



1 SETTING FOR A CONFLICT: 1881-1908

At the same time of the Russian pogroms of the early 1880s and the ensuing first Jewish *aliya* (immigration), Palestine lay wholly within the Ottoman Empire. On the West of the Jordan, it comprised the independent *Mutasarrifiyya* (*Sanjak*) of Jerusalem (Quds-i-Cherif) to the south and part of the *Vilayet* of Sham (Syria) to the north. In 1883, the *Vilayet* of Sham was reorganised and the northern part of Palestine; namely, the *Sanjaks* of Acre and Nablus (Balqa') were made part of the *Vilayet* of Beirut.

The *Sanjak* of Jerusalem was independent and directly linked to the Minister of the Interior in view of its importance to the three major monotheistic religions. It comprised the greater part of the territory of Palestine and more than three quarters of its population.¹

The total number of villages was 672 with an estimated population of 457,592² (not including the Beduins). The number of educational establishments in Palestine amounted to 956 most of which were primary and elementary schools.

The overwhelming majority of the population was Sunni Muslim. Small numbers of Shi'a and Druzes existed, while around sixteen per cent of the population was Christian, mainly Greek Orthodox, Latin and Greek Catholics. Arthur Ruppin put the number of Jews living in Palestine in 1880 at 25,000.³ Both Jews and Christians were free to practise their religions and enjoyed a degree of autonomy through the Millet system.⁴

The majority of the Muslim population was engaged in agriculture and lived in villages. Apart from the peasants there was a considerable number of unsettled beduins, particularly in the vicinity of Beersheba. The urban population, both Muslim and Christian, was engaged in commerce, the crafts and modest agricultural industries, and some people held government posts.

Prior to 1880 almost the entire Jewish population of Palestine lived in its 'Four Holy Cities': Jerusalem, Tiberias, Safed and Hebron. A sizeable proportion of Palestine's Jewry was supported to a very large extent by the *challukah* system; the organised collection of funds in the Diaspora for the support of the pious scholars in Palestine. Nevertheless, piety was not the sole characteristic occupation of Jews in Palestine. As early as 1851, the British Consul in Jerusalem reported