CHAPTER 11

The Incomplete Civil Servant?
The Figure of the Neighbourhood Headman (Muhtar)

Élise Massicard

This chapter is part of the collective reflexion on the modes of government in the Ottoman Empire and in Turkey, and on the state-society relations and interactions that are related to them. It is dedicated to the figure of the muhtar, a term that covers the headmen of villages or neighbourhoods, although here we will focus only on muhtars in urban areas. There are approximately 53,000 muhtars in Turkey, 13,000 of whom are headmen in urban neighbourhoods varying substantially in size—from a few hundreds to tens of thousands of inhabitants. Unlike most existing studies on muhtars, here they are seen as the lowest level of the administration, the closest to the citizens and thus as the ideal point of entry for a study of the permeability of the ‘state’, but also for an analysis of the concrete forms of the relations between citizens and the administration.

The first section argues that the figure of the muhtar is not consistent with a reading in Weberian terms of “rationalisation” of institutions. In fact, the

1 The key reference on the creation of the muhtarlık remains Musa Çadırcı, “Türkiye’de Muhtarlık Teşkilatının Kurulması Üzerine Bir İnceleme” [A Study of the Foundation of the Muhtarlık organisation in Turkey], Belleten, vol. 34, no. 135, 1970, pp. 409–420, which is based on the chronicles of Ahmet Lütfi Efendi (1873). The other key text here is that of Cem Behar, based on the study of a single source, the registers of the muhtar of a neighbourhood in 19th-century Istanbul. For the contemporary period, most studies take the perspective of administrative science. Many of them are PhD or master’s theses which often use survey-based questionnaires with muhtars and sometimes with residents, but there are few qualitative studies. Most of them inquire the muhtarlık about issues such as participation or local democracy. Other studies, in particular those dedicated to politics in urban peripheries or poverty, analyse the muhtarlık indirectly, revealing their role in local politics or access to public services. Certain peripheral neighbourhoods (such as Ümraniye in Istanbul) consequently have a prominent place in these studies.

2 This chapter is based on several sources: the study of the existing literature and legal texts; an analysis of the press, primarily over the last two decades (a pragmatic choice, linked to the difficulty to conduct a thematic press review before the digitalisation of many articles in the 1990s); as well as on some exploratory interviews conducted with muhtars and observation of some muhtarlık in Istanbul. This first study is part of a larger project which also deals with the muhtarlık’s relationship to politics, which will be set aside here.
muhtars appeared over the course of the bureaucratisation of the Empire and their emergence is generally interpreted as part of that framework. However, the characteristics of this position distance it from Weber’s ideal-type of the civil servant. To the extent that proximity (geographical, social and relational) with the population is an integral part of the role of the muhtar, it seems more relevant to consider the muhtar as an institutionalised intermediary, as the second section shows. This chapter, then, considers the muhtar a figure of continuity, a link between the official order—itsel...