COMMENT ON PROFESSOR BARKAN’S ESTIMATE OF THE POPULATION OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE IN 1520-30

Professor Barkan’s estimate of the population of the Ottoman Empire in 1520-30, published in the first issue of this Journal, sheds a flood of light on a most important question.1) His figures are the first and only ones of their kind, and are moreover in line with other available information; for these reasons they will be eagerly welcomed by scholars who will use them as a starting point for further investigations.

The object of this note, however, is to question one of the items in the estimate, viz. the figure for the Christian population of the Arab provinces.2) The figure given seems much too small, though it should be immediately added that any corrections made in it are not likely to affect significantly the grand total given by him.3) Prof. Barkan puts the number of Christian Arab households at 944 which, assuming as he does an average of 5 persons per household, gives a total of 4720 persons. This estimate may be criticized from two angles: as a relative and as an absolute figure.

a) The figure of 944 Christian Arab households is put alongside one of 113,358 Muslim households, i.e. the Christians represent less than 0.3 per cent of the combined total. Now the most recent censuses or estimates show the following distribution:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Jordan (estimate a)</th>
<th>Lebanon (census 1932)</th>
<th>Palestine (census 1931)</th>
<th>Syria (est. 1937)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>848</td>
<td>2,127</td>
<td>3,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>860</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This estimate, made in the late thirties, was chosen in preference to the recent census in order to avoid double counting arising from the presence of Palestine Arab refugees.

1) These estimates were first published by Prof. Barkan in Turkiyat Mecmuasi, vol. x, 1951-53, in an article entitled “Tarihi demografi arastirmaları ve Osmanlı tarihi”.

2) These consisted of the following liwa: Damascus, Safad and Salt, Ajlun, Gaza and Ramla, Jerusalem, Hama, Hums, Tripoli, Aintab, Birecik, Aleppo, Adana, Uzeyr, Tarsus and Sis. The area thus covered coincides fairly closely with that of present day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel, but is slightly more extensive in the north.

3) It may also be added that Professor Barkan’s table makes no mention of the Jewish communities in the Arab countries. In the 16th century, the town of Safad alone had some 15,000 Jewish inhabitants, and there were large groups in Aleppo, Damascus, Jerusalem, Tiberias and elsewhere.
Deducting from the Christian total a figure of 130,000, representing the Armenian population of Lebanon and Syria in the 1930's, the number of Arab Christians comes to 730,000 or 16.4 per cent of the combined total of the two communities.

Now in 1920-30 the Christian proportion must have been at least equal and more probably higher. First, because with the exception of the Armenians, for whom allowance has been made, there has been no significant immigration of Christians into the Levant; on the other hand, there has been a small Muslim immigration from the Caucasus and North Africa, not to mention the Arabian peninsula. Secondly, because the bulk of the very considerable emigration from Lebanon, Syria and Palestine in the 19th and 20th centuries has consisted of Christians; the large 'Syrian' communities of North and South America are overwhelmingly 'Christian'.

Thirdly, there has been a certain amount of conversion from Christianity to Islam, but practically none in the reverse direction. Hence, assuming the Muslim figure to be correct, a total of some 20,000 Christian households, giving a population of 100,000, may be closer to the mark.

b) The estimate may also be criticized from another angle. A growth from 4570 in 1520-30 to about 730,000 in the 1930's would imply an annual rate of increase of 1.5 percent, maintained over four centuries. Moreover, this rate should be appreciably raised to allow for the large scale emigration mentioned above. Now a rate of growth of 1.5 percent is usually attained only in countries which have been subjected to modern medicine and hygiene. No comparable rate of growth over such a long period has, to our knowledge, occurred anywhere and certainly not in an area plagued by disease and insecurity and stricken with poverty, as were the Arab countries during these four

---

1) Between 1860 and 1914, emigration from Lebanon and Syria totalled about 330,000 – see Said B. Himadeh (editor), The Economic Organization of Syria, p. 16 (Beirut, 1936).

2) On the other hand, there is the possibility that the Christians may have had a slightly lower death rate, because of better hygiene, and hence a slightly higher rate of growth. See below, footnote 4; any differential in this direction must however have been outweighed by the three factors mentioned above.

3) The following estimates show the orders of magnitude involved. „During the next two centuries (i.e., 1450-1650) the population of the world and Asia, respectively, increased about ⅓ per cent per year; that of Europe, about ⅓ per cent per year... Since 1650 the average annual rate of growth of the world's population has gradually risen, moving from 0.29 per cent in 1650-1750 to 0.75 per cent in 1900-1940 and to about 1.2 per cent at present.” Joseph J. Spangler and Otis D. Duncan, Demographic Analysis (Glencoe, 1957) p.1. Even in the 18th century, when demographic growth had already been greatly accelerated, the population of England and Wales is estimated to have increased by only 18 per cent during the first half of the 18th century and by less than 50 per cent during the second half, giving an average rate of growth of under 0.6 per cent.