



The Palestinian Authority in collaboration with Turkey is searching the Ottoman State Archives for documentation regarding Palestinian ownership of lands, including waqf property in Jerusalem, to prevent land from being sold to Israel

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Overview

For years the Palestinian Authority (PA) has collaborated with Turkey in transferring documents to the Palestinians from the Ottoman State Archives, **primarily those dealing with the ownership of real estate**. The Palestinians consider the documents a tool to prove the ownership of lands Israel is trying to take control of, and to prevent them from being transferred to non-Palestinians. The documents are also considered a tool that may be used in suits brought against Israel in international courts, proving the "Palestinian right" to the lands. It was reported that as part of the **PA-Turkish collaboration, the Palestinians received from the Ottoman State Archives copies of many documents dealing with the registry of Muslim and Palestinian lands and property in Ottoman Empire territory between the years 1517 and 1914**.

- ▶ Apparently, the Palestinians are currently making an effort to **prove *waqf* (religious endowments) ownership of the land in and around Jerusalem**. On March 11, 2018, a ceremony was held in Bethlehem, during which Jamal Abu Tuyur, head of the *waqf* office in Bethlehem, gave Yusuf Ideiss, PA minister of religious endowments, files from the Ottoman State Archives dealing with *waqf* property in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The documents were given to the Palestinian *waqf* by **TIKA (the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency)**, a Turkish humanitarian aid organization which is a department of the Turkish Prime Minister's office. TIKa is involved in collaboration with the PA in locating documents in the Ottoman Archives. The documents were given to Abu Tuyur during a visit he paid to the Archives in Istanbul.
- ▶ Yusuf Ideiss and Jamal Abu Tuyur gave speeches at the ceremony. They emphasized the need to document and preserve Palestinian and Arab history to combat the Israeli government's attempts to distort Palestinian history and the history of the Palestinian and Arab holy places (Wafa, March 7 and 11, 2018). They did not discuss the number of files received, what they dealt with, or whether **the PA would use them to prevent the lands of**

the Christian [churches] in Jerusalem from being sold to Israel (aljazeera.net, March 11, 2018).



Files and documents from the Ottoman State Archives in Istanbul given to Yusuf Ideiss, the Palestinian minister of religious endowments (Facebook page of Palestinian ministry for religious endowments, March 11, 2018)

PA-Turkish collaboration in locating documents in the Ottoman State Archives dealing with Palestinian ownership of land

- ▶ An examination carried out by the ITIC revealed that for many years **PA representatives and Turkey have collaborated closely** to locate documents in the Ottoman State Archives and transfer them to the PA, **mainly documents relating to the ownership of land**. A number of Palestinian entities have been involved, among them **the Palestinian embassy in Ankara; the Palestinian minister of endowments; the ministry of religious endowments and the Methaq Center for Heritage and and Islamic Research**, which is subordinate to the ministry of religious endowments.
- ▶ The Turks are represented by the **Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA)**. It is a humanitarian aid organization that is a department of the Turkish prime minister's office. Its operations are global, including in **Judea, Samaria, the Gaza Strip and Jerusalem**. It is directly subordinate to the Turkish prime minister and receives most of its

funding from his office. In ITIC assessment, as far as the Turks are concerned, collaborating with the PA by transferring Ottoman documents is aimed help the Palestinians establish their claims against Israel for ownership of **lands by providing proof that the lands are registered as Palestinian and Muslim *waqf* property**. That is also intended to help Palestinians prevent Israel from taking legal and political measures regarding the lands.¹



The TIK logo

Transfer of documents from the Ottoman State Archives to the PA (2005-2018)

In **2005** it was reported that **the Palestinian embassy in Ankara had received documents provided by the Turkish authorities from the Ottoman State Archives relating to land registry [*tapu* in Turkish] from the time of the Ottoman Empire**. The Palestinians **received about 140,000 pages of Muslim/Palestinian land and real estate registration from between 1517 and 1914**. All the documents **had been transferred to microfilm** (al-Yaum, Saudi Arabia, al-Saudi, October 9, 2005; Paldf, May 2005).

► On April 21, 2010, **Nabil Ma'arouf**,² the PA ambassador to Ankara, announced the PA had received a copy of the Ottoman State Archives from the Turkish government. He said it was a very important step which could help **Palestinians prove the ownership of Palestinian land** to official Israeli institutions or settlers' associations eager to acquire them. He said the **copy of the Ottoman State Archives** had been left in the Palestinian legation in Ankara, lest Israeli agents take it while it was being transferred to PA territory. He said the PA was establishing an ad-hoc consular department in the Palestinian legation in Ankara that **would deal with requests for archived documents**. To that end, he said, employees would be trained to read Ottoman Turkish and to use microfilm. He added that within a short time the department

¹ For further information about TIK, see Appendix A of the March 27, 2017 bulletin, " Hamas's military wing uses foreign aid funds sent to the Gaza Strip: The case of the head of the Gaza Strip office of the Turkish aid organization TIK."

² **Nabil Ma'arouf** was Palestinian ambassador to Ankara until May 2015. He was replaced by **Fa'ed Mustafa**, who represents the PA in Turkey to this day,

would be established and Palestinians would be able to send requests for information about property registration [*tapu*] (al-Ayam, April 21, 2018).

► In **2011** the BBC in Arabic reported that many **Arab lawyers in east Jerusalem had appealed to the Ottoman State Archives in Istanbul to locate land and property registrations**. Their objective was **to prevent Israelis from taking control of property in east Jerusalem**. The lawyers claimed that in many instances there was no Israeli or British Mandate registration, and therefore they had to locate the documents in the Ottoman State Archives (YouTube, September 28, 2011).

Stipend and research program of the Ottoman Archives as a means to support the PA in law suits against Israel

► In 2015, **Sa'id al-Hajj, a Palestinian publicist and researcher** who specializes in the issue of Turkey, wrote an article in which he said that **a giant project was being conducted** in collaboration with a group called the Turkish-Palestinian Forum. The project deals with the methodical **processing of millions of Ottoman State Archives documents to cull all those relating to "Palestine and the Palestinian cause."** He said the objective was to sort and catalogue the documents, and later to translate them into a number of languages (including modern Turkish, Arabic, English and French). That would make them accessible to researchers around the globe. To advance the project, a Turkish program was instituted by the office of the Turkish prime minister to provide stipends for students.

► Sa'id al-Hajj also wrote that the **Turkish-Palestinian Forum was in the process of establishing a library** that would unite all the Turkish and foreign sources dealing with the Palestinian cause. He said that according to the chairman of the Forum, **the time had come to translate Turkey's great sympathy for the Palestinian cause into consistent, established action**. In that way the Palestinians would be able to **sue Israel hundreds and even thousands of times to demand financial reparations that Israel would not be able to pay** (website of Sa'id al-Hajj, June 30, 2015).

According to Sa'id al-Hajj's article, the project is not limited to documents in the official **Ottoman State Archives**, but to various other archives in Turkey. The objective is to present historical, formal, documented legal information about land registry and ownership, the *waqf*, private property, legal disputes, inheritance, the *firmans* (decrees) of the Ottoman sultans and other historical documents. The documents will be used to prove ownership of land and property the State of Israel "took control of" and **to sue the Israel in international courts to prove the "right of the Palestinians."**

► According to **Kudret Bülbül**, chairman of the stipend program, **the Palestinian lands would be documented based the Ottoman documents.** He said **that would prevent Israel from claiming that government or private lands were not Palestinian.** He said that in addition, the program would provide financial aid and stipends for academic theses and PhD dissertations dealing with the Palestinian cause based on the documents.

Collaboration of the Palestinian Methaq Institute and the Ottoman State Archives

► **The Methaq Center for Heritage and and Islamic Research is a research institute in Abu Dis directly subordinate to the Palestinian *waqf*.** It deals with the history of Palestine and Jerusalem, and runs an archive. It collaborates with the Ottoman State Archives in Turkey.



Profile picture of the Methaq Facebook page Methaq Center for Heritage and Islamic Research (January 8, 2018).

► On May 28, 2016, **Yusuf Ideiss, minister of religious endowments in the Palestinian national consensus government**, met in Istanbul with the chairman of the Ottoman State Archives to discuss collaboration, especially relating to the preservation of Ottoman and

Arabic manuscripts and documents carried out by the Methaq Center. They discussed the possibility of joint projects and the exchange of information. Ideiss noted the efforts of the ministry of religious endowments "in Palestine and beyond" to provide the support necessary for Methaq's activities. The objective is to preserve the Arab and Islamic national identity by means of the Methaq archive. The chairman of the Ottoman State Archives expressed his willingness to increase coordination and collaboration with the Palestinian ministry of religious endowments **to create a reservoir of "Palestinian memory."** They agreed to collaborate on the restoration of manuscripts, teaching courses, and joint research (Wafa, May 28, 2016).



Right: Yusuf Ideiss, the Palestinian minister of religious endowments (right) meets in Istanbul with the chairman of the Ottoman State Archives (Wafa, May 28, 2018). Left: Khalil al-Rifai, chairman of Methaq (right) meets with the TIKA representative in the PA (Facebook page of Methaq, November 8, 2017).

- ▶ **On November 8, 2017, Khalil al-Rifai, Methaq chairman, hosted the TIKA representative in the PA.** They discussed instituting closer relations (Facebook page of Methaq, November 8, 2017).
- ▶ **On March 4, 2018,** a meeting was held at the Methaq Center in Abu Dis. Present were **Fa'ed Mustafa**, Palestinian ambassador to Turkey; **Sa'eb Nazif**, chairman of the Palestinian land authority; **Khalil al-Rifai**, Methaq chairman; and a representative of the "authority for the struggle against the fence and the settlements." They were given a survey of Methaq's activities and structure, and discussed researching the documents of the Ottoman State Archives and mutual collaboration (Facebook page of the PA ministry of religious endowments, March 5, 2018).

The meeting at the Methaq Institute (March 4, 2018)



Right: Fa'ed Mustafa, Palestinian ambassador to Turkey (second from left). At the far right is Khalil al-Rifai, Methaq chairman. Left: Fa'ed Mustafa, PA ambassador to Turkey, at the far left, sits across the table from Methaq chairman Khalil al-Rifai (Facebook page of Methaq, March 5, 2018)