominate Saqallah in his place. Because the well known attributes of Saqallah are incompatible with the esteemed task, when his intrigues became known to the higher instances, orders were issued to reject their baseless complaints, and as a result the public started blessing our just ruler [*malikuna*] who supports the truth.

Then Saqallah approached Istanbul to tarnish the good name of our *mufti*. Afterwards he came back to Gaza upon being appointed to serve as the head of Jaffa's *shari'a* court. A month after he came back, Saqallah returned to Istanbul together with his three supporters, 'Abdalla al-Fayid, Ramadan Abu-Khadra, and Salih al-Shawwa. If an edict had been issued to inquire about them or investigate their complaints in the sub-district and

in the district, or by [sending] a special officer, or [by inquiring] in the vicinity, their acts, which are opposed to the exalted will [of the sultan], and the truth behind their baseless claims, signed by them and by their supporters, which [includes] names without real people behind them, would have been clear.

Since we know the justice of our master, may God support him, we dare to submit a petition to beg for justice, to punish the intriguers, in the sake of God and his Prophet, and to protect the honest people and the people of [religious] knowledge, so that the good prayers of the public for the supporter of truth, our master *Amir al-Mu'minin*, will multiply.

BOA, Y. MTV., 77/140, 10 Nisan 1309 (April 22, 1893) (2)

[illegible][illegible]