

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS IN SYRIA (LATE 18th – EARLY 20th CENTURIES)

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Abstract. *This article analyzes the distinctive features of administrative reforms implemented in Syria from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries. The study provides a scholarly examination of the evolution of central government policies, the improvement of the administrative management system, and the continuity of reforms from the Tanzimat period to the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II within the framework of the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, the article explores the relationship between central and local administrations, the policy of sedentarizing Bedouin tribes, the development of infrastructure, the regulation of the taxation system, and the organizational measures aimed at ensuring public security. The findings of the research demonstrate that the reforms carried out in the Syrian provinces during this period not only enhanced the administrative efficiency of the Ottoman state but also had a significant impact on the socio-political stability of the region.*

Keywords: Syria, Ottoman Empire, Tanzimat reforms, Abdulhamid II, modernization process, administrative reforms, centralization, local administration, infrastructure.

Introduction. At the end of the 18th century and during the first half of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire experienced a period of serious political and economic decline. While Western states were rapidly advancing in technological, military, and administrative fields, the Ottoman Empire faced the necessity of reforming its internal systems. In particular, the Arab provinces — Damascus, Aleppo, Beirut, Jerusalem, and other Syrian regions — became testing grounds for the empire's reform experiments

The Syrian experience is evaluated as an imperial model of modernization, and it is of great importance to highlight the impact of this process on local society based on historical sources. Studying the early stages of modernization in the Syrian provinces of the Ottoman Empire holds significant scholarly value. This is because many elements of the traditional social structures of that period proved their vitality during the modernization process and have survived to the present day.

At present, it is impossible to fully understand the internal political and social processes taking place in the Arab countries of the Middle East without analyzing the problems of mutual influence between Eastern and Western civilizations that occurred in the 19th century. It was precisely during that period that a new system of global

relations between the East and the West was being formed. The modernization period of the Ottoman Empire is often associated in historical literature with terms such as “crisis,” “disintegration,” and “dependence.” However, the sharp judgments implied by such terminology often contradict objective historical reality. In the Ottoman Empire—particularly in relation to its Arab frontier regions—Eurocentric stereotypes have deep historical roots. These began to take shape as early as the works of Western contemporaries describing the events of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Only by understanding historical events in all their diversity and taking into account the full range of objective analyses accumulated in the historical tradition can we properly study the process of interaction between East and West in the modern era. The Ottoman Empire played an important role in this process, demonstrating by its own example that it was possible to find points of convergence between East and West and to create viable structures that harmonized traditional and externally introduced elements.

Of particular importance is the process of synthesis between Western influence and the reform policies of the Ottoman government. Historians have devoted considerable attention to the reform processes that took place in the Ottoman capital, Istanbul, as well as in the Balkan provinces. However, the Arab countries that were part of the Empire in the nineteenth century—especially Syria, which occupied a significant place among the Sultan’s Arab territories—have largely remained outside the scope of scholarly research.

Nevertheless, Syria was not only formally but also in practice an integral part of the Ottoman Empire, and it fully experienced both the positive and negative outcomes of the Tanzimat reforms of 1839–1876. During this period, the history of the Syrian provinces allows us to observe the gradual transformation of traditional Eastern society as a result of the strengthening ties with the West and the large-scale reforms implemented by the central government. Continuing to serve as a bridge between Europe and Asia, Syria assimilated many achievements of Western civilization while remaining part of a great Muslim empire. Consequently, it transformed from a region once characterized by disorder and instability into one of the most politically and economically stable and prosperous provinces.

Main part. At the end of the 18th century, although Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire, the local nobility and religious elite held an important place in political power. They often shared authority with the governors (valis) appointed by the imperial center²⁷. In the economic sphere, the iltizam (tax farming) system prevailed, under which large landowners were granted the right to collect taxes on behalf of the state. This system weakened the control of the central government but helped maintain

²⁷ Hourani, A. Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables in Syria, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1968.

local social stability²⁸. During this period, the administrative, religious, and social structures were based on traditional foundations, relying on Sharia law and local customs.

During the reign of Sultan Mahmud II (1808–1839), the Ottoman Empire embarked on a path of modernization. He reorganized the army, abolished the Janissary corps in 1826, and strengthened the central bureaucracy. These reforms had a significant impact in Syria as well. In particular, the “iltizam” system was restricted, and taxes began to be collected directly into the state treasury. Provincial governors (valis) were made directly subordinate to the central government. Military measures were taken against tribal authorities. As a result, the political influence of the central authority increased considerably in the Syrian provinces²⁹.

The Tanzimat period represented the most active phase of Ottoman modernization. Based on the Reform Edicts of 1839 and 1856, administrative councils (meclis-i idare) were established in the provinces, along with civil courts (meclis-i nizamiye) and commercial councils (meclis-i ticaret). Reforms were carried out in the taxation, judicial, educational, and transportation systems³⁰. During this period, a bureaucratic class emerged in Syria, and in Damascus and Beirut, a new social group composed of state officials and intellectuals from the merchant class appeared. This stratum later became the foundation of national movements³¹.

During the reign of Abdulhamid II, reforms continued, but their political nature changed. The Sultan chose the path of “despotic modernization,” meaning he pursued modernization under a centralized and authoritarian rule³². During this period, the Hejaz Railway was constructed, and Syria became an economic center. The activities of the security forces (gendarmerie) were strengthened. The number of state schools, administrative buildings, and madrasas increased. The political independence of the local elite decreased. Nevertheless, order, tax compliance, and administrative discipline significantly improved in the Syrian provinces. As a result of Abdulhamid II’s policies, Syria became one of the economically stable provinces of the Ottoman Empire³³.

Despite modernization, Syrian society did not completely lose its traditional social structures. The religious elite, merchants, and tribal leaders adapted to the new

²⁸ Masters, B. *The Arabs of the Ottoman Empire, 1516–1918: A Social and Cultural History*, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

²⁹ Findley, C. V. *Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire: The Sublime Porte, 1789–1922*, Princeton University Press, 1980.

³⁰ Rogan, E. *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850–1921*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

³¹ Deringil, S. *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1909*, I.B. Tauris, 1998.

³² Karpat, K. *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State*, Oxford University Press, 2001.

³³ Abu-Manneh, B. *The Islamic Roots of the Gülbane Rescript*, *Die Welt des Islams*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 1994.

administrative system while maintaining their influence. This situation is explained as a “dual system,” meaning the parallel existence of traditional and modern forms of governance³⁴. In this regard, the reforms in Syria, unlike Western modernization, took on the character of a “localized modernism.”

Conclusion. The reforms carried out in the Syrian provinces from the late 18th to the early 20th century represent one of the most striking examples of the Ottoman Empire’s modernization, reflecting the process by which a traditional society adapted to a modern state system. During the Tanzimat era and the reign of Abdulhamid II, political centralization intensified, a bureaucratic administrative system took shape, and significant progress was observed in the fields of security, education, and the economy, while the central government’s control over the traditional elite increased. At the same time, political centralization limited the principles of participation and freedom within society. However, from a historical perspective, Syria’s experience laid the foundation for the formation of modern state institutions in the Arab East. The Ottoman reforms in the Arab provinces represented a historical process that maintained a balance between tradition and modernization, ensuring both the stability of the empire and the development of modern state thinking in its time.

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³⁴ Hourani, A. *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939*, Cambridge University Press, 1983