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Introduction

Late Ottoman Gaza, a Coastal City Detached from the Sea

Approaching Gaza

For anyone wanting a panoramic view of late nineteenth-century Gaza, the best spot was from the top of Jabal al-Muntar, a hill to the east of the city. The unknown photographer who hiked up on a sunny day in the early twentieth century captured the broad swath of fields around the city delineated by cactus fences, the large sand dunes to its west towards the Mediterranean Sea, and the city's general embeddedness in its agricultural surroundings (Figure I.1).

Another photograph taken by a British reconnaissance plane during World War I (WWI) when the region of Gaza was the theater of battles between the Ottoman and British forces, shows Gaza's geographic position in even sharper relief: Large sand dunes separate Gaza from the Mediterranean Sea, some four kilometers to its west (Figure I.2). Its tiny port was connected to the city by a dirt road through the sands. On the photo, both the road and the port installations are barely visible. Their position can mainly be derived from that of the gardens around the port whose dark colors contrast starkly with the bright sands around it.

Gaza, as clearly visible in these two images (Figures I.1 and I.2), was not a port city, at least not in the usual sense of a city defined by its port. Its tiny port was connected to the city by a dirt road through the sands and is barely visible.

This impression is compounded by Gaza's representation on contemporary maps. For example, in the first precise map of late Ottoman Palestine published by the British Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF) in 1879, Gaza resembles an oasis surrounded by a large green belt of fields and orchards rising out of the vast sand dunes (Figure I.3). Gaza's second defining feature was its location at the crossroads of major trade and traffic routes in southern Palestine, on the border with the sparsely populated Negev and Sinai deserts.

Almost every reader today will immediately compare these bird's-eye views of Gaza as a trade and agricultural center embedded in a

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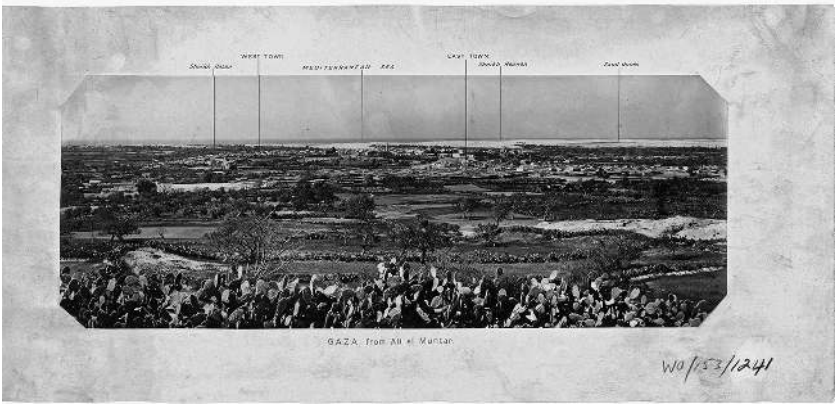


Figure I.1 View of Gaza from Jabal al-Muntar, dated 1918.[1]
Source: The National Archives, London. https://images.nationalarchives.gov.uk/assetbank-nationalarchives/action/viewAsset?id=75483&index=1&total=5&view=viewSearchItemImage, library reference: WO 319/2/1. Title: Palestine, Gaza from Ali el Muntar. Creator: War Office.

wide-ranging network of overland routes with media images that show the reality of today's Gaza Strip as a heavily populated territory with sharp boundaries dictated by the outcome of the 1948 war. Since the early 2000s, these images have been complemented by the media coverage of combat between the Israeli army and Palestinian militias, as well as power struggles involving several regional powers. In contemporary public discourse, Gaza tends to be characterized solely as a theater of the ongoing conflict. Meanwhile, the city and its complex society have been neglected in academic scholarship.

This study addresses this lacuna and seeks to contribute to a better understanding of Gaza and its hinterland during the late Ottoman period, up to WWI. It aims to depict the dynamics of an important city and region that have been overshadowed by the devastations of that war and the ongoing Israeli–Arab conflict. In a wider context, this work aims to provide a building block for a better understanding of the social fabric of the Eastern Mediterranean in the modern period.

Why write another book on a late Ottoman city, and why Gaza? We became interested in this topic through reading sources as well as personal encounters. Both of us trained in Islamic and modern Middle

[1] The picture shows the minaret of Gaza's Grand Mosque (the ʿUmari Mosque, al-Jamiʿ al-Kabir al-ʿUmari) intact and thus must have been taken prior to its destruction in the spring of 1917 during the battles between the Ottoman and British armies around Gaza.

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Figure I.2 An aerial photo of Gaza taken during WWI.
Source: Australian War Memorial, pic. BO1997. Title: "A BE2 Series aircraft of the Australian Flying Corps over Gaza," c. 1917.

Eastern studies, and have gradually specialized in the social, cultural, and political history of late Ottoman Palestine. We became aware that the southern part of the country constituted a blind spot in knowledge of the Eastern Mediterranean, although it was home to a large part of the population of late Ottoman Palestine and had experienced dramatic dynamics that needed to be understood. Studying Gaza as citizens of Germany and Israel in a time of heightened political tensions and military conflict created a number of obstacles. Starting this book with two aerial photographs and a map, all produced by British photographers, members of the military and technicians, is emblematic of the context of this study and our positionality as historians: we approach Gaza from the outside. Given the political situation in Israel and the Palestinian territories in the last few decades, we cannot visit Gaza and it is difficult to contact local scholars who possess vast amounts of knowledge and have abundant sources at their disposal, even for email correspondence or participation in conferences abroad.

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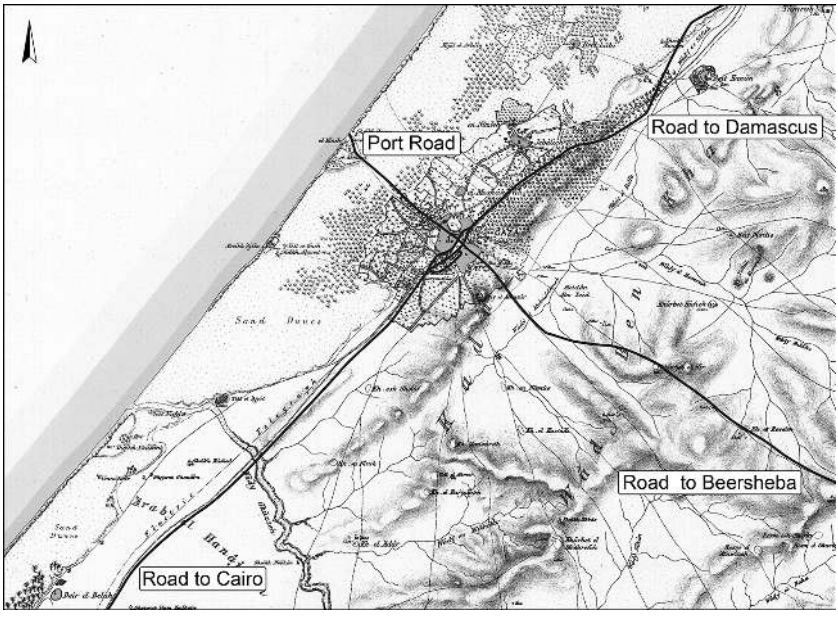


Figure I.3 Gaza depicted in the Palestine Exploration Fund Map of 1879 (labels added).
Source: Based on the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF), Survey of Western Palestine, sheet 19, 1879 (surveyed and drawn under the supervision of Lieut. C.R. Conder and Lieut. H.H. Kitchener in May 1878). Note Gaza's insular position at the crossroads of two overland routes, its agricultural oasis and its symmetric layout around the crossroads.

To date, there is not even one monograph in any of the major European research languages on late Ottoman Gaza. Nevertheless, there are rich documentary records on Gaza in different places in the world, especially in archives compiled by the Ottoman and British Empires. In this volume, we sift through these records to formulate hypotheses on Gaza's social, political, and cultural dynamics in the hope of laying the groundwork for a more comprehensive history of this important part of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Gaza's contemporary isolation is only one of several reasons for the general absence of research on this city during the late Ottoman period. Around 1900, Gaza was one of the largest and most important cities in Ottoman Palestine and had a population of some 20,000–25,000 inhabitants. The city had a small port from which barley was exported to Europe, but its inner-city markets were in fact more important. Thus, politically, economically, and culturally, it was more like an interior

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market city than a coastal port city. Compared to Jerusalem, Palestine's political capital and a magnet for pilgrims, or the port cities to its north such as Jaffa, Haifa, and Beirut, Gaza may easily appear somewhat isolated. This at least is the impression when looking at it from the vantage points of the typical narratives of the emergence of "the modern Middle East" that have dominated the historiography of the Eastern Mediterranean over roughly a century.[2] Many studies dealing with the late Ottoman period summarily depict Gaza in terms of "stagnation," "crisis," and "decline," by more or less explicitly taking the rapid growth of nearby cities such as Beirut, Jaffa, and Jerusalem as standards of comparison.[3] Certainly, in comparison to these localities, Gaza was much less involved in the major developments that historian James Gelvin called the "great nineteenth century transformation" of the Middle East, such as incorporation into the world market, Ottoman state centralization, and extensive social differentiation fueled by an unprecedented degree of human mobility and migration.[4] The city went largely unnoticed by most Western travelers, journalists, pilgrims, explorers, and diplomats who visited the Holy Land in growing numbers in the nineteenth century. The relatively small number of Westerners who did visit Gaza mostly portrayed it as a sleepy provincial backwater in an attractive natural and agricultural landscape.[5]

Arabic sources present similar views, as can be gauged from a selection of quotes on the city compiled by the local chronicler ʿUthman al-Tabbaʿ in the early twentieth century.[6] They praise Islamic learning in the city, the lush gardens of Gaza's oasis, and the natural beauty of its dunes by the blue sea.[7] At the same time, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Arabic intellectuals criticized the "lack of economic opportunities" and

[2] See, for instance, James Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), part II, "The Question of Modernity"; William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 6th ed. (London: Rutledge, 2016), part 2, "The Beginnings of the Era of Transformation."

[3] Yehoshua Ben-Arieh, "The Population of the Large Towns in Palestine during the First Eighty Years of the Nineteenth Century according to Western Sources," in Moshe Maʿoz (ed.), *Studies on Palestine during the Ottoman Period* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), pp. 49–69; Yehoshua Ben-Arieh, "The Development of Twelve Major Settlements in Nineteenth Century Palestine," *Cathedra* 19 (1981), pp. 83–143 [in Hebrew].

[4] Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East*, part II.

[5] See, for example, Ellsworth Huntington, *Palestine and Its Transformation* (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), pp. 64, 73, 131.

[6] ʿUthman al-Tabbaʿ, *Ithaf al-aʿizza fi tarikh Ghazza* [Presenting the Notables in the History of Gaza], vols. 1–4, edited by ʿAbd al-Latif Abu-Hashim (Gaza: Maktabat al-Yaziji, 1999) [in Arabic]. Images of Gaza can be found in the chapter on "Literary Praise and Blame of Gaza (*Ghazza wa-ma qila fi madhiha wa-dhammiha*)," *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 57–62.

[7] Poetry attributed to ʿAbd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi (1641–1731), *Ibid.*, pp. 57–58.

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"slow progress" in Gaza.[8] The editors of the Jaffa-based Arabic newspaper *Filastin* ("Palestine"), in a rather alarmist piece in which they called for more government attention to Gaza, went as far as to evoke the Prophet Zephaniah's words "Gaza will be abandoned" (Zephaniah 2:4).[9] Gaza, they wrote, gave the impression of having been "left alone by the government, isolated from the world, abandoned by God."[10]

Nevertheless, a closer look at the city and local sources in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish shows that Gaza was the economic and transportation hub of southern Palestine, a center of Muslim religious education and scholarship, home to a population with diverse social backgrounds, and the theater of exceptionally stormy political events that were linked to both imperial politics and local factionalism. Gaza's diverse society, the rifts within its elite, and the heterogeneous coalitions supporting the rivaling parties, which was also manifested in the city's morphology, are the core of this study.

The Regional Background

Since late Antiquity, Gaza was a major hub within the network of trade and traffic in Western Asia, on a par with urban centers like Jaffa in Palestine or Tripoli in Syria and secondary only to the "global-scale" transportation nodes, cultural and education centers of the Old World such as Damascus and Aleppo, imperial capitals such as Constantinople/Istanbul or Cairo, or pilgrimage sites such as Jerusalem or Mecca. Two major factors that changed its relative position in the hierarchy of cities from medieval times were its position within empires and the prevailing modes of trade. The first major change was connected to the imperial order and occurred with the Ottoman conquest of Gaza in 1517. In the Mamluk Sultanate, Gaza had been the capital of a very centrally located province (*niyaba*) and an important center of Islamic learning. Under the Ottomans, the city was relegated to a more peripheral position and received less imperial investment than under the Mamluks. Nevertheless, it was an important pillar of Ottoman rule situated on the vital Cairo–Damascus road, and it contributed to the provision of the Hajj caravan. The second major change was induced by the changing world economy in the second half of the nineteenth century when caravan trade declined in importance. Gaza's leading families had to look for new business opportunities and grapple with the changing nature of a

[8] Prose and poetry quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 59.
[9] *Holy Bible. New International Version* (NIV) (London: John Murray Press, 2017).
[10] *Filastin*, "Ghazza [Gaza]," *Filastin*, August 31, 1912, p. 1.

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centralizing and modernizing Ottoman Empire. In this process, the old elites were challenged by newcomers. These developments were still in full swing at the turn of the twentieth century.

During the late Ottoman period, Gaza was located at the crossroads of major land routes near the border between the Ottoman Empire and Egypt – *de jure* an Ottoman province, but *de facto* an independent state since the early nineteenth century and from 1882 under British occupation. Economically and socially, Gaza was subject to larger trends similar to those that Ulrike Freitag described for the port city of Jeddah in the southern margins of the Ottoman Empire:

> Many Ottoman port cities expanded in the course of the nineteenth century due to the rise in exports from their agricultural hinterlands and of imports for local markets – which incidentally also increased religious heterogeneity. Global economic developments played out differently in Jeddah […]. [I]n the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it lost its role as major entrepôt in the trade between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean through the rise of Aden and the advent of steamshipping. This could not be compensated for by the increase in local (distributary) trade […]. These developments might also explain the slower urban growth of Jeddah in comparison to other Ottoman port cities.[11]

Gaza likewise did not benefit from the late-nineteenth-century wave of globalization. As a result, it did not experience the significant increase in immigration and in religious heterogeneity observed in Alexandria, Jaffa, Haifa, or Beirut. This at least partially explains the relative disinterest in the city on the part of contemporaneous Western visitors to the Holy Land.

In the case of Gaza, the major factors contributing to its overall economic slowdown were the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which diminished the importance of caravan trade, and the competition from the more successful northern ports of Jaffa and Haifa. However, these were somewhat offset by new economic opportunities when Gaza became a commercial hub in response to the rising demands for grain in Europe, especially barley, which the rural areas around Gaza could provide in large quantities earlier in the season than other places.[12]

The strategic importance of the Gaza region increased after the British occupied Egypt in 1882 and specifically after the administrative dividing

[11] Ulrike Freitag, *A History of Jeddah: The Gate to Mecca in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 35.

[12] See Johann Buessow, *Hamidian Palestine: Politics and Society in the District of Jerusalem, 1872–1908* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2011), p. 273; Dotan Halevy, "Drinking (Beer) from the Sea of Gaza: The Rise and Fall of Gaza's Maritime Trade in the Late Ottoman Period," *Hamizrah Hahadash* 55 (2016), pp. 35–59 [in Hebrew].

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line between Egypt and Palestine was set in 1906 following tremendous British pressure. Another important development that considerably affected Gaza was the separation of the Bedouin-populated region of Beersheba from the Subdistrict (*kaza*) of Gaza in 1900 and the establishment of the new Subdistrict of Beersheba (in Arabic Biʾr al-Sabʿ, in Hebrew Beʾer Shevaʿ, in Ottoman Turkish Biʾrüsseb), although influential Gazan notables and merchants maintained some of their earlier ties with the Bedouins around Beersheba even after this administrative move.[13]

The region around Gaza was populated by dozens of villages that made their living primarily from grain farming. The population was characterized by a plurality of identities, often constructed around binaries such as urban and rural, nomadic and sedentary, landowners and tenants, newcomers and people whose ancestors had settled the land many generations earlier, and people originally from Egypt, as opposed to individuals who had come from other parts of Palestine.[14] Some rural migrants settled in the outskirts of Gaza itself, for instance in the Eastern neighborhood of Shujaʿiyya, and maintained ties with their village of origin. There were few European settlers in the vicinity of Gaza, unlike in the vicinity of Jaffa and Haifa, which were the focus of German Templar and Jewish settlement.[15] Only a handful of small Jewish colonies were established at the end of the nineteenth century in the Subdistrict of Gaza, at a distance of some 30–40 kilometers from Gaza itself.[16] Recent research has identified intensification of urban–rural relationships as well as a growing tendency towards regionalism and the

[13] See Arab Bureau, *Personalities of South Syria*, vol. I (Cairo: Arab Bureau, 1917), pp. 4, 7–8.

[14] See Yehoshua Ben-Arieh, "The Villages in the Sancak of Gaza (Including Jaffa and Ramla) in the 1870s," *Shalem* V (1987), pp. 139–187 [in Hebrew]; David Grossman, "Rural Settlement in the Southern Coastal Plain and the *Shefelah*, 1835–1945," *Cathedra* 45 (1987), pp. 57–86 [in Hebrew]; David Grossman, *Arab Demography and Early Jewish Settlement in Palestine: Distribution and Population Density during the Late Ottoman and Early Mandate Periods* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2004), pp. 54–65 [in Hebrew]; Gideon M. Kressel and Reuven Aharoni, "Egyptian Immigrants in *Bilad al-Sham*," *Jamaʿa* 12 (2004), pp. 201–245 [in Hebrew].

[15] See Yossi Ben-Artzi, *Early Jewish Settlement Patterns in Palestine, 1882–1914* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), pp. 120–134.

[16] See Ran Aaronson, "The Extent and Characteristics of the First Wave of Modern Jewish Settlement in Eretz-Yisrael (1882–1890)," in Yehoshua Ben-Arieh, Yossi Ben-Artzi, and Haim Goren (eds.), *Historical Geographical Studies in the Settlement of Eretz Israel*, vol. I (Jerusalem: Yad Yizhak Ben-Zvi, 1987), pp. 78–95 [in Hebrew]; Yehoshua Ben-Arieh, "Geographic Aspects of the Development of the First Jewish Settlements in Palestine," in Mordechai Eliav (ed.), *The First Aliyah*, vol. I (Jerusalem: Yad Yizhak Ben-Zvi, 1981), pp. 85–96 [in Hebrew].

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development of a regional identity in the Gaza region in the second half of the nineteenth century (see Chapter 3).[17]

Gaza during the late Ottoman period was caught up in internal political strife. This had to do with the relatively weak Ottoman presence in the region, and the radical economic transitions that led to a reshuffling of economic resources in different sectors of the population. Between the 1870s and 1890s, factional strife was centered on appointments to the post of the city's jurisconsult, the *mufti*.[18] Gaza's local politics and the influence and jockeying by local notables curtailed the influence of the District of Jerusalem's Administrative Council, which had jurisdiction over Gaza. Thus, on the ground, its involvement and control over issues such as the supervision of tax collection and registration of land was only partial.[19] The Gazan elite tended to operate within rival coalitions while trying to draw Istanbul into its internal conflicts. It maintained complex relationships with the Jerusalemite elite that dominated Palestine's politics (i.e., different elite families in Gaza sided with different segments of the Jerusalem elite) and with Ottoman officials as well as with the agricultural sedentary population and Bedouins in the city's outlying areas.[20]

Gaza in a Comparative Perspective

How typical, or unique, was Gaza, compared to the many urban centers in Bilad al-Sham ("the Syrian land," also known at times as Greater Syria)[21] and the wider Eastern Mediterranean? What insights can be drawn from the literature that will help understand Gazan society at the end of the nineteenth century? While this book focuses on late Ottoman

[17] See Buessow, *Hamidian Palestine*, pp. 103–105; Yuval Ben-Bassat, "Regional Cooperation among the Rural Population of Palestine's Southern Coast as Reflected in Joint Petitions to Istanbul at the End of the Nineteenth Century," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 46 (2012), pp. 213–238; Yuval Ben-Bassat, "Mass Petitions as a Way to Valuate 'Public Opinion' in the Late Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Empire? The Case of Internal Strife among Gaza's Elite," *Turkish Historical Review* 4 (2013), pp. 135–152.

[18] See Buessow, *Hamidian Palestine*, p. 284; Yuval Ben-Bassat, *Petitioning the Sultan: Protests and Justice in Late Ottoman Palestine* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), pp. 65–66; Ben-Bassat, "Mass Petitions."

[19] See Haim Gerber, *Ottoman Rule in Jerusalem, 1890–1914* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1985).

[20] See Ben-Bassat, "Mass Petitions"; Yuval Ben-Bassat, "Bedouin Petitions from Late Ottoman Palestine," *JESHO* 58 (2015), pp. 135–162.

[21] We use the Arabic term "Bilad al-Sham" as short-hand for late Ottoman Syria and Palestine (today comprising the territories of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Gaza, and the West Bank). Bilad al-Sham constitutes the central part of the broader Eastern Mediterranean region or the "Levant," a term coined in medieval Europe.

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Gaza, it engages in a dialogue with several strands of Middle Eastern history, including the study of urban politics and urban elites, urban–rural relationships, the interplay between imperial and local forces and the implementation of Ottoman reforms in the provinces, as well as studies on class, gender, religion, and ethnicity. The commonality across all these approaches is that they explore cities in context rather than in isolation, and as points of departure for broader topics in Middle Eastern history.[22]

Despite its specific characteristics, and its relative detachment from some of the key processes undergone by the most dynamic cities in the coastal regions of the Eastern Mediterranean, Gaza was nonetheless greatly influenced by processes and events beyond its borders, including international trade, trans-regional pilgrimage routes, and geostrategic regional developments. There are several important studies on Ottoman cities dealing with various aspects of these features that considerably influenced our perspective and enabled us to generate comparative hypotheses related to Gaza.

Damascus, the political center of Bilad al-Sham from the time of the Islamic conquests up to WWI, has attracted much attention in academic historical scholarship. Linda Schatkowski Schilcher's path-breaking study *Families in Politics* examined local politics in this city in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (c. 1750–1870).[23] Although the elites of Damascus operated on a much grander scale and the city boasted more religious and cultural diversity than Gaza, it offers important points for comparison, and in particular its imperial connectedness. The two crucial economic factors accounting for the imperial connectedness of Damascus were the caravan trade flowing through this city and the grain economy in its hinterland, since grain was the major source of taxation of the empire and its main means of provisioning the population.[24] Both

[22] In the words of historian James Reilly "[S]tudies of discrete Ottoman provinces or regions like geographic Syria help to explain the types of nations and paths to modernity that emerged after World War I. This literature represents intersections of the global, the local, and the historically contingent." See James A. Reilly, "Ottoman Syria: Social History through an Urban Lens," *History Compass* 10/1 (2012), p. 77. This is also the ambition of the comparisons in our recent volume on the urban history of late Ottoman Bilad al-Sham. See Yuval Ben-Bassat and Johann Buessow (eds.), *From the Household to the Wider World: Local Perspectives on Urban Institutions in Late Ottoman Bilad al-Sham* (Tübingen: Tübingen University Press, 2023).

[23] Linda Schatkowski Schilcher, *Families in Politics: Damascene Factions and Estates of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1985).

[24] On this issue, see Linda Schatkowski Schilcher, "The Grain Economy of Late Ottoman Syria and the Issue of Large-Scale Commercialization," in Çağlar Keyder and Faruk Tabak (eds.), *Landholding and Commercial Agriculture in the Middle East* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 173–195.

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