

Ordinary Jerusalem 1840–1940

Opening New Archives, Revisiting a Global City

Edited by

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Collective Petitions (*‘arż-ı mahżār*) as a Reflective Archival Source for Jerusalem’s Networks of *Citadinité* in the late 19th Century

Yasemin Avcı, Vincent Lemire, and Ömür Yazıcı Özdemir

Since the last quarter of eighteenth century, the creation of central archival depositories has put a great mass of archival documents produced by the imperial states at the disposal of historians conducting research on the “long” nineteenth century.¹ In spite of their undeniable importance to historical studies, focusing on these documents as a dominant source poses certain methodological problems. The abundance of these documents might lead the historian to fall into the trap of a top-down, state-centric approach. At its most extreme, it might seem there is no social or economic change without state impulse. Instead, citizens appear as objects of socioeconomic developments than as subjects of historical processes. They remain historically unimportant or become simple, “silent masses.” In order to establish a bottom-up approach and to hear the voices of ordinary people, historians have started to give much more importance to historical sources such as private journals, autobiographies, and diaries; so-called “ego-documents.”² Some archival materials in state archives are also valuable sources, presenting data that enable historians to overcome the methodological challenges of a state-centric approach and

- 1 The creation of centralized archival depositories in major European cities dates to the eighteenth century (St. Petersburg in 1720, Vienna in 1749, Warsaw in 1765, Venice in 1770, Florence in 1778, etc.). In France, the Revolution established the National Archives by the decree of September 7, 1790, and in 1794, the archives were opened to the public. Following France, the UK established the Public Record Office in 1838. In 1881, the Pope Leo XIII opened to the public the Archivio Segreto Vaticano, which had been established in 1611. See Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, trans. Steven Rendal and Elizabeth Claman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 87–88. The Ottoman Archives were created in 1846 under the name of Hazine-i Evrāk (Treasury of Documents). For further information, see Alev Erkmen, *Geç Osmanlı Dünyası’nda Mimarlık ve Hafıza: Arşiv, Jübile, Âbide* [Architecture and memory in the late Ottoman world: archive, jubilee, monument] (Istanbul: Bek, 2010), 37–74.
- 2 For the definition of the term “ego-documents,” see Rudolf Dekker, “Jacques Presser’s Heritage: Egodocuments in the Study of History,” *Memoria y Civilización* 5 (2002).

concentrate on the questions and theoretical issues of social history. Petitions are one of these sources.

Although studying petitions is a well-accepted way of assessing the political trends of a society, it would be naive to consider petitions as transparent mirrors of directly accessible public opinion.³ Petitions are not fully autonomous and spontaneous texts. Rather, they are framed text forms, standardized and bound by specific syntactic rules. Petitions are not always written by the person who is the signatory: a public writer, a notable, or a representative may stand between the signatory (or signatories) and the recipient of a petition. Moreover, the term “petition” covers a wide variety of concrete situations. Petitions may arise from class actions or individual requests, corporatist complaints or slanderous denunciations, or may be expressions of sincere thanks or gratitude. To analyze a set of petitions, therefore, one needs to focus just as much on what is said as on how it is said. The documentary context must also be analyzed (language, date, paper type, number of handwritten signatures). This is the methodological choice we made in this chapter. We chose not to consider petitions as a perfect observatory of a fetishized “public opinion” but rather as the complex laboratory of different forms of *citadinité* coexisting sometimes in contradictory ways in the mixed city of Jerusalem.⁴

Since the 1980s, several historical disciplines, from ecclesiastical and legal, to cultural and gender history, have used petitions as historical texts in the field of social history.⁵ It seems that historians have put increased attention on petitions especially in the wake of a special 2001 issue of *The International Review of Social History*. This issue focused on petitions as crucial, informative and reflective sources for the study of social history. In the introduction, Lex Heerma Van Voss argues that petitions are unique sources that enable

3 Yuval Ben-Bassat, “Mass Petitions as a Way to Evaluate ‘Public Opinion’ in the Late Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Empire? The Case of Internal Strife among Gaza’s Elite,” *Turkish Historical Review* 4, no. 2 (2013).

4 Vincent Lemire, *Jérusalem 1900: La ville sainte à l’âge des possibles* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012); Lemire, *Jerusalem 1900: The Holy City in the Age of Possibilities*, trans. Catherine Tihanyi and Lys Ann Weiss (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

5 For example, see Stephen Higginson, “A Short History of the Right to Petition Government for the Redress of Grievances,” *Yale Law Journal* 96, no. 1 (1986); Tor Hauken, *Petition and Response: An Epigraphic Study of Petitions to Roman Emperors, 181–249* (Bergen: Norwegian Institute at Athens, 1998); William Mark Ormrod, Gwilym Dodd, and Anthony Musson, eds., *Medieval Petitions: Grace and Grievance* (Rochester: York Medieval Press, 2009); Ronald J. Krotochynski, *Reclaiming the Petition Clause: Seditious Libel, Offensive, Protest, and the Right to Petition the Government for a Redress of Grievances* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

social historians to hear the voices of ordinary, nonelite people.⁶ It seems that scholarly attention to petitions has also contributed to the development of research projects. For instance, in France, Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée University historians led a collective academic research project from 2007 to 2012. Its aim was to build a database of all petitions submitted to the National Assembly and to the Senate from 1815 to 1940, and to analyze the results by matching them with geographic, gender, and social data.⁷

Since the 1980s, scholars of Ottoman history have also used petitions as a historical source.⁸ Unlike the scholarly interest in petitioning in the earlier periods of Ottoman history, there are only a few studies devoted to examining petitions as historical texts for analyzing the late Ottoman period. Undoubtedly the most significant contribution to this field is Yuval Ben-Bassat's 2013 book *Petitioning the Sultan* (London: I. B. Tauris). Ben-Bassat aims to explore petitions sent by Ottoman subjects in Palestine to the sultan and central government from 1865 to 1908. He deals with petitions submitted by villagers, Bedouins, Ottoman officials serving in Palestine, foreign nationals, Jewish settlers, and especially urbanites of Gaza and Jaffa. The sole but important limit of this book is the nonexistence of petitions sent by the inhabitants of Jerusalem. In the current chapter, we examine a set of two hundred collective petitions submitted by the urbanites of Jerusalem from 1840 to 1915. In tracing collective petitions through the computerized system of the Ottoman State Archives (Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi – BOA), the first criterion was to determine which collective petitions were submitted from Jerusalem. We thus

6 Lex Heerma Van Voss, "Introduction," *International Review of Social History* 46 (2001): 10.

7 For further information, see <http://acp.u-pem.fr/projets-de-recherche/petitions/>; Also, the program of the final symposium: http://www.parlements.org/colloques/13_03_2122_Petitionner_L_appel_aux_pouvoirs_XIXe_XXe_siecles.pdf.

8 For the pioneering studies in this field, see Hans Georg Majer, ed., *Das Osmanische "Registerbuch der Beschwerden" (Şikâyet Defteri) vom Jahre 1675* (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1984); Halil Inalcik, "Şikâyet Hakkı: Arz-ı Hâl ve Mahzarlar" [Right to complain: petition and collective petition], *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* 7–8 (1988); Michael Ursinus, *Grievance Administration (Şikâyet) in an Ottoman Province: the Kaymakam of Rumelia's Record Book of Complaints of 1781–1783* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005). For a recent study on the subject, see Murat Tuğluca, *Osmanlı Devlet-Toplum İlişkisinde Şikâyet Mekanizması ve İşleyiş Biçimi* [The complaint mechanism and its functioning in the relationship between state and society in the Ottoman Empire] (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2016). See also Nora Lafi, "Petitions and Accommodating Urban Change in the Ottoman Empire," in *Istanbul as Seen from a Distance: Centre and Provinces in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Elizabeth Özdalga, M. Sait Özervarlı, and Tansu Feryal (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2011).

excluded petitions sent by the inhabitants outside the city, including from villagers close to Jerusalem, and we also excluded people from other districts such as Jaffa, Hebron, Gaza, and Beersheba. Our study is based on a collection of two hundred petitions presented by the urbanites of Jerusalem, from a larger collection of the more than six hundred petitions sent by the people throughout Jerusalem province.

Looking for Petitions in the Ottoman State Archives: From Inputs to Outputs

In the Ottoman Empire, petitioning was an institution with roots in the early days of the empire. Individuals or groups of individuals from all segments of society enjoyed the right to present written appeals to the imperial bureaucracy on a broad range of social, economic, moral, and legal issues. Petitioning was a traditional way for urban or rural subjects to convince the imperial bureaucracy to intercede in their cases; namely to eliminate excessive taxation or any form of oppression (*zülüm*). Petitioning was not solely a mode of lodging complaints against abusive bureaucrats and officials. Petitions were also submitted in favor of a local governor or an official. They might be sent to request an act of kindness or an advantage to the benefit of the petitioner. Some petitions were submitted in order to congratulate the government on the effectiveness of a public infrastructure project. Therefore, petitions had a dual political function: on one hand, petitioning was an institution through which the citizens of the empire involved themselves in decision making procedures, central, or local politics. On the other hand, petitions were an effective method of government and legitimation for imperial power. Petitions must be considered in the global framework of the inputs and outputs of the administrative and archival process. This strategy guided us as we searched for petitions amid the huge mass of Ottoman archives.

In accordance with the existence of an established petitioning mechanism, special registers and correspondences appeared in the BOA. Prior to the second half of the nineteenth century, the first collection concerned with petitions is the *Mühimme defterleri* (Registers of Important Affairs).⁹ The *Mühimme* registers contain orders and decrees issued by the sultan after discussions by

9 The BOA today houses 419 *Mühimme* registers dating from 1553 to 1915. For further information, see Yusuf Sarıncay et al., *Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi Rehberi* [Guidebook to the Ottoman State Archives] (Istanbul: Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü, 2010), 7–21.

the Dīvān-ı Hümāyūn¹⁰ (Ottoman Imperial Chancery) on all matters of interest to it.¹¹ From the sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries, responses to petitions issued as firmans were also inscribed in these registers.¹²

In 1649, the central bureaucracy created the *Şikāyet defterleri* (Registers of Complaints) as separate volumes of *Mühimme* registers, likely due to the increase in the numbers of complaints. This meant that the decrees issued as a result of petitions were no longer inscribed along with the other affairs recorded in the *Mühimme* registers. The *Şikāyet defterleri*¹³ contain the decrees and firmans issued upon appeals by the individuals or groups of inhabitants to the related governmental office or directly to the sultan himself.¹⁴ This practice continued until 1746. In that year, the central bureaucracy began to organize the Registers of Complaints geographically, in accordance with the administrative division of the empire. Thereafter, they were to be referred to as *Vilayet ahkām defterleri* (Registers of Provincial Decrees). In both of these

- 10 The Dīvān-ı Hümāyūn was the imperial council located at the top of the Ottoman central government. It functioned as a high court of justice and a cabinet that discussed and made decisions on all governmental affairs. See Recep Ahıskalı, "Divan-ı Hümayun Teşkilatı" [The organization of the Imperial Council], in *Osmanlı*, ed. Güler Eren, vol. 6 (Ankara: Yeni Türkiye Yayınları, 1999).
- 11 The present volumes of *Mühimme* registers cover a period of over three centuries, from the mid-sixteenth to the second half of the nineteenth centuries. The whole collection contains copies of more than 150,000, or perhaps even 200,000 decrees. See Uriel Heyd, *Ottoman Documents on Palestine, 1552–1615: A Study of The Firman According to the Mühimme Defteri* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), xv. For further information about these registers, see also Feridun M. Emecen, "Osmanlı Divanının Ana Defter Serileri: Ahkām-ı Miri, Ahkām-ı Kuyûd-ı Mühimme ve Ahkām-ı Şikāyet" [The principal series of registers of the Ottoman Imperial Council: imperial decrees, decrees of the Ottoman Imperial Council, answers to petitions], *Türkiye Literatür Araştırmaları Dergisi* 3, no. 5 (2005).
- 12 Linda T. Darling, *Revenue-Raising and Legitimacy: Tax Collection and Finance Administration in the Ottoman Empire, 1560–1660* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 248.
- 13 In the BOA, the *Atık Şikāyet defterleri* registers are 213 in number, dated from 1649 to 1837 (AH 1059–1252), while the *Şikāyet defterleri* registers are thirty-eight in number and dated from 1504 to 1819 (AH 920–1234). For further information, see *Başbakanlık Osmanlı*, 21–22.
- 14 Along with other occasions, the sultan's participation in public worship for Friday prayer (Cuma Selamlığı) was an opportunity for people to present petitions directly to him, a practice that lasted until the end of the empire. For the details of this occasion, see Mehmet İpşirli "Osmanlılarda Cuma Selamlığı (Halk-Hükümdar Münasebetleri Açısından Önemi)" [Ottoman Friday prayer (its significance with regard to people-sovereign relationship)], in *Prof. Dr. Bekir Kütükoğlu'na Armağan* [Tribute to Prof. Dr. Bekir Kütükoğlu] (İstanbul: Edebiyat Fakültesi Basımevi, 1991).

registers (*Şikāyet defterleri* and *Vilayet aḥkām defterleri*), we do not have the original petition (inputs), but we do have the decrees (*hüküm*) of the Dīvān-ı Hümāyūn, because the outcome (or outputs) of the administrative and legal process began with a petition. Despite the lack of original petitions, the *aḥkām* registers present us with valuable information on the origin, content, and identity of petitioners as well as on the various stages of their bureaucratic, administrative, and political responses.¹⁵ The *aḥkām* registers were thus very helpful in analyzing the causal link between petitions and decisions, and in understanding the decision-making process. Studying the *aḥkām* registers also provides valuable information on the identity of their senders, distribution of petitions by place of origin, and petition addresses.¹⁶

The *aḥkām* registers of the province of Damascus provide information about decrees issued by the central government upon petitions submitted by the inhabitants of Jerusalem province. The total number of these registers is nine and they span the period 1742–1908 (AH 1154–1326). These registers contain decrees related to the governmental and legal affairs of Jerusalem, Safed, Aclun, Lecun, Gaza, Nablus, Saida, Beirut, and all other administrative regions under the jurisdiction of the provincial government in Damascus.¹⁷ Although these are valuable sources of information on the final decisions made by the central government on petitions, we cannot see the text of the original petitions. The wording and formulation of the original petitions would enable us to hear the voices of ordinary people. Though many original petitions remain unavailable, Faroqhi reminds us that we have a vast number of original petitions both in the Topkapı Palace Archives and in the BOA. Some collections in the BOA, namely the Maliyeden Müdevver¹⁸ (transferred from the Ministry

15 The same methodological choice (focusing on registers) was taken by the project “Pétitions adressées aux Assemblées (Chambre et Sénat) de 1815 à 1940,” which was conducted from 2007 to 2012 by Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée University. See n. 7.

16 For an empirical study analyzing the statistical data obtained from an *aḥkām* Register, see Fatma Acun and Ramazan Acun, “Demand for Justice, and Response of the Sultan in the Early 16th Century,” *Études balkaniques* 2 (2007).

17 After the implementation of the Vilayet Law of 1871, the Jerusalem sanjak was detached from the province of Damascus and raised to the status of an “independent” subdivision of a province (*elviye-i gayrimülhaka*), connected directly with the central government in Istanbul. In this way, the governor of Jerusalem, now responsible directly to Istanbul, was regarded as a *vali* whose area of jurisdiction happened to be relatively small. Yasemin Avcı, *Değişim Sürecinde Bir Osmanlı Kenti: Kudüs 1890–1914* [An Ottoman town in transition: Jerusalem, 1890–1914] (Ankara: Phoenix, 2004), 60–61.

18 These registers, which contain many documents especially on fiscal affairs, are called *Maliyeden Müdevver* [transferred from the Ministry of Finance] because the Ministry of Finance delivered them to the BOA in 1945. See *Başbakanlık Osmanlı*, 266–72.

of Finance) and Kamil Kepeci¹⁹ (catalogued by Kamil Kepeci), present original petitions alongside many different types of archival documents. However, Faroqhi also notes that “most of the petitions investigated are so routine that very little trace remains of the petitioner’s manner of expressing himself, so that at present, the summaries retained in the *Mühimme* and *Şikāyet* registers remain quite irreplaceable.”²⁰

From the beginning to the end of the empire, original petitions and related correspondences are fragmentary and dispersed among many classifications in the BOA. In order to trace the individual and collective petitions of the nineteenth century, we may use the BOA’s ever-growing and improving computerized system. As all Ottoman historians know, almost every file after the nineteenth century has a summary in the database. Our research in these archives showed that it is not easy to trace petitions by searching file summaries. When we carry out a catalogue search in the summaries using related keywords such as *‘arż-ı hāl* (individual petition), *istidā‘* (petition), or *‘arż-ı maḥẓār* (collective petition), with the word “Jerusalem,” few documents are found. We have been able to isolate the set of two hundred collective petitions used in this study by searching through the digital images of almost seven thousand files from various collections collected for the Open Jerusalem project from the BOA. We do not claim that the collections contain just two hundred petitions: further research may result in the discovery of more petitions.

Nineteenth-Century Changes: Petitioning in the Era of Tanzimat and the Telegraph

In presenting himself as “a just and legitimate ruler,” the Ottoman sultan’s primary duty was to “command good and forbid evil” and to ensure that justice was rendered to the empire’s subjects. In accordance with the Islamic tradition, the sultan was the “shadow of God on earth” (*Hālife-i rūy-i zemīn*) and the creator of a temporal order to the benefit of all subjects entrusted to him by

19 This collection, which consists mainly of registers of fiscal offices, is called Kamil Kepeci Tasnifi because it was classified under the direction of Kamil Kepeci, an Ottoman archivist who began working in the BOA in 1924. For further information about this collection, see *Başbakanlık Osmanlı*, 263–65.

20 Suraiya Faruqi, “Political Activity among Ottoman Taxpayers and the Problem of Sultanic Legitimation,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 35, no. 1 (1992): 5.

God.²¹ As the basic source of state legitimacy and the guarantor of its just rule, the Ottoman sultan set up a mechanism that enabled every subject to complain directly to the imperial government or the sultan himself regarding the injustices they suffered. Aside from individual petitions, there were also petitions submitted in the name of a group of people. Undoubtedly, the advantage of collective petitions over individual ones was the weight given to petitions bearing many signatures. In addition, collective petitions were less risky for petitioners who were afraid of recriminations by the accused parties.

Previous studies on the Ottoman petitioning system revealed that the imperial government used the system widely, both at the provincial and central levels.²² As the registers in the BOA show, before the nineteenth century, the Dīvān-ı Hümāyūn had a special office, the Dīvān-ı Hümāyūn Şikāyet Kālemi (Petitions Office of the Ottoman Imperial Chancery), which was in charge of dealing with petitions at the imperial level.²³ After the examination of a petition in the Dīvān, a firman was usually issued in response to petitions and was then sent to the related central government office or to the concerned provincial government authorities such as the qadi, the governor or other senior military officers in the region. At the provincial level, it was usually the qadi who examined the petitions and rendered the decision,²⁴ but, occasionally, if the provincial governor received petitions as the sultan's deputy in the provincial district under his command, it was the vilayet *Divani* (provincial supreme court) which fulfilled the regular duties prompted into action by the petitioner.²⁵

As many decrees inscribed in the *aḥkām* registers demonstrate, petitioners' demands were taken seriously to such a degree that they successfully convinced the government to alter its behavior. As Linda T. Darling has noted, "in the Ottoman Empire, petitioning the ruler was not a mere formality; it generated lasting and sometimes wide-ranging changes in the application of laws

21 Rifa'at Ali Abou-el-Haj, "Aspects of the Legitimation of Ottoman Rule as Reflected in the Preambles to Two Early Liva Kanunnameler," *Turcica* 21/23 (1991).

22 Yuval Ben-Bassat, *Petitioning the Sultan: Protests and Justice in Late Ottoman Palestine (1865–1908)* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 31.

23 Said Öztürk, "Sosyo-Ekonomik Tarih Kaynağı Olarak Ahkam Defterleri" [Registers of decrees as sources of socioeconomic history], in *Pax-ottomana: Studies in Memoriam Prof. Dr. Nejat Göyünç*, ed. Kemal Çiçek (Ankara: Sota and Yeni Türkiye, 2001), 611.

24 Uriel Heyd, *Studies in Old Ottoman Criminal Law*, ed. M. L. Ménage (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 226.

25 Ursinus, *Grievance Administration*, 8–9.

and regulations of the empire.”²⁶ In this respect, the institution of petitioning enabled the Ottoman imperial authority to preserve its legitimacy, especially during periods of political crises or changes. The petitioning system also served the Ottoman sultans as a means to monitor the activity of bureaucracy both at central and local levels, allowing the sultans to gather valuable information about their conduct.

In the Tanzimat period, the role and importance of petitioning did not diminish. On the contrary, as Ben-Bassat has noted, “it took on new importance and went through a process of revival and transformation due to both technological progress, as well as more fundamental institutional and legal changes.” The reforms that changed the nature of government motivated Ottoman subjects to behave more like citizens of a modern state. They increased their expectations that the state would listen to their concerns more closely than before.²⁷ During the Tanzimat period, the state penetrated the lives of its subjects more than ever before. Censuses, registration of lands, public education, health, tax surveys, and unification of the taxation system all meant that the Ottoman state undertook many new functions and duties that it had not fulfilled directly in the past. In the eyes of the citizens, the state ceased to be an ambiguous, ill-defined entity. It became a visible system whose presence was manifested in daily life. As a result, “there were both more possibilities to petition as well as more reasons to petition.”²⁸

Indeed, the penetration of the state into public life is not a development that occurred despite the intentions of Tanzimat reformers. The reformers’ primary motivation was to achieve greater centralization, especially in the administrative apparatus. Such a goal required the establishment of a modern bureaucratic system ranging from the imperial center to the local level based on a strong and detailed recording system. The establishment of many institutions and administrative bodies such as *Meclis-i İdāre* (provincial administrative council), *Meclis-i belediye* (municipal council) and *Nizāmiye* courts provided Ottoman subjects with many avenues to articulate their concerns and grievances and to demand justice and redress from the government. As Gerber points out in his pioneering book on the province of Jerusalem during the late Ottoman period, the Administrative Council of Jerusalem received petitions from the residents of the district on various matters and fulfilled

26 Darling, *Revenue-Raising and Legitimacy*, 281.

27 Ben-Bassat, *Petitioning the Sultan*, 33, 39.

28 Ben-Bassat, “Mass Petitions as a Way,” 139.

regular duties, prompted into action by the petitioners.²⁹ We also came across many petitions, both individual and collective, in Jerusalem municipality documents on almost every matter related to the municipal administration of the city.³⁰

Aside from the increasing bureaucratization of government, another factor that facilitated the petitioning system in the Tanzimat period was undoubtedly the introduction of the telegraph in the 1860s. With the advent of the telegraph, ordinary people could appeal directly, easily, and affordably to the central government. The abundance of petitions in the BOA, especially dating from the third quarter of the nineteenth century, proved that petitioning became a routine practice that remained affordable for everyone in the empire. The advent of the telegraph eliminated the need for petitioners to send a representative to Istanbul or to appeal to the local qadi to lodge a complaint.³¹ As Bektaş notes, the telegraph increased central government control over the provinces to a great extent. In certain cases, local officials and governors, even pashas, were dismissed or transferred to other provinces in response to collective telegraphic petitions. Believing their complaints would not be properly conveyed because of the bureaucracy and inefficiency of local administrations, petitioners preferred to seek contact directly with the central government.³²

Petitions were submitted directly to the sultan during Friday prayer, in which the sultan participated. This practice continued into the second half of the nineteenth century. In order to cope with the growing number of petitions submitted to the sultan during Friday prayer, the central government created a special office called the Ma'rûzât-i Rikâbiye Dâiresi (Bureau of Petitions).³³ As many registers located in the BOA prove, the main functions of this office were to gather, examine, and even prepare a list of petitions and assign the issues declared in the petitions to the related governmental office.³⁴ The emergence

29 Haim Gerber, *Ottoman Rule in Jerusalem, 1890–1914* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1985), chaps. 7–9.

30 For instance, for a collective petition submitted by some of the residents of Mahane Yehuda neighborhood on May 4, 1904, on the subject of building a sewer main in their quarter, see Jerusalem Municipal Archives (JMA), *Minutes of Jerusalem Municipality*, vol. 9, 1.

31 Ben Bassat, *Petitioning the Sultan*, 33, 180.

32 Yakup Bektaş, "The Sultan's Messenger: Cultural Constructions of Ottoman Telegraphy, 1847–1880," *Technology and Culture* 41, no. 4 (2000): 695.

33 BOA, *İrâde Dâhiliye*, 107/5390, 29 Şaban 1261/September 2, 1845.

34 For an example of this lists see, BOA, "Âmedi Kalemi Defterleri," 244, 29 Zilhicce 1331/November 29, 1913.

of the office clearly signifies the Ottoman efforts to institutionalize the petitioning system, and its maintenance through the nineteenth century shows that the traditional image of the sultan as the dispenser of justice continued despite the reformed nature of the state and the improved division of labor among the bureaucratic institutions. It was only after 1908, and the end of effective rule by the sultans, that the Ottoman Parliament came to the fore to deal with the petitions. Accordingly, the Ma’rūzāt-i Rikābiye Dāiresi was put under the jurisdiction of the Ottoman Parliament, and its name was changed to Meclis-i ‘Ayān İstidā‘ Encümeni (Senate Committee for Petitions).³⁵

When the Numbers Speak for Themselves: Statistical Data Describing the Collective Petitions of Jerusalemites

Petitions are scattered throughout many different collections in the BOA. As figure 8.1 shows, many of the collective petitions submitted by the inhabitants of Jerusalem come from the collection of the Bāb-ı ‘Ālī Evrāk Odası (Sublime Porte Record Office – BEO). This bureau, established in 1851, coordinated all the correspondence between the imperial center and the provinces, the ministries, and all other state offices in Istanbul. The circulation of all official correspondence at the level of the imperial center was under its control.³⁶

After the petitions were registered, the Ministry of Interior generally handled them. The ministry sent copies of petitions to the appropriate offices and requested the investigation of the issues raised in the petitions. Correspondence was usually conducted between the Ministry of Interior and the sanjak of Jerusalem. If a petition that was not written in Ottoman Turkish was received, it would be sent to the Translation Bureau (Tercüme Odası) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There, the petitions were translated into Ottoman. The collections of the Hāriciye Nezāreti Tercüme Odası (HR.TO, Translation Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs) is therefore the second collection in which many petitions were grouped. A considerable number of petitions or correspondence

35 The Committee for Petitions of the Meclis-i ‘Ayān (Senate) published weekly lists of examined and resulted petitions. Five samples of these lists published as booklets may be seen in the Atatürk Library in Istanbul.

36 Murat Candemir, “*Bāb-ı ‘Ālī Evrāk Odası*” [Record office of the Sublime Porte] (PhD diss., Istanbul University, 2002), 60–62.

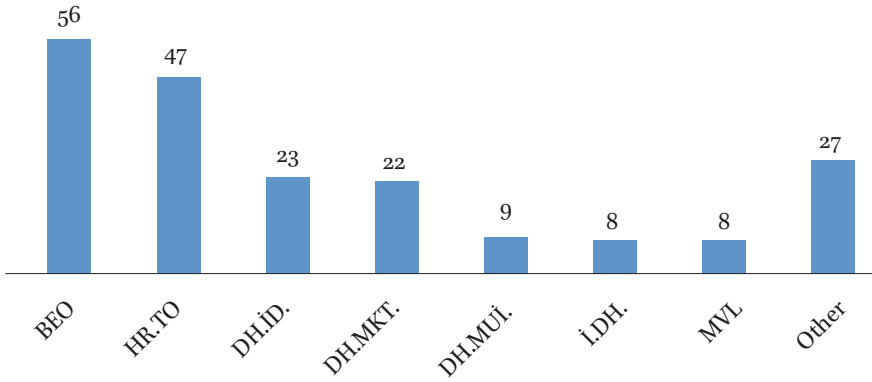


FIGURE 8.1 Classification codes, 1839–1915.

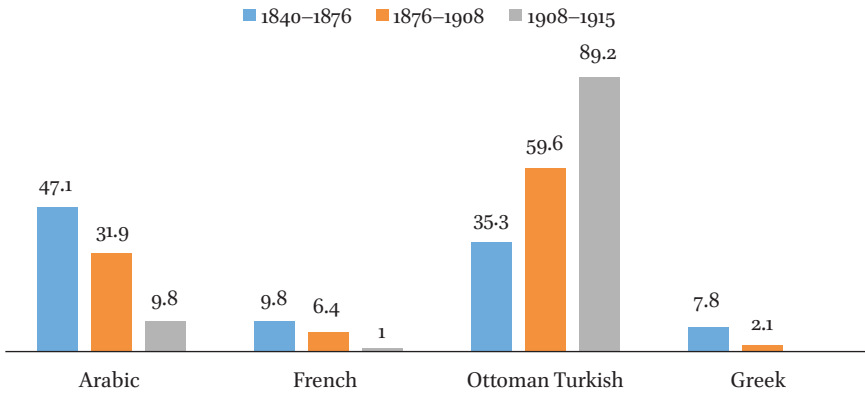


FIGURE 8.2 Original language of petitions, 1840–1915 (in percentages).

related to petitions is also found in the collections of the Ministry of Interior (DH.MKT., DH.ID., DH.MUI collections, for example).³⁷

Collective petitions were written in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish more often than French and Greek (fig. 8.2). While the preferred language was Arabic between 1840 and 1876, from 1876 onward, Ottoman Turkish took precedence.

37 DH.MKT., *Dāhiliye Nezāreti Mektübī Kālemi* (Correspondence Office of the Ministry of Interior). DH.ID., *Dāhiliye Nezāreti İdāre Evrākı* (Administrative Documents of Ministry of Interior). DH.MUI., *Dāhiliye Nezāreti Muhaberat-ı ‘Umūmiye İdāresi Belgeleri* (Documents of the General Correspondence Office, Ministry of Interior). İ.DH., *İrade Dahiliye* (Imperial Decree on Interior Affairs). MVL., *Meclis-i Vala* (Supreme Council of Law). For further information about these collections, see *Başbakanlık Osmanlı*, 360–62, 377.

Between 1876 and 1908, the decrease in petitions written in French and Greek is striking. The permeation of Ottoman cultural domination in the region is not a valid explanation for this; on the contrary, the period under consideration saw the increased cultural penetration of Europe. It is more likely that the trend toward increased bureaucratization both at the local and central levels caused petitioners to write in Ottoman Turkish when dealing with the Ottoman bureaucracy. Petitioners would have reasoned that writing in the language of the administration was more practical and beneficial. On the other hand, because of the low literacy rate among the native population,³⁸ collective petitions (especially when they bore a large number of signatures) were usually written on behalf of the signatories by urban notables, members of the ulema class, or sometimes even by the local officers. Moreover, if any of the signatories were not literate, they had to solicit the assistance of professionals, the ‘arzuḥālcı (petition writers), who were highly informed about the petitioning process. Before the nineteenth century, the profession was organized under the guild of petition scribes (*eṣnāf-ı yazıcıyân*).³⁹ Even after the all-out decline of guilds, there were strict rules that qualified one as an ‘arzuḥālcı.⁴⁰ Because the petitions had to be submitted directly to the relevant local or central government bureau, petition writers needed to know which department to send the petition to and had to be familiar with legal regulations.⁴¹

The addressees of collective petitions provide critical clues about which administrative unit or figure the petitioners accepted as dispenser of justice. Petitions submitted directly by petitioners as telegraphs, without the mediation of an ulema or ‘arzuḥālcı, give particular hints as to what addressees

38 Due to the lack of reliable data, it is difficult to pin down the literacy rate in the Ottoman Empire. It is estimated that Muslim literacy rates were about 2–3 percent in the early 19th century and probably 15 percent at its end. See Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 167. For Palestine, the first orderly survey about the literacy rates at our disposal was carried out during the general census of 1931. It was performed by the British Mandate government and applied modern methods. “The survey put the overall literacy rate among sedentary Arabs, 7 years old and up, at c. 20%. Among Muslims it was c. 14% (men c. 25%, women 3%), and among Christians c. 58% (men c. 72%, women c. 44%).” Ami Ayalon, *Reading Palestine: Printing and Literacy, 1900–1948* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 16–17.

39 Necdet Sakaoglu, “Arzuhalciler” [Petition-writers], in *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* [Encyclopedia of Istanbul from past to present], vol. 1 (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt, 1993).

40 For an imperial decree indicating the rules for admission to the profession, see BOA, İrâde-i Meclis-i Valâ, 318/13449, 14 Safer 1271/November 6, 1854.

41 Başak Tuğ, *Politics of Honor in Ottoman Anatolia: Sexual Violence and Socio-Legal Surveillance in the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 106.

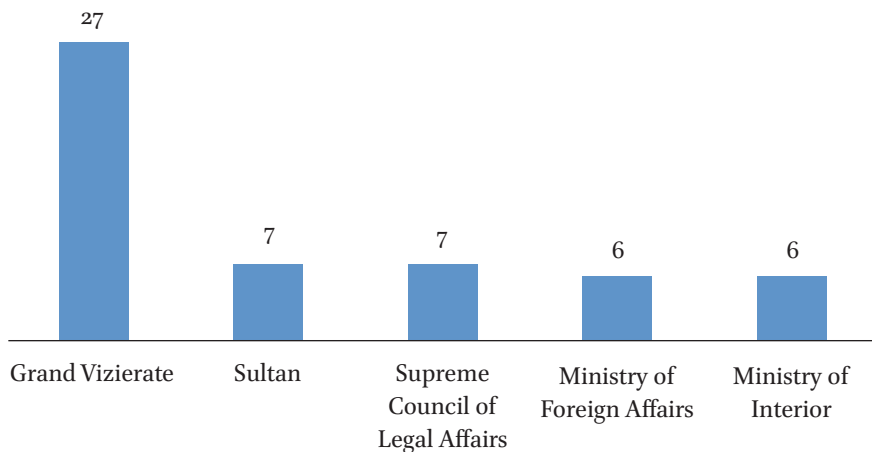


FIGURE 8.3 *Addressee of collective petitions, 1840–76.*

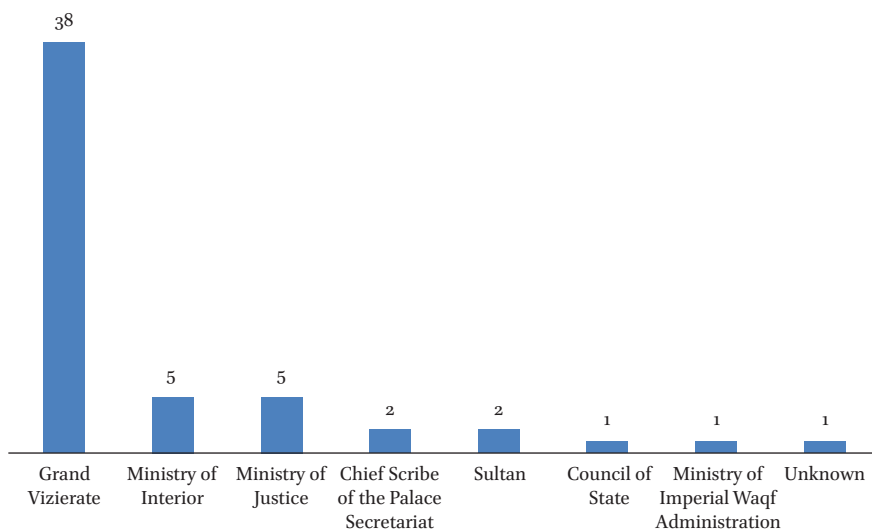


FIGURE 8.4 *Addressee of collective petitions, 1876–1908.*

knew about Ottoman bureaucracy. As figures 8.3–5 indicate, the vast majority of collective petitions were addressed to the Grand Vizierate or the ministries, especially the Ministry of Interior. This shows that the Grand Vizierate, as the absolute deputy of the sultan, was the highest authority dealing with the people's complaints or requests. The Ministry of Interior also held a prominent place as a receiver of petitions. This is because Jerusalem and its environs, a subdivision of a province (*sanjak* or *mutaṣṣariflık*) and not a province (*vilayet*) itself, were under the direct jurisdiction of the ministry. For

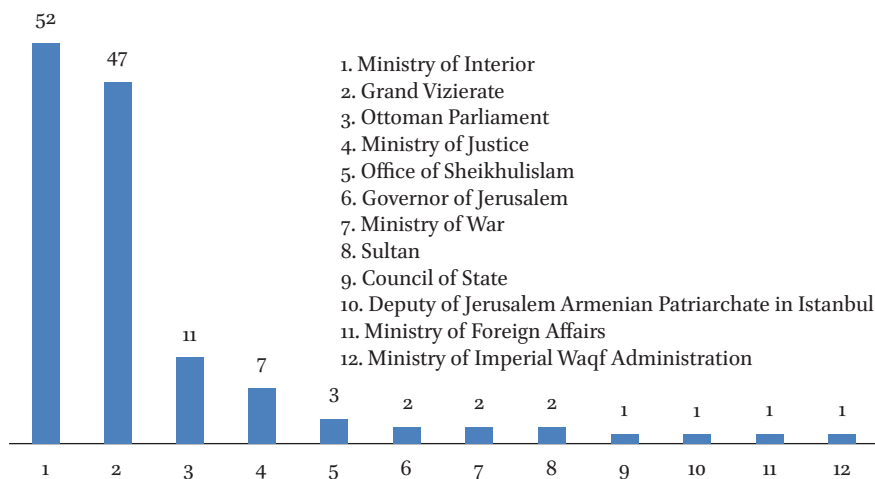


FIGURE 8.5 Addressee of collective petitions, 1908–15.

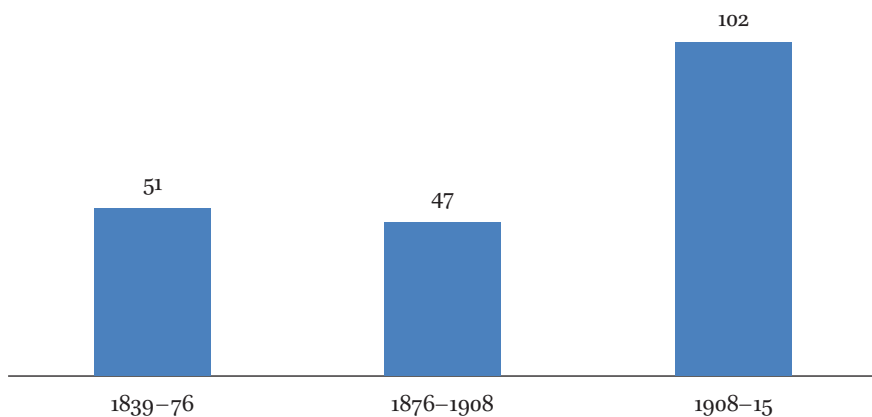


FIGURE 8.6 Date sequence of 200 collective petitions, 1839–1915.

this reason, the ministry conducted all of Jerusalem's local government affairs. We also have some petitions addressed directly to other ministries, central offices, and administrative councils, such as the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Imperial Waqf Administration, the chief scribe of the palace secretariat (Mābeyn Başkātıplığı) and the Council of State (Şūrā-yı Devlet). At times, the same collective petition was sent to more than one addressee. We have exactly thirty-five collective petitions, out of two hundred files, addressed to more than one place. It is likely that the petitioners, in writing to several addresses, thought that their complaints or requests had a better chance of reaching the Ottoman government.

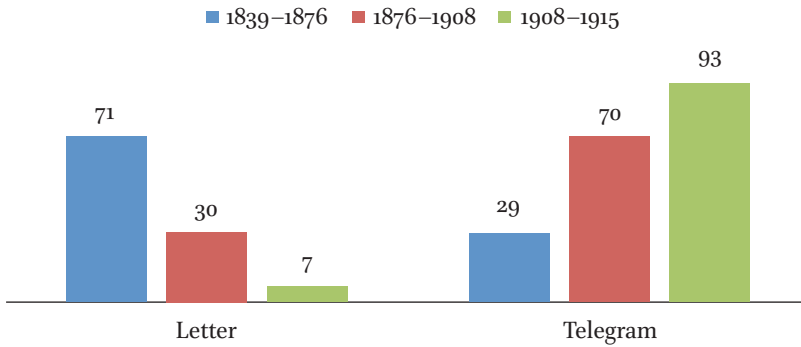
The sultan was also seen as an asylum addressee who could receive direct petitions despite the inclination towards institutionalization at every level of the administration (figs. 8.3–5). In other words, it seems that even in the age of reforms the sultan maintained his status as the dispenser of justice and the benevolent ruler. After the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, the Ottoman Parliament became another address to which the petitions were sent (fig. 8.5). Petitioning activity increases considerably after 1908. More than half of the two hundred collective petitions were dated after 1908 (fig. 8.6). This is a clear sign of the growing politicization of Ottoman subjects after the revolution. Developments such as the promotion of provincial newspapers, increase in readership, the spread of modern secular education and, most importantly, the atmosphere of relative freedom following the revolution prompted petitioning activity in Jerusalem and in many other Ottoman cities.⁴²

Another reason for the revival of the petitioning institution in the period under discussion was the advent of the telegraph. The creation of an effective telegraph network in Jerusalem sanjak, which began with the establishment of the first telegraph line between Jerusalem and Jaffa in 1865, resulted in a flood of telegraphed petitions from the city to the central authorities. As figure 8.7 shows, more than 70 percent of collective petitions submitted from 1839–1915 were in telegraph form. The telegraph provided the Ottoman subjects with a means to convey their petitions and complaints rapidly to the central authorities. For the first time, they established real direct contact with the imperial center. By telegraph, they could bypass the heads of the local bureaucracy and even the central authorities, and appeal directly to the sultan. The telegraph also eliminated the need to use intermediaries or travel personally to Istanbul.⁴³ As Rogan points out, “the telegraph could be interpreted as an instrument giving subjects a political voice to reach all levels of government, to express opinions, make complaints, and petition for change. Knowing that messages sent by this technology were guaranteed to reach their intended recipients, the telegraph heightened the expectation of a response.”⁴⁴

42 M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902–1908* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

43 Ben-Bassat, *Petitioning the Sultan*, 35.

44 Eugene L. Rogan, “Instant Communication: The Impact of the Telegraph in Ottoman Syria,” in *The Syrian Land: Processes of Integration and Fragmentation, Bilad al-Sham from the 18th to the 20th Century*, ed. Thomas Philipp and Birgit Schaebler (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1998), 114.

FIGURE 8.7 *Form of collective petitions, 1839–1915.*

Topics, Wording, Signatures: Networks of *citadinité* through Collective Petitions

The use of the telegraph also changed the linguistic style of the petitions. The earliest collective petitions from before the advent of the telegraph were written in flowery language. Their texts are strongly formulaic and possess a stereotypical character, particularly in the introductory lines, reserved for praying for the sultan's health or for glorifying the addressed authority. For instance, a collective petition submitted to the Grand Vizierate in 1865 to thank the government for taking precautions to prevent cholera from spreading in the province starts with a long prayer for the sultan's well-being: "May God protect our Sultan, the benefactor, the shah of shahs, the breath of earth, by endowing him with good health, luck, honors, with majesty and prosperity, and embellish him with the crown of the caliphate, symbol of sovereignty and glory, till the day of the last judgment" (fig. 8.8).⁴⁵ Such petitions seem to have been written by the ulema, the local bureaucrats or professionals, and not by ordinary people. The language of the petitions in telegraphic form is simpler. The messages directly express the intention of petitioners without long lines of prayer and praise. For instance, a collective petition signed by thirty people, most of them members of Greek Orthodox clergy, expresses its purpose outright: "the nomination of the Patriarch is being conducted in contradiction to

45 BOA, Şadâret Mektûbî Kâlemi Mühimme Kâlemi Belgeleri, 344/879, 9 Cemaziye'l-âhir 1282/October 30, 1865.



FIGURE 8.8 Collective petition signed by 55 people and submitted to the Grand Vezierate to thank the government for taking precautions to prevent cholera from spreading in the province of Jerusalem, 1865.

BOA, SADÂRET MEKTUBÎ KALEMÎ MÜHİMME KALEMÎ BELGELERİ,
344/879, 9 CEMAZİYE'L-ÂHIR 1282/OCTOBER 30, 1865.

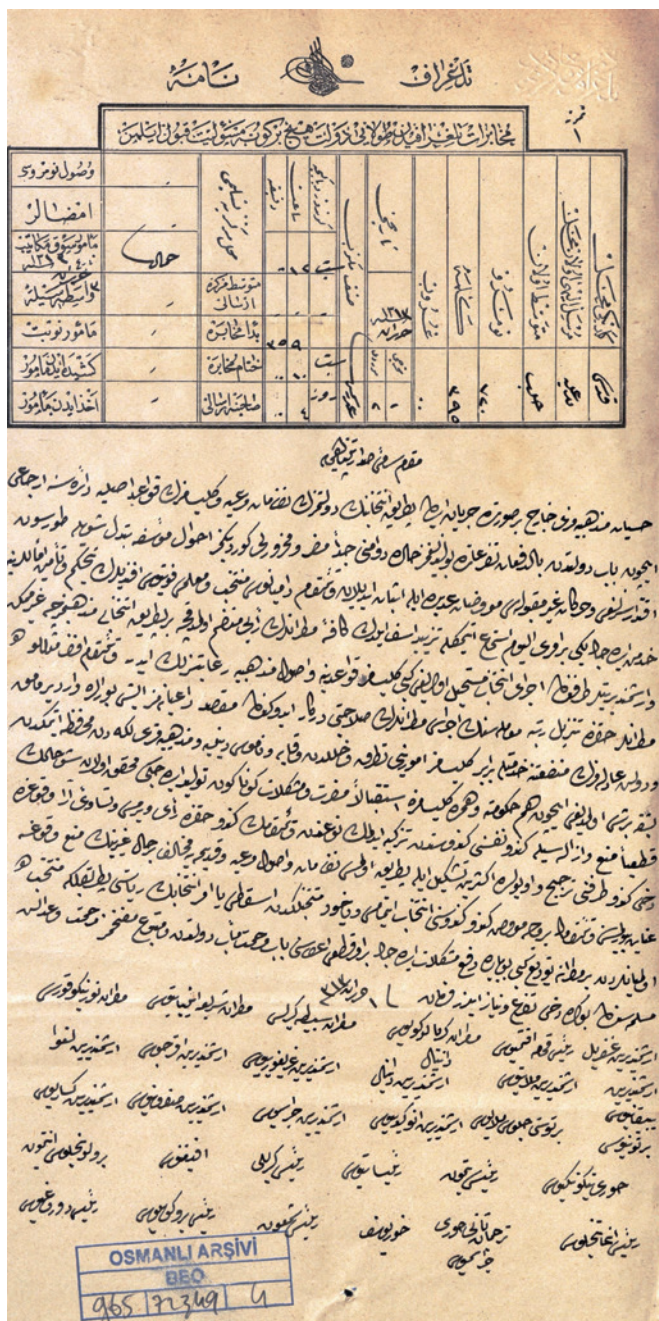


FIGURE 8.9 *Collective petition signed by 30 people and submitted to the Grand Vizierate to complain about the process of nominating the Greek Patriarch of Jerusalem, 1897.*

BOA, BÂB-I ALÎ EVRAK ODASI, 965/72349, 15 MUHARREM
1315/JUNE 16, 1897.

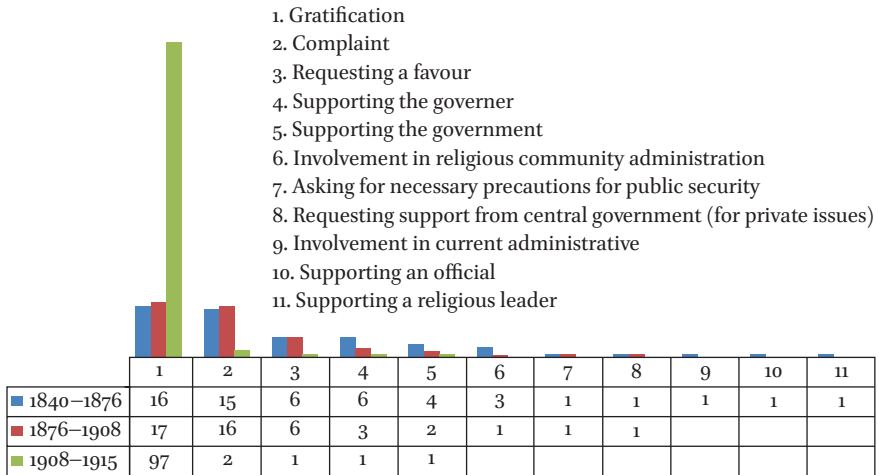


FIGURE 8.10 *Subject matter of collective petitions, 1840–76.*

our denominational life” (fig. 8.9).⁴⁶ Telegraphic petitions were thus formulated more freely and reflected the real voice and intention of petitioners.

Figure 8.10 shows the frequency distribution of subject matters of two hundred collective petitions. It proves that the urban dwellers of Jerusalem did not always send petitions of complaints. There are also petitions submitted that declare loyalty to the Ottoman government or congratulate the sultan on his accession to the throne.⁴⁷ Likewise, petitions in favor of a certain official (usually the acting governor) were also common. A typical example is the collective petition signed by thirty-five people, submitted to the Grand Vizierate in 1852, which gratified the acting Jerusalem governor, Hafız Pasha. The petition’s text reads, “as the afore-mentioned Pasha has protected and treated all the subjects fairly and justly, and used his best endeavor in the application of Beneficial Reforms (*Tanzīmāt-ı Hayriye*), everyone is so rejoiced and happy that they are constant in performing good deeds.”⁴⁸ The Ottoman local authorities, especially the mutessarif, used such petitions as a way to mobilize and demonstrate popular support for themselves. In addition, Jerusalemites also

46 “Hayat-ı mezhebiyemizi hâric bir şürette cereyân eden patrik intihâbı.” BOA, Bâb-ı ‘Âli Evrâk Odası, 965/72349, 15 Muharrem 1315/June 16, 1897.

47 For instance, see the collective petitions submitted by the deputies of Greek, Syriac, and Armenian communities in order to congratulate Murad V on his accession to the throne in 1876. BOA, *Hâriciye Nezâreti Tercüme Odası Belgeleri*, 516/65, May 28, 1876.

48 BOA, *İrâde-i Meclis-i Valâ*, 249/9103, 1 Zilhicce 1268/September 16, 1852).

sent petitions to the central government to express their gratification for precautions taken to ensure public security and health or to describe their contentment with the benefits of urban infrastructure improvement projects such as the water supply works in Jerusalem.⁴⁹

Collective petitions expressing complaints were the second most common petitions sent from Jerusalem. Jerusalemites most often complained about the governor, a certain official, or the acting religious community leader. At times, a complaint against the Jerusalem governor was the subject of numerous collective petitions. For instance, a complaint petition submitted by forty-nine Jerusalemites in 1880 against the governor of Jerusalem, Ra’uf Pasha, broaches the subject by stating that “as we have recursively dared to submit petitions by now, the oppressions and injustices to which we have subjected by the governor of Jerusalem, Ra’uf Pasha, is well-known to His Excellency, the Minister.”⁵⁰ Despite these petitions, Ra’uf Pasha ruled the province of Jerusalem for eight more years. The reason behind these complaints was likely the fact that he was able to impose his authority over the powerful families of Jerusalem. Rauf Pasha’s eleven-year tenure (1877–88) was exceptional in Jerusalem, where officers typically served short terms in office.⁵¹

Another motivation for writing petitions was strife between religious communities. As we observe in the collective petitions, tension between the Syriac and Armenian communities about rights to perform religious ceremonies in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre came to the fore many times.⁵² The collective petitions are also a source of information about local politics, largely dominated by the urban notables, including the Huseyni, Khalidi, Alami and Dajani families.⁵³ Rivalries between urban notables come up in many petitions. For example, there are petitions submitted as a way of leveling accusations. A collective petition submitted in 1885 and signed by four members of Huseyni family accused the Khalidis of using their influence and connections

49 For instance, see the collective petition, signed by ninety-one people, to thank local governors for their efforts in improving the waterways from the spring in ‘Ayn Salih (in the vicinity of Bethlehem) to Jerusalem. BOA, İdare Dâhiliye, 549/38228, 8 Muharrem 1283/May 23, 1866.

50 BOA, Hariciye Nezâreti Tercüme Odası Belgeleri, 556/135, December 22, 1895.

51 Avcı, *Değişim Sürecinde Bir Osmanlı Kenti*, 24.

52 For instance, see the collective petition sent by the members of the Syriac community of Jerusalem to complain about Armenian infringement upon their rights in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, see BOA, Yıldız Mütenevvi Ma’rûzât Evrâkı, 75/144, 19 Safer 1310/September 12, 1892.

53 For further information about the rivalry between the urban notables, see Avcı, *Değişim Sürecinde Bir Osmanlı Kenti*, 121–31.

in local government for personal gain and of breaking existing legal norms. Another example of a petition illustrating the rivalry between the Huseyni and Khalidi families is one submitted in 1910. The petition, sent simultaneously to the Grand Vizierate and to the Ministry of Interior, dealt with alleged abuses committed by the members of Huseyni family in the municipal elections of Jerusalem. It was signed by eighteen people who presented themselves as “people from the native population” (*āhāliden*).⁵⁴ However, soon after, another petition on the same subject was signed by two people from the Khalidi family. The impression given is that the Khalidis, as the opponents of the Huseynis, might have implicitly supported the first petition.⁵⁵

Considering the statistical data of collective petitions in an overall assessment, it becomes obvious that the petitioning institution enabled the residents of Jerusalem to become involved in urban politics. It also gave them a say in local administrative affairs. In sending collective petitions, they could influence the internal affairs of their religious community, hitherto handled solely by the clergy. In this respect, it makes sense that collective petitions often bore many signatures. For instance, 419 people signed one collective petition. This was a petition submitted by the members of the Syriac community against the infringement of their rights at holy sites by the Armenians (fig. 8.11). However, it is not always easy to read the seals or signatures of petitioners; at times we encounter names without official titles, faith, or profession. For this reason, it is not possible to compile clear and reliable statistical data about the identity of petitioners. On the other hand, some general remarks can be made. Collective petitions signed by the ordinary people without collaboration from notables, the ulema, or religious leaders are very rare. Those that exist are largely in telegraph form.⁵⁶ More often, members of the ulema (religious scholars, qadis, imams, muftis, *ḥatīp* and others), and urban notables or religious community leaders signed collective petitions on behalf of groups.⁵⁷

Collective petitions usually concerned people from the same social, professional, or religious group. However, when it comes to economic matters such

54 BOA, Muhaberât-ı Umumiye İdaresi Belgeleri, 71/44, 24 Safer 1328/March 7, 1910.

55 BOA, Muhaberât-ı Umumiye İdaresi Belgeleri, 91.1/40, 25 Rebiyü'l-evvel 1328/May 6, 1910.

56 For a collective petition in telegram form sent on behalf of lepers to ask the favor of reassigning the residential place which had been left for them in Jerusalem, see BOA, Hâriciye Nezâreti Tercüme Odası Belgeleri, 13/552, July 15, 1875.

57 For collective petitions signed by the Greek Orthodox and Armenian patriarchs on behalf of their communities to support the acting governor in taking precautions in order to ensure public security in the vicinity of Jerusalem, see BOA, İdare Dâhiliye, 277/17417, 26 Zilkâde 1269/August 31, 1853.



FIGURE 8.11

Collective petition signed by 419 people from the Syriac community and submitted to the Ministry of Justice to complain about Armenian infringement on their rights in the holy sites of Jerusalem, 1893.

BOA, BÂB-I ALÎ EVRAK ODASI,
208/15557, 7 ZILKADE 1310/
MAY 23, 1893.

as tax deductions or exemptions and local production, there are petitions sent by people who belonged to different religious faiths. For instance, a case concerning tobacco production in Jerusalem appeared in a collective petition written in Arabic and signed by 328 people from both the Muslim and Jewish communities in 1884. It was submitted to the Ministry of Interior in 1883 after the Ottoman Public Debt Commission turned the tobacco monopoly over to a private German-French company, the Régie co-intéressée des tabacs de l'Empire Ottoman. The Régie was in charge of selling tobacco products in the Ottoman domains. It set its own prices and chose its shops, requiring other shops selling foreign tobacco products to obtain a license from it in order to operate.⁵⁸ Under these conditions, the petitioners called for state permission to produce local tobacco, which they preferred over “the disgusting and

⁵⁸ Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, vol. 2, *Reform, Revolution, and Republic: The Rise of Modern Turkey, 1808–1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 233.

intoxicating” tobacco products sold by the Régie.⁵⁹ Consumer preference was indeed most likely not the main factor motivating this petition. Rather, the petitioners’ hope was to dissolve the tobacco monopoly regime in order to preserve their profits from the local tobacco trade. Another example of collective petitioning by people from different religious faiths is the one signed on behalf of all the butchers of Jerusalem. Here, the rising rates of municipal taxes after the Young Turk Revolution created common ground for Muslims, Christians and Jews to complain and request justice.⁶⁰

Conclusion

The right to petition the Ottoman government, not only for a redress of grievances but also for promoting requests and raising concerns, evolved into an institution which met the demands of both individuals and groups of people. The large number of archival documents in the BOA related to petitioning presents the direct proof of this conclusion. Especially after the period of Tanzimat reforms, Ottoman subjects acquired many avenues of appeal at both local and central levels to raise their concerns and grievances. Indeed, the change in the nature of government altered the relationship between the state and the individual. As reforms made the state more visible in daily life and more functional with regard to land and tax surveys, censuses, law enforcement, communication, education, and health services, it was no longer an “amorphous entity” in the eyes of its subjects.⁶¹ It meant that Ottomans had many more reasons than before to voice their opinions and grievances. Consequently, both the local government and the imperial center received petitions, in growing numbers, on almost every issue affecting individuals or groups. As the statistical data proves, particularly after the Young Turk Revolution, petitioning activity was spurred to a great extent. This was the result of factors such as the development of printed media, the expansion of secular education, and the penetration of liberal ideas. More importantly, the 1876 constitution (art. 14) consolidated the right of individuals and groups to submit petitions “on the subject of infractions of the laws or regulations committed either to their

59 BOA, Hâriciye Nezâreti Tercüme Odası Belgeleri, 389/101, June 7, 1884.

60 BOA, Bâb-ı Âli Evrâk Odası, 3583/268721, 7 Cemaziye'l-âhir 1327/June 26, 1909.

61 Ben-Bassat, *Petitioning the Sultan*, 117.

personal prejudice or the prejudice of the public welfare.”⁶² The concept of “the public welfare” is obviously very striking here, because it granted everyone the right to react to anything that presented a challenge to the public interest.

For Ottomans, petitioning was not solely a mode of lodging complaints. Many petitions were submitted in favor of a local governor or an official. Some petitions sought more involvement in the religious community administration. Yet others asked for favors and personal benefits. In petitioning, people could make their voices heard in political and administrative processes. Collective petitions in particular are valuable sources that should be used to analyze urban politics. They also provide insight into the concerns, claims, and expectations of Ottoman subjects *vis-à-vis* the changing local and imperial politics. As this study has shown, the collective petitions (‘arż-ı maḥẓār) sent to Istanbul from Jerusalem shed light on the combined efforts by urban inhabitants to promote their shared interests. Moreover, these petitions can be studied as texts for understanding the issues of interurban networks, regional cooperation and even the nature of regional identity.

62 Article 14 states: “One or several persons belonging to the Ottoman nationality have the right of presenting petitions to the competent authority on the subject of infractions of the laws or regulations committed either to their personal prejudice or the prejudice of the public welfare and may in the same way address in the form of a complaint signed petitions to the Ottoman General Assembly to complain of the conduct of the State functionaries or employes [sic].” For the full text of the English translation of the 1876 constitution, see “The Ottoman Constitution, Promulgated the 7th Zilbridje, 1293 (11/23 December, 1876),” *American Journal of International Law* 2, no. 4 (1908), 367–87.