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In Pursuit of Laicized Urban Administration: The *Muhtar* System in Istanbul and Ottoman Attitudes toward Non-Muslim Religious Authorities in the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

The Ottoman Empire introduced the *muhtar* system in Istanbul in 1829, appointing lay headmen, called *muhtar*, to the lowest levels of urban administration: Muslim neighborhoods; Orthodox, Armenian, and Catholic parishes; and Jewish congregations. This reform resulted in the overlapping of state responsibilities and those of non-Muslim religious authorities, later leading to disputes between the groups. This article investigates such disagreements in an effort to understand how state officials perceived non-Muslim religious authorities' participation in imperial governance. In so doing, this article argues that, as non-Muslim political movements began developing during the late nineteenth century, state officials adopted a cautious attitude toward non-Muslim clergy, viewing the latter as requiring more careful handling than the layman. This take on clergymen was a shift, a reconsideration of the exceptional treatment they had previously enjoyed, and ignited a growing desire to sever the ties, formerly tolerated, between *muhtars* and religious authorities.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire; non-Muslims; Istanbul; *Millet* System; patriarchy

In the nineteenth century, Istanbul's multireligious society witnessed a wide range of urban reforms. One of the earliest such projects—later implemented across the provinces—was the appointment of lay headmen, called *muhtar* (sing.), at the lowest level of urban administration: Muslim neighborhoods; Orthodox, Armenian, and Catholic parishes; and Jewish congregations. Prior to 1829, when the *muhtar* system was introduced in Istanbul, imams, priests, and rabbis were both the religious and administrative heads of their local communities. With the coming of the new system, *muhtars* officially joined these religious functionaries in their administrative duties. Such *muhtars* were chosen from among local residents and expected to shoulder some of responsibilities of community leadership, including recording demographic events, issuing resident identification certificates, and representing the community before state and judicial authorities. By introducing a similar method into the local administration of different religious groups, the Ottoman state deepened its involvement in these communities at the most fundamental level, encroaching on areas where, among Christians, Istanbul's patriarchy had previously held responsibility. Thus, this reform entailed the overlapping of responsibilities between the state and non-Muslim religious authorities, which later led to disagreements between the two. This article focuses on the negotiations between these authorities and looks at nineteenth-century changes in non-Muslim participation in imperial governance.

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Recent work in Ottoman studies, particularly pertaining to Ottoman modernity, has shed light on the continuity of the internal transformations that occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, instead of merely focusing on the rupture caused by European influence in the nineteenth century.¹ The *muhtar* system was also a product of an internal transformation ongoing since the eighteenth century: the state's long-term effort to better control human inflow into Istanbul and achieve peace and order in the imperial capital. As the regime increasingly blamed Istanbul's immigrants for social disorder and disturbance, political authorities gradually strengthened their intervention in and control over society.² This attitude culminated in the 1820s' enhanced application of internal passports and the introduction of the *muhtar* system in 1829.³ This article views the *muhtar* system in this light, not from the perspective of general reforms to local administration, emphasizing how the Ottoman government attached special importance to this system in Istanbul, as the state aimed to both reinforce its control over the population and maintain peace and order in the empire's political center.⁴

In this regard, the treatment of non-Muslims—constituting one third of the empire's population and half that of the capital—was by no means marginal. Both the 1820s' Greek War of Independence and Armenian political activities beginning in the 1880s contributed to heightened concerns over controlling human mobility.⁵ However, non-Muslims have often been underrepresented in studies on the *muhtar* system.⁶ This is often true for studies on

¹ Among the major contributions, see: Rifa'at Ali Abou-El-Haj, *Formation of the Modern State: The Ottoman Empire, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005); Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Ali Yaycioglu, *Partners of the Empire: The Crisis of the Ottoman Order in the Age of Revolutions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

² Betül Başaran, *Selim III, Social Control and Policing in Istanbul at the End of the Eighteenth Century: Between Crisis and Order* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Işıl Çokuğraş, *Bekâr Odaları ve Meyhaneler: Osmanlı İstanbulu'nda Marjinalite ve Mekân (1789-1839)* (Istanbul: İstanbul Araştırmaları Enstitüsü, 2016); Madoka Morita, "Between Hostility and Hospitality: Neighbourhoods and Dynamics of Urban Migration in Istanbul (1730-54)," *Turkish Historical Review* 7, no. 1 (2016): 58-85; and Shirine Hamadeh, "Invisible City: Istanbul's Migrants and the Politics of Space," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 50, no. 2 (2017): 173-93.

³ On internal passports, see: Musa Çadırcı, "Tanzimat Döneminde Çıkarılan Men'i Mürûr ve Pasaport Nizâmnameleri," *Belgeler* 15, no. 19 (1993): 169-82; Christoph Herzog, "Migration and the State: On Ottoman Regulations Concerning Migration since the Age of Mahmud II," in *The City in the Ottoman Empire: Migration and the Making of Urban Modernity*, ed. Ulrike Freitag, Malte Fuhrmann, Nora Lafi, and Florian Riedler (London: Routledge, 2011), 117-34; Nalan Turna, *19. Yüzyıldan 20. Yüzyıla Osmanlı Topraklarında Seyahat, Göç ve Asayiş Belgeleri: Mürûr Tezkereleri* (Istanbul: Kaknüs Yayınları, 2013); İlkay Yılmaz, *II. Abdülhamid Döneminde Güvenlik Politikaları, Mürûr Tezkereleri Pasaportlar ve Otel Kayıtları: Serseri, Anarşist ve Fesadın Peşinde* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2014), 177-202; İlkay Yılmaz, "Governing the Armenian Question through Passports in the Late Ottoman Empire (1876-1908)," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 32, no. 4 (2019): 388-403; and David Gutman, "Travel Documents, Mobility Control, and the Ottoman State in an Age of Global Migration, 1880-1915," *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 3, no. 2 (2016): 347-68.

⁴ For studies on the *muhtar* system, see: Cem Behar, *A Neighborhood in Ottoman Istanbul: Fruit Vendors and Civil Servants in the Kasap İlyas Mahalle* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003); Musa Çadırcı, "Türkiye'de Muhtarlık Teşkilâtının Kurulması Üzerine Bir İnceleme," *Belleten* 34, no. 135 (1970): 409-20; Ali Akyıldız, "Türkiye'de Muhtarlık Teşkilâtının Kuruluşu ve Gelişimine Genel Bir Bakış," *Türk Kültürü İncelemeleri Dergisi* 14 (2006): 11-30; and Mehmet Güneş, *Osmanlı Döneminde Muhtarlık ve İhtiyar Meclisi (1829-1871)* (Istanbul: Kitabevi, 2014).

⁵ On the influence of the Greek War of Independence, see: Turna, *19. Yüzyıldan 20. Yüzyıla*, 60, 61; and Herzog, "Migration and the State," 120. See also an order dated 1824: İstanbul Mahkemesi Şeriye Sicilleri 154, 26a, accessed October 8, 2021, <http://www.kadissicilleri.org/goster.php?blm=ist154&bsm=ist154b173>. On the Armenians, see Yılmaz, "Governing the Armenian Question."

⁶ Ayşe Ozil explores the role that Anatolia's Orthodox Christian *muhtars* played in tax collection in *Orthodox Christians in the Late Ottoman Empire: A Study of Communal Relations in Anatolia* (London: Routledge, 2013), 57-64. Mérope Anastasiadou-Dumont mentions Orthodox Christian *muhtars* in Istanbul, albeit briefly, in *Les Grecs d'Istanbul au XIX^e siècle: Histoire socioculturelle de la communauté de Péra* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 138, 139; see also "Non-Muslim Communities and State Control in the Late Ottoman Empire: Administrative Practice and Decision-making within the Greek Orthodox Parishes of Istanbul," in *Religious Communities and Modern Statehood*:

the Ottoman institutional reforms of the nineteenth century, although most such reforms were undertaken to establish centralized rule over the empire's multireligious subjects and achieve political integration. Among others, Cem Behar, in his detailed investigation of a single Muslim neighborhood in Istanbul, commented that its *muhtar* "did take upon himself the responsibility of performing a large number of public duties that turned him into a *community leader*." Behar also suggested that the *muhtar* reform caused little confusion among Istanbul's Muslims and the transfer of power from imams to *muhtars* was, in general, smooth.⁷ How then, one might ask, did the Ottoman government introduce the *muhtar* system among non-Muslims, Christians in particular, who had different social structures due to their hierarchical churches? How did the introduction of the *muhtar* system influence the relationship between the state and non-Muslims, as well as the role of religious institutions? This article tackles these questions, thereby contributing to understandings of the imperial management of religiously diverse populations.

The responsibility the Ottoman state gave religious institutions in its relationship with non-Muslim subjects has long been controversial in Ottoman studies. In turning their attention away from the traditional framework, the *millet* system, more recent scholars take a renewed understanding of this subject, fostering discussion of the historical unfolding and development, from the early centuries of the Ottomans to their downfall, of the relationship between the state and non-Muslim religious authorities.⁸ During the period of territorial expansion, according to these researchers, the Ottomans used the tax farming system to accommodate the Christian clerical structure's higher authorities into Ottoman governance, and the Christian clergy's connection with imperial authorities allowed them to exercise power over their communities. Scholars have also shown that, in the eighteenth century, Christian patriarchates in Istanbul could increase their status through collaboration with the state, and the state designated the advantages and exemptions granted to Istanbul's religious authorities as religious privileges in the mid-nineteenth century.

With regard to the nineteenth century, scholars have discussed the change in the centuries-old collaboration between the state and non-Muslim religious authorities, culminating in government attempts to curtail the privileges of such authorities and the subsequent rise in tensions during the reign of Abdülhamit II (r. 1876–1909), within the broader context of general non-Muslim alienation in the empire.⁹ Furthermore, recent

The Ottoman and Post-Ottoman World at the Age of Nationalism and Colonialism, ed. Michalis N. Michael, Tassos Anastasiadis, and Chantal Verdeil (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2015), 10, accessed October 8, 2021, <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01452033>.

⁷ Behar, *A Neighborhood*, 78–83. See also Noémi Lévy-Aksu, *Ordre et désordres dans l'Istanbul ottomane (1879–1909): De l'État au quartier* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2013), 222–3.

⁸ Tom Papademetriou, *Render unto the Sultan: Power, Authority, and the Greek Orthodox Church in the Early Ottoman Centuries* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015); Molly Greene, *The Edinburgh History of the Greeks, 1453 to 1768: The Ottoman Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); Macit Kenanoğlu, *Osmanlı Millet Sistemi: Mit ve Gerçek* (Istanbul: Klasik, 2004); Elif Bayraktar Tellan, "The Patriarch and the Sultan: The Struggle for Authority and the Quest for Order in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Empire" (PhD diss., Bilkent University, 2011); Yusuf Ziya Karabıçak, "Local Patriots and Ecumenical Ottomans: The Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople in the Ottoman Configuration of Power, 1768–1828" (PhD diss., McGill University, 2021); and Masayuki Ueno, "Religious in Form, Political in Content?: Privileges of Ottoman Non-Muslims in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59, no. 3 (2016): 408–41. For recent reviews of the *millet* system and Ottoman non-Muslims in the early modern period, see Eleni Gara, "Conceptualizing Interreligious Relations in the Ottoman Empire: The Early Modern Centuries," *Acta Poloniae Historica* 116 (2017): 57–91.

⁹ Haris Exertzoglou, "To «Pronomiako» Zitima," *Ta Istorika* 16 (1992): 65–84; Dimitrios Stamatopoulos, "From Millets to Minorities in the 19th-Century Ottoman Empire: An Ambiguous Modernization," in *Citizenship in Historical Perspective*, ed. Steven G. Ellis, Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, and Ann Katherine Isaacs (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2006), 253–73; Ramazan Erhan Güllü, "Istanbul'da Ermeni-Rum Kiliseleri Krizi ve Ermenilere Tanınan Yeni İmtiyâzlar (1890–1891)," *OTAM* 38 (2015): 31–53. Daniel Ohanian emphasizes the continuation of the collaboration in the early twentieth century in "Collaboration in Ottoman Governance: The c. 1907 Imperial Census and the Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate of Istanbul," *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 4, no. 2 (2017): 365–80.

studies have directed attention to a different aspect of development by demonstrating how the state shifted away from a relationship with non-Muslims mediated by religious institutions towards one that incorporated non-Muslim lay elite into imperial governance in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁰ Thus, this study of the *muhtar* system deepens our understanding of this transition through showing the trend of incorporating laymen extended to the level of local administration and was not abandoned in the late nineteenth century. This article considers the *muhtar* system among non-Muslims in Istanbul and its relationship with their religious institutions within a larger trend of laicization, arguing that Ottoman officials were inclined to using multiple channels to communicate with non-Muslim subjects, with *muhtars* being alternative intermediaries to circumvent religious authorities in the late nineteenth century.

Laicization, a term forged in studies of French history, provides a nuanced explanation of the changing treatment of religion and clergymen in the modernizing world. Juxtaposed to secularization, which, in general, refers to the marginalization of religion in society and can be used and interpreted with various meanings, laicization specifically refers to an institutional change aimed at restricting and withdrawing religious and clerical control.¹¹ In this article, I avoid the term secularization, opting instead to use laicization, as it emphasizes the administrative changes implemented and discussed by Ottoman officials. As political movements developed among non-Muslims in the late nineteenth century, particularly among Armenians, Ottoman officials felt an increasing need to enhance state control over their mobility. Thus, officials turned to non-Muslim *muhtars*, separating this position from the control of religious authorities, as they saw clerical institutions as requiring more careful handling than laymen. This laicization of urban administration sought to strengthen state control over human mobility, even though practicalities necessitated continued collaboration between the state and non-Muslim clergymen.

Although the *muhtar* system was a reform of the state's relationship with its subjects, enhanced state control over society also intersected with developments within non-Muslim communities. In the 1860s, the leaders of three major non-Muslim communities pursued internal administrative reforms aimed at reinforcing their control within their respective communities.¹² These reforms culminated in the creation and incorporation of community administration regulations in the imperial code of law and the institutionalization of a central community administrative body, giving institutional framework to lay participation. However, while each non-Muslim group in this movement was mainly concerned with reforming community administration at the central level, Armenians took it a step further, stipulating the establishment of a parish-level board in their regulations. These stipulations entrusted the management of parish affairs to the board, which, in the system introduced by the government, would share responsibility with the *muhtars*.

As a consequence, and as reflected in their rare appearance in Armenian and Armeno-Turkish sources, the position of *muhtar* remained minor among the Armenians of

¹⁰ Stamatopoulos, "From Millets to Minorities"; Richard E. Antaramian, *Brokers of Faith, Brokers of Empire: Armenians and the Politics of Reform in the Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020); and Masayuki Ueno, "Empire as a Career: Hagop Grjigian or an Armenian in the Ottoman Bureaucracy," *The Memoirs of the Toyo Bunko* 76 (2018): 57–80.

¹¹ For the difference between secularization and laicization, see Jean Baubérot, "Sécularisation, laïcité, laïcisation," *Empan* 90 (2013): 31–8. See also José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), ch 1.

¹² Vartan Artinian, *The Armenian Constitutional System in the Ottoman Empire 1839–1863: A Study of its Historical Development* (Istanbul: n.p., 1988); Ilan Karmi, *The Jewish Community of Istanbul in the Nineteenth Century: Social, Legal and Administrative Transformations* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1996), ch 3; and Aron Rodrigue, "The Beginnings of Westernization and Community Reform Among Istanbul's Jewry, 1854–1865," in *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Avigdor Levy (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1994), 439–56. For a comparison of the regulations of three communities, see Roderic H. Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire 1856–1876* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), ch 4.

nineteenth-century Istanbul. Nevertheless, in the late nineteenth century, Armenian and other non-Muslim *muhtars*' roles and positions became points of contention between the state and non-Muslim religious authorities; traces of such disagreements can be found in Ottoman documents produced not only by state departments, who wanted to use *muhtars* to encroach on non-Muslim communities, but also non-Muslim religious authorities, who endeavored to block such encroachment. This article draws heavily on Ottoman documents to investigate the negotiation between these parties around the treatment of non-Muslim *muhtars*, as well as referring to Armenian and one major Greek primary source.

Here, terminology from the Ottoman documents must first be explained. In the early decades of the *muhtar* system, Istanbul's non-Muslim *muhtars* were also called *muhbir* or *kahya*.¹³ While these terms were used interchangeably with *muhtar*, I use the latter as the representative term in order to facilitate readers' understanding, unless greater specificity is needed. In Ottoman documents, a unit to which a *muhtar* was appointed in Istanbul is consistently referred to as *mahalle*, regardless of whether it was citing a Muslim neighborhood or Christian parish. A distinction between the words is made in translation when possible.

According to the empire's official chronicle, the government decided, in 1829, to appoint two *muhtars* tasked with keeping a record of the population and controlling their movements to each neighborhood or parish of every confessional group in greater Istanbul.¹⁴ In the mid-nineteenth century, the government gradually expanded the *muhtar* system to the provinces. When it conducted an 1867 empire-wide reorganization of local administration through the promulgation of the Law for Provincial System, the state officially situated the *muhtar* at the lowest level of the administrative hierarchy: villages and neighborhoods or parishes. According to this law, *muhtars* bore responsibility for tax collection, security, the arbitration of disputes, and other local affairs, and were to be elected by local residents from among male Ottoman subjects above the age of 30 who paid over 100 *kuruş* in state taxes.¹⁵

This article is divided into three sections. The first section deals with the early and mid-nineteenth century and demonstrates that, during this period, the Ottoman state situated Istanbul's non-Muslim *muhtars* under the authority of their respective religious institutions. Following on, the second and third sections consider the late nineteenth century, investigating state attempts to restructure the role of non-Muslim religious authorities in *muhtar*-related affairs in order to elicit a change in officials' attitudes toward religious authority involvement in imperial governance.

Non-Muslim *Muhtars* under Religious Authorities

In nineteenth-century Istanbul, each religious group formed small local communities around their place of worship. As there was little segregation by religious affiliation, these small local communities—Muslim neighborhoods, Christian parishes, and Jewish congregations—overlapped geographically. Thus, while people from different religious groups lived on the same streets, sharing a sphere of everyday life, the units of their local communities were divided confessionally. Further, whereas Muslims had numerous mosques throughout the city, only a limited number of churches and synagogues existed due to restrictions on building new ones; restrictions only lifted by the 1856 Reform Edict.¹⁶ This led to a conspicuous difference in the total number and size of local communities. While Istanbul's Muslim neighborhoods were smaller, both geographically and population-wise, often with only a single

¹³ Among non-Muslims in the province, *kocabaşı* was the term used for the position of *muhtar*. Güneş, *Osmanlı Döneminde Muhtarlık*, 27–9.

¹⁴ Ahmed Lütfi, *Tarih-i Lütfi*, vol. 2 (Istanbul: Matbaa-i Amire, 1874), 173; and vol. 5 (Istanbul: Mahmud Bey Matbaası, 1884/5), 35.

¹⁵ *Düstur*, first series, vol. 1 (Istanbul: Matbaa-i Amire, 1872/3), 918–20.

¹⁶ Kenanoğlu, *Osmanlı Millet Sistemi*, 289–91. Despite such restrictions, there are numerous examples of newly constructed churches and monasteries in the provinces. Machiel Kiel, "Müzakere," in *Osmanlı Devleti'nde Din ve Vicdan Hürriyeti* (Istanbul: Ensar Neşriyat, 2000), 267–74; and Greene, *The Edinburgh History*, 68–71, 120–1.

imam, Christian parishes covered much wider areas, had larger populations, and included several priests.¹⁷ This is confirmed by 1844 census data: Greater Istanbul had 496 Muslim neighborhoods with 87,231 male residents, and another 8,466 Muslim males lived outside these neighborhoods; whereas there were 54, 34, and 18 Orthodox Christian, Armenian, and Jewish parishes/neighborhoods respectively, with male populations of 49,323, 48,866, and 12,032.¹⁸

When, in the 1820s, the Ottoman government became more concerned with human mobility and social order in Istanbul, Christians were of particular concern. Indeed, the Greek War of Independence encouraged state officials to keep a vigilant eye on the inflow of Orthodox Christians into Istanbul.¹⁹ Furthermore, the abolition of the Janissary corps in 1826 led to the collapse of Albanian and Kurdish labor migrant networks, subsequently replaced by Armenians from the eastern provinces, whose presence became quite conspicuous in Istanbul thereafter.²⁰ Moreover, the European Great Powers' intervention influenced the credibility of Armenian Catholics, who were suspected to have ties with France. In 1828, the Ottoman government counted thousands of Armenian Catholics in Istanbul—two fifths of whom were immigrants from the provinces—through the ecclesiastical network of the Armenian Patriarchate and expelled them from the capital unless they returned to the Armenian Church.²¹ It was in this decade that the Ottoman government enhanced the imposition of internal passports and introduced the *muhtar* system in Istanbul.

Only fragmented information remains on the *muhtar* and internal passport systems among non-Muslims in the early and mid-nineteenth century, but the information available suggests the government first introduced these systems among Christian subjects through their existing social structure. As such, when introducing the *muhtar* system, the Ottoman government did not divide Christian parishes into units as small as Muslim neighborhoods. Instead, as Istanbul's patriarchates were intermediaries between the state and its Christian subjects in the city, the government imposed the issuance of certificates on these intermediaries in 1824, forcing them to prove the identity of addressees when applying for internal passports.²²

One of the earliest documents on the administration of the *muhtar* system among non-Muslims was likely written in 1835 and evidences the government expectation that non-Muslim *muhtars* shoulder the same duties as their Muslim counterparts, foremost being the recording of demographic events and bringing human mobility under state

¹⁷ For a general overview of Muslim neighborhoods in Istanbul, see Behar, *Neighborhood*, 3–7. The results of the parish board election offers an idea of the geographical scope of Armenian parishes in Istanbul. For more, see *Dehgegakir Kordzatir Hantsnazhoghovoy Azkayin Sahmanatrat'ean Nergayats'eal Handean Ėnthanur Zhoghovoy Azkayin Eresp'okhanutean i 20 Sebdeper Amsoy 1863* (Istanbul: Dbakrut'iwn Hovhannu Miwhēndisean, 1863). On the Beyoğlu parish of Orthodox Christians, see Meropi Anastasiadou, "De la paroisse à la communauté: Les Grecs orthodoxes de Stavodroni (Beyoğlu-Istanbul)," *Anatolia moderna* 10 (2004): 149–65.

¹⁸ For 1844 census data, see Yoichi Takamatsu, "Ottoman Population Registers of Late 18th- and 19th Century Istanbul as a Source for the Study of the Greek Orthodox (Rum) Population," in *Human Mobility and Multiethnic Coexistence in Middle Eastern Urban Societies 1: Tehran, Aleppo, Istanbul, and Beirut*, ed. Hidemitsu Kuroki (Tokyo: ILCAA, 2015), 71–84. Selçuk Akşin Somel introduces census data that appeared in an undated register. Although he assumes the data belongs to 1830–31, the numbers are same as those in the register dated 1844. See "Vak'a-i Hayriyye Sonrasında İstanbul'un Sosyal Yapısının Ana Hatlarına Dair Yeni Bazı Veriler: 1830–31 Devresine Ait İstanbul Nüfus Sayımı Hulusa Pusulası," *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* 56 (2020): 143–224.

¹⁹ Turna, 19. *Yüzyıldan 20. Yüzyıla*, 60, 61; Herzog, "Migration and the State," 120; and Karabıçak, "Local Patriots," 445.

²⁰ Donald Quataert, "Labor Policies and Politics in the Ottoman Empire: Porters and the Sublime Porte, 1826–1896," in *Humanist and Scholar: Essays in Honor of Andreas Tietze*, ed. Heath W. Lowry and Donald Quataert (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 1993), 62–5; and Florian Riedler, "Armenian Labor Migration to Istanbul and the Migration Crisis of the 1890s," in *The City in the Ottoman Empire: Migration and the Making of Urban Modernity*, ed. Ulrike Freitag, Malte Fuhrmann, Nora Lafi, and Florian Riedler (London: Routledge, 2011), 160–76.

²¹ Kemal Beydilli, *II. Mahmud Devri'nde Katolik Ermeni Cemâati ve Kilisesi'nin Tanınması (1830)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Üniversitesi Yakındoğu Dilleri ve Medeniyetleri Bölümü, 1995), 8–16.

²² İstanbul Mahkemesi Şerhiye Sicilleri 154, 26a; and Beydilli, *II. Mahmud Devri'nde*, 169–71.

control.²³ In Istanbul, the patriarchates and newly established chief rabbinate were expected to report all movements in and out of Istanbul, movements from one neighborhood or parish to another, and births and deaths in their communities to judicial authorities. However, such reporting was not exact because, under these religious authorities, non-Muslim *muhtars*—chosen from among the “disinterested and non-corrupt” by “the patriarchs, chief rabbi, persons in charge under them, and notables of communities”—did not conduct precise record keeping at the local level. The 1835 document insists that, although non-Muslim *muhtars* shouldered the same duties as their Muslim counterparts, their negligence was notable, as numerous people settled in neighborhoods and parishes, and others died or left, without being recorded or reported. Recognizing the problem, the government ordered non-Muslim religious authorities to force their *muhtars* to re-examine neighborhoods/parishes to correct population records.

Thus, the Ottoman government did not alter the existing forms of state-subject relationship through the introduction of the *muhtar* system, relying instead on networks centered on non-Muslim religious authorities and situating non-Muslim *muhtars* under the authority of their respective clerical institutions. The 1835 document also suggests the government recognized that both clergymen and lay notables participated in managing and decision making around communal affairs.²⁴ The *muhtar* system extended the lay participation observed in the top echelons of religious communities to parish and neighborhood population control.

Documents dated from 1858 suggest the promulgation of the Reform Edict, which promised equality between Muslims and non-Muslims and ordered the reform of non-Muslim community administration, did not change the government’s reliance on non-Muslim religious authorities in affairs related to *muhtars*. The same set of documents also indicates that, among the government-expected roles, *muhtars* were also to act as guarantors for neighborhood and parish residents; a role played in Muslim neighborhoods by imams prior to the introduction of the *muhtar* system. According to these documents, when Muslims in Istanbul wanted to transfer property or apply for an internal passport from the municipality, they had to obtain one-time-use certificates from *muhtars* or guild wardens verifying their identity. Such an identity certificate equated to the issuer agreeing to act as a guarantor for the addressee, taking responsibility for them. However, while the government entrusted Muslim *muhtars* with the duty of verifying the reliability of property owners and migrants, aiming to maintain peace and order in the imperial capital, for non-Muslims, the government granted their religious authorities with the duty to issue such and other certificates.²⁵

In 1858, the government discovered that the Orthodox Christian Patriarchate had been inappropriately issuing identity certificates. In the ensuing investigation, it was determined that the patriarchate had farmed this duty out to subcontractors, who charged sky-high fees and issued documents for personal profit without conducting necessary background checks.²⁶ In a subsequent memorandum submitted to the government, the Orthodox Christian Patriarchate first denied the charge and explained why the duty had been retained by the patriarchate instead of given to the *muhtar*. The explanation neatly demonstrates the difficulty inherent in a multicultural and multilingual society.

While the patriarchate had allowed *muhtars* to issue certificates for property transfers at first, this led to the acquisition of property by non-Ottoman Orthodox Christians; an illegal act until the law of 1867 and subsequent protocols formally deregulated restrictions on

²³ BOA (Cumhurbaşkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi), HAT. 19258C ([1835]).

²⁴ For Christian lay notables in the first half of the nineteenth century, see Christine M. Philliou, *Biography of an Empire: Governing Ottomans in an Age of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Hagop Levon Barsoumian, “The Armenian *Amira* Class of Istanbul” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1980); and Ueno, “Empire as a Career.”

²⁵ BOA, HR.MKT 235/27 (17 April 1858); and İ.HR 8269, no. 1 (4 June 1858).

²⁶ BOA, HR.MKT 235/27.

foreigners purchasing real estate.²⁷ Istanbul's Orthodox Christian inhabitants included numerous individuals with foreign citizenship, particularly the Kingdom of Greece.²⁸ Thus, due to the need to confirm applicants' status as Ottoman subjects and consult population records held in the patriarchate for further family information, the duty of issuing certificates was devolved to the patriarchate. With regards to documents for internal passports, *muhtars* and priests' inability to write Turkish in Arabic script caused difficulty, ultimately resulting in the preparation of documents in Greek and subsequent translation into Turkish. The patriarchate claimed that hiring a clerk who could write Turkish or enlisting local imams or Muslim *muhtars* had been deemed unrealistic due to cost, although the financial details were not specified. Moreover, such solutions would require excessive additional work: Orthodox Christian *muhtars* who could not read but understood spoken Turkish would need to confirm the content of a translated document through someone reading it aloud before the seal was affixed. Hence, the patriarchate had to shoulder responsibility for preparing documents in Turkish.²⁹

Regardless of the explanation, the government could not tolerate the circulation of illegal documents, and thus invoked the theory of equality between Muslims and non-Muslims, claiming that granting an exception for non-Muslim subjects, but not Muslim subjects, was inappropriate. Nevertheless, the government did not actually pursue equal treatment, continuing instead to rely on the patriarchate to manage certifications, instructing patriarchates and the chief rabbinate to adopt a compromise: identity certificates would be prepared by parish *muhtars* and priests, alongside guild wardens, and the patriarchate would be responsible for checking the information. The clerk at the patriarchate tasked with this would receive one *kuruş* as a fee.³⁰

Although, in general, the patriarchate accepted the government's instruction, it also requested minor modifications to the new method. Firstly, it argued that the one *kuruş* fee paid by addressees would not cover the expense of employing such clerks; a claim the government disputed. Secondly, the patriarchate demanded that parish priests not be involved in the issuance of identity certificates, as "priests are not able to engage in affairs other than church and religion," thus their involvement in a "procedure of the government" (i.e., issuing documents for submission to state authorities) would be inappropriate. As such, the patriarchate drew a clear distinction between the higher religious authorities who appropriately interfered in state affairs, and the lower clerics, who were only to involve themselves in religious affairs. Although it is unclear whether state officials actually accepted this logic, they did grant the request, as they considered the involvement of parish priests to be redundant because certificates were to be confirmed and sealed by the patriarchate. The government also informed the Armenian and Catholic patriarchates of the modifications made regarding the noninvolvement of priests.³¹

Nevertheless, an 1861 document suggests this new method did not function as expected due to Christian *muhtars*' lack of Turkish writing skills; while the government still instructed *muhtars* to issue the certificates necessary for internal passport applications, with additional background checks done by the patriarchates, it allowed other certificates and documents to be issued by capable clerks appointed by the patriarchates.³² Thus, the government had no choice but to increase its reliance on the administrative capabilities of non-Muslim religious authorities, as priority was given to preventing the circulation of illegal documents. Still, as

²⁷ Michael Christopher Low, *Imperial Mecca: Ottoman Arabia and the Indian Ocean Hajj* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 104; and Belkis Konan, "Osmanlı Devletinde Yabancıların Kapitülasyonlar Kapsamında Hukuki Durumu" (PhD diss., Ankara University, 2006), 98–109.

²⁸ Anastasiadou, "De la paroisse," 153, 156.

²⁹ BOA, İ.HR 8269, nos. 2 (5 May 1858), 3 (undated).

³⁰ BOA, HR.MKT 235/27; İ.HR 8269, no. 1.

³¹ BOA, İ.HR 8269, nos. 2, 3; and HR.MKT 245/21 (6 July 1858).

³² BOA, A.MKT.MVL 138/3 (18 December 1861).

in provincial reforms, state officials did not hesitate to adopt case-specific modifications, despite the self-proclaimed principles of standardization and uniformity.³³

Newspaper articles from 1861 confirm the government allowed Armenians in Istanbul to adopt a different method for issuing certificates for property transfers, and newly formed parish boards, not *muhtars*, shouldered this responsibility. From the late 1850s to early 1860s, Istanbul's Armenians conducted extensive reform of the administration of their community in the Patriarchate of Istanbul. In 1860, as part of these reforms, boards were formed to carry out the administrative duties of each parish; board members were elected by the residents of each parish.³⁴ In response to an article criticizing the Armenians of Beşiktaş, the Beşiktaş parish board published a report in the Armenian newspaper *Masis* (*Ararat*) about a recent case related to the issuance of certificates for property transfers.³⁵ In this case, two Armenians belonging to the Armenian Church applied to the Beşiktaş parish board to obtain a certificate to sell their house to a Protestant; however, as the circumstances required the extensive confirmation of information, the procedure became prolonged. While the procedure was ongoing, several other Armenians in Beşiktaş wrote to the parish board requesting that members scrutinize the request thoroughly, as the house sat opposite an Armenian school and people were concerned that Protestants would attempt to convert the children. This complaint led the board members to request instruction from the patriarchate, and thus the issuance of the document was even further delayed. This delay led to rumors spreading among Armenians in Istanbul that the Beşiktaş Armenians were blocking the issuance of the document because the buyer was a Protestant.³⁶

The Beşiktaş board's report indicated that the sellers were fully aware of their duty to apply to the parish board for the prerequisite certificate to conduct property transfers, and the board dealt with the application according to its obligations. The report referred to the local *muhtar* twice. First, when the parish board was required to confirm that the property's other shareholders had consented, they asked the *muhtar*, who replied with the information he had. Second, when the parish board discussed the letter of consent with the broker, they said the *muhtar* would visit a shareholder in the Beşiktaş parish to obtain it.³⁷ Thus, this report shows the *muhtar* playing the role of an assistant or clerk for the parish board. As discussed later in detail, the Armenian patriarchate indicated to the government that *muhtars* working among Istanbul's Armenians were essentially assistants to the parish boards.

In the early and mid-nineteenth century, the Ottoman government situated non-Muslim *muhtars* under the authority of their respective religious authorities, expecting this to be a more effective method of population control. Such religious authorities, who were pursuing reform of the administration of their own communities, were thus able to adapt the *muhtar* system to their own aims and in a manner they considered suitable.

Restructuring

As previously discussed, although issuing verified-identity certificates for neighborhood residents and acting as their guarantor were the government's primary expectations of Istanbul's *muhtars*, it also depended on religious authorities among non-Muslims in this regard. However, in the late 1870s, when the government grew increasingly cautious of the treatment of non-Muslims, it changed its attitude towards this reliance on religious authorities. The turmoil in the Balkans, the defeat in the war against Russia, and the

³³ Uğur Bayraktar, "Reconsidering Local versus Central: Empire, Notables, and Employment in Ottoman Albania and Kurdistan, 1835–1878," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 4 (2020): 691.

³⁴ *Azkayin Sahmanatru't'iwn Hayots'* (Istanbul: Azkayin Dbaran Surp P'rgch'i, 1860), arts. 60–5. See also, *Azkayin Sahmanatru't'iwn Hayots'* (Istanbul: Dbaran H. Miwhēndisean, 1863), arts. 52–6.

³⁵ *Miwnadiyi Ērjijyas*, no. 66 (3 April 1861).

³⁶ *Masis*, nos. 477 (10 April 1861), 478 (17 April 1861).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Treaty of Berlin prompted the growth of non-Muslim political activity, including among the clergy, which instigated the rise of the Macedonian and Armenian Questions. As a consequence, the government's concern about the number and mobility of non-Muslim subjects grew, leading to the enactment of three new laws: the 1881 Population Registration Law, accompanied by an empire-wide census; the 1884 Passport Law; and the 1887 Internal Passport Law.³⁸ In these circumstances, however, who should be the guarantor of identity and registrar of demographic changes became a delicate question. Among Muslims, all these roles were assigned to *muhtars* and imams.

A document written in 1888 briefly mentions that, nine or ten years prior, the government had attempted to transfer the duty of issuing identity certificates from religious authorities to the municipality, but, due to the fierce opposition of Christian patriarchates, the restructuring was never finalized. The patriarchates demanded financial compensation from a government already suffering serious financial difficulties, arguing they would lose the revenue gained from the certificate fee and the reforms would negatively affect Christians' communal tax payments.³⁹ The government, after this failed attempt, had no choice but to entrust "patriarchates, chief rabbinate, and parish boards" with the responsibility of issuing identity papers for passport and internal passport applications when it enacted laws concerning these documents several years later.⁴⁰

Indeed, non-Muslim religious authorities also took a further step to retain their certificate issuer role and prevent the loss of their influence among the flocks. In 1880, the Synod and Mixed Council of the Orthodox Christian Patriarchate published the "Regulations for Parish *Muhtars* in Constantinople" in Greek, which stipulated the selection process for and duties of Orthodox Christian *muhtars*, asserting the patriarchate's authority to define the position and roles of Istanbul's Orthodox Christian *muhtars*.⁴¹ Interestingly, the preamble to these regulations emphasizes the patriarchate's qualification in issuing certificates for submission to state authorities, using the Turkish term, *ilmühaber*, in Greek script:

Although the Law for Provincial System stipulates the selection and duties of *muhtar* in its fourth section, [these stipulations] are not applicable to parish *muhtars* in Constantinople. While, according to the aforementioned law, *muhtars* in [provincial] dioceses were entrusted governmental and public duties and stipulated to chair the council of elders (*ihityar meclisi*), parish *muhtars* in Constantinople engage themselves in completely different duties. They stamp parish seals entrusted to them on documents necessary for property transfers and on communal and other documents proving birth, baptism, marriage, identification, nationality, living, and death. As its own duty, the Ecumenical Patriarchate issues *ilmühaber*, official documents necessary in front of diverse state authorities, by referring to the documents [that *muhtars* prepared]. *Muhtars* have responsibility toward the patriarchate and must be trustworthy persons.⁴²

The preamble outlines the difference between the duties of *muhtars* in the provinces and those in Istanbul. In Istanbul, Orthodox Christian *muhtars* were assigned to prepare documents used within their community for various purposes, including obtaining identity certificates from the patriarchate. Likewise, the body of the regulations also gave limited duties to Istanbul's Orthodox Christian *muhtars*, namely stamping and issuing various types of documents and keeping records. Other stipulations of the regulations also subordinated Orthodox Christian *muhtars* to the patriarchate, the one allowed direct contact with state authorities.⁴³

³⁸ Yılmaz, "Governing the Armenian Question," 389–93.

³⁹ BOA, Y.PRK.AZN 3/17 (28 January 1888).

⁴⁰ Yılmaz, II. Abdülhamid Döneminde, 177–78, 205.

⁴¹ *Kanonismos tōn Mouchtarēdōn tōn Enoriōn Kōnstantinoupoleōs* (Istanbul: Typois Anatolikou Asteros, 1880).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 4–6.

In the same year, Armenian leaders more clearly proclaimed that the authority to issue official certificates belonged solely to the patriarchate, using the same Turkish term *ilmühaber* in Armenian script. The Lay Council of the Armenian Community, which functioned as a main organ of the Armenian community's administration, issued an instruction in Armenian. We learn of it when it was repeated eight years later:

The Civil [Lay] Council of the [Armenian] National Administration was informed that some of the parish boards in the capital, acting against the previous instruction of the [Armenian national] administration announced through a circular dated 28 August 1880 and numbered 269, were issuing official *ilmühabers* in Turkish [*t'ürk'erên bashdönagan ilmukhabêrner*] using the seal of their parish *muhtar* [*irents' t'aghi mukht'arats' gnk'ov*]. Considering that the National Patriarchate was the sole authority qualified to issue official *ilmühabers*, it [the council] decided to remind [them] of the aforementioned circular and urge parish boards to act accordingly in a similar circumstance.⁴⁴

The 1888 repetition of this instruction might be related to a Ministry of Domestic Affairs proposal to the Grand Vizirate a week earlier regarding the amendment of the Internal Passport Law of 1887. According to this law, *muhtars* and imams were tasked with issuing certificates for internal passport applications for Muslims, while this duty was entrusted to the patriarchates, chief rabbinate, or parish boards for non-Muslims.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the Ottoman Census Office found that certificates for Jews were not being issued in accordance with this new law, as the preparation of this type of document was entrusted to the heads of congregations (*cemaatbaşı*) within the Jewish community; the chief rabbinate only had to ratify the document (or the acting chief rabbinate in this case).⁴⁶

This legal concern, however, brought a different side of the matter to the Ministry of Domestic Affairs' attention. The Ministry of Justice and Religious Affairs, which had jurisdiction over non-Muslim religious affairs, commented that heads of Jewish congregations were equivalent to Muslim *muhtars*. Thus, the Jews took an approach drawing similarity with Muslims, based upon which the Ministry of Domestic Affairs found it inappropriate to disregard documents issued by Jewish congregation heads. Moreover, the ministry also found it inappropriate to impose extra procedures on non-Muslims only. In the name of equality (*müsavat*), the ministry proposed the Grand Vizirate modify the stipulations of the Internal Passport Law to ascribe the duty of issuing certificates to the *muhtars* of the Orthodox and Armenian Christians instead of their patriarchates.⁴⁷ No response to this proposal has been found.

A similar proposal had been made by Mustafa Ziver, the head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, seven months prior.⁴⁸ In his five-page report, "A Report Concerning the Situations and Acts of Clergymen, their Harmful Influence on Christians, and the Necessity to Take Certain Measures Regarding this Issue," he proposed transferring the role of issuing certificates to non-Muslim *muhtars*.⁴⁹ Based on his exceptional experience

⁴⁴ *Punch*, no. 2113 (8 September 1888).

⁴⁵ Turna, 19. *Yüzyıldan 20. Yüzyıla*, 85.

⁴⁶ BOA, DH.MKT 1537/97 (30 August 1888). Between 1863 and 1909, acting chief rabbis were appointed in Istanbul instead of a chief rabbi. See Avigdor Levy, "Introduction," in *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Avigdor Levy (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 1994), 106–7.

⁴⁷ BOA, DH.MKT 1537/97.

⁴⁸ The Directorate of Religious Affairs was established within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs around 1860 to deal with the government's relationships with non-Muslim religious authorities. This reflects the government's grave concern about its treatment of non-Muslims after the Crimean War. In 1877, the directorate was transferred to the Ministry of Justice, which became the Ministry of Justice and Religious Affairs thereafter, to avoid the impression that the Ottoman government regarded its non-Muslim subjects as foreigners. See BOA, İ.DH 61932 (25 November 1877); and Fatmagül Demirel, *Adliye Nezareti: Kuruluşu ve Faaliyetleri (1876-1914)* (Istanbul: Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2008), 64–70.

⁴⁹ BOA, Y.PRK.AZN 3/17.

as the head of the department dealing with the government's relationships with non-Muslim religious authorities since 1870, Mustafa Ziver insisted on the need to curtail the influence of non-Muslim clergymen over their flocks.⁵⁰ The growing political activities of Bulgarians and Greeks in Macedonia, Armenians in the eastern Ottoman provinces, and the involvement of clergy members in such must have been on Ziver's mind when writing this report.⁵¹ He emphasized the frequency of Christian clergymen's inappropriate actions, which, according to the report, included trying to free Christians arrested for crimes and involving themselves in land disputes, tax issues, and the government's settling of Muslim refugees and immigrants. Ziver acknowledged that recent judicial reforms had reduced clergymen's involvement in these issues, but worried that non-Muslim clergymen had yet to abandon their "malicious desires." In his opinion, "Today, the first preoccupation of the clergymen is political affairs," accusing them of inciting "national feelings" (*kavmiyet ve cinsiyet hissiyatı*) among people and conducting secret negotiations with foreign ambassadors and consuls.⁵²

In response, Ziver called on the Ottoman government to curtail the "secular" influence the Christian clergy had on their flocks, but also acknowledged there were challenges to achieving this goal. Such clerics acted secretly, left no evidence, and any attempt to punish them could invite complaints of infringing on religious privilege. Expressing doubts about their loyalty did not conform to the "delicacy of situation and time," and carelessness in this context would provoke such clerics to seek support from European states.⁵³ Ziver's writing summarizes Ottoman officials' view of non-Muslim clergymen: even if not at the center of non-Muslim political activities, they were considered harder to handle than laymen due to their special status and influence.

Although lay non-Muslims were not necessarily more trustworthy than clergymen, Ziver sought to utilize them to curtail the "secular" influence of religious functionaries. He proposed transferring the role of certificate issuance from clergymen to *muhtars*; in fact, he devoted nearly half the report to this question. Ziver argued that, over the past several decades, this role had strongly supported clergymen's expanding secular influence. It was a duty entrusted to them before the state established the municipality and census system, and thus had to address its lack of information on Christian populations by asking for that held by churches and patriarchates. Because the laws enforced thereafter required subjects to obtain certificates for certain administrative procedures, Christian subjects had to apply to their respective religious authorities for these documents. Applying the binary of spiritual and material, as well as religious and secular, Ziver explained the convenience of this situation for Christian religious authorities, "because, at the present time, mere spiritual influence is not sufficient to incite [Christians] due to the weakening of Christian religious doctrines," so religious authorities needed to "find means to have material influence [on their flocks] and gain capacity as an authority involving secular procedures."⁵⁴ Accordingly, Christians who were not obedient to their religious authorities struggled to complete administrative procedures. An incident in 1890 fully supported Ziver's argument.

⁵⁰ According to his curriculum vitae, Mustafa Ziver was born in Istanbul in 1844, a son of the chief gatekeeper at the imperial palace. He entered Ottoman bureaucracy at 18 and was transferred to the Directorate of Religious Affairs in 1863. He was promoted to the head of the department in 1870 and remained in the post for several decades. See BOA, DH. SAİD 4/268, 269.

⁵¹ For instance, see İpek Yosmaoğlu, *Blood Ties: Religion, Violence, and the Politics of Nationhood in Ottoman Macedonia, 1878–1908* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Toygun Altıntaş, "The Placard Affair and the Ankara Trial: The Hnchak Party and the Hamidian Regime in Central Anatolia, 1892–93," *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 4, no. 2 (2017): 309–37; and Varak Ketssemanian, "The Hunchakian Revolutionary Party and the Assassination Attempts against Patriarch Khoren Ashekanian and Maksudzade Simon Bey in 1894," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 50, no. 4 (2018): 735–55.

⁵² BOA, Y.PRK.AZN 3/17.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* This view of Christianity in the empire was connected to Ottoman understanding of the "decline of Christianity in Europe" in the same period. See Amit Bein, *Ottoman Ulema, Turkish Republic: Agents of Change and Guardians of Tradition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), ch. 2.

That year, the Orthodox Christian Patriarchate conducted a strike protesting the government's infringement on religious privileges. In this protest, the patriarchate went beyond closing religious institutions, also asserting its secular influence by ceasing the issuance of certificates, leaving their flocks unable to transfer property.⁵⁵

Ziver proposed the government transfer the role of certificate issuance to parish *muhtars* and “completely sever *muhtar* ties with the churches” by paying them sufficiently through the municipality. This method would not burden the municipality because the revenue from certificate fees would cover *muhtar* salary costs. According to Ziver, this approach had already been introduced in an anti-Hasunian group of Armenian Catholics in Istanbul and anti-patriarch Chaldean Catholics in Mosul, suggesting that intra-communal disputes had previously affected administrative procedures applying to non-Muslims.⁵⁶ Ziver anticipated that a generalization of this method would halve the “harmful influence” religious authorities held over their flocks.⁵⁷

Severing the Ties between Religious Authorities and *Muhtars*

Later developments suggest that Ottoman officials could not completely remove the role of issuing certificates from clergymen. Meanwhile, documents written in the late nineteenth century suggest that Ziver's other proposal—that is, severing *muhtars*' ties with churches—had already been the practice among Ottoman state officials since the early 1880s. In the late nineteenth century, many officials found it necessary to restrict the influence of non-Muslim religious authorities, and their concerns led the state to attempt to curtail such authorities' privileges. On the one hand, these attempts caused a dispute in 1883 between the Ottoman government and Christian patriarchates of Istanbul (known in previous studies as the privileges question), which resurfaced in the early 1890s and 1909–11.⁵⁸ On the other hand, these attempts also resulted in unnoticed modifications to the relationship between non-Muslim religious authorities and *muhtars*.

In April 1883, the Municipality of Istanbul reported to the Ministry of Justice and Religious Affairs on an Armenian Patriarchate request to dismiss Mgrdich Ağa from his role as *muhtar* of the Karagümruk-Salatomruk parish.⁵⁹ In response, the municipality conducted an investigation but found no reason to support his dismissal, as even the parishioners had submitted a petition expressing their satisfaction with the *muhtar*'s work.⁶⁰ Although available documents give no details, we can infer that the patriarchate had a disagreement with the *muhtar* and/or the parishioners, who may have wanted to temper the patriarchate's control over their affairs. In this case, unlike Ottoman authorities of the early and mid-nineteenth century, the municipality considered Armenian Patriarchate interference in

⁵⁵ BOA, DH.MKT 1783/5 (19 November 1890). For the patriarchate's protest, see Denis Vovchenko, “A Triumph of Orthodoxy in the Age of Nationalism: The Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Sublime Porte, Russia, and Greece (1856–1890),” *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook* 28/29 (2012/2013): 255–6, 262; and Lora Gerd, *Russian Policy in the Orthodox East: The Patriarchate of Constantinople (1878–1914)* (Warsaw: De Gryuter, 2014), 50–1; Güllü, “İstanbul'da Ermeni-Rum,” 41–3.

⁵⁶ For the factional division among Catholic Armenians, see Charles A. Frazee, *Catholics and Sultans: The Church and the Ottoman Empire 1453–1923* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 264–72.

⁵⁷ BOA, Y.PRK.AZN 3/17.

⁵⁸ Exertzoglou, “To «Pronomiako» Zitima”; Vangelis Kechriotis, “The Modernization of the Empire and the Community ‘Privileges’: Greek Orthodox Responses to the Young Turk Policies,” in *The State and the Subaltern: Modernization, Society and the State in Turkey and Iran*, ed. Touraj Atabaki (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 53–70; Vovchenko, “A Triumph of Orthodoxy,” 255–66; Nobuyoshi Fujinami, “Privileged but Equal: The Privilege Question in the Context of Ottoman Constitutionalism,” in *Balkan Nationalism(s) and the Ottoman Empire*, vol. 3, ed. Dimitris Stamatopoulos (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2015), 33–59; and Güllü, “İstanbul'da Ermeni-Rum.”

⁵⁹ The quarter of Salatomruk did not have a church, so its residents belonged to the parishes of Karagümruk or Balat until the establishment of parish boards in the early 1860s. The Karagümruk and Salatomruk quarters were then merged into a single parish. See *Deghegakir Kordzatir Hantsnazhoghvoy*, 17–29.

⁶⁰ BOA, ŞD 705/2, no. 12 (4 April 1883).

matters related to *muhtars* to be inappropriate. The municipality, seeking to cease the patriarchate's involvement, claimed that while these matters were under municipal jurisdiction, Istanbul's Armenians were instead selecting their *muhtars* through parish boards, which were subordinate to the patriarchate.⁶¹ This claim led to a jurisdictional dispute between the municipality and the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul.

In the correspondence between the municipality, the State Council, the Ministry of Domestic Affairs, the Ministry of Justice and Religious Affairs, and the patriarchate, the Ottoman authorities justified their claim through invoking the Law for the Provincial System. According to this law, they insisted, locals had the right to elect their *muhtar* by majority vote, no matter which religious community they belonged to; the elected *muhtar* would then be appointed by the municipality, providing him with an official seal. This was the general method applied at the time, and the addition of any other procedure would infringe on the municipality's jurisdiction. The Ottoman authorities confirmed that "the right to vote belongs to residents, and the duty of appointment to the exalted [Ottoman] government."⁶²

This argument suggests that the Ottoman authorities aimed to bypass the patriarchates by removing *muhtars* from patriarchal jurisdiction, making them alternative channels for direct communication with non-Muslims at the local level. From the authorities' perspective, *muhtars* were an "intermediary" (*vasita*) with residents, acting directly under government authority. Nevertheless, Armenians were electing *muhtars* through parish boards, although patriarchal interference had sometimes been prohibited. Parish board members were laymen, but still the state authorities considered their subordination to the patriarchate problematic. Thus, the municipality unfavorably characterized elections held through parish boards as revealing the "involvement of the clergy office" (*idare-i ruhaniyenin teşriki*). In several documents, state authorities negatively characterized such involvement as patriarchate "interference" (*müdahale*), choosing instead to laicize local administration. The State Council also claimed that it was impossible to confirm whether parish board members were chosen in a reliable manner.⁶³

From the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul's perspective, it was the government interfering in community affairs; thus, the governmental call to stop the "patriarchate's interference" was unacceptable. Responding to the demand, the patriarchate submitted memoranda explaining its position. In these, the patriarchate claimed that election through parish boards was a long-established way Istanbul's Armenians chose their *muhtars*; a way long tolerated by Ottoman authorities. The patriarchate then demanded exceptional treatment, as granted in the past, by emphasizing the difference between the role Istanbul's Armenian *muhtars* played and the role of provincial *muhtars*. In the provinces, *muhtars*' main duties were to keep records of demographic events, issue certificates for property transfers, and help in the collection of taxes. For Armenian *muhtars* in Istanbul, however, these duties belonged to others: other state officials were responsible for tax collection, without the participation of Armenian *muhtars*; the patriarchate was responsible for issuing certificates for property transfers; and parish boards were tasked with record keeping, alongside other parish affairs, in accordance with the Armenian National Constitution. From the patriarchate's perspective, Istanbul's Armenian *muhtars* were merely assistants serving parish boards. Accordingly, the difference in duties between *muhtars* in Istanbul and those in the provinces sufficiently justified the difference in their election methods.⁶⁴

The patriarchate also emphasized the subordination of *muhtars* to parish boards, claiming that Armenian *muhtars* could essentially be seen as elected by locals:

⁶¹ BOA, ŞD 705/2, nos. 11 (22 November 1883), 12, 13 (9 May 1883).

⁶² BOA, ŞD 705/2, no. 11.

⁶³ BOA, ŞD 705/2, nos. 3 (11 February 1884), 4 (21 January 1884), 11, 12, 13.

⁶⁴ BOA, ŞD 705/2, nos. 9 (19 December 1883), 13 (4 June 1883).

Entrusting the affairs and duties pertaining to *muhtar*ship to parish boards is a more reliable method for the state and the [Armenian] community than to centralize them in the hands of a person, and our humble community has adopted that method for a long time. Armenian *muhtars* have been under the supervision and direction of these boards and in the position of their footman. Their selection has been conducted by the members of parish boards who were elected by residents by majority vote in accordance with our humble National Constitution and are in the position of their representatives. . . . they [*muhtars*] are naturally regarded as the electee of the residents.⁶⁵

The patriarchate argued that *muhtar* election through parish boards was nothing but an indirect reflection of the parishioners' will, adding that this was superior to direct election because municipal officials could neither predict whether those directly elected by parishioners had the necessary capacity and integrity nor could they respond to any potential antagonism among residents due to such an election. Moreover, *muhtar* independence from parish boards was considered inappropriate because, without such oversight, they might practice corruption. Therefore, *muhtars* should remain under the supervision and instruction of the boards.⁶⁶ The patriarchate then emphasized the practical aspects of the status quo. However, while this justification might have been accepted by Ottoman authorities in the mid-nineteenth century, when non-Muslim religious authorities were easily incorporated into state population control efforts, neither the Istanbul municipality nor the State Council accepted this argument in the 1880s. Thus, the patriarchate was ultimately forced to accept the municipality's requirements.

In January 1891, the Armenian Patriarchate petitioned the municipality to reconsider the method of selecting Armenian *muhtars*.⁶⁷ Perhaps the patriarchate was encouraged by the Ottoman government's appeasing stance regarding the privileges question, which resurfaced in 1890 and developed into a much larger dispute than in 1883. After protracted negotiations, public protest, and a strike, the Ottoman government compromised with the Orthodox Christian and Armenian patriarchates in the autumn of 1890, worried that further delays would invite foreign intervention.⁶⁸ In the petition, the Armenian Patriarchate first reflected on the former state of Armenian parishes in Istanbul, writing that the system had worked well until the recent modifications to election methods. The patriarchate emphasized the close connection the *muhtar* position had with the church and parish board, mentioning that *muhtars* had previously been paid from church coffers, their seals held by parish boards, and the documents requiring their seal were issued and sealed by the boards. This reminder was meant to prompt the municipality to tolerate Armenians in Istanbul using *muhtars* for parish administration.⁶⁹

The patriarchate then claimed that the modification of election methods had caused new difficulties. A few years prior, following the Law for Provincial System, the municipality had instructed Istanbul's Armenians to elect *muhtars* by majority vote. The municipality then began to inscribe *muhtars'* names on their seals; seals that previously only noted their titles. The patriarchate requested that exceptional treatment be instituted, again emphasizing the difference between Armenian *muhtars* in Istanbul and those in the provinces. The patriarchate also pointed out that the government had not assigned a salary for Istanbul's Armenian *muhtars* after this modification, which made finding competent candidates—candidates capable of reading and writing in Turkish, with awareness of the law, and contented with small earnings—difficult. Furthermore, the patriarchate countered the municipality's legal logic by ingeniously turning it on its head, claiming that duties undertaken by *muhtars* were actually

⁶⁵ BOA, ŞD 705/2, no. 9.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ BOA, ŞD 2568/20, no. 3 (22 January 1891).

⁶⁸ Vovchenko, "A Triumph of Orthodoxy," 261–3; and Güllü, "İstanbul'da Ermeni-Rum."

⁶⁹ BOA, ŞD 2568/20, no. 3.

supposed to fall to parish boards according to the Armenian National Constitution, which was approved as state law. Thus, the call to observe the Law for Provincial System not only caused trouble among Armenians, but also sacrificed one state law for another.⁷⁰

The patriarchate's request was submitted to the cabinet, who decided in the municipality's favor, arguing that Armenian parishes should follow the same method as Muslim neighborhoods, i.e., *muhtars* should be elected by locals and appointed by the municipality. The cabinet further contended that the appointment of *muhtars* was not a religious matter, therefore it had nothing to do with the patriarchate.⁷¹

Several documents indicate that, in the late nineteenth century, state officials consistently favored separating Istanbul's non-Muslim *muhtars* from the jurisdiction of religious authorities. Indeed, Istanbul Armenians from several parishes expected parish boards to be able to temporarily cover when the *muhtar* was absent, but they could not obtain permission from the government.⁷² The case of the Jews in 1900 deserves particular attention, as it demonstrates officials' preference for laicizing urban administration. In the neighborhoods of Piripaşa and Turşucu in the Hasköy quarter, Istanbul, a single Jewish congregation head undertook *muhtar* duties. Thus, without informing the acting chief rabbi, the Jews of Piripaşa petitioned the government to appoint an independent head of congregation, claiming their population was too large for a single person to oversee. Moreover, they elected candidates for each area by majority vote and the municipality approved the candidates' appointment and ordered their seals prepared.⁷³ This case strongly suggests that the introduction of the *muhtar* system encouraged popular activism among Istanbul's Jews in a manner unfavorable to their religious authority.

The acting chief rabbi halted this process, arguing that the municipality should not give official seals to Jewish congregation heads or treat them like neighborhood *muhtars*, as such were supposed to report to the chief rabbinate. However, based on the understanding that Jewish congregation heads should be treated the same as *muhtars*, state officials did not accept this claim. Moreover, officials criticized the interference itself, calling it an "involvement of clergy members" (*cemaat-ı ruhaniyenin teşriki*) in *muhtar* affairs. In response, the acting chief rabbi went on a strike, insisting that he would not approve the municipality's seals; necessary approval if congregation heads wished to be involved in religious affairs and have their seals accepted by official departments. This move caused administrative affairs among Jews to stagnate. The rabbi also attacked one of the candidate's suitability, which suggests he may have had personal reasons for his resolute opposition.⁷⁴

The government did not accept the acting chief rabbi's opposition, as state documents clearly demonstrate that officials considered equal treatment of the empire's various non-Muslim groups to be a necessity. Officials' primary concern appears to have been that tolerating such interference might lead other non-Muslim communities to act similarly, understanding how the treatment of one non-Muslim group could affect others. To justify their rejection, state officials invoked the State Council comment in the 1883 dispute about election method of Armenian *muhtars*: "the right to vote belongs to residents, and the duty of appointment to the exalted government." Henceforth, it was deemed appropriate to address Jewish congregations heads as *muhtar* "in a manner similar to the *muhtars* of other non-Muslim communities" (*sair cemaat-ı gayrimüslime muhtararı misillü*).⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ BOA, ŞD 2568/20, no. 6 (18 March 1891); MV 63/62 (18 March 1891).

⁷² BOA, DH.MKT 1087/65 (29 May 1906); 1179/22, no. 1 (12 June 1907); 2544/14 (13 October 1901); ZB 372/30 (1 June 1905).

⁷³ BOA, DH.MKT 2308/111 (14 February 1900).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ BOA, BEO 112152 (30 May 1900).

Conclusion

This article investigated problems related to non-Muslim *muhtars* to discern state officials' attitude toward the participation of non-Muslim religious authorities in imperial governance. As the Ottoman government introduced the *muhtar* system in Istanbul in the early nineteenth century to reinforce state control over the population, the government appears to have seen no harm in allowing non-Muslim religious authorities to be involved. At first, the state situated non-Muslim *muhtars* under their respective religious authorities, and relying on these networks also remained necessary during the Tanzimat period. The state's priority was not to apply the system uniformly, but to strengthen state control over society. Thus, each non-Muslim group could adapt the *muhtar* system to its own community, incorporating this new position into existing community administration structures.

In the late nineteenth century, state officials adopted a different attitude toward non-Muslim clergymen. Previously, imperial authority had valued these clergymen for their influence over their flocks, imparting special status upon them to mobilize that influence. In the late nineteenth century, however, this strength became an obstacle for the government, and this new view underscored the review of non-Muslim clergy's exceptional treatment and the reconsideration of the position and role of Istanbul's non-Muslim *muhtars*. Nevertheless, non-Muslim religious authorities were not easily handled, as their special privileges allowed them to negotiate with the imperial authority and resist its interference. The opposition of such religious authorities forced government concessions in the political disputes known as the privileges question and, moreover, hindered government efforts to revoke the duty of issuing identity certificates.

Meanwhile, the government insisted on separating Istanbul's non-Muslim *muhtars* from the jurisdiction of their respective religious authorities. While the government could not completely exclude such religious authorities from imperial governance, and thus continued collaborating with them to a certain degree, it turned non-Muslim *muhtars* into alternative means—means that circumvented their religious institutions—of controlling non-Muslims. Furthermore, as the Armenian and Jewish cases outlined above suggest, non-Muslim *muhtars* served as alternative bases of power at the local level; bases that could temper the influence of religious authorities. This shift reflected the government's changing approach to non-Muslims as, in the late nineteenth century, the Ottoman government still sought to incorporate non-Muslims as individuals, not through their religious institutions.

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