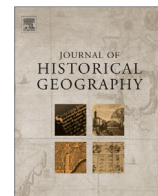




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The collision of Empires as seen from Istanbul: the border of British-controlled Egypt and Ottoman Palestine as reflected in Ottoman maps

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Abstract

This article analyses the historical and cartographical understanding of the creation of the border between Egypt and Ottoman Palestine – Israel's current southern border – by examining Ottoman maps from the period between the mid nineteenth century and World War I. These maps deal with different stages of the border's definition and demarcation, and shed light on the Ottoman view of the region and its borders, which differs considerably from the more widely known British perspective. Most of these maps were not produced to deal directly with the issue of the border, but when embedded within the broader Ottoman cartographic and geopolitical framework, provide crucial information which allows us to trace the process of border definition.

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The aim of this article is to amend the historical and cartographic understanding of the setting of the border between British-controlled Egypt and Ottoman Palestine in 1906, which later became the border between Israel and Egypt. It does so by presenting eight Ottoman maps recently located at the Turkish Prime Minister's Ottoman Archive in Istanbul (the *Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi*, henceforth BOA). These maps, some of which were official and others not, help trace the process of defining this border and shed light on the Ottoman viewpoint on its creation. This viewpoint has largely been ignored by researchers and is much less well-known than the British perspective. The maps in the set discussed here were mainly produced prior to 1906 and deal with the internal administrative borders between the Ottoman provinces of Egypt, the Hijjaz and Syria (the southern part of which became the Province of Jerusalem in 1872). These internal administrative borders later influenced the creation of the border between British-held Egypt and Palestine under Ottoman rule.

The Ottoman maps presented in this article confirm that this Empire had relatively few reliable maps on which to base its geopolitical and territorial claims as it came under increasing

pressure from the European colonial powers throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The maps, moreover, reveal differences in the 'cartographic cultures' between the Europeans, in this case the British who ruled Egypt, and the Ottomans. Modern Ottoman cartography was virtually non-existent before the turn of the twentieth century, which helps explain the state of Ottoman cartography in the Sinai desert before that time. Unlike efforts by Western cartographers at the time to produce professionally accurate maps reflecting the physical characteristics of a given territory as well as human activity there, Ottoman cartographers were for the most part mainly interested in producing schematic maps that only represented certain features such as prominent natural characteristics, major settlement localities, infrastructure, roads and railroads, and administrative borders. The first major surveying project in the Empire that included triangulations and careful modern map making took place only in the 1910s.¹ At that time the Young Turk regime, which took over the Empire in 1908, commissioned the Ottoman army's mapping department to systematically map the Empire's territories, starting with its core regions.

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E-mail addresses: yuval@research.haifa.ac.il, yossib@univ.haifa.ac.il.¹ See Harita Genel Müdürlüğü, *Haritacı Mehmet Şevki Paşa ve Türk Haritacılık Tarihi* [Mehmet Sevki Pasha the Cartographer and History of Turkish Cartography], Ankara 1980.

Prior to this date, Ottoman maps were not drawn by professional cartographers using modern mapping techniques. These maps could not have been used for definitively marking boundaries as they were too general and imprecise.² Nonetheless they still represent Ottoman approaches to the issue of the Empire's borders – as vague as this concept was given that the Empire's borders were not themselves precisely fixed. Thus, even though some of the maps discussed here were obviously not official documents, they reveal a great deal about the Ottoman perception of political space. Moreover, during the rule of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909), maps were used frequently by the Ottomans for ideological purposes. During this sultan's rule, maps were produced for the first time to show the borders of the whole Empire – which extended over parts of three continents – to be used in classrooms and elsewhere.³ These official maps often ignored changes in the actual borders of the Empire and continued to treat territories lost in previous years, including the Sinai desert, as though they were still under Ottoman rule.⁴ This ideological choice was part of an effort to create a shared national agenda among Ottoman subjects at a time when the Empire was rapidly losing many of its territories, and to project an image of unity under Ottoman rule.

After 1882, when the British occupied Egypt, and up to WWI, the importance of the border region between Ottoman Palestine and Sinai increased considerably. Not surprisingly, as a result, at the turn of the century there was extensive Ottoman investment in the southern part of Palestine (which was included in the District of Jerusalem), whose strategic importance vis-à-vis the frontier with Sinai was growing. This included the establishment of Beersheba in the early twentieth century as an administrative centre around which the Bedouin tribes were to be settled; the founding of the border town of 'Awja al-Hafir and the new administrative sub-district of al-Hafir near the border between the Negev and Sinai deserts; investment in infrastructure (telegraph lines, bridges, roads and railroads); and a reorganization of the region's administrative units along with efforts to register tribal land.

Despite these strategic considerations, and actual steps taken on the ground, the Ottoman Empire was ill-prepared for the tough negotiations with the British in 1906 over the demarcation of the 230 km-long border between Sinai and Palestine. They had no adequate cartographic information on this region, and during the negotiations they had to rely on British maps to which annotations in Ottoman Turkish were added. Although it is speculative to assume that better maps would have helped the Ottomans withstand British pressure, at least tactically it could perhaps have improved their position when delineating the final border by insisting on the inclusion of important water sources and strategic points near the border within their territory.⁵

Politics, maps and the Sinai-Palestine border

The history of the border between Ottoman Palestine and the Sinai Peninsula has attracted the attention of several previous researchers,

particularly since it became an international problem during the peace negotiations between Israel and Egypt at the end of the 1970s.⁶ At that time, these two states were engaged in a tense standoff over the demarcation of several specific points along their future border, most notably the shoreline of Taba on the Red Sea, some 12 km south of the Israeli port town of Eilat, a dispute which was eventually resolved by international arbitration between the two sides in 1986.⁷

Historically, Ras Taba shore was the southernmost point held by the Ottomans on the Red Sea shores of Sinai after their 1906 agreement with Britain to mark the border between Egypt and Palestine, which was reached under heavy British pressure and following skirmishes between British/Egyptian and Ottoman forces earlier that year. For the Ottomans it was a key strategic point that they insisted on maintaining sovereignty over given its vantage point close to the head of the Gulf of 'Aqaba and their interests in keeping 'Aqaba and the entire head of the Gulf beyond the reach of British cannons. The town of 'Aqaba was not only an important strategic garrison but was also located on a historical pilgrimage route from Egypt to the holy Islamic cities in the Hijjaz. The British, for their part, wanted to keep the Ottomans as far as possible from the Suez Canal, while leaving no doubt about British sovereignty over the Sinai desert, and eliminating the last Ottoman presence on the western shores of the Gulf of 'Aqaba (see Fig. 1).

By contrast, the Ottoman approach to Sinai was based on the line defined in the 1841 Inheritance Firman granted by Abdülmecid (r. 1839–1861), the Ottoman sultan at the time, to the governor of Egypt, Muhammad 'Ali (r. 1805–1848). In the 1830s, Egyptian troops led by Muhammad 'Ali's son Ibrahim had stormed the Levant and reached central Anatolia, thus threatening the very existence of the Ottoman Empire. In 1840–1841, following European and above all British intervention, the crisis was resolved and Muhammad 'Ali's army withdrew back to Egypt. In return, on February 13, 1841 (and again on June 1 of the same year) he was granted an imperial Ottoman decree (the Inheritance Firman) which authorized him and his descendants to rule Egypt on behalf of the Ottomans.

As of 1892, however, Evelyn Baring, the British Consul in Egypt who later became Lord Cromer, made efforts to discredit the fact that from 1841 on, when the Inheritance Firman was issued, the eastern border of Egypt stretched from Rafah on the Mediterranean shore directly to Suez, leaving almost all of Sinai in Ottoman hands. Instead he promoted a line which went from 'Aqaba at the head of the Gulf of 'Aqaba in the Red Sea to Rafah and worked to gain the British full control over Sinai (see Fig. 1).

The Red Sea shores of the Hijjaz up to 'Aqaba were of lesser importance to the British at that time. Direct steamboats carrying pilgrims from the port town of Suez to Jeddah had minimized the need to keep fortresses along the Red Sea in this region to protect the pilgrimage land routes. Thus, the fortresses built there by Egyptian forces in the preceding decades were evacuated in the 1890s, and the region, including 'Aqaba, was once more subordinated to the Ottoman administration in the Hijjaz. Nevertheless, the Sinai

² For more on Ottoman mapping in the pre-modern era, see P. Emiralioglu, *Geographical Knowledge and Imperial Culture in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, Burlington, VT 2014.

³ B. Fortna, *Imperial Classroom: Islam, Education and the State in Late Ottoman Empire*, Oxford 2002, 186–191.

⁴ Fortna, *Imperial Classroom* (note 3), 198–199; B. Fortna, Remapping Ottoman Muslim identity in the Hamidian era: the role of cartographic artifacts, *Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam* 3 (2000) 45–56; B. Fortna, Change in the school maps of the late Ottoman Empire, *Imago Mundi: The International Journal for the History of Cartography* 5 (2004) 29–30.

⁵ See M. Brawer, *Israel's Boundaries*, Tel-Aviv 1988, 74.

⁶ For instance, see N. Kadmon, Delineation of the international boundary between Israel and Egypt in the Taba area: a cartographic evaluation, *Studies in the Geography of Israel* 14 (1994) 50–70 which is a study of the demarcation of the Israeli-Egyptian border between 1906 and 1982 based on 107 maps in which there were divergences from the 1949 armistice line between Israel and Egypt; Brawer, *Israel's Boundaries* (note 5); G. Biger, *Land of Many Boundaries: The First Hundred Years of the Delimitation of the New Boundaries of Palestine-Eretz Israel 1840–1947*, Sde Boker, 2001 [in Hebrew]; H. Srebro, International boundary making, *FIG Report* 59 (2013) which is a theoretical and methodological article about the delineation of international borders in which the 1906 border is used to illustrate the problems involved in setting international borders, the technical skills required, how to measure points along the border and how to mark them on the ground.

⁷ Reports of international arbitral awards: case concerning the location of boundary markers in Taba between Egypt and Israel, 29 September 1988, Vol. XX (2006) 1–118.

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