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“The Pit and the Pond”: Hydraulic Projects and Municipal Rights in Modern Palestine

Nadi Abusaada 

ABSTRACT

The rationalization of urban water-supply systems and networks was a pressing concern in the development of modern cities globally in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The rise of the modern city did not manifest only in the complete overhaul of water and sewage infrastructures but also in the creation of new mechanisms of urban governance to manage them. Examining understudied municipal water projects in Jaffa and Nablus, two chief centers of light industry in the late Ottoman and Mandate eras, this paper provides an analysis of the historical relationship between urban governance and urban infrastructures in modern Palestine. It investigates the involvement of Palestinian urbanites in the debates over municipal water projects in their cities, demonstrating that these constituted more than merely utilitarian instruments and were foundational to the articulation of urban rights in modern Palestine.

KEYWORDS

Water; municipalities; infrastructure; Palestinian cities; Ottoman Palestine; Mandate Palestine

IN AUGUST 1912, TOWARD THE END OF OTTOMAN RULE IN PALESTINE, an article appeared on the first page of *Filastin* titled the “Pit and the Pond.”¹ The piece in the country’s leading Arabic-language newspaper came at a critical juncture for the Ottoman government, then beset by internal dissent and political setbacks, to which it responded by attempting to tighten its grip on the imperial territories, including Palestine.² Written by leading Palestinian journalist Issa al-Issa, the article was a political commentary on the state of administrative affairs in the Mediterranean port city of Jaffa and the city’s relationship to the High Porte (central government) in Istanbul. It drew its analogical title from the irrigation system sustaining the coastal town’s vast citrus estates to describe the nonreciprocal nature of a relationship characterized by the extraction of Jaffa’s wealth and the depletion of its resources. Jaffa’s irrigation system channeled water by means of three primary components—a wheel (*na’oura*), a small basin (the pit), and a large reservoir (the pond)—which al-Issa saw as analogous to the forces determining the city’s fate. “The wheel,” he wrote, “is us, the *ahali* [residents], who labor and suffer day and night to pay our fees and taxes to the [Ottoman] government.”³ The pond, he went on, was the High Porte that collected such fees and taxes,⁴ and the pit was the city’s municipal revenues, which he described as “the meager amount remaining to us to reform our district and keep our wheel running.”⁵ Wrapping up his argument, al-Issa lamented, “Whenever the wheel stops, the High Porte does not help us reallocate what we poured into its pond but confines us to our small pit.”⁶

For al-Issa and his fellow urbanites in late Ottoman Palestine, water constituted more than a mere analogy for the relationship between the city and the empire. The provision and

distribution of water-supply systems and networks constituted a shared concern for urban populations globally at the time. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, new systems of urban governance and administration, especially municipalities, played a significant role in the bureaucratization of access to water⁷ in a process that was not merely a top-down affair. Urban residents all over the world were increasingly questioning, contesting, and evaluating their access to water as a measure of their access to the city. Focusing on late Ottoman and Mandate Jaffa and Nablus, this paper explores how the trajectories of water supply systems shaped local discourses on municipal rights and responsibilities in modern Palestine. In doing so, it builds on scholarship that has been uncovering the overlooked histories of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century municipalization and municipal projects more broadly within the Ottoman Empire as well as in neighboring geographies around the same period.⁸

Municipalization was both a by-product of change already underway and a major driver of further urban transformation. In the late Ottoman Arab provincial territories, including Palestine, locally elected municipal councils came into being after cities began witnessing noticeable demographic, physical, and cultural changes.⁹ These new systems of governance were not introduced in an administrative or institutional vacuum, however.¹⁰ They were preceded by a long-established system of urban governance and administration carried out by institutions such as sharia courts, waqfs, and guilds.¹¹ In some instances, municipalization relied on these preexisting modes of governance. However, as Jens Hanssen argues, this should not induce a “transformophobe” position that elides local populations’ desire for change and its advocacy.¹² As historians of the Arab *nahda* have shown, this was a period of rapid intellectual, cultural, social, and material change that was both self-conscious and autogenetic.¹³ Municipalization was at once driven by and a driver of these changes.

Ever since their establishment, municipalities throughout the Middle East were deeply preoccupied with water projects. In rapidly expanding nineteenth-century cities like Istanbul, Cairo, and Beirut, the supply and management of water systems were of the utmost priority on the agenda of urban officials, planners, and engineers. As evident in the writings of Noyan Dinçal on Istanbul, Khaled Fahmy on Cairo, and Jens Hanssen on Beirut, a shared concern about public health, hygiene, and disease prevention underpinned municipal urban planning and water projects in these cities.¹⁴ Egyptian city planners’ obsession with public hygiene, outlined by Fahmy, offers an alternative view of Cairo’s modernization to Eurocentric paradigms that focus on the borrowed aesthetic language of Haussmann’s renovation of Paris in the planning of Khedival Cairo.¹⁵ Together, the three cases demonstrate that although European influence was evident in the planning of modern Middle Eastern cities, a rising class of local administrators, planners, and health experts were simultaneously leading the transformation of these cities in relation to their local urban environments and societal needs.

Within Palestine, the loudest concerns regarding the future of water supply emanated from Jerusalem. Such concerns were not particularly new. “Since Jerusalem took her place in history as a city,” E. W. G. Masterman, a British medical missionary wrote in 1902, “no problem has more constantly troubled her successive generations of rulers than her water supply.”¹⁶ Masterman, who was then living in Palestine, goes on to explain how the city’s geographical situation as Palestine’s “backbone” and its elevated topography contributed to this problem.¹⁷ He also outlines how the country’s successive ruling regimes attempted to resolve the issue, referencing the water project that Ottoman Greek engineer Franghia Bey prepared for the Jerusalem municipality in 1901.¹⁸ In his recent work on both realized and unrealized water

concession projects in Jerusalem, Vincent Lemire concludes that in the late Ottoman period, “water remains a political issue, the public fountains are still a symbolic symbol and a material base for authority, and the underground water networks are still networks of power.”¹⁹

The abovementioned works have been crucial to the study of urban planning and urban-water projects in late Ottoman cities, shifting the focus away from dominant imperial and colonial actors and onto the local administrators, experts, and engineers who initiated change. Despite this shift, much of this research centers on the activities of the governing actors rather than the governed. This article takes a different approach. It examines urban contestations over water projects mainly from the perspective of the urban residents involved. Focusing on the two Palestinian cities of Jaffa and Nablus in the late Ottoman and early Mandate years, it reads the creation of new mechanisms of urban governance in tandem with the emergence of a new understanding and articulation of urban rights and responsibilities. Unlike in Jerusalem, where water conflicts were mainly framed around problems of supply and scarcity, in Jaffa and Nablus, where water resources were relatively abundant, the conflicts concerned the ownership and distribution of water resources.

In shedding light on some of the public debates surrounding water systems in Jaffa and Nablus at the turn of the twentieth century, the article relies on a range of historical and archival sources. These include the Nablus Municipality Archives and the Jerusalem Municipality Archives; as well as local Arabic-language newspapers, especially the Jaffa-based *Filastin*, a major forum that both echoed and shaped discourse on and struggles over municipal rights and responsibilities, including water affairs, in late Ottoman and Mandate Palestine. While it is tempting to frame municipal rights relative to “right to the city” discourses in contemporary urban studies, this article refrains from projecting these frameworks onto the urban past.²⁰ Instead, it echoes and analyzes the contemporary language of Palestinian urbanites during the period under study. The article also relies on a close examination of the turn-of-the-century development of the two cities’ built environments using historical maps and field visits. Such spatial and material components are essential for grounding historical struggles in the physical terrains in which they unfolded. That approach is also essential for understanding how local urban environments, topographies, and architecture influenced the trajectories of water courses and the tensions surrounding them.

Pre-municipal Waters in Jaffa and Nablus

Hydraulic projects in Jaffa and Nablus have a long history that predated the municipal era. For centuries, the two cities depended on their inhabitants’ utilization of locally available and abundant water resources to sustain continuous human settlement. In Nablus, the springs at the foot of Mount Ebal were the city’s primary source of water ever since its foundation in Roman times. Urban residents collected water from these springs and carried it back to their residences and workshops in clay pots or *qirab* (water bags) [see [Figure 1](#)].²¹ The springs were also connected to an elaborate network of hand-dug canals that gushed fresh spring water into the city’s *sabils* (public fountains). In later years, water also reached the private fountains of urban mansions and the city’s soap factories and bathhouses. As was common throughout the region, the *sabils* of Nablus were usually registered as waqf properties and were often built to commemorate the lives of their endowers. Their design included ornamental elements and detailed stonework with poetic or religious inscriptions. By the late nineteenth century, there



Figure 1. Preparation of the *qirab* (water bags) in Nablus, picture by Antonin Jausen, 1920s.
 SOURCE: École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem archives, digitized glass plate, 00322-J0327, Jerusalem.

were more than twenty *sabils* in the Old City. Although they were scattered throughout Nablus, the *sabils* were mainly concentrated in the two main throughways connecting the eastern and western gates of the Old City with the Great Mosque at the center.

Sabils were a similarly essential asset for Jaffa’s residents. It is not incidental, for instance, that the monumental constructions of the city’s famous Ottoman governor—Muhammad Abu Nabbout, who ruled between 1807 and 1818—included three *sabils*: two located outside the Old City’s Great Mosque and one on the road to Jerusalem [see Figure 2].²² While these may have been sufficient for the needs of Old City residents and of travelers, the growing belt of citrus orchards surrounding the city in modern times required its own water supply. Utilizing the water-rich subsoils east of Jaffa, the orchards were primarily irrigated by means of Persian wheel wells, operated by workers or mules [see Figure 3]. “The very existence [of Jaffa’s gardens],” the US missionary William Thomson wrote in 1859, “depends upon the fact that water to any amount can be procured in every garden, and at moderate depth.”²³ Thomson observed that the Persian wheel wells, locally known as *na’ura*, “seem admirably adapted for the purpose intended—simple in construction, cheap, quickly made, soon repaired, easily worked, and they raise an immense quantity of water.”²⁴ He added that despite numerous efforts to introduce pumps, these “always fail and get out of repair; and as there is no one able to mend them, they are thrown aside, and the gardener returns to his *na’ura*.”²⁵

Upon their establishment in the late nineteenth century, the locally elected municipal council in each city became the central entity responsible for water provision. The 1877 Ottoman municipalities code explicitly stated that municipal duties included the responsibility to “watch over and attend to . . . the construction and repair of all public and private water supplies on payment by the party interested; and in general all matters relating to water supply, subject to the condition that waqf affairs be administered according to the regulation relating thereto.”²⁶



Figure 2. Photograph of Mohammad Abu Nabbut's *sabil* (fountain), near Jaffa, 1870–1900.
SOURCE: Istanbul Research Institute Archives.

The law's phrasing ascribed responsibility to the municipality for both public and private water supply and conditioned it on payment by "interested parties."²⁷ This condition ensured that the municipality had the administrative authority to manage the city's water resources but was relieved of the financial burden of improving and maintaining water systems. As the principal distribution- and subscription-based municipal service, water supply was also central to the early systematization of municipal council relations with urban residents, who were no longer just constituents but also the municipality's clientele and source of revenue.

As the central authorities responsible for providing and managing urban water supply, municipal councils became susceptible to increased pressure from urban residents seeking to improve hydraulic networks. In Nablus, such improvements were central to council activities from the time of the municipality's establishment. Water from nearby springs channeled through open-air canals was often polluted by the time it reached the city and the municipality undertook several projects to shield these canals with a stone covering, collecting the funds necessary from urban residents, per the municipal codes.²⁸ In the 1890s, as elite residences sprang up outside the Old City, the municipality initiated a comprehensive project to expand the water system to the new urban developments. The first target for the project was Shweitreh, an emerging suburb west of Nablus, where municipal surveyors reported "an urgent need for the provision of water due to its scarcity and a growing population."²⁹ The municipality also introduced new urban sanitation systems: closed sewers for wastewater were established all over the city to combat the foul smell of sewage and the spread of disease.³⁰ It also incorporated



Figure 3. Photograph of Persian wheel water system in Jaffa's citrus plantations.
SOURCE: Frank Scholten, *La Palestine illustrée*, 1929.

street drainage, especially after the city's markets and alleyways were flooded by heavy winter rains in the early 1890s.³¹

The following years witnessed multiple episodes of contestation regarding municipal water projects in the two cities. A primary concern that emerged was the question of water as a shared public resource and urban right at a time when water provision was routinely susceptible to monopolies. For urban residents, therefore, the ownership and distribution of water-supply systems became a key measure of their local council's ability to make good on its commitment to protecting the public interest. In early twentieth-century Jaffa and Nablus, two situations are central to understanding how water became a testing ground for urban rights. First was a conflict over the ownership of the Jarisha mills on the al-'Awja River north of Jaffa just before World War I. Second were the public debates over the politics of water distribution in Nablus in the 1920s. Examining the history of these two situations in relational terms illuminates the centrality of water projects (and their parallels) throughout Palestine at the time while also accounting for the socioeconomic and spatial dynamics that shaped local struggles over municipal waters.

“The Soul of Our City”: Reclaiming Jaffa's Jarisha Mills

Less than ten kilometers north of Jaffa, the al-'Awja River runs east to west, carrying the water from Ras al-'Ein, a spring east of the Petah Tikva colony, into the Mediterranean Sea. As it approaches the sea, the river branches south toward Jaffa, passing through the citrus plantations

east of the city. At the intersection of the al-ʿAwja River and its southbound tributary, seven water-powered mills had been built on Ottoman *miri* (state) lands and were historically operated by the residents of the nearby Palestinian village of Jarisha [see Figures 4 and 5].³² East of these, other mills were built on the river in al-Mahmudiyya and Farukhiyya. Since all of these mills lay outside Jaffa’s municipal boundaries, the Jerusalem District Administrative Council held official jurisdiction over them. In 1901, as the city of Jerusalem was witnessing its own boom in public construction and municipal projects, the administrative council deliberated the idea of auctioning off the mills to “finance the construction of a new municipality building in Jerusalem.”³³ In September that year, the council announced it was offering the mills for sale, asking for 60,000 piasters for both the Farukhiya and Mahmudiyya mills and 300,000 piasters for the Jarisha mills.³⁴ While it is uncertain from Ottoman documents whether the sale of the Mahmudiyya mills took place, it is clear that the sale of the Jarisha and Farukhiyya mills was halted.

In 1912, selling off the Jarisha and Farukhiyya mills was again brought up by the Jerusalem District Administrative Council, albeit behind closed doors. On December 4, *Filastin* published an article speculating about who the buyer might be and mentioned the name of Hajj Yousef Effendi Wafa, a Jerusalem notable and the head of its chamber of commerce. “It is no



Figure 4. A map of Jarisha, 1940.

SOURCE: Survey of Palestine, Palestine Open Maps (<https://palopenmaps.org/>).



Figure 5. Postcard photograph of the mills at Jarisha, northeast of Jaffa, 1900s.

SOURCE: Unknown.

secret,” *Filastin* commented, “that whoever buys the mills also controls the [al-‘Awja] river.”³⁵ The paper further expressed wariness about Wafa’s close connections to Albert Antébi Effendi, an influential Jewish middleman who had earlier brokered the sale of Arab lands to Lord Rothschild and Zionist colonial agencies.³⁶ The al-‘Awja mills case is one of the earliest instances of *Filastin* explicitly warning against Jewish land purchases in Palestine, foreshadowing the utilization of land purchases, colonial development, and resource extraction as a means to concretize Zionist dominance over the Palestinian landscape in subsequent decades.³⁷ The secretive nature of the administrative council’s dealings further aggravated the concerns expressed in the editorial: “*Filastin* took upon itself the right to publicize this sale so that the *ahali* would pay attention to it and participate in the auction.”³⁸ The paper added that it “feared for the greatest and most vital resource in their [the *ahali*’s] country to be overtaken by others, especially after much of its waters had been diverted to the Mulebis [Petah Tikva] settlement.”³⁹

Upon the article’s publication, Jaffa’s residents took immediate action to protect what they considered their city’s most vital resource. A few days later, *Filastin* published a copy of a petition addressed to Jaffa’s Arab mayor calling for municipal intervention against the sale. The petition—signed by over forty individuals, including landowners, merchants, a doctor, a pharmacist, and a lawyer—clarified the political and economic stakes at play if the mills were sold:

It is well known that the [al-‘Awja] river is the soul of our city, and that the success of our future economic projects depends on it, and that from its waters looms the progress of the city and its passage toward development. It is also known that whoever owns the mills also controls the springs of the river and diverts its waters as they wish. If we accept that the municipal councils are a microcosm of the entirety of the nation and that every municipality is to be held responsible

by each and every one of its urban residents, then this petition is intended to warn you that we protest, in our collective capacity, the sale of the above-mentioned mills to any individual, whether foreign or Ottoman.⁴⁰

The petition made it clear that city residents rejected the privatization of Jaffa's most essential water resource on principle, regardless of the acquirer's identity. The signatories' decision to address the letter to the Jaffa municipality, and not to the Jerusalem District Administrative Council that initiated the sale, was significant. Although the mills were located outside the city's municipal boundaries, the residents viewed their sale as an urban, and by extension municipal, affair. They justified this by highlighting the centrality of the river for the city's "progress" and "economic development" at a time when the Jaffa citrus industry and other emerging industries were witnessing remarkable growth. The pressure by urban residents was effective: three days after *Filastin* published the petition, the Jaffa municipality announced in the newspaper's pages that it would be purchasing the Jarisha and Farukhiyya mills "for the benefit of the public interest."⁴¹

"A Hindrance to Urban Development": Water Monopolies in Nablus

Concerns about water distribution in Nablus paralleled those regarding water ownership in Jaffa. However, unlike in Jaffa, where the conflict centered on forces external to the city, in Nablus, the tensions mainly came from within. The major source of tension concerned the effective monopolization of the city's water by a select number of elite families that denied the rest of the city any access to that resource. While the issue had been brewing for decades, it was not until the 1920s that it exploded into a full-fledged public controversy, making the nationwide newspaper headlines for weeks. The controversy started in June 1924, when Muhammad Ali Taher (pen name Abu al-Hassan), a Nablus-born journalist residing in Cairo, published a commentary in *Filastin* on Nablus's urban development.⁴² His article focused mostly on water distribution, spurring debates both within and outside the city. The subject of Nablus's water, as the debates made clear, was a delicate matter that was closely tied to urban power hierarchies and to Nablus notables' involvement in municipal affairs.

In his commentary, Taher described the changes in Nablus's urban fabric in the few decades before World War I. He contrasted the new construction activity outside the city walls with the Old City's spatial arrangement, where the houses were so close together as to practically be on top of each other. There, "you would not find a street without a building or an arch that blocks fresh air and sunlight," he wrote.⁴³ While Taher portrayed the move toward extra muros construction in a positive light, he resolutely pointed to what he framed as the central obstacle preventing Nablus from becoming a "truly developed city" and a "great summer destination": the state of its water systems and their unfair distribution.⁴⁴ Taher initially explained that the water courses running through the city along nonmetallic canals were causing problems associated with excess moisture, particularly in the Old City's dense urban fabric.⁴⁵ However, it was another one of his observations that spurred the controversy: Taher pointed out that despite being abundant, Nablus's water resources were "monopolized" by a handful of elite households that diverted all the water to their large urban villas, private gardens, and bath-houses [see [Figure 6](#)].⁴⁶ Most urban residents, he added, including many living outside the Old City, were excluded from the water network.⁴⁷



Figure 6. A general view of the dense fabric of Nablus’s Old City from the east, including the palaces of urban notables. One of the palaces in the city appears to the right.

SOURCE: “The Vale of Napulus, (i.e., Nablus), Holy Land,” graphic, between ca. 1890 and ca. 1900, lot 13424, no. 092, US Library of Congress, <https://lcn.loc.gov/2001699271>.

Taher’s commentary, published on the front page of the country’s leading newspaper, ignited a major conflict between the different actors involved in Nablus’s water distribution. As with *Filastin*’s warning against the sale of the Jarisha mills, Taher’s article similarly spurred immediate local action. On July 18, 1924, *Filastin* published an open letter signed by twenty-four Nablus residents endorsing Taher’s statement.⁴⁸ The signatories included the mukhtars of the al-Qaisariyya quarter, the mukhtar of the Eastern Orthodox community, a priest on behalf of the Samaritan community, as well as wealthy local figures who did not belong to the city’s old notable families. The signatories explained that for two years they had been calling for action against the exclusive control of the city’s water by a select group of beneficiaries and demanding its redistribution among the city’s residents.⁴⁹ The letter also explained that when dissenting individuals had turned to the British governor of the Nablus district to take action, these same “beneficiaries” overwhelmed him with a barrage of deeds attesting to their generations-long “ownership” of the city’s water resources.⁵⁰ The pressure they sought to exert, the signatories concluded, indicated that their continued control of water “reproduced the exploitation and power of their ancestors in the Dark Ages.”⁵¹ The letter finally noted that although a previous British governor had hired engineers to investigate redistributing the city’s water to “all classes [of people],” nothing had come of it before his term ended.⁵²

Two weeks later, the newspaper published a response to both Taher and the letter’s signatories, authored by Haidar Effendi Tuqan.⁵³ Tuqan, who had served several terms as the city’s mayor (1911–12, 1917, 1918), belonged to the very type of family of notables that was indicted for benefiting from the unfair water distribution arrangement. In his response, Tuqan first defended the “historical owners” of water in Nablus as “merchants, muftis, and Islamic judges

known for their piety, devoutness, and righteousness . . . [who had] purchased the water without [causing] injustice or harm.⁵⁴ He then described the letters as nothing but “propaganda-filled pamphlets” before going on to attack Taher personally. He alleged that Taher was only advocating for water redistribution to benefit a few “influential people,” including two of his cousins who had built houses for themselves outside the Old City.⁵⁵ Unsurprisingly, Tuqan’s accusatory letter was poorly received by Taher and his cousins in Nablus. In their response to the slanderous accusations, they pointed out first, that Tuqan’s letter was shocking coming from a man who was lobbying for the British government to retain his seat as the mayor of Nablus, a position that rendered him a public servant; second, that the earlier letter sent to the British governor demanding water redistribution was signed by 850 individuals from the city; and third, that unjust water distribution systems established in an era of “religious intolerance” and “despotism” could not justifiably continue in the present “age of enlightenment and knowledge.”⁵⁶ On August 15, the newspaper announced that it would no longer publish pieces on the topic and that it hoped that Nablus’s residents “would settle this issue among themselves.”⁵⁷

Unlike in Jaffa, where the municipality’s response to local demands was immediate, it took another eight years before a comprehensive water project was implemented with the explicit aim of redistributing water resources in Nablus. Ironically, the project was launched under the administration of another member of the notable Tuqan family. In February 1932, Nablus’s then-mayor, Suleiman Bey Tuqan, announced it would begin distributing water from one of the city’s main springs, Ras al-‘Ein, to the “faraway houses that have spread across great areas of [the city’s] peripheries where the distance to fountains and water resources is too great and the need for water is immense.”⁵⁸ The project was highly beneficial to the urban developments spreading outside the Old City, especially those on Mount Ebal. A month later, in a speech he delivered during the high commissioner’s visit to Nablus, Mayor Tuqan requested government support for the city’s water distribution project, which he described as “the largest and most vital project in the city.”⁵⁹ Tuqan explained that the municipality could not alone bear the costs given government cuts to municipal funds.⁶⁰ This demand was illustrative of the often conflicted relationship between the Palestinian-run municipal councils and the British authorities, which oscillated between dependency and muted resistance. In August, and after considerable delays, the British Colonial Office finally approved a substantial loan for the Nablus municipality to embark on the water project, spurring numerous requests for similar loans by Palestinians thirsting for municipal water projects of their own in other cities.⁶¹

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Notwithstanding the different actors and contexts involved, the two water episodes in Jaffa and Nablus shared fundamental elements that demonstrate the centrality of water politics in the relationship between municipalities and urban residents in modern Palestine. The nineteenth-century transformations that both cities witnessed—including the growth of their industries and economies, and the remarkable expansion of their residential suburbs—created new urban conditions in which existing water supply systems were no longer sufficient to meet the demands of the cities’ populations. The struggle over water was thus both a by-product of the modern city and an essential instrument for guiding its development. It is not incidental, for instance, that in both cases, the tensions underlying access to water were tied to the shifting relationship between the cities and their surrounding environs. In Jaffa, a growing belt of citrus plantations was expanding the city’s economy, residences, and populations well beyond the

precincts of the Old City, justifying the municipal council’s involvement in the al-‘Awja River waters that lay beyond its boundaries. Similarly, the tensions over water supply in Nablus was mainly between the new middle-class elites building new suburban developments outside the Old City and the old notable elites, including the Tuqans, who directed the city’s water resources to their sizable mansions within the Old City. While the materiality of the citrus plantations and the suburban developments embodied the two cities’ transformation around the turn of the century, the debates over access to water emphasized their modernity’s unfulfilled promises.

In both cities, the struggle over water provision encompassed political agendas and power dynamics that surpassed mere practical demands. In Jaffa, water became an instrument to push back against Jewish colonial investment in the city and to protect access to al-‘Awja River and its surrounding Palestinian-owned estates. In Nablus, water was a major tool for challenging the power of the old Palestinian elites and their monopolization of the city’s wealth and resources. In both cases, urban residents viewed water projects as a concrete means to test the scope and limits of the municipalization process that replaced previous mechanisms of urban governance. This was expressed, for instance, in the Taher cousins’ contrast between the “dark ages” when notable families dominated water-supply systems and the “age of enlightenment” when municipalities established a new understanding of the city’s shared resources and their residents’ right to access these. Such concerns were not too dissimilar from the sentiments expressed by Jaffa’s residents over a decade earlier, when they described their municipal council as a “microcosm of the nation,” demanding that it take tangible steps against the privatization of the city’s most vital water source and asserting their rights as urban residents to hold local officials and representative bodies accountable.

In both instances, urban residents viewed the municipal promises of urban “development” and “progress” as inseparable from their rights to the city and its shared resources. Although they were unable to fully contest the unfair allocation of resources between the “pit” and the “pond,” an arrangement that favored exclusive interests over public ones, their demands had a tangible influence on the redirection of the water channels that sustained their modern cities.

About the Author

Nadi Abusaada is an architect, urbanist, and historian. He is currently a postdoctoral fellow at ETH Zürich. He is the cofounder of Arab Urbanism, a global network dedicated to historical and contemporary urban issues in the Arab region. His writings have been featured in *The Architectural Review*, *The International Journal of Islamic Architecture*, and the *Jerusalem Quarterly*, among others.

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 32. The Arabic meaning of *jarisha* is “crushed wheat,” pointing to the mills’ centrality within the village economy.
 33. Public bid for mills in Jaffa area for Jerusalem Municipal Building, July 6, 1898, file JM-AIY/Ottoman Registers/Vol6/P11a/Item64, Open Jerusalem Archives, <http://www.archives.openje->

- rusalem.org/index.php/public-bid-for-mills-in-jaffa-area-for-jerusalem-municipal-bldg-3-sep-tember-1901-gregorian-calendar-21-agustos-1317-ottoman-fiscal-calendar-rumi.
34. Jerusalem Municipality Meeting Minutes, September 3, 1901, JM-AIY/Ottoman Registers/Vol5/P20a/Item124, Open Jerusalem Archives, <http://www.archives.openjerusalem.org/index.php/municipal-issues-6-july-1898-gregorian-calendar-24-huzayran-1314-ottoman-fiscal-calendar-rumi>.
 35. “The Mills of Jarisha and Hajj Yusuf Wafa” [in Arabic], *Filastin*, December 4, 1912, 3, Jrayed–Arabic Newspaper Archive of Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine, The National Library of Israel, <https://jrayed.org/en/newspapers/falastin/1912/12/04/01/?&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN%7ctxTI-----1>. The sale of land in the village of Mulebis to Zionist interests was facilitated by Salim al-Kassar. Those land parcels became the foundation for Petah Tikva, the first Jewish colony in modern Palestine.
 36. “The Mills of Jarisha and Hajj Yusuf Wafa,” 3.
 37. On these processes in late Ottoman and Mandate Palestine, see Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress: Palestine in the Age of Colonial Development, 1905–1948* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013).
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