Short Description of the Dissertation Project: “Ottoman tribal policies in the district of Dair az-Zūr (1840-1908)”

Located on the trade routes between Aleppo, Damascus, Mosul, and Baghdad, Dair az-Zūr occupied a very important place in the strategic geography of the Ottoman Empire. It was the most important market town in the region, and the local Bedouins traded extensively with travellers and city-dwellers, selling animal produce and purchasing all kinds of essentials in return. Tribal structures always played a prominent role in the society of Dair az-Zūr, and nomadic tribes wielded significant political power there. As the Ottoman government tried to strengthen the central authority in its provinces in the Tanzimat and Hamidian eras, they began to make strenuous efforts to reduce the power of local sheikhs in the district of Dair az-Zūr. The aim of this study is to examine the relations between the tribes and the state in Dair az-Zūr during this period of momentous change.

This dissertation focuses on the power relations between the tribe and the state. They are considered through a description and analysis of the strategies used by the Ottoman government to secure official control and integrate the nomadic tribes of Dair az-Zūr into the Ottoman Empire. These strategies were often aimed at reforming or changing tribal institutions, which generally constituted the local power structures in the desert. In this respect, the effects of these policies on the tribal structure of Dair az-Zūr are examined.

The study is based mainly on primary written sources. The Prime Ministerial Archives in Istanbul and Foreign Office papers in the Public Record Office (London) are essential sources for the Tanzimat and Hamidian Eras, as both contain invaluable information on tribe-state relations in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. For the origins of the tribes and their distribution in the Deir az-Zūr region, I have used predominantly local sources. On the other hand, travel accounts and travelogues of Europeans who had visited the region from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century contain invaluable information on the socio-political structures of the tribes and were thus also extensively consulted. MENTION THE EUROPEAN DIPLOMATIC SOURCES AS WELL? YOU USED THEM QUITE A LOT I THINK (E.G., SKENE’S CORRESPONDENCE).

Existing archival material on tribal groups deﬁne the following strategies that the Ottoman state employed in order to control its large tribal population in Dair az-Zūr during the Tanzimat and Hamidian time: 1) transforming or destroying existing tribal structures through military force; 2) settling the tribes; 3) divide and rule; 4) integrating selected leaders and their followers into administrative structures by incentives such as subsidies, negotiation, reconciliation, and education.

I have demonstrated in this study how the Ottoman government’s policies towards the tribes of Dair az-Zūr were impacted by the implementation of the Tanzimat and how they became more systematic after Ferīk’Azmī Paşa ‘s military expedition of 1857. Subsequently, a decisive shift in the attitude of the Ottoman government towards the nomads occurred. For the first time in many years, the government’s policy became more systematic and consistent, as well as more technologically sophisticated. The Ottoman administration built forts all along the desert frontier and staffed them with well-armed and mobile troops. As a result, the Ottomans began to successfully conquer and subjugate nomadic tribes. Military expeditions were also mounted with more determination and strategic planning than previously. With the establishment of military institutions better suited to the desert climate and nomadic tactics, the balance of power in Dair az-Zūr began to change in favour of the Ottoman government.

At the same time, nomadic settlement became a pillar of governmental policy towards the tribes. The state combined the use of force and negotiation with tribal leaders in order to settle as many tribes as possible. By encouraging sedentary lifestyles and agricultural production, the government hoped to make the nomadic tribes easier to control, as well as to increase the taxation revenues from the newly farmed land. Sources show that Ottoman officials were to some extent successful in this aim, managing to settle tribes such as the al-‘Afādila; however, many others clung to their nomadic ways or else settled only briefly and then returned to nomadism.

My study also demonstrates how tribal structures increasingly affected the work and policies of the Ottoman administration, as tribal leaders established closer relations with the central authorities. Over time, such special relationships produced significant benefits to the local leaders, such as substantial subsidies and the establishment of a special boarding school for their sons, who were both educated and provided with military training. The Ottoman government also officially recognized the authority of some of the tribal leaders in Dair az-Zūr. By granting power to certain tribes, the Ottoman government made the local leaders complicit in controlling the frontier, acknowledging that it would not have been able to exert this control without their help. To affirm their status, the central government provided tribal leaders with subsidies and honourable titles, such as “Emīr Umra”, in the hope that they would continue to curb tribal rebellions and promote peaceful solutions in Dair az-Zūr.

An examination of Ottoman contemporary archival documents regarding Dair az-Zūr suggests that Ottoman officials were quite intolerant of tribes and often biased against them. They used derogatory terms to describe them, such as “savage” and “primitive”. This provided a perfect ideological cover for trying to steer the tribes away from their traditional, nomadic lifestyles. Settlement was not considered merely strategically and economically beneficial to the state, but also part of a civilising and uplifting mission, designed to share the wonders of civilisation with the Bedouin. In addition to analysing Ottoman policies towards the nomadic tribes of Dair az-Zūr in themselves, this study also places them in this wider ideological context, examining the ways in which the Ottoman state communicated and reinforced its “civilising mission”.