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# THE CLAIMS IMPLICATING THE OTTOMANS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A JEWISH COMMUNITY IN JERUSALEM

## Abstract

Since the time of the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II, the relationship between the Ottomans and the Jewish communities within the Muslim world has been described as generally positive. However, a number of Arab academics cast claims over the Ottoman role in the Jewish presence in Jerusalem, starting from Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (Kanuni Sultan Süleyman), who, according to these claims, was the “first Muslim Sultan to allow Jews to reside in Jerusalem”. Other authors claim, contradictory to what many historical sources suggest, that Sultan Abdülhamid II played a role in assisting the Jewish Zionist migration to Palestine by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, historical analyses show that these claims are very much doubttable as there is strong evidence on the presence of a Jewish community in Jerusalem before the Ottoman rule of the city, despite what some academics describe as a ban over Jews from residing in Jerusalem by Caliph Umar Ibn al-Khattab. This paper studies the Jewish presence in Jerusalem before the Ottoman rule and the relationship between the Ottoman authorities and the Jewish community in Jerusalem under the reigns of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent and Sultan Abdülhamid II. The paper argues for the Ottoman tolerant approach towards diverse faiths in that holy city.

**Keywords:** Jerusalem, Ottoman Empire, Jews, Islam, Sultan Süleyman, Sultan Abdülhamid II

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## Özet

Osmanlı Sultanı II. Bayezid devrinden itibaren, Osmanlı devleti ile İslam dünyasında bulunan Yahudi toplulukları arasındaki ilişkiler genel olarak olumlu olarak tanımlanmıştır. Ne var ki, bir kısım Arap akademisyenler, Kudüs'teki Yahudi mevcudiyetine ilişkin olarak, "Yahudilerin Kudüs'te ikamet etmelerine izin veren ilk Müslüman Sultan" olan, Kanuni Sultan Süleyman'dan başlayarak, Osmanlı rolüyle ilgili iddialarda bulunmuşlardır. Başka bazı yazarlar ise, birçok tarihsel kaynağın iddiasının aksine, Sultan II. Abdülhamid'in 19. yüzyılın sonlarında Filistin'e yönelik Yahudi Siyonist göçüne yardım etmede rol oynadığını ileri sürmektedir. Ne var ki, tarihsel analizler, bu iddiaların, bazı akademisyenlerin Yahudi cemaatinin Kudüs'te ikametinin Halife Ömer bin Hattab tarafından yasaklandığına ilişkin iddialarına rağmen, Kudüs'te bir Yahudi cemaatinin kentin Osmanlı egemenliğine geçmesinden önce mevcut olduğuna ilişkin elde güçlü kanıtlar bulunduğundan, oldukça şüpheli olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu yazı, bir yandan Osmanlı egemenliği öncesinde Kudüs'teki Yahudi varlığını, bir yandan da bölge Osmanlı egemenliğine geçtikten sonra Kanuni Sultan Süleyman ile Sultan II. Abdülhamid'in hüküm sürdüğü dönemde Osmanlı yetkilileri ile Kudüs'teki Yahudi toplumu arasındaki ilişkiyi ele almaktadır. Makale, bu kutsal şehirdeki farklı inançlara karşı Osmanlıların hoşgörülü bir yaklaşım sergilediğini ileri sürmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kudüs, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Yahudiler, İslam, Sultan Süleyman, Sultan II. Abdülhamid

## **Introduction**

The relationship between the Ottomans and the Jewish community in Jerusalem has been subject for debate for quite a long time. This is due to the fact that the Ottoman Empire was the last Muslim Empire to rule Palestine before its fall to the British troops in 1917. This invasion, and later mandate, came with a controversial declaration by Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, on behalf of the British government, to the leaders of the Zionist movement, for the establishment of the a “Jewish national home” in Palestine. However, one cannot say that the Jewish interest in Palestine as a national state started in 1917. The fact that a Jewish community existed in Palestine under the patronage of western powers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is noted by numerous researchers. Some even claim that the Jewish immigration to Palestine under the Ottoman Empire must have been approved by the Ottoman authorities. Other researchers go further to suggest that the Ottoman collaboration with the Jewish interests in Palestine started as early as the beginning of the Ottoman Caliphate in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

A prominent Syrian historian, Prof. Suhayl Zakkar (2015), claims that the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (Kanuni Sultan Süleyman) “broke” the Umar Assurance of Safety to the people of Jerusalem by allowing the Jews to reside in Jerusalem for the first time in Muslim history. Zakkar states that this was done under the pressure of the Sultan’s “Jewish wife Roxelana”, usually referred to in Ottoman literature as “Hurram Sultan”.

Zakkar’s claim is not but part of a stream of “blaming” the Ottomans for the current situation in Jerusalem, especially by some Arab academics of nationalist backgrounds. Other academics cast doubts on a possible role of the well-known Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II in facilitating the Jewish immigration to Palestine in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which led eventually to the creation of the current State of Israel, and later to the occupation of the Eastern side of Jerusalem, including the holy sites such as the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Holy Sepulcher Church. This is why such claims should be studied and clarified with a more balanced academic approach. After all, the Ottoman Empire ruled Jerusalem for more than 400 years, a period long enough to witness many ups and downs.

The question arises here, therefore, would be: Were the Ottomans the first to allow the Jews to reside in Jerusalem? Also, what was the Ottoman reaction to the Jewish immigration to Palestine in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries?

## Bayezid II welcomes Jewish refugees

The relationship between Jews and the Ottomans goes back to the reign of Sultan Bayezid II, who ruled the soon-to-become an empire, between 1481-1512 CE. This period witnessed the fall of the last Muslim state in Andalusia, namely Granada, in 1492 CE, to the Spanish Christian kingdom. Soon after that, Muslims and Jews of Spain suffered from one of the most notable atrocities in European history, thousands were tortured and persecuted, and thousands were expelled to the Eastern Muslim world. The Jewish community of Andalusia found shelter in the Ottoman lands under Bayezid II, who allowed Jews to reside in Anatolia and become part of the Ottoman state (see Kohen, 2017: pp. 21-22). It can be said that Beyazid II was setting the vision of tolerance that would have authority in the emerging Ottoman Empire and its relationship with its diverse communities. This vision would later be the core aspect in Ottoman imperial discourse that allowed the Empire to flourish for 400 years. The Ottoman tolerance towards the followers of other religions was the main aspect to emerge within the Empire's long rule. This tolerance was expanded to cover Jerusalem as being one of the major diverse cities in the world. However, the openness of the Ottomans cannot be understood as being a "turn over" an alleged old Muslim ban of Jews from residing in the holy city. This alleged ban is very much doubtful.

## Umar's alleged "Ban" of Jews

Current academic and non-academic Arabic literature on Jerusalem almost agree that the second Muslim caliph, Umar Ibn al-Khattāb, granted the people of Jerusalem an assurance of safety, known as *al- 'Uhdah al- 'Umariyyah*. Numerous versions of this assurance were mentioned by historians such as Ibn al-Bitriq (Eutychius), al-Ya'qūbī and others. However, the version mentioned in al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk* (History of Messengers and Kings), adds a condition to ban Jews from residing in the city of Jerusalem alongside its Christian majority. This version of the document (al-Ṭabarī, n.d.: vol.3, p.609) says:

No Jews shall reside with them [i.e. the Christians of Jerusalem] in Aelia [i.e. Jerusalem]<sup>1</sup>.

This condition is explicitly mentioned for the first time in al-Ṭabarī's version of the assurance. It is not mentioned in any other version. Nonetheless, Michael

<sup>1</sup> ولايسكن بليلياء معهم أحد من اليهود (Wā lā yaskunu bi Īlyā'a ma' ahum aḥadun min al-Yahūd).

the Syrian (1901: vol.2, p.425), who does not mention a text of such an assurance, mentions that Sophronius, the bishop of Jerusalem, asked Umar “to remove the Jews from Jerusalem”. Michael lived in the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE, so he was quite late compared with al-Ṭabarī.

To have al-Ṭabarī’s version as a sole source of this controversial condition can be one reason to cast doubts on its credibility. Al-Duri (1989: p.107) argues that “the reference to the Jews finds no support in Arab sources, and only Michael the Syrian mentions it”, al-Duri adds that “Ibn al-Jawzi, who seems to give the same account of the *ṣulḥ* produced by Saif [i.e. at al- Ṭabarī’s version], does not mention the Jews”. Cairo Geniza documents mention that the Caliph Umar allowed 70 Jewish families to reside in the southern area of Jerusalem, i.e. close to the village of Silwan<sup>2</sup> (see Gil, 1997: pp. 69-73).

Musa al-Basit (2000: p. 48), however, argues that this condition was indeed part of the original assurance of safety, given by Umar, as a matter of maintaining the *status quo*. Jews were banned from entering the city previously, as a reaction to their cooperation with the Persians during their invasion of Jerusalem in 614 CE. He goes to claim that Umar was an expert on the Jewish mentality due to his experience with the Jews of Arabia during the time of the Prophet, and therefore was able to “observe” the future that would happen if he allowed the Jews to reside in Jerusalem (see al-Basit 2000: pp.48-51), (by this al-Basit refers to the current occupation of Jerusalem). The problem with this claim is that it is politically motivated, which makes it quite unreliable. Also, one can say that, had this condition been present in the original text of the assurance of safety, Muslims would have never allowed Jews to reside in the city of Jerusalem. This can be argued looking at the high status of the Caliph Umar in Muslim tradition, especially with the presence of a *ḥadīth* (tradition) by the Prophet Muhammad says: “Hold fast to my *Sunnah* (example) and the examples of the Rightly Guided Caliphs who will come after me”<sup>3</sup> (Abu Dawood, n.d.: vol. 4, p. 200) (al-Tirmidhī, 1975: vol. 5, p. 44), and another more specific *ḥadīth* says: “Stick to the two after me, Abu Bakr and Umar”<sup>4</sup> (al-Tirmidhī, 1975: vol. 5, p. 609).

This is also what Muhammad Hassan Shurrab rely on in accusing the Ottomans of letting the Jews reside in Jerusalem, as Zakkar claimed previously. Shurrab (2003: vol.2, p. 634) claims that “during the reign of the Ottoman Sultan

<sup>2</sup> See Cairo Geniza Documents, Cambridge University Library, T-S Ar.6.1 , pp. 1-2

<sup>3</sup> عليكم بسنتي و سنة الخلفاء الراشدين المهديين بعد ي

<sup>4</sup> اقتدوا بالذنين من بعد ي أبي بكر و عمر

Abdülmecid, Jews owned their first piece of land in Jerusalem, namely the Montefiore neighborhood". In other words, Shurrab argues that no land in Jerusalem was possessed by Jews before Sultan Abdülmecid.

## Jews in Jerusalem before the Ottomans

It is noted that Zakkar and Shurrab differ in their claim that the Ottomans were responsible for admitting the Jews into Jerusalem and their ownership of land. While Zakkar attributes this to Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent who died in 1566 CE, Shurrab attributes it to Sultan Abdülmecid, who died about 300 years later in 1861 CE. This contradiction emphasizes that these two claims are relatively problematic.

The Jewish presence in Jerusalem under Muslim rule dates back to as early as, at least, the Umayyad period. The French pilgrim Arculf, who visited Jerusalem around 670 CE, i.e. in an Early Muslim period that dates back to the reign of the first Umayyad Caliph Mu'āwiyah Ibn Abī Sufyān, mentions the presence of Jews in Jerusalem during the time of Mu'āwiyah (see Adamnan, 1889: p. 14).<sup>5</sup> Ibn al-Murajjā and later Al-'Ulaymī clarify that, during the Umayyad period, al-Aqsa Mosque had a number of Jewish servants working on the glass of lamps and chandeliers, and they were therefore exempted from paying *Jizyah* (tax). (see Ibn al-Murajjā, 1995: pp.61-62) (see Al-'Ulaymī, 1999: vol. 1, p. 411).

Yosi Ben-Artzi (1990: p. 21) argues that a Jewish quarter in Jerusalem may have existed "located in the southern section of the town with the main entrance at Zion Gate". Dan Bahat (1996: p. 56) agrees that a Jewish quarter did exist at least during the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE, yet its exact location is debatable. Although this argument may not be based on clear evidence, it can be argued that Jews resided in the city of Jerusalem and even had a synagogue within its walls. The existence of a synagogue within the wall of Jerusalem is evident in numerous accounts, especially when dealing with the fall of Jerusalem during the 1<sup>st</sup> Crusade in 1099 CE. The Crusaders gathered the Jews inside their synagogue and put them to fire as numerous historical accounts mention (see Ibn Taghrī Bardī, 1992: vol.5, p.149) (see al-Arif, 2005: p.257). Sylvia Schein (1990: p. 23) even argues that the 1<sup>st</sup> crusade left Jerusalem "for the first time since the seventh century without a Jewish community".

After the end of the crusades and the capture of Jerusalem by Sultan Saladin, the Jewish community was re-established in Jerusalem alongside its new Muslim

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<sup>5</sup> Arculf names Mu'āwiyah: "Mavias, The King of the Saracens".

and Christian communities (Schein, 1990: p. 30). This was a natural reaction to the religious cleansing committed by the 1<sup>st</sup> Crusade, and to re-stabilize the balance and bring back religious harmony in the city. Al-'Ulaymī mentions normal Jewish presence inside the walls of Jerusalem during the Mamluk period. He even mentions the Jewish Quarter inside the city while describing its shape and neighborhoods during his time (see Al-'Ulaymī, 1999: vol.2, p.105). The description of the Jewish quarter in Jerusalem by al-'Ulaymī suggests that its area and location were not changed until its expansion by the Israeli authorities in 1967 CE.

These accounts suggest, thereof, that Jews were almost certainly not banned from residing in Jerusalem by Caliph Umar. Also, it is not correct to attribute the presence of Jews inside the old city of Jerusalem to the Ottomans. It could be argued that the Ottomans dealt with the presence of the Jews in Jerusalem as a normal situation similar to the presence of Christians and Muslims.

One may argue that, even though the Ottomans may not have encouraged Jews, in particular, to reside inside Jerusalem, they could have had a role in strengthening the Jews' power to a very high level. This is claimed by some academics, who usually attribute this to Roxelana (Hurrem Sultan), the wife of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. For example, Mohammad Ahmad (2009: p.209) claims that Roxelana was of a Jewish-Polish origin. Zakkar (2015) goes further to claim that Roxelana, who was of a Jewish Russian origin, conspired with other Jewish figures to take control of the Ottoman Empire, by rebuilding a "wall for Jerusalem that's a Jewishly inspired vision" and paving the area in front of the Western Wall of the al-Aqsa Mosque in order to change the wall into a "Wailing Wall" for the Jews.

There are many problems with these claims; Roxelana was on fact not of a Jewish origin, she was of an Orthodox Christian origin (see Lewis, 2017). It is true, as Naim A. Güleriyüz (2012: p.47) argues, that Jews witnessed their golden time under the rule of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. This does not relate to any specific relationship between the Sultan and the Jewish community in particular. Jews were welcomed by Sultan Bayezid II after their expulsion from Spain as mentioned earlier. Having Suleiman's reign as the golden time for Jews, Güleriyüz argues, was part of the general atmosphere of tolerance spread by the Ottoman Empire in its peak during the reign of Suleiman. Christians and Muslims of Jerusalem also lived a golden time during Suleiman's reign, and Ottomans were, in general, known for their tolerance, which, as Makdisi (2009: p.929) argues "was first and foremost a strategy of empire".

No special status was given to the Jewish community in Jerusalem, and they were treated equally with followers of other religions. This even resulted in the closure of the Ramban Synagogue in Jerusalem during the Sultan Murad III, grandson of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, in 1587 CE, as parts of it were built on land that belonged to the 'Umari Mosque (see Cohen, 1924: pp.82-83). This comes at the same time when Nicolo Nicolais (1580: p.145) describes the Jews of the Ottoman Empire, around 1580 CE, of great wealth and freedom of commercial activities. This shows that special treatment for the Jews did not exist; rather it was the same treatment of other religious communities in the Ottoman Empire.

## Formation of a Jewish national state

The issue of the relationship between the Ottomans and the Jews in Palestine in general, and in Jerusalem in particular, takes a different and more dramatic approach in some Arab academic writings. It goes further to accuse the late Ottoman Sultans, particularly Abdülmecid and his son Abdülhamid II, of collaborating with the efforts to form a Jewish state in Palestine and sell lands to the Jews in preparing for this goal.

On one hand, as mentioned earlier, Shurrab claims that Jews owned their first land in Jerusalem in the time of Sultan Abdülmecid. This, in fact, could hint an Ottoman role in selling lands to the Jewish immigrants, and thus to the formation of a national Jewish state in Palestine. Shurrab's controversial claim does not take into consideration that Jerusalem at that time was considered the city within the walls, where a Jewish quarter did exist before that time. Having resided in their own quarter in Jerusalem centuries before Sultan Abdülmecid, Jews owned land inside the city. Documents show that, during a dispute between Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem on the Synagogue of Ramban in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Jews provided documents showing that they bought a land inside the old city of Jerusalem (see Cohen, 1924: p.78). Shurrab's claim neglects the presence of the Jewish quarter in Jerusalem and refers specifically to the "Montefiore" neighborhood known as "Mishk'not Sha'ananim, which was first bought and established by the British Sir Moses Montefiore in 1855 CE during the reign of Sultan Abdülmecid (see Hirscheler, 1971: vol.2, p.800). It is worth mentioning that this land was at that time considered out of the city of Jerusalem since it was out of its walls. Shurrab's neglect of the presence of the Jewish quarter inside the walls of Jerusalem proves his subjectivity on this issue.

On the other hand, Fadwa Nusairat (2014: p.232) goes further to hint that Jews had a certain relationship with the Ottoman Sultan, Abdülhamid II, which

caused the latter to ignore the Jewish immigration to Palestine in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nusairat accuses Abdulhamid II of collaborating with the Zionist movement in its efforts to purchase lands and organize mass Jewish immigration to Palestine. This collaboration came, according to Nusairat, in the form of ignoring these efforts and letting them go further without any serious counteraction.

However, the problem with this argument is that it neglects statistics of Jewish immigrants to Palestine during the late Ottoman period. According to Anis Mahmud (2014: p.347), Sultan Abdulhamid II succeeded during his reign to reduce the number of Jewish immigrants by half. Between 1882-1908 CE, around 1,600 Jewish immigrants entered Palestine annually, with a total number of around 50,000 during that period. This is compared with about 100,000 tried to immigrate to Palestine within that period. In other words, Abdulhamid II succeeded in reducing the number of Jewish immigrants. The continuation of this immigration despite the efforts of Abdulhamid II should not be a reason to solely hold Abdülhamid II responsible. Mahmud argues that “the position of Sultan Abdülhamid II towards the Zionist settling activities shall not be studied far from its historical circumstances”, which shows that even “some of the Arab aristocratic families and feudal lords were less aware of the Zionist danger that threatened their lands” (Mahmud, 2014: p.348). The same can be argued about many corrupt Ottoman officials who were not aware of the consequences of their actions. These factors reduced the effects of Sultan Abdülhamid II’s decisions and procedures to save the lands and stop the Jewish immigration that was supported by imperial powers of the time.

The success of dethroning Sultan Abdülhamid II effectively contributed in increasing the number of Jewish immigrants significantly according to statistics (Mahmud, 2014: p.347). This shows that the presence of Sultan Abdülhamid II and his attitude towards the Jewish immigration to Palestine did not assist the Zionist cause, and therefore he cannot be accused of collaborating with the Zionist movement to ease the Jewish acquisition of lands in Palestine, as Nusairat claims.

These serious accusations could be based on a nationalist background, Nusairat and Shurrab support in general Arab nationalism as can be noted in their writings (see Shurrab 2003: vol.2, p.635).<sup>6</sup> This cast doubt on the credibility of these arguments being subjective and based on ideological dogmas.

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<sup>6</sup> Nusairat is in fact a member of the Arab Nationalist Congress and is well known of her Arab nationalist opinions and writings.

## Conclusion

To conclude, an objective study of the Jewish history in Jerusalem under Muslim rule shows that Jews lived in Jerusalem alongside Muslims and Christians in harmony under Muslim states. To claim that the Ottomans had any favoring arrangements for the Jewish community in Jerusalem is baseless, simply since their attitude towards the Jews in Jerusalem went in line with the Islamic overall inclusive vision of Jerusalem and the Ottoman general tolerant approach towards followers of other faiths. Jewish community indeed existed in Jerusalem long before the formation of the Ottoman Empire. They were not excluded from residing in Jerusalem throughout Muslim history. The Ottoman sultans did not change their basic position towards Jews until the dawn of the Zionist ideology, which violated the openness and tolerance of the Ottoman Empire, and tried to seize lands in Palestine, in order to form a new exclusive vision in the holy city and Palestine. Sultan Abdulhamid II resisted this, yet it was too late to stop this project completely in an Empire that was coming towards its end.

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