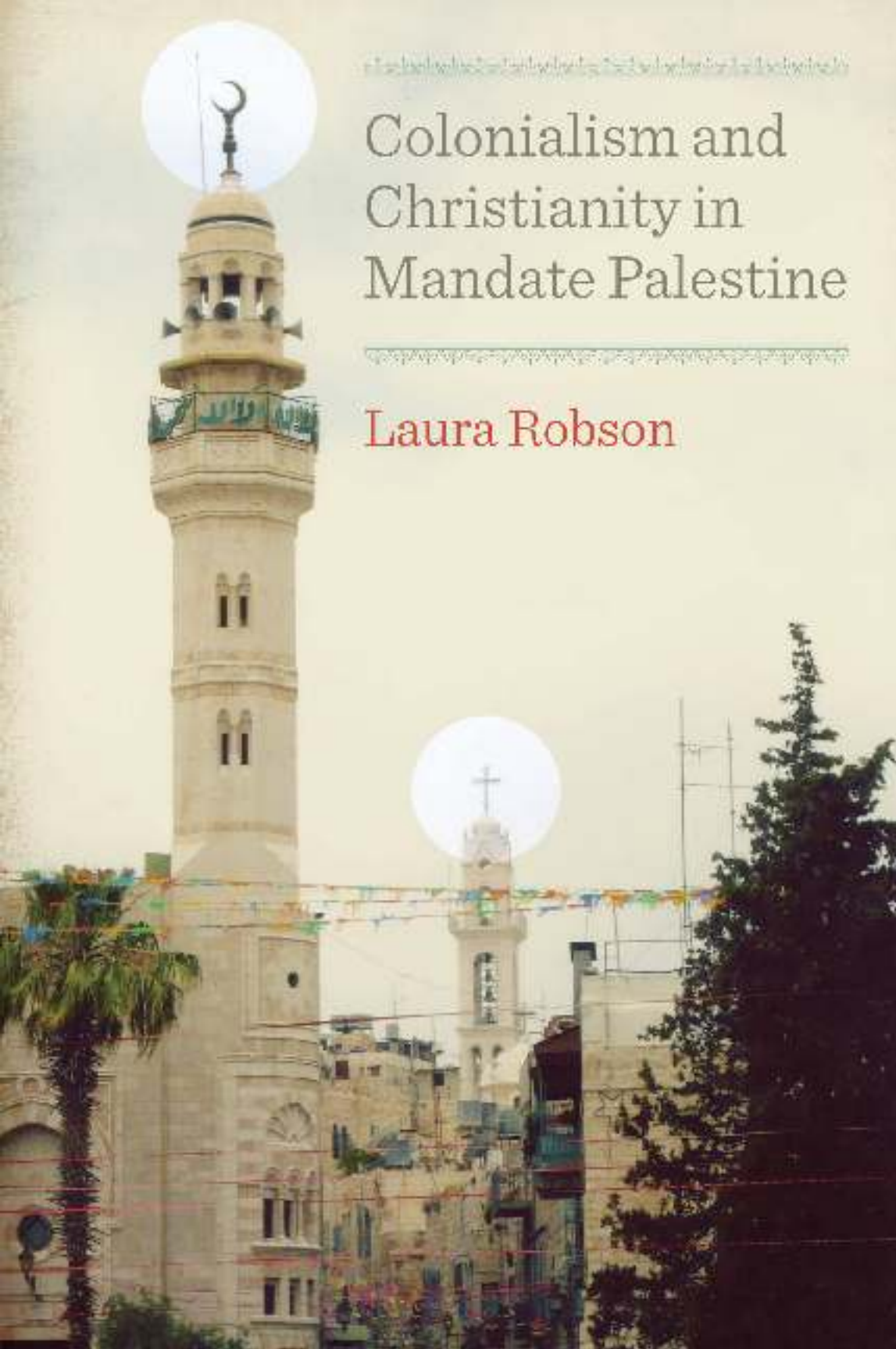


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Colonialism and Christianity in Mandate Palestine

Laura Robson



COLONIALISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN MANDATE PALESTINE



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*in Contemporary History, Politics,
Culture, and Religion of the Levant*

COLONIALISM *and*
CHRISTIANITY *in*
MANDATE PALESTINE

LAURA ROBSON



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*To I.E.R., A.E.R., and T.J.R.
with love*

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NOTE *on* TRANSLITERATION

In this work I have generally followed the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* system of transliteration from Arabic to English. For the sake of clarity, I have chosen to leave place names in their most common forms. When individuals have expressed a preference for the transliteration of their names, I have used their own spellings; in a few cases when a name appears only in English in the archival sources, I have maintained the sources' spelling. Where an anglicized spelling appears in a source, I have included the *IJMES* transliteration in brackets.

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INTRODUCTION

To contemporary global audiences, Palestine often seems an ancient bastion of violent sectarianism. Frequently described as a “crossroads” of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, it is understood as a place where religious identifications trump all other loyalties, where ancient communal hostilities can flare up at any moment, and where a primitive, tribal religiosity has always held sway. Jerusalem, in particular, has become the modern era’s most recognized symbol of sectarian strife—a status made visible in tourist maps of its Old City that depict a walled enclosure strictly divided by religion. The Muslim, Christian, and Jewish quarters appear on such literature as fixed and unchanging entities, representative of centuries-old, perpetually hostile divisions in the “Holy Land.”

The idea that a violent sectarianism has characterized Palestine since time immemorial is widespread, powerful—and fundamentally mistaken. In fact, sectarianism did not emerge as a primary aspect of Palestinian politics until the third decade of the twentieth century when Palestine officially became part of the British Empire. Palestine’s new colonial rulers permanently transformed the nature of its politics by introducing an inflexible sectarianism as a major organizing principle of the new state; they also propagated the idea that it was an ancient and inevitable aspect of political life in the “Holy Land,” a notion that continues to reverberate in the affairs of the region to the present day.

In this book I am concerned with two main themes. First, I seek to discover how sectarianism came to be a major feature of the political landscape in twentieth-century Palestine, under the aegis of the new British colonial state. Second, I endeavor to understand one of the most significant consequences of this shift toward sectarianism: the nearly total marginalization of the region’s Arab Christian communities as a politics of Muslim versus Jew took hold in interwar Palestine.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Arab Christians represented

more than 10 percent of Palestine's population. Prominent in every profession and present at every level of politics, Arab Christian leaders did not view themselves as a part of a disenfranchised or threatened community; they considered themselves central actors in Palestine's emergence as a modern Arab nation. But during the period of British colonial rule, from 1917 to 1948, Palestinian Christians saw their political fortunes erode drastically and suddenly. From a prominent and influential place in a multi-religious, middle-class, nationalist discourse in the early years of the twentieth century, they fell to a position of almost total exclusion from Muslim-dominated national politics by the late 1930s.

In the context of British imperial rule and the anticolonial resistance it engendered, "Muslim" and "Christian" became oppositional political categories for the first time, with ruinous consequences for Palestine's Arab Christians. The British colonial state provided the backdrop for the transformation of Palestinian Christians into a legally defined "religious minority" and the development of politically meaningful Muslim and Christian communal identifications. This making of sectarianism in Palestine—and the subsequent erasure of the Arab Christian communities from the country's political history—is essentially a modern colonial story.

In Ottoman Palestine, prior to the British takeover, communal identifications often had a bearing on citizens' occupations, economic status, and social milieu but did not absolutely define their political affiliations or the nature of their representation vis-à-vis the state. By contrast, the British colonial administration made the early decision to promote communally organized legal and political structures on the model of imperial policy in India and elsewhere. This move allowed for the easy incorporation of a new, relatively autonomous European Jewish settler community into Palestine; it also deliberately encouraged the emergence of much more rigid forms of sectarian identification among Palestinian Arabs. In response to these policies, Arab Christian leaders began to reinvent their religious communities as political entities in the hopes of taking a leading role in a communally organized political system.

This politicization of Christianity, which both reflected and furthered the construction of an increasingly sectarian political landscape, failed to reverse the colonial ghettoization of the Christian communities. In the late 1930s some of Palestine's Muslim leaders began to use the new sectarian political structures of the mandate state to garner support for a nationalist movement increasingly deploying Islamist rhetoric and organization. "Muslim" and "Christian" were now something more than communal designations; they were competing political categories. By the time the British abandoned their imperial project in Palestine in 1948, their colonial policies had helped

to sideline the Arab Christian communities by redefining Christians as a political entity separate from the Muslim and Jewish populations.

The emergence of a rigid sectarianism in British-ruled Palestine connects it with a global colonial history, including South Asia and Africa, of the modern construction of supposedly “traditional” categories of religion and ethnicity. As in other parts of the British Empire, the colonial making of sectarianism permanently transformed local, national, and regional politics. It cast Palestine as a place where religious affiliation inevitably equaled political identity, and it diminished Palestine’s Arab Christian communities, previously central to Arab politics, to the point of near-invisibility. Further, the promotion of sectarian organization served to advance a colonial vision of Britain as a necessary mediator between inveterate religious enemies in Palestine and in the Middle East more broadly, thereby legitimating its continued presence there—an idea that continues to influence Anglo-American approaches to the Middle East to the present day.¹

The making of sectarianism in Palestine, with its ensuing marginalization of the Palestinian Arab Christian communities, constituted one of the most significant transformations wrought by imperial rule in the modern Middle East. The international community’s contemporary interventions into what it understands as the sectarian affairs of the “Holy Land” continually demonstrate that the consequences of this colonial history are still with us.

PALESTINIAN ARAB CHRISTIANS: AN INTRODUCTION

During the late nineteenth century, Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire, run from Istanbul. Its most important city, Jerusalem (al-Quds), had a population of about fifty thousand, 45 percent of whom were Christian. Jerusalem constituted an autonomous district that reported directly to Istanbul; Palestine’s other two districts, Nablus and Acre, were administratively linked with Beirut.² Already in 1900 the trickle of Zionist Jews from Europe proclaiming the revival of a Jewish homeland in Palestine was beginning to worry Palestinian Arabs, but the number of European immigrants was as yet very small. In 1914, at the end of the Ottoman period and just before World War I began, Arab Christians constituted about 10 percent of the population.³

Three-quarters of Palestine’s Christians lived in cities, with particular concentrations in the Jerusalem district but present in all the region’s major urban centers. The Greek Orthodox Church (a major branch of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, headed by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem) represented the largest denomination of Palestinian Arabs, making up nearly half of the Christian population. The patriarchate owned huge tracts



Map by Lindsay Mayer

Late Ottoman Palestine and Syria

of land in and around Jerusalem, including some of the city's most important Christian sites; today, it is still the largest nonstate landowner in Israel. The patriarchate and the brotherhood of monks who headed the church were, by ecclesiastical law, ethnically and nationally Greek, while the whole of the laity and most of the lower clergy were Palestinian Arab—a situation that caused considerable tension within the church.

The second-largest community was Greek Catholic, which followed the Byzantine Catholic rite; its members were clustered in the Galilee and the northern parts of the country. There were smaller communities of Latin Catholics (headed by the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem and under the jurisdiction of the Vatican), Maronites, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholics, and Copts. The small but influential Protestant community consisted primarily of Arab Episcopalians, mainly converted from Greek Orthodox Christianity by British missionaries during the second half of the nineteenth century.

During the nineteenth century, the Ottoman millet system helped to define the social, political, and economic meanings of these communal labels. This system involved the recognition of Christians and Jews as *ahl al-kitab*, “people of the book,” who were entitled to the protection of the state and a certain degree of communal autonomy in return for a number of restrictions on their participation in civil society and public worship as well as special tax requirements.⁴ They were organized into semi-autonomous communities known as millets. The Ottoman government recognized six millets: the Greek Orthodox, the Armenian Orthodox, and the Jews, and the more recent additions of the Syrian, Armenian, and Chaldean Catholics. The Latin Catholic community, although substantial, did not officially constitute a millet because it was considered a non-indigenous group despite the predominance of Arabs within the church.⁵ The newly established Arab Protestant community received a kind of partial recognition in 1850.⁶

The Ottoman millet system underwent substantial changes during the mid-nineteenth-century period of empire-wide reforms and reorganization known as the *tanzimat*, the goal of which was the defensive modernization of the Ottoman Empire against internal and external military and economic challenges.⁷ The *tanzimat* reforms lifted a number of the restrictions on non-Muslim communities, allowing greater leeway in religious worship, permitting non-Muslims to serve in governmental administration, and consenting to the construction of some churches. Furthermore, *dhimmis* (“protected peoples,” members of recognized non-Muslim religious communities) would now be subject to conscription for the first time. These changes transformed the status and visibility of Christian communities throughout

the Arab provinces, and the upheaval contributed to a wave of popular sectarian violence in Damascus, Mount Lebanon, and Nablus during the mid-nineteenth century—an early example of the ways in which increasingly interventionist imperial policies could contribute to the emergence of new kinds of communalism.⁸

Under the influence of the shifting millet system, Christian and Jewish communities began to dominate certain social and economic spheres, particularly the commercial and merchant classes. By the beginning of World War I, Christians had become an important part of an emerging middle class in Palestine that stood between Palestine's peasantry and impoverished city dwellers on one hand and the "urban notables" who had long dominated the Palestinian political landscape on the other.⁹ These new, primarily urban middle-class elites (which included Muslims as well as Christians) understood themselves as a potential ruling force and viewed themselves as the intellectual vanguard of Palestine and as contributors to a broader Arab and Ottoman political discourse.¹⁰ Members of this rising middle class did not define themselves politically in terms of their religious affiliation but in terms of their status as elites and, especially, their commitment to new forms of Arab modernity. Their interest in modernity—which Carol Gluck has usefully summed up as characterized by "industrialization, the nation-state, expanded political participation, forms of middle-class or mass society, and inescapable integration in the world"¹¹—had counterparts all over the world during this period; these Christian and Muslim Arab middle classes were part of a global trend of non-Western elites engaged in exploring how to remake their societies in "modern" but not necessarily Western terms.

In 1917, during the later stages of World War I, the British occupied Jerusalem under the leadership of General Edmund Allenby. The European powers already had begun to divide up the Middle East among themselves, and Britain's de facto possession of Palestine helped to assure that the "Holy Land" would become part of the British Empire. In the postwar peace agreements, France took the newly defined territories of Syria and Lebanon, and Britain claimed Iraq and Palestine, carving out the new region of Transjordan soon thereafter. All of these were technically "mandates" rather than "colonies" and were supposed to be under the supervision of the League of Nations with an eye toward eventual independence. In reality, though, the European imperial powers made no essential distinction between their new Middle Eastern "mandated" possessions and their directly held colonies elsewhere.¹²

Britain appointed its first high commissioner for Palestine in 1920 and began the reorganization of the colonial state; the League of Nations finalized Britain's possession of the mandate for Palestine three years later. By this time, Britain's support for the Zionist movement—which proposed the



Palestine and Transjordan under the British Mandate

construction of a “Jewish National Home” in Palestine as a response to European anti-Semitism—had crystallized. The famous Balfour Declaration of 1917, a letter from British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to the Zionist leader Walter Rothschild, gave the Zionist movement formal notice that “His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object.”¹³ This promise was now formalized in the text of the league’s mandate despite having already caused intense hostility, resentment, and rebellion among Palestinian Arabs. The new European Zionist presence in Palestine would shape the nature of British rule there and

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have a major impact on the construction of new kinds of sectarian identities for Palestine's Arab Christian communities between 1917 and 1948.

The Palestinian Christian communities' eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history as sites of European intervention in Ottoman affairs would also influence British mandate policy toward Arab Christians. During the last two centuries of Ottoman rule, a number of European powers—beginning with Russia and France and later including Greece, Italy, and Britain—had laid claims to “protectorates” over the Christian communities of the empire, claiming that they needed to be shielded from the depredations of Muslim Ottoman rule. Although the British themselves had engaged in this practice during the nineteenth century, they now worried that this legacy of association between indigenous Arab Christians and the other European powers might lead to unwelcome French, Russian, or Italian interventions in Palestine through the Arab Christian communities. This suspicion, combined with considerable domestic British Protestant support for the Zionist project (evident in popular literary works like George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, first published in 1876), served to distance mandate officials from Palestinian Christian leaders. The British would not view Arab Christians in Palestine as natural allies of the colonial state.¹⁴

Above all, British rule over Palestine and policy toward its Arab Christians drew on models of imperial administration elsewhere, especially in India. The structures of the mandate state were nearly identical to those of direct colonial rule throughout the British Empire, a parallel that also held between the French-controlled mandate territories of Syria and Lebanon and France's directly held colonial possessions elsewhere. More important, colonial methods originally designed to maintain British suzerainty over large Indian and African subject populations were vital to the battery of tactics British officials deployed in their new Middle Eastern possessions after World War I. These included violence, intimidation, public humiliation, and collective punishment, as well as subtler methods of co-opting local elites, establishing new economic hierarchies, making use of educational and health networks to support the colonial enterprise, and creating and maintaining ethnic and religious divides.

To produce and enforce these religious and ethnic divisions, the British engaged in extensive legal, political, and administrative classifications of their colonial subjects. These methods—which Benedict Anderson has summed up as “census, map, and museum”—became central to how mandate officials understood and enforced the meaning of religious identity and the place of Arab Christians in Palestinian Arab society. As Anderson has written, “The effect of this [classificatory] grid was always to be able to say of anything that it was this, not that; it belonged here, not there. . . . This is why the colo-

nial state imagined a Chinese series before any Chinese, and a nationalist series before the appearance of any nationalists.”¹⁵ The British colonial state in Palestine could not imagine a web of interlocking identities in which religion might not have absolute political meaning; it needed to define and then enforce both Islam and Christianity as irreducible political entities under a state-designed rubric.

In Palestine, as in India and Africa, the British claimed to adhere to a “status quo” policy, by which they meant that as few changes would be made to the extant legal, political, and social structures of the new colonial possession as possible—a strategy intended to promote easy relations with the subject population, reduce imperial operating costs, and forestall anticolonial rebellion. In practice, colonial officials tended to claim imperial adherence to previously existing institutions while in fact continually altering and modifying them to suit the demands of the British colonial state. This paradigm provided the basis for the British approach to the Ottoman millet system in Palestine. While declaring their commitment to maintaining the millet system, the British actually substantially reworked and extended it, emphasizing communal representation as a basic political principle of the mandate government and classifying their new Arab subjects into rigidly defined sectarian blocs. Armed with a specifically colonial understanding of the meaning of religious identity in Palestinian society and the means to enforce British views, the mandate government now began both to assume and to enforce a radical legal and political separation between Muslims and Christians, enshrining a new kind of sectarian politics in Palestine.

CONCEPTS OF SECTARIANISM

The word “sectarian” has a particular set of connotations in Middle Eastern history. Western scholarship about the Middle East has a long history of understanding sectarianism as an essential and permanent aspect of Islamic societies.¹⁶ This idea, which continues to influence both scholarly and popular portrayals of the Middle East, has had a powerful ally in the “clash of civilizations” literature that reached its apogee in the work of historian Bernard Lewis and political scientist Samuel Huntington and found a mass audience in the United States and Europe following the attacks of September 11, 2001.¹⁷ This approach rests on the assumption that Islam constitutes the primary intellectual and political loyalty of all Muslims and that Islam is at its core an antimodern, feudal, fanatical force operating in direct opposition to the Western commitment to progress, democracy, and modernity.

The “clash of civilizations” thesis has helped to reinforce popular percep-

tions of a “primitive” sectarianism driving all political activity in the Middle East. It understands sectarianism in the Middle East as a natural result of an inherent fanaticism, characteristic of the Islamic world and absent from the West. Further, it offers a Western explanation—and self-exoneration—for the “failure” of the Middle East to construct viable nation-states; the region’s ongoing political turmoil and the difficulties of nation-building can be attributed to unalterable confessional loyalties rather than to a history of destructive Western political and military intervention.¹⁸ This vision of the meaning of sectarianism in the Middle East, then, says a great deal more about the self-representation of the West as liberal, rational, and beneficent than it does about the social and political roles of religion in the Middle East.¹⁹

In fact, sectarianism cannot be understood as a primitive, atavistic clinging to religious identity. Rather, following Ussama Makdisi’s definition, it is a modern historical process through which religious affiliations take on specific political meanings.²⁰ Such a definition makes it possible to trace exactly how sectarian identities emerged in particular historical circumstances in the modern Middle East instead of merely assuming their ancient, unchanging existence.²¹

In late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Palestine, communal affiliations coexisted with local, ethnic, familial, and regional identities without contradiction, all contributing to the texture of Arab social and political life.²² Communal tensions did arise during this period, most notably in mid-nineteenth-century Nablus, where the implementation of major Ottoman reforms concerning the rights of religious minorities in the empire combined with growing panic about Christian-Muslim violence in Mount Lebanon to produce a brief outbreak of intercommunal conflict. But Muslims and Christians also had a long history of cultural and social accommodation; sources from nineteenth-century Palestine record a daily existence in which the various religious communities engaged in a wide variety of social interactions, shared holy sites and spaces, and celebrated one another’s religious holidays and festivals. Communal boundaries helped to define the shape of social, familial, and geographic relations but were generally flexible and porous.

The European powers saw little of this complexity. They had a long history of conceiving of Palestine as the “Holy Land” and were coming off a century of intense involvement in the disputes between Palestine’s many (largely foreign-dominated) churches and the Ottoman government. Bitter conflicts among Palestine’s European-run churches had sometimes even provided a *casus belli* for the European powers, as when a dispute over control of Bethlehem’s Church of the Nativity contributed to the outbreak of the British-French-Russian Crimean War in 1854. As a consequence of this fraught involvement, the European powers tended to view Palestine—especially its Christian populations—as irretrievably torn by sectarian impulses. Religious

difference did carry social, economic, and political meaning in Ottoman Palestine, but the intense disputes among Palestine's churches, mainly over control of property, were not an expression of local sectarian politics but of foreign powers exerting their might in a kind of proxy struggle against other European nations. Local Arab Christians and Muslims experienced and practiced their religious affiliations in less exclusively political (and, usually, less contentious) ways, as one among many identities.

With the British assumption of power in Palestine in 1917, the landscape changed dramatically. Now, a European state with a long history of commitment to nationalist power politics among Palestine's church institutions wielded direct control over its indigenous Arab Muslim and Christian communities. The British, and to some degree the other European powers involved in the church politics of the "Holy Land," could now apply their vision of a sectarian Palestine not only to its foreign-dominated churches but also to its local Christian communities on the ground. Almost immediately they began to shape a much more rigidly sectarian political system for Palestine in which access to government and representation was possible only through state-sponsored communal institutions. This restructuring coincided with conversations throughout the Arab world about the role of Islam in a post-Ottoman political order and a rising awareness of the potential relevance of religious identities for molding modern nations. Arab Christians in all the Ottoman successor states were facing the question of how to shape their participation in new political structures that often explicitly recognized Islam as central to ethnic, regional, and national identities.²³

As the British began to construct a colonial administration that assumed the political centrality of communal identifications, Arab Christians—responding to the new colonial system, pressures within their foreign-dominated church institutions, and broader currents in the Arab world—gradually started to re-imagine their religious communities as modern political entities. They began to model their religious institutions after secular systems, to define communal movements in nationalist political terms, and to inscribe their communal histories at the center of nationalist political mythologies. These actions, designed to respond to British policies and carve out a space for Christian political participation, ultimately helped to advance the sectarian political system being built under mandate authority.

ARGUMENT AND SOURCES

This study begins with the last years of Ottoman rule and the first years of the British occupation of Palestine, when the meaning of religious affiliation

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