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Nora Lafi

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Asma Moalla

The Regency of Tunis and the Ottoman Porte, 1777-1814: Army and government of a North-Africa Ottoman eyalet at the end of the eighteenth century

London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004

Reviewed By Nora Lafi (ZMO Berlin)

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With “*The Regency of Tunis and the Ottoman Porte*” Asma Moalla has written a detailed and thoroughly convincing study of the army and government in this Ottoman province at the turn of the eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries. This is the Husaynid period, and the time of pasha-bey Hammûda (1777-1814) which is marked by a peculiar evolution of the relation between Western province and its central administration in Istanbul. But this book is also an occasion to contribute to new interpretative frameworks about the Ottoman Empire and its provinces, Tunisia in particular.

While the existing historiography has tended to insist on what the author calls the “autonomy thesis”, present research has to re-examine interpretative schemes on the relation of provinces with Empire, even in the case of provinces ruled by a local dynasty. The over-estimation of political autonomy had different reasons and ideological backgrounds, ranging from a justification of colonial rule to a necessity to strengthen nationalism after independence. It also had a methodological reason: the separation between Ottoman studies and Maghreb studies and the lack of a combined use of local and imperial archives for the writing of the history of this region. Asma Moalla clearly intends to insert her work in the current methodological renewal in Maghreb studies and largely succeeds in doing so with this book.

One of the author’s most important contributions in enlarging the historical panorama of Tunisia is the use of local chronicles. Plenty of studies have already been written from the perspective of the chronicles of foreign travellers. While the author acknowledges this literature, she has chosen to broaden the view by the use of Arabic chronicles, such as Muhammad Abî Dînâr (XVIIth c.), Muhammad al-Wazîr al-Sarrâj al-Andalusî, Muhammad al-Saghîr, Hammûda ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azîz, Ahmad ibn Abî’l-Diyâf (XVIIIth. C.) and Muhammad Bayram al-Khâmis (XIXth. c.). Asma Moalla stresses the fact that these sources, when used, have been read in a way which favoured the autonomy thesis, as the writers of the chronicles were often directly working for the local dynasty. Her intention to re-examine this interpretation generates broader questioning on the spirit of administration. One has to stress the accuracy and pertinence of the intent.

But one could have also expected another step in this process of re-examination: the use of more local administrative archives and, most of all, the use of central Ottoman archives, which surely constitutes the next horizon for this kind of work. Asma Moalla’s book is nevertheless an important contribution to the historiographical opening of Tunisia to the Ottoman studies. Her book is composed of two main parts, and seven chapters. The first part, composed of two chapters, is conceived as a “prologue”, and is a presentation of the general history of the province of Tunisia between its integration into the Ottoman Empire (1574) and 1777, date of the beginning of the reign of Hammûda Pasha. Here the author recalls the main phases of this history, and proposes some new interpretations, based upon an analysis of the meaning of the notion of *eyalet* and the reading of the relationship between the Tunisian army (*jund*) and Istanbul at the occasion of the 1591 uprising. Asma Moalla shows how this event was auspicious for the Ottoman government to set up a new policy in the Maghreb: “it is, therefore, more plausible to assume that the post-1591 administrative order was essentially devised and edicted by the Porte itself, though it took into consideration the claims of the rebel *jund*” (p. 12). She insists that what has been translated as

Regency in the European sources of the time, and has been accepted unquestioningly by the historiography ever since, was called in Ottoman words *eyâlet mümtâze*, or privileged province.

Asma Moalla then proceeds to describe in a convincing way how this new order existed not in separation from the Empire. Although granted the right to an autonomous army and the exemption from directly contributing to the central fiscal system, the province was still considered as Ottoman and had a series of duties, including participation in Ottoman military campaigns and the fight against “Christian fleets”. This interpretation, which complies with present trends in the historiography of the Maghreb, is very important. But even if this period is not the main focus of the author, it could have benefited from a reading of both local and central administrative archives.

One could try to go further with the reinterpretation of the post-1591 administrative scheme using the concept of *Ancien régime* governance[i]: the fact that the imperial government granted special privileges to a province or a town still makes them fully part of the system, and in no way negates the system. It was in fact common practice to devolve power in the two main domains of the central government competence – fiscal matters and army regulation. A defining feature of Ottoman policy, other provinces of the Empire were also granted such privileges. When Greek inhabitants of Rhodes for example were granted fiscal privileges, and the right not to participate in the Ottoman warfare, the logic was the same: the construction of a viable Ottoman system, whose very substance was to take into account local situations. The interpretations of the meaning of this system for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries do not necessarily have to be compatible with the dismantling of the system during the next two centuries under the pressure of both nationalisms and European imperialism. Asma Moalla’s book has to be praised for permitting an insertion of Tunisia in such an interpretative scheme.

The second part of her book, and object of her main research, focuses on the reign of Hammûda Pasha. Asma Moalla has chosen the army, the general administration and fiscal policy to examine the relation between Tunis and Istanbul. Her description of the “estrangement and reconciliation” process during the last decades of the eighteenth century is very convincing: she shows how military matters were objects of a precise rhetoric playing on belonging vs. autonomy, and that local rulers were aware of how far they could go in pushing this rhetoric. Participation in imperial warfare, the use of symbols and parallel diplomacy were avenues in which Hammûda Pasha negotiated his own situation *vis à vis* the empire. What Asma Moalla successfully shows is that the whole game is Ottoman in substance. The author also shows how provincial armies were used against one another in order to restore imperial order, as in the case of the Tunisian-Algerian war of 1807, and how this Ottoman way of governing the empire was both successful and dangerous for the cohesion of the whole system. Asma Moalla’s interpretation of the 1811 janissary rebellion in Tunis as a local expression of the weakness of the central power following the death of Selim III is also well argued, as is her reading of the way in which European powers (France and England first) take profit of the defects of Ottoman imperial governance in a time of doubts to pervert the system.

Chapter 4 is about the Pasha, under a dynastical and symbolical perspective. Asma Moalla’s analysis of the *application* procedure and of *investiture* ceremonies is important: the author succeeds in replacing it in an Ottoman interpretative scheme, and tries to read every element found in chronicles under the perspective of the rhetoric of autonomy/belonging. Signs of sovereignty and signs of submission are accurately combined. The use of court *étiquette* as an indicator of general trends in the provincial governance is very convincing, and reveals the *meticulousness* of the Ottoman government in what it allowed and not, and how local rulers were aware of this rule. Iconographic documentation would have been useful to highlight this process, but her method is innovative. The author does the same demonstration with a reading of the role of the *mamlûk* which succeeds in going further than traditional *pittoresque* interpretations: beyond a presentation of their various geographical origins, their role in the administration is stressed in a precise way. Asma Moalla aims at understanding the whole system, and is aware of the risk of giving too much importance to the *pittoresque*. The enormous respect of the Pasha Bey for the symbol of the imperial bread (he eats the daily ration his sultan gives to its soldiers) is seen by the author as representative of the importance in local rule of imperial “belonging.” Her interpretation of this fact (p. 85) – echoes of which she found in chronicles – constitutes one of the most beautiful moments of the book.

The description of the organisation of the army of the province of Tunisia (chapter 5) is more classical, but also allows further interpretative steps. The main achievement of the research is the fact that “the structure of the Tunisian *jund* was, to a remarkable extent, a reproduction of its Istanbul model” (p. 90). Asma Moalla successfully illustrates the convergence between Tunis and Istanbul through her analysis of both the military vocabulary and the very organization of the army. Her attention to linguistic details – based on profound knowledge of Arabic – and the effort of juxtaposing *osmanli* equivalents is to be praised. Even if more attention could have been paid to recruitment, the various components of the army (Janissaries, *zūwāwa*, “tribal cavalry”) are described precisely in their organization and their relation to the power. Most interesting is the attention to the privileges conferred by belonging to one corps or another. This introduces an element of interpretation for the whole administrative system, the description of which is the object of chapter 6.

The administration was divided into two sections: the *dīwān al-hisbān*, which Asma Moalla interestingly translates as “accountancy”, and the *dīwān al-inshā*, “the chancery” (p. 108). She describes the role and provinces of the main figures in the administration. The *sabīb al-tābi*, guardian of the seal, was in charge of the relation with the Porte, of military actions, and the supervision of functionaries and officials. This position granted comfortable revenues. The *bash kātib* acted as a general secretary, and the Malekite *kātib* were generally members of notable families serving in the beylical administration. The aim of Asma Moalla’s description of this administrative order is not to just repeat what had already been described, and instead try to link what she finds for Tunis to an Ottoman parallel. This is part of her method, aiming at a discussion of the autonomy thesis, and the result is very convincing: the described system is a local derivative of the Ottoman order.

As for the provincial administration, Asma Moalla’s explanation of the role of tribal instances and local shaykhs shows well the insertion of traditional forms of governance into the description of the whole evolving administrative system. But this part is not the object of an archival focus, and relies on the reading of existing documentation. It does not always succeed in going further than what has already been written, especially for urban governance, for which the description of the shaykhs as representing the tribal order can not fully apply. The very analysis of urban government in its relation to provincial and central powers could have been an occasion to find an organizational link between the tribal dimension and state building. In cities, especially Tunis, urban governance has known an evolution during this period which reflects the setting of another aspect of the Ottoman rule: the relation with local *élites*, notables and guilds. This is not the object of Asma Moalla’s book, but one could have hoped that having successfully updated interpretations related to the army and the central administration, she would have applied the same method to lower ranges of the administrative and social ladder.

The seventh chapter on the revenues of the beylical treasury is an innovative presentation of this aspect of governance for the province, and the base for rewarding comparisons. The presentation is clear and relies on a systematic list of traces of specific taxes into archives and chronicles. As for the army, this is an occasion to compare with the Ottoman system. Asma Moalla successfully demonstrates that the fiscal system which was applied in Tunis fitted the Ottoman frame. Very interesting is the description of taxes on rural land and agricultural production, and the effort to link these taxes to the social order. The description of taxes applied to production and sales is also accurately identified as the ones setting the relations with Christian traders. The only lacuna in Moalla’s interpretation of this system is, once again, related to the urban condition.

Generally speaking, this book is a very important contribution to Tunisian historiography. It exemplifies the opening to new trends in the analysis of the Ottoman period, marking a break with colonial and nationalistic literatures (the second having often been very closely aligned with the first). The Regency of Tunis is presented by Asma Moalla in an innovative way: her use of new sources and new readings of already known documents related to the case of Tunis raise some new questions regarding new trends in the Ottoman historiography more generally. Asma Moalla has shown that Tunis could be read as part of the Ottoman Empire. New developments in her work and in the new Tunisian historiography in general could benefit from collaboration with Ottoman historiography, both in method and content: the use of central ottoman archival documents, the practice of comparison, at both an imperial and local to local scale, and a discussion of broader concepts on governance, administrative history, reform, old *régime*

and modernity.

Nora Lafi is a fellow of the Working Group on Modernity and Islam (Wissenschaftskolleg Berlin). She collaborates in research activities of the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Berlin.

i[i] On the elaboration of the concept in an European context, see: Berengo (Marino), *L'Europa delle città. Il volto della società urbana europea tra Medioevo e Età moderna*, Turin, Einaudi, 1999; and Bély (Lucien), *Dictionnaire de l'Ancien Régime*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1996. A discussion on the pertinence of the concept (and its limits) in an Islamic context is part of present trends in the interpretation of Ottoman governance and in methodological debates in this field.