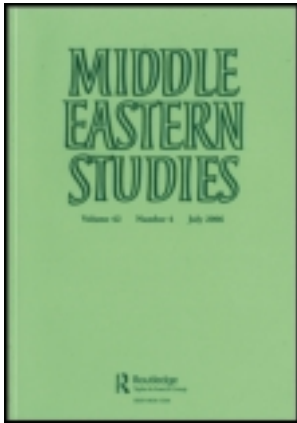


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Middle Eastern Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fmes20>

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Published online: 11 Jun 2013.

To cite this article: Yuval Ben-Bassat (2013): Rural Reactions to Zionist Activity in Palestine before and after the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 as Reflected in Petitions to Istanbul, Middle Eastern Studies, 49:3, 349-363

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2013.783823>

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Rural Reactions to Zionist Activity in Palestine before and after the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 as Reflected in Petitions to Istanbul

YUVAL BEN-BASSAT*

It is fairly rare to find first-hand accounts dating back to the end of the nineteenth century that give voice to the rural population and the Bedouins of Palestine regarding their initial encounters with the Zionist colonists. The problem of subaltern representation in this formative period is even more acute in Palestine than in other areas of the former Ottoman Empire due to the troubled political history of this area in the twentieth century. Aside from the fact that historically the rural population was predominantly illiterate and left very little evidence behind for future generations,¹ the severe bi-national political conflict that led to the destruction of hundreds of Arab villages in 1948 and the displacement of their population eradicated much of the evidence about these localities.² The lack of organized Palestinian national archives which would document and preserve the modern history of Palestine's Arab population is another reason for this dearth of material. Not surprisingly, much of what we know about early Zionist–Arab encounters is based on various Jewish and European sources which, although varied and in part very informative, do not account for the full spectrum of the problem with all its nuances, cultural dimensions, and long-lasting historical precedents, customs and norms. In the words of Rashid Khalidi:

[R]egarding issues crucial to the modern History of Palestine like the overall economic and social effects on the Palestinians of land sales to Zionist purchasers, the scope of peasant dispossession and resistance, the degree of politicization of the rural population, and the impact of Zionist settlement on the Palestinian Arab rural majority ... the British and Zionist records are necessary central sources ... and while attention must be paid to the newspapers and activities of the elite Arab urban population ... what happened at the village level should be the primary focus, and sources that reflect this local reality should be sought out.³

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As indicated in the above quote, other than the issue of the absence of sources, analyses of Arab opposition to Zionist activity during the late Ottoman era, as well as during the Mandate (a period which has received significantly more attention in the literature), predominantly focus on the educated urban elites and not on the rural population. This in part stems from the assumption, shared by many historians, that the educated elites assumed a greater role in shaping the course of the conflict developing in Palestine and in leading Palestinian society than other groups such as the rural population. Mandel, for instance, writes in the introduction to his classic book on the origins of the conflict in Palestine, *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, that he chose to focus ‘almost entirely on the reactions of the political elite among the Arabs to Zionism, because in the long run it was their response, and not that of the peasant masses, which was significant’.⁴

However, in order to comprehensively analyse the development of the political conflict in Palestine after 1908 and the rise of political opposition to Zionist activity among the Arab educated elite, it is important to examine the series of clashes between Jews and Arabs which took place on the ground in rural Palestine starting in the early 1880s, the beginning of proto-Zionist colonization in dozens of localities around the country. As Khalidi convincingly points out, these ‘scattered early incidents were important not only in defining the terms of the Palestinian–Zionist conflict, but also in the genesis of Palestinian identity’.⁵ In this regard, research on late Ottoman Palestine still tends to deal predominantly with the period following the Young Turk revolution of 1908, which is perceived as the formative period for the political conflict in this land, often at the expense of previous periods. The liberalization of political activity and the reinstatement of parliamentary life and the constitution allowed the seeds of local Arab identity to germinate after the revolution, a process that was accelerated by the spread of the Arab press in the Levant and the end of Hamidian censorship. Concomitantly, for the first time clashes between Jews and Arabs in rural Palestine also involved Arab urban circles and were extensively covered by the press and echoed in political circles. These developments, combined with the general disappointment among the Arab population over the outcome of the Young Turk revolution especially with respect to the continuation of Jewish immigration and settlement activity in Palestine, helped crystallize the first steps toward political opposition to Zionist activity.⁶ Nevertheless, in order to have a more complete and sequential picture of Jewish–Arab relationship at the time, the period before 1908 must be explored as well.

In an attempt to fill in this gap, this study examines five petitions sent to Istanbul by the rural population of Palestine dealing directly or indirectly with the effects of Zionist colonization activity as of the early 1880s. Two of the petitions were sent prior to the revolution of 1908, whereas the other three were sent in the years following the revolution. Although the analysis of petitions as historical texts has several limitations, as will be discussed below, these documents nonetheless shed light on the changes in the discourse on Jewish activity among both the rural population which initiated the petitions and the urban milieu where the petitions were organized and written by professional petition writers. The petitions reveal the complexity and multi-dimensional facets of Zionist–Arab relationships and provide a perspective that goes beyond the traditional (hagiographic) characterization of the political conflict between the two populations that typically dominates research. As regards

attitudes toward the Zionist activity, the watershed of the 1908 revolution is clearly reflected in the petitions, their content, tone and language. All in all, the five petitions provide a more nuanced perspective on the unfolding of Jewish–Arab relations.

Petitions as a Historical Source

Were petitions to the Ottoman sultan at the end of the nineteenth century still common and to what extent do petitions constitute valid historical texts? Despite the lingering effects of the previous patrimonial system, the massive reforms and efforts at modernization gradually undertaken in the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century gave it the semblance of a modern bureaucratic state. Under such circumstances, it makes sense to assume, at least on the face of it, that the traditional long-lasting Ottoman–Islamic institution of petition to the ruler would lose its importance, if not vanish completely, and give way to more modern means of pursuing justice and redress from the state, its representatives and institutions. These include the establishment of *nizami* courts, including higher and lower appeal courts, in the empire's provinces and their differentiation from the *shari'a* courts; the introduction of the Ottoman civil code that was based on a codification of the *shari'a* law as of 1869 and throughout the 1870s (the *Mecelle*); the establishment of modern-style state ministries; the operation of administrative councils in the provinces on several levels which dealt locally with petitions on issues such as the assessment and collection of taxes; and even the short-lived parliament and constitution of the mid-1870s. Nevertheless, as the Ottoman archives show, numerous petitions continued to be sent to Istanbul from the provinces during this period, in fact in growing numbers, suggesting that the institution of petition to the Ottoman ruler did not lose its importance or relevancy and continued to serve as a channel of direct communication between the imperial centre and the subjects in the provinces that bypassed the bureaucracy. Moreover, it took on new importance and went through a process of revival, change and transformation.

In part, this process was facilitated by the introduction of new technologies and means of communication (i.e. post offices, telegrams, railroads and steamboats) which overcame geographical and physical barriers. It enabled every Ottoman subject to contact Istanbul quickly and easily and demand redress, without travelling or significant expense, as was often the case in the past. In part, however, it was also the result of the state's unprecedented intervention and regulation of many aspects of its subjects' lives (censuses, registration of land, tax collection, presence in the provinces, education, health, infrastructure projects, etc.), which strengthened its image as the address for its subjects' complaints. The impact of the autocratic, highly centralized rule of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1908/9) also needs to be taken into account. During his reign, the institution of petitioning to the ruler was considered another means of control and legitimization. Abdülhamid II even established a special office (Maruzat-ı Rikâbiyye Dairesi) in the Yıldız Palace to handle petitions, and his representatives collected petitions from subjects during Friday prayers and on religious holidays. This suspicious sultan used petitions to gather valuable information and intelligence on the whereabouts of various officials, office-holders and local leaders, and perhaps even to block unnecessary reforms and changes.

Most of the petitions found today at the Central Ottoman Archives in Istanbul (Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi) were sent by the urban population and covered an enormous range of topics. Urbanites submitted both personal petitions about specific

matters, which concerned them as individuals, as well as collective petitions about issues affecting groups of people. Individuals' petitions dealt with injustices by local officials, demands to charge offenders and criminals with wrongdoings, the status of certain lands, taxes and business disputes, salaries and familial issues, to mention only some.⁷ Collective petitions tended to involve complaints about the conduct of senior local officials and demands to replace them, taxes (unfairly) levied on merchants and landowners, the status and classification of lands, development plans, the security situation, moral and religious matters and so on.⁸ The archival materials, however, show that the rural population also submitted a considerable volume of petitions, although narrower in number and scope and dealing mainly with taxes, the status of lands, and abuse of power by officials.

The petitions were sent to Istanbul by mail or telegraph. They were almost always written by professional petition writers, *arzuhalcis*,⁹ and not by the petitioners themselves, who were for the most part illiterate. The *arzuhalcis*, in return for a fee, served as an intermediary between the Ottoman subjects and the sultan and his senior representatives. They enabled petitioners, especially those who were illiterate but others as well, to express their claims within a framework and mechanism recognized by the Ottoman authorities while using the jargon, language and codes of literary expression sanctioned by the Ottoman system. They thus acted as go-betweens who allowed the rural population to adhere to the rules of the game – i.e. the Ottoman system of petitioning to the sultan – and by so doing enhanced the presentation of their case and increased their chances of obtaining redress.

Yet the fact that the petitions were not written by the petitioners themselves means that they should be read with scepticism since the phraseology may have led to misunderstandings, inaccuracies and distortions. It could be claimed that these crafted petitions, which were at times even written based on manuals explaining how to write petitions to various functionaries regarding various matters, were not an authentic representation of the rural populations' actions, wishes and intentions. In fact, some historians claim that the petitions are no more than literary compositions which are informative about the rules of petition submission and the accepted (uneven) discourse between the rulers and their subjects, but cannot be analysed as historical texts that faithfully reflect the petitioners' words/world-view. Often the petitioners did not even have the basic skills to review the contents of the petition, a fact which certainly impeded their ability to fully and accurately present their case. Nevertheless, beyond the formulaic phrases, the fancy wording, the required blessings and the accepted structure of the petition, the petitions were based on a historical understanding of a certain event as perceived by the petitioners that was reflected in their narrative, as penned by the *arzuhalcis* (to some extent these narratives can be confirmed by outside sources, as will be shown below).

Historical Setting

The size of the Jewish population of Palestine prior to the First World War is a highly controversial issue. Based on Ottoman and British censuses, and on statistical calculations, McCarthy estimated the Jewish population of Palestine in 1914 at 61,000 people, about 8 per cent of its total population.¹⁰ Other estimates, usually based on figures provided by Arthur Ruppin,¹¹ assess the size of the Jewish population of Palestine on the eve of the First World War to be between 80,000–90,000

people, about 14 per cent of Palestine's total population.¹² It is estimated that during the first and second *'aliyot* (sing. *'aliya*), the term used in Zionist historiography to designate the waves of Zionist immigration to Palestine which took place in 1882–1903 and 1904–14 respectively, some 10,000 people settled in dozens of agricultural colonies (*moshavot*, established mainly during the 'first *'aliya*' but sporadically also later) as well as cooperative settlements (*kvutsa / kibbutz*, established after 1910), which constituted the backbone of the 'new *yishuv*', the modern, national, Jewish community in Palestine. These agricultural villages were established mainly in several hubs in Palestine's coastal plains and lowlands.

At the beginning, almost every newly established Jewish settlement clashed with its Arab neighbours over issues such as borders of plots, grazing and water rights, theft and various kinds of assault. In some cases, minor quarrels, which can perhaps be interpreted as 'cultural misunderstandings', turned into violent confrontations culminating in injuries and even deaths. Occasionally, tensions persisted for years and led to costly trials, boycotts and mutual complaints to the Ottoman authorities. At times clashes turned into regional conflicts involving other colonies and villages in the region. In most cases, however, cultural misunderstandings were only a trigger for unrest whose underlying cause was tensions concerning other issues, usually a struggle over resources (i.e. land and water), especially given the fact that the two sides gradually learned to know each other better. Thus, even 20 years after the establishment of the first Jewish colonies, clashes with the Arab population were a matter of daily routine, although usually these did not reach the level of open violence, as occurred from time to time in various localities.¹³

Jewish–Arab Interactions as Reflected in Petitions to Istanbul by the Rural Population

1. *Rehovot and the Bedouins of Khirbat Duran.* The first case study deals with claims of ownership by Bedouins in Khirbat Duran, some 25 kilometres south-east of Jaffa. Representatives of the Bedouin group of al-Sitriyya/Arab Abu al-Fadl¹⁴ petitioned Istanbul several times soon after the colony of Rehovot was founded in 1890,¹⁵ arguing that the new colonists forced them to leave their land, prevented them from cultivating land they had been occupying for many generations, and had chased them away:

Based on this, and since we are Bedouins who have lived in tents in this khirba [Khirbat Duran] from olden times and we have no other place besides it, and further we have no other land to cultivate, and since we are from amongst the Bedouins who are loyal subjects of the exalted and eternal state, which is our protector, without expecting anything in return; and based on the famous justice of the state and the justice and equity of your Excellency which are renowned all over the world, with the hope that we will not be the only ones to be deprived of obtaining the justice and equity of the exalted state; we have no other choice but to submit this petition to beg for the issuance of an exalted order to allow us to remain in our place of birth where we reside, based on the current arrangement and not to let the Jews [Israelites] chase us away and prevent us from cultivating the land in a way which will guarantee their and our rest and benefit; or else issue an exalted order to allocate us land from the imperial property, which would be sufficient for our livelihood and to sustain our families and children.¹⁶

Zionist sources indicate that Rehovot had an argument during the first year of its establishment with the Bedouin group living to the east of the colony, which leased some of the lands bought by the colony on a yearly basis.¹⁷ Levin-Epstein, the head of Rehovot's managing committee during its first years, wrote the following about this dispute:

As said, the land of Duran [Rehovot] is comprised of nearly 10,600 dunams. Of these, the previous land owner rented out around 600 dunams to Bedouins, who were close neighbours to Rehovot, as well as rivals. Given that we were newcomers in the country, who did not know the language, and the practices of the place were alien to us, the first quarrel between us and the Bedouins took place while they were sowing their land. 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 Bedouins, 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 sowed it only once [thus far], with summer crops, and therefore had the right to sow it once more with winter grain crops, harvest it, thresh it, a task which will take the whole summer, and only then they will leave. We did not know if they were speaking the truth, therefore we asked Mr. Hankin [Yehoshua Hankin, a leading Jewish land dealer] to come to us and explain the root of the issue. Mr. Hankin told us that the Bedouins were right. Thus, we compromised with the Bedouins: provided that they removed their tents from our land, they could come and cultivate the land they rented, until they collected the winter crops. In such a way, the first quarrel between us and our neighbours ended in a good way.¹⁸

The Bedouins, for their part, admitted in their petition that the land where they resided had previously been sold to a local landowner (in Arabic: *min ahl al-watan*), but claimed that before the arrival of the Jewish colonists in 1890, whom they accuse of buying the land in an underhand fashion with the help of a person named Hajj 'Ali Haykal Efendi, a member of Jaffa's Administrative Council (in Arabic: *majlis idara*)¹⁹ they had reached an understanding with the landowner who let them stay and continue cultivating the land as tenants.²⁰ They claimed that they had not reached a similar arrangement with the Jews. These events were apparently resolved amicably and did not lead to violence. However, sometime later the colony and the Bedouins of al-Sitriyya clashed over a grazing dispute, which the author Moshe Smilansky from Rehovot, who witnessed the events, claims were connected directly to the Bedouins' strong initial feeling that the land on which Rehovot was established was theirs.²¹

Petitions of this kind by Bedouins illustrate the disparity between the way they perceived the issue of ownership of land and the interpretation of Ottoman law and the government's official policy. After the introduction of the Ottoman Land Law of 1858, the government demanded 'the registration of all lands in the land registry office, in the name of the actual possessors of the right of usufruct (*tasarruf*)'.²² As far as the Bedouins were concerned, the fact that they had occupied a certain plot of land and cultivated it for many years was sufficient to grant their rights over it. This

explains their demand to the government to force the colonists to compromise with them or grant them equivalent land to the one from which they had been evicted. The Bedouins emphasized historical rights and existing arrangements which they felt should be upheld. The Jews, on the other hand, emphasized their legal rights and the fact that the Bedouins had no legal standing regarding the land, that the land had been purchased, and their willingness and flexibility toward the Bedouins. In the words of Gershon Shafir who tried to theorize this problem:

The conflicts over customary rights were only the upper layer of a decisive historical encounter between two theories and legal bases of ownership: the absolute right of private ownership on which European capitalism rested and which already was indirectly introduced into the Ottoman Empire by the Land Code of the Tanzimat, and the more diffuse, but not less extensive, rights of usage in practice in many pre-capitalist societies.²³

2. *Gedera and Villagers in the Region of Masmīyya-Qastina.* Villages in the region of Masmīyya-Qastina,²⁴ in the northern part of the Gaza sub-district (*kaza*), repeatedly petitioned collectively to demand a reduction in their *vergi* tax (land and property tax).²⁵ In one of these petitions, the villagers cite three recent examples of land transactions in their region, which they consider evidence of the land's real value.²⁶ The first case was vacant land (*mahlul*) in the Arab village of Zarnuqa to their north which was sold at an auction (*müzayedede*).²⁷ The second example dealt with land bought for the establishment of the Jewish colony of Gedera, also in their vicinity.²⁸ The third case was land owned by rich, influential people whose identity is not disclosed. In all three cases, the villagers claimed, the land sold was evaluated at much lower prices than theirs, although the price of these lands should have been similar and the property tax should have been calculated at lower rates.²⁹ While expressing their frustration at the tax rates they were required to pay, the petitioners refer directly to the Jewish colonization activity in their vicinity and provide specific details regarding it. In this context, it is interesting to see how the villagers phrased their demand for justice from the sultan: 'It is known to your Highness that the mercy and compassion of the ruler, may God save him, is attributed to all the dominions of the Empire and does not discriminate one over the other, but encompasses all. Is it possible that these just rules and orders will let us suffer from this injustice and unfairness?'³⁰

The Jewish activity was thus used here by the villagers as a reference, and as a way to demand equal treatment by the state to that allegedly given to the colonies whose apparent better treatment upset the petitioners.

3. *The al-Fula Incident.* The al-Fula incident took place in northern Palestine two years after the revolution, and symbolized the initial politicization of the conflict and the involvement of the Arab urban circles in it. Al-Fula was a village located in Marj Ibn 'Amir (the Jezreel valley) at the foot of the Nazareth mountains. The Sursuk family from Beirut bought large segments of the valley from the Ottoman government in 1872, during the reign of Sultan Abdülaziz (r. 1861–76). In 1910 Elias Sursuk sold the land of al-Fula, some 3,500 dunams, to a Zionist organization called the Jewish National Fund (JNF), which was established at the beginning of the century

to purchase land and facilitate Jewish colonization activity.³¹ The JNF's attempt to exercise its ownership rights and settle colonists there led to tensions and eventually to a clash between the villagers of al-Fula, who previously were tenants on Sursuk's land, and the Jews who settled there. The former were encouraged by the *kaymakam* of the sub-district of Nazareth, Shukri al-'Asali,³² who refused to complete the transaction, and the generally negative attitude toward Zionist activity which had spread in the empire and in Palestine after the revolution, including in the press.³³ As far as they were concerned they cultivated and possessed the land, had the right of usufruct over it, and did not care whether the owners were from Beirut or elsewhere as long as the situation on the ground remained the same. The Jews, on the other hand wanted to implement their full ownership rights as they saw fit, and in accordance with Ottoman law.

The villagers of al-Fula turned to the Ottoman institution of petitioning and submitted a petition to the grand vizier against Sursuk Efendi (Ilyas Sursuk) claiming that together with another person, an Ottoman middleman who helped facilitate the transaction, they had sold the lands of their village to Zionists who were not Ottoman subjects. Interestingly, their use of the terms 'Zionist' and 'sons of the religion of Moses' (in Turkish *siyonist musevi*) and 'non-Ottoman' (in Turkish *yabancı ecnebi*) in the petition contrasts with the older petitions discussed above where Jews were called 'Israelites' (in Arabic *isra'iliyyun*) or *musevi*. The villagers expressed concern for their livelihood and lands, and added that there were about 1,000 people living there who had no other land or sources of livelihood.³⁴ Moreover, they added that they rejected the oppression of foreigners, and made an uneasy comparison with the Ottoman state which had ruled them for many years, while using the same vocabulary (*tahakkum*, i.e. oppression, arbitrary power). Thus, on the top of what we know and what was published about the incident of al-Fula, which deteriorated into a bloody fight and was widely reported in the Arabic press in Palestine and in the Levant, the villagers' petition provides information about their own perception of the event. The land transfer was perhaps legal by the book, but it affected their daily lives and deprived them of their sources of livelihood. This helps account for their resistance to the establishment of the cooperative settlement of Merhavia on land purchased from Sursuk by the JNF.³⁵

4. *Masmiyya and the Bedouins of al-Wuhaydat*. This case, which took place in 1910, does not deal directly with Jewish activity but is still very telling. It involved the village of Masmiyya, some 25 kilometres north-east of Gaza,³⁶ and the Bedouin group of al-Wuhaydat³⁷ who were both fighting over land known as al-Mukhayzin.³⁸ The conflict led to a trial and the submission of dozens of petitions to Istanbul by both parties, more so by the villagers. In a nutshell, the villagers claimed that they had cultivated the land for hundreds of years whereas the Bedouins took possession illegally during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1908/9). Through their connections in Gaza, the Bedouins were allegedly able to obtain illegal title deeds for the land which prompted the villagers to take the matter to court.

Two aspects of this conflict are striking. The first was the fact that the villagers' petitions written by the *arzuhalcis* castigate the Abdülhamid era so soon after it ended. While adapting the petitions to the new discourse of the post-Hamidian period, a decision which was doubtless motivated by flattery, the petition terms the

previous era one of darkness and tyranny, whereas the new post-revolution era was described as sunshine.³⁹ Moreover, there is an unusual reference to constitutional rights, the new age in the empire's history, and the subjects' right to be protected by the rule of law.⁴⁰ Second, among the villagers' repeated arguments is the claim that unless the state and its legal institutions protect them, the land will eventually find its way into Jewish hands as had often occurred during the despotic era of Abdülhamid II.⁴¹ The villagers thus blame the former regime for allowing Jewish activity to take place and warn that the same thing could happen again. The petition writers and the villagers were probably well aware of the change of tone with regard to Jewish activity after the revolution and the spread of opposition to it in the press and among the urban elite of Palestine; otherwise they would not have referred to this particular threat.

5. *Rehovot and Zarnuqa*. The last case study dates to 1913. Representatives of dozens of villagers in the *kaza* of Gaza sent a collective petition, interestingly together with a tribal group located in the *kaza* of Jaffa near al-'Awja (ha-Yarkon) river, against the activities of the two large Jewish colonies of Rishon le-Zion and Rehovot in their vicinity. The villagers wrote to the grand vizier that the Jewish colonies had treated them harshly, attacked travellers who passed near the colonies, hired Jewish and foreign guards who behaved very aggressively towards the rural population, and possessed illegal weapons. They argued, moreover, that the local court had issued summons to several Jews but the colonies had replied that these individuals were out of the country:⁴²

It is well known that the exalted state works continuously for the welfare of the people and the numerous degrees it issues clearly testify to this. The state does not discriminate when applying justice and conferring mercy between poor and rich, peasant and townsman, Muslim, Christian and Jew. However, the above-mentioned Jews attacked the people of our village, robbed and looted their belongings, killed, and even violated their families' honour, all this in a way which we cannot find words to describe . . . One example of their attacks is that they appointed Jewish and foreign Cerkes (Circassian) guards and put them on duty armed with various weapons, including illegal ones such as Martin [guns], Mauzner [pistols] and knives,⁴³ to ride with their horses on the public roads. They catch every villager who travels along the public road, beat him, and take his clothes and money. They kill whoever opposes them. They also shoot passers-by on the public road, and murder them. At first, the guards of 'Uyun Kara [Rishon le-Zion] attacked two camel owners who were transporting iron. They wanted to take their clothes, money, and camels, but they refused to hand over their camels and fled from 'Uyun Kara with their camels, while protecting each other [in order to find refuge] with the people of justice. But unfortunately, they had to walk for three hours in the lands of the Jewish colonies [Rishon le-Zion, Nes-Ziona, Rehovot] and another hour in the land of the village of Kubayba in the sub-district of Gaza [before they reached their village Zarnuqa]. Meanwhile the guards of 'Uyun Kara had time to call the guards of Duran [Rehovot] who opened fire on the abovementioned camel convoy, injuring five servants [Qawas] and a horse which they shot.⁴⁴

Jewish sources indicate that the immediate cause for the petition was a violent clash between the colony of Rehovot and the adjacent Arab village of Zarnuqa which took place a few days prior to the submission of the petition, on 23 July 1913. The event started as an argument over accusations of theft from vineyards owned by Jewish farmers located between the colonies of Rishon le-Zion and Nes-Zionah, some 15 and 20 kilometres respectively south-east of Jaffa, and quickly deteriorated into a fight between Rehovot and the nearby village of Zarnuqa, where the presumed thieves fled and found refuge.

The incident left an Arab and a Jew dead and resulted in tremendous hostility between the two sides, even though eventually reconciliation (*sulh*) was officially organized by an Arab moderator.⁴⁵ The fact that a Jewish guard in Rehovot was found dead a few days later in dubious circumstances, possibly as an act of revenge, contributed to the turmoil.⁴⁶ Tension was also high in the colony of Rehovot itself between the 'first *'aliya'* farmers and the young hotheaded 'second *'aliya'* Jewish guards of *Hashomer*, who demanded a stern response to the village of Zarnuqa.⁴⁷

The Zarnuqa affair raises a number of important points.⁴⁸ The fact that dozens of villages signed a petition against the Jewish colonies very rapidly after the events took place (the petition was sent to Istanbul within a few days of the event) is indicative of the event's wide-scale influence. The mass petition accused the Jewish colonies of illegal usage of weapons and aggressiveness towards their neighbours in an unprecedented fashion. On the ground, the involvement of hundreds of people in the brawl between the two sides was fairly rare in the history of the two people's relationships up to then. Moreover, the clash in 1913 was the culmination of a series of other daily confrontations and the tense relationship between the Arab rural population and the Jewish guards in the region, a claim which is strengthened in a recent study by Gur Alroey on the *Hashomer* organization in Rehovot and its confrontational tactics.⁴⁹

Analysis and Conclusion

In the hundreds, if not thousands of petitions from Palestine dating back to the last decades of the Ottoman period in the central Ottoman archives in Istanbul, Zionist activity occupies a fairly minor place and is mentioned as only tangentially impacting on other developments, processes and activities that preoccupied Palestine's population at the time. This perhaps reflects the relatively limited scope of Jewish activity other than in several specific regions where the Jewish presence was concentrated. The small number of petitions on Jewish activity contrasts sharply with official Ottoman correspondence in which proto-Zionist activity received considerable attention due to the government's overt opposition and its fear of the emergence of a new national problem in the empire.

As seen, the petitions, despite their limitations, provide a glimpse of the attitudes held by the rural population and allow a unique grassroots view of the Zionist–Arab encounters in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century, which is sometimes described in the literature but rarely from first-hand accounts. Notwithstanding the intermediary of the petition writers, who voiced their complaints on paper and served as the spokesmen for the rural population, the documents still provide valuable information on the petitioners' aspirations, perceptions, concerns and actions. Hence

the petitions can fill in missing data and help shed light on historiographical problems such as the scarcity of primary sources, the focus on the urban elites, and the overemphasis on the period after 1908.

The petitions highlight the conflicting perceptions of land ownership between the rural population and the Jewish colonists. The latter bought the land, received legal title deeds and wanted to fully exercise their ownership. The former, however, often acted on the basis of notions of traditional rights, norms and practices that had existed for generations. As far as they were concerned, occupying a place and cultivating or grazing there for generations granted them ownership rights to all intents and purposes, a point which demonstrates the cultural rift between the two sides.

The five case studies discussed here suggest some overarching conclusions as regards the early Zionist–Arab encounters and the 1908 revolution as a watershed in the two people’s relationships. The innovations and changes brought about by the 1908 revolution are echoed in the petitions. This was seen in allusions to the new era as the shining of the sun over the people’s heads, the bashing of Abdülhamid II’s reign as a time of oppression and tyranny, the discourse on the new constitutional and legal rights,⁵⁰ the strong warnings regarding Jewish activity and the accusations levelled against it which were unprecedented and encompassed wider circles than before (as seen in the massive petition from 1913) and the way Jews were now termed Zionists. These are all indications of the change that took place after 1908.

In a recently published book on Palestine during the Young Turk period, Michelle Campos writes that ‘the Arab–Jewish conflict in Palestine was not immanent, but rather erupted in dialectical tension with the promises and shortcomings of “civic Ottomanism”’.⁵¹ The sporadic Jewish–Arab clashes before 1908 indeed should not be seen as inevitably leading to the national conflict which developed later on. Nonetheless, these clashes were later ascribed nationalist interpretations and considered the forerunners of the conflict.⁵² Very soon after 1908, however, the intensified on-going Jewish–Arab clashes in fact constituted a new relational era between Jews and Arabs, as reflected in the petitions. Despite sincere attempts to find a common ground and a shared vision among Palestine’s various sectors, the clashes in rural Palestine soon took on political overtones. They were on the agenda of Arab members of the Ottoman parliament and the nascent political parties, the booming press dealt with it intensively, and larger urban, educated Arab circles were attentive to its repercussions and warned of the effects of on-going Jewish activity.

Finally, in almost every new case of Jewish settlement activity, petitions were submitted to Istanbul by the rural population and the Bedouins in the vicinity who were affected, either directly or indirectly, whether by dispossession, conflict over borders of plots, the loss of grazing grounds, water rights, ‘cultural misunderstandings’ and the like. A preliminary analysis of the Jewish colonization activity in lower Galilee at the very beginning of the twentieth century, for example, where a group of Jewish colonies was established by the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), reveals that this activity led to the submission of petitions to Istanbul and to extensive correspondence about the matter between the Ottoman bureaus. Similar findings are applicable to Kfar Saba in central Palestine.⁵³ They suggest that the petitions constituted a way for the rural population to express their dissatisfaction and resentment over the arrival of the newcomers whose settlement usually involved some kind of friction with the local population. Future research thus needs to examine patterns of petitioning

by the rural population of Palestine in more cases of Jewish colonization activity in Palestine during the last decades of Ottoman rule.

Notes

1. On the difficulties in studying rural societies with a scant literary tradition and the sources available to Ottoman historians dealing with these societies, see A. Singer, *Palestinian Peasants and Ottoman Officials: Rural Administration around Sixteenth-Century Jerusalem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.1–23; S. Faroqhi, *Approaching Ottoman History: An Introduction to the Sources* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chapter 4.
2. R. Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp.89–93.
3. *Ibid.*, p.91.
4. N.J. Mandel, *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p.xvii.
5. Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, p.93.
6. For a description and analysis of these processes, see Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, pp.110–11, 114–17; Mandel, *The Arabs and Zionism*, pp.84–92.
7. For example, see Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (henceforth BOA), HR TO, 536/77, 17 Jan. 1892 (a petition in French and its translation into Ottoman which was sent from Jaffa to the grand vizier by telegraph, signed by the Jewish Maghrebi entrepreneur and activist Yosef Moyal against the *kaymakam* of Jaffa whom, according to Moyal, had trespassed. Moyal was a ‘serial petitioner’ who submitted dozens of petitions against local officials and members of Jaffa’s Arab elite in the 1890s and 1890s, who in turn often complained about him).
8. For example, see BOA, HR TO, 397/86, 24 Temmuz 1308 [5 Aug. 1892] (a collective petition sent from Jaffa to the grand vizier signed by dozens of landowners headed by the town’s *Nakibüleşraf*, against a land survey in the town designed to change the status of lands which *de facto* were treated as *mülk* category lands back to their original *de jure* status as *miri* lands).
9. On petition writers, see J. al-Din al-Qasimi and K. al-‘Azam, *Qamus al-Şina’at al-Shamiyya* [Dictionary of Crafts in Damascus], vol. II. (Paris: Mouton & Co, 1960) [in Arabic]; J. Chalcraft, ‘Engaging the State: Peasants and Petitions in Egypt on the Eve of Colonial Rule’, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.37, No.3 (2005), pp.306–7; G.L. Lewis, ‘Arz Hāl’, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition (Brill Online, 2013).
10. J. McCarthy, *The Population of Palestine: Population History and Statistics of the Late Ottoman Period and the Mandate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp.17–24, 37.
11. Ruppin was the head of the World Zionist Organization branch in Palestine, established in Jaffa in 1908.
12. See for example I. Kolatt, ‘The Organization of the Jewish Population in Palestine and the Development of its Political Consciousness before World War I’, in Moshe Ma’oz (ed.), *Studies on Palestine During the Ottoman Period* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), p.211 (the data refer to 1914); McCarthy argues that these numbers are highly inflated and are based on inaccurate estimates by Ruppin for ideological purposes aimed at magnifying the Jewish component of Palestine’s population. See McCarthy, *The Population of Palestine*, pp.18–19.
13. For example, see the log-book of the colony of Rishon le-Zion from the first years of the twentieth century, which is preserved today at the municipal museum in the city of Rishon le-Zion. It documents daily clashes with villagers in the vicinity of the colony, with whom the colonists had known for over 20 years, over grazing, theft, trespassing, business disputes, sanitary issues and the like.
14. About this group, see W. Khalidi, *All that Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992), pp.356–7; D. Grossman, *Arab Demography and Early Jewish Settlement in Palestine: Distribution and Population Density during the Late Ottoman and Early Mandate Periods* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2004), p.35 [in Hebrew].
15. Rehovot was one of the largest and wealthiest ‘first *‘aliya*’ colonies. It was established by the Warsaw Jewish society *Menuha ve-Nahala*, which was influenced by the liberal Jewish thinker Ahad ha-‘Am. Rehovot was an independent colony which was not directly run by the Rothschild administration, unlike many of the other colonies, although it received a great deal of indirect aid and support from

- this administration. During its first years Rehovot was run by a very effective and strong administrative committee, which was one of the reasons for the colony's success.
16. BOA, HR TO, 395/32; see also DH MKT, 1771/129; 1795/85.
 17. See Central Zionist Archive, A 216/1, 29 Feb. 1892, letter no. 19, pp.45–8 (a letter by Levin-Epstein to *Menuha ve-Nahala* society in Warsaw; see also E. Levin-Epstein, *Zikhronotai* [My Memoirs] (Tel Aviv: ha-Ahim Levin-Epstein, 1932), pp.240–44; on Rehovot's relationships with its Arab neighbours during the late Ottoman period, see Y. Ro'i, 'The Relations between Rechovot and its Arab Neighbors, 1890–1914', *Zionism*, Vol.I (1970/71), pp.150–203 [in Hebrew].
 18. *Ibid.*, p.240.
 19. On this family, see Iris Agmon, *Family and Court: Legal Culture and Modernity in Late Ottoman Palestine* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), pp.222–7; on 'Ali Haykal Efendi, see BOA, HR, TO, 393/44, 27 Teşrinisani 1305 [9 Dec. 1889] (Haykal applied to the grand vizier against Yosef Moyal, arguing that he insulted him as well as other officials and subjects, and that he collaborated with a person named Istiryadi Efendi, a member of the administrative council of Jerusalem, to turn *miri* lands which Moyal bought near Jaffa into lands with *mülk* status. Moyal was claimed to have sold part of this land to Istiryadi as part of the deal between them. Moreover, Istiryadi apparently voided complaints against Moyal which were sent to the administrative council of Jerusalem, and helped Moyal avoid sanctions. As proof of his argument, Haykal attached a *mazabata* (official decision) against Moyal which was issued by the administrative council of the *kaza* of Jaffa on 29 August that year and sent to Jerusalem after Haykal filed a complaint and an investigation was conducted by the council).
 20. BOA, HR TO, 395/32.
 21. M. Smilansky, *Rehovot: Shishim Shenot Hayeha* [Rehovot: Sixty Years since its Establishment] (Rehovot: Dvir, 1949/50), pp.31–2 [in Hebrew]. Smilansky adds another interesting point to his description of the clash with al-Sitriyya, namely the aid extended to Rehovot by the other Jewish colonies in the region which sent reinforcements once the news of the events reached them. Eventually the two sides learned to get along with each other despite uneasy relationships which lasted a few more years.
 22. Haim Gerber, *Ottoman Rule in Jerusalem, 1890–1914* (Berlin: K. Schwarz, 1985), p.199.
 23. G. Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp.201–2.
 24. For a very interesting examination of Qastina's social composition based on the 1905 Ottoman census, see J. Büsow, *Hamidian Palestine: Politics and Society in the District of Jerusalem, 1872–1908* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), pp.258–65; about the villages in this region, see 'U. al-Tabba', *Ithaf al-A'izzah fi Ta'rikh Ghazzah* [Presenting the Notables in the History of Gaza], Vol.II, ed. 'A.Z. Abu-Hashim (Ghazzah: Maktabat al-Yaziji, 1999), pp.426–39 [in Arabic].
 25. A set of four petitions that are clearly related to each other, although there are differences in the number of villages submitting each petition. See BOA, HR TO, 395/60, 29 Kânunusani, 1306 [10 Feb. 1891]; 395/61, 5 Şubat, 1306 [17 Feb. 1891]; 395/104, 1 Zilhicce 1308 [8 July 1891]; 396/79, 18 Rabiyyülâhır 1309 [21 Nov. 1891, in the translation into Ottoman of the letter in Arabic it is erroneously written that the letter has no date].
 26. BOA, HR TO, 396/79.
 27. Zarnuqa was located south-west of the colony of Rehovot, some 25 kilometres south-east of Jaffa. On this village, see W. Khalidi, *All that Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992), pp.424–5; D. Grossman, *Expansion and Desertion: The Arab Village and its Offshoots in Ottoman Palestine* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1994), pp.164, 240 [in Hebrew].
 28. Gedera was a small colony in the northern Gaza sub-district established in 1884 by single, secular-minded, young members of the *Bilu* organization who immigrated to Palestine from Russia and initially supported a socialist and Jewish nationalist agenda.
 29. BOA, HR TO, 396/79.
 30. BOA, HR TO, 395/104.
 31. On the al-Fula incident and its importance, see Rashid Khalidi, 'Palestinian Peasant Resistance to Zionism before World War I', in W.E. Said and C. Hitchens (eds.), *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question* (London and New York: Verso, 2001), pp.219–24; Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, pp.100–101, 106–10; Mandel, *The Arabs and Zionism*, pp.106–7.

32. Al-'Asali came from a noble family in Damascus; later he became member of the Ottoman parliament as a representative of his hometown. He was known as a very vocal opponent of Zionist activity and used this card in his campaign and later in parliament.
33. Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, pp.107–9; Khalidi, 'Palestinian Peasant Resistance to Zionism', pp.219–24.
34. BOA, DH MUI, 93/41, 24 Nisan 1326 [7 May 1910]; see also DH MUI, 98-2/1, 26 Mayis 1326 [8 June 1910] (from the Ministry the Interior to the Ministry of Finance, regarding an investigation about illegal sales of lands in northern Palestine by Sursuk and Twayni to foreigners. The Ministry of the Interior transferred letters which were received from Beirut and Jerusalem about the matter. Beirut said the registration of the land transaction was a deliberate falsification by foreign consuls and the official in charge of the registration of contracts.
35. In a workshop at the University of Zürich in October 2011 entitled 'Rifts in Time, Israel/Palestine, 1911–2011', Joel Beinin raised the possibility that the petition by the villagers of al-Fula was initiated by al-'Asali himself who forced them to remain on their land despite its sale and literally did everything he could, almost to the point of insubordination, to prevent the transaction from being completed.
36. On this village, see Khalidi, *All that Remains*, pp.124–6 (there were in fact two villages called Mas-miyya, 'the little' and 'the big'; 'Uthman al-Tabba', *Ithaf al-A'izza fi Ta'rikh Ghazza* [Presenting the Notables in the History of Gaza], Vol.II, ed. 'A. Abu-Hashim (Gaza: Maktabat al-Yaziji, 1999), p.439 [in Arabic].
37. Scattered information about this Bedouin group is 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*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (1985), pp.20–49; 'A. al-'Aref, *Toldot Be'er-Sheva u-Shvateha* [History of Beer Sheba and Its Tribes] (Tel Aviv: Shani, 1937), p.75 [in Hebrew].
38. For information on this locality, situated some ten kilometers south of Ramle, see <http://www.palestineremembered.com/al-Ramla/al-Mukhayzin/index.html>
39. BOA, HR TO, 401/58, 22 Kânunusani 1325 [2 Feb. 1910].
40. BOA, DH MUI, 77-1/24, 9 Şubat 1325 [22 Feb. 1910]; on the discourse on constitutional rights in the aftermath of the 1908 revolution, see M.U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), p.6. Campos writes that 'Ottoman citizens studied and cited the constitution and other revolutionary "sacred texts" that endowed them with political power, and they utilized a variety of tools to exercise and preserve that power'.
41. BOA, DH MUI, 77-1/24; for similar warnings by the people of Nablus, which shows that using the threat of Jewish takeover was becoming commonplace, see BEO, 3959/296856, 9 Teşrinievvel 1329 [11 Nov. 1913] (a collective petition to the grand vizier by the notables of Nablus asking him to develop a railway line from Jerusalem to 'Afula through their town and to invest in various other infrastructure projects in Palestine to save the region from Jewish domination. They enumerate the various advantages of these projects for the empire and its subjects. The Ministry of the Interior informs the grand vizier that the projects mentioned by the notables are already in the planning stages and that the information they refer to is not up to date.
42. BOA, DH EUM EMN, 30/5, 16 Temmuz 1329 [29 July 1913].
43. literally 'white weapon,' probably similar to the French 'arme blanche,' which refers to a knife.
44. BOA, DH EUM EMN, 30/5, 16 Temmuz 1329 [29 July 1913].
45. Smilansky, *Rehovot*, pp.75–6.
46. *Ibid.*, p.75.
47. *Ibid.*, pp.73–5; G. Alroey, 'The Servants of the Settlement or Vulgar Tyrants? A Hundred Years of the Hashomer Association: A Historical Perspective', *Cathedra*, Vol.133 (2009), pp.84–94 [in Hebrew]. Alroey writes about the conduct of *Hashomer* in the Zarnuqa affair that 'the rhetoric of blood, betrayal, murder and national pride transferred the Jewish-Arab conflict from a local dispute between Jewish and Arab farmers to national and even nationalistic realms' (p. 93).
48. For the repercussions of the Zarnuqa affair, see Mandel, *The Arabs and Zionism*, pp.174–5, and for the broader context, see chapter 8. Mandel writes that 'the incident provided anti-Zionists with a pretext to step up their activities'. In this regard, he cites second-hand reports about a petition sent by the local rural population in the region of Rehovot to the governor of Jerusalem complaining about the activity of the Jewish colonies but he makes no mention of their appeal to Istanbul. His source

- for this petition is correspondence between Jewish activists, who claimed that the person who organized the villagers' petition to the governor of Jerusalem was sheikh Suleiman al-Taji from Jaffa, the founder of the Ottoman Patriotic Party in this town, who was known as a strong opponent of the Zionist activity.
49. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*, pp.84–94; see also Shafir, *Land, Labor, and the Origins of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict*, p.141 (cites examples of contemporary critics in the colonies of Hashomer's harsh attitude toward the Arab rural population).
 50. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*, pp.6–7, 45. On the bashing of Abdülhamid's period, Campos writes that, 'In public addresses and on the pages of the newly free press, complaints of the sufferings of the past thirty-three years abounded. Father, brother, and son had feared each other, neighbors had informed on one another, and man had to hide his own thoughts from himself' (p.45); on the changing discourse in rural petitions in the second half of the nineteenth century in Egypt which reflected/adjusted to the spirit of the times, see Chalcraft, 'Engaging the State'. Chalcraft writes that 'peasants were quick to appropriate, in the service of older notions of right and justice, new constitutionalist discourses, and lodged new and sometimes assertive appeals to elections, the rule of law, popular choice, rights, and even, in one case, equality. An older moral economy drew on newly authorized concepts to bolster its largely preexisting claims, which were then subtly transformed by this process of appropriation. Peasant moral economy was no barrier to such appropriation, then; in fact, it helped drive it forward' (p.19).
 51. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*, p.7.
 52. Israeli politicians, for example, often refer to a Jewish blacksmith named Avraham Yalovski who was murdered in 1888 in the colony of Nes-Ziona by unknown perpetrators as the first victim of the Jewish–Arab conflict. To cite one such example, see the speech of late Prime Minister Rabin at the signing ceremony of the Gaza–Jericho accord on 4 May 1994. <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Archive/Speeches/PM+RABIN+SIGNALING+CEREMONY+OF+THE+GAZA-JERICHO+ACC.htm>
 53. BOA, Y PRK UM, 78/34, 28 Kânunusani 1321 [10 Feb. 1906] (testimony by the imam of the Bedouin group of Arab al-'Awja and the *mukhtars* of Bir 'Ades and Qalqilya about the improper way in which the land of Kfar Saba was sold to Jews about a decade earlier. These statements were recorded during an investigation concerning this matter).