

REFORMS IN SYRIA DURING THE RULE OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

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Abstract. *This article analyzes the administrative reforms implemented in Syria during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II and examines the despotic nature of the Ottoman government. It explores the issues related to the administrative legacy of the Tanzimat era and its enduring influence on Syria. The paper also discusses the consequences of despotic governance, such as the strengthening of security measures and centralized administration, the pressure exerted on local elites and the population, and the tightening of political and social restrictions. The study emphasizes that the administrative reforms of the Tanzimat period were not abolished during the reign of Abdulhamid II; on the contrary, by the end of the nineteenth century, they had demonstrated their effectiveness.*

Keywords: *Ottoman Empire, despotism, Tanzimat era, administrative reforms, centralized administration, vali, Abdulhamid II, municipal council.*

No period in the history of the Ottoman Empire from the late 19th to the early 20th century has been evaluated as negatively and one-sidedly in local historiography as the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876–1909). In various studies, this era has been described as a time of “medieval tyranny,” “national oppression and mass massacres,” “a regime of military-police terror and violence,” or “the dictatorship of Sultan Abdulhamid II representing the most reactionary layers of the Turkish feudal class.” Such interpretations attempt to emphasize the supposedly entirely negative nature of the system that took shape in the Ottoman Empire during the last quarter of the 19th century.

At the same time, some scholars have argued that there was neither continuity nor logical succession between the Tanzimat era and the reign of Abdulhamid II, claiming that the sultan-caliph pursued a policy opposed to reforms based on absolute power. However, historical sources and evidence describing the social life of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries especially in the Syrian provinces show that such views are one-sided.

The sultan’s absolute authority did indeed bear certain despotic features, which was a common characteristic of almost all Eastern monarchies. Nevertheless, while acknowledging this fact, it would be incorrect to overshadow the reform processes carried out in several key areas of state and social life during the reign of Abdulhamid II. These reforms should be regarded as a practical manifestation of the Ottoman Empire’s efforts toward modernization, improvement of administrative governance, and integration of certain segments of society with the modern world.

To gain a clear understanding of the true nature of Abdulhamid II's reign and to properly compare it with the preceding and subsequent historical periods, it is necessary to conduct a deep and systematic analysis of various sources. Such a source-based analysis has not yet been sufficiently carried out in local historiography. Therefore, comparing Abdulhamid II's policies toward Syria with those of the Tanzimat era is of great importance. Such a comparison makes it possible to examine the issues of continuity and consistency in areas such as provincial administration, domestic policy, infrastructure modernization, and the development of cultural and educational spheres.

As mentioned above, many researchers have generally evaluated the results of the Ottoman Empire's administrative reforms in a negative light. According to them, the ideas set forth in the imperial edicts of 1839 and 1856, as well as in the Constitution of 1876, turned into "rules that remained on paper" during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II, losing their practical significance. In their view, the reformist ideas and noble intentions of the Tanzimat statesmen proved ineffective due to the opposition of the reactionary-minded sultan and corrupt officials.

At the same time, some scholars, while underestimating the results of the reforms and denying their practical value, have noted that the old political institutions were abolished without establishing any stable system in their place. As a result, the old Ottoman bureaucracy was replaced by a new administrative apparatus that was half-Europeanized, half-Oriental, unprincipled, and deeply corrupt¹.

However, a study of the formation and development of Ottoman local administrative institutions in the Syrian provinces during the 19th century shows that the efficiency of the state apparatus at the provincial level continuously increased. During the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II, the influence and authority of the Ottoman central government in the Syrian provinces became significantly stronger compared to the Tanzimat period.

In the last quarter of the 19th century, the administrative system in the Syrian provinces gradually improved. In 1887–1888, new administrative-territorial reforms were implemented in the region. In particular, the Jerusalem sanjak² was again granted the status of a separate administrative district — a *mutasarriflik* — directly subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior. At the same time, the province of Beirut was reestablished, encompassing the coastal territories from Latakia in northern Syria to Haifa in the south, as well as the northern districts of Palestine (Nablus and Jenin).

By the early 20th century, Ottoman Syria had been administratively divided into three large provinces — Aleppo, Syria (Damascus), and Beirut — and three separate *mutasarrifliks*: Mount Lebanon (Jabal Lubnan), Jerusalem, and Deir ez-Zor. These administrative reorganizations during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II represented

¹ Kotlov, L.N. *The Formation of the National Liberation Movement in the Arab East (Mid-19th Century – 1908)*. Moscow, 1975. – P. 124–127.

² During the Ottoman period, the sanjak (in Turkish — "sancak") was an administrative division and represented a smaller territorial unit within a province.

consistent efforts by the central government to strengthen its control over the provinces, rationalize regional administration, and integrate local governance systems into the unified administrative policy of the empire.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the number of lower-level administrative units — *nahiyas* (subdistricts) in Syria increased significantly. In the early 19th century, however, there were no formal administrative structures either in the *nahiyas* or in the *qazas* (districts); all authority was concentrated in the hands of local *ayans* — influential community leaders³. By 1899, the province of Beirut consisted of 5 *sanjaks*, 21 *qazas*, and 49 *nahiyas*. The administrative system was organized hierarchically, with each level of authority strictly subordinated to the official above it. This indicates that by the late 19th century, the Ottoman administrative system had become more centralized, and local governance structures operated in close connection with the state apparatus.

As a result of these administrative and territorial changes, the provincial administration gained the ability to exercise stricter and more centralized control over nearly all aspects of social life. The central government also sought to deprive officials of their traditional privileges within the state structure. At the same time, one of the relative successes of the Ottoman administrative system in Syria during the second half of the 19th century was the significant improvement in public security and the near elimination of threats from Bedouin tribes. This becomes especially clear when compared with the situation in the early 19th century.

If in the late 18th and early 19th centuries many mountainous and plain regions of Palestine — including the Jezreel Valley and coastal areas — remained sparsely populated and economically weak due to frequent Bedouin raids, by the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries the situation had completely changed.

The English traveler Laurence Oliphant wrote the following about this situation: “Readers will be astonished to learn that almost every inch of the Jezreel Plain is now under active cultivation. One can travel freely across the entire plain without carrying weapons. On the southern edge, a small number of Bedouins still live in their black tents, but they no longer raid the villages. On the contrary, they themselves are plundered and driven away, as the new landowners demand that they pay in gold coins for the right to use the pastures. Thus, the inhabitants of the villages located on the plain now live in complete safety⁴.”

The strengthening of Ottoman administrative structures in the Syrian deserts was further reinforced by the establishment of the administrative center of Beersheba in southern Palestine in 1900, which held significant strategic importance. With the creation of this new administrative hub, the Ottoman provincial authorities began to act as active mediators in resolving land ownership and territorial disputes among the Bedouin tribes in southern Palestine and the Negev Desert. In particular, a clear example of such administrative activity

³ Gerber H. A New Look at the Tanzimat: The Case of the Province of Jerusalem. - Palestine in the Late Ottoman Period., - P. 188-210.

⁴ Oliphant L. Haifa or Life in Modern Palestine. Edinburgh, London, 1886. – P. 59.

was the dispatch of a special government commission from Jerusalem to Beersheba to resolve the conflict between the 'Azazma and Tiyaha tribes over the formal registration of land ownership at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries⁵.

Along with the establishment of the administrative center in Beersheba, the Bedouin tribal sheikhs began actively registering their lands through official legal procedures. At the same time, they started to rely on the patronage and legal protection of the Ottoman administrative structures whenever necessary. As a result of these processes, the sphere of influence of the central government in the region expanded, and tribal structures gradually entered a process of integration into the state administrative system. Thus, the activities of the Beersheba center are regarded as an important step by the Ottoman Empire toward ensuring political stability and administrative control in the desert regions of Syria and Palestine.

The policy toward the Bedouins was pursued consistently not only in the southern territories but also in northeastern Syria. In particular, in the province of Aleppo and the sanjak of Deir ez-Zor, the Ottoman administration compelled the Bedouin tribes to adopt a sedentary lifestyle through persuasion, economic pressure, and, when necessary, the threat of force. This process served as an essential component of the central government's broader political strategy to establish control over desert regions, expand taxation, and ensure military security.

The results of this policy are clearly confirmed by the 1880 report of the British consul in Aleppo. In his report, he wrote:

"In the areas closest to Aleppo live the Ferdun, Lahab, and Shehemi tribes. Recently, they have been compelled to take up agriculture. Although they still keep their tents to move short distances during the summer months for grazing their livestock, they have now completely abandoned their warlike and raiding habits. They have sold their warhorses and purchased animals suitable for farming instead. As a result, they are now fully obedient to Turkish authority, pay their taxes regularly, and there is not the slightest sign among them of any desire for independence⁶." This information shows that in the second half of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire succeeded in significantly expanding its sphere of political control over the desert regions by economically and socially integrating the Bedouins. Thus, the nomadic tribes gradually joined a sedentary, agriculture- and tax-based economic system, becoming an integral part of the centralized administrative order.

In the sanjak of Deir ez-Zor — established by the Ottoman authorities in northeastern Syria to encourage the local Bedouins to adopt a settled way of life — the British officer

⁵ Gerber H. A New Look at the Tanzimat: The Case of the Province of Jerusalem. - Palestine in the Late Ottoman Period., - P. - 188-210.

⁶ Issawi Ch. The Fertile Crescent, 1800-1914. N. Y. - Oxf., 1988. - P. 59.

Captain D. Stewart, in 1881, recorded the presence of dozens of villages, a system of regular tax collection by state officials, as well as gendarmerie and regular army units⁷.

The Ottoman influence also strengthened significantly in the mountainous regions of Palestine. In establishing order there, the decisive role belonged to the gendarmerie: "Turkish soldiers became like a plague for the Arab villages. Usually, just two soldiers were enough to keep an entire village in fear. They would arrive on horseback, carrying an order to arrest someone from among the villagers. The shaykh was obliged to hand over the person they demanded. Until he did so, the soldiers would remain in the village — consuming the villagers' food supplies, slaughtering their sheep, drinking sweet coffee, while their horses were fed with barley cleaned of chaff. All of this had to be provided daily by the villagers," wrote a contemporary observer of the events of the late 19th century⁸.

For comparison, it should be noted that in the 1850s, Ottoman administrative authority in these areas was barely noticeable. Under the supervision of the gendarmerie, the head of the village administration conducted elections, ensured the payment of taxes, registered land ownership, resolved minor disputes, and regularly reported all important events to higher authorities.

In the province of Syria, one of the prominent Ottoman statesmen who paid particular attention to issues of public security and order was Midhat Pasha⁹, who served as governor (vali) of the province between 1878 and 1880. On his initiative, the local public order system was reorganized, and new, efficient cavalry and infantry police as well as gendarmerie units were established. The members of these units received good salaries and presented themselves as disciplined state officials¹⁰.

Conclusion. The administrative reforms implemented in Syria during the reign of Abdulhamid II marked a profound turning point in the political, social, and institutional life of the Ottoman Empire, exerting a strong influence on the subsequent evolution of the imperial governance system. As a result of the reforms carried out during this period, the relationship between state administration, local authority, and central control acquired a new character. This, in turn, made it possible to maintain political stability in the Syrian provinces and ensure social balance among different strata of society.

The governing model of Abdulhamid II, often described by many researchers as "despotic" or "authoritarian," was in fact a firm political strategy aimed at preserving state stability, shaped in consideration of the geopolitical and domestic conditions of the time. This policy sought to strengthen effective administrative mechanisms not only in the

⁷ Issawi Ch. *The Fertile Crescent, 1800-1914*. N. Y. - Oxf., 1988. - P. 64.

⁸ Gerber H. *A New Look at the Tanzimat: The Case of the Province of Jerusalem*. - *Palestine in the Late Ottoman Period*, P. - 188-210.

⁹ After returning from exile in 1878, Midhat Pasha was appointed governor of Syria, and in 1880 he was transferred to the position of governor of Izmir. Later, he was arrested and accused of organizing the murder of Sultan Abdulaziz, who had been deposed in 1876.

¹⁰ Fadeeva, I.L. *Midhat Pasha: Life and Activities*. Moscow, 1977. - P. 104-110.

empire's central regions but also in distant provinces such as Syria, Palestine, and the Hijaz — all of which were of great strategic importance.

Sultan Abdulhamid II pursued his policies by relying on the institutional legacy of the reforms initiated during the Tanzimat period. Through the modernization of the central administration, strengthening real control over the provinces, renewing the bureaucratic apparatus, and integrating local elites into state service, he expanded the sphere of central influence. As a result, the system of governance in Syria underwent a complete transformation. In particular, tax collection became more stable, anti-corruption measures gained seriousness, infrastructure (roads, telegraph lines, administrative buildings) developed significantly, and a cadre of qualified officials emerged within the local administration.