



Ottoman Palestine

Ottoman Palestine was made up of three Sanjaks, or sub-provinces, each ruled by a provincial governor. Of these, the Sanjaks of Acre and Balqa' (Nablus) were under the administration of the larger Vilayet (province) of Beirut, while the largest Sanjak of Jerusalem was independent due to its religious and historical significance and its governor directly responsible to the Sultan (see map).

The population of Ottoman Palestine in 1878 was in excess of 440,000 and was made up of many ethnic groups and members of various denominations of the three monotheistic faiths, each of which had maintained a presence in the area for well over a millennium. Muslims represented the overwhelming majority of the Ottoman citizens of Palestine (88%), which had been under uninterrupted Muslim rule since 1187. This population included both Sunni (the vast majority) and Shi'ite communities as well as members of the Druze sect. Much of the population was rural, with agriculture as the principal source of income and the center of traditional life.

Christians of various denominations constituted 9% of the population in 1878, generally living in long-established urban communities. Jews accounted for the remaining 3% of the total population of Palestine, numbering approximately 14,000 people and living predominantly in urban communities.¹ They consisted primarily of Orthodox Jewish citizens of the Ottoman Empire without a separate agenda or allegiance.

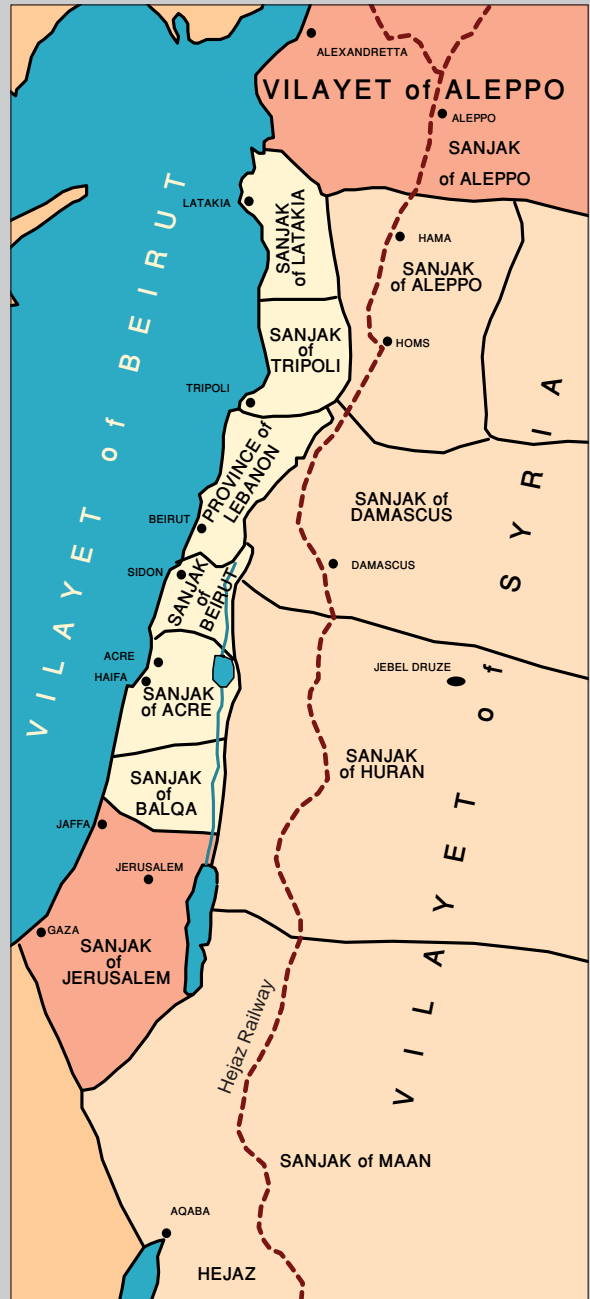
When Zionism began to threaten the sound equilibrium of cultures in Palestine, opposition to Jewish immigration came from Arabs, Palestinians and the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid, who saw the Zionist movement as a vehicle for European colonial ambitions in the region and was keen to limit the risks it posed to his ailing empire. Meanwhile the Young Turks, who controlled the Ottoman Empire from 1908, were apprehensive about the influx of large numbers of Russian Jews to Palestine possibly furthering Russian interests in controlling access to the Bosphorus and the Mediterranean from their Black Sea ports.



Sultan Abdul Hamid II



Administrative Boundaries in Ottoman Palestine



Proud of both their Arab identity and their Canaanite ancestry, the inhabitants of Palestine were a vibrant society with a rich cultural heritage deeply invested in the cities, the villages and the land they had inhabited for millennia. Governed from Istanbul by the sultan, they formed part of the decentralization movement in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire that sought autonomy and self-determination for their people.

¹ Figures from *The Palestine Question in Maps*, PASSIA publications, 2002