

## BEING IMPERIAL, BEING EPHEMERAL: OTTOMAN MODERNITY ON GAZA'S SEASHORE

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**Abstract** | Gaza of the late Ottoman period was integrated into an imperial web of Eastern Mediterranean port cities. As a maritime nodal point exporting grain grown in the arid terrains of southern Palestine, it enjoyed a peculiar status. This article explores the materialization of this status in the form of two interrelated urban institutions, a maritime pier and a municipal hospital. It is argued here that Gaza's pier-hospital construction project between 1893 and World War I exposed tensions and conflicts that radiated outwards in concentric circles, from the urban to the provincial and then to the imperial, bringing into play the very pillars of imperial modernity: public health and economic development, and the related question of which strata of the Ottoman body politic would dominate the two. Further along in the pier-hospital project's realization, the same fault-lines informed an inter-imperial conflict between the Ottomans and their European rivals over the shore of Gaza, such that this modest sea outlet transformed into a global arena of struggle for political legitimacy and economic sovereignty. Probing the undercurrents of this conflict, the article ultimately returns to the materiality of the pier-hospital initiative to argue for the peculiar modernity engendered by Gaza's imperial status, one that was ephemeral as it encompassed states of construction and of ruin almost simultaneously.

### INTRODUCTION

Late Ottoman Gaza: an imperial port. Is such a description a misnomer? If the picture it conjures up is that of a colorfully bustling 19<sup>th</sup>-century port city, then the term imperial port is certainly misplaced. Gaza, with its meager port infrastructure, was utterly unlike the cosmopolitan, booming mercantile hubs of Ottoman Alexandria, Izmir, Salonica, or Mersin. It was certainly different from the Levantine Haifa or Beirut, Amin Maalouf's famous *Echelles du Levant*. Nevertheless, late Ottoman Gaza corresponds fully to the definition of an imperial port in terms of its role within the *system* of Ottoman ports and of the social and political tensions it engendered. World-System theorists encouraged historians to think structurally rather than comparatively on the relations between port cities on a global scale. World-System

theory critics argued for the multidirectional formation of these structures as inclusive of social and cultural elements rather than merely inhabiting economic vectors flowing from core to periphery. The case presented here draws on both approaches to narrate a local story of globalization and modernization, and their shared discontent in a far-flung, virtually forgotten, borderland of the Ottoman state. This article traces the local endeavor to establish a pier on the Gaza shore (see Figure 1) and a municipal hospital inside the city, from the initial concept in the early 1890s to its abandonment on the eve of World War I. The vision of a port and a hospital, and later their realization as actual facilities, construction sites, and finally as ruins, generated local tensions between the imperial center and the province, between the Ottoman Empire and its rivals, as well as between local players within Gaza. In keeping with oth-



er major port cities and political centers, money, honor, and imperial legitimacy were all at stake, thus staging Gaza as an imperial site.

What did the process of turning a provincial port into an *imperial* one entail for Gaza? The article takes a magnifying glass to the pier and hospital project as the core features of this trajectory. The initiative to establish both structures started from below, in Gaza, and by way of the district capital in Jerusalem, before eventually garnering the backing of the Sublime Porte. Once their intra-imperial status had been defined, the port and hospital could proceed to the next stage, which involved an inter-imperial dispute between the Ottoman Empire, on one

hand, and its competitors, on the other, as to the former's sovereign right to collect port taxes. As they wended their way upwards through the political hierarchy from the municipal to the global, the Gaza pier and hospital animated this dispute not merely as physical facilities, but as markers of liberal values upon which political claims were made. The pier represented economic development and free trade, the hospital represented public health and humanitarianism, and together they stood for civilization and progress. Claim-making in the name of these ideals inhabited an intriguing dynamic: In the planning phases, the economic and humanitarian rationale of the port-hospi-



**Figure 1:** The Gaza Pier in 1940.

Source: Moshe Schwartz and Trudy Schwartz-Hiller, *The Pier and Fishing Boats, Gaza, 1940*, black and white negative, Moshe and Trude Schwartz Collection, Digital Collections, Younes & Soraya Nazarian Library Online Catalogue, University of Haifa, 990014893300402791, [https://haifa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/1g6dahv/972HAI\\_MAIN\\_ALMA11154601210002791](https://haifa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/1g6dahv/972HAI_MAIN_ALMA11154601210002791) (accessed 14 September 14 2020).

tal project replaced, rather than complemented one another, with one claim retreating as the other advanced. Later, though, in their incomplete form as a ruin and construction site, the pier and the hospital, economics and humanitarianism, constituted an ideological whole. But before exploring the story of the two structures and their ideological scaffoldings as part of the history of Gaza's short-lived port, it is worth inquiring first what exactly constituted a 'port' in the period in question.

### BACK TO GRAIN IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

Although the pier discussed here was completed in 1906, Gaza's maritime activity in the age of steam goes back more than three decades earlier. During the 1870s, commercial trade in Gaza barley—cultivated in the city's hinterland by semi-nomadic agriculturalists and local peasants—became established, growing to constitute the single largest share of the city's annual income by the 1890s. The last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the efflorescence of the Eastern Mediterranean's famous port-cities. As Gaza struggled to establish its very first port infrastructure, namely a pier, a road connecting the city center to the coast, and a customs house, such innovations were already a thing of the past elsewhere. In Jaffa, a stone quay had been built around mid-century, plans to construct breakwaters and a modern harbor were drawn up starting in the 1860s, and the harbor acquired a lighthouse in 1865. Once the Jaffa-Jerusalem rail line was laid in 1892, its extension into the water made the port's main pier, and a new quay, 6 meters wide and 75 meters long, was built in 1898.<sup>1</sup> Haifa, for its part, boasted a jetty for the loading and landing of lighters by the 1850s, and a deep-water harbor and breakwaters were designed by a British company in the 1890s, with German-led works starting after the city was connected to the Hijaz railway

1 Dan Mirkin and Haim Goren, "Yafo-namal le-lo' namal: le-Kishlonan shel ha-tokhniyot min ha-me'a ha-tsha' 'esre le-haqamat namal moderni 'amoq mayim be-Yafo [Jaffa — a Port without a Port: Failure of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Plans to Build a Modern Deep-Water Port]," *Cathedra* 143 (2012), pp. 133–152 [in Hebrew]; Avitsur Shmuel, *Nemal Yafo: be-Ge'uto uve-shq'ato* [The Port of Jaffa: its Rise and Decline] (Tel-Aviv: Milo 1972), pp. 107, 113 [in Hebrew].

branch line in 1905 (although work was halted by the outbreak of World War I).<sup>2</sup> In Izmir, modern facilities replaced the old, privately-owned wooden piers in 1880.<sup>3</sup> In Beirut, work on modern harbor infrastructure started in 1890, becoming operational in the following decade.<sup>4</sup> In Salonica, similar projects started in 1897.<sup>5</sup>

Was Gaza, with its history of Mediterranean connections since biblical times, a latecomer to this race for maritime accessibility? Here I wish to suggest that Gaza's late start and slow development can better be explained by the way it *participated* in this new system of ports rather than the way it competed with them. In other words, the question is not how Gaza developed relative to its neighboring ports, but how it did so as one of them.

This perspective becomes clearer looking at the products being exported from these ports. Gaza was first and foremost an exporter of grain to Europe, specifically barley destined to the beer-brewing industry in Britain. Elsewhere, I show why this specific industry required Gaza barley.<sup>6</sup> Here, my concern is the place of Gaza within the wider Levantine trade in grain in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Faruk Tabak has demonstrated in the broadest framework possible, roughly from the 1840s onwards, at the end of what is known as the Little Ice Age, farmers throughout the Mediterranean Basin returned to the cultivation of grains in the plains and valleys after some three centuries of retreat to vineyards and olive groves cultivation in the hillsides and mountains. In the Eastern Mediterranean, this trend was complemented by the Ottoman 1858 Land Law,

2 Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress: Palestine in the Age of Colonial Development, 1905–1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 47–54; Alex Carmel, *Ottoman Haifa: A History of Four Centuries under Turkish Rule* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), pp. 127–129.

3 Elena Frangakis-Syrett, "The Making of an Ottoman Port: The Quay of Izmir in the Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of Transport History* 22/1 (2001), p. 29.

4 Jens Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut: The Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 91.

5 Basil C. Gounaris, "Salonica," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 16/4 (1993), p. 500.

6 Dotan Halevy, "Lishtot (bira) meha-yam shel 'Aza: 'Aliyata ve-shq'ata shel 'Aza ke-'ir mishar yamit ba-me'a ha-tsha' - 'esre [Drinking (Beer) from the Sea of Gaza: The Rise and Fall of Gaza's Maritime Trade in the Nineteenth-Century]," *Ha-Mizrah he-Hadash* 55 (2016), pp. 35–60 [in Hebrew].

which encouraged landowners to farm the wastelands and marshes of the coastal plains and gradually claim them as possessions. Not unrelated was the resettlement of previously malaria-stricken regions following the advent of quinine, which caused a resurgence of “King Corn,” as well as other grains as a staple export to European cities.<sup>7</sup>

For Tabak, the return to the plains and to grain crops reintegrated the Mediterranean Basin into a cohesive unit (in the Braudelian sense) after centuries of detachment, creating the false notion of time-honored *Méditerranéité* on the eve of the twentieth century. Roger Owen has shown convincingly that the combination of growing security in the plains of Greater Syria and the repeal of Britain’s Corn Laws led to a rise in production and export of cereals from the Levant to Europe starting in the 1840s. This process further accelerated in the final quarter of the century.<sup>8</sup> Linda Schilcher has brilliantly demonstrated how the “dry-farming boom,” which saw the commercialization of Syria’s grain production during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, shifted the landscapes of cultivation belts around the region’s main cities and gave rise to new socio-political formations; it is this phenomenon that laid the basis for Schilcher’s analysis of the emergence of family-based factionalism in late-Ottoman Damascus.<sup>9</sup> Focusing on the political economy of Beirut, Yaşar Eyüp Özveren has further advanced our understanding of this process, extending it to the coastal regions. Özveren suggested that following the opening of the Suez Canal, locally-produced grain gained prominence as an export product, now that silk could be obtained more easily and cheaply from India and East Asia.<sup>10</sup> Unlike silk, however, grain was not being produced in Beirut’s immediate hinterland, and thus Beirut merchants could not easily transport their product for export without significantly increasing its costs,

leaving other coastal cities that grew grain in their vicinity to benefit. The resurgence of Tripoli as a trade hub in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is one example, and on the Palestinian coast Haifa obviously benefitted the most from the new grain trade since it enjoyed a natural maritime harbor and geographic access to the wheat and barley of the Hawran and the northern plains of Palestine.<sup>11</sup> It is in that capacity that Haifa required the building of a Hijaz railway branch line from Dar’a, which indeed quadrupled its grain exports after 1905,<sup>12</sup> the year that the Gaza pier was also completed. At times, Beirut merchants served as middlemen in sales to Europe as well as to the Ottoman state itself. As Kristen Alff has recently shown, some Beirut-based firms grew to the extent that they took full possession of the supply side by acquiring huge swaths of agricultural land in Mount Lebanon, in Marj Ibn ‘Amir (the Jezreel Valley), around the coastal plain of Jaffa, in Mount Hebron and Jenin, as well as in Adana-Mersin region in Anatolia, and around Alexandria in Egypt.<sup>13</sup> Given this larger transformation of the region in terms of the transition to the grain trade, the development of Gaza as an exporter of barley was not much of a coincidence, but part of a broader trend.

Yet, Gaza played a specific role in the turn-to-grain economy. In the dry saline lands of the desert-facing region of Gaza, precipitation starts late and remains on average below 200 mm. annually. Unlike other species of grain, barley flourishes in such conditions, and Gaza had traditionally been a source of the grain for caravans travelling between Egypt, Syria, and the Hijaz.<sup>14</sup> During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> cen-

7 Faruk Tabak, *The Waning of the Mediterranean, 1550–1870: A Geohistorical Approach* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 21–25, 290–297.

8 Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800–1914* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1993), pp. 174–179.

9 Linda Schilcher, “The Grain Economy of Late Ottoman Syria and the Issue of Large-Scale Commercialization,” in Çağlar Keyder and Faruk Tabak (eds.), *Landholding and Commercial Agriculture in the Middle East* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 173–195.

10 Yaşar Eyüp Özveren, “Beirut,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 16/4 (1993), pp. 480–481.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 481.

12 Eugene L. Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850–1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 66.

13 Kristen Alff, “Levantine Joint-Stock Companies, Trans-Mediterranean Partnerships, and Nineteenth-Century Capitalist Development,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60/1 (2018), pp. 157–158.

14 Abdul-Karim Rafeq, *Ghazza: Dirasa ‘umraniyya wa-ijtimaiyya wa-iqtisadiyya min khilal al-wathaiq al-shariyya 1273–77/1857–61* [Gaza: A Demographic, Social, and Economic Study Based on the Shari’a Court Records 1273–77/1857–61], (Damascus and Amman: n.p., 1980), pp. 6, 77 [in Arabic]; Nu’man al-Qasatli, *Al-Rawda Numaniyya fi siyahat Filastin wa-ba’d al-buldan al-Shamiyya* [Nu’man’s Garden: Travels in Palestine and other Regions of Greater Syria], edited by Shawkat Ramadan Hujja, ‘Imad Rifat Bishtawi, and Muhammad ‘Iami (Irbid: Mu’assasat Hama-

tury, the Ottoman enforcement of sedenterization among nomadic populations and the flood of Egyptian peasants and semi-nomads pushed into Palestine by Ibrahim Paşa increased the cultivation of such lands considerably. By the 1870s, maritime trade had replaced traditional overland desert transport routes and Gaza had lost its role as a caravan way station.<sup>15</sup> Instead, it gradually turned toward the sea to continue supplying Ottoman maritime travelers and to export the ever-increasing surpluses of barley from its hinterland to Europe.<sup>16</sup> In this dual role, it followed its own path as both a desert- and sea-facing town, but it was also a player in the wider Mediterranean and Ottoman grain trade.

The combination of these two roles made Gaza the port that steamers traveling the Levantine coasts passed through to collect barley on their way to or from other ports. The economic logic was simple. Overland transportation was (and remains) much more expensive than maritime transport, making it uneconomical for Gazan farmers and merchants to sell their product beyond the confines of their own region. Their location close enough to the sea (unlike other regional breadbaskets such as the Hawran or the Beqa'a) allowed Gazan merchants and their customers to engage in the broader grain trade with relatively little investment in land routes or coastal infrastructures. The only items that had to travel by land prior to the final purchase were the grain samples attesting to the barley's quality.<sup>17</sup> As is evident from several cases in the 1890s, Beirut concessioners traded with the Ottoman state in Gaza grains as staples of provisioning for the annual Hajj. They thus sent their ships from Beirut to load the cargo already on their way to Jedda. These ships "stopped by" or "called at" (*uğrarak*) maritime outlets such as Tyre, Acre, Haifa, and Gaza. There, small rowboats, *faluka* or

*ma'una* in the vernacular, carried the grains from the coast to the steamers anchored safely in deeper waters.<sup>18</sup> Due to the vast continental shelf that expands roughly two miles into the sea on Gaza's coast, steamers could not enter the port for fear of running aground and being damaged. They thus were completely dependent upon local lighters.

As a result, aside from Haifa which would grow into a fully-fledged port city, sea outlets based on lighter transport, such as Gaza, Acre, and Tyre, emerged as satellite or "daughter ports" to the booming coastal cities of Beirut and Alexandria. Each of them experienced the process differently, however.<sup>19</sup> For Acre, becoming a satellite port was clearly part of a historical decline, while in Gaza it was seen as the hope for a new and promising regional role. To be sure, major ports like Beirut, Alexandria, and, later, Tripoli, Haifa, and Jaffa, could also serve as calling stations for steamers on multi-destination journeys. What differentiated Gaza and other similar satellite sea outlets was that they mostly supplied seasonal products, often cultivated nearby, and that they only rarely took in imports. European manufactured products were of course sent to Gaza but they generally came in overland from Jaffa, Beirut, or elsewhere. Because they were much more lucrative, finished goods justified the relatively high cost of overland transportation whereas exports of raw materials had to go by sea.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, as Johan Mathew observed in the case of the Arabian Sea, steamers were calling in at such maritime nodal points but were not *coaling* there. Small ports on steamer routes did not include

da li-l-Dirasat al-Jami'iyya wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 2011), p. 200 [in Arabic]; Edward Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine, Mount Sinai and Arabia Petraea: A Journal of Travels in the Year 1838* (London: Murray, 1841), p. 378.

15 Ludwig Salvator (Archduke of Austria) *The Caravan Route Between Egypt and Syria* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1881), p. viii.

16 Johann Buessow, *Hamidian Palestine: Politics and Society in the District of Jerusalem 1872-1908* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p. 272.

17 Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA), BEO., 516/3866/2, 3 Eylül, 1310 (15 September 1894) (District Governor of Gaza to the Governor of Jerusalem).

18 BOA, BEO., 516/38660/2, 29 August 1894 (the Governor of Beirut to the Governor of Jerusalem); BEO., 1123/84157/2, 1 Mayıs, 1314 (13 May 1898) (the Governor of Beirut to the Grand Vizirate); BEO., 1118/83816/3, 17 Nisan, 1314 (29 April 1898) (the Governor of Beirut to the Grand Vizirate).

19 "Report for the Year 1889 on the Trade of Alexandria," *Foreign Office Annual Series (FOAS), Diplomatic and Consular Report on Trade and Finance (DCRTE): Egypt*, London, 1890: 10; see similarly the effect on small ports with the rise of Mersin in Meltem Toksöz, *Nomads, Migrants and Cotton in the Eastern Mediterranean* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), p. 96.

20 *Reports from Her Majesty's Consuls on the Manufactures, Commerce and Trade of their Consular Districts* (London: Harrison and sons., 1874), p. 1595; Report for the year 1906 on the Trade and Commerce of Palestine, *Annual Series (AS), Diplomatic and Consular Reports (DCR): Turkey*, London: 1907, p. 11.

coal depots, which made their overall infrastructural apparatus much simpler.<sup>21</sup>

The resulting structural dynamic obviated the need (as well as the opportunities) for capital flow into these small ports. On the contrary, their proximity to the coast, on the one hand, and their monocultural and seasonal type of exports, on the other, made unnecessary the risky investment in roads, rail, storage facilities, and financial institutions. Although Beiruti merchants bought grain in Gaza as part of a wider portfolio of speculative investment throughout Greater Syria and parts of Anatolia, for Gazan merchants, the buying and selling circuits remained immediate and largely local.<sup>22</sup> With no investment in port infrastructures needing to be made, Gazan merchants accumulated wealth but not considerable capital, and when the barley trade declined, they lost their fortunes rapidly, unlike foreign merchants who could disengage without adverse financial consequences.<sup>23</sup>

Consequently, Gaza's meagre port infrastructure around the turn of the century was overall neither a sign of backwardness nor of an embryonic stage of development. Rather, it testified to Gaza's position within a system of Mediterranean ports of varying scales. This notion should be kept in mind given that Ottoman terminology for port infrastructures does not make the typology presented here particularly clear. Documents would often refer interchangeably to: *liman*, a harbor site regardless of function or built infrastructures; *rıhtım*, a quayside or dock laid horizontally along the shore; and, *iskele*, a single pier extending vertically into the water. The French term *échelle*, prevalent in Ottoman correspondence, provides further opportunity for terminological slippage. *Les échelles* were the principal Ottoman port cities where French traders enjoyed the privilege of having stairways or ladders—literally *échelles*—slung down from European

ships to local boats to offload cargo and passengers. The Ottoman term *iskele* comes from the same Latin origin but connotes the modest landing point of a pier, a ladder-like object lying flat on the water surface. Simple as it may be, the pier (*iskele*) discussed below materialized precisely to serve as an imperial position handling exports, complementing a web of principal imperial ports (*échelles*). With this in mind, the next section looks at the port in Gaza from the vantage-point of the imperial center in Istanbul and then links the two perspectives.

### THE RISE OF THE PIER-HOSPITAL PROJECT THROUGH SYPHILIS AND CHOLERA

In May 1893, the members of the Administrative Council of the Gaza sub-district (*meclis-i kaza*) presented the governor of Jerusalem (*Mutasarrıf*) with an ambitious development scheme. They proposed the building of a thirty-bed municipal hospital in Gaza, paving the streets, and digging a sewer system, all within the next twenty-five years. The city of Gaza and its environs had recently experienced the ravages of a syphilis epidemic owing to the absence of proper health and hygiene facilities.<sup>24</sup> Although no historical evidence points to an exceptional spread of the disease in the Gaza region during the 1890s, it is possible that the local council sought to dramatize some occasional outbreaks in the district.<sup>25</sup> As Seçil Yılmaz has noted, syphilis was the focus of a targeted Ottoman imperial effort to secure a body-politic of healthy, able-bodied, and moral subjects in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The state campaign to eliminate syphilis among men whose professions required travel—such as sailors and stevedores, soldiers, and seasonal workers—involved frequent screenings, prophylactic guidance, and the building of syphilis hospitals. The issue was especially high on the Sublime Porte's agenda from the 1890s onwards.<sup>26</sup> It is

21 Johan Mathew, *Margins of the Market: Trafficking and Capitalism across the Arabian Sea* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), pp. 38–39.

22 Alff, "Levantine Joint-Stock Companies," pp. 156–157.

23 Linda Schilcher argues that in grain production of dry-farming conditions capital overall went for seasonal investments such as seeds and money lending dissimilar to the land-sunk infrastructures of plantations or factories. That allowed investors to easily disassociate and shift their interest between different locales at will. See Schilcher, "The Grain Economy," p. 191.

24 BOA, ŞD., 2281/7/3, 23 Şevval 1310 (10 May 1893) (the Governor of Jerusalem to the Ministry of the Interior).

25 Some cases were indicated around Gaza in the 1890s but the main site recognized with Syphilis was Hebron. See J. Macqueen, "Syphilis Insontium in Palestine," *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 10/1 (1 January 1934), pp. 33–50.

26 Seçil Yılmaz, "Threats to Public Order and Health: Mobile Men as Syphilis Vectors in Late Ottoman Medical

also conceivable that an outbreak of syphilis was cited deliberately to further other interests, especially considering how the public health project was to be financed. The council suggested imposing a tax of 20 *para* on each sack of grain and 4 *para* on each *Istanbul kile* (equivalent to one European bushel) exported from Gaza.<sup>27</sup> In addition, the plan outlined an additional 20% duty to be paid by each party to the transaction. To achieve this, the plan called for regulating Gaza's export sites by building a central pier (*iskele*), 4 meters wide and 100 meters long, where grain merchants would load their cargo and be required to pay a pier due, termed accordingly *iskele ücreti*.<sup>28</sup>

This pier, the council argued, would ease the handling of the cargo and avert such frequent mishaps as sacks of grain falling into the water while being loaded onto lighters. A good pier would also allow mail service vessels traveling between Jaffa and Port Said to "stop by" (*uğraya çıkmak*) and serve Gaza. Finally, a functioning pier would stimulate development and settlement of the adjoining 100,000 *dunams* of currently uninhabited coastal sand dunes.<sup>29</sup> The planners estimated that an annual export of 200,000 bushels of grain would yield sufficient tax revenue to build the pier within three years, pave the streets and establish a sewer system in the following five years, and complete the hospital in the remaining seventeen years of the plan.<sup>30</sup> The plan suggests considerable ambition on the part of the Gaza sub-district council. The only other Ottoman municipal hospital in the district was in Jerusalem, the capital, a forty-bed facility built only few years earlier, in 1891.<sup>31</sup> In Gaza, the Anglican Church

Missionary Society (CMS) had been providing basic medical treatment since 1882, with a British doctor joining the local team in 1886 and an in-patient clinic and a dispensary added in 1890.<sup>32</sup> Establishing a municipal hospital was thus not a foregone conclusion and the governor of Jerusalem had to endorse the coupling of the Gaza grain trade with a public health project. "The meager income of this municipality, and the poverty of the majority of the population," he wrote to the Sublime Porte, "would make it impossible to expect their individual contribution" to fight the spread of the "terrifying disease [*illet-i müdhişel*]" that was syphilis.<sup>33</sup>

Referencing the Gaza municipality was cardinal. The plan called for the Gaza Municipal Council (*meclis-i belediye*) to oversee both the actual collection of the tax and the bookkeeping associated with it and, most importantly, the allocation of the revenues. The sub-district council recused itself from access to the money, except in exceptional cases which it would have to justify in advance.<sup>34</sup> The overall development project, including the anticipated port, was perceived as a *municipal* project. The year the project was first presented was also the year of the official establishment of the Gaza Municipal Council. This conjunction of events was likely not coincidental. Yuval Ben-Bassat and Johann Buessow have suggested that municipal tasks in Gaza and other cities had been handled informally several years prior to the municipality's official founding in 1893.<sup>35</sup> It is thus safe to assume that leading local notables were involved in the plan long before its formal unveiling. By 1893, the plan, with the newly announced municipality's role embedded in it, was ready to be submitted to the district governorship in Jerusalem. Gaza's urban elites could consolidate their economic and political clout

Discourse and Practice," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13/2 (2017), pp. 222–243. For the implementation of similar discourse under British and French rule in the interwar period, see Liat Kozma, "Venereal Disease and Mobile Men: Colonialism and Labor in the Interwar Years," in Benoit Pouget and Yann Ardagna (eds.), *Villes, Sociétés Urbaines et Syphilis En Méditerranée et Au-Delà (XVIème-XXIème Siècle)*, (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires d'Aix Marseille, forthcoming).

27 BOA, ŞD., 2281/7/16, 23 Şevval 1310 (10 May 1893) (a copy of the thirteen-point plan sent from Gaza to Jerusalem), articles 1, 5.

28 *Ibid.*, article 8.

29 *Ibid.*, article 2.

30 *Ibid.*, articles 8–11.

31 Zalman Greenberg, "Beit ha-holim ha-ironi ha-turki bi-Yrushalayim [The Turkish Municipal Hospital in Jerusalem]," *Cathedra* 78 (1995), pp. 54–55 [in Hebrew]; Johann

Buessow, "Ottoman Reform and Urban Government in the District of Jerusalem, 1867–1917," in Ulrike Freitag and Nora Lafi (eds.), *Urban Governance under the Ottomans: Between Cosmopolitanism and Conflict* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 116–119.

32 "C.M.S Medical Missions: Gaza, Palestine," *Mercy and Truth* 200/17 (August 1913), pp. 279–280.

33 BOA, ŞD., 2281/7/3, 23 Şevval 1310 (10 May 1893) (the Governor of Jerusalem to the Ministry of the Interior).

34 *Ibid.*, articles 6–7.

35 Yuval Ben-Bassat and Johann Buessow, "Urban Factionalism in Late Ottoman Gaza, c. 1875–1914: Local Politics and Spatial Divisions," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 61/4 (2018), p. 629.

via the international grain trade, the sub-district council, and the municipal council and it is thus no wonder that they saw an interest in linking all three under one proposal. The swift rise of the Shawwa merchant family to prominence at the expense of the more traditionally rooted *kadis* and *ashrafs* of the Husayni family, as presented by Ben-Bassat and Buessow, demonstrates this dynamic very well. Starting in the late 1890s, the Shawwas controlled Gaza's municipal offices while increasing their share in the grain trade.<sup>36</sup>

Following a series of inquiries by the Ministry of the Interior, the Gaza sub-district council was asked to fine-tune its financial plan for the hospital. The council was required to specify the projected cost of the different wards and the types of patient rooms, kitchens, and laundry rooms planned, and to provide an estimate of staff salaries, food, and the overall maintenance of the building.<sup>37</sup> The proposal was discussed once more at the State Council (*Şura-yı Devlet*) level and was eventually rejected. The State Council remarked that based on current financial prospects, there would be no way of ensuring the upkeep of the hospital once it was built. With no other sources of income, "such projects do not last for long (*payidar olmaması*)," the council argued suggesting to find another means to treat the syphilitic inhabitants of the Gaza region.<sup>38</sup>

From its inception to its elimination from the imperial agenda, this project illustrates the striking convergence of spatial scales on which the Empire operated. The syphilis epidemic was certainly not only a local but also an imperial concern, and Gaza's involvement in the barley trade was informed by global economic trends. Nevertheless, both these elements were intimately tied to local affairs in Gaza. In other words, if hospitals and public health were hallmarks of imperial modernity across Ottoman domains, why would the local Gazan export sector have to bear the burden of such endeavors rather than the state's financial instruments? And, if maritime trade was an im-

perial asset, why should its facilitation and taxation be justified on the basis of public utilities such as a local hospital? Theoretically, it would be in the Empire's interest to strengthen its export sector, to collect more taxes, and to fight the venereal diseases that were undermining the imperial body politic.

Certainly, a little more than a decade after the Ottoman default of 1875 and under the watchful eye of the Public Debt Administration, any costly initiative had to earmark, if not imaginatively come up with, a well-defined source of income. For local governors and communities interested in making improvements at the provincial level, such practices of ad hoc financing were commonplace.<sup>39</sup> But, the parties involved in this case also thought of local-global relations in different terms. By raising the question of public health, an imperial issue par excellence, Gaza's elite class tried to align the state with its own financial interests through a local port that would generate the tax revenues needed for the hospital project. They looked to instrumentalizing a global trend, grain exports from Gaza, to solve what they perceived as a local problem—the syphilis epidemic. But the state was not so easily convinced that Gazan trade was going global or that the syphilis threat was acute enough to warrant being managed on any other level but the local one. In imperial eyes, Gaza was not developing into a port and epidemics required higher-grade responses than could be provided at the sub-provincial level.<sup>40</sup> Given these diverging perspectives, the Gazan plan was shelved for the rest of the 1890s.

The state soon reversed itself, however. Barley exports witnessed a steep rise in the remaining years of the decade: when the plan

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 636–637.

37 BOA, ŞD., 2281/7/5, 31 Temmuz 1309 (August 12, 1893) (the District Governor of Gaza to the Governor of Jerusalem).

38 BOA, DH. MKT., 59/36/3/1, 15 Kanun-ı Evvel 1309 (27 December 1893) (State Council decision).

39 In the Jerusalem Municipality, for instance, dues on traffic and commodities made an essential part of the overall budget, including for the upkeep of the city's municipal hospital. Buessow, "Ottoman Reform and Urban Government," p. 125.

40 For the role of provincial councils in administering issues of public health, see Miri Shefer-Mossensohn, "Communicable Disease in Ottoman Palestine: Local Thoughts and Actions," *Korot* 21 (2011/12), pp. 43–45 [in Hebrew]. The Ottoman state's efforts to eliminate syphilis from the region of Kastamonu, only several years after the period discussed here, testify to the vast medical and structural means required. See Ebru Boyar, "An Inconsequential Boil' or a 'Terrible Disease'? Social Perceptions of and State Responses to Syphilis in the Late Ottoman Empire," *Turkish Historical Review* 2/2 (2011), pp. 101–124.



was first proposed, in 1893, Gaza exported around 15,000 tons of barley, but by the second half of the 1890s this quantity had more than doubled to 40,000 tons in 1897, stabilizing at 30,000 in 1898 and 1899.<sup>41</sup> In 1900, the agent for the Prince Line shipping company in Jaffa estimated that Britain imported £120,000 worth of barley from Gaza annually, and thus recommended appointing an official consular agent in the town.<sup>42</sup> During the same period, Gaza was also provisioning the Vilayet of Jedda for the Hajj pilgrimage via Beirut merchants. In 1901, the governor of Jerusalem estimated that Gaza was exporting 1–2 million *kile* of barley per year, the equivalent of 21,000–42,000 tons, a figure that was supported by British consular reports from Jerusalem.<sup>43</sup>

It was this discernable increase in barley exports that prompted the revival of the shelved port-hospital plan around 1900. An initial appeal from the Governor of Jerusalem to the Sublime Porte again bemoaned the loss of cargo due to inadequate facilities incurred both while transporting grain from Gaza's hinterland to the coast and when loading cargo onto lighters. A paved road and a proper pier, he suggested, would improve Gaza's ability to compete with other suppliers of grains to Europe.<sup>44</sup> In response, the Ministry of the Interior gave the green light to examine the question anew and the Department of Public Works prepared plans for two possible types of pier. Another round of consultations concluded that the more expensive of the two, a wood and metal structure, estimated to cost 220,000 *kuruş* should be built. To raise the money required, the ministries involved decided in July 1901 to auction plots of state-owned land on the coast of Gaza. The Ministry of the Interior expected

that there would be great demand for the sand dunes in question and that their value would skyrocket once the plans for the port were published. So now the Land Registry office (*Defter-i Hakani*) joined the circle of players.<sup>45</sup> By April 1902, the State Council Civil Affairs section (*Mülkiye Dairesi*) together with the Ministry of the Navy (*Bahriye*) started searching for a coastal site for the establishment of an official Port Authority,<sup>46</sup> and although it was soon found, other imperial formalities remained to be concluded. The State's Commission for Muslim Migrants had to certify that the land had not been earmarked for the settlement of Muslim refugees (*muhacirler*), and the treasury sought to ensure that future tax revenues from the coastal land, given its projected betterment, would go into state coffers and not to the municipality.<sup>47</sup>

Prominently absent from discussion, however, was the original impetus for the whole project, namely the municipal hospital and the larger public health project. The plan as revived in the early 1900s was solely concerned with making Gaza more conducive to international trade. Moreover, whereas the projected pier had been described as covering its costs in the previous iteration of the plan, its construction was now to be funded by the selling of coastal lands. The grain trade had turned out to be surprisingly profitable during the 1890s, and as the lure of developing a maritime outlet was taking hold in imperial calculations, its presumed contribution to public health concerns no longer seemed relevant. Not for long, however.

In the fall of 1902, the worst cholera epidemic in the history of modern Palestine struck Gaza, with one historian estimating that some 3,000 people succumbed to the disease.<sup>48</sup> The Ottoman authorities determined that Gaza was the source of the epidemic within Greater Syria

41 "Report for the year 1893 on the Trade of the Consular District of Jerusalem," *FOAS, DCRTF: Turkey*, London: 1894, p. 5; Report for the year 1897 on the Trade and Commerce of Jerusalem and District, *FOAS, DCR: Turkey*, London: 1898, p. 10; Report for the year 1898 on the Trade and Commerce of the Consular District of Jerusalem, *FOAS, CDR: Turkey*, London: 1899, p. 7.

42 The National Archives (United Kingdom) (TNA), FO 195/2084, 25 September 1900 (M. Beirut to the British Consul in Jerusalem).

43 BOA, DH. MKT., 2507/115/1/1, 25 Haziran 1317 (8 July 1901) (the Ministry of the Interior to the Grand Vizier); Report for the year 1902 on the Trade and Commerce of Palestine, *AS, DCR: Turkey*, London: 1903, p. 6.

44 BOA, DH. MKT., 2507/115/1/1, 25 Haziran 1317 (8 July 1901) (the Ministry of the Interior to the Grand Vizier).

45 *Ibid.*

46 BOA, İ. BH., 5/9/3/1, 28 Zilhace 1319 (7 April 1902) (the Grand Vizier to the Ministry of the Navy).

47 BOA, DH. MKT., 500/29/2/2, 27 Teşrin-i Sani 1318 (19 November 1902) (the Ministry of the Interior to the Grand Vizier); DH. MKT., 500/29/3/1, 6 Zilhicce 1320 (5 March 1903) (State Council Financial Section to the Ministry of the Interior).

48 Dan Barel, *Ruah ra'a: Magefot ha-kolera ve-hitpathut ha-refu'a be-Erets-Yisra'el be-shalhe ha-tqufa ha-othmanit* [An Ill Wind: Cholera Epidemics and Medical Development in Palestine in the Late Ottoman Period] (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2010), p. 83 [in Hebrew].

and the town was thus virtually quarantined.<sup>49</sup> The effect on the port planning was twofold. First, the grave necessity for medical facilities in the town resurfaced. While syphilis—a slow-spreading disease requiring long-term, geographically expansive treatment, along with high standards of hygiene and restricted sexual conduct—had not been a sufficient trigger to build a local hospital, the cholera epidemic, decimating thousands in several weeks, proved the opposite. Gaza became Palestine's "patient zero," the southernmost point of the Ottoman province from which the epidemic presumably started to spread. This notion invigorated the logic of "localizing" the disease for targeted treatment since the outbreak of the next cholera epidemic would have to be halted by local forces in situ. This in turn rekindled the idea that Gazan revenues, and particularly port-related taxes, should finance a local hospital since it was to some extent Gaza's responsibility as the cholera gateway to prevent the deadly disease from spreading.

The secondary effect of the cholera outbreak, however, undermined the first. Because of the quarantine imposed on the town, exports that year went into free-fall with a mere 2,940 tons of barley estimated to have been shipped out.<sup>50</sup> Worse yet, the quarantine order interfered with the sowing of barley, usually carried out in the autumn before the first winter rains, which in turn resulted in unusually low yields in 1903.<sup>51</sup> The prospect of development in Gaza was yet again in the balance. Discussions about the port project abated for another two years.

In March-May 1905, the State Council and a subsidiary "special committee" approved the final plan for the port. In order to start construction on the pier and pave a road to it, the municipality of Gaza was instructed to take out a loan of 2,000 Turkish pounds. According to this plan, once the pier was completed, local authorities could start collecting duty from merchants, which in turn would cover interest on the loan, the pier's maintenance costs, and finally the

building of the long-awaited hospital. Parceling and auctioning the sand dunes would be put off to a later phase in order for their price to appreciate after the new infrastructure was built.<sup>52</sup> This iteration of the plan once again incorporated the hospital and tax collection into the same scheme. An addendum to the State Council's approval specified which import and export items would henceforth be taxed. They included cereals, oranges, rice, sugar, luggage, liquids, finished goods, domestic animals, pack animals, cattle, as well as passengers.<sup>53</sup> By July 13, the governor of Jerusalem had received the plan as an official *Irade* from the Grand Vizier, and on August 7, it was published in the District of Jerusalem's official gazette, *Kudüs-i Şerif*.<sup>54</sup> For the foreign merchants dealing in Gaza barley, what stood out was of course the price of the grain, which had now become 2 *para* more costly per bushel.<sup>55</sup>

#### SCALING UP THE IMPERIAL CLAIM: TRADE AND HUMANITARIANISM AS IMPERIAL LEGITIMATORS

The Ottoman authorities in Gaza did not wait for the official gazette's publication. They had started collecting the barley tax a few days earlier. The end of the summer was precisely the time when the supply of European barley started to dwindle and the demand for eastern Mediterranean varieties surged. The effect of the new tax was felt immediately. Bewildered merchants telegraphed the British Consulate in Jerusalem to complain, and ships docking in Beirut were uncertain as to whether to continue their journey to Gaza, given that the new price changed their preexisting contracts with local suppliers. The British and Italian consuls in Jerusalem, representing their subject mer-

49 "ha-Yehudim be-'Aza [The Jews in Gaza]," *Havatselet*, November 7 (1902), p. 5 [in Hebrew].

50 Report for the year 1902 on the Trade and Commerce of Palestine, FOAS, CDR: Turkey, London: 1903, pp. 3–6.

51 Gaza is absent from the British trade report for this year, and shipping reports only indicate some 4,000 tons of barley exported. See "Trade Reports," *The Scotsman*, 14 September, 21, 1903.

52 BOA, İ. DH., 1435/35/2, 16 Muharrem 1323 (23 March 1905), 16 Rebiülevvel 1323 (21 May 1905) (*mazbata* by the State Council and *mazbata* by the State Council Special Committee). Rumors around the financial preparations for the pier and the hospital started circulating in Jerusalem in April 1905. See "ha-Shavu'a [This Week]," *Hashkafa*, 18 April 1905, p. 2 [in Hebrew].

53 BOA, İ. DH., 1435/35/1/1, 16 Muharrem 1323 (23 March 1905) (addendum to the State Council's *mazbata*).

54 "Gazze'de iskele ve hastahane inşası," *Kudüs-i Şerif*, 25 Temmuz 1321 [7 August 1905].

55 TNA. FO 195/2084, 16 August 1905 (the British Consul in Jerusalem to the British Consul in Istanbul).

chants, demanded that the Ottoman governor suspend the duty immediately even though he could not reverse an imperial order without being instructed to do so.<sup>56</sup>

Matters soon escalated to involve the higher echelons of imperial diplomacy. In November 1905, the Istanbul embassies of Italy, Greece, Austro-Hungary, Russia, Belgium, France, and Britain staged an orchestrated protest by sending a series of dispatches to the Ottoman Foreign Ministry. All contained the exact same text, written in French, demanding a suspension of the “surtax” until the conditions for its collection were clarified between the Ottoman Empire and the European powers. They demanded, first, that the tax be levied on both foreign and Ottoman subjects; second, that the levy be limited in its objectives; and, finally, that the Ottoman government supply sufficient guarantees for the feasibility of the pier project.<sup>57</sup> What could these guarantees be? In an update to his superior, the British Consul in Jerusalem suggested that the Jerusalem Governor would contract a foreign firm, or at least foreign engineers working for Ottoman companies, to construct the pier and the hospital.

The Sublime Porte was uninterested in such minute details. In response to these claims, the Grand Vizier made it clear that the essential point of the project was to facilitate trade for all, foreigners and Ottomans alike. The Porte rejected the claim that the tax discriminated against foreign subjects and underlined that Ottoman subjects paid dues on imported goods. In addition, the Grand Vizier stressed that by easing the transfer of cargo through the pier, all would be equally able to trade in Gaza, without economic or logistical “impediments and problems.” This rationale of free trade on a small scale justified enacting the levy without previous notice, he added.<sup>58</sup> Absent from this rationale was, once again, the hospital. All that the Grand Vizier saw reasonable to harness

here was the mutual economic gain expected from the project. Note that the same method applied here was the one Gaza used to try to convince Istanbul to embark on the project in the first place. Once more, in a time of export prosperity, only the facilitation of trade was mobilized to justify building the pier and levy the tax.

By the time the Grand Vizier’s reply arrived, the barley-trade season was over, and the issue became moot. Only twelve ships, a relatively small number, called at the port of Gaza during the subsequent 1906 season, which diminished the protests over the tax. Nevertheless, these ships transported some £180,000 worth of barley back to Europe.

The building of the pier was completed by December 1906.<sup>59</sup> Extending 60 meters long and 8 meters wide, it was smaller than had originally been proposed in the 1893 plan. But the reduction in its size was of lesser importance than the larger climatic conditions that prevailed on Gaza’s littoral. Without a breakwater, the waves approaching from the southwest did not allow boaters to float steadily alongside the pier without crashing their lighters into its pillars. As early as the next barley trade season in 1907, the British Consul of Jerusalem observed Gazan stevedores hauling the lighters onto the beach, loading the sacks of barley, and then launching the boats back into the water using built slipways while the newly-built pier stood idle. The pier’s contribution to improving trade was thus more questionable than ever.<sup>60</sup>

In addition, 1907 saw a particularly bad harvest that endangered the very subsistence of the poorer segments of the population, prompting the Ottoman authorities to curtail grain exports from Gaza and elsewhere.<sup>61</sup> By that point, however, the cost of building the pier had still not been fully covered. To close the remaining gap in the budget, the authorities increased the tax from 2 to 5 *para* on each *kile* of barley. Besides the fact that the pier had brought no improvement to trade conditions, this increase in

56 *Ibid*; Italian merchant Alfonso Hussan [sic], for instance, had a sales contract for buying some 150,000 bushels of Gaza barley, now taxable at 300,000 *para*, the equivalent of 7,500 *kuruş* or some £48. BOA, HR. İD., 269/52/13/1, 6 Eylül 1321 (19 September 1905) (a copy of an appeal from the Italian Consulate to the Ottoman Governor of Jerusalem).

57 BOA, HR. İD., 269/52, November 1905 (Foreign Consulates to the Foreign Ministry).

58 BOA, HR. İD., 269/52/9/1, 18 Kanun-ı Sani 1321 (31 January 1906) (the Grand Vizier to the Foreign Ministry).

59 Report for the year 1906 on the Trade and Commerce of Palestine, AS, DCR: Turkey, London: 1907, p. 11.

60 TNA. FO 95/2255, 24 December 1907 (British Consul in Jerusalem E. C. Blech to British Consul in Istanbul N.R. O’Connor).

61 Trade of Palestine for the Year 1907, AS, DCR: Turkey, London: 1908, pp. 14–15, 23–24.

the tax rate once again jeopardized preexisting contracts with British importers. And despite the appeals of the British Consul in Jerusalem, the tax remained at 5 *para* in the years that followed, even after the harvests recovered. The British Consulate continued to monitor tax revenues from the pier and noted that its cost should have been fully recovered by the winter of 1908. To the chagrin of the British, however, the tax remained in place as they continued to purchase Gaza barley the following year. By the end of 1909, Italian merchants who loaded wheat from Gaza's coast also engaged in protest, invoking yet again the fact that the tax had contributed nothing to the dilapidated pier, and that in any case its construction had been completed long ago.<sup>62</sup>

Foreign Ministry correspondence points to a pattern that accorded with the seasonal rhythm of the barley trade. This diplomatic seasonality allowed the Governor of Jerusalem and the Foreign Ministry to easily dismiss the complaints directed by foreign merchants. The first protests usually arose when the prospective harvest was evaluated at the end of winter and the beginning of spring. This was the time that future contracts with foreign merchants were signed on the basis of the anticipated quantity and quality of the grain, and when investments in seed for future seasons was considered. Then came a period of diplomatic dormancy when grain was being harvested and stored. Claims surfaced once more in late summer when the merchant ships arrived to finally collect their cargo often without knowing whether their complaints from a few months earlier had had any effect. Bound to their contracts, they would have no choice but to pay the pier duty, which they did, and the issue was once again shelved until the following season.<sup>63</sup> In the context of this dynamic, the Ottoman side did not have to do much to justify its right to levy the tax. In response to the Italian Consul's claims, for instance, one Ottoman Foreign Ministry official

stated that as of 1905 no other consulate had expressed any dissatisfaction with the tax, and therefore surely some "understanding can be reached."<sup>64</sup> Eventually, until the issue arose again, both sides preferred not to quarrel over a few tons of grain.

But in the summer of 1910 an exceptional event upset this pattern. A British steamer coming from Beirut called at Gaza to unload building materials. This event was rare both because, as mentioned, Gaza was rarely an import node, and since the cargo was not of commercial quality. It was destined to the CMS station in Gaza for the construction of an outpatient bloc (see Figure 2) within the new missionary hospital that had been constructed between 1904 and 1908.<sup>65</sup> The tax collector at the Gaza pier seized the materials until the head of the Gaza mission, Dr. Robert Sterling, arrived to settle the amount due. The British Consul in Jerusalem protested to the Ottoman governor and the dispute quickly reached Istanbul.<sup>66</sup> Since the barley trade had not yet resumed that season, the British Consul was surprised that the tax still applied despite the deliberations of previous years. When the Gaza *kaymakam* was asked to explain, he replied that reservations had indeed been voiced but had never resulted in new instructions. The tax is needed, he wrote to Jerusalem, for the building of a municipal hospital in Gaza.<sup>67</sup> In a more detailed reply, also used by the Foreign Ministry, the governor of Jerusalem elaborated on the moral dimensions of the project: "The need for such charitable institutions (*mu'assasat-i hayriye*) which serve human life, cannot be exaggerated," he wrote. Foreign merchants were expected to take part in this endeavor "out of humane considerations" (*insaniyetkarından*) the same way that the Ottoman state, for its part, exempted foreign charitable institutions from duties. It was only local municipalities

62 National Library of Israel (NLI), ARC 4\* 1513, December 1909 (Table of Import and Export from Gaza 1906–1909); BOA, BEO., 3657/274204/2/1, 12 Teşrin-i Evvel 1325 (27 October 1909) (the Foreign Ministry to the Grand Vizier); BOA, HR. İD., 269/52/17/1, 3 Şubat 1325 (5 February 1910) (the Italian Consulate in Istanbul to the Foreign Ministry).

63 For the seasonal rhythm of barley trade, see BOA, DH. İD., 40/2/17/10, 17 Temmuz 1329 (30 July 1913) (the Governor of Jerusalem to the Ministry of the Interior).

64 BOA, HR.İD., 269/54/4/1, 18 Şevvel 1327 (2 November 1909) (the Grand Vizier to the Foreign Ministry).

65 TNA, FO 195/2351, 2 August 1910 (the British Consul in Jerusalem to the British Consul in Istanbul).

66 BOA, HR. İD., 269/52/19/1, 21 Temmuz 1326 (10 August 1910) (the Foreign Ministry to the Governor of Jerusalem); H. Sykes, "New Accommodation for Out-Patients in Gaza," *Mercy and Truth* 174 (June 1911), p. 185.

67 BOA, HR. İD., 269/52/19/1, 21 Temmuz 1326 (10 August 1910) (the Foreign Office to the Governor of Jerusalem).

that levied partial taxes from such bodies for local needs. The hospital project, he argued, was the goal of this “local” tax from its inception and it was now under way since the foundations has recently been laid at Tall al-Sakan inside the city boundaries.<sup>68</sup>



**Figure 2:** The CMS Outpatient Block (1911). Source: Anon. “The Out-patient Block, Gaza,” 1911. Photograph. In “New Accommodation for Out-Patients at Gaza Hospital,” *Mercy and Truth* 15, no. 174 (1911), p. 185.

The British could not accept this argument, and with good reason. Probing into the earlier deliberations, they flagged the Ottoman response to their very initial protest against the tax going back to 1906. Indeed, no mention had been made of the hospital then or afterwards. As remembered, it was only the pier, and the commercial benefits that derived from it, that were mentioned. The last time that the hospital had been brought up in name was in the original *İrade* dated 1905, which the foreign consuls never agreed to and probably also disregarded. Moreover, the British Consul asked what good would come of the municipal hospital given that a missionary hospital was being built in the town anyhow.<sup>69</sup> “Though a hospital is a benevolent institution deserving sympathy and support,” he wrote to the Sublime Port, “the levying of pier dues for its construction has no

precedent and is contrary to established principles.”<sup>70</sup>

The clash between the two prospective medical facilities as mediated by this tax duty exposed the obvious competition between the Ottoman state and missionary societies in the realm of health. But more pointedly, by forcing the British to participate in the moralist discourse around the founding of hospitals, it exposed the prevalent dynamic in the Gaza port project writ large. This becomes clearer when juxtaposed with the start of the barley trade season. The year 1910 was one of the worst harvests of recent decades, when not a single bushel of barley was exported.<sup>71</sup> The pier had proved to be of little use long before then, but the rationale for the hospital was only invoked when the barley trade failed. The very same dynamic was at work when the Municipal Council of Gaza tried to persuade the Sublime Porte to endorse the pier duty and the port plan at the outset, in 1893. The initial impetus for the plan was the provision of health facilities, but the State Council only approved the project because of the anticipated profitable harvest and the promise of economic gain. It was the cholera epidemic of 1902, and the decline in trade that followed, which revived the hospital as a worthy cause. In other words, the Ottoman state internalized the methods of the province and applied them to its own negotiations with rival imperial powers, emphasizing free trade in times of abundance, and the health services in times of scarcity.

The year 1910 indeed heralded a period of scarcity that was to last until World War I. In total, 8,000 tons of barley were exported in 1911, 7,928 in 1912, 18,437 in 1913, and only 4,000 in 1914.<sup>72</sup> Although better than nothing, these amounts were a far cry from the export levels of 30,000 and 40,000 tons in earlier years. Likewise, as the supply of grain steadily decreased, the price also went down, and a bushel of bar-

68 BOA, HR. İD., 269/52/21/1, 16 Şaban 1328 (23 August 1910) (the Governor of Jerusalem to the Foreign Ministry); BOA, HR. İD., 269/55/2, 30 September 1910 (a Note Verbal to the British Embassy in Istanbul).

69 TNA, FO 195/2351, 11 September 1910 (the British Consul in Jerusalem to the British Consul General in Istanbul).

70 BOA, HR. İD., 269/55/4/1, 30 September 1910 (Note Verbal no. 105).

71 NLI, ARC 4\* 1513/53 (Gaza: Financial Report of 1910).

72 Report for the year 1911 on the Trade of the Consular District of Jerusalem, AS, DCR: Turkey, London: 1912, p. 17; Report for the year 1912 on the Trade of the Consular District of Jerusalem, AS, DCR: Turkey, London: 1913, p. 18; Report for the year 1913 on the Trade of the Consular District of Jerusalem, AS, DCR: Turkey, London: 1914, p. 20; Romanti 'Ezer, “From the Negev: By Our Special Reporter in Gaza,” *Ha-Herut*, 2 July 1914 [in Hebrew].

ley was now sold for 2–3 shillings, compared to 10 and even 20 shillings previously. The cumulative effect was a sizeable outmigration of tribesmen and urbanites from the Gaza region and general disquiet among barley traders abroad who wondered whether Gaza could remain a supplier for long.<sup>73</sup> In April 1911, the British Consul in Jerusalem had to stress to his superior in Istanbul that despite the bad harvest, the British Consular Agent in Gaza should be maintained.<sup>74</sup>

In an era of scarce revenues, the Ottomans used the hospital as the essential rationale for the tax, no longer a mere vision but now already a physical object, a construction site. For the British however, the hospital's structure more than anything else resembled its failed counterpart—the ruined pier. The conclusion of this affair would involve the entanglement of the ruin with the construction site, exposing the extent to which these were mirror images of each other.

#### GAZA'S EPHEMERAL MODERNITY: NOT YET, BUT NO LONGER

The Gaza Municipality started to build the long-awaited hospital in 1911. While thus far only connected to the pier in a financial arrangement, henceforth the two structures came to reflect one another physically as well. The pier was a decaying wreck slowly being devoured by the waves while the hospital was a building in the making. Both were half-structures, one of which was a slowly disintegrating ruin eroded by the forces of nature, and the other was an unhurriedly rising construction site erected by the endeavors of men. Or was it the opposite?

In March 1911, the British Consul in Jerusalem went to Gaza to visit his consular agent. He reported that a significant part of the pier was already gone and that what was left of it lay submerged. Within the city, work had started on the hospital site. The basement was built but subsequent work had stopped because of a lack of funds. "I doubt whether the building

ever will be finished," he noted; consequently, "there is not the slightest justification for levying the dues," which were now said to have been increased, he added.<sup>75</sup> In a further effort to reject the tax, in October he ordered his agent to reconstruct the annual income garnered from the tax since 1906 and to examine what share of it had indeed financed the hospital. The consul suspected that the "notoriously corrupt" mayor of Gaza, Sa'īd Efendi al-Shawwa, was skimming off much of the revenues and that the Ottoman financial plan was thus structurally flawed. The pier, the British argued in October 1911, is "in ruins and already beyond repair," and the hospital, currently still in a "most embryonic state," would never benefit British subjects given that a state-of-the-art British missionary hospital already existed in the town.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, in February of that year the new and lavish outpatient section of the CMS hospital had been inaugurated in a public ceremony.<sup>77</sup> A subsequent official appeal by the British Consul in 1913 claimed that only twenty of the original pier's sixty meters remained intact and that work on the hospital had long ago ceased.<sup>78</sup> An editorial in *Filastin* from August 1912 corroborated this account. The editor, 'Isa al-'Isa, who arrived in Gaza on board a Prince Line steamer that was collecting barley en route to Britain, noticed that with only some thirty meters remaining, the pier was reminiscent of the "skeleton of a giant beast." The hospital in-the-making was described in more favorable terms, save for its insalubrious location adjacent to the town's cemetery. Of beasts or human beings, both the port and the hospital evoked in 'Isa the specter of decaying corpses.<sup>79</sup> By late 1913, the operation of the modern CMS hospital had long become routine.<sup>80</sup>

But the Ottoman logic for Gaza's progress followed a different trajectory. From the *kaymakam* of Gaza all the way to the Sublime Porte, Ottoman officials saw the pier duty ar-

73 TNA. FO 195/2452, 14 March 1913 (Dissatisfaction among Bedouins in the Beer Sheba Region).

74 TNA. FO 195/2377, 26 April 1911 (Desirability of the Existence of a Consular Agency in Gaza).

75 TNA. FO 195/2377, 21 March 1911 (Visit to Gaza).

76 TNA. FO 195/2377, 23 October 1911 (Pier-Dues at Gaza); BOA, HR. İD., 269/58/1 (Note Verbal 123).

77 Sykes, 186–7.

78 BOA, HR. İD., 269/59/1, 26 April 1913 (Note Verbal no. 62).

79 "Ghazza [Gaza]," *Filastin*, 31 August 1912, p. 1 [in Arabic].

80 "C.M.S Medical Missions: Gaza, Palestine."

rangement as having no expiration date precisely because the costs of future maintenance and repair were embedded in it. As with other locations across the Empire, the Grand Vizier replied to the British complains, only a steady stream of income in the form of *ücret*, and not onetime funding, could ensure the functioning of public utilities.<sup>81</sup> Such a conceptualization can be likened to the traditional form of *vakıf*, pious endowment. Responding to the British consulates on their own terms, the Ottomans accentuated their liberal vision of egalitarian rights and duties in the marketplace and access to health services. Since all nationalities enjoyed free trade in the port of Gaza, all should pay for its facilities. In so doing, Ottoman and non-Ottoman subjects alike would also contribute to the establishment of a public hospital, which, once completed, would admit all patients for free “without distinction of race or nationality.”<sup>82</sup> The Ottoman argumentation, in other words, exposed the British rhetoric as being one of discrimination. In the Ottoman framing, it was not the Ottoman hospital which would be superfluous once established, but the missionary one, since in accordance with the imperial policy of non-discrimination, Ottoman subjects would enjoy health services in the municipal hospital without being exposed to proselytization. The Ottoman responses made sure to refer to the hospital in French as a “humanitarian” (*humanitaire*) cause, emphasizing that the importance of public health was something that modern statesmen “would surely understand.”<sup>83</sup> It is tempting to suggest here that the Ottomans were defining public health as a universal right: a modern form of humanitarian effort distinguished from more traditional forms of humanitarian endeavor based on exclusion, religious piety, and philanthropy, like that of the Christian missionary hospitals.<sup>84</sup>

81 BOA, HR. İD., 269/57/1, 16 Haziran 1327 (29 June 1911) (the Grand Vizier to the Foreign Ministry); HR. İD., 269/55/6, 26 July 1911 (Note Verbal 56).

82 BOA, HR. İD., 269/58/5, 2 Kanun-ı Sani 1327 (15 January 1912) (the Grand Vizier to the Foreign Ministry); HR. İD., 269/58/6, 31 January 1912 (Note Verbal 9).

83 BOA, HR. İD., 269/59/7, 30 August 1913 (Note Verbal 62).

84 This is contrary to Keith Watenpaugh's recent argument that the turn from “early” to “modern” humanitarianism in European thought occurred only during World War I and interwar periods. See *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism*

British merchants continued to pay the Gaza pier tax throughout the period under discussion until the outbreak of World War I. Interestingly, in decades often associated with Ottoman economic inferiority, the capitulatory regime, and the reign of the Public Debt Administration, it was in this provincial Ottoman port, with its wavering grain supply, that the Empire had the upper hand. The seasonality of the trade and its relative marginality undermined effective British objection. The discussion revolving around the pier-hospital question exposed the undercurrents of this power struggle. The British vocabulary stressing the missionary hospital's scientific and technological superiority, the alleged corruption of Ottoman officials, and dilapidated Ottoman facilities expanded on the central notion of things being “beyond repair.” In British eyes, the wrecked pier and half-built municipal hospital of Gaza were an indication of the backward, corrupt, and inviable nature of Ottoman development projects mirroring the state of the Ottoman Empire itself as a political and economic ruin beyond repair.

For the Ottomans, however, the pier was not necessarily a ruin, falling one-directionally into oblivion, but more of a work in progress, like the hospital. Could the pier have been repaired with no breakwater, after it lost most of its length? That is the wrong question to ask, the Ottoman governor would argue. The pier, once established, was more than its physicality. It was an imperial foothold in this province on the path to regulating an ever-growing web of imperial connections—between the grain-producing hinterland and the seashore, between urban merchants and the peasantry, and most importantly, for nodes of trade like Gaza, connections to the larger cluster of sea outlets within the orbit of Beirut and Alexandria. Even if dysfunctional, it was the basis for a development process which could only expand over time. Both the pier and the hospital, the Ottoman Foreign Ministry argued, were not forgotten even if they seemed abandoned, since they were part of a system of ports that could be harnessed in the name of free trade to ameliorate public health along its nodal points.<sup>85</sup>

Where does this place our understanding

(California: University of California Press, 2015), pp. 4–6.

85 BOA, HR. İD., 269/59/7, 30 August 1913 (Note Verbal 62).

of the Gaza pier-hospital project? The historical reality does not rest, as the cliché might have it, “somewhere in the middle” between the two opposing visions of the Ottomans and the British. It does fall however in the fragile and certainly uncanny space where the *times* of construction site and ruin overlap. Gaza’s experience of modernity on the fringes of the Empire was one of perpetual promise—of future economic development, public health, and civilization—in the form of a towering construction site, while at the same time, the fulfillment of this promise seemed to have already taken place without anyone noticing, leaving behind its dreary aftermath in the form of ruins. The pier had not yet been fully constructed when it was already a wreck, and while the hospital was under construction, its progress appeared to go backwards in time towards a state of disintegration.

The turn from construction to ruin was thus not a chronological one passing through a stage of completeness but rather a sublimation-like passage transitioning between distinct physical phases. As we have seen, it is exactly the nonlinear capacity of the ruin to be thought of as a construction site, and vice versa, that illustrates the entanglement between the two. Hanna Arendt termed the intellectual void following World War I in Europe, when

one modernity ceased to exist and the new one could not yet be articulated, as a “historical no-man’s land” between the “no longer and the not yet.” She marked an empty space, bordered by the bygone as a starting-point, and the appearance of its replacement as the end-point.<sup>86</sup> Relying on the Aristotelian notion of temporality, she articulated the idea of time itself through her meditation of Western modernity. It is ultimately the *now*, the *present*, which is sealed between a distinct past and some prospective future. And this *now*, where the past is erased in order to be inscribed upon, marks the natural path from ruin to construction, from antiquity to modernity.<sup>87</sup>

However, for our non-European case here, these two markers ought to be reversed. The modern *now* of Gaza was not squeezed into the space between the no longer (past) and not yet (future), but vice versa. It existed in the precarious overlay of being not yet, and at the same time no longer, modern. Chakrabarty’s epistemology of colonial modernity, the famous “waiting room of history” here turns out to be at the same time modernity’s recovery room,<sup>88</sup> where modern construction sites are always already their own ruins. Modernity itself emerged in Gaza on the imperial periphery, as ephemeral as a blink, flickering its certainties and discontents at the same time.

86 Hannah Arendt and Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb, *Reflections on Literature and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 121.

87 David E. Johnson, *Kant’s Dog: On Borges, Philosophy, and the Time of Translation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), pp. 28–31.

88 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference - New Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 8–9.



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### What is a ‘Local’ Source? Cross-Checking Ottoman and British Correspondence on an Urban Society

Historians of the Middle East, and of Palestine in particular, are often accused of relying too much on European sources (travelogues, consular correspondence, news reports) rather than using original Arab and Ottoman archival documents. Sources have become more readily available in the last two decades as a result of easier access to archives and digitization projects. Thus, working with primary Middle Eastern sources is now considered crucial for historical accuracy and a truthful representation of local agency. Local court records, diaries, newspapers, and family collections are invaluable materials for a genuine understanding of Middle Eastern realities and are now being studied (or sought after) intensely.

However, not all locations in the Ottoman Empire produced or engaged with such local sources. Peripheral districts and towns, where literacy was rare, have left scant paper trails for future historians to discover. In such cases, the prime collections for tracing whatever exists is the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi in Istanbul. Whether in tax records or administrative exchanges, details are likely to emerge in this ocean of documentation.

In fact it is rare not to find something of value in the BOA, even for the most obscure topics. However, while useful and rich, it should be recalled that the imperial archive is hardly a “local” source. In terms of their form, organization and content, the BOA documents first and foremost reflect the viewpoint and concerns of the imperial center. Even if originally composed in Gaza, Jaffa, or Jerusalem, the documents found in the BOA collections were drafted, worded, contextualized, categorized, and ultimately archived for and within an imperial logic that viewed the local case within a vast

network of needs and interests. Ironically, at times certain European consular reports written by figures who were well-rooted in Ottoman society, represent the local spirit as much as a BOA dossier, although the former was foreign and the latter supposedly local. Their detachment from the larger imperial context can contribute to making foreign depictions reflective of local realities.

This article employs both types of sources by juxtaposing Ottoman correspondence between Gaza, Jerusalem and Istanbul preserved in the BOA with British sources discussing these same places mostly from the British National Archives. By making use of both source bases, the story takes into account a broad spectrum of interests and realities from the sub-district, through the province, to the imperial center, and all the way to the international arena. These circles are seldom concentric, but intersect, overlap and complement one another. It would have been impossible to reconstruct the amounts and revenues from Gaza’s annual export market, for instance, without the testimony of the local British consular agent Knesevich. Similarly, the broader implications of this trade on the development plans of Gaza could only have been found in the BOA. While representing British interests, Knesevich was not British, but rather a merchant of Austrian nationality residing in Gaza. Although technically foreign, his accounts genuinely reflect Gaza’s economic and social conditions. At the same time, while the imperial center discussed tax issues and urban plans for Gaza at length, much of the local information was motivated by inter-imperial political quarrels. Together, therefore, the documents of both types help create a more complete picture that is better attuned to the local and global lenses.