

Late Ottoman Gaza: An Eastern Mediterranean Hub in Transformation. By Yuval Ben-Bassat and Johann Buessow. Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp. xii + 192. \$110.00 (cloth).

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When Yuval Ben-Bassat and Johann Buessow were researching and writing this monograph, they could not have known that the subject of their study would soon be deliberately obliterated. As a result, their already valuable study of a late Ottoman provincial hub acquires added worth as a testament to a society that has all but vanished.

Late Ottoman Gaza focuses on Gaza City, in the north-central part of the strip, during the nineteenth century and the earliest years of the twentieth, up to World War I. It is succinct and lucidly written, although it often reads rather like a research report. Ben-Bassat and Buessow are seasoned experts in late Ottoman provincial history at the University of Haifa and Ruhr-Universität in Bochum, Germany, respectively. They use a broad spectrum of primary sources to shed light on the changing demographics, economic life, and political culture of Gaza City and its vicinity during this period.

The book proceeds in very orderly fashion, with an Introduction, four core chapters, and a Conclusion. Ben-Bassat and Buessow take pains to position their study in the context of earlier studies of the eastern Mediterranean littoral, and above all Greater Syria (*Bilād al-Shām*), during the late Ottoman era. As the authors point out, there has been no monograph in a major European language on Gaza, in contrast to numerous studies of Jerusalem, Haifa, Beirut, and Damascus. (To their great credit, they take into account recent monographs on Gaza in Arabic and Hebrew.) The primary sources they exploit to fill this lacuna consist of documents, largely in Ottoman Turkish, from the central Ottoman archive in Istanbul; the one extant *sharī'a* court register (*sijill*), in Arabic, from Gaza, which covers 1857–1861; and judiciously chosen narrative sources, above all two political tracts by members of Gazan notable families and a mammoth biographical dictionary/chronicle/gazetteer by a local scholar. All these are supplemented by the 1905 Ottoman census of Gaza, maps, mainly prepared by the British Mandatory powers, and aerial photographs taken by an arm of the British air force during World War I.

These sources allow the authors to recreate the overall arc of Gaza City's administrative, economic, and demographic history in the late Ottoman era. Situated in the

southernmost part of the large province of Damascus, Gaza was the second largest city in Ottoman Palestine, after Jerusalem, and had a large agricultural hinterland. It played a key role in regional caravan trade, lying just north of the *hajj* route from Cairo, which made it well-placed to supply pilgrims with grain. Its role in the caravan trade received a blow from the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Around this time, luckily, Gaza began to export much of its sizable barley crop to Britain, where it fueled the beer industry. This revelation of Gaza's role in the global consumer economy will come as news to most readers, regional experts or otherwise. By the time World War I broke out, however, the barley boom had gone bust, leaving Gaza in economic crisis.

In tracing this historical arc, the authors are careful to explain the pervasive influence on Gaza of Egypt, for which Gaza had been a zone of influence for centuries, never more so than during Mehmed 'Alī Pasha's occupation of Ottoman Syria from 1831–1840. Gaza's notable families partook of religious and cultural trends originating in Egypt, and peasants and Bedouin traveled back and forth between the two regions; peasants from Egypt even established barley-growing villages. In contrast, while the authors note Gaza's sometime regional domination by Jerusalem, they could do more to explain the larger city's profound political influence on Gaza, to the extent that Gaza sometimes seems a political satellite of Jerusalem. A case in point is the Ḥusaynī family, Gaza's most powerful clan of local notables, who were related to the better-known family of the same name in Jerusalem and in fact rose to prominence in Gaza through a rivalry with Jerusalem's Khālīdī family. Chapter 4 (pp. 121–25) points out that the Ḥusaynīs monopolized the office of *mufti* of Gaza for most of the period covered in the book, while the Khālīdīs dominated the *qāḍī*-ship of Gaza. Yet the manner in which the two posts related to each other, as well as the roots of this inter-city struggle for religio-political leadership, are not fully explicated.

To make the overall historical trajectory more comprehensible, the authors home in on key tipping points. For example, the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 exacerbated divisions among Gaza's notable families, as did the beginnings of Zionist activity in Ottoman Palestine in the 1890s and the Young Turk revolution

in 1908. Demographic tipping points include the devastation of Gaza's population by the 1902 cholera epidemic, years of drought around 1910, which triggered a wave of emigration, and the Ottoman evacuation of the city in 1917 in the face of British bombardment. Meanwhile, a major administrative tipping point for Gaza was the establishment of Beersheba by the Ottomans in 1900 as the southernmost administrative center of Ottoman Palestine, with the aim of shoring up Ottoman authority on the Egyptian border. This move isolated Gaza from the northern Negev, over which it had previously held influence. These conjunctures do not appear repeatedly in each chapter but are instead discussed as they relate to particular topics.

Perhaps the book's most significant contributions are its explorations of Gaza's topography and expansion (Chapter 2) and of the city's factionalism (Chapter 4) during the period under study. For the former topic, the authors exploit census data, plus historical maps and photographs, to show that the city grew along two major axes: the west-east road from the sandy port into the city center and the north-south artery situated near the city's eastern edge, which formed the main overland route between Damascus and Cairo. The caravan trade helped to determine that wealth concentrated in the Daraj and Zaytun neighborhoods located on either side of the north-south route. Daraj, the city's largest neighborhood, with over 28,000 residents in 1905, was the historical hub of elite residence and commercial activity, where the powerful Ḥusaynī faction had its headquarters. Shujā'īyya and Tuffāḥ, located toward the city's rural outskirts, were much smaller (5,000 and 2,000, respectively) and poorer, with a heavy agricultural base, although the northwestern portion of Shujā'īyya had by 1905 become a commercial hub to rival Daraj. Zaytun, 1905 population between two and three thousand, was home to Gaza's diverse Christian and Jewish population, who were not well-represented in the 1905 census. The census records and the lone extant *sharī'a sijill* enable the authors to delve even deeper, investigating sub-neighborhood street-level dynamics in each of these four quarters.

Where factionalism is concerned, Ben-Bassat and Buessow carefully position its manifestations in Gaza against the influential "politics of notables" paradigm introduced by the late Albert Hourani, as well as more specific studies of urban factionalism in the Ottoman provinces. They present Gaza's brand of factionalism as a case of multiple factions based on notable families—principally the Ḥusaynī, Shawwa, Busaysu (often

rendered Bseiso in the modern-day press), 'Alamī, and Abū Khadra families—none of whom had resided in Gaza before the eighteenth century. Reading between the lines of the authors' discussion, however, one gets the sense that Gaza's notable rivalries tended toward a form of bilateral factionalism, with the Ḥusaynīs and a few smaller allied families facing off against a shifting coalition of Khālīdīs, Shawwas, Busaysus, and others. In this connection, it can't have been insignificant that the Ḥusaynīs and Khālīdīs belonged to the two rival blocs into which Arab populations in the region had coalesced since the Late Antique period—respectively, Yamanī, or "southern Arab," and Qaysī, or "northern Arab"—although these affiliations are not mentioned in the book. As in other instances of bilateral factionalism, both within the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere, Gaza's factions acquired various competing political affiliations—above all pro-Ottoman central authority vs. pro-British/Egyptian—with the changing times.

The 1892 struggle for the *mufti*-ship between the incumbent Muḥammad al-Ḥanafī al-Ḥusaynī and one Muḥammad Saqallāh, supported by the Jerusalem Khālīdīs, enables the authors to gauge factional membership from the signatures on rival petitions to the imperial government. At this point, the Busaysus were solidly pro-Ḥusaynī, the Abū Khadras pro-Saqallah, while the Shawwas and 'Alamīs were split between the two. When, in the mid-1890s, the Busaysus and Shawwas withdrew their support from the Ḥusaynīs, the pro-Saqallāh faction was able to prevail on the imperial authorities to exile the Ḥusaynī leadership to Ankara. The larger context of this maneuver, the authors explain, was the Ottoman sultan Abdülhamīd II's (r. 1876–1909) administrative overhaul of the district of Jerusalem, featuring the above-mentioned establishment of Beersheba as the administrative center of the northern Negev, and the enforcement of municipalities among the cities of the district. Gaza was now run not by a *mufti* but by a mayor, who for most of the period between the mid-1890s and World War I belonged to the Shawwa family. The saga of the Ḥusaynīs thus demonstrates how local factional rivalries consistently intersected with imperial-level agendas.

Any attempt to understand socio-economic life in a pre- or early modern empire must take into account the relationship between cities and their rural hinterlands. Nonetheless, this important topic is typically undertreated in monographs on Ottoman Arab provincial cities. To their credit, Ben-Bassat and Buessow devote an entire chapter (Chapter 3) to Gaza City's relations

with the population of its rural hinterland, both peasant agriculturalist (*fallāḥ*) and Bedouin. Gaza City administered fifty-nine villages in the period under study, including Khān Yūnis and Rafah, today considered separate cities. Perhaps this chapter's most intriguing revelation is how Bedouin in Gaza City's hinterland were able to forge ties with the city's elite and thus intervene in factional politics. This is especially clear in the case of the Wuḥayda Bedouin clan and Gaza's powerful Ḥusaynī family, who were linked by claimed descent from the Prophet Muḥammad's grandson Ḥusayn. Petitions by Bedouin representatives to the imperial government against the Ḥusaynī and Shawwa families demonstrate the Bedouins' political agency as they attempted to enlist the imperial authorities against local rivals. On the other hand, as in other Arab provinces, Bedouin populations and villagers could as easily ally with rival notable families, in effect becoming members of their factions.

Where villagers specifically are concerned, the authors argue that toward the end of the nineteenth century, peasant intermarriage with members of notable families, along with shared religious rituals, such as visitation of local saints' tombs, contributed to a growing sense of shared regional identity, as did mobilization against the early Zionist settlers. Meanwhile, the replacement of the old *shaykh al-qarya*, or village headman, with the more authoritative *muhtar* (*mukhtar*), recognized by the imperial government, gave the villages more institutionalized and influential representation in Gaza City and farther up the administrative chain. To make this point more forceful, the authors might have explained the *muhtar* system more fully.

My chief criticism of this otherwise illuminating book is that it might have benefited from meaningful engagement with the literature on the pre-nineteenth-century Arab provinces. In general, greater diachronic contextualization would have fleshed out the picture of Gaza's role as a peripheral Ottoman commercial hub while showing more clearly how the city and its district participated in certain long-standing features of Ottoman political and religious culture, thus providing a more comprehensive background for the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century changes that the book discusses. More specifically, this approach would have supplied a more meaningful context for Gaza's brand of factionalism, the persistently bilateral character of which I feel is inadequately acknowledged,

as well as the pronounced Bedouin component to the factions. Eighteenth-century regional precedents for the phenomenon of *mufti* dynasties, above all in Damascus and Jerusalem, could also have been explored, and further light have been shed on the historical roots of some of Gaza's notable families. The history of Sufi orders in the region, above all the Khalwatīs and Shādhilīs, could likewise have been explicated in greater depth.

Late Ottoman Gaza is, in some respects, a throw-back to the provincial city and province studies of the 1980s and 1990s. I mean this as a compliment. It is a thoroughgoing, empirically grounded exploration of a key city and its hinterland that unquestionably fills a lacuna in Ottomanist scholarship. The authors mercifully avoid theoretical and methodological posturing while, at the same time, positioning their study firmly in the context of earlier generations of monographs on the Ottoman provinces. One hopes that this monograph will inspire additional research on Gaza's pre-nineteenth-century history.

Transcending the book's contribution to Ottomanist scholarship is, of course, the service it provides to preserving the memory of Gaza. Obviously, late Ottoman Gaza was quite different from early twenty-first-century Gaza: a largely rural society with only a fraction of the population, and part of a completely different economic and political network. Nonetheless, Ben-Bassat's and Buessow's monograph documents the local and regional history that laid the foundation for what Gaza became in the twentieth century and the first quarter of the twenty-first century, before its recent destruction.

In pursuit of this sort of historical preservation, the authors have compiled the Gaza Historical Database, using information culled from the array of primary sources they consulted. Supported by the two authors' universities, in collaboration with the University of Tübingen, the site features an interactive map incorporating data from all the maps that the authors used, an image database of historical photographs and architectural plans, and a gazetteer that plots on the available maps all place names encountered in the research. The database is briefly described in the book's Introduction (pp. 29–31) but deserves much wider publicity since it is a valuable tool for the reconstruction of Gaza's vanished past, joining such non-academic initiatives as the online Bseiso Family Archive (bfarchive.org). It can be accessed at gaza.ub.rub.de/gaza/.