

Arguing for Political Legitimacy in a
Late Ottoman City: A Fictional Literary
Dialogue from Gaza, c. 1895

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Introduction

Political writing in the guise of fiction was a popular literary genre in the late Ottoman Empire. The heavy political censorship under Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) may have been a motivating factor for using the fictional form, as it might have increased the chances of escaping the censor.¹ Not surprisingly, some of the publications in this genre, in manuscript and in print, were published anonymously or under pen names. However, censorship was not the only possible reason for opting for the fictional form when making a political statement. Intellectuals and their publics in the Ottoman Empire could draw on a rich heritage of fictional political writings and probably also savored the aesthetics of playing with fact and fiction.² Anonymous literary dialogues could cover numerous topics other than imperial politics or the legitimation of rule. In 1908, for example, the women’s journal *Demet* (‘Bouquet’ in Ottoman Turkish) published a fictional conversation between three young women who debated the state of women’s integration into the Ottoman labor market. The author is unknown, and the text was published under the name of a women’s association called the “Red-White Club” (*Kırmızı Beyaz Kulübü*).³

One of the best-known examples of literary political texts in Arabic from the late Ottoman Empire is a political manifesto written by the

¹ On censorship in the late Ottoman Empire, see Donald J. Cioeta, “Ottoman Censorship in Lebanon and Syria 1876–1908,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10 (1979), pp. 167–186; Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 38–39 and passim; François Georgeon, *Abdülhamid II: le Sultan Calife* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2015), pp. 159–164; İpek K. Yosmaoğlu, “Chasing the Printed Word: Press Censorship in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1913,” *The Turkish Studies Association Journal* 27–1/2 (2003), pp. 15–49.

² Examples of literary political texts in Arabic and Persian are found chiefly in the ‘Mirrors for Princes’ genre consisting of writings giving guidance to young princes concerning conduct, ethics and discharge of office (*Fürstenspiegel*). For an introduction, see Patricia Crone, *God’s Rule: Government and Islam. Six Centuries of Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 148–164.

³ Kırmızı Beyaz Kulübü, “Genç Kızlar Arasında” [Among Young Women], *Demet*, no. 4, 8 Tışrin-i Evvel 1324 [October 21, 1908], pp. 53–55.

Aleppo-born intellectual ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi called *Umm al-Qura* (The Mother of Villages [Mecca]), which was first printed in 1899 in Cairo under the pseudonym of *al-Rahhala* (“the traveler”). This text purports to be the minutes of a (fictional) Islamic congress in Mecca, where delegates from all over the Muslim world came to discuss the future of the global Islamic community.⁴ *Umm al-Qura* was highly controversial and attracted much attention among Arabic readers. The fictional setting in Mecca hints at Kawakibi’s doubts that the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph had a legitimate claim to central authority in the Muslim world at the time, and was an open affront to Sultan Abdülhamid II and his Pan-Islamic policies. Many also interpreted this text as a call to the Arabs to reclaim their traditional role and power to the detriment of the Turkish-speaking population in the Empire.

The Arabic manuscript edited and analyzed in this study originated in a similar context and is also a case of political fiction. It consists of an anonymous political pamphlet in Arabic that was authored in the mid-1890s in Gaza by supporters of the Husayni family in the city and was sent to the imperial government in Istanbul shortly thereafter. At the time, the city of Gaza, located some four kilometers from the coast in the southern part of the Ottoman District of Jerusalem and not far from the Egyptian border, numbered some 20,000–25,000 people. In the mid-1890s, the opponents of the Husaynis, including families who previously supported them, were finally able to oust them from power and take over key positions in Gaza. The main bone of contention in Gaza’s stormy politics, starting from the mid-1870s, was competition over offices in the local bureaucracy, especially the post of the city’s mufti.

The author of this nine-page text spread over five double pages is unknown: it is not signed and has no dedication. The date of publication and its targeted audience can only be conjectured. Given the facts

⁴ See al-Rahhala [‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi], *Umm al-Qura: wa-huwa dabt mufawadat wa-muqarrarat Mu’tamar al-Nahda al-Islamiyya al-mun’aqid fi Makka al-mukarrama sanat 1316h* [Mother of Villages: Protocol of the Negotiations and Decisions of the Conference of Islamic Revival held in Mecca in the Hijri year 1316] (Cairo, 1899) [in Arabic]. On Kawakibi, see Itzchak Weismann, *Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi: Islamic Reform and Arab Revival* (London: Oneworld, 2015).

mentioned in the text and the folder in which it is located in the Ottoman Archives in Istanbul (*Cumhurbaşkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi*), it appears to have been written in 1895.⁵ It is classified under *Bâbiâli Evrak Odası Evrakı*, ‘Documents of the Sublime Porte Documentation Office.’ There it forms part of a file of more than forty documents that date from the beginning of 1895 to the summer of 1896, all of which deal with the administration of Gaza. They include petitions from Gaza to Istanbul and correspondence between various bureaus of the Ottoman central government and the provincial administrations of Jerusalem and Beirut. This documentation indicates that the Dialogue reached Istanbul at a time when Gaza’s factionalist struggles were coming to a head and that these struggles involved high-ranking statesmen both in the provincial centers of the region and in the imperial capital of Istanbul.⁶ The topics and text forms within this file are varied. It includes, for example, more than a dozen petitions filled with complaints and accusations by adherents and opponents of the mufti and the *kaymakam* of Gaza as well as of the governor of Jerusalem.

Particularly interesting in our context are two documents. One is a letter by the *şeyhülislam* to the Grand Vizier from July 30, 1895, in which he offers his advice as to how the central government should intervene in these struggles. Different options are weighed against each other, one of them being the transfer of both the governor and the *kaymakam* to other posts in the nearby Syrian province, but keeping the mufti in place. In the end, the *şeyhülislam* recommends dismissing the mufti and having another person elected instead. What emerges from this document is the great political weight that Istanbul attached to Gaza’s mufti, who is viewed as being on equal footing with the powerful governor of Jeru-

⁵ The text must have been written before December 1895, since one of its main targets of criticism, *kaymakam* Hasan Bey, was dismissed after that date. See BOA. HR. MTV., 717/85, 23 Cemaziyelahir 1313 [December 11, 1895] (petition criticizing Hasan Bey and noting that he had been dismissed and that parts of the local population reacted with public demonstrations of joy).

⁶ For a general survey of the Dialogue genre in the classical Arabic literature, see Regula Forster, *Wissensvermittlung im Gespräch. Eine Studie zu klassisch-arabischen Dialogen* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

salem, and how leading figures in the central government were divided over the question of how to resolve Gaza's internal conflicts. The second document is an undated Ottoman-Turkish paraphrase of the Dialogue. This document proves that the Dialogue was taken seriously enough to have it translated so that its contents could be understood by officials who were not proficient in Arabic. It also contains important information that was included in the Arabic original which was sent to Istanbul by the 'Extraordinary Commissary for Egyptian Affairs' (*Mısır Fevkalade Komiseri*) Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Paşa.⁷ This helps place the Dialogue in a specific historical context and better determine the identity of two key personalities mentioned in the text.

Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Paşa was one of the most prominent Ottoman statesmen of the time: he was a distinguished general, a hero of the Russian-Ottoman War of 1877–78 and had held coveted administrative positions. He was the Ottoman Empire's highest-ranking representative in British-occupied Egypt since 1885. We do not know whether he maintained personal contacts with personalities in Gaza, but two other documents from the file make it clear that he communicated with the Grand Vizier's office in Istanbul about allegations that Britain might use the political turmoil in Gaza as a pretext for military intervention.⁸

⁷ "Mısır Fevkalade Komiseri Devletlü Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Paşa irsal olunan arabıyyatu'l-ibare imzasız bir varakanın tercümesidir." BOA. BEO., 651/48815, lef 29, n.d., unsigned; on the Ottoman high commissioner in Egypt, see Oded Peri, "Ottoman Symbolism in British-Occupied Egypt, 1882–1909," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 41/1 (2005), pp. 103–120; Maurus Reinkowski, "Osmanen und Post-Osmanen in Ägypten," in Börte Sagaster et al. (eds.), *Hoşsohbet. Erika Glassen zu Ehren* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2011), pp. 237–250.

⁸ BOA. BEO., 651/48815_18, letter from Bâb-ı 'Ali to Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Paşa, translating a complaint that arrived on 7 Cemaziyülâhur 1312 [August 19, 1896], from a resident of Gaza named 'Abdallah, about the *kaymakam* Hasan Bey Bedirhanpaşazade's intrigues with the British in Egypt, together with several local notables and office holders in Gaza, which are aimed to facilitate British takeover of the region and the dispatching of troops there: "Gazze kazasının ve belki bütün livanın İngiltere hükümeti tarafından işgal edilmesini teshil için dahil-i kazada şuriş ve fesad ıka' etmek teşebbüsünde bulunuyorlarki maksadları ıslah-ı ahval için buraya İngiliz askerinin sevkine sebebiyet vermektir" (in order to make it easier for the British government to occupy the Subdistrict of Gaza and even the entire province, they are making deliberate efforts to cause havoc in the district to provide the British army with a pretext to be sent to the region to pacify the situation). *Ibid.*, lef 28, letter by

What is exceptional about the Dialogue is the fact that Ahmed Muhtar Paşa himself is mentioned in it and that one of his subordinates is a key protagonist. The fact that Ahmed Muhtar Paşa forwarded the text suggests that he endorsed its content. This, in turn, means that the Husayni family in Gaza could count on him as a mediator and as part of their network in the central government.⁹

With this in mind, let us return to the text itself. The text takes the form of a fictional dialogue between three Muslim men: Wa‘iz ibn Nasuh, the narrator, who is a respected scholar from Gaza, and two young men named Sadiq ibn Amin and Nashid ibn Rashid whom he meets by chance on the shores of Gaza. Sadiq is also from Gaza, whereas Nashid is a subordinate of Ahmed Muhtar Paşa who apparently has been dispatched by his master from neighboring Egypt on a fact-finding mission to establish the truth about local conflicts in Gaza. The three men’s names are symbolic and characterize their specific roles in the dialogue. The narrator’s name Wa‘iz ibn Nasuh translates as “the warner, son of the provider of good advice.” The name of Nashid ibn Rashid, the Egyptian visitor, means “the seeker of truth, son of the rightly guided,” characterizing him as a sound inquirer. Finally, the name of Sadiq ibn Amin, the young Gazan means “the sincere, son of the trustworthy,” which characterizes him as a reliable source of information.

In what ways is the ‘Dialogue’ a political text? At first glance, details suggest that it was an opposition pamphlet. The fact that an Egyptian and two Gazans meet on the shore, far from the watchful eye of the local Ottoman authorities, would alone have had the earmarks of political intrigue at the time. Egypt was nominally under Ottoman control, but de facto it was an autonomous political entity ruled by the ‘Khedival’ dynasty established by Muhammad ‘Ali (d. 1848) which in 1882

Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Paşa to the Ministry of the Interior, stating that he had received several anonymous letters with allegations against Gaza’s *kaymakam* which seemed substantial enough to be examined by the Ministry.

⁹ In an earlier instance, it was a high-ranking military in Istanbul whom the Husaynis entrusted with presenting a mass-petition in support of mufti Muhammad Hanafi al-Husayni to Sultan Abdülhamid II. See BOA. Y. MTV., 77/140, 10 Nisan 1309 [April 22, 1893], 2 pp.

had come under British colonial control. The administrative boundary between the Ottoman domains and British-controlled Egypt, which de jure was drawn in 1906, was de facto located only a few kilometers from Gaza and was heavily contested.¹⁰ The three interlocutors in this Dialogue who clearly have fictional names, meet in a secretive setting, discuss events that they see as political scandals and jointly propagate a conspiracy theory. A further hint as to the text's political overtones is the fact that the author preferred to remain anonymous. However, in contrast to Kawakibi's *Umm al-Qura*, this is not an anti-government text. Its main message are complaints, similar to those that inhabitants of Ottoman Palestine would send to the imperial government in petitions, such as the ones archived in the same file.¹¹ Like petitions, the complaint is ostensibly addressed to the ruler, to entreat him to intervene and restore justice. In fact, however, petitions could also contain more or less subtle threats to the government.¹² The anonymous Dialogue from Gaza is characterized by the same ambiguity: it professes loyalty to the Ottoman state but at the same time depicts a threatening scenario where disregard of the complaint could lead to serious consequences for the state. In this regard, the text can be seen as a rare, if not unique, case of a petition in literary form.

What then is the complaint and the threat in the anonymous Dialogue? The text is mainly a defense of the then dominant political camp in Gaza, the Husayni family and their supporters, combined with allega-

¹⁰ On the Ottoman-British border dispute, see Yuval Ben-Bassat and Yossi Ben-Artzi, "The Collision of Empires as seen from Istanbul: The Border of British-Controlled Egypt and Ottoman Palestine as Reflected in Ottoman Maps," *Journal of Historical Geography* 50 (2015), pp. 25–36. A report from the British consular agent in Gaza states that in 1906, Gazan notables in fact aired the idea of seeking British "protection." Johann Buessow, *Hamidian Palestine: Politics and Society in the District of Jerusalem, 1872–1908* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p. 505. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that other Gazan notables successfully solicited the intercession of the Egyptian Khedive on their behalf. See Yuval Ben-Bassat and Johann Buessow, "Urban Factionalism in Late Ottoman Gaza, c. 1875–1914: Local Politics and Spatial Divisions," *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 61/4 (2018), p. 617.

¹¹ On petitioning in late Ottoman Palestine, see Yuval Ben-Bassat, *Petitioning the Sultan: Protests and Justice in Late Ottoman Palestine* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 41, 59, 71, 119.