State Lands in Mandatory Palestine

Up to the 1960s, research on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Palestine focused largely on political history, with a strong bias toward the history of Zionist activity in the region and toward the Jewish community (Yishuv). Since the 1967 war, a growing body of research has highlighted economic and social issues and has slowly "rediscovered" and examined Palestinian Arab society. Even more recently, some scholars have emphasized the need to evaluate the impact that interrelations of Arabs and Jews have had on perceptions of national and social identity communities increasingly developed apart from each other, at least in some ways, neither did so in a vacuum completely isolated from the other.

Some of the more recent political and social history focuses on the importance of the land issue in Jewish and Arab relations in Palestine. Tyler’s book fits into this context. Land continues to be one of the core issues in the ongoing Palestinian-Arab-Israeli conflict. Any future solution to the problem, whether a two-state or, much less likely, a binational solution, will have to address the sticky and controversial issue of the division and/or sharing of land resources. Tyler’s book covers an important and, at the time, controversial aspect of the land question: the issue of state lands, lands that formerly had been Ottoman state lands and that during the Mandate period came under British purview.

Tyler’s book is a significant contribution to a line of books dealing with the Mandate period generally and with the question of land tenure, land development, and Jewish land settlement specifically. The book consists of two major parts. Part 1 explores Britain’s handling of the state lands issue; part 2 covers its role in rural development. The purpose of the book is to examine Britain’s record vis-a-vis the pledges spelled out in the appropriate articles of the League of Nations mandate for Palestine, i.e., articles 6 and 11. In short, Tyler argues that Britain was derelict in handling the state lands issue. However, despite various factors that hindered economic progress during the mandate period (e.g., Britain’s failure to commit to rural development, peasant backwardness and poverty, a conservative Arab landowning class, and limited Jewish financial resources), Palestine benefited from increased agricultural production; from improvement in methods, crops, and livestock; and from the development of a more market-oriented economy (p. 200). In fairness to Britain (if one can overlook its brazen imperialist ambitions, its paternalistic attitude toward the Arabs, and, in the end, its lack of will), Tyler delineates four reasons why "efforts to honour the pledge to encourage close settlement of Jews on state and waste lands and a more intensive utilization of the soil ... had [by 1948] produced only meager results.” These reasons include the challenge of executing the dual obligation to Jews and Arabs; the "chaotic condition" of the land regime that Britain inherited; the fact that, as investigations demonstrated, only a small amount of unoccupied state land was suitable for cultivation; and the fact that the rapid growth rate of the Arab populations sales to Jews...
(so well spelled out in Kenneth Stein’s book) transfers of Arab land (pp. 204-205). Tyler then concludes with this statement: “The mandatory authorities’ record with regard to the close settlement of Jews and more intensive cultivation on state lands is littered with enough examples of lost opportunities, undue delays and mismanagement to justify the charge of serious administrative failure” (pp. 205-206). Thus, he adds, Jewish disappointment on the issue of how Britain dealt with state lands is “understandable” (p. 207).

To flesh out part 1 of his book, Tyler presents three case studies: Beisan, Huleh, and key coastal lands (the Ahlit, Kabbara, and Caesarea concession). In Tyler’s words, the case studies “are used to illustrate the mandatory’s view of its obligations to both [the Arab and Jewish] communities with regard to state lands, to explain Jewish disappointment and criticism of Britain, and to highlight the clash of Arab and Jewish cultures, lifestyles and attitudes toward land and its utilization” (p.17). In my estimation, he succeeds admirably in obtaining this goal.

In part 2, Tyler examines change and investment in the rural sector; the preservation and improvement of the natural environment; and the improvement of Arab agriculture by establishing security of title and tenure, through providing financial credit in the form of loans (to cultivators) and fund guarantees (to the Agricultural Mortgage Company, for example), through rural education, and through tax and tariff reform. In this part, Tyler really does not contribute much new that has not already been addressed by other scholars, such as Kenneth Stein, Charles S. Kamen, and Ylana Miller, among others. Thus, the real strength and contribution of his book lies in the early chapters on state lands.

Tyler’s book includes three maps, one showing registered land in Jewish possession in 1944 and two showing the Huleh Valley and concession area (divided into the periods 1920-34 and 1934-48). All three maps appeared, in some form, in Tyler’s three articles on the Beisan lands issue and the Huleh lands and concession published in Middle Eastern Studies in 1989, 1991, and 1994. Eight tables give statistical information on topics such as rural land prices and the cost of living in Palestine, state domains, state lands in the hands of Jews, Jewish land acquisition, and expansion of Arab agriculture.

The variety of historical sources Tyler mined for his analysis include archives (Great Britain’s Public Record Office and Israel’s State and Central Zionist Archives); private papers and manuscripts (such as the Sir John Chancellor papers); official publications (of the British and Mandate governments, and the Zionist movement); and a strong list of secondary sources. Although I found part 1 of Tyler’s research to be more enlightening than part 2, overall his book is well researched and well written, and is a fine addition to the slowly growing body of literature dealing with the period of the Palestine mandate.

Notes

[2]. The phrase “relational history” comes from Zachary Lockman, Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906-1948 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 8. Lockman places himself in the company of a body of scholars dealing with the Mandate period who challenge the “conventional approach” that includes the “dual society” paradigm. Explaining his “relational history” approach, he states that “Palestine can only be grasped by studying the ways in which both [the Arab and Jewish] communities were to a significant extent constituted and shaped within a complex matrix of economic, political, social, and cultural interactions.” The argument for economic separatism is put forward by Barbara J. Smith, The Roots of Separatism in Palestine: British Economic Policy, 1920-1929 (London and New York: I. B. Tauris And Co. Ltd., 1993).


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