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Local Legitimacy and Tax Policy: Qaids as Part of a Composite State in Colonial Tunisia

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Abstract

The colonial history of Tunisia has long been dictated by colonial sources that made the qaid (an official in charge of fiscal attributions), from the viewpoint of the capital city, a local notable and often a prevaricator. This study proposes to reconsider the relationship between government and regional power in the colonial context by drawing on the recent work of Ottoman studies about provincial elites. The article studies the fiscal reforms of the interwar period in a cereal-growing region of Tunisia, relying on sources in Arabic produced by the qaids, namely the administrative correspondence between local authorities, the prime minister, and colonial controllers. This article describes the role of qaids in the negotiation between national law and local specificities and finally highlights the role of decentralization and a local way of thinking about the state in the 1930s. It contributes to colonial history and the history of taxation by highlighting the territorial fractures in North Africa and the agency of local actors under the protectorate.

Keywords: colonialism; fiscal reform; qaids; regional administration; taxation; Tunisia

Since the early modern era, the qaid has embodied the two essential functions of the state in North Africa: tax collection and law enforcement. From the late 16th century, in the two Ottoman provinces of Tunis and Algiers as well as in Morocco, the qaid usually occupied a temporary function; he was merely a man sent from the capital to carry out tax-collecting missions among faraway tribes or regions. He was in many ways the provisional representative of the state. From the 18th century onward, the function of qaid became a permanent one, as North African rulers began to appoint local notables to the position. The function was ambiguous; although the qaid continued to represent the state at the level of a city or tribe, he also came to represent regions at the level of the state. In this new capacity of regional governor, the qaid must be understood as one of the main actors in North African state-building.

In Tunisia, an Ottoman province since 1574–75, this shift occurred during a period of sweeping reforms. At the end of the 18th century, the Husainid dynasty obtained an unprecedented level of autonomy from the Sublime Porte.¹ While continuing to recognize the sovereignty of the sultan in Constantinople, the Tunisian dynasty created a de facto autonomous state composed of the bey, his ministers, and the servants appointed by beylical decree. In the 1870s the prime minister, Khayr al-Din Pasha, introduced administrative reforms in the province of Tunis, based on the Ottoman and French models.² The settlement of tribes, the professionalization of the qaids, and the standardization of the tax system were parts of a state-building process that ended in the colonial period. In the precolonial reformist context (1830s–70s), the qaid took on the role of a “genuine official,” a label coined by Haim Gerber in his classic study of the Sanjaq of

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¹Asma Moalla, *The Regency of Tunis and the Ottoman Porte, 1777–1814: Army and Government of a North-Africa Ottoman Eyalet at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004).

²Mongi Smida, *Khereddine, ministre réformateur. 1873–1877* (Tunis: Maison tunisienne de l'édition, 1970); Gérard S. Van Krieken, *Khayr al-Din et la Tunisie (1850–1881)* (Leiden: Brill, 1976).

Jerusalem.³ Gerber's expression referred to men who, having mingled with the "local aristocracy" in the initial moments of their career, become fully part of the capital's bureaucratic elite.

When the French imposed a protectorate over Tunisia in 1881, they left the existing Tunisian administrative infrastructure mostly untouched. The institution of the qaid itself remained largely unaltered throughout this transition, with the sole exception that qaids were supervised and at times even commanded by civil controllers (French officials represented the colonial power of France, under the supervision of the resident general at the head of the French administration).⁴ In addition to these local colonial controllers, the centralized *direction des affaires indigènes* managed the appointment, control, and payment of the qaids. The Tunisian state became a composite state, split between a new colonial bureaucracy built on the French administrative model and a set of persisting beylical institutions left untouched by protectorate authorities. French authorities abolished some public administrations, such as the foreign affairs ministry, that had become useless under colonial rule. The institution of the qaid, however, remained intact. Indeed, the qaid's fiscal and police prerogatives made him an indispensable tool for maintaining order in colonial Tunisia.

This article argues that the composite nature of the state is not merely relevant on a national scale with a government divided between colonial administration and traditional state institutions. This "divided rule" was a result of maintenance of the bey's sovereignty, as Mary Lewis has eloquently demonstrated in her recent book.⁵ The state's composite nature can be seen in the different regional administrations that constituted it, so that colonial Tunisia appears more geographically diverse and decentralized than classical approaches suggest. John Eliot has used the concept of composite states to describe the early modern Iberian monarchy as a union of heterogeneous local and legal structures.⁶ Other historians of the Iberian Peninsula have further enriched this notion to highlight the strong autonomy of local powers, despite a legal link with the sovereign, to decenter the history of the state by focusing on the modes of organization and interactions between different "poles" forming a "polycentric monarchy."⁷ This article highlights a new scale of regional analysis that contrasts with the colonial history that has often been centered around the political capitals of the Maghrib. It thus builds on recent scholarly trends focusing on, in the case of Egypt, "overcome[ing] the centripetal forces of Cairo and Alexandria" and emphasizing the "significance of geographically peripheral places and regions" in the historiography.⁸

Here I highlight the local autonomy of the qaid's administration through the example of taxation in Béja, a rural province located in northwestern Tunisia, between the end of the 19th century and the 1930s. This case study reveals the nuances of the relationship between the colonial state and beylical institutions. It also sheds light on rural-urban relations and Tunisian state-building. I reassess a historiography of colonial Tunisia that was overly focused on the French administration and national movements that reduced the qaid to a feudal role. More broadly, I seek to contribute to the history of a figure who has been central to Middle Eastern historiography since Albert Hourani's classic formulation of the "politics of notables."⁹ Hourani stressed the fundamental role played by urban notables (*a'yān*) as intermediaries between the central imperial authority and the local population and highlighted the fact that their social power was independent from that of the ruler. I, on the other hand, examine their professionalization and consider them as a new category of civil servants.

I focus on Béja to explore how governors have shown resistance to tax standardization through a discourse calling for a more decentralized policy. Béja was a region partly representative of the Tunisian

³Haim Gerber, *State and Society in the Ottoman Empire* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 40.

⁴Elisabeth Mouilleau, *Fonctionnaires de la République et artisans de l'Empire. Le cas des Contrôleurs civils en Tunisie (1881–1956)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000).

⁵Mary D. Lewis, *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881–1938* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

⁶John H. Elliott, "A Europe of Composite Monarchies," *Past & Present* 137, no. 1 (1992): 48–71.

⁷Pedro Cardim et al., eds., *Polycentric Monarchies: How Did Early Modern Spain and Portugal Achieve and Maintain a Global Hegemony?* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2013).

⁸Lucia Carminati and Mohamed Gamal-Eldin, "Decentering Egyptian Historiography: Provincializing Geographies, Methodologies, and Sources," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, no. 1 (2021): 107–11.

⁹Albert Hourani, "Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables," in *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. William R. Polk and Richard L. Chambers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 41–68.

countryside more broadly. The city and its surroundings constituted a very fertile region. Béja itself was referred to as the country's breadbasket, an attribute further enhanced by colonization and the mechanization it introduced, which concentrated agriculture on industrial grain farming.¹⁰ The fertility of the soil and the frequency of rainfall protected the region from chronic droughts such as those that regularly devastated the southern regions of the country. As a result, most of Tunisia's wheat, the country's main crop, came from the northwest.¹¹ There were other prominent agricultural regions, such as the olive-growing areas of the Sahel, but these have received more attention from Tunisian scholars, if only because they were the regions of origin of national movement leaders such as Habib Bourguiba.¹²

The 1930s also offer a particularly interesting perspective given the major changes that were enacted in Tunisia's tax policy during this period. The abolition of the canonical tax (*'ushr*) on cereals was followed by the abolition of tax farming as a payment system for qajids in the context of the Great Depression. These two reforms took place within the framework of a new fiscal policy of the French protectorate.¹³ Until the 1930s, France maintained the beylical tax system that focused mainly on agricultural production and disproportionately affected Tunisian peasants. The *'ushr* was one of the main taxes alongside the *qānūn*, a tax on olive oil. In the face of the economic crisis, however, taxation shifted toward Europeans and new industrial economic sectors. Direct taxes on wages and salaries took on a more essential role than agricultural taxes. Reforming the taxes pertaining to agricultural production and abolishing tax farming was part of a wider movement toward a taxation system that was better adapted to the evolution of the Tunisian economy. I focus on these two reforms in particular because they had the greatest impact on the qajids, the Tunisian peasantry, and agricultural activity, whereas the others mainly affected the cities, Europeans, and salaried workers.

For all these reasons, this case study is indicative of a transformation of the state's relations with the countryside and local powers. This focus will not prevent comparisons with qajids elsewhere in the region. To veer away from the traditional historiography of colonial Tunisia, this article starts by drawing links between Ottoman studies and the existing literature around qajids and local power in North Africa. This latter literature is written in Arabic and too often ignored by colonial historical approaches. Turning to local archives and using different agricultural districts as case studies, I then look at the method of collection and subsequent abolition of the *'ushr* tax. The final section of this paper is dedicated to analyzing reform of the qaid's salary. All three sections pay particular attention to the language used by qajids to emphasize the particularity of their role as civil servants.

A Brief History of the Qaid

By analyzing the discourse and practices of the qaid administration in the context of colonial Tunisia, I wish to take a different approach than the historiographical debates based primarily on colonial history, European rivalry, and the emergence of national movements in Tunisia.¹⁴ According to this classical perspective, the qajids constituted a feudal and self-interested notable class that embodied and exemplified collaboration with colonial authorities. In this view, the qajids' legitimacy was undermined by systematic abuses in the collection of taxes, leading to their replacement after independence by a new political elite stemming from the nationalist intelligentsia. Following recent studies on the imperial transition in Tunisia, I opt instead for a framework that I deem more apt: that of the Ottoman Empire. These works insist on the inscription of the Ottoman province of Tunisia on the whole empire, through

¹⁰ Ahmed Kassab, *L'évolution de la vie rurale dans les régions de la Moyenne Medjerda et de Béja-Mateur* (Tunis: Université de Tunis, 1979).

¹¹ Emile Violard, *La Tunisie du Nord. Les contrôles civils de Souk El Arba, Béja, Tunis, Bizerte et Grombalia* (Tunis: Imprimerie Moderne, 1906); Protectorat français, Direction générale de l'agriculture, *L'agriculture en Tunisie* (Bourg, France: De Victor Berthod, 1931).

¹² See rural cases cited by Ali Mahjoubi, *Les origines du mouvement national en Tunisie* (Tunis: Université de Tunis, 1982).

¹³ Noureddine Douigi, "La politique fiscale du protectorat français en Tunisie (1884–1939)," *Revue d'histoire maghrébine* 23, no. 81–82 (1996): 183–200.

¹⁴ Charles-André Julien, *L'Afrique du Nord en marche, Algérie-Tunisie-Maroc, 1880–1952* (Paris: Omnibus, 2002); Kenneth Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

legal links but also family networks.¹⁵ From an administrative perspective, the protectorate retained institutions, like the qaid, that were still those of an Ottoman province. This provincial scale provides an ideal framework for comparison with studies focused on the Middle East's Arab provinces, even in a colonial context, as well as offering alternative models to the binary opposition between central and local power.

In North Africa and in Morocco in particular, the opposition between center and peripheries was envisaged through the warlike relationship between tribes and the sultan's state, the Makhzen. After independence, Moroccan historians strongly criticized the colonial epistemology and shed light on the more subtle and at times contradictory dynamics of negotiation and obedience between the tribes and the Makhzen, whose legitimacy the tribes ultimately recognized.¹⁶ Many subsequent studies have confirmed the existence of alliances between the sovereign power and tribes in the 18th and 19th centuries.¹⁷ In the Tunisian historiography, the appearance of tribes in the scholarly literature is less pronounced, except for some regional monographs studying local societies based on important colonial documentation.¹⁸ Tunisia is often presented, like in Jean Ganiage's work, as a small province of the Ottoman Empire that, as it tried to counter European ambitions, attempted to reform its taxation system and administration along the lines of the Ottoman Tanzimat, but to no avail.

More recently, historians have renewed Jean Ganiage's approach; they have begun to utilize local sources in Arabic to overcome Eurocentrism and examine the endogenous dynamics of state-building in Tunisia. More precisely, scholars have studied the relationship between local communities and the central government during 19th-century economic and fiscal crises, reducing the agency of European actors. Indeed, in these times, the beylic of Tunis had to tackle several shifts in weather patterns alongside a decline in its commercial activity and difficulties collecting taxes. For this last mission, as early as the 18th century, the state could rely on a strong network of local qaids allied with powerful families in Tunis.¹⁹ Abdelhamid Hénia's book on the southwestern Tunisian region of the Jerid describes attempts by the beys to strengthen central power by replacing local chiefs (or shaykhs) with qaids to levy taxes.²⁰ When Ahmad Bey (r. 1837–55) imposed a tax reform in the 1840s, he appointed one qaid for the entire region of Jerid, instead of the previous multitude of shaykhs. However, this system created too much antagonism between local societies and the state and numerous abuses of power, which led to the ruin of the region.

Furthermore, the professionalization of the qaids remained mostly incomplete. In the mid-19th century, qaids came from the military and administrative corps of the Mamluks, European slaves in the service of the bey of Tunis. M'hamed Oualdi has shown that the title of qaid given to mamluks was more an official title than a regional administrative charge, like the fiscal responsibility of geographical districts. There were qaids of the Jews, qaids of the customs, etc.²¹ In addition, the qaid had often bought his way into office (the *iltizām* system of tax farming), so that, as Ganiage remarked, they "considered their charges more as profits than as administrative jobs."²² However, Ganiage's analysis is questionable.

¹⁵M'hamed Oualdi, *A Slave between Empires: A Transimperial History of North Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

¹⁶Abdallah Laroui, *Les origines sociales et culturelles du nationalisme marocain (1830–1912)* (Paris: Maspero, 1977); Germain Ayache, *Études d'histoire marocaine* (Rabat: Société marocaine des éditeurs réunis, 1979).

¹⁷See the literature review in Muhammad al-'Ayadi, "Al-Madrasa al-Tarikhiyya al-Maghribiyya al-Haditha al-Mujtam'a: Ishkaliyyat wa-l-Mafahim," in *Dirasat fi al-Mujtama' wa-l-Tariih wa-l-Din* (Casablanca: Fondation du Roi Abdulaziz al Saud, 2014).

¹⁸Salim Labyad, *Mujtama' al-Qabila : al-Bināa al-Ijtima'i wa Tahawwulatuhu fi Tunis: Dirasa fi Qabilat 'Akara* (Tunis: al-Matba'a al-Magharibiyya li-l-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Ishhar, 2006); Muhammad al-Hamas, *al-Isti'mar al-Faransi wa Qaba'il al-Wasat wa-l-Janub bi-l-Bilad al-Tunsiyya (1881–1950)* (Tunis : Markaz al-Nashr al-Jami'i, 2008); al-Tayyib al-Nafati, *Mujtama' al-Watan al-Qabali Zaman al-Isti'mar al-Faransi: Dirasa fi Waqf Fuqara' al-Aryaf 1881–1956* (Tunis: University of Tunis, 2012).

¹⁹Salwa Hwidi, "Dirasa li-Fi'at al-Qiyad 'al-Thanwiyyin' min Khilal Namudhaj al-Qiyad Muhammad b. Nasr b. Maluka," in *Le personnel de l'État dans la Tunisie moderne et contemporaine*, ed. Hassine-Raouf Hamza, Ali Noureddine, Adel Ben Youssef, and Thouraya Belkahia Karoui (Tunis: Amal éditions, 2011).

²⁰Abdelhamid Hénia, *Le Grid, ses rapports avec le beylik de Tunis (1676–1840)* (Tunis: Université de Tunis, 1980).

²¹M'hamed Oualdi, *Esclaves et maîtres: Les mamelouks au service des beys de Tunis du XVII^e siècle aux années 1880* (Paris: Sorbonne, 2011).

²²Jean Ganiage, *Les origines du protectorat français en Tunisie (1861–1881)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959), 133.

Although the qaid remained a venal occupation more than a true profession, new rules formalized their service. In 1860, a law regulating the status of governors (*qānūn khidmat al-'ummāl*) was promulgated to determine the mandatory appointment by the bey, the rights and duties of the qaids, and the moral obligations attached to their service.²³ As was the case for the Fundamental Pact (*'Ahd al-Amān*, 1857) and the Constitution (1861), the great rebellion of 1864 suspended the enforcement of this text. That same year, the main tax (*majba*) was increased twofold and popular riots targeted specifically the Mamluk qaids because they were perceived as “foreign” by the same tribes they pressed for taxation.²⁴ Abdelhamid Hénia describes the aftermath of the 1864 revolt as a period of “notabilization” of the qaid.²⁵ Tunisian notables gradually replaced mamluks; they were native to local tribes and regions and sought to find new revenues by providing services to the state.

In 1881, at the onset of the French protectorate, most qaids, who were now notables in the Houranian sense, proved somewhat distrustful of the colonial state. Throughout the colonial period, historians have depicted qaids in a rather unfavorable light. In this view, the qaids allied themselves with the French in an attempt to increase their personal profits to the detriment of most Tunisians. Although Julia Clancy-Smith and Arnold Green have shown the withdrawal tactics of the ‘ulama’ to minimize their collaboration with the colonial authorities, other historians have portrayed the qaid office as one of the main pillars of French colonial domination in Tunisia.²⁶ According to colonial sources and taxpayer petitions, qaids were the champions of tax abuse and took advantage of the French presence to establish their own brand of “despotism” (*zulm*).²⁷ The colonial alliance finally discredited them after independence in 1956, and a large proportion of qaid families were excluded from the new state administration.²⁸ The qaids’ intrinsically conservative nature was to be blamed for their passivity when faced with the changes brought on by the colonial state and nationalist movements. Still, according to this line of argument, both of them (the colonial state and the national movement) held a monopoly over the initiative of reforms.²⁹ Very few scholars have seriously considered the role of the qaid as a civil servant, either as a potential guarantor of the public interest or at the very least as a political rather than solely self-interested actor.

However, this is how Albert Hourani presented the notable of the 19th-century Middle East: as a local political actor with whom the state had to deal to reach the local population. I argue against the claim that qaids were merely local notables who subserviently collaborated with colonial authorities. Rather, they must be understood as officials with fiscal prerogatives who defended what I call a form of “local legitimacy.” This legitimacy stemmed from their attempt to reconcile local specificities with fiscal policies and public interest. This is partly the line sketched by Hourani’s thesis; notables maintained ambivalent relations of dependence and resistance vis-à-vis the state, whether that state was Ottoman, Tunisian, or French. Admittedly, by pitting the notables’ “conservatism” against the external state’s “modernity,” Hourani’s paradigm runs the risk of becoming excessively binary.³⁰ Extending this politics of the notables into the 20th century and complementing this approach with more recent work on the history of the Ottoman provinces, I will discuss this tendency of the notables toward conservatism by showing another type of discourse based on the general interest.

The historiography of the Ottoman Empire provides the framework for reassessment of the relationship between the qaid and the central state, in particular with regard to taxation. In both early modern

²³“Status of the ‘Ummal,” Archives Nationales de Tunisie (hereafter ANT), H, 55.

²⁴Oualdi, *Esclaves et maîtres*, 325–50.

²⁵Abdelhamid Hénia, ed., *Être notable au Maghreb: Dynamique des configurations notabilliaires* (Tunis: Institut de recherche sur le Maghreb contemporain, 2006), 16.

²⁶Julia Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Arnold Green, *The Tunisian Ulama: 1873–1915; Social Structure and Response to Ideological Currents* (Leiden: Brill, 1978); Mahjoubi, *Origines*, 92; ‘Adnan al-Mansar, *Istratijiyya al-Haymana, al-Imaya al-Faransiyya wa Mu’assasat al-Dawla al-Tunisiyya* (Sousse, Tunisia: Faculté de lettres et de Sciences humaines de Sousse, 2003), 367.

²⁷Al-Hamas, *al-Isti’mar al-Faransi*, 286.

²⁸Khalifa Chater, “Changements politiques et exclusion lors de la décolonisation: le cas du Makhzen en Tunisie (1954–1959),” *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 69, no. 2 (2004): 63–75.

²⁹Lisa Anderson, *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya: 1830–1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

³⁰See James L. Gelvin, “The ‘Politics of Notables’ Forty Years After,” *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 40, no. 1 (2006): 19–29.

and modern history scholarship, an impressive set of local monographs aimed to highlight a “bottom-up view of Ottoman history” that challenged the “strong state paradigm” initially made tempting by the centralized nature of the Ottoman state.³¹ More particularly, this new conception of the articulation between imperial and local power was conducted through a renewed study of taxation, which brought the study of notables to the fore. Historians have linked the sociology of local governors with the features of tax farming. As early as the 16th century, the system of tax farming led to a paradox identified by I. Metin Kunt: “The candidate who could afford a large retinue while out of office could get a position and therefore have official revenues with which to increase his household.”³² Much like the Tunisian *qaïd*, the Ottoman governor was a potentate at the head of a local household and was on the lookout for ways to make a profit. As Linda Darling has pointed out, however, this did not prevent the central government from adapting its tax policies according to petitions from residents and adjusting its demands to local specificities.³³ In the 19th century, this mode of negotiation was still valid, because the Sublime Porte could not cut the state off from the “local bases of economic and political power without compensating them adequately.”³⁴ At a time when the Ottoman Empire was gradually putting an end to tax farming, it had to find intermediate solutions adapted to each situation.

Therefore, given that local elites constantly challenged the administrative control of the state, the study of tax farming sheds light on the opposition between the central state and local authorities. This is why Dina Rizk Khoury invites us to look beyond the opposition between a (strong) centralized state and a (weak) decentralized state.³⁵ More explicitly, as Ehud R. Toledano emphasizes, the process of “localization” (i.e., the promotion of Arab or other native elites) was accompanied by a parallel process of “Ottomanization” (integration within Ottoman political culture) in the 18th and 19th centuries.³⁶ In a practical way, as early as the 18th century, the notables were studied as partners of the imperial government, rather than adversaries.³⁷ Taxation was one of the means of “lengthy negotiation” between the central power and local Ottomanized elites.³⁸ The essential idea of Ottoman provincial studies was indeed that of negotiation. Yet one should ask, can this be applied to a colonial context? Can French colonial power be likened, with regard to its relationship with local authorities, to the Ottoman Empire? Do Arab notables have a comparable attitude toward Istanbul and Paris, two imperial capitals?

Allowing for differences in scale, some trends from Ottoman history are relevant to this Tunisian study. The comparison is not new. Jens Hanssen, Thomas Philipp, and Stefan Weber advocate the idea of a “grammar of difference” (inherited from new imperial history) in the Ottoman context.³⁹ Two concrete factors are considered significant to reassessing the relationship between center and periphery in both the North African and Ottoman contexts. The first is the distribution of fiscal resources because, according to Randi Deguilhem, these constitute the true measure of local autonomy.⁴⁰ The

³¹Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700–1900* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 2.

³²I. Metin Kunt, *The Sultan’s Servants: The Transformation of Ottoman Provincial Government, 1550–1650* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 77.

³³Linda T. Darling, *Revenue-Raising and Legitimacy: Tax Collection and Finance Administration in the Ottoman Empire, 1560–1660* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 281.

³⁴John K. Bragg, *Ottoman Notables and Participatory Politics: Tanzimat Reform in Tokaet; 1839–1876* (London: Routledge, 2014), 5.

³⁵Dina Rizk Khoury, *State and Provincial Society in the Ottoman Empire: Mosul, 1540–1834* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 10.

³⁶Ehud R. Toledano, “The Emergence of Ottoman-Local Elites (1700–1900): A Framework for Research,” in *Middle Eastern Politics and Ideas: A History from Within*, ed. Ilan Pappé and Moshe Maoz (London: I. B. Tauris, 1997), 154.

³⁷Ali Yaycioglu, *Partners of the Empire: The Crisis of the Ottoman Order in the Age of Revolutions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

³⁸Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine*, 19.

³⁹“Did the benevolent *tanzimat* reforms (*Tanzimat-I hayriye*) turn the Ottoman Empire into a colonial empire? Is it time to ‘mainstream’ the Ottoman Empire and integrate it into academic debates on imperialism and colonialism elsewhere in the world, or would we abandon the specificities of the historical Ottoman context?” Jens Hanssen, Thomas Philipp, and Stefan Weber, eds., *The Empire in the City: Arab Provincial Capitals in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Würzburg, Germany: Ergon Verlag, 2002), 6.

⁴⁰According to Randi Deguilhem, “True localism expresses the degree of self-sufficiency, self-determination and solidarity in a society, not just the origins of its rulers or the degree to which external control is successfully resisted”; “Centralized Authority and Local Decisional Power,” in Hanssen et al., *Empire in the City*, 219.

second refers to the institutions responsible for collecting such resources, with Hanssen underlining the multiplication of local councils, inspections, and commissions above the governors that “channel the centre-periphery relations into *in situ* institutions” in the 19th century.⁴¹

During the colonial period, Tunisia imperfectly followed this pattern. Since the protectorate treaty of 1881, its legal link with the Sublime Porte had been broken. The French preferred to abolish intermediary institutions and favored a more vertical and concentrated administration, in line with their plan of domination. Nevertheless, as outlined above, Ottoman historiography provides us these two useful ideas for understanding Tunisian history. First is the relevance of taxation as an indicator of autonomy and as a process subjected to negotiation. Second, qajds, much like Ottoman governors, tended to compare provinces with each other to highlight the specificity of their own regions and subsequently adapt rules that had been adopted at the imperial level.⁴² Looking at their discourse regarding the state, the function of Ottoman governors appears to be a real professional occupation with a specific administrative *savoir faire*.

The sources exploited by students and scholars of Ottoman studies also are worthy of attention. I wish to emphasize the need to rebuild an “emic perspective” through the archives of local actors to counter-balance the dependence on colonial or foreign sources that tend to present the fiscal regime of Ottoman provinces as chaotic and inefficient.⁴³ For the Ottoman Empire, judicial sources overstate the logic of conflicts between the central state and local elites. John Bragg used shari’a court records, which he calls “prosaic archives,” to better understand the participation of local elites (who staffed and oversaw shari’a courts) in imperial reforms.⁴⁴ Haïm Gerber circumvented the lack of historical chronicles on Jerusalem—a scarcity that also afflicts colonial Tunisia—by studying the minutes of the *mejlis-i idare* of the Sanjaq of Jerusalem.⁴⁵ This administrative council was responsible for collecting taxes, which made it a space for negotiations and conflicts between collectors and citizens. However, these local archives do not provide an infallible access to the minds of local actors, since the centralization of the state goes hand in hand with centralization of the archives. As Marc Aymes points out, these local archives tend to speak the same language and use the same administrative categories as the state.⁴⁶ However, despite these biases, it is possible to grasp the “localist ideology of resistance” through some of the arguments contained in specific documentation. Petitions for example are particularly valuable.⁴⁷ They show variations in interpretations of the law by the bedouins and the state, through the nature of the dispute with the state (land tenure, tax collection, military conscription) but more essentially through the moral vocabulary and values used to support the request, particularly those of justice.⁴⁸ Through the study of this language, John Chalcraft shows that the state was not only a place of oppression but “the referee and locus of claim making.”⁴⁹

I also wish to highlight a source that is both local and central: the correspondence between qajds and the high officials of Tunis. These letters (circulars, acknowledgments of receipt, daily reports) were subject to strict regulation, but at the same time they allowed qajds to freely express their specific needs as well as their personal conceptions of the public interest. This correspondence is kept in the archives of the civil controllers (in the diplomatic archives in Nantes, France, and in the archives of the Section d’État,

⁴¹Jens Hanssen, “Practices of Integration: Center-Periphery Relations in the Ottoman Empire,” in Hanssen et al., *Empire in the City*, 56.

⁴²Marc Aymes, “Affaires courantes pour marcheurs d’empire: Le métier d’administrateur dans les provinces ottomanes au XIXe siècle,” *Genèses* 72, no. 3 (2008): 4–25.

⁴³For the bedouins, see Johann Büssow, Kurt Franz, and Stefan Leder, “The Arab East and the Bedouin Component in Modern History: Emerging Perspectives on the Arid Lands as a Social Space,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 58, no. 1–2 (2015): 1–19.

⁴⁴Bragg, *Ottoman Notables*, 6.

⁴⁵Gerber, *State and Society*.

⁴⁶Marc Aymes, *A Provincial History of the Ottoman Empire: Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2014).

⁴⁷Johann Büssow, “Street Politics in Damascus: Kinship and Other Social Categories as Bases of Political Action; 1830–1841,” *History of the Family* 16, no. 2 (2011): 108–25.

⁴⁸Yuval Ben-Bassat, “Bedouin Petitions from Late Ottoman Palestine: Evaluating the Effects of Sedentarization,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 58, no. 1–2 (2015): 135–62.

⁴⁹John Chalcraft, “Engaging the State: Peasants and Petitions in Egypt on the Eve of Colonial Rule,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37, no. 3 (2005): 303–25.

the office of the prime minister, preserved in series E of the Archives nationales de Tunisie [al-Arshif al-Watani al-Tunisi]). In the latter case, they are organized thematically, for example by fiscal issues. The correspondence was written in Arabic, with a brief French translation, often authored by a secretary and signed by the qaid. All of it was handwritten, although some of the prime minister's circulars were printed in Arabic. Civil controllers could annotate each piece of mail they checked.

Many subjects were mentioned in this correspondence: police reports, judicial decisions, economic bulletins, the appointment and management of civil officials, etc. Fiscal matters occupied an important place and were representative of the form of this correspondence. More importantly, the issue of the remuneration of civil servants was particularly revealing of the daily work of the qaid and his conception of the general interest. In explaining the inadequacy of their remuneration, they listed all the functions that fell under their authority and their intrinsic contribution to public service. In this respect, qaid presented themselves as actors of the state, at the head of a small administration, rather than as mere spokespersons of notability. Unfortunately, we are often forced to use a comparative lexical analysis of their arguments, not least because of the lack of biographical information on these qaid. This shortcoming derives from archival logic in Tunis; the files of the national archives are arranged thematically, for instance according to different types of taxes. The information on qaid themselves, on the other hand, must be explored by consulting their personal files, which are often incomplete and even nonexistent in the case of the many qaid of lesser importance or shorter mandates. Only additional in situ surveys could make up for this deficiency.

On a broader scale, administrative sources give us some features of the qaid corps. In the mid-1930s, the number of *caïdats* (the districts of a qaid) was reduced from eighty to thirty-five.⁵⁰ The qaid were generally literate but without dedicated training; they were recruited by conservative social forces and landowners and, in the military territories of the south, by local leaders, appointed in particular for their warrior skills. However, in the 1930s, the corps was socially heterogeneous, insofar as it included members of the beylical aristocracy and elites from Tunis, but also powerful local families or tribal chiefs. In this respect, the Tunisian corps was more precociously bureaucratized than in Morocco, where the qaid often came from the region they administered. Tunisia, rather, followed the Algerian model, even if, as Colette Establet has shown for the 19th century, the qaid has remained an ambivalent figure, somewhere between the civil servant and the tribal chief.⁵¹

The Discourse of Local Legitimacy

With this in mind, I now turn to the history of tax reform in the Béja district between the two world wars. The canonical grain tax is a perfect example of negotiation between the state and local elites. Commissions were set up locally to determine the basis for this tax. The qaid defended the legitimacy of actors from the “country” (*watan*) calculating the tax. The exercise of tax sovereignty was therefore shared between various actors, in the name of a common ideal of public service and the interest of the inhabitants.

The *ushr* (in French sources *achour*) represented the tithe, or tenth, in Islamic law. Although not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an, it is part of a number of canonical taxes established by the Prophet Muhammad on fruits and cereals. Depending on the Islamic legal school under consideration, its exact amount, its beneficiaries, and whether it serves as alms (*zakat*) were subject to debate.⁵² In the case of Jerusalem, Gerber explains that this “main land tax” was impossible to collect through a direct system of a tax collection (the *emanet* system), despite an attempt to do so during the Tanzimat.⁵³ Many small-scale collectors in close contact with local farmers were required to calculate the tax base. In Tunisia, the *ushr* had to be proportional to the volume of harvests. Its irregularity throughout the years allowed the qaid, according to Ganiage, to impose a system of corruption-based distribution

⁵⁰For these details, see Arthur Girault, *Principes de colonisation et de législation coloniale. La Tunisie et le Maroc* (Paris: Sirey, 1936); and Antoine Perrier, “La liberté des protégés: souverains, ministres et serviteurs des monarchies marocaine et tunisienne sous protectorat français (1881–1956)” (PhD diss., Paris Institute of Political Studies, 2019), 292.

⁵¹Colette Establet, *Être caïd dans l'Algérie coloniale* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1991).

⁵²T. Sato, “Ushr,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 2010, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/9789004206106_eifo_COM_1309.

⁵³Gerber, *State and Society*, 48.

that essentially burdened the poorest peasants.⁵⁴ In 1856, Muhammad Bey transformed this into a fixed contribution calculated on the cultivated acreage, and no longer on the product of the harvest. However, the methods of calculating this acreage, the extent of which varied greatly with weather conditions, led to further complaints by peasants and abuses by qaid.⁵⁵

These conflicts led the Tunisian government to create local commissions in 1868 to calculate the tax rate according to which the qaid could collect the *'ushr*.⁵⁶ These local institutions decided on the size of plots and exemptions for certain crops. France maintained them in the early years of the protectorate. From 4 April 1903 onward, the state compensated the members of this commission with the hope of guaranteeing their independence from farmers and preventing any attempts of bribery.⁵⁷ The local commissions were composed of members appointed by the prime minister (the Tunisian chief of government) on the proposal of each qaid, and chosen from among the honorable and competent persons of the qaidship (mainly the notables, *a'yān*).⁵⁸ Whereas civil controllers could attend commissions and monitor their decisions, local Tunisian actors carried out most of the day-to-day tasks.⁵⁹ These tax calculation commissions were at the heart of the relationship between central and local government and symbolized a logic of negotiation defended by the qaid and undermined by the colonial power when the latter imposed standard rates at the national scale.

This is illustrated by studying a letter from the qaid of Teboursouk (a small municipality south of Béja that fell within the jurisdiction of the same district) to the director of finance of the protectorate, a French administrator whose role was equivalent to that of a finance minister of Tunisia (Fig. 1). In this letter, dated 17 May 1909, the qaid presented tax collection as a mission intrinsically carried out in consultation with local actors. In the original version of his letter (which was partially translated into French, but I refer to the Arabic text due to simplification or rewriting of certain passages by the colonial interpreter), he recalled that the prime minister asked him to designate “suitable” persons to compose the commission, in particular for the positions of chairpersons, intendants (*amīn*), and clerks (*'udūl*).⁶⁰ However, it would appear that the appointed committee did not take the qaid’s suggestions into account. In his reaction, the qaid protested, first by presenting a moral argument:

Your first letter showed confidence [*thiqa*] in your auxiliary the qaid and your clemency [*ra'fa*] toward the [Tunisian] subjects, after which you canceled the effects [*abtala*] of this confidence by the content of the second letter. In this case, taking into account the qaid’s opinion means encouraging his advice [*nuṣḥa*], his wise judgment [*ḥazm*], and his concern for service [*i'tinā' bi-l-khidma*]. You thus increase his consideration [*i'tibār*] in the eyes of the inhabitants.

All the elements of a political Islamic axiology were here brought together: the need for advice was a canonical obligation of a sovereign, as evidenced in the Sunni legal tradition and in the mirrors for princes literature.⁶¹ The *khidma* (service) was a common value for all public servants within the Tunisian monarchy, based on continuity, public interest, and personal abnegation. The qaid therefore spoke to the French director as an advisor would address his prince. He added that his local power closely depended on the consideration given to him by the sovereign or his representatives. Respecting his opinion was therefore in the interest of central government.

The qaid’s second argument highlighted the local legitimacy of the commission’s members. He referred to a *lajna min al-'amal* (literally a commission from the qaidship; *'āmil* is equivalent to qaid

⁵⁴Ganiage, *Les origines du protectorat*, 99.

⁵⁵Van Krieken, *Khayr al-Din*, 200.

⁵⁶Note from the secretary general to the director of finance, ANT, E, 23/1, 7 August 1901.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Circular of the prime minister to the qaid, ANT, E, 23/1, 6 March 1909.

⁵⁹Circular of the resident general to civil controllers, ANT, E, 23/1, 3 April 1901.

⁶⁰Letter from the qaid of Teboursouk to the director of finance, ANT, E, 23/1, 17 May 1909.

⁶¹Makram Abbes, *Islam et politique à l'âge classique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009). For an example of this literature in North Africa, see Etty Terem, “Navigating Modernity: Lessons in Government and Statecraft in Precolonial Morocco,” *Mediterranean Studies* 25, no. 1 (2017): 76–97.

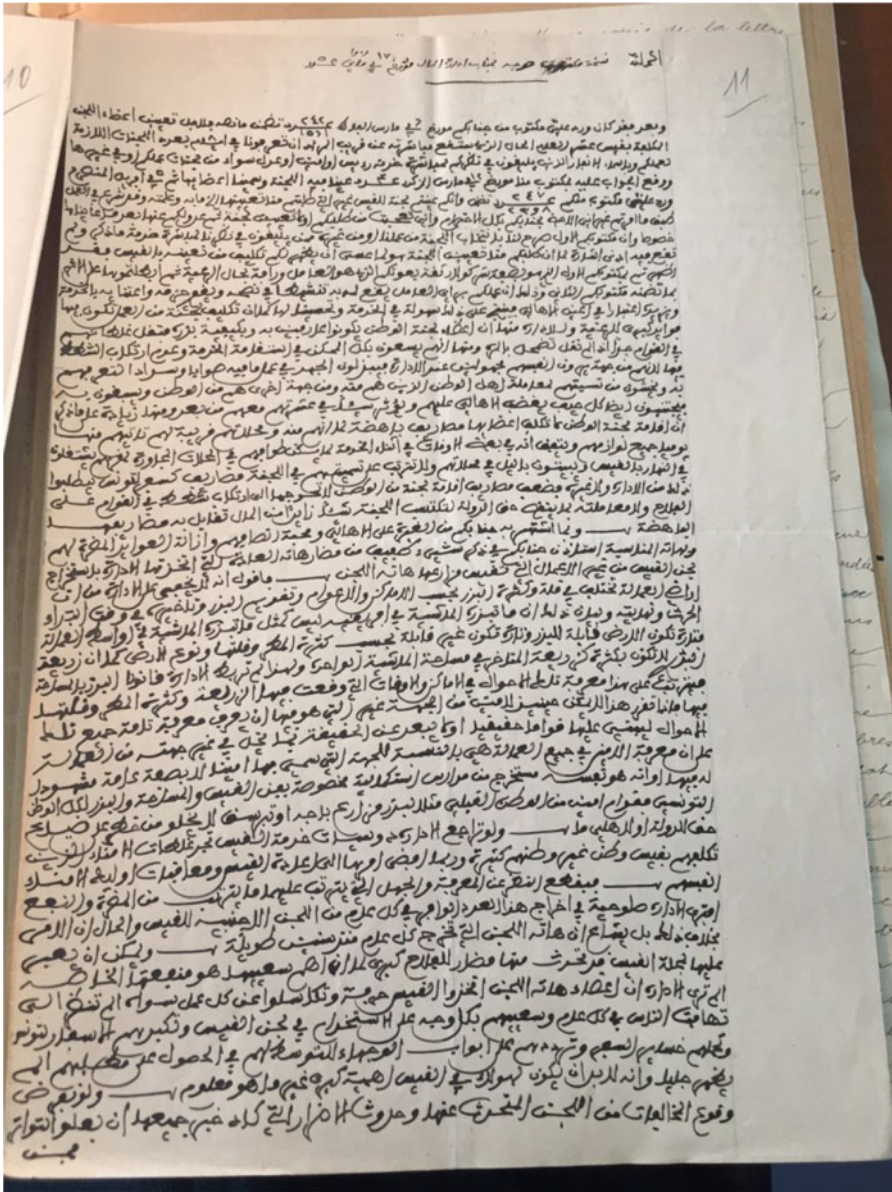


Figure 1. Letter from the qaid of Teboursouk to the director of finance, 17 May 1909 (ANT, E, 23/1).

in Arabic manuscripts) which the French administration translated as local commission. The qaid also mentioned a *lajnat al-watan* (country commission), the same institution but with an emphasis on its local origin. In effect, the qaid alluded to a commission composed of local men, the *ahl al-watan*. The word *watan* refers to the homeland, the place of birth or the small country, the *balad* (*bled* in local dialect). The argument put forward by the qaid was pragmatic. In his view, such a commission could contribute to “facilitate the operation of the public service” (*al-suhūla fi-l-khidma*) because local members knew which seeds (*badhra*) were sowed on their lands. The qaid added that he endeavored to be irreplaceable in the eyes of both the administration and the inhabitants who knew him. He also outlined the virtuous effects of reputation and local knowledge on agricultural engineering and claimed toward the end of his argument that the local commission would save on travel expenditures that should have been paid to foreign members. He concluded that taxation is most effective in the context of in situ control by local men and relevant inhabitants.

In the same vein, the qaid presented his qaidship as a specific territory to which uniform legislation from the capital city is maladjusted. The qaid asserted that it was a “self-evident fact” (*shay’ tafif*) that seeding methods change according to location, rainfall, and soil type, and that therefore “it is not possible for a collector [*amīn*] from a place other than this one [*min al-jīha ghayr al-latī huwa minhā*] to know all the local circumstances that allowed him to establish [his report] accurately [*haqīqan*].” The criterion for local membership was rudimentary and vague; one should come from somewhere in the district. In 19th-century Damascus, Johann Büsow notes that the use in petitions from residents of the phrase “local people” (*ahl al-bilād*) implied a political purpose. Indeed, this expression refers to Muslims specifically, as opposed to Christians in a multi-faith context.⁶² By analogy, I suggest that the frequent use of the word *waṭan* also was political in a colonial context, because it distinguished the inhabitants of the qaidship not only from “foreigners” who had come from the capital or from another part of Tunisia, but also from French settlers.

The qaid’s letter presented participation in tax collection by the country’s men as necessary to the qaidship as well as to the state itself. A “*waṭan* commission” would guarantee the integrity (*qawām*) of the treatment of the peasant (*fallāḥ/fellāh*) to avoid anything that could harm the state’s share (*ḥaqq al-dawla*, in the sense of the lion’s share) in relation to the inhabitants’ share (*ḥaqq al-ahālī*). For the qaid, in short, an effective commission was beneficial to both the state and the inhabitants of the qaidship. As a result, the qaid presented as a civil servant, adopting a common bureaucratic language of financial efficiency with the director of finance. He explained that the local expertise of the inhabitants would be necessary as long as there was no “school that would concretely teach how to determine the surface area [*qays*], surveying [*misāḥa*], and sowing [*badhr*] for all regions of Tunisia.” The legitimacy of local actors was essentially based on a pragmatic argument, in addition to the moral need for consultation. The qaid of Teboursouk highlighted the contradictions of a centralizing policy desired by the colonial power but lacking the concrete means to achieve its purposes. In the absence of a professional corps of surveyors, the notables from the country remained essential. If we ignore what happened next in this exchange of opinions, it is noteworthy that the Teboursouk qaid presented himself as the champion of both local and state interests.

Thirty years later, the Tunisian government would abolish the cereal tax, which was considered unequal, as part of a rural development program initiated by the protectorate in 1935.⁶³ This measure aimed to correct the growing inequalities between small Tunisian farmers and French settlers that were due to the global economic crisis. The wheat economy, mainly destined for export to France, was particularly affected. The collapse of wheat prices and the difficulty of selling agricultural production in France, combined with several years of drought, caused famines.⁶⁴ In this context, inequalities between Tunisians and the French were glaring. The settlers monopolized the most fertile land and modern agricultural techniques, through mechanization. As a result, whereas a few hundred French settlers produced two million quintals of wheat from 170,000 hectares, 250 to 350,000 Tunisian fellahin produced only 1.8 million quintals from 600 to 650,000 hectares.⁶⁵ In addition, the French paid a tiny amount of tax compared to the Tunisians; for example, they owed only one tenth of the ‘*ushr*. From 1936 onward, when the Front Populaire (an alliance of left-wing movements) came to power in France with a policy designed to reduce social inequalities in North Africa, the colonial state took a series of measures to intervene in the regulation of the economy and help disenfranchised peasants.

The decree of 26 December 1935 abolished the “achour tax on cereals and legumes.”⁶⁶ The prime minister’s circular and the acknowledgement of receipt of this circular by the qaid provide insight into how the measure was received at the local level. The official speech is contained in the circular of 13 January 1936, an address by Prime Minister al-Hadi al-Akhwa. The reform was aimed at “improving the situation of peasants” (*taḥsīn mu’tabar fī ḥālat al-fallāḥīn*), especially the smallholders (*aṣghār*). The taxes that replaced the ‘*ushr* were based on real capital (animal and grain) rather than on the

⁶²Büsow, “Street Politics in Damascus,” 115.

⁶³Al-Hamas, *al-Isti’mar al-Faransi*, 267.

⁶⁴Jean Poncet, “La Crise des années 30 et ses répercussions sur la colonisation française en Tunisie,” *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer* 63, no. 232–233 (1976) : 622–27.

⁶⁵Poncet, “Crise des années 30,” 624.

⁶⁶Undated secret intelligence note, ANT, E, 23/8.

expected number of crops or plot size. In other words, the state imposed a uniform mathematical measure that no longer depended on how grain was grown or on weather conditions. As a consequence, the power of Tunis no longer depended on the local knowledge that the qaid of Teboursouk considered essential.

The letter in which the Béja qaid, Muhammad al-Zawari, acknowledged receipt of these instructions emphasized his role as representative, but also the consultative nature of this mode of governance. He brought together “khalifats [delegates of the qaid, either in his court, the city, or the countryside], shaykhs [leaders of tribes or very small towns], elders and peasants of the Béja khalifat [the city of Béja], the heads of sectors [*umda*],” that is, the local actors with whom he governed, to announce the news.⁶⁷ His letter did not purport to mask the climate of economic concern of 1936. At the meeting where he announced the abolition of the tax, those present expressed “hopes for a better future and a recovery of the situation of the countryside [*bādiya*].”⁶⁸ The qaid reported the suppression of the *ushr* announced by the civil controller, insisting, once again, on the importance of consultation:

We met at the civil control headquarters. The session was opened by the civil controller with a presentation [*baṣṭ*] that went into great detail [*mushab*] about the interest of this reform, the overwhelming benefits [*ghazīr*] for all and in particular for small farmers. He drew attention to the commendable behavior [*ḥamīd*] of the government, which never stops working with consultation [*nushḥ*] and clemency [*raʿfa*].

These last two words, already present in the 1909 letter from the qaid of Teboursouk, were not mentioned in the French translation. They nevertheless allude to the political ideal of good governance in the Islamic tradition, a common language assumed by Muslim scholars and state actors like the qaid. In his study of Muhammad al-Zawari, Adnen Mansar describes the qaid as a zealous henchman of French domination across his qaid positions in the country.⁶⁹ Zawari emphasized with vivid and suggestive expressions the colonial propaganda: the word *mushab* can mean not only prolific but also talkative, overly long, just as the meaning of *ghazīr* is close to overabundant or overflowing, like river water or rain.⁷⁰ Unconditional collaboration with the French was thus obvious, but the qaid also addressed his letter to the prime minister when he expressed his concerns for the economic situation in his district. Indeed, the removal of the *achour* did not help the qaid’s affairs, as was illustrated by the protest of his successor the following year.

The Abolition of Tax Farming: A State Within a State

Until 1937, the qaid’s salary was proportional to the taxes he levied. Scholars have often interpreted this system as an invitation to the misappropriation of tax funds; however it appeared to be more complex than a mere vestige of feudalism. Another letter from the Béja qaid shows that the qaid was at the head of a small administration, making them a part of the composite state. He took care of the salaries of the employees and paid for office supplies with his own financial resources, that is, without any support from the state.

In the Ottoman taxation system, the prevalent method of remuneration was tax farming (*iltizām*), a common system throughout the Ottoman Empire with medieval origins in the system of *iqṭāʾ*.⁷¹ *Iqṭāʾ* was the concession granted by Mamluk princes to their servants on a territory in which they benefited from taxes on and ownership of the land. It must be distinguished from the Ottoman *timar*, which did not

⁶⁷Letter from the qaid of Béja to the prime minister, ANT, E, 23/8, 16 January 1936.

⁶⁸The word usually refers to the bedouin steppe, but in this context it is definitely the countryside.

⁶⁹Adnan Mansar, “Pouvoir caïdal et régime colonial en Tunisie dans l’entre-deux-guerres: le cas Zouari,” *Rawafid* 5 (1999–2000): 41–76.

⁷⁰Marcelin Beausnier, *Dictionnaire pratique arabe-français* (Algiers, 1887), 473. This dictionary does not mention *mushab*.

⁷¹Claude Cahen considered the comparison between *iqṭāʾ* and feudalism, despite strong similarities, irrelevant. “L’évolution de l’*iqṭāʾ* du IX^e au XIII^e siècle: contribution à une histoire comparée des sociétés médiévales,” *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 8, no. 1 (1953): 25–52.

imply a right of ownership of the land.⁷² In Tunisia, the tax concession, very similar to the *timar*, did not entail any property rights for its beneficiaries. The *iltizām* presented many tax disadvantages for the central power, leading the bey Hammuda Pasha to reform it at the beginning of the 19th century, although it had already been abolished in Egypt in the early 1810s.⁷³ This system never fully satisfied the Tunisian state, although it had the advantage of not paying wages directly from the government budget. As a consequence, the quids had to take care of their entire administrations with their own resources.

However, the colonial power decided on a reform to improve the financial reliability of tax collection.⁷⁴ The purpose of this reform also was political, as tax issues constituted an important reason for popular discontent during this period. The Destour, a nationalist party created in 1920, made the issue of unequal taxation between the French and Tunisians the cornerstone of its anti-colonial program.⁷⁵ In the 1930s, the leader of the Neo-Destour (a new political formation resulting from a split with the old Destour leadership), Habib Bourguiba, presented himself as the defender of small farmers ruined by the crisis, although his party was still weakly established in the Tunisian countryside at the time. However, he seized the opportunity to blame colonial authorities for the famines.⁷⁶ If the peasant forces remained passive actors in comparison to the urban elites and the workers' movements, their discontent contributed to the unpopularity of the protectorate.⁷⁷ The fiscal reform, which extended taxes to Europeans, also was intended to moralize the collection systems. A group of the quids themselves were in favor of this reform, which was synonymous with professionalization and which held the promise of greater economic security and social recognition thanks to the new administrative salary.⁷⁸ Economic conditions having slightly improved by 1937, this facilitated the promulgation of the beylical decree of 31 May 1937, which gave the quids a legal status and a direct salary. The government was proceeding cautiously; by no means did it turn the quids into civil servants. Indeed, protectorate authorities were keen to maintain full freedom in the appointment of quids. The Inspector General of Administrative Services Charles Saumagne wrote in 1937, "[the qaid] is a trusted man chosen by the prince to represent him personally, to whom he agrees to pay taxes, which he appoints to the policing, who does not enjoy a salary leading to membership of the Welfare Society, and whom the Prince dismisses whenever he wishes."⁷⁹ This is why the decree did not replace tax leasing with a single salary but gave all the quids a choice between two forms of remuneration.

A letter from the qaid of the Hammama (a large tribe in southwest Tunisia) shows how the qaid received this reform.⁸⁰ In his letter, the tribal governor describes the reform as that of a beneficent government (*janāb al-ḥukūma al-khayriyya*) that has endowed the governors of the kingdom (*ummāl al-mamlaka*) with a regular income (*dakhl rāji*) as a salary (*murattab*).⁸¹ He explains that the quids had the choice between two options (*amarayn*), the first consisting of a "deduction [*baqā*]" on the taxes [*ḍarā'ib*] owed to them," allowing them to retain the old organization of tax farming. The other choice was formulated as "compensation [in lieu of tax farming] by a qaid's salary" (*ta'wīḍ dhalika bi-jirāyya qā'ida*). It is this latter option that the qaid chose.

That this decree coincided with the abolition of the *'ushr* tax led to a tricky situation in the opinion of the qaid of Béja. A long letter he wrote reveals the importance in the qaidship of what I call a "state within the state," that is, the autonomous administration of each region based on the model of the state. This letter could be compared to a contemporary letter from the qaid of Kairouan, another large agricultural

⁷²Nicolas Michel, *L'Égypte des villages autour du 16ème siècle* (Paris: Peeters, 2018), 105.

⁷³Robert Hunter, *Egypt under the Khedives: 1805–1879; From Household Government to Modern Bureaucracy* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984), 19.

⁷⁴Perrier, "La liberté des protégés," 292.

⁷⁵*La Tunisie Martyre, ses revendications* (Paris: Jouve and Cie, 1920).

⁷⁶Mahjoubi, *Origines*, 542.

⁷⁷Mouldi Lahmar, "'La 'révolte du pain' dans la campagne tunisienne. Notables, ouvriers et Fellahs," *Esprit* 100, no. 4 (1985): 9–19.

⁷⁸Perrier, "La liberté des protégés," 306.

⁷⁹The Welfare Society was a kind of mutual pension fund for Tunisian civil servants. ANT, A, 201/67, 25 January 1937.

⁸⁰Mustapha Tlili, "Ahmed Ben Youssef des Hamāma: Itinéraire d'un notable de milieu tribal au XIXe siècle," in Hénia, *Être notable*, 220–27.

⁸¹Letter from the qaid of the Hammama to the prime minister, Centre des archives diplomatiques de Nantes (hereafter CADN), 1/TU/1V/2498, 23 December 1937.

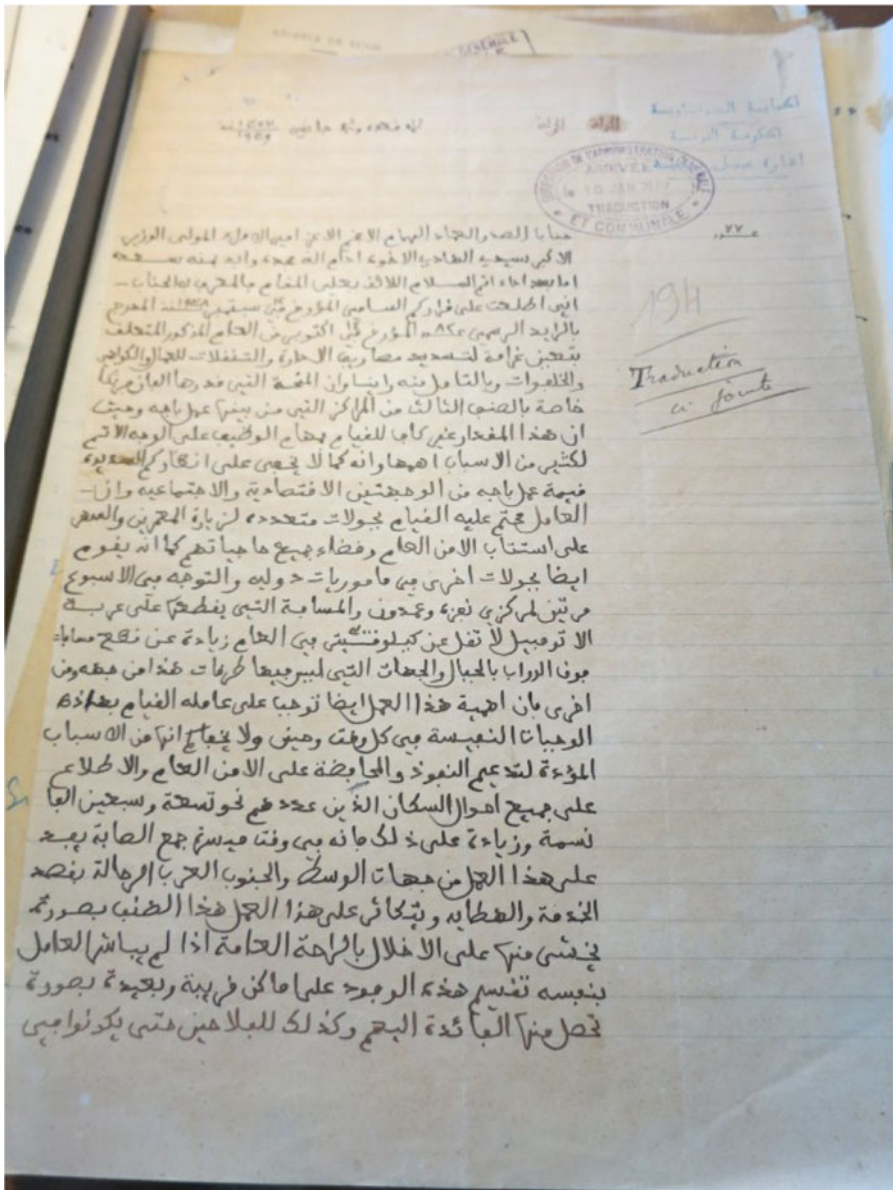


Figure 2. Letter from the qaid of Béja to the prime minister, 8 January 1939 (ANT, E, 3/24).

region of Tunisia, a little further south, fifty kilometers from the east coast. The discourse of the qaid of Béja could indeed be interpreted as a desire for state decentralization (although it must be noted that the word is for the most part an anachronism) insofar as it condemned the inappropriateness of a uniform tax legislation throughout Tunisia. The unfortunate fate of Béja, the cereal qaidship par excellence, was emphasized by the qaid Muhammad al-'Ajimi in his letter of 8 January 1939 to the prime minister (Fig. 2):

This new status [*al-nizām al-jadīd*] fixed a percentage of the tax levies [in the event that the qaid chose to be paid according to the first option described above]. But there is no doubt that the Béja qaidship is above all a rural qaidship [*'aml fallāhī qabl kull shay*], where a large part of the taxes [*ḍarā'ib*] that can be levied in other qaidships such as the *qānūn* [tax on olive and date

trees] or those on olives, palm trees, resources of the continent or sulphate for seeds do not exist. As a result, the qaid will be prejudiced [*sayahrīmu*] from the beginning of this year by the abolition of the collection of *'ushr*.⁸²

This passage provides us with a key insight into the issue of resource sharing as part of the relationship between local authorities and the state. The abolition of one tax and its subsequent replacement by another could favor one territory or prejudice another. Colonial public policies were not yet constrained by “spatial planning,” which required the equal distribution of resources among the territories. Spatial planning was to gain traction only in post-1945 French public policy. The disadvantages that were soon to emerge from abolishing the cereal tax reflected not only the colonial authoritarian decision-making process but also the *raison d'être* of the tax farming system. Despite the numerous abuses of the qaid, it was a way of adapting each qaid's income to the rural features of his territory, in the absence of a fixed salary.

These rural characteristics appeared even more clearly in the complaint of the qaid of Kairouan. A few weeks after the Béja qaid, the qaid Nasr b. Sa'id b. Qasr wrote to the prime minister to draw a link between the low salary and the very particular climatic conditions of those years. In his letter he described the crisis (*al-azma*), low rainfall (*qillat al-amṭār*), and the lack of sunshine (*faqdan ra'n*) which also had hit his colleagues (*zumalā'*) in other qaidships in western Tunisia.⁸³ The local resources of Tunisian civil servants were fundamentally agricultural resources and therefore subject to the vagaries of the seasons. He added “our [tax] share needed to carry out our fundamental missions [*qiyām ma'mūriyyatinā*] has become superficial [*tafīf*].” It is striking that both the Béja and the Kairouan qaid use the same word, *tafīf*, to describe the share of tax revenue left to them by the state. It also is clear that the alternative qaid's pay was insufficient to compensate for this loss of income.

In many cases, the problem of low salaries for local governors was correlated with their private wealth. It is because they were poorly paid that the qaid needed to be already rich to carry out their duties. Public and private money thus merged into a practice associated with personal enrichment. Naturally, the Béja qaid justified this need for money in terms of public service missions which, if we put aside the assessment of the grounds for his needs, give us an insight into the state within the state that the qaid managed:

The administration of the qaidship [*idārāt al-'aml*] is composed of two khalifats, seven titular secretaries [*kataba rasmiyyin*], in addition to assistants [*mu'awanin*] for all administrative, judicial, executive, and military services [*al-khidmāt al-idāriyya wa-l-'adaliyya wa-l-tanfīdh wa-l-ḥarbiyya*], those of civil registry, finance, real estate funds [*ṣundūq al-iqāriyya*], religious archives [*ṣundūq tawthīq al-dīniyya*], public works, health and forestry administration [*idārat al-ṣiḥḥa wa-l-ghābāt*] and all the rest.⁸⁴

What the qaid described here is an administration (as he himself puts it, albeit in the plural form, *idārāt*), a small state representing an annual correspondence of 5,714 letters that, among other things, issued poverty certificates (*shahādāt al-latī tasallum li-l-fuqarā'*) for the poor who came to knock on the door of his office. The archives of the qaidships in Tunis contain the personal files of secretaries; the latter are not very numerous. At any one time, the qaid of the Hammama had five secretaries.⁸⁵ However small in number, these agents nevertheless provided vital local services to the inhabitants of the qaidship. The poverty certificates, for example, were mandatory to obtain any social assistance from the state or other benevolent associations. Telephone expenses, office supplies, and building maintenance also fell under the responsibility of the qaid. Kairouan's qaid also regretted that his low income

⁸²Letter from the qaid of Béja to the prime minister, ANT, E, 3/24, 8 January 1939.

⁸³Letter from the qaid of Kairouan to the prime minister, CADN, 1/TU/AV/2493/3, 17 January 1938.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Letter from the qaid of the Hammama to the prime minister, ANT, A, 82/4, 7 November 1941.

“hindered his ability to carry out administrative tasks [*qabada ‘an al-qiyām*] such as [public] works, handling things or secretarial work [*katābiyya*].”⁸⁶

There is still a limit on the interpretation of these letters, resulting from the alarmist trope of administrative writing that consists of exaggerating a situation to capture the attention and hopefully gain better advantages from the central government.⁸⁷ This exaggeration was a communication strategy, but the few colonial statistics on the salaries of the qajids to which we have access confirm their meagerness. At the end of the 1930s, the salary of a qaid at the top of the administrative scale (28,500 francs) remained much lower than the salary that the staff representatives in 1936 at the very least considered honorable (40,000 francs).⁸⁸ In general, the entire beylical bureaucracy was paid poorly compared to colonial officials. For example, a French janitor at the fifth level of the public works administration earned the same salary as a professor at the Great Mosque.⁸⁹ The qaid’s complaint was partly based on credible facts that allowed him to include local particularities and public interest in his arguments.

This inadequate remuneration had political consequences for the qaid himself, and more so for the government. The two letters reveal a logic of negotiation between local and central authorities, for example in the warning—almost a threat—from the Kairouan qaid writing to the prime minister: “If the government does not care about us [*idh lam tahattama al-ḥukūma bi-amrinā*], the shares on taxes will remain low, it will no longer be able to cope with the necessities, and the qaid will have to go into debt.” At this very moment, “there is no doubt that authority will collapse in the eyes of public opinion” (*isqāṭ al-nufūdh fi naẓar al-‘amma*). The government had a duty to support its qajids financially, otherwise the authority of the state would be diminished. Here, the interests of the qajids and Tunisia were interdependent. The governor of Kairouan left little choice here to the prime minister, who was obliged to trust his appreciation of local realities and the stability of his representative in the qaidship. In making such claims, the qaid presented himself neither as a notable nor as a landowner, but as a civil servant who must lead a personal administration that he maintained with his own money. The political nature of the qaid service is even more explicit in the case of Béja’s qaid. In this context, he reminded the prime minister of the meaning of his obedience: “There is no doubt that [all these duties] benefit the sovereignty of both governments [*jawā’id ta’ūdu ‘alā siyādat al-ḥukūmatayn*] and the interest of inhabitants of different kinds [*maṣlaḥat al-sukkān ‘alā ikhtilāf ajnāsihim*].”

Evidently, the two governments referred to are France and Tunisia (both operating in Tunisia), although less mention was made of the colonial power in the qajids’ letters. *Maṣlaḥa*, referring to the common good or public interest in Sunni legal tradition, is another recurrent word in the political vocabulary of the time.⁹⁰ Despite local peculiarities, the qaid thought of himself as a part of the state since he used the same rhetoric as all state agents did to defend their rights, regardless of the nature of their administration.

Conclusion

The figure of the notable has marked more than fifty years of research on Middle East history. As spokespersons for the rural world and as intermediaries with the state, the notables had grassroots authority in a local community.⁹¹ During the 19th century, state-building was a process rooted in antagonism, negotiation, and inclusion of notables. As in Egypt, two paradigmatic figures opposed each other and embodied the tensions between the local and the central, the bureaucrat (the effendi) of the capital and the notable of the province.⁹² By focusing on colonial Tunisia in the first half of the 20th century, another historical

⁸⁶Letter from the qaid of Kairouan to the prime minister, CADN, 1/TU/AV/2493/3, 17 January 1938.

⁸⁷For the Moroccan case, see Nicolas Michel, *Une économie de subsistances. Le Maroc précolonial* (Cairo: IFAO, 1997).

⁸⁸Administrative note, CADN, 1/TU/1V/2553, 1936.

⁸⁹Comparison of note about the remuneration of religious dignitaries (CADN, 1TU/1V/2012, c. 1937) with table of salaries of public works management auxiliaries (CADN, 1/TU/2V/7561, c. 1942).

⁹⁰Felicitas Opwis, *Maṣlaḥa and the Purpose of the Law: Islamic Discourse on Legal Change from the 4th/10th to 8th/14th century* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

⁹¹Nathan Brown “Peasants and Notables in Egyptian Politics,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 26, no. 2 (1990): 145–60.

⁹²James Whidden, *Monarchy and Modernity in Egypt: Politics, Islam and Neo-Colonialism between the Wars* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013).

trend, less known in the Middle East, appears: the professionalization of the notable or, at least, of the functions of notables such as the qaid. The reform of the salary of the qaid increasingly assimilated them to civil servants at the head of real public services. The opposition between notable and bureaucrat no longer summarized the tensions between central and local. Such tensions took place in the different administrations of a composite state, in which local offices retained a certain margin of autonomy despite strong legal and financial links with the state.

From a colonial history perspective, the study of the qaid's correspondence shows that synthesis between the interest of the country (*waṭan*) and the laws of the state was the result of a provincial mode of operation that preceded colonization. More precisely, it was inherited from the reforms of the 19th century. In this respect, the qaid government is another indication of Ottoman legacy in Tunisia.⁹³ This case study thus demonstrates the relevance of a connection between Ottoman studies and colonial studies, especially for Tunisia, and perhaps more broadly for Algeria, two former Ottoman provinces. The example of Béja also highlights the importance of local and rural scales in understanding state-building processes in North Africa, which remained a predominantly rural region throughout the colonial period.

In a sense, the existence of a state within the state rendered the qaid an advocate of decentralization. The legitimacy of concerted power depended on local skills, which derived knowledge from experience of the land and people. As a result, the qaid did not represent a local elite that resisted political change which was supposed to come only from the colonial state. They also were civil servants rooted in a geographical context, with a particular vision of public affairs. The central power and local elites were united by the same language, the morality of good government, although this language may well have concealed private interests. It is too simplistic to oppose the central power's drive toward modernization with an alleged passive resistance at the level of local qaid.

During the interwar period, the Tunisian colonial state encouraged forced-march centralization, excluding local elites and notables. The qaid was forced by this process of centralization to become the privileged champion of local interests, while remaining a representative of the state. The word *ahāli* (people), whose interests the qaid claimed to defend, refers certainly to the men of *waṭan*, as opposed to the capital. But in the colonial context, it also refers to indigenous Tunisians, as opposed to French controllers and settlers. The qaid was essential actors of the state; they were, simultaneously, officials appointed by the government, spokespersons for their country, and in some instances defenders of Tunisian interests against French policies. Historiography, focused on either the Destour or on the colonial state, has attempted to explain the qaid's role in terms of vested interests only. As I have shown, however, the qaid also embodied a local way of thinking about the state, a claim for decentralization that certainly survived as a resistance to further centralization policies in Bourguiba's post-independence Tunisia.

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⁹³Leon C. Brown, ed., *Imperial Legacy: The Ottoman Imprint of the Balkans and the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Oualdi, *A Slave between Empires*.