

The Middle East & North Africa (MENA) and the Balkans: Challenges of Transformation

Sofia, 13th – 15th December 2012

Contact between the Balkans and the Middle East & North Africa in Ottoman Times: Socio-Economic and Demographic Aspects

Svetla Ianeva*

During a long period of over three centuries (from the mid-16th to the late 19th century) the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa belonged to one and the same political and economic entity: the Ottoman Empire. The Balkans were integrated into the empire from 1361 to 1481 while the Ottoman conquest of Arab lands began in 1517 and came to an end in the 1570s. Combining macro-historical with the micro-historical approaches, I will consider the questions of the economic relations between the regions under examination during Ottoman times from a long term perspective, the related demographic phenomena (such as migration between the two regions) and, to the extent possible, some contemporary dimensions of these past interrelations.

The Ottoman Empire extended its territories across three continents and its economy during the classical period was a vast and, to a great extent, self-sufficient world-economy under the strict control of the state. The main principles of regulation of economic activity, which first and foremost entailed the provisioning of the army, the palace and the numerous populations of the empire (more than 22 million people since the end of the 16th century), applied to the empire's entire territory. Control was performed through direct supervision by state officials as well as through corporative organisations such as guilds and rural communities. In this respect, I shall point out that while the origins of Ottoman guilds remain a question of debate among scholars, they all agree on amazing uniformity in the hierarchical structure and economic and social functions of guilds all across the empire and, thus, in the two regions under examination as well.

Trade Relations in Ottoman times: A Macro-Historical Picture

From the 16th to the mid-18th centuries, commercial relations between the different Ottoman regions on the internal imperial market were of crucial importance for the functioning of the empire and its economy while international exchange played a secondary role. This situation changed in the late 18th and the 19th centuries with the gradual incorporation of different Ottoman regions and economic sectors into the modern world economy. Still, according to recent evaluations, the volume of inter-regional exchange within the empire always remained superior to that of international trade, even in the 19th century. For example, in 1862, the volume of goods with provenance from other regions of the

The Middle East & North Africa (MENA) and the Balkans: Challenges of Transformation

Sofia, 13th – 15th December 2012

empire in Damascus was five times the volume of imports from abroad. Despite the growing importance of foreign merchants in the internal imperial market, inter-regional exchange remained mainly in the hands of Ottoman merchants. In the 19th century, trade connections between imperial regions were facilitated by the abolishment of internal custom duties as well as the development of transport communications.

The shortlist of only the main products exchanged between the regions in Ottoman times shows an impressive variety. From Egypt came coffee (re-exported from Yemen), rice, sugar, beans, linen, flax, dates, safflower, ammonia, hides and wheat. In return, Egypt took from the other provinces goods such as fabrics, furs, tobacco, iron, arms, timber, firewood, soap, raw silk and dried fruit. In Syrian provinces, textiles, wood, furs and arms came from Anatolia and the Balkans. The fez produced in Tunisia were exported and worn all across the empire. Silk cloth from Bursa, Tokat, Amasya and other Anatolian locales were traded in other Ottoman provinces alongside skins from Konya, mohair from Ankara, tanned lather from Kayseri, copper from Tokat, and hazelnuts, dried fruit and ceramic tiles from Kütahia. Central Balkan lands exported to other Ottoman regions raisins, wine, tobacco, wool, furs, metals, horseshoes and other ironwork, raw silk, beeswax and rough woolen clothing while the Western Balkans (Albania and Bosnia) exported muskets and other arms, leather and ironwork. Wheat was exchanged among the regions depending on local harvests.

Extensive caravan routes connected the different regions, and the main trade centres and market places on these roads brought together merchants from various provinces of the empire. As such, Bursa was a very important trade centre on the Silk Road. Here Genoese, Florentine, Iranian, as well as Ottoman (Arab, Armenian, Greek, Turk, Jewish) merchants met to trade silk, fine woolen, cotton and silk cloths, mohair, camel wool, fish, wax, pepper and other spices, ceramics, leather, etc. The market of Cairo was also very important in the inter-regional commercial relations between the Maghreb, Anatolia, the Balkans and the Red sea region, crucial for the provisioning of Hejaz with wheat and the import of coffee from Yemen. The port city of Izmir was, like Cairo, a crossroad of caravan and maritime routes where merchants from the two regions as well as Europe met. Other important inter-regional commercial centres were Aleppo in northern Syria (the crossroad of four main caravan routes), Tripoli and Beirut in southern Syria, and Tunis in the Maghreb. In the custom registers of the cities of Kafa and Azov on the north Black Sea coast, located on the so called "Tatar Road", as well as in those of Akerman on the "Moldavian Road," the commercial activity of Genoese, Greek, Armenian, Jewish, Anatolian and Middle Eastern (especially from Bursa and from Syria) merchants is recorded. They had engaged in inter-regional as well international trade and were particularly active on the Bursa-Istanbul-Black sea sections of these trade roads. Also, their activity was quite important for south-north commercial connections within the empire and the provisioning of the capital. The Ottoman capital was not only a huge

The Middle East & North Africa (MENA) and the Balkans: Challenges of Transformation

Sofia, 13th – 15th December 2012

consumption centre but also the crossroad of almost all the trade roads and the core of the Ottoman world economy.¹

Alongside these year round functioning commercial centres where people from the different regions of the Ottoman Empire met on a daily basis, (which was very important for the contacts examined), big fairs were organised usually once a year. According to the famous 17th century traveler, Evliya Çelebi, at the Doliani (Ustrumca) fair in the Balkans (located between present-day Petrich and Strumitsa), thousands of merchants from "the seven climates on land and sea" – Rumelia (the European provinces of the empire), the Arab lands, Persia, India, Samarqand, Bukhara, Egypt, Syria and Iraq, and Europe – met every year during the "season of the cherries" to exchange their various goods.² The fairs were the most important inter-regional exchange places for not only goods but also ideas, information and professional experience, which largely explains the many similarities in the commercial practices of merchants all across the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa including, for example, the most popular forms of business partnerships practiced, *mudarraba* and *inan*.

While the interventionist and provisionist economic policy of the Ottomans could be considered to certain extent as limiting to free initiative, the lack of political frontiers within *pax ottomanica* as well as the existence of very large custom zones within the empire and the moderate rates of internal custom duties (abolished furthermore in the late 1830s) were certainly favorable to inter-regional trade. Access to the huge imperial market was quite easy to economic subjects from all the provinces. Also, with the absence of serfdom, this resulted in the professional migratory movement of not only merchants but also some craftsmen despite economic and demographic consequences.

Professional Migration between the Two Regions in the 18th and 19th Centuries: A Microhistorical Perspective

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, many craftsmen – tailors of coarse woolen clothes called *abacı* migrated seasonally from the central part of the Ottoman Balkans to Anatolia, Syria and Egypt to sell their goods. They benefited from a very large, almost unlimited market because these clothes were traditionally worn by most of the rural male population in the empire. Some of the *abacı*s who were entrepreneurial enough to export their produce to distant markets were registered in their guild registers (as for example in the register of the Plovdiv *abacı* guild) as well as the chronicle of the local archbishop with family names deriving from the cities they visited on a regular basis to sell their goods.³ Family names such as Izmirli, Bursalı, Amasalı, Kaiserili, Erzerumlu, Tokatlı, Aidınlı, Diarbakırlı, Halepli, Mısırlı, Şamlı (from Şam, Damascus), Arabistana and Arabogları⁴ clearly indicate the professional relation of these *abacı*s to the respective imperial markets in the Middle East and North Africa. As it is well known, the Turkish suffix "lı" is used to indicate a person's place of origin, so it is

The Middle East & North Africa (MENA) and the Balkans: Challenges of Transformation

Sofia, 13th – 15th December 2012

interesting that in this case that identification with the cities to which the *abacıs* were connected by business relations was even stronger than identification with their places of origin. While most of these craftsmen migrated seasonally, during the spring, summer and autumn months (nine months altogether), for the market realisation of their production (alongside their journeymen and apprentices, using every stop on the road to complete semi-finished clothes) and spent the winter in their home towns (e.g. Koprivshtitsa, Karlovo, Kalofer, Plovdiv, Sliven, etc.) tailoring the woollen clothes, there were also some masters *abacıs* who established shops and workshops in some of the distant locations of export in the Middle East and North Africa.

This was the case of Ivan Madjarov and his partner, Doncho Palaveev, who were from the small Balkan town, Koprivshtitsa, and in the mid-19th century, founded the so called "Mısır Company." The company produced and exported coarse woollen (*aba*) clothing, woollen socks and slippers from the Central Balkans as well as the regions of Salonika and Serres), *külahs* from Bursa, and some other, mainly textile, articles to Egypt. The commodities were transported by land to Gallipoli, then by sea to Alexandria, and then either by boat along the Nile River or by train in the interior of Egypt. By the 1840s, Madjarov had produced *aba* clothing in his home town and exported them to the Ottoman capital where he usually resold them to Egyptian merchants who then traded them in the Arab provinces of the empire. In the 1850s, the company established an office in the Ottoman capital and a workshop in Chorapchi Han. Madjarov gradually realized that the notorious interest of Egyptian merchants in his goods was a sign of the great potential of the markets in the North African region and undertook the venture of trying to conquer this unknown and distant but promising market. The main seat of the company during the late 1850s, the 1860s and the 1870s became Cairo, where the partners established a wholesale shop in Halil Han through which production from the Central Balkans passed into the hands of merchants from Arab provinces and Bukhara in addition to two shops for retail trade for the local customers. The company also had a branch in Alexandria that was run by two former journeymen of Madjarov and Palaveev. Its most prosperous years were during the digging of the Suez channel when local demand nearly doubled. Moreover, the company had established commission agencies in Serres, Salonika and Bursa. It was a rather big and decentralised enterprise (with, as we have seen, agencies located on three different continents) that engaged on the whole nearly 100 permanent workers and about the same number of seasonal workers and whose production was entirely destined to the North African and Middle Eastern markets. From the late 1860s on, it suffered from the competition of the import of modern European articles to Ottoman markets, and although it tried to adjust to the new fashions and economic conjuncture (by importing European textiles and organising the tailoring in Koprivshtitsa of "*alafranga*" clothes for, again, export to Egypt) together with the establishment of political and custom frontiers in the Balkans as well as the new

The Middle East & North Africa (MENA) and the Balkans: Challenges of Transformation

Sofia, 13th – 15th December 2012

professional orientation of the partners' heirs, the company started to decline and ended its economic activity in the late 1870s.

According to the memoirs of Mihail Madjarov (Ivan Madjarov's son, who visited Cairo and Alexandria in the late 1860s, reaching the Egyptian coast via Izmir), the Bulgarian colony in Alexandria at that time consisted of fifty to sixty people, mostly milkmen, some of whom even imported buffalo cows from the European provinces of the empire (transported to Egypt by steam boats). The Greek colony in that town was flourishing and well-organised and had its own schools. There was another Bulgarian company with a seat in Cairo at the time, whose three members originated from Koprivshtitsa. Exported mainly *abaci* articles and spirits to Abyssinia (present-day Ethiopia and parts of Eritrea) and smuggling weapons there, this company had a branch in Massawa (on the Red sea) and imported from there ivory and ostrich feathers to Egypt.⁵ A registration in the chronicle of the Plovdiv archbishop indicates the partition of property between partners at the end of the 18th century, the establishment of a permanent seat of a Bulgarian *abaci* company in the Middle East, this time in Damascus, with branches in other Syrian cities.⁶ If the settlement of Bulgarians in Middle Eastern and North African cities in Ottoman times was still rather exceptional, we should bear in mind the numerous and economically active Greek colonies that were present in several cities in the region (such as Cairo and Alexandria) and that provided for animated economic relations between the two regions under examination.

On the other hand, two independent and reliable sources – the "Memorial of the Christian population of the city of Plovdiv according to oral testimonies" by Konstantin Moravenov, written in 1869 and the register of the *abaci* guild of Plovdiv from the beginning of the 19th century – testify to the settlement of a master *abaci* from Syria in Plovdiv whose name was Hacı Kiriak Melkon. He eventually became head of the *abaci* guild of Plovdiv and was re-elected as such for a period of almost ten years, from 1811 to 1820 (which is really quite impressive). He was a Syrian Christian, probably an Armenian, and was invited by his friends – *abacis* from Plovdiv who were visiting his home-land for their trade and with whom he had *alış-veriş* (commercial relations) – and was co-opted in the local craft corporation. His case seems to confirm the existence of close commercial links sometimes leading to professional migratory movement between the two Ottoman regions under examination. Hacı Kiriak Melkon married a local woman and had a son who later became member of the Plovdiv *abaci* guild as well and two daughters, one of whom married a local Greek doctor, Georgaki, that had studied in Europe and the other an Arab *abaci* from Damascus.⁷

What can we learn from this almost forgotten common past of the two regions? Between the mid-16th and the late 19th centuries, within the Ottoman realm, trade relations between the Balkans and the Middle East and North Africa were enduring and quite intense and migration, often professionally motivated, were not an unusual phenomenon. The political disintegration of the Ottoman Empire

The Middle East & North Africa (MENA) and the Balkans: Challenges of Transformation

Sofia, 13th – 15th December 2012

and the globalisation of economy did not result in the immediate disintegration of economic relations between the two regions; and the potential of inter-regional exchange remained immense and is arguably still present. While we are not about to abolish the political frontiers, the example of large custom zones and moderate custom policies could be probably considered. This is also applicable to the importance of individual (often professional) migration that we observe nowadays and private economic initiative for the strengthening of interrelations as well as the transfer and exchange of all kinds of experience, know-how, ways of life and ideas.

**Associate Professor at the Department of History, New Bulgarian University and member of the editorial board of Turkish Historical Review and of CIEPO (Comité des études pré-ottomanes et ottomans or the "International Committee for Pre-Ottoman and Ottoman Studies").*

Endnotes

¹H. Inalcık and D. Quataert eds. (1994) *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire 1300–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 218–255; 271–314; 474–519

²E. Çelebi *Seyahatname* (translation by S. Dimitrov, 1972) (Sofia: Otechestven front), pp. 277–280.

³ N. Todorov (1972) *Balkanskiat grad XV-XIX vek* (Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo), p. 201.

⁴ For example: Petko Izmirli, Dimitar Izmirli, Georgi Izmirli, hacı Mihal Izmirli, hacı Atanas Izmirli, Kosta Tokatlı, Stefan Tokatlı, Tanas Tokatlı, Ioan Kaiserli, Anastas Kaiserli, Ivan Kaisarlia, Kiprian Kaisarli, Ivan son of hacı Sefer Kaisarlia, Triandafil Halepli, Sirin Aidınlı, Mihail Amashali, Sava Amashali, Georgui Amashiali, Anastas Amashalia, Ivan Amashlia, Dimitar Amashali, Andon Amashali, Kiriak Amashali, Yani Amashali, Kostan Bursalı, hacı Vasil Bursalı, hacı Yani son of hacı Georgi Manisalı, Kiriak, son of Petar Diarbekirli, celebi Yanako Diarbekirli, Stavri Arabogları, Arabistana, Lazar Hristov Chamli. See: 'Kondika na Plovdivskia abadjiiski esnaf', translated by M. Apostolidis and A. Peev (1930), *Godishnik na Narodnata biblioteka i muzei v Plovdiv*, Vol. 3, pp. 6, 11, 13, 18, 29, 30, 31, 37, 45, 46, 48, 49, 50, 51, 53, 54, 60, 69, 71, 72, 75, 81, 86, 99, 102, 106, 148, 162, 163.

⁵M. Madjarov (2004) *Spomeni* (Sofia: Damian Yakov), 66–73; 121–130.

⁶Todorov (1972), p. 201.

⁷K. Moravenov (1984) *Pamiatnik na plovdivskoto hristiansko naselenie, 1869* (Plovdiv: Hristo G. Danov), pp. 30–31; 'Kondika', pp. 119–120, 129, 136, 144, 150.

Al Jazeera Center for Studies

Copyright © 2013, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, All rights reserved.