Corruption and Limits of the State in the Ottoman Province of Baghdad during the Tanzimat

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The Ottoman reform period – or *Tanzimat* – has received mixed praise, both at the time and by historians of the 20th century. However, there is no doubt that in the decades between 1840 and 1870 the outlook of the Ottoman Empire changed profoundly. The broad trajectory of this change has been described in general terms as a policy of centralisation.¹ This also meant an expansion of the state bureaucracy and the attempt to control aspects of daily life, which were previously beyond the limits of the state. As such this development was in tune with the general trend in the societies of western and central Europe. All of them, since the end of the 18th century at least, witnessed a dramatic increase of state bureaucracy.²

In the sphere of international relations, however, the *Tanzimat* period was characterised by the final and irrevocable failure to establish the Ottoman Empire as a peer to the European powers. In the economic field this development was accompanied by a thorough failure to "modernise" the Ottoman economy according to standards of industrialised societies and to effectively establish "modern" methods to control state revenues and taxes. This is what may be termed "the failure of Ottoman modernisation." It should be pointed out, however, that no ethical or moral value should be attached to the concept of modernisation. In this context it merely defines the ability of a political system to survive within the ever-expanding reach of the system of nation states emerging in Europe during this time.

In an attempt to explain this failure scholars have adopted two different approaches, that we may term the "internal" and the "external" explanation. Put simply, the internal explanation blames in one way or another Ottoman society for the failure of Ottoman modernisation while the external explanation holds European colonialism/imperialism or the so-called "world-economy" responsible. While in principle it is an undue oversimplification not to look at both internal and external factors, it may be heuristically helpful to concentrate on one single issue before attempting its re-integration into the whole historiographic picture.

It is in this framework that I propose to explore the phenomenon of corruption in the Ottoman provincial administration of Iraq. Corruption, in the historical context of the late Ottoman Empire has hitherto not been systematically dealt with, although it arguably constituted an important factor in the failure of Ottoman modernisation.

Corruption as a historical phenomenon is a problematic issue to deal with – from both a theoretical and a practical point of view. After decades of relative neglect it emerged as an important subject of political science only during the late 1980s and the 1990s.³ In 1997 the guest editors of the special issue on corruption of the periodical *Crime, Law and Social Change* noted "the paradox of the coexistence of an inconclusive dispute about definitions and a consensus on the severity of the phenomenon"⁴ – an observation that seems still to be valid. There has been a

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considerable amount of discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of various definitions of corruption, that cannot be dealt with extensively in this essay. At the core of the problem obviously lies the fact that corruption "essentially denotes deviation or perversion from some ideal state or natural condition, and scholars appear to have different notions of what that condition is."⁵ It has been proposed to distinguish between the following six widespread definitions of corruption⁶

- 1. "deviation from behaviour in the public interest"
- 2. "behavior that deviates from legal norms"
- 3. behavior that deviates "not only from written rules, but also from norms or moral standards sanctioned by the public"
- 4. a co-phenomenon to patrimonialism "as juxtaposed against the concept of rational-legal administration"
- 5. the "use of market mechanisms, rather that a mandatory pricing model, to allocate goods"
- 6. "the perversion of agency relationships that constitute democracy."

It is clear that each of these definitions has its trade-offs of advantages and disadvantages. I will skip this discussion⁷ and content myself with the proposition that in order to apply this concept to the case of the late Ottoman Empire phenomena such as nepotism, clientelism or patronage should be excluded from the definition of corruption as they are closely linked to the Weberian concept of patrimonialism and were key elements of the structure of the Ottoman (as well as of any other pre-modern patrimonial) state.⁸

On the other hand, "corruption with theft",⁹ i.e., bribery, embezzlement, blackmailing etc. was in principle as unacceptable in patrimonial systems as it was in rational-legal ones. The fact that it is often extremely difficult to make a clear distinction between a gift and a bribe and the fact that the Ottoman ruling elite sometimes practised "corruption with theft" very openly, does not - in my view - justify the conclusion that there existed no cultural notion of "too much" in the Ottoman case, even if one admits that what was too much depended often on the political context. The assertion that "members of the ruling class who were in power appropriated whatever wealth they could, without any sense of corruption or greed, but rather out of a sense of entitlement"¹⁰ may be somewhat simplistic even if it is coupled with "a corollary that can best be described as *noblesse oblige.*"¹¹ As the importance of the complimentary notions of justice (*adl*) and oppression (*zulüm*) in the Ottoman political language seems to indicate, there must have existed a rather complex cultural code of appropriation and misappropriation.¹² The campaign against bribery (*rüshvet*) played an important role in the *Tanzimat*, even if it seems to have been a complete failure.¹³

If the theoretical premises for the study of corruption in the Ottoman context are not easily defined, the practical difficulties for studying Ottoman corruption prove to be even more difficult to deal with: As corruption is - almost by definition- something clandestine, in many cases it may not have found its way into the documents of the Ottoman state archives. There are some exceptions, notably when investigations (*tahkikat*) against officials were opened. However, very

often these investigations did not lead to tangible results, especially when they were directed against high-ranking officials.

Ottoman corruption, however, is quasi omnipresent in contemporary European sources, e.g. in travelogues or consular records. Frequently concrete cases are presented along with a general turcophobic bias that the British resident in Baghdad in the mid-19th century, Colonel A. Kemball, described as the "proverbial improvidence and mismanagement of Turkish Officials."¹⁴ Moreover, misinformation, ignorance of local affairs, political calculation and - of course - personal involvement in corruption by consular agents and other European residents are possibilities to be reckoned with.¹⁵ Yet, given the relative paucity of sources on corruption, they nevertheless have to be considered a valuable resource that cannot be ignored. Unfortunately, when accusing Ottoman dignitaries of corruption European observers do not in most cases reveal their sources of information, so that we sometimes have to conclude that they were just repeating publicly available rumours. However, I tend to believe that these rumours concerning the honesty or dishonesty of high-ranking Ottoman officials were not altogether unreliable. I would propose it to be practically reasonable from a historian's point of view to regard these accounts as basically reliable so long as we do not have evidence to the contrary.

There is another point in support of this argument that deserves to be mentioned: The famous *serasker* Namik Pasha (1804-1892) who twice was appointed *vali* of Baghdad was probably one of those top-level Ottoman administrators and politicians that were most disliked by European observers. In the wider European public his name was closely linked to the incidents of Jidda in 1858 where more than twenty Europeans were massacred by a mob incited by local notables and Ottoman officials.¹⁶ Although he was never proven to have been personally involved, Namik Pasha - the then governor of Jidda - was widely considered to be politically responsible for the outrage and was accused of obstructing efforts to punish the culprits. While European observers repeatedly denounced Namik Pasha as a religious fanatic when he was serving as governor-general of Iraq they never - as far as I can tell - blamed him to be corrupt. In fact, Namik seems to have been one of those Ottoman dignitaries who managed to amass a fortune without resorting to forms of corruption. If the accusation of corruption had been a *topos* or a standard element of the way in which European observers represented Ottoman officials they disliked, Namik Pasha would have been an obvious target.

The fact that in his case the accusation of corruption is missing shows, I suggest, that it was not used indiscriminately in contemporary European sources. On the other hand, a caveat is in order here: European brokers residing in Baghdad were not only playing an active role in the political corruption within the province. Apparently, they were also often involved in such dubious business practices that they embarrassed the British consul more than once.¹⁷ Thus, travellers and authors of travelogues who formed their opinions on the honesty or dishonesty of Ottoman officials by drawing on the accounts of these European residents may have been thoroughly misguided.

Corruption among Ottoman officials was certainly not limited to the provincial administration in borderlands of the Empire. Yet if we consider the often precarious nature of Ottoman rule in those regions the generally accepted de-legitimising effect of political corruption may have been more severe in its consequences on political and administrative stability. The province of Baghdad never belonged to the heartland of the Ottoman Empire. Conquered only under Sultan Süleyman Kanuni in the mid-1530s it was lost again to the Safawid Shah 'Abbas in 1623 and reconquered by Murad IV in 1638. The struggle with Persia over this region continued under Nadir

Shah in the 18th century. Even the second treaty of Erzurum that the Porte concluded with Iran in 1847 did not put an end to incidents on the border. The *timar* system was never introduced in Baghdad and until the *Tanzimat* the province continued to be a *salyane* province that was paying no regular taxes but an annual lump sum to the government in Istanbul. Population density was low, most of the inhabitants being tribal or of tribal origin. The more powerful tribes represented a serious counterweight to Ottoman military, administrative and fiscal control. Moreover, a substantial percentage of the Arab population of Iraq was Shiite. For them the legitimacy of the Sunnite Ottomans was rather doubtful. The conversion of Mesopotamian tribes to Shiism was a recent phenomenon that continued during the 19th century.¹⁸ Implementing a policy of centralisation in such a borderland province must have been seriously hampered by the presence of high-ranking officials who on the one hand represented the administrative and military authority of the Ottoman state on the spot and were seeking to secure an extra income for themselves on the other.

In light of my earlier argument on corruption I suggest a preliminary table of corrupt and noncorrupt provincial administrations in Baghdad during the roughly forty-one years from 1831 to 1872, i.e., from the governorship of the first post-Mamluk vali in Baghdad, 'Ali Rıza Pasha to the dismissal of the famous Midhat Pasha. During this period eleven different valis were appointed in the *vilayet* of Baghdad. One of them, Namik Pasha, was appointed twice, so that we have to count twelve. Whenever a new vali was appointed he would bring in a whole entourage of new officials while many of the old ones were dismissed from their posts. Thus, we are dealing with twelve different provincial administrations in Baghdad during the forty-one years from 1831 to 1872. Of the eleven *valis* five were credibly reported to have been corrupt. Another three of the remaining six pashas were admitted to be honest while for the remaining three I was unable to find any clear evidence. Following the principle of *in dubio pro reo* I assume them to have belonged to the group of non-corrupt officials. Thus, of eleven pashas five appear to have been corrupt and six honest. However, of these eleven *valis* four were reported to be unable to control their corrupt high-level subordinates. Among them was Midhat Pasha, who otherwise was considered honest and 'Abdi Pasha (i.e., 'Abdülkerim Nadir Pasha, later serdar-i ekrem), who belongs to the group of officials I was unable to classify. That means that of the twelve administrations under eleven different valis from 1831 to 1872 seven may be regarded to be corrupt at the top level (which means either the *vali* himself or his high level administration or both) while three were regarded as honest. No information concerning the conduct of the remaining two administrations could be found. As a result, they too were put into the category of "honest" officials.

Vali	Alleged Corruption ¹⁹
'Ali Rıza (1831-1842) ²⁰	+*
Necib (1842-1849) ²¹	+
'Abdi (1849-1851) ²²	? *
Vecihi (1851)	?
Namık (first tenure, 1851-1852)	-
Gözlüklü Reshid (1852-1857) ²³	-
Ömer Lütfü (1857-1859) ²⁴	+
Mustafa Nuri (1859-1861) ²⁵	+*
Ahmed Tevfik (1861)	?
Namık (second tenure, 1861-1868)	-
Takiyeddin (1868-1869) ²⁶	+
Midhat (1869-1872) ²⁷	_*

When we put the corrupt Ottoman provincial governments that were in charge of the Province of Baghdad between 1831 (excluded) and 1872 on a time axis, it would appear that out of 41 years, Baghdad passed roughly 28 years under a corrupt administration while for 13 years the administration was viewed both willing and able to check corruption. This corresponds approximately to a ratio of two thirds to one third. At the same time I am acutely aware that neither the table nor the calculation are watertight. In fact, they offer not more than a provisional outline for further discussion.

As far as I can see, it was only in two cases that the Ottoman central government in Istanbul opened investigations (*tahkikat*) on the charge of corruption against *valis* of Baghdad: in the cases of Necib Pasha after his dismissal in 1849 and of Mustafa Nuri Pasha in 1861. In both cases the investigations did not lead to tangible results.²⁸ The *tahkikat* against Necib Pasha, which included his sons (among them the later prominent mayor of Istanbul (*shehremini*) "Sağır" Ahmed Shükrü Bey), were apparently dropped in 1851 after Necib had died a rich man in Istanbul. Those against Mustafa Nuri and his deputy (*kethüda*) and son-in-law dragged on for a while but apparently did not lead to a conviction. Mustafa Nuri received a high pension (*mikdar-ı vafi ma'zuliyet maashu*) after his deposition in 1861.²⁹ Even Mustafa Nuri's *kethüda* who was commonly considered to have been mainly responsible for the corruption of Mustafa Nuri's administration escaped punishment and was appointed governor of a sub-province (*mutasarrıf*).³⁰ It is true that Mustafa Nuri never got another post in the Ottoman administration until 1877 when - shortly before his death - he was appointed a member of the Ottoman senate (*meclis-i ayan*).³¹ This, however, might have been due to his old age and to the fact that after the death of Sultan 'Abdülmecid in 1861 he apparently lost some of his former influence within the palace.

Trying to quantify corruption is extremely problematic as figures, due to the clandestine nature of the process, are normally unavailable. However, there are some figures available, which were provided by the French consul in Baghdad, Veimars, and others.³² They are about the administration of Necib during the financial year corresponding to 1845, the last before he received the province as a tax farm much in the fashion of the traditional *salyane*.

Although these figures cannot be verified they may be realistic. They indicate that the revenues of the province of Baghdad amounted to roughly 23 million piasters and that Necib Pasha put an additional three to three and a half million piasters in his own pocket. That would correspond to a percentage of about 13 to 15 percent. Given the fact that Necib was generally regarded as an extreme case this percentage may represent the upper limit rather than the average of Ottoman high-level corruption in the province of Baghdad. However, one has to keep in mind that we are talking about the amount pocketed by the highest Ottoman official only. There were, of course, many more pockets of Ottoman officials and intermediate tax farmers to be filled, so we can easily guess that an over-taxation of fifty percent or more may not have been exceptional. On the other hand there are reports by the British resident to the effect that it was only after Necib took the province of Baghdad as a tax farm for allegedly 50,000 purses (i.e., 25 million piasters) that he considerably increased his rapacious manoeuvres.³³

What were the most frequent acts of corruption reported in connection with upper level administrators in Baghdad? By far the most profitable and easy one seems to have been to charge an extra "gift" for farming out the right to collect taxes. Another one seems to have been to blackmail tribal *shaykhs* for large amounts in cash and kind (especially valuable horses). If the *shaykhs* did not comply the *vali* threatened to support a rival. This practice tended to be especially

harmful as it easily led to tribal unrest with potentially disastrous economic consequences. The tribal uproar that contributed to the dismissal of Necib is said to have been partially caused by this kind of tribal politics.

If we consider the fact that one of the consequences of political corruption is its de-legitimising effect on the political system in which it occurs the legitimacy of the Ottoman administration in Mesopotamia appears in a rather unfavourable light. It must not be forgotten that - considering the high percentage of tribal and Shiite population - the legitimacy of Ottoman rule in this area was not very well founded anyway.

A case in point is the - mainly Sunni - town of Tikrit on the Tigris. We know that during most of the 19th century the town had to pay a tax known as *khuwwe* that was traditionally levied by the powerful Arab tribe of the Shammar.³⁴ In addition the local residents were taxed by the Ottomans. It is only from the state-centric viewpoint of political history that one may regard the *khuwwe* as illegal and the money including the surplus for several corrupt officials that had to be given to the Ottomans as a legal tax.³⁵ From the viewpoint of the Tikriti taxpayer, the difference cannot have been that substantial. Under these circumstances the *Tanzimat* rhetoric according to which the sultan did care for the welfare and prosperity of his subjects remained little more than an unfulfilled promise. Moreover, against powerful tribes the Ottoman state was unable to sustain a monopoly of violence. In some way and depending on the perspective (taxpayer) and the time (i.e., during roughly 28 out of the 40 years from 1831 to 1871), the Ottomans then were but one of several groups trying more or less effectively to extort money.

The existence of high-level corruption in 19th century Ottoman Iraq during the *Tanzimat* marks an internal border within the state apparatus that does not coincide with the notion of a dichotomy between local (or peripheral) and central powers. None of the Tanzimat-valis in Baghdad had local roots. All of them belonged to the upper echelons of the Ottoman state bureaucracy. In the case of Iraq it is obvious that this state was not able (or not willing) to efficiently control the drain of scarce resources into the pockets of some of its elite members. While the results of this paper must be regarded as preliminary, they nevertheless raise some questions of general interest for the study of 19th century Ottoman history. First, we have to ask whether the issues discussed here were specific only to Iraq or whether it can be verified that severe high-level corruption was indeed a widespread phenomenon in Ottoman provincial administration during the *Tanzimat*. If that was indeed the case, corruption could turn out to be one of the key factors in the failure of Ottoman modernisation, reflecting the central government's inability to rein in high-level bureaucrats and to rationalize the exploitation of the empire's provinces. In this case documentation from the Ottoman state archives concerning fiscal matters during the Tanzimat should be regarded with even greater reservation as to their factual value as they are today. Finally, the existence of widespread high-level corruption might also add a new perspective to our understanding of the cultural rift that the *Tanzimat* arguably brought about within Ottoman society. The lack of legitimacy of the new Tanzimat order might turn out to have been less due to any form of Islamic conservatism but rather to the mishandling and misappropriation of resources by parts of the state elite.

¹ E.g. Stanford J. Shaw, "Local Administrations in the Tanzimat," in *150. Yılında Tanzimat*, ed. Hakkı Dursun Yıldız, Ankara 1992, 33-49.

² For an overview see Lutz Raphael, *Recht und Ordnung. Herrschaft durch Verwaltung im 19. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt 2000.

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³ Martin J. Bull and James L. Newell, "New Avenues in the Study of Political Corruption," Crime, Law & Social Change, 27 (1997), 169-183.

⁵ Thomas D. Lancaster and Gabriella R. Montinola, "Toward a Methodology for the Comparative Study of Political Corruption," Crime, Law & Social Change, 27 (1997), 188.

⁶ The following is based on Lancaster and Montinola, "Toward a Methodology," 188-190. For a slightly different classification cf. e.g. Thomas Heberer, Korruption in China. Analyse eines politischen, ökonomischen und sozialen Problems, Opladen 1991, 15-20.

For a discussion cf. Lancaster and Montinola, "Toward a Methodology" and Heberer, Korruption in China.

⁸ A discussion of the "patrimonial household" as one of the key models of the Ottoman state can be found in Carter V. Findley, Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire. The Sublime Porte, 1789-1922, Princeton 1980, 30-39.

Andrei Schleifer and Robert W. Vishny, "Corruption," The Quarterly Journal of Economics (August 1993), 601. ¹⁰ Rifa'at Abou-El-Haj, Formation of the Modern State. The Ottoman Empire Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries, New

York 1991, 56.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹² For zulüm cf. Ahmet Mumcu, Osmanlı Hukukunda Zulüm Kavramı. Deneme, Ankara 1972.

¹³ For a first assessment of bribery in the Ottoman context cf. Ahmet Mumcu, Osmanlı Devletinde Rüshvet (Özellikle Adlî Rüshvet), 2. baskı, İstanbul 1985. This study also includes a chapter on the Tanzimat era.

¹⁴ As quoted by his successor Colonel Herbert; Public Record Office, Kew/Foreign Office [= PRO/FO] 195/949, No. 6, 27 April 1870, Herbert to Elliot.

¹⁵ E.g. cf. the remarks of Charles MacFarlane on this point in his *Turkey and its Destiny*, London 1850, vol. 1, 178.

¹⁶ On this affair cf. William Ochsenwald, Society, and the State in Arabia: The Hijaz Under Ottoman Control, 1840-1908, Columbus 1984, 141-152.

¹⁷ PRO/FO 195/318, No. 78, 6. Dezember 1848, Rawlinson to Stratford Canning.

¹⁸ Cf. Yitzhak Nakash, "The Conversion of Iraq's Tribes to Shi'ism," International Journal of Middle East Studies, 26

(1994), 443-463. ¹⁹ Explanation of symbols: -: *vali* reported non-corrupt; +: *vali* reported corrupt; ?: no information on corruption of *vali* available; *: subordinates reported corrupt. ²⁰ James B. Fraser, "Memorandum on the Present Condition of the Pachalic of Bagdad and the Means it Possesses of

Renovation and Improvement." [1834], in Precis Containing Information in Regard to the First Connection of the Hon'ble East India Company with Turkish Arabia [...] Between AD 1646 and 1846 [...]. Calcutta: Foreign Dept. 1874, xxxii; Keiko Kiyotaki, "Ottoman Land Policies in the Province of Baghdad, 1831-1881," Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin - Madison, 1997, 56; Austen Henry Layard, Autobiography and Letters From His Childhood Until His Appointment as H.M. Ambassador at Madrid, ed. William Bruce, London 1903, vol. 1, 345.

²¹ PRO/FO 78/777, No. 223, 19 July 1849, Stratford Canning to Palmerston.

²² William Kenneth Loftus, Travels and Researches in Chaldaea and Susiana, London 1858, 11 and 108.

²³ The Times (London), 2 July 1856; Cevdet Pasha, Tezâkir 13-20, ed. Cavid Baysun, 3. baskı, Ankara 1991, 34.

²⁴ Archive Diplomatique de Nantes: Constantinople D (Bagdad 1859-1868), No. 132, 12 October 1859, Tastu to

Thouevenel; Archive Diplomatique de Nantes: Constantinople D (Bagdad 1859-1868), No. 138, 6 December 1859, Tastu to Thouvenel.

²⁵ PRO/FO 195/676, No. 14, 5 June 1861, Kemball to Bulwer: MacFarlane, *Turkey, vol. 1*, 178,

²⁶ Archive Diplomatique de Nantes: Bagdad (consulat) A 45, No. 4, 17 February 1869, Rogier to Bourée; Lamec Saad, Sechzehn Jahre als Quarantänearzt in der Türkei, Berlin 1913, 49f.

²⁷ Archive Diplomatique de Nantes: Constantinople D (Bagdad 1869-1877), No. 11, 27 September 1871, Guys to de Vogué; Archive Diplomatique de Nantes: Bagdad (consulat) A 45, No. 5, 16 July 1872, to Comte de Vogué; Public Record Office: FO 195/949, No. 2, 20 March 1871, Rassam to Elliot; Bernhard Stern, Jungtürken und Verschwörer. Die innere Lage der Türkei unter Abdul Hamid II. Nach eigenen Ermittlungen und Mittheilungen osmanischer Parteiführer, 2. ed., Leipzig 1901, 130.

²⁸ Relevant documents in the Bashbakanlık Arshivi, Istanbul include (for Necib Pasha): Irade - Meclis-i Vala 4890, 5488, 12183 and Irade - Meclis-i Mahsus 918, 986, 1174 (for Mustafa Nuri Pasha).

²⁹ Ahmed Lûtfî, Vak'a-Nüvis Ahmed Lûtfî Efendi Tarihi, vol. 10, ed. M. Münir Aktepe, Ankara 1988, 31.

³⁰ Mehmed Süreyya, *Sicill-i Osmani*, tr. Nuri Akbayar, Istanbul 1996, vol. 4, 1038.

³¹ Ibid., vol. 4, 1275f and Sinan Kuneralp, Son Dönem Osmanlı Erkân ve Ricali (1839-1922). Prosopoprafik Rehber, Istanbul 1999, 110.

³² Ministère des affaires étrangères, Paris: CCC, Bagdad, No. 110, de Veimars to Guizot, 29 April 1846.

³³ PRO/FO 195/334, No. 7, 11 March 1850, Kemball to Stratford Canning.

³⁴ Max Freiherr von Oppenheim, Vom Mittelmeer zum Persischen Golf durch den Hauran, die syrische Wüste und Mesopotamien, Berlin 1900, vol. 2, 216.

Ibid., 182.

³⁵ Cf. Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Scocpol, Cambridge 1985, 169-191.