

The Ottoman Municipal and Central Archives for the History of Jerusalem: Creating the Perfect Match of Sources

The Minutes of the Council of Jerusalem Municipality (Kudüs Belediyesi Meclis Zabıt Defterleri) is housed today in the Historical Archives of Jerusalem Municipality. It consists of eighteen unclassified registers of the decisions reached by the Jerusalem Council between the years 1892-1910 and the year 1917. During the period 1890-1910, the registers of municipal resolutions carried in the years 1309 (1893-1894), 1319 (1903-1904), and 1327-1330 (1911-1916) are missing. Together these registers contain almost 1300 pages. The total number of municipal resolutions is 4000. Approximately, half of the resolutions are written in Ottoman Turkish, and half in Arabic. Each resolution are of various sizes ranging from one paragraph or a couple of lines to two pages.

I have completed the transliteration of all resolutions written in Ottoman, and Falestin has done the work for the resolutions written in Arabic. Now we have a text as you may see on the screen (Slayt).

The resolutions have been written in a rough draft format: we have a bad handwriting, many lines drawn over, many words are deleted, or added later, in some parts this corrupts the meaning of sentences and makes their reading an arduous task. The reason for this is that these registers are came into being for the use of municipal council itself. The council was not required to send these registers to a higher authority. On the other hand, while studying in the archives I come across many archival documents stating that, not Jerusalem municipality, but some municipal councils in the other cities were warned for not registering their resolutions by the officers from the Ministry of Interior. It means that occasionally, the Municipalities were inspected by the central government authorities.

In the study of Ottoman municipal administration in general, and of any city in particular, it is rare to have at our disposal a collection of registers of this kind. As far as I know, apart from Jerusalem, one can find similar archival sources also on the municipalities of Nablus, Bursa and Istanbul. We have an article written by Mahmud Yazbak on Nablus Municipality between the years 1868 and 1914. His study is based on the minutes of Nablus municipality, but he does not give detailed information about these registers. The minutes of Istanbul and Bursa municipalities include resolutions of a few years time, For example;

- the minutes of Istanbul contains the resolutions between 1337-1339 (1918-1920)
- the minutes of Bursa contains the resolutions merely for the year 1910. (There is a M. A. Thesis written by Nilüfer Uğurlu in the University of Uludağ, Bursa , in 1998).

Thus for these two cities (Istanbul and Bursa) we do not have an adequate source, like the minutes of Jerusalem municipality to manage a detailed study.

The Minutes reveal almost all spheres of municipal administration in Jerusalem and represent a mine of information on Ottoman urban government in general. By consulting these minutes, one can analyze the crucial matters about the Ottoman municipalities: such as, the administrative mechanism of municipality, the scope of municipal authority, the budget, municipal incomes and taxes, the relation of municipal council with the Jerusalem Governor (*mutasarrıf*), the Provincial Council (*meclis-i idare*), and with the other municipalities or councilor bodies functioning in the Province.

A detailed information can also be obtained from the minutes about the range of the activity of municipal council; such as

- the preservation of law and order in accordance with, the Law of Provincial Municipalities, 1877 (Vilayat Belediye Kanunu)
- urban planning and supervision of building area in accordance with the Building Code (*Ebniye Kanunu*, 1882), and the Law of Expropriation, (*İstimlak Kanunu*, 1879) and the other legal regulations.
- the matters about public health, sanitation, cleanliness, urban infrastructure, water supply, lighting and electricity and so on.

While dealing with the municipal minutes we came across to important methodological problems; the great majority of the resolutions recorded in the minutes of Jerusalem Municipality, are of an exceedingly trivial nature; A more or less random selection of the matters dealt with includes: public bids for repairing a mosque or a zaviye, or for supplying foods for military troops in Jerusalem, appointment of officials in the lowest grades, regulation of prices of basic necessities of life such as grain, vegetable, and charcoal, and similar items. Thus we have to select which resolutions are important for us, and the answer to this problem depends on the content of any study. Actually we have another methodological problem; a great many of the documents at our disposal are either beginnings or

continuations of issues; rarely does a matter begin and end in one resolution. Thus one should consider these minutes in integrity, I mean we need to know the resolutions on the related topics taken before, and for sure, we need to know the functioning mode of municipal council.

Besides that, in the minutes, we do not have resolutions in matters of obvious importance about the Jerusalem Municipal government

Some missing topics are these:

- municipal elections,
- the name of the members of Municipal council (we have the signatures, but we do not have the concrete member lists)
- name of the mayor
- visual sources (in the minutes, it is stated that, the plan or sketch of a building or street, or whatever it is) are produced, but we do not have them.

Thus in order to fill the gap we have to consult to the other archives, undoubtedly the most important of which is the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi. Indeed, in order to understand the importance of Ottoman central archives, firstly we are required to know how the Municipal council functions, what kind of relationship it has with the other provincial authorities, and most importantly its place in the decision-making hierarchy.

As you know, the real motive behind the *Tanzimat* reforms was to create a system of centralized government and actually the municipality is a body designed to enhance the central power over the provinces. It should be emphasized that the establishment of modern municipalities in the Ottoman Empire has not been resulted from the evolution of a traditionally separate urban government. Rather the municipalities should be recognized as one of the reforms of central bureaucracy. In discussing the establishment of modern municipalities, it appears that the intention of Ottoman government was not very radical. I mean, the municipalities were not established to produce a sense of local identification. What the Tanzimat statesmen really wanted was to make the cities developed, well planned, clean and enlightened.

During the period under discussion, the province of Jerusalem feels the controlling effect of central government more than the other provinces in Palestine, because the Ottoman government faced with many political difficulties in the Jerusalem province. The increased foreign interests manifested by their "presence" in land with the erection of many buildings such as convents and new churches, the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, and the Jewish immigration started in 1890s are the most crucial problems faced by the Ottoman government in Jerusalem. Under

these conditions, the *sancak* of Jerusalem was given a special importance by the central government. When the *sancak* was widened to include the districts of Gaza and Jaffa, Jerusalem for the first time in its history under Ottoman rule, became the administrative centre of central and southern Palestine. After the implementation of the Provincial Law of 1871, the *sancak* was detached from the province of Damascus, and became one of the 'independent' province (*elviye-i gayri mülhaka*) connected directly with the central government in Istanbul. By this way the governor of Jerusalem was made responsible directly to İstanbul. First of all, it is necessary to mention that the Jerusalem Municipality did not function as an entirely independent body. From the beginning, the municipal council is subordinate to the Jerusalem governor (the *mutasarrif*) and the administrative council (the *meclis-i idare*). The fact that the mayor was elected and appointed by the *mutasarrif* actually made the municipal council a tool in the hand of *mutasarrif* to implement direct Ottoman rule and centralization policy. In other words, being chosen by the *mutasarrif*, the representative of the central government, the Jerusalem mayor were bound to reflect the central government's interest in local policy.

In this respect, the Jerusalem municipality, as an administrative body, it had to act in concert with the *mutasarrif* and the other governmental bodies functioning in the province. In practice, provincial authorities and the administrative council (*meclis-i idare*) closely supervised the activities of municipality. Its budget had to be approved by the administrative council. The administrative council also kept a close eye on the way an approved budget was actually handled. Thus, little was undertaken without informing them and almost every resolution of the municipality required the approval of the administrative council or the governor. Moreover, in some cases, especially for the projects involving great expense, such as water supply, lighting and electricity, the approval of central government was also necessary. In addition to the strict governmental control over the municipal administration, the Jerusalem municipality was also dependent on the attitude of the consuls and the heads of the foreign communities, because there was a large population of foreign residents generally living in the quarters outside the city wall and the foreign consulates were their representatives.

Therefore, It seems that the Jerusalem Municipal Council was not a council of decision-making on its own initiative. I mean if it has to reach a decision crucial to Jerusalem inhabitants, it discusses the matter and forwarded it to the administrative

council or the *Mutasarrif*. If it is a great issue which also exceeds the authority of *Mutasarrif*, the issue goes to the related bureau of central government, usually the Ministry of Interior. Meanwhile, it is also noteworthy to state that the *mutasarrif* is a humble bureaucrat perhaps even a puppet in a carefully graded hierarchy. And also because of the developments that made Jerusalem the most delicate province in Palestine, the *mutasarrif* could not be expected to be a determined governor. These facts all together limits the functional performance of the Municipality.

Well speaking concretely, the municipality functions if an important urban issue proceeds to the agenda of Jerusalem Municipality, the decision-making procedure is like that

1. it discusses the matter, write a *mazbata* (a detailed report) and send it to the Administrative Council
2. After the debates at the administrative council, it send the matter to the *Mutasarrif*
3. The *Mutasarrif* writes a memorandum, and send that memorandum to the Ministry of Interior or the Grand Vezir.
4. If the matter is a critical issue, it is also to be discussed by the central councils such as *Meclis-i Vala-yı Ahkam-ı Adliye*, *Meclis-i Has*, *Şura-yı Devlet*.
5. Finally the issue is decided by the imperial decree of Ottoman Sultan (*irade-i seniyye*).