

From 'brothers in religion' to 'bandits': Chechens in Mardin in the late Ottoman period

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During the nineteenth century, the Ottoman state experienced considerable difficulties in maintaining complete control of both its governance and its territories. The state therefore focused on modernising its military capabilities, as well as establishing its bureaucracy and state structure as an attempt to shore up these weaknesses. From the time of Selim III (1779–1807), the state sought to focus on improving its military capacity in order to withstand the might of hostile European powers. The Ottoman elites were also aware that the Ottoman state could not survive with the existing structure, and thus considered reform vital to maintaining the empire. In addition to the threat from external military conflicts the Ottoman state was also vulnerable because of the spread of nationalist ideas, coupled with deficits in its economy and an incompetent bureaucracy. The Russian conquest of the North Caucasus during the middle of the nineteenth century also resulted in major problems for the state, in particular the mass movement of refugees to Ottoman lands.

During this period, various North Caucasian groups, totalling over a million individuals, moved to the Ottoman Empire, commencing from the early 1860s and during the post-Russian-Ottoman War of 1877–78 and the late 1880s.¹ The majority of these people were Circassians, along with a number of Abkhazians, Chechens, Dagestanis and Ossetians. This current article examines one from among this group – the Chechens – and their journey to the Ottoman Empire, focusing particularly on those eventually settling in the Mardin region. The article shall also give a brief overview of their journey, which commenced in the North Caucasus and followed the Batum, Ardahan, Çıldır, Kars, Erzurum and Mardin route.

One could say that the Ottoman state aimed to place the Chechens on its south eastern frontier since taxation, security and state control were not as successful as the state had hoped for in the post-*Tanzimat* era in the region. By taking this step, the Ottoman state could increase its tax income and provide security for further agricultural production and refugee settlement in the region. As far as could be seen from Ottoman state archival sources, the Ottoman state did not have a consistent policy to settle refugees in its territory. Following the ever-increasing number of refugees arriving in the Ottoman Empire, the state used certain policies to organize those refugees who arrived for its own advantage. Some of the *muhacirs* were settled in areas where there were problems,² others were settled in areas to balance the Muslim-Christian populations or increase the number of Muslim people in areas where Muslims were disproportionately represented,³ and some such as the Chechens were settled on the frontiers so that the Ottomans could maintain control of the region in terms of security, finance and providing order. It must be stressed that the state expected loyalty from these *muhacirs* as the state was a Caliphate which showed benevolence to the Muslim peoples who were arriving. To increase the financial stability of the region and attain sustainable financial benefit from the refugees, the Ottoman state was to execute a host of policies. These included providing agricultural tools