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Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Ademimerkeziyetçiliğin Resmîyeti

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Abstract: While scientists acknowledge the existence of autonomous entities within the Ottoman Realm, no concerted effort seems to be in place to summarise and categorise them properly regarding the method of their establishment and maintenance throughout their histories. This article is an attempt to close this gap by providing a detailed landscape of decentralised arrangements throughout its vast realm. To this end, we will distinguish three major types of decentralisation concerning their formality: formal and informal or legal and non-legal, as well as the third, “quasi-formal”. Throughout the study, we found out that while most of the decentralised arrangements could be categorised as formal, the informal and quasi-formal autonomy was also thriving within the empire and some of these instances have managed to survive centuries without formalisation or abolishment by the Ottomans.

Key Words: Ottoman Empire, decentralisation, autonomy, tribal politics, administrative division

Öz: Literatürde Osmanlı içinde otonom yapıların var olduğu kabul edilse de bu yapıların oluşma ve tarih boyunca sürdürülme biçimi açısından değerlendirme ve uygun şekilde sınıflandırma konusunda yeterli çalışma yapılmamıştır. Bu eksikliği gidermeyi hedefleyen bu çalışma kapsamında bu geniş coğrafyadaki ademimerkeziyet anlaşmalarının ayrıntılı görünümünü sunulacaktır. Bu noktada, resmîyet açısından şu üç ademimerkeziyet türü ele alınacaktır: resmî, gayriresmî (veya yasal ve yasadışı) ve “yarı resmî”. Araştırmada ulaşılan sonuca göre ademimerkeziyet anlaşmalarının çoğu resmî olarak sınıflandırılabilse de gayriresmî ve yarı resmî otonomi de imparatorluk kapsamında yerini bulmuş ve bazı örnekleri yüzyıllar boyunca Osmanlı tarafından resmîleştirilmeden veya feshedilmeden varlığını sürdürmeyi başarmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, ademimerkeziyet, otonomi, kabile politikaları, idari taksimat, merkezsizleştirme

Introduction

The practice of modern nation-states is that all forms of decentralisation are recognised formally in the body of law. Even in autocratic or dictatorial states, such appearances are maintained for the sake of legitimacy. However, before the American and French Revolutions and the rise of nation-states, traditional politics not always resorted to written law and even if they did, it lacked the rigid hierarchy we see today due to the lack of constitutions as we understand them. Instead, many such arrangements were reflected in tradition, created by a spoken agreement or practice/custom, or through the acceptance of the *de facto* situation on the ground. The same was true for one of the *ancient regimes* of the Middle East – the Ottoman Empire - from before the encroachment of European powers and the era of nation-states in the region. Scientists acknowledge the existence of autonomous entities in this empire. There are books and articles concerning a particular region or practice, such as works on European tributary states, particular dynasties of local nobles, tribal politics, or books concerning especially its official administrative division. However, no concerted effort seems to be in place to summarise and categorise them properly regarding the method of their establishment and maintenance throughout their histories. This, in turn, would showcase the sophistication of the Ottoman state and correspond with the new understanding which contravenes the previously

held concept of the “decline” of Islamic empires from the 17th century on. Moreover, this rich heritage of legal practices could present a precious resource for modern-day politicians attempting to reform the countries in the region. This article is based on an excerpt from the author’s PhD dissertation and an attempt to close this gap by providing a detailed landscape of arrangements throughout their vast realms through the lens of political science rather than a purely historical one. Throughout it, we will distinguish three major types of decentralisation concerning their formality: formal and informal or legal and non-legal, as well as the third, “quasi-formal”, the distinction made based on the way they were established and maintained. Additionally, while the main purpose of the article is to present this diversity of decentralisation, certain conclusions from their comparison will be made at the end. However, before focusing on the core issue of this paper, it would be necessary to explain the term decentralisation, as well as explain the distinctions regarding the formality of decentralised arrangements applied throughout it.

1. Terminology

The term decentralisation may justifiably cause confusion in many readers, especially those with a background in political science, who are used to the terms “federalism”, “federalisation”, and “federation” being commonly used by scholars of politically decentralised polities, including such names as Bryce, Watts, Elazar, Riker, and others. However, the use of these terms poses a certain problem. While this article does not allow for a thorough argument, it is worthwhile to provide at least the crux of it here to avoid misunderstanding.

In essence, all of them are, if we were to analyse them philologically, derived from the Latin word *foedus* (and more precisely - its plural form *foedera*) meaning ‘league, alliance’ and used initially by Roman Empire to name the alliances created with surrounding states.¹ Initially, federation and confederation meant unifying to provide protection from common enemies, and this explanation for the origins of federations was a commonly accepted one well into the 20th century.² In the 20th and 21st centuries, however, more and more decentralised states were formed out of previously unitary ones, contradicting the meaning of *foedus*. Additionally, the classical federations such as the USA, Switzerland, Canada, and others, involve a territorial aspect, as well as specific power relations between the centre and the constituent units, described by Elazar as a non-centralised “federal matrix”.³ Watts and many others, in turn, describe federation as a hierarchical structure with at least two levels of government.⁴ Nevertheless, many decentralised arrangements such as autonomy, federacy or non-territorial decentralisation known as consociationalism⁵ do not fit this pattern, causing Elazar to call them systems with certain federal qualities, not outright federations, and Watts to speak of “the spectrum of federal political systems”.⁶ Overall, the terms “federalism”, “federation” and “federalisation” are too narrow when use to describe decentralisation for two reasons:

¹ A. N. Sherwin-White, Tim Cornell, “foedus,” in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, accessed 30.06.2022, <http://classics.oxfordre.com/abstract/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-2693?rskey=yHelzB&result=1>.

² William H. Riker, “Federalism,” in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, ed. Robert E. Goodin, Philip Pettit, Thomas Pogge (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 612-619; Kenneth C. Wheare, *Federal Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 37-40.

³ Daniel Elazar, *Exploring Federalism* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1987), 34-38.

⁴ Ronald L. Watts, “Models of Federal Power-Sharing” (paper presented at International Conference on Federalism, Mont-Tremblant, October 1999), <http://www.forumfed.org/library/models-of-federal-power-sharing/>; Riker, “Federalism.”

⁵ Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies. A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 21-52.

⁶ Elazar, *Exploring Federalism*, 44-64; Watts, *ibid*.

- 1) Focusing on the philological roots of the ‘federation’ and the use of this term in classical literature on the subject, it does not encompass the federation formed out of a previously unitary state
- 2) Putting aside the considerations regarding the origin of the federation, it still holds a notion of a specific power arrangement which may not be true for many polities, especially in so-called ‘asymmetrical federations’.

We have to acknowledge, however, that is a general practice to use those terms in political science as well as public administration, in contrast to “decentralisation” which is usually associated with the delegation of certain responsibilities to local authorities without autonomy and the power to legislate. However, after analysis of existing literature, many institutions as well as political scientists use decentralisation to describe a general category of power arrangements, of which federalism is only one, specific type or describe federalism as a radical spectrum of decentralisation.⁷ To differentiate it from “soft” decentralisation or delegation, some use the term “political decentralisation” to describe this genus of political systems.⁸

Overall, since the Ottoman Empire was not formed as an alliance of territorial units and the relations between those units and the capital were not equal to the modern “federal matrix”, in this work, we will use the term decentralisation in the meaning of “political decentralisation”, that is, involving at least some degree of political, military, or financial autonomy.

2. The classification of decentralised arrangements

Throughout this paper, we will differentiate between three types of decentralisation discernible in the Ottoman Empire:

- 1) **Formal (legal) decentralisation** – decentralised arrangement based on the written letter of the law rather than traditions, customs, or spoken arrangements. There are four main types of documents which formed the basis for formal decentralisation in the Ottoman Empire or serve as evidence of such:
 - *Kanunname* (the book of law): codes of law providing the basic rules for punishments, taxation as well as other administrative matters.
 - *Ahdname/Ahidname* (the act of covenant): covenants were used for various purposes, including peace treaties, capitulations (trade and tax incentives often coupled with legal autonomy), and establishing Christian vassal states in the Balkans.⁹
 - *Ferman* (from Persian *farman* - order): orders of sultans covering a wide range of topics.

⁷ “What, Why & Where,” World Bank, accessed 13.12.2022, <http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/decentralization/what.htm>; UNDP, “Decentralization: A Sampling of Definitions” (n.d.: UNDP, October 1999), 6, http://web.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/documents/decentralization_working_report.PDF; Dominic Heinz, “Birds of the Same Feather: Federalism and Decentralisation in Germany” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Decentralisation in Europe*, ed. Jose Manuel Ruano, Marius Proftiroiu (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 15-45; Stanislaw Ehrlich, “Theoretical Reflections on Federations and Federalism,” *International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique* 5, No. 4, Pluralism and Federalism (1984): 359-367; Enric Martinez-Herrera, “Federalism and ethnic conflict management” in *New Directions in Federalism Studies*, ed. Jan Erk, Wilfried Swenden (London: Routledge, 2010), 141-156; Edward L. Rubin, “The Role of Federalism in International Law”, *Boston College International and Comparative Law Review* 40, issue 2 (2017): 195-243; Liam Anderson, *Federal Solutions to Ethnic Problems. Accommodating Diversity* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 264; Paolo Dardanelli, John Kincaid et al., “Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Theorizing Dynamic De/Centralization in Federations”, *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 49 number 1 (2019): 1-29.

⁸ E. Martinez-Herrera, “Federalism and ethnic conflict...”, 142.

⁹ Nejdet Gök, *Beylikler Döneminden İtibaren Osmanlı Diplomáticasında Berat Formu* [The form of *Berat* in the Ottoman Protocol from the Beylik Period on] (PhD Thesis, Marmara University, 1997), 270-277.

- *Berat* (diploma/order): *berats* granted their receiver a certain position such as a minister, governor, or another bureaucrat, or certain privileges, including tax exemptions and legal immunity.
- 2) **Informal (non-legal) decentralisation** – decentralised arrangements established through tradition, custom or practice of sultans and governors, who sometimes were forced or preferred to accept the *de facto* situation.
 - 3) **Quasi-formal decentralisation** – a mix of informal and formal elements, that is, an arrangement where some of the autonomy enjoyed by an individual/group/region was derived from the law of the empire, while other aspects were formed through tradition, custom, or acceptance of local power relations.

While the names of these categories are rather self-explanatory, the purpose of applying these categories to the Ottoman Empire deserves an explanation of its own. It is true that all states, even contemporary ones are a mix of these three types of relations between various authorities. However, in the era of the nation-state, the Weberian bureaucratic state is the ideal model. In it, all the rules applied in the state should find their expression in law, and all that are not, are deemed illegal, especially if they concern political power and inter-governmental relations. Moreover, the informal and quasi-formal arrangements are usually associated with so-called “failed states”, that is, states which lose some of their power and the vacuum created by the state’s failure is filled by non-state or para-state actors. That is the origin of many non-recognised polities such as Somaliland, and the recent emergence of the IS.¹⁰ This “failure” of a state is, as the name suggests, usually conceived as a negative development and there are attempts to quickly either eradicate those entities and re-establish the “rightful” government (as was the case with IS), or to re-incorporate such new entities as autonomous regions using written law or new constitutions (as it was attempted with Somaliland).¹¹ However, in the Ottoman Empire, while the formal/legal decentralised arrangements were the most common practice, many instances of informal/non-legal or quasi-formal decentralisation were long-lived and not always conceived as a negative development. Moreover, as stated in the introduction, this paper aims to classify the rich heritage of Ottoman decentralisation to show the diversity of these arrangements and provide some kind of orderly enumeration for the benefit of further studies.

3. Legal or formal arrangements

The first example of formal decentralisation could be the structure of the state itself and the *eyalet sistemi* (province system) of Ottomans. The classic structure of the Ottoman state comprised of *sancaklar* (banners) with *sancakbeyi* as the military commander. Sancaks were from then on grouped into *eyalet* (province) with *beylerbeyi* as the governor. Both *beylerbeyis* and *sancakbeyis* by that time were mostly the slaves (*kul*) of the emperor coming from newly incorporated aristocracies of conquered regions or educated and assimilated through the *devşirme* system, pushing out the rooted *ghazi* families from the first years of the principality to the fringes of the empire.¹² The decentralisation in the case of the *eyalet* system takes two primary forms:

¹⁰ Ken Menkhaus, “State Failure, State-Building, and Prospects for a “Functional Failed State” in Somalia,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 656 (November 2014), 154-172; Marc Lynch, “Failed States and Ungoverned Spaces,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 668 (November 2016), 24-35.

¹¹ Harun Maruf, “Somali, Somaliland Leaders Resume Talks in Djibouti,” *VOA News*, 15.06.2020, <https://www.voanews.com/africa/somali-somaliland-leaders-resume-talks-djibouti>; International Crisis Group, “Somalia-Somaliland: The Perils of Delaying New Talks,” *Africa Report* N°280, 12.07.2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/280-somalia-somaliland-perils-delaying-new-talks>.

¹² Heath W. Lowry, *The Nature of the Early Ottoman State* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 115-130, 139-143.

- 1) the decentralised body of law
- 2) the responsibilities and powers of *sancakbeyis* and *beylerbeyis*.

Regarding the decentralisation of the body of law itself in the Ottoman Empire, the instrumental role in this process was played by *kanunnames*. Two major categories of these documents were issued, one being central (*merkezi*) *kanunnames*, while others were *eyalet*, *sancak*, or even *nahiye* (a sub-division of *sancak*) *kanunnames*. As visible in numerous examples, the provincial and sub-provincial books of law provide most of the rules regarding taxation, economic matters, and even penal law.¹³ Tax rates are not equal between provinces and even if they are, this is caused by the same articles included in two separate provincial laws or, in other cases, proclaimed firstly in central books of law only to be repeated in the local ones.¹⁴ While it could be argued that such matters do not constitute *political* autonomy per se, many contemporary movements for autonomy/independence raise the matters of economy or religion as their priorities which are to be achieved through their new political status. The political autonomy, in turn, was provided in the Ottoman Empire by the wide powers enjoyed by *sancakbeyis* and *beylerbeyis*. To the author's knowledge, no document states the full extent of their power, therefore their status is quite ambiguous. It is known from sources that they were involved in all military and administrative matters of their provinces and rarely received exact instructions unless there was some point of contention, a military conflict, a crime or irregularities involved.¹⁵ Such instructions were in the form of *ferman* and can be found in collections of *mühimme defteri*. Moreover, those *beylerbeyi* holding provinces on the fringes of the empire were also engaged in foreign affairs, a power mostly restricted to the central government in other polities.¹⁶ Finally, they were in some more distant provinces granted the right to appoint lesser officials such as *mültezim* (tax collectors) from among the local notable families.¹⁷ The power of military commanders was itself checked by *kadı* (judge) and *defterdar* (treasurer), with different periods seeing the balance of power towards one or another of these officials.¹⁸ Then, from the 18th century on, the provincial councils dominated by local elites (*ayan*) and chosen by them gained increasing say in the affairs of the province.¹⁹

Later on, the 1864 Province Regulation (*Vilayet Nizamnamesi*) together with its provincial successors as well as modifications from 1867 and 1871 codified the new status of provinces and more precisely defined the functions possessed by various officials and bodies such as *vali* (governor) and *defterdar* (treasurer).²⁰ Additionally, local *meclis* (council) were

¹³ Laws regarding taxation are included in nearly all provincial *kanunnames* in the collection: Ahmet Akgündüz, *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri ve Hukuki Tahlilleri* [Ottoman Kanunnames and Legal Analyses] (Istanbul: Fey Vakfı, 1990 (a)), vol. 1; Ahmet Akgündüz, *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri ve Hukuki Tahlilleri*. [Ottoman Kanunnames and Legal Analyses] (Istanbul: Fey Vakfı, 1990 (b)), vol. 2. As for penal law, examples include *Kefalonya Kanunnamesi* – Akgündüz, *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri* (1990 (b)), 2: 422-428.

¹⁴ For example, tax rates are provided in both the *umumi* (central) *kanunnamesi* from the period of Bayezid II, and in *Kefalonya Kanunnamesi* – Akgündüz, *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri* (1990 (b)), 55-62, 422-428. At the same time, *kanunname* for Karaman province includes both taxation and an article explicitly stipulating that laws regarding murder were not separately prepared for this province and they are provided in the central *kanunname* – Ahmet Akgündüz, *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri ve Hukuki Tahlilleri* [Ottoman Kanunnames and Legal Analyses] (Istanbul: Fey Vakfı, 1991), 3: 313-335.

¹⁵ Akgündüz, *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri* (1990 (a)), 219-220.

¹⁶ David, Geza, "Osmanlı Klasik Döneminde Beylerbeyilik ve Eyalet İdaresi" [The Institution of *Beylerbeyi* and Provincial Administration in the Classical Ottoman Period] in *1864 Vilayet Nizamnamesi*, ed. Erkan Tural, Selim Çapar (Ankara: TODAİE, 2015), 3-8.

¹⁷ Abdul-Rahim Abu-Husayn, *The View from Istanbul. Ottoman Lebanon and the Druze Emirate* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 128-168.

¹⁸ Halil Inalcik, "Centralisation and Decentralisation in Ottoman Administration," in *Studies in Eighteenth Century Islamic History*, ed. Thomas Naff, Roger Owen (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 27.

¹⁹ Inalcik, "Centralisation and Decentralisation," 41-50.

²⁰ Precise limitations were introduced especially in the 1871 document, although the necessity of consulting the new measures with the council introduced in the 1864 *vilayet nizamnamesi* was already a major limiting factor. Texts of

strengthened and their diversity was ensured in this act. The respected locals were to take seats in councils on every level of local administration from *nahiye* through *kaza*, *liva* up to *vilayet*.²¹ Moreover, although the governor had to nominally “appoint” provincial council members, they were chosen by the community, as was the case in the 18th century with the council of *ayan*. In many aspects autonomous character of provinces was upheld, they were tasked with maintaining security, education, public works, and incentives for industry and agriculture, as well as with serving justice and tax and revenue autonomy, that is, determining and collecting taxes for their operations.²² Still, the imperfect implementation of the 1864 and the successor laws resulted in provinces on the fringes of the empire such as Syria enjoying even more freedoms, expressed in the superiority of the local council over *valis*, who had to side with factions to maintain some form of authority.²³

Moreover, the autonomy of Druze and Maronites of Mount Lebanon, previously informal, was partially formalised firstly in 1841 by the creation of Druze and Maronite Druze and Maronite *kaymakamlık* (region), with both *kaymakams* responsible to the governor of Sidon.²⁴ Then, the conflict and massacres of 1860 and following pressure from foreign powers (especially the United Kingdom and France) forced the Ottomans to grant the newly created province an autonomous status in 1860, confirmed by 1864 *nizamname* (ordinance) in the spirit of this new legislation.²⁵ This document provided for appointments of officials from the local religious groups along sectarian lines as well as legal autonomy of Lebanese courts, the establishment of local security forces, non-presence of the Ottoman army and exemption from all taxation.²⁶

The near-independence of Egypt under Mehmet Ali was, too, a formal one from 1841 on, when sultan Abdülmecid I issued a ferman establishing the hereditary rule of Mehmet Ali and his descendants over Egypt.²⁷ Its subordination to Porte, however, was, for the most part, an official façade rather than autonomy.

To other decentralised elements of the Ottoman Empire instituted and maintained in a formal/legal manner, belong vassal states such as Wallachia, Transylvania, Moldavia, Ragusan Republic, Chios Republic, and Crimean Khanate. The Christian states on this list (which means all except for Crimea) were incorporated into the Ottoman domain through *ahdnames*, with the fact itself already acknowledging them as not being merely newly conquered provinces but entities in their own right.²⁸ As for Crimea, it was incorporated into the domain in 1475 after the

those documents are accessible as attachments in *1864 Vilayet Nizamnamesi*, ed. Erkan Tural, Selim Çapar (Ankara: TODAİE, 2015), 374-383, 394-400, 422-440.

²¹ The relevant sections: *1864 Vilayet Nizamnamesi* chap. 4 sec. 1-4; *1867 Vilayet Nizamnamesi* sec. 1 art. 3-4; *1871 Idare-i Umummiye-i Vilayat Nizamnamesi* chap. 4. Texts available: *1864 Vilayet Nizamnamesi*, ed. Tural, Çapar, 380-383, 395-396, 432-440.

²² The relevant sections: *1867 Vilayet Nizamnamesi* sec. 3; *1871 Idare-i Umummiye-i Vilayat Nizamnamesi* chap. 2 sec. 1, chap. 4 sec. 1. Text available: *1864 Vilayet Nizamnamesi*, ed. Tural, Çapar, 397-400, 423-424, 432-433.

²³ Moshe Ma'oz, *Ottoman Reform in Syria and Palestine, 1840-1861. The Impact of the Tanzimat on Politics and Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 93-95; Ruth Roded, “Tradition and Change in Syria during the Last Decades of Ottoman Rule: The Urban Elite of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama, 1876-1918” (PhD Thesis, University of Denver, 1984).

²⁴ Farah Caesar, “The Problem of the Ottoman Administration in the Lebanon 1840-1861” (PhD Thesis, Princeton University 1957), 146.

²⁵ William Harris, *Lebanon. A History 600-2011* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 158-161.

²⁶ The text of the *nizamname* is provided in: Cenk Reyhan, “Cebel-i Lübnan Vilâyet Nizamnamesi” [The Vilayet Law of Mount Lebanon]. *MEMLEKET Siyaset Yönetim* 1 (2006): 171-181, <http://www.yayed.org/uploads/yuklemeler/msy-1-9.pdf>.

²⁷ Khaled Fahmy, “The era of Muhammad'Ali Pasha, 1805-1848,” in *The Cambridge History of Egypt. Volume 2: Modern Egypt, from 1517 to the end of the twentieth century*, ed. M. W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 175.

²⁸ Sandor Papp, “ahdname (ahitname),” in *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Gabor Agoston, Bruce Masters (New York: Facts on File, 2009), 21-22; Viorel Panaite, “The Legal and Political Status of Wallachia and Moldavia in Relation to the Ottoman Porte,” in *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and*

Ottoman intervention on behalf of a contender for the Crimean throne, Mengli Giray, which intervention resulted also in the direct Ottoman control of Kaffa.²⁹ The rulers of all these vassal states enjoyed freedom in deciding on the internal affairs of their domains. The states enjoyed their laws and no attempts at proselytising Islam were made, while their expected contribution to the Empire was providing levies, tribute, and taxes as well as supplying the passing armies and paying special war taxes if asked to.³⁰ More than that, while it doesn't seem to be an officially endorsed prerogative, they maintained also foreign relations, even with the enemies of the Ottoman Empire, as was the case with Moldavian *voyvoda* (voivode) and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Crimea and Moscow, and Transylvania with the Hungarian Kingdom.³¹ The official character of the autonomy of these polities is expressed in both documents and titles. Sultans signed *ahdnames* with the European principalities and used *berat* to appoint rulers chosen by the local nobles rather than their candidates until the early 18th century.³² Later on, until the end of Ottoman rule, Phanariote Greeks from Istanbul's *Fener* neighbourhood were appointed instead, but the autonomy persisted.³³ A similar pattern of continued local rule can be observed in Crimea, where the khan approved by the sultan was always of the Giray dynasty.³⁴ However, this respect for the local elections/dynastic traditions did not mean that sultans were barred from dismissing their vassals, although this seems to be the tool of the last resort for it could lead to an uprising instigated by the deposed ruler. In their place, other local candidates were granted a *berat*.³⁵ In some cases, an uprising or general displeasure with such a move forced sultans to revoke these nominations in favour of a candidate chosen by the people.³⁶ Apart from the *ahdname* and the procedure of choosing the ruler, the titulature of rulers of the vassal states used in the official Ottoman orders constitutes yet another formal/legal recognition of their autonomous status. The ruler of Transylvania is addressed and mentioned as a king (*kral*), while those of Moldavia and Wallachia were *voyvodas*.³⁷ As for the Crimean hereditary rulers, they preserved for themselves the title of *khan* (*han* in modern Turkish) which is equal in

Seventeenth Centuries, ed. Gábor Kármán, Lovro Kunčević (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 26-42; Teréz Oborni, "Between Vienna and Constantinople: Notes on the Legal Status of the Principality of Transylvania," in *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Gábor Kármán, Lovro Kunčević (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 71-77; Lovro Kunčević, "Janus-faced Sovereignty: The International Status of the Ragusan Republic in the Early Modern Period," in *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Gábor Kármán, Lovro Kunčević (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 92-98.

²⁹ Halil İnalçık, "Yeni Vesikalara Göre Kırım Hanlığının Osmanlı Tâbîliğine Girmesi ve Ahidname Meselesi" [The Entrance of Crimean Khanate under Ottoman Rule and the Issue of Ahdname in accordance with New Documents], *Belleten* VIII, no. 30 (April 1944), 185-229, <https://www.ttk.gov.tr/yayinlarimiz/dergi/belleten-cilt-viii-sayi-30-yil-1944-nisan/>.

³⁰ Panaite, "The Legal and Political Status," 30; Yusuf Sarıncay (ed.), *83 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri* ["Register of Important Affairs" no. 83] (Ankara: T.C. Başbakanlık, 2001), 32, 44-47, 56.

³¹ Panaite, "The Legal and Political Status," 21-22; Oborni, "Between Vienna and Constantinople," 67-89; Radu G. Păun, "Enemies Within: Networks of Influence and the Military Revolts against the Ottoman Power (Moldavia and Wallachia, Sixteenth–Seventeenth Centuries)," in *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Gábor Kármán, Lovro Kunčević (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 209-245.

³² İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi*. [Ottoman History] (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1988), 2: 400-407; İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi* [Ottoman History] (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 2011), 4: 87; Orhan Kılıç, *18. Yüzyılın İlk Yarısında Osmanlı Devleti'nin İdari Taksimatı. Eyalet ve Sancak Tevcihatı* [The Administrative Division of the Ottoman State in the First Half of 18th Century. Regulations regarding Provinces (*eyalet*) and sub-provinces (*sancak*)] (Elazığ: Ceren Maatbacılık, 1997), 29-30.

³³ Christine M. Philliou *Biography of an Empire. Governing Ottomans in an Age of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Cafer Çiftçi, "Bâb-ı Âli'nin Avrupa'ya Çevrilmiş İki Gözü: Eflak ve Boğdan'da Fenerli Voyvodalar (1711-1821)" [Two Eyes of Sublime Porte Turned towards Europe: Phanariote Voyvodas in Wallachia and Moldavia (1711-1821)], *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 7, no. 26 (Summer 2010), 27-48.

³⁴ İnalçık, "Yeni Vesikalara Göre Kırım";

³⁵ Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi*, 2: 400-407; Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi*, 4: 26-32.

³⁶ Natalia Królikowska, "Sovereignty and Subordination in Crimean-Ottoman Relations (Sixteenth–Eighteenth Centuries)," in *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Gábor Kármán, Lovro Kunčević (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 96.

³⁷ Examples: İsmet Binark (ed.), *3 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri* ["Register of Important Affairs" no. 3] (Ankara: T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü, 1993), 49-50, 58-59, 112, 227, 561.

meaning to that of a Persian “shah” or English “king” and their country is titled as *hanlık* (khanate).³⁸

Georgian principalities were also formally autonomous elements in the Ottoman mosaic. They entered it first as tributaries during the reign of Selim I., and then, during the rule of Suleiman I., gradually became Ottoman vassals either through conquest or through voluntary submission, hoping to gain support against other principalities or the looming threat of Safavid Iran.³⁹ The Ottoman hold of the Western part of Georgia (including principalities of Imereti, Megrel, and Gürel) was firmly established in the Amasya treaty of 1555, while the East was conquered on a couple of occasions during Ottoman-Safavid wars from the 16th to 18th century.⁴⁰ As for the formality of Georgian principalities within the Ottoman framework, there are a few clues. First are the documents attesting to the submission of Georgian princes to Istanbul and even a document directly mentioning *ahdname* as the type of treaty signed between the king and the sultan (“Kendi için ahidnâmede olan şartların...”).⁴¹ Secondly, sultans issued letters confirming princes as kings (*melik*) of their countries (*ülke*).⁴² Additionally, these rulers are commonly addressed or spoken of in official correspondence and orders (*buyuruldu*) as rulers (*hâkim, Han*).⁴³ Together, they are titled *Kıdvetü a'yâni'l-milleti'l-Mesîhiyye* (“The leaders of the Messianic [Christian] Nation”).⁴⁴ Georgian principalities, too, were hereditary.

Yet another example of de-facto vassal states which were officially recognised by the Ottoman Empire is Kurdish principalities which joined it during the war between sultan Selim I. and shah Ismail Safavid. Similarly to other vassal states, Kurdish principalities enjoyed autonomy in their internal affairs, their rulers were hereditary, and their responsibilities towards the Ottomans comprised mostly of certain taxes as well as military levies and extraordinary taxes and supplies in times of war.⁴⁵ The major principalities at least throughout the 16th century were exempted even from tax obligations.⁴⁶ It should be worth mentioning that these obligations were often neglected by the local rulers, at times deeming Ottoman supremacy a purely official matter.⁴⁷ The number of those principalities changed over time, some sources mention 17 principalities, while others give a greater number, separated into two categories:

- 1) Major principalities (*hükümet*, in some sources *eyalet* as an administrative unit)
- 2) Minor principalities, often regarded as hereditary *sancak/yurtluk/ocaklık*, often included within normally governed provinces as *liva/sancak*.⁴⁸

³⁸ Examples: Binark (ed.), *3 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri*, 424, 425-426, 561-562; Akgündüz, *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri*, Fey Vakfı, İstanbul 1992, 4: 536-537.

³⁹ Nebi Gümüş, “XVI. Asır Osmanlı-Gürcistan İlişkileri” [Ottoman-Georgian Relations in the 16th Century] (PhD thesis, Marmara University, 2000), 58-60; Sadık Müfit Bilge, *Osmanlı Çağında Kafkasya. 1454-1829 (Tarih-Toplum-Ekonomi)* [Caucasus in the Ottoman Period. 1454-1829] (İstanbul: Kitabevi, 2012), 43-54.

⁴⁰ Gümüş, *XVI. Asır Osmanlı-Gürcistan*, 66.

⁴¹ Mümin Yıldıztaş, *Osmanlı Arşiv Kayıtlarında Gürcistan ve Gürcüler* [Georgia and Georgians in Ottoman Archival Records] (İstanbul: Gürcistan Dostluk Derneği, 2012), 57, 115, 205.

⁴² Yıldıztaş, *Osmanlı Arşiv Kayıtlarında Gürcistan*, 87, 107, 131, 141, 143.

⁴³ Yıldıztaş, *Osmanlı Arşiv Kayıtlarında Gürcistan*, 81, 101, 149, 191.

⁴⁴ Yıldıztaş, *Osmanlı Arşiv Kayıtlarında Gürcistan*, 141, 153.

⁴⁵ Martin van Bruinessen, Hendrik Boeschoten, *Evliya Çelebi in Diyarbekir. The Relevant Section of the Seyahatname Edited with Translation, Commentary, and Introduction* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 17-28; Akgündüz *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri*, 4: 463.

⁴⁶ Hakan Özöğlü, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 538-539.

⁴⁷ Martin van Bruinessen, “Kurds, States, and Tribes,” in *Tribes and Power: Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East*, ed. Faleh A. Jabar, Hosham Dawod (London: Saqi, 2002), 165-183.

⁴⁸ Bruinessen, Boeschoten, *Evliya Çelebi in Diyarbekir*, 17-19; Akgündüz *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri*, 4: 463-464, 469-470; Orhan Kılıç, “Kürdistan Tabirinin Osmanlı Uygulamasındaki Muhtevası Üzerine Bazı Tespitler (16.-18. Yüzyıllar)” [Some Conclusions Regarding the Use of the Term Kurdistan in Ottoman Practice (16th-18th Century)], in *Tarihte Türkler ve Kürtler Sempozyumu* [Turks and Kurds in History Symposium], ed. Orhan Kılıç (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2014), 1: 177-198; İbrahim Yılmazçelik, “Diyarbekir Eyaletinin İdarî Taksimatı ve 1848-

The word *hükümet* (government) already suggests that they were not equal in status to a standard *sancak* and closer to that of European vassals of the Empire. However, even the minor principalities which were counted among *sancak* enjoyed the previously mentioned hereditary rule, while two such principalities in Dersim (roughly today's Tunceli) and one in Bağdat Eyaleti are additionally titled *ülke* (country): *Çemişkezek Ülkesi* and *an ülkâ-i Çemişkezek* (or *Sağman an ülkâ-i Çemişkezek* and *Pertek an ülkâ-i Çemişkezek*), and *ülkâ-i Bâbân*.⁴⁹ The titles of rulers of these Kurdish principalities are also telling, for they enjoy titles such as Sultan, Han (ruler, king), Pîr (sage, leader), Beg (modern Turkish *bey* – master, governor, ruler) and when the particular name is not mentioned, they are addressed as *hâkim* (ruler).⁵⁰ As for the documents instituting Kurdish principalities formally as autonomous parts of the Ottoman Empire, there are three major sources: *fermans*, *berats* and *kanunnames* collected in *mühimme defteri*. Firstly, during the war with Safavids, Selim I. is said to have given blank orders with the sultan's signature (*nişan-ı şerif*) to Mevlana İdris Bitlisli to fill in and give to Kurdish lords willing to fight against İnan as *berat* (decision, nomination) confirming their hereditary positions.⁵¹ Moreover, one *ferman* issued by Suleiman I. during his Iraq campaign is of special interest for it establishes the autonomy for Kurdish lords who joined the empire.⁵² As for other *fermans* and *berats*, they were used to confirm the ascendancy of a new ruler in cases of contested succession, as well as to depose unruly rulers and establish new ones (their sons/relatives) in their place, similarly to the practice from European principalities.⁵³ Finally, *kanunnames* establish the position of Kurdish principalities within the framework of the Ottoman Empire. One such document regarding the organisation of the state and land from the reign of Suleyman I. the Magnificent lists several such entities in *eyalets* of Diyarbakır, Van, Şehr-i Zul (Şehr-i Zor), Musul, and Baghdad, and categorises them as either *hükümet* or *yurtluk/ocaklık*.⁵⁴

Another formally decentralised entity with hereditary rulers was the Emirate of Mecca which was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire with the conquest of Mamluk Egypt by Selim I. Due to the status of Hijaz as the site of the two most important cities of Islam – Mecca and Medina – and since the sharifian dynasty descended from the Prophet Muhammad, the sultan upheld its autonomy on the condition that the rulers of Hijaz will accept the Ottoman supremacy and include a prayer for the sultan in Friday sermons, a symbol of sovereignty in Muslim states.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, while the powers of the sharif were not officially curbed until the 19th century, sultans and local governors tended to change the persons holding the title in cases of insubordination, open rebellion or if they saw a more fit, more obedient member of the dynasty

1864/1867 Tarihleri Arasında Kürdistan Eyaleti Adıyla Yeniden Teşkilatlandırılması” [The Administrative Division of Diyarbakir Province and its Reorganisation between the Years 1848-1864/1867 under the name of Kurdistan Province], in *Tarihte Türkler ve Kürtler Sempozyumu* [Turks and Kurds in History Symposium], ed. Orhan Kılıç (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2014), 1: 215-226.

⁴⁹ Pervin Sevinç, “955-982 / 1548-1574 Tarihli Osmanlı Beylerbeyi ve Sancakbeyleri Tevcih Defteri (563 nr.)” [The Ottoman Grant Register of *Beylerbeyi* and *Sancakbeyi* from 955-982/1548-1574 (no. 563)] (MA Thesis, Marmara University, 1994), 50, 94; Halil Sahillioğlu, *Topkapı Sarayı Arşivi H. 951-952 Tarihli ve E-12321 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri* [The Archive of Topkapı Palace. “Register of Important Affairs” no. E-12321 from AH 951-92] (İstanbul: IRCICA, 2002), 155, 201.

⁵⁰ For clarity, Mir and Beg/Bey, while used also to title normal sancakbeyi and beylerbeyi after the name in relation to the place they ruled (“mirmiran-ı sâbık-ı Bağdat...”), in the context of Kurdish hereditary rulers were used before the name or right after it as their personal titles (Pîr Ahmed Bey). Sevinç, “955-982 / 1548-1574 Tarihli Osmanlı,” 50, 69-71; *Elkab kanunnamesi* in: Akgündüz *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri*, 4: 433-439.

⁵¹ Nazmi Sevgen, *Doğu ve Güneydoğu Anadolu'da Türk Beylikleri* [Turkish Beyliks in the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia] (Ankara: Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü, 1982), 30; Akgündüz *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri*, 3: 210-211.

⁵² Sevgen, *Doğu ve Güneydoğu*, 42-43.

⁵³ Sevgen, *Doğu ve Güneydoğu*, 56-59, 143-144.

⁵⁴ Akgündüz *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri*, 4: 463-464, 469-473.

⁵⁵ Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi*, 2: 399; Gerald de Gaury, *Rulers of Mecca* (London: George G. Harrap & Co, 1951), 124.

to replace them. This occurred several times throughout Ottoman rule.⁵⁶ The more advanced and systematic encroachments upon the sharif's powers were conducted only after reclaiming the control of the province by the Ottomans from Egyptian hands in the 1840s since it coincided with the Tanzimat period of reform culminated in the *Vilayet Nizamnamesi* of 1864 mentioned earlier.⁵⁷ However, the measures such as the increased influence of local councils and *vali* (governor) were curbed due to the duality of the executive (governor and sharif) and the unwillingness of local notables and administrators.⁵⁸ As for the formal/legal aspect of the autonomy enjoyed by the Emirate of Mecca, we find several pieces of evidence. First of all, sultan Selim I. issued a *ferman* announcing the upholding of sharif's autonomy and gave it to the latter's son to bring back to Hijaz.⁵⁹ Secondly, new sharifs were reportedly given *ferman* confirming their position.⁶⁰ Therefore, it was indeed a formal/legal autonomy, even if not always respected in practice.

There is also an instance of decentralisation within the Ottoman Empire which appeared as informal arrangements and shortly after became formalised and included within the body of law produced by the Sublime Porte - the Maghrib possessions of the Ottomans, Algeria (*Cezayir*), Tunisia (*Tüniüs*), and Tripolitania (*Trablusgarp*). Their autonomy was expressed first and foremost in the fact that they didn't remit revenue to the capital and maintained their independent janissary corps and fleets.⁶¹ Moreover, they conducted their own foreign policy, declared wars on European states, and even fought with each other (as happened many times between Algeria and Tunis).⁶² They were attached to the empire by corsairs on Ottoman payroll who became rulers of these lands either on the invitation of the local population (as it happened in Algeria) or to counter the attempts at controlling them by European powers and their allies (as was the case with Libya and Tunisia).⁶³ Initially, these provinces did not automatically become parts of the empire but declared themselves to be its subordinates. Then, after a few decades, they have been incorporated as special-status (*imtiyazlı*) provinces and the sultan started appointing *beylerbeyis* to govern them.⁶⁴ However, this classical Ottoman model did not work out well in this geography and all three provinces developed a model of governance in which the *ocak* (local janissary corps, in Turkish "hearth") became the main centre of power, with its leaders sitting in a *divan* (council) and choosing a *dayı* (or *dey* in Arabic version) as the actual ruler. For a while at least, in Algeria and Tunis, there was a struggle for power between Istanbul-nominated pashas and *ocak*-nominated *dayıs*, with the result being the acceptance by the Sublime Porte of the situation which was, according to Asma Moalla, the expression of Istanbul's pragmatic politics of decentralisation rather than simple acceptance of *de facto* situation.⁶⁵ A little different scenario followed up in Libya, where firstly the local *divan* (council) took power from 1661 on, and then, after a series of coups and changes in the governor's office, in 1711, Ahmad Karamanlı usurped the power from the governor and

⁵⁶ Gaury, *Rulers of Mecca*, 128-168; Saleh Muhammad Al-Amr, *The Hijaz under Ottoman Rule 1869-1914: Ottoman Vali, the Sharif of Mecca, and the Growth of British Influence* (Riyad: Riyadh University Publications, 1978), 45-46.

⁵⁷ Al-Amr, *The Hijaz under Ottoman*, 53-77.

⁵⁸ Al-Amr, *The Hijaz under Ottoman*, 82-89.

⁵⁹ Gaury, *Rulers of Mecca*, 124; Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi*, 2: 278.

⁶⁰ Gaury, *Rulers of Mecca*, 146, 156, 158; Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi*, 2: 399.

⁶¹ Asma Moalla, *The Regency of Tunis and the Ottoman Porte, 1777-1814. Army and government of a North-African Ottoman eyalet at the end of the eighteenth century* (London: Routledge, 2004), 12-18.

⁶² Yusuf Sarımay (ed.), *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Cezayir* [Algeria in Ottoman Records] (Ankara: T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü, 2010 (b), 36-42, 66-67, 96-97, 110-112, 124, 154-155; Moalla, *The Regency of Tunis*, 17-18, 33, 36-44, 56-57.

⁶³ James McDougall, *A History of Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 9-13; Houari Touati, "Ottoman Maghrib," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam. Volume 2: The Western Islamic World Eleventh to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Maribel Fierro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 506-514.

⁶⁴ Kılıç, 18. *Yüzyılın İlk Yarısında Osmanlı*, 77-80; Touati, "Ottoman Maghrib," 514-518.

⁶⁵ Moalla, *The Regency of Tunis*, 11-13; Touati, "Ottoman Maghrib," 514-518.

established his dynasty which ruled for more than 120 years.⁶⁶ However, despite the difference in the historical process, the formal aspects of these autonomies are quite similar for the Ottoman Empire began to send *fermans* investing the *dayıs* and Karamanlı rulers with the title of *beylerbeyi*, therefore changing the *de facto* situation into a *de iure* one.⁶⁷

Yet another example of formally recognised autonomy is the nomadic and transhumant tribes/groups in different parts of the Ottoman Empire, from the Balkans to the Eastern corners of the empire. They were treated as administrative units with the status of *yurtluk/ocaklık* with their own leaders as administrative officers.⁶⁸ Their autonomy was granted officially with *kanunnames* as it was with other administrative units. The examples are *Boz Ulus Kanunnamesi* and *Yörük Sancağı Kanunnameleri*.⁶⁹ Laws regarding some other tribes were included in provincial *kanunnames*.⁷⁰ Many such units are mentioned as *sancak*.⁷¹ The Roma people in the Balkans were similarly grouped as a *Cingâne Sancağı* and given a *kanunname*.⁷² This, however, didn't last. As the character of the empire changed from a polity of nomadic tribes to a more settled and stable one, attempts were made to settle those tribes. *İskan politikaları* (settlement policies) were implemented from the 17th until the 20th century, leading to the settlement of many tribes, even if it sometimes resulted in severe casualties as was the case for tribes in the vicinity of Adana in the second half of the 19th century.⁷³

The case of tribal rulers in Ottoman possessions in the Persian Gulf is also one of officially recognised autonomy. After entering the Ottoman sphere of influence as the result of the Iraq campaign of Suleiman I., local sheikhs and emirs were given official recognition in their roles as landholders and leaders of their respective communities in the form of *istimaletnames* ("letters of appeasement) and *berats*.⁷⁴ At the same time, the whole province was organised like all other Ottoman provinces.⁷⁵ This tribal autonomy lasted until the end of the empire's rule in this region, with a period from 1670 to the early 19th century seemingly totally deprived of the presence of Ottomans due to the military campaign of Bani Khalid.⁷⁶ After the reconquest by Mithat Pasha in the 1870s, the character of local autonomy changed at least officially due to the Ottoman attempts at centralisation and bringing even the fringes of its domain under a form of direct rule. From then on, the significant local rulers were to be appointed as state officials with the title of *kaymakam*.⁷⁷ Still, the title was hereditary and involved not much more than formal recognition of Ottoman sovereignty. Especially Al-Thani sheikhs of Qatar seem to have had a free hand when it came to foreign politics, military actions,

⁶⁶ Touati, "Ottoman Maghrib," 522; Kılıç, *18. Yüzyılın İlk Yarısında Osmanlı*, 80; Ronald B. St John, "Ottoman Empire", "Karamanlı (Qaramanlı) Dynasty," in *Historical Dictionary of Libya*, Ronald B. St John (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 141-142, 191-193.

⁶⁷ McDougall, *A History of Algeria*, 38; Sarıay (ed.), *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Cezayir*, 130-131, 134.

⁶⁸ Reşat Kasaba, *A Movable Empire. Ottoman Nomads, Migrants, and Refugees* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 20-25.

⁶⁹ Akgündüz *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri*, 4: 689-723.

⁷⁰ Akgündüz *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri*, 3: 329.

⁷¹ One document provides a number of *yörük sancakları* (yörük are transhumant Turkish tribes) in Rumeli Eyaleti: Akgündüz *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri*, 4: 465.

⁷² Akgündüz *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri*, 4: 511-523; A. Akgündüz *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri*, 2: 383-386.

⁷³ Andrew G. Gould, "Pashas and Brigands: Ottoman Provincial Reform and its Impact on the Nomadic Tribes of Southern Anatolia, 1840-1885" (Ph.D. Thesis, University of California, 1973); Yonca Köksal, "Coercion and Mediation: Centralization and Sedentarization of Tribes in the Ottoman Empire," *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, No. 3 (May 2006): 469 – 491.

⁷⁴ Zekeriyâ Kurşun, *Basra Körfezi'nde Osmanlı-İngiliz Çekişmesi. Katar'da Osmanlılar 1871-1916* [Ottoman-English Rivalry in the Gulf of Basra. Ottomans in Qatar 1871-1916] (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 2004), 21-28; Jon E. Mandaville, "The Ottoman Province of al-Hasâ in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90, No. 3 (Jul.-Sep. 1970): 486-513.

⁷⁵ Mandaville, "The Ottoman Province".

⁷⁶ Ahmad M. Abu-Hakima, *The Modern History of Kuwait: 1750-1965* (Beirut: Khayats, 1983), 38.

⁷⁷ Kurşun, *Basra Körfezi'nde Osmanlı*, 140-146; Frederick F. Anscombe, *The Ottoman Gulf. The Creation of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 21-25, 31-33.

and signing treaties as long, as it did not cause problems for the Ottomans.⁷⁸ At the same time, Kuwait with its ruling al-Sabah family was exempted from taxes and the military presence of Ottomans, satisfying itself by raising the Ottoman flag.⁷⁹ As for lesser sheikhs, in Najd, they were given temporary governmental functions until the appointment of *kaymakam*.⁸⁰

4. Non-legal or informal arrangements

These forms of decentralisation were instituted through tradition, custom, necessity and practice and remained outside the written law of the Ottoman Empire. However, it does not necessarily mean that their non-legal status was constant. Some of the types of decentralised arrangements described in the previous part started as informal arrangements, only to become officially acknowledged by the state later. This was, for example, the fate of the Maghrib possessions of the Ottoman Empire, which officially became autonomous provinces. As for the decentralised features of the Ottoman Empire which remained informal, there are several examples which fit into three broad categories, with the first one being the autonomy enjoyed by some provinces and their ruling classes, the second one the phenomenon of *ayan*, and the third one comprising tribal politics.

Regarding the autonomy of provinces and governors, there are many examples in the Ottoman Empire, including Egypt, Ottoman Iraq (Baghdad, Basra, Mosul), and Lebanon and Syria. Concerning Egypt, its partial autonomy was directly connected to its Mamluk past. Mamluk households were incorporated into the Ottoman system and after initial weakness, started to exert more and more influence over pashas sent from Istanbul. The latter were delegated for short periods and enjoyed no local support; therefore, they could exert their power only by exploiting rivalries between Mamluks. However, even that proved inefficient from the mid-17th century. As a result, less and less revenue was remitted to Istanbul and most administrative positions came to be occupied by Mamluks.⁸¹ The additional element of the Egyptian political puzzle was the role of Bedouin tribes which, although unable to unify to achieve lasting influence, were nevertheless a force to reckon with. As a result, some *sancaks* and many minor positions were given to Arab shaykhs in return for their cooperation, as it was during the Mamluk rule.⁸² The situation then only changed for the worse for the Ottoman Empire after the French invasion, when Mehmet Ali, an officer of the Ottoman army, managed through political intrigues to gain the status of *vali* and in a short time began to conduct a *de facto* independent policy which led to his war and near-victory with his old sovereign, the result of which was the official autonomy as mentioned above.⁸³ As for Ottoman Iraq, it was always a difficult territory to subdue and incorporate as a regular part of the empire. It was divided into three provinces: Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra. Large swathes of Mosul province were occupied by Kurdish principalities recognised by the empire in the 16th century, as mentioned before. Apart from that, the governorship of the province was captured by a local Jalali dynasty which ruled in the 17th and early 18th centuries.⁸⁴ Similarly, Baghdad and Basra became at the beginning of the 18th century a holding of a peculiar “dynasty” of Mamluks of Caucasian origin who were trained at the household in the capital. Despite the numerous efforts of the Ottoman government to install in Baghdad a centrally appointed governor, these were usually killed or

⁷⁸ Kurşun, *Basra Körfezi'nde Osmanlı*, 163-170.

⁷⁹ Anscombe, *The Ottoman Gulf*, 21-22; B.J. Slot, *Mubarak Al-Sabah. Founder of Modern Kuwait, 1896-1915* (London: Arabian Publishing, 2005), 32-35.

⁸⁰ Anscombe, *The Ottoman Gulf*, 46.

⁸¹ Stanford Jay Shaw, *The Financial and Administrative Organization and Development of Ottoman Egypt 1517-1798* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 1-10; Jane Hathaway, *The politics of households in Ottoman Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge State University, 1997), 5-16.

⁸² Reuven Aharoni, *The Pasha's Bedouin. Tribes and state in the Egypt of Mehemet Ali, 1805-1848* (London: Routledge, 2007), 23-25.

⁸³ Khaled Fahmy, “The era of Muhammad'Ali Pasha, 1805-1848,” in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, ed. M. W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2: 139-175.

⁸⁴ Jane Hathaway, *The Arab Lands under Ottoman Rule, 1516-1800* (London: Routledge, 2008), 94-95.

forced to retreat by Mamluks themselves and other local political actors who have grown accustomed to Mamluk rule. As a result, until 1830, Mamluk governors were appointed for long terms and replaced by their pupils, usually those who previously served them as *kethüdas*.⁸⁵ In Syria and Lebanon, the *de facto* autonomy of Druze, Christian, Kurdish, and Shia tribes was due to their position in secluded mountains and deserts nearly impossible to be controlled by outsiders. Out of these communities, several powerful local dynasties were born, which often managed to capture key governmental posts and tax farms for themselves and their relatives. Some, like Fakhr al-Din Ma'n in the first half of the 17th century and the al-'Azam dynasty of the 18th century managed to control many districts both officially and unofficially.⁸⁶ In Lebanon, as Abdul-Rahim Abu-Husayn observes, the period from the mid-16th to early 18th century was one of "an almost continuous state of open Druze rebellion"⁸⁷ and Druze supremacy, which was replaced in turn by the "principality" of Shihab until 1841.⁸⁸ Moreover, those groups and/or their paramount families were often feuding leading to wars and massacres such as that of 1638, 1711, 1718, 1753, 1759, 1771, 1780, 1838, 1841, 1845, and most notably, in 1860.⁸⁹ Even the imposition of direct control by Istanbul in the form of a centrally-nominated governor in the spirit of Tanzimat reforms has failed, leaving the old arrangements in place.⁹⁰ Moreover, the latest conflict of 1860 which resulted in massacres of Christian civilians, has caused the provinces and sub-provinces forming today's Lebanon to become officially autonomous, as it is mentioned in the previous subchapter.

Another example of informal decentralisation was initially the phenomenon of *ayan*, that is, local, provincial notables. While such a class is not an innovation in itself, it gained unprecedented power in the 17th century in the Ottoman Empire, following the period of unrest (*celali* uprisings), failed military campaigns in Europe, and the protracted conflict with Safavids over Iraq. As a result, urban elites in the provinces (*taşra*) started to gain increased importance in local affairs as well as to accumulate wealth. They held private *levend* armies (with soldiers of peasant origin as opposed to professional military classes such as janissaries), organised households and sometimes managed to install their kin on various levels of provincial administration.⁹¹ The latter aspect of their power was developed over time. Firstly, *beylerbeyi* started to appoint local *ayan* as their deputies (called *mütesellim* or *voyvoda*, appointed instead of a governor in some sancaks) and tax collectors (*muhasıl*).⁹² In the 18th century, *ayan* started to decide who should receive the position of *mütesellim*.⁹³ It was then that they gained a precarious semi-formal position within the state framework, which is described in the next subchapter. Before that, however, their power was not sanctioned by any type of government document, hence its informal character.

Finally, the tribal politics of the Ottoman Empire, while in the case of many tribal confederations and large tribes regulated through written law, was in some cases a purely non-

⁸⁵ Ebubekir Ceylan, *The Ottoman Origins of Modern Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 37-41; Hathaway, *The Arab Lands*, 95-98; Tom Nieuwenhuis, *Politics and Society in Early Modern Iraq. Mamlük Pashas, Tribal Shayks and Local Rule Between 1802 and 1831* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982), 13-26; Süleyha Yenidünya, "XIX. Yüzyıl Başlarında Osmanlı Devleti'nin Bağdat'ta Kölemen Hâkimiyetini Kaldırma Teşebbüsleri" [The Attempts of the Ottoman State to Abolish the Mamluk Rule in Baghdad in the early 19th Century], *Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları* 182 (November 2009): 1-46.

⁸⁶ Harris, *Lebanon. A History*, 95-104, 140-141, 153-154, 157-159; Hathaway, *The Arab Lands*, 87-90.

⁸⁷ Abu-Husayn, *The View from Istanbul*, 14.

⁸⁸ Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions. The History of Lebanon Revisited* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), 108-129.

⁸⁹ Harris, *Lebanon. A History*, 108, 114-115, 117-123; Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions*, 68-69.

⁹⁰ Caesar, "The Problem of the Ottoman Administration," 132-146.

⁹¹ I. Metin Kunt, "Devolution from the Centre to the Periphery: An Overview of Ottoman Provincial Administration," in *The Dynastic Centre and the Provinces. Agents and Interactions*, ed. Jeroen Duindam, Sabine Dabringhaus (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 30-48.

⁹² Inalcik, "Centralisation and Decentralisation," 29-31, 36.

⁹³ Inalcik, "Centralisation and Decentralisation," 32.

legal or informal matter. Especially in the Ottoman-Qajar border, many tribes utilised the porous border to their advantage – the common tactic was to escape to the other side of the border if the government sent the army or attempted to collect taxes and levies. While starting from the Treaties of Erzurum there were attempts to delimitate the border and contain the migrations of tribes, the Ottoman forces could not contain this movement totally as testified in various documents from the late 19th and early 20th century.⁹⁴ Apart from the Ottoman-Qajar borderland, the non-legal tribal autonomies were especially prevalent in the (themselves autonomous as previously presented) Ottoman Regencies in Maghrib – Algeria, Tunis, and Tripolitania/Libya. In all three, Berber and Arab tribes living in places formally within their borders but distant from the shore and urbanised areas or in inaccessible places such as the Kabyle mountains of Algeria were exempted from most or even all taxation, instead provided paid soldiers (called *zuwâwa* in Tunis) to the local army, which sometimes could comprise mostly such tribal units, outnumbering the local *ocak*.⁹⁵ Some tribes in the Kabyle region managed even to maintain their independence under the Koukou kingdom until the 17th century and then regain this independence in 1748, which was to last until the French invasion.⁹⁶

5. Quasi-formal decentralisation

Naturally, apart from clearly formal or informal decentralisation, mixed arrangements of partially formal and partially informal character arose throughout history, especially in the Ottoman Empire. These could come into existence in two opposite processes:

- 1) Formal institutions gaining autonomy/powers not mentioned in the letter of law.
- 2) Informal institutions partially incorporated into the state framework.

While the topic is worth longer consideration and many of the previously classified arrangements could fit into this description in particular cases, we will paint it with a rather thick brush, using two examples of overtly quasi-formal character - *ayan* from the 18th century on, and the *millet sistemi*.

The first case of mixed informal/formal decentralisation is the later period of *ayan* ascendancy in regional Ottoman politics. What started as an informal practice gained legitimacy when the documents of investiture (*berat*) began to be issued on the condition that the local elite approves of the choice by the governor.⁹⁷ Later on, their power found reflection in the establishment of local councils (*divan*) of *ayan* which kept the local *beylerbeyi*, *sancakbeyi*, and *kadı* in check and even enjoyed prerogatives in municipal matters and security.⁹⁸ Not only that but in 1726 a decree was issued, according to which *ayan* from local dynasties were to be appointed as *sancakbeyi*.⁹⁹ Still, the source of autonomy and power of *ayan* was a rather complicated matter. On the one hand, over time, the position of *ayan* gained increasing legitimacy, with official certificates (*buyruldu*) issued to the heads of notables in provinces (*baş-ayan/reis-i ayan/ayn al-ayan*), and the *ayan* gaining increasing prominence through local

⁹⁴ Yusuf Sarıncay (ed.), *Arşiv Belgelerinde Osmanlı-İran İlişkileri* [Ottoman-Iranian Relations in Archival Records] (Ankara: T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü, 2010 (a)), 272-276, 354-355, 378; Sabri Ateş, *The Ottoman-Iranian Borderland. Making a Boundary 1843-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), all but particularly p. 49-51, 177-179.

⁹⁵ Lisa Anderson, *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 47-52; Moalla, *The Regency of Tunis*, 100-107; Hugh Roberts, *Berber Government. The Kabyle Polity in Pre-colonial Algeria* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 193-200; Al-Hamzeh Al-Shadeedi, Nancy Ezzeddine, "Libyan tribes in the shadows of war and peace," *CRU Policy Brief*, February 2019, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/PB_Tribalism.pdf.

⁹⁶ Roberts, *Berber Government*, 200-206, 261-269, 277-278.

⁹⁷ Inalcik, "Centralisation and Decentralisation," 34.

⁹⁸ Inalcik, "Centralisation and Decentralisation," 32-44.

⁹⁹ Yücel Özkaya, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Âyânlık* [Ayanship in the Ottoman Empire] (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2014), 145.

councils.¹⁰⁰ However, they represent a “grey sphere” between the legal and non-legal types of decentralisation, quite like the powers of *beylerbeyi* but unlike them, they are more strongly tilted towards a non-legal/informal type. After all, while the power of *beylerbeyi* was rooted in the state and was only extended by non-legal means, the case of *ayan* is quite to the contrary. Despite the negative attitude of many statesmen and short-lived attempts at their abolition in 1786, the continuing political importance of *ayan* was felt shortly after with their participation in the short-lived *Sened-i İttifak* (Charter of Alliance) of 1808 when the leading *ayan* dedicated themselves to the service of the Ottoman Empire in the form which seems to some quasi-federal.¹⁰¹ Their influence rose even further as the Tanzimat reforms unfolded, giving more and more rights and prerogatives to regional councils and then the state parliament, both occupied by *ayan*. This decentralisation of rule and influence of *ayan* was maintained in some form until the fall of the empire and the only threat to it seemed to be the CUP coup of 1908. This event, together with the promise of national elections was not well received by local Syrian *ayan* and we can expect that notables in other provinces shared their fear.¹⁰²

The second instance of mixed formal/informal decentralisation measure in the Ottoman Empire is the autonomous status of some religious minorities such as Greek Christians and Armenians, known as the *millet sistemi* (“the system of nations”). In theory, it provided them with the freedom to practice their religion and manage their internal affairs, including trying cases between the members by their internal court and tax collection by church officials.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, the extent to which this autonomy is for some time an object of contention between scientists, with some suggesting that the minorities themselves were not eager to utilise it to its fullest and instead often chose regular Ottoman courts to resolve their disputes.¹⁰⁴ In other cases, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, some of the patriarchies pursued cases which were beyond their jurisdiction, such as cases related to penal law or tax evasion.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, it seems as if religious minorities have managed to extend their jurisdiction over spheres which were not initially granted to them in *ahdnames*. Still, whatever the extent of this autonomy, it remained a check on the government’s power to influence the affairs of minorities. This topic will require more research in the future to determine the exact extent and features of this type of decentralisation.

6. Conclusions

It is possible to draw a couple of concluding remarks from this comparison of various types of decentralisation.

- 1) Formal decentralisation was predominant in the Ottoman Empire - even its regular provinces were granted separate laws through *kanunnames*, not to mention many autonomous provinces and entities in Maghrib, Georgia, Kurdistan, Europe, Hijaz, and the Persian Gulf.
- 2) Informal decentralisation, while less prevalent, was still a viable form of establishing autonomy for certain groups/regions. In many cases, the centre could not manage to impose its administrative practices and was forced to accept the *de facto* position of certain tribes or local noble families. However, such informal decentralisation’s

¹⁰⁰ Inalcik, “Centralisation and Decentralisation,” 38-43.

¹⁰¹ Ariel Salzmann, *Tocqueville in the Ottoman Empire. Rival Paths to the Modern State* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 186-187; Enver Ziya Karal, *Osmanlı Tarihi*. [Ottoman History] (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1988), 5: 88-96.

¹⁰² Philip Shukry Khoury, “The Politics of Nationalism: Syria and the French Mandate, 1920-1936” (PhD Thesis, Harvard University, 1980), 78-81.

¹⁰³ Yavuz Ercan, *Osmanlı Yönetiminde Gayrimüslimler* [Non-Muslims under Ottoman Rule] (Ankara: Turhan Kitabevi, 2001), 241-250; Karen Barkey, George Gavrilis, “The Ottoman Millet System: Non-Territorial Autonomy and its Contemporary Legacy”, *Ethnopolitics* 15:1 (2016): 24-42.

¹⁰⁴ Antonis Anastasopoulos, “Non-Muslims and Ottoman Justice(s?),” in *Law and Empire. Ideas, Practices, Actors*, ed. Jeroen Duindam, Jill Harries, Caroline Humfress, Nimrod Hurvitz (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 275-292, 286-289.

¹⁰⁵ Anastasopoulos, “Non-Muslims and Ottoman Justice(s?),” 281-285.

longevity depended solely on the empire's ability to influence it. While succeeding households in Egypt have managed to maintain and expand their autonomy against Istanbul from the 17th century until 1918, the dynasty of Mamluk Paşas of Baghdad lasted only around a century when it was abolished by military means. Similarly, the autonomy of tribes in Ottoman Maghrib or on the frontiers of Qajar Iran depended on their ability to escape the state's reach and once it was made difficult in the 20th century, it quickly vanished.

- 3) Quasi-formal decentralisation could be established in two distinct fashions. Firstly, some officially acknowledged forms of autonomy were expanded by their holders. That was the case of millet sistemi. Others were the result of the empire trying to incorporate a de facto situation into its body of law. This way, the institution of ayan was accepted in the 18th century and then again, during the Tanzimat reforms.
- 4) Together, all three forms of decentralisation, even except regular administrative division, covered much of the Ottoman Empire until the 19th century, when it started to lose its holdings in Europe and Maghrib and abolished the Kurdish emirates.
- 5) The Ottoman Empire, rather than attempting the universal application of the law, preferred to adjust to local conditions and accommodate the elites and customs of conquered people. This flexibility and the predominance of decentralisation seem to have aided their longevity and allowed them to enter the 20th century.

With this all being said, the topic of Ottoman decentralisation is a deep and complex one. This article was only an attempt to show and cursorily classify as much of their diversity as possible. More extensive research into the extent and interrelations between various types of decentralisation within the empire should be conducted in the future in order to truly understand its meaning and nature.

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