RELIGIOUS COEXISTENCE IN OTTOMAN PALESTINE: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This study analyzes religious coexistence in Bayt al-Maqdis during the Ottoman rule, focusing on the millet system that regulated religious and social life. The millet system granted autonomy to religious communities but faced challenges such as sectarian tensions among Christian communities and foreign intervention, particularly from Russia and France. These tensions, along with the influence of the Zionist movement on the Jewish community, revealed the system's weaknesses in managing sectarian differences and external influences. The study also examines how Tanzimat reforms transformed the administrative structure and how the millet system adapted to these changes, particularly through the establishment of municipal councils. Overall, the Ottoman millet system provided a space for religious coexistence but was vulnerable to tensions and social changes that challenged political and social stability.

Keywords: *Ottoman Palestine, religious harmony, millet system, interfaith relations, Muslim*

Introduction

The rule of the Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1517) over Bayt al-Maqdis (Jerusalem) marked a significant era in the political, religious, and cultural history of the sacred city. Following the decline of the Ayyubid Dynasty, the Mamluks succeeded in filling the political vacuum across the Levant (Bilad al-Sham) and consolidated their authority as the guardians of Islamic territories, including Bayt al-Maqdis. Although the city did not serve as a major administrative centre given that Mamluk power was primarily based in Cairo and Damascus, it nevertheless retained its status as an important spiritual and intellectual hub. A variety of religious and social infrastructures were developed, including the construction and restoration of mosques, madrasas, khanqahs, and public water fountains (*sabils*), reflecting the Mamluks' commitment to the Islamisation of urban space and the preservation of Islamic religious heritage.[1]

Furthermore, Mamluk rule symbolised a concerted effort to defend the sanctity of the city from foreign threats, particularly in the post-Crusade context and in response to Mongol expansion. The Mamluk victory at the Battle of 'Ayn Jalut[2] in 1260 CE not only halted Mongol

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[1] Donald, P. Little, "Jerusalem under the Ayyubids and the Mamluks 1187–1516AD,"in *Jerusalem in History,* ed. Asali Kamil. J. (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1990), 191.

[2] The Battle of ʿAyn Jālūt took place on 3 September 1260 between the Mamluks of Egypt and the Mongols near the Jezreel Valley in Palestine. It marked the first major defeat of the Mongol Empire in open battle and stopped their westward expansion into the Muslim world. Led by Sultan Qutuz and Baybars, the Mamluks defeated the

advance into the Levant but also reinforced their legitimacy as protectors of the Islamic holy lands. During this period, Bayt al-Maqdis emerged as a symbol of Islamic resilience and as a focal point of religious devotion, including pilgrimage to the Tomb of Prophet Ibrahim, the al-Aqsa Mosque, and the Dome of the Rock.[3] Nevertheless, by the late 15th century, the Mamluk Sultanate was plagued by internal weaknesses such as economic decline caused by disrupted trade routes, political instability, and internal power struggles which gradually eroded their ability to effectively govern the region.[4]

A major geopolitical shift occurred in 1517 when the Ottoman Sultanate, led by Sultan Selim I, defeated the Mamluks in two decisive battles at Marj Dabiq[5] and Ridaniyyah.[6] The fall of the Mamluk marked the end of one era and the beginning of Ottoman rule in the Levant, including Bayt al-Maqdis. The city's transition to Ottoman authority was formalised through a treaty of surrender, thus integrating it into a larger and more centralised imperial structure.[7] This marked the beginning of a new chapter for Bayt al-Maqdis, particularly under the reign of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520–1566), which is often described as a golden age of urban renewal and imperial patronage. Key development projects during this period included the fortification of the city walls (which remain intact today), the construction of a water distribution system, the beautification of al-Aqsa Mosque, and enhancements to the Dome of the Rock.[8]

The Ottomans also introduced a more systematic administrative framework based on the *Eyalet* and *Sanjak* system, with Bayt al-Maqdis falling under the jurisdiction of the Damascus Eyalet. Although the city did not rival Istanbul or Damascus in political centrality, it continued to serve as a major religious centre for Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike. The Ottoman sultans and administrators not only preserved religious freedom among the city's multiethnic and multifaith population but also ensured the safety of pilgrims, religious students,

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Mongol army under Kitbuqa, who was captured and executed. This victory protected key Islamic regions like Egypt and Mecca, strengthened the Mamluk Sultanate, and preserved Islamic civilization from Mongol destruction. The battle is seen as a turning point in Islamic and world history. Charles Phillips, "Battle of 'Ayn Jālūt", *Britannica*, accessed on June 15, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Ayn-Jalut .

[3] Jonathan M. Bloom, "Mamluk art and architectural history: A review article." *Mamlūk Studies Review* 3 (1999): 54.

[4] Abu-Munshar, Maher Y. "Jerusalem as a Place of Exile during the Mamluk Era." *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 14, no. 2 (2019): 101.

[5] The Battle of Marj Dābiq (24 August 1516) was a major confrontation between the Ottoman Sultanate, led by Sultan Selim I, and the Mamluk Sultanate, commanded by Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri. The battle took place in the northern region of Aleppo, Syria. The Ottomans emerged victorious due to their superior use of modern firearms, including cannons, and more disciplined military formations. The Mamluk defeat paved the way for Ottoman control over the Levant region, including Aleppo and Damascus. Sultan Qansuh was killed in the battle, marking a significant rupture in Mamluk authority. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Brittanica, "Battle of Marj Dābiq," *Britannica*, accessed on June 15, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Battle-of-Marj-Dabiq .

[6] The Battle of Ridāniyyah was the decisive clash between the Ottomans and the Mamluks, fought near Cairo, Egypt. This time, Sultan Selim I faced Tuman Bay II, the last Mamluk sultan. Once again, Ottoman military strategy and technological advantage secured their victory. Following the defeat, Cairo was captured, and Tuman Bay II was executed. This battle officially ended the Mamluk Sultanate, and the regions of Egypt and the Hijaz, including Mecca and Medina, were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire. Sultan Selim I also assumed the title of Caliph of Islam, establishing the Ottomans as the central authority of the Muslim world. Michael Winter, "The Conquest of Syria and Egypt by Sultan Selim I, According to Evliyâ Çelebi," in *The Mamluk-Ottoman Transition,* ed. Stephan Conermann and Gül Sen (Göttingen: V&R unipress GmbH, 2017), 127.

[7] David Myres. "An Overview of The Islamic Architecture of Ottoman Jerusalem," in *Ottoman Jerusalem: The Living City,* ed. Sylvia Auld and Robert Hillenbrand (Council for British Research in the Levant, 2000), 326.

[8] Ibid.

and residents. The *millet* system was expanded to accommodate Bayt al-Maqdis's religious diversity, allowing Jewish, Orthodox Christian, Catholic, and Armenian communities to manage their own religious and social affairs autonomously, albeit under the overarching authority of the Islamic government.[9]

Accordingly, this study seeks to explore in depth the Ottoman policies toward Bayt al-Maqdis, particularly about the development of religious institutions, the governance of multi-religious communities, and efforts to maintain social harmony in a city revered by the main three faiths, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. This analysis aims to demonstrate how the Ottoman approach not only preserved the Islamic heritage of Bayt al-Maqdis but also provided a compelling model of interreligious coexistence managed within an Islamic imperial framework.

The Ottoman Millet System and Its Implementation in Palestine

The Ottoman *millet* system, a hallmark of the Empire's approach to governance and religious plurality, was deeply rooted in the principles of pragmatic administration and Islamic jurisprudence. It emerged not only as a system of organizing non-Muslim communities but also as a political solution to managing a vast and multi-ethnic empire. The conceptual foundation of the millet system can be traced back to the early post-conquest period of the Ottoman state, particularly after the capture of Constantinople in 1453. Sultan Mehmed II (Mehmed the Conqueror) institutionalized the millet system by organizing the non-Muslim communities notably the Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Jewish populations into self-governing entities known as "*millets*." These communities were allowed to preserve their own legal codes, cultural traditions, and religious institutions under the leadership of their respective religious heads. Remarkably, each millet was even granted the privilege of electing its own leader, an exceptional degree of autonomy in a centralized imperial structure.[10]

This arrangement was not merely a reflection of Ottoman administrative tolerance but also a political manoeuvre to stabilize governance over newly integrated territories. By granting these communities the ability to manage their internal affairs, the Ottoman authorities reduced potential resistance and secured the loyalty of diverse populations. A further demonstration of this inclusive approach can be observed during the reign of Sultan Selim I, particularly after his conquest of Bayt al-Maqdis in 1517. During his visit to the city, he received a Spanish envoy who relayed a request from the Spanish king to allow Christian pilgrims to continue visiting the holy city. Sultan Selim I agreed, maintaining the Mamluk-era precedent that permitted such pilgrimages.[11] This response reflected the continuity of Ottoman policy in upholding religious tolerance and safeguarding access to holy sites for non-Muslims.

Moreover, Sultan Selim I provided guarantees to all religious communities, affirming their right to perform religious rites without interference. This assurance served to consolidate Ottoman control while simultaneously fostering an atmosphere of coexistence and religious

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[9] Mughul, M. Yakub. *The Ottoman policy towards non-Muslim communities and their status in the Ottoman empire during the 15th & 16th centuries: interaction of civilisation*. (Turkiye: Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu, 2015), 2138.

[10] Eryılmaz, Bilal. *Osmanlı Devletinde Millet Sistemi*. (İstanbul: Ağaç Yayınları, 1992), 101.

[11] Celalzâde Mustafa Çelebi. *Selimnâme*. Edited by Ahmet Uğur and Mustafa Çuhadar. (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1990), 426.

security.[12] The Ottoman policy of religious tolerance and administrative flexibility contributed to the demographic and cultural diversification of its territories. The Empire became a refuge for many non-Muslim groups fleeing persecution in Europe. Jewish and Christian migrants increasingly settled in Ottoman lands, including Palestine, where diverse ethnic and religious groups coexisted, particularly from the seventeenth century onward. In cities such as Jerusalem, Hebron, Bethlehem, and Nazareth, populations of British merchants, Armenian craftsmen, Turkish officials, Moroccan residents, Sunni Arabs, and Orthodox Christians lived side by side, enriching the region's cultural fabric.[13]

On the eve of World War I, the Christian population in Jerusalem had grown significantly, reaching approximately 40,000. These Christians, mainly Arab in origin, belonged to various sects, including Greek Orthodox, Latin Armenians, Syriacs, Copts, Evangelicals, Maronites, and Greek Catholics. Among these groups, the Greek Orthodox community was the most prominent.[14] Their continued presence and secure status in the city reflect the lasting impact of the millet system and the broader Ottoman strategy of accommodating religious diversity. On the other hands, the *millet* system represented a distinctive model of religious and administrative governance. Far from being a static legal construct, it evolved as a pragmatic response to the Empire's socio-political realities. Grounded in Islamic principles of "ahl al-dhimma" (protected non-Muslims), but expanded with Ottoman administrative genius, the system ensured a degree of religious freedom and social autonomy rare for its time.

The Ottoman *millet* system, a distinct model of ethno-religious governance, was shaped by the empire's need to manage a diverse population spread across vast territories. Rooted in the Islamic concept of *ahl al-dhimma*, the protected status of non-Muslims and developed through pragmatic political mechanisms, the millet system provided legal, religious, and social autonomy to various religious communities, particularly in regions of high religious significance such as Jerusalem. Following the Ottoman conquest of Bayt al-Maqdis in 1517, the Empire adopted a policy of continuity and tolerance with regard to Christian and Jewish communities. The Ottoman administration granted broad authority to the Orthodox, Latin, and Armenian Patriarchates over the management of Christian holy sites. Each group maintained the rights they had acquired, and the administration never sought to revoke them. The patriarchates' headquarters, as well as the priests' residences, were located inside the walled city of Jerusalem, while foreign community residences were positioned outside the walls.[15]

A noteworthy aspect of Ottoman governance was its even-handedness in dealing with both local Christian populations and foreign groups. Each community was permitted to construct churches, monasteries, schools, and homes that reflected their cultural character a practice facilitated by the geopolitical interests of European powers like Germany and Russia, who maintained institutions in the city.[16]

Conflict among Christian denominations regarding the holy sites common under the Mamluks was mediated more effectively during the Ottoman period through formalized

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[12] Tansel, Selahaddin. *Yavuz Sultan Selim*. (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1969), 160–161.

[13] Kutb, a.g.m., 411–414; cited in Azmi Khouli, *Osmanlı Döneminde Kudüs'teki Yabancı Okullar* (XIX. Yüzyıl) (İstanbul, 2006), 23.

[14] Hakim, Yusuf. *Suriye ve'l-'Ahd el-'Osmanî*. (Beirut: Dâr el-Nahâr, 1991), 191–192.

[15] Hakim, *Suriye ve'l-'Ahd el-'Osmanî*, 147.

[16] Hakim, *Suriye ve'l-'Ahd el-'Osmanî*, 147.

sharing agreements. The administration ensured peaceful co-management by all Christian groups, with authority divided in a manner that preserved each community's rights.[17] In one notable case, when the covering of the Virgin Mary at the Church of the Nativity was torn, representatives of various Christian groups rushed to repair it, nearly sparking conflict. The Ottoman administration swiftly intervened, ordering that each community contribute materials, thus enforcing collective responsibility and diffusing the tension.[18]

To prevent tensions, especially during religious festivals and ceremonies, the Ottoman state deployed police units and elite soldiers under capable commanders. Civil judges and district commanders supervised such events, and successful conclusions were reported to Istanbul. When high-level consuls from Russia, Greece, and France were present, security was even tighter. Despite frequent ceremonies drawing thousands of pilgrims especially Russians no disturbances were reported, highlighting the Empire's effective control and commitment to religious peace.[19]

Beyond Christian groups, Jewish communities also benefitted immensely from the Ottoman millet system. Following increasing persecution in Europe, particularly from the mid-15th century onward, Jews migrated to the Ottoman Empire in large numbers. Sultan Mehmed II allowed Jews to settle in Istanbul and appointed a Chief Rabbi to lead them. The 1492 expulsion from Spain brought another major wave of Jewish refugees, welcomed by Sultan Bayezid II, who instructed that they be treated with dignity. This led to the Ottoman Empire becoming a primary refuge for Spanish and Portuguese Jews.[20]

In Palestine, Jews settled in Jerusalem, Gaza, Tripoli, Egypt, and Anatolia. Initially limited in number around five hundred in the 15th century they lived peacefully in Muslim-majority neighbourhoods like Sharef, al-Risha, and al-Masleh without reported tensions.[21] Jews were perhaps the most warmly received non-Muslim group by the Ottoman state, enjoying relatively uninterrupted coexistence with both the authorities and local Muslims until the second half of the 19th century, when rising political concerns over Jewish immigration to Palestine prompted regulatory measures.[22]

Relations between Muslims and Christians were likewise characterized by mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. Even before the Ottoman conquest, good neighbourly relations prevailed, and under Ottoman rule, they further improved. Christians were allowed to elect their own religious leaders and, despite some limitations such as not entering Muslim holy sites or bearing arms maintained positive relations with their Muslim neighbours.[23] The state even went so far as to protect Christian monks in monasteries, restore their residences, and pay them salaries, reflecting a policy of active support.[24]

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[17] Yakub, Yusuf. *Nahiyetü'l-Kudüs'ş-Şerif*, Vol. 1. (Jerusalem: Matbaʿat al-Maʿārif, n.d.), 53.

[18] Mustafa Murad ed-Debbâg, *Biladuna Filistîn: Fi Beyti'l-Makdis*, C. 9, kisim 2, (Daru'l Hudâ, Kefer Kara' 1991), 146

[19] Ibid,.

[20] Bernard Lewis, *Notes and Documents from the Turkish Archives*, (Jerusalem, 1952), 5–9.

[21] Yakub, *Nahiyetü'l-Kudüs'ş-Şerif*, I: 40–41

[22] Eryılmaz, Bilal. *Osmanlı Devletinde Gayrimüslim Tebaanın Yönetimi*, (İstanbul: Ağaç Yayınları, 1996), 202.

[23] Yakub, *Nahiyetü'l-Kudüs'ş-Şerif*, 1: 50.

[24] Yakub, *Nahiyetü'l-Kudüs'ş-Şerif*, 1: 50–51.

The *millet* system also had educational and cultural impacts. The founding of various schools for Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Bayt al-Maqdis raised the overall cultural level of the society and helped form an aristocratic class, which in turn facilitated intercommunal harmony. Moreover, the religious significance of Jerusalem attracted pilgrims and tourists from Europe and America, creating economic prosperity and reinforcing social cohesion. Muslims, Christians, Jews, and even foreigners lived in a remarkably open and democratic urban atmosphere, each community maintaining its own religious and civic institutions.[25] Interestingly, while competition did emerge between local Arab Christians and newly arrived Christian groups, relations between these newcomers and the Muslim population remained friendly. In fact, Muslims sometimes aided Christian newcomers, who worked in local institutions or engaged in trade and crafts.[26]

In its early application, the *millet* system successfully regulated relations among the Empire's major religious groups primarily Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Yet, this coexistence was not without tensions. From the earliest years of Ottoman rule in Palestine, conflicts between Christians and Jews were evident. Due to what Christians perceived as disruptive behaviour by Jews, an agreement was made to restrict Jews from entering Christian holy sites. Violators of this accord faced a penalty of one hundred gold coins, payable to the Governor of Bayt al-Maqdis.[27]

However, beginning in the 16th century, the Ottoman administration took deliberate steps to mediate and improve Jewish-Christian relations. Ottoman authorities assumed a judicial role in resolving intercommunal disputes, reducing tensions and transforming hostility into peaceful coexistence.[28] This reconciliation process would later culminate in a remarkable transformation in the 19th century, when certain Christian groups particularly from Europe began actively supporting Jewish communities, viewing this as a religious imperative connected to the Second Coming of Christ.[29]

A major turning point in the evolution of the millet system came with the *Tanzimat* Edict of 1839 (Gülhane Hatt-ı Hümayunu). The term *Tanzimat*, meaning reorganization or regulation, denoted a series of imperial reforms aimed at restructuring state institutions in alignment with modern legal and administrative norms. According to Tayyib Gökbilgin, this edict was in continuity with earlier adaletnâme (justice proclamations) and reflected the state's renewed commitment to safeguarding life, property, and personal dignity.[30]

As İlber Ortaylı notes, the *Tanzimat* reform movement was driven by a desire to stabilize the Empire amidst social crises and internal transformations. Crucially, the edict promised justice and equality for all Ottoman subjects, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.[31] This

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[25] Mustafa Murad ed-Debbâg, *Biladuna Filistîn: Fi Beyti'l-Makdis*, 9:144.

[26] Hakim, *Suriye ve'l-'Ahd el-'Osmanî*, 144–145.

[27] Yakub, *Nahiyetü'l-Kudüs'ş-Şerif*, 1: 53.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Beyan Nüveyıd Hut, *Filistin: el-Kadiyye, eş-Şa'b, el-Hadare*, (Beirut, 1991), 229.

[30] Gökbilgın, "Tanzimat Hareketinin Osmanlı Müesseselerine ve Teşkilatına Etkileri," *Belleten* 31, no. 121 (1967): 93

[31] Ortaylı, İlber. *Türkiye İdari Tarihi*. (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Yayınları, 1979), 264.

egalitarian spirit was further reinforced by commitments to reform taxation, military conscription, and judicial processes.[32] These reforms expanded the scope of millet privileges, particularly in the fields of education and culture. The *Islahat Fermanı* of 1856, which followed the *Tanzimat*, provided non-Muslim communities with greater freedom to establish schools and cultural institutions, often with the backing of Western European powers. This led to a significant increase in non-Muslim-led educational initiatives.[33]

Later, the Ferman-ı Adalet (Edict of Justice) of 1875 reaffirmed these rights and went even further by mandating provincial elections for judges, implementing equal taxation, and abolishing forced labour (angarya). It also facilitated school-building initiatives by Christians and introduced locally elected gendarmes to protect life and property. However, this edict introduced a significant caveat: these rights were to be reserved only for loyal subjects, thus subtly reintroducing distinctions among the population based on political allegiance.[34] Taken together, these legal developments marked a transformation of the millet system from a religious community-based administrative framework to a proto-modern citizenship model. While originally constructed on the principle of communal autonomy under religious leadership, by the 19th century, the *millet* system had been reshaped by codified equality, legal rationalization, and the emergence of secular institutional governance.

The evolution of the Ottoman millet system from the 15th to the 19th centuries reflects a progressive adaptation to the empire's internal diversity and external pressures. What began as a religio-political mechanism for managing non-Muslim populations evolved particularly through the *Tanzimat* and *Islahat* reforms into a framework that granted equal legal and civil rights to all subjects of the empire, at least in theory. Nevertheless, practical limitations, political definitions of loyalty, and foreign influence continued to shape its boundaries. The system's resilience and adaptability remain a testament to the Ottoman Empire's ability to govern a pluralistic society over the course of centuries.

Interfaith Relations in Urban Centers: Bayt al-Maqdis as a Microcosm

The Ottoman Empire's administration of Bayt al-Maqdis during the reign of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent provides a rich and illustrative case study of interfaith coexistence, urban development, and the functional pragmatism of the millet system in an imperial context. This system, which allowed for communal autonomy based on religious identity, was not merely a bureaucratic structure but an adaptable and ideologically grounded framework that promoted cohesion in diversity, particularly in sacred urban centres such as Bayt al-Maqdis.

1. Urban Development and Sacred Space: Interweaving Religious Authority with Social Infrastructure

During the reign of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, Bayt al-Maqdis underwent significant urban development. A notable example of this is the Hürrem Sultan Foundation's soup kitchen (imaret), which contributed to the city's economic and social welfare. Ottoman chroniclers,

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[32] Karal, "Gülhane Hatt-ı Hümayununda Batının Etkisi," *Belleten* 28, no. 122 (1964), 601.

[33] Kodaman, Bayram. *Abdülhamid Devri Eğitim Sistemi*. (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1988), 41.

[34] Ertuğrul, *Kültürümüzü Etkileyen Okullar*, 79; cited in Azmi Khouli, *Osmanlı Döneminde Kudüs'teki Yabancı Okullar* (XIX. Yüzyıl) (İstanbul, 2006), 47.

such as Solakzade and Peçevi, praised these developments, particularly the restoration of the sacred rock, revered as a site where the prophets of the Children of Israel had worshiped.[35]

Süleyman's inscription on the Halil Gate, bearing the phrase *"lā ilāha illā Allāh Ibrāhīm Khalīl Allāh"* (There is no god but God; Abraham is the friend of God), was a powerful political and theological message. It served not only to reinforce Islamic legitimacy but also to embrace Bayt al-Maqdis's non-Muslim communities, recognizing their shared prophetic heritage.[36]

These urban investments were more than architectural they were symbolic acts of sovereignty. Süleyman's title, inscribed on the Coenaculum (a site believed to be the location of the Last Supper and the tomb of Prophet David), referred to him as the "Servant of the Noble Sanctuary and Protector of Islam," reflecting a humble yet authoritative religious guardianship.[37]

2. Charity, Pilgrimage, and Economic Ethics in a Multiconfessional City

Ottoman endowments in Jerusalem were understood in the larger context of pilgrimage routes leading to Mecca, linking the city spiritually and materially with other hubs such as Ramla, Gaza, Hebron, Damascus, and Egypt.[38] These charitable activities not only addressed religious piety but were also economic strategies aimed at fostering urban prosperity and social order. As Celalettin Çelik argues, the Ottomans utilized religion to promote social solidarity and urban identity. Religion was not segregated from economic or administrative considerations; instead, it was integral to the moral economy of the city.[39] Charitable complexes, educational endowments, and public works thus served both spiritual and socio-economic functions.

3. Justice and the Multiconfessional Judiciary: The Role of the Qadi

In the Ottoman circle of justice, the qadi (judge) was central, not merely a religious figure but a key administrative official. The Qadi of Jerusalem ranked among the most prestigious posts in the empire, comparable to those in Istanbul, Mecca, and Damascus. By 1575, the role became a mevleviyet post, reserved for scholars (müderris) from institutions such as the Süleymaniye Dār al-Ḥadīth.[40]

The judicial elite appointed to Bayt al-Maqdis were not ordinary administrators; they were imperially trained scholars, often with prior experience in major urban centers.[41] Their appointment by the Shaykh al-Islām, the empire's highest religious authority, underscores the

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[35] Mehmed Hemdemi Çelebi, *Solakzade Tarihi*, (Mahmud Bey Matbaasi, 1880), 318.

[36] Mehmet Şeker, *Gelibolulu Mustafa Âlî ve Mevâʾıdü'n-Nefâʾis Kavâʾıdu'l-Mecâlis*, (Ankara: Turkish Historical Society, 1997), 118.

[37] Mehmet Tütüncü, *Turkish Jerusalem (1516–1917) : Ottoman Inscriptions from Jerusalem and Other Palestinian Cities.* (Haarlem: Research Centre for Turkistan and Azerbaijan, 2003), 31–32.

[38] Faroqhi, Suraiya. *Pilgrims and Sultans (1517–1683)*. (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Publishing, 2008), 47.

[39] Çelik, Celalettin. *Urbanization and Religion*. (Konya: Çizgi Publishing, 2002), 92.

[40] İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *The Scholarly Institution of the Ottoman State*, (Ankara: Turkish Historical Society, 2014), 102–106.

[41] Îsâ-Zâde, *History [Text and Analysis]*, Edited by Ziya Yılmazer. (Istanbul: Fetih Cemiyeti, 1996), 67–68, 119, 136

importance of their role in preserving interreligious justice and communal balance.[42] Importantly, non-Muslims were permitted to follow their own religious laws, appealing to the qadi only when intercommunal disputes or unresolved issues arose. This dual judicial system exemplified the Ottoman interpretation of pluralism: recognition of distinct religious codes under an overarching legal structure rooted in imperial sovereignty.[43]

4. The Millet System in Practice: Bayt al-Maqdis as an Ottoman Laboratory

Bayt al-Maqdis served as a microcosm of the millet system, where Islamic governance embraced religious diversity without dissolving difference. The state recognized multiple truths within a unified imperial logic. Ottoman sultans not only legitimated their rule through Islamic symbolism but also institutionalized tolerance via legal mechanisms and urban policy. As Kınalızade Ali Efendi emphasized, justice was the cornerstone of governance, and prosperity was a condition for justice. By fostering economic stability and accommodating diverse faiths, the Ottomans laid the groundwork for a multicultural model that enabled peaceful coexistence, at least in structural terms.[44]

Legal and Institutional Frameworks for Religious Coexistence

The Ottoman Empire's approach to governing its multi-religious society, known commonly as the *millet* system, was underpinned by both legal traditions inherited from Islamic governance and institutional structures that evolved to ensure coexistence and administrative efficiency. The historical precedents for this system can be seen in the policies of earlier Muslim rulers, including the legal guarantees extended by Caliph ʿUmar to non-Muslim communities in Jerusalem. This foundational ethos was reaffirmed by Ottoman rulers, particularly by Yavuz Sultan Selim, who, upon his entry into Jerusalem on December 31, 1516, issued *firmans* to both the Armenian Patriarch III Serkis and the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Attalia. These decrees ensured the protection of their communities from injustice while also mandating that they refrain from interfering in the affairs of other religious groups. Such renewals of earlier legal guarantees point to an Ottoman intent to institutionalize religious tolerance through continuity and legitimacy.[45]

The *millet* system was not a rigid, static entity imposed from above; rather, it evolved within the dynamic sociopolitical context of cities like Jerusalem, where multiple religious and ethnic groups coexisted. After the Ottoman conquest, Jerusalem witnessed the emergence of distinct elite classes: the imperial Ottoman administrators and the local *aʿyān* (notables) and *umarāʾ* (military leaders). These groups remained culturally and ethnically distinct, resulting

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[42]Amy Singer, *Kadılar, Kullar, Kudüs'lü Köylüler*, çev. Sema Bulutsuz (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1996), 38.

[43] Alattin Dolu, "Osmanlı Kroniklerinde Kudüs Algısı," *Pamukkale Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 25/1 (2016): 35.

[44] Kınalızade Ali Efendi, *Ethics of State and Family*, Edited by Ahmet Kahraman. (Istanbul: Tercüman 1001 Essential Works Series, 2013), 282–283.

[45]Ercan, 15–17; Satış, 309; cited in Feyza Betül Köse, "Osmanlı Dönemi Kudüs'ünde İdari ve Sosyal Yapı," *Osmanlı Araştırmaları Dergisi* 1 (2015): 173.

in a lack of unified control over local administration or religious institutions. A third group, comprising those with Mamluk or Ottoman military backgrounds, maintained a cohesive identity and social prestige but held limited political influence.[46] This stratification reveals how the millet system coexisted with other forms of socio-political hierarchy that reflected administrative and cultural pluralism.

The shared cultural sphere that facilitated dialogue between the Ottoman authorities and local elites was often mediated by religious and mystical networks, especially Sufi orders. In Jerusalem, Sunni-Sufi affiliations were strong, and prominent Sufi figures held significant roles in religious administration. The appointment of Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Dajjānī, a Sufi, as a Shāfiʿī mufti, and the prominence of the ʿAlamī family of the Rifāʿī order, exemplify the symbiosis between state authority and religious legitimacy in the Ottoman governance model.[47] These cases show that the Ottoman regime integrated local religious traditions into its broader imperial structure, often accommodating local religious elites rather than displacing them.

Spatially, the *millet* system was reflected in the organization of urban life. The Old City of Bayt al-Maqdis was traditionally understood to be divided into four religious quarters: Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Armenian. However, modern scholarship has revealed that this division was less rigid and more influenced by ethnic, social, and historical factors than previously thought. Other distinct neighbourhoods such as the Syrian, Maghribī, and Protestant quarters further complicate this simplistic fourfold model. Despite this, the centrality of intercommunal interaction remains a hallmark of Bayt al-Maqdis's urban life, highlighting the millet system not as a segregating force but as a flexible framework for managing diversity.[48]

The legal role of community leaders within the millet system also reveals its practical administrative functions. Leaders like the *shaykh al-ḥāra* and *shaykh al-zuqāq* acted as intermediaries between the population and the state. Though the role of the *shaykh al-ḥāra* declined during the Ottoman period, figures like the *shaykh al-Yahūd* the representative of the Jewish community retained crucial administrative functions. He was responsible for tax collection and distribution and acted as a guarantor and mediator. His legitimacy derived from internal communal selection, wealth, and familial prestige rather than formal Ottoman appointment, emphasizing the bottom-up nature of leadership within the millet structure.[49]

Lastly, the Ottoman Empire's urban planning and religious sensibilities were reflected in the treatment of holy spaces. For example, although Muslims were prohibited from residing on the Temple Mount due to its sanctity, the area immediately surrounding it became a focal point of Muslim settlement. This pattern shaped the physical distribution of the population and mirrored the reverence of religious space across communities.[50] The Ottoman *millet* system

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[46] Ze'evi, Dror. *An Ottoman Sanjak in the 17th Century: Society and Economy in the Jerusalem District*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 78–79

[47] Ze'evi, *An Ottoman Sanjak in the 17th Century: Society and Economy in the Jerusalem District*, 79–81.

[48] Ben-Arieh, Yehoshua. "The Growth of Jerusalem in the Nineteenth Century." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 65, no. 2 (1975): 252–253.

[49] Amy Singer, *Kadılar, Kullar, Kudüs'lü Köylüler*, çev. Sema Bulutsuz (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1996), 38. Alattin Dolu, "Osmanlı Kroniklerinde Kudüs Algısı," 49-50.

[50] Ben-Arieh, Yehoshua. "The Growth of Jerusalem in the Nineteenth Century." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 254.

served as a foundational mechanism for organizing religious plurality within the empire. Its successful implementation, particularly in a multi-confessional city like Jerusalem, was grounded in legal tolerance, institutional recognition, and imperial pragmatism. Through policies that extended legal autonomy and administrative responsibility to religious communities, the Ottomans crafted a model of coexistence that balanced imperial authority with localized governance.

Jewish Community and Legal Recognition

Following the Ottoman conquest of Bayt al-Maqdis in 1516, a significant demographic and institutional transformation occurred within the Jewish community. A major catalyst for this transformation was the arrival of Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain during the Inquisition. These refugees among them scholars and mystics revived and expanded the existing Jewish presence in the city.[51] The Ottomans not only welcomed these migrants but also institutionalized their religious freedoms and rights. For instance, by the 1520s, the Western Wall had been recognized as a permanent Jewish prayer site, and the empire took active steps to protect and maintain it.[52] A Jewish visitor, David dei Rossi, praised Ottoman policy by contrasting it favorably with European regimes, remarking that Jews were not subjected to special taxation in Jerusalem.[53]

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Ottoman government further structured Jewish communal leadership by requesting the appointment of a *Hahambashi* (Chief Rabbi), selected from among the Sephardic clergy. This position, officially recognized by the Sultan, was charged with overseeing both religious and fiscal responsibilities, such as tax collection and the management of the *halukka* system international donations for the support of Jerusalem's Jewish poor.[54] These developments illustrate how the millet system adapted to changing demographics and ensured internal leadership within each religious community.

Christian Communities: Pluralism and Supervision

The Christian population in Bayt al-Maqdis represented a complex mosaic of sectarian traditions, each with its own institutions and international ties. Ottoman policy recognized and regulated this diversity, granting space for religious practice while maintaining state oversight. The Greek Orthodox Church held primacy among Christian groups, with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre serving as the centre of Christian religious life. The affirmation of the Greek Patriarchate in 1845, followed by its increased prominence, reflects the Ottoman state's tendency to centralize religious leadership within larger, more established institutions.[55] However, sectarian tensions, particularly with the Latin (Catholic) community, frequently arose. French-backed Catholic efforts to regain influence in Jerusalem resulted in the re-

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[51] Al-Aseli, *Jerusalem under the Ottoman*, Trans. from Arabic. (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1996), 207.

[52] Tanyu, Hikmet. "Ağlama Duvarı." In *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, Vol. 1, (Istanbul: TDV Yayınları, 1988), 474-475.

[53] Al-Aseli, *Jerusalem under the Ottoman*, 207

[54] Nicault, Catherine. *La Palestine: Terre des Juifs, Terre des Autres*. (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2000), 48–49.

[55]Ercan, Yavuz. *Osmanlı Yönetiminde Gayrımüslimler*. (Ankara: Turhan Kitabevi, 2001), 241–242

establishment of the Latin Patriarchate in 1848, highlighting how European geopolitics intersected with local religious dynamics.[56]

Despite their small numbers, Latin Catholics received protection under the Capitulations, as evidenced by the 1604 agreement with France, which assured the safety and freedom of Catholic clergy operating in Bayt al-Maqdis.[57] Moreover, Catholic institutions such as the Notre-Dame de France and Marie-Reparatrice Convent were established during the late nineteenth century, extending religious and charitable services to the broader population[58]. These institutions functioned under the umbrella of the millet system, yet their growing power was a concern for the Ottomans, especially given their foreign backing. Evliya Çelebi's *Seyahatname* offers a vivid description of Christian religious practices and Ottoman regulation thereof. During Easter, the Ottoman authorities including the *pasha*, *qadi*, and *shaykh al-Islam* oversaw ceremonies at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to maintain order among the thousands of international Christian pilgrims. This annual sealing and unsealing of the church underscores both the importance of the site and the degree of state involvement in inter-religious space.[59]

The Armenian Patriarchate and Eastern Christian Institutions

The Armenian community, with an ancient presence in Bayt al-Maqdis, was institutionally incorporated into the *millet* system through the recognition of their own patriarchate, one of three Armenian patriarchates within Ottoman territories.[60] Like their counterparts in Istanbul, the Armenian Patriarchs of Bayt al-Maqdis exercised both religious and administrative roles within their community.[61] The legal protection and continuity granted by Yavuz Sultan Selim in 1516 laid the groundwork for their autonomy under Ottoman rule.

The *millet* system ensured that each major Christian denomination had its own legal representative who communicated with the Ottoman authorities on behalf of their community. However, internal struggles particularly between the Greek hierarchy and local Arab clergy demonstrated the fragility of such arrangements. Russian support for Arab clergy in the early 20th century posed a challenge to Greek authority, prompting Ottoman officials such as Governor Ali Ekrem Bey to favour the Greeks as a means of limiting Russian influence.[62] This intervention reveals the political undercurrents shaping millet leadership and the extent to which the Ottomans managed religious affairs within the broader context of imperial strategy.

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[56]Karaman, Hasan. "Kudüs'te Hıristiyan Mezhepleri Arasındaki Münasebetler." In *Kudüs: Dinler ve Kültürler Beşiği*, edited by Yusuf Ziya Kavakçı, 91–97. (Istanbul: Ensar Yayınları, 1999), 96. Ben-Arieh, 254.

[57] Ben-Arieh, Yehoshua. "The Growth of Jerusalem in the Nineteenth Century." 254.

[58]Nicault, Catherine. *Jerusalem 1850–1948*. Trans. Estreya Seval Vadi. (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2001), 59

[59] Evliya Çelebi. *Seyahatname*, Vol. 1. Edited by Robert Dankoff. (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2006), 259–260

[60] Yaşar, Şükran. "The Ottoman Administration of Jerusalem and the Privileges Granted by Yavuz Sultan Selim to the Armenian Community in Jerusalem." *Celal Bayar University Journal of Social Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2003): 105–115.

[61]Öztuna, Yılmaz. *Büyük Osmanlı Tarihi*, Vol. 8. (Istanbul: Ötüken Neşriyat, 1994), 42.

[62]Kushner, David. "Ali Ekrem Bey, Governor of Jerusalem, 1906–1908." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 3 (1996), 352–353.

Russian Orthodox and Imperial Interventions

The growing presence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Bayt al-Maqdis in the nineteenth century reflected Russia's broader aspirations in the Ottoman East. The purchase of *miri* land in 1857–58 and the establishment of the Russian Quarter by 1864 marked a shift in the spatial and political landscape of Bayt al-Maqdis. These properties, designed to host Crimean pilgrims, further internationalized the city's religious demography.[63] As with the Latin Catholics, the Russian Orthodox community's expansion was viewed with caution by Ottoman authorities, who sought to balance foreign influence with domestic order.

The Ottoman millet system in Bayt al-Maqdis was not a rigid legal code, but a dynamic framework shaped by political pragmatism, religious pluralism, and international diplomacy. While the system allowed non-Muslim communities considerable autonomy in religious, legal, and social matters, the empire retained ultimate authority over intercommunal relations and leadership appointments. Through legal recognition, institutional structuring, and imperial supervision, the Ottomans crafted a multifaceted approach to religious coexistence that shaped the sociopolitical fabric of Bayt al-Maqdis and set a precedent for managing diversity within a pre-modern empire.

The Ottoman *millet* system, while rooted in classical Islamic governance, evolved significantly during the *Tanzimat* era (1839–1876), particularly in urban centers like Bayt al-Maqdis. The system, initially structured around religious affiliation and communal autonomy, adapted to the broader goals of modernization, centralization, and administrative efficiency set forth by the *Tanzimat* reforms. The establishment of municipal and administrative councils during this period represents a critical shift in how the Ottoman state managed religious coexistence not by undermining the *millet* structure, but by integrating it within a more modern bureaucratic framework.

The Formation of Municipal Governance in Bayt al-Maqdis

Following the *Tanzimat* emphasis on legal equality and centralized administration, a major institutional innovation in Bayt al-Maqdis was the establishment of the Municipal Council (*Meclis-i Beledî*) in 1863 by imperial decree. This development made Bayt al-Maqdis the first city after Istanbul to be granted a municipal council, signalling its political and religious importance within the empire.[64] Though officially established in 1863, the council began functioning in 1866 [65], marking the onset of a new era in urban governance that expanded beyond the traditional *millet*-based leadership model.

The *millet* system continued to play a foundational role, particularly in the composition and election of council members. In 1898, the electoral structure allocated seats based on communal demographics: 700 Muslims, 300 Christians, and 200 Jews were granted voting

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[63]Kenanoğlu, M. Macit. "Miri Arazi." In *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, Vol. 30,. (Istanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2005). 157–160.

[64]El-Aseli, Muhammad. *Jerusalem under the Ottoman Rule*. (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1996),336.

[65]Nicault, Catherine. *Jerusalem 1850–1948*. Trans. Estreya Seval Vadi. (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2001), 190.

rights, contingent on their tax contributions.[66] This tax-based suffrage reflected the Ottoman effort to merge communal representation with civic responsibility. Despite the state's centralizing ambitions, the influence of major Jerusalemite families particularly the Khalidis and Husaynis remained strong, with nearly all mayors between 1867 and 1914 drawn from their ranks.[67] The enduring prominence of elite families indicates that while the *millet* structure was being reframed within new legal institutions, it was far from dismantled.

Administrative Reforms and Communal Inclusion

The Bayt al-Maqdis Municipal Council was composed of both appointed officials and elected experts engineers, physicians, and veterinarians demonstrating a shift toward professionalization. At the same time, the communal-religious character of representation was preserved, as the mayors continued to represent prominent Muslim families, and religious communities were proportionally included.[68] The council's decisions, including the appointment of the mayor, required approval by the Ottoman governor, further underscoring the balancing act between imperial oversight and communal autonomy.

This model of governance illustrates a transformation of the *millet* system from a purely religious-legal framework to a hybrid system that integrated religious affiliation with modern civic identity. The municipal reforms allowed for cross-communal cooperation in urban management while maintaining each group's internal autonomy. Such a structure served both the Ottoman political objective of unity and the practical need for peaceful coexistence in a deeply pluralistic city.

Public Services and Urban Modernization

The role of the municipality expanded substantially by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Initially responsible for public health, police supervision, and price control, the Bayt al-Maqdis Municipality gradually undertook urban development initiatives that affected all communities. These included the construction of neighbourhoods outside the city walls, opening of secular schools, street lighting, and the development of a sewerage system.[69] These services, while secular in nature, benefited all religious communities and required intercommunal collaboration and oversight.

Institutional developments such as the founding of a municipal hospital in 1891, the formation of a police force in 1886, and the construction of public infrastructure like fountains and clock towers[70] exemplify how urban life was increasingly governed by shared civic institutions rather than solely by communal-religious ones. This transition did not abolish the

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[66] Nicault, Catherine. *Jerusalem 1850–1948*, 86.

[67] Schölch, Alexander. "Jerusalem in the 19th Century (1831–1917)." In *Jerusalem in History*, edited by K. J. Asali, 233–266. (London: Scorpion Publishing, 1989), 239.

[68] Nicault, *Jerusalem 1850–1948*, 86.

[69] Dieckhoff, Alain. *The Invention of a Nation: Zionist Thought and the Making of Modern Israel*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 190–191.

[70] Al-Aseli, *Jerusalem under the Ottoman*, 207.

millet structure; instead, it recontextualized it. Religious identity continued to inform social organization, but civic identity and urban belonging began to take on more prominent roles in the late Ottoman context.

By the 1890s, further modernization efforts were implemented, including the regulation of construction within Jerusalem, the widening of Old City streets, the banning of camels, and the organization of municipal sanitation and fire services.[71] These reforms required centralized planning and cooperation among the city's diverse communities Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike suggesting that religious coexistence was being actively structured through institutional, not merely traditional, mechanisms.

The *Tanzimat* reforms in Bayt al-Maqdis represent a pivotal phase in the historical evolution of the *millet* system. Rather than erasing communal boundaries, the reforms redefined them within a civic and bureaucratic framework that emphasized collective responsibility, professional governance, and imperial authority. The establishment and expansion of the Municipal Council facilitated religious coexistence by providing a legal and institutional platform for communal participation in the governance of shared urban space. In doing so, the Ottoman state reinforced its role as both a guardian of religious pluralism and a modernizing force in the lives of its subjects.

The Ottoman *millet* system functioned not merely as a framework granting autonomy to religious communities, but as a dynamic model of governance that structured the empire's multi-religious society. In cities like Bayt al-Maqdis marked by deep religious and ethnic diversity, the system preserved social harmony while reinforcing imperial authority. By balancing legal legitimacy, local representation, religious pluralism, and centralized oversight, the Ottomans institutionalized a form of tolerance rooted in both tradition and pragmatic governance. During the *Tanzimat* era, the *millet* system was integrated into modern municipal and civic reforms, allowing religious identity and civic belonging to coexist within a shared administrative space. Ultimately, the Ottoman *millet* system, when assessed within its historical context, offers a compelling model for managing religious diversity one in which communal difference was not merely tolerated but embedded into the fabric of governance as a mechanism of social cohesion and political stability.

Conclusion

Overall, this study concludes that, despite various challenges faced by Palestinian society under Ottoman rule, they achieved an extraordinary level of religious tolerance and cooperation. The existence of the millet system and governance policies that promoted religious freedom provided space for Muslims, Christians, and Jews to coexist relatively peacefully. However, this situation was not without tension, especially in the later phases of Ottoman rule, when social and political changes began to challenge the stability that had been built. The findings of this study indicate that interreligious understanding in Ottoman Palestine was a product of social and political dynamics shaped by both local and global factors, as well as the active role of the Ottoman government in managing and stabilizing the situation. These findings contribute

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[71] Nicault, Catherine. *Jerusalem 1850–1948*, 88.

to a deeper understanding of religious diversity in historical contexts and offer valuable insights into how religious harmony can be maintained in multi-religious societies.

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Amy Singer, *Kadılar, Kullar, Kudüs'lü Köylüler*, çev. Sema Bulutsuz (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1996), s. 38; aktaran Alattin Dolu, "Osmanlı Kroniklerinde Kudüs Algısı," *Pamukkale Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 25/1 (2016)

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