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THE *ARZUHALCIS* AND THE CHANGING LATE OTTOMAN URBAN SPHERE IN GAZA

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Abstract | Little research has been devoted to date to the work and social background of the *arzuhalci*s, the professional letter and petition writers in the Ottoman Empire, even though they were part of the Ottoman urban landscape of the 19th century and handled most of the public's writing and correspondence with the authorities. The services they offered were well known to the general public and a wide variety of people, men and women, urbanites, villagers, Bedouins, and officials alike, approached them and paid for having their petitions written professionally. This article examines the arzuhalacis' social profile and status in society based on the Ottoman census of 1905 for the city of Gaza on the southern Palestine coast. Petitions sent from this city to Istanbul by the city's urban population as well as by peasants and Bedouin from the region were for the most part written in Arabic, often in a very high register, which no doubt was formulated by professional petition writers. Several questions come to mind when exploring the place of the *arzuhalci*s in Gaza, in particular given what we know about this city's stormy politics at the time. How many petition and letter writers were active in this city? Were any of them identified with one of the factions in this city to an extent that others from rivaling coalitions refrained from using their services? Were any of the petition writers in Gaza former state employees, or perhaps non-natives of Gaza? What was their relationships with state and local officials? Finally, where were they active in Gaza's public space? This article attempts to respond to some of these questions to better understand the role of the *arzuhalci*s in the public space of a late Ottoman provincial city in Greater Syria.

INTRODUCTION

The missionary George Robinson Lees (1860–1944) depicted scribes in Ottoman Palestine at the end of the 19th century as follows:

> [They] are known by their clothing, and the inkhorn in the girdle [...]. They will be seen in the market-place looking for clients. They consider extreme politeness a part of their stock-in-trade [...]. The scribes in the modern market-place [...] are writers of petitions and letters, and not necessarily learned in the law, though a certain amount of legal knowledge is required to fulfill the conditions of the local government regarding contracts and matters relating to the sale of property. As soon as one is approached he draws from his inkhorn his reed pen, dips it into the sponge filled with ink at the other end, places the paper, which has been drawn from his bosom, on his hand, and writes whatever is required [...]. When the letter or petition is finished, the sand or dust in the street is scattered over it, then blown away; a handy substitute being near, no blotting-paper is ever used. Nor is there such a thing as a signature; the peasant cannot write, and even if he could, he would still seal the document with

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> his ring like his betters [...]. Nearly every peasant wears a ring with his seal on it; if he does not own such a mark of distinction he dips his thumb in the ink and presses it on the paper instead. The Scribe is most frequently employed in writing petitions, as no suppliant can make a personal application to the Megliss (Council), or a Government official [...without presenting] his case in writing, duly sealed and stamped, however trivial.[1]

Despite the importance of the *arzuhalci*s – professional letter and petition writers – in the fabric of late 19th-century Ottoman cities and their ubiquity, as Lees indicates in the quote above, little research has been devoted to their work and not much is known about their training other than sporadic brief referrals in various accounts.[2] Contemporary studies have tended to neglect the role of the *arzuhalci*s, even though their profession was not new in the Ottoman urban landscape of the 19th century and they handled most of the public's writing and correspondence. Similarly, scant information is available about the social background of the *arzuhalci*s or the development and changes in their work in light of the processes of modernization and urbanization taking place in the Ottoman Empire at the time. Yet many sources make it clear that the *arzuhalci*s were key figures in the Ottoman urban sphere and played an important role in urban politics. They interacted with all segments of society, in various neighborhoods of the city, and with individuals from all walks of life who needed their services. They helped rival urban coalitions frame their approaches to Istanbul and were actively involved in city politics and the major events taking place there.

In his seminal 1968 paper "Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables," Albert Hourani introduced a concept which dominated the study of cities in Bilad al-Sham for many years.[3] Hournai noted the presence of a strata of influential urban notables who served as intermediaries between the local population and the Ottoman authorities. Many historians of the Middle East followed Hourani's lead by studying the role played by urban notables and the 'politics of the notables,' emphasizing the paramount importance of patronage and the primacy of 'vertical' versus 'horizontal' social ties. Younger generations of scholars have criticized this view as an elite bias that dominates most contemporary written accounts of local politics that has been adopted too uncritically by many historians.[4]

The case of the *arzuhalci*s discussed here is an example of an important type of intermediary between the urban and rural populations and the Ottoman authorities in Istanbul which does not entirely fit Hourani's 'politics of notables.' *The arzuhalci*s, who facilitated correspondence between the subjects and the imperial center, did not come from the upper echelons of the society and were not the most influential persons in the urban sphere. Yet they carried out an important form of mediation without which connections with the imperial center would have been impossible. The famous American sociologist Mark S. Granovetter in his well-quoted article "The Strength of Weak Ties,"

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1 Rev. G. Robinson Lees, *Village Life in Palestine: A Description of the Religion, Home Life, Manners, Customs, Characteristics and Superstitions of the Peasants of the Holy Land, with Reference to the Bible* (New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co.,1905), pp. 191–192.

2 On the *arzuhalci*s, see G.L. Lewis, "ʿArḍ Ḥal," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1990), p. 625; Mehmed Z. Pakalın, *Osmanlı tarih deyimleri ve terimleri sözlüğü* [Dictionary of Ottoman historical idioms and terms] (Istanbul: Millî Eğitim Basımevi, 1983), vol. 1, pp. 90–91; Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi and Khalil al-ʿAzm, *Qamus al-sinaʿat al-shamiyya* [Dictionary of crafts in Damascus] (Paris: Mouton, 1960), vol. 2, pp. 307–308; John Chalcraft, "Engaging the State: Peasants and Petitions in Egypt on the Eve of Colonial Rule," *IJMES* 37/3 (2005), pp. 306–307.

3 Albert Hourani, "Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables," in William Polk and Richard Chambers (eds.), *Beginning of Modernization in the Middle East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 41–68.

4 See Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), pp. 8, 22; Johann Buessow and Astrid Meier, "Ottoman Corporatism, Eighteenth to Twentieth Centuries: Beyond the State-Society Paradigm in Middle Eastern History," in Bettina Gräf et al. (eds.), *Ways of Knowing Muslim Cultures and Societies: Studies in Honour of Gudrun Krämer* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), p. 85.

discusses the concept of a "bridge" between social networks, which can help understand the role played by the *arzuhalci*s as intermediaries who enabled connections to be made between the Empire's subjects in the provinces and the imperial center. A "bridge," he writes, is a "line in a network which provides the *only* path between two points.[5]

The *arzuhalci*'s stand in the streets of late Ottoman cities can be seen as a "nodal point" of urban governance, as defined by Marc Hufty. Hufty defines urban governance in its most general sense to include all the patterns of social coordination and processes of managing a city. His definition of a nodal point is "the physical or virtual interfaces where problems, processes, actors, and norms converge."[6] The *arzuhalci*'s stand was both a physical place were actors came together to discuss problems and negotiate the ways to address them, but it could also be regarded as a "virtual interface," since it was needed to make the connection to the imperial government. However, the *arzuhalci*s were not neutral transmitters but rather exercised mediation by contributing to the message's production and transfer (e.g. by using the proper terms and linguistic register, conciseness etc.).

It remains unclear to what extent the petition writers were able to influence the political processes taking place in the city given their role as intermediaries between the commoners and the imperial center. What was their agency and contribution? Did they have room to maneuver or were they merely a mechanical cog in the wheel of transferring the petition to Istanbul? In this regard it should be recalled that *arzuhalci*s expressed the complaints of the people who hired them in a way that would be acceptable to the elite in the imperial center Istanbul, thus enacting a type of conceptual translation. Nevertheless, their letters were translated into Ottoman Turkish in the Translation Bureau of the Foreign Ministry upon arrival in Istanbul (linguistic translation), before the administrative process of handling petitions could be engaged.

This short article discusses the *arzuhalci*s' social and economic profile as they appear in the Ottoman census of 1905 for the city of Gaza, which is preserved today in its entirety in the Israel State Archive in Jerusalem.[7] It explores how the traditional duties of the *arzuhalci* were influenced, evolved and changed in response to advances in technology, processes of urbanization, and the city's expansion and modernization.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The *arzuhalci*s were literate individuals, although they did not necessarily have formal training, and did not come from the higher echelons of society. Unlike the dragomans who were responsible for relationships between the foreign consulates and embassies and Istanbul, the *arzuhalci*s were not governmental officials, but rather private local people, perhaps retired scribes who had been employed in the Ottoman bureaucracy, and possessed general knowledge of languages (particularly Ottoman, but also local languages depending on the province where they worked; in Greater Syria, obviously Arabic), the art of correspondence, and the rudiments of law. They drew on formulaic letters in handbooks, a widespread practice throughout Islamic history. There is evidence that a guild of *arzuhalci*s existed in Istanbul at the end of the 18th century and that their members were required to have an official permit to exercise their profession.[8] Similar guilds were also set up in the Empire's provinces, especially in large cities such as Cairo.[9]

Findley cites evidence that at times Ottoman officials wrote petitions in return for payment during their work hours, a practice that was frowned upon by their supervisors and was derogatorily known as *kağıt haffaflığı*.[10] Other terms used to designate the public petition

5 Mark S. Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78/6 (May 1973), p. 1364.

6 Marc Hufty, "Investigating Policy Processes: The Governance Analytical Framework (GAF)," in Urs Weismann, Hans Herni et al. (eds.), *Research for Sustainable Development: Foundations, Experiences, and Perspectives* (Bern: Geographica Bernensia, 2011), p. 401.

7 Israel State Archive (ISA), Nüfus Registers # 240–283, 436–446.

8 Pakalın, *Sözlüğü*, vol. 1, pp. 90–91.

9 Chalcraft, "Engaging the State," p. 306.

10 Carter V. Findley, *Ottoman Civil Officialdom: A Social History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 216.

writers were *köşebaşı yazıcısı* (street-corner scribe/petition writer) or simply *yazıcı* (scribe, petition writer).[11] Salim Tamari calls the *arzuhalci* a "*katib adiliyyah*" ("justice scribe") and says that in late Ottoman Palestine these scribes often sat in cafés waiting for customers.[12] Since it is known that the number of cafés grew considerably in the 19th century, this may very well indicate the increasing visibility of the *arzuhalci*s in the urban space during this period. The term "justice scribe" itself might suggest their involvement or familiarity with legal issues, which coincides with Avi Rubin's claim that before the legal reforms of the 19th century and the recognition of the profession of modern attorney in the *nizamiye* courts, the *arzuhalci*s at times appeared in courts as legal representatives. One of the documentary justifications he provides as proof is that the *arzuhalci*s needed a special permit to engage in their occupation.[13] Rubin also quotes Judge Sehbaz who considered that the petition writing profession had a negative effect on Ottoman law.[14] Whether laudatory or derogatory, all the different epithets ascribed to the *arzuhalci*s tend to indicate the importance of their occupation.

The services offered by the *arzuhalci*s were well-known to the general public, as can be seen in contemporary descriptions of their services to diverse people and groups in the population, including men and women, urbanites, villagers, Bedouins, and officials alike, in return for a fee.[15] Paintings from the 19th century depict the wide variety of people who approached them and paid to have their petitions and letters written professionally.[16] For example, many of these paintings portray women approaching the *arzuhalci*s' stand in the street, a phenomenon that still awaits further research beyond the fact that illiteracy rates were higher among women than men.[17] These paintings show that the *arzuhalci*s sat at the entrance to the Ottoman post and telegraph offices, in the markets or in cafés,[18] similar to the document-writers one can still see today at the entrance to courts and public offices in the Middle East, including in Turkey. Approaching the *arzuhalci*s, which was considered a legitimate act, may have allowed women to venture into the public sphere of the cities, and increased their numbers and appearance there.[19]

In fact, the *arzuhalci*s served as intermediaries between the imperial subjects and the Ottoman central authorities, thus replacing the *shar'ia* court scribes who for the most part had penned approaches to the imperial authorities in the past. They allowed petitioners, for example, to express their claims within a framework and mechanisms authorized by the authorities while using the jargon, language, and codes of literary expression sanctioned by the Ottoman system. A study of 500 petitions sent from Gaza and Jaffa and their environs showed that the vast majority of the petitions sent to Istanbul from these localities at the end of the 19th century were written by *arzuhalci*s, compared to only a small percentage written by the petitioners themselves without the help of professional petition writers. The latter were usually short

11 Jun Akiba, "The Practice of Writing Curricula Vitae among the Lower Government Employees in the Late Ottoman Empire: Workers at the *Şeyhülislâm*'s Office," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 6 (2007), p. 22.

12 Salim Tamari, *Mountain against the Sea: Essays on Palestinian Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 177; the more common spelling of the term would be *katib 'adliyya*.

13 Avi Rubin, "From Legal Representation to Advocacy: Attorneys and Clients in the Ottoman Nizamiye Courts," *IJMES* 44 (2012), p. 115.

14 Avi Rubin, *Ottoman Nizamiye Courts: Law and Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 105.

15 For numerous examples of petitions written by *arzuhalci*s, see Yuval Ben-Bassat, *Petitioning the Sultan: Protests and Justice in Late Ottoman Palestine* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

16 On the importance of the *arzuhalci*s in the life of Ottoman subjects, see Charles Henry Timperley (ed.), *The Gallery of Engravings* (London: Fisher, Son & Co., 1844), vol. 3, p. 57.

17 For instance, see the picture of two women with a child approaching an *arzuhalci* in Timperley, vol. 3, between p. 56 and p. 57; see also Martinus Rorbye, "A Turkish Notary Drawing up a Marriage Contract" (Constantinople, 1837); D. Wilkie, "Arzuhalci" (The Wilkie Gallery, London, 1845); Fausto Zonaro, "The Scribe" (unknown year).

18 See, for instance, the painting depicting a letter writer, his customer and a gossip in Walter Thornbury, *Turkish Life and Character* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1860), vol. 1, between p. 103 and p. 104 and the description of the three on pp. 103–104; the Ottoman post and telegraph services were merged in 1871 under one department after previously being separate. See Roderic H. Davison, "The Advent of the Electric Telegraph in the Ottoman Empire: How Morse's Invention was Introduced at the Time of the Crimean War," in idem, *Essays in Ottoman and Turkish History, 1774–1923: The Impact of the West* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 141, 152.

19 Fruma Zachs and Yuval Ben-Bassat, "Women's Visibility in Petitions from Greater Syria during the Late Ottoman Period," *IJMES* 47/4 (2015), pp. 765–781.

telegrams that did not adhere to the form or style of professionally written petitions.

There are several indications that *arzuhalcis*, rather than ordinary people, wrote most of the petitions, even though they did not sign their names on the petitions. Many of the petitioners were no doubt illiterate and could not write petitions themselves.[20] The fact that almost all the petitions were sent to the Bureau of the Grand Vizier suggests it was no coincidence and that there was some kind of directive behind this procedure. Furthermore, many of the rationales and justifications appearing in the petitions are composed of similar repetitive phrases, and a specific jargon is used throughout. Most petitions have the same structure and lay out the petitioners' claims in a stereotypical way.[21] Hence, familiarity with the language, structure, and line of argument of the petitions, which were often based on formulas noted in manuals that contained sample letters written especially for this purpose,[22] makes it possible to distill the voices of the petitioners by extracting the details of their specific appeals from the heavily structured and formulaic writing.[23] Consider the following idealistic depiction of life in Gaza and the relationships of its residents with the Sultan which is full of praise to the sultan, motifs, and flattery, as appearing in a petition by supporters of the Husayni faction in Gaza against their rivals in the city from 1893 (see Figure 1):

> After praying to God to save the power of our master, *Amir al-Muʾminin*, some of the *ʿulamaʾ*, *ashraf* and merchants of Gaza beg, in the sacred name of the Prophet and in the name of our master *Amir al-Muʾminin*, may God give him victory, that you pass on our petition to the threshold of the Sultan. Like others, the people of our sub-district, with God's blessing, enjoy the Sultanic policy of justice, they are living in comfort like brothers without deceit or intrigue [which exists] in other places, and they pray continually to our merciful ruler.[24]

20 On the illiteracy rate in Palestine at the end of the 19th century, see Ami Ayalon, *Reading Palestine: Printing and Literacy, 1900–1948* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), Chapter One. As regards literacy among the rural population of Palestine at the time and the question of how the villagers dealt with the problem of reading and writing, the characterization by Eliyahu Zeev Levin-Epstein, the head of the colony of Rehovot during its early years, is instructive: "In every village there is only one person who knows how to write. He is called the *katib*, that is to say the scribe of the village. All the other inhabitants of the village know neither how to read nor how to write. And when the sheikhs had to sign their name on a certain document, they did so in one of the following two ways: either they had a copper seal, in which their name was inscribed, and they dipped the seal in ink and stamped it on a paper, or they would dip their fingers in ink and press them on the document, instead of a signature. And if one of the villagers had to write a document, he did not need to write, since he did not know how to write, but instead everything was done by a professional person, who made sure there were two witnesses present, who testified that they had heard with their own ears, that so and so the son of so and so ordered this document to be written." See Eliyahu Levin-Epstein, *Zikhronotai* [My memoirs] (Tel-Aviv: Levin-Epstein Brothers, 1932), p. 239.

21 For example, the opening greetings, presentation of the case and the "facts," mentions of the law or other cases, specific requests, and concluding remarks and salutations.

22 For instance, see Mehmet Hayret Efendi, *Fihrist inşayi Hayret Efendi* [Catalogue of Correspondence of Hayret Efendi] (Cairo: Dar Tabaʿat Bulaq, 1825) (a manual in Arabic containing sample letters teaching scribes how to write to various officials, office holders, high ranking officers, and bureaucrats); see also segments of the book by Hasan al-ʿAttar, *Kitab inshaʾ al-ʿAttar* [al-ʿAttar's book of correspondence] (Istanbul: Matbaʿat al-Jawaʾib, 1299 [1881]) (this book in Arabic, of which several editions were published, was aimed at larger segments within the educated elite and not merely the scribes, and includes a wider variety of letters, including various forms of address and approaches to various professionals); instruction manuals on how to write letters and petitions existed in many other societies in Europe and elsewhere. Christa Hämmerle notes that new manuals were written over the course of the 19th century "in response to rapidly changing historical conditions." These manuals, however, still "adhered in part to the principles of ancient rhetoric." See Christa Hämmerle, "Requests, Complaints, Demands: Preliminary Thoughts on the Petitioning Letters of Lower-Class Austrian Women, 1865–1918," in Caroline Bland and Máire Cross (eds.), *Gender and Politics in the Age of Letter-Writing, 1750–2000* (Burlington, VT: Routledge, 2004), p. 116.

23 For a manual instructing ordinary people how to write petitions and various kinds of letters (both personal and public) themselves without the help of a professional letter writer, see Yusuf al-Shalfuni Efendi (ed.), *Turjuman al-mukataba* [Index of writing / Compendium of correspondence], 7th ed. (Beirut: al-Matbaʿa al-Kulliyya, 1887). This booklet in Arabic was published by several publishing houses in several editions starting in the late 1860s. It differs considerably from previous manuals such as those by Hayret and al-ʿAttar, reflecting the changing times.

24 Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA), Y. MTV., 77/140, 10 Nisan 1309 [22 April 1893] (a collective petition sent from Gaza to Field Marshal Derviş Paşa with a request to convey the petition to the Sultan in person. The petition bears the signatures of 123 people in support of the *mufti* al-Sayyid Muhammad Hanafi Efendi al-Husayni).

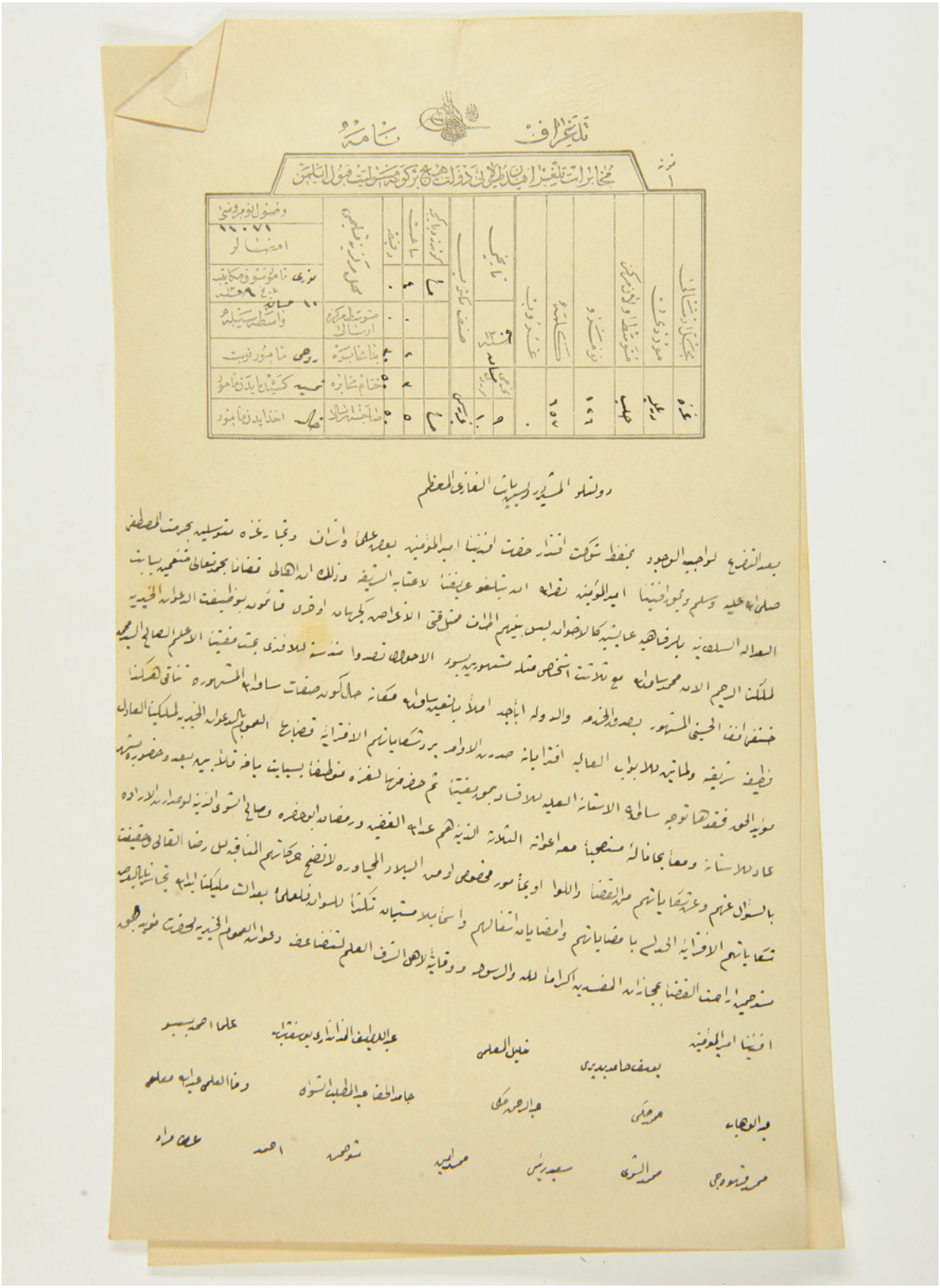

Figure 1: A Mass Petition in Support of the Mufti al-Sayyid Muhammad al-Hanafi Efendi al-Husayni.
Source: BOA, Y. MTV., 77/140, p. 1 of 2, 10 Nisan 1309 (22 April 1893).

By the final decades of the 19th century, the *arzuhalci*s wrote petitions on a stamped letter, which corresponded to a stamp duty. In this period there was a growing need for the *arzuhalci*s' services on the part of the Empire's subjects, which had to do with the mushrooming of official documents as part of the standardization process in the Ottoman bureaucracy and the need to comply with the modernizing state, at a time when the development of literacy was much slower. This was a temporary situation that changed dramatically when literacy became widespread.

As the Empire went through fundamental changes in the 19th century and its relationships with its subjects were transformed and intensified, correspondence and letter writing moved toward a more straightforward, simple style that was less flamboyant. Manuals from this period demonstrating how to write letters for various occasions and situations allowed Ottoman subjects (who often referred to themselves in petitions as *ʿabid*; i.e., slaves) to correspond directly with the state.[25] This also extended to personal and familial correspondence, which testifies to its wider potential audience as well as the growing scope of modern correspondence beyond the work of petition writers.[26] This can be seen in an advertisement published in 1905 in the Hebrew newspaper *Havatselet* in Jerusalem by a scribe named Daʾud ʿAzmi al-Husayni. He had been an official in several Ottoman local institutions and now worked out of an office located opposite the government house:

> After I worked for thirteen years in the scribal office of our exalted government here in the holy city [of Jerusalem], in the capacity of chief scribe in the commercial court of Jaffa, and then in the commercial bureau here in the holy city (may it be rebuilt and re-established), I then worked for the last twenty years as a member of the qadi court here, as the certified documents from the necessary places [show]. I have just recently resigned from this job, and decided with God's help to open a special office across from the government house. I am prepared to be a lawyer[27] for all the affairs that shall come to my hands, and I hope to satisfy the needs of all those who bring me their business with integrity and justice. I am also willing to make applications to all the courts of our most exalted government here in the [holy] land and elsewhere in the Arabic or Turkish languages, to make notices of protest and appeal against the rulings of all courts according to the level of legal judgement emanating from the courts, to translate from Arabic to Turkish and to write all kinds of bills, promissory notes, and partnership contracts etc., and everything will, God willing, be pleasantly explained to each and every person. I will also represent for free the cases of poor people who truly cannot afford to pay. All who seek me will find me in my said office every day from two in the morning until ten in the evening [Ottoman time] except for Friday.[28]

25 For example, see al-Shalfuni, *Turjuman al-mukataba*.

26 As Ami Ayalon has shown, literacy rates are only part of the explanation why the need for the scribes' services was growing. As he notes, reading and writing are two different skills and, as can be seen even today, since people may have partial literacy skills and may know how to read but not how to write. In his own words: "A complete reading ability and a total absence of it are merely two situations at the opposite ends of a rainbow. In between there are many intermediate levels of reading competence." Letter writing guides may be another confirmation of this phenomenon. See Ayalon, *Reading Palestine*, p. 18.

27 See the discussion on "justice scribe" above.

28 *Havatselet*, 30 Nissan 5665 (5 May 1905). Translated from Hebrew in Michael Talbot, "Jewish Scriveners and Arab Lawyers in Ottoman Jerusalem" Blog, *Tozsuz Evrak* (6 October 2013), http://www.docblog.ottomanhistorypodcast.com/2013/10/jewish-scriveners-and-arab-lawyers-in.html; another advertisement in *Havatselet* on 10 Adar 5658 (4 March 1898), also translated in Talbot's "Jewish Scriveners," Scriveners," is for a former Jewish teacher from the Jewish community who worked as a letter and petition writer: "I have the honour to inform the esteemed public that for anyone who has anything to do with the exalted government, I am ready to write in fluent Turkish for them [and] to copy everything from Turkish to French or vice versa. Also, for anyone who wants to learn the Turkish language, I am ready to teach them the spoken and written language as well as grammar, all in the best way possible, and I guarantee to provide what is required of me. My residence is in [the Jerusalem neighborhood of] Even Yiśraʾel. Nissim Ben-Mikhaʾel."

THE ARZUHALCIS IN GAZA

Given what we know about Gaza's stormy politics during the last quarter of the 19th century and the rift within its elite between two rival camps that made strenuous efforts to garner as much support as they could among the city's population, Gaza is a good case study for examining the role of *arzuhalci*s in the urban social sphere.[29] The controversy in Gaza was centered around the appointment to the post of the city's *mufti*, which afforded the family who controlled it considerable influence, leverage and resources. The struggle that erupted in the mid-1870s and lasted until the end of the century opposed the Husayni family and its supporters, on the one hand, to a changing coalition of opponents headed by the Saqallah family and, as of the mid-1890s, the Shawwas and Busaysus, two families who previously supported the Husaynis, on the other. Several questions come to mind in this regard: Was there more than one petition and letter writer in this city? Were any of the scribes so closely identified with one of the factions in this city that others from rivaling coalitions refrained from approaching him? Were any of the petition writers in Gaza former state employees? Were they perhaps non-natives of Gaza? What was their relationship with state/local officials? Where were they active in Gaza's public space? Was their occupation influenced and in what ways by technological changes, the city's modernization and changing nature, and the people's growing ability to read and write?

Petitions sent from Gaza to Istanbul by the city's urban population as well as by peasants and Bedouins from the region were for the most part written in Arabic, often in a very rich and elaborate style, which no doubt was formulated by professional petition writers.[30] Unlike the case in other cities in Palestine, one hardly ever comes across petitions in Ottoman Turkish or in French sent form Gaza. Most of the petitions sent from Gaza were collective and only a few were personal, unlike the situation in Jaffa, for example, where there were many more personal petitions. The petitions from Gaza were also much more political than in other cities in Bilad al-Sham, perhaps reflecting the very tense relationships among its elite and the rift between two rival coalitions in the last quarter of the 19th century.

It remains unclear how many petition writers lived in Gaza, but so far two from this city have been identified from the Ottoman census of 1905.[31] One of them was an *arzuhalci* named Muhammad Sharrab who lived in the neighborhood of Zaytun, in the sub-neighborhood of al-ʿAjami. He is a rare and interesting case since quite a lot can be gleaned about his social background from the census and other sources. His family came from Khan Yunis, some 25 kilometers south of Gaza. According to the Gazan chronicler ʿUthman al-Tabbaʿ, it was a "big family with many branches in Khan Yunis,"[32] as well as in Gaza and in al-ʿArish in northern

29 For more on the division in Gaza's elite and the rivalry between the opposing coalitions, see Yuval Ben-Bassat and Johann Buessow, "Urban Factionalism in Late Ottoman Gaza, c. 1875–1914: Local Politics and Spatial Divisions," *JESHO* 61/4 (2018), pp. 606–649.

30 For example, see BOA, HR. TO., 390/56, 22 Zilkade 1302 (2 September 1885) (a petition to the *Sadaret* signed by ʿAbd al-Rahman Shafiq al-Husayni, ʿAbd al-Hayy Faʾiq al-Husayni, Muhammd al-Hanafi al-Husayni, and Husayn al-Husayni); HR. TO., 394/67, 2 Eylül 1306 (14 September 1890) (a petition to the *Sadaret* signed by 42 people from Gaza against the possible appointment of al-Hanafi, the son of Ahmad Muhyi al-Din, as the *mufti* of Gaza instead of the current mufti Muhammad Saqallah); HR. TO., 395/44, 23 Kânunuevvel 1306 (4 January 1891) (a petition to the *Sadaret* submitted by Bedouins in Gaza against the governor of Jerusalem, Reşat Paşa, and two notables from this town named Salim al-Husayni and ʿArif Bey who, together with al-Hanafi and his brothers, the sons of the former *mufti* of Gaza, collaborated with their rivals among the Bedouins, and persecuted them); HR. TO., 395/60, 29 Kânunusani 1306 (10 February 1891) (a petition in Arabic sent to the Grand Vizier signed by 16 *muhtars* in the region of Gaza to reduce their vergi tax); HR. TO., 395/61, 5 Şubat 1306 (17 February 1891) (the same issue, bearing the signature of four *muhtars*); HR. TO., 395/104, 1 Zilhicce 1308 (8 July 1891) (the same issue, bearing the signature of 27 *muhtars*); HR. TO., 396/79, 18 Rebiyülâhır 1309 (21 November 1891) (the same issue, bearing the signatures of 20 *muhtars*); HR. TO., 398/53, 26 Teşrinisani 1308 (8 December 1892) (a petition to the *Sadaret* signed by 64 people from Gaza in favor of Muhammad Saqallah); HR. TO., 399/3, 9 Nisan 1309 (21 April 1893) (a petition to the *Sadaret* signed by 91 notables and religious scholars from Gaza); Y. MTV., 77/140.

31 Note that out of an estimated population of some 20,000–25,000 people in Gaza at the time, we have thus far only identified the heads of households, some 3,000 people, in addition to several small regions in the city which we have fully transcribed, given our special interest in them. Thus, one cannot exclude the eventuality that more petition writers will be identified later in the project.

32 ʿUthman al-Tabbaʿ, *Ithaf al-aïzza fi tarikh Ghazza* [Presenting the Notables in the History of Gaza], ed. Abd al-Latif Abu Hashim (Gaza: Maktabat al-Yaziji, 1999), vol. 3, p. 259 [in Arabic].

Sinai.[33] The 1905 census indeed includes 21 Sharrab households in Khan Yunis. Among the occupations the members of these households are listed as holding, 14 were peasants (*çiftçi*), some were shop owners (*bakkal*, *dükkancı*), and one was a member of the local administrative council (*müdüriyet-i meclis aʿzası*), which was a relatively senior post, especially given the modest occupations of most of the other family members.[34] In Gaza there were only five Sharrab households. Some educated male family members moved there from Khan Yunis and climbed the social scale ladder.

The father of Muhammad Sharrab was Shaykh Salim b. Muqbil b. Salim Sharrab from Khan Yunis who moved to Gaza where he worked in trade. He died there in 1285 (1868/9). The family was upwardly mobile, capitalizing on their higher education and commercial success. Its family tree as drawn by Tabbaʿ shows a large number of *shaykh*s, *efendi*s, state officials, merchants, and teachers in Gaza, Khan-Yunis and al-ʿArish between c. 1850 and 1910, among Shaykh Salim's children and grandchildren.[35] Shaykh Salim had five sons: al-Hajj Muhammad (the *arzuhalci*), Mustafa, Shakir (d. 1320/1903–4),[36] Ahmad Efendi (d. 1320/1902–3), who was a *muhafiz* (governor) of al-ʿArish in Sinai, a region under British-Egyptian de-facto control,[37] whose very successful and wealthy children continued to live and do business in the caravan trade in this city,[38] and finally Shaykh Yusuf, the family's most renowned figure, a famous *ʿalim*, who spent most of his life in al-Azhar in Cairo (b. 1254/1838 in Khan Yunis, d. 1330/1912 in Cairo).[39]

Shaykh Yusuf Sharrab, who was blind, moved to al-Azhar from Gaza in 1280 (1863/4) and studied there for nine years, and then taught in the institution for 12 years. He got married in Egypt but was extradited in 1882 for supporting the ʿUrabi Revolt. Thereafter, he returned to Gaza and taught at several local institutions, in addition to serving as the *imam*, *khatib* and *mudarris* at the Katib Wilaya Mosque in the neighborhood of Zaytun. Tabbaʿ writes that his scholarly fields of expertise were *fiqh*, *hadith* and *tafsir*. He had excellent relations with leading scholars at al-Azhar, was a member of the Shadhiliyya Sufi order, and made the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1319 (1901/2).[40] Ahmad Busaysu, in his 1897 manuscript *Kashf al-Niqab*, writes that Yusuf Sharrab was a "meticulous" jurist and "clever" scholar, but at the same time "a person who was difficult to get along with, who liked to quarrel and to meddle in affairs that did not concern him."[41]

The occupations of members of other households of the Sharrab family in Gaza included two makers or sellers of sieves or screens (*gharabili*, *kalburcu*), one measurer (*keyyal*, *ölçen*), and one real estate agent (*simsar*). The *arzuhalci* discussed here, Muhammad Sharrab (born 1283/1866–7 in Gaza), was the son of the scholar Shaykh Salim and his wife Hanifa, who were originally from Khan Yunis and then moved to Gaza. He was the head of a 10-person household, including two wives.[42] His first wife was Fatima, who was born in Egypt in 1279 (1862/3) and died in 1326 (1908). His second wife ʿA'isha was born in Gaza in 1293 (1876) and was from a respected local elite family, the Burnus, the daughter of Muhammad al-Burnu and Labiba. His three sons were given typical Ottoman-Egyptian first names: Mahmud Hamdi who was born in Gaza in 1320 (1902/3), Yusuf ʿAbd al-Halim, who was born in Gaza in 1321 (1903/4), and Ahmad Sub-

33 *Ibid*., vol. 4, p. 386.

34 ISA, Nüfus, Reg. 240, pp. 177–196.

35 Tabbaʿ, *Ithaf al-aʾizza fi tarikh Ghazza*, vol. 3, pp. 259–261.

36 *Ibid*., vol. 3, p. 259.

37 Sinai's attachment to Egypt gained recognition only following the ʿAqaba incident in 1906 after which an administrative dividing line was drawn between the head of the Gulf of ʿAqaba and the Mediterranean separating British controlled Egypt from the District of Jerusalem in Ottoman Palestine.

38 *Ibid*.

39 A biography of Yusuf al-Sharrab is found in al-Tabbaʿ, *Ithaf al-aʾizza*, vol. 4, pp. 379–389; see also ʿAdel Mannaʿ (ed.), *Aʿlam Filastin fi awakhir al-ʿahd al-ʿuthmani* (1800–1918) [The Notables of Palestine during the Late Ottoman Period (1800–1918)] (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya, 1995), p. 221 [in Arabic].

40 Tabbaʿ, *Ithaf al-aʾizza fi tarikh Ghazza*, vol. 4, p. 385.

41 Ahmad Salim Busaysu, *Kashf al-niqab fi bayan ahwal baʿd sukkan Ghazza wa-baʿd nawahiha min al-aʿrab* [Unveiling the Situation of some Inhabitants of Gaza and of some of the Bedouin Groups in its Surroundings], Arabic autograph manuscript, dated 29 Rajab 1315 AH / 24 December 1897, Gaza, Wizarat al-Awqaf [in Arabic], p. 70.

42 ISA, Nüfus, Reg. 261, p. 79, *mesken* 59 (PDF 41). I would like to thank Dr. Sarah Buessow for bringing this information to my attention.

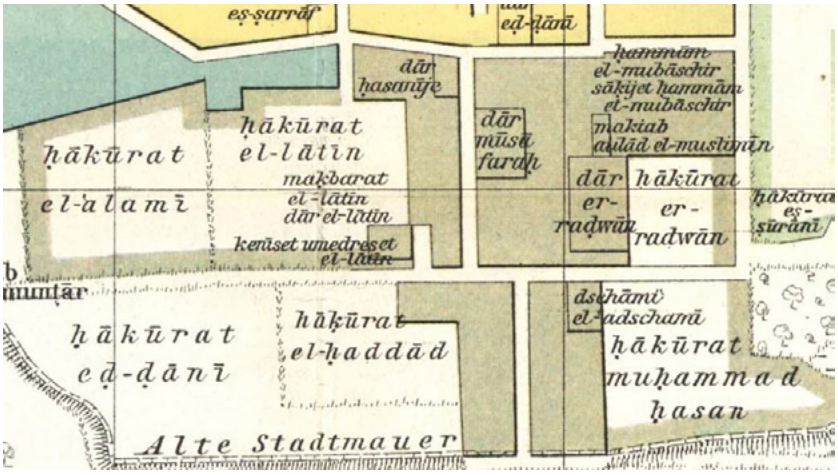

Figure 2: The Area Marked as Harat al-Jehud [Yahud] (the Jewish Neighborhood) in Gatt's 1888 Map of Gaza.

hi who was born in Gaza in 1322 (1904/5).[43] The region where the family lived, ʿAjami, was one of the most cosmopolitan areas of late Ottoman Gaza, and was also called "Harat al-Jehud [Yahud]," the Jewish neighborhood, by the Austrian priest George Gatt in his famous map of Gaza dating to the late 1880s, probably since it was the area where most of the Jews of Gaza resided (see Figure 2).[44] This region was also close to many Christian households and institutions, especially the Greek Orthodox Porphyrius Church, and the Latin Compound, which are included in Gatt's 1888 map.[45]

In terms of political affiliation, the *arzuhalci* Muhammad Sharrab discussed here and his brothers Yusuf, Shakir and Mustafa, all signed a petition for the incumbent *mufti* of Gaza Muhammad Hanafi al-Husayni and against his rival Muhammad Saqallah and his supporters, who had allegedly plotted to replace the *mufti*.[46] Another petition from the same period in favor of the Husayni family was signed by Muhammad Sharrab, the *arzuhalci*, his brothers Mustafa and Yusuf, as well as an unidentified relative of theirs called Turki Sharrab.[47] It is perhaps surprising that an *arzuhalci* was not politically neutral, as one might expect from a petition-writer, but rather identified so clearly with the side of *mufti* Muhammad Hanafi al-Husayni. Two years later, however, in the mid-1890s, the Sharrab family apparently abandoned its support of the Husaynis. In this case, Yusuf Sharrab was part of an anti-Husayni petition in March 1895 signed by nineteen notables in Gaza that clearly reflected the developing schism between the Husaynis and their erstwhile supporters the Shawwas and Busaysus, discussed elsewhere in this volume.[48]

The second petition writer from Gaza identified in the 1905 census appears to have come from a more modest background. ʿAbd al-Jawad Milad was a Muslim born in 1288/1871–2 in Gaza, who lived in the neighborhood of Barjiliyya (Daraj), *mesken* (house) number 738.[49] Members of his family recorded in the census were employed in low-level municipal or governmental jobs such as a guard in the municipality or a member of the *zabtiye* police force.

Other than the two *arzuhalci*s found thus far in the census, it lists ten scribes who, as seen above, may very well have been involved in petition writing outside their official working hours. They included six scribes/calligra-

43 Tabbaʿ, *Ithaf al-aʾizza fi tarikh Ghazza*, vol. 3, p. 361.

44 Georg Gatt, "Legende zum Plane von Gaza," *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 11 (1888), pp. 149–150.

45 Gatt, *ibid.*, p. 149.

46 BOA, Y. MTV., 77/140; a book on Gaza's history was published by a member of the Sharrab family in 2006. See Muhammad Hasan Sharrab, *Ghazzat Hashim: ʿArus al-Sham wa-thaghr al-murabitin* [Hashim's Gaza: The Bride of Greater Syria and the Gate of the Murabitun] (Amman: al-Ahliyya li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawziʿ, 2006) [in Arabic].

47 BOA, HR. TO., 399/3.

48 BOA, BEO., 651/48815, 20 Mart 1311 (1 April 1895).

49 ISA, Nüfus, Reg. 266, p. 3 / PDF 3.

phers (*katib*, *ketebe*), one Shariʿa court scribe (*mahkeme-yi şerʿiye katibi* / *başkatibi*), one scribe in the department of education (*meʾarif ketebesinden*), one in the Agricultural Bank (*Ziraat Bankası katibi*), and one neighborhood scribe (*mahalle katibi*). Since seven of them went by the title of *efendi* in addition to one with the title *bey*, as opposed to only two who held no titles, they most probably came from respected families. In fact, some of the scribes were from very distinguished Gazan families such as the Husayni and Makki.[50]

THE POST AND THE TELEGRAPH

The advent of new technologies and means of transportation in the 19th century considerably affected the work of the *arzuhalci*s, who needed to adapt their letters, including the wording, style, content, and language to the spirit of the time. Even the actual locations where the *arzuhalci*s solicited work may have changed given the rising importance of the Post and Telegraph office. The new modes of transportation and communication allowed Ottoman subjects quick and relatively easy communication with the imperial center, without many of the previously needed intermediaries. As Keith Watenpaugh notes, the new technologies bridged the vast distances of the Empire much more rapidly and constituted an important component in the process of modernizing society in the Middle East.[51] Although the introduction of the telegraph was carried out with other goals in mind in the mid-1850s, within a short span of time the accessibility of the Empire's subjects to Istanbul, at a time of comprehensive reforms in the Empire, completely transformed the relationships of Ottoman subjects in the provinces to the state, in particular the imperial center. For the first time they enjoyed real direct contact with the center without geographic and physical barriers. Even when residing in the Empire's most remote provinces, they could now have direct contact quickly and easily with the central government without going through the bureaucracy and the local authorities. This eliminated the need to travel personally to Istanbul, send a representative there, or complain through the local *kadı*. All one had to do was to go to the nearest post and telegraph office – they were located in all the major towns in the provinces, and gradually also in small towns – write a petition with the help of the *arzuhalci*s in return for a fee, pay the required transmission fee, and send the petition to its destination in Istanbul, where it was translated and enter the bureaucratic process which petitions underwent.[52]

Petitioning Istanbul through the telegraph thus became an affordable procedure, particularly in comparison with the official and unofficial costs of approaching the judicial system such as the *nizamiye* courts (although the telegraph was not very cheap either, since every word cost money when sending a wire, which might partially explain the frequent use of collective petitions). The advent of telegraph lines and the regularization of the postal services resulted in a flood of petitions to the central authorities in Istanbul. Hence the telegraph, which was first introduced to the Ottoman Empire in the mid-1850 at the time of the Crimean War as means of control and centralization, concomitantly allowed subjects in the provinces "to reach all levels of government, to express opinions, make complaints, and petition for change."[53]

In this regard it is interesting to examine the effects of the interaction between the "old regime" semi-official *arzuhalci* institution and

50 Mannaʿ, *Aʿlam Filastin*, pp. 96–101, 346.

51 Keith David Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 4.

52 For more on the influence of the telegraph in Ottoman Syria, see Eugene Rogan, "Instant Communication: The Impact of the Telegraph in Ottoman Syria," in Thomas Philipp and Brigit Schaebler (eds.), *The Syrian Land: Processes of Integration and Fragmentation, Bilād al-Shām from the 18th to the 20th Century* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998), p. 114; apparently there were sometimes obstacles to sending telegraphs from Ottoman post offices, since clerks censored matters they considered delicate. Moreover, it sometimes took a few days for a telegraph to arrive. See Elihu Grant, *The People of Palestine: An Enlarged Edition of "The Peasantry of Palestine, Life, Manners and Customs of the Village"* (Westport, CT: Hyperion, 1976), p. 231.

53 Rogan, "Instant Communication," p. 114. The importance the central government attributed to the telegraph offices can be seen from the fact that its directors in Jerusalem were not locals. See Ziad ʿAbd al-ʿAziz al-Madani, *al-Awqaf fi l-Quds wa-jiwariha khilal al-qarn al-tasiʿ ʿashr al-miladi, 1215 H/1800AD–1336H/1918AD* [The Waqfs (Endowments) in Jerusalem and within the Vicinity in the Nineteenth Century, 1800–1918AD] (Amman: The Author, 2004), p. 64 [in Arabic].

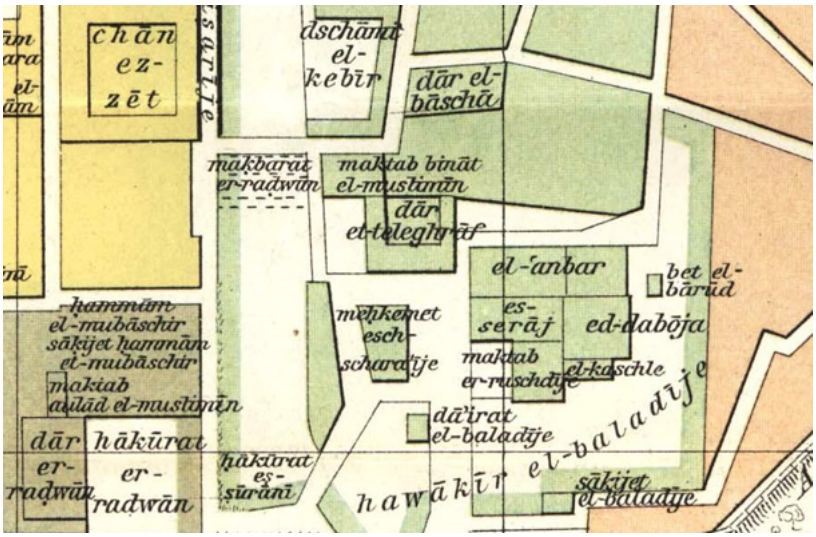

Figure 3: "Dar et-teleghraf" (Telegraph Office) in Gatt's 1888 map of Gaza.[54] Note the location of the telegraph office next to the government's main institutions in Gaza (municipality, schools, the governor's house, the ammunition and weapons store, the grain store, the municipal gardens, the barracks, and the government Headquarters). The city's main mosque was also nearby.

the formalized Telegraph and Post Office of the late Tanzimat period. Telegraph services first became available in Palestine in the mid-1860s and soon spread to major towns and even smaller localities. A telegraph office was apparently opened in Gaza soon after the service reached Palestine. As mentioned above, the Post and Telegraph Office was located in the new center of governance in the city, which was the result of the Tanzimat reforms, particularly their second phase when the reforms gradually trickled down to the Empire's provinces in the 1850s-1860s (see Figures 3 and 4). It was in this new center of governance that the *arzuhalci*s most probably operated and found the bulk of their clients. The flood of petitions sent from Gaza to Istanbul in the last quarter of the 19th century was almost entirely written by *arzuhalci*s, whose importance in the urban sphere seemed to be on the rise. Given the division of the city into political factions whose rivalry had most of the city's elite involved with one of the opposing camps, each side must have had its favorite petition writer/writers, a point that awaits further investigation and clarification. As we have seen, from what is known thus far at least one of the two petition writers identified in Gaza was politically involved and signed petitions in favor of the Husayni family.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the social background of the *arzuhalci*s in late Ottoman Gaza, in particular that of Muhammad Sharrab, based on the Ottoman 1905 census, archival documents, and manuscripts from the period. The *arzuhalci*'s main task was to enable Ottoman subjects to conduct a dialogue with the imperial authorities in Istanbul, which were delegated authority by the Sultan to handle petitions, in a defined situation of asymmetry in their status and relationships. Yet to a certain extent Muhammad Sharrab and other *arzuhalci*s actively shaped the dialogue between the subjects and the imperial authorities and engaged in an important task of mediation between them. Despite the changing nature of the Ottoman state in the 19th century and the differences in status of its subjects, who were now closer to being citizens of a modern state, they still needed the services of the petition and letter writers. In fact, they increasingly used their services to deal with the bureaucracy of the modernizing state, which interfered in their daily affairs to an unprecedented extent

54 Thus far we have identified one telegraph officer (*telegraf çavuşu*) in the Ottoman census, an individual named Sulayman Shiblaq living at house number 123 in Zaytun. See ISA, Nüfus, Reg. 261, p. 151/PDF 77.

Figure 4: The Telegraph Office in Gaza.
Source: Ekrem Işın (ed.), *Üç kitaplı kentler: 19. yüzyıl fotoğraflarında Kudüs ve kutsal topraklar* [Cities of the Three Books: Jerusalem and the Holy Land in 19th-Century Photographs] (Istanbul: İstanbul Araştırmaları Enstitüsü, 2008), p. 69 [in Turkish] (taken from the album of Grand Vizier Kıbrıslı Kamil Paşa [c. 1900]; note the pole with the telegraph wires).

and involved many more interactions with its subjects (filling in forms, applying for permits, obtaining certificates, appealing decisions, etc.). The *arzuhalci*s thus exercised a traditional occupation that survived these changes and the technological developments they brought about such as the ability to send petitions by mail and telegraph. They were an important component of the urban landscape during the late Ottoman period and to some extent their importance and the need for their services was even on the rise.

Petition and letter writers can still be seen in several places in Istanbul today, such as next to courts and main administrative buildings. This is perhaps related to the low literacy rates among some segments of the population in the Middle East, and the nature of some centralized bureaucratic regimes, as well as the ability of petition and letter writers to adapt the craft of petition-writing and adjust it to the changing times and to the needs of the society in different periods.

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PETITIONS: WHEN URBAN RESIDENTS APPROACHED THE SULTAN

As was the case for other Islamic Empires before it, the Ottoman Empire allowed all its subjects to submit petitions directly to the ruler to complain about wrongdoings in the bureaucracy and state apparatus, and ask for justice ad hoc, a practice generally known since Abbasid times as *mazalim*; literally, wrongdoings or injustice. Petitions were written according to very rigid rules that included the use of flattery, flowery motifs, jargon, formulas, and the belittlement of the petitioners vs. glorification of the ruler.

In principle, every Ottoman subject had the right to submit a petition (*arz-ı hal, arzuhal*) to the Sultan and beg for justice, in person, through a representative or delegation, or by sending a written petition. Petitions were often written in the name of a collective (*arz-ı mahzar*) and not by individuals. This was a way to give more clout to the petition and was consonant with the Ottoman predilection for treating imperial subjects as groups rather than as individuals.

In the imperial center itself, from the mid-17th century onwards, responses to petitions were inscribed in separate volumes called Şikayet Defterleri, "Registers of Complaints." This practice continued until the early 19th century and stopped for unknown reasons in 1813. As a result, records of petitions submitted after that date are scattered throughout various sections of the Ottoman Archive, including in the Foreign Ministry, whose Translation Bureau (Tercüme Odası) was responsible for translating petitions sent from the provinces to Istanbul into Ottoman Turkish.

The Divan-ı Hümayun (Imperial Council), and later during the reform period in the 19th century, the State Council, Şura-yı Devlet, discussed the petitions submitted by subjects to the Sultan. In response, the Imperial Council or a handful of other senior office holders in the central government issued a sultanic degree (*firman*), in the name of the Sultan.

In the second half of the 19th century the number of petitions sent to Istanbul from the provinces increased. The petitions now sent to the imperial center dealt with almost every issue affecting the local population, large or small, by individuals or groups who either preferred not to go through the regular reformed legal and administrative channels or the province's chain of command, or used this mechanism alongside parallel legal action as a way to manipulate the system in their favor and gain the upper hand in local disputes.

One reason for the flood of petitions to the imperial center was that the reforms of the 19th century and the state's efforts to achieve greater centralization were concretized in much greater interference in its subjects' lives. The modernizing state started penetrating and regulating areas it had previously neglected, either partially or completely. Consequently, subjects increasingly expected the state to provide redress for their concerns. Another reason was the installation of modern postal services and telegraph lines throughout the Empire's provinces, which allowed Ottoman subjects to have direct contact with the center

without geographic or physical barriers or intermediaries. All they needed to do was approach the nearest post and telegraph office, write the petition with the help of a professional petition-writer (*arzuhalci*) in return for payment, pay the required transmission fee and send the petition to its destination in Istanbul. The third explanation has to do with the autocratic reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1909), for whom petitions were a perfect way to collect information, take the pulse of the provinces, monitor the work of officials in the provinces, identify elements suspected of disloyalty, and deter subjects from taking part in political or irredentist activity.

Although all segments of Ottoman society submitted petitions to Istanbul, the vast majority of the petitions was still sent by the urban population. This population had considerable means at its disposal and possessed the knowledge and ability to deliver the petition to Istanbul, and knew how to use its influence and connections in the Ottoman capital to make sure its concerns were attended to, and later could also control whether steps had been taken pursuant to the claims. The range of topics broached by the urban population was enormous. Petitions by urbanites appear to have been used as an efficient mechanism to conduct its affairs with the central government, convey messages and leverage its interests. Much more than previously, it had clear political overtones. Urbanites submitted numerous personal petitions about specific matters that concerned them as individuals, as well as collective petitions about issues affecting groups of people. In particular during the reign of Abdülhamid II, petitions were used as a tactic to involve Istanbul in local urban politics and local quarrels in the provinces, or to settle personal scores between rival coalitions and personalities, as seen in the case of Gaza.