Chapter 6

Ambiguous Relations between Religious Institutions and Waqf Properties at the Beginning of Ottoman Rule

Waqf Survey by the Ottoman Government in the Sixteenth Century

Waqf Survey in the Ottoman Period
When the Ottomans conquered Syria and began to rule, they conducted several land surveys and left many land survey registers. Some registers recorded waqf deeds and waqf properties in the province of Damascus, including numerous small endowments made by ordinary people.

Studying waqf endowment activity in the cities of Syria has been difficult because of the scarcity of surviving endowment deeds. No original deeds have been found for Ayyubid or Mamluk Syria, whereas the small number of endowment deeds made by sultans and amirs in medieval Egypt are well known and have been used for study.1 Although documents relating to waqf endowment in Ottoman Syria are rare in comparison with those of Ottoman Egypt and Turkey, some pioneering studies have been done on the urban development of Damascus using waqf endowment deeds found at the Zāhiriyā Library and other documents recorded in the shari‘a court registers. Since the sources are so limited, most studies have concentrated either on the development of religious institutions in particular cities, based on geographical and historical narrative sources, or on case studies of major institutions, based on waqf endowment deeds.2

In this chapter, I shall attempt to analyse waqf endowment activity and its effect on urban development in Damascus and the Ṣāliḥiyya quarter, thus extending our horizon to the smaller endowments recorded in these registers.

1 Muḥammad Muḥammad Amin, al-Awqāf wa-al-ḫayāt al-ʾijtimāʿīyya fī Miṣr 648–923 AH/1250–1517 AD (1980); Petry, Protectors or Praetorians?

After defeating the Mamluk army led by Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī at Marj Dābiq in Sha`ban 922/ June 1516, Sultan Selim entered Damascus with some 200,000 soldiers, and the citizens of the city surrendered on 1 Ramadan/28 September 1516. He distributed about one hundred dirhams per person to the personnel of various mosques and madrasas. In Dhu al-Qa`da he visited the tomb of Ibn al-ʿArabī, a famous scholar of mysticism (d. 638/1240) in the Ṣāliḥiyya quarter and dispersed dirham coins to its inhabitants. He then left Damascus to conquer Egypt with his army, arriving there in Muharram 923/ January 1517, and returned to Damascus in Ramadan/September 1517. He then ordered a survey of its inhabitants and waqf properties and also began the construction of a new congregational mosque at the site of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s tomb in Ramadan 923. The minbar was erected in Muharram the following year and a celebration was performed.  

The chronicle of Ibn Ṭūlūn gives a detailed report about the conduct of the waqf survey. The new Ottoman qadi, Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn, was in charge of this survey and he used local Damascene staff. First, they ordered those in charge of waqf properties to appear and submit their accounts for the previous two years for examination on 7 Dhu al-Qa`da 923/21 December 1517. Some of them appeared before the qadi and his staff, and, seeing that they were taking the waqf documents away, cried out and fled. Next day the investigators sent a letter to al-Nuʿaymī asking him to bring them his book (Tanbih al-ṭālib wa-al-madāris ‘alā bayān mawādiʿ al-fāʾida, another title of Dāris), which they wished use to get information about the religious institutions in Damascus so as to be able to survey the waqf (institutions and properties). Al-Nuʿaymī criticised them, saying it was customary to submit the list of waqf properties under the names of the individual founders one by one. They asked him to show them his book, but he refused and instead wrote the names of the madrasas on a piece of paper. Furthermore, al-Nuʿaymī and Ibn Ṭūlūn, who had abridged al-Nuʿaymī’s book, sent their agents to the qadi, as he wished to know the names of the founders of the madrasas. They told him the names in order to give him evidence about the waqf. The following month, the qadi and his local staff went to the Ṣāliḥiyya quarter to survey the madrasas there. They began at the

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3 Mufākahat, 11, pp. 65, 68, 79–80. This jamiʿ is located along Asad al-Dīn street and called Jamiʿ Shaykh Muḥyī al-Dīn. There is a large prayer room, courtyard and the tombs of Ibn al-ʿArabī and ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazāʾirī (d. 1300/1883), a leader of the national movement in Algeria against French colonisation. The tombs are topped by a semi-dome and are a famous spot for tomb visitation (ziyāra) (see Photo 9 & 10).