Conflicting Accounts of Early Zionist Settlement: A Note on the Encounter between the Colony of Reḥovot and the Bedouins of Khirbat Duran†

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ABSTRACT By comparing a recently discovered rare petition sent to Istanbul in 1890 by the Bedouins of Khirbat Duran to protest the establishment of the Jewish colony of Reḥovot, some 25 kilometres south-east of Jaffa on Palestine’s central inner coastline, to accounts written by Reḥovot’s first colonists, the article explores claims of land ownership rights by the two sides. Beyond this unique perspective on the early Zionist–Arab encounter, these differing accounts highlight some of the underlying reasons for strains in the relationships between the two populations in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century. Agrarian and social developments in Palestine in the decades preceding the beginning of Zionist activity in the 1880s ought to be examined in order to better contextualise both the source materials and the events involving the two populations.

We understood that after we had bought the land, paid its price, and received title-deeds from the government, we were the land’s sole owners and no one else had a say [on this matter]. Thus, we did not want the Bedouins, they and their wives, children and herds, to come and occupy our land. (Eliyahu Levin-Epstein, the head of the colony of Reḥovot in 1890)

The farm, which was in our hands from [the time of our] fathers and forefathers was taken from us by force, and the foreigners do not want to treat us according to the accepted norms among the farmers and according to human norms. (The Bedouins of Khirbat Duran in a petition to Istanbul, 1890)

Introduction

Almost every newly established Jewish colony in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century clashed with the Arab rural population in its vicinity during its first years. Often minor incidents, which at face value could be attributed to ‘cultural misunderstandings’, turned into violent clashes between the two sides. At times, tensions persisted for years and led to costly trials, boycotts and mutual complaints

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to the Ottoman authorities. However, in most cases these cultural misunderstandings were apparently a trigger for clashes whose fundamental cause was tension over other issues, particularly the struggle over resources such as borders of plots and ownership of land, grazing and water rights and the theft of movables.

The Jewish colony of Rehovot was no exception in this regard. Zionist sources indicate that Rehovot, founded in 1890 some 25 kilometres south-east of Jaffa in Palestine’s inner central coastal region, clashed several times with Bedouins and villagers in its vicinity during the first years following its establishment. One of these disputes took place a few years after the colony was established with the al-Sitriyya or Arab Abu al-Fadl Bedouin group, which resided to the east of the colony and had been leasing some of the land bought by the colony on an annual basis. Although superficially the dispute appeared to revolve around grazing rights, the circumstances surrounding the purchase of the colony’s land cannot be ignored. A rare petition and the associated correspondence, which were recently located in Istanbul at the Başbakanlık Devellet Arşivleri, reveal the Bedouin side of this quarrel. When juxtaposed with sources written by Rehovot’s first colonists, the Bedouin materials differ from the colonists’ accounts in many ways.

Beyond this unique first-hand perspective on the events, these conflicting portrayals can teach us a great deal about some of the difficulties the two populations faced during their initial encounters, including their conflicting perceptions of land ownership. Moreover, they deepen our point of view on early Zionist–Arab relationships, and shed new light on early Zionist settlement activity as recorded in understudied Ottoman documents. My main argument is that in order to understand the ensuing relationships between the two populations as of the 1880s, we need to look more thoroughly at the society the first Zionist colonists were exposed to, and the agrarian upheavals the area had experienced in previous decades.

**Differing Accounts**

I turn first to the conflicting accounts of the encounter. Eliyahu Ze’ev Levin-Epstein, the head of the colony of Rehovot during its early years, wrote the following about the initial encounter between his colony and the Bedouins of al-Sitriyya:

1 On Rehovot’s relationships with its neighbours during its early years, see Yaakov Ro’i, ‘The Relations between Rechovot and its Arab Neighbors, 1890–1914’, *Zionism*, I (1970/1971), pp. 150–203 [in Hebrew].
2 See *Central Zionist Archive*, A 216/1, 29 February 1892, letter n. 19, pp. 45–48 (a letter from Eliyahu Levin-Epstein, to the Menuha ve-Nahla society in Warsaw which was behind the establishment of this colony); see also Eliyahu Levin-Epstein, *Zikhronotai [My Memoirs]* (Tel-Aviv: ha-Ahim Levin-Epstein, 1932), pp. 240–244 [in Hebrew]; Eliyahu Aharon Aizenberg, ‘The Purchase of Rehovot’s Land: From the Memoirs of Eliyahu Aharon Eizenberg’, in Abraham Yaari (ed.), *Zikhronot Erets Yisrael: Mejah ve-Esrim Pirke Zikhronot me-Haye ha-Yishuv ba-Arets meha-Me’aah ha-Sheva’*–‘*Esreh ve-*Ad Yamenot* 2 [Memoirs from Erets Yisra’el: 120 Chapters of Memoirs from the History of the Jewish Community from the Seventeenth Century to the Present], vol. II (Jerusalem: ha-Mahlaqa le-Inyane ha-No’ar shel ha-Histadrut ha-Tsionit, 1947), p. 641 [in Hebrew]; for more on this Bedouin group see Walid Khalidi, *All that Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992), p. 356; David Grossman, *Expansion and Desertion: The Arab Village and its Offshoots in Ottoman Palestine* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1994), p. 35 [in Hebrew].
3 This approach is supported by the account of Moshe Smilansky, the popular historian and novelist from Rehovot, who writes that the Bedouins of Khirbat Duran in fact did not give up their initial tenancy claims, a fact which later led to confrontation between the two sides. See Moshe Smilansky, *Rehovot Bat Shishim, 1890–1950* (Rehovot: The Local Municipality, 1950), pp. 31–32 [in Hebrew].
As said, the land of Duran [Rehovot] is comprised of nearly 10,600 dunams. Of these, the previous land owner rented out around 600 dunams to Bedouins, who were close neighbors of Rehovot, as well as rivals. Given that we were newcomers in the country, who did not know the language, and the practices of the place were alien to us, the first quarrel between us and the Bedouins took place while they were sowing their land. We understood that after we had bought the land, paid its price, and received title-deeds from the government, we were the land’s sole owners and no one else had a say [on this matter]. Thus, we did not want the Bedouins, they and their wives, children and herds, to come and occupy our land. We planted vineyards, and were afraid that their herds would destroy them. We asked them to leave the place, but they claimed that they had rented it for two years, had sowed it only once [thus far], with summer crops, and therefore had the right to sow it once more with winter grain crops, harvest it, thresh it, a task which would take the whole summer, and only then they would leave. We did not know if they were speaking the truth; therefore we asked Mr. Hankin (Yehoshu’a Hankin, a leading Jewish land dealer) to come to us and explain the root cause of the issue. Mr. Hankin told us that the Bedouins were right. Thus, we compromised with the Bedouins: provided that they removed their tents from our land, they could come and cultivate the land they rented, until they collected the winter crops. In such a way, the first quarrel between us and our neighbors ended in a good way.4

Representatives of the Bedouins residing in Khirbat Duran provide us with a different account of this same event in a petition they submitted to the Ottoman Grand Vizier in Istanbul. The Bedouins argued that the people of the new colony prevented them from cultivating land they had been occupying for many generations and had chased them away from Khirbat Duran (see Appendix for the actual document):

We, Hamdan Abu-Hataba, ‘Abd al-Hadi Abu-Ehmeid, Mahmoud Abu-Rysheicha, and Muhammad Ibn Salem, Muslim Ottomans, the mukhtar and elder males of the Abu-Hataba tribe, in our own names and in the name of all the members of the tribe, bring the following to the cognizance of your Highness [the Grand Vizier]:

Our tribe numbers 32 families comprising approximately 200 people, from amongst the loyal subjects of the exalted state, residing in tents in Khirbat Duran which belongs to the sub-district of Jaffa in the district of Jerusalem. This tribe, from olden times and from [the time of our] fathers and forefathers, does not know any other land than the above mentioned Khirbat Duran, makes its living from it, and does not have any other place of residence other than this khirba. Recently, the exalted government sold this farm to certain people from amongst the residents of the state (watan). We did not express any opposition since the new landowners clearly knew that the farm (mazra’a) was cultivated and held by us from olden [times]. They did not express any opposition to us and did not expel us from our [place of] residence or from our farm. On the contrary, they made it as easy for us as possible to cultivate this land, such that both parties were satisfied and benefited from it. [But] as we were in this situation, the farm was suddenly sold to a group of foreign Jews (Isra’iliyyin), who came to this land, and possessed capital and had economic means at their disposal. They succeeded in buying this land with the help and support of ‘Ali Efendi Heikal, a member of the Administrative Council of the sub-district (kaza) of Jaffa and the Committee of Commerce (sic: muba’iyat, should be mabaya‘at), who is notorious for interventions of this kind.5

4 Levin-Epstein, Zikhronotai, p. 240.
5 Levin-Epstein describes Heikal in his memoirs, when referring to the purchase of Rehovot’s land, as a Muslim middleman (sarsur) who helped to buy the land from its previous Christian landowner, ‘an Efendi from Jaffa’. See Levin-Epstein, Zikhronotai, p. 126.
Later, these rich Jewish buyers, who had already built a few buildings on the land of this *khirba* without official permission, with the help of the above mentioned efendi, were not satisfied with what they had done. They started to chase us away from our place of residence, and to prevent us from cultivating the above mentioned farm, so that only their people would benefit from it. The more we made concessions to them, with the aim that both sides would derive advantages, [the more] they continued to upset and annoy us, and opposed us with stern resistance, in order to prevent [us from fulfilling] our wishes. In this way, all the members of the tribe experienced great distress, since we do not have another land (*watan*) or farm other than this. We are in a situation of confusion and do not know what to do. The farm, which was in our hands from [the time of our] fathers and forefathers was taken from us by force, and the foreigners who do not want to treat us according to the accepted norms among the farmers and according to human norms (*al-sha’ā’ir al-insaniyya*) and compassion, took it over. In short, [they reject us] even as their servants, and the blame for this damage and the mistreatment we received can only be attributed to the unacceptable [acts of] the above mentioned efendi.

Based on this, and since we are Bedouins who live in tents in this *khirba* from olden times and we have no other place aside from it, and also because we have no other land to cultivate, and since we are from amongst the Bedouins who are loyal subjects of the exalted and eternal State, which is our protector, without expecting anything in return, and based on the well-known justice of the state and the justice and equity of your Excellency that are famous all over the world, with the hope that we will not alone be deprived of the justice and equity of the exalted state; we have no other choice but to submit this petition to beg for the issuance of an exalted order to let us stay in our place of birth where we reside, based on the current arrangement and not to let the Jews chase us away and prevent us from cultivating the land in a way which will guarantee their and our rest and benefit; or else issue an exalted order to allocate us land from the imperial property, which would be sufficient for our livelihood and the sustenance of our families and children. We are applying to obtain mercy, to the one who has the authority to issue imperial edicts and grant benevolence.6

The Bedouin Petition as a Historical Source

There is no doubt that the petition by the Bedouins from Khirbat Duran, which was sent to Istanbul by mail, was written by a professional petition writer, *arzuhalci*, and not by the Bedouins themselves who were almost certainly illiterate. The language and modes of expression, the reasoning and justifications, the requests made, the structure of the petition, the depiction of the just ruler, are all formulaic and standard.

Ottoman subjects had a growing need for the services offered by the *arzuhalcis* in order to deal with the labyrinth of the reformed state bureaucracy and demand their rights. This was true to such an extent that the petition writers increasingly served as intermediaries between the imperial centre and the subjects in the provinces. They translated the subjects’ complaints and allowed them to contact the local

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6 *Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivleri* (BOA), HR. TO., 395/32, 3 Kānumunvelvel 1306 [15 December 1890] (a petition by four members of the Bedouin group Abu-Hataba from Mazra‘at Duran to the Grand Vizier protesting establishment of the colony of Rehovot); see also BOA, DH. MKT., 1771/129, 1 Rebiyülevvel 1308 [15 October 1890] (a telegraph to the *mutasarrıflık* of Jerusalem from the Ministry of the Interior about the petition of Sheikh Ibrahim Sutry from the *nahiyet* of Ramle, which implies that the Bedouins submitted at least one other petition than the one discussed here); BOA, DH. MKT., 1795/85, 15 Cemaziyuvelvel 1308 [27 December 1890] (a telegraph to the *mutasarrıflık* of Jerusalem from the Ministry of the Interior about the petition by the Bedouins of Khirbat Duran); the *mutasarrıflık* of Jerusalem at the time was an autonomous region governed directly from Istanbul. Hence the correspondence from Istanbul was sent to the governor of the province whose jurisdiction included the sub-district of Jaffa where the incident took place.
or imperial governments. In order for the petitions they wrote to turn into formal approaches, they wrote on a stamped letter, which in fact was a governmental stamp duty.

Nevertheless, the *arzuhalcis* were not government officials, but rather private local literate people without formal training, who did not emerge from the higher echelons of society. They possessed sufficient knowledge in several languages (particularly Ottoman Turkish; in the Arab provinces Arabic, of course), the art of correspondence, law and the like.

There may thus be some question as to whether this petition can be considered an authentic representation of the Bedouins’ actions, desires, deeds and whereabouts. The *arzuhalci*, in return for a fee, served as an intermediary between the Ottoman subjects and the Sultan and his senior representatives. These petition writers enabled the petitioners, especially those who were illiterate but others as well, to express their claims within a framework and mechanism recognised by the Ottoman authorities while using the jargon, language and codes of literary expression sanctioned by the Ottoman system. As Chalcraft commented when describing petitions submitted by the rural population in Egypt to the Khedive in the 1860s and 1870s:

> By and large, they [the peasants] used an officially authorized language of complaint in a heavily power-laden context, where a wrong word could cost them their lives. In other words, social interests expressed were not preconstituted in some authentic peasant space. However … although elite languages helped constitute even the nature of the demands lodged by the peasants, these languages were simultaneously filled out, colored, and defined by the concrete projects of peasants themselves. The encounter between the petitioner and ruler, although heavily asymmetrical, was also dialogic in that peasants manipulated, contested, and partially redefined official terms. Collaboration with petition writers was a part of this inevitably ‘fallen’ construction, not simply an inauthentic and repressive new layer of representation.8

Similarly, beyond the formulaic phrases, the fancy wording, the required blessings and the accepted structure of the petition, the Bedouins’ petition, as well as other petitions sent by the rural population of Palestine at the time, were based on a historical understanding of a certain event as perceived by the petitioners and as such authentically reflects their narrative (which to some extent is confirmed by Zionist sources). The petition writers thus served as a medium that allowed the rural population to adhere to the rules of the game, i.e., the Ottoman system of petitioning to the Sultan, while enhancing the presentation of their case and increasing their chances of obtaining redress.

It is fairly unusual to find first-hand accounts dating back to this era that capture the voices of the rural population of Palestine, especially that of the Bedouins, in such a vivid and telling way. The problem of subaltern representation is even more acute in Palestine than in other areas of the former Ottoman Empire due to the political history of this territory in the twentieth century. Thus, aside from the fact that the rural population was predominantly illiterate and left very little evidence behind for future generations, the severe bi-national political conflict that led to the destruction of

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7 For further details about petition writers, see G.L. Lewis, ‘Arz Hâl’, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1 (1986), p. 40; for more on the group of petition writers see John Chalcraft, ‘Engaging the State: Peasants and Petitions in Egypt on the Eve of Colonial Rule’, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 37 (2005), pp. 306–307; see also Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi and Khalil al-Azm, *Qamus al-Sina’at al-Shamiyya* [Dictionary of Crafts in Damascus], vol. II (Paris: Mouton & Co, 1960), pp. 307–308 [in Arabic].
8 Chalcraft, ‘Engaging the State’, pp. 308–309.
hundreds of Arab villages in 1948 and the displacement of their population eradicated much of the evidence about these localities. The lack to date of organised Palestinian national archives which would document and preserve the modern history of Palestine’s Arab population is another reason for this dearth of material.

Moreover, discussions about the Arab population of Palestine during this period, as well as later during the Mandate (a period which has received much more attention in the literature), for the most part deal with the educated urban elites and not with the rural population, particularly as regards Arab opposition to Zionist activity. This stems from the assumption shared by many historians that the educated elites were more important in shaping the course of the conflict developing in Palestine and in leading Palestinian society than other groups such as the rural population. Neville Mandel, for instance, writes in the introduction to his classic book on the origins of the conflict in Palestine, *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, that he decided to focus ‘almost entirely on the reactions of the political elite among the Arabs to Zionism, because in the long run it was their response, and not that of the peasant masses, which was significant’. Petitions by the rural population and other associated material, however, provide a new perspective which is not solely focused on the urban educated elite and allow us to conduct a bottom-up examination of the early Zionist–Arab encounters and the environment in which they unfolded.

**Analysis: Conflicting Perceptions of Land Ownership**

At the heart of the conflicting Jewish and Bedouin accounts discussed above were differing perceptions of land ownership. Following the introduction of the Ottoman Land Law of 1858, the government demanded the ‘registration of all lands in the land registry office, in the name of the actual possessors of the right of usufruct (*tasarruf*)’ [11]. The land reforms were part of an ongoing process that was implemented unevenly in various parts of the Empire, whose general aims were to consolidate the state’s hold over its resources and increase revenues from land taxes. In Palestine, which went through a relatively accelerated process of modernisation and development during the second half of the nineteenth century and was exposed to growing European influence and the flow of foreign capital, the new Land Law of 1858 followed by the Vilayet Law of 1864 led to the registration of large plots of land under the names of a small group of absentee landowners, especially in the under-populated coastal and lowland regions. [12] Included in this group were members of Palestine’s leading traditional elite as well as members of the newly emerged elite of commercial entrepreneurs. [13] Some of these absentee landowners were Muslim, Christian or Jewish locals who lived in the urban centres of the Levant, especially in Jerusalem and in the developing port towns of Jaffa and Beirut, whereas others were foreign nationals, such as consuls and representatives of religious institutions and various colonisation associations. Given the growing demand for land and its commercialisation, many of these landowners treated their

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9 Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 89–93.

10 Neville J. Mandel, *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. XVII.

11 See Haim Gerber, *Ottoman Rule in Jerusalem, 1890–1914* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1985), p. 199.

12 Muhammad Y. Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 22–25.

13 Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*, pp. 37–38.
possessions as a commodity that could yield tidy profits within a short time on the real estate market. Others took measures to increase their revenues from the land by settling tenants or by leasing it out to its previous owners/occupiers in return for a certain percentage of the yields,\textsuperscript{14} as in the case discussed here of the Bedouins in Khirbat Duran before the land was sold to the Jews.

In this regard, the Bedouin petition illustrates the disparity between their perception of the issue of land ownership and rights on the ground and Ottoman law and the policies the government promulgated, on the basis of which the Jewish colonists demanded exclusive rights over their newly purchased land. Legally speaking, in accordance with the new Ottoman laws, the colonists had bought the land fully and outright from its absentee landowner on the free market and were thus entitled to ask the Bedouins, or for that matter any other tenant, to leave (although for the most part the seller himself was asked as part of the transaction to make sure the purchased land was not occupied by tenants).\textsuperscript{15} The Bedouins admit in their petition that previously the land where they resided was in the hands of a local absentee landowner who allowed them to continue cultivating it as tenants until it was bought by the Jews. As far as they were concerned, however, the fact that they had occupied the land and cultivated it for many years—originally they were from southern Palestine—gave them rights over it. This explains their demand to Istanbul to force the Jewish colonists, whom they perceived as strangers, to compromise with them or else grant them equivalent land.

As long as they were not asked to evacuate the land, the Bedouins felt no real change in their status in comparison to the past, other than the rent they were now required to pay to the absentee landlord as tenants. Problems started, however, when they were asked to vacate the land after Rehovot was founded. A similar process occurred in many other villages that lost their land at the time, including in the region south-east of Jaffa discussed here, such as in the case of the colony of Gedera and the adjacent village of Qatra on whose former land the colony was established.\textsuperscript{16} Gershon Shafir who tried to theorise this problem writes the following:

\begin{quote}
The conflicts over customary rights were only the upper layer of a decisive historical encounter between two theories and legal bases of ownership: the absolute right of private ownership on which European capitalism rested and which already was indirectly introduced into the Ottoman Empire by the Land Code of the Tanzimat, and the more diffuse, but not less extensive, rights of usage in practice in many pre-capitalist societies.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Reverting for a moment to the broader picture concerning the early Zionist–Arab encounters, the first colonists who started settling in Palestine in the early 1880s and established dozens of agriculturally based colonies throughout it integrated into a society which was in the midst of rapid unfinished transformations whose tenets

\textsuperscript{14} Muslih, \textit{The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism}, p. 24.
\textsuperscript{15} Rehovot’s land was bought from Alfred Rok, a Christian landowner from Jaffa, at a price of 11 Francs per \textit{dunam}.
\textsuperscript{16} Gedera was established in 1884 some 10 kilometres from where Rehovot was later founded by members of the BILU movement – BILU is the Hebrew acronym for the Biblical sentence in Isaiah 2:5: “Beit Ya’aqov lekho ve-nelkha,” the house of Jacob, let us go – on 3000 \textit{dunams} purchased from a Frenchman named Philbert Beit. Previously it had belonged to the adjacent Arab village of Qatra, which lost the land due to debts. The villagers continued to cultivate the land they formerly owned. When that land was sold to the Jews, the villagers resented having to evacuate it since they perceived it as theirs. In the first year of Jewish settlement, they continued to lease the land from the colonists.
\textsuperscript{17} Gershon Shafir, \textit{Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882–1914} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 201–202.
were largely dictated from above by the imperial centre (and gradually also by market forces). The agrarian changes after 1858 and various centralisation measures carried out by the government on the ground (such as unification and standardisation of the tax-collecting system and restructuring of the land registration procedures) left many issues related to ownership of land, the status of various lands, land taxes and demarcation of plots unresolved, and generated resentment and bewilderment among the rural population. This situation is evident in numerous petitions submitted by the local population to the central Ottoman authorities in Istanbul about these matters. One major bone of contention, which is well documented in the literature, was that many plots of land acquired by absentee landowners—which later were often sold on the free market and hence facilitated the beginnings of Zionist settlement activity—were obtained in dubious ways, at the expense of the indebted rural population who, on a practical level, continued viewing it as its own. Second, fraud, profiteering and illegal activity with regard to registration of land, ownership claims and taxes were still rather common in the Ottoman administrative–bureaucratic system, especially at the local level, as suggested by numerous petitions concerning these matters and investigations instigated against officials who were accused of abusing their power.

The arrival of the first Zionist settlers starting in the early 1880s and their interaction with the local population added a new source of tension to previously existing ones, particularly in places where considerable Jewish settlement activity took place, such as in the region south-east of Jaffa. As a result, the issue of land ownership and borders of plots, which often was never finally settled, pitted the Zionist colonists and the Arab population against each other. The fact that the registration of land in the Ottoman registrars was based on vague descriptions, rather than on geographical coordinates, often further complicated things.

18 For instance, see BOA, HR. TO., 389/104, 12 Şaban 1301 [7 June 1884] (a translation into Ottoman of a petition in Arabic by a Bedouin group called Arab al-‘Awja, located near Nahr al-‘Awja [ha-Yarkon] protesting the classification of their land as waqf whose income went to the ‘Abdulhadi family. The Bedouins claimed they had resided for hundreds of years on regular miri land which belonged to the state).
19 Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*, pp. 22–25.
20 To cite several illuminating examples, BOA, HR. TO., 395/60, 29 Kânunusun 1306 [10 February 1891]; 395/61, 5 Şubat 1306 [17 February 1891]; 395/104, 1 Zilhicce 1308 [8 July 1891]; 396/79, 18 Rabiyü’l-Abrar 1309 [21 November 1891] (a group of four petitions jointly submitted by villages in the region of Masmû‘a to reduce the amount of the vergi tax they had to pay. The villagers claimed the collection of taxes took place under duress based on a faulty estimation provided by ‘liars and corrupt people who meant to cause harm’. They added that some of the orders from the central government about reductions in the amount of the vergi tax they were asked to pay were ignored. Interestingly, among other examples, cases of land purchase by Jewish colonists are cited in order to demonstrate the land’s real value and the petitioners claim that the Jews receive justice which they were denied); 387/61, 29 Rebiyüllevvel 1296 [23 March 1879] (a petition by the village of Sarafand-i Kubra claiming that many of its inhabitants had to leave the village for other places due to the high taxes extorted by the tax collector, a member of the Meclis-i Temyîz [meaning here nizamîye court of appeal] in Jerusalem, Naqib Zadah Rabah Efendi [al-Husaynî], from waqf land in the village); 461/54, 19 Cemaziyûlaðar 1293 [12 July 1876] (a petition by 46 orchard owners in the vicinity of Jaffa against the decision to start collecting tithe from them in addition to the vergi tax, a decision which, they argued, brought them to the brink of bankruptcy. The petitioners complained about the whereabouts of the accountant of the district of Jerusalem, the mehasebeci); 551/81, 14 Temmuz [26 July 1874] (a petition by three administrators of waqf land in Ramle against the tax collector who contravened imperial orders and allegedly had ties with the governor of Jerusalem).
21 Waddesdon Manor, England, PICA Archive, 6/5/4 (a report to the Jewish Colonization Association by E. Meyerson from 1914 about the Jewish colonies in Palestine): ‘Comme il n’y a jamais eu de triangulation ni de mensuration d’aucune sorte, la propriété est indiquée simplement par son nom et par les noms de toutes les pièces qui la constituent et qui sont généralement très nombreuses. In y a bien une indication sommaire de la superficie … Ce qui fait foin, dans le couchant, ce sont les limites indiquées, autant que cela est possible en l’absence de tout point de repère, à l’aide de mentions telles que: “la limite va de la pierre qui a la forme d’un dos de chameau jusqu’à l’olivier placé sur la montagne”.’ Translation: “Because no survey was ever made, or
At times, the borders of the land purchased were ratified only after an expensive trial, and large portions of the land bought by Jews were lost following claims of ownership made by Arabs. In extreme cases, the borders of the colony were set only after a violent clash had taken place. This is the backdrop for the encounter between the colonists of Rehovot and the Bedouins of Khirbat Duran.

**Conclusion**

The petition sent by the Bedouins of Khirbat Duran and similar ones submitted at the time by the rural population in Palestine are rare testimony on the part of subalterns that provide a unique innovative angle on the early Zionist–Arab encounters in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century. They show that with regard to late Ottoman Palestine, despite the political occurrences and the upheavals in this area in the twentieth century, there are considerable understudied primary sources representing the voices of the rural population. These view developments in a light that differs considerably from the customary prevalent prism of urban elites, national agendas and the ensuing political Jewish–Arab conflict.

Beyond the conflicting accounts of the encounter between the two populations in the 1880s and 1890s, petitions by the rural population vividly demonstrate that the Jewish colonists integrated into a society in the throes of considerable upheavals and transformations as a result of reforms in the Ottoman agrarian system, the nature of the Empire’s bureaucracy and administration and the impact of market forces. The colonies needed to cope with changes which in part remained contested and unresolved (e.g. ownership of land, borders of plots, water rights, grazing grounds). Thus, some of the objections to the arrival of the Jewish colonists raised by the rural population were exacerbated by ongoing developments whose roots went back many years. Many of the daily clashes between the two populations over issues such as borders of plots, grazing and water rights and even cases of theft and intentional damage to fields must be interpreted in this light rather than being merely viewed as ‘cultural misunderstandings’. Moreover, this background must be taken into account when exploring later developments in the relationships between the two populations.

Footnote 21 continued

measurement of any kind, the land is simply designated by its name and the names of all the parcels that make it up, of which generally there are many ... Although there is a rough indication of the area, what counts in the “East” are the borders, which are indicated as best as possible when there are no points of reference by using descriptions such as “the border goes from the rock that looks like a camel’s hump to the olive tree on the mountain”.

22 The colony of Nes-Zionah (initially called in Hebrew ‘Vadi Hanin’), established in 1883 by Reuben Lerer, some 5 kilometres north of Rehovot, lost 500 out of 2000 dunams purchased by Lerer following a trial with the Arab village of Sarafand al-Kharab, which claimed the previous owner of the land where the colony was established, a German Templar who exchanged his land with Lerer, had taken over part of its land.

23 For instance, the colony of Qastina, established for the second time in 1896 by the Hoveve Zion movement, some 15 kilometres south of Gedera, was involved in a dispute with an Arab sheikh from a nearby village who took over some of the colony’s land, claiming it was established on waqf land. Ten colonists were hurt and one villager died in a massive brawl between the two sides. Reconciliation was achieved only after a long and expensive trial. Interestingly, an attempt by the colonists of Rehovot to ratify the borders of the colony in advance by asking the rural population in the vicinity as well as the Ottoman authorities to affix their signatures to a copy of the colony’s map, having learned a lesson from the experience of other colonies, did not prevent clashes between the two sides later on.

24 For instance, grazing disputes between the colonists of Rishon le-Zion, located some 15 kilometres south-east of Jaffa, and the Arab rural population in its vicinity were frequent even 20 years after its establishment. See the local archive of Rishon le-Zion (in the city’s museum), outgoing letters, 1900–1902.
Appendix

BOA, HR. TO., 395/32, 3 Kânunulevvel 1306 [15 December 1890]
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A petition by four members of the Bedouin group Abu-Hataba from Mazra‘at Duran to the Ottoman Grand Vizier in Istanbul protesting the establishment of the colony of Rehovot