

Eliminating autonomy, creating autonomy: diverging trajectories of provincial autonomous institutions in the late Ottoman Empire

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Abstract

There were two opposing tendencies in the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century in terms of the relations between the centre and the provinces. On the one hand, existing de facto autonomies were eliminated as the government engaged into a long campaign of destroying the military and political power of local provincial rulers. On the other hand, new autonomous institutions were established in different parts of the empire. Kurdish autonomy is an example of the first trend. From 1830s to 1850s Kurdish autonomous institutions which had been in place since the sixteenth century were targeted and eradicated as part of the reform programs. The second trend is exemplified in cases of autonomy established in provinces such as Serbia, Lebanon and Crete. Kurdish autonomy was destroyed because its institutions such as the emirates which ruled over tribal confederacies were deemed incompatible with an emerging modern state. The new instances of autonomy were attempts to cope with the problems that the Ottoman state was faced with in a new world: increasing foreign pressure, rising ethnic-based demands and a nascent commercial capitalism. New cases of autonomous rule by and large institutionalized certain existing practices of administration by officially sanctioning and but also regulating them. Based on the literature and research in the Ottoman archives, my paper argues that the newly established institutions ('Dual Administration' and 'Chief Knez' in Serbia, 'Double Kaimakamate' and 'Mutasarrifiya' in Lebanon, 'High Commissioner' in Crete, etc.) were not signs of decline of the empire or merely products of foreign imposition. They were practical solutions produced out of the interaction between local specificities, the general tendencies in the empire in the nineteenth century and international politics. Rather than weakening central rule, institutions of autonomy contributed to the survival of a struggling empire until the end of the Great War.