

Palestine Under Muslim Rule

Muslim rule in the Holy Land would last a thousand years of nearly continuous rule. Life changed radically over that millennium, as the expansion of Islamic empires created and brought together markets, cultures, and intellectual spheres under a new political system.

Religious Tolerance

For many minority groups, relief from intense religious persecution came when the Rashidun Caliphate took over Palestine in 638 CE. In keeping with Qur'anic teachings about tolerance and religious freedom, the Muslims quickly dismantled many discriminatory policies of the past; the most egregious of these, the ban on Jews living in Jerusalem, was repealed by the Rashidun soon after the conquest of the Levant.¹ Many Jews returned to the city after their five-century-long absence.

Along with the explicit repeal of discriminatory policies came the establishment of a new social system governing religious minorities: the system of the *dhimmi*. In this system of social organization, monotheistic religious minorities were granted protection and security by the state in exchange for the payment of the *jizya* tax. Jews and Christians were granted practical religious autonomy, with the right to establish their own legal system to be used among members of the faith. In matters outside the jurisdiction of their religious courts (such as legal disputes and crimes involving a Muslim or offenses against the public decency), they were granted full legal equality with Muslims.² Jews and Christians were also exempt from mandatory military service,

¹ Gil, Moshe. *A History of Palestine, 634-1099*. p. 70-71

² Sirry, Mun'im A. *Scriptural Polemics: The Qur'an and Other Religions*. p. 179. By today's standards, it was not technically perfect legal equality. Although otherwise equal, religious

as well as the *zakat* tax demanded of Muslims. The *jizya* tax itself was “progressive”, structured so as to draw more heavily from the rich and less from the poor.³

The *dhimmi* system was not implemented uniformly throughout the millenium of Muslim rule, and it placed a varying degree of burden on non-Muslim communities at various times throughout history. Yet, in a world where state-sanctioned massacres and forced conversions were common (and would remain common for centuries), it was quite progressive; Muslim rule generally ushered in a period of relative religious freedom. To quote historians Bernard Lewis and Buntzie Ellis Churchill: “Muslim tolerance of unbelievers was far better than anything available in Christendom, until the rise of secularism in the 17th century.”⁴ Outside of this system, Muslim rulers generally kept existing administrative structures in tact, and governed the territory much the same as it had been governed under the Byzantines.⁵

The quality of life for religious (and ethnic) minorities under the Islamic empires was as described; yet, it is important to note some exceptions. Under the reign of the eighth Umayyad caliph Umar II in the eighth century, a system of clothing identification for members of the *dhimmi* was established, forcing many Jews to wear yellow stars on their persons. This practice was short-lived, but was unfortunately occasionally revived by Islamic rulers.⁶ In 15th century Morocco, Jews of select cities were restricted to living in designated walled communities called *mellah*, a practice that would be revived in later times.⁷ Under Islamic rule, there were occasionally attempts by rulers (especially in North Africa) at forced conversions, ethnic

minorities were typically prohibited from holding high political offices, and their testimonies against Muslims in courts of law were not accepted.

³ Abū Khalīl, Shawqī. *Al-Islam Fī Qafaṣ Al-Ittihām*. p. 149

⁴ Lewis, Bernard, and Buntzie Ellis Churchill. *Islam: The Religion and the People*. 2011 ed. p. 146

⁵ Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 15

⁶ Levy, Richard S. *Antisemitism: A Historical Encyclopedia of Prejudice and Persecution*. p. 779

⁷ Lewis, Bernard. *The Jews of Islam*. Nachdr. ed. p. 28

cleansing, and the like. Other, less severe restrictions on minority life would pop up from time to time around the Muslim world. In interpreting these incidents, it is important to note that Islamic rule, spanning nearly a thousand years, consisted of thousands of different rulers and thousands of different historical situations. It would be unreasonable to expect that Muslim rulers everywhere would have treated minorities in the same way throughout this long stretch of time, especially considering the state of social development in the Middle Ages. When judged against the light of the times, and when considering the system as a whole rather than individual instances, it is clear that Islamic rule, though imperfect, generally brought relative ethnoreligious tolerance to the Jews and other minority groups.

Pre-Ottoman Palestine

The Rashidun caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab himself, upon finding the Temple Mount desecrated and neglected in the mid-seventh century, manually labored to restore it to its former glory and built the Al-Aqsa mosque. More attention would be given to Palestine (Filastin in Arabic) upon the ascension of the Umayyads to the caliphate in 661. Palestine, being close to the heart of the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus, was seen as a strategic position to control culturally for the empire; as such, it was the site of much architectural development and investment. The Islamic holy site of the Dome of the Rock was built in 691 on the site of the former Temple of Solomon, and the al-Aqsa mosque underwent expansion.

As a result of the establishment of new Arab rulers and their faith, political interest in developing Palestine, and the pre-existing tribal immigration from Arabia, Palestine gradually converted to Islam and began to speak Arabic. This process was slow and naturally-progressing; it would not be until sometime after the Crusades that Islam would fully become the religion of

the people.⁸ The Arabization of Palestine, while also naturally-progressing, was faster, with historians such as Ronnie Ellenblum suggesting that Palestine may have been predominantly Arab by the turn of the millenium.⁹ In that period of time between the rise of Islam and the Crusades, Palestine changed hands many times: first from the Rashidun to the Umayyads in 661, then to the Abbasids in 750, then to the Fatimids around 1000, and to other groups as well (including the Turkish Seljuks and the Arab-Berber Fatimids). The consequences of changing rulers for the inhabitants of Palestine were minimal until the Crusades.

The First Crusade, lasting from 1096 to 1099, was a horrifically bloody event; emblematic of this are the details surrounding the decisive siege of Jerusalem, among the most bloody chapters in the history of Palestine. It is hard to describe the hellishness of that massacre. A few quotations from the Professor of History of the Crusades at the University of Oxford scratch the surface of the bloodshed:

*“Jews were burnt inside their synagogue. Muslims were indiscriminately cut to pieces, decapitated, or slowly tortured by fire (this on Christian evidence)...The city’s narrow streets were clogged with corpses and dismembered body parts, including some crusaders crushed in their zeal for the pursuit and massacre of the defenders. The heaps of the dead presented an immense problem for the conquerors; on 17 July many of the surviving Muslim population were forced to clear the streets and carry the bodies outside the walls to be burnt in great pyres, whereat they themselves were massacred, a chilling pre-echo of later genocidal practices.”*¹⁰

⁸ Avni, Gideon. *The Byzantine-Islamic Transition in Palestine: An Archaeological Approach*. pp. 332-336

⁹ Ellenblum, Ronnie. *Crusader Castles and Modern Histories*. p. 53

¹⁰ Tyerman, Christopher. *God's War: A New History of the Crusades*. p. 158

The subsequently established crusader states lasted from 1098 to 1187 (although certain crusader states on the coast would last until 1291); in terms of contributions to the long-term development of the region, they are relatively insignificant. It is certain that they provoked widespread anger across the Muslim world, yet due to disunity and political factionalism among the Muslim rulers, nothing was immediately done to take Palestine from the crusaders. The various crusader states were able to temporarily survive in a hostile environment by playing Arabic, Turkish, and Armenian neighbors off of each other in a complex web of alliances.

In 1187, Saladin, the famous Kurdish general, destroyed most of the crusader's presence in the Holy Land. Jerusalem was captured; in this second siege, the Jerusalemites were treated much better than they had been in the former. A ransom was implemented for the freedom of those of crusader origin, the paying of which entitled one to leave the city with their freedom. Christians of non-crusader origin, the elderly, and several slaves were freed without ransom. Those who were not paid for were taken from the city and sold into slavery. Christian holy sites were preserved, and both Christian and Jewish worship were to continue freely after the liberation of the city. It is generally agreed upon by historians that, in contrast to the crusaders' siege, Saladin's siege was orders of magnitude more peaceful.¹¹

The Ayyubid Sultanate, established earlier by Saladin in 1171, diplomatically granted Emperor Frederick II political control of Jerusalem in 1229 for ten years as a result of the Sixth Crusade. In 1250, the Mamluk sultanate, founded by a military junta of former slave-soldiers, defeated the Ayyubids and took control of Egypt, Palestine, and parts of Western Arabia. Mongol armies in 1258 surged into Arabia, sacking Baghdad and, according to some scholars, ending the Islamic Golden Age. Descending into northern Palestine, the Mongol's advance was halted by

¹¹ Holt, P.M. *The Age of the Crusades: The Near East from the Eleventh Century to 1517*.

Mamluk armies at the Battle of Ain Jalut near Nazareth. This marked the first time the Mongol Empire was permanently held back from expansion in their rapid conquest.

Ottoman Palestine

In 1516, the Ottoman Empire came to power. As four centuries of their rule passed, many wars, revolts, and conflicts would spring up, and all would be suppressed. Although Palestine was of relatively small economic importance during this time, it had a strategic cultural and religious value for the Ottomans. In the sixteenth century, Bedouin raids on Jerusalem caused Suleiman the Magnificent to put the city through numerous renovations: new walls were built, a prayer room at the Wailing Wall was established, several new water-wells were constructed across the city, and the Dome of the Rock was updated and cleansed.¹²

A particularly notable chapter in the history of Palestine took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries - it was here that Palestine gained partial autonomy under the powerful influence of local strongmen.

Zahir Al-Umar, a former trader and tax collector, rose to power in northern Palestine in the 1730s, building an independent powerbase in his home region of Galilee. Taking advantage of European economic interest in the untapped potential of Palestinian exports, Zahir monopolized several key agricultural industries, using the tax revenues from the exports to Europe to build a military force loyal to him.¹³ He would extend his sphere of influence and power to create a “sheikhdom” encompassing almost all of Palestine in 1774, excluding Jerusalem and the surrounding hinterland. He cultivated great economic prosperity during his

¹² Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 52

¹³ Ibid. 61

reign, and greatly developed local industries and thriving foreign markets.¹⁴ That prosperity even enabled him to go so far as to develop a foreign policy, allying himself with the Mamluk Sultanate and Russia against the Ottoman Empire. In 1774, the consequences of his subversion against the Empire caught up to him, and he was killed by the sultan's forces; yet, the autonomy of Palestine lived on through Ahmad al-Jazzar.

Al-Jazzar was among the commanders who defended Beirut from a joint Russia-Zahir attack in 1773; after surrendering the city, he worked for a time under Zahir before stealing Zahir's tax revenues and fleeing his domain.¹⁵ In the wake of the fall of Zahir, al-Jazzar was appointed governor of Sidon, and soon after the governor of Damascus. He gained particular influence in Acre, which Al-Jazzar would go on to successfully defend against Napoleon Bonaparte in 1799. The French siege of Acre was the turning point of their campaign in Egypt and Syria; it is here that Napoleon was halted from becoming the self-proclaimed "Emperor of the East".¹⁶ This victory brought Al-Jazzar much prestige and recognition in the Ottoman Empire.¹⁷ On the back of this prestige and political influence, Al-Jazzar would further carve out his own sphere of influence in Palestine. After his death from malaria in 1803, he would be succeeded by various men.

Al-Jazzar's rule was marked by more loyalty to the Ottomans than had been observed in Zahir; notably, he did not pocket Ottoman tax revenues. Yet, in many other ways, the two were strikingly similar. Both monopolized industry and relied on trade with Europe, both extracted heavy taxes from their subjects to fund private militias, and both transitioned the economy of

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Philipp, Thomas. *Acre: The Rise and Fall of a Palestinian City, 1730-1831*. p. 51

¹⁶ Napoleon, and J. Christopher Herold. *The Mind of Napoleon: A Selection from His Written and Spoken Words*. Columbia paperback edition. ed. p. 49

¹⁷ Napoleon's defeat is still celebrated by Palestinians as a point of national pride.

Palestine to a higher stage of development.¹⁸ The reigns of both rulers were bittersweet for Palestinians at the time; though it is true new industries and markets opened up as a result of the export market, the heavy taxation pushed many to emigration.¹⁹ It is important to note that neither ruler entertained explicitly nationalist sentiments; however, it is certain that unifying this relatively small territory under one ruler helped to strengthen the sense of community among the subjects, especially when based on a shared grievances. This phenomenon would develop further in the Egyptian occupation of Palestine.

In 1831, the Ottoman governor of Egypt, Muhammad Ali, sent his stepson Ibrahim Pasha to conquer Palestine for the profitable exports and plentiful resources. By 1832, they were successful, and Pasha began to enact centralizing reforms, such as new taxes, a repeal of the limits on church and synagogue renovation, and the introduction of urban “advisory councils” to standardize and regulate political power throughout Palestine.²⁰ Christian and Jewish minorities were granted much more representation and tolerance under the Egyptian occupation, and European diplomatic and missionary centers were permitted to open in Palestine.²¹ In general, European influences were embraced by Pasha, most likely in an effort to increase European economic interest in Palestine. This effort was unpopular with the Muslim majority, where the crusades still lived on in collective memory; to add insult to injury, Pasha shut down many Islamic charities and institutions, and quartered soldiers in mosques and Islamic schools.²² The most unpopular policies of all were the forced conscription of Muslims into the Egyptian army,

¹⁸ Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 61

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Doumani, Beshara. *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus ; 1700-1900*. Nachdr. ed. pp. 44-45

²¹ Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 66

²² Ibid. 67

and the complete disarmament of Muslim populations (Christian and Jews being free to bear arms).

These Egyptian reforms were despised across all strata of society.²³ Farmers resented the conscription policy that threatened to take away their sons, as well as the disarmament policy which threatened to take away their means of self-defense. Urban and rural leaders feared their powerful positions as tax collectors would be usurped by Pasha's new government. Nomadic Bedouin tribes were afraid of what the Egyptians would do to stop their extortions of travelers and merchants, for which they relied on for income. The grievances of Palestinians were diverse and multifaceted; yet, they almost universally despised the new government and its policies.

In 1834, this disgust ignited into the Peasants' Revolt, led by former Jerusalem deputy governor Qasim al-Ahmad. Tens of thousands of Palestinians from all backgrounds took up arms against the Egyptian occupation, and after scarcely a month of fighting most of Palestine came under their control.²⁴ The two sides negotiated a truce, which would prove to be a ruse on the part of Ali's forces in order to break down the rebel coalition through deportations and executions. Factionalism and the diverging interests of the social groups making up the rebel coalition (particularly those of the urban notables who wished to preserve their own power) also furthered the disintegration.²⁵ Upon the resumption of the rebellion in July, Egyptian forces, armed with modern equipment and with superior organization, successfully put down the Peasants' Revolt.²⁶

Despite the ultimate failure of the Peasants' Revolt to end the Egyptian occupation, it was nevertheless notable in that it united nearly all segments of Palestinian society in the pursuit of

²³ Kimmerling, Baruch, et al. *The Palestinian People: A History*.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 68

²⁶ Ibid.

one common cause. The revolt was not the first unification of different social strata under one “Palestinian” administration - Zahir and Al-Jazzar may be considered the forerunners of this process. Yet, while the efforts of these men were important for the distinct political entities they established in Palestine, they fell short of cultivating any sort of greater national consciousness among the people. The Peasants’ Revolt built upon that foundation which had been laid, and perhaps for the first time in the region's history gave the people’s social self-perception a pre-nationalist tint. It will be noted that the reading of the Peasants’ Revolt as a pre-nationalist revolution is contested and controversial. Certain Israeli historians such as Benny Morris have questioned whether the revolution can be considered pre-national, given the lack of an explicit demand for Palestinian nationhood.²⁷ Yet, many other historians, such as Khaled Safi, Baruh Kimmerling and Joel Midgal, do interpret the sheikhdом periods and the Peasants’ Revolt as the beginning of a consciousness, the birth of that which would eventually become Palestinian nationalism.²⁸

Though the Palestinians had failed, Europe would succeed. Fearing the consequences of Ottoman destabilization for the balance of power in Europe, Britain, Russia, Prussia, and Austria launched a joint attack on the Egyptians, driving them out of Palestine 5 years after the Peasants’ Revolt was suppressed.

The next major event in the history of Palestine, the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms, helped to bring Palestine into modernity; these reforms were an attempt to centralize Ottoman control against the nationalist impulses of the people and the expansionist ambitions of foreigners.²⁹

²⁷ Morris, Benny. "The Rejection." *The New Republic*, [newrepublic.com/article/66875/the-rejection](https://www.newrepublic.com/article/66875/the-rejection). Accessed 24 May 2022.

²⁸ The question of the origin and authenticity of Palestinian nationalism will be dealt with in more detail in a later section.

²⁹ Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 71

Councils of local notables were created throughout the empire, which helped to standardize and formally distribute political power. Using the organizational strength of these councils, many infrastructure projects were taken up to cultivate neglected areas. The military strength of the Ottoman state was increased, at the expense of the rural Bedouin. A renewal of effective law enforcement suppressed crime more effectively, and several important land reforms made tax collection more efficient. The land reforms in particular were of great importance for Palestine; old methods of registering land ownership were overhauled in favor of a more transparent and navigable system, leading to a renewed interest in private property and the global agriculture market. This attracted further interest from foreign powers and consolidated local influence in the hands of wealthy families. As a result, the Palestinian economy grew significantly between 1856 and 1880.³⁰

In 1882, the first Zionist settlers emigrated to Palestine, starting the First Aliyah (lit. “ascent” in Hebrew). An analysis of Zionist ideology and its various motivations will be dealt with in a later section; for now, suffice it to say that Zionism is the political ideology that espouses the development of a Jewish state in Palestine.³¹ Many factors made emigration away from Europe popular: economic difficulties, Russian pogroms, and general persecution in Europe were among the most pressing factors that pushed many Jews to migrate. The First Aliyah saw approximately 35,000 Jews emigrate from mostly Eastern Europe and Yemen to Palestine, with approximately half leaving after a few years.³² These settlers endeavored to build agricultural colonies to productivize Jewish settlers into laborers and farmhands; regardless, some Jews chose to settle in the towns instead. Socialist ideology greatly influenced these Zionist settlers;

³⁰ Ibid. 91

³¹ Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 102

³² "The First Aliyah (1882-1903)." *Jewish Virtual Library*, www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-first-aliyah-1882-1903. Accessed 31 May 2022.

the Second Aliyah, lasting from 1904 to 1914, saw the implementation of utopian, communal “kibbutz” in various areas across Palestine.³³ Yet, despite these early developments, Zionist sentiments prevailed only amidst a small sect of the Jewish population, with many Jews dismissing it as either impractical or ideologically corrupt.³⁴ Those Jewish families which had actually been living in Palestine prior to the Aliyahs (the “Old Yishuv”) were often deeply religious, and as thus resented the European secularism that the Zionists brought.³⁵ To quote Ilan Pappé,

*“That there was no single Jewish community is shown by the constant struggles and small wars between the newcomers and the veterans...The veteran Jews saw Zionism as heresy, and a threat to the ethical code of Judaism in that it cherished secularization as the means of salvation.”*³⁶

Not until World War One would Zionism become majorly influential in Palestine.³⁷

Nonetheless, the rising tide of Zionism was noticed by the Ottoman authorities and Arab populations. In a region where foreign capitulations and contracts were being increasingly forced upon the weak empire, Zionist immigration was heralded as another example of European expansionist ambitions.³⁸ Jews were quickly banned from settling in Palestine (although immigration to other areas of the Ottoman Empire was permitted), and land sale to Zionists was also outlawed; upon being met with fierce pushback from the European consulates, the Ottomans

³³ Goldenberg, Sheldon, and Gerda Wekerle. "From Utopia to Total Institution in a Single Generation: The Kibbutz and the Bruderhof." *International Review of Modern Sociology*, vol. 2, www.jstor.org/stable/41420450. Accessed 27 May 2022.

³⁴ Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 103

³⁵ Pappé, Ilan. *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*. 2nd ed. p. 53

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 101

³⁸ Ibid. 121

eased these restrictions. Certain sections of the Arab effendi also moved to condemn Zionism: in 1891 a council of Jerusalem notables publicly denounced the movement.³⁹ The effect of this political activity on the average Palestinian was relatively minimal - both Arabism and Zionism were still relatively underground - but among the Arab intelligentsia, anti-Zionism became common.⁴⁰

Various groups of Turkish intellectuals and military officers banded together in 1908 to modernize the Ottoman empire in what would come to be known as the Young Turk Revolution. The revolution was an uprising against the authoritarian sultan by a coalition of dissatisfied Turkish nationalists, and was happily greeted by Arab notables throughout the Ottoman Empire for their promises of minority autonomy and democratic rule.⁴¹ In 1912, this support would disappear as the revolutionaries strayed from their principles - the liberals among the Young Turks (who had been calling for less government involvement and increased minority rights) were defeated by militant hardliners who wished to pursue centralization at the expense of constitutionalism.⁴² Soon after the revolution, a crackdown on Arab nationalist activity shutdown many political organizations or forced them underground. Turks were systematically promoted in government offices over Arabs, and prominent Arab leaders were executed on accusations of treason.⁴³ Furthermore, the intense secularism of the Young Turks alienated many religious Muslims and urban notables with direct threats to depose them. This was the impetus for modern

³⁹ Ibid. 122

⁴⁰ We do not imply that this was a fervent or ubiquitous conviction. The tension was a mild one at best, in a context where both sides (Arab and Zionist) saw more pressing issues at hand than the reaction of one to another.

⁴¹ Thompson, Elizabeth F. *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Arab Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of Its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance*.

⁴² Ahmad, Feroz. "The Young Turk Revolution." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 3, www.jstor.org/stable/259696. Accessed 28 May 2022.

⁴³ Thompson, Elizabeth F. *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Arab Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of Its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance*.

Arab nationalism, and the watershed moment for the Arab nation.⁴⁴ Arab newspapers, such as *Filastin*, began to flourish in Palestine and throughout the Arabic-speaking world. Nationalist associations, disguised as culture and literature clubs, sprung up all over; diverse in viewpoints and ideology, these associations all agreed on two points: the existence of the Arab nation, and the necessity to strengthen it.

⁴⁴ Pappé, Ilan. *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*. 2nd ed. pp. 57-58

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