



حبر أبيض
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Slavery in Ottoman Era: Tools for Slavery and Swords for Tyranny

Enslavement system was an anomalous phenomenon in the history of human societies what prompted the true Islamic religion to work on eliminating it. Rather, it was made by Islam a religious expiation for some serious religious and societal abuses (intentional breaking of the fast in Ramadan, expiation of a broken oath, manslaughter...). Thus, such phenomenon has diminished until it became extinct in most of Arab and Islamic countries, except for areas that were subjugated by Ottoman Sultanate. Slave trade was reversely spread. It became active with a structured feature especially from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries AD by legalizing such phenomenon and normalizing it in a blatant violation of Islam spirit, which rejects enslavement, and the approach of predecessors who have fought this phenomenon and its negative repercussions. Therefore, we recall the quote of Al- Farouk Omar Bin Al- Khattab, may Allah be pleased with him, "How can you enslave people when their mothers delivered them as free people".

In this context, enslavement phenomenon has spread in the Ottoman Sultanate in the aftermath of the wars and settlement campaigns which Ottomans carried out in North and East Africa, Eastern Europe, Balkans, and Caucasus. This has led to a great expansion in slave base in the Sultanate that made them establish an important social base, even though it had no economic or political rights at all although they formed, at one time, a fifth of Constantinople population. In this regard, we find that the Turkish researcher Hayri Kuksen Ozkurai confirms this assumption by saying, "enslavement was strongly present inside the Ottoman Empire reaching %10 of urban population. Due to wars, and trade networks for import, they were enabled to bring 15 thousand slaves annually and continuously. However, this exploitation process was not based on a racial or ethnic dimension because Ottomans enslaved different peoples according to political contexts of every stage".

Slaves had an important role in driving the economy inside the Sultanate, as well as the classic roles which they used to play inside royal palaces. However, they were brought for demographic, cultural and military purposes through the attempt to expand the military, political, and religious base controlled by sultans, considering that most of slaves who converted into Islam were not able to return to their countries after their liberation.

Accordingly, slaves were the breeding ground that gave birth to one of the most important tools of Ottoman oppression which was called "Janissaries". Perhaps one who is familiar with the history of Janissaries armies founded by the Ottoman Sultan, Murad I, will get to an intuitive conclusion that this military class, which has been, for centuries, the cornerstone of Ottoman military establishment, is only one of enslavement policy manifestations performed by Ottomans against peoples whom they subjugated. They are the crimes which, in our estimation, amount to crimes against humanity by targeting children, and bringing them to Astana, then, making them subject to a brainwashing process before involving them in the army where loyalty is only to Sultan. This justifies terrorism crimes carried out by this tool of oppression against areas subdued by Ottomans of which Arabs had the largest share.

If enslavement, as indicated, is an anomalous phenomenon according to Muslims, those who called themselves "Caliphs" made it one of the pillars of expansion strategy of Ottoman Empire. They treated the phenomenon according to an approach that is closer to "Realpolitik" than to adhering to Sharia rules and prophetic guidance. In this respect, we record that when Sultan Mahmoud II decided to abolish slavery trade in the early nineteenth century, he excluded black slaves from the decision while all white slaves who were Greek, Georgians, Armenians, and Circassians were emancipated. Then, they became Ottoman citizens who enjoyed all the citizenship rights. On the other hand, black slaves continued suffering under the yoke of this slave system that robbed them of their right to exercise their most basic human, even animal, rights. Consequently, the situation remained as it was until the end of Ottoman Empire, as some statements confirmed that trade of bondmaids continued until 1908 AD.

It is worth noting that those who were called "Harem of the Sultan" were those bondmaids who furnished palaces of Ottoman family. Some of them ended up marrying the Head of Ottoman state including Suleiman the Magnificent, who was said to have fallen in love with an Ukrainian (bondmaid) called "Roxlan" whom he married, then she gave birth to Sultan Selim II. In addition, many slaves who were able to take advantage of the support of the large grass- roots of slaves inside the Sultanate, as well as their knowledge of what was going in the Kitchen Cabinet were capable of reaching important political positions. This includes Ali Bey al-Kabir who, is Ottoman of Greek origins, has become ruler of Egypt and Hijaz before he rebelled against Ottoman state. There was also Ahmed Pasha Al- Jazzar (Ahmed Al- Bushnaki), whose origins trace to Bosnia and Herzegovina, who were able to subjugate vast areas of the Levant. However, hatred conviction towards Turks made him act with effective independence from decision- making center in Constantinople.

The suffering to which slaves were subject during Ottoman state era makes researcher wonder, do we really face a political entity whose treatment base is Islamic religion, Sharia jurisprudence, and customs as stipulated in the empire constitutions that has specified these three chapters as the sources of legislation?! Thus, we find that the same author, Hayri Kuksen Ozkurai, stated in his thesis titled "Slavery in Ottoman Empire (16th-17th AD century): Legal Foundations, Socio- economic facts..." "It is worth noting that mistreatment of the Master (slave owner) is an excessive exercise of privileges given to the latter instead of being a violation of slave's right to a physical integrity". (Pg. 165 of the French version).

In order to give the honorable reader a description of the painful situation that slaves experienced in the Ottoman Empire during 17th century, we present to him the case of one of the bondmaids called "Sertab". She was a victim of a cruel treatment of a man who owned her, called Mohammed Bin Mohammed. He treated her with excessive violence in one of Istanbul neighborhoods. Neighbors submitted a complaint to the Ottoman judiciary stating the following, "in addition to drinking wine and never praying, Mohammed enters his home every day drunk and he strikes his bondmaid (Umm Al- Walid) who is called Sertab. He takes her to slave market on several occasions in order to sell her." After hearing the testimonies of witnesses, all the court has done was that it judged Mohammed to be deported from the neighborhood with the charge of disturbing the public tranquility but not for the crime of inhuman treatment against the bondmaid, Sertab. She had to accompany him to another place with the hope that he would repent, on his own initiative, his violent brutality against her.

Perhaps this "realistic" story can give a general conclusion of enslavement reality of Ottoman state. Such reality was a recognized legal system which generated armies of human waste that severely punished all of those who stood in their way. They have made peoples suffer from different kinds of torture and extermination. As for those who became strongly rooted, among them, they rebelled against Ottoman authority at the first opportunity. They declared their actual independence from it and repudiated belonging to that entity which only produced the culture of killing, and terrorism, as well as ethnic and racial supremacy.