

The Reasons for the Rise and Decline of the Ottoman State

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Abstract

The Ottoman Turks were a small group of nomadic warriors who managed to expand their territory into one of the greatest empires of fifteenth and sixteenth century. Originally from a minor principality bordering the Byzantine Empire in northwestern Anatolia, their empire extended from Hungary to Arabia, Tunisia and Abyssinia. While the people who formed the Ottoman State included men who merited the rank of *weliyyullah*,¹ their numbers would also have included other less pious people. Although the principles of Islam were theoretically accepted and applied throughout Ottoman history; it is safe to assume some opposed those principles in practice. While both pious deeds and errors could be found within the Ottoman State, it is because of their good acts that they were granted the grace of being the standard-bearer for Islam for 600 years. However, when their bad deeds outweighed their good, that honor was taken from them. This article will give the main reasons for the rise of the Ottoman State and for its decline.

1- General Considerations

The Ottoman State was a great state, and to write about Ottoman history is a major undertaking. Those who see only the errors in great affairs and are quick to judge are both deceived and deceive in turn. The result of such quick judgments is that wickedness will be magnified and cause us to lose sight of all that is beautiful. If we look at someone with the assumption that all the odors he exudes over a year are exuded at one time, we would not find that person very appealing. Likewise, if one gathers all the wrongs that took place throughout the 600-year reign of the Ottoman State over a vast area of 20 million square kilometers and look at it through that black veil, one would then indeed see a dark history. This way of looking at things lies behind many kinds of strange interpretations. In the eyes of a lover, the whole universe is involved in a game of love and sport, but for a mother mourning her child's death the whole cosmos is weeping in sadness. Neither view is finally true.

The Ottoman history of 600 years should be studied in such a fashion that both the negative and positive aspects are seen. In fact, there is no period in history that does not contain any evil acts, and there is no period in history that does not contain any good acts. Those who look at history in any other way will not only mislead themselves but others as well. If such a person – Allah forbids – would live for a millennium, he would excoriate even Omar's

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¹'Those who are close to Allah.'

administration because it did not fit his ideals. As result of this chimera, such a person would take a destructive rather than constructive look at history. We should never forget that throughout history those whose good deeds outweigh their evil ones always merit forgiveness and exoneration.

The people who formed the Ottoman State were not completely innocent and without fault. Although they included people such as Murad I, Murad II, Muhammad the Conqueror, Selim the Excellent, and Abdulhamid II, all of whom merited the rank of weliyyullah ('those who are close to Allah'), they probably also included others who committed sins such as drinking alcoholic beverages. It is a fact that all the principles of Islam were theoretically accepted and applied throughout Ottoman history. However, it is also a fact that there were others who took such principles lightly in practice. It is impossible to deny both. As with everything, both pious deeds and errors could be found within the Ottoman State. Nevertheless, it is because their good acts outnumbered their bad for 600 years that the Divine Destiny granted them the grace of being the standard-bearer of Islam for so long. Then, when their bad deeds outweighed their good, that honor was taken from them – again through the decree of the Divine Destiny. Thousands of archive documents indicate that, even at their worst moments, the Ottomans did their best to conform to Islamic law (*Sharī'ah*) even on matters of interpretation (*ijtihād*) – leaving aside the fact that they disregarded overt Islamic prohibitions such as the proscribing of alcoholic drinks.² As a matter of fact, an Ottoman sultan manifested his dedication to the Islamic law in his firman as follows:

As all of us are bound to the sacred laws of *Sharī'ah*, if we strive to accord all our deeds and actions with them, there is no doubt then that Allah the Best of helpers will bestow us with His Divine prosperity and aid and victory in our Supreme State with the blessed spirit of the Exalted Prophet (ﷺ) being pleased.³

2- Reasons for the Rise of the Ottoman State

We should attempt to seek how a small sultanate in Anatolia was able to grow into a great Muslim state; the reasons that ensured its rise, the policy of conquest and its results, are all significant. Accordingly, the conquest policy of the Ottoman State and the causes that turned a small principality into a universal state within a short time could be cited as simultaneous reasons for

²Cf. S. J. Shaw & Stanford J. Shaw, *Empire of The Gazis: The Rise And Decline Of The Ottoman Empire, 1280-1808*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Mancur Olson, *The Rise and Decline of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

³PA, Hatt-ı Hümâyûn, nr. 22679.

the rise of the Ottoman State. Nevertheless, these issues should be studied separately. The reasons for the rise of the Ottoman State can be summarized as follows:

a. The most significant reason was their adherence to their spiritual values and Islam, which could also be called the spirit of *I'lā Kalimat Allāh*. One's value is proportionate to one's zeal, and one whose zeal is for one's country is a nation in himself. One should be bound firmly to one's country, and there should be important reasons for preferring the life of one's nation to one's own so that one is zealous for one's own country. And, needless to mention, these important reasons and firm bonds cannot be anything but spiritual values. A nation that has not equipped its army with spiritual values will encounter dangers in the future at any time and cease to exist. In fact, this meaning could be specified further with reference to history. The notion that once enabled the Ottoman State to maintain its life and existence against the great states of Europe was the following motto of the army derived from the Noble Qur'ān: "I will be a martyr if I am killed and a *ghāzī* if I kill." As a matter of fact, before setting out for the Battle of Kosovo, Murad Khudavendigar prayed: "O Allah! Make me a martyr on the way of Religion and prosperous in the Hereafter." And his prayer was answered. Our ancestors, who were inspired with that spirit, faced death with enthusiasm and passion; and therefore always terrified Europeans. I ask you now: how can we stimulate today's simple and naive young soldiers into making such elevated self-sacrifice? What feeling can replace these spiritual merits? What, other than belief in Allah and the Hereafter, could make one eagerly forsake one's life and the whole world?

History has proven that whenever Muslim Turks have lived in accordance with Islamic spiritual values they have progressed; and whenever they have distanced themselves from the spiritual values, they have regressed. This would be when the Turkish foes struck at their weakest points. The enemy never defeated the Turks on the battlefield but stabbed them from within, always presenting dangers as prescriptions for salvation. Even if a nation's material arsenal has been equipped with modern weapons and that nation has risen to the level of an empire, it is headed for destruction as long as its spiritual arsenal is empty.

The Patriarch of Phanar, Istanbul, Archbishop Gregorios, who was executed before the middle gate of the Patriarchate in 1821 for treason, wrote the following in a letter to the Russian Czar Alexander:

It is impossible to crush and ruin Turks physically, for they are perseverant, robust, proud and dignified people; and their traits mentioned above come from their devotion to their

religion and submission to Divine Destiny, from the strength of their traditions and their feeling of obedience to their superiors. Accordingly, we should first exterminate the feeling of obedience, break the spiritual bonds and weaken the religious fortitude in Turks. Once their morals have collapsed, we shall have stripped Turks of the true power that has always led Turks to victory, and thus we shall be able to defeat them by means of physical force. Mere triumphs on battlefields do not suffice to destroy the Ottoman State. What we should do is complete this destruction without the Turks knowing about it.⁴

General Ignatiev, the Russian ambassador to Istanbul during the reign of Sultan Aziz, added after Czar Alexander mentioned the letter: “Precisely these symptoms were manifested during my term of office.” Indeed, the youth at the time of *Tanzimat* (Reforms), who had unfortunately been taken in by the above-mentioned ruses, did truly turn out “to be enemies of their national traditions, thus debasing themselves to such a degree that they could not even be their forefathers’ boots,” as the Russian ambassador stated.⁵ Yet, on the other hand, Ibn al-Kamal explained through examples that the Ottoman State had risen neither by having fought against the *Ghaznawid*, *Saljuqid* or *Khaznawid* Muslim states nor by rebelling against their own Lord, but entirely by means of the above-mentioned *ghaza* (*jihad* = preventive war) spirit and zeal. Moreover, some anecdotes mentioned in the forewords of Ottoman histories were actually chosen to reflect that spirit.

b. The second reason that elevated the Ottoman State to its high position was the fact that it exercised a perfect state of law, particularly during the period of its rise; in other words, it took *Shar‘-i Sharif* (*Shari‘ah*) and *Qanun al-Munif* as its basis. As a matter of fact, those who study the work titled *Osmanlı Kanunnameleri* (the Ottoman Legal Codes), in which are published 763 legal codes, will see that it is possible to show via graphs the periods of the rise, cessation, decline and fall of the Ottoman State in relation to the above-mentioned legal codes. Beginning with the Conqueror, the Ottoman legal codes were already preeminent. In fact, the tasks of making and executing legal codes had been in the hands of efficient people throughout the age of Sultan Sulaiman the Lawgiver. However, the period of cessation began with the reign of Sultan Selim II and came to a halt during the reign of Sultan Murad III. That was when the period of decline first started, and later such holes appeared that could not be covered by *Adalatnamahs*. It was in the period 1700-1800 that the danger arose of the Ottoman State ceasing to be a state of law. During the rise of the Ottoman Empire, its citizens – Muslims

⁴H. Fethi Gözler, *İdeal Türk Gençliği* (Ideal Turkish Youth), *Milli Kultur* (Ankara: May 1985), p. 27f.

⁵Ibrahim Canan, *Ahırzaman Fitnesi ve Anarşi* (The Last Time Sedition and Anarchy) (Istanbul: 1982), pp. 104-105.

and non-Muslims – believed that the state followed the law absolutely and that justice was done without any discrimination. And truly, for a state whose citizens shared such a belief, it was destined to rise. Abussuud, for instance, stated:

Rents may not remain as they are with the imperial prescript of the Sultan, for no impermissible act becomes permissible upon the Sultan's decree; no unlawful thing ever becomes lawful. This is the decree of *Shar'-'i Sharif* on these issues. By no means of manner at all, it is to be subject to the threat of a verse of the Noble Qur'ān to conceal the *Sharī'ah* decrees while being cognizant thereof.⁶

Cognizant to this, the Conqueror stated: "... and let them keep their churches and carry on their rituals; but let them not ring their bells lest I should convert their churches into mosques."⁷ Zenbilli Ali Effendi declared: "Now that they have consented to being subjects, we are supposed to protect their lives, goods and chastity as we do ours as per the decrees of our Religion. It is against our Religion to compel them in this matter."⁸ These and other such declarations thus highlighted the respect showed not only for the individual rights and freedoms of non-Muslims but also for their religious freedoms, as long as they remained within legal limits. They also formed the tripod of the state of law and justice explained above.

c. Yet another reason was the perfection of the Ottoman 'wealth' and 'army', both of which caused the nation to last. The wealth that contributed to the rise of the Ottoman State was not money that had been collected from people by force but that appeared by virtue of the prosperity of the country. In that period the sources of the Ottoman wealth were nothing more than *Sharī'ah* taxes and legal sources of income; there were almost no *takalif-i orfiyyah* (extraordinary taxes). Bayezid the Lightning (*Yıldırım*) was so sensitive that he considered those *qādīs* (judges of *Sharī'ah* Law) who received from plaintiffs and defendants to be recipients of bribery and attempted to execute those *qādīs* who committed such acts.

The empire also lasted for so long because the army was efficient and qualified, for the soldiers were trained as perfect warriors with the utmost zeal for holy wars. Until the reign of the Lawmaker, the number of Janissaries had been *ad extremum* ten to twelve thousand and they were victorious

⁶Süleymaniye Lib. Rashid Effendi, no. 1036, dd. 48/a-49/a.

⁷Paris, Bib. Nat. Manus. Fonds Turc Anc. no. 130, fol. 78; *Rehber-i Mu'amalat* (A Guide to Procedures), Paragraph, p. 213f.; 'Abd al-Karīm Zaydān, *Ahkām al-Dhimmiyyīn wa al-Musta'minīn* (Baghdad: n.p., 1963), p. 95f.; pp. 130-136.

⁸Ahmed Akgündüz, , *Belgeler Gerçekleri Konuşuyor I-V* (Documents State the Facts, I-V), Izmir 1989-92, v. III, pp. 180-183.

everywhere. At the defeat of Vienna their numbers had presumably reached fifty thousand, but then their only concern was to hoard what they had pillaged. As a matter of fact, the Janissary Code is the greatest evidence of what we have mentioned heretofore. Finally, and most significant of all, when the empire was on the rise, soldiers were not involved in politics or in administration.

d. Yet both the Ghilman system and the Kapikulu system, which have been criticized by certain historians in our time, rank among the leading reasons for the rise of the Ottoman State, for most of the great states in history perished through the rebellions of those aristocratic *beys* (Chieftains) who had been subject to them. For instance, the Abbasid Caliphate was devastated by those aristocratic families it had itself raised to prominence, and the Grand Seljuk State was ruined by the Kharzamids, who had been the chief judges in that state. It is an obvious fact that the State encountered difficulties, with certain dynasties. In order to get rid of such difficulties, the Ottoman State conscripted *devshirme* (recruits) and slaves who had neither families nor close relatives, educated and trained them as civil servants at a special school called *Andarun Maqtabi* (Palace School). They employed them during the rise of the State and, from the beginning, succeeded in their objective.⁹

e. It should also be mentioned that there was absolute freedom of academic pursuit during the rise of the Ottoman State. A country resembles a person whose mind and spirit are the scientific and spiritual (humane) disciplines while its body is its politics and administration. The balance between these two elements was ensured during those periods. The first caliphs of the Abbasid Caliphate, the first rulers of the Andalusian Amawids and the first Ottoman sultans were the perfect examples of those who had achieved that balance. Mollah of Guran, who had not only declined Sultan Muhammad the Conqueror's offer to make him vizier and *Qāḍī 'Askar* but also did not receive the sultan in his *taqyah* (dervish lodge), was certainly aware of the fact that that balance could be kept only as long as the Conqueror remained at his palace and he at his *taqyah* and *madrasah*. This significant principle of balance was expressed in an Ottoman legal code as follows:

⁹Ali, *Mawā'id al-Nafā'is fī Qawā'id al-Majālis* (Ankara: Mehmed Şeker, 1997), p. 167 *et seq.*, p. 336 *et seq.*, 345, 365.

Qādīs shall carry out *Sharī'ah* decrees; however, they will transfer such issues as are related to the order and protection of the country and the administration of people to the State's Ministers, who are the rulers of sword and politics.

It was for that reason that the ancient people called civil servants *Arbāb al-Sayf* (Experts of Sword) and scientists *Arbab al-Qalam* (Experts of Pen). As a matter of fact, the most important task fell to scientists in ensuring the above-mentioned balance. Yet scientists should know that the highest rank and honor in the world are pertained to science. Any scholar who loves God and the Truth cannot be subject to anything but Allah, for whoever credits the Truth cannot forsake it for the sake of anything else. These words by Abussuud, and the following, reflect this: "Answer: No. No impermissible thing ever becomes permissible by the Sultan's order. No unlawful thing can ever be lawful."¹⁰

f. Another reason for the rise of the Ottoman State was that tasks were delegated to efficient people not only in the *'ilmiyyah* (sciences), *sayfiyyah* (army) or *qalamiyyah* (government offices) but in other areas as well. The role of skill (*al-mahārah*) and piety (*al-ṣalāh*) cannot be denied in the foundation and decline of civilizations. An examination of history will show that those nations who absorbed these two traits have established many civilizations and survived for a long time. Unfortunately on the other hand, one can also see – if one is open to this – that those civilizations and states that had declined lacked either one or both of these two qualities. Skill means that one should be talented, efficient and skillful in one's profession. Yet piety means that one has reached a high standing in both religion and morals. It should be emphasized here that piety and skill are separate qualities. Such elevated feelings as public spirit, patriotism, loyalty and justice are the fruit of piety and grow in that garden. Then again, matters such as business, art, talent and the like are the fruit that can be picked in the garden of skills. No real patriotism, loyalty or justice can be expected from a person whose heart and conscience have not been embellished with spiritual feelings. Nonetheless, business, arts and talent are separate things: an impious person might be a good shepherd and an alcoholic can repair clocks while he is sober. In brief, piety and skill are separate merits.

The following verse of the Noble Qur'ān, which is said by some interpreters and jurists of Islam to have been revealed particularly to address those senior statesmen who are vested with administrative authority, is very meaningful in this respect:

¹⁰Sulaimaniye Library, Rashid Effendi, No: 1036, p. 48/a.

Verily, know that Allah decrees you the following: one of them is, you should entrust things for safekeeping to efficient ones; and another is, do justice when you judge between people. How nicely Allah advises you. (You are certainly to observe these orders.) For verily, Allah is the Hearer of your decisions and Seer of what you do as to things for safekeeping.¹¹

As a matter of fact, the following saying by the Exalted Envoy of Allah (ﷺ) affirms this very meaning: “Give a thing for safekeeping to those who deserve it and do not betray those who have betrayed you.”¹²

Those who have studied the period of the rise of the Ottomans know very well why they were able to establish a world state in a very short time and how meticulous they were in piety and skill. In fact, the reason why such nations in Rumelia, like the Serbs, Hungarians and others, preferred the sovereignty of the Ottomans over others, was because of Zenbilli Ali Effendi as well as Sultan Selim the Excellent, who was an equitable and valiant sultan. There was also Abussuud, who was a monument of justice in the Ottoman State, as well as Sulaiman the Magnificent. It is easy to better comprehend why and how the Ottoman sultans galloped from victory to victory when the *nisahnjis* and *Qādī Askars*, who represented the State in foreign affairs, were chosen meticulously from among the experts of the science of diplomacy. The Ottoman victories are also rendered understandable when a statement by the Lawmaker’s grand vizier in the book called *Asafnamah* authored by him is read with a feeling of admonition and when it is made obvious in the legal codes that *Diwan-i Humayun* (the Council of Ministers) would not convene without *Hajagan al-Diwan* (The experts and masters of State Council *Diwan-i Humayun*).

The Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid I, who knew very well that the appointment of inefficient people to offices led to the Ottoman State’s decline, expressed that truth to his Grand Vizier in a *firman* (sultan’s edict) for an appointment:

My dear Vizier! Submit to me several efficient candidates for the position of *Tadhkiraji* (first secretary to the Grand Vizier) after close consideration. Unless we first train our own civil servants when they are acting improperly, we do not have the face to put others in their places. I know that you shall not favor anybody. But why do you not inform me about those who dare to commit such acts and accept bribes? Our State has fallen into this

¹¹*Sūrat al-Nisā’* (Chapter of Women), Verse: 58; Muḥammad bin Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi’ li Aḥkām al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: n. p., 1965), V/255f.

¹²*Ibid.*, V/255f.

situation by always saying: 'Let it not be from me.' From now on keep me informed of any evil acts you know about regardless of who commits them. And thus I shall admonish thee.¹³

The influence of all the above-mentioned factors enabled the Ottoman State to rise in a very short time despite the occurrence of bribery, exploitation, dissipation, squandering, illegitimate acts, oppression, and other vicious acts in that State.¹⁴

3. The Reasons for the Decline and Fall of the Ottoman State

The reasons for the Ottoman State's decline and fall were the loss of those motivations that helped it go from victory to victory. These reasons have been explained in history books on the Ottoman, corpora of laws, corpora of justice and corpora of politics. It should be emphasized that although Ottoman historians hold that the age of its decline began with the era of Sultan Murad III, the fact is that its decline started during the late reign of Sultan Sulaiman the Lawmaker, which was emphasized by Kochi Bey.¹⁵ The most noteworthy texts will be outlined here.

a. First and above all, the spirit of spreading God's word (*I'lā'Kalimāt Allah*), which ensured the Ottoman State gained victory after victory, had weakened. Instead of holding fast to Islam, the Turks began to distance themselves from it, and began to prefer hoarding goods and obtaining positions instead of meriting the Divine pleasure of Allah. As a result, the process of corruption and disintegration began in every field. The soldiers of Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa Pasha, who were reputed to be the strongest and most regular army of Europe in Vienna, began to be more interested in acquiring plunder from non-Muslims than fighting for the cause of Allah. This was how the soldiers, who were going after loot, were caught unaware by the enemy forces and routed. The same is found in the arguments regarding the *Nizām-i Jadīd* (New Order) during the reign of Sultan Selim III. It is well known that even those who wished to reform the State in the name of *Nizām-i Jadīd* spent the money collected for it on boat excursions and entertainments in the Bosphorus for their own pleasure. In short, the objective

¹³PA, *Khatt-i Humayun* (Firman), no. 23581.

¹⁴*Tawqī'i Qanunnamesi* (Legal Code Tawqīi), MTM, v. II, p. 541; Ibn al-Kamal, *Tarikh-i Uthmani* (*The History of the Uthmanis*), VII Book (Ankara: Turan, Şerâfettin, 1991), p. LIF.; Cemal Kutay, *History Speaks* (v. 1, issue I), pp. 69-70; Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, *Munazarat* (Debates) (Istanbul: 2004, p. 10.

¹⁵*A Treatise of Kochi Bey* (*Risalah*) (Istanbul: Ali Kemal Aksüt, 1939), pp. 25-50.

began to be benefits for themselves rather than the pleasure of Allah and virtue. Although the disease was diagnosed by the movement of *Tanzimāt* (Reforms), such prescriptions were applied that would aggravate the wound rather than heal it. Midhad Pasha and those who had murdered Sultan Abdulaziz, and the Unionists who dethroned Abdulhamid, worked within a network of mutual interest. From the reign of Mahmud II onwards, the concepts of nominal justice, law, equality and liberty, rather than imposing the word of Allah, constituted the spirit of reform. This meant the supporters of reform quickly tended towards a European lifestyle and away from an Islamic one. The Unionists, who attempted to destroy the philosophy of the Union of Islam of Abdulhamid in 1908, moved so far from the Islamic faith via the notion of *Turanjılık* (Pan-Turkism) that even Ziya Gökalp criticized them in 1913. This resulted in the huge Ottoman State falling apart within a very short time. The grave examples of this are many. The deviation from *Sharī'ah* and the Exalted Codes caused decline and dissolution in every sector of the State.

b. The Ottoman legal system became so corrupt that it began to fail to protect the rights of its subjects, Muslims or non-Muslims. Justice was replaced by tyranny and legal decrees were replaced by the orders of some civil servants. In short, a regime of oppression rather than justice started to make itself felt. That being the case, those who had been united by justice, like an umbrella around the State, began to distance themselves from it in groups. Opposition to legislation came to such a head that some Ottoman sultans began to issue decrees entitled *Adaletname* (Codex of Justice) so that the legal corpora would be observed. Nevertheless, it is hardly possible to state that those decrees of *Adaletname* worked. The virus of bribery, alleged to have started with Rustam Pasha, made Grand Viziers unable to carry out public affairs, township scribes began to appoint fiefs (*timars*) according to sycophancy instead of proficiency, the system of recruiting *ajemi oghlans* (Christian conscript boys) who formed the foundation of the Janissary Corps began to be done by seizing the boys through force and tyranny instead of applying the code of recruitment. Through interference with the *qādīs* (judges) and people, skilled businessmen turned courts into places of oppression rather than justice. Government officers such as *qādīs* and *others* turned the high offices (*manşibs*) and posts that they acquired through favors and other means, into places for collecting money by force so that they could execute their promises. The Ottoman State failed to maintain its notion of a State of Law because, among other things, it had suffered consecutive troubles including a financial crisis facing the Treasury. Civil servants, who

were selected from among unqualified people, pushed the governors of provinces and *sanjaks* into negligence and laxity. These governors began to carry out their duties, sometimes without even going to the places to which they had been appointed, through authorizing *mutasallims* (deputy lieutenant governors and local tax and tithe collectors) on their behalfs and *voivodes*, who were authorized regarding judicial matters. Through its weakness in legislation and administration, administrators arose who took over the administration in provinces and *sanjaks*, and who in some places had been appointed by the State as governors of provinces or *sanjaks*, *A'yans* in Rumelia and usually *Derebegs* in Anatolia. It is well known that they established an administration of absolute tyranny between 1700 and 1800.

c. Yet another reason for the decline and even destruction of the Ottoman State was the corruption of the '*Ilmiyyah* (Learned Men) class. The fact that illiteracy replaced knowledge caused the Ottoman State to decline. The corruption of the '*Ilmiyyah* class can be viewed in three ways.

First, as is the case from the ruling era of Selim II onwards, academic positions and titles began to be acquired by incompetent people. Until the time of Selim II, there had been no nation or border with respect to academics. For example, a specialist in any branch of science, whether in Cairo, Tabriz, Baghdad, Venice or Paris, could serve in the highest post in the Ottoman institutions of the '*Ilmiyyah* class. Fāhrūddīn Ajemī, Emir Sultan of Bukhara, Herevī and others are examples of this. Beginning with Selim II, however, academic titles and posts started to be acquired by bribery and favoritism, which destroyed academic institutions. Sultan Mehmed III explained his statement, "I have been unable to find anyone in this world whose word is true and who is righteous" as follows:

I once praised Shaikhulislam Bostan-zadah Effendi and he immediately appointed an illiterate brother of his to the post of the Qādīaskar of Rumelia; and again he appointed an illiterate young man as the Qādī of Thessalonica. Still I hoped for piety and righteousness in my father's teacher, Sa'duddin, who made one of his young sons the Qādīaskar of Anatolia and another the Qādī of Edirne (Adrianople), which made me ill-famed among the *mawali* (chief judges of the State) and sages and himself disgraceful.¹⁶

Although these statements are not fully true or documented, it is not for nothing that terms such as scientists by birth arose in the era of Selim II and that different abuses were mentioned in the *Corpus of Science* (dated 1006).

Second, the corruption of the '*Ilmiyyah* class was caused by the decline in the quality of academic studies as well as proficiency. We have the textbooks

¹⁶Ali of Gallipoli, *Naṣīḥat al-Salāṭīn (Sultans' Advice)*, Khusraw Pasha Library, no. 311, dd. 53/a-107/b.

studied at the *Madrasas* (Schools) of the Conqueror and those ones studied after Selim II. A comparison of the two groups easily demonstrates that there are major differences in both content and specialization. While the work of Ibn al-Sina titled *Al-Qānūn fī al-Ṭibb* (Laws of Medicine) was used at the Schools of Medicine during the reign of the Conqueror Muhammad, later a book of merely 200 pages called *Al-Hidāyah* (Guidance) (but not *al-Hidāyah* in Islamic Jurisprudence) was the textbook. Whereas such major works as *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif*, *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid* and *Sharḥ al-Tawālī* had been studied in *Al-Kalām* (theology) and philosophy during the rise of the Ottoman State, the syllabi was later limited to *Sharḥ al-Aqā'id* and similar works. While the earlier Ottoman scientists had held discussions on Ibn al-Rushd, Imām Ghazālī and Ibn Sīnā', the later ones began to debate the question of whether practical positive sciences should be studied at all.

Third, under the influence of those with little knowledge of the sciences it was thought there were contradictions between certain apparent dogmas of Islam and science. To the contrary, Islam is the source, father and chief of all the authentic sciences. Under the wrong influence of some incorrect beliefs in Europe a few *Khodjas* denied that the world was round, which had already been determined by Imām al-Shafi'ī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, and Islam lost a great deal because of that. The arguments between Qāḍi-zadah and Sivasi were some of those grave scenes. Yet those scientists who made an exerted effort to destroy the Observatory of Istanbul should be included in that group.¹⁷

Since all states are bound to collapse when illiteracy replaces learning, the Ottoman State also took part in its own annihilation through the above-mentioned reasons. It was no longer a state in which men of science from all over the world took shelter. Now it was an Ottoman *Madrasah* where the students debated very simple matters. The corruption of the members of the *'Ilmiyyah* class began to influence the educational and judicial systems of the Ottoman State directly. Moreover, the industrialization and mechanization within Europe were not exported to the rest of the Empire at a satisfactory level.

d. Cracks began to appear in the monetary system, which had sustained the State. Ottoman money that had been gold or silver until the reign of the Lawgiver became *maghshūsh* (base coin) during Sultan Murad III's reign. The uncertainty in the value of *akcha*¹⁸ began to have a negative impact in

¹⁷Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, *Muḥākamāt*, Preface.

¹⁸Akcha or **akçe**: A silver coin, the **akçe** was the chief monetary unit of the Ottoman Empire. Three *akçes* were equal to one para. One hundred and twenty *akçes* equaled

finance, in that the salaries of army officers and civil servants became insufficient; the subjects' buying power with that *akcha* began to diminish in the market. The State, whose money began to be devalued and which for that reason failed to meet its expenses, began to apply new and sometimes unjustified taxes under the title of *Takālif-i Diwaniyyah* (Imperial Duties). As a matter of fact, the other name for the *Waqi'h-i Beglerbegi* (The Incident of Beglerbegi) that occurred in 1589 was 'The Revolution of *Akcha*'. The State Treasury began to empty and the State was unable to pay the expenses of wars and salaries which were increasing daily. Every measure taken by the State to increase its revenues further froze the relations between the State and its subjects. The shortage of money had negative effects on the institutions of the State in all aspects. As a result, European commodities began to increase in Ottoman markets, prices began to skyrocket, irregularities arose in the collection of *iltizām*¹⁹ and in similar tax-collection matters; and at last public order began to break down. More and more farmers who could not pay the State their tax, and whose loans increased, abandoned their farms. *Levends* (Ottoman rebel bands) who lost their jobs and homes, not only proved to be the capital of the Rebellions of Jalal, but they also ruined city life. The unemployed were exploited by corrupt renegades like Molla Qabız, Oghlan Shaikh and other merchants of hope, who began to appear here and there. The fact that the number of unemployed *levends* went up gave rise to riots in the eighteenth century.²⁰

e. The weakening of religious life brought squander and dissipation, despite the poverty of the Treasury and people. In the end debauchery and wastage ate away the Ottoman State and led to its destruction. The *halvah* talks during the Age of Tulip (*Lale Devri*), the unceasing landowner parties in later times, the excessive expenditure on entertainment of money collected during the reign of Selim III in the name of *Nizām-i Jadīd* (New Order), the introduction of dancing, balls and all kinds of music into Ottoman social life in the aftermath of *Tanzīmāt* (Reforms) were among the major causes that led to the decline of the Ottoman State. When legal earnings no longer covered the expenses of dissipation, civil servants began to commit abuse and take

one kuruş. Later the kuruş became the main unit of account, replacing the *akçe*. In 1843, the silver *kuruş* was joined by the gold lira in a bimetallic system.

¹⁹An *İltizām* was a form of tax farm that appeared in the 17th century in Ottoman Egypt. *İltizāms* were sold off by the government to wealthy notables who would then reap up to five times the amount paid by taxing the peasants and extracting agricultural production.

²⁰Yalçın Aydın, *Türk Ekonomi Tarihi* (An Economic History of Turkey) (Ankara: Anklara University, 1979), pp. 352-353.

bribes, vagabonds started to rob innocent people. Since dissipation and squandering increased after the defeat of Vienna, the delights and entertainments of the Tulip Age lay behind the Rebellion of Patrona Khalil too. Given that the events led by Kabakchi Mustafa and Alemdar Mustafa²¹ were caused by the transgression of the supporters of *Nizām-i Jadīd* of *Shar‘-i Sharīf* (i.e. *Sharī‘ah*). The cause of the Arab Revolt led by Sharif Hussain as well as the Albanian Rebellion under the leadership of Esad Toptani was the illegitimate lifestyles of the Unionists.²²

f. The corruption of Ottoman soldiers who had sustained the State occurred in two ways:

First, the training and ethics of the soldiers declined. Although the Janissary Corps gained hundreds of victories at times when they numbered only 6,000 to 12,000, later, when their numbers were ten times that much (as the Janissary Legislation informs us), they began to cause the State trouble, aside from their victories. Such statements in the Janissary Legislation regarding their corruption and improper recruitment through abuses into the Corps, clearly suggest to readers that the State was on the verge of collapse. The searches for *Nizām-i Jadīd* (New Order) during the reign of Selim III merely remained a formality and the essential requirement that soldiers be obedient and virtuous was neglected. While Mahmud II had abolished the Janissary Corps, an accomplishment that was called *Waqi‘ah Khayriyyah* (the Auspicious Feat), he failed to obtain the desired result. He had moved so far

²¹*Revolt of Kabakchi Mustafa and Alemdar Mustafa Pasha: Selim III Opponents of Nizām-i Cedid* led by Kabakci Mustafa revolted and killed Raif Mahmud. The Ottoman Government decided to assemble on their policy with regard to this revolt. But Grand Vizier Kose Musa Pasha claimed that the revolt was an insignificant event. Consequently, the rebels gained power. Sultan Selim III, being too late to put down the revolt, had to have the new corps abolished. But the rebels continued their activity and wanted to depose the sultan and his eleven advisors. Eventually Sultan Selim said, “It is better to leave the Caliphate rather than to be the Caliph of such a rebellious nation” and abdicated his throne (29 May 1807). Selim lived in the palace for one more year and died during Alemdar Mustafa Pasha’s attempt to restore him to the throne. Although his reform movements were interrupted, he had succeeded in founding a modern state. He introduced a modern military system and established technical schools.

²²PA, *Daftar al-Muhimmah* (Book of Records of the Imperial Assembly of State), no. 134, p. 190; Topkapı Palace Museum Archives, no. 7737; Senior Chelebi-zadah, *History of Asım* (Addendum to the History of Rashid), v. VI, pp. 42-43, 100-101, 134-135, 137 (Ban on Marijuana and Opium), 223-224, 233-234, 259-260 (Lessons for the Interpretation of the Holy Qur‘ān), 265, 363-364, 370, 377, 384, 453, 464; *The History of Rashid* (Istanbul: n.p., 1282), v. V, pp. 19, 29, 45, 88, 177, 366, 444 (*Sa‘dabad*), 527-528, 555; *The History of Subhi* (Istanbul: 1198), d. 34/a-b.

from the spirit of the matter that he introduced that the newly formed armies play the snare drums instead of Mahtar Music. Unfortunately, it is possible to state that the reason for the loss of the Battle of the Balkans was merely the incompetence of soldiers.²³

Second, the soldiers interfered with politics. The Ottoman army had, at times, played a role in domestic politics until the time of Othman II, when it became more direct and apparent. Similar incidents could also be found in the era of Murad IV. It was this interference that eventually became even more apparent with the Revolt of Patrona Khalil. The martyrdom of Selim III was one of its bitter fruits. However, the very act that ruined the State in the history of the Ottoman was the martyrdom of Sultan Abdulaziz by soldiers. From that time until the fall of the Ottoman State (excluding those periods when Sultan Abdulhamid II ruled) soldiers were fully involved in politics. The Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–1878 (*93 Harbi* in Turkish) was lost for that reason, which led to the sorrowful event of the Treaty of Berlin. When the Unionists rose to power in 1908 and especially when Tal'at Pasha, a postman, was appointed Grand Vizier, the soldiers' meddling with politics went too far. It can be said that the conflicts between the Unionists (*Ittihadjisi*) and the Saviours (*Khalaskars*) in the Balkans' Defeat brought about the destruction of the Ottoman State.

g. Another cause of the destruction of the Ottoman State was that the government offices were given to incompetent persons through bribery and favoritism.

The employment of unqualified people in government services and nepotism played an important role in the destruction of the Ottoman State. A Dutch lawyer made the following statement in 1897:

If Islam were now practiced as it was earlier applied in the Ottoman State, this country would not have suffered such disasters they have been undergoing ever since the beginning of the 20th century. There is no justice, *qadis* take bribes, and *muftis* have become untaught. This situation and practice have disturbed the Sultan who is sitting in his Palace. Officials' corruption and abuses as well as tumults everywhere foreshadowed the extermination of the Ottoman State and the setting of Muhammad's Crescent (*Hilal al-Muhammad*). Therefore, they clung to *Tanzimat* (Reforms); and started supposing –

²³ Ahmed Jawdat Pasha, *Waqā'i' al-Dawlah al-'Aliyyah* (Istanbul: n.p., 1271-1301), v. XII, pp. 168-197, 297-309 (The Bill of Ashkinjis); pp. 311-315 (Rescript on the Abolition of Janissaries); 316-322 (The Code of Asakir-i Mansurah al-Muhammadiyah); Enver Ziya Karal, *Osmanli Tarih* (Ankara: TTK, 1988), v. V, pp. 144-151.

through the inculcation of us the Europeans – that the source of all those evil acts was their religion. In fact, the fault lay not in the Religion of Muhammad but in the conveyance of the State into incompetent hands.²⁴

It is sufficient to simply to state that the Unionists made Tal‘at Bey, a postman, Grand Vizier.

h. Another issue with respect to the causes of the destruction of the Ottoman State was the matter of the women’s sultanate, such as Kosam Sultan and others, who had plotted to administer the State for almost a century.

4. Conclusion

As a result of the above-mentioned reasons, the Ottoman State, the civil servants who governed it and the governed public declined hopelessly. This is his bitter fruit of bribery, abuse, laziness and disorderliness, of failing to catch up with the times. At last, when their evil deeds outweighed their pious ones, Divine Destiny decreed that this long-lasting Islamic State was to be annihilated.²⁵

²⁴Prime Ministerial Ottoman Archives, *Devlet-i Aliyyedeki İslâhat-ı Kanuniye* (The Legal Reforms in the Ottoman State), PA, YEE, nos. 14-1540, pp. 17-21.

²⁵*Mehmed Şeker, Thesis, I/237f.; Ahmed Uğur, Osmali Siyasetnameleri (Ottoman Books of Politics) (Kayseri: n. p., 1992), p. 171f.; Na‘imah Muşafâ Effendî, Rawdat al-Ḥusayn fî Khulaşat Akhbâr al-Khafiqayn (Istanbul: n.p., 1280), v. I, pp. 33-58; Pasha, waqā‘i’, v. IV, pp. 279, 307; v. V, pp. 91, 107, 171f.; 187f.; v. VIII, p. 5f.; 186 et seq.; Muşafâ’ Akdağ, Türkiye’nin İctimâî ve İktisâdî Tarikhi I-II (A Social and Economic History of Turkey I-II) (Ankara: n. p., 1979), v. II, pp. 395-474; İsmail Hakki Uzunçarşılı, Osmsnli Tarihi (Ankara: n. p. 1982-1983), v. III, Chapter I, p. 124; Bekir Kütükoğlu, ‘Murad III,’ İA, v. VIII, pp. 623-624.*