

BOOK REVIEW

DIERAUFF, Evelin. *Translating Late Ottoman Modernity in Palestine: Debates on Ethno-Confessional Relations and Identity in the Arab Palestinian Newspaper Filasṭīn (1911 – 1914)*. Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2020. 456 p. ISBN 978-3-8471-1066-8.

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Historians examining the years preceding the Second Constitutional Era are faced with a dearth of extant primary sources from Palestine¹ written in the native language of the vast majority of its inhabitants. This represents a challenge especially when exploring the issues of identity and intercommunal relations. However, with the ensuing era of “liberty, equality, brotherhood”² after the Young Turk Revolution of July 1908 the situation changed significantly and a new written source began to be locally produced. Dozens of Arabic periodicals were founded in the next years in Palestine, although many had only a very short life-span of several issues and most are not extant.³ Among the most long-lived papers were *al-Quds* (1908 – 1914) and *al-Munādī* (1912 – 1913) both published in Jerusalem, *al-Karmal* (1908 – 1914) based in Haifa and *Filasṭīn* (1911 – 1914) established in Jaffa. It is the last paper which is the subject of Evelin Dierauff’s sizeable monograph.

Even though Dierauff’s monograph is focused on one primary source – the semi-weekly newspaper *Filasṭīn* – the book is arguably the most complex, detailed and comprehensive analysis of ethno-religious coexistence in the sub-district of Jaffa (and to a lesser degree in the district of Jerusalem) during the Second Constitutional Era. These years are of crucial importance as they constitute a bridge between the Ottoman and Mandate periods when several crucial events, developments and changes took place. Dierauff treats them as part

¹ *Sanjaqs* of ‘Akkā, Nābulus and the *mutaṣarrıfīya* of Jerusalem.

² The slogan of the revolution can be found on the title page above the name of the newspaper in every single issue of *al-Quds*.

³ The most comprehensive work on late Ottoman Arabic Palestinian press was written by Yehoshua. YEHOSHUA, Ya‘qūb. *Tārīkh al-ṣaḥāfa al-‘Arabīya fī Filasṭīn fī al-‘ahd al-‘Uthmānī (1908 – 1918)* [The History of the Arabic Press in Palestine in the Ottoman Era (1908 – 1918)]. Jerusalem: Maṭba‘at al-Ma‘ārif, 1974.

of the “saddle period”⁴ during which a profound transformation of relations between various communities took place (pp. 49, 397–398). In fact, Arabic newspapers enable us for the first time to see Palestinian society in much more detail than previously. Indeed, Evelin Dierauff’s masterful analyses show us the possibilities offered by this neglected and vastly underexplored source and demonstrate the crucial importance of contemporary newspapers as a well of valuable information especially when examined by innovative approaches and methods. Her application of close reading to discussions of various issues concerning inter- and intra-communal relations yields excellent results. One of the crucial and most productive aspects of the monograph is its sharp focus “on chronological developments in *Filasṭīn*’s debates, carving out its major shifts, [so that] transformations in selected group relations can be observed in slow motion” (p. 44). Contextualization and engagement with scholarly literature is another strength of this work. An additional asset is the amount of useful biographic information not only about *Filasṭīn*’s editors (pp. 58–60), but also its contributors and other personalities.

The meticulousness of the author’s exploration of the newspaper is remarkable and the magnitude of provided details astonishing. To demonstrate the amount of work done by her suffice it to say that she identified 1,895 articles relevant to her research (p. 47) and categorized them according to 162 keywords. To give a few examples, she found that the topic of Ottoman unity was discussed in 527 articles, Orthodox matters in 452 and Zionism in 362. On the other hand, the extensiveness and detail-oriented approach can also be considered a drawback from the perspective of the book’s readability, as it will appeal to a limited specialist audience and will probably not attract a more general readership (even though it would deserve to be widely read). Nevertheless, scholars interested in late Ottoman Palestine and the Arabic press will greatly enjoy this monograph. Specialist readers might also appreciate long translated quotes from the newspaper which often include transcription of key Arabic terms.

On the less positive side, it is unfortunate that the book suffers from a high number of typos and small mistakes that can be found throughout the book. It seems that the proofreading was either done in haste or was entirely lacking. Among the shortcomings of the monograph are missing letters, conjunctions, duplicated and wrong words (e.g. “raw model” instead of “role model”, pp. 89, 404). Several factual mistakes can be found in the book, like the assertion that *al-Aṣma‘ī* ceased to be published because of the death of its owner (p. 56), whereas in reality it was discontinued earlier because of Ḥanā ‘Abdallāh al-‘Īsā’s intense

⁴ The term “saddle period” (Germ. *Sattelzeit*) was coined by Reinhardt Koselleck and denotes the transition from the pre-modern to the modern era – which in the European context covers roughly the years 1750 – 1850.

involvement in the Orthodox Renaissance and his prolonged absence in Istanbul where he was acting as a leading member of a native delegation.⁵ Moreover, Yūsuf al-‘Īsā (1870 – 1948) was not the younger cousin of ‘Īsā al-‘Īsā (1878 – 1950, p. 59) as he had been born earlier. In addition, it was not Yūsuf al-‘Īsā who was a member of the Arab Orthodox delegation to Istanbul in the summer of 1909, but, as had been mentioned before, his brother Ḥanā ‘Abdallāh al-‘Īsā (pp. 194, 197). Surprisingly, Dierauff reproduces the inaccurate version of the story recounting periodic delivery of *Filasṭīn* to the villages of the sub-district of Jaffa free of charge (p. 156). This policy had been reported before by several historians starting with Yehoshua,⁶ while Rashid Khalidi emphasized its importance and impact.⁷ However, careful examination of *Filasṭīn*’s content shows that it was a short-lived scheme as the editors ended it two and a half months later. What is more, it seems from the article in which the editors announced the termination of this endeavour that the gendarmerie had not been distributing the issues at all or had stopped doing so long before the editors discovered its failure: “We were very surprised yesterday when we saw the issues piled up at the station and covered with dust; some of them were used for testing pens. We came with someone to take these issues back to our office and have decided not to send them any more [...]”⁸

Besides an introduction and conclusion (numbered as Chapter V), the monograph is divided into four sizable chapters. The introduction (pp. 17 – 50) provides the reader with an overview of the historical context and defines the methodology used in the book.

Chapter I (pp. 51 – 115) focuses on the newspaper, its editors and their mission. The author treats *Filasṭīn* as a collective enterprise with a broad spectrum of authors, not as a private forum for its editors (pp. 74 – 75). She recognizes three central priorities permeating the writings in the newspaper. Firstly, a “modernization imperative” including promotion of modernization and progress and support for reforms (pp. 79, 81–84). This approach was applied to all contemporary phenomena including Zionist immigration and colonization –

⁵ *Al-Quds*, 14 September 1909, No. 84, p. 2.

⁶ YEHOASHUA, Y. *Tārīkh al-ṣaḥāfa al-‘Arabīya fī Filasṭīn fī al-‘ahd al-‘Uthmānī (1908 – 1918)* [The History of the Arabic Press in Palestine in the Ottoman Era (1908 – 1918)]. Jerusalem: Maṭba‘at al-ma‘ārif, 1974, pp. 18–19.

⁷ KHALIDI, Rashid. *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, p. 57.

⁸ *Filasṭīn*, 28 August 1913, No. 266–63, p. 3. Quoted in BEŠKA, Emanuel. *From Ambivalence to Hostility: The Arabic Newspaper Filasṭīn and Zionism, 1911 – 1914*. Bratislava: Slovak Academic Press, 2016, p. 20.

which was commended by the editors and some other authors as long as it was considered beneficial for Palestine and its inhabitants. Moreover, a strong emphasis was put on schools, education and literacy. Secondly, the editors embraced wholeheartedly “Ottoman patriotism” and “constitutionalism” and in their discourse often contrasted it to the “despotism” (Arabic *al-istibdād*) of Sultan Abdülhamid II’s era before the revolution (pp. 93 – 96). Thirdly, a strong focus was placed on the public sphere with the goal of educating the nation and “creating a public opinion” (pp. 78, 110 – 113). The editors used sharp, provocative and polemic language to provoke their opponents in order to increase the interest of readers (pp. 79 – 81). Moreover, they criticised Palestinian (Eastern) backwardness, in line with an Orientalist approach (pp. 91 – 93). However, their view of the West was ambivalent: on the one hand they admired its level of progress and development but on the other they criticised Western policies, notably the colonization of foreign lands and interventions in Ottoman internal affairs (p. 107). Muslim-Christian harmony was strongly promoted in the newspaper, albeit mostly by Christian authors (p. 106). Furthermore, this chapter also contains an extensive analysis of various concepts and identities (pp. 94 – 110) and discusses the approaches of other authors to this topic (p. 99).

Chapter II (pp. 117 – 173) begins with a discussion of Jaffa’s rapid growth in the 19th century following its occupation by Egyptian forces. It treats the sub-district of Jaffa as an “ethno-confessional contact zone”. The various attributes given to the city attest to its growing importance, economic standing and multicultural character. While engaging with the secondary literature on the Jaffa-Tel Aviv conurbation Dierauff criticizes Ruth Kark for overwhelmingly relying on European and Zionist sources and largely ignoring the Ottoman and Palestinian perspectives. In addition, she points out Kark’s echoing of Zionist mythology and emphasizing the exclusive merits of Jewish immigrants in the development of the city (pp. 120, 143).⁹ The sub-chapter *Ethno-Confessional Cohabitation and Power Sharing* (pp. 154 – 173) contains two important case studies. The first focuses on Jaffa’s neglected infrastructure and the pressures exerted by local stakeholders on the authorities to carry out its modernization. The most important issue that impeded Jaffa’s development was its woefully inadequate port facilities, above all the lack of a deep-water port (pp. 159 – 163). The other sub-chapter deals with the issue of insecurity in the *qaḍā’*, which was for the most part blamed on the immigrants from the Arab Maghreb. It is noteworthy that the editors’ frustration with them was such that in spite of their strict secularism they asked for the application of punishments under Islamic law (Arabic *ḥudūd*) against the criminals. Furthermore, they also lobbied for the expulsion of Maghrebi immigrants from the region. The inability of the

⁹ KARK, Ruth. *Jaffa: A City in Evolution, 1799 – 1917*. Jerusalem, 1990.

authorities to solve the bad security situation was repeatedly criticized in the semi-weekly publication (pp. 163 – 173).

Chapter III deals with the “Orthodox Renaissance” a reform movement that sought the empowerment of native Greek Orthodox Christians in the Patriarchate of Jerusalem (pp. 175 – 276). Dierauff demonstrates that its promotion was the primary reason behind the establishment of *Filasṭīn* and it was the most frequently discussed subject for most part of its pre-WWI existence (pp. 178, 196 – 197, 406 – 407). This is perhaps the most important section of the monograph as it breaks new ground and offers new insight into the genesis of this important movement. It is surprising that this is apparently the first work that systematically tackles this crucial subject during these formative years. The author provides readers with a concise account of the Patriarchate’s history and summarizes the research that had been done by other scholars. Nevertheless, this is the chapter that is the most difficult to read, because of the complexity of the issue, the wealth of details, the diverse interests of the representatives from Jerusalem and other regions and frequently changing alliances. In addition, it is painful to follow how the efforts of the native activists were systematically and determinedly frustrated by the various delaying tactics of the Greek clerical hierarchy, in order to prevent any substantial and meaningful changes in the *status quo*.

Dierauff identifies the main actors on both sides of the conflict (pp. 200 – 205), the composition, erratic functioning and major problems of the Mixed Council (pp. 218 – 223) which was the crucial institution where most of the negotiations took place. Moreover, she identifies and portrays in meticulous detail the changes in alliances between the lay representatives of various dioceses and several escalations and de-escalations that occurred throughout those years. She describes the tactics employed by the activists to persuade the government to accede to their demands: sending petitions, dispatching delegations, publishing open letters in the press and mobilizing the community by organizing demonstrations, boycotts and the occupation of the strategically located St. James Church in Jerusalem as well as other buildings. Furthermore, she also briefly characterizes the methods used by their adversaries (pp. 211 – 218). In addition, she presents the terminology and main ideas employed by the native activists (pp. 205 – 211), setting the Orthodox struggle in the context of the battle against both despotism and foreign rule and attuning their discourse to be in accord with constitutionalism and Ottomanism. The intensive anti-Patriarchal crusade led to *Filasṭīn*’s first temporary suspension in November 1913. Thereafter, at the turn of 1914, under pressure from the authorities, the editors ceased their anti-clerical campaign and significantly reduced the coverage of Orthodox matters.

Chapter IV focuses on discussions of Zionism (pp. 277 – 395) and it examines closely how the treatment of Zionist immigration and colonization in *Filasṭīn* changed over time. Whereas during the first years the “dialogical elements” were

preponderant, by the end of 1913 all debate ended and was replaced by an all-out anti-Zionist campaign. Whereas in the first phase the editors and some other contributors perceived Zionist immigration and colonization through the “modernization imperative” as potentially beneficial for Palestine and its native inhabitants, later they came to see it as an economic, political and demographic threat. The chapter contains an exhaustive introduction in which the author engages with the scholarly literature in a systematic and detailed manner (pp. 280 – 285). Dierauff should be commended for her accurate, factual and often critical treatment of previous scholarship on the subject. She does not shy away from pointing out mistakes and misconceptions, such as when she criticizes the uncritical reliance by some authors on ‘Īsā al-‘Īsā’s memoirs written at a much later point in time under completely changed circumstances (pp. 282 – 283). By comparing ‘Īsā al-‘Īsā’s claims in the memoirs with the results of her qualitative analysis of the newspaper’s content she clearly proves her point.

Previous works have already noted and analysed the transformation that took place in *Filasṭīn*’s discussion of Zionist immigration and colonization in the pre-WWI period. The author of this review had previously published a monograph that overlaps with this chapter. When comparing the two, Dierauff’s text adds new perspectives to our knowledge. Whereas chapter 2 of *From Ambivalence to Hostility*¹⁰ focuses on two major discursive shifts *vis-à-vis* Zionism (the first based on concerns regarding its social and economic impact and the latter its political ambitions), Dierauff identifies additional nuances and expands the number of alterations to five. Her research into the Orthodox Renaissance leads her to pinpoint the end of Yusuf al-‘Īsā’s membership in the Mixed Council and the concomitant cessation of al-‘Īsās’ anti-Patriarchal campaign as a turning point giving the editors an additional impetus to embrace anti-Zionism and engage in an all-out anti-Zionist campaign from the beginning of 1914. This new perspective certainly has to be taken into account. However, it seems to me that Dierauff overemphasizes the impact of this change as the coverage of Zionism had already substantially intensified in the summer 1913 and was reinforced even more in the following months. Therefore, I consider it to be part of a longer-lasting shift fed by several events, controversies and developments. In addition, I do not agree with Dierauff’s deduction that another reason for the campaign was the fact that the editors considered Zionism a “‘safe’ enemy” (pp. 391–392, 414). In fact, the ‘Īsās must have been aware of the legal proceedings brought against editors of other newspapers (most prominently Najīb al-Naṣṣār, the owner and editor-in-chief of *al-Karmal* from the district of ‘Akkā) caused by their criticism of Zionist immigration and colonization. Indeed, the subsequent suspension of

¹⁰ BEŠKA, Emanuel. *From Ambivalence to Hostility: The Arabic Newspaper Filasṭīn and Zionism, 1911 – 1914*. Bratislava: Slovak Academic Press, 2016, pp. 33–64.

Filasfîn in April 1914 by the authorities highlights the “unsafeness” of the Zionist adversary as a target of their press offensive. Furthermore, even this forced seven-week-long interruption (April – June 1914) did not deter the editors from pressing on with the campaign; on the contrary, they further intensified it in the next months after the suspension had been lifted.

The Conclusion (Chapter V) is concise, well-written and well-organized and neatly recapitulates the content of the book.

To sum up, *Translating Late Ottoman Modernity in Palestine* is the most comprehensive scholarly book on the late-Ottoman newspaper *Filasfîn*. This book demonstrates the potential of newspapers to fill the gaps regarding our knowledge of crucial issues of late Ottoman Palestine, including Zionism, the tensions within the Greek Orthodox community and ethno-religious relations in the *mutaşarrıfîya*. Its scholarship is innovative and it contains informed and sophisticated analyses of various aspects of ethno-religious coexistence in a crucial period of Palestine’s history. It is highly recommended reading for scholars interested in the history of Palestine and the Arabic press and offers many relevant insights.

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