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The struggle within: "moral crisis" on the Ottoman homefront during the First World War

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Conclusion

Morality was instrumental in discourses regarding the preservation of social and political order throughout the history of the Ottoman Empire. Political and social crises were often translated into concerns over morality making it the ultimate touchstone of whether the state was doing its duty. Morality came to be considered part of the principles of religion, and the role of the Ottoman ulema in maintaining moral order meant that their moral authority was established in legislation as well as in jurisdiction. In the course of the nineteenth century, with a shift in the perception of state power, public order, and the formation of a broad intellectual and public space, morality became a contested realm among several actors.

This study analyzes the preconditions that led to emergence of moral decay debates in the society and among the ruling elites together with discourses of morality and moral decay in the context of the First World War. It focuses on how morality became instrumental for polemics on several issues around political, cultural, and social developments. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that debates over morality had new political, social, and cultural implications closely associated with the circumstances of war.

The approach of this study differs from previous ones to discourses of moral decline as it presents a multifaceted scrutiny of moral decline beyond debates about prostitution, on which other approaches primarily focus. Also, instead of taking moral decline as reality per se, I consider it as a discourse

echoing important political and social implications. I study the discourse in juxtaposition with the historical context, and in this way, I demonstrate the vast space that morality occupied in various realms. I argue that moral space was highly politicized and was intermingled with several issues that were fundamental to the social and political transformation of the empire. Throughout this study, I sought to answer the question how morality related to the war. This simple question was crucial for shedding a light on the Ottoman experience of the First World War.

Opinionated articles on morality in the Ottoman press lead one to assume that prostitution and venereal disease should dominate a study on morality as these were considered and perceived as major threats to public morality. However, as demonstrated in this work, both morality and moral decline had wider definitions and implications in the period in question. The sense of moral decline was triggered not only as a result of war-induced anxieties, but also due to domestic and external developments. In their quest to save the state and form a new society, the Ottoman intelligentsia directed its attention to morality which was the priority among realms to be reformed. It was crucial for the progress, regeneration, and revival of the nation. The problem of morality reveals a common anxiety regarding the national regeneration. As the First World War was a watershed event for envisaging the future nation, debates on morality became urgent in discussions of the social and intellectual structure on which the nation should rely. From the standpoint of morality polemicists, the system of values and social norms constituted obstacles to the advancement of the Ottoman Muslim society and contributed to the decline of the empire.

Similar to contemporary debates about morality, the issue of women was central to morality discussions. The war created a common anxiety about the consequences of the broader participation of women in social and economic life vis-à-vis the future of the patriarchal order. As most women had to fend for themselves during the war, concerns about the degradation of norms surrounding the patriarchal family dominated morality debates. A common anxiety was evident in debates on what should replace the old moral order. In the highly politicized atmosphere of the war, nationalism met morality,

marking a moment of transformation between the old moral order and a new one.

This study explores three major realms for the study of wartime morality, namely ideologies defended by the intelligentsia, official measures and policies implemented by political and military elites, and state interventions into the family and female sexuality. Undoubtedly, these three areas of inquiry are not mutually exclusive. As shown throughout this dissertation, these layers continuously feed one another. For the sake of the simplicity of presentation, I presented them under separate headings.

First, I present intellectual discussions of morality through several journals representing different ideological standpoints among the Ottoman intelligentsia. Among the major publications covering morality and moral decline, I evaluated *İslam Mecmuası*, *Yeni Mecmua* and *Sebilürreşad*. While *Sebilürreşad* represented the Islamist wing of the Ottoman political spectrum, *Yeni Mecmua* and *İslam Mecmuası* belonged to Turkish nationalists whose popularity was increasing at the time. Of these two journals, *İslam Mecmuası* was the instrument by which nationalists clarified their views on religion. Evaluating *İslam Mecmuası* from the point of morality is crucial to see how new interpretations of religion and Islamic law intersected with the reformists' search for a new morality. The journal has a different theological approach to morality whereby Turkish nationalists developed to weaken the arguments of Islamists. The nationalist version of Islamic morality sought to establish a new morality based on collectivism, solidarity, and modern needs. On the other hand, *Yeni Mecmua* employed a more explicit sociological approach to morality and moral decline which thoroughly reflected the views of the nationalists. Moral decline as deliberately evaluated by Necmettin Sadak and Ziya Gökalp in this journal served the objectives of establishing a new life and envisaging a new future for the Turkish society. Gökalp's ideas have been subject to several inquiries in various fields of research. However, his approach to the issue of morality has never been studied in detail. In this respect, an analysis of Gökalp's understanding of morality is vital to shed light on his intellectual and political legacy. In this study, I explore his concept of "national morality" and evaluate it as part of the nascent secular ideals of the intelligentsia. Adopting the Durkheimian *morale laïque* and the ideology of

the French Third Republic, the nationalists approached moral decline as an instrument to stress the need for political and legal change. They discovered that morality plays is a unifying power in society and incorporated it into debates around solidarism. Discussion of the new morality went hand in hand with emphasis on the need for reform in realms such as education, family, and professional life. While reforms in education would establish the foundation of national morality, legal reforms would strengthen ties binding individuals to one another. A rational understanding of morality in professional life would solve war-induced problems such as profiteering. Similarly, the establishment of rational morality would regenerate Muslim families by eliminating the power of traditions and superstitions surrounding the formation and dissolution of family.

The writers in *Sebilürreşad*, on the other hand, were exasperated by these comments on new morality. The main concern of *Sebilürreşad*'s writers was to underscore the facts that Islam is the only source of morality and that Islamic practices are the instruments for reaching a higher moral standard. According to this line of thought, moral decline was the result of divergence from Islam because religion was the only source of morality. Accordingly, all calamities, including the loss of land, the dissolution of the empire, and social problems, stemmed from moral decline. For them, the strength of the Muslims was their faith in the greatness of God and their respect of the Sharia; once religion lost its power, defeat was inevitable. The discourses of moral decline in this journal aimed to bolster critiques of European cultural influence. The main characteristics of the morality discussion in *Sebilürreşad* – which were distinctively different from those of the nationalists on morality – were the centrality of sexuality, opposition to the feminist movement, and critique of Western modernity. They harshly criticized the concept of “national morality” which they considered antagonistic to God’s orders. The editors of *Sebilürreşad* employed discourses of moral decline to attack nationalists, asserting that they contributed to moral degeneration by advocating for the rights of women through the concept of a new life and freedom. In a time when spiritual ideologies were under attack by materialism, the writers of *Sebilürreşad* used the moral decline paradigm to reestablish a religious hegemony over lifestyles and public space. As the judicial and executive power

of the Ottoman ulema was at risk, the morality argument became an urgent means to reclaim these powers.

Going through women's journals shows how women responded to gendered polemics on moral decline. Through the articles in women's journals such as *Kadınlar Dünyası*, *Genç Kadın*, *Bilgi Yurdu*, and *Seyyale* I present an overview of the main discussions on moral decline and morality from the perspective of Muslim women. While some of the women writers in these journals expressed their discontent over the double standard of moral expectations, others shared patriarchal approaches towards morality. For female advocates of family reform, the morality issue became a political tool for questioning traditional values in the society that constituted an obstacle to women's participation in social life. The war context is crucial for understanding this point because these women established their ideas on the fact that during the war many Muslim women had to fend for themselves in the absence of men.

In short, intellectual discussions about moral decline show how morality was politicized in the context of the war. The rise of materialism, the declaration of jihad, ideological contests over political and public space, critiques of previous reforms, the search for a new life, the war-induced social problem of profiteering, and women's labor and political rights constituted the major topics of polemics of moral decline. Moral decline debates offered several prominent intellectual figures an opportunity to discuss and question extant daily and social practices in their quest for social reform and a new spirit. Once an obstacle to progress, morality became an ideal starting point to penetrate in previously untouched institutions. This study deliberately puts the discussion in its historical political and social context in order to understand the increased emphasis on morality.

In a second layer of analysis, I focus on official approaches to the problem of immorality in manners that included the concept of public morality. By drawing attention to wartime regulations regarding the protection of public morality in combatant countries, I argue that moral anxieties created a common discourse intermingled with concern about both the practical and political implications of moral decline. In the course of the war, violations of public morality became part of the growing concern for national security;

meanwhile, the wartime rivalry among combatant countries constituted the backbone of a cultural opposition in which moral contestation played a significant role. The Ottoman Empire prioritized moral considerations over other concerns, as evidenced by official propaganda underscoring the superiority of Muslim identity. By exploring wartime developments such as the court martial orders regarding immorality and the role of the abolishment of capitulations in the fight against prostitution and the trafficking of women, I argue that there was an increasing emphasis on national security in response to “immoral” behavior. These findings underpin the initial claim of this dissertation that morality reflects political and social change instead of being an independent set of cultural norms. I believe this approach enables an evaluation of the First World War period as a moment of transition from an old moralistic discourse to the new medical moralism which gained momentum in 1930s eugenic thought in the Republic of Turkey.

The analysis of foreigners’ applications for citizenship which were elaborated on in chapter 3 underpins this basic finding. These applications were denied on the basis of moral quality of the applicant, corroborating the assertion that moral judgments corresponded to national security concerns and wartime measures to rid society of “undesirable” elements. As discussed in chapter 3, the nationality of foreigners was important for identifying the “other” in the atmosphere of the war and labeling them as immoral. The basis of their exclusion was legitimized by using the etiquettes of morality.

The present study examines an unexplored wartime measure against the violation of morality, namely that unregistered, illegal prostitutes and morally weak individuals were sent out from martial law territories to places where there were no railway connections. Using the archival documents from several departments of the Ministry of the Interior Affairs together with petitions sent to them, I determine whether the “ostracism” of immoral individuals went beyond the military measures and became a social phenomenon. Interestingly, Ottoman authorities did not stigmatize these people to the extent of leaving them unemployed. I contend that this was partly because the Ottoman government associated the violation of public morality with the violation of public order. I interpret this an indicator of the fear of

further moral decline and the deterioration of public order that could accelerate due to poverty.

In quotidian life, the protection of public morality was vital for maintaining public order. However, this did not mean that Ottoman authorities, whether bureaucratic or military, established absolute authority over public morality. Entertainment, leisure activities, and “vices” such as alcohol and gambling constituted a source of revenue for the state. Therefore, the government had a pragmatic approach towards such expenses. Among the conservative public, such vices signified moral corruption as they symbolized the immorality of Western civilization. On the other hand, a second, new critique emerged out of nationalist sentiment that such places distract people’s attention from the war. In an effort to sublimate moral and financial interests, semi-governmental war relief organizations became dominant in the organization of entertainment. Eventually, moral instruction and war propaganda conflicted with the need to increase revenue as the public showed little interest in regulated entertainment.

A common trend was that many social, economic, and political problems were translated into the discourse of moral decline in the popular perception of morality. This was particularly valid for the problem of war profiteering, demonstrating that the collective memory of the war was shaped by the moralistic imagery of wartime inequality between the rich and the poor. The literary products of the postwar era explicitly reflect this tension through the representation of wealthy profiteers. The stories of debauchery of such characters attracted wider audiences than political critiques.

When the object of analysis is morality in traditional societies, family is an inevitable subject. Ottoman society was no exception in this regard. Therefore, widespread concerns about morality, values, traditions, and norms vis-à-vis the wartime family is one of the major topics of this study. As detailed in chapter 4, there was evident concern about family and women in many combatant countries, but the Ottoman case had its own peculiarities. In the Ottoman case, attention was directed not only towards the family per se, but to all forms of encounter between men and women. I consider the family in this wider context of gender, sexuality, and patriarchy. The relations

between men and women were surrounded by a set of norms interwoven with Islamic law and customs regulating sexual conduct.

Legislations on family during the First World War sought to regenerate Muslim families while controlling sexual relationships on the homefront. I demonstrate how wartime legislation that targeted the family was driven by moral concerns, and I argue that morality discourses reveal the interaction of social and political conditions with ideas about the establishment of a new civic order. The latter was established on the basis of changing perceptions of the family, sexuality, and morality.

This study is as much about the social circumstances in which Ottoman people lived as it is about intellectual discussions. Contrary to widespread contentions among researchers that prioritize the ideological motive of state elites to modernize the family, I analyzed the demands of the women and soldiers' who asked for protection from the state, reminding it of the government's duties and promises. In this respect, I consider the provisional law authorizing martial courts to try the cases of sexual assault of soldiers' family members as a first step of legislative intervention in the family. As a complementary, I explore another attempt to regulate sexual relationships on the homefront, namely the Adultery Bill of 1916. This proposal stipulated that high ranking military officials would be permitted to file complaints to initiate legal processes on behalf of soldiers against their unfaithful wives. This attempt was futile due to debates on the nature of the law and the limits of the public and private realms. In this study, the Ottoman Rights of Family Decree is evaluated as one legislative attempt to regulate and protect the family. Instead of considering state intervention in the family as a step towards modernization, I evaluate the preconditions of the Family Decree within a framework of social circumstances that triggered the profound change. The present study demonstrates that to understand family reform, one must consider intellectual debates about the limitations of Islamic Law, the role of mores and values in the foundation of Ottoman Muslim families and socio-economic conditions on the homefront. Furthermore, this study reveals how discourses on the regeneration of the nation coincided with discourses of moral decline, shaping the assertion of the need for social reform. The quest for a new family envisioned by the reformist intelligentsia was inherent to

the projects of new life and new morality which were based on secular and rational foundations.

The sources used in this study reflect the wide scope of morality debates. Their variety also demonstrates how morality was incorporated into politics, lawmaking, daily life, and intellectual debates. Despite censorship of certain topics, it is possible to say that the morality issue was discussed at length in the Ottoman press.

Morality and moral decline debates have been the subject of a few studies of the Ottoman Empire, albeit on a limited scale. In the scope of this study, I mainly focus on the central notion of *ahlâk* in the particular context of the First World War. However, further research covering the periods between the Tanzimat era and early republican Turkey will reveal the changing discourses of morality more comprehensively. Since morality is at the intersection of topics such as education, family, law, education, and social life, I believe further studies on morality from historical perspective will contribute to the historiography of the Ottoman Empire in several contexts and shed a new light on topics that have been studied previously.

Morality still has a distinct place in debates over secularism, gender, and modernity reflected in different views on lifestyle, school education, male and female relationships, public order, and law making. Debates that took place over a hundred years ago are important for understanding the contemporary ideological and political atmosphere of the Republic of Turkey.