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Dördüncü Milletlerarası Kongre Tebliğleri

13-17 Ekim 2010, Üsküp, Makedonya

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Ottoman Administration in the Balkans

Halit Eren*

The policies and methods that governed Ottoman expansion, settlement and administration in different regions developed into systems that were unique in their general salient traits as well as in features peculiar to different regions. In this respect the Ottoman period in the Balkans is an exemplary phase well representative of those traits and features. Ottoman administration in the Balkans constitutes one of the main regional dimensions of Ottoman history. Similarly, the Ottoman period in the Balkans is one of the main dimensions of Balkan history. Their combination has produced exemplary experiences of interest to policy-makers as well as of importance for academic study.

The Ottoman administrative system established in the Balkans has not been one of imperialism, oppression or domination. For nearly six centuries peoples of diverse faiths, ethnic origins and cultures lived together in the Balkans in a state of peaceful co-existence. At the basis of this, we find the very basic methods applied by the Ottomans in their settlement in the region. Having passed from Asia Minor to Thrace after securing the Çimpe fortress in Gallipoli as a base in 1352, they continued to expand westward. This process took place before the conquest of Istanbul; by surrounding Istanbul it facilitated its conquest. Thus, while Ottoman expansion in the Balkans was continuing, the policy of *istimalet* (tolerance and protection) on the one hand, and, on the other, the activities of the dervishes in aiming to introduce Islam and the Turkish state to the population, created a welcoming atmosphere towards the new administration.

In the Balkans the *istimalet* policy was applied not only to the population in rural areas but also towards church authorities, feudal lords, landowners and

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the local military. A notable feature of the system was, among others, that pre-Ottoman laws, customs and traditions were incorporated into the Ottoman legislation applicable in the region, which can be considered as the most effective result of the *istimalet* policy. Moreover, studies have suggested that the inclusion of Christian military groups, the vassals, in the Ottoman military was facilitated by the confidence gained by these military groups in the powerful Ottoman administration, which guaranteed their status and took their lands under its protection. This confidence ensured that most of these landlords did not oppose the new rule. A number of Christian garrisons handed over their fortresses to the Ottomans and joined their ranks. Timar ownership proved attractive to many. From the mid-14th to the 16th century the voynuks (auxiliary military forces) from Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia and Thessaly joined the Ottoman armies (though they later lost their importance in the Ottoman military forces).

The Ottoman settlement in the Balkans had begun at a time when the Byzantine Empire, the Bulgarian Empire and Dushan's Empire disintegrated into a number of feudal principalities and districts. An important example of the pragmatic nature of Ottoman expansion and administration policy was the manner in which, wherever they settled, the Ottomans recognized and gave their patronage to the diocese and the bishops. The latter were granted timars, thus becoming members of the Ottoman administration. Meanwhile, the independent rulers who established feudal states after the disintegration of Dushan's Empire later became vassals of the Ottoman Empire. This policy based on tolerance greatly facilitated Ottoman expansion in the Balkans. The fair practices and tax system applied to the Orthodox Church assisted in the acceptance of Ottoman administration by the urban and rural masses of the population. A Christian lord could be granted a timar on condition that he had a military background and could prove his loyalty to the sultan. If these conditions were met timar holders and voynuks could be granted by the Sultan ranks commensurate with their prior statuses. Their right to hold lands in the form of timars and *baştina*, was largely protected over time. Nobility from various regions of the Balkans were becoming timar holders and assuming the military, and also administrative and economic duties this involved. A large number of them embraced Islam. In all matters and practices from the granting of timars and assignment of duties to the transfer of ownership and

inheritance, Christian and Muslim timar holders were subjected to the same treatment. Soldiers provided by timars in the Balkans participated in Ottoman war campaigns, such as the Battle of Ankara in which Yildirim Bayezit opposed the Timurid sovereign Timur.

It is also noteworthy that Ottoman settlement in the Balkans put an end to the Catholic propaganda led by the Papal authorities and Hungarian kings calling upon the Orthodox community to adopt Catholicism. The Ottoman state extended protection to the Orthodox Church; its hierarchic system and all the privileges enjoyed under Christian rule were maintained.

For the Ottoman state there was a continual growth in the importance of Thrace and the Balkans as a strategic base. After the conquest of Edirne in 1362, Murad I established the region as a Beylerbeylik which at first had a greater military than administrative significance. For centuries the Rumeli Beylerbeyliği maintained a privileged position. Numerous indications of this can be traced in the official documents. This also becomes evident in the development and reclamation policies applied in the Balkans. As known, in Islam, starting from the earliest Islamic states, urban development was given priority as a milestone of development and civilization. The Ottomans adopted this policy with the result that the same policy of the revitalization of cities and towns and improvement of the infrastructure soon began to be applied in the Balkans as in other parts of the Empire. At the same time, new villages were established by Turcoman settlers in Thrace beside the existing Christian towns and villages resulting in permanent settlement, not a temporary one. In this process, one of the most characteristic features of Ottoman administration in the Balkans was the introduction of the waqf system. Institutions for various purposes and public buildings attached to the waqfs were established everywhere under the Ottoman administration. Among them, educational establishments and public and private libraries occupied a prominent position. These and other types of waqf dating from the Ottoman times remain as the heritage of a dynamic urban and cultural activity.

I would like to support these brief observations by citing some cases from different periods in different parts of the Balkans which reflect the characteristics of Ottoman administration in the Balkans and also the cooperative approach displayed by the local populations.

I first wish to refer to the well-known firman of Sultan Mehmed II granting

freedom of faith and worship to the Franciscan priests of Bosnia.¹ It reads: “I, sultan Mehmed Han, inform all the world that those who possess this imperial edict, the Bosnian Fransiscans, are in my good graces and I do hereby command: let nobody harass or disturb those mentioned or their churches. Let them dwell in peace in my empire. And let those who have become refugees be allowed to do so and be safe. Let them return and let them settle in their monasteries without fear in all countries of my empire”. And it goes on “Let nobody attack, insult or endanger their life or their property, nor the property of their church”

Secondly, I wish to mention two firmans relating to Skopje. One of them, dated 13 December 1879, is an order for the distribution of coal for heating to needy members of the local population and emigrants from Skopje. The second one, dated 22 August 1876, announces that the aid extended by the Muslim and non-Muslim population of Skopje to the armies consisting of animals and flour was announced in the military gazette and gratitude was expressed to the local authorities.

An order dated 14 July 1559² asks the vaivode of Wallachia to keep the region of Transylvania under continuous scrutiny and to do all that is necessary to protect the region. The Sultan orders the vaivode of Wallachia to cooperate with the vaivode of Moldavia and not to spare one minute in watching out for the security of the province and its people.

Another example is the order of Sultan Suleyman the Lawgiver to the *kadis* of Semendire (Smederevo) dated 23 April 1560. “I have been informed that earlier taxes were collected from the population illegally. I sent an order stating ‘From now on whoever from among the people it may be, whatever his rank, I do not allow the collection of even a single object that would be against the law’. Not only you did not end such practice, it came to my knowledge that you did not inform me of it. When this order of mine reaches you you must record it immediately in the register and put it to effect. In case you are not capable of preventing injustice, then inform me even if the one who does the injustice is the *sancakbeyi*. From now on never tell me you are incapable of this, in which case you would be immediately dismissed from office. Publicize this order widely so that no one can claim ignorance of it.”

1 BOA, Düvel-i Ecnebiye Defteri, 14/2 1, 4 Nisan 1478.

2 BOA, Muhimme Defteri 3, Hüküm 112.

To continue our sampling of cases from over the centuries; a regulation dated 10 October 1617³ orders the voivode of Moldavia to guarantee freedom of religious practice to the vladika (prince-bishop), bishops and priests; that he makes sure that nobody, not even Greek patriarchs, interfere with the ceremonies conducted by vladikas, bishops and other priests in their churches or with matters of their own concern.³

A fiscal regulation⁴ dated 1797 to protect the population of Romania from all kinds of loss: that tax payments due by state officials be collected in accordance with the laws; that those applying to become voivode sell some of their property to avoid gossip; that the cost of manpower and wood supplied by the population be paid fully and that the cost of the sheep collected for the state be fully reimbursed.

Another example, this time from a later date, is contained in the joint petition dated 1822 sent by the Christian authorities in Wallachia expressing the gratitude of the metropolitan, the priests and the people of Wallachia for the authorization given to appoint the voivode of Wallachia from among the local boyars.⁵

A letter dated 1853 addressed to Sultan Abdulmecid by Christian religious authorities, notables and the people of Tuzla in Bosnia, expresses gratitude to the Sultan for the policies applied in the region, thanks to which welfare and peace had increased.⁶ The letter says that the general inspector of Rumeli and the Governor of Bosnia have, in conformity with the orders of the Sultan and by the intercession of the metropolitan and the archbishop of Zvornik, guaranteed their complete freedom of faith and practice.

Another example is the document whereby the notables in Bergos request financial assistance from the Sultan to build a church.⁷ It states that thanks to the policies of the Sultan they were spending their days in confidence and comfort.

Another letter of thanks in Serbian is addressed to Sultan Abdulmecid by

3 BOA, Muhimme Defteri 82, Hüküm 87.

4 BOA, HAT, 12550-C.

5 BOA, HAT, 45530-A.

6 BOA, İ-Hariciye 4860-2, 16 April 1853.

7 BOA, İ-Hariciye, 14039-3, 2 April 1839.

the notables of Bosnia, expressing thanks for the authorization to construct new churches.⁸

A firman dated 11 October 1864⁹ grants all religious functionaries immunity from customs duties.

Again relating to Skopje, I have the copy of a firman dated 20 October 1884 naming "Teşvikiye" the new district formed by new Christian immigrants near the existing new Christian village.

Still another is a cable dated 27 May 1900 which affirms loyalty to the Sultan and has a list of signatories from Skopje.

These examples can be multiplied. Cases highlighting the traits and features I have referred to, among many others, will be covered by the distinguished congress participants. I thank them for their contributions and also express my appreciation of the quality and the variety of themes achieved in this series of congresses on Islamic civilization in the Balkans. I believe this resulted from both the development of research and teaching in this area and the importance accorded to it, the state patronage and support extended and cooperation of the academic institutions devoted to scholarly activities relating to this theme.

8 BOA, Hariciye 4860-5, 16 April 1853.

9 BOA, Buyuruldu Def. No. 5, s. 75.