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Socio-political changes, confessionalization, and inter-confessional relations in Ottoman Damascus from 1760 to 1860

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GENERAL CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I aimed to analyze how socio-political changes affected inter-confessional relations in Ottoman Damascus from 1760 to 1860. Through a diachronic approach, a cross-reading of various primary sources and a micro-historical approach which focused on the city of Damascus, this research revealed the interaction between internal dynamics of religious communities and inter-confessional relations. First, we will address the main argument of this thesis. We will then present its findings, point to limitations and provide directions for further research. Finally, we will highlight the implications of this study.

1. Main Argument

Through the exploration of dynamics pertaining to three social groups in Damascus, Greek Catholics, Jews and members of the *ṭarīqa* Naqšbandīya-Ḥalidīya, this thesis argued that sociopolitical changes over the time period under study affected inter-confessional relations through the interplay of two dynamics. First, the long term development of confessional cultures reinforced the borders between religious communities. It heightened confessional consciousness among Ottoman Christians, Jews and Muslims. Then, in the 19th century this process was intensified through the *Tanzimat* reforms, the institutionalization of the *millet* system, and increased foreign intervention, which polarized the population along religious lines. In addition to structural changes, the interplay of social and political actors who instrumentalized sectarian discourses as tools of power contributed to the politicization of religious identities. These dynamics led to conflicts between Christians and Muslims, but also between Christians and Jews, and among Christian communities. The internal construction of religious communities in this period also shaped inter-confessional tensions. The nature of the elite of non-Muslim communities changed as a new merchant class replaced the traditional lay

leadership of the communities. The new elite among both Jews and Greek Catholics did not benefit from the same level of legitimacy than the traditional leadership among the population. They were not embedded in the same patronage networks across religious borders and rather relied on foreign powers' protection. It led to a crisis of authority among non-Muslim communities which prevented traditional elites from functioning as intermediaries and from reducing inter-confessional tensions. The religious leadership of non-Muslim communities was also strengthened by the reforms in the first part of the 19th century. However, its increasing authority and interventions into the lives of their flock met with strong resistances and even rebellion. Furthermore, the Ottoman *Tanzimat* reforms challenged the traditional intermediaries of urban and rural politics who stood in the way of the centralization of power and resources. In consequence of this crisis of representation and authority among all religious communities, consensual elite politics were replaced by a popular form of political mobilization which emphasized sectarian understandings of society and presented power relations between religious groups as a zero-sum game. It contributed to the confessionalization of Ottoman society as religious identities became the basis of conflicting claims of access to resources. This heightened confessional consciousness and the politicization of religious identities led to events of inter-confessional and intra-confessional violence in the mid-19th century.

2. Findings

In chapter one, I analyze the development of confessional cultures among Christians, Jews and Muslims since the 17th century. This process involved the intensification of doctrine, the reinforcement of religious borders, and the homogenization of practices and norms. I highlight similar developments among Christians, Jews and Muslims such as projects of religious reforms. Among Muslims, I focus on the political and spiritual influence of the charismatic leader of the Naqšbandīya-Ḥalidīya, Shaykh Ḥālīd, who played an important role

in Damascene politics. His program of reform, supported by the Ottoman government in the first part of the 19th century, contributed to the politicization of the Muslim population on religious grounds. It identifies the social and political role of non-Muslims as a source of weakness of the Ottoman Empire in this period of military defeats and internal secession.

Among Christians, I explore similar reform movements, either under missionary influence or as a result of internal impetus, which encouraged separation and distinction among religious groups. The development of confessional cultures was intensified by the schism between Orthodox and Catholic churches in the 18th century. Chapter two explores the separation of the Greek Catholic Church from the Greek Orthodox Church which was followed by a competition for followers, recognition and ecclesiastical resources between the two clergies. In addition to defining their identity in regards to the Greek Orthodox Church, Greek Catholics had to find their place in the Catholic world by emphasizing their distinction from Latin missionaries. These conflicts between Christian communities increased their visibility in the public realm. Demonstration of prestige, building of luxurious places of worship, and displays of alliances with foreign powers were often intended to increase the status of the Church in the eyes of the flock or to impress rival Christian communities. However, these displays were interpreted by the Muslim population as provocations and as political statements, thereby causing inter-confessional tensions.

The 19th century saw the culmination of this long term development of confessional cultures with the institutionalization of the *millet* system as part of the *Tanzimat* reforms. Chapter three and four analyze how these transformations increased the authority of patriarchs and *hahambaşılar* and encouraged the centralization of resources within the religious institutions. It challenged the existing system of overlapping forms of communal authority. Traditional elites were replaced by new merchant elites relying on foreign protection. The political role of this new elite caused resentments both within and outside the community. The

institutionalization of the *millet* system was accompanied by an effort to emphasize separation and distinction from other communities. These reforms led to widespread resistances which highlighted the politicization of different forms of belonging such local identity, class, kinship and *‘aṣabīya*, which became alternative bases for claims of access to resources. These internal divisions fostered the intervention of a variety of outside actors, such as the Ottoman government, foreign consuls and missionaries, who were instrumentalized by various actors in this struggle over institutional power. This observation emphasizes the agency of local actors rather than presenting them as passive pawns of foreign imperialism.

Chapter five and six turn to structural changes in the 19th century. The *Tanzimat* and especially the Islahat Fermanı of 1856 upset the social order of Ottoman society by abolishing various privileges and granting equal legal and political rights to non-Muslims. This transformation of social hierarchies was perceived as a loss of status and as a humiliation by many Muslims. It gave rise to resentments against both Christians and foreign powers, seen as the instigators and main beneficiaries of the reforms. Chapter five analyzes how these larger imperial transformations were articulated locally through the specificities of the context of Damascus. Historical precedents, such as the Egyptian rule of the city, affected the perception of the reforms as a zero-sum game between religious communities. Because of their role during the Egyptian period and their political influence in the following years, the Greek Catholic elite became the focus of popular resentments.

The transformation of the status of non-Muslims in the empire, and especially the abolition of *ğizya*, put an end to the social contract of the *ḍimma*. It led to inter-confessional tensions exemplified by the mention of the abolition of the *ğizya* as a justification for the attack against the Christian quarter of Damascus in the summer of 1860. Chapter six showed that they were various opinions among Damascene ulema regarding the status of the *ḍimma* after the abolition of the *ğizya*. However, because of the delegitimization of the elite ulema

and the popularity of *ṭarīqa* leaders such as Shaykh Ḥālīd, the opinion which claimed that the protection of non-Muslims had been abolished resonated more among the population.

In addition to structural changes at the level of the empire, chapter seven explores how the advantages granted to non-Muslims under foreign protection in trade, tax-farming and land-ownership put them in competition with traditional power holders such as ulema, *āšrāf*, notables and *āḡāwāt* in Damascus. Sectarian discourses were used as tools of power in this economic competition. Interpersonal conflicts were used by foreign consuls and governors in their bid for influence, turning them into diplomatic conflicts which in turn polarized the population. This chapter underlines the agency of local actors in shaping the applications of the reforms in the provinces and using them to further their own position.

Through a case study of the division of the Greek Catholic community regarding the adoption of the Gregorian calendar presented in chapter eight, I show that, through the institutionalization of the *millet* system, religious distinction became the basis of claims of access to communal resources. The internal divisions of the Greek Catholics were used by outside actors as tools of influence in the region. At the same time, local Greek Catholics invited and instrumentalized the intervention of outside actors to further their own power over the institutions of the Church. It led to a conflict of jurisdiction between foreign consuls, Rome and the Ottoman government which politicized the Greek Catholic religious identity. This affair also pointed to the increasing role of commoners in community affairs. This dramatic division of the community led to a crisis of authority which prevented the patriarch to function as an intermediary with the state and to collect taxes. It caused the hostility of the governor and popular resentments among Muslims of the city.

Greek Catholics also played an important role in the repeated accusations of blood libels against Jews in the mid-19th century. Chapter nine analyzed the increasing confessional consciousness of Greek Catholics and Jews in Damascus. The local competition for access to

resources between the elites of the two groups, events on the imperial scale, and foreign intervention led to the development of sectarian discourses.

Chapter ten showed that the *Tanzimat* reforms' attacks on intermediaries as well as the introduction of new forms of taxation led to a change of societal hierarchies and encouraged commoners to challenge the authority and privileges of the elite. This dynamic was observable within religious communities' institutions and in the society at large. The elites attempted to diffuse tensions between social classes by turning them into inter-confessional conflicts.

Rather than analyzing the violence solely in confessional terms, the events of 1860 have to be read in the continuity of rebellions against taxation and conscription in the first part of the 19th century. The Damascene governor's double standards in the policies he adopted in regards to Christians and Muslims contributed to the perception that Christians had a great influence on the Ottoman government. His weakness and compromising attitude in the treatment of the Greek Catholics and Greek Orthodox who had rebelled against the *bedel-i askeri* contrasted with the harsh measures used against *āḡāwāt* and other intermediaries. It caused resentments towards both the governor and Christians, shaping the inter-confessional form of the rebellion of 1860. Inter-confessional relations are thereby a by-product of state-society relations. The political influence on the governor of a group of Greek Catholic merchants simultaneously under foreign protection and employed in the provincial administration also played a role in the immediate causes of the attack against the Christian quarter of Damascus in 1860. Discontent towards the reforms and provincial governor were thereby redirected towards Christians, and especially towards Greek Catholics who had come to assume a predominant political role in the city.

3. Limitations and Further Research

Analyzing inter-confessional relations over a century forced me to make some choices regarding the types of interactions addressed in this research. The various sources guided me by pointing to aspects of inter-confessional relations that they deemed relevant.

I chose to focus on three main social groups and to explore inter-confessional relations over a century. Thereby, I do not claim to encompass the whole range of inter-confessional relations in the city of Damascus, but rather to highlight the interaction between the construction of communities, the transformation of religious identification and inter-confessional relations. In the same manner, the focus on the specific context of Damascus did not allow me to compare with other cities and regions, restricting my ability to generalize certain conclusions of this research for other contexts. Instead, I highlighted the specificities of the local context in shaping the understanding of the socio-political transformations of Ottoman society and the applications of the reforms. However, the occurrence of various cases of inter-confessional violence in various cities in the mid-19th century hint at the general transformation of inter-confessional relations across the empire. An analysis of these various events of violence through the lense of the interaction between internal communal dynamics and inter-confessional relations would further our understanding of the transformation of Ottoman society in the *Tanzimat* period.

I was able to analyze a variety of internal dynamics of Greek Catholics and Jews. However, I was able to consult more sources on Greek Catholic than Jews, in part because of my lack of knowledge of Hebrew, but also because of the lack of comparable sources available. I was thereby able to delve more into the case of the former than the latter. However, the comparison between the two communities allowed me to highlight similar dynamics.

My work in the archives of the Congregation of the Propaganda Fide and the Archivio Segreto was fruitful, but I was not able to consult the archives relating to other Catholic

communities such as the Maronite, Syriac Catholic and Armenian Catholics of Damascus. A comparison with these archives would further shed light on the interactions and competition between Catholic communities.

A comparison with Greek Orthodox internal dynamics would also have completed this analysis of inter-confessional relations. However, I was not able to do so given the difficult, if not impossible, access to Russian archives and to the archives of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Beirut. Church archives could have provided another possible source of information on the history of the various Christian Churches present in Damascus. However, due to the political situation in Syria since the beginning of my thesis, I have not been able to access them. In any case, these sources are not as abundant and systematic as the archives consulted for this research.

While I consulted the court records of Damascus, I have not made an extensive use of it for this thesis, mainly because I have found limited information regarding non-Muslims in the various volumes I consulted, which concern sales and purchases. The documents I consulted confirmed my initial hypothesis of the growing activity of Christian and Jewish protégés in the purchase of properties around the city. However, these dynamics deserve to be explored further to highlight the economic strategies of Ottoman Christians and Jews in rural Syria, which have not been addressed by previous research.

Similarly, the Ottoman archives are extremely rich and I could not consult all the documents relevant to Damascus to the same extent that I did with the French and British archives as well as the archives of the Congregation of the Propaganda Fide. As a consequence, I used extensively consular and missionary archives for this research. However, I critically analyzed them through the perspectives gained from chronicles and Ottoman archives which allowed me to challenge narratives and assumptions underlying these archives' analysis of Ottoman society.

I ended my study of Ottoman Damascus with the violence of 1860. However, I came upon information regarding the transformation of the Greek Catholic community after the violence. Further research should be conducted to analyze how violence affected the self-identification of Greek Catholics and their political role in the city. It would also be interesting to see how the influx of charity which followed the massacre affected the balance of power between various institutions within the Greek Catholic community.

4. Implications

This research contributes to the study of inter-confessional relations in various contexts by pointing to the importance of internal constructions of community. In addition, this research provides additional insights about the history of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century and especially about the *Tanzimat* period by shedding light on the reception of the reforms in the specific socio-political context of Damascus. Then, the case studies of the internal dynamics of Greek Catholics, Jews and the analysis of the socio-political role of *ṭarīqa* Naqšbandīya contributes to improve our knowledge of these social groups. Furthermore, this research casts a new light on the attack against the Christian quarter of Damascus in 1860. These events of violence occupy an important place in the collective memory of inter-confessional relations in Syria. The remembering of the violence is revived by the increasing occurrences of inter-confessional violence in the contemporary Middle East, shaping the constant re-imagination of the Syrian nation. These collective memories are instrumentalized for a variety of political projects and to give faith to various narratives of the nation either in the Syrian context or abroad. This research which analyzes the transformation of inter-confessional relations over time and highlights the underlying dynamics of the violence of 1860 challenges sectarian historical narratives that play an important role in the articulation of inter-confessional relations in the contemporary Middle East. By contextualizing this traumatizing event, historical research creates a distance from sectarian

representations of the past and provides a new basis for the re-imagination of collective identifications and narratives.¹

¹ On the relation between history and memory see Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).