

Muslim and non-Muslim networks of Power in the 18th century

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Recent scholarship has finally turned its attention to the acts, deeds and intentions of grandee households and their influence in ottoman politics and economy. Moreover, the discourse on intermediaries and power brokers revisited contemporary accounts of Muslim and non-Muslim cooperation in the pursuit of power. Yet, the role of the non-Muslims in these mixed networks of power is tinted by anachronistic analytical frameworks, like the insularism of the millet theory and the scripturalism of dhimmitude assigning to non-Muslim members of these networks a role ranging from accidental to insignificant. Notwithstanding the silence in most cases of ottoman sources to the deeds of non-Muslims in the ottoman social and political sphere, lest it reiterates their subordinate role, in an effort to depict the determination of the ruler to reinstate its omnipotence as the guardian of the Shariah, non-Muslim sources are very verbal on mixed networks of power.

This paper will test these assertions and use as a case study the rise to power and the downfall of such a mixed network in the 18th century. Utilizing Ahmed Resmi, Hakim Efendi and Şemdanizade Histories, I will discuss the information about Moralı Hafız Beşir Agha, the Chief Harem Eunuch from the perspective of the Muslim sources. I will then use the account of Hysilantis, a dhimmi, about the alliance between him, his appointed treasurer Süleyman and the Armenian sarraf Agop and their gradual rise to becoming the most important vehicle for appointments, noting Hysilantis' detest for such blunt practices; to add how foreign observers like Nepluev and Flachet assessed them, given Nepluev's negative criticism and Flachet's positive depiction.