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Prisoners and Slaves in Ottoman era

One of the controversial historical issues is the issue of slave status in Ottoman Era. There are many introductions to this study which diverge to a large extent. Some people ask about what is new regarding this matter! Ottoman state has inherited all the conditions of slaves which were known in the previous Islamic countries. Accordingly, there is nothing new. This opinion ignores the fact that there is always something new with regard to history movement, not to mention that we are discussing the slave status at the beginning of modern times as Europe would witness slavery abolition after that.

Some people consider Devshirme tax, which was the actual head tax imposed on open Christian areas in Eastern Europe which was subjugated by Ottoman state, as a form of enslavement. These countries presented numbers of their children to the Sultan. They left their homeland and they were converted into Islam. They were also made to enter military schools affiliated to Ottoman state; then, they became Janissaries, the mainstay of Ottoman army, and the slaves of Sultan, whose only loyalty was to him.

Thus, we have two views regarding the conditions of Janissaries: one of them adopts the viewpoint of the Balkan area whose people think that; accordingly, they have lost the bloom of their children as that area was emptied of future youth. In addition, there was a sensitive matter regarding the conversion to another religion. Thus, Devshirme and Janissaries were seen as a form of enslavement.

Ottoman sources also consider this from another perspective. They think that the actual head tax was not new to the traditions of Europe during Middle Ages. Those sources refer to the good education received by those children, as well as the brilliant future that awaited them as soldiers of the Sultan. Moreover, they also monitor that some of those children could occupy the highest positions in the state such as, Grand Vizier which was equivalent to the rank of a Prime Minister. Some sources exaggerate considering that Devshirme system generated a kind of civilizational encounter between East and West, and showed the potential of multiculturalism.

There is another form of enslavement indicated by Suraya Faruqi within her study of prisoners and slaves in Ottoman state. In this regard, Faruqi highlighted an important issue which is the prisoners of war, and prisoners of sea piracy who were turned into slaves. There is no abundant information in this regard, especially concerning the life of those slaves so that she gave them an interesting title "Prisoners Away from Spotlight".

Faruqi tried to track information about European prisoners who were captured by Ottomans, especially those who were captured at the sea or through the attacks of Ottoman pirates on villages and coasts of Islands. She also monitored conditions of war prisoners, especially the wars of Ottoman state with Austria, as well as the attempts of ransoming prisoners, otherwise they would have been slaves.

Faruqi tracked the conditions of those people. She started with what she called "Tragedies of Transfer Process". She meant transfer people to sell them as: "they were chained together, in addition to all the pain and humiliation brought to their souls by this experience".

Faruqi indicated that many of those prisoned slaves, who could not release themselves with money, worked on ships and navy yards. The most difficult of these jobs was rowing in warships.

When food prices skyrocketed in the second half of sixteenth century, slaves working on ships generally received the least possible amount of food. One of them, Michael Heberer, whose origin traces to an area near Heidelberg in Germany, gave a harsh description to this situation as he worked as a rower on such boats from 1589 -1580. It was mentioned that the boat owner- who was a Bey- asked the ship captain to beat the slaves harder so that they would row with greater force. However, captain refused so replying that slaves needed more food, not harder beating!

Turkish sources responded to this saying that the condition of Muslim prisoners in European countries at that time was no less bad. They also indicated the pirate operations carried out by Sovereign Military Order of Malta offshore. In addition, in the sixteenth century, sources monitored tens of thousands of Muslim prisoners who lived as slaves in many Italian provinces, especially on the Island of Sicily.

Stories of captivity and enslavement have drawn the attention of literature and writers. Some of them have tackled them, especially in the Mediterranean and Ottoman world. One of the most important stories is "A Thorne in the Heart" by the Greek writer, Riya Galanaki. It is about the life story of Lieutenant- General, Ismail Pasha, who was originally a Greek child from Crete Island. When he was a young boy, he was captured by Ottomans and was converted into Islam. He was sold to Egypt where he became a Major Commander in the army. Galanaki, the writer, represented the tragedy of Lieutenant-General, Ismail, when he had to return to his homeland in Crete but this time, he was invader to suppress the island revolution against Ottoman rule. Thus, the tragedy emanated as the revolution leader was the brother of Lieutenant- General, Ismail. The two brothers confronted each other but as enemies. The story embodies the family tragedy. Rather, it was the tragedy of Crete Island as a whole.

Thus, stories of prisoners and slaves drew the attention of literature and writers due to their excitement and tragedy.

References:

- 1) Suraya Faruqi: The Ottoman Empire and The World Around It; translated by: Hatem al- Tahawy, Dar Al- Madar Al- Islami.
- 2) Riya Galanaki: A Thorne in the Heart, the Life Story of Lieutenant- General, Ismail Pasha; translated by: Hamdy Ibrahim, Al-Ahram Center for Translation.