

'Down with the Bell!' The Nāblus Uprising of April 1856

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the uprising of April 1856 in the Palestinian town of Nāblus, in which local Christians were attacked after symbols of European influence appeared in the town and a man was killed by a British missionary. The events preceding, during and after the uprising are retold from a range of British primary sources, travellers' accounts, newspaper reports and consular documents. However, the paper argues that these Western representations of the uprising were mired in colonial concerns, and puts forward a rereading of the uprising as an act of resistance, against a background of complex local politics, dissatisfaction with the Ottoman Empire's Tanẓīmāt reforms, and growing European presence in Palestine.

KEYWORDS: Consuls, Islam, Missionaries, Ottoman Empire, Palestine, Travellers



INTRODUCTION

ON FRIDAY 4TH April 1856, an English missionary named Samuel Lyde (1825-1860) shot a man dead outside the Palestinian town of Nāblus, thirty miles north of Jerusalem.¹ 'A clergyman of the Anglican Church, whose ill-health prevented him from exercising the duties of his profession in England, at least during the winter months', Lyde, a fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge, visited Syria in the winter of 1850-1 and remained there doing missionary work among the 'Alawīya community in al-Lādhiqīya (Latakia), unconnected to any organised missionary society'.² Having visited Jerusalem, Lyde was

¹ The author wishes to thank the two anonymous reviewers of this paper's first draft for their helpful comments, and Nadine Aranki, Aliya Ali, Colter Louwerse and Pascale Péan for their support and practical assistance.

² Samuel Lyde, *The Ansyreeh and Ismaeleeh: A Visit to the Secret Sects of Northern Syria* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1853), pp. iii-iv.

on his way northwards when the fatal incident occurred. According to newspaper reports, the victim of the shooting was a local Muslim, 'Yasma, son of El-Abd', a disabled but well-known and respected resident of Nāblus.³

While Lyde maintained the shooting had been an accident, Yasma's death proved a serious grievance for the people of Nāblus. A day of violence and destruction followed. By its end, according to reports, four or six of the town's Christian community had been killed and more injured, their churches ransacked, and their homes looted by some of the town's Muslim majority.⁴ The house of Nāblus's Ottoman governor, a Muslim from a powerful local clan, was briefly besieged by armed residents after Lyde took refuge there.⁵ Although the uprising lasted only one day, the aftermath dragged on in the Jerusalem courts for months; memories of the uprising haunted British figures who had been involved, for years.

While on a far smaller scale than other outbursts of violence in the Ottoman Eastern Mediterranean, such as the anti-conscription riots in Aleppo in 1850 and the violence in Damascus in 1860 in which three thousand Christians may have died, the uprising in Nāblus makes for an intriguing study.⁶ In addition to the violence against their Christian neighbours, the Muslims of Nāblus targeted all the symbols of Western presence in their town – European flags, the Protestant school with its new church bell, and the houses of the local agents of European consuls. The uprising was a manifestation of the latent conflict underlying the encounter of the West with Palestine, the Ottoman Empire, and the Islamic "Orient" of the Western imagination. It can be read as a precursor to the later anti-colonial and nationalist movement(s) in Palestine, occurring as the Tanẓīmāt facilitated Western encroachment into Ottoman territory.⁷

³ 'The Outrages at Nablous', *The Daily News*, 5 May 1856.

⁴ 'News of the Week', *Liverpool Mercury, etc.*, 10 May 1856; 'Prussia (From Our Own Correspondent)', *Times*, 8 May 1856.

⁵ Mary Eliza Rogers, *Domestic Life in Palestine* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1862), p. 294.

⁶ Ussama Makdisi, *The Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), p. 54.

⁷ See Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

Using reports in the British press, the accounts of British travellers and consular documents, this article investigates the 1856 uprising, which has previously been unduly overlooked in historical literature.⁸ This article firstly investigates the uprising's context, moving from the imperial – the Ottoman Empire in the Tanzīmāt period – to the local, Palestine and Nāblus, in this period increasingly subject to the Western gaze. The sources recounting the uprising are reviewed, before the events preceding, during and following the uprising are reconstructed. The article concludes by proposing a 'decolonisation' of how the uprising has been read in the past, moving from a narrative of senseless sectarian violence to one of local politics and resistance, in which local Christians were tragically targeted as a result of European activity in Palestine.

THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE, PALESTINE AND NABLUS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The Nāblus uprising occurred in the middle of the Tanzīmāt reform era (1839-1876). The impetus for the reforms, which theoretically legislated equality between Muslim and non-Muslim Ottoman subjects, was the threat of the disintegration of the Empire. With the revolt of Egypt's governor Muḥammad 'Alī (1769-1849) and his occupation of the Eastern Mediterranean in 1831, the overthrow of the Ottoman state seemed imminent to Western observers. In return for Britain's help in restoring Syria and Palestine to Ottoman control, Sultan 'Abdūlmecīd I (r. 1839-1861) delivered the first of the Tanzīmāt in November 1839. Makdisi summarises the contradiction at the heart of the Tanzīmāt period:

Equivocation and ambiguity were at the heart of the Tanzimat. The sultan's immediate concern was pacifying and appeasing foreign powers. Yet the object of the decrees was his vast and disparate subject population. The Tanzimat reforms were couched in language of total

⁸ For brief discussions of the uprising, see Abdul Latif Tibawi, *British Interests in Palestine, 1800-1901: A Study of Religious and Educational Enterprise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 116; Orlando Figes, *Crimea: The Last Crusade* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), pp. 429-430.

sovereignty, but in their timing, content, and concessions they actually underscored Ottoman dependency on Britain.⁹

British and French support for the Ottomans during the Crimean War of 1853 to 1856 resulted in the Hatt-ı Hümayūnu of February 1856. Whilst it reaffirmed Christian-Muslim equality, Davison notes that the Hatt-ı Hümayūnu was 'essentially made in Europe, and autochthonous in form alone'. It damaged the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, where there had previously generally been coexistence. Considering the patronage and protection Christians received from European powers, ordinary Muslims now seemed disadvantaged.¹⁰ The Nāblus uprising was an act of resistance by inhabitants of one significant town on the periphery of the Empire to what they considered an attack on their interests, foisted upon them by foreigners.

Palestine had already experienced significant instability, with a revolt against taxes in Jerusalem and Nāblus in 1825-6, and a widespread uprising against the Egyptian occupation in 1834. The *ulāmā*, the Islamic clergy, often played an important role in these uprisings.¹¹ Traditional scholarship has posited the '*ulāmā*' as leading opposition to the Tanẓīmāt around the Empire; recent research has revealed a more complex picture. Yazbak argues that in Nāblus the '*ulāmā*' often turned new systems of power to their advantage.¹² Freas notes that the new power structures imposed by the Tanẓīmāt ruptured the relations between Palestinians and their traditional leaders. Local notables, including the '*ulāmā*', courted the people to win local political struggles, sometimes by leading protests against the Ottomans in the guise of the Tanẓīmāt.¹³

⁹ Makdisi, *The Age of Coexistence*, p. 52.

¹⁰ Roderick H. Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire, 1856-1876* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 54, 63.

¹¹ 'Adel Manna', 'Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Rebellions in Palestine', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 24 (Autumn 1994), 51-66.

¹² Mahmoud Yazbak, 'Nabulsi Ulama in the Late Ottoman Period, 1864-1914', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 29 (February 1997), 71-91.

¹³ Erik Eliav Freas, 'Ottoman Reform, Islam, and Palestine's Peasantry', in *Visual Arts and Art Practices in the Middle East* (= *The Arab Studies Journal*, 18 (Spring 2010)), 196-231.

Palestine was not only subject to local and Ottoman politics; a Western colonial gaze was increasingly falling on the region. Anticipating the Empire's collapse, European powers competed to increase their influence, building consular and missionary institutions and extending their "protection" over minorities (France over Catholics, Russia over Orthodox Christians, and Britain over the tiny Protestant community and Jews). Britain took the lead, establishing a consulate in Jerusalem in 1839 and the first Protestant church in Palestine, Christ Church in Jerusalem, in 1849.¹⁴ British involvement in Palestine also had a profoundly ideological dimension. A 'Biblical Orientalist' view of Palestine as the Judeo-Christian Holy Land left Westerners largely blind to the existing majority-Islamic society in Palestine, until incidents such as the Nāblus uprising threatened their safety or interests.¹⁵

Nāblus challenged the image among Victorian Evangelicals of Palestine as a backwards part of the Orient stuck in Biblical stasis. With around 20,000 inhabitants, Nāblus was among Palestine's largest towns.¹⁶ Known for its olive oil and soap production, Nāblus was a centre of Levantine and international trade networks; Western travellers could find 'Manchester cottons, printed calicoes, Sheffield cutlery, Bohemian glasses for narghilehs, and crockery and trinkets of all kinds from Marseilles' in the town's bazaar.¹⁷ As Doumani has described, Nāblus owed its position as 'Palestine's principal trade and manufacturing centre' to its relative 'autonomy'; resentful of Turkish

¹⁴ Alexander Scholch, 'Britain in Palestine, 1838-1882: The Roots of the Balfour Policy', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 22 (Autumn 1992), 39-56.

¹⁵ For Biblical Orientalism, see Lorenzo Kamel, 'The Impact of "Biblical Orientalism" in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Palestine', *New Middle Eastern Studies*, 4 (2014), <<http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archives/1263>>.

¹⁶ Beshara Doumani, "The Political Economy of Population Counts in Ottoman Palestine: Nablus, circa 1850," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 26 (February 1994), 1-17, p. 1.

¹⁷ Mary Eliza Rogers, 'Samaria and Plain of Esdraelon', in *Picturesque Palestine, Sinai and Egypt*, 4 vols, ed. by Charles Wilson (London: J.S. Virtue and Co., 1881), II, 1-24 (p. 10).

rule, local notable families fought bloody conflicts, but managed to maintain Nāblus's functional independence.¹⁸

Regarding the growing Western presence in Palestine, Yazbak writes that in Nāblus 'it was hardly felt before the end of Ottoman rule', and 'prominent figures, let alone the broader strata of the town's inhabitants, rarely met Europeans'.¹⁹ Nāblus with its large Muslim majority was not an obvious target for missionary activity. Nevertheless, a Protestant missionary school was constructed there in the early 1850s.²⁰ Nāblus had a small Christian community, the census of 1871-2 recording 96 Christian households, mainly Orthodox with a few Latin and Protestant families.²¹ The Protestants, converts from other denominations, were led by the highly-regarded missionary John Bowen (1815-1859) until early 1856, when he returned to Britain; he became Bishop of Sierra Leone shortly before his death.²² Nāblus was also home to Palestine's only Samaritan community, and a small Jewish community; fascinated with the Samaritans, many Western travellers visited Nāblus. The British, French and Prussian consuls in Jerusalem each appointed local Muslim or Christian agents in Nāblus.²³

Yet Nāblus also developed a negative reputation in travellers' texts.²⁴ Unlike most of the towns visited by Europeans – ports like Jaffa with its cosmopolitan feel, or towns such as Nazareth with sizeable non-Muslim communities and noticeable European missionary presence – Nāblus was dominated by its Muslim population.

¹⁸ Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 1-2.

¹⁹ Yazbak, 'Nabulsi Ulama', p. 72.

²⁰ Seth J. Frantzman, Benjamin W. Glueckstadt and Ruth Kark, 'The Anglican Church in Palestine and Israel: Colonialism, Arabization and Land Ownership', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 47 (January 2011), 101-126 p. 103.

²¹ Alexander Scholch, 'The Demographic Development of Palestine, 1850-1882', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 17 (November, 1985), 485-505, p. 486.

²² See John Bowen, *Memorials of John Bowen, LL.D., Late Bishop of Sierra Leone* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1862), pp. 502-503.

²³ Finn, *Stirring Times*, II, p. 425.

²⁴ See David Kushner, 'Zealous Towns in Nineteenth-Century Palestine', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 33 (July 1997), 597-612.

Automatically interpreting what may have been reasonable expressions of wariness from the town's inhabitants as anti-Western hostility, travellers used their written representations of Nāblus to denigrate Islam and Muslims. Welsh Calvinistic Methodist missionary John Mills (1812-1873), whose 1864 *Three Months' Residence at Nablus* included an account of the uprising, wrote 'the natives of Nablus are the most fanatic and wicked of all the Mussulmans of Palestine', and warned that 'Nablus is not the safest place for a Frank [European] to remain in'. Incidents of overt aggression towards Western travellers were rare; Mills admitted that, despite his apprehensions during his stay, 'it all ended in words'.²⁵ Travellers' texts were as much products of their imaginations as reflections of reality.

The uprising turned Nāblus into a meeting place of different worlds, an intersection between global politics, colonial ideology, and local concerns. Multiple dimensions of conflict and resistance can be read in the British representations of the uprising: resistance of Nāblus's populace to the Tanẓīmāt reforms imposed upon them; conflict between indigenous Palestinian identity and European colonial interests; and the mismatch between Western travellers' expectations of the Holy Land, and the society they actually encountered.

NARRATING THE UPRISING

News of the uprising was reported in the local and national press from late April 1856. The *Belfast News-Letter* reported under the headline 'Alarming Outbreak in Syria', that 'the whole of the Nablous country is in a state of insurrection, in consequence of the reported murder of a Turkish mendicant by an English missionary. The foreign consulates had been pillaged, and the Prussian consul killed'.²⁶ The following day, the same publication referred to the report it had received as 'a curious and not very credible statement', described the aforementioned murder as 'alleged', and stated 'we

²⁵ John Mills, *Three Months' Residence at Nablus, and an Account of the Modern Samaritans* (London: John Murray, 1864), pp. 275, 95.

²⁶ 'This Day's London News: Alarming Outbreak in Syria', *The Belfast News-Letter*, 28 April 1856.

withhold our belief from the assigned cause of this *emeute* until we have more direct details to satisfy us on the point'.²⁷

Subsequent newspaper reports confirmed the uprising, presenting an image of Muslims as fanatical and violent, the Ottoman Empire as verging on collapse, and the Tanẓīmāt as ineffectual. The most interesting of the newspaper reports was 'an almost verbatim transcription of a letter addressed by three of the most respectable Protestant Christians in Nablous'. Dated 9th April, the letter first appeared in the *Daily News* under the headline 'The Outrages at Nablous'. This was, supposedly, the only occasion on which Palestinians could tell their own story directly. However, the authenticity of the document cannot be known, nor (if it was authentic) the accuracy of the 'almost verbatim' translation, nor the extent to which the anonymous authors provided a heightened picture to call for increased protection from Britain. Their sensational account vindicated those who, after the Crimean War, wished Britain to pursue more proactively the defence of Christians in the Ottoman Empire. 'Where are the English, where the French and the Sardinians, who have shed their blood to uphold the power of Islam, and to give liberty to the Christians of the East?' asked the letter. 'They have spill [sic] their blood in vain. Their toil has gone in emptiness. Pharoah [sic] will not let Israel go'.²⁸

Later, longer texts appeared by British individuals who were in Palestine during or around the time of the uprising. *Domestic Life in Palestine* was authored by Mary Eliza Rogers (1827-1910), sister of the British vice-consul in Haifa, Edward Thomas Rogers (1831-1884); when he returned to Palestine after leave in 1855, Mary accompanied him. Mary's account of the uprising was enriched by Edward's eyewitness report from Nāblus. Another account appeared in John Mills's *Three Months' Residence*. Mills was not in Palestine during the uprising, but in 1860 he gathered information from 'Yohannah El Karey, a young Arab and a native of Nablus', who claimed – perhaps inaccurately – to have been with Lyde at the moment of the

²⁷ 'Outbreak in Syria', *The Belfast News-Letter*, 29 April 1856.

²⁸ 'Outrages at Nablous', *Daily News*.

shooting, and to have been 'beaten without mercy' during the uprising, until saved by the intervention of a Muslim friend.²⁹

Another account of the uprising was published in 1878, penned by Britain's consul in Jerusalem from 1846 to 1863, James Finn (1800-1872). His lengthy memoir of the Crimean War years, *Stirring Times*, edited posthumously by his wife Elizabeth, dedicated a whole chapter, 'Unexpected Troubles', to the uprising. Finn kept a close watch on developments in Palestine which could affect Britain's interests. Mary Rogers, for instance, reported that her brother was directed to 'watch carefully, and report to Mr. Finn all that is going on' regarding the powerful family which governed Nāblus at the time of the uprising, the 'Abd al-Hādī clan'.³⁰ Of all the uprising's chroniclers, Finn was the closest to the events, and expended much effort afterwards attempting to achieve a satisfactory closure from Britain's perspective. Finn's consular diary and correspondence, as well as his memoir, reveal how Britons resident in the Eastern Mediterranean faced the uprising's aftermath.

In none of these accounts are the Muslim majority of Nāblus allowed to speak, except through the distorting pens of Westerners; in all the accounts, to extents differing only slightly, Islam and Muslims are demonised, and the uprising was used to create, in Stockdale's words, a portrait of 'the inherent danger of the Holy Land, a location increasingly constructed throughout the nineteenth century (and twentieth century) as a place of timeless conflict and chaos, where life could be snatched away at any moment'.³¹ Ottoman documents such as the *sijilāt* or court records, may provide a different picture for future research, though the voices of most of the ordinary

²⁹ Mills, *Three Months' Residence*, pp. viii, 101, 102. El Karey was born in 1843 or 1844, making him twelve or thirteen at the time of the uprising. He was later sponsored by Mills to study in Pontypool and London in the 1860s, after which he returned to Nablūs as a missionary until his death in 1907. John H.Y. Briggs, 'The Revd Youhannah El Karey and Nineteenth-Century Baptist Missions in Palestine: Part 1', *Baptist Quarterly*, 44 (Winter 2014), 86-98.

³⁰ Rogers, *Domestic Life*, p. 216.

³¹ Nancy L. Stockdale, 'Danger and The Missionary Enterprise: The Murder of Miss Matilda Creasy', in *New Faith in Ancient Lands: Western Missions in the Middle East in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Heleen Murre-van den Berg (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 113-132, p. 114.

Palestinians who rose up, or suffered, in 1856, are surely lost forever. The British accounts nevertheless hold their own value, not only for their representations of the uprising, but also for insights into Victorians' fears of a mass Islamic resistance to Empire.

ANATOMY OF AN UPRISING

While Lyde's action triggered the uprising, the wider uncertainty around the Tanẓīmāt and the increasing European presence in Palestine was manifested in several ways preceding the shooting. While the Hatt-ı Hümāyūnu was announced in Istanbul on 18th February 1856, according to Finn it had yet to be conveyed to the Ottoman governor of Jerusalem, although the news was known to the European residents of Jerusalem 'through newspapers and travellers' by late March.³² On Saturday 29th March, Samuel Gobat (1799-1879), a Swiss Calvinist who was appointed Bishop of Jerusalem in 1846, journeyed to Nāblus carrying, in Finn's words, 'a bell with him in his luggage, which had been procured from England, to be put up there upon the Chapel School'. By introducing a church bell where there had not previously been one, Gobat ill-advisedly wished to put into practice the promises of the Hatt-ı Hümāyūnu, even before they were known to the local populace. In a circular letter of November 1857, Gobat neglected to mention this, omitting his own role in the affair.³³ Finn claimed he 'had no idea [...] that [Gobat] had such an instrument of peril to the public peace for such a town as Nabloos, among his luggage on the mules'. Arriving in Nāblus, Gobat sent a letter informing the town's governor that the new bell would be rung for Sunday worship. Initially inquiring whether, in Finn's words, 'the Bishop was furnished with an order from the Pashà [of Jerusalem] for the putting up of the bell in such a town as that', Nāblus's governor Maḥmūd 'Abd al-Hādī assented 'on being informed that the

³² All information from Finn on the uprising below, unless otherwise cited, is from Finn, *Stirring Times*, II, pp. 424-440.

³³ Samuel Gobat, *Samuel Gobat, Bishop of Jerusalem. His Life and Work* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1884), p. 315.

Bishop placed dependence upon the Sultan's new Hatt-i-Humayoon'. He sent his guards to the school when the bell was rung, but no negative reaction materialised.

The second cause which according to British sources created 'feelings of vindictive animosity against the Christians' in Nāblus, was European consulates' celebration of the birth on 16th March 1856 of the French Prince Imperial, son Napoleon III.³⁴ This news reached Jerusalem on 31st March; that evening saw a *soirée* for French and British travellers in the city, which, Finn recorded, included a performance of the *Marseillaise* in Arabic by a 'son of the barber Butros', among other entertainments. The following day, a more formal banquet for European consuls and the Ottoman governor was held at the French consulate. The next Friday, the day of the Nāblus uprising, the Ottoman governor of Jerusalem granted British travellers the long-desired access to the Ḥaram al-Sharīf, the Islamic holy compound containing the al-Āqṣā Mosque and Dome of the Rock.³⁵

The marking in Nāblus of the French prince's birth was less extravagant, though it may have seemed more incongruous to local residents. According to Finn, on the 31st the French consul sent a letter to the French agent in Nāblus, informing him of the prince's birth, and a letter for Maḥmūd 'Abd al-Hādī, instructing him to congratulate the agent, a telling indicator of the European powers' confidence with the Ottoman authorities in the Tanẓīmāt period. The agent – according to one report 'the son of a rich Mahomedan [...] only 14 years of age' – borrowed British and Ottoman flags from the Protestant school and flew them on 1st April over his home.³⁶ Finn described the flags as 'not much exceeding the size of a pocket-handkerchief'; the French flag may have been larger, as one newspaper reported that in the subsequent uprising the crowd 'enveloped the Consular agent in his own flag, and rolled him thus through the street'.³⁷ Gobat and the British agent displayed the British flag. The governor, according to Finn,

³⁴ 'Summary', *Liverpool Mercury, etc.*, 7 May 1856.

³⁵ See Finn, *Stirring Times*, 2, pp. 418-423; Rogers, *Domestic Life*, pp. 291-293.

³⁶ 'Prussia', *Times*.

³⁷ 'Foreign Intelligence: Turkey', *The Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Herald*, 21 May 1856.

'took no notice of these tiny exhibitions', but allowed his soldiers to 'fire salutes of musketry in the street', for which he charged a fee to the consular agents. The flags were kept flying until April 4th, in Finn words 'a great mistake among many other mistakes'. Luckily for Gobat, Nāblus's resident Protestant missionary John Zeller (1830-1902), and some local Protestants, they left Nāblus for Nazareth on the morning before the uprising.³⁸

Several commentators attributed the subsequent outburst of anger to the flags' appearance in particular, and hatred of Western presence in Palestine in general. Explaining that 'the population of Nablous is among the most savage and most fanatical of Asia', the author of one article claimed it had been 'hitherto thought advisable not to excite its fanaticism by any external signs of foreign influence, and the Consular agents never hoisted their flags'.³⁹ Finn claimed that after the raising of the flags, 'among the fanatic Nabloosians, a hostile feeling was seething, and waiting only for an opportunity of overt explosion'. He also speculated whether the whole episode had been planned by 'the fanatical party' of the Ṭūqān family, rivals in the power struggle over Nāblus with the 'Abd al-Hādī family who 'had always been of the Liberal party'.

One more factor was mentioned as enflaming tensions. Finn claimed that the Hatt-ı Hümayūnu 'had not [...] been officially communicated to the authorities in Palestine, much less to the native public' when Gobat travelled to Nāblus, its content only known 'through the European newspapers and general rumour'. According to Finn's consular diary, the Hatt-ı Hümayūnu was only officially announced in Jerusalem on 6th April.⁴⁰ Several sources posited the people's anger in Nāblus during the uprising as arising primarily from the Hatt-ı Hümayūnu, of which they were apparently already

³⁸ Rogers, *Domestic Life*, p. 294.

³⁹ 'Foreign Intelligence', *Bury and Norwich Post*, and *Suffolk Herald*.

⁴⁰ James Finn, Elizabeth Anne Finn, *A View from Jerusalem, 1849-1858: The Consular Diary of James and Elizabeth Anne Finn*, ed. by Arnold Blumberg (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1980), p. 222.

aware.⁴¹ Rumour may have played a role in sparking the uprising; yet the writers' willingness to attribute the violence to opposition to Muslim-Christian equality, speaks also of Western conceptions of Islam and the (im-)possibility of reforming the Ottoman Empire.

Despite these possible aggravating factors, most sources agreed that it was the fatal encounter between Lyde and Yasma which sparked the unrest. All the British sources sought to exonerate Lyde of guilt for Yasma's death, claiming that Yasma – fulfilling the stereotype of the greedy Oriental, seeking “baksheesh” from Western travellers – waylaid Lyde as he was on his way out of Nāblus on horseback. Grabbing Lyde's gun, Yasma was killed when the gun discharged accidentally. According to Finn's diary entry during Lyde's subsequent trial, the only witnesses were three women, whose testimony could not be given in an Ottoman court.⁴² This contradicts Mills's claim that his protégé Yohannah was with Lyde at the time, though the absence of any other witnesses did allow Lyde's own version of events, subsequently adopted by his British supporters, to be accepted unchallenged.

Reports dutifully did their best to blacken Yasma's character. The Nāblus Christians' letter portrayed Yasma as 'of evil form, utterly untrained, like the people of his country'.⁴³ Rogers described Yasma (like Mills and Finn, she did not provide his name in her account) as 'deaf and dumb, and slightly deranged in intellect, and consequently was superstitiously respected by the Arabs, and was yet, at the same time, an object of their amusement', adding 'he was a professed beggar, and very importunate'.⁴⁴ Finn wrote similarly of Yasma's 'habitual impudence'. The closest to an actual expression of sympathy came from Mills, who described him as a 'poor fellow'. In Mills's perhaps inaccurate account, Lyde immediately proceeded to the house of Yasma's father to offer him 'blood-money', which the man wished to accept 'with characteristic love of

⁴¹ See 'Egypt (From Our Own Correspondent)', *Times*, 29 April 1856; 'Outrages at Nablous', *Daily News*; 'Summary', *Liverpool Mercury*, etc.; 'News of the Week', *Liverpool Mercury*, etc.

⁴² Finn, *A View from Jerusalem*, p. 223.

⁴³ 'The Outrages at Nablous', *Daily News*.

⁴⁴ Rogers, *Domestic Life*, pp. 295-296.

backsheesh.⁴⁵ According to the Nāblus Protestants' letter, 'the Moslems seized him [...] and took him to the judgement'.⁴⁶ All reports agreed that Lyde was soon taken to the house of the governor, Maḥmūd 'Abd al-Hādī, which quickly proved beneficial for Lyde's wellbeing.

Yasma's death caused the pre-existing tension to erupt into the uprising. In Finn's dramatic phrasing, 'the cup of fanaticism was full, and the one drop more caused it to run over'. British reports blamed the '*ulāmā*' for using the pretext of Yasma's death to mobilise the people in revolt.⁴⁷ The Nāblus Protestants' letter stated that 'one of the Ulema, Mohammed Tirforha, went down with his brother Amar, and began to cry in the streets, "Allah Akbar! Allah Akbar! (God is great); Oh, religion of Mohammed, art thou dead?"' A 'Sheick Sulah-el-Bacane' assembled a group of twelve '*ulāmā*' who had allegedly previously agreed to stoke an anti-Christian uprising.⁴⁸ In the letter's sensationalist language, this coldly premeditated plan was a 'treacherous snake, bred long before'. The assorted '*ulāmā*' prevented the call to the Friday noon prayer (the main collective worship of the week for Muslims) at the Nāblus mosque, the gathered crowd challenged to either 'pray behind the (Christian) priests and consular agents', or to 'manifest the religion of Mohammed', as 'the women began to shout and urge them on'.⁴⁹

Finn provided an outline of the subsequent uprising:

Shrieks and cries arose from the infuriated crowd – 'Vengeance on the Christians for the blood of Islām!' – 'Down with the flags!' – 'Down with the bell!'

The bell and the flags, including the Turkish, were soon on the ground — the tricolor of France, subjected to special indignity, having an

⁴⁵ Mills, *Three Months' Residence*, p. 101.

⁴⁶ 'Outrages at Nablous', *Daily News*.

⁴⁷ 'Summary', *Liverpool Mercury, etc.*; 'News of the Week', *Liverpool Mercury, etc.*

⁴⁸ Yazbak lists the Tuffaha and Baqani among Nāblus's important '*ulāmā*' families in the mid-nineteenth century. Yazbak, 'Nabulsi Ulama', p. 74.

⁴⁹ 'Outrages at Nablous', *Daily News*.

old shoe tied to it before being dragged through the miry street, by way of expressing the popular hatred.

The French Agent's house, and the Protestant mission house and school, as well as the dwellings of Protestant natives, were sacked. The grey-headed father of the Prussian Agent, Kawwâr (the old man was not a Protestant), running for refuge to the house of his friend the English Agent (who was happily absent from Nabloos), was murdered within its threshold.

Not only were the houses of the Agents and of the Protestant Christian natives sacked, but the others, the Greek-rite Christians, were likewise plundered in their houses and in their church, and the dwelling of the deacon in charge of it.

The letter contained further details: the 'old man of 80' and 'helpless old woman' who were also attacked; the theft of an agent's wife's jewellery and clothes, 'leaving nothing in the house of the least value'; and the destruction of an 'English iron plough', symbolic of ungrateful Orientals' rejection of Western progress. The rioters 'cursed' the sultan himself for issuing the Hatt-ı Hümayûnu, invoking the Islamic formula that 'the ruled need not obey when the ruler is rebellious'. The letter also noted that some Christians were given refuge by Muslims in their homes, though added that they 'most likely paid them the price of their blood for their safety'.⁵⁰ This is confirmed in Finn's diary; in July 1857, Finn met 'Shaikh Mahhmood Yaeesh of Nablus & his son (Hhassan) who [...] protected the Christians [...], saved lives, & fed the suffering for several days in his own house'.⁵¹ According to the *Times*, Muslim neighbours of the Prussian agent (a local Christian) armed themselves to defend the agent's home.⁵² While these cases of Muslim-Christian solidarity were perhaps the exception rather than the norm, their occurrence shows that claims in the British press that 'a whole city [...] rose on 500

⁵⁰ 'Outrages at Nablous', *Daily News*.

⁵¹ Finn, *View from Jerusalem*, p. 262.

⁵² 'Prussia', *Times*.

miserable Christians', were not strictly accurate.⁵³ Finn noted that 'neither Jew nor Samaritan was either insulted or injured' during the events.

While this occurred, Lyde was sheltered by 'Abd al-Hādī, according to Mary Rogers, in 'his new and beautiful house, which was actually besieged by the people, and considerably injured, because the Governor refused to yield the offender up to them'. Lyde apparently made his will, and 'begged the Governor to let him go out to the mob, that they might be appeased by his death'. This attempt at self-sacrifice was denied by 'Abd al-Hādī, who could surely imagine some of the consequences he might face if he allowed a missionary from one of the Ottomans' European allies to perish in such a way. In Rogers's account, 'Abd al-Hādī' reassured Lyde that "'I and my family, my servants and all my household, will risk our lives, rather than let yours be sacrificed'".

In fact, the anger of 'the mob' was short-lived, dissipating by the end of the day. News reached Jerusalem on Saturday through the British and Prussian agents who had fled Nāblus, according to Finn leaving their wives behind, as they 'still trusted (and in this they were not mistaken) to Moslem principles of honour for the safety of their female relations'. The next morning, a group including Edward Rogers set out from Jerusalem to retrieve Lyde, who returned to Jerusalem on 10th April with 'a little party of Turkish irregular cavalry'.⁵⁴ Lyde was presented as a gentle soul, remorseful over Yasma's death. Finn claimed 'the poor man was in great grief at the result of the accident, and needed all the cheering and kindness which friends could bestow'. Lyde's mental torment, Finn wrote, in addition to his 'well-known life of courage and self-denial', earned him 'a deep feeling of respect for him from all quarters (except, of course, the turbulent fanatics of Nabloos)'.⁵⁴

Rogers returned three days later, with a report of the destruction: in Zeller's house he found 'the floors covered with broken china, leaves of books, maps, and papers of all descriptions, in fragments'. Rogers also bore jewellery which 'some of the

⁵³ 'Outrages at Nablous', *Daily News*.

⁵⁴ Rogers, *Domestic Life*, p. 294.

Christian women of Nablûs' had entrusted to him for safekeeping.⁵⁵ This may not have been strictly necessary; according to Finn, once the dust had settled, the participants in the uprising 'became so frightened' of the punishment they could face, 'that they not only remained perfectly quiet, but came by night and threw back into the houses some of the stolen things'. Nevertheless, some Christian families did leave Nāblus, whether temporarily to seek asylum or permanently to start their lives in areas with greater security. In 1860 Mills found that the Protestant community had been 'ruthlessly scattered in a day', there being only 'a few still retaining the Protestant name' in Nāblus (the census of 1871-2 recorded thirteen Protestant households).⁵⁶

European presence in Nāblus also diminished in the wake of the uprising. The Protestant mission was moved to Nazareth, where Zeller worked until 1876.⁵⁷ Mills reported that the mission school had continued 'and was incomparably the best in Nablus', with two local Protestant converts as teachers.⁵⁸ Finn withdrew his agent from Nāblus and did not allow the British flag to be flown there over two years.⁵⁹ This was in marked contrast to the approach of the French consulate. Finn alleged that the French, viewing 'the affair of the insurrection as merely a disturbance, such as will happen occasionally anywhere', soon briefly raised their flag again in Nāblus 'with firing of muskets' – thus recreating one of the events which led to the uprising – before 'a speech [...] to the effect that it was not to be hoisted again till a proper reparation of honour could be obtained, seeing that Nabloos had shown itself to be unworthy of being honoured by the banner of France!' Finn added he could 'imagine the expression of

⁵⁵ Rogers, *Domestic Life*, pp. 294-295.

⁵⁶ Mills, *Three Months' Residence*, pp. 102-103; Scholch, 'The Demographic Development of Palestine', p. 486.

⁵⁷ Church Missionary Society, 'Biographies' <www.churchmissionarysociety.amdigital.co.uk> [Accessed 11 November 2019].

⁵⁸ Mills, *Three Months' Residence*, p. 103.

⁵⁹ Various, 'Despatches from Her Majesty's Consuls in the Levant, Respecting Past or Apprehended Disturbances in Syria: 1858 to 1860' (London: Harrison and Sons, 1860), p. 44.

countenance prevailing among the street populace on hearing this condemnation of themselves’.

Three matters remained to be settled: Lyde’s trial for Yasma’s death; compensation to the Nāblus Christian community for their losses; and the punishment of the uprising’s perpetrators. Lyde’s trial was scheduled for 21st April in the Ottoman court, in front of a Muslim judge or *qāḍī*. Finn received criticism for not holding the trial in a consular court; he later claimed that ‘according to the international capitulations the Turkish courts retain their proper supremacy in criminal causes’.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Finn paid Lyde’s bail, leaving him free to join Finn for a ride to the village of Ārṭās near Bethlehem (where Finn sponsored a farm of messianic Jews) on 19th April, the same day Yasma’s family arrived in Jerusalem for the trial. On the 21st, after encountering the problems of the female witnesses unable to testify, and the difficulty in determining Lyde’s intentions, the *qāḍī* adjourned the trial until he could consult with the *mufī* of Jerusalem, who was attending a Muslim festival.⁶¹ The court pronounced a verdict of deliberate homicide and a fine of ‘10,000 drachmas weight of silver’ on 29th April. Eventually, as Lyde wrote himself to the *Daily News* on 3rd July, through Finn’s efforts the verdict was revised to accidental homicide, though the fine stood.⁶²

Lyde returned to al-Lādhiqīya before the fine had been paid, and the case was transferred to the Ottoman governor of Beirut Khurshīd Pasha, and Britain’s consul-general in Beirut Niven Moore (1799-1889). Judging from consular correspondence, Moore decided to link the fine’s payment to compensation for the Nāblus Christians and punishment of the uprising’s leaders by the Ottomans. As this was slow in coming, the fine remained unpaid for some time.⁶³ Not only Yasma’s bereaved family suffered from this policy; Lyde seems to have been tortured by guilt. In *Stirring Times*, Finn claimed that Lyde spoke of his ‘anxieties’ over the unpaid fine when visiting Jerusalem

⁶⁰ See ‘Foreign Intelligence’, *Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Herald*.

⁶¹ Finn, *View from Jerusalem*, pp. 223, 225.

⁶² ‘The Disturbances at Nablous: To the Editor of the Daily News’, *The Daily News*, 26 July 1856.

⁶³ Various, ‘Despatches’, pp. 15-18.

in February 1857. Finn's diary reveals that Lyde in fact suffered a mental breakdown, arriving at Jerusalem 'in a state of insanity'. Finn had Lyde confined to the Prussian Hospice, and finally sent back to England on 17th March.⁶⁴

The fine, strangely enough, seems ultimately to have been settled by the Ottoman government. After two years of the British consuls pressuring him to punish the leaders of the uprising, Khurshīd wrote conciliatorily to Moore on 28th April 1858, proposing that '10,000 piastres should be paid by the [Ottoman] Government to the heirs of the dumb man [...] on condition that the clergyman who ventured to kill the dumb man, the occurrence which occasioned this affair, should be sent to England never to return again'. Unaware of Lyde's earlier departure, Khurshīd admitted that 'the authorities are ignorant of what has been done with respect to the aforesaid clergyman'. Moore was clearly happy to reply that 'Mr. Lyde [...] has, of his own free will, returned to England, with no intention I believe of returning to Syria'.⁶⁵ The guilt over the fine, and his mental health issues, cast a shadow over Lyde's final years; he died in Alexandria on 1st April 1860.⁶⁶ As for Yasma's family, Finn claimed that the costs of the case were subtracted from the award, and 'the plaintiffs obtained but a mere trifle' (perhaps explaining why Khurshīd was prepared to pay). Khurshīd sent with the letter to Moore 55,000 piastres of compensation for the Nāblus Christians, who had also been deprived of recompense for two years; Mills complained that it 'was but small compensation for the injury done'.⁶⁷

The British consuls were more concerned with ensuring the uprising's leaders were brought to justice. A successful prosecution would hopefully deter future attacks on Western interests in Palestine, test the effectivity of the Tanzīmāt reforms, and, most importantly, prove the extent of the consuls' influence and ability to force the local authorities to act in their interests. Finn and Moore hounded the governors of Jerusalem

⁶⁴ Finn, *View from Jerusalem*, pp. 251, 254.

⁶⁵ Various, 'Despatches', pp. 17-18.

⁶⁶ 'Cambridge', *The Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Herald*, 17 April 1860.

⁶⁷ Mills, *Three Months' Residence*, p. 102.

and Beirut for two years.⁶⁸ Finn identified four prominent figures he thought should be arrested: the *qādī* and *mufī* of Nāblus, and 'Sheik Mahomed Ashour' and 'Abdul Fettah Aga Numr'. Finn sent the names to Moore, who relayed them to Khurshīd in October 1857, and again in April 1858; Khurshīd stalled, arguing that 'the imprisonment of a few of the vagabonds who ventured to commit the riots, is not consistent with justice', and that instead a 'strict investigation' was necessary.

The British consuls' grievances also focused on Nāblus. While the town's governor had saved Lyde's life during the uprising, over time the British consuls turned against 'the notorious Mahmoud Abd-ul-Hady', as Moore described him, accusing him of working against their interests and harbouring the uprising's ringleaders.⁶⁹ Maḥmūd 'Abd al-Hādī's reluctance to dispatch the suspects to Beirut, as the British desired, is understandable in the context of local Palestinian politics in the Tanẓīmāt period. Perhaps believing he had done enough to show due respect to the Ottoman Empire's European allies by sheltering Lyde, 'Abd al-Hādī may also have wished to demonstrate his independence from Ottoman rule; arresting local Muslim leaders could have aroused the ire of the people of Nāblus.

Unrest in the Nāblus region had continued after the uprising, the 'Abd al-Hādī family fighting their rivals to maintain their control. The alliances of the Crimean War already fading, Finn also accused the 'Abd al-Hādī of 'look[ing] on themselves as in some way French partisans', and undermining British influence. Complaining in an October 1858 letter of Bedouin allies of the 'Abd al-Hādī robbing an Ottoman postman and stealing livestock, Finn expressed his belief that 'Palestine is in need of some one capable and honest man, armed with full powers, to put it all right in a few days'. This would have to be a governor not subject to the same pressures and rivalries as local families. The Ṭūqān family sent delegations to Jerusalem and Beirut, to persuade both British consuls and Ottoman governors of the desirability of a governor appointed by

⁶⁸ See Finn, *View from Jerusalem*, p. 263.

⁶⁹ Various, 'Despatches', pp. 16, 17.

the Sublime Porte.⁷⁰ Their wish was granted in late 1858 or early 1859, when Ottoman troops were sent from Damascus to arrest 'Abd al-Hādī; Moore reported with satisfaction that 'the arrest of this Chief has, owing to his unpopularity, been effected without the least opposition'.⁷¹ Soon after, the large assault in April 1859 of Ottoman forces on the stronghold of the 'Abd al-Hādī family, the nearby village 'Arrāba, ended Nāblus's autonomy and reinstated rule from Istanbul.⁷² Even so, according to Finn the new regime was also reluctant to take action on the uprising; his memoir asserted that 'to this day neither the seditious rioters nor the actual perpetrators of the violence of the 4th April, 1856, have met with any chastisement'.

CONCLUSION: DECOLONISING THE UPRISING

When much greater violence broke out in Damascus, British observers placed the Nāblus uprising in a straightforward narrative: a violently intolerant Muslim majority, implacably opposed to the reforms of an impotent Ottoman government, victimising helpless Christians across the Eastern Mediterranean. A report by Cyril Graham (1834-1895), part of a European commission to Syria in 1860, mentioned how 'the Protestant chapel and school, and the English consulate [sic] at Nablous, were plundered, the consul's father was killed, and a number of others were severely beaten' in the uprising, despite the incident having no direct connection to the later violence: although opposition to the Tanzīmāt may have united the insurgents in Nāblus and those elsewhere, the factors of Gobat's bell, the European flags and Lyde's shooting of Yasma were all highly specific. Rubbishing the chances of successful reform in the Ottoman Empire, and without attempting to mask his hostility towards Islam, Graham concluded that 'no man, with Syria's dark history before him, can say that Mohammedanism is productive of ought but evil'.⁷³

⁷⁰ See Finn, *View from Jerusalem*, p. 256; Various, *Despatches*, p. 16.

⁷¹ Various, 'Despatches', p. 61.

⁷² Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine*, pp. 231-232; Rogers, *Domestic Life*, p. 389.

⁷³ Cyril Graham, 'The Disturbances in Syria', *North British Review*, 33 (November 1860), 332-355, pp. 346, 332, 353.

Claiming that the Nāblus uprising and other regional episodes of unrest revealed the nature of Islam and Muslims, commentators suggested the existence of anti-Western sentiment across the Islamic world. The Indian Mutiny of 1857, attributed by some to a 'Muslim Conspiracy', showed the dangers this could pose.⁷⁴ Finn spelt out a nightmarish scenario:

The Green Flag must be unfurled, the Jehâd (Holy War) must be proclaimed against all Christians – in Circassia and Asiatic Russia – in Algeria against the French – in India against the English – all true believers would rise as one man, and, Inshallah! it would not be long before the last great triumph, the coming of Mohammed, and victory for ever to Islâm.

Such a warning, Finn cautioned, would 'never be quite idle' whilst 'thousands and millions of men, women and children' believed such an apocalyptic revolt would soon begin.⁷⁵ In 1875, during a 'Conference on Missions to the Mohammedans' in London, the aging Bishop Gobat cited the Nāblus uprising as evidence that an anti-Christian conspiracy had been consciously planned by Muslims. Gobat claimed that

in the year 1855 there was a great meeting at Mecca, at which it was resolved that in all countries the Mohammedans should destroy all that was not Mohammedan; and the first fruit of it was at Nablous, where some Christians were killed, and several were wounded. Several houses were plundered, as was also his [Gobat's] own school there.⁷⁶

There is a hollow ring to Gobat's words, coming from an individual whose insensitive introduction of a church bell probably contributed more than any 'great meeting at Mecca' to the uprising's outbreak, who escaped the uprising out of sheer luck, and who lost very little compared to the local Christians or Yasma's bereaved family.

⁷⁴ Ramesh Rawat, 'Perception of 1857', *Social Scientist*, 35 (November-December 2007), 15-28, p. 15.

⁷⁵ Finn, *Stirring Times*, I, p. 346.

⁷⁶ Various, 'Conference on Missions to the Mohammedans, Held at the Church Missionary House, Salisbury Square, on the 20th and 21st of October, 1875' (London: Church Missionary Society, 1875), p. 23.

European observers were unable to view the uprising through anything other than a colonial lens. This reduced a complex situation, combining the increasing Western presence in Palestine, local political factors in Nāblus, and the impact of changes across the Ottoman Empire, to a binary opposition between Islam and Christianity, and, by implicit extension, Orient and Occident. The uprising occurred in a period when European empires were increasingly imagining themselves as one day controlling Ottoman territories, nowhere more than the Holy Land.⁷⁷ Mills, for instance, explicitly envisaged a European colonisation of the Nāblus area. Noting that the city was surrounded with 'gardens and orchards, luxuriant with vegetation', he averred that 'with European industry, and art, and taste [...] it could be made one of the most charming spots upon the face of the globe'.⁷⁸ Insofar as Muslims represented a threat to this future for Palestine, and to Western interests generally, they were discursively vilified in the British reports of the uprising, and their leaders' punishment was obsessively sought by British consuls.

To discern its real significance, our view of the Nāblus uprising must be 'decolonised', divorced from the essentialist outlook and imperial concerns of its British observers, and placed in its proper context. Despite the near-uniform bias of all the British representations of the uprising, it is possible to read in them not a story of 'fanatical' Muslims versus 'helpless' Christians, but of resistance to the growing presence of European empires, and unpopular reforms dictated by the Ottoman Empire and those same European powers. The Europeans in Nāblus narrowly escaping the uprising, the people's anger fell upon their Christian neighbours and local consular agents. As Makdisi notes, both the Ottoman Empire and European powers singled out Christians, and inadvertently contributed to their victimisation. 'Whether as objects of imperial concessions by an ostensibly benevolent sultan, or of concern and protection by

⁷⁷ See Scholch, 'Britain in Palestine'.

⁷⁸ Mills, *Three Months' Residence*, pp. 26-27.

European powers', Christians were marked as different to their Muslim neighbours during the Tanẓīmāt period, with tragic results across the Eastern Mediterranean.⁷⁹

We may sympathise with both the plight of the Christian community, and the concerns of the Muslims of Nāblus, which were eventually vindicated. Within a lifetime, from 1917 to 1948, Britain occupied Palestine, and the British flag flew again over Nāblus. Times had changed, and Palestinian Christians would play an important role in the nationalist resistance.⁸⁰



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⁷⁹ Makdisi, *The Age of Coexistence*, p. 54.

⁸⁰ See Laura Robson, *Colonialism and Christianity in Mandate Palestine* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).