In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Palestine and Syria have been places associated with refugees. The victims of the Palestinian Nakba (catastrophe) of 1948 – and their descendants – form a sizeable diaspora in the Middle East and throughout the world, with many thousands living in refugee camps of various kinds across the region. And, of course, Syrians fleeing the brutal civil war that has raged since 2011 have constituted a major part of the waves of the mass movements of people from the Middle East in recent years, fleeing by land and by sea to seek safety in Northern and Western Europe, and beyond.

Yet in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the final decades of the existence of the Ottoman Empire, both Palestine and Syria saw significant population movements, both in and out. Some of the incoming migrants were more willing than others, often motivated by religion and politics, including German Templers and parts of the Zionist movement. However, many of the Jews who moved to Palestine in the later nineteenth century were galvanised in their migration by increasing persecution in Central and Eastern Europe. As they docked in the ports of Jaffa and Haifa, they might have passed Palestinians setting off on ships heading out, on the start of a journey that would take them to new economic opportunities on the other side of the Atlantic. This diaspora of Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians in North and South America is often called the mahjar, a word that encompasses a range of complex socio-political features.

The term mahjar comes from the Arabic root h-j-r, to flee, to move away, to emigrate, to seek refuge. The same root provides a key term in the story of late Ottoman Syria and Palestine – muhajirun. Although it may seem strange in 2018 to imagine either Palestine or Syria being places of refuge and safety for anyone, in the late Ottoman period several groups of refugees sought to establish new lives for themselves and their communities there. My research has considered two of these groups in particular: first, Algerian refugees, fleeing the violence and oppression of French rule; and second, Cretan Muslims seeking sanctuary in the face of growing sectarian violence on that island. We might also add to this list Circassians, a generic term covering several Caucasian population groups who had left – or been forced to leave – their homelands due to Russian expansionist policies in the Caucasus region.

Michael Talbot*

* Senior Lecturer in the History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Middle East, University of Greenwich
Before considering how the Ottoman state dealt with these specific refugee populations, it is worth dwelling briefly on the context that created them. In terms of foreign policy, the Ottoman Empire faced three major challenges in its final period of existence. From the eighteenth century, the Ottoman Empire – still a significant state covering the Middle East and Anatolia, a significant chunk of the Balkans, and with autonomous provinces in North Africa – began to face new and deadly challenges. The first was the growing power of a Russian state that, having expanded significantly and rapidly throughout Asia to the east, had increasingly turned its attention to taking Ottoman provinces in the west. A number of defeats and territorial losses to the Russian Empire saw the Ottoman Empire weaken in military power and international stature. Second, the rise of nationalism, especially in the Ottomans’ Balkan territories, saw several significant provinces break away, gaining autonomy and independence throughout the nineteenth century, notably Serbia and Greece. Third, the Western European states, formerly key (if not always reliable) Ottoman allies, began to take advantage of Ottoman weaknesses to take Ottoman provinces for their own, especially the French in Egypt (briefly), Algeria and Tunisia, and the British in Egypt and Cyprus. In response to these, and other external and internal pressures, the Ottoman Empire underwent a series of major changes in the nineteenth century. A programme of intensive military and administrative modernisation created new structures and ideologies that aimed to show that the Ottoman state could compete in this new imperial world. As the Empire lost more and more of its Christian-population provinces in Europe to rivals and independence movements, the Ottoman state itself took on a more distinctly Asian and Muslim character, something also reflected in its ideology, especially in the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909). The loss of territories with significant Muslim populations around the Black Sea and in North Africa had been a significant blow to the prestige of the Ottoman Empire, and under Abdülhamid II’s rule in particular there was a strong move to assert the role of the sultan as caliph, the leader and protector of the world’s Muslims.

Caught in these great geopolitical events were two quite different groups of people seeking refuge from violence in Crete and Algeria. Algeria had been part of the Ottoman Empire since the early sixteenth century, although in practice it had exercised a high degree of autonomy, even independence. Algerian corsairs had gained a reputation for targeting European (and American) shipping in the Western Mediterranean, which often led to war with various powers, including France. Several economic and political entanglements – not to mention the need for a distraction back at home – led to the French invasion of Algeria in 1830, an invasion that would mark the beginning of over a century of French colonial rule.

There was resistance to the new rulers, and one rebellion, led by the Amir ‘Abd al-Qadir, was the catalyst for Algerian settlement in Syria and Palestine. When ‘Abd al-Qadir’s rebellion was defeated in 1847, many of his followers were given the option to leave Algeria and settle in Ottoman Syria and Palestine. Over the next half a century, tens of thousands of Algerians would make the increasingly difficult journey to Palestine, where an Algerian community arose around the port cities of Acre and Haifa, and in several villages in the Galilee region. Sometimes they were granted land in existing villages, sometimes they requested to settle on “empty” land to develop their own communities. Rather than being settled ad hoc, there was coordination
through central and provincial governors and administrators, consultations with local communities, and, from the 1860s, with support from the Ottoman Refugee Commission. In some cases, Algerians were given land to found their own villages, particularly in the area around Tiberias.

In Northern Palestine, the Algerians were but one group of refugees and migrants making their homes in the towns and villages of the Galilee region. The Algerian case is interesting in that there was a clear legal push and pull factor for their migration, in addition to the political and economic pressures of French colonialism. The case of Cretan Muslims is far more recognisable, at least to twenty-first century eyes, as a refugee crisis. From the time of the conquest of Crete by the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth century, Crete had been home to a sizeable Muslim minority. The rise of Greek nationalism, which had a distinctly Orthodox Christian flavour, meant that conflicts between the Ottoman Empire and Greece necessarily played out from time to time on the island of Crete, which did not become part of the new Greek kingdom. A number of nationalist-inspired uprisings in the second half of the nineteenth century concentrated the Muslim population into specific areas and towns, and also saw Crete granted a degree of autonomy.

Although many Muslims had fled earlier in the century, the major catalyst came at the end of the 1890s when a series of major uprisings by Greek Christians on Crete, egged on by the government in Athens, resulted in a major war between the Ottoman Empire and Greece in 1897, and confessional violence on Crete. Although international involvement attempted to introduce measures of control, this instability triggered the flight of Muslims from Crete, with a second major wave coming in 1908 and a Cretan declaration of unity with Greece.

Many thousands of Cretan Muslims headed across the Mediterranean on ships, reaching sanctuary in the Ottoman Lebanese port of Tripoli. Many of them settled in and around the port area of Tripoli, but soon it became clear to the local authorities and the Ottoman Refugee Commission that a more substantial solution was needed to house and support this new influx of people. New housing blocks and neighbourhoods were designed to provide homes for Cretans within the town itself, but one of the biggest achievements of the refugee commission and the Ottoman government was the swift construction of a new purpose-built village, situated to the north of Tripoli on the Syrian coast. The village became known as Al-Hamidiyah, named after Sultan Abdülhamid II, whose government oversaw its development.

The Ottoman government invested significant amounts of money and effort into supporting and establishing the settlements of the Algerians in Palestine and the Cretans in Lebanon and Syria. Indeed, those communities survived the end of the Ottoman Empire itself. Yet later events in the region would have a significant impact upon these communities, established to settle and support refugees from oppression and violence elsewhere in the Mediterranean, turning their inhabitants once more into refugees. In Palestine, almost all of the villages established by the Algerian refugees or inhabited by them were depopulated and/or destroyed during the Nakba of 1948. As a result, Algerian inhabitants of Palestine joined the wider Palestinian community in refugee camps and exile. In Lebanon, the Cretan community has been caught in the crossfire
of sectarian violence in Tripoli. And in Syria, many of the descendants of Cretan Muslims who found sanctuary in their new town of Al-Hamidiyah at the turn of the twentieth century found themselves retracing their ancestors’ journey across the Mediterranean, seeking refuge in a land that had once expelled them.

There were many criss-crossing journeys of people both to and from the Ottoman realms in the empire’s final decades, creating a complex picture. History has often focused on flights from Syria and Palestine, seeing them as regions creating economic migrants and refugees. Yet in the late Ottoman period, Syria and Palestine were also recipients of a range of population groups seeking new lives and protection from violence and instability. The response of the Ottoman state in largely accepting these groups through liberal citizenship laws was often countered by less liberal land regulations, but nonetheless it was possible to seek sanctuary in the Ottoman realms. The Ottoman state invested heavily in supporting and resettling refugees from within its former and current provinces, allowing those resettled to maintain their own distinctive identities and traditions. The Algerians in Palestine and the Cretans in Syria and Lebanon are key examples of these efforts and attitudes. There is a tendency to homogenise the Palestinian and Syrian refugee populations, or to divide them strictly by sectarian or confessional identities. Yet in becoming refugees once again, in the Nakba and in the Syrian Civil War, these two communities revealed the more intricate layers of history preserved within larger refugee and migrant populations.