
‘It goes without saying that there was a close relationship between the process of modernization and politics of centralization in the Ottoman Empire’ (177). This seems to be the main contention of Ebubekir Ceylan’s book on ‘Ottoman Iraq’, or rather ‘Ottoman Baghdad’ (the two are used interchangeably). Policies of modernization/centralization, in Ceylan’s analysis of the central state’s practices (as observed through imperial documents, consular reports and memoirs), emanate from powerful governors ruling the provincial center towards the unruly and corrupt nomads living in an insecure countryside.

In the first chapter, Ceylan introduces the region before the reforms. Baghdad was not a desirable post for bureaucrats; before it became secure and accessible with the Tanzimat reforms (1839-1876), the road to Baghdad was ‘dangerous to health’ (29). Agriculture was significant but difficult, requiring costly irrigation in the insecure countryside (22-26). Prior to the 1800s, more than half of the diverse population in ‘Ottoman Iraq’ were nomads, though centralization reduced this ratio steadily. Regional identities were significant: Kurds ‘often rebelled against the provincial administration’ (22) and preferred to live in the mountainous northern regions provinces, while the Shi’a preferred the holy cities and southern provinces (35). With the ‘weakening of the Ottoman central authority’ (37) in the seventeenth century, Mamluks began ruling Baghdad. ‘The Ottomans were ‘not able to appoint governors from Istanbul’ (39). Ceylan argues that this picture changes drastically in the course of the nineteenth century through a series of top-down reforms, sometimes much to the resentment of the local populace. The significance of Baghdad Province is obvious, but its interchangeability with ‘Ottoman Iraq’ is problematic. Take the case of diversity: Table 3, listing different religious and ethnic groups in the city of Baghdad, is used to demonstrate ‘the multi-religious and multi-ethnic character’ of ‘Ottoman Iraq’ (34). However, as Ceylan notes, urban centers were more diverse than the sparsely-populated countryside controlled by different groups.

Ceylan’s central argument about the essential role of security is an important one shared by many other works on the provincial application
of Tanzimat. The Ottoman state was ‘brought back in’ with the Tanzimat reforms, militarizing and ‘securing’ the region. The demise of Baghdad’s last Mamluk governor, Davud Pasha (1816-1831), who re-enlisted the Janissaries as the Nizamiye army after Mahmud II (r. 1808-1839) eliminated the former throughout the empire, the Jalilis in Mosul and various Kurdish dynasties in the north marked the ‘consolidation of the Ottoman central administration in Baghdad’ (54), improving ‘the chronic lack of security’ (55) associated with local notables. Reforming and increasing the Sixth Army’s capacity (centered in Baghdad) was significant for the Tanzimat governors in Baghdad.

Thanks, partially, to the provincial newspaper Zewra, which promoted ‘patriotic and religious rhetoric’ (60), Midhat Pasha (1869-1872) was more successful than the other governors in applying the reforms. This is one of the few times that Ceylan approaches this newspaper’s role critically. Otherwise, he scarcely questions Zewra’s rhetoric. For example, in claiming that ‘banditry was a way of life for certain tribes’ (56) in Baghdad, he relies on the official newspaper uncritically. (Furthermore, Zewra was not the ‘first provincial newspaper’ (20) as Ceylan seems to claim. As governor of Bulgaria (1864-1869), Midhat Pasha had ordered the publication of Tuna/Dunav in 1865 as the bilingual official newspaper of the Danube Province).

Chapter three deals with the most important agents in Ceylan’s analysis: the governors. At the local level, much of Tanzimat seem to be about what the governors could accomplish: ‘Tanzimat policies pertaining to the administrative structure were aimed at reducing the great power of the provincial governors’ (69) and ‘it was the governors who served in the 1850s and 1860s […] who made considerable efforts to modernize the province’ (178). Ceylan lists the significant governors in two tables (unfortunately, without identifying the sources). Among these, he considers Midhat Pasha’s governorship as ‘the culmination of reform in Baghdad’ (84).

In emphasizing the governors’ power Ceylan is much in line with some of the earliest works on Tanzimat like Moshe Maoz (1968),1 who according to him, ‘rightly pointed out’ that ‘the measure of authority the governor could exercise in his jurisdiction depended mainly on his personality. […] A firm and vigorous governor with strong patronage in Istanbul was in a position to counterbalance his opponents, to make them cooperate

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