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Changing Capitalist Structures and Settler-Colonial Land Purchases in Northern Palestine, 1897–1922

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Abstract

By tracing Zionist and German Templer efforts to buy arable private property in Palestine between 1897 and 1922, I show the ways in which the changing balance of Ottoman and Levantine forces over land and labor—as well as political and economic institutions and social structures—facilitated settler-colonialism in northern Palestine. In this article, I examine official records of the Ottoman state, Jewish organizations, and Levantine, Jewish, and Templer real estate papers. I argue that changing capitalist practices in northern Palestine, driven especially by interactions of Beirut-based companies with the changing global capitalist market, facilitated settler-colonialism in the region. Specifically, Ottoman state-sponsored violence during World War I increased peasant dispossessions in the fertile region of northern Palestine, already in progress since at least the mid-19th century, making settler colonies possible.

Keywords: capitalism; German Templers; landed property; Ottoman Empire; Palestine; settler-colonialism; Zionism

On September 15, 1902, the largest family-owned Levantine-based agricultural and real estate companies (unincorporated subsidiaries of Sursuq et Frères and other family companies) signed a contract with the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), selling as many as ninety-seven villages, or 200,000 to 300,000 dunams, of contiguous land in Palestine.¹ This was not the first contract between these organizations; the first contract, for lands in the Jezreel Valley (Arabic, *Marj ibn ‘Amr*; Hebrew, *Emek Yizra‘el*), was signed in 1897, nineteen years after European Orthodox Jews established the first Jewish settlement in Palestine.² However, the 1902 sale was the largest land transaction between absentee landholders

¹ The spellings of Levantine family names in this article are transliterated from the Arabic following *IJMES* style. Note that these family names have multiple spellings for foreign documents. Levantine here signifies global companies with significant activity in the Levant, the region currently comprising the countries of Jordan, Palestine/Israel, Lebanon, and Syria. A dunam is an Ottoman unit of measure equivalent to the amount of land an ox can plow in a day, or approximately 900 square meters. See Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, Israel (hereafter CZA), J15\2284\2, for the contract between S. I. Pariente (JCA, Beirut) and Jirjis Musa Sursuq (Sursuq et Frères, Beirut; referred to as Jirjis or George Sursuq in JCA records in French) for the sale of Kafr ‘Ata (today, Kiryat Ata), Majdal, and Jidru, 15 September 1902. When possible, villages named follow the spelling in Walid Khalidi, *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992). Village names not found in Khalidi’s volume but present in the Sursuq Family Archive are transliterated from the Arabic spellings in this archive.

² Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem (hereafter CAHJP), 254/2/8, letter from D. Hayn (Beirut) to the Council of Administration for the JCA (Paris), 25 January 1898; Herzl Theodor Raphael Patai and Harry Zohn, *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl* (New York: Herzl Press, 1960), 519.

and the JCA. In correspondence, the real estate company would record a fixed number of dunams in the *tapu* (Ottoman land registry) in the name of the JCA, until approximately “200,000 dunams for certain and possibly 100,000 more [had] been transferred” to one or two JCA-appointed individuals in the region.³

In 1869, the members of this real estate subsidiary signed paperwork recognizing their use rights on much of the land in Palestine’s fertile Jezreel Valley. At that time, they could not have foreseen such lucrative deals with foreign companies; members remarked in 1904 that it was as if they had been preparing for thirty years for offers that were forty times the market value of the land.⁴ Eager to make the deal in 1902, the subsidiary assured the JCA’s purchasing agents that hundreds of peasant families who lived on the land would be expelled. After the contract went into effect, the Jewish buyers could “have whomever they please work on their land.”⁵ At the same time, the real estate subsidiary negotiated similar terms to German Templers in smaller deals for Bethlehem of Galilee and surrounding villages, outside of Nazareth. The Templers worked closely with JCA purchasing agents, conducting joint deals.⁶

These 1902 land transfers to the JCA and the German Templers went largely unfulfilled, as they did in 1897. The JCA was dissatisfied, of course, because, despite paying for the land, it was “unable to colonize all of the properties.”⁷ The Palestinian Arab peasants refused to move, instead continuing to live and work on these lands alongside the Jewish immigrants. Representatives for the JCA and the German Templers complained that the transfer did not completely translate to absolute ownership. The property was embroiled with other claims, particularly those of local peasants whose families held use rights (usufruct) on the land in addition to rights over homes, buildings, agriculture, and even drinking water.⁸

The reality conflicted with the JCA’s stated objective to “gradually remove peasants.”⁹ Their leaders’ aim had been to establish Jewish settlements in which Jewish immigrants could live and benefit from the land.¹⁰ This fertile territory in Palestine was to be filled with Jewish immigrants of European origin for the endurance of a Jewish colony.¹¹ The Templers reached similar conclusions to the JCA in moving new Templer immigrants to fertile plains outside of Nazareth (Lower Gallilee).¹² Throughout the early 20th century, increased Jewish and Templer immigration created competition not only with local Palestinian Arabs but also with new European settlers. The JCA and the Templers became

³ Sursuq Family Archive, Phoenix Center for Lebanese Studies, Holy Spirit University of Kaslik, Lebanon (hereafter SFA), 21358, letter from Tu’ayni (Beirut) to Alfred Sursuq (Beirut), 7 October 1902; CZA, J15\4388, Annex #785, letter from Jirjis Musa Sursuq (Beirut) to S. I. Pariente, director general of the JCA Palestinian settlements (Beirut), 30 July 1903. My translation uses “transfer” (French, *transfert*; original Ottoman Turkish, *ferağ*). Here, “transfer” is intentional because it signals that it was not a sale of ownership but a transfer of rights to usufruct.

⁴ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivleri (Ottoman Archives of the Prime Minister’s Office), Istanbul (hereafter BOA), BEO2428/182089, petition from Jirjis Musa Sursuq (Beirut) to the Grand Vizier (Istanbul), 25 December 1904, 3.

⁵ SFA, 21358, letter from Tu’ayni to Sursuq.

⁶ The German Templers formed a pietist sect of the Lutheran Church. They migrated to Palestine in the mid-nineteenth century and settled in Haifa in 1868. They focused their land purchases on Bethlehem of Galilee (and surrounding areas) because they considered it, and not the Bethlehem south of Jerusalem, to be the true birthplace of Christ, and therefore the site of his eventual second coming. For more on the German Templers, see Ruth Kark and Seth J. Frantzman, “Consuls, Demography and Land in Palestine: German-Americans in the Haifa Templer Colony,” *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* (1953-) 126, no. 2 (2010): 153–67.

⁷ “Rapport: L’Administration centrale au Conseil d’Administration,” presented at the General Assembly, Paris, 1902 (Paris: Imprimerie R. Veneziani, 1903), 46.

⁸ CAHJP, 254/2/27, letter from D. Haym (Beirut) to the Council of Administration for the JCA, (Paris), 26 May 1898, 4, 7.

⁹ CAHJP, 254/2/27, letter from David Haym, official for the JCA, to JCA Head Office (Paris), 7.

¹⁰ CAHJP, 257/2/96, contract between the JCA (Paris) and O. Ossovetzky (Beirut), 6 October 1899; BOA, DH.I.UM 26/4/8, letter from the Minister of Tapu to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 21 November 1910, 23; BOA, DH_H 21/1/90, Report from the Court of First Instance (Acre), 18 December 1912.

¹¹ “Rapport,” 1903, 89.

¹² Israel State Archives, Jerusalem (hereafter ISA), 552/5, “Dorfes Ailut c/a Hans Keller,” 1902–1904.

more insistent on acquiring unoccupied land without rightsholders. Particularly throughout the second aliyah (wave; 1903–14), the JCA and other Jewish organizations renewed their efforts for “pure” settlement.¹³ JCA purchasing agents finalized the 1902 land sale for 800,000 dunams in 1925—more than twenty years later. The change happened because the Levantine-based family real estate and agricultural subsidiaries had expanded and changed the terms for capital accumulation in northern Palestine.

The topic of regional land sales between Jewish organizations and Arab sellers does not want for contributors. Although differing in arguments and at odds about numbers and significance, most books and articles investigating land and Jewish immigration in Palestine prior to World War I agree that between 1869 and 1872 a family named Sursuq (and perhaps other families) purchased 240,000 to 300,000 dunams of land from the Ottoman government and subsequently, between 1898 and 1939, sold this land to the JCA, the Jewish National Fund (JNF), and other organizations.¹⁴ However, without seller records or knowledge of the Ottoman Turkish language, scholars have not unspooled why coveted rural spaces were so inaccessible to foreign buyers prior to World War I but accessible after 1922. By contrast, I draw on papers of the Jewish Colonization Organization, German Templers, Ottoman government, and the Beirut-based family’s real estate subsidiary to demonstrate how the latter acquired and sold land in Palestine.¹⁵ Scholars of Palestine have pointed out the significance of Sursuq (Sursock) land sales; I have accessed the Sursuq Family Archive at the Phoenix Center housed at the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK), Lebanon, including the papers of buyers and sellers of the most arable land in the Jezreel Valley and other regions of northern Palestine.

Beyond its empirical addition, this article also adds to literature on capitalism and settler-colonialism, and their intersection, in late Ottoman northern Palestine. I argue that the process of accumulation by dispossession, in conjunction with the growth of local agribusiness in late Ottoman northern Palestine, facilitated settler-colonialism in the region. Indeed, changes in the company’s techniques for capital accumulation in the Jezreel Valley did result in the dispossession of Palestinian Arab peasants prior to 1914, but especially during and following World War I. After the war, land purchasing agents from the JCA, the JNF, American Zion, and other Jewish organizations, as well as the Templers, revisited the sale contracts from 1902. Between 1924 and 1925, these groups and the family agricultural subsidiaries completed the largest land sales in 20th-century Palestine, dispossessing and physically displacing thousands of peasants from these lands. The legality of these sales and dispossessions figured greatly in contests and collaborations beginning in 1922, between settlers, Palestinian Arabs, and companies under the British Mandate for Palestine. They

¹³ After the JCA took over administration of the Jewish colonies in Palestine from the Rothschilds, its members, in addition to members of the Jewish National Fund and local labor unions, began their move toward pure settlement, which became the dominant method of the Zionists. Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 100; Gershon Shafir, “Zionism and Colonialism: A Comparative Approach,” in *The Israel/Palestine Question*, ed. Ilan Pappé (London: Routledge, 1999), 87.

¹⁴ Laurence Oliphant, *In the Land of Gilead, with Excursions in the Lebanon* (New York: D. Appleton, 1881). In 1869, one member of the Sursuq family bought large stretches of land in Palestine from the Ottoman imperial government. The land totaled 240,000 dunams and included twenty villages, with a total population of 4,000 people. For these plots, a “Mr. Sursock” paid 6,000 Ottoman lire to the Ottoman State Treasury and 12,000 lire to an unnamed politician, ostensibly in the form of a bribe (277). This narrative is repeated in various ways in academic studies that have yet to capture the complexity of these purchases for the history of settler-colonialism and land tenure in northern Palestine. For instance, see Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882–1914* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996); and Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, 107. For more general views about how the 1858 Land Code made Jewish land purchases of private property possible see Mahmoud Yazbak, “The Villagers of Aylut in the Grip of the New Templars [sic],” in *Struggle and Survival in Palestine/Israel*, ed. Mark LeVine and Gershon Shafir (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012).

¹⁵ The painstaking work of Amin Abu-Bakr in the Jenin and Nablus court records has provided empirical work to guide this more complete picture of land sales. Amin Abu-Bakr, “Mulkiyyat al-Sursuq fi Filistin 1869–1948,” *Majlat Jami’at al-Najah li-l-Abhath* 18, no. 2 (2004): 395–444.

continue to figure prominently in land disputes between Israeli-backed settlers and Palestinians today.¹⁶

Finally, this article offers the northern Palestine case to challenge existing scholarship on the importance of the 1858 Land Code and successive legislation in the Ottoman Empire. Scholars have attributed the process of land commodification and concomitant changes in labor-capital relations in the Levant to the enactment of the Ottoman Land Code, but this oversimplifies the case.¹⁷ Huri İslamoğlu, for example, maintains that the 1858 Land Code and the 1864 Provincial Code (Vilayet Nizamnamesi) established “control of the central bureaucracy over land and signaled an elimination of multiple claims to land revenues.”¹⁸ Gershon Shafir’s landmark study of land and labor in Palestine claims that the Land Code introduced European private property into the Ottoman Empire in an indirect way.¹⁹ I contend that such reforms alone did not lead to the commodification of land in the countryside—a claim that Kenneth Cuno and Beshara Doumani make for Egypt and Palestine, but do not elaborate on, choosing to focus on the early modern roots of late Ottoman economic reforms.²⁰ Actually, the gradual reconfiguration of social relations within changing 19th-century local and global political and economic realities made certain local transformations in property ownership possible. But only during World War I were these transformations naturalized within the landscape of northern Palestine, enabling indirectly supported settler-colonial land purchases.

Beginnings of Agribusiness and Acquisition of Land Titles in Northern Palestine

With mid-19th century changes in global markets, the family subsidiaries gradually shifted their techniques for accumulation from tax farming to all aspects of silk and then grain and cotton production and transportation. Before signing the contracts with Jewish and Templer purchasing agents in 1902, Beirut-based families had businesses investing in properties for thirty years, with the express goal of capital accumulation by dispossessing peasants of their usufruct, or use, rights. Members of these business families had built their companies by drawing on the shareholding practices they had used as *multazims* (tax farmers) in the late 17th and early 18th centuries in Cyprus and Greater Syria.²¹ They created subsidiary units for manufacturing, agriculture, transportation, and real estate, each led by family members, and in conjunction with other family members in the region. They also became bankers, lending to major infrastructure projects and to foreign purchasing agents, such as the JCA.²² During the Crimean War, these family companies redirected their capital

¹⁶ Kristen Alff, “Property Disputes in Israel Come with a Complicated Back Story—and Tend to End with Palestinian Dispossession,” *The Conversation*, 14 June 2021, <https://theconversation.com/property-disputes-in-israel-come-with-a-complicated-back-story-and-tend-to-end-with-palestinian-dispossession-161250>.

¹⁷ Scholars make this claim about the Levantine companies’ land. For more general views about the 1858 Land Code and change in northern Palestine see Yazbak, “Villagers of Aylut.” Haim Gerber overstates change for Palestine after 1858 in *The Social Origins of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1987), 75–82. For other early conventional views on the Land Code as a turning point in the Levant and Fertile Crescent, see Tosun Arcanli, “Property, Land, and Labor in Nineteenth Century Anatolia,” in *Landholding and Commercial Agriculture in the Middle East*, ed. Çağlar Keyder and Faruk Tabak (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991); and Roger Owen’s introduction in *New Perspectives on Property and Land in the Middle East*, ed. Roger Owen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 2000).

¹⁸ Huri İslamoğlu, “Towards a Political Economy of Legal and Administrative Constitutions of Individual Property,” in *Constituting Modernity: Private Property in the East and West* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 16.

¹⁹ Shafir, *Land, Labor*, 202.

²⁰ Kenneth Cuno, *The Pasha’s Peasants: Land, Society and Economy in Lower Egypt, 1740–1858* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700–1900* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

²¹ For more on the Sursuq family and the family’s companies, see Lorenzo Trombetta, “The Private Archive of the Sursuqs, a Beirut Family of Christian Notables: An Early Investigation,” *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 82, no. 1–4 (2009).

²² SFA, 18119_134, letter from Jirjis Musa Sursuq to J. Hamel, 24 April 1900, 127.

from silk and monopolies of wheat and grain trades to Western Europe.²³ When East Asian silks undersold those from Mount Lebanon, the families pivoted to agricultural production through the steady purchase of *tapu senedi* (title deeds) for lands in the Levant and Egypt.²⁴ By the late 19th century, these family businesses, now joint-stock companies, had invested in cultivating wheat, grains, and cotton in the interior regions of the Levant and Egypt, as these were connected to the growing Levantine and Egyptian ports by new railway lines. Modifying shareholding arrangements to meet their needs, these joint-stock companies hired local managers, bookkeepers, and seasonal wage laborers, and formed agricultural subsidiary companies with family members and trusted merchants in Haifa, Acre, Alexandria, Sidon, and Mersin.

The first step these new agricultural subsidiaries took after investing in the land was to take control of the planting and harvesting as tax farmers on the most fertile land in the Levant, including over 800,000 dunams (approximately 200,000 acres, or 310 square miles) of land in Ottoman Palestine.²⁵ The Jezreel Valley, Jordan Valley, and coastal plain were selected because of their fecundity, proximity to the port in Haifa, and their contiguity. Much of this land was designated as *mīrī*, or state-owned land, with the Ottoman government guaranteeing the protection of peasants' rights to use.²⁶ The family businesses, by providing initial capital to the peasants during growing seasons, were starting to exert control over the daily operations on these farms through managers on their payroll.²⁷

In 1869, these family-run agricultural subsidiaries seized an opportunity to broaden their legal rights over land they controlled in Palestine. Although they had been dispossessing peasants of their use rights to immovable property by confiscating usufruct rights as collateral for debt, this method was not considered a legal sale until 1861.²⁸ Indeed, peasants had transferred, traded, and mortgaged use rights since at least the 18th century. By the mid-19th century, rights to use and rights to a limited type of freehold on *mīrī* land had become blurred in social practice.²⁹ However, the promulgation of the Ottoman Land Code in 1858, and subsequent laws that followed, legitimated greater flexibility for the circulation and inheritance of arable land. It also occasioned surveys (*yokalama*) of the Ottoman provinces to formalize record holders' rights of use. In short, as Martha Mundy and Richard Smith's work on other regions of Palestine demonstrates, the Ottoman Land Code and subsequent Ottoman land laws and survey results were neither created without social precedent

²³ The Sursuq and Bustrus families and their partners had cornered the silk market in the 1850s, and silk production—and prices—rose exponentially in the 1850s and 1860s. By 1862, their Levantine companies owned thirty-three silk factories. Jirjis Sursuq stated that land capital was tied to profits from silk. See SFA, 18022_138r, letter from Jirjis Musa Sursuq (Beirut) to Jirjis Farazli (Haifa), 12 August 1908; Şevet Pamuk, *A Monetary History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 212; and Jens Hanssen, *Fin De Siècle Beirut: The Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2005), 36. For silk, see Samir Kassir, *Beirut*, trans. M. B. Devoise (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 123. For the Crimean War, see Trombetta, "Private Archive," 5–6.

²⁴ Akram F. Khater, "'House' to 'Goddess of the House': Gender, Class, and Silk in 19th-Century Mount Lebanon," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 3 (1996): 328–29.

²⁵ Amin Abu-Bakr, "Mulkiyyat al-Sursuq." The region commonly known as Palestine refers here to the area contained within the sanjaks (districts) of Akka (the Galilee), Nablus, and Jerusalem (Qudus Sharif). For more on the designation of Palestine during the late Ottoman Empire, see Salim Tamari, "Shifting Ottoman Conceptions of Palestine: Ethnography and Cartography," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 48 (2011): 6–16.

²⁶ According to Ottoman land law, the state possessed *rakabe* (absolute ownership) over all arable land. The cultivators were tenants of the state.

²⁷ SFA, 18022_228, letter from Jirjis Musa Sursuq (Beirut) to Salim Habib Jahal (Haifa), 4 May 1909.

²⁸ The Ottoman government issued imperial decrees on 7 January 1861; 29 September 1861; and 2 September 1862. In them, the government used the term "sale" to describe the transfer of *mīrī* land from one individual to another for cash. On 2 December 1869, Ottoman officials included agricultural land in a regulation related to the forced sale of immovable property as debt repayment. Martha Mundy and Richard S. Smith, *Governing Property, Making the Modern State: Law Administration and Production in Ottoman Syria* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 51.

²⁹ A. E. Aytekin, "Agrarian Relations, Property and Law: An Analysis of the Land Code of 1858 in the Ottoman Empire," *Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 6 (2009).

nor applied to land without preexisting social hierarchies.³⁰ From the early 19th century, these family businesses served as powerful *multazims* in parts of northern Palestine. By the late 1860s, they were able to influence both legal and administrative outcomes related to official Ottoman matters of land tenure.

Changes in immovable property laws, influenced by social practices and efforts to survey land in Palestine between the 1860s and 1870s, underwrote the partial consolidation of the family agricultural businesses' legal privileges over agricultural land. In 1866, the Ottoman government formed *emlak* (real estate) commissions to register all *mīrī* land in the Syrian province. The surveys began in the Jezreel Valley and other fertile regions of Palestine. The government issued paperwork in the form of title deeds (Arabic, *kushanāt*; Turkish, *tapu senedi*) to individuals or groups that could prove they had paid their taxes.

The Ottoman government also created a property commission to assess individuals' eligibility for title deeds through proof of paperwork. First, individuals who showed proof of *hakk-ı karar* (tax payments) going back at least three years could attain a title deed by paying a *harç-ı mutat* (one-time fee). The commission was careful to find all such taxpayers during this first stage. Four years after the start of the surveys in Palestine, the property commission began to record and auction off titles that it deemed *shemsiye* (unclaimed land), meaning land for which peasants could not show *hakk-ı karar*. The commission required these individuals to pay the *bedel-i mişl* (market price) for these lands, which was much higher than the *harç-ı mutat*.³¹

But in northern Palestine, in 1869, at the start of the state's land survey, before peasants had a chance to come forward, Niqla Sursuq, Habib Bustrus, Jibrān Tu'ayni, and Mata Farah, all members of the extended Sursuq family, approached the wali (governor) of Syria, Muhammad Rashid Pasha, with a bribe: they would pay him 3,000 Ottoman lira and he would convince the state to give them title deeds for land in the Jezreel Valley and outside of Nazareth at *bedel-i mişl*. But this was not a boon for the Ottoman treasury. The family paid 17,000 liras, yet only 6,000 liras allegedly made it into the treasury for title deeds for use rights of land in more than twenty villages. The rest of the money went to bribe other officials for recording purchases of "unclaimed" land.³² In this way the family businesses laid claim to use rights on the most strategically valuable lands in the region, preventing peasants from paying the *harç-ı mutat* to claim title deeds on lands for which they had paid taxes but were without sufficient documentary evidence to prove it.³³

Having already carved out their place in the global agricultural commodity trade, the surveys in Palestine were designed to correspond with the family's real estate subsidiaries (and agricultural subsidiaries that were vertical integration of their businesses), as well as family subsidiaries invested in the manufacture of textiles in industrial cities.³⁴ As the Sursuq brothers wrote to an agent in Europe, companies like theirs, whose members were already heavily invested in agriculture, expected title deed purchases to accumulate capital by "avoid[ing] the cost of intermediaries" for production and distribution on the global market.³⁵ The family was most enthusiastic about growing cotton, as they did on lands in Egypt granted to them by Egyptian Khedive Isma'il Pasha.³⁶ The agricultural subsidiaries

³⁰ Mundy and Smith, *Governing Property*, 77.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

³² Abu-Bakr, "Mulkiyyat al-Sursuq." See also Laurence Oliphant, *The Land of Gilead, with Excursions in the Lebanon* (New York: D. Appleton, 1881).

³³ BOA, BEO 2428/182089/9, letter from Interior Ministry (Istanbul) to the Grand Vizier (Istanbul), 17 February 1906.

³⁴ Kristen Alff, "Levantine Joint-Stock Companies, Trans-Mediterranean Partnerships, and Nineteenth-Century Capitalist Development," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60, no. 1 (2018): 162–75.

³⁵ SFA 18113_019, letter from Sursuq and Bros. (Beirut) to Sirs R. Atwood Beaver Company (Liverpool), 3 February 1912.

³⁶ SFA, 18119_133, and SFA, 18119_134, letters from Jirjis Musa Sursuq to J. Hamel, 30 April 1900; SFA, 18022_228r, letter from Alfred Sursuq (Beirut) to Salim Habib Jahal (Haifa), 24 August 1909, 173; "Majlis al-A'la li-l-'Ulum," *United Arab Republic* 1 (1957): 18.

were exclusively concerned with purchasing title deeds as well as mechanized plows and other farming equipment from Cyprus, Germany, and Egypt. The subsidiaries repaired mills for irrigation, diverted water to their lands, and expanded arable zones.³⁷ With increased control, they more accurately predicted the futures of the products that they produced.³⁸ Increased control along with attendant peasant dispossession of rights on land was, in other words, necessary for these subsidiaries' maximal capital accumulation on the global market for their materials.

Changes in Landed Property in Northern Palestine

The local companies' control was not absolute, however. Peasants and local officials in northern Palestine were cognizant of the Sursuq family's tactics for gaining domination over farming in the regions, even if they only learned of title deed transfers days after officials issued and recorded them in the registry on a subsidiary's behalf. Representatives of the family had just completed acquisitions in the subdistrict of Nazareth, for instance, when urban merchants and mukhtars (village leaders) traveled to Damascus to convince the governor to reverse the *ferağ* (transfer) of title deeds and restore the usufruct rights of all peasants who could show proof of tax payments.³⁹ When the governor refused, the mukhtars took their case to the newly formed Administrative Council of Acre (Arabic, *majlis al-idāra*; Turkish, *meclis-i idare*).⁴⁰ Although the council included at least one member who was a family company shareholder, it forced the subsidiaries to return individual title deeds to multiple families for *mīrī* land outside of the villages of Ma'lul, al-Maqbih, Safsaf, and al-Tira.⁴¹ In return for relinquishing these title deeds, the council refunded 2,000 lira to the subsidiaries from the 6,000 lira they had paid. In addition to these returned deeds, local merchants and peasants prevented the total ownership of the villages by maintaining ownership of the olive groves, buildings, homes, and other land designated as nonstate *mulk* (freehold).⁴²

The court's return of title deeds and the existence of private owners did not end the efforts of the family's agricultural subsidiary to accumulate titles for land and property in northern Palestine. Even with some of the title deeds reverting to the peasants, the purchases of 1869 meant the agricultural subsidiary had the capital for more accumulation. However, the family found subsequent title purchases more difficult after peasants in the region also petitioned the reversal of earlier acquisitions. Just one year after the family's spurious title grabs, the purchases drew the attention of Palestinian Arab peasants in other regions of the Jezreel Valley, Nazareth, and Tiberias. From 1870 onward, the subsidiaries had little success purchasing deeds from the government. Records from 1872 show they acquired parts of only five villages from the Ottoman state, a fraction of what had been purchased in 1869.⁴³

³⁷ SFA, 18022_274r, letter from Jirjis Musa Sursuq (Beirut) to Salim Habib Jahal (Haifa), 29 July 1909; SFA, 18022_228r (173), letter from Alfred Sursuq (Beirut) to Salim Habib Jahal (Haifa), 24 August 1909; "U.S. Monthly Consular and Trade Reports, Report from US Consul General G. Bie Ravndal, Beirut," *Yearbook, Texas Department of Agriculture Bulletin* 13 (1910), 39.

³⁸ SFA, 18119_197, letter from Jirjis Musa Sursuq to J. Hamel, 22 April 1900; SFA, 18119 (132), letter from Alfred Sursuq (Beirut) to J. Hamel (Paris), 30 April 1900.

³⁹ Colin Imber, *Ebu's-Su'Ud: The Islamic Legal Tradition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 115–38.

⁴⁰ Cuno, *Pasha's Peasants*, 82.

⁴¹ Mansur As'ad, *Ta'rikh al-Nasira: Min Aqdam Azamaniha Ila Ayyamina al-Hadira* (The History of Nazareth from Antiquity to the Present Time) (Cairo: Matba'a al-Hilal, 1924), 288.

⁴² For more on the meaning of *mīrī*, *mulk*, and other Ottoman land categories, see Huri İslamoğlu, "Property As Contested Domain: A Reevaluation of the Ottoman Land Code of 1858," in Owen, *New Perspectives*, 18–19.

⁴³ SFA, 18078, land accounts for 'Akka, 1895–1903; SFA, 18078_006, payments made from accounts for Sursuq et Freres, 31 December 1897. See also SFA, 23464, report of sale of land to Nachlé Tu'ayni (Beirut); SFA, 21357_1-3, memo outlining villages for sale, 1903.

With the central government reluctant to auction off more usufruct rights, and with some members of the administration of Acre blocking new registrations, the Beirut-based Sursuq family business revised its title-purchasing schemes. During the Hamidian and Committee of Union and Progress periods (1876–1914), the agricultural subsidiary formed a real estate affiliate with banks whose members oversaw the purchase and financing of title deeds in northern Palestine and other fertile regions in the Levant, Anatolia, and Egypt. During this thirty-eight-year time frame, the Sursuq family more than doubled the number of dunams of agricultural land it owned in the Levant through frequent and painstaking small-scale purchases and acquisitions. Still, these were not the full takeovers envisioned in the original plan in the late 1860s. The Beirut-based real estate subsidiary purchased shares in the villages of Nuris (a subdistrict of Jenin), Jalud, Shatta, al-Malaha, and al-Sulm (near 'Afula). Between 1897 and 1899, it acquired more title deeds in the subdistrict of Acre.⁴⁴ The new generation of family leaders, whose grandfathers started the original family companies, were under the impression that they could simply buy, sell, and mortgage title deeds as if they possessed the freehold private property.

Indeed, the language of agricultural land rights was changing. In 1850, the agricultural subsidiary described their relationship to the land and the peasants as *multazim*; by 1908, the new head of the Beirut-based agricultural subsidiary, Jirjis Musa Sursuq, distinguished between tax farming and ownership of title deeds. Lamenting that company managers in the countryside continued to blur the distinction, Jirjis stressed to these supervisors that the agricultural subsidiary was not only a *multazim* anymore. Instead, it possessed title deeds, which signaled *tamlīk hadhā al-arāḍī* (ownership of this land).⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Jirjis and family members also acknowledged that they did not own everything on the land they purchased. Peasants, for instance, still owned their homes, and some peasants and merchants still held usufruct rights for certain plots. Importantly, even if the agricultural subsidiary wanted to, the peasants could not be forcibly moved off the land. Expulsion would contradict Ottoman land law, which the Ottoman government applied to northern Palestine.⁴⁶ Most importantly, it would have resulted in serious losses; if the Ottoman government blocked the sale after the agricultural subsidiary expelled the peasant families, there would be no one to work the land.⁴⁷

Attempting the Impossible: Settler-Colonial Title Deed Purchases, 1896–1910

The Jewish Colonization Association began its activities in Palestine in 1896. Baron Maurice de Hirsch had founded the JCA in 1891, only five years prior to the association advocating for and assisting in the purchase of agricultural land in the region. In 1899, Baron Edmond de Rothschild consolidated his land titles in Palestine with those of the JCA, making the JCA the largest landowner for Jewish settlement in the Lower Galilee. Starting in 1901, the JCA attempted to remove peasant families from the land that they had purchased.⁴⁸

The main objective of the JCA's Council of Administration was to own contiguous lands in the *liwā'* (district) of Safed and *qaḍā'* (district) of Tiberias.⁴⁹ But even as peasants were unsuccessful in reclaiming all title deeds for usufruct rights, Zionist and Templer purchasing agents mostly failed in their efforts to purchase land for pure settlement in Palestine. Najib Sursuq of the real estate family subsidiary bribed officials to permit land transfers, but these were still officially demarcated as *mīrī* lands. Local officials protected the peasant cultivators by applying the Ottoman law regarding *mīrī* land that prohibited whole villages from being sold and,

⁴⁴ SFA, 18078, Account records, properties, acquisitions, and rents in the district of Acre, 1895–1904.

⁴⁵ SFA, 18022_153r, letter from Jirjis Musa Sursuq (Beirut) to Bawakim Ankiri (Haifa), 12 October 1908.

⁴⁶ CZA, J15\4388, Annex #553, letter from Jirjis Musa Sursuq (Beirut) to S. I. Pariente (Beirut), 4 October 1902.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, 102–3.

⁴⁹ CAHJP, 254/2/28, letter from David Haym (Beirut) to the Council of Administration for the JCA (Paris), 4 July 1898.

consequently, peasants from being uprooted from their homes.⁵⁰ Purchasing agents such as those from the JCA could not expel inhabitants from the properties for which they signed private sale contracts with the real estate subsidiary in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

According to Sursuq family account records, the JCA began buying land from Levantine sellers in December 1897, starting with parts of the villages of 'Abayda and Hattin.⁵¹ By the end of the 19th century, Jewish purchases reached a standstill. JCA found no alternative but to work with the family's agricultural subsidy to "transfer" title deeds only for usufruct rights. Between 1895 and 1899, Jewish immigrant groups purchased usufruct rights to a small number of shares in villages to circumvent the roadblocks to full ownership, but these did not correspond to rights of freehold private property and enclosure, as they were well aware. Peasants remained in their houses and working the land. Further, to avoid being denied official paperwork for the land from the local *tapu* official, agents signed private contracts to allow shares they purchased from the family agricultural subsidiary to remain in the names of their Levantine partners in the *tapu* records.

Jewish or Zionist purchasing agencies were not the only groups that found local officials preventing them from legally expelling peasants from the land. There was a second wave of Templer settlement in the region in 1902, when over five hundred Templers moved to the Haifa colony. By 1910, over two hundred Templer settlers lived in the Wilhelma colony, on twenty-two hundred acres of land.⁵² To purchase these lands, the German Templers approached Najib Sursuq, of his family's agricultural subsidiary, through Hans Keller, the son of the German consul general. The Templers wanted to purchase fertile land in the village of Aylut outside of Nazareth. Hans Keller and Sursuq family representatives developed a strategy. They would indent the peasants to gain the title deeds to the land, and then expel them.⁵³ When the peasants living on the land realized this tactic, they confiscated the entire winter's sesame harvest "to show everyone [Keller's] conduct."⁵⁴ The mukhtars held the harvest, went on strike, and wrote petitions to the German consul, agricultural managers, and local Ottoman officials.⁵⁵ As a result, the villagers were successful in garnering their own bases of support from the *qā'imaqām* (the district sub-governor), the *qadi* (judge) of Nazareth, and other Ottoman officials. The local officials forced Hans Keller to maintain his position as tax farmer and relinquish pure settlement on this land. Consequently, peasants who possessed title deeds in other interior regions near Aylut—in the Nazareth plain—petitioned the Ottoman government for a system of lending and oversight that would permit them to keep their titles and so remain safe from company or settler expulsion.⁵⁶

However, the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the pogroms that erupted in its wake prompted a new wave of Jewish settlement in Palestine between 1904 and 1914, the second aliyah. These settlers were mainly labor Zionists who sought sole Jewish ownership of land and the exclusion of non-Jewish workers from the Jewish economy insofar as possible. This increased pressure on Zionist land purchasing agencies to acquire freehold—or absolute—ownership of land. By 1914, out of a total Jewish population of 60,000 living in Palestine, as many as 36,000 were new Jewish immigrants.⁵⁷ Just prior to and during the second aliyah,

⁵⁰ Even the grand vizier, Kamal Pasha, had to get an *irade* (imperial decree) from Sultan Abdülhamid II and pressure the local *tapu* minister to expel peasants from properties he sold to the JCA in 1902; SFA, 21359, letter from [unknown] Sursuq to Nakhle Sursuq, Sursuq et Frères, head office (Beirut), 7 October 1902.

⁵¹ SFA, 18078_1-3, Land Accounts for Acre, 1895–1903; see entry 6, "Returns from sales made to the Jews in 'Abayda and Hattin, etc.," 31 December 1897.

⁵² Ya'acov Golan, "A Critical Analysis of the Plans for the Preservation of Four Templer Colonies in Israel" (MA thesis, University of Arizona, 1995), 50–54.

⁵³ ISA, 552/5 "Dorfes Aylut," 1.

⁵⁴ ISA, 552/5, "Petition from the inhabitants of Aylut," 11 October 1906, 89.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ As'ad, *Ta'rikh al-Nasira*, 99.

⁵⁷ Justin McCarthy, *The Population of Palestine: Population Statistics of the Late Ottoman Period and the Mandate*, Institute for Palestine Studies Series (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 23–24.

the goals of the settlement organization leaders for landed property ownership led to a narrowing of acceptable forms of labor and, relatedly, land.⁵⁸ The JCA's purchasing agents no longer accepted the private and unfulfilled promises of the Sursuq family's business to deliver land free of peasant inhabitants, or simply usufruct rights remaining in the Levantine companies' names. They now wanted guarantees in writing that the lands would be dispossessed of their Palestinian Arab peasant populations before the final transfer of money.⁵⁹ The JCA informed the family's real estate subsidiary that it was not interested in buying agricultural land unless it was both contiguous and free of Arab inhabitants.⁶⁰

On 15 September 1902, Jirjis Musa Sursuq, director of the Beirut-based real estate subsidiary, signed a contract in Paris with S. I. Pariente, the general manager for all JCA activities in Palestine, for the sale of the villages of Jidru, Kafr 'Ata, and Majdal (Tiberias District), in their entirety, to be put in the name of Edmond Lachman, a local Jewish resident of Jerusalem.⁶¹ Jirjis Musa's family members cautiously agreed to the Zionists' terms, presuming that the subsidiary would get the sales by bribing officials. These villages, he promised the Zionists, fit their needs. There were "contiguous lands" measuring "approximately 75,000 dunams in size" and "form[ed] a magnificent estate in all respects."⁶² Jirjis Musa also assured Pariente that once the first sale was completed, Pariente's associates in the JCA could "extend their lands further towards Shafa 'Amr," east of Haifa, in a contiguous N-shaped pattern for Jewish settlement.⁶³ The real estate subsidiary agreed to transfer 80,000 dunams of the land to the JCA, "not to a Jewish colony, but to one or two Jewish persons, who can then have whomever they please work on their land."⁶⁴ The choice to not include the name of any Jewish colony or purchasing organization on the paperwork was part of a strategy developed after the Ottoman and local governments issued bans and barriers to land purchases by non-Ottoman Jews.⁶⁵

Some Sursuq family leaders believed that the transfer would occur once the Ottoman Council of Ministers officially accepted the JCA's petition to put title deeds for land in the vilayet (province) of Beirut in the name of the JCA's president, Narcisse Leven, a foreigner. Jirjis Tueni, Jirjis Musa's uncle, bribed an official at the Ministry of the Interior to give the family and JCA permission for the transfers, and then brought this granted permission to the council for its approval.⁶⁶ Even so, the council informed the family and JCA that Jews of foreign birth were not permitted to live on the land, and so the peasants must remain. Jirjis Musa and other family leaders already knew that the government's permission for the sale of land was unreliable; not only was this permission "difficult to obtain," he expressed privately to Pariente, but it "may be withdrawn at any time, due to any circumstance."⁶⁷ In the event that no agreement could be reached, Jirjis Musa told his family member, Nakhlé Sursuq: "We will have to do our best to recoup the funds we have laid out" as a bribe to get the deal done.⁶⁸

⁵⁸ Shafir, *Land, Labor*, 69.

⁵⁹ CZA, 255/3/117, letter from D. Haym (Beirut) to the Council of Administration for the JCA (Paris), 27 June 1899.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ CZA, J15\2284\2, contract between S. I. Pariente (Beirut) and Jirjis Musa Sursuq (Beirut) for the sale of lands in Kafr 'Ata, Majdal, and Jidru, 15 September 1902. Also see CZA, J15\4388, Annex #834, letter from Jirjis Musa Sursuq (Beirut) to the director general of the JCA (Beirut), 16 November 1903.

⁶² SFA, 18119_195, letter from Jirjis Musa Sursuq (Beirut) to S. I. Pariente, general manager for the JCA in Palestine (Beirut), 4 April 1901; this letter is also in CZA, J15\4388, JCA file.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ SFA, 21358, letter from Tu'ayni (Beirut) to Alfred Musa Sursuq (Beirut), 7 October 1902.

⁶⁵ For more details on these bans and their various loopholes, see the foundational work of Neville J. Mandel, "Ottoman Policy and Restrictions on Jewish Settlement in Palestine: 1881–1908," part 1, *Middle Eastern Studies* 10, no. 3 (1974): 324–28.

⁶⁶ Neville J. Mandel, "Ottoman Practice as Regards Jewish Settlement in Palestine: 1881–1908," *Middle Eastern Studies* 11, no. 1 (1975): 34–35.

⁶⁷ SFA, 18119_195 (195), letter from Jirjis Musa Sursuq to Pariente.

⁶⁸ SFA, 21359, letter from Jirjis Musa Sursuq (Beirut) to Nakhlé Sursuq (Beirut), 7 October 1902.

Capital Accumulation, or Maintaining Pre-Capitalist Usufruct Rights, or Both?

Put simply, the Sursuqs tried to sell land for which ownership was contested and for which legal *mīrī* designation did not permit sale empty of inhabitants, even when peasants did not hold title deeds. Peasants, merchants, and Ottoman administrators challenged the Sursuq family's assertions of ownership of *mulk* land—buildings and orchards, for instance—on these properties. Specifically, the governor of Beirut, Rashid Bey, argued that the peasant inhabitants owned all the residential buildings on the land of Jidru, Kafr 'Ata, and Majdal, according to the Ottoman Land Code of 1858.⁶⁹ The Sursuqs thought they could avoid embroiling themselves in legal disputes by selling the JCA only usufruct rights over *mīrī* land. They had told the JCA that its representatives had to pay a price significantly above market value for the *mulk* land—the buildings, the water mill, and the 1,000 dunams of land on which the mill sat. The sale did not include the olive trees or other orchards owned by other parties, which Alfred Musa Sursuq told Pariente (through local representative Don Gle) would be sold separately later.⁷⁰ The Sursuqs did not reveal this strategy to the JCA, but decided to pay the owners of the *mulk* titles enormous sums of money to convince them to sell.⁷¹ If they could accomplish it, it would mean getting as much as forty times the market value of the land. Most Sursuq family members concluded that the compensation would be worth the out-of-pocket costs and efforts.⁷²

Behind closed doors, however, extended family members focused much more on this latter concern.⁷³ They worried about possible significant financial losses. If Ottoman officials rejected or reversed a land sale, the family risked losing labor *and* capital from the sale. In a region of the Levant in which labor was scarce and yet a priority for agricultural companies, including the family's, effective capital accumulation meant keeping peasants on the land, not dismissing them.⁷⁴ Indeed, by purchasing title deeds, the agricultural subsidiary had to dispossess peasants of all their rights, effectively making the peasants wage laborers. Discussing the expulsions with Nakhlé Sursuq, an unnamed Tu'ayni questioned whether the sale was worth the effort and up-front expense. Even if the paperwork looked clean and the sale went through, the primary shareholders simply did “not have the time, in practice, to expel all the inhabitants of all the villages.”⁷⁵ They also did not have the brute force necessary to make them leave.

Back in 1905, the Sursuq family's real estate and agricultural subsidiaries wanted to sell their land for the high prices that the Zionists and German Templers offered. But they began to experiment with growing cotton, and witnessed an increase in global prices for agricultural exports.⁷⁶ The family shareholders feared that if the local or imperial government overturned Zionist or Templer purchases *after* the subsidiaries had expelled the peasants from the land, the family would be left with title deeds for usufruct rights but no labor to work that land. In October 1902, Jirjis Musa Sursuq expressed surprise that “the state of these affairs have gone on a long time without seriously damaging [the subsidiary's] interests.”⁷⁷ The family could foresee a scenario in which they would no longer make money from selling the cotton while also not profiting from its exchange value.

⁶⁹ BOA, BEO 1896/142150/6, “Memorandum on the issue of lawful sale or confiscation of land by the state,” 3 August 1903.

⁷⁰ CZA, J15\4388, letter from Alfred Musa Sursuq (Beirut) to Don Gle (Beirut), 24 June 1901.

⁷¹ SFA, 18022_342, letter from Jirjis Musa Sursuq (Beirut) to Alfred Sursuq (Beirut), 26 June 1901.

⁷² BOA, BEO 2428/182089 (3), petition from Jirjis Musa Sursuq (Beirut) to the Grand Vizier (Istanbul), 25 December 1904.

⁷³ SFA, 21359, letter from Tu'ayni (Beirut) to Nachlé Sursuq, Sursuq et Frères, head office (Beirut), 7 October 1902.

⁷⁴ SFA, 18148_227, note addressed to Mrs. Sursock and Sons (Beirut) concerning properties in Jidru, Kafr 'Ata, and Majdal, 27 November 1908.

⁷⁵ SFA, 21359, letter from Tu'ayni (Beirut) to Nakhlé Sursuq, Sursuq et Frères, head office (Beirut), 7 October 1902.

⁷⁶ CZA, J15\4388, Annex #553, letter from Jirjis Musa Sursuq (Beirut) to S. I. Pariente (Beirut), 4 October 1902.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

The real estate shareholders agreed they would remove the peasants and cancel rental contracts only after all of the JCA's deposits were paid, mortgage payments were set up, and the family's land managers assured them that the season was between planting and harvest.⁷⁸ The family was growing tired of the seemingly impossible demands of Zionists and Templers to evacuate villages before sales were completed. They decided that if the JCA wanted to buy their property, JCA purchasing agents would have to transfer and consolidate the title deeds themselves after the sale was complete. In his role as banker, Jirjis Musa Sursuq told the JCA that he would give the JCA a loan to purchase on their own the remaining peasant-owned plots and provide an additional loan of 3,000 francs to make the transfers in the registry office. From July 1905 and going forward, after the sale was complete and the money was received, the difficult task of dispossessing rights-holders and removing approximately one hundred inhabitants from their homes in each village sold would be the sole responsibility of the buyer.⁷⁹

The Zionist purchasers were expectedly unhappy with this arrangement. They complained that the JCA had "little exploited the lands of Mesha, Yamma, Delaika, and 'Abedieh," and they had not yet acquired the entire village of Hittin, for which they had already paid. JCA members complained that thirty-six Jewish settlers "cultivated" only part of the land in Yamma "superficially" and were still living on the land with Palestinian Arab peasant inhabitants.⁸⁰ This changed, temporarily, on 20 April 1910, when Muhammad 'Afifi, a representative for Ilyas Ibrahim Sursuq of the real estate company, signed a private contract with Elias Blumfeld, the representative of a large Jewish purchasing company, the Palestine Land Development Company (PLDC). The PLDC acted as the agent for the World Zionist Organization (WZO) in northern Palestine, including the village of al-Fula. After the sale was finalized, no one in the Ottoman government claimed to know how it happened. Ottoman ministers in Istanbul speculated that Ilyas "used sale contracts for foreigners and ratified these contracts through some of the consuls of Mount Lebanon."⁸¹ This strategy involved enlisting the help of foreign consuls to argue for free commercial trade in the empire for their citizens.

Al-Fula was the PLDC's first successful purchase, but other attempts to purchase land were not as successful. Otto Warburg and Arthur Ruppin had established the PLDC in January 1908 for the acquisition and distribution of agricultural land in Palestine. Seeing their interests were aligned, they hired Hans Keller as agent for land acquisitions.⁸² According to the contract, the family's real estate subsidiaries were responsible for breaking the leases for mills and guarantors of land shares and for "compensat[ing] all farmers for any rights to the land" before their agreed-upon date of transfer.⁸³ After the subsidiaries assured the PLDC that these steps had been taken, the parties pushed for the sale. But "energetic Arabs", as members of the PLDC described them, who fought against such purchases, and additional claimants who either were not paid or refused the money, made for a bitter battle between peasants, renters, and local officials on one side, and the PLDC and the family subsidiaries on the other.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ CZA, J15\4388, Annex #834, letter from Sursuq to JCA.

⁷⁹ CZA, J15\4388, Annex #553, letter from Sursuq to Pariente, 5 July 1905. The number of villagers is estimated by data compiled from secondary sources and company records. See SFA, 23464, report of sale of land to Nachlè Tu'ayni (Beirut); SFA, 21357_1-3, memo outlining villages for sale, 1903; SFA, 18078_1-3, 6, Land Accounts for Acre, 1895-1903; and Abu-Bakr, "Mulkiyyat al-Sursuq."

⁸⁰ Jewish Colonization Association, "Rapport: L'Administration centrale au Conseil d'Administration," presented at the General Assembly, Paris, 25 June 1910 (Paris: Imprimerie R. Veneziani, 1906), 46. The spellings of these villages are preserved from the French in the original. Mesha is likely Mas-ha; Delaika is on the southwestern tip of Lake Tiberias (Sea of Galilee); 'Abedieh is the same village as 'Abayda.

⁸¹ BOA, ŞD 2310/10/9, court report, 3 August 1910.

⁸² BOA, DH_H_00021_1_00090_004, report from the Court of First Instance, Acre, 1912.

⁸³ CZA, J18\6828, addendum to contract between Mohammed Affifi (Haifa) and Elias Blumfeld, agent for the PLDC (Beirut), 21 April 1910.

⁸⁴ CZA, Z3\1517, letter from Arthur Ruppin (Jaffa) to the Action Committee of the Zionist Organization (Berlin), 13 September 1911. For more, see Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, 106-10.

Between the high prices deemed necessary to cover losses and the willingness of settler-colonial entities to pay more, the price per dunam of land in Marj ibn ‘Amr (the Jezreel Valley) had more than doubled between 1902 and 1910. These prices and increases in settler violence against peasants who refused to leave villages hampered the Zionists’ ability to buy rights over land. The PLDC paid the astronomical price of 41 francs per dunam for 10,000 dunams of land in al-Fula, about forty times the average. The JCA and PLDC lamented that “prices [in the Jezreel Valley], like everywhere in Palestine, are continuously rising.”⁸⁵ In fact, there was no longer a market for land in fertile regions of Palestine because the Zionist agents drove up the price of shares so much that even Zionist organizations had a hard time affording them. While Elias Blumfeld was negotiating the terms for the village of al-Fula, the PLDC was planning to buy the adjacent village of ‘Afula. However, as Ruppin reported, “because [the PLDC] could not afford it, [its members] had to give ‘Afula up.”⁸⁶ Further, land purchases and settlement after 1910 led to increased settler violence against Palestinian Arab peasants and racialized segregation of the workforce. Jewish worker associations in Galilee discussed the idea of boycotting Arab workers.⁸⁷ Seven Jewish workers in al-Fula awaited trial for the alleged murder of Palestinian Arabs in al-Sulm.⁸⁸

In the immediate lead-up to World War I, the Sursuq family’s real estate and agricultural subsidiaries renewed their push to sell land, and, with the calls to boycott Arab labor, Zionist purchasing agents were provided even more incentive to conclude the deals. The instability of the period of the Italo-Turkish War in 1911, an outbreak of cholera in the region, a scarcity of money, and continued frustrations with not being able to sell “Haifa cotton” at prices higher than Egyptian long-staple varieties inspired the family to entertain new contracts. The Italo-Turkish War distracted the public and the Ottoman administration; in October 1911, Arthur Ruppin suggested that “because of the war, public attention has been diverted from our work and it is now apparent that the possibility exists, to get through this land purchase without any noise, which was impossible at another time.” The Zionist purchasing agents received more funds from the Sursuq banking subsidiary to pay for lands, and the prices for lands were falling.⁸⁹ These purchasing agents created large agricultural companies, which Zionist leaders averred would hasten the project of pure settlement, “because colonists [still] usually work the soil with Arab workers.” The Zionists faced competition from European companies for these lands, which they wanted to preempt for fear that “in one to two years [the sales would] become impossible.” The year 1914 also marked a renewed push for “new lands” to realize the Zionists’ “main objective [of] acquiring the greatest possible cohesive land.”⁹⁰ This endeavor first stalled and then was accomplished when settler-colonial and local capitalist interests began to align.

Settler-Colonialism and Capitalism in Northern Palestine, World War I

Between 1920 and 1925, the Sursuq family’s agricultural and real estate subsidiaries made large land sales to Jewish and Templer purchasing agents, selling much of the land they had promised the Zionist and Templer purchasing agents over the prior two decades. It took a world war for these contracts to be realized. The physical destruction of Palestine and wider Greater Syria during World War I and the end of the Ottoman Empire provided fertile ground for the physical dispossession of Palestinian Arab peasants in the Jezreel

⁸⁵ CZA, Z3\1517, letter from Ruppin to Action Committee, 25 May 1914.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ CZA, Z3\1447, letter from Ruppin to Action Committee, 24 September 1911.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 24 September 1911 and 9 November 1911. It is unclear what the outcome of this trial was, but Ruppin hints that the Zionist Action Committee, a small leadership body of the WZO that met at regular intervals, offered to compensate the families of those Arabs killed.

⁸⁹ SFA, 18113_29, letter from Sursuq and Bros. (Beirut) to Sirs R. Atwood Beaver Company (Liverpool), 20 February 1912.

⁹⁰ CZA, Z3\1517, letter from Ruppin to Action Committee, 25 May 1914.

Valley and other contiguous arable regions where the family's agricultural subsidiaries operated. The city of Nazareth and its surrounding villages of Majdal and 'Afula, for example, suffered direct raids on its land and villagers, displacing the population or costing them their lives.⁹¹ The villagers of 'Afula experienced a dual displacement. In 1915, shortly after the war began, Ottoman Prime Minister Jamal Pasha ordered German surveyors to stem the spread of malaria in the area. His solution: burn the town to the ground. The village then became the site for the Ottoman army's main telephone exchange in the region. As expected, the Royal Air Force destroyed 'Afula a second time in 1918 when it targeted the telephone hub to obstruct Ottoman communication.⁹²

World War I represented a confluence of destruction, wheat diverted to soldiers, malaria, a plague of locusts, the rising political influence of the family subsidiaries, the willingness of wartime Ottoman leadership to support private investments, and peasants' and local officials' inability to stop commodification efforts.⁹³ World War I created more barriers to peasants affirming their rights to land and property, yet they continued to fight for their title deeds. Nevertheless, the capitalists and settler-colonialists added a new tool for dispossession: state-sanctioned physical violence.

During World War I, the main priority for the Ottoman state was feeding its growing numbers of soldiers. The state, under the triumvirate of the Committee of Union and Progress, sanctioned the real estate and agricultural subsidiaries to take control over the surplus products in the fertile regions under their jurisdiction; so, the subsidiaries demanded that peasants relinquish all or most of their agricultural yields. In the first two years of the war, peasants in northern Palestine were forced to give up their cereals from the season, aside from what they needed for seeds and supplies.⁹⁴ Jamal Pasha and the Sursuq family signed contracts for joint monopolies over corn and flour. British observers reported that these monopolies increased famine because, of course, "it was easier to do without [paraffin, oil, and sugar] than to do without bread."⁹⁵

Once the government permitted the subsidiaries to take nearly all the seasonal yields, they refused to take anything less. They now had the capital and political position to fight for more control over planting and harvesting. After the government relaxed emergency measures, the new generation of company leaders and their lawyers did not roll back their demands on farmers, mandating 80 to 100 percent of their yields. In "exchange," they gave peasants small payments in kind or, more frequently, cash, calling it payment or wages.⁹⁶ Cash, of course, bought very little under wartime conditions of inflation and scarcity. In other cases, the "payment" was still in kind, but not adequate to sustain the peasant families, if it was even high enough in quality to eat. For example, in the case of the peasants in Kafr 'Ata, the Sursuqs' lawyer reported that he instructed the company's manager to "pay [the peasantry] 20 percent of the harvest." He added that he would make sure that he gave "the most insignificant part to the peasants and the majority of it to [the subsidiaries]."⁹⁷

⁹¹ Yigal Sheffy, "Destabilizing the Enemy: The Raid on Nazareth 19–20 September 1918," in *Palestine and World War I: Grand Strategy, Military Tactics and Culture in War*, ed. Yigal Sheffy Eran Dolev and Haim Goren (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014).

⁹² M. Talha Çiçek, *War and State Formation in Syria: Camel Pasha's Government during World War I, 1914–1917* (London: Routledge, 2014), 246; Sheffy, "Destabilizing the Enemy."

⁹³ On locusts see Sam Dolbee, *Locusts of Power: Borders, Empire, and Environment in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 173–76.

⁹⁴ SFA, 19235_40, account record supplement in letter from Alfred Sursuq (Beirut) to Habib and Aziz Rabiz (Haifa), 12 September 1917.

⁹⁵ India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library, IOR/L/PS/18/B267, "Memorandum on Intellectual and Political Forces in the Ottoman Empire," 1917, 12. For more on the Sursuqs' actions leading to famine, see Graham Auman Pitts, "A Hungry Population Stops Thinking about Resistance: Class, Famine, and Lebanon's World War I Legacy," *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 7, no. 2 (2020): 217–36.

⁹⁶ SFA, 19235_118, letter from Alfred Sursuq (Beirut) to Phillip Jahshan (Haifa), 4 September 1917; SFA, 17550, letter from Jirjis Zakhyya (Haifa) to Alfred Sursuq (Beirut), 19 August 1918.

⁹⁷ SFA, 19235_118, letter from Sursuq to Jahshan; SFA, 17550, letter from Zakhyya to Sursuq.

According to the land manager's reports, the peasants did not agree to the terms of their new low "payments" in useless cash or meager amounts of spoiled wheat. Many realized that wages equaled a curtailment of their rights to live and work on the land. The subsidiaries pushed to make their payments as little as 5 percent in some regions outside of Haifa and in the district of Nazareth.⁹⁸ However, in villages like Kafr 'Ata, which remained relatively quiet during the war, mukhtars forced company representatives to negotiate the terms of the division of the agricultural yield with them. In Kafr 'Ata, groups of peasants revolted by confiscating the wheat that they had harvested, holding it in warehouses until they received at least 20 percent of the harvest.⁹⁹

These were not the only peasants in northern Palestine who protested the confiscations of their harvests. Peasants in Jidru refused to hand over grains and other valuable agricultural products marked for delivery to the Ottoman state. The peasants forced the subsidiaries to negotiate with them for higher rates of payment in kind. They wrote frequent petitions to local government officials, the same officials who had been allied with peasants throughout the previous decade. In these petitions the Jidru mukhtars complained that the Levantine agricultural companies were stealing their product. Likewise, eighty-seven families in Ma'lul negotiated for 2,000 dunams of land and an additional 3,000 later.¹⁰⁰ Other peasants continued to harvest their fields, plowed over newly drawn property lines, stopped flows of irrigation, and produced documents to reverse land sales. In response, the subsidiaries considered threats for the "names of the people who caused disruptions . . . with their lies."¹⁰¹ Subsidiary managers and local Ottoman police threatened these so-called troublemakers with bodily harm and incarceration.¹⁰²

With state support from Jamal Pasha, the Sursuq family directed Ottoman soldiers to inflict violence against peasants. Starting in the late 19th century, the family and its settler-colonial partners had begun to install private armed guards to protect cash crops in northern Palestine. The war accelerated these violent forms of surveillance and discipline, and peasants complained that "if they protest[ed], they [were] given over to the mercies of the Gendarmes" or local Ottoman police. In letters to its managers, the subsidiaries stressed the necessity of threatening peasants with the fear of government intervention and physical assault by Ottoman soldiers. As Alfred Sursuq reported to his lawyer in 1917, he was certain that "the esteemed government does not accept such behavior."¹⁰³ However, because of the state's need for wheat and grain, it would most definitely "crack down on such encroachments if [he] notified] them."¹⁰⁴

These instructions included threats to the usual supporters of local peasants. The family insisted that it no longer mattered if these peasants were "held up as heroes by the *tapu* department" and other local officials who had historically supported the peasants' pleas. The family's subsidiaries were backed now by the imperial government, and they had witnessed the Ottoman prime minister issue orders to local governors and *tapu* officers to follow their requests.¹⁰⁵ Jamal Pasha was by now infamous for hanging suspected defectors in the center of Beirut, today known as Martyrs' Square. The local officials feared a similar fate.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁸ SFA, 19235_389, letter from Sursuq et Frères (Beirut) to Habib and Rebiz (Haifa), 9 September 1918; SFA, 19235_136 (134), letter from Sursuq et Frères (Beirut) to Phillip Jahshen (Haifa), 19 October 1918.

⁹⁹ SFA, 17550, letter from Zakhyya to Sursuq.

¹⁰⁰ CZA, J18\5318, letter from the acting governor of Galilee to the legal secretary of the Government House (Jerusalem), 7 July 1921.

¹⁰¹ SFA, 19235_096, letter from Alfred Sursuq (Beirut) to Bawākim Ankiry (Haifa), 13 July 1917.

¹⁰² SFA, 19235_118, letter from Sursuq to Jahshan.

¹⁰³ National Archives, British (hereafter TNA), CO 733/60, "Concession and Regulations of the Syreo-Ottoman Agricultural Company Limited," 1914.

¹⁰⁴ SFA, 19235_119, letter from Alfred Sursuq (Beirut) to Phillip Jahshan (Haifa), 4 September 1917.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Faris al-Khuri, *Awraq (1873-1962)* (Damascus: Tala, 1989), 168-71.

In this historical moment, with the superior profits they earned from state grain monopolies, the Sursuq family purchased mechanized plows and hired day laborers to replace protesting peasants. It had begun mechanizing farms in northern Palestine with German-made machines in the 1890s. Wartime simply hastened mechanization. Plows were a necessary expense if the subsidiaries were to continue their capital accumulation. With both human and animal labor scarcer by the end of the war, the real estate and agricultural subsidiaries pushed harder for mechanized farming.¹⁰⁷ Ottoman officials aided in this process, because more machines provided more food at a lower cost. For a small fee, Jamal Pasha gave the Beirut-based family subsidiaries access to the military to transport shipments of new American Fowler 12-horsepower, steam-driven double engine plows for drainage and quick plowing.¹⁰⁸ Other plows came from Canada.¹⁰⁹

The subsidiaries used their increased profits and the chaos of the war to have their lawyers reexamine title deeds against the official *tapu* registry. The lawyers were to consolidate shares, standardize measurements, draw borders, and create “more accurate” maps that corresponded to imagined property boundaries—and the lawyers extended these boundaries beyond the designated property lines.¹¹⁰ The family took every opportunity to remove all peasants’ claims to usufruct rights and to disenfranchise peasants and merchants who owned title deeds for *mīrī*, *mulk*, and *mushā`* (owned in common) land, or other types of land in the fertile regions of northern Palestine. As expressed in letters written during the war, they wanted to erase the names of peasants and other title deed holders in the *tapu* registry, putting entire villages in the names of family members. This would help complete sales of “their” land to land purchasers and secure returns from investments, like for the new plows.¹¹¹ For example, Alfred Sursuq asked Jamal Pasha to issue “the necessary decree” to the *tapu* office to put all the title deeds in the village of Jidru in the name of the Sursuq brothers and their partners, expunging any residual title deed holders from the official record.¹¹² The Sursuqs did the same for rental agreements with individuals whom they considered to be intransigent renters and guarantors.¹¹³

Moreover, the Sursuq family used its government connections to quickly buy up more land. Alfred and his brothers used government channels to buy peasant land that the army had confiscated or that the government labeled as *mahlūl* (land left uncultivated or damaged, reverting to the state). The family used its growing capital to buy the titles of these confiscated government lands.¹¹⁴ For example, at the start of the war, the family only owned approximately half of the shares in the villages of Qira (locally called Qira wa Qamun). After the military took over shares in the villages, citing wartime necessity, Alfred Sursuq, Yusuf al-Khuri, and Khalil Thabit successfully “made the case by petition to the Prime Minister Ahmed Jemal Pasha” to claim all twenty-four shares, and to register them in their own names.¹¹⁵ Their lawyers were told to “pay special attention to gathering the title deeds for Jidru, Majdal, Kafr ‘Ata, Ja’tun, Ja’run, and Qira (Qira wa Qamun) and the warehouses of Khirbat al-Shuna as soon as possible, without any delay and no matter what the cost.”¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁷ SFA, 18081_238, letter from Alfred Sursuq (Beirut) to Jemal Pasha (Istanbul), 17 November 1918; SFA, 18081_241, letter from Alfred Sursuq (Beirut) to Jemal Pasha (Istanbul), 12 December 1918.

¹⁰⁸ SFA, 18081_238 letter from Alfred Sursuq to Jemal Pasha; SFA, 18081_241, letter from Sursuq to Jemal Pasha.

¹⁰⁹ SFA, 19235_471, letter from Major A. Love, company manager (Haifa), to Maney Harris Co. (Toronto, Canada), 1917.

¹¹⁰ SFA, 19235_118, letter from Sursuq to Jahshan.

¹¹¹ SFA, 19235_119, letter from Sursuq to Jahshan.

¹¹² SFA, 19235_096, letter from Sursuq to Ankiry.

¹¹³ SFA, 19235_074, letter from Alfred Sursuq to Bawākīm Ankiry, 30 April 1917.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ SFA, 19235_137, letter from Alfred Sursuq (Beirut) to Phillip Jahshan (Haifa), 5 October 1918.

¹¹⁶ SFA, 19235_184, supplement to letter from Alfred Sursuq (Beirut) to Phillip Jahshan (Haifa), 15 December 1917.

What the subsidiaries could not buy from the central government in Istanbul, they purchased on the local market in Palestine. The Sursuq family records attest to the veracity of stories about peasants “selling their homes and fields for a simple loaf of bread, and of speculators expropriating entire districts” in Greater Syria during the war.¹¹⁷ The Beirut-based family subsidiaries made as many “private deals” as they could with peasants, who had been left desperate in part by the subsidiaries’ activities, often choosing indeed between sale or death.¹¹⁸ In August 1917, the family welcomed a special commission from the Istanbul government to map the new limits of villages for which the subsidiaries held official title deeds.¹¹⁹

Conclusion

By the time the League of Nations assigned the British Mandate for Palestine in 1922, members of the Sursuq family’s real estate subsidiary and the settler-colonial purchasers had already completed some of the land transactions for which they signed contracts in 1902. By 1930, Jewish organizations had successfully purchased approximately 800,000 dunams of the most fertile land in Palestine as private property.¹²⁰ After these sales, approximately 1,270 Palestinian Arab peasants were expelled from these lands.¹²¹ Some Palestinian Arab tenants on Jewish land “disappeared” even before the British had learned that any land sale had occurred.¹²² Starting from at least the mid-19th century, the family’s agricultural and real estate companies increasingly dispossessed peasants from land as part of changing capitalist practices on immovable property in northern Palestine. These practices on agricultural land in particular supported settler-colonialist projects for pure settlement in the region, but neither dispossessions nor sales were possible without Ottoman state-sponsored violence, that is, coercion and control by Ottoman police and soldiers during World War I.

Scholars have repeated the fiction of settlers’ successful purchase of Palestinian rural land before World War I. This fiction, after all, is part of the permeated discourse of settler-colonialism that settler-colonial leaders have relied on for the foreclosure of alternative futures after 1948. But, as demonstrated in this article, the Sursuqs’ use of sharecropping in labor-scarce regions of Palestine conflicted with settler-colonial demands for pure settlement prior to World War I. Late 19th-century agricultural social relations in Ottoman Palestine constantly shifted in conjunction with changes in the global capitalist market and domestic iterations of these changes, of which the Ottoman Land Code was a part. But, critically, peasants continued to present title deeds and tax payment paperwork showing their right to the usufruct, homes, and *mulk* land, with local officials’ support, in the early 20th century.¹²³ World War I was the watershed moment at which settler-colonial

¹¹⁷ Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Graham Pitts, “Fallow Fields: Famine and the Making of Lebanon” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, Washington, DC, 2016).

¹¹⁸ SFA, 19232_966, letter from Alfred Sursuq (Beirut) to Bawākim Ankiry (Haifa), 23 November 1915; SFA, 19232_967, letter from Alfred Sursuq (Beirut) to Bawākim Ankiry (Haifa), 23 November 1915.

¹¹⁹ SFA, 19249_356, letter from Major Alan Love (Haifa) to Alfred Sursuq (Beirut), 18 January 1919; “The limits of our villages are well known, especially during the month of August 1917 when a special commission came from Constantinople and made a map of the limits of our villages.”

¹²⁰ Arthur Ruppin, “Buying the Emek,” *New Palestine*, May 1929, 38; Abraham Granott, *Land and the Jewish Reconstruction in Palestine* (Jerusalem, 1931), 84.

¹²¹ Granott argues that the Zionists displaced only 688 peasant families from the land they purchased from the family’s subsidiaries and other organizations between 1921 and 1928. The Arab officers in Nazareth and Haifa submitted to the British officials a number twice as large. Granot, *Land*, 90–91. By Granott’s own admission, the larger number were peasants with interests in the land, not necessarily all living on the land at the time.

¹²² CZA, L18/5323, letter from Yehoshua Hankin, representative for the JNF (Jaffa) to Dr. Yaakov Tahon (head of Palestine Bureau, Jaffa), 11 June 1921.

¹²³ TNA, F0733/204/6, “180 Claims in Land Case” (Hedera-Tulkarm Dispute), extract from *Palestine Bulletin*, 24 September 1931.

efforts for pure settlement through freehold land purchases could be realized, and the addition of a British administration favorable to Zionism naturalized settler-colonialism in rural spaces in northern Palestine.

Acknowledgments. I would like to give my sincerest thanks to the many scholars and institutions that made this article possible. A very big thank you to Joel Gordon, *IJMES* editor, for taking the time to go through this manuscript meticulously, and to the anonymous reviewers who helped consolidate ideas and reformulate interventions. I would also like to thank Joel Beinín for guiding the dissertation and making early comments on this article. I thank the individuals in attendance at North Carolina State University faculty research workshop series for offering valuable suggestions on structure. The members of the Ottoman Political Economy Workshop, Nora Bakarat, Peter Hill, Önder Akgül, and Naz Yucel, also provided detailed feedback on Zoom and in writing. I would like to thank the Phoenix Center at USEK, in Kaslik Lebanon, where the Sursuq records are being digitized. I also could not have written this article without the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Stipends program and support from the librarians, staff, and fellow fellows during my residency at the National Humanities Center in June 2022.

Cite this article: Kristen Alff (2023). “Changing Capitalist Structures and Settler-Colonial Land Purchases in Northern Palestine, 1897–1922.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 55, 675–692. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823001290>