

# The History of Gaza and Palestine (16th–Early 20th Century)<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup>1851 map of Ottoman Syria (the region of Palestine is in the Southwest)

<sup>1</sup> This note was partially constructed using CoPilot to create a synopsis of 2025 *Empire Podcast Episode #296 (Ottoman Gaza: Gunpowder Conquests & Rising Nationalism, Part 6)*. Hosts: [William Dalrymple](#) & [Anita Anand](#), with Professor [Eugene L. Rogan](#).





Source: TimeMaps Ltd.

## 1. Ottoman Rule (16th–18th Century)

- In 1516 the **Ottoman Empire** took control over the region. Gaza and other towns like Jerusalem and Nablus were part of larger Ottoman provinces, often under Sidon or Damascus. There was **no province called Palestine**; instead, it was part of **Greater Syria** and divided into districts centered on market towns.
- Greater Syria had a **Muslim majority population with large Jewish and Christian communities**. The Ottoman Empire was very keen to get the cooperation of all these communities.
- The Ottoman system allowed **religious communities autonomy**: Muslims, Christians, and Jewish People could follow their own personal laws for marriage, burial, and business. Churches collected taxes and enforced Ottoman law.
- Non-Muslims (Christians and Jewish People) were **dhimmis**—protected but second-class citizens. They paid a special tax (jizya) but were exempt from military service. Compared to Europe at the time, they faced less persecution. You could not take arbitrary action against minorities in the Ottoman Empire – they were second-class citizens, but still protected.



- Identity was based on **religion and local ties**, not nationality. Example: Arab and Turkish Muslims generally saw themselves as part of the same Sunni faith, not as separate nations.
    - Professor Eugene L. Rogan: “You’re dealing with a world in which your religious affiliation is probably your single most important marker and where people were moved around the map with a kind of cosmopolitanism that really defies what [many people] say.”
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## 2. 18th Century: Cotton Trade and Local Power

- Palestine began to stand out as a distinct region due to the **cotton trade**, which was highly valuable in Europe.
  - **Zahir al-Omar**, an Arab leader, used cotton wealth to build power in northern Palestine, making Acre his base. Later, **Ahmed Pasha al-Jazzar** ruled brutally but kept Palestine semi-independent from Istanbul.
  - This period saw **decentralization**: local leaders gained power as the Ottoman center weakened.
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## 3. 19th Century: European Influence and Tourism

- Europe’s industrial revolution changed trade. European goods flooded the Eastern Mediterranean.
- European powers (Britain, France, Russia, United States, etc.) increased their presence through **diplomats, missionaries, pilgrims, and tourists**. Steamships and Thomas Cook’s tours made the Holy Land accessible to middle-class travelers (thanks to people like Thomas Cook). Many countries begin to open embassies and consulates throughout the region to accommodate their tourists and pilgrims.





Section of Rand, McNally & Co.'s new 14 x 21 map of Turkey in Asia, Asia Minor. Copyright 1895, by Rand, McNally & Co. (Chicago, 1897)

- Maps began marking **Palestine** prominently, reviving Roman names ('Palestina' in Latin evolved into 'Philistine' in Arabic, and eventually became 'Palestine' in modern European usage.) Locals still identified by town or tribe, not as "Palestinian" yet.

#### 4. Rise of Palestinian Identity

- Professor Eugene L. Rogan: "... before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, you were in a pre-nation state world where people simply did not go around describing themselves as national figures. They would not be Italians, right? They would be Florentines or Venetians . . . . And the same applied to the Eastern Mediterranean. If you were to identify, it would be to a town, or if you were from a big city like Damascus, to a quarter . . . **But that nation-state idea and the whole political ideology of nationalism catches on like a contagion in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.**"



- By the **late 19th century**, some Arabs in southern Syria (Palestine) started calling themselves **Philistini (Palestinian)**—a proto-national identity.
  - Newspapers like *Philistine* (founded in Jaffa, 1911) reflected growing awareness of a shared Palestinian identity, though still under Ottoman rule.
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## 5. Jewish Communities and Zionism

- Indigenous Jewish communities had lived in Palestine for centuries, mainly in cities like Jerusalem, Hebron, Safa, and Tiberias. Gaza had almost no Jewish population.
- **Zionism** emerged in the late 19th century due to:
  - **Push factors:** anti-Semitism and pogroms in Russia.

**Pogrom is a Russian word meaning “to wreak havoc, to demolish violently.” Historically, the term refers to violent attacks by local non-Jewish populations on Jewish People in the Russian Empire and in other countries.**

- **Pull factors:** religious desire to live in the Holy Land.
  - Support from wealthy Jewish philanthropists (Montefiore, Rothschild).
- Professor Eugene L. Rogan: “I think the antisemitism of Western Europe . . . had many European countries looking to Palestine as a place in which perhaps they could encourage the migration of their own Jewish communities as a way of solving their own Anti-Semitic problems.”
- **Theodor Herzl** (1860–1904), a journalist, led political Zionism, arguing Jewish People needed a state in Palestine. He organized the first Zionist Congress in 1897.
  - Herzl knew Arabs lived in Palestine. His private writings suggested buying land and gradually moving locals out—controversial ideas kept secret at the time.
- By 1904, **Tel Aviv** was founded as the first genuinely Jewish city in Palestine.



- Professor Eugene L. Rogan: “Politically engaged Jewish People who began to take from the Jewish question and its underlying anti-Semitism the idea that they were a distinct nation who would never really be accepted and assimilated into Europe and to seek, through a national movement, national revival in their biblical homeland, Palestine. And that’s, I think, the background to the emergence of a political movement known as Zionism.”

- **Dreyfus Affair:**

- Professor Eugene L. Rogan: “Alfred Dreyfus was an officer in the French army who was scapegoated for the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (19 July 1870 to 28 January 1871), as though Jewish People had been in some way responsible for a French defeat that was a national humiliation . . .”



*Captain Alfred Dreyfus*

- As a journalist, Theodor Herzl covered the trial that was “. . . by all measures of justice, unjust.” Herzl has an awakening that there was no future for Jewish People in Europe. Even in post revolutionary France, Republican France, with its philosophy, its ideologies of equality.

## 6. Growing Tensions Before WWI

- Ottoman MPs from Palestine tried to stop Jewish immigration, fearing land loss.
- Riots broke out (e.g., Jaffa Riots) as tensions rose between Arabs and new Jewish immigrants.
- Professor Eugene L. Rogan: “. . . the relationship between the indigenous Jewish community of Palestine and the new immigrants is quite an interesting one because the local community was not itself ideologically motivated. Their presence in Palestine dated back generations and they were not politically so much as religiously motivated in most cases.

And they saw their place in local societies having been long established by the norms governing relations between Muslim, Christians, and Jewish People in the



Ottoman Empire. The European immigrants were much more assertive. They were much more politically engaged.

- There was a tension between the local and immigrant Jewish populations of Palestine that meant that they weren't all working towards the same goals. And I don't think that the indigenous Jewish population was really drawn into the activism of the new immigrants.”
- Palestinian newspapers accused Zionists of boycotting Arabic language and merchants, aiming to take over the land.
- By 1914, Jewish People were only **4–5% of the population**, but their organized movement and land purchases worried locals.

