

---

## Book Review

---

---

*The Role of Abdul Hamid II in Facilitating Zionist Hegemony Over Palestine* by Fadwa Nusairat (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2019. 255 pp., US\$14.00. ISBN 978-9953-82-860-2)

Review by Bahia Farhat, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, Lebanon; and M.A. in History and International Relations, Saint-Joseph University of Beirut, Lebanon. Email: bahia\_farhat@yahoo.com

The question of how the Zionists managed to take control of Palestinian lands has been a subject of heated debate in Arab intellectual circles, and has opened up space for many questions including: Who sold Palestine to the Zionists and who facilitated their occupation? Was it the intention of Sultan Abdul Hamid II to do so? And what role did he play in “facilitating” the occupation of Palestine? The author, Fadwa Nusairat, provides answers to these questions and many other related issues by exploring and analyzing historical documents, providing an account of what might have happened.

This book overturns prevailing uncertainties and challenges deep beliefs that have developed within a wide spectrum of Arab, academic discourses, and intellectual and popular milieus. The book contradicts the historical postulate that Abdul Hamid II was very careful to prevent the establishment of a Zionist entity in Palestine and sheds a light on the sultan’s role and contribution to Zionist domination the country. This book exposes the standpoint of Sultan Abdul Hamid II in relation to the Zionist movement and its relentless pursuit to buy lands and build settlements in Palestine. It also exposes the manner in which the sultan dealt with this issue and his significant and consistent approach in failing to prevent settlement expansion in Palestine.

The author provides a historical analysis of the sultan's public standpoint on Zionist domination over Palestinian territory since its onset between 1876 and 1909. It is significant to note that the text, through an objective and clear articulation of the facts, asks questions that leads the reader to a certain conclusion. For example, when the author discusses the negotiations between Herzl and Abdul Hamid II, she poses the question that if Abdul Hamid had firmly rejected letting go of one inch of Palestinian territory, why did these negotiations last for six more years?

The author seeks to put the reader in the general context of the research available before further elaborating on the topic. She describes the general conditions of the Ottoman Empire during Abdul Hamid II's reign and explores his personality, since his character plays an important role in anticipating the possible outcome of upcoming events, as he was a smart, refined politician with a quick wit who was highly aware of Europe's internal and external affairs. The book also defines the Zionist movement and introduces its founder, Theodor Herzl, who called for a Jewish state to be established in Palestine.

The book's four chapters focus on Zionism since its establishment, its consequences, and the negotiations that took place between Sultan Abdul Hamid II and the Herzl, finally concluding by quashing the sultan's portrayal as a defender of Palestinian land.

Chapter 1 explores the sultan's standpoint on Jewish migration to Palestine and the general conditions of the Jews in the Ottoman Palestine as they were given religious and educational autonomy and enjoyed the privileges of foreign nationals. The author then presents early Jewish immigration to Palestine and the sultan's policy towards this immigration that was characterized by contradictions which led to the failure of authoritative measures to prevent Jewish migration to Palestine. Although Sultan Abdul Hamid II refused to sell land directly, he expressed a willingness to facilitate Jewish demands whether through disregarding the enforcement of the laws related to their immigration or by legislating regulatory constitutions and enactments that responded to their demands.

Chapter 2 is devoted to discussing Sultan Abdul Hamid II's standpoint towards the Zionist colonization of Palestinian territory as it represented the first stages that led to the establishment of a full-blown colonialist movement, with its own apparatus, associations, and banks that supported it. Finally, there is a presentation of the cumulative results of Abdul Hamid II's attitudes towards the colonialist movement that led the Zionist

takeover of Palestine, which later resulted in the formation of the Zionist state: Israel.

Chapter 3 exposes the objectives from which the negotiations started between Herzl and Abdul Hamid. Herzl aimed at obtaining documents that allowed international recognition of Palestinian territory bestowed by the sultan in exchange for paying Ottoman foreign debts and revitalizing the Ottoman economy through the activities and investments made by rich Jewish families such as the Hirschs, the Rothschilds, and the Montagus.

Chapter 4, the last chapter, is specifically devoted to exploring people's attitudes towards Zionist activity in Palestine, and the sultan's standpoint in relation to these attitudes. Moreover, it demonstrates the huge effort made by the local leadership, residents, and Arab journalism at preventing Zionist immigration to Palestine, whether through petitions and complaints raised by families to the sultan, or by the articles published in the major newspapers that warned him about the Zionist danger and suggested firm measures to be taken against the colonial enterprise.

The author opposes prevailing beliefs that have circulated in Islamic and Arab discourses that presented the sultan as one of the firmest opponents to the Zionist project in Palestine. Through the investigation of events and conditions, and the study of numerous Arabic and English resources, she shows that the sultan's reign witnessed unprecedented colonial Jewish activity in Palestine, which led to the formation of the preliminary structure of the Zionist entity.

The Zionists were able to settle thousands of Jews in Palestine as their numbers increased to up to 80,000 settlers in 1908, which accounts for three times their population in 1882. Zionist Jews took ownership of about 400,000 *dunums*<sup>1</sup> of land and constructed sixty-eight plantation colonies. Their centralization was no longer limited to the cities of Jerusalem, Safed, Hebron, and Galilee, but rather spread across the coastal cities such as Jaffa and Haifa. Meanwhile, they refused to obtain Ottoman nationality and to submit to the state's provisions. What further reinforced this proliferation was the wide gap between the theory and practice of Abdul Hamid II's policy. He issued documents that aimed to prevent immigration and settlement, but then he either repealed or modified them according to the interests of the Zionists and their supporters.

1. About 400,000,000 m<sup>2</sup>.

In 1888, the Ottoman Empire issued documents that allowed the Jews a religious visit to Jerusalem for only three months. However, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France objected this, arguing that these documents did not coincide with the privileges offered to other foreign nationals, which led the Ottomans to rescind this legislation. The Ottoman Empire, once again, issued new instructions that prevented foreign Jews from entering Palestine unless they paid insurance and signed a pledge to leave within thirty days from their date of entrance. However, this was again canceled in 1899. According to the author, the contradictory decisions, legislations, and orders demonstrated a significant failure of Abdul Hamid's policy. What further aggravated the responsibilities entrusted to him was the fact that although he sensed the Jewish danger, he did not take enough precautions to prevent Jewish influx into Palestine, especially as the Zionists did not hide their agenda but rather declared it openly.

Throughout, and in the context of what the author presents in terms of opinions about the role of Abdul Hamid in facilitating Herzl's mission, the reader is led to ask the following questions: Does the sultan deserve all the blame? Does the responsibility of Jewish domination over Palestinian land lie upon him? Did the Zionism we know today have the same dimensional perspectives back then, especially as the Jews were positively viewed by the Ottoman state before creating the Zionist state? The European nations adopted and supported the rising nationalism in the Ottoman Empire as Christian countries revolted against the Ottoman state, forming alliances with the West and causing wars. This led to an increasing influence over the Ottoman Empire's economy and a further weakening of it. The Jews remained cautious and were thus regarded as loyal to the state. They even compensated the Ottoman state's economy and revitalized it through investments. This has led some critics to conclude that the attention given to Herzl by the sultan did not stem from his interest in the Zionist movement, but rather from his interest in the Jews and their role in saving the Ottoman Empire from the debts that burdened it. Thus, his accountability for what happened to Palestine can be viewed ambivalently.

These historians cite what is known as the "Abu Al-Shamat letter," which was sent by Sultan Abdul Hamid II to Sheikh Mahmud Afandi Abu Al-Shamat,<sup>2</sup> where he stated: "I was forced to give up the Islamic caliphate because of the pressure and threats practiced on me by the heads of a Union

2. Sultan's mentor and sheikh of the Shadhili Tariqa in Damascus, a Sufi order of Sunni Islam.

Assembly known as ‘Young Turks’. These federals insisted and forced me to approve the establishment of a national Jewish homeland in the holy land ‘Palestine’. Regardless, I have not categorically approved this mandate [...] following my final response, they have agreed to dethrone me and briefed me about my exile to Thessaloniki and so I accepted.”<sup>3</sup>

The author disagrees with the above-mentioned opinions and concludes that convicts the sultan. There is no doubt that Abdul Hamid II negotiated with Herzl for financial reasons, first owing to the deteriorating financial state of the Ottoman sultanate, in addition to growing European domination. The sultan aimed to obtain money without affording direct and frank concessions to Herzl in Palestine, as he realized that the Ottoman Empire could survive only by relying on the Arabs and Muslims, and their support in facing European intervention. Moreover, Muslim antagonism towards the Zionist project was growing stronger day by day. For this reason, it was hard for him to give up Arab support easily.

Abdul Hamid was confronted with two difficult choices that forced him to engage in long negotiations with the leader of the Zionist movement that later failed. The sultan was willing to make the empire accessible to Jewish immigrants from all over the world on the condition that they pledged to become Ottoman nationals who were allowed to live in any district except for Palestine, and he informed Herzl of the following: “Enter this country as businessmen, become our friends, and then you are allowed to do whatever you want.” Herzl did not account for any grants offered by the sultan other than the agreement on the Palestinian territories. Why then did the negotiations then last for six years?

The author asserts that the sultan alone bears the responsibility of the Zionist project in Palestine, disregarding the accountability of the governors and local authorities who administered the volatile state as they were confused about how to deal with Jewish immigrants to Palestine. To support her conviction further, the author discusses documents that the sultan had issued as a response to the Palestinians’ objection to Jewish immigration, but these were never seriously considered. Moreover, the sultan issued partial documents that allowed the Zionists to buy specific parts of Palestine and build settlements in it, in exchange for the financial rewards offered by the Zionists.

3. Excerpt from the letter of Sultan Abdul Hamid II to Sheikh Mahmud Afandi, known as the “Abu Al-Shamat letter,” dated 22 September 1913.