

# Security, Crime, Punishment, and Prisons in the Late Ottoman Empire

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The burgeoning literature on security, crime, punishment, and prisons in the Ottoman Empire presents opportunities to explore not only new archival investigations and methodological discussions about the notions of criminality in the Empire, but also encourages us to re-think the interconnected relation between law, security and penal policy in the Empire. This one-day workshop entitled “Security, Crime, Punishment, and Prisons in the Late Ottoman Empire” was a chance to present and discuss some recent examinations of the triangle of security, crime, and punishment in order to offer new insights into Ottoman social and legal history by providing case studies from throughout the Empire.

As in many contemporary states, the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire saw the institutionalization of security forces and also the expansion of surveillance mechanisms, such as passport regulations in order to track population movements. More importantly, these mechanisms focused on hastening the process of surveilling criminals as defined by the State. Furthermore, through administrative and infrastructural urbanization attempts, particularly in the imperial center, which aided in regulating street life, new understandings of criminality generated novel relationships between Ottoman cities and their residents. This relationship was expressed through adherence, or not, to policies and the eventual construction of new prisons throughout the Empire.

The workshop had three sessions and overall seven papers were presented during these sessions. In the first session of the workshop, Ebru Aykut (Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University) examined the practice of the death penalty and the meaning of justice in the late Ottoman Empire. Aykut argued that for the local authorities, the death penalty was a necessary instrument to deter criminals and maintain public order and security, which could be accomplished only if the punishment was inflicted immediately without delay. Aykut stated that according to the State, the principle of legality and procedural correctness was more important and necessary than deterrence by punishment. Thus, there was a gap between the local understandings of justice, which were concerned more with the promptness of punishment than procedures and written law, and what justice meant for the central government. In this respect, Aykut elaborated that the death penalty turned into a contested and in some cases negotiable issue between the central and provincial authorities in the late Ottoman Empire. As the second presenter of the first session, Noémi Lévy-Aksu (Boğaziçi University) focused on the use of martial law (*örfi idare*) in the aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman war of 1877-78 in various districts of the Balkans and Eastern Anatolia. Lévy-Aksu discussed and posited that banditry, gangs and ethno-religious tensions were the main reasons behind the application of martial law in these districts. By presenting many case studies from the late 1870's to early 1880's, Lévy-Aksu argued that martial law turned into a tool of government in terms of dealing with serious tensions at different levels of the state apparatus.

In the second session of the workshop, İlkay Yılmaz (İstanbul University/ZMO) presented a paper on the hotel registers in the Hamidian Era, which

were part of new mechanisms against security threats perceived by the Ottoman state. Yılmaz stated that some incidents occurred in the late Ottoman Empire, for instance assassination attempts and demonstrations of Kumkapı in 1890 and Bâb-ı Âli in 1895, which played a major role in the shift of security practices of the Empire. Yılmaz argued that as in contemporary states such as in France and Belgium, the Ottoman government issued new registration regulations not only to collect individual information about the visitors of hotels and residents of apartments but also to track anarchists in the Empire. After presenting the relationship between city and crime in fin de siècle Istanbul, Nurçin İleri (Binghamton University) touched upon mapping criminality through space and time, which existed in the physical and social borders of the city, and analyzed the quantitative and qualitative production of crime narratives that shaped the perception of city dwellers. İleri argued that crime narratives did not operate in one direction, rather various narrative options were available and they reverberated around the street corners, popular newspapers, and official journals and in general around the city. The third presenter of the session, Nora Lafi (ZMO/BMBF/member of EUME) focused on the shift of policing methods and controlling public order and their actors from the classical ages of the Ottoman Empire to the establishment of modern municipality in Tunis as a part of Ottoman reforms in the nineteenth century. Based on the collections of the National Archives in Tunis, Lafi illustrated that the balance of powers in policing was deeply modified during the Tanzimat era.

In the last session of the workshop, Yektan Türkyılmaz (EUME Fellow 2014/15/ZMO) presented two intriguing murder cases that occurred in the first decade of the twentieth century. Türkyılmaz argued that these cases, including the case of Melkon Mir-Sakoyan, illustrate the anxious political atmosphere and nervous social psychology in Ottoman provinces in the aftermath of the Balkan Wars and more importantly the eagerness of both central and local officials to negotiate, cooperate, and compromise.

As an organizer of the workshop, I was the latest presenter. I attempted to examine the ways in which the legal concept of *hapishane-i umumi* (the general prison) shifted in the late Ottoman Empire by focusing on the cases of Istanbul and Izmir. Based on the Ottoman Archives and particularly *Polis Mecmuası* (Ottoman police journal), I argued that the general prisons in Istanbul and Izmir aimed to be role models in terms of health and hygienic conditions, prison work, and education.

All of the papers presented at the workshop, organized with the support the “Europe in the Middle East – the Middle East in Europe” and the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), where I have been affiliated as an EUME fellow for the academic year 2014-15, share many common grounds in terms of sources and methodology. After the long and productive question and answer sessions, these papers are now being edited for the publication, which will attempt to make a significant contribution to the general framework of Ottoman reform in the aspects of security, crime, punishment, and prisons in the late Ottoman Empire.

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