

## The role of Ottoman ulema in peaceful conflict resolution

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There were different groups that undertook the role of mediator between the rulers and the ruled at diverse times and under diverse conditions in the Ottoman Empire. These intermediary elites were great potential allies of the rulers and were placed in centers of political and social power, especially in provincial areas of the empire. These intermediary elites fulfilled important functions in providing public order in the Ottoman Empire. According to Albert Hourani, three groups in the nineteenth century undertook the role of mediation to maintain public order and provide the obedience of subjects to the center.<sup>1</sup> The first were leaders of local garrisons. Since they had direct contact with the armed forces, the government needed them greatly. These leaders acted on the direct orders of the government. They served as both military bodies and organizations of provincial stabilization, defending the central government's interests. If the number of battalions was inadequate, the second and third groups of mediators working on behalf of the government came into the political spectrum as part of traditional actors. The second there were secular notables known as *ayan*, *aghas*, or *amirs* (*landlords*) who had their own autonomy and official, semi-governmental character. The power of these individuals and families came from political and military tradition or, for some big families, from control over the agricultural production, the possession of *malikanes*, or the supervision of the *waqfs* (*pious foundation*). The third group was the *ilmiye* class whose power was derived from their religious position.<sup>2</sup> They were well-educated scholars, muftis, and jurists and were the only group that could confer legitimacy to the government thanks to their divine knowledge and Quranic discourse.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the ulema's leadership did not come from military force in contrast with the members of other ruling-class institutions.<sup>4</sup> Their power rested upon just religion, which provided them with general recognition and respect.<sup>5</sup> In the realm of mediation, these three groups played certain roles – as leaders and intermediaries – in closing the gap between the government and the rest of society at different times. The central authority directly maintained interaction with these groups and persisted with the help of these different kinds of local, notable groups. These groups continued their legacies in administrative areas in the empire throughout the nineteenth century as a result of their mediatory function. In this context, this article draws attention to the fundamental, rising role of ulema as an intermediary in dispute resolutions which accompanied the increasing reliance of government on alternatives to military force in the nineteenth century.

The maintenance of order became more significant because it played a crucial role in the imperial decision-making process of the centralized government's decisions. This process was more complex and multidimensional than the standard narratives of Ottoman historiography. Despite numerous works of mainstream historiography on *ilmiye* and ulema, the literature on the Ottoman ulema is far from comprehensive as far as the true place and function of the ulema during the nineteenth century. In the current historiography, most works focus on the paradigm of the declining power of the ulema in the nineteenth century, concentrating on increasing secularism in the empire, the ulema's loss of political and social autonomy, and the rise of modern,

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western forms of education as alternatives to traditional madrasa education.<sup>6</sup> In these studies, the ulema are represented approximately as conservative instructors of Islamic religion, and they have a deeply-rooted tendency to conceptualize the ulema as a traditionalist opposition to the reform movements of the Tanzimat period. The narrative shared by these studies is bereft of any analysis of archival documents. However, this study is an examination of the Ottoman ulema's role in the context of everyday nineteenth-century social life through analysis of primary sources found in the Prime Ministry Ottoman Archive. It also differs significantly from earlier studies on the Ottoman ulema's power with respect to its unconventional approach to the questions and different answers and standpoints vis-à-vis the same questions. In contrast to the one-sidedness of previous studies, this study aims to depict the roles of ulema in formal and social life to generate a complex picture of *ilmiye* members. This article shows that the ulema expanded its position and role by becoming the voice of the rural population and an effective partner of the central government in the nineteenth century. In contrast to the extant literature which mostly overlooks the ulema's actual role in the peaceful conflict resolution processes during the reform period, this study will explain the survival of ulema as both state agents and religious leaders in contrast to the narration of ulema that has largely been on the basis of a decline paradigm.

Most studies about state and province relations in the Ottoman Empire describe the Ottoman central state as the most powerful authority and every province depends on the central state. Many historians agree with this classical understanding and ignore other social groups and peripheral forces in the Ottoman Empire exclusively. Until recently, previous mainstream studies have not, with a few exceptions, provided data in terms of multiple agencies and power relations between central government and regional actors. But in the past decade new approaches of Ottoman historians to state and province aim to criticize this understanding of state power and the position of other provincial networks. They focus on provincial society by asking new questions about the nature of the central state and the regional alliance network of the state in the Ottoman provinces. These historians enable us to study critically new insights and deeper understanding of Ottoman provincial history.<sup>7</sup> For instance, Abdülhamid Kırmızı is asking new questions about the relationship of capital to province and how governors actually practiced in the provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The power struggle between provincial governors and the central government was defined by Kırmızı as one of the most significant developments of the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire. Kırmızı also arrives at a conclusion that the central government could strengthen its authority in the provinces thanks to close contact and cooperation with local powers.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, John Bragg asserts that the central government needed the notables' support in order to reach its provinces and consolidate state power, so the central elite strategically incorporated the notables into new institutions of provincial government.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, our study aims to make new interpretations of state and society relations by uncovering broader patterns of Ottoman ulema.

In this regard, the present study diverges from conventional Ottoman historiography in at least two respects. First, it identifies the impact of the ulema's key role in enhancing government capacity in rural regions of the empire by describing the relations between the center, provincial administrative systems, and society. Second, it sheds light on how the ulema served as a government mechanism to consolidate social and religious order, especially in the peripheral territories of the empire in the nineteenth century. I will therefore examine the multidirectional mediatory role of ulema in this study through analyses of Ottoman archival documents. The ulema's religious prestige and the respect they commanded allowed them to provide final resolutions to conflicts in many uprisings. This examination of Ottoman ulema's role in peaceful conflict resolution will better explain the ulema at the peripheral level, especially in the late nineteenth century.

Undoubtedly, religion was one of the most effective factors preserving imperial unity during the nineteenth century, as in almost every period. The religious leaders were also generally one of the most influential groups in government that could affect society and had the power to

