The Ottoman Empire in the Middle of the Eighteenth Century and the Fragmentation of Tradition: Relations of the Nationalities (Millets), Guilds (Esnaf) and the Sultan, 1740-1768

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Ottoman studies in the West other than diplomatic have concentrated on the nineteenth century. Recent studies of the eighteenth century Ottoman Empire indicate that the malady which afflicted the “sick man of Europe” predates the time that the “Eastern Question” preoccupied European diplomatists. Within the Ottoman Empire Istanbul was a microcosm of the complex interplay of Christian (Armenian, Greek, and European), Jewish and Muslim groups during a period of political disorder and decline. During this time of internal rebellion and war these groups attempted to define their identities and priorities—racial, religious, political or financial, while forging new alliances with the Sultanate and ruling groups. I have indicated in previous studies that emerging alliances were not necessarily along millet (religio-national) lines. Economic groupings superseded traditional allegiances. In my opinion an understanding of the period under consideration is essential to an understanding of the nationalistic movements of the nineteenth century and the accompanying problems of modernization which persist even today in the Middle East.

Between the height of the price revolution in the middle sixteenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century monumental changes had taken place in Europe. As Professor Braudel put it, a “new sharp toothed capitalism” had come into being with accompanying manifestations from internal capitalistic developments to the

* For detailed references see bibliography in my article and book listed at the end of this article.
expansion of Europe into other lands. This was not true of the
Ottoman Empire. When the effects of the price revolution began to
abate in Europe around 1650, the shattered economy of the Ottoman
Empire could not withstand the onslaught of European capitalism
which undermined its abilities to industrialize. The "underdevelop-
ment" of the Ottoman Empire and of the Middle East had begun.
In these circumstances the silk and spice trade became all the more
important as well as a competitive source of revenue for the Ottomans
and the Persians whose economies were increasingly in the backwater
of world trade and commerce. Yet in the first half of the eighteenth
century both countries were sustaining huge empires; while the Otto-
man Empire had been reduced as a result of treaties with Europe,
the Persian Empire was experiencing an expansion.

The Ottomans and the Persians could not, however, reconcile their
imperial ambitions with their medieval economies. Because of their
inability to confront the Europeans successfully, the Ottomans gradu-
ally lowered their imperial gaze in Europe, but they did not do so
in the east where they sought aggrandizement at the expense of the
Persians. Nadir Shah, the emperor of Persia, also pursued a policy
of imperial expansion at great expense to his subjects. The quarter of
a century of wars (1723-1748) between the Ottomans and the Persians
demonstrated not only the inability of the two Muslim Empires to
confront the Christian west but also revealed they could not make
war on one another without the fear and apprehension of raising
yet another specter of declining economies and empires-internal
rebellion. The threat of rebellion and war caused a realignment
of the traditional Ottoman political bases. I think that this realign-
ment of the middle eighteenth century was the source of many
major conflicts in the empire and was one of the fundamental
reasons for the exacerbation of tension among the Millets or the
Christians, Jews and the Muslims as well as among Muslim them-
severs.

The study of the relations of the millets or non-Muslim (Greek,
Armenian, Albanian and Jewish) nationalities of the Ottoman Empire
during the period (1740-1768) on the basis of a comparative study of
the respective relations of the millets through their representation
in the guilds (esnaf) of Istanbul is significant for several reasons.
Toward the end of the second decade of the eighteenth century and
especially after the Treaty of Passarowitz (1718) Istanbul experienced an expanding and inflationary economy with all of its attendant advantages and evils. The stresses on this economy had a parallel effect on the guilds which were organized not only along economic lines but, were political, religious and cultural organizations. The strains on the guilds became particularly evident during the Patrona Halil rebellion in 1730.

During the course of the Patrona rebellion (1730-31) the rebels and some of their supporters succeeded briefly in achieving some of the highest offices in the Empire with the backing of elements, especially the ulema, which had formerly supported the Sultan. The rebellion of 1730 in effect caused a realignment of those groups endorsing or opposing the Sultan’s policy of increased contact with Europe. The major support of the Sultanate prior to 1730 had come from the military elite and the ulema. After 1730 elements of the military elite which opposed the introduction of European military techniques and the ulema, who were opposed to the infiltration of European (French) customs and ideas in Ottoman society, began to collaborate with the anti-Sultan forces. In effect, the post 1730-31 alignment was much more volatile than the pre-1730 one, because elements of the Janissaries and/or the ulema could change their support from the Sultan to his opponents depending upon the circumstances and strength of the Sultan. This new instability was one of the reasons for the centralization of power in the hands of the Sultan, a policy which began to bear fruit during the reigns of Selim III (1789-1807) and Mahmud II (1808-1839).

The fluidity of the new alignment is also demonstrated by the actions of the esnaf or “petite bourgeoisie” of artisans and merchants who in 1730 were one of the vocal opponents of the Sultan and Grand Vezir. In the spring of 1731 some of the guilds, in face of a threat to their business by continuing disorder in Istanbul, threw their support to the new Sultan, Mahmud I (1730-1754) and as a result the last supporters of Patrona Halil were executed or imprisoned. Even though Mahmud I promised to rescind the extraordinary campaign taxes imposed by his predecessor, the newly won allegiance of the esnaf, many of whom were non-Muslim, was to be a mainstay of his reign. This switch of allegiance was one of the most sudden and significant changes of eighteenth century Ottoman history.
During the next decade the new allegiance of the guilds was not an easy one for Mahmud I to nurture. The ten years following the Patrona rebellion were among the most trying of the new Sultan's reign. Not only the territorial integrity of the empire but the very underpinnings of the Caliphate and the sovereignty of the Sultan were threatened by the military successes and the religious propaganda of Nadir Shah of Persia. Peace on the eastern front was still in the negotiating stage when war with Russia and Austria commenced in full force in 1736. The Treaty of Belgrade (1739) despite its advantageous articles for the Ottomans quelled the disquiet neither of the people of Istanbul nor the war party at the Porte. The Russo-Austro-Ottoman war of 1736-39 was not without victories for the Ottomans, but the Treaty of Belgrade did not satisfy those at the Porte who wished to pursue a more aggressive policy. Throughout the war with Russia and Austria differences among the ulema, Sultan, Grand Vezir, Kizlar Ağası, Janissaries, and the guilds were exacerbated by the scarcity of provisions. The winter of 1739 was extremely severe and the mood of the people became more rebellious. Tension in the city mounted as the desperate plight of the people began to find expression in arson as the winter progressed. It was at this point that rebellion broke out. The main consequence of the 1740 rebellion was that it appears to confirm the alignment of 1731 with the astounding addition that the Sultan armed the non-Muslim guilds and they assisted the Sultan in suppressing the rebellion.

Everard Fawkener, the British Ambassador at the Porte, thought that the hatt-i hümayun (Sultanic Decree) which ordered all shopkeepers to keep their shops open during a rebellion was a remarkable proclamation in that the shopkeepers were also commanded to take up arms and to attack the insurgents on threat of being hanged from their own shopdoors. On June 9 there was another flare-up, but before it could gather momentum it was suppressed by the people in the neighborhood (mahalle) where it occurred. The people fell upon the rebels and "knocked on the Head the Mutineers as they were directed" by the hatt-i hümayun which had called for the retaliation on the part of the esnaf who had been armed for this purpose. There were those in Istanbul who were of the opinion that the June 9 outbreak was not for the purpose of a general uprising of the people, but rather only a quarrel among Janissaries. But the
suppression of it by the esnaf and people of the neighborhood could have given great offense to the Janissaries. According to Fawkener, the retaliation on the part of the esnaf was detested by the Janissaries and it made the hatt-i hümâyûn seem ill—judged, for now the esnaf—many of whom were Christians and Jews—were called upon to take arms against the Janissaries. Fawkener was of the opinion that an interference of this type could lead to a “general Massacre of those people (which) may one day very easily be the effect of it, as well as what further Mischief may be apprehended from the Militia’s being got together in arms, & fearing in punishment of it”. This, indeed, is a striking and highly significant passage.

The fact that the arming of the non-Muslims corresponded with the inauguration of extensive capitulations to France (1740) which insured even greater advantages to the millets in the subsequent years was to further exacerbate tensions between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. The alliance of the Sultan and the non-Muslim bourgeoisie was, however, a double—edged sword. The millets were to prosper in the latter part of the eighteenth century but only with the favor of the Sultan. The Sultan, in effect, held the millets, especially after 1740, as captives. In future if the millets did not acquiesce to his policies, the Sultan would be able to turn the discontent of the crowds on them. For unlike the social revolution of Patrona Halil, after 1730 the resentment of the Muslim masses could be turned more effectively against the millets. The millets, in turn, could only escape from this bind by nationalistic expressions which emerged in due course during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. But the alignment of forces which produced rebellion and social upheaval in 1730-31 was not to be resurrected, largely due to the Sultan’s policy of 1740. The legacy of 1740 was increased tension between Muslim and non-Muslim which prohibited reform and modernization in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.


Mardin, Şerif, S., “Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?” *Daedalus*, vol. 102, No. 1 (Winter, 1973).


