

Sharif, Malek: *Imperial norms and local realities. The Ottoman municipal laws and the municipality of Beirut (1860 - 1908)*. Würzburg: Ergon Verlag 2014. ISBN: 978-3-89913-997-6; 258 S.

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Before publishing his recent book, Malek Sharif has published a varied collection of articles about medicine in the late Ottoman times.¹ He has also co-edited with Christoph Herzog in 2010 a collective volume on the Ottoman parliament in which he published a study on the Syrian representatives.² The current book is widely recognized as an important effort at revising perceptions of the late Ottoman era not only for understanding the local echo of the imperial constitutional reforms in the provinces but also for reflecting on the multicultural construction of parliamentary debates in Istanbul during the constitutional period.

The work that is discussed here, which emerges from a dissertation presented at FU Berlin in 2004, is an attempt at revising perceptions on local administration and imperial impulses during the era of the Ottoman reforms of the second half of the 19th century with a focus on the municipality of Beirut. The main thesis is that there is a stronger convergence between the imperial promoters of the reforms and the local *milieu des notables* (i.e., influential persons) that counters the dominant interpretation prevailing in historiography on the relationship between both spheres. The other central thesis of the book is a revised chronology of the creation of the modern municipality. Malek Sharif argues that it was not created during the 1870s, as many thought, but during the 1860s.

The introduction, as a first step, includes a defence of these central positions. As a lot of work in the field of Ottoman municipal studies has been undertaken between 2004 and 2014, the review of the literature has been updated. All major studies are considered in the book, but the author does not always capitalize on the results and spirit of these studies. The dichotomy he describes between common views that are supposedly still widely accepted and his critical re-examination is some-

times too static: many historians who published on Ottoman municipalities since 2004 share the critical perspective with him. Furthermore, some of the pioneering works on the issue were already published before 2004. The mainstream Malek Sharif positions himself against was no longer mainstream even in 2004 and there were already many challenges by a number of researchers.³ By then, it was already outdated to think that imperial reforms were totally external to the local sphere, or that they were the result of a top-down process imposed by the empire to the provinces. The idea of changing the previously dominant chronology had also already been in circulation for some time. In spite of this ambiguity, the introduction presents the interpretative context of the research with great clarity and draws the attention to the case of Beirut within the wider circumstances at the scale of the empire. The sources used for the study are mostly press and local official gazettes as well as yearbooks. Archival resources from the central archives of the Ottoman Empire in Istanbul (BOA) were also used, as were European consular sources.

The book consists of seven chapters. The first one is about municipalities in Syria before the introduction of municipal law in the framework of the Ottoman reforms. Malek Sharif describes the fascination of various figures in the Arab world, like Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq or Salim Butrus, with the municipal organization of Europe. Then he traces the first mentioning of a modern municipality in Beirut, namely in 1860, which substantiates his claim of an early implementation of a form of municipal reform in the city. Beyond the assumption that local *notables*, thanks to the provided figures, had a culture, thereby making them sympathetic to imperial reform im-

¹Malek Sharif, *Missionaries, medicine and municipalities. A history of smallpox vaccination in the nineteenth-century Beirut*, in : *Archaeology & history in Lebanon* (2005) 22, p. 34–50.

²Christoph Herzog / Malek Sharif (eds.), *The First Ottoman Experiment in Democracy*, Würzburg 2010.

³For example, see Jens Hanssen / Thomas Philipp / Stefan Weber (eds.), *The Empire in the City. Arab Provincial Capitals in the Late-Ottoman Empire*, Würzburg 2002. Jens Hanssen's doctoral dissertation was presented in Oxford in 2001 and published four years later as „*Fin de Siècle Beirut. The Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital*“ (Oxford 2005).

pulses, he gives very few details on concrete links between the fascination for Europe and actual reforms in Beirut. This does not help to really understand the way reforms were conceived, between possible European inspirations, central imperial impulses in Istanbul, and the local urban culture in the provinces – a point that is crucial for the interpretation of the nature of the reforms. Most lacking in this chapter is the search for previous forms of old regime municipal organization in Beirut. Historiography has shown that such old regime forms existed in all Ottoman cities – which is why the reforms were indeed reforms and not just the creation of something new. In order to understand how the modern municipality, promoted by the empire in the context of local *notables* being quite open to reform, went along with previous forms of organization, one has to investigate the nature of the latter. A central question would be how the local council of *notables* was organized before the reforms, with its specific urban municipal competences, and how it was transformed during the reforms. Another central question would address the evolution of the composition of the municipal elite between the old and the modern form of municipal organization. Unfortunately, the author does not pose these questions, which will hopefully be undertaken by future research.⁴

In the first chapter, Malek Sharif provides many details about the various steps of the reforms between the formation of a Council of Municipal Organisation in 1860 (p. 32) and the actions of various civil committees or the creation of the first municipal council (p. 37). The most interesting reflections are about mediations between various spheres in the definition of the competences and legal organization. The second chapter provides further details about such mediations. Through a presentation of the 1867 Municipal Code, the author manages to show how local realities were much more complicated than a purely mechanical implementation of a legal framework designed in Istanbul. All decisions on the functions of the municipality were the result of complex processes of negotiation. The same view is offered on the 1871 Law on Provinces (p. 66). The third chapter is then logically about the implementation in Beirut

of the 1877 Ottoman Law on Provincial Organisation. The content of this text is analyzed with great precision (p. 79–90), as is the role of Syrian representatives like Niqla al-Naqqash and Husayn Bayhum during discussions in the Istanbul parliament. This is the core of Malek Sharif's contribution to present debates on the Ottoman reforms: far from being imposed by an external sphere, they were negotiated both in Istanbul in regards to their content and locally concerning their implementation by *notables* who were able to act at different scales. Malek Sharif analyses how debates in the imperial capital city were also followed day by day by the local press in Beirut. Chapter four is about the municipal elections. The core of it is a statement by the author against interpretations by Wajih Kawtharani and Jamil Musa al-Najjar on the alleged failure of the Ottoman municipal reforms in Beirut. Malek Sharif argues that the reforms were indeed implemented successfully and had a profound impact on urban organization and development. He provides lots of details on the elections and the biographies of the main figures of this process, like Ibrahim Fakhri Nami Bey, Muhyi al-Din Efendi Hamada, 'Abd al-Qadir al-Qabbani, 'Abd al-Rahman Baydun Pasha, and 'Abd al-Qadir al-Dana. The next chapter is on municipal finances. Here again, Malek Sharif positions himself against earlier views, that is to say those who see the municipality only as a taxation instrument at the service of the province. He shows that things were more complicated, and that financial difficulties of the municipality derived from a series of factors, including resistance to taxation by some *notables* and foreigners, and the consequences of the delegation of public services and public works to foreign concessionaires. The last two chapters are about the relationships between the municipality and the governors, as well as the sector of public health.

Overall, this book is an important contribution to the present revisionist trend in the historiography of Ottoman municipalities. It

⁴ A recent book by Hassan Hallaq already gives a few indications around the urban competences of the *Mutassallim* in the 1840s and about the transition towards a reformed system: Hassan Hallaq, *Baladiyya Beirut al-Mahrûsa (1840–1943)*, vol. 1, [The Municipality of Beirut (1840–1943)], Beirut 2013.

provides central information and interpretative ideas on the nature of the municipality of Beirut, and it is also an invitation to continue research, for example, around the question of the roots of municipal organization in the city and on decision-making processes in the daily basic activities of the institution. The chapter on public health provides an excellent model for such a study, with its attention to actual activities of the municipality (municipal hospital, municipal pharmacy, vaccination campaigns, etc.) that led to the invention of a genuine form of Ottoman municipal social welfare. Hopefully, the same kind of work will soon be available for other sectors of activity, like public works, urban planning, and education.

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