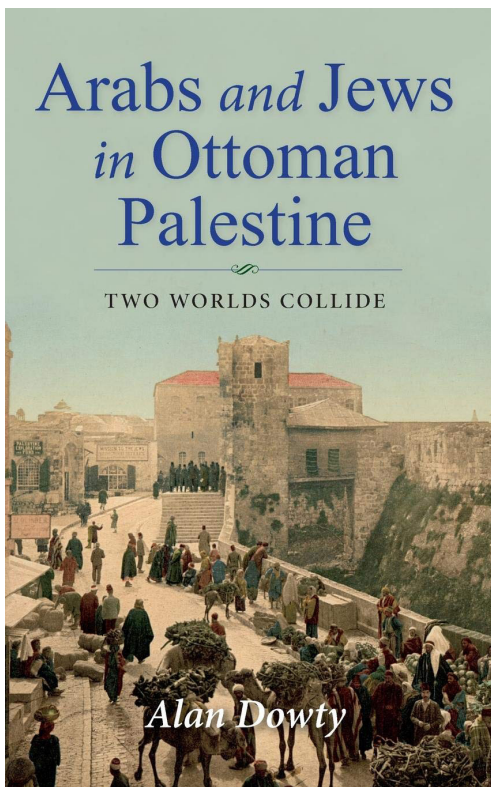




Arabs and Jews in Ottoman Palestine: Two Worlds Collide

By Alan Dowty

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While Alan Dowty's *Arabs and Jews in Ottoman Palestine, Two Worlds Collide* is an extremely well written and well researched book, the title is somewhat misleading. Though the book does touch on (and even concludes with) political and ideological developments within the Palestinian Arab community during the late-nineteenth/early- twentieth centuries, ultimately, it is a history of early Zionist settlement and the manner of its engagement with Palestine's Arabs, a group that, at least up until the final chapter, often comes across as a monolithic and somewhat anonymous entity. This is not to imply that the story Dowty tells is biased in the sense of representing a pro-Zionist perspective—indeed, more often than not, he is critical of the behavior and attitudes of the early Jewish settlers. It is, nonetheless, their story, albeit well told and well supported by the author's research (which is largely based on Jewish primary sources). After allowing for this, I can unreservedly recommend the book, not least for providing a better understanding of the evolution of Zionist (and later, Israeli) attitudes and perceptions regarding Palestine's Arabs, a consequence of tenets central to Zionism and the larger context of late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century European imperialism within which the early Jewish settlers operated. Both of these served to constrain what the settlers were able to perceive regarding Palestine's Arabs as a people and what actually underlay Arab opposition to Zionism.

The book truly excels in its elaboration of the broader context within which said attitudes and perceptions took shape, inclusive of certain concrete historical developments that preceded the First Aliyah (i.e., the first wave of Zionist settlement), and in many respects, laid the groundwork for it. This reader, for instance, was unaware that in the mid-nineteenth century, there was a movement among Jews already residing in Palestine away from a dependence on the charity of Diaspora Jews (*haluka*), and towards "productivization"—the learning of trades, launching of commercial ventures, and introduction of modern technology—such as would "make Jews in Palestine self-supporting and self-assured." (p. 31). Related to this was the idea of a "Jewish return to the soil," which complimented the programs of mid-nineteenth century Christian Restorationists such as the Templars, who believed

that "Jews would make the land flourish once more." (p. 32). There was even a Jewish newspaper based in Jerusalem printed in Hebrew, not as part of a nationalist program, but rather to better reach both Ashkenazi and Sephardic audiences (p. 31). All of this "set the stage," so to speak, for Zionism proper, both ideologically and as a practical enterprise.

Of special importance in the shaping of the attitudes and perceptions of the early Jewish settlers towards Palestine's Arab population—which constitutes the subject of a great deal of discussion in the book—were developments in Europe, not least, the emergence of Zionism, the ideological underpinnings of which made it difficult for the early Jewish settlers to even consider the possibility that Arab resistance was essentially that of an indigenous people resisting foreign intrusion. From the very start, even before Herzl transformed Zionism into an international movement, a basic tenet of Zionism was that in going to Palestine, the Jews were returning to their homeland; it was only when they were no longer aliens in other peoples' lands that they would cease being persecuted. How then, to allow that Arab opposition was rooted in a perception that the Jews were exactly that? "If they were merely creating another Diaspora, then how did the Return to Zion represent a radical shift in Jewish history?" (p. 142). Hence the assertion from an early point of the Jews' historical claim to Palestine, even while almost willfully remaining oblivious to the possibility that the Arab inhabitants might have a legitimate national claim to it (p. 79). Indeed, it would not be until the 1905 Zionist Congress that Zionists would begin to recognize Palestine's Arabs as having a collective national interest and thus constituting a political problem, and, consequently, a significant obstacle to the achievement of Zionist goals.

None of this constitutes a major revelation, but Dowty does an excellent job situating the various conflicts that took place between the early Jewish settlers and Palestine's Arabs in exactly this framework: the early Zionists resisted the possibility—indeed, were almost incapable of recognizing—that underlying Arab resistance was the same impetus behind the pogroms back home. Consequently, conflicts were consistently "localized," explained away as stemming from problems peculiar to individual episodes, or typical of how the Arabs acted even amongst themselves: they were a hardship to overcome, much

like “aridity or malaria, not a political problem.” (p. 225). This in turn saw a resistance to engaging with the Arab community directly as a national entity with an equal or possibly superior claim to the land, resulting in a tendency—one that would carry over into the early history of the Israeli state—to always seek out a presumed higher authority: then the Ottoman government, later the British mandatory one, and during the first few decades of Israel’s existence as a state, the Hashemite rulers of Jordan.

Equally important in the shaping of the attitudes and perceptions of the early Jewish settlers towards Palestine’s Arabs was the simple fact of their being “European” at the height of European imperialism. They took for granted that they represented a culture superior to that of the Middle East. Especially relevant in this regard was that the movement was inspired by Jewish intellectuals, individuals who strongly affiliated with European culture and had initially put their faith in the prospect of assimilation, and who, in spite of ultimately being rejected by Europe, now “clung to their European identity as a point of reference and as... a favorable factor in their new and challenging environment.” (p. 93). In line with conventional European imperial thought, the early Jewish settlers maintained that they were “bringing the blessings of modernity to an unenlightened population,” (p. 89) much as present-day Israelis continue to claim that they represent superior “Western” values vis-à-vis Palestinian Arabs, whom they still frequently characterize as semi-barbaric. Related to this was the early Jewish settlers’ insistence (and Israel’s continued insistence) that “strength” was the only basis for dealing with their Arab neighbors, deeming the latter to have no understanding of such “abstract values” as justice, and that relying on them could only be perceived as a sign of weakness. The necessity of the use of force when dealing with Arabs very quickly became a central theme in the new Jewish Yishuv, long before full-fledged military forces of any kind were established (p. 141).

Ultimately then, the book is about the early Jewish settlers and the manner of their engagement with Palestine’s Arabs, largely as understood from the perspective of the former. While the book does eventually come around in the final chapter to discussing political and ideological developments as pertained to the latter, it is primarily for the purpose

of better understanding changes in Zionist thought during the Second Aliyah regarding the nature and extent of Arab resistance. After making allowance then for the fact that the book represents a particular perspective, it works quite nicely, and if its account of the Arab perspective on Jewish-Arab relations during the period of early Jewish settlement is not nearly as fleshed out, neither is it ignored. In any event, there is no shortage of books providing the Arab side of the story, often, it should be noted, in a manner not fully representative of the Jewish/Zionist perspective. Certainly a single volume telling the story from the perspectives of both in equal measure would be welcome, but this is not that book, however much the title might suggest otherwise.