A Zionist torn between two worlds: Aharon Eisenberg’s correspondence after the Young Turk Revolution

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Through the correspondence of Aharon Eisenberg (1863–1931), this article examines the reactions of Zionist activists in Ottoman Palestine to the Young Turk Revolution of 1908. It challenges the presumed dichotomies between supporters and opponents of the Yishuv’s integration in the Ottoman framework in the aftermath of the revolution and between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, and argues instead that there was wide-ranging support for Ottomanization in the national circles in the Yishuv, mainly due to realpolitik considerations. This support was made possible by the fluidity of the term “Ottomanism,” which allowed a broad spectrum of groups to interpret it as best suited to their interests.

Keywords: Aharon Eisenberg; Zionism; Ottomanism; Young Turk Revolution

Introduction

Political and societal changes in Palestine in the aftermath of the Young Turk Revolution provide an opportunity to examine deliberations among Zionist activists residing there on the question of their future relationship with the Ottoman Empire and the issue of Ottomanization.1 This article presents a case study of the activity of Aharon Eisenberg (1863–1931), a fervent Zionist and First Aliyah colonist from Rehovot, who was deeply involved in Jewish colonization activity in Palestine from the late 1880s and was one of the most prominent activists in the national circles of the Jewish community (Yishuv), whose efforts have been somewhat underestimated, forgotten, and neglected in the annals of Zionist activity. After the July 1908 revolution Eisenberg participated in at least one meeting of the local Jerusalemite branch of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), the leading organ behind the Young Turk Revolution, and left interesting records of his contacts.2 He was eventually denied membership in this branch because of his refusal to disavow Zionism and stop paying the shekel, the membership fee of the Zionist movement.3 In his correspondence with leading Zionist leaders following his meetings, Eisenberg evaluated the impact of the revolution on Zionist activity in Palestine. This correspondence reveals the issues that preoccupied the local Zionist activists (as opposed to the Zionist political leadership in Europe), their positions with regard to the question of integration into the empire and acceptance of Ottoman citizenship, their vision for a future relationship between the government and the Yishuv, and the prospects for Zionist activity in Palestine. At the same time, Eisenberg’s contacts also teach us a

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great deal about the nature of the CUP’s activity in the provinces immediately after the revolution, its policies, and its position on the Zionist question.

The meaning of Ottomanization

Researchers dealing with the history of the late Ottoman Empire tend to disagree both about the meaning of the term Ottomanism, the official ideology held by the empire during part of the time from the 1870s to its final years, as well as the extent to which this ideology was indeed wholeheartedly adhered to by the CUP. What exactly did the Ottoman state mean by adhering to this notion, variations of which had been circulating for a few decades, at a time when national sentiments were on the rise among various peoples within the empire’s constantly shrinking borders? Was this notion indeed the guiding principle for the empire’s elite? Did the empire’s elite really believe it was still possible to create a shared Ottoman national identity among its diversified peoples given the spread of national agendas and ideologies?

The debate on the meaning of Ottomanism was particularly virulent in the period following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 which brought about a liberalization of the political system and the lifting of censorship in the empire. The revolution exacerbated intercommunal relationships and prompted various groups to better define their unique characteristics vis-à-vis other groups in the empire as well as the latter as a whole. In the turbulent decade that was to be the final years of the Ottoman Empire, which included several wars, the rise of national sentiments among the empire’s people, the secession of several provinces, and eventually its defeat and final collapse, the debate on Ottomanism was much more than a theoretical academic squabble for the empire’s subjects.

Researchers such as Erik J. Zürcher have claimed that the embrace of the ideology of Ottomanism on the part of the empire’s leadership was no more than a façade, since they realized that in the period after the revolution it had no practical value. At this stage the CUP had already begun to support the ideology of Turkification. Zürcher noted that “While the Committee officially supported Ottomanism . . . its interpretation of Ottomanism came close to Turkification of the non-Turkish elements.” 4 Muhammad Muslih also suggested that at a certain stage of their rule, the CUP adopted Turkish nationalistic policies, a move that alienated the empire’s Arab population. 5 Hasan Kayalı, on the other hand, has noted that centralization measures by the imperial center in Istanbul were often misinterpreted as efforts at Turkification. Kayalı differentiates between a Turkish nationalistic policy, which he believes did not exist, and a centralization policy. He argues that the latter was a policy enforced on the periphery by the predominantly Turkish center in order to enhance its control over the empire’s provinces, and was in turn the main cause of the erroneous perception of a “Turkification” policy. 6 Other researchers such as Eyal Ginio argue that Ottomanism only ended with the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, which finally pushed the shrinking empire towards Islamic Ottomanism. 7

By contrast, Jacob Landau takes the position that the Young Turks were never inclined towards one particular policy but adopted different policies towards different segments of the population in the empire and beyond its borders, based on their needs and the characteristics of the specific group with whom they were dealing. In his view, Ottomanism was the policy implemented with regards to the ethnic minorities in the
empire and abroad, while Islamism/Pan-Islamism were manifested towards the Muslim population in the empire and abroad, and Pan-Turkism towards the Turkic population in Russia and Central Asia. Thus, according to Landau, the Ottomans often changed their emphasis on various policies according to their needs. 8

Regardless of motivation, the debate on Ottomanism is crucial to understanding the positions and attitudes of the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine. According to most estimates, at the time of the 1908 revolution the Yishuv, which was structurally divided along several lines (such as nationality, language, ethnicity, rabbinical courts, and culture), constituted less than 10 percent of the total population of the country. Studies dealing with the positions taken by Yishuv members regards the question of integration into the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the Young Turk Revolution broadly take two major approaches. On the one hand, researchers such as Israel Kolatt claim that in the (predominantly Ashkenazi) national circles – often referred to in the literature as the “new Yishuv” – many did not believe the Jewish national movement could continue to develop freely or achieve its goals within the framework of the Ottoman Empire. Thus manifestations of support for integration in the empire were only lip service to avoid the displeasure of the Ottoman government which might threaten the future of the Jewish national project in Palestine. Behind closed doors, however, the national circles feared that Ottomanization – the acceptance of Ottoman citizenship and integration in the Ottoman sociopolitical system – would be detrimental to the national cause and might even lead to assimilation. 9 On the other hand, it is often alleged that the Sephardic Ottoman community in Palestine, in particular the younger generation, strongly supported the Ottoman framework and believed it was possible for the Yishuv to integrate into Ottoman society while concomitantly preserving its cultural and social uniqueness. 10 This debate over the Sephardic community in Palestine is one facet of the larger ongoing discussion among researchers about the reaction of the Sephardic community in the empire to the issue of Ottomanism even before the revolution, but more vehemently and acutely after it. 11 The fact that this community was well integrated into Ottoman society and culture, that its members were Ottoman subjects, that Sephardic elites led the Jewish millet – as opposed to the Ashkenazim who for the most part remained foreign nationals – are all behind the proliferation of research on the attitude of Sephardim to Ottomanism.

In contrast to the prevalent approach that identifies a dichotomy between the Yishuv’s Sephardic and Ashkenazi reactions to the Young Turk Revolution, it is argued here that after the revolution, the Ottoman framework, despite its overt disadvantages and the genuine fears it elicited among many circles in the Yishuv for a variety of reasons, 12 was nevertheless accepted by many in its national circles. Due to realpolitik considerations, these circles, which included an amalgam of First Aliyah colonists and activists, Second Aliyah pioneers, and young educated Sephardic circles who took part in the Zionist national project, perceived it as the best available option at the time for safeguarding the Yishuv’s interests and further pursuing the Jewish national project, given the rapid political changes taking place in the empire, in particular the introduction of a parliamentary representative regime.

The revolution thus constituted a watershed in the attitude of the national circles in the Yishuv towards the question of future activity within the Ottoman Empire. This new stance was more than a tactical maneuver or an effort to temporarily conceal the true objectives of the Jewish national movement in order to appease the Ottoman government. Rather, it reflected a genuine shift from pre-revolutionary positions during the rule of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1909). Given the prevalent notion among many activists
that the post-revolutionary Ottoman Empire was about to be revived and strengthened, many in the national circles came to accept the idea of Ottomanization despite the great challenges it posed. To grasp the complexity of this issue it is worth recalling the headline of the long and vigorous campaign by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858–1922), “Jews! Be Ottoman!” on the front pages of his newspaper *Ha-Tzvi*. 13 This ideological stand, however, only partly converges with the concept Michelle Campos termed the “Ottoman brotherhood” which prevailed for a short while after the revolution. The latter concept led many in the empire to believe that under the new regime the structure of the empire would be preserved and its different peoples would be able to find their place under the Ottoman flag. 14 In the Yishuv’s nationalist circles, however, it was accepted mainly for reasons of realpolitik rather than out of a genuine sense of affiliation.

What facilitated these activists’ support of Ottomanization may have been the fluidity of this ill-defined term, which was interpreted by different groups in the empire in ways that differed from the “official” Ottoman interpretation. 15 Even the Young Turk movement, it should be recalled, was not a monolithic group and various ideas existed among its members with regards to the issue of Ottomanization. This fluidity enabled many in the national circles to believe there was not necessarily an inherent contradiction between support for Ottomanism and the aims of the Jewish national project.

As a result, in a clear shift from the Herzlian period, few people in the Yishuv at this stage, even among the most adamant national circles, truly believed that the collapse of the empire was imminent and thus seriously contemplated options outside its framework, such as the establishment of an independent Jewish political entity. Consider, for example, the move by the Second Aliyah Po’alei Zion leaders such as David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973), Yitzhak Ben-Zvi (1884–1863), Israel Shochat (1886–1961), and others, who traveled to Istanbul and Salonika in the years after the revolution to study law in order to be able to better represent the Yishuv and its interests in Ottoman institutions. 16 After 1908 they all envisioned a revival of the Ottoman Empire, opposed European plans for its partition, and foresaw the Yishuv’s future within the Ottoman framework. 17 In fact they thought of Ottomanism as a way of both detaching themselves from the East European diaspora (*galut*) and preventing an Arab takeover of Palestine for as long as the Jews did not have a majority there (Ben-Gurion, for example, gradually came to the conclusion that the main rivals of the Jews in the struggle over the land would be the Arabs). Even the Ottoman defeat in the Balkan Wars did not discourage them, as it was thought that the empire would now be more homogenous and stable, once circumscribed mainly to its Asian territories. 18

It was not until fairly late into World War I, when the tide had clearly turned against the Ottoman Empire, and in light of the stern Ottoman policy towards Yishuv members in Palestine led by the notorious Jamal Pasha (in Turkish Cemal Paşa), that the Second Aliyah parties of Po’alei Zion and Hapo’el Hatza’ir abandoned their policy of support for the Ottoman Empire (the former, it should be recalled, supported this policy much more strongly than the latter which had always been much more reserved). 19

**Eisenberg’s Ottoman background**

In order to understand Eisenberg’s correspondence and the positions on Ottomanism held by activists in general in the Yishuv, it is worthwhile first exploring his unique background. Eisenberg was born in 1863 in Pinsk in the region of Minsk in the Russian
Empire (today Belarus), which was part of the Jewish Pale of Settlement, and received a religious education. Having married at a young age, he emigrated to Ottoman Palestine with his family in 1886 at the age of twenty-four out of proto-Zionist convictions. After a short period of hard manual labor in Jaffa as a stonemason, he settled in the small colony of Ness Ziona (Vadi Hanin), some twenty kilometers southeast of Jaffa. A few years later he moved to the newly established colony of Rehovot several kilometers to the south and became one of the leaders of this large, prosperous, and important colony.²⁰

Figure 1. Aharon Eisenberg, 1863–1931. Reproduced from Aharon Feldman (Ever Hadani), Aharon A. Eisneberg (Tel Aviv: Masada, 1947), 6. Courtesy of the Eisenberg family, Rehovot.
Eisenberg accepted Ottoman citizenship quite soon after immigrating to Palestine. One of his sons, Ben-Karmi Eisenberg (1891–1920), with his father’s encouragement, volunteered to serve in the Ottoman army after the revolution, when its ranks were first opened to non-Muslims, and even became an officer, a rather unusual phenomenon among young members of the Yishuv at the time. He fought in the Balkan Wars (1912–13) in which the empire confronted a number of Balkan states that had previously been under its rule for long periods of time, and was even honored with the title ghazi, warrior in the name of Islam, for his excellence and bravery. Later he served as an officer on the Russian front during World War I. He was severely injured, taken prisoner of war and, some two years after the War ended, died of severe illness in a POW camp in Siberia.

Interestingly, Ben-Karmi is quoted as saying that he never contemplated deserting from the Ottoman army even when it was clear it was going to be defeated since he considered it an immoral act that would bring shame to the entire Yishuv. He is also quoted by students from Ottoman Palestine who studied in Istanbul and met him there between the Balkan Wars and World War I as being supportive of establishing a Jewish autonomy in Palestine under Ottoman tutelage and in favor of population exchanges between the Arab peasant population in Palestine and Jews from the surrounding Arab states.

Aharon Eisenberg himself was involved in some settlement activity that was carried out within the Ottoman framework. He set up Agudat Neta’im (the Planters’ Society) in 1905, with the aim of purchasing lands and planting orchards in Palestine to sell them later to private owners as turnkey farms. In 1910 he managed, with the help of his son-in-law Gad Frumkin (1887–1960), whom he helped travel to Istanbul to study law, to register Neta’im in Istanbul as an Ottoman society, a challenging task given its objectives. He thus sought to facilitate Neta’im’s everyday operations in Palestine, while bypassing Ottoman restrictions on Zionist settlement activity. Interestingly, at a certain stage Neta’im even contemplated settling Jews in Anatolia, due to ongoing difficulties in its operations in Palestine, precisely at a time when many Jewish immigrants from Russia were facing abject poverty. This strategy was perceived as a preparatory stage for settling some of these Jews later on in Palestine, but the plan, which sparked tremendous opposition among leading Jewish leaders and activists, was eventually shelved.

Despite operating within the Ottoman framework and being an Ottoman subject, Eisenberg’s involvement in purchase of land for Jewish settlement sparked opposition among Arab circles and was debated in the Arab press in Palestine. The Hebrew newspaper Ha-Herut, which represented the young nationalist intelligentsia within the Sephardic population of Palestine, responded to these accusations by saying that “Mr. Aharon Eisenberg is the father of the Jewish Ottoman army officer Eisenberg, who now stands on the battlefront of Shtalja. The young officer ... reached the rank of first lieutenant and later yet was honored and achieved the important distinction of al-ghāzī ... If this gentleman and his father are not considered Ottomans, who, then, are the Ottomans?”

Aharon Eisenberg at the CUP branch in Jerusalem
Eisenberg had a number of contacts with Ottoman officials following the Young Turk Revolution, including the governor of Jerusalem. At that time branches of the CUP
had been established throughout the provinces of the empire, including in several towns in Palestine such as Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Tiberias. The Jerusalem branch was the most active and important and hosted Ottoman officials, local Arab leaders, and a handful of Jewish activists from different backgrounds who came together under one roof. Eisenberg participated in a secret meeting of this branch, despite the prerequisite of denouncing Zionism – a demand that eventually prevented him and several other activists from being elected to this branch – and held discussions with its leaders (apparently in a separate forum). His aim was to take the pulse of the new regime’s position vis-à-vis the Yishuv and initiate dialogue with the local CUP leadership in Palestine.

Eisenberg left fascinating well-written records of these contacts, which are housed today in the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem. He wrote about his contacts in Jerusalem to prominent Zionist leaders such as David Wolffsohn (1855–1914), the head of the World Zionist Organization who succeeded Theodor Herzl, and Menachem Ussishkin (1863–1941), the head of Hovevei Zion’s central committee in Odessa. Eisenberg’s letters reveal that despite being merely a local activist in the Jewish colonies in Palestine, he was well aware of the political goals of Zionism and was involved in debates over the future of Jewish settlement activity, in addition to his concerns regarding the everyday routine of the colonies. Moreover, he had a thorough understanding of political developments in the empire, its geopolitical situation, and the rationales for its policy. Hence, Eisenberg’s impressions of these meetings provide a thoughtful analysis of the empire’s political situation at the time in general and particularly in Palestine. At times he even made practical suggestions to his interlocutors concerning the policies the Yishuv and the Zionist movement should adopt to protect their interests and pursue further their goals.

According to Eisenberg’s letters, during his meetings in Jerusalem he was told that the CUP would not oppose Zionism as long as its agenda remained apolitical and did not threaten the empire’s territorial integrity, that it only opposed the political aspects of Zionism but did not categorically reject all the Jewish settlement activity in Palestine, and finally, that Jews who wished to join the CUP could do so, as long as they denounced Zionism and stopped paying the shekel. Thus, he wrote to Ussishkin:

In the midst of the days of constitutional renewal I was in Jerusalem where I was able to direct [should be sense] the winds blowing in the major political centers in this country. I was able to meet the heads of the “Young Turks” and even once to attend their secret meeting, and to hear from their own mouths their opinion of the current situation and their attitude towards Zionism, after hearing that this question had arisen among them. . . . [T]he “Young Turks” are now the heroes of the day and every clerk and author-to-be attributes things to them which they have said or not, and there is no end to all this verbosity.

The heads of “[the Committee of] Union and Progress” in Jerusalem consider Zionism to be a local question, and thus did not see fit to notify the other major branches of the state. In one of their meetings in Jerusalem they expressed stern opposition to political Zionism, to the extent that a decision was taken during this meeting not to accept Jews to their ranks for the time being who are inclined towards political Zionism and pay the Zionist shekel . . . . I had a virulent argument with the heads of the branch and I tried to prove to them that Zionists can be the most fervent patriots of the government and the country and that if we had demanded extra rights and expressed special aspirations it was solely related to the former situation in Turkey and the previous regime which suffocated every flower and blossom before it even started to bloom. But now since there is a new order in the
country and we have been given equal rights and have the ability to work freely and lawfully, we will minimize our claims and work together with them to enable the country and the state to prosper. But they insisted because they are very familiar with the aims of the Zionist movement, which they read about constantly in the newspapers of our parties. On the basis of their principles they are obliged to resist the Zionist program.

Nonetheless, despite their opposition to political Zionism, they do not oppose – according to what they say – the activities of the JCA [Jewish Colonization Association] in the Land of Israel, the system of the Baron [Edmond James de Rothschild] and the activities of Hovevei Zion. They do not have anything against all those who are doing practical work in the Land of Israel. Only not a drop of politics. On the contrary, they say: come work with us together for the progress of the country, and if the Zionist movement ever changes its political orientation, we will accept all its activists as our friends, and will be one large force.

So, with regard to practical work in Eretz-Yisra’el, if a willingness is manifested to demonstrate patriotism to the country, I think we will not encounter any obstacles. We only have to know how and in what ways to sweeten the sting of political Zionism, how to override this point, which is the crux of the opposition of the Young Turks, for many years.39

Eisenberg’s comments, based on what he was told at the CUP branch in Jerusalem, suggest that the general guidelines underlying the CUP’s policy towards Zionist activity in Palestine as manifested and implemented in the coming years were already in place shortly after the revolution and were known to the local Ottoman officials there. By and large, these guidelines did not differ from the attitude of the CUP’s predecessor, Abdülhamid II,40 the only key difference being the willingness of the CUP officials in Jerusalem to allow non-political Jewish settlement activity to continue in Palestine.

Evidently, prominent Zionist activists and Jewish leaders at the time were familiar with these considerations. Wolffsohn, for example, confirmed in one of his letters to Eisenberg that he was fully aware of the fact that the CUP mainly feared the political facets of Zionism and that it was necessary to convey the message to its leaders that the Zionist movement had no intention whatsoever of threatening the empire’s territorial integrity.41

Based on his impressions from these meetings and his evaluation of the new situation in the empire in the aftermath of the revolution, Eisenberg made several practical suggestions to the Jewish leaders with whom he corresponded. First, he proposed initiating negotiations with the heads of the CUP’s main branches in Paris, Salonika, and Istanbul, since he realized their far greater importance for policymaking than the local branch in Jerusalem:

In my opinion, there is a need now to enter into negotiations directly with the centers of “union and progress” in Kushta [Istanbul], Salonika and Paris, and to prove to them that after they have brought salvation and liberty to all the peoples of the East, they are now the most suitable and deserving to speed up the salvation of the most ancient of the peoples of the East. And if this people can find shelter under Ottoman rule, based on the new rules, it will be the most loyal and dedicated to the country and to the liberty of the state, the same liberty for which they, the “Young Turks” sacrificed themselves. Together with this nation, the [positive] forces in the Ottoman Empire and in the Land of Israel itself will be strengthened, and foreign elements which negatively influence the country will be weakened, as will foreign intervention that has always striven to weaken the power of the state and to undermine it.42

Second, he was convinced that the Yishuv and the Zionist movement needed to focus on actual activity in Palestine, unite their fragmented forces, pursue low-profile land
purchase, strive to create areas with a dense concentration of Jews, promote Jewish labor, and establish a national education system. In Eisenberg’s eyes these were all necessary steps in order to create a critical Jewish national mass in Palestine that could influence the empire’s Palestine policy.\textsuperscript{43}

At the same time, however, Eisenberg warned against raising the question of the future relationship between the Zionist movement and the Ottoman Empire to avoid unnecessary tension or stir up Ottoman opposition. In this way, he sought to neutralize the sensitive aspects of Zionist activity which were hard for the Ottoman government to accept, until the right time came for discussing them in the future. Moreover, he thought that all activity on the ground must be carried out quietly:

Everything is done on our side with much fanfare. For every little activity in the Land of Israel which is only entertained in thoughts, so much noise is made. Horns are blown and articles are printed in the papers, without any limit to the exaggerations and hyperbole. The cry has made the rounds of the whole Zionist camp: Jews should take over all the labor professions in the Land of Israel. A very natural and correct demand that we, the activists here, have always tried to fulfill as far as we could.... But these are things that must be done quietly.\textsuperscript{44}

Eisenberg’s letters suggest that his vision was the establishment of some kind of Jewish autonomy in Palestine under an Ottoman federative umbrella, a stance that clarifies his position with regard to the issue of Ottomanism and activity within the imperial framework.\textsuperscript{45} Nonetheless, like other Jewish leaders and activists he did not explicitly refer to the question of Palestine’s demography at the time, which under a parliamentary regime was expected to favor the vast Arab majority that constituted around 90% of the country’s population. Most likely Eisenberg and others believed that massive Jewish immigration and colonization activity would change the situation.\textsuperscript{46} In this regard, Eisenberg apparently did not believe that there was inherent enmity between the Jews and the Muslim population of Palestine. In one of his letters to Wolffsohn he wrote that:

We still have plenty to do in terms of purchasing the country’s land and farming it, as well as with regard to language and national education in addition to the [issue of learning the] languages of the country, because in that we are not different in any way from the rest of the peoples in this land, and anyway the Muslims feel much closer to us and they have more trust in us than in the Christians.\textsuperscript{47}

Eisenberg’s position diverged considerably from the official perception of Ottomanism promoted by the empire after the revolution, namely, a new type of hybrid identity shared by its citizens, a form of “Ottoman nationalism” that would replace all other forms of particularistic national identities held by the empire’s minorities. If we disregard the demographic question for a moment, Eisenberg’s stance was much closer in nature to that of the opposition group within the Young Turk movement, the League of Private Initiative and Decentralization, headed by Prince Sabahaddin (Sultanzade Sabahaddin Bey, 1878–1948), which at the time advocated decentralization of the empire’s provinces and the creation of a federative entity under the House of Osman.

Nevertheless, Eisenberg’s correspondence needs to be read with a grain of salt. Due to the CUP’s heterogeneous nature and the fact that in the initial period after the revolution its control over the empire’s policies was largely carried out behind the scenes, it is often hard to determine its official stands on many issues, including those...
related to the Yishuv and Zionist activity in Palestine, if they existed at all at this stage.\textsuperscript{48} Thus, when interpreting the significance of these contacts, it is important to consider the extent to which the leaders of the CUP local branches such as the one in Jerusalem were indeed authorized to speak in the name of the central leadership, and whether the positions they expressed were indeed official ones. In the case of Zionism, as in other cases, the loose structure of the CUP apparently resulted in a wide range of stances, a fact that greatly confused Jewish activists who were in contact with Ottoman officials.\textsuperscript{49}

\textbf{Was Eisenberg a lone voice?}

Eisenberg’s ideas are especially intriguing given his personal background. On the one hand, his activity was characteristic of the “practical Zionists” in the Yishuv, who emphasized the creation of facts on the ground through the expansion of Jewish settlement activity and attributed somewhat less importance to diplomatic activity and high-level politics. On the other hand, unlike many “practical Zionists,” Eisenberg sought to reach an understanding with the Ottoman authorities and ascribed great importance to working within the Ottoman system, as reflected in his efforts to encourage dialogue with the leadership of the CUP in Jerusalem, and other activities in which he was involved. In this sense, he was not merely a “practical Zionist,” but also an “Ottomanist” in the broader sense of the term, as will be discussed in more detail below.

Eisenberg was not a lone voice among Zionist activists at the time. Similar ideas were also expressed by other figures in the Yishuv such as Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who ran a campaign in favor of Ottomanization on the front pages of his newspapers, as well as by some circles of the young Sephardic intelligentsia in Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{50} After the Young Turk Revolution, it seems, Eisenberg’s approach was adopted by many others in the Yishuv’s national circles. Some of the First Aliyah colonists and Second Aliyah activists, for example, gradually accepted Ottoman citizenship, the clearest manifestation of their decision to promote the Yishuv’s interests within the Ottoman framework.\textsuperscript{51} They perceived Ottomanism, with all its disadvantages and the challenges it posed,\textsuperscript{52} as the most suitable and appropriate framework at the time for achieving the Jewish national goals, given the new political situation created in the empire. Thus, for reasons that mainly had to do with realpolitik – i.e., an assessment of the Yishuv’s power and capabilities on the one hand, and the empire’s expected revival on the other – the national aspirations of many in the “new Yishuv” following the revolution were conceptualized within an Ottoman framework. Such a framework, they believed, would allow the Yishuv to grow and preserve its unique nature within a loose federation of nations under the House of Osman.

This explains why other alternatives for governing the empire, which were contemplated and in part even pursued by the CUP (such as Turkism and Pan-Turkism, Islamism, Pan-Islamism, and Islamic Ottomanism), were considered detrimental to the Jewish national project. All the latter, it goes without saying, left the Yishuv’s national circles with much less maneuvering space for pursuing their interests within the Empire’s framework and finding their place there. Thus, at a certain point after the revolution when members of the Yishuv thought that the preferred policy of the government had become Turkism rather than Ottomanism, there was general opposition
to it, and concerns were expressed that the new policy conflicted with the stated aims of the revolution and with the previous official policy of Ottomanism they had supported. 53

Conclusion: A local Zionist Ottomanist orientation

Aharon Eisenberg’s correspondence and his activities provide a vivid illustration of the deliberations in the national circles in the Yishuv following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, which are all too often neglected in the literature. As a fervent Zionist, who was well aware of the fundamental changes taking place in the empire’s political system, Eisenberg sought ways to continue developing the Jewish national project in Palestine while reducing the fears of the new regime which vehemently opposed the political aspects of Zionism. Eisenberg’s approach, as reflected in his letters and activities, can be seen as having a local Zionist Ottomanist orientation. On the one hand, he was a practical Zionist, who emphasized on-the-ground activity in Palestine, in particular the purchase of land and colonization activity. On the other hand, he strove to reach an understanding with the government, at both the local and imperial levels. He was keenly aware of the new situation created in the empire in the aftermath of the revolution and convinced that the empire would be revived. He worked on the basis of a realistic estimation of the Yishuv’s needs and capabilities and a good sense of what it could achieve under the best possible circumstances. Moreover, in his activities Eisenberg implemented the principle of operating within the Ottoman framework, to the benefit of the Yishuv, according to Ottoman law. By the same token, he emphasized the common interests of the Yishuv and the empire, and did not believe it was appropriate at the time to discuss the ultimate utopian political goals of the Zionist movement, which were opposed by the new regime as well as by factions in the Jewish community in Palestine and beyond.

As far as Eisenberg and many other activists in the “new Yishuv” were concerned, in the post-revolutionary era support for Zionism did not necessarily contradict their idea of Ottomanism. For these activists, it largely meant a kind of Jewish autonomy under a vague flexible Ottoman federal umbrella. They did not abandon for a moment the political aspirations of the Zionist movement, but they saw no point in discussing goals which at the time they considered unrealistic, and thought that insisting on doing so would poorly serve the interests of the Jewish national movement. The demographic situation in Palestine at the time, which under the new parliamentary regime was expected to work against the Yishuv, was largely ignored in this paradigm, perhaps due to the activists’ expectations that it would soon change as a result of massive Jewish immigration. This was the major difference between the vision of the Jewish activists in Palestine and that of the opposition party within the Young Turk movement which advocated governing the empire in a decentralized way.

Others, however, particularly the official representatives of the Ottoman state, interpreted the concept of Ottomanism in a completely different way. At least in the initial period after the revolution, before it was abandoned altogether a few years later in favor of new policies responding to the changing political and international circumstances, 54 the empire officially promoted Ottomanism as a new form of hybrid Ottoman identity, i.e., a new source of national identification shared by the empire’s various ethnic and religious minorities, deliberately crafted to replace their rapidly emerging particularistic national identities.
Finally, a point worth mentioning despite being beyond the scope of this article, and one that deserves further research, is that support for Ottomanization in the Yishuv following 1908 challenges the dichotomy depicted in the literature between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. This simplistic dichotomy overlooks other no less important divisions within the Yishuv, which often led to controversies and rivalries in the early twentieth century, such as the one between central European Jews (Ashkenazim) and Jews from the territories of the Russian Empire (Ostjuden). These conflicts were manifested both in the institutions of the Zionist movement and in the Jewish colonies in Palestine. Moreover, many of those considered Ashkenazim were in fact Jews from regions previously ruled by the Ottoman Empire, such as Romania and Hungary, who at times even stressed their Ottoman origin when dealing with the Ottoman authorities. Finally, there were many Sephardic Jews involved in the Zionist colonization and settlement activity such as purchasing lands for Baron Edmond James de Rothschild’s administration and later for the Jewish Colonization Association. Those who lived in Ottoman Palestine often searched for various kinds of engagement, as seen here with regard to the question of Ottomanism.

Notes
1. In this article Palestine refers to the various Ottoman districts in the region which later became known as Mandatory Palestine.
2. For the local branches of the CUP, see Campos, Ottoman Brothers, 96–99.
3. Ibid., 274 n. 24.
4. Zürcher, Turkey, 133–34.
5. See, for example, Muslih, The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism, 60–61.
6. See Kayali, Arabs and Young Turks, 8.
7. Ginio, “Mobilizing the Ottoman Nation.”
8. Landau, “He’arot,” 200–1.
9. See Kolatt, “The Organization of the Jewish Population of Palestine,” 228–29.
10. See Campos, “Between ‘Beloved Ottomania’ and ‘The Land of Israel’,” 462, 466, 479; Jacobson, “Sephardim, Ashkenazim and the ‘Arab Question’,” 121.
11. See, for instance, Phillips Cohen, “Between Civic and Islamic Ottomanism”; Campos, “Between ‘Beloved Ottomania’ and ‘The Land of Israel’”; Gribetz, “An Arabic-Zionist Talmud”; Phillips Cohen, “Fashioning Imperial Citizens.”
12. The traditional circles in the Yishuv were apprehensive about the compulsory conscription to the army and social developments that might encourage secularization. Nationalist circles were concerned that enthusiasm for the new constitutional regime would eventually turn into support for Ottoman nationalism at the expense of Zionism. Some leaders of the Yishuv feared that under a constitutional parliamentary regime, the future of Jewish activity in Palestine and the Yishuv’s ability to influence Ottoman Palestine policy would depend on obtaining Ottoman consent. Thus far the Jews had been able to buy their way into Palestine by bribing Ottoman officials (the notorious bakshish) and finding loopholes in the ineffective Ottoman administration which did not go out of its way to implement the government’s decision to block Jewish immigration to Palestine or the purchase of land. There were fears that the new situation would change considerably with the establishment of a representative parliamentary regime that was expected to reflect the Arab demographic majority in Palestine. See Kolatt, “The Organization:” 212, 229; Wiener, “Ha-medinyut ha-tziyonit be-Turkiyah,” 273–74.
13. Ha-Tzvi, January 12, 1909; on Ben-Yehuda’s Ottomanization, see Lang, Daber ivrit 2:605–20.
14. Campos, Ottoman Brothers.
15. For more on this issue, see Ben-Bassat, “Rethinking the Concept of Ottomanization.”
16. See Brun, Shoftim u-mishpatanim be-Eretz-Yisrael, part 2; Goldstein, “Turkiyah me’al ha-kol.”

17. Markovitzky, Be-kaf ha-kela shel ha-ne’emanuyot, 21.

18. Goldstein, “Turkiyah me’al ha-kol,” 56.

19. For these two parties, see Shapira, Ha-Po’el ha-Tza’ir; Ben-Zvi, Po’alei Tziyon. The newspaper Ha-Po’el ha-Tza’ir, which was the mouthpiece of the party carrying the same name, expressed reservations regarding the acceptance of Ottoman citizenship without first securing the rights of the Jews in Palestine and consulting with the European Powers. It feared that unequivocal renunciation by the Jews of their European citizenships might enrage the European Powers, and could provoke them to turn their back on the Jews in times of trouble. However, in secret meetings, Ha-Po’el ha-Tza’ir expressed reserved support for Ottomization, but decided not to publish this decision in its newspaper. See Ha-Po’el ha-Tza’ir, December 1908–January 1909 (the Hebrew month of Tevet) and May–June 1909 (the Hebrew month of Sivan); Shapira, Ha-Po’el ha-Tza’ir, 107–8.

20. Feldman (Ever Hadani), Aharon A. Eisenberg, chaps. 5–7.

21. Campos, Ottoman Brothers, 222–23 (quoting Ha-Herut).

22. Markovitzky, Be-kaf ha-kela shel ha-ne’emanuyot, 18–21.

23. Quoted in ibid., 19 n. 24.

24. Frumkin, Derekh shofet bi-Yerushalayim, 168.

25. Feldman, Aharon A. Eisenberg, 134–36; for more about this society, see also Katz, “Paths of Zionist Political Action,” 125–32; The government deliberated whether or not to let Eisenberg, who submitted an application together with Yitzhak Levi, register Neta’im as a company given its aims and the sensitive situation in Palestine. The provinces of Beirut and Jerusalem were asked to convey their opinion on the application. See Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi [The Prime Ministerial Ottoman Archive in Istanbul] (hereafter BOA), MV, 129/4, 7 Haziran 1325 [June 20, 1909]; see also BOA, BEO, 3584/268736 (1327/C/8), 8 Cemaziyülşani 1327 [June 27, 1909]. Levi and Eisenberg requested a permit to set up “An Ottoman Company for Agriculture, Industry and Trade Ltd.,” which would purchase land in the regions of Syria and export its products abroad. BOA, BEO, 3625/271831, 9 Şevval 1327 [October 24, 1909]. Beirut and Jerusalem were asked to convey their opinion regarding Eisenberg’s and Levi’s request and whether or not they had objections to it, provided that the company would work outside of Palestine.

26. Brun, Shoftim u-mishpatanim be-Eretz-Yisrael, 114–19.

27. Frumkin, Derekh shofet bi-Yerushalayim, 162. Frumkin claims that in 1914, just before World War I, Net’aim was re-registered under a new name in order to bypass Ottoman restrictions on its shareholders (ibid., 163). For the regulations and aims of the society of Neta’im, see Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem (hereafter CZA), A 208/8, pp. 438–41.

28. Frumkin, Derekh shofet bi-Yerushalayim, 164–66; Feldman, Aharon A. Eisenberg, 162.

29. Protocol of a meeting of leading Zionist activists in the Bnai Brith branch in Istanbul, CZA, A 199/40.

30. See, for example, Menachem Ussishkin to Eisenberg, September–October 1912, CZA, A 208/16; for more on similar Jewish activity in Anatolia at the time, see Siren H. Bora, “Alliance Israe’lite Universelle’in”; and Katz, “Paths of Zionist Political Action in Turkey,” 129–31.

31. See Campos, Ottoman Brothers, 222.

32. Quoted in ibid., 222–23.

33. Eisenberg to Wolffsohn, August 20, 1908, CZA, A 208/7.

34. See Zürcher, Turkey, 99; Mandel, The Arabs and Zionism, 64, 69.

35. Frumkin, Derekh shofet bi-Yerushalayim, 147.

36. Campos, Ottoman Brothers, 274 n. 24.

37. Eisenberg to Ussishkin, September 28, 1908, CZA, A 208/1.

38. Some of Eisenberg’s letters were published in Feldman, Aharon A. Eisenberg, 153–65.

39. Eisenberg to Ussishkin, September 28, 1908, CZA, A 208/1 (my translation).

40. Mandel, The Arabs and Zionism, 58.

41. Wolffsohn to Eisenberg, September 7, 1908, CZA, A 208/16.

42. Eisenberg to Ussishkin, September 28, 1908, CZA, A 208/1.
43. Ibid.
44. Eisenberg to Wolffsohn, October 6, 1908, CZA, A 208/1. Wolffsohn seemed to agree with the need to lower the profile of Jewish activity. See his letter to Eisenberg of September 7, 1908, as part of the ongoing correspondence between them, in CZA, A 208/16; for a similar opinion by Ussishkin in a letter to Eisenberg, see letter on p. 319 (undated), CZA, A 208/16.
45. Eisenberg to Ussishkin, September 28, 1908, CZA, A 208/1.
46. Ibid.
47. Eisenberg to Wolffsohn, August 20, 1908, CZA, A 208/7.
48. Mandel, The Arabs and Zionism, 58–59.
49. Wiener, “Ha-medinyut ha-tziyonit be-Turkiyah,” 263–65.
50. See, for example, Ha-Tzvi, March 8, 1909; Ha-Herut, December 27, 1909.
51. The issue of Ottomanization within the Yishuv still awaits thorough research.
52. About the fears of conscription, see Jacobson, From Empire to Empire, 30.
53. Ha-Tzvi, March 23, 1909; speech by the Zionist leader Max Nordau at the 9th Zionist congress, Ha-Herut, January 8, 1910; nevertheless, it must be stressed that despite the wide support in the Yishuv for Ottomanization, enlistment in the army, a process that was fraught with great risks, fears, and hardships obviously did not become a popular choice. See Markovitzky, Be-kaf ha-kela shel ha-ne’emanuyot, 15–17.
54. For the shift in Ottoman policy following the Balkan Wars, see Ginio, “Mobilizing the Ottoman Nation.”

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