Modernization, Communal Space and Inter-Confessional Conflicts in Nineteenth-Century Damascus

Anais Massot

In 1860 the Christian quarter of Damascus, called Maḥalla al-Naṣārā was attacked by a large group of people coming from different parts of the city. Many Christians were killed and their houses plundered. This event is part of a series of attacks against Christians in the Ottoman Empire in the mid 19th century. Violent historical events such as riots and events of communal violence are subject to a variety of interpretations. Classic theories about civil violence tend to be underlined by a specific conception of state-society relations based on the European historical experience. When non-European contexts are addressed it is through the prism of ‘ethnic violence’ between primordial groups. Context, structures, inter-personal networks and state policies are often ignored and groups are considered as given entities. This theoretical approach can be observed in the way the attacks on the Christian neighborhood of Damascus in 1860 have been interpreted in the context of the Ottoman reforms. Ottoman reformers and an early scholarship presented inter-confessional violence as setbacks on the way to modernization, outbursts of primordial inter-religious hatred demonstrating the need for further reforms.

This modernizing discourse presents violence as an offshoot of traditionalism and associates ‘modernization’ with peaceful societal relations. However by examining inter-group relations in Damascus culminating in the 1860 attacks, it becomes clear that “modernizing” reforms, far from improving societal relations, actually contributed to inter-group conflicts in Damascus. Indeed, the Tanzimat reforms, in addition to other international or local dynamics, undermined the crosscutting urban fabric in which Christians and Jews played a variety of societal roles. In the previous centuries, the overlapping system of craft corporations, neighborhoods and patronage networks created crosscutting markers of identity that were as important as religion in defining one’s place in society. In the 19th century, the reforms, coupled with other dynamics, created a language of rights through which communities defined their identities and loyalties. In this process, religion became the main border on which society was imagined.

The 1860 riots have been explored through a variety of prisms but the communalization of space has not yet been explored. How was ‘communal space’ constructed through the language of the Tanzimat reforms and how did it contribute to inter-confessional conflict? In order to address this question, the changes to the urban fabric introduced by the Tanzimat will be explored. Then I will look at how the reforms enacted a paradoxical language of Christian rights that led to the communalization of space. Finally I will describe how a specific part of Maḥalla al-Naṣārā came be the target of resentments through the interaction of international relations and consular politics.

Ashutosh Varshney, in the context of India, indicates that violence or the lack of it in the context of conflicts can be explained by the strength of inter-ethnic civil engagement. He argues that the possibility of conflict transforming into violence depends on the presence or absence of crosscutting cleavages, blurring the border between binary groups. Such societal links also makes it harder for politicians to polarize the society on the religious line. While Christians, Jews and Muslims had always been distinct religious groups, in the 19th century their religious identities became the most important determinant of political alliances and relation to the state. Other societal borders such as class, status or guild were becoming less relevant in capturing popular imagination. This process was a consequence of both the undermining of the crosscutting system of urban governance and the politicization of religious identifications.

The Tanzimat reforms attempted to undermine the urban fabric and networks of power in place through the creation of an administrative council in charge of tasks which were previously undertaken by various societal actors, such as craft organizations and neighborhood leaders acting as intermediaries.
conflicts were resolved also changed under the Ottoman reforms. Conflicts were formerly addressed by
shuyūkh (leaders) of craft organizations, appointed by its members and empowered by the qādī. The
guilds often occupied a certain neighborhood and acted as administrative agents to maintain order. In
addition neighborhood shuyūkh were also in charge of diffusing and regulating conflicts. Interpersonal
issues, which were previously dealt with in the sharī‘a courts were now addressed by the administrative
council, which was put in charge of the judiciary. The role of intermediary actors was thereby challenged,
and conflicts were now to be addressed centrally. Then, in the sharī‘a court the judgments used to be
systematized and individuals from all social groups could bring complaints to the judge. However, under
the council, judgments were not systematized and winning a case depended on the political weight of the
complainant. This change had the consequence of allowing only groups or influential individuals to bring
cases to court. Therefore individuals had incentives to turn interpersonal issues into communal issues to
give more weight to their claims.

Then the reforms instituted a language of rights that contributed to marking the religious border as the
main axis on which political loyalties and solidarities were understood. Tariq Jazeel and Catherine Brun,
in their work on Sri Lanka, describe a process of “institutionalization of ethnic differences and a new
system of political representation” under British rule. In the Ottoman Tanzimat case, differentiation was
institutionalized but through the opposite medium: the institutionalization of a paradoxical notion of
equality. The Tanzimat decrees enacted between 1839 and 1861 abolished the legal distinction which had
existed in the Ottoman Empire between Muslims and non-Muslims. This meant that Christians and Jews
did not have to pay the poll tax any longer. At the same time there was an obligatory conscription into
the army for all subjects. However, Christians and Jews could pay a lower fee than Muslims to avoid
conscriptions. This example exposes the truncated notion of equality embedded in the reforms.

The language of rights that was enacted during the reforms focused on rights to build churches, rights to
hold crosses in processions, rights to ring church bells and to participate in the council which was the
instrument of the Tanzimat. Therefore notions supposed to be universal rights and portrayed as progress
were understood as specifically Christian rights. The Tanzimat were thereby seen as devoted to improve
the status of Christians. However this was indeed a perception as many Muslims also benefited from the
reforms. Still, opposition and support for the reforms were often framed through this discourse of
communal distinction.

The right to hold religious processions. Indeed processions are often a place of contestation, a means to mark

Religion was politicized through a variety of dynamics, including the use of space. Indeed, through the
language of the reforms, space was institutionalized as a tool of group identifications and group
narratives. Brun and Jazeel argue that to think about cultural politics we must think spatially, indeed
identifications do not happen in a spatial vacuum but differences are rather produced through space. They
see space not only as a container of inter-group relations but also as a fabric through which identifications
are shaped.

An example of the interaction of the language of the reforms with spatial dynamics is the right to
undertake religious processions. Indeed processions are often a place of contestation, a means to mark
communal space. Processions have always been embedded in the urban structure of Ottoman cities. They were social practices weaving the fabric of the city together and delimitating ownership of spaces and the borders of neighborhoods. They were also a medium to show respect to other neighborhoods and leaders thereby reinforcing hierarchies and the overlapping system of power.\textsuperscript{18} When the legal authorization to carry Christian processions in the city were enacted in the context of the Tanzimat, they were no longer seen as a tool of reinforcement of urban relationships but instead were seen as privileges awarded to Christians. Processions came to be seen, whether this was the intention or not, as political claims. During those processions, displays of political allegiances contributed to the conflation of local Christian communities with foreign powers, thereby creating a binary vision of the world based on religious identifications. An example of such a procession occurred on May 1st 1841, on the occasion of the celebration of the French King. The French consul M. Ratti Menton wearing his best clothes organized a procession inviting all the Catholics from his house to the Catholic Franciscan convent of Terra Santa.\textsuperscript{19} After celebrating a mass at the convent, Catholics came out firing muskets and chanting ‘Vive le Roi’\textsuperscript{20}

The display of European flags also created social tensions: from 1855 onwards, European consulates started to fly their own flags.\textsuperscript{21} The intertwining of foreign policy, political allegiances and intergroup relations is exemplified by the following event: a debate which erupted in 1841 between Greek Catholics and Greek Orthodox over the donning of a certain priestly attire took an international dimension when the English consul sided with the Catholics and the governor Najib Pasha with the Orthodox. The administrative council imposed restrictions on the priestly attire of the Catholics.\textsuperscript{22} As a response and an act of defiance to this decision the Catholic churches flew the French flags on their roof.\textsuperscript{23} In the previous centuries those types of conflicts could have been resolved through the urban ‘ancient regime’ based on interpersonal problem solving and the involvement of intermediaries but in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the interaction of international policy and local dynamics created a very sensitive and politicized environment. In this context, local conflicts could take an international scope. In the same period, foreign powers’ intervention on behalf of Maronite and Catholic Christians eventually led to a petition signed by influential Damascenes, both Muslim and Jews, asking the expulsion of Europeans and Uniate Christians from the city.\textsuperscript{24}

Then, the status of Christians and the discourse of their rights were also used in inter-personal power struggles between consuls and governors. Complaints to the sultan that the governor was not enforcing Christian rights could make the latter lose his position. For example the British consul complained to the Sultan that Najib Pasha, the wāli of Damascus for the years 1841-1842, was not treating Christians correctly as he was expected to because of the Tanzimat reforms. Najib Pasha almost lost his position because of those accusations.\textsuperscript{25}

Then, European consuls started to give protected status to Christian individuals, which meant that they could enjoy the tax breaks accorded to Europeans during the Capitulation treaties from 1838 onwards and that they were to benefit from diplomatic representation as if they were foreign individuals.\textsuperscript{26} The local politics of the consuls contributed to a perceived association between local Christians and foreign powers, indeed they would often use their protective power over Christians to interfere into interpersonal issues.\textsuperscript{27} They thereby turned personal matters into issues of international relations. This language of minority rights, closely related to power struggles, placed Christian communities in a difficult situation as they became associated with foreign intervention – which in this period was seen as contributing to the disintegration of the Empire. This dynamic is especially true in the case of the Greek Orthodox, who became associated with Russia and the Greek Catholics, who were seen as France’s agents. Their religious identity became the main prism through which their role in Syrian society would be seen.

As a consequence of those dynamics and uses of space, a strong spatial dimension can be read in the accounts of the riots. Indeed, the neighborhood called Mahalla al-Naṣāʾrā, was the sole target of the 1860 violence. Christians living in other areas were not bothered, even when they lived a few streets away from
the targeted neighborhood. It is also interesting that some groups from the Midan, a suburb where Christians also lived, participated in the riots and therefore had to pass in front of Christian houses in their own neighborhood in order to reach the city center but did not harm them. In addition, only the consulates present in the neighborhood were attacked; the ones outside were ignored by the crowd. Maḥalla al-Naṣārā was also increasingly associated with Catholicism and therefore with France. Indeed, many Catholic churches were built or renovated in this area in the beginning of the 19th century. It should be added that those Catholic institutions tended to center on a particular zone of the Christian neighborhood called Bāb Tūmā. This zone, as the surroundings of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, was the least populated by Muslims. The eastern area of the neighborhood, called Bāb Sharqī, was composed of a mixed population and hosted the non-Uniate churches. The Catholic missions and churches and the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate were directly attacked during the 1860 riots, while the other churches are described as only affected by the general fire of the neighborhood. The violence therefore did not target the whole Christian community but rather specific groups within it. It is not surprising that this is the case since France had a strong role in the Egyptian occupation, and was seen as causing the trouble in Mount Lebanon to weaken the Ottoman Empire. In the context of the Russo-Ottoman wars and after the Greek Revolution, the Greek Orthodox were also increasingly seen as Russian agents working to weaken the Sultan’s authority. The 1860 destruction of Bāb Tūmā can therefore be considered not as an attack against Christians but rather as strikes towards what those spaces came to represent. Resentments were not directed at displays of a certain religious identity but rather at the claims and political meaning these displays came to embody.

In conclusion, the modernization reforms of the Ottoman Empire enacted a language of rights that affected intergroup relations. The end of the Ottoman Empire saw an urban transformation from a system in which different cleavages were overlapping into one in which a clear majority and minority were delimited. The distinction between Muslims and Christians’ relation to the state was institutionalized through the language of the reforms, consular politics and international dynamics. While those changes were designed to improve the situation of Christians in society it actually extracted them from the overlapping crosscutting system of local governance. The reforms, with their emphasis on visibility, designated space as a tool of identification claims and conflicts, which contributed to turning Bāb Tūmā into a specific locus of resentment. In this context, the politicization of religious identities by the interplay of international relations, consular politics and other local dynamics, created the possibility of violence.

Anais Massot is a Research Master’s student in Area Studies at Leiden University, and a Master 2 student in Sciences of Religions and Society at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales.

6 Ibid, 131.
7 Ibid, 136-137.
12 Masters, Christians and Jews, 138.
13 Moshe Ma’oz, Ottoman Reform, 2.
14 Linda Schatkowski Schilcher, Families in Politics: Damascene Factions and Estates of the 18th and 19th Centuries (Berliner Islamstudien. Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1985) 71; Commins, 10.
15 Makdisi, 10, 19-20.
17 Brun and Jazeel, 1-24.
18 Raymond, 304.
20 Paton, 37.
21 Ma’oz, Ottoman Reform, 227.
23 Ibid, 131.
24 Ibid, 140.
25 Ibid, 117.
27 See for example such interventions by the French consul in A.E. CPC/ Turquie, Damas, vol. 1, 2, Ratti Menton- Francois Guizot, January 6th 1841.
29 Ibid, 85, 89.
34 A.E. CPC/ Turquie, Damas, vol. 7, 8, Outrey-Thouvenel, July 28th 1860.