

**THE CONSCRIPTION OF RELIGIOUS STUDENTS IN THE OTTOMAN  
EMPIRE**

**by**

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## STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for any award or any other degree or diploma in any University or other institution. It is affirmed by the candidate that, to the best of his knowledge, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the issue of the military service of religious students in the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman conscription system as it was first formulated after the declaration of the *Tanzimat* edict in 1839 included many different types of exemptions for various social groups. Students enrolled in *medreses* comprised one of these groups. In the first decades of the system, religious students had to pass an annual “conscription examination” before a commission of officials in order to receive their exemption. In 1892, Sultan Abdulhamid II suspended these examinations and granted all religious students indefinite exemption. On the surface, this measure was taken in immediate response to the public resentment caused by an attempt by the authorities in Istanbul to forcibly deport religious students from the provinces back to their hometowns. However, this thesis argues that the policy of indefinite exemption was part of the Hamidian regime’s strategy of forming paternalistic relationships between the Sultan and his subjects. This was meant to gain popular support in the face of growing opposition in the 1890s, and religious students made full use of the favor. The policy of indefinite exemption was reversed after the Young Turks rose to power in 1908 with a vision of strict social control. This triggered much resentment and resistance among the religious students and were a major factor in their participation in an uprising in the imperial capital in April 1909, known as the 31 March Incident. This thesis argues that the suppression of the uprising gave the new regime the perfect opportunity to solidify its strict control over society and that the religious students were one of the groups that were affected the most. As such, this is a study of the evolution of Ottoman state-society relations between 1876 and 1914 through the lens of the religious students’ military service. However, it also shows that the late Ottoman state was not monolithic. Instead, in both the Hamidian and Second Constitutional eras, different branches of the state sought to pursue their own agenda and at times clashed with each other.

**Keywords:** Ottoman Empire, conscription, army, religious students, medrese, exemption, state-society relations, Abdulhamid II, The Second Constitutional Period

## ÖZET

Bu çalışma Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'ndaki medrese öğrencilerinin askerliği meselesini incelemektedir. Zorunlu askerlik sistemi, 1839'da Tanzimat Fermanı'nın ilanının ardından geliştirildiği şekliyle farklı toplumsal gruplar için çok çeşitli muafiyetler içermektedir. Medreselerde kayıtlı olan öğrenciler bu gruplardan biriydi. Sistemin ilk dönemlerinde öğrencilerin askerlikten muaf olabilmek için her sene resmi bir heyet tarafından düzenlenen "kura sınavı"na geçmesi gerekmektedir. 1892 yılında Sultan II. Abdülhamid bu sınavları iptal etti ve bütün medrese öğrencilerine süresiz muafiyet hakkı tanıdı. İlk bakışta, bu karar İstanbul'daki taşradan gelen medrese öğrencilerinin memleketlerine sürülmesine teşebbüs edilen ve kamuoyunda negatif yankı uyandıran hatalı bir hamlenin sonucu olarak alınmıştır. Bu çalışmanın ana tezi, bunun Abdülhamid rejiminin sultanla tebaası arasında özel ilişkiler kurma stratejisinin bir parçası olduğudur. Bu strateji, özellikle 1890'larda artan muhalefet karşısında rejimin toplumsal desteğini arttırmak için uygulanmıştır. Süresiz muafiyet uygulaması 1908'de Jön Türklerin iktidara gelmesiyle sonlandırılmıştır. Fakat yeni iktidarın sıkı toplumsal kontrol politikasının parçası olarak attığı bu adım medrese öğrencileri arasında büyük hoşnutsuzluğa sebep olmuş ve başkentte Nisan 1909'da patlak veren (ve 31 Mart Olayı olarak bilinen) isyana katılımlarına zemin hazırlamıştır. Bu teze göre, bu isyanın bastırılması yeni rejime hedeflediği sıkı toplumsal kontrolü sağlamak konusunda fırsat vermiştir ve medrese öğrencileri de bu yeni durumdan en çok etkilenen grupların başında gelmektedir. Bu şekliyle bu çalışma aslında 1876 ve 1914 yılları arasında Osmanlı devlet-toplum ilişkilerinin gelişiminin medrese öğrencilerinin askerliği meselesi üzerinden bir incelemesidir. Çalışma ayrıca son dönem Osmanlı devletinin yekpare ve her kademesi ortak hareket eden bir yapı olmadığını göstermektedir. Aksine, hem II. Abdülhamid hem de II. Meşrutiyet dönemlerinde devletin çeşitli kurumları kendi gündemleri çerçevesinde hareket etmeye gayret etmiş ve hatta zaman zaman birbirleriyle çatışmıştır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, zorunlu askerlik, ordu, medrese öğrencileri, medrese, muafiyet, devlet-toplum ilişkileri, II. Abdülhamid, II. Meşrutiyet Dönemi

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed very important military developments for the Ottoman Empire. The most important of these was the destruction of the Janissary Corps in 1826, which gave the state a free hand to create a modern, regular army in the style of Western Europe. As the cornerstone of any such military establishment, the institution of conscription would soon follow. Conscription was adopted in the Ottoman Empire with the *Tanzimat* decree of 1839 and thereafter became a crucial part of Ottoman centralization efforts. As it transformed the army of the empire and was an important factor in the mobilization efforts of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, conscription holds an important place in Ottoman military history.

However, while not underestimating this perspective, I argue that while treating conscription as a part of Ottoman military history is important, it is also rewarding to look at the subject through the lens of social history and state-society relations. Ottoman state-society relations underwent major transformations throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and later, and issues surrounding conscription reflect a microcosm of those transformations. This thesis is a study of the military service of religious students in the late Ottoman Empire. Religious students were exempted from conscription under various conditions throughout this period and, although they were definitely not a cohesive or a particularly well-organized group, they fought hard to retain and make full use of this privilege. Official attitudes towards the conscription of religious students changed dramatically between the reign of Abdulhamid II (1876 – 1909) and the Second Constitutional Era (1908 – 1918), when the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) rose to power. These changes, along with the dramatic incidents accompanying them, make the military service of religious students a perfect case to study the transformation of Ottoman state-society relations.



The first section of this introductory chapter looks at Ottoman state-society relations in general between 1876 and 1914 and attempts to lay out the framework for the particular case of the military service of religious students. The second section follows up by examining the existing literature on Ottoman conscription and whether and how these scholarly works take state-society relations into consideration as part of their study of conscription, as well as explaining the main arguments of the thesis. The introduction concludes with an outline of the study, along with a description of its scope and research methodology.

### **I. Evolution of State-Society Relations in the Ottoman Empire, 1876 – 1914**

There are various different popular and academic interpretations of the regime of Abdulhamid II, ranging from the image of a tyrannical “Red Sultan” to a devout “Great Khan” to the last of the *Tanzimat*-style Ottoman rulers who sought to modernize every aspect of the state and society under his autocratic guidance, with the current dominant understanding being that “it was oppressive but dedicated to reform.”<sup>1</sup> The regime survived for more than three decades, and throughout these years it was constantly on a quest for legitimacy and support, both internally and in the foreign arena. Internally, this quest revolved around strategies that were meant to cultivate personal loyalty to the Sultan, both among the general public and within certain social groups.<sup>2</sup> For the general public, the strategy was based on a carefully-designed sultanic image, projected through public works, imperial gifts, official ceremonies and charity efforts.<sup>3</sup> In the case of specific groups, it involved the use of

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<sup>1</sup> Nadir Özbek, “Modernite, Tarih ve İdeoloji: II. Abdülhamid Dönemi Tarihçiliği Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme,” *Türkiye Araştırmaları Literatür Dergisi* 2 (2004): 86; Şükrü Hanioglu states that Abdulhamid believed in a “legal autocracy,” based on respect for the law and “the Islamic principle of justice. This “legal autocracy” would be a far cry from despotism (*istibdad*) or European-style absolutism. See M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University, Press, 2008), 123.

<sup>2</sup> Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876 – 1909* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998); Selim Deringil, “Legitimacy Structures in the Ottoman State: The Reign of Abdülhamid II (1876 – 1909),” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23 (1991): 345-359.

<sup>3</sup> Nadir Özbek, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nda Sosyal Devlet: Siyaset, İktidar ve Meşruiyet 1876 – 1914* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2004); Nadir Özbek, “Imperial Gifts and Sultanic Legitimation during the Late Ottoman

moderate policies aimed to prevent collective resentment and special favors meant to present the Sultan as their personal, paternalistic benefactor. Such groups ranged from nomadic tribes to the urban poor of Istanbul to, in the case of this thesis, religious students. This style of rule was popularly known as *idare-i maslahat* (literally “administration of affairs”) and, for many observers, came to be seen as one of the defining characteristics of the Abdulhamid regime.<sup>4</sup>

Each case in which the Hamidian regime sought to not alienate or gain the support of a certain social group can serve as an instructive study in the state-society relations of the era. Much effort was spent concerning tribal groups, which were seen as relatively easy to convince to support the state in return for certain incentives.<sup>5</sup> Many of these incentives were indeed connected to conscription. Kurdish tribes were left outside the scope of the official conscription system while militia units called “Hamidian regiments” (*Hamidiye alayları*) were formed from volunteers. This voluntary form of service replaced the conscript’s loyalty to the state with loyalty to the Sultan’s person based on personal tributary relationships between the Sultan and the tribal leader on one hand and between the tribal leader and the volunteer on the other.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Kurdish tribal leaders were co-opted through gifts by the Sultan and the enrollment of their sons in special “tribal” schools.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the state did not attempt to subject the Bedouin tribes of the Transjordan region to conscription in return for their tacit acceptance of imperial authority.<sup>8</sup> For the case of the Yazidi tribes of

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Empire, 1876 – 1909,” in *Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts*, eds. Michael Bonner, Mine Ener and Amy Singer (New York: SUNY Press, 2003), 202-220.

<sup>4</sup> Gökhan Çetinsaya, “Çıban Başı Koparmamak: II. Abdülhamid Rejimine Yeniden Bakış,” *Türkiye Günlüğü* 58 (1999): 54-64; Özbek, “Modernite, Tarih ve İdeoloji,” 85.

<sup>5</sup> Gökhan Çetinsaya, “II. Abdülhamid Döneminde Kuzey Irak’da Tarikat, Aşiret ve Siyaset,” *Divan İlmi Araştırmalar* 7 (1999): 153-168.

<sup>6</sup> Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*; Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains*, 101-104.

<sup>8</sup> Eugene Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 214-215.

northern Iraq, the regime tried to induce them to convert to Islam by offering to leave them outside the conscription system.<sup>9</sup>

Tribal groups were not the only section of society that the Hamidian regime attempted to mollify and co-opt through the use of the conscription system. Religious students were quite numerous throughout the empire and represented a significant force both in Istanbul and in the provinces. More importantly, the state took the contentment level of religious students to mirror that of the wider *ulema* community, and making sure that the *ulema* was not in a state of discontent was always an important part of Abdulhamid's agenda.<sup>10</sup> By 1892, the numbers of religious students in the capital had especially increased, and there were rumors that members of the *ulema* were preparing to overthrow the Sultan. Under such circumstances, and as will later be discussed in Chapter 2, the Sultan decided in September 1892 to deport military-age religious students from the provinces back to their hometowns. However, this move backfired with a great public outcry, and the regime reformulated its treatment of religious students into one of appeasement. The deportations were cancelled, and instead the Sultan personally granted all religious students indefinite and unconditional exemption from military service. Beforehand, every religious student had to pass an annual "conscription examination" in order to be exempt for that year as required by the law, but the new imperial decree more or less meant that simply being a religious student would be enough to receive exemption. While this would cause numerous problems for the state, it was likely seen as an acceptable sacrifice in the name of greater popular support for the Sultan.

For an example of a more "fringe" group and a case not related to conscription, Nadir Özbek demonstrates how the state chose not to act harshly against even the beggars and

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<sup>9</sup> Edip Gölbaşı, "The Yezidis and the Ottoman State: Modern Power, Military Conscription, and Conversion Policies, 1830 – 1909," (MA thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2008); Edip Gölbaşı, "Turning the 'Heretics' into Loyal Muslim Subjects: Imperial Anxieties, the Politics of Religious Conversion, and the Yezidis in the Hamidian Era," *The Muslim World* 103 (2013): 3-23.

<sup>10</sup> İsmail Kara, "Turban and Fez: Ulema as Opposition," in Elisabeth Özdalga (ed.), *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy* (London: Routledge, 2005), 165-179.

vagrants in Istanbul out of fear that alienating the urban poor could potentially destabilize the regime.<sup>11</sup> According to Özbek, a modern kind of welfare state first tentatively emerged during Abdulhamid's reign out of the political considerations of the regime regarding legitimacy.<sup>12</sup> This emergence happened in a monarchical and paternalistic manner. The Hamidian government emphasized that the official charity and aid campaigns were personal favors of the Sultan, who was "the sole protector of the poor."<sup>13</sup> The aid for the poor was distributed ritualistically and was not presented as the welfare mechanism of a modern, bureaucratic state, but as the Sultan's charity.<sup>14</sup> When complaints regarding beggars and vagrants began to increase in the Istanbul press in the 1890s, an imperial poorhouse (*Darülaceze*) was established in 1896. However, it was built to house only 1,000 people and was arguably meant to be symbolic and to showcase the Sultan's personal largesse towards the urban poor as opposed to cracking down on them. The regime chose to ignore the complaints of the intellectuals of the time regarding the vagrants "infesting" Istanbul and instead sought to increase its popularity among this large mass of people in the imperial capital.<sup>15</sup>

In all such efforts, state authority was deliberately presented in a way that was "personalized and not bureaucratic."<sup>16</sup> This inevitably led to the Sultan choosing to rely on his personal court at the Yıldız Palace and often going past or overriding the state bureaucracy, causing significant political and administrative tension. Özbek argues that this situation was the central weakness of the Abdulhamid regime and prevented it from gaining stability, eventually leading to its downfall.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, examples of such behavior on the part of the Sultan regarding the military service of religious students and the resulting discontent within the official civil and military bureaucracy form one of the core ideas of this thesis. The

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<sup>11</sup> Özbek, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Sosyal Devlet*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 79-89.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

decision made by Abdulhamid to grant indefinite exemption to religious students effectively ignored the existing conscription law and annulled years of official practice. The removal of a large section of military-aged men from the available manpower pool caused difficulties in meeting recruitment quotas while the door was also opened to abuse via spurious enrollment in *medreses*. Provincial officials – both civil and military – regularly complained about these facts in official correspondence with the center and attempted to rectify the situation as much as they could by weeding out fake students. However, the center often turned a deaf ear to such complaints, and the Sultan instead regularly warned provincial officials not to be harsh on the religious students.<sup>18</sup>

According to Özbek, increasing constitutionalist opposition led the regime to intensify its paternalistic ruling style in the 1890s. This move, however, contributed to the further weakening of the regime by adding to the aforementioned problem of the erosion of administrative-bureaucratic structures. In fact, Özbek notes that the regime was weak and fragile precisely because political power was personalized, paternalistic and surrounded by language that was far from bureaucratic. This enabled over time for a widespread opposition movement to loosely coalesce around the idea of dethroning the Sultan and restoring the Constitution.<sup>19</sup> It is important to note here that the decision to grant religious students indefinite exemption from military service was made in 1892, precisely at a point when the Abdulhamid regime was increasingly looking for ways to gain more popular support and

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<sup>18</sup> While all these cases might suggest Abdulhamid was preoccupied with his image within the empire, Selim Deringil argues the main objective of the regime's legitimation efforts was ultimately always the international public. This was because the main "crisis of legitimacy" for the regime was in the international arena, particularly due to the massacres perceived to have been carried with the Sultan's blessing against Bulgarians and Armenians. See Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains*, 18; This idea has significant relevance when one notes that even when the state took an action that could potentially alienate the members of the *ulema*, authorities took pains to stress to the *international press* that the Sultan would never abandon his policy of supporting the *ulema*. See Amit Bein, "Politics, Military Conscription, and Religious Education in the Late Ottoman Empire," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38 (2006): 293; Nevertheless, it can be argued that the legitimation efforts were geared both towards internal and external consumption, with the core objective of keeping the regime stable.

<sup>19</sup> Özbek, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Sosyal Devlet*, 43.

legitimacy in the face of growing opposition. The threats faced by the regime likely forced it to take a drastic action that it could likely ill afford in terms of the problems it would cause.<sup>20</sup>

The state's attitude towards society would change dramatically with the collapse of the Hamidian regime after the Young Turk Revolution of July 1908 and subsequent events. The Young Turks had been reared on a secular-positivist ideology that emphasized the impersonal power of the state and the need for the transformation of society through determined central policies.<sup>21</sup> They did not see the need to build paternalistic relationships with certain groups and instead saw a need to increase control over potentially destabilizing elements, along with the rest of society. However, in the immediate aftermath of the 1908 Revolution, they were faced with a wave of street demonstrations and workers' strikes voicing various demands, both in Istanbul and in the provincial centers.<sup>22</sup> In the midst of all this, the new ruling elite sought to introduce policies that would increase their control over the society. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, religious students were one of the most important groups targeted in this context. In November 1908, the government moved to reinstitute the conscription examinations that had been on hold since 1892. However, this act triggered significant opposition from the students, who staged demonstrations and managed to gain some minor concessions.

Resentment caused by such attempts to impose the Young Turks' vision on society led to a boiling point in April 1909, in a major uprising known as the "31 March Incident." This uprising was a violent reaction by disaffected groups. However, when the uprising was suppressed, the imposition of martial law gave the new regime an opportunity to rapidly push

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<sup>20</sup> It is likewise important to note that the Abdulhamid regime was very selective in choosing which social groups it sought not to alienate, even in this period. A series of events targeting the Armenians known as the "Hamidian massacres" took place between 1894 and 1896. See Robert Melson, "A Theoretical Enquiry into the Armenian Massacres of 1894-1896," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24 (1982): 481-509; Cezmi Eraslan, "I. Sason İsyanı Sonrasında Osmanlı Devletinin Karşılaştığı Siyasi ve Sosyal Problemler," *Kafkas Araştırmaları Dergisi* 2 (1996): 1-12.

<sup>21</sup> Feroz Ahmad, *The Young Turks: The Committee of Union and Progress in Turkish Politics, 1908 – 1914* (London: Hurst Company, 2010), 147-148; M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902 – 1908* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 293-295.

<sup>22</sup> Ahmad, 22-25.

through a series of measures that would realize its vision of strict social control, tightening the screws on various groups. Again, conscription was a major factor. Concessions recently granted to religious students were reversed, and the conscription examinations started. Non-Muslims and the residents of Istanbul, previously exempt from military service in practice, were made eligible with a new law in August 1909. The state moved to extend conscription to tribes in the Transjordan, which prompted a revolt in Karak in 1910.<sup>23</sup> Apart from conscription, labor unions were outlawed, it was made more difficult for workers to go on strike, and a law was passed that would crack down harshly on vagrancy and begging.<sup>24</sup> Porters working in the Istanbul harbor, who had been active in both the Austrian boycott of 1908-9 and in the 31 March Incident, were brought under strict working conditions while a number of them was arrested and exiled.<sup>25</sup>

The Unionist intensification of control over society in the aftermath of the 31 March Incident in 1909 was a break from the past in many ways and a watershed moment in terms of Ottoman state-society relations. However, it was also definitely not as complete as the new ruling elite would have liked, and state administration continued to exhibit some trends from the Hamidian era. Groups targeted by the new policies could still resist and challenge the increasing of central control as much as they could, and this did not necessarily have to go beyond legal confines or take the form of armed revolt, as in the example of the tribes in Karak.

Religious students could no longer stage mass demonstrations like they did before the 31 March Incident, but they continued to use the main way still open to them: petitions. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, petitions by religious students asking for exemption or various different concessions continued after 1909 and even up to 1914. The authorities did not

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<sup>23</sup> Rogan, 214-215.

<sup>24</sup> Ahmet Gündüz Ökçün, *Tatil-i Eşgal Kanunu 1909: Belgeler – Yorumlar* (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Yayınları, 1982); Özbek, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Sosyal Devlet*, 92-95.

<sup>25</sup> Can Nacar, "20. Yüzyılın Başında İstanbul Limanı: Hamallar, Dersaadet Rıhtım Şirketi ve Osmanlı Hükümeti," *Kebikeç* 41 (2016): 60-63.

dismiss these petitions out of hand but instead often treated them seriously. Such petitions sometimes led to disagreements between different branches of the state that continued for months and even years, as a case study discussed in Chapter 3 demonstrates. Such episodes show that the trend of different state branches pursuing their own agenda continued after the end of the Hamidian regime, although such behavior was certainly counter to the centralization and bureaucratization aims of the Unionists.

## **II. An Evaluation of the Existing Literature on Ottoman Conscription**

There is a large number of scholarly works dealing with the history of Ottoman conscription, ranging from books and articles to unpublished dissertations and theses. On the most basic and shallow level, there are general military histories such as Virginia Aksan's *Ottoman Wars 1700 – 1870* and *A Military History of the Ottomans: From Osman to Atatürk*, by Mesut Uyar and Edward J. Erickson, which merely mention the institution of conscription as a cornerstone in the formation of a modern, regular army but do not go into further detail.<sup>26</sup> In terms of more specialized works, there is a strand of Turkish historiography that looks at the issue purely from a legal standpoint, using legal texts and regulations as their main basis.<sup>27</sup> While they constitute very useful resources, such works generally neglect to look at how these laws were turned into practical policy on the ground and how the people affected by them chose to respond.

More recently, studies looking at conscription at a more detailed and nuanced level have been published. Interestingly, the majority of these choose to end their period of study with the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and as such they do not overlap with the time period

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<sup>26</sup> Virginia Aksan, *Ottoman Wars 1700 – 1870: An Empire Besieged* (London: Longman Publishing, 2007); Edward J. Erickson and Mesut Uyar, *A Military History of the Ottomans: From Osman to Atatürk* (Santa Barbara: Praeger International, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> See Ayten Can Tunali, "Tanzimat Döneminde Osmanlı Kara Ordusunda Yapılanma" (PhD dissertation, Ankara Üniversitesi, 2003); Musa Çadırcı, "Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Askere Almada Kura Usulüne Geçilmesi," *Askeri Tarih Bülteni* 18 (1980): 59 – 75; Osman Köksal, "Mükellefiyet-i Askeriye Kanun-u Muvakkati 29 Nisan 1330 (Osmanlı Devleti'nde Askeralmada Son Durum)" (MA thesis, Ankara Üniversitesi Türk İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü, 1987).



studied in this thesis. For example, Tobias Heinzelmann's study titled *Cihaddan Vatan Savunmasına: Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Genel Askerlik Yükümlülüğü 1826 – 1856*, chiefly looks at how the official discourse of the state and the *raison d'être* of the Ottoman army transitioned from an "Islamic" to a "patriotic" duty via the institution of conscription and the reforms of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>28</sup> Veyssel Şimşek's MA thesis, "Ottoman Military Recruitment and the Recruit: 1826 – 1853," mainly describes the procedures involved in the conscription process and likewise concludes before the Crimean War.<sup>29</sup> Gültekin Yıldız's work titled *Neferin Adı Yok* looks at the prospects faced by the individual recruit at the time of the shift towards conscription between 1826 and 1839, mainly through the lens of bureaucratization and standardization.<sup>30</sup> All of these scholarly works are focused on an interesting era of Ottoman conscription, when the conscription system was evolving painfully in fits and starts. One of the problems associated with this time period seems to be the lack of the voice of those targeted by conscription, and this is in fact reflected nicely by the title of Yıldız's book. While Yıldız bemoans the voicelessness of the enlisted man, the other studies are mostly content to take the viewpoint of the state. Another problem associated with this is that the question of exemptions, whenever it is discussed, is analyzed by way of the changes in the laws and regulations, instead of whatever demands and problems they entailed on the ground.

More relevant to this thesis are works looking at how the issue of conscription was related to Ottoman state-society relations. Mehmet Beşikçi's book *The Ottoman Mobilization of Manpower in the First World War* has at its center the argument that the unique strains produced by the mobilization for the First World War redefined state-society relations and

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<sup>28</sup> Tobias Heinzelmann, *Cihaddan Vatan Savunmasına: Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Genel Askerlik Yükümlülüğü 1826 – 1856*, trans. Türkis Noyan (Istanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> Veyssel Şimşek, "Ottoman Military Recruitment and the Recruit: 1826 – 1853" (MA thesis, Bilkent University, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> Gültekin Yıldız, *Neferin Adı Yok: Zorunlu Askerliğe Geçiş Sürecinde Osmanlı Devleti'nde Siyaset, Ordu ve Toplum 1826 – 1839* (Istanbul: Kitabevi Yayınları, 2009).

gave social actors in Anatolia an opportunity to negotiate with the center.<sup>31</sup> This thesis, however, argues that such negotiation processes also existed earlier and were not limited to the unique constraints of the mobilization for the First World War and that this is demonstrated by the case of religious students. There are also studies examining state-society relations via focusing on the conscription of specific social groups, such as non-Muslims. Ufuk Gülsoy's work *Gayrimüslimlerin Askerlik Serüveni* and the various studies by Edip Gölbaşı investigating the conscription of the Yazidis are the most significant examples.<sup>32</sup> The common thread found in these studies comprises attempts by the state to redefine its relationship with the subject group by intensifying its control and the reaction that this produced.<sup>33</sup> This thesis, in effect, basically aims to apply this analytical framework to the case of religious students, which has never been studied before.

Moreover, a common problem found in almost all these works is that they treat "the state" as a monolithic and homogenous actor in its relations with the people. There is scant mention of disagreements between different ministries, for example, or of conflicts of interest between civil and military officials. However, such incidents were a common theme in late Ottoman history, and it is one of the core arguments of this thesis that, throughout the period

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<sup>31</sup> Mehmet Beşikçi, *The Ottoman Mobilization of Manpower in the First World War: Between Voluntarism and Resistance* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishing, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> Ufuk Gülsoy, *Osmanlı Gayrimüslimlerinin Askerlik Serüvenleri* (Istanbul: Simurg Yayınları, 2000); Edip Gölbaşı, "The Yazidis and the Ottoman State: Modern Power, Military Conscription, and Conversion Policies, 1830 – 1909," (MA thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2008); Edip Gölbaşı, "Turning the 'Heretics' into Loyal Muslim Subjects: Imperial Anxieties, the Politics of Religious Conversion, and the Yazidis in the Hamidian Era," *The Muslim World* 103 (2013): 3-23.

<sup>33</sup> The most apparent intensification of state control happened in 1908-9 in both cases; The question of reaction (or resistance) to conscription is an important one. In the case of non-Muslims studied in both these works, the state did not significantly modify its policy in response to the reaction. This was also mostly the case with the tribal revolts in the Transjordan. However, as will be discussed in Chapter 3, the reaction of the religious students was treated more seriously and managed to generate minor concessions from the state. In a somewhat similar example of reactions causing modification of official policy, individual resistance by conscripts in the form of desertion would prompt the state to increase various measures in the First World War. See Erik J. Zürcher, "Little Mehmet in the Desert: The Ottoman Soldier's Experience," in Hugh Cecil and Peter Liddle (eds.), *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced* (London: Leo Cooper, 1988): 230 – 241; Erik J. Zürcher, "Between Death and Desertion: The Experience of the Ottoman Soldier in World War I," *Turcica* 28 (1996): 235 – 258; Erik J. Zürcher, "Refusing to Serve by Other Means: Desertion in the Late Ottoman Empire," in Ö. H. Çınar and Coşkun Üsterci (eds.), *Conscientious Objection: Resisting Militarized Society* (London: Zed Books, 2009): 45 – 52.

between 1876 and 1914, different branches of the state often disagreed and clashed with each other in terms of their conscription agenda. Abdulhamid II's statements and orders overruling and dismissing the concerns of provincial officials after 1892 is the clearest example of this. However, the trend definitely did not end with the Hamidian regime, and disagreements between branches of the state continued well into the Second Constitutional Era, as will be seen in Chapter 3.

### **III. Sources, Scope and Study Outline**

The issue of the military service of religious students started with the first Ottoman conscription law of 1846. I aim to provide a full picture of the issue, and accordingly the thesis starts with that date. However, the information used for the first thirty years of Ottoman conscription is mostly cursory and mainly gleaned from the text of conscription laws, as well as various secondary sources. The material I have for the years before the reign of Abdulhamid II (1876 – 1909) views the issue solely through the perspective of the state and does not provide information on how religious students responded to the requirement of conscription.

The documents found in the Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives in Istanbul (*Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi – BOA*) contain a wealth of information and represent the most useful resource for this study. Included in the archives are both petitions written on behalf of religious students and copious volumes of correspondence between the different branches of the Ottoman state. While the petitions are a very useful source in demonstrating the demands of the students and how they sought to frame these demands, the communications between state branches illuminate how these often attempted to pursue their own agenda.

I have made direct use of fifty-two different archival documents from different catalogues. The most important catalogue was arguably *Dahiliye*, collating documents

relating to the Ministry of the Interior, particularly its *Mektubi* (correspondence) and *İdare* (administration) sections (DH. MKT. and DH. İD.). Many of the petitions used in the thesis come from the DH. MKT. catalogue. Similarly, the *Bab-ı Ali Evrak Odası* (BEO) catalogue collecting documents relating to the affairs of the Grand Vizierate was also extremely useful, and much of the Ministry of War correspondence I have used actually comes from here. For the Hamidian period, catalogues of documents passing through the Yıldız Palace were naturally an important source, in particular the *Yıldız Mütenevvi Maruzatı* section which holds petitions sent directly to the palace. I have also used the *Şura-yı Devlet*, *Maarif* and the *Teftişat-ı Rumeli Evrakı* catalogues.

Another very valuable source is the minutes of the Ottoman Parliament (*Meclis-i Mebusan*), which reconvened in the aftermath of the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 after an absence of more than thirty years. Many important subjects went through detailed – and heated – discussions in the Parliament, and I have found documentation of several sessions dealing with the military service of religious students. Indeed, for the years 1908-1909 the parliamentary minutes explain the complicated situation clearly via detailed and lively speeches that enlightened me as much as they did the listening parliamentarians at the time.

The third kind of primary source I have used comprises newspapers published in Istanbul after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908. Since censorship was lifted with the revolution, such newspapers offer significant insights into the public opinion of the time, as well as making it easier to create a chronology of events thanks to their news reports. The most important one I have used for the thesis was *Beyan'ül Hak*, while I also used *Sabah*, *Serbesti*, *Şura-yı Ümmet* and *Kanun-ı Esasi* as well as *The New York Times* and the *Times* of London. *Beyan'ül Hak* proved to be particularly useful since it was published by the Association of Islamic Scholars (*Cemiyet-i İlmiyye-i İslamiyye*). Although this organization had links to the CUP and was formed with its blessing in 1908, it still did not refrain from

voicing the concerns and demands of the *ulema* community. As such, the issue of the military service of religious students came up regularly in the *Beyan'ül Hak*, particularly helping us better understand how the students and their backers in the wider *ulema* community framed and legitimized their demands. The newspaper was published on and off between 1908 and 1918, but I have used issues published in 1908-9, because this was when conscription was on the newspaper's agenda.

Finally, I have made use of a wide range of valuable secondary sources. The most important of these were mainly older works describing official laws and regulations in great detail. Even though they do not discuss the effects of these laws and regulations on the ground, they have in a way carried the difficult task of transcribing and deciphering legal texts for me. Despite this, I have taken care to double-check some of the more important passages in their original form in the *Düstur* (the collected Ottoman legal codex) and I had to decipher some of the more minor texts myself.

Apart from these studies on laws and regulations, secondary sources dealing directly with the history of Ottoman conscription or Ottoman military history in general were certainly quite useful, at least in providing me with a general outline. On the other hand, works published on Ottoman state-society relations and on turning points such as the 31 March Incident of 1909 proved to be of greater benefit in fleshing out the study. I have also used a number of articles dealing with the history of Ottoman religious education and, in particular, how the state attempted to reform this institution after 1908. Although mostly written from the standpoint of education and containing the opinions of the Ottoman ruling elite, these articles were nevertheless worthwhile in understanding the situation faced by religious students in the period studied in the thesis.

The following chapter starts off by providing a general outline of the history of Ottoman conscription, followed by a look at the legal requirements for religious students for

the first thirty years of Ottoman conscription. The main focus of the chapter is Abdulhamid's reign up to the Young Turk Revolution (1876 – 1908). The main turning point discussed in this chapter is a decision by the Sultan in 1892 to indefinitely suspend the conscription examinations of religious students, in effect providing them with a blanket exemption from military service. This is the point from which all future arguments and disagreements regarding the issue would arise.

The third chapter deals with the Second Constitutional Era (1908 – 1914), a time that proved to be much more tumultuous for religious students. Even though they were able to negotiate with the new regime for a time and even gain limited acceptance of their demands, their participation in the 31 March Incident of 1909 would be a disastrous turning point that led to their collective punishment by the state, coupled with an almost-complete loss of negotiating power. The chapter also includes an interesting case study of one particular religious student's quest for exemption, an effort that made him write countless petitions and spanned several years. Finally, the study ends with a conclusion chapter reiterating my main points and discussing the potential contribution of the thesis to the existing literature.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **CONSCRIPTION IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE AND RELIGIOUS STUDENTS BEFORE THE 1908 YOUNG TURK REVOLUTION**

This chapter looks at the period between the initial conception of conscription in the Ottoman Empire in 1839 and the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, with particular emphasis on the reign of Abdulhamid II (1876 – 1909). The first section provides a general outline of conscription in the empire until 1908 in order to present the legal and ideological framework of military service. Using this as a basis, the subsequent section describes the procedures involved in the exemption of religious students from service until 1876. This is followed up by the section on the Hamidian era, when the military service of religious students first truly became an important issue.

The main breaking point of the chapter – and perhaps the entire thesis – is 1892, when the Sultan decided to personally grant indefinite exemption to religious students. This chapter argues that this was a calculated move consistent with the regime's social policies aimed at shoring up popular support and constitutes an important chapter of state-society relations in the late Ottoman Empire. It further argues that this decision caused significant resentment within the administrative apparatus of the empire, in particular the military officials in the provinces, and that this tension would gradually increase until the Young Turk Revolution.

#### **I. An Overview of Conscription in the Ottoman Empire, 1839 – 1908**

Conscription was officially introduced as a concept in the Ottoman Empire with the Tanzimat decree of 1839. In the previous two centuries, the army was composed of central and provincial components. Janissaries formed the backbone and the most numerous element of the central branch. They consisted of recruits who willingly joined the ranks on the basis of a centrally-paid salary and certain incentives brought by being a member of the corps. The provincial troops were also mainly volunteers, either recruited and organized by the central

government or mobilized by provincial officials and notables. Most of these provincial troops served on a temporary basis, apart from those who fulfilled permanent roles in garrison units or served as part of provincial retinues (*kapı halkı*) and were demobilized once a military campaign ended. Since this system sometimes failed to provide enough troops against the ever-expanding European armies, coercive elements were increasingly introduced to the recruitment procedure in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. This mainly happened in the form of landless peasants and convicts being pressed into service in the Balkans and Anatolia, a technique that was used in wartime by various government officials tasked with bringing a selected number of *miri levendat* (state-funded militiamen) to the front.<sup>34</sup> However, it is not possible to characterize this as a true precursor to conscription and most of the troops still served on a voluntary basis.<sup>35</sup>

The first attempt at creating a regular, standing army based on the European model was the famous *Nizam-ı Cedid* (New Order) army organized by Sultan Selim III in 1792. This force consisted of volunteers and eventually grew to a size of 24,000 troops before being disbanded due to pressure from the traditional military formations of the empire, mainly the Janissaries, in 1807.<sup>36</sup> Following Selim's dethronement and Mahmud II's accession in 1808, a similar effort named *Sekban-ı Cedid* (New Musketeers) also met the same end. However, in 1826 the Sultan managed to destroy the Janissaries in a bloody final confrontation that came to be known as the "Auspicious Incident" and immediately afterwards announced the creation of a new army. This army was to be known as the *Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammediye* (Victorious Soldiers of Muhammad).

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<sup>34</sup> Virginia Aksan, "Ottoman Military Recruitment Strategies in the Late Eighteenth Century," in *Arming the State: Military Conscription in the Middle East and Central Asia 1775 – 1925*, ed. Erik J. Zürcher (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), 23–24.

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of the Ottoman military in the 18th century, see Virginia Aksan, *Ottoman Wars 1700 – 1870: An Empire Besieged* (London: Longman Publishing, 2007).

<sup>36</sup> The story of the *Nizam-ı Cedid* reforms is described in detail in Stanford J. Shaw, "The Origins of Ottoman Military Reform: the *Nizam-ı Cedid* Army of Sultan Selim III," *Journal of Modern History* 37 (1965): 291–306.



It took at least a decade after the formation of Mahmud II's new-style regular army for the Ottoman state to seriously consider conscription. Although European-style dress, drill and equipment were adopted in 1826 with the creation of the new regular army, the empire had not chosen to copy the new European conscription systems.<sup>37</sup> The new army was initially composed of volunteers recruited in Istanbul. Afterwards, it was left up to provincial officials to fill their recruitment quotas as they wished. These quotas were often filled with the forced drafting of young peasants (often landless ones known as *çiftbozan*)<sup>38</sup> on a random basis, in what amounted to a form of press-gang rather than an organized conscription procedure. With no system in place, the unfortunate draftees who were taken would go on to serve up to twenty years in the army. In 1834, a reserve force named *Redif* (literally "the Second Line") was formed parallel to the main army and was meant to comprise veterans in their final years of service, but it was still not clear how many years a soldier was supposed to spend in either branch.<sup>39</sup> In 1841, the main *Asakir* branch was renamed as the *Nizamiye* (Regular Army) while the *Redif* retained its name.<sup>40</sup>

As the inequality and the massive suffering caused by the lack of a standardized recruitment method were clear to observers within the government, who also blamed the poor performance of the new army on this situation,<sup>41</sup> the introduction of a "just" conscription

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<sup>37</sup> For a study that provides a concise description of the Ottoman military under Mahmud II, see Avigdor Levy, "The Military Policy of Sultan Mahmud II 1808 – 1839" (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1968).

<sup>38</sup> Gültekin Yıldız, *Neferin Adı Yok: Zorunlu Askerliğe Geçiş Sürecinde Osmanlı Devleti'nde Siyaset, Ordu ve Toplum 1826 – 1839* (Istanbul: Kitabevi Yayınları, 2009), 139.

<sup>39</sup> Veysel Şimşek, "Ottoman Military Recruitment and the Recruit: 1826 – 1853" (MA thesis, Bilkent University, 2005), 35–36.

<sup>40</sup> Erik Jan Zürcher, "The Ottoman Conscription System in Theory and Practice (1844 – 1918)," in *Arming the State: Military Conscription in the Middle East and Central Asia 1775 – 1925*, ed. Erik J. Zürcher (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), 82.

<sup>41</sup> The new Ottoman army performed very poorly against Mehmed Ali's Egyptian army, on which it was actually modeled, in two separate military campaigns in 1832 and 1839. The Battle of Konya in 1832 resulted in Grand Vizier Mehmed Reshid Pasha being taken prisoner by the enemy while the Battle of Nisib in 1839 ended in a major embarrassment following years of preparation. For these campaigns, see Khaled Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2002), 160-198.

system was one of the primary promises of the Tanzimat decree.<sup>42</sup> It took the state four more years to follow up on that promise. After long deliberations in the Sultan's Military Council (*Dar-ı Şura-yı Askeri*), the imperial decree on conscription titled the *Tensikat-ı Celile-i Askeriye* (Grand Military Regulations) was announced on 6 September 1843. According to the decree, soldiers were going to be drafted from the Muslim population of the empire according to a ballot system based on the drawing of lots. Active service in the standing *Nizamiye* branch was to be limited to five years, while those who were not drafted to the *Nizamiye* would serve on a part-time basis in the *Redif* reserve units for seven years.<sup>43</sup>

However, the imperial decree of 1843 did not specify the procedures involved in the new conscription system. The first conscription law of the empire, known as *Kur'a Kanunname-i Hümayunu*, was issued three years later in 1846.<sup>44</sup> The law specified that the recruits for the *Nizamiye* would consist of men between the ages of 20 and 25 and that the length of service would be 5 years.<sup>45</sup> The local regiment in a given district (*kaza*) would provide the *kur'a meclisi* (conscription council) with the number of recruits needed for that year.<sup>46</sup> Eligible men in the district were required to gather at a specified location on a specified date in the spring.<sup>47</sup>

The first order of business would be the removal of those exempt from service who were still required to show up from the list. The officials would then attempt to fill the year's quota with volunteers. If not enough volunteers came forward which was likely almost always the case, the remainder would be picked by the drawing of lots. Any man who picked an

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<sup>42</sup> Mehmet Hacısalıhoğlu, "Inclusion and Exclusion: Conscription in the Ottoman Empire," *Journal of Modern European History* 5 (2007): 267.

<sup>43</sup> Ayten Can Tunalı, "Tanzimat Döneminde Osmanlı Kara Ordusunda Yapılanma" (PhD dissertation, Ankara Üniversitesi, 2003), 32–33. For the full text of the decree, see *ibid.*, Appendix II.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 53; the full text of the law is found in Musa Çadırcı, *Tanzimat Sürecinde Türkiye – Askerlik* (Ankara: İmge Kitabevi, 2008), 65–89.

<sup>45</sup> Tunalı, 54; Çadırcı, 70–71.

<sup>46</sup> The law did not clarify the exact make-up of the council beyond stating that it would include a number of military and civil officials and local notables. Later laws and regulations would be more explicit in this regard while allowing for some flexibility. The most important member of the council was the commander of the local *Redif* regiment.

<sup>47</sup> Tunalı, 55–56; Şimşek, 40.

envelope that contained a piece of writing saying “*asker oldum*” (“I have become a soldier”) would be selected. Those who picked an empty envelope were free to go until next year’s muster. Anyone who managed to pick an empty envelope five years in a row would be enrolled in the *Redif*. *Redif* service was basically modeled on the Prussian *Landwehr* and entailed a month of active service and training in the local *Redif* regiment every year for seven years. If war broke out, the *Redif* units could be mobilized for frontline duty similar to the *Nizamiye*.<sup>48</sup>

The conscription law of 1846 discussed a wide range of temporary and permanent exemptions apart from the obvious categories such as the old, the sick and the infirm, including certain government officials, members of the *ulema*, residents of Istanbul, religious students, the Sultan’s attendants, religious functionaries such as imams, as well as people whose family status made them ineligible for service.<sup>49</sup> Exemption based on family status covered a wide range of situations. For instance, if a person was the only son of the family or had no adult brothers or worked as the sole breadwinner, he would not be drafted in the current call-up. The law included even more obscure and surprisingly detailed cases of exemption such as fathers who would have to leave their infant child in the care of a stepmother.<sup>50</sup> People who had “important” professions such as merchants and craftsmen could send someone else in their place.<sup>51</sup> The replacements would often be slaves, leading to a disproportionate number of black recruits in some regiments.<sup>52</sup>

In practice, the exemptions also extended to regions and groups the state’s power could not penetrate despite the centralization efforts of the Tanzimat era. These included distant areas such as Tripolitania, Yemen and the Hawran, and nomadic tribes. For these

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<sup>48</sup> Tunalı, 58–60.

<sup>49</sup> Erik Jan Zürcher incorrectly suggests that the Law of 1870 was the first one to discuss exemptions. See Zürcher, 97.

<sup>50</sup> Tunalı, 62–63.

<sup>51</sup> Çadırcı, 76–77.

<sup>52</sup> Şimşek, 38.

cases, the government attempted to encourage voluntary service.<sup>53</sup> Even though few people from such groups and regions volunteered for the regular army, they would often be found on the frontlines in large numbers in times of war, serving as irregular troops. Until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mobilization of such irregulars in cases of military conflict was a necessity for the state.<sup>54</sup>

There was no mention of non-Muslims in the conscription law since it was not assumed that they had any obligation to serve, despite the Tanzimat decree having promised the equality of all Ottoman subjects. However, the *Islahat Fermanı* (Reform Edict) declared in 1856 in the aftermath of the Crimean War nominally extended military service to non-Muslims as a further step towards equality. In spite of this, the thought was not seriously entertained in government or military circles, and in practice non-Muslims were required to pay an exemption tax known as the *bedel-i askeri* (military fee), which in effect was a replacement for the Islamic *jizyah* tax. Thereafter, conscription laws and regulations continued to mention only Muslims, and non-Muslims would not be required to serve in practice until 1909.<sup>55</sup>

The military structure of the empire did not go through a major overhaul between 1846 and 1869. It is possible that the successful conclusion of the Crimean War (1853 – 1856) and the lack of any major military conflict for many years afterwards meant that the state was satisfied with the existing system for a long time. The first restructuring occurred with the declaration of new regulations by Hüseyin Avni Pasha, head of the Military Council on 18 August 1869 and the subsequent new conscription law issued on 8 March 1870.<sup>56</sup> According to the new system, the total duration of military service was extended to twenty years.

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<sup>53</sup> Mehmet Beşikçi, *The Ottoman Mobilization of Manpower in the First World War: Between Voluntarism and Resistance* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishing, 2012), 99–100; Zürcher, 97.

<sup>54</sup> Tobias Heinzelmann, “Changing Recruiting Strategies in the Ottoman Army, 1839 – 1856,” in *The Crimean War 1853 – 1856: Colonial Skirmish or Rehearsal for World War?*, ed. Jerzy W. Borejsza (Warsaw: Neriton, 2011), 21.

<sup>55</sup> Hacısalihioğlu, 276–77.

<sup>56</sup> The Military Council was formed in 1837 with the aim of advising the Sultan on military matters. It was the Council that had suggested conscription for the first time in 1838.

Draftees would serve in the *Nizamiye* for four years. *Redif* service was divided into active and passive categories. Veterans of *Nizamiye* service as well as men who were not selected in the musters for four consecutive years would perform active service in the *Redif* for two years, followed by four years of passive service with fewer obligations. Upon the completion of *Redif* service, the men would be enrolled in the *Mustahfiz* for ten more years, a new part-time branch modeled on the Prussian *Landsturm* and envisioned as a home-guard militia. The extension of the total service obligation to twenty years and the creation of the *Mustahfiz* branch greatly expanded the size of the army. The new law also introduced the *bedel-i nakdi* (cash fee), which was paid by Muslims who were selected for *Nizamiye* service but did not want to go. Hence, with this new fee, the practice of sending replacements was abolished.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the reorganization that took place beginning in 1870, the Russo-Turkish War of 1876 – 77 led to a catastrophic defeat and laid bare a serious number of inadequacies in the Ottoman army, and the government invited a German military commission under General von der Goltz as part of its efforts to improve the military. Changes suggested for the conscription system by the commission were implemented in the conscription law of 1886.<sup>58</sup> The new law was mainly intended to resolve organizational problems encountered in the musters. The system was streamlined through a number of changes. One important change was that people who demanded exemptions would be investigated by the conscription councils only if they were actually called up in the muster whereas before those eligible for exemption were selected before the drawing of the lots, thus eliminating unnecessary overhead. There were also some restrictions placed on exemptions.<sup>59</sup> The modifications basically aimed to get more men to the army faster.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Tunalı, 111–112.

<sup>58</sup> The full text of the law is found in *Düstur*, Tertip 1, Cilt 5, 656–695.

<sup>59</sup> These restrictions involved the exemption of religious students and are discussed later in the chapter.

<sup>60</sup> Rıdvan Ayaydın, “Osmanlı Devleti’nde Askeri Yükümlülükler ve Muafiyetler 1826 – 1914” (MA thesis, İstanbul Üniversitesi, 2011), 75.

The law would remain unmodified until exemptions were seriously restricted after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908.<sup>61</sup> As will be discussed in the following chapter, the exempt status of non-Muslims and Istanbul residents was abolished through the Law on the Military Service of non-Muslims passed in 1909.<sup>62</sup> The last general conscription law of the empire was passed in May 1914 in the run-up to World War I, further limited exemptions, lowered the draft age to eighteen, merged the *Redif* with the *Nizamiye* and abolished *Mustahfiz* service, while significantly bringing the total duration of military service up to twenty once more. While this final law was meant to be temporary and possibly written with an eye towards the impending mobilization, the Ottoman defeat in the war meant that it was not followed by any other legal documents.<sup>63</sup>

## **II. The Status of Religious Students in the Tanzimat Era, 1839 – 1876**

Although members of the *ulema* were considered part of the *ilmiyye* (religious/judicial establishment) class in the classical age of the Ottoman Empire, there was no expectation that they would perform any form of military service.<sup>64</sup> This naturally also included religious students studying at *medreses*. Therefore, with the introduction of conscription, there was an expectation that religious students would be exempt from service. The first Ottoman decree regarding conscription, the *Tensikat-ı Celile-i Askeriye* of 1843, had only stated that certain

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<sup>61</sup> Beşikçi, 97.

<sup>62</sup> The Law of 1909 is found in full in *Düstur*, Tertip 2, Cilt 1, 420–455.

<sup>63</sup> Beşikçi, 106; Aydın Köksal, “Mükellefiyet-i Askeriye Kanun-u Muvakkati 29 Nisan 1330 (Osmanlı Devleti’nde Askeralmada Son Durum)” (MA thesis, Ankara Üniversitesi Türk İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü, 1987), 22; The temporary nature of the 1914 law is also apparent considering that twenty years of active military service would be too draconian and unnecessary for a peacetime system.

<sup>64</sup> Seminary students were generally granted exemption from conscription in contemporary Europe. See, for example, Marco Ravinello, “The draft and draftees in Italy, 1861 – 1914,” in Erik J. Zürcher (ed.), *Fighting for a Living: A Comparative History of Military Labour 1500 – 2000* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 486. However, to be accepted in these schools was difficult, and the numbers of their students were never as significant as the religious students in the Ottoman Empire, with the possible exception of Russia, where spurious enrollment in seminaries was a problem. See Robert F. Baumann, “The Debates over Universal Military Service in Russia, 1870-74” (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1982), 304-310; In a comparable example from the Muslim world, exemption was granted to all religious students as soon as conscription was instituted in Iran in 1925. However, this exemption policy did not turn into an issue since the whole conscription system was abolished soon after its institution. See Stephanie Cronin, *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921 – 1941* (London: Routledge, 2003), 43-45.

groups and individuals would be exempt from military service. The law that came three years afterwards, however, went into much greater detail on the subject. After clarifying that the members of the *ulema* were exempt from the draft in the opening paragraphs of the section dealing with exemptions, the conscription law discussed religious students in Article 16. The article justified the exemption of religious students by highlighting the importance of education “for the betterment of the realm” and stated that the existence of a large number of religious students represented the glory of the empire (*şan-ı meal-i nişan-ı saltanat*). However, the necessity of examinations was also noted, since there had to be a system to distinguish who was a genuine religious student now that enrollment at a *medrese* meant evading military service. Interestingly, the article also stated that although the sons of *ulema* members would be considered part of the *ulema* class themselves and naturally be exempted, they should also be subjected to examinations since some sons tended to take up different professions than their fathers.<sup>65</sup>

Article 17 further justified the need for “conscription examinations” (*kur’a imtihanı*) for the religious students by arguing that certain military-age men were registering as students despite having little to do with religion just to avoid the draft.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, all religious students between the ages of 20 and 25 would be required to attend the draft musters. They would show up individually before the conscription commission for their examination and would be free to go for the year if they were successful.<sup>67</sup> Article 27 stated that religious students would also not serve in the *Redif*, since having succeeded in five different examinations in five years clearly identified them as successful prospective scholars dedicated to learning.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Çadırcı, 74.

<sup>66</sup> “18-20 yaşına varmış, belki de Kur’an-ı Kerim’i yüzünden bir kere bile hatm etmemiş olan bazı kimesneler”

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

The examination process for the students was described in Article 42 of the law. According to this, the religious students coming before the conscription commission would be tested by a *medrese* examiner (*mümeyyiz*) and members of the *ulema*.<sup>69</sup> The article specified different test subjects for every age group. 21-year-olds would be tested on the subject of *izhar* (identification of Arabic characters), 22-year-olds on *kafiye* (syntax) and 23- and 24-year-olds on classic texts by Molla Cami and Molla Fenari “in a spirit of complete fairness.” Those who were deemed successful would be noted in the official documents and allowed to go until next year’s muster.<sup>70</sup> Those religious students who studied at Istanbul *medreses* rather than their local institutions were discussed in Article 59. According to this, the lists of provincial religious students in the capital would be forwarded to the Office of the Şeyhülislam by the provincial military authorities, and the office would subject these to the conscription examinations in line with the procedures described in Article 42.<sup>71</sup>

Although the subjects on which the religious students would be tested were set by the law of 1846, there were no specific instructions concerning the details of the examinations. It was likewise not clear how many members of the local *ulema* would be part of a conscription commission. They were considered among the “notables” who could join the commissions in varying numbers even though the law at least specified that one *medrese* “examiner” (*mümeyyiz*) had to be there. The fact that these aspects were left open to interpretation paved the way for differing local practices and some of the examinations being too lenient or possibly too harsh. A more pressing problem still was the issue of provincial religious students studying in the imperial capital. The exact procedures involved in their examinations were not clear, and in order to deal with this problem, an addendum to the law was prepared by the Sultan’s military advisors in June 1864, known as the Regulation by the Military Council on Religious Students (*Talebe-i Ulum hakkında Dar-ı Şura-yı Askeride Kaleme*

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<sup>69</sup> The law stated that the commission had to have members from the *ulema*.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-81.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.



*Alınan Nizamname*). According to this, the students in Istanbul would have to “present themselves” (*isbat-ı vücud*) to the military authorities within nine months after they were called up in the muster. Then, arrangements would be made for their examination at the Office of the Şeyhülislam at an appropriate time.<sup>72</sup>

The conscription law of 1870 (*Cedide-i Askeriyeye Tevkifan Tanzim Olunan Kur’a Kanunname-i Hümayunu*) brought some changes to the system discussed above, as well as clarifying some of the complicated procedures.<sup>73</sup> The changes were generally meant to make the whole process more organized and introduce a measure of standardization to the conscription examinations. It was also aimed at making the process easier to carry out for the authorities responsible for the musters. For instance, Article 12 stated that regimental chaplains (*alay imamı*) would be present at the conscription examinations and that if their number was insufficient, the Military Council in the capital had to be notified.<sup>74</sup>

Articles 21 and 22 brought some slight restrictions to the exemption process and made the conscription examinations more comprehensive. For example, those who registered as religious students after they were called up would not be considered eligible for exemption, suggesting that this had likely been an issue before. Logic, calligraphy and spelling were added to the test subjects, and students aged 24-25 would be required to write a short essay in Turkish or Arabic to prove that they were at least literate enough to express themselves (“*ifade-i meram idecek kadar Arabi veya Türki inşadan imtihan olunarak...*”). The “essay” in question here likely refers to a few short sentences. Calligraphy (*hat*) would be tested by asking the student to write a few letters. If the letters were legible enough to be understood, the student would be considered successful. Success in spelling (*imla*) would be awarded if

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<sup>72</sup> Tunalı, 71–72.

<sup>73</sup> The full text of the law is found in Tunalı, Appendix V.

<sup>74</sup> Çadırcı, 73.

the student managed to write a few words describing objects or people.<sup>75</sup> Clearly, the threshold for success in the writing tests was basic literacy. This was no doubt in response to the fact that Ottoman *medrese* education was shifting to oral instruction and memorization, with less and less emphasis on reading and writing. This was a cause of concern for many leading members of the ulema and had led to a serious decline in student quality.<sup>76</sup>

The new law also made arrangements for the first time for students who were studying away from their hometowns but not in Istanbul. These students would have to obtain a document known as a *şehadetname* (witness statement) from the local *Redif* battalion commander testifying that they were indeed studying at a local *medrese* before taking their examination at the provincial army headquarters within nine months of their call-up. Therefore, the commanders of *Redif* battalions were also tasked with visiting the *medreses* in their area of responsibility and keeping tabs on the students every three months.<sup>77</sup>

The law also made an emphasis on the status of being *geceli gündüzlü medresenişin* (or just *medresenişin*) for the students.<sup>78</sup> This meant that the students eligible for exemption had to be staying “day and night” at the *medrese* dormitories.<sup>79</sup> Such a measure was necessarily taken because, at least in some districts, fake enrollments were increasing and regular attendance even among genuine students was decreasing. Many apparently preferred to come to the *medrese* only a couple of days each week, doing other jobs in the meantime. For instance, only a third of the religious students registered in Kastamonu in 1874 were classified as *medresenişin*.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 75; Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (hereafter BOA), DH.MKT 1652 / 108 (3 Muharrem 1307 / 30 August 1889).

<sup>76</sup> Mustafa Ergün, “II. Meşrutiyet Döneminde Medreselerin Durumu ve Islah Çalışmaları,” *A. Ü. Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Dergisi* (1982): 69.

<sup>77</sup> Çadırcı, 85-86.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>79</sup> Such students were also known as *dahili*. See Ergün, 65.

<sup>80</sup> Abdullah Bay, “Modernleşme Dönemi Osmanlı Taşra Medreseleri: Kastamonu Medreseleri ve Taşrada Medrese Hayatı,” *Karadeniz Araştırmaları* 33 (2012): 68.

In general, the exemption procedures regarding religious students seem to have worked more or less smoothly in the *Tanzimat* era (1839 – 1876). Although there were certainly some problems, which necessitated the procedures to be modified, the lack of any serious complaint regarding the system in these years can be construed as a sign of its overall competency.<sup>81</sup> One sore issue seems to be the examination of students studying away from their hometowns, which for one reason or the other could not be resolved satisfactorily despite regular modifications. It was still reported to be a major problem as late as 1873, leading to the creation of a specialized “examination commission” at the Office of the Şeyhülislam.<sup>82</sup>

### **III. Emerging Problems and Initial Reform Efforts under Abdulhamid II, 1876 – 1892**

Certain problems started to become apparent regarding the conscription examinations of religious students after the Russo-Turkish War of 1876 – 77, which had broken out immediately after Abdulhamid II’s accession to the throne. The procedures to be carried out during the draft musters were deemed by the imperial advisors at the Military Council to have caused problems during the wartime mobilization due to their unnecessary complexity. For instance, the requirement that religious students also had to draw lots and be recorded as new personnel in the regimental notebooks before they went through the examination meant that time and effort were wasted. Hence, it was thought that the system should be streamlined.<sup>83</sup> This resulted in a number of changes reflected in the new conscription law of 1886.

The new law, issued on 24 October 1886 and titled the Law for the Recruitment of the Imperial Regular Army (*Asakir-i Nizamiye-i Şahanenin Ahzine dair Kanunname-i Hümayun*),

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<sup>81</sup> Of course, the fact that I could not find any evidence of complaints in this period in the archives does not necessarily mean that they did not exist. However, it can be argued that this still points to the system being relatively more robust compared to the later years.

<sup>82</sup> Amit Bein, “Politics, Military Conscription, and Religious Education in the Late Ottoman Empire,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38 (2006): 286.

<sup>83</sup> BOA, ŞD. 2466 / 27 (27 Rebiülahir 1301 / 25 February 1884).

contained one major concession towards religious students.<sup>84</sup> The law allowed the students to take a second examination within twenty days if they failed the first one due to a mental block (*bir ariza-i asabiye tesiriyle*).<sup>85</sup> Otherwise, the procedures regarding religious students were mostly unchanged since the law was primarily concerned with speeding-up the mobilization of draftees, which was the main improvement to the conscription system offered by the German military commission under General von der Goltz.

Although there is no mention of egregious cases of draft-dodging via enrollment as religious students in archival documents from this period, this had evidently started to become an important problem by 1890, at least in Istanbul. The examinations performed in the capital after the issuing of the 1886 conscription law were widely known to be much less strict than those in the provinces, and this resulted in ever-larger numbers of military-age men arriving in the city to enroll in medreses.<sup>86</sup> In a scathing report to the Sultan in 1890, Sabit Efendi, a leading member of the ulema, stated that the “rabble filling the religious schools” in Istanbul were students in name only and merely intended to avoid the draft. He criticized officials at the Office of the Şeyhülislam for neglecting their duty of weeding out men who were simply pretending to study at *medreses*. He went on to warn the Sultan that this situation had been going on for at least two years and that serious measures and reforms were needed.<sup>87</sup> His criticism was echoed by other members of the *ulema* and the bureaucratic establishment who wrote similar reports and particularly referred to the possibility of increasing the manpower pool available to the army by reforming the medrese institution.<sup>88</sup>

By 1890, the increasing numbers of religious students arriving in Istanbul from the provinces had also become a serious security concern for the Sultan. Abdulhamid was keenly aware that the coup d'état that had toppled his predecessor, Abdulaziz, in 1876 had started

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<sup>84</sup> Tunalı, 134.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>86</sup> Bein, 289.

<sup>87</sup> BOA, Y.PRK.MŞ. 3 / 6 (23 Rebiülevvel 1308 / 6 November 1890).

<sup>88</sup> Bein, 287–288.

with street demonstrations by religious students in Istanbul.<sup>89</sup> Similar demonstrations had threatened to destabilize his reign at its very start in 1877, as well.<sup>90</sup> Later on, Abdulhamid was increasingly afraid that those who might move to dethrone him could easily find allies among the rapidly-increasing numbers of religious students in the capital, especially the more “ignorant” ones arriving from the provinces.<sup>91</sup> According to a report in the *Times* of London, rumors swirled in Istanbul in the summer of 1890 that there was serious “discontent” and “agitation” among the *ulema* and the religious students and that these groups were preparing to overthrow the Sultan.<sup>92</sup> Similar rumors that emerged one year later and claimed that the Grand Vizier and the Şeyhülislam were planning to stage a coup led Abdulhamid to dismiss both Grand Vizier Kamil Pasha and Şeyhülislam Ömer Lütü Efendi in September 1891.<sup>93</sup>

As a result of these concerns, Abdulhamid decided in 1892 to launch a sort of “intervention.” The first step would be the deportation of those students who were within the draft age back to their hometowns, reducing the number of religious students in the capital to about 3,000 from 10,000. It is possible that one of the reasons for this measure was also the rapid expansion of the population of Istanbul in the 1870s and the 1880s.<sup>94</sup> In order to counter possible complaints from the *ulema*, the initiative was cloaked as an effort to improve the living conditions of the students from the provinces as well as to overhaul the quality of the *medreses* in the capital. The deported students would also receive a fixed sum of money to cover their travel expenses. Moreover, the deportations would be accompanied by an overall reform program meant to introduce stricter controls for *medreses* and bring them to the level

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<sup>89</sup> Yılmaz Öztuna, *Bir Darbenin Anatomisi* (Istanbul: Ötüken, 1984), 40.

<sup>90</sup> Bein, 289.

<sup>91</sup> Roderic H. Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 325-327.

<sup>92</sup> “Discontent in Constantinople,” *Times*, (21 June 1890).

<sup>93</sup> Bein, 290.

<sup>94</sup> The population of Istanbul, according to reliable estimates, increased from around 357,000 in 1844 to around 874,000 in 1885. See Zafer Toprak, “Tarihsel Nüfusbilim Açısından İstanbul’un Nüfusu ve Toplumsal Topoğrafyası,” *Dünü ve Bugünüyle Toplum ve Ekonomi* 3 (1992): 120.

of secular state schools. These reforms were likely meant to keep the number of religious students low in the future, especially in the capital.<sup>95</sup>

What ensued on the first day of deportations on 18 September 1892 was nothing short of a major fiasco. Apart from logistical difficulties caused by a lack of planning, which forced hundreds of students to sleep out in the open while waiting to be ferried, those who did not immediately show up to be deported were treated like criminals by the police, rounded up in raids on their schools and homes and often being brutally beaten. In many cases, the students were not even notified that they were to be sent back to the hometowns before plainclothes police officers started assaulting them. The police also falsely notified the public that all religious students from the provinces instead of just the military-age ones would be deported.<sup>96</sup> Since the deportations had begun without any prior notice, rumors began to swirl. According to the memoirs of Hüseyin Kamil [Ertur], who was enrolled at an Istanbul *medrese* at the time, rumors circulated that religious students were thrown into the sea with stones tied to their feet after being taken aboard ships. Some students managed to escape by hiding in the houses of sympathetic Istanbul residents.<sup>97</sup> Another student named Mehmed Fahreddin later recalled how they were “slapped, whipped, kicked and driven to the steamships group after group.”<sup>98</sup> Years later, in a parliamentary session on 10 March 1909 regarding the conscription of religious students, Istanbul deputy Mustafa Asım Efendi remembered the “terrible incident” when poor students were put on ships and expelled from the city.<sup>99</sup> Ali Nazmi Efendi, who had been a religious student in Istanbul at the time and later rose to become a

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 290–291; BOA, DH.MKT. 2004 / 65 (28 Safer 1310 / 21 September 1892); BOA, Y.PRK.MŞ. 3 / 40 (27 Safer 1310 / 20 September 1892).

<sup>96</sup> Bein, 291.

<sup>97</sup> Esat K. Ertur, *Tamu Yelleri* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1994), 31-2.

<sup>98</sup> Bein, 291.

<sup>99</sup> Meclisi Mebusan Zabıt Ceridesi (hereafter MMZC), Devre I, Cilt II, İnikat 39 (25 Şubat 1324 / 10 March 1909): 209.

prominent member of the *ulema*, wrote in 1909 about how students were “driven like flocks of sheep to be deported.”<sup>100</sup>

The events, which took place over the course of a single day, horrified the people of Istanbul as well as the members of the *ulema* in general. Even though the authorities had likely intended for the whole process to take place quietly, considering that not even an official notice had gone out prior to the deportations, many Istanbul residents clearly saw what happened to the hapless religious students. Hüseyin Kamil felt that the people were so horrified by what happened that they were liable to start an uprising,<sup>101</sup> What was initially meant to increase security in the imperial capital was about to produce the exact opposite effect. Unnerved by the negative public response, Abdulhamid issued an order for the deportations to stop on the second day, after around 2,000 students were already expelled from the city. Looking for scapegoats, the Sultan reprimanded both the Ministry of Police and the Office of the Şeyhülislam for their failures during the deportations, even though no senior officials were dismissed.<sup>102</sup>

#### **IV. The Period of Indefinite Exemption, 1892 – 1908**

Immediately after the deportations were stopped, the Sultan moved to control the damage. Rumors were already spreading in the foreign press regarding a “plot” hatched by Abdulhamid against the religious students and the *ulema*. For instance, the Russian press reportedly claimed that Abdulhamid was deliberately targeting the *medreses* because he considered them centers of subversive activity, while *The New York Times* claimed that religious students in Istanbul were being “arrested” in droves.<sup>103</sup> Both the Ottoman public and

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<sup>100</sup> Ali Nazmi Efendi, “Makale-i Mahsusa,” *Beyan’ül Hak*, no. 17 (12 Kanunusani 1324 / 25 January 1909).

<sup>101</sup> Ertur, 40.

<sup>102</sup> Bein, 292; I have not come across any information about what subsequently happened to the 2,000 students who were deported. It can fairly be assumed that most of them would slowly trickle back to Istanbul after the deportations were stopped.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

the foreign press were reassured by the regime that the Sultan had no untoward intentions towards religious students. In an official notice published in the *Sabah* newspaper on 18 September, the authorities stated that the deportations were actually meant to be for the benefit of the students from the provinces since most of them had no place to stay and were suffering in inns and coffeehouses, having arrived in the capital after hearing that examinations were easier there. The measure was also described as aiming to reduce the risk of a cholera outbreak in the city.<sup>104</sup> Similar official statements were also sent to the foreign press by the Foreign Ministry.<sup>105</sup>

Moreover, within a few days, the Sultan announced in an imperial decree (*irade-i seniye*) that conscription examinations were suspended for a year. The decree did not mention the deportations but instead stated that the suspension was on account of the difficulties encountered by the religious students in coming to the capital and the provincial centers to take the exams. However, it was noted that the suspension was for the present year and that the examinations would resume the next year.<sup>106</sup> Religious students and *medrese* teachers learned about the Sultan's decision quickly. In a letter written on 23 September 1892 and published in *Sabah*, Abdüllatif Efendi, who was a *medrese* examiner (*mümeyyiz*) in Istanbul, stated that he and a number of students heard about the decree while they were at a religious ceremony (*mevlüd*) at a mosque when a government official who was also there announced it to them at the end of the ceremony. On behalf of his students and his friends in the *ulema*, he thanked the Sultan for his generosity and expressed his wishes for his continued health and well-being.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> *Sabah*, (9 Eylül 1308 / 18 September 1892).

<sup>105</sup> "Turkey," *Times*, (23 September 1892); "Turkish Students Sent Home," *New York Times*, (22 September 1892); That Abdulhamid was forced to cancel this measure at least partly due to concerns about his image in the foreign press supports Selim Deringil's argument, mentioned in the introductory chapter, that the regime was intensely preoccupied with its legitimacy in the foreign arena.

<sup>106</sup> "Tebliğat-ı Resmîye," *Sabah*, (15 Eylül 1308 / 27 September 1892); BOA, Y.MTV. 68 / 17 (4 Rebitülevvel 1310 / 26 September 1892).

<sup>107</sup> *Sabah*, (16 Eylül 1308 / 28 September 1892).



Despite the debacle of the deportations and the one-year suspension on the examinations, however, the Sultan did not immediately decide to halt his planned *medrese* reform program. Shortly after the announcement of the suspension, new measures intended to increase the scrutiny on religious students were decreed. The objective was to closely supervise the enrollment and education of the students and to restrict their exemptions from military service. Most important among the new measures was the introduction of report cards known as *şehadetname*.<sup>108</sup> These report cards were part of a new yearly marking system for the students. Those who got the best grade would automatically gain exemption for the year. Those with the middling grade would have to undergo the examination. Finally, those who got the worst grade would not be able to take the conscription examinations at all and would be drafted. This system would simultaneously make sure that there were no unnecessary exemptions and improve the quality of students in the *medreses*.<sup>109</sup> However, following official memorandums from the Office of the Şeyhülislam and the Foreign Ministry warning of possible loss of prestige both abroad and among the *ulema*, the new measures were indefinitely shelved only a few months after their announcement.<sup>110</sup>

Although the initial imperial decree of September 1892 was presented as a one-year measure, it was followed by Abdulhamid extending the suspension on examinations indefinitely through imperial decrees issued every year, until the policy was finally reversed after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908.<sup>111</sup> After initially being motivated by security concerns to expel religious students from Istanbul and then having taken an ad-hoc decision aimed at controlling the fallout, the Hamidian regime reformulated its policy towards the students into one of appeasement. Through the indefinite and unconditional exemption from

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<sup>108</sup> *Şehadetname* would also come to refer to a witness statement by a *medrese* teacher certifying that the holder of the document was a religious student.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 293; MMZC, Devre I, Cilt II, İnikat 39 (25 Şubat 1324 / 10 March 1909): 209.

military service, the large numbers of religious students in the empire went from being a potential threat for the regime to a group allied to the Sultan and personally favored by him.

The appeasement policy towards the religious students that took shape after 1892 is very much consistent with the ruling style of the Abdulhamid regime. As previously mentioned in the introductory chapter, Abdulhamid's understanding of *idare-i maslahat* necessitated that social groups that had the numbers and the influence to potentially destabilize the regime had to be kept content. In this case, the religious students and the broader *ulema* network presumed to support them constituted a very important and potentially powerful example of such a group. This happened at a time when the regime was in need of allies. As also noted before, the Hamidian regime also found itself weaker than before in the 1890s. In the years after 1892, the constitutionalist opposition spearheaded by the Young Turks was increasingly gaining support within the empire while the stability of the regime was shaken by demonstrations led by Armenian political organizations in the capital.<sup>112</sup> This was accompanied by attacks on Armenian communities in both Istanbul and in the provinces which took place between 1894 and 1896. These developments greatly tarnished the image of the regime in the international arena.<sup>113</sup> Shoring up the support of religious students by presenting the Sultan as their paternalistic benefactor must have appeared as a very useful policy at this juncture. At a time when no major military conflicts had taken place for a long time and with the regime focused more on internal rather than external threats, the manpower losses incurred by the army due to the indefinite exemption policy was probably seen as acceptable.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Hanioglu, *A Brief History*, 145-6; Özbek, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Sosyal Devlet*, 43.

<sup>113</sup> Hanioglu, *A Brief History*, 131; Eraslan, "I. Sason İsyani,"; Melson, "A Theoretical Enquiry."

<sup>114</sup> Using military service as a tool to maintain its support was not a tactic that was used only on the religious by the Abdulhamid regime. The tribes of the Transjordan region were deliberately left outside the scope of conscription and not touched for more than ten years in exchange for their tacit acceptance of the regime. See Eugene Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 214-215; A modified form of voluntary military service was similarly used to cultivate personal devotion to the Sultan among Kurdish tribes. See Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

In effect, the 1886 conscription law remained in place, with all its regulations regarding the examination procedure for religious students. However, the law was personally overruled by the Sultan, and no conscription examinations took place for sixteen years. The previous procedure was now replaced by a much simpler one in which the religious students simply showed up at the draft musters every year carrying brief documents known as *şehadetnames*. These were witness statements written by the teachers at their *medreses* identifying them as genuine religious students.<sup>115</sup> The statements often also noted that the student was regularly staying at the *medrese* compound and was thus *medresenişin*. The members of the conscription committee could sometimes investigate whether a student was truly staying at the *medrese*, and there are a number of petitions in the archives asking for students who were not *medresenişin* to be granted exemption as well.<sup>116</sup>

The indefinite exemption policy clearly paved the way for serious abuses of the system and triggered serious complaints, including and most significantly from within different branches of the state apparatus. As the institution most affected by the new status quo, the military was quick to complain. Requests from both the Second and the Third Armies reached the Ministry of War in the spring of 1894 stating their expectation that the Sultan's policy would be reversed and asking what was to be done regarding religious students. Although certainly not overtly critical of the Sultan's decision, they noted that the situation was causing serious problems and was a source of injustice.<sup>117</sup> A harsher complaint from the governor of Trabzon written to the Fourth Army staff in 1899 observed that the number of religious students in the province was ten times higher than the number generally allowed and

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<sup>115</sup> MMZC, Devre I, Cilt II, İnikat 39 (25 Şubat 1324 / 10 March 1909): 213-14.

<sup>116</sup> BOA, BEO 702 / 52639 (23 Cemaziyelevvel 1313 / 11 November 1895).

<sup>117</sup> BOA, Y.MTV. 97 / 41 (6 Zilhicce 1311 / 10 June 1894).

that the system was being terribly abused by “malicious individuals,” particularly in the Erzurum area.<sup>118</sup>

Criticisms also came from outside the state, and they were generally more vocal. Opposition publications operating out of foreign countries often pointed out the wretched state of the *medreses* and the inequalities caused by the exemption policy in very harsh terms that were also critical of the *ulema* as a whole.<sup>119</sup> For example, *Şura-yı Ümmet*, which was the mouthpiece for the Young Turk movement and which was published in Paris before the Constitutional Revolution in 1908, carried an opinion piece in 1904 that questioned why the *medreses* gained special privileges while they produced the “most ignorant people possible” who “could not be useful for any purpose.”<sup>120</sup> However, even though Abdulhamid’s policy was intended to improve his standing in the eyes of the *ulema*, it seems that his decisions may have caused the opposite effect for at least some of its leading members. The idea that the policy was causing the stagnation of the religious schools was held by both opposition-leaning and pro-government scholars. Petitions kept reaching the palace asking for reforms. In a report he wrote for Abdulhamid, a scholar named Hüsrevbeyzade Celaledin noted that the exemption policy was causing illiterate peasant boys to “wrap a cloth around their heads and flock to *medreses*.” Instead of calling for an outright return to the conscription examinations of the past, he suggested that making middle school education mandatory for *medrese* enrollment might alleviate the problem since this would ensure that the prospective students would at least be of a certain quality.<sup>121</sup> Şeyh Aliefendizade Muhyiddin (or Muhiddin), who was also an influential member of the *ulema*, presented the Sultan in 1896 with a petition containing his criticisms and suggestions. He spoke more openly, calling the exemption

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<sup>118</sup> BOA, BEO 1342 / 100625 (11 Rebiülevvel 1317 / 20 July 1899); Erzurum was part of the Trabzon province at the time.

<sup>119</sup> Bein, 295.

<sup>120</sup> “Şundan Bundan,” *Şura-yı Ümmet*, no. 46 (15 Zilkade 1321 / 2 February 1904).

<sup>121</sup> Ramazan Balcı, “Medreselerin ıslahı konusunda Sultan II. Abdülhamid’in hazırlattığı bir layihanın tahlili,” *Tarih Okulu* 12 (2012): 165.

policy a sure way to ruin the *medrese* institution in the long run and claiming that the imperial administrators were allowing this to happen because “lack of religion” (*dinsizlik*) made it easier to administer the empire in an arbitrary manner.<sup>122</sup>

There was certainly cause for complaint. As years wore on and the “temporary” policy became crystallized, the quality of the religious schools as well as that of the students who supposedly attended them declined steadily. Students who arrived in Istanbul to attend religious school generally spent 18 years on average for an education program that was supposed to take 8 years.<sup>123</sup> Many of those only spent the first six months actually participating in classes and then drifted away.<sup>124</sup> Some abandoned the schools and returned to their hometowns altogether as soon as they reached the age of 26, making them no longer eligible for the draft.<sup>125</sup>

The situation in the provinces was not any better. Two local residents of the Gediz district in Kütahya province named Caferzade İbrahim Hakkı and Mehmed wrote a letter to Istanbul in late 1898 warning the government of the dire situation in their town. They said that local civil servants and wealthy members of the community had acquired documents from a *medrese* teacher named Şakir Efendi falsely identifying them as religious students to help them avoid the draft.<sup>126</sup> A report sent to the Ministry of War from the Silile district of Konya in January 1908 stated that all of the 160 men eligible for the draft in the district were found to be registered as religious students, leaving the local *Nizamiye* and *Redif* regiments with no new recruits. The report went on to warn that the vast majority of these men actually had other jobs and never attended classes, having registered with the sole aim of avoiding the

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 164-65; Hoca Muhyiddin, “Zat-ı Şahaneye Takdim Kılınan Arizadan,” *Kanun-ı Esasi*, no. 2 (23 Recep 1314 / 28 December 1896); The same Muhyiddin would later grow to be active in the opposition against Abdulhamid. See İsmail Kara, “Turban and Fez: Ulema as Opposition,” in Elisabeth Özdalga (ed.), *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy* (London: Routledge, 2005), 165-179.

<sup>123</sup> Ergün, 60.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>126</sup> BOA, DH.MKT. 2155 / 74 (19 Şaban 1316 / 2 January 1899); It is not recorded who these two men were exactly.

draft.<sup>127</sup> An investigation conducted by the Third Army headquarters in the town of Yenice near Çanakkale around the same time revealed that, of the 180 people registered as religious students in the district, only two were actually present at the *medrese*.<sup>128</sup> Likewise, a letter written by a local resident of the Prepol (Pirlepe) district of Manastır province in November 1907 claimed that all the students of the local Bakıya Hanım Medrese along with some of the teachers were doing different jobs while also enjoying their exempt status and demanded an urgent investigation.<sup>129</sup>

While the new situation certainly received significant criticism, it was also widely accepted. Many people were more than willing to make full use of the privilege. An interesting feature of the 1892 – 1908 period is the absolute explosion in the number of petitions from provinces complaining of the unlawful drafting of religious students. While there are almost no such petitions written before 1892 during the reign of Abdulhamid II, the central government and the palace were flooded with letters after the Sultan began his indefinite exemption policy. Petitions in this regard absolutely dwarf the number of complaints about how the system was being abused. The petitioners were comprised of religious students themselves and their families, sometimes written individually and sometimes representing a large group and often complained that the local draft commission or the commanders of the *Redif* regiments were forcibly drafting students who were able to produce *şehadetname* documents identifying their status.<sup>130</sup> Those who were being drafted were often claimed to be *medresenişin*, as was required, and were sometimes said to have

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<sup>127</sup> BOA, BEO 3263 / 244677 (4 Safer 1326 / 8 March 1908).

<sup>128</sup> BOA, TFR.I AS. 58 / 5711 (20 Safer 1326 / 24 March 1908).

<sup>129</sup> BOA, TFR.I ŞKT 152 / 15157 (15 Rebiülahir 1326 / 17 May 1908).

<sup>130</sup> BOA, TFR.I ŞKT 104 / 10333 (1 Zilhicce 1324 / 16 January 1907); In one particular case, the petition was written on behalf of the entire population of Pirlepe. See BOA, TFR.I ŞKT 123 / 12280 (5 Recep 1325 / 17 August 1907)..

been drafted while visiting their homes,<sup>131</sup> standing in for their fathers at the family-run store<sup>132</sup> or out shopping.<sup>133</sup>

The petitioners also often praised the Sultan, thanked him for his policy concerning religious and blamed malicious local officials, particularly from the military.<sup>134</sup> The four individuals claiming to represent the community of Pirlepe even spoke of an entire “conspiracy” by the entire local military establishment to draft all the 240 youths studying at the local *medrese* in the summer of 1907 and sought help from the Ministry of Interior.<sup>135</sup> A letter sent to the Yıldız Palace in 1896 by one Kadri from Kayseri claimed that even “mullahs” from the local *medreses* were being drafted by the “evil” *Redif* commander, adding that the soldiers of the *Redif* regiment were forced to sleep out in the open because of the commander’s neglect.<sup>136</sup> Apart from the obvious claim of being *medresenişin*, the discourse found in the petitions offers important clues as to how the petitioners sought to legitimize their situation. They often emphasized that they were hardworking and successful students. For instance, İmamzade Hafız Mehmed Emin Efendi from the village of Geşo in Eğin, which was part of the Mameratülaziz province, writing in April 1904, argued for exemption in terms of his unique “worth” as a religious student.<sup>137</sup> In June 1906, Mustafa bin İbrahim from Bursa

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<sup>131</sup> BOA, BEO 2357 / 176765 (13 Rebiülahir 1322 / 27 June 1904).

<sup>132</sup> BOA, DH.MKT 423 / 47 (17 Rebiülevvel 1313 / 7 September 1895).

<sup>133</sup> BOA, DH.MKT 1227 / 83 (25 Zilhicce 1325 / 29 January 1908).

<sup>134</sup> The tendency of petitioners to profess a personal bond between themselves and the monarch, particularly concerning the issue of military service while also blaming hapless local officials apparently forms an interesting parallel between the Hamidian regime and the entire ruling period of the Romanov dynasty in Imperial Russia. In making their complaints to the center regarding injustices in the conscription system, Russian peasants regularly thanked their “tsar-father” and asked him to correct the abuses carried out by evil low-level administrators. See Josh Sanborn, “Conscription, Correspondence, and Politics in Late Imperial Russia,” *Russian History* 24 (1997): 27-40.

<sup>135</sup> BOA, BEO 3134 / 235031 (20 Recep 1325 / 29 August 1907); Considering that, as mentioned before, another complaint from Pirlepe one year later claimed that all the students at the local *medrese* were doing other jobs, this communal complaint seems to have worked. See BOA, TFR.I ŞKT 152 / 15157 (15 Rebiülahir 1326 / 17 May 1908).

<sup>136</sup> BOA, Y.EE. 145 / 1 (25 Zilkade 1314 / 25 April 1897).

<sup>137</sup> BOA, MF.MKT. 788 / 15 (13 Rebiülahir 1322 / 27 June 1904).

stated that he was drafted just as he was about to receive his diploma as a religious scholar, highlighting the injustice of the situation.<sup>138</sup>

While appealing to the Sultan's sense of justice and complaining of acts of mistreatment by corrupt or neglectful local officials is a common theme throughout Ottoman history, it can be argued that the petitioners between 1892 and 1908 felt especially empowered by Abdulhamid's favorable policy towards religious students.<sup>139</sup> Their trust in him was not misplaced. In 1902, the Sultan warned military and civil officials in the provinces not to cause difficulties for religious students in terms of their exemption and to ease their scrutiny, stating that their harsh treatment was pushing many students to unnecessarily come to Istanbul.<sup>140</sup> However, it seems that in the chaotic environment caused by the indefinite exemption, local military officials kept attempting to identify and draft people spuriously enrolled as religious students. They were mostly trying to curb what they saw as a serious abuse of the system. More importantly, the personnel deficiencies caused by the manpower loss incurred due to the policy must also have been on their agenda. The fact that some military officials kept drafting students and the Sultan saw the need to warn them can be taken to suggest a serious tension between the regime's core and resentful military (and sometimes civil) officials in the provinces. In fact, this trend would continue even into the Second Constitutional Era after 1908.

The number of petitions found in the archives particularly increases for two specific periods: 1896-7 and 1907-8. It seems that in both periods, military officials forcibly drafted more men who claimed to be religious students compared to other times.<sup>141</sup> The first one might be attributed to the army's increased need for soldiers in the run-up to the Greco-

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<sup>138</sup> BOA, TFR.I ŞKT 94 / 9379 (26 Cemaziyelahir 1324 / 17 August 1906).

<sup>139</sup> For an analysis of the discourse found in Ottoman petitions, see Yuval Ben-Bassat, "The Ottoman institution of petitioning when the sultan no longer reigned: a view from post-1908 Ottoman Palestine," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 56 (2017): 87-103.

<sup>140</sup> BOA, Y.MTV 232 / 24 (2 Rebiülahir 1320 / 9 July 1902).

<sup>141</sup> Out of the total of thirty-six petitions I have come across in the archives complaining about the forcible enlistment of religious students between 1892 and 1908, seventeen are from 1907-8 and ten are from 1896-7, with the rest being scattered through the years.



Ottoman War of 1897. The intensification in 1907 and 1908 was probably due to the fact that more and more people were abusing the system as the years wore on. It could also potentially suggest that military officers in the provinces were becoming more openly resentful towards the Abdulhamid regime and were taking matters into their own hands more and more. Whatever the reason, the situation was certainly untenable by 1908 and had caused many in the military to be openly hostile towards the *ulema* and apparently consider them to be unjustly favored by Abdulhamid. This meant that the Young Turk Revolution was quickly followed by a government decision in November 1908 to reinstate the conscription examinations, which shall be discussed in the next chapter.

## **V. Conclusion**

The issue of religious students' military service was set to follow an interesting trajectory after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, but its one consistent feature would be ever-intensifying scrutiny by the state, particularly as a result of cataclysmic events such as the 31 March Incident of 1909. Due to their identification with the regime of Abdulhamid II, sympathy for the religious students along with the rest of the *ulema* was very low amongst government circles and the Young Turks who now dominated public discourse. Some claimed that religious schools had to be closed down altogether.<sup>142</sup> Hence, during the Second Constitutional Period, despite certain minor concessions granted due to public pressure, the authorities would keep introducing tighter measures concerning the military service of religious students, so much so that the *medreses* of Istanbul were virtually emptied of students during the Balkan Wars.<sup>143</sup> As mentioned before, the most important breaking point in this regard would be the 31 March Incident.

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<sup>142</sup> Adem Ölmez, "II. Meşrutiyet Devrinde Osmanlı Medreselerinde Reform Çabaları ve Merkezileşme," *Vakıflar Dergisi* 41 (2014): 130.

<sup>143</sup> Ergün, 77.

The developments before the fateful year of 1892, on the other hand, generally followed a trend of slowly-increasing restrictions on exemptions, in line with the gradual streamlining of the overall conscription system. Yet, the new laws and regulations also regularly offered new concessions to religious students such as the permission to take the conscription examination for a second time. It is accurate to characterize the state as being having a stern but well-structured and fairly competent outlook regarding the issue during this period. It is not possible to know for certain the extent of abuses that must have apparently taken place to some degree, but at least the available documentation suggests that the system pretty much worked as intended. I could not find any complaints in the archives for the years between 1876 and 1892, either from the populace or from the government officials and the members of the *ulema*. Yet, this does not mean that they do not exist, but they are certainly not readily apparent. The existing correspondence, often between military units and the central government, often takes the form of clarifications regarding the examination procedures.<sup>144</sup> Although it can be argued that the religious students felt empowered by the Sultan's official stance after 1892 to fight for their rights, thus fuelling the "petition explosion" that took place afterwards, the lack of complaints and petitions before that year should not be construed as society not having a "voice" in the face of the central government. Considering the available evidence, it seems much more likely that this was because the system was more ordered before 1892, leaving comparably little room for complaints.

As also explained in the introductory chapter of the thesis, the conditions surrounding the issue of the military service of religious students between 1892 and 1908 make it very worthwhile case study of state-society relations during the Abdulhamid regime. The unique qualities of the Sultan's understanding of *idare-i maslahat* are out in full force throughout the events. The paternalistic monarch, motivated by security concerns and seeking to maintain his

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<sup>144</sup> BOA, DH.MKT 1883 / 107 (25 Rebiülevvel 1309 / 29 October 1891).

legitimacy in the eyes of both internal and external actors and increase the public support for his regime, personally granted a major favor to a very important social group in 1892. He did so by overriding the existing legal and bureaucratic framework of the state, thereby likely contributing to the deterioration of his own administrative apparatus.

The paternalistic character of this act was clearly not lost on those who favored from it. As noted before, the petitioners who complained about the perceived injustices wreaked by local officials often saw fit to thank the Sultan. While the local officials could act unjustly for whatever reason, they were sure that their paternalistic father-monarch was not to blame could resolve the problems. This can naturally be taken as one of the ways the religious students used to give themselves legitimacy in order to make use of the status quo between 1892 and 1908. Despite criticisms from select few members of the *ulema* and claims that emerged after the Young Turk Revolution that religious students had been unhappy about the exemption policy, they were clearly more than content to enjoy the privilege accorded to them. Nevertheless, tying their fortunes to those of the Sultan so intricately would also put them in a negative light in the Second Constitutional Era, so much so that the Association of Religious Students bemoaned in 1909 that “everyone but the poor religious students [were] enjoying the liberties accorded by the Constitutional Revolution.”<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> BOA, BEO 3481 / 261065 (7 Muharrem 1327 / 29 January 1909).

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **CONSCRIPTION AS A SOCIO-POLITICAL TOOL: RELIGIOUS STUDENTS AND THE YOUNG TURK REGIME, 1908 - 1914**

The rise to power of the Young Turks with the Constitutional Revolution of July 1908 kicked off a turbulent decade that saw the Hamidian ruling style replaced by greater centralization, bureaucratization and a radical political program. This led to significant changes in state-society relations, and many of these changes were structured around military service. Having benefited from Abdulhamid's patronage in the past, religious students were one of the primary groups that were affected by this transformation.

This chapter looks at the period between July 1908 and 1914. It starts off by exploring the attitudes of the new ruling elites towards military service in general and then describes what happened in these years regarding the military service of religious students. This period witnessed the removal of the Hamidian privilege of indefinite exemption from religious students in 1908. This prompted a backlash from the students, which contributed to their participation in the 31 March Incident and an intense crackdown from the authorities thereafter. This crackdown would be followed by stricter regulations. The 31 March Incident of April 1909 is thus the central breaking point for the 1908 – 1914 period.

Also included in the chapter is a case study of one particular religious student whose persistent quest to avoid military service spanned years and produced copious amounts of correspondence between different branches of the Ottoman state. This case study serves to demonstrate the seriousness with which the issue of military service was taken by the authorities and how various apparatuses of the state could get locked in serious instances of tug-of-war during this period.

## **I. Young Turk Attitudes towards Conscription after the Constitutional Revolution, 1908 – 1914**

The Young Turks viewed the military as one of the main institutions that could steer the Ottoman Empire away from ruin. This was a natural inclination given that many of their leading members were military men. Beyond just guiding the politics of the empire, the military establishment (once properly reformed and reorganized) could act as a driving force for the betterment of Ottoman society as a whole. This would not only be in the form of modernization but also through a “social revolution” that would create “a new intellectual and moral order” on the same level with the nations of the West.<sup>146</sup> According to the Young Turks, the Ottoman Empire was on the verge of fragmentation because the central state was weak and because society was fractured along ethnic, religious and social lines. This was the case not only between Muslims and non-Muslims but also within the Muslim population. They felt that this fragmentation had been purposefully promoted by the despotic regime under Abdulhamid II, which had pitted different elements of society against each other so that a coherent opposition could not emerge, at the cost of weakening the empire at its seams.<sup>147</sup>

Even before they rose to power, the Young Turks viewed conscription as a powerful tool that could help strengthen both state and society as part of the potential military-related measures at their disposal.<sup>148</sup> The conscription system as it existed under the Hamidian regime (and before) was seen as sorely lacking in providing the personnel needs of the army effectively both on paper and in practice. Vast sections of society, both Muslim and non-Muslim, as well as large regions of the empire, remained outside the scope of military service. This meant that not only the central state was fairly weak in penetrating and influencing these

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<sup>146</sup> Feroz Ahmad, “War and Society under the Young Turks, 1908 – 18,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 11 (1988): 266-267.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 267; Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East, 1914 – 1920* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 4–6.

<sup>148</sup> Feroz Ahmad, *The Young Turks: The Committee of Union and Progress in Turkish Politics, 1908 – 1914* (London: Hurst Company, 2010), 22-23.

territories and groups, but also that a very significant section of the population did not feel that they had a stake in the empire. Those Ottoman subjects who did not serve in the military naturally did not see themselves in the same light as those who did and would not share concerns for the continued existence of the empire.<sup>149</sup> This was particularly true for non-Muslim communities, but the differences in the conscription practices between various Muslim social groups and regions were also recognized as a problem that led to inequality. All of this was in fact in stark contrast with the vow in the *Tanzimat* decree of 1839 that the burden of conscription would be divided fairly on all Ottoman subjects.<sup>150</sup>

At the time of the constitutional revolution in July 1908, the Young Turks strictly “adhered to the ideology of Ottomanism and understood it as the only way to safeguard the Ottoman state.”<sup>151</sup> Ottomanism, which had first emerged as an idea in the 1860s, argued that if all Ottoman subjects, regardless of religion or ethnicity, had the same rights and responsibilities, this would unite them under a common cause, as part of a collective Ottoman identity. This would help counter the rising trends of nationalism, particularly in the Balkans. To this the Young Turks added the idea that the disparate groups united under the Ottoman banner also had to be under the control of a strong central state.<sup>152</sup>

Simply put, the best and shortest way to bring together all Ottoman subjects in a unified and cohesive society and to bring them under the power of the state was seen by the Young Turks as making them serve in the same army and fight for the same cause. The Ottoman army itself was weaker and smaller than it could have been due to the limited nature of conscription, and reforms in this regard would also boost the military strength of the empire. Being apparently aware of the fact that the central state did not possess enough power

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<sup>149</sup> Eyal Ginio, “Mobilizing the Ottoman Nation during the Balkan Wars (1912 – 1913): Awakening from the Ottoman Dream,” *War in History* 12 (2005): 158; Gültekin Yıldız, “Ottoman Military Organization, 1800 – 1918,” *The Encyclopedia of War*, 1st ed (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 6.

<sup>150</sup> Erik Jan Zürcher, “The Ottoman Conscription System in Theory and Practice, 1844 – 1918,” *International Review of Social History* 43 (1998): 439.

<sup>151</sup> Ginio, 158.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 158–159.

to penetrate all levels of society across the geographical expanse of the empire, the Young Turks saw truly universal conscription in practice was a far-fetched idea. Nevertheless, they thought that some major steps could be taken and that exemptions from military service could be limited to a great extent.<sup>153</sup> One prevailing idea at the time was such measures would be part of a movement that would make the Ottoman Empire “the Japan of the Near East.”<sup>154</sup> If conscription were not to prove to be able to unify the Ottoman nation, it would at least transform the relationship between the central state and society into one based on strict obedience.<sup>155</sup>

After indirectly taking the reins of power with the start of the Second Constitutional Period in July 1908, the Young Turks organized within the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), also known as the Unionists, did not wait long to implement their reforms regarding the conscription system. One of the first steps taken was the reversal of Abdulhamid’s indefinite exemption policy towards religious students which had started in 1892.<sup>156</sup> Although its effects were somewhat dramatic, this measure was based on the framework of the 1886 conscription law, which was legally still in force. Far more important was the passing of the Law on the Military Service of non-Muslims (*Anasır-ı Gayrimüslimenin Kuralları Hakkında Kanun*) in August 1909.<sup>157</sup> This law abolished the practice of non-Muslims paying the exemption fee known as *bedel-i askeri* (“military fee”) and made it mandatory for them to serve in the army. Residents of Istanbul, who had likewise traditionally enjoyed exemption

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<sup>153</sup> Mehmet Beşikçi, *The Ottoman Mobilization of Manpower in the First World War: Between Voluntarism and Resistance* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishing, 2012), 140–144.

<sup>154</sup> Ahmad, 267.

<sup>155</sup> Mehmet Beşikçi, “Balkan Harbi’nde Osmanlı Seferberliği ve Redif Teşkilatının İflası,” *Türkiye Günlüğü* 110 (2012): 28; The idea that conscription could be used to unify a nation or even turn a mass of people into a nation was certainly not unique to the Young Turks. Eugen Weber argues that military service was one of the tools used by the French state to achieve national unity between 1870 and 1914, much later than commonly assumed. See Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870 – 1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 292-302; In the case of Japan, which the Young Turks looked up to, conscription was seen as a quick way to elevate the status of peasants downtrodden for centuries. See E. Herbert Norman, “Soldier and Peasant in Japan: The Origins of Conscription,” *Pacific Affairs* 16 (1943): 47-63.

<sup>156</sup> The policies of the CUP regarding the military service of religious students are discussed in the subsequent section of the chapter.

<sup>157</sup> Beşikçi, *The Ottoman Mobilization*, 97.

from military service, were also included in the new law of August 1909 and would have to serve. The government waited only two months to put the law into practice and ordered the conscription of all eligible Ottoman subjects in October 1909.<sup>158</sup> Finally, the CUP also attempted to broaden the geographical scope of conscription and extend it to frontier regions that had been traditionally exempt. Many of these areas were home to nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes which had been autonomous and averse to central power for a long time. In the Transjordan, for example, a concerted effort to implement conscription in 1910 prompted “much crying and lying of age” in the Ajlun district and triggered a serious revolt in the more autonomous Karak district.<sup>159</sup>

The main reason why the government pushed ahead with these dramatic steps towards more universal conscription in such haste was the international situation the empire found itself in almost immediately after the Young Turk Revolution. On 5 September 1908, Bulgaria proclaimed full independence from Ottoman authority, followed on the next day the Austrian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (under de facto Austrian occupation since 1878) and Crete’s declaration of union with Greece. The Ottomans appealed to the European powers for assistance but were simply left to “fend for themselves.”<sup>160</sup> The empire could not respond to these challenges militarily, and the Unionists instead organized a boycott against Austria to protest the annexation.<sup>161</sup> However, it was clear to them that they could only prevent and defend against such further aggressions by building up the strength of the army. Another reason for the measures towards universal conscription was likely the counterrevolutionary uprising known as the “31 March Incident” that had broken out in the imperial capital in April 1909. Although the uprising, which quickly toppled the government in Istanbul, was

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>159</sup> Eugene Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 214-215.

<sup>160</sup> Ahmad, 266.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 268; Doğan Çetinkaya, *1908 Osmanlı Boykotu: Bir Toplumsal Hareketin Analizi* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2014).



suppressed fairly quickly, it likely scared the Unionists enough to prompt it to increase its control over society.

The steps that the Young Turks took in 1908-9 were generally aimed at increasing the manpower pool available to the army while increasing the control of the state over society. Bringing previously-exempt groups within the scope of conscription invariably also put them under greater central control. However, widening the extent of conscription could not by itself provide an effective boost in military strength, and the CUP also had structural reforms for the army in mind. These included the weeding out of senior officers not deemed to be effective, the enacting of a whole new conscription law and the abolition of the *Redif* branch. However, these reforms would not take place until a series of major military conflicts between 1911 and 1913 laid bare their necessity. The most significant of these was the First Balkan War that took place between October 1912 and May 1913. Shortly before the outbreak of the war, the CUP-backed government was forced to resign by the mutiny of a group of military officers. In its stead, a new government comprising well-known statesmen under Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha known as the “Great Cabinet” rose to power in July 1912.<sup>162</sup>

The new government, despite also comprising a core of military men, did not continue the military reforms of the CUP and would also meet its own major problems as the First Balkan War started in October 1912. The war effort proceeded disastrously for the Ottomans. As the armies of the Balkan nations invaded and occupied the European possessions of the empire, the Ottoman military was woefully slow to mobilize. The *Redif* branch faced a near-total collapse, with its units mostly disintegrating before reaching the front.<sup>163</sup> The newly-conscripted non-Muslim troops also performed very poorly. While there had been some measure of enthusiasm for the draft among the Christian and Jewish communities in 1909,

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<sup>162</sup> Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 19–20; Ahmad, *The Young Turks*, 81–84.

<sup>163</sup> Beşikçi, “Balkan Harbi’nde Osmanlı Seferberliği,” 35–39; Ali İhsan Sabis, *Balkan Harbinde Neden Münhezim Olduk* (Istanbul: İlgi Kültür Sanat Yayınları, 2014 / 1914), 55-57.

this feeling quickly dissipated under wartime conditions.<sup>164</sup> The non-Muslim conscripts would later be kept away from the frontline and relegated to unarmed labor battalions during the First World War.<sup>165</sup>

While a number of commentators blamed the previous actions of the CUP for the Balkan disaster, with some claiming that the Ottomans had lost their spirit because the CUP had swapped religious devotion for secular patriotism, the Unionists themselves argued that the debacle was caused by their removal from power and the incompetency of the new government.<sup>166</sup> As the war was drawing to a close, the CUP saw an opportunity to regain power. The Great Cabinet was toppled with a coup d'état on 23 January 1913, and the CUP seized full power instead of manipulating and guiding the government from shadows as before.<sup>167</sup>

The new Unionist government quickly set about reforming the military while the war was still going on as well as forming a committee of national defense and declaring “the whole Ottoman nation in a state of mobilization.”<sup>168</sup> The Regulation for the General Organization of the Military (*Teşkilat-ı Umumiye-i Askeriye Nizamnamesi*) was issued on 13 February 1913 with the objective of improving the organization and the logistics of the army and retiring older officers unfit for service.<sup>169</sup> One of the main aims of the new regulation was to reorganize the functioning of the military recruiting offices so that the new draftees could reach their units faster.<sup>170</sup> The fighting against the Balkan alliance ended on 30 May 1913

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<sup>164</sup> Beşikçi, *The Ottoman Mobilization*, 102–104; According to Istanbul deputy Ibrahim Vasfi, there were many telegrams in early 1909 from representatives of non-Muslim communities in different provinces asking for the draft to be extended to them. See Meclisi Mebusan Zabıt Ceridesi (hereafter MMZC), Devre I, Cilt II, İnikat 39 (25 Şubat 1324 / 10 March 1909): 210.

<sup>165</sup> Beşikçi, *The Ottoman Mobilization*, 105; I could not find any information regarding the performance of conscripted Istanbul residents during the Balkan Wars, who were the other major group along with non-Muslims and religious students affected by the changes of 1908-9. For religious students during the Balkan Wars, see later in the chapter.

<sup>166</sup> Ginio, 174; Samih Nafiz Tansu, *İttihat ve Terakki* (Istanbul: İlgı Kültür Sanat Yayınları, 2016), 127.

<sup>167</sup> Sina Akşin, *Jön Türkler ve İttihat ve Terakki* (Ankara: İmge Kitabevi, 2014), 351–353.

<sup>168</sup> Ahmad, “War and Society under the Young Turks,” 270.

<sup>169</sup> Beşikçi, “Balkan Harbinde Osmanlı Seferberliği,” 43.

<sup>170</sup> Mustafa Şahin and Cemile Şahin, “Türk İstiklal Harbi’nde Askerlik Şubeleri ve Kilis Askerlik Şubesi,” *A. Ü. Türkiyat Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi* 52 (2014): 275.

with huge territorial losses for the Ottomans that sent shockwaves throughout the empire. Almost all the European lands that had belonged to the empire for centuries, including the former imperial capital Edirne, had been lost, and this would prove difficult for people all over the empire difficult to tolerate.<sup>171</sup> Despite the end of hostilities, all the participating nations remained on a war footing, and tensions between the victors over the spoils quickly boiled over into a new conflict. The Ottomans used this opportunity to regain Edirne, which had been lost to Bulgarian forces.

Sensing that a greater conflict was in the offing and now even more convinced that “the empire could be saved (only) through a program of radical reform,” the government kept pushing ahead with its overhaul of the military.<sup>172</sup> The military crisis faced by the empire had led the Unionists to put even greater emphasis on the army. The budget allocated to the military was almost doubled, despite the economic difficulties the empire found itself in.<sup>173</sup> The structural reforms that had been waiting until 1908-9 would take place at this point. An agreement was signed with Germany in December 1913 to reorganize the army structure, and in particular, the conscription system. At the same time the empire also aligned itself diplomatically with Germany and its allies, finally officially joining the Central Powers on 2 August 1914, also declaring mobilization on the same day. Shortly before these events, the last conscription law of the Ottoman Empire, named *Mükellefiyet-i Askeriye Kanun-ı Muvakkati* (“Temporary Military Service Law”) was passed in May 1914.<sup>174</sup> In fact, the Ministry of War as well as the members of the parliament had been agitating for a new conscription law at least since August 1908, considering the 1886 law that had been in force

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<sup>171</sup> A history of the Ottoman Empire published in Cairo around that time stated: “Today the Bulgarians are in the outskirts of Çatalca! What a disgrace! You, the offspring of Osman, the descendants of Bayezid, the children of Mehmed the Conqueror, the successors of Suleiman! Even those who were your slaves only yesterday covet what you have.” See Ginio, 169.

<sup>172</sup> Ahmad, “War and Society under the Young Turks,” 266.

<sup>173</sup> Şevket Pamuk, *Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyete Küreselleşme, İktisat Politikaları ve Büyüme* (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2012), 146.

<sup>174</sup> Akşin, *Jön Türkler ve İttihat ve Terakki*, 408–412; Köksal, 22; Ali Kaşıyüğun, *Osmanlı Devleti'nin I. Dünya Savaşı'na Girişi* (Istanbul: Yeditepe Yayınevi, 2015), 234–235.

before outdated.<sup>175</sup> However, the new law took almost six years to appear due to political upheaval and military conflicts. Instead, as mentioned before, the Unionists had chosen to pass a separate law in August 1909 that simply expanded the scope of conscription to non-Muslims and Istanbul residents.<sup>176</sup>

By May 1914, when the law was finally formulated and published, the CUP leadership was aware that they might very soon find themselves at war. The new law was thus explicitly of a temporary character and included measures that were aimed at increasing the size of the army quickly and that were likely not meant to be permanent since they were too draconian for peacetime. The most important such measure was the extension of the duration of military service to twenty years, as well as the lowering of the draft age from twenty to eighteen.<sup>177</sup> The part of the law that was meant to be permanent, however, was the abolition of the *Redif* branch. As mentioned before, the *Redif* units had proven to be wholly ineffectual during the Balkan Wars. Even before the war, the *Redif* was somewhere between a strategic military reserve and a provincial security force, while being ineffectual at carrying out both these tasks.<sup>178</sup> Therefore, with the 1914 conscription law, all *Redif* units were converted into regular ones same as the active branch (known as the *Nizamiye*) and all draftees from this point on would have the same military service obligations.<sup>179</sup>

This temporary law proved to be the final conscription law of the Ottoman Empire as the First World War would lead to its dissolution. However, the period between 1914 and 1918 pushed the government further on its trajectory towards the concept of “total war,”

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<sup>175</sup> The most significant Unionist criticism regarding the 1886 law was that it was “unjust” – likely referring to the exclusion of non-Muslims - and a “product of the era of despotism.” See MMZC, Devre I, Cilt II, İnikat 39 (25 Şubat 1324 / 10 March 1909): 212.

<sup>176</sup> Beşikçi, “Balkan Harbinde Osmanlı Seferberliği,” 31.

<sup>177</sup> Osman Köksal, “Mükellefiyet-i Askeriye Kanun-u Muvakkati 29 Nisan 1330 (Osmanlı Devleti’nde Askeralmada Son Durum)” (MA thesis, Ankara Üniversitesi Türk İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü, 1987), 22.

<sup>178</sup> Beşikçi, “Balkan Harbi’nde Osmanlı Seferberliği,” 37; In 1911, up to a third of the active *Redif* battalions were deployed in Yemen to put down an insurrection. See Sabis, 22–23.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, 40–41; Mehmet Arslan, “Birinci Dünya Harbinde Çanakkale Cephesine Asker Alım İşlemleri ve Askerlerin Cepheye İntikalleri,” *Çanakkale Araştırmaları Türk Yılığ* 18 (2015): 225–227; Somewhat stricter conditions for *Redif* service had been set in April 1911. See Köksal, 19; For a detailed discussion of the *Redif* up to 1886, see Musa Çadırcı, *Tanzimat Sürecinde Türkiye – Askerlik* (Ankara: İmge Kitabevi, 2008), 41–55.

defined as an unprecedented level of resource and manpower mobilization and participation by the home front in the war effort.<sup>180</sup> Although more prevalent in the European arena of the war, the idea is also applicable to the Ottoman wartime experience, as the burdens faced by the home front increased and an ever-greater percentage of the military-age population was drafted for service. In order to efficiently organize the home front, the state had to have greater penetrating power at the local level, and the wartime period marked the era of greatest central control over local actors down to the village headmen in Ottoman history. This process in some ways had started with the last-ditch Unionist mobilization efforts of the final stage of the Balkan Wars and can be considered a natural extension, or, perhaps, the fateful endpoint of the Young Turk way of thinking that the military should wield considerable influence and should act as a guiding hand for society.<sup>181</sup>

The whole period between 1911 and 1918 was in fact a time of war. As one major conflict ended another began, sometimes overlapping one another as in the case of the First Balkan War and the Italo-Turkish War. Feroz Ahmad notes that “[a]nyone seeking an appropriate period in order to study the impact of war on society is unlikely to find one more suitable for this purpose than the decade 1908-18 in the history of the late Ottoman Empire” and that although “the Turks were no strangers to warfare,” this period was largely unprecedented.<sup>182</sup> In any case, this was a decade in which war and all kinds of military matters came forcefully to the forefront. This is also why it is perhaps the best time period to study in terms of the impact of conscription on Ottoman society.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Mehmet Beşikçi, “‘Topyekun Savaş’ Kavramı ve Son Dönem Osmanlı Harp Tarihi,” *Toplumsal Tarih* 198 (2010): 1.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-3.

<sup>182</sup> Ahmad, “War and Society under the Young Turks,” 265.

<sup>183</sup> Feroz Ahmad also argues that this decade, and especially the World War years, witnessed a social and economic renaissance under the CUP leadership. See Ahmad, “War and Society under the Young Turks,” 278; Şevket Pamuk mostly disagrees in terms of the economy, except for a degree of industrial import substitution during the war. See Pamuk, 149.

## **II. Era of Uncertainty for Religious Students, July 1908 – March 1909**

By the time of the declaration of the Constitution on 23 July 1908, religious students had already gone through their draft musters for that year. As had been the case for the past sixteen years since Sultan Abdulhamid II had suspended conscription examinations in 1892, they had shown up at the musters for military-age men, proven that they were registered at religious schools by showing the conscription committees the *şehadetname* documents provided by their teachers and gone home.<sup>184</sup>

As discussed in the previous chapter, in the period between 1892 and 1908, Abdulhamid had regularly urged civil and military officials in the provinces to act leniently towards the religious students and simply accept those who were able to produce the *şehadetnames*. Naturally, these documents could often be fake, obtained through bribery or nepotism or provided to “students” who were never present at their schools, so there was much grumbling coming from the military and civil officials in the provinces. According to one report prepared by the Ministry of War in July 1906 on account of complaints arriving at the Office of the Şeyhülislam, it had become common practice for company commanders (*bölük zabıtları*) in the provinces to suddenly show up at a *medrese*, post guards at its entrance to prevent anyone coming in, go through the chambers and register the students who were not there at the time to be drafted, while the normal process for the students was to appear before the official committee consisting of officers, civil officials and *medrese* representatives at the designated muster times.<sup>185</sup> The situation frequently led to military officers taking matters into their own hands, often exceeding legal limits. The complaints coming to Istanbul from provincial military and civil officials about spurious enrollment in the *medreses* to avoid

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<sup>184</sup> The musters for the year 1908 took place between 14 April and 13 May. See MMZC, Devre I, Cilt II, İnikat 39 (25 Şubat 1324 / 10 March 1909): 208-209.

<sup>185</sup> Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (hereafter BOA), BEO 3480 / 260936 (3 Muharrem 1327 / 25 January 1909).

military service gradually intensified, along with the problem of dodgy *şehadetnames* itself.<sup>186</sup> There were reportedly seventy *medreses* just in the Of district near Trabzon in 1908, and a vast majority of the military-age population of the district was registered as their students.<sup>187</sup> A great degree of frustration had been built up among military circles regarding the issue.

Shortly after the declaration of the Constitution, the military began demanding that the conscription examinations for religious students start again. On 25 August 1908, the *Hassa* Army command based in the capital urged the Ministry of War to make a formal request to the government regarding the matter, on the grounds that the current practice was causing the army great losses in personnel.<sup>188</sup> Acting upon this, the Minister of War Cemil Pasha prepared a detailed plan for the reinstatement of the conscription examinations and sent it to the Grand Vizierate and the Office of the Şeyhülislam for approval on 17 October 1908. In the plan, it was noted that the practice of indefinite exemption of religious students that had been going on since 1892 was in opposition to the “entirety of the revived Constitution” and had to be corrected. However, as it would cause significant problems to subject students who had been studying for more than one year to several different exams, it was suggested that every student only go through the exam for their current year of study. If they passed their exams, the sixth-year students would thereafter be permanently exempt while the younger ones had to take an exam every year until they passed their sixth.<sup>189</sup> The plan suggested that the examinations start in March 1909, especially considering that religious students had already officially received their exemption for 1908. Also included in the plan was a template

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<sup>186</sup> Istanbul deputy Mustafa Asım Efendi claimed that students were present at the *medreses* for only around two months every year. See MMZC, Devre I, Cilt II, İnikat 39 (25 Şubat 1324 / 10 March 1909): 209.

<sup>187</sup> Ali Birinci, “31 Mart Vakasının Bir Yorumu,” *Türkler*, 1st ed (Istanbul: Yeni Türkiye Yayınları, 2002), 197.

<sup>188</sup> BOA, BEO 3446 / 258441 (11 Zilkade 1326 / 5 December 1908); the *Hassa* (“Elite”) Army was tasked with guarding Istanbul and was supposed to be the best-equipped army command of the empire. As such, its commanders had greater influence compared to the commanders of other armies.

<sup>189</sup> After passing their final exam, the successful religious students were officially enrolled in the *Redif* branch. However, they were not actually expected to serve.

detailing the types of questions to be asked in the exams, which was prepared by the experts at the Ministry of War.<sup>190</sup>

The Office of the Şeyhülislam approved this plan on 24 October 1908, and the Grand Vizier asked the cabinet to make their final decision on the matter.<sup>191</sup> The cabinet members discussed and approved the proposal on 29 November. Yet, the cabinet decided not the use the template for questions prepared by the Ministry of War for the time being. Although the template would be included in the planned new conscription law, the examinations would be carried out using the topics laid out in the existing 1886 law until the new law came out.<sup>192</sup>

Although the conscription examinations were supposed to begin in March 1909, military officers tasked with recruitment did not waste any time in calling religious students to show up before conscription committees for examinations. Encouraged by deputies in the Parliament, some of them attempted to organize “unofficial” examinations in their home constituencies. In a parliamentary session dated 10 March 1909, Osman Fevzi Efendi of Bursa stated that he and “several of his friends” attempted to be pioneers in encouraging the military regarding this matter. However, he concluded that these examinations did not happen as they desired.<sup>193</sup> Although the examinations were “unofficial” (or could be considered extra-legal), they clearly received a significant degree of support from both some of the deputies in the parliament.

The officials who carried out such examinations branded them as a repeat of those for 1908. However, the musters for that year had already been concluded. Accordingly, religious students considered themselves exempt for the year, at least until the musters for 1909 in March and were very much vocal in their opposition to the unofficial policy. Complaints

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.; The questions in this template were supposedly harder than those described in the 1886 law. It is definitely interesting that the Ministry of War took upon itself to prepare a template of questions for religious students. See Birinci, 198.

<sup>191</sup> BOA, BEO 3441 / 258034 (1 Zilkade 1326 / 25 November 1908)

<sup>192</sup> BOA, BEO 3446 / 258441 (11 Zilkade 1326 / 5 December 1908); BOA, MV 122 / 10 (4 Zilkade 1326 / 28 November 1908); A copy of the cabinet decision can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>193</sup> MMZC, Devre I, Cilt II, İnikat 39 (25 Şubat 1324 / 10 March 1909): 211.



began pouring in from different regions of the empire. The most important appeal came from the Association of Religious Students (*Talebe-i Ulum Cemiyeti*). This organization had been formed soon after the Young Turk Revolution and was linked to the Association of Islamic Scholars (*Cemiyet-i İlmiyye-i İslamiyye*), which itself had links to the CUP.<sup>194</sup> According to its founding document, the chief aims of the Association of Religious Students were to help improve the quality of religious education in the Ottoman Empire and deal with problems faced by religious students.<sup>195</sup>

A petition written by the association on 27 January 1909 and addressed to the Grand Vizierate started off by stressing that the religious students were certainly aware of the need for conscription examinations since the religious establishment had suffered greatly since 1892 due to the indefinite exemption policy. While they were not opposed to the idea of examinations, the petitioners stated that it would be a great injustice for them to start now. This injustice would be quite similar to the “unjust acts that happened almost every day” during the absolutist reign of Abdulhamid. The petition then highlighted the suffering of the religious students who were constantly being harassed to show up for their exams and noted how bizarre it was that such things could happen “in a time of liberty.” It was claimed that the examinations essentially had no meaning, because *medrese* education had changed considerably since 1892 and the types of questions laid out in the 1886 conscription law no longer corresponded to the materials studied by pupils. Under these circumstances, no religious student would be able to pass the exam.<sup>196</sup> They at least needed some time to prepare. Accordingly, the association requested that the conscription examinations be postponed for a minimum of six months.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Edip Bukarlı, “31 Mart Vakası’na Cemiyet-i İlmiyye-i İslamiyye’nin Bakışı,” *Akademik Tarih ve Düşünce Dergisi* 8 (2016): 94–95.

<sup>195</sup> *Talebe-i Ulum Cemiyeti Nizamnamesi* (Istanbul: Necmi İstikbal Matbaası, 1335), 2–3.

<sup>196</sup> Birinci notes that in any examination at this time, only a few students were able to succeed. See Birinci, 198.

<sup>197</sup> BOA, BEO 3481 / 261065 (7 Muharrem 1327 / 29 January 1909); A copy of the petition can be found in the Appendix.

There were also many other petitions and appeals, sometimes written by small groups of individuals and sometimes by persons claiming to represent entire *medreses* or even districts. Three religious students named Hamdi, Mahmud and Müslim who were studying at a *medrese* in Tirana, Albania wrote a petition dated 7 January 1909 and addressed to the Ministry of Interior. In the petition, the trio stated that they had been summoned by the local military officials for their examinations three months before they were supposed to take place and complained that this treatment was clearly unjust.<sup>198</sup> Three Islamic scholars writing on behalf of the entire student bodies and faculty of five different *medreses* in Malatya laid out their arguments similar to the ones voiced by the Association of Religious Students. They particularly noted that religious students would not be able to pass the examinations due to the changes in *medrese* education since 1892 and asked the Grand Vizier for mercy.<sup>199</sup>

It is important to note that in some instances, students' protests sometimes escalated into violence in some instances. In January 1909, for instance, hundreds of religious students in Elazığ protesting the unofficial policy forced their way into the mayor's offices where the examinations were taking place. There, they declared that they would not take the exams and would prevent other students from doing so. The incident could only be contained with the arrival of gendarmerie troops. A letter written to the Interior Ministry on 5 February by several local notables headed by one Cünelizade Muhittin defended the actions of the protesters and blamed the situation on local military commanders.<sup>200</sup>

While the conscription examinations had been supposed to start in March 1909 and initial efforts at organizing them earlier had been "unofficial," it appears that, at least in Syria, examinations were fully endorsed by the Ministry of War and the Ministry of Interior. There, the whole effort to organize conscription examinations quickly ground to a halt in late January

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<sup>198</sup> BOA, DH.MKT 2705 / 45 (19 Zilhicce 1326 / 31 December 1908).

<sup>199</sup> BOA, BEO 3481 / 261065 (7 Muharrem 1327 / 29 January 1909); the five *medreses* were named Hamidiye, Şehabiye, Nuriye, Garbiye and Duhaniye.

<sup>200</sup> BOA, DH.MKT 2748 / 12 (2 Safer 1327 / 23 January 1909).

1909 after running into significant resistance by the religious students, the *medrese* teachers and local notables. When the Fifth Army command based in Damascus complained of the students' resistance in an official report, the Ministry of War responded by urging the commanders to disregard the local resentment and go through with the examinations.<sup>201</sup> It seems that the ministry was particularly eager for the examinations to happen in Syria because the Fifth Army, which was based in the province, was significantly understrength. When it appeared as if the resistance of the Syrian religious students was too much to overcome, the Minister of War ordered on 16 March that the understrength military units in the Zor district of Syria be brought up to full strength by drafting religious students who were not able to pass their exams in Adana.<sup>202</sup>

In another confirmation of that the examinations had pretty much taken on an official character by January 1909, at least in the Syrian context, Nazım Pasha, the governor of Syria, wrote to the Ministry of Interior on 25 January stating that the authorities in the province were doing their best to carry out the examinations despite the resistance. Another report dispatched to the Ministry of Interior by the governor's office on 11 March warned that the situation was getting worse and that the Syrian religious students had decided to appeal directly to the Parliament.<sup>203</sup> Clearly, the religious students and their supporters were desperately trying to make their voice heard, and it seems that the intensifying official support for the examinations had increased their desperation. A petition had been sent to the Interior Ministry on 13 February by Mehmed Rashid, the head of the Abdullah Pasha *Medrese* in Damascus, but had gone unheeded. In this petition, Mehmed Rashid called on the authorities "in the name of the Constitution" to postpone the examinations. He also noted that he was aware of the chaos in Istanbul, where religious students who had come from the provinces were also being pressured to take their exams. He highlighted the preposterousness of the

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<sup>201</sup> BOA, DH.MKT 2732 / 77 (16 Muharrem 1327 / 7 February 1909).

<sup>202</sup> BOA, DH.MKT 2771 / 46 (27 Safer 1327 / 20 March 1909).

<sup>203</sup> BOA, DH.MKT 1305 / 12 (9 Muharrem 1327 / 31 January 1909).

situation by pointing out that while this was going on, the native residents of Istanbul were still completely exempt from military service, even though this by itself was contrary to the second clause of the Constitution, which noted that the residents of the capital were not to be treated differently than the people of any other Ottoman province.<sup>204</sup>

We do not know if the examinations in other provinces were endorsed as clearly as in Syria by the ministries, since the Fifth Army in Syria had particular personnel problems, but this may very well be the case. Indeed, as Mehmed Rashid noted, the tension in the provinces was particularly amplified in Istanbul. One reason for the agitation of the religious students in the capital was, as also discussed by Mehmed Rashid, the markedly different treatment they faced compared to the native residents of the city. Those who were born in Istanbul were traditionally exempt from military service, and this privilege had been held up in the 1886 conscription law. At the time of the writing of the law, the Constitution had been suspended by the Sultan. It was now in effect, however, and it clearly stipulated that the residents of Istanbul were not to have any special privileges. The CUP did have plans for the extension of military service to Istanbul residents (and to non-Muslims), but in the current situation it seemed to the religious students in the capital that they were being unfairly targeted and facing discrimination.<sup>205</sup>

Newspapers, both those that were clearly opposed to the CUP like the “reactionary” *Volkan* published by Dervish Vahdeti and even some others that were loosely linked to the CUP like the *Beyan’ül Hak* published by the Association of Islamic Scholars, fanned the flames of discontent.<sup>206</sup> Editorials published in the *Volkan* frequently highlighted that, while normally 21-year-old males were drafted for military service every year, the authorities

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<sup>204</sup> BOA, DH.MKT 2761 / 74 (16 Safer 1327 / 9 March 1909); The second clause of the Constitution read as follows: “The capital of the Ottoman State is the city of Istanbul, and this city does not have any special privileges or exemptions compared to other Ottoman lands”; A copy of Mehmed Rashid’s petition can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>205</sup> MMZC, Devre I, Cilt II, İnikat 39 (25 Şubat 1324 / 10 March 1909): 210.

<sup>206</sup> In fact, the opinion pieces in the *Beyan’ül Hak* often criticized the state of the *medreses* and religious education in general. See Ramazan Boyacıoğlu, “Beyan’ül Hak’ta Ulema, Siyaset ve Medrese,” *Cumhuriyet Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* (1998): 67.

intended to subject all religious students between the ages of 21 and 26 to conscription examinations.<sup>207</sup> Mehmed Fatin Efendi, who was the chief columnist of the *Beyan'ül Hak*, criticized the decision to reinstitute the conscription examinations. He argued that while some form of examination and grading was necessary as part of religious education, the conscription examinations were not up to the task as they were first formulated with the objective of curbing the total number of religious students. Their main flaw was that they were conducted by the military while, in fact, what the situation required was regular, internal examinations within the *medreses*. Like the Association of Religious Students, he pointed out that religious students were sure to fail their exams since the subjects currently studied did not correspond to the topics laid out in the 1886 conscription law.<sup>208</sup>

The number of religious students in Istanbul just prior to the revolution of July 1908 was around 10,000 and thus they represented a significant political force in the capital.<sup>209</sup> It is unclear whether examinations were actually taking place in large numbers in Istanbul in January-February 1909. They were not happening en masse but taking place on a small scale. In any case, the religious students were very vocal in stating that they did not want to be subject to exams, either at that point or in March. Protests began to be organized, drawing in large numbers of students, members of the *ulema* and their supporters. Large demonstrations took place on 14 and 28 February 1909.<sup>210</sup> In both of these demonstrations, the speakers covered their demands with a layer of constitutional legitimacy by appealing to the Constitution. Their most important point was that it was unfair for Istanbul residents (who did not have any constitutional privileges) to be exempt from military service while there were

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<sup>207</sup> Birinci, 198.

<sup>208</sup> Boyacıoğlu, 69–70.

<sup>209</sup> Bein, 296; It is estimated that there were around 30,000 religious students in the provinces in early 1911, although this estimate is less certain and seems somewhat low, although it may also reflect the reduced number of students due to examinations. See MMZC, Devre I, Cilt V, İnikat 78 (30 Mart 1327 / 12 April 1911): 2278.

<sup>210</sup> *Serbesti* (3 Şubat 1324 / 16 February 1909); *Beyan'ül Hak*, no. 26 (13 Mart 1325 / 29 March 1909).

constant attempts to draft students. The students also noted that they did not have enough time to prepare for the examinations even if they were to happen in March or April.<sup>211</sup>

By the beginning of March 1909, the complaints pouring in from the provinces and the demonstrations in Istanbul convinced the authorities that the situation was untenable and that something had to be done. A joint commission consisting of deputies from the parliamentary committees (*encümen*) for military and educational affairs came together to advise the Parliament regarding the issue. In the official report presented to the Parliament on 7 March, the commission stated that it was not proper to summon religious students for examinations because they had already received their exemption for the year 1908. It also criticized the Ministry of War for being the main force behind these examinations and pointed out that while the extension of conscription to the entirety of the Ottoman population (essentially meaning Istanbul residents and non-Muslims) was also necessary by the articles of the Constitution, the ministry had decided to postpone those measures until 1909. As such, the insistence on subjecting religious students to examinations before the next year's musters started in April 1909 was unnecessary.<sup>212</sup> In any case, by the time the commission presented its proposal to the Parliament, there was only one month left until April. Yet, if it was approved, the examinations that had been carried out up to this point would apparently be annulled. Thus, students who had already been drafted would have one more chance to take the exam.<sup>213</sup>

Heated arguments broke out when the Parliament convened to discuss the commission's report on 10 March. While the discussion was started by Istanbul deputy Mustafa Asım Efendi describing the unfortunate events that took place in Istanbul in 1892 in order to explain the basis for Abdulhamid's indefinite exemption policy and arguing that it

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<sup>211</sup> Birinci, 198; Teoman Alpaslan, *31 Mart Ayaklanması* (Istanbul: Kamer Yayınları, 2015), 201; Sina Akşin, *Şariatçı Bir Ayaklanma: 31 Mart Olayı* (Ankara: İmge Kitabevi, 1994), 55.

<sup>212</sup> MMZC, Devre I, Cilt II, İnikat 39 (25 Şubat 1324 / 10 March 1909): 208-209.

<sup>213</sup> However, this is not entirely clear from the text of the commission's report.

was certainly fair for the examinations to officially start in April 1909, other members sympathetic to the CUP countered the conclusions of the commission's report with sensual tales of the corruption of *medreses* and the sheer incompetence of most of the religious students attending them. Mehmed Talat Bey of Ankara described visiting a *medrese* where of the 485 registered students, more than 250 could not read a single letter and claimed that while "worthy" students had already been studying hard for the exams since August and could succeed without any problems, those agitating for postponement were completely illiterate and could not be considered students anyway. However, even Mehmed Talat Bey conceded that it would be wrong, for instance, to quiz a sixth-year student on six years' worth of questions.<sup>214</sup>

On the side supporting the report, Osman Fevzi Efendi of Bursa pointed out that even the planned overhaul of the state treasury was postponed until 1909. Hasan Fehmi Efendi of Sinop noted that the 1886 conscription law was unjust anyway, having been prepared during Abdulhamid's reign, and ideally had to be replaced before subjecting religious students to examination. In the end, the Parliament voted to accept the commission's report, meaning that the conscription examinations could only legally start in April.<sup>215</sup> However, while the likely annulment of examinations that had been carried out beforehand can be taken as an important concession, this measure still granted the religious students only thirty more days or so to prepare and was taken as a half-hearted move. For the students who might have anticipated such a decision and had already noted that they did not have enough time to prepare even if the exams happened in March or April, this was clearly too little, too late.<sup>216</sup>

Meanwhile, military circles were quick in their backlash even to this half-measure. A scathing letter written by the officers of the Ereğli *Redif* battalion in Konya arrived at the

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<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 213; It is not recorded in the parliamentary minutes how many deputies voted to accept the resolution and how many voted against.

<sup>216</sup> Birinci, 198.

Parliament only days after the decision, and it was then passed to the Council for Interior Affairs (*Dahiliye Encümeni*). In their letter, Major Mustafa Galip, Captain Ahmed Şevki and a few other officers started off by stating that there were 700 religious students registered in their area of responsibility and that more than 500 of these were completely illiterate. Then, they claimed that the Parliament had been easily swayed by a handful of deputies who came from the ranks of the *ulema* (“*bir iki mebus hocaefendiler...*”) and that its decision showed favoritism towards the religious students that was even worse than examples seen during the Hamidian era.<sup>217</sup> The officers then compared the reluctance to serve on the part of the students to the supposed enthusiasm shown by non-Muslims for military service and noted that religious students should volunteer on their own to wage *jihad*. Not only did they not do that, but they constantly actively sought ways to avoid service. The officers claimed that the richer students were planning to avoid serving by paying the cash fee (*bedel-i nakdi*) ever since they heard news about examinations, and this by itself showed that they were not really studying. The authors of the letter said that most of the so-called students were actually uneducated men engaged in farming<sup>218</sup> and challenged them to live up to the name of student by taking the exam: “If they are (really) students, why are they so afraid? Let them take the exam. If they can pass, they should be exempted from military service.”<sup>219</sup> The officers continued their missive by relating stories of religious students misreading the title of the *Hürriyet* newspaper as *Şura-yı Ümmet* (another popular newspaper) and of how they believed folk hero Koroğlu to be an Islamic holy man. At the end of the letter it was argued that it was wrong for the authorities to accede to the demands of “everyone holding demonstrations” and that measures should be taken instead on the basis of the law.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> “*devr-i sabıkta alenen iltimas adeti meş’umesine rahmet okutacak derecede...*”

<sup>218</sup> “*hep çift ve çubuğu ile meşgul ve elleri çalışmaktan nasırlanmış okuması yazması olmayan fie-i cahiliye*”

<sup>219</sup> “*Madem ki talebedir, neden korkuyor? İmtihan olsun, verebilirse askerlikten affolunsun.*”

<sup>220</sup> MMZC, Devre I, Cilt II, İnikat 54 (26 Mart 1325 / 8 April 1909): 689-690.



While this letter caused shock and consternation in the Parliament, many deputies agreed that the officers had stated the truth.<sup>221</sup> The existence of this letter itself is perfect proof of the level of resentment towards religious students among military circles, which seemingly carried over from the Abdulhamid era. In effect, the decision of the Parliament in March 1909 had pleased neither the religious students, who kept claiming that they did not have enough time to study for the exams due to officially start in April 1909, nor the members of the military establishment. During the above-mentioned demonstration in the Beyazıt square on 28 February, the religious students had stated that a postponement of one or two months would not mean anything for them.<sup>222</sup> Military officers, on the other hand, often ignored the Parliament's decision and continued the conscription examinations unabated. Thereupon, on 27 March, the deputies summoned the Minister of War to explain why the army was acting contrary to the decision of the Parliament.<sup>223</sup> Coincidentally on the same day, Grand Vizier Hüseyin Hilmi Pasha ordered the minister that examinations be suspended for a whole year, meaning that they would start taking place only in April 1910.<sup>224</sup> The rationale for this decision was that since a new imperial decree (*irade-i seniye*) reversing Abdulhamid's last decree exempting students from service had not been issued, it would be better to not carry out the examinations until a new conscription law was prepared. The Ministry of War expected that the new law would be ready within the year.<sup>225</sup>

This latest decision added a new layer of chaos and confusion to the situation. Military commands complained that their units were understrength and asked the Ministry of War whether they should wait until the new conscription law or keep drafting religious students,

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 691.

<sup>222</sup> Birinci, 198.

<sup>223</sup> MMZC, Devre I, Cilt II, İnikat 47 (14 Mart 1325 / 27 March 1909): 511.

<sup>224</sup> MMZC, Devre I, Cilt II, İnikat 50 (18 March 1325 / 31 March 1909): 572; The War Minister sent a letter to the Parliament explaining the latest orders from the Grand Vizier and asking if he still had to show up. See Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> BOA, BEO 3560 / 266962 (10 Cemaziyelevvel 1327 / 2 June 1909); Birinci claims that a new *irade-i seniye* postponing exams for another year was also issued, but his only evidence is a newspaper column alluding to such a document. See Birinci, 198.

especially since the musters for the year 1909 were around the corner.<sup>226</sup> It is clear that military commanders were not happy about the Grand Vizier's decision, which may have been made based on the large volume of petitions arriving directly at his office. In any case, this last postponement would very soon be completely overridden by the events of the 31 March Incident.

### **III. The 31 March Incident and its Repercussions, April 1909 – October 1914**

The uprising known as the “31 March Incident” was a brief counter-revolution that took place in Istanbul between 13 and 24 April of 1909. It was a reaction against the growing influence of the CUP that brought together disaffected members of the military, the religious establishment and their supporters among the poor commoners of the capital. The nucleus of the revolt comprised the soldiers of the 4<sup>th</sup> Jaeger Battalion (*Avcı Taburu*) that were deployed from Salonika in order to restore order in the capital buffeted by political upheaval, protests, common crime and political assassinations. The rebels claimed that they were acting in the name of the *sharia* and professed their loyalty to Sultan Abdulhamid, calling for the rollback of many of the CUP's policies. The uprising was suppressed by the “Army of Action” (*Hareket Ordusu*) that was organized by the CUP in the Balkans and culminated in the deposition of Abdulhamid II on 27 April 1909.<sup>227</sup>

The 31 March Incident brought together many groups disaffected by recent events, all of whom were subsequently punished for their involvement in the uprising. Apart from specific individuals who were targeted and punished in the immediate aftermath, groups that were seen as suspect as a whole were punished through collective measures. Such measures targeted even porters who were working at Istanbul harbor<sup>228</sup> and homeless vagrants.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> BOA, BEO 3560 / 266962 (10 Cemaziyelevvel 1327 / 2 June 1909)

<sup>227</sup> Bukarlı, 93–94.

<sup>228</sup> Can Nacar, “20. Yüzyılın Başında İstanbul Limanı: Hamallar, Dersaadet Rıhtım Şirketi ve Osmanlı Hükümeti,” *Kebikeç* 41 (2016): 60-62.

Among those that participated in the uprising, religious students (along with the rest of the *ulema*), represent one of the more important groups. It is clear that their discontent regarding the issue of their military service was one of the significant factors that led to the events. As such, the uprising was also fateful in sealing the matter for good and taking away from religious students any hope of its resolution in their favor.<sup>230</sup> When the uprising started on 13 April 1909, religious students and other members of the *ulema* were among the first groups to swell the ranks of the mutineers from the Jaeger battalions. While hundreds of students joined the rebels marching towards the Parliament building as individuals or small groups, others organized themselves in their *medreses* and start to gather on their own in different locations to support the revolt. Hundreds of students from the Fatih and Beyazıt *medreses* assembled near the Ayasofya mosque close to the Parliament building with white, green and red banners.<sup>231</sup> They chanted slogans calling on the city residents to leave their homes and join the uprising and marched towards the Parliament.<sup>232</sup> Observers noted that the religious students swarming the Parliament looked like a white blanket surrounding the building, other students gathered on the steps of the Yeni Cami had the appearance of a large patch of daisies due to their headdress.<sup>233</sup>

While a vast number of religious students in Istanbul joined the revolt and were even implicated in a number of killings and other acts of violence, many others chose not to participate. The Association of Islamic Scholars and its junior organization, the Association of Religious Students urged everyone, including their own members, to stay away from the rebels. Two days after the start of the uprising, *Beyan'ül Hak* chastised the mutineers for

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<sup>229</sup> Nadir Özbek, "Beggars and Vagrants in Ottoman State Policy and Public Discourse, 1876 – 1914," *Middle Eastern Studies* 45 (2009): 791.

<sup>230</sup> For detailed analysis of the 31 March Incident, see Sina Akşin, *Şeriatçı Bir Ayaklanma: 31 Mart Olayı* (Ankara: İmge Kitabevi, 1994) or Necdet Aysal, "Örgütlenmeden Eyleme Geçiş: 31 Mart Olayı," *A.Ü. Türk İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü Atatürk Yolu Dergisi* 37-38 (2006): 15 – 53 or Siddık Yıldız, "Çıkışından Bastırılmasına Kadar 31 Mart İsyanı" (MA thesis, Gazi Üniversitesi, 2006).

<sup>231</sup> Bukarlı, 102.

<sup>232</sup> Alpaslan, 239.

<sup>233</sup> Akşin, *31 Mart*, 55; Birinci, 201.

revolting and stated that religious affairs and the *sharia* were strictly the realm of the *ulema* and not the soldiers. Moreover, the associations sent some of their loyal members among the mobs and into the barracks to convince religious students to leave the ranks of the revolt.<sup>234</sup>

We do not know what kind of response these calls received from religious students, especially considering that the students were probably aware of the associations' links to the CUP. In any case, immediately after the suppression of the revolt, the CUP started implementing repressive measures towards the religious students. They were already easy targets due to the military service issue, and the military establishment had only begrudgingly agreed to postpone their examinations. The Ottoman military attaché in Vienna, Hakkı Bey, represented a commonly-held view among the CUP when he expressed to members of the British press that religious students had joined the rebellion due to “the intention of the late government to make all classes, including the clergy, liable to military service.”<sup>235</sup>

Very soon after the arrival of the Army of Action in the capital and the end of violence, many religious students were arrested.<sup>236</sup> Although none of them was executed, at least nineteen religious students and a *medrese* teacher in Istanbul are recorded as having received various punishments for different transgressions.<sup>237</sup> For example, Hoca Rasim Efendi, who was an instructor at the Beyazıt *medrese*, was sentenced to hard labor (*kürek*) for life for having given a speech during the uprising.<sup>238</sup> Two students named Kilisli Anber and Hafız Halil received lifetime jail terms for having provoked other students to join the rebels.<sup>239</sup> One Sami Efendi was sentenced to fifteen years in jail for having previously served the Sultan as a spy, while two other students were given five and ten years for writing a

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<sup>234</sup> Bukarlı, 105–106.

<sup>235</sup> Bein, 301.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>237</sup> *Abdurrahman Şeref Efendi Tarihi*, ed. by Bayram Kodaman and Mehmet Ali Ünal (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1996), 209–255.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 219, 253.

provocative letter and carrying anti-constitutionalist propaganda materials, respectively.<sup>240</sup> Nine others were sentenced to exile up to seven years, mostly for the letters they wrote during the revolt or for signing a letter sent to the *Volkan* newspaper.<sup>241</sup> Finally, five religious students are recorded as having been deported to their hometowns for simply having participated in the uprising, presumably to be conscripted without going through an examination.<sup>242</sup>

A considerable number of students, however, were removed from the capital via conscription. The postponement granted only weeks ago by the Grand Vizier was disregarded completely by the Army of Action command, which subjected every military-age religious student it found in Istanbul to examination and sent those who could not pass to their home districts under armed guard to be drafted.<sup>243</sup> It is understandable that these examinations were meant to quickly punish the rebellious religious students as a group and curb their number in Istanbul and were probably not exactly fair. In any case, around 6,000 religious students were conscripted in the capital within a few months.<sup>244</sup> The examinations carried out by the Army of Action were approved and confirmed as official policy by the Ministry of War on 25 May, and it was instructed that examinations would also take place in other provinces as well.<sup>245</sup>

Religious students and the members of the *ulema* constituted one of the most important groups that took part in the 31 March Incident and were, accordingly, in the crosshairs of the state in its aftermath. However, many other groups that participated or that were simply suspect or undesirable in the eyes of the Unionists were also punished in various ways. This was accompanied by a general intensification of social control by the central state. The Young Turks had first risen to power in 1908 with a radical political program that would

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 245-250.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 218-226.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 244-246; Four religious students in Urfa are also recorded as having been exiled to Sivas for giving an anti-constitutionalist speech. See *ibid.*, 233.

<sup>243</sup> BOA, BEO 3560 / 266962 (10 Cemaziyelevvel 1327 / 2 June 1909).

<sup>244</sup> Bein, 297.

<sup>245</sup> BOA, BEO 3560 / 266962 (10 Cemaziyelevvel 1327 / 2 June 1909).

transform state-society relations towards greater central control and bureaucratization. For a while, they pushed this agenda mostly unsuccessfully, and this caused a wide range of resentment, which boiled over into the 31 March Incident. The suppression of the revolt gave the CUP a free hand not only to punish the participants, but to carry out its social program as well. The authorities moved quickly to clamp down on the porters working in the Istanbul harbor,<sup>246</sup> for example, and to pass a law that introduced strict controls on the beggars and the homeless in the city.<sup>247</sup> As mentioned before, conscription was legally introduced for non-Muslims and the residents of Istanbul. In addition to these, the Parliament passed a law that outlawed labor unions and made it more difficult for workers to go on strike.<sup>248</sup> All of these measures were carried out with great speed and were mostly complete by August 1909.

The treatment of religious students in terms of their military service would not see any relaxation after the turning point of the 31 March Incident. While the Association of Islamic Scholars complained that they were falsely accused of treason as a group and subjected to unjust treatment, claiming that the *ulema* and religious students were as patriotic as anyone else, their pleas largely fell on deaf ears.<sup>249</sup> The Parliament decided on 29 July 1909 that provincial examinations could take place at *Redif* battalion headquarters instead of at the regiment level, since the time it took for students to get to the regimental headquarters caused logistical difficulties. This was meant more to streamline the process rather than to ease the religious students' troubles.<sup>250</sup>

The authorities were now very keen on making sure that spurious enrollment in a *medrese* was not used as a method to avoid military service. Inspectors from the Ministry of War regularly looked into the cases of students and made sure they were drafted if they did

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<sup>246</sup> Nacar, 60-62.

<sup>247</sup> Özbek, "Beggars and Vagrants," 791.

<sup>248</sup> Ahmet Gündüz Ökçün, *Tatil-i Eşgal Kanunu 1909: Belgeler – Yorumlar* (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Yayınları, 1982).

<sup>249</sup> *Beyan 'ül Hak* 33 (29 Haziran 1325 / 12 July 1909).

<sup>250</sup> MMZC, Devre I, Cilt V, İnikat 120 (16 Temmuz 1325 / 29 July 1909): 588-589.

not pass the exam. One report prepared in November 1909, for example, noted that one Memun studying at the Fatih *medrese* passed his exam while his friend Refik failed and was sent to a unit in Tripolitania.<sup>251</sup> Another report from Lüleburgaz written in February 1911 contained the investigator's conclusion that a military-age male named Mustafaoğlu İbrahim who claimed to be registered at the İncirlikuyu *medrese* was in fact not present there and therefore could not be considered eligible for the examination.<sup>252</sup>

In the meantime, efforts towards the creation of a new conscription law continued. At a meeting of the cabinet in February 1910, it was decided that the new law was a necessity and had to be prepared soon.<sup>253</sup> Other meetings and official reports followed in June and December of the same year.<sup>254</sup> However, it seems that the process to draft the new conscription law was taken slowly due to the fact it was no longer urgent since a limited law had been put into effect in August 1909, soon after the 31 March Incident, making non-Muslims and the residents of Istanbul eligible for military service. In any case, the new conscription law would take until May 1914 to materialize.

At the same time, the state continued to crack down on attempts by religious students to avoid military service. The Ministry of Interior warned in a circular in February 1912 that the *şehadetname* documents signed by *medrese* faculty were not enough to prove that a person was a legitimate religious student. To be considered as such, the documents had to be investigated and approved by local authorities.<sup>255</sup> The *şehadetnames* were essentially witness statements by the faculty and had been considered adequate to render its holder exempt from military service between 1892 and 1908. The ministry warned that cases of *şehadetname* fraud were taking place in the provinces and that they had to be investigated very carefully for

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<sup>251</sup> The report was prepared on the request of the *Redif* regiment in Memun and Refik's home district, İskeçe in western Thrace. The officers in the regiment demanded to learn whether these two men were still studying in Istanbul; BOA, DH.EUM.THR 92 / 18 (29 Şevval 1327 / 13 November 1909).

<sup>252</sup> BOA, DH.EUM.THR 59 / 68 (26 Safer 1329 / 26 February 1911).

<sup>253</sup> BOA, MV 137 / 28 (6 Safer 1328 / 17 February 1910).

<sup>254</sup> BOA, MV 141 / 75 (18 Cemaziyevvel 1328 / 28 May 1910); BOA, BEO 3830 / 287196 (29 Zilkade 1328 / 2 December 1910).

<sup>255</sup> BOA, DH.HMŞ 10 / 21 (19 Rebiülevvel 1330 / 8 March 1912).

this reason.<sup>256</sup> However, at the same time, the conscription examination seems to have gained precedence over documentation regarding who was a genuine religious student, since it was no longer possible to avoid the exam, which could easily weed out fake students.<sup>257</sup> The tightening of the screws was mirrored by minor reorganizations of *medreses* in Istanbul and the provinces that took place from time to time. More often than not, these reorganizations resulted in a reduction in the total number of religious students. For example, in early 1910, the government put a cap on the total number of students a school could have and restructured the curriculum along the lines of the one used in the secular schools of the empire.<sup>258</sup>

All of this is not to say that the authorities turned a deaf ear to complaints put forward by religious students. A petition written to the Parliament by one Kürtzade Mehmed Rıfkı on 13 May 1911, for example, complained that military commanders in Düzce and Gerede were forcibly drafting religious students without allowing them to attend the exams on the basis that they were not always present at the *medreses*. Mehmed Rıfkı argued that while those who were drafted were indeed legitimate students, they had to go out to buy food or stand in for their fathers or brothers at the family-run shops from time to time.<sup>259</sup> This petition kicked off a long series of communications between different official branches of the state at the end of which it was decreed by the Council of State (*Şura-yı Devlet*) in January 1914 that it was not a problem for religious students to briefly work at their family-run shops or for married ones to go home to see their families at night as long as this did not interfere with their studies.<sup>260</sup> Similarly, the Interior Ministry decided in August 1912 that those religious students who

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<sup>256</sup> BOA, DH.HMŞ 22 / 105 (14 Rebiülevvel 1330 / 3 March 1912).

<sup>257</sup> MMZC, Devre I, Cilt VI, İnikat 136 (4 Ağustos 1325 / 17 August 1909): 505-507.

<sup>258</sup> Bein, 297; Adem Ölmez, "II. Meşrutiyet Devrinde Osmanlı Medreselerinde Reform Çabaları ve Merkezileşme," *Vakıflar Dergisi* 41 (2014): 132-133.

<sup>259</sup> BOA, DH.İD 22 / 16 (30 Rebiülevvel 1330 / 19 March 1912).

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid*; BOA, BEO 4267 / 319956 (12 Rebiülahir 1332 / 10 March 1914); BOA, DH.İD 21 / 17 (25 Zilkade 1330 / 5 November 1912); BOA, DH.İD 206 / 3 (16 Rebiülahir 1332 / 14 March 1914).



studied at *medreses* away from home could take their exams at their current location instead of going back to their home district.<sup>261</sup>

The Balkan Wars proved to be an important milestone for the issue of the military service of religious students, due to the scale of the conflict and the proximity of the frontlines to Istanbul, where there was still a very significant number of students. It was the first major military conflict in which religious students who could not pass their exams participated. All the 180 *medreses* in Istanbul - along with other schools - were temporarily closed for the duration of the conflict. Although this did not mean that the religious students who had gained exemptions had to serve in the army, most of them chose to volunteer. Meanwhile, some who were from the provinces decided to go home. This left around 2,000 religious students in the capital in 1913.<sup>262</sup> Nevertheless, some military officers still blamed the religious students for the weakness of the army. Mehmed Muhtar Pasha, who commanded the Third Army Corps fighting against the Bulgarians and who supposedly wrote his memoirs while under siege in Edirne in March 1913, blamed the poor state of the army partly on the chance accorded to religious students to avoid military service via examinations.<sup>263</sup>

The final conscription law of the empire came into effect on 12 May 1914. It was mainly a continuation of the state's efforts to keep reducing the extent of exemptions among religious students. In its Article 42, it stipulated that religious students could be exempted for four years in total after succeeding in four consecutive exams but still had to perform a "short-term service" (*hizmet-i maksure*) of one year after passing their fourth exam.<sup>264</sup> This meant that there was now no way for religious students to avoid military service altogether, and even

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<sup>261</sup> BOA, DH.İD 21 / 7 (17 Ramazan 1330 / 30 August 1912).

<sup>262</sup> Mustafa Ergün, "II. Meşrutiyet Döneminde Medreselerin Durumu ve Islah Çalışmaları," *A. Ü. Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Dergisi* 1-2 (1982): 77; It can be a matter of speculation whether these religious students truly "volunteer" or if they were somehow coerced to do so.

<sup>263</sup> Mehmed Muhtar Pasha also blamed many other things: infrastructural problems, lack of modern weapons, poor military training, politics within the military, incompetent officers and, even, bad weather. See Ginio, 170.

<sup>264</sup> Köksal, 82. This one-year service truly fit the "short-term" description when one considers that the 1914 law defined military service as 25 years for the infantry, 20 years for the gendarmerie and various auxiliary branches and 17 years for the navy. See *ibid.*, 22.

those who were successful in their examinations would have to serve for a period of time. Moreover, shortly before the new conscription law, the government published the Regulation on the Reform of Religious Schools (*Islah-ı Medaris Nizamnamesi*). This regulation dated March 1914 grouped all the *medreses* in Istanbul together under a single organization under direct state control, and all the *medreses* now had to have directors (*müdür*) assigned by the Ministry of Education. This move reflected another tightening of controls on religious students. The state attempted, mostly unsuccessfully, to implement the same policy in the provinces in 1917.<sup>265</sup>

The new conscription law precipitated a new wave of petitions from religious students asking that they be exempted from service altogether. In a report prepared for the Office of the Grand Vizier on 3 July 1914, on the eve of the First World War, the Interior Ministry argued that one of the principal causes of the Ottoman defeat in the Balkan Wars was the continued exemption of religious students and that, as a result, no relaxation was possible regarding this matter. It was also noted that the state had to act this way despite the constant pleas and petitions that kept arriving at the ministry from religious students.<sup>266</sup> In any case, the general mobilization of the Ottoman army that was going to start on 2 August would soon render any further pleas inconsequential.

#### **IV. The Case of Kırçovalı Hafız Recep**

During this turbulent era starting with 1908, the cases of individual religious students, often spurred by petitions and complaints, could cause disagreements between different branches of the state apparatus that spawned copious amounts of correspondence and took months and sometimes years to be resolved, often only with the intervention of the highest levels of the state. Such incidents highlight how seriously the issue of the military service of

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<sup>265</sup> Ölmez, 135–137.

<sup>266</sup> BOA, DH.HMŞ 23 / 105 (21 Şevval 1332 / 12 September 1914).

religious students was taken by the authorities after July 1908 as well as the attention paid to petitions in this era. Such episodes are also significant for this thesis in that they demonstrate that the tensions over conscription between different branches of the state that existed during the later stages of Abdulhamid's reign continued into the Second Constitutional Era.

One such high-profile case involved a religious student named Recep from the Kırçova (Karecova) district of Manastır province. Known as Hafız Recep thanks to his memorization of the Quran and the son of a *medrese* teacher named Ali, Recep was registered as a student at his father's school when he was drafted into the army along with two of his friends in late 1907.<sup>267</sup> Even though religious students could easily avoid military service during Abdulhamid's reign by simply showing up at the draft musters with their *şehadetname* documents, these three had not presented themselves at the year's muster. As a result, the local military authorities belonging to the Third Army decided that they were not genuine religious students and drafted them. They were not the only ones to be drafted either, as the *Redif* officers in Kırçova ordered around 150 religious students to be drafted during that muster due to various reasons.<sup>268</sup>

Subsequently, petitions were written on the behalf of Recep and his friends to the Ministry of War in early 1908. Attached to the petitions were witness statements written by the faculty members of the *medrese* that confirmed Recep and his friends were indeed students there. Consequently, the ministry decided that the three were indeed religious students and were to be released back to civilian life. They left their barracks and went back to being religious students. However, their luck was short-lived as the Third Army command based in Manastır reported to the ministry that the trio was almost never present at their *medrese*. Thereupon, the ministry dispatched several military officers and one civil servant

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<sup>267</sup> The other two men were called Davud and Abdülkadir.

<sup>268</sup> MMZC, Devre I, Cilt VI, İnikat 136 (4 Ağustos 1325 / 17 August 1909): 505; the reasons why the rest of the 150 students were drafted are not mentioned but presumably a number of them might also have not shown up at the draft musters as required.

from Salonika to Kırçova to investigate their situation. The investigators reported that Recep and his friends were working as “butchers and grocers” and that they could not be considered religious students. Upon this report, they were drafted again in May 1908. Never to be daunted, however, the three men wrote another protest petition to the Ministry of War.<sup>269</sup> In response, the ministry referred their case to the governor of Manastır, and he confirmed the prior conclusion of the investigators from Salonika.<sup>270</sup>

After the governor’s decision, the case was closed for a while. However, sensing an opportunity in the declaration of the Constitution in July 1908, Recep and his friends, who were then in the ranks of the army, laid out their case directly to the Parliament. The Parliament, in turn, referred the case both to the Ministry of War and to the Office of the Şeyhülislam. While the ministry gave support to the investigators’ decision, the Office of the Şeyhülislam reached the opposite conclusion.<sup>271</sup> To resolve this stalemate, the Parliament set up a commission of experts that would investigate the issue. Finishing its work in August 1909, the commission reported that the Office of the Şeyhülislam was better equipped to determine whether someone was a genuine religious student or not.<sup>272</sup>

After the commission’s report, the issue came before the general assembly of the Parliament on 17 August for the final decision. The deputies who took the stand made various arguments about the legality of the situation and offered potential solutions. Ömer Feyzi Efendi of Karahisar-ı Şarki, for instance, argued that since conscription examinations were in force now, there was no reason for Recep and his two friends not to be considered religious students. If they were not genuine students, they would not be able to pass the examinations anyway. Mustafa Sabri Efendi of Tokat pointed out that since the military service status of the students of imperial schools were within the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, the

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<sup>269</sup> The parliamentary minutes do not explain what the men said in this petition.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 505–506.

<sup>271</sup> It is not known what evidence either side had for their conclusions. The deputies themselves wondered this during the parliamentary session of 17 August.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 505.

status of religious students should be determined by the Office of the Şeyhülislam and not the Ministry of War. Zeynelabidin Efendi of Konya stated that the whole process violated legal norms anyway. If the Ministry of War thought that Recep and his two friends were not genuine religious students, then it should have first prosecuted the *medrese* teachers who had written statements confirming the trio to be students. The ministry had not done that but had simply ordered Recep and the others to be drafted. However, the priority should have lain in penalizing faulty *medrese* faculty who made false claims.<sup>273</sup>

In the end, the Parliament decided that it could not conclusively handle the case and referred it to the Council of State. The Council of State made its decision on 9 February 1910. By that point, Recep and his friends had served in the army for almost two years in total. The report by the Council of State started off by noting that it could not be conclusively determined whether the three men were religious students or not due to the ongoing disagreement between the Ministry of War and the Office of the Şeyhülislam. However, the Council still decreed that they were to be considered students since, in any case, the conscription examinations would lay bare the truth of their claims. Thus ends the long saga of Kırçovalı Hafız Recep and his friends, and there is nothing in the official documents that says whether they passed their exams in the end or not.<sup>274</sup>

This somewhat extraordinary case definitely shows the lengths the branches of the Ottoman state could go to in order to resolve individual situations. It also shows what a serious matter the issue of the religious students constituted for the military establishment. Interestingly, the story begins in the last years of Abdulhamid's reign, during which the Sultan was frequently instructing provincial military and civil officials not to pressure religious students regarding their military service. However, Recep and his friends, along with many others in the district, were in fact drafted by the military at the time. This can be taken

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 505–507.

<sup>274</sup> BOA, BEO 3702 / 277646 (3 Safer 1328 / 14 February 1910); BOA, ŞD 2789 / 7 (24 Şaban 1327 / 10 September 1909); BOA, ŞD 3066 / 13 (19 Recep 1328 / 27 July 1910).

to show that in the last years of his regime, Abdulhamid's iron grip was weakening and that provincial officials opposed to the indefinite exemption of the religious students were slowly gaining the upper hand. Also in a unique twist, while for the vast majority of religious students the Young Turk Revolution meant a complete reversal of their fortunes, Recep and his friends actually gained the opportunity to potentially avoid military service thanks to the declaration of the Constitution.

## **V. Conclusion**

The issue of the military service of religious students after July 1908 was intricately linked to the waves of political upheaval that emanated throughout the Ottoman Empire and also connected to the privileges accorded to them earlier by Abdulhamid. After the Young Turk Revolution, many commentators coming from the ranks of the *ulema* claimed that even though it appeared as if the Sultan favored the religious students with his indefinite exemption policy between 1892 and 1908, he was the one that, alternatively, carried out the "first assault" against religious education or dealt the "final bitter blow" to an already deteriorating institution.<sup>275</sup> However, these commentators were clearly seeking to cover their position with legitimacy in the post-Hamidian era. There is nothing to suggest that the privilege of indefinite exemption was somehow resented by the religious students.

One has to look at the issue through the lens of the peculiarities of the Abdulhamid regime. It had a specific style of rule (*idare-i maslahat*), which combined repressive measures with efforts meant to curry favor with certain groups such as nomadic tribes and even the urban poor of the capital as mentioned in the introductory chapter and co-opt them in order to expand the support base of the regime. The indefinite exemption policy itself may appear to be and may in fact have started as a haphazard response to an ill-advised plan to reduce the

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<sup>275</sup> Boyacıoğlu, 17; Ergün, 81.

number of religious students in the capital, but it is certainly consistent with Abdulhamid's style and policies in the 1890s. The religious students were one of the groups that the regime chose to favor and extend privileges in exchange for support. Those who claimed that Abdulhamid had inflicted harm on the *ulema* were those who spoke after the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, when it was in their interest to make such claims. In fact, religious students themselves do not seem unhappy about the exemption policy at any point, although they certainly started protesting loudly as soon as it was scrapped by the CUP.

While various trends seen in the Hamidian period continued into the Second Constitutional Era, others were dramatically reversed. The resentment felt by officials in the provinces regarding conscription and the disagreements that broke out between different branches of the state persisted after the Young Turk Revolution. This is demonstrated, for instance, by the letter written by the commanders of the Ereğli *Redif* battalion and the case of Kırçovalı Hafız Recep. On the other hand, the Abdulhamid regime's strategy of presenting himself as the personal benefactor of certain groups and offering concessions to them was certainly scrapped, particularly after the 31 March Incident, and replaced by greater social control wielded by an impersonal central state bureaucracy. What happened to the religious students cannot be scrutinized in a vacuum and should instead be treated as part of a wider trend in Ottoman state-society relations in this period.

In any case, Abdulhamid's policies caused widespread distrust towards the religious students and the entirety of religious education as a whole among the military establishment, and this would have decidedly negative consequences for the students after the Young Turks seized power. Their participation in the 31 March Incident can be taken as an understandable reaction to the unfair situation they were left to face in the aftermath of the revolution of July 1908, but that participation resulted in the direct opposite of its desired effect after the uprising was suppressed. Despite (or perhaps, as part of) efforts and plans by the state to

reform the *medreses*, the institution kept decreasing in size and influence after 1909. The number of religious students in Istanbul was down to a mere 500 in early 1918.<sup>276</sup> The death knell for them had in fact sounded long before their formal abolition under the Republic in 1924.



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<sup>276</sup> Bein, 297.



## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

This study has focused on the issue of religious students' military service in the late Ottoman Empire, starting with the initial institution of conscription after the *Tanzimat* decree of 1839 and ending with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. In this time period, and in particular from 1892 onwards, the question of exemption for religious students became a flashpoint issue that reverberated far beyond the realm of the military. This took place as ruling elites sought to use conscription in general and exemption from service in particular as a socio-political tool and as the religious students themselves fought long and hard as much as they could for this privilege.

Although the narrative starts with the *Tanzimat* decree, 1892 is the main breaking point of the issue because in that year, as discussed in Chapter 2, Sultan Abdulhamid II decided to extend indefinite exemption to all religious students. As the exemption policy was extended year after year, what had started as a damage control measure in response to a public outcry turned into an integral part of a concerted strategy to increase popular support for the regime. After 1892, religious students did not have to undergo conscription examinations or perform military service for sixteen years. This caused significant tension between the civil and military officials in the provinces, for whom the policy caused significant administrative problems, and the center represented by the Sultan, whose main concern was ensuring the continued support of the religious students and the members of the *ulema*.

The fact that the indefinite exemption policy had turned into a flashpoint issue is demonstrated by the speed with which the new ruling elite moved to reinstitute conscription examinations after the Young Turk Revolution of July 1908. As discussed in Chapter 3, however, religious students were not to accept this new measure, and they fought back with petitions, opinion pieces in newspapers, demonstrations and physical resistance. This reaction

was strong enough to force the new regime to offer concessions to the students. However, these concessions were not enough due to their half-hearted nature, and they were completely reversed after tensions reached the boiling point with the 31 March Incident in April 1909. After the suppression of the uprising, the new ruling elites of the empire would immediately reinstitute the conscription examinations and keep the religious students (among other social groups) under tight control through conscription.

This study makes a number of general conclusions. First, the indefinite exemption policy that first materialized in 1892 clearly fit Abdulhamid II's ruling strategy and demonstrates the nature of Ottoman state-society relations in that era. The Sultan was wary about the danger of losing his throne and viewed the large numbers of religious students in the imperial capital as a potentially destabilizing element, particularly in light of the role that they had played during the overthrow of Abdulaziz in 1876. Motivated by these security concerns, he moved in September 1892 to deport religious students from the provinces back to their hometowns. The move backfired and caused a negative public reaction that was significant enough to prompt the Sultan to reconsider in order to preserve his image. He decided to cancel the measure and also suspend the conscription examinations of the students for a year via an imperial decree. This boosted his popularity among the religious students and the *ulema*. As the 1890s wore on, the difficulties that the regime found itself in led to the renewal of the indefinite exemption policy for fifteen more years, in an attempt to find a crucial ally for the Sultan in the religious students, whose numbers also kept increasing thanks to the exemption. Both the initial deportation in September 1892 out of security concerns and the subsequent reformulation of the immediate response to the public outcry into a long-term policy meant to co-opt the religious students into supporting the regime are manifestations of key characteristics of the Hamidian era.

Second, the 31 March Incident is a key turning point in terms of Ottoman state-society relations, and this can also be seen through the lens of the conscription of religious students. The Young Turks rose to power in July 1908 with a sociopolitical program that was much more radical than the Hamidian regime. Abdulhamid II had generally sought to shore up his regime by trying not to alienate various social groups and co-opting their support, be they religious students, nomadic tribes or the workers and the poor people of Istanbul. The Young Turks, on the other hand, wanted to bring society under their strict control. Their attempts to do so, however, were less than successful in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. As a major example, the reintroduction of conscription examinations triggered strong resistance among religious students all over the empire. In these circumstances, the suppression of the uprising in April 1909 and the subsequent declaration of martial law provided the ruling elite with the opportunity they needed to implement their social vision. As the Hamidian *idare-i maslahat* policies were completely reversed, the religious students found themselves under strict state control and their avenues of resistance greatly curtailed.

Third, the religious students and their supporters among the *ulema* were never passive and voiceless actors. They were quite vocal in protecting the privilege granted to them by Abdulhamid II against what they saw as abusive behavior by provincial officials between 1892 and 1908. When this privilege was threatened in the aftermath of the Young Turk Revolution, they showed their agency through mass demonstrations and outbreaks of violence, as well as more petitions. Their participation in the 31 March Incident can be taken as the final and most desperate step in their challenge against the stripping of their exemption right. Even after any potential for violent action was thoroughly suppressed and the military service of religious students was brought under tight scrutiny after 1909, they continued to write petitions to voice their demands, even right before the general mobilization for the First World War started in the summer of 1914.

Fourth, the state that the religious students interacted with was not a homogenous and unitary entity. The different elements that made up the Ottoman state could get locked in disagreements and clashes with each other, pursue their own agenda at the expense of others and even operate beyond the confines of legality at times. This occurred both during the reign of Abdulhamid II and in the Second Constitutional Era, although it manifested in different ways. In the Hamidian era, the principal tension was between the core of the regime centered around the Yıldız Palace in the imperial capital and the military and civil officials in the provinces. While these officials could not criticize the Sultan's policy openly, they often complained about the administrative and bureaucratic chaos caused because of it. While they were likely motivated by the mundane difficulties they encountered in filling out the personnel quotas of the local army units and regulating the *medreses*, they generally laid out their complaints in terms of the injustice and the "evil" that resulted from the exemption. In response, the Sultan personally intervened on behalf of his protégés and sternly warned provincial officials not to put pressure on the religious students.

Problems between different branches of the state continued after the Young Turks rose to power. In this period, these problems mostly happened in the form of different state entities disagreeing with or going against the wishes of each other. As discussed in Chapter 3, parliamentary deputies initially sought to carry out "unofficial" conscription examinations in their home provinces as part of their own political agenda, despite there being no legal basis for this. Likewise, in the first months of 1909, the military establishment saw fit to ignore a decision by the Parliament to postpone the conscription examinations of religious students and was fully supported by the Ministry of War itself in this. The ministry was motivated to do so by the dire personnel difficulties of the army. The situation resulted in the Minister of War being summoned by the Parliament to answer for himself just before the outbreak of the 31 March Incident. Similarly, different branches of the state could often get locked into long

bouts of disagreement on more trivial matters such whether someone could be considered a genuine religious student or not, as demonstrated by the case study of Kırçovalı Hafız Recep in Chapter 3. In that case, the Ministry of War and the Office of the Şeyhülislam could not agree on whether three particular men were to considered religious students or not for almost two years, and the issue had to be arbitrated in the end by the Council of State (*Şura-yı Devlet*).

This study has attempted to situate the issues caused by the conscription of religious students in the wider context of Ottoman state-society relations. However, there is still much room for research. The present study invites researchers to extend the scholarship on both the Ottoman conscription system and state-society relations by looking at how the exemption question played out for other social groups, as well as geographical areas. Another potential avenue can be an integration of the military service issue into a detailed study of the evolution of the Ottoman religious education system as a whole. It is my opinion that this study only begins to scratch the surface in what could provide a wealth of insight for late Ottoman history.

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APPENDIX

مجلس وکلاء مذکورہ بالا کے مخصوص منسلک و ترقی کے سبب سے

10

خلد کشتی	ماضی جو لٹا نہ ذوات قلمک اساری	مجلس مذکورہ
مجلس کثافتی		تاریخ
بیت		بیت
		۵۰ دیکھو
<p>مجلس مذکورہ بالا کے مخصوص منسلک و ترقی کے سبب سے</p> <p>مجلس مذکورہ بالا کے مخصوص منسلک و ترقی کے سبب سے</p> <p>مجلس مذکورہ بالا کے مخصوص منسلک و ترقی کے سبب سے</p>		
تاریخ مجلس	تاریخ مجلس	تاریخ مجلس
بیت	بیت	بیت
<p style="font-size: 1.2em;">موضوع مالی</p> <p>مجلس مذکورہ بالا کے مخصوص منسلک و ترقی کے سبب سے</p> <p>مجلس مذکورہ بالا کے مخصوص منسلک و ترقی کے سبب سے</p> <p>مجلس مذکورہ بالا کے مخصوص منسلک و ترقی کے سبب سے</p>		
<p style="font-size: 1.2em;">مکاتیب</p> <p>مجلس مذکورہ بالا کے مخصوص منسلک و ترقی کے سبب سے</p> <p>مجلس مذکورہ بالا کے مخصوص منسلک و ترقی کے سبب سے</p> <p>مجلس مذکورہ بالا کے مخصوص منسلک و ترقی کے سبب سے</p>		
<p>مجلس مذکورہ بالا کے مخصوص منسلک و ترقی کے سبب سے</p> <p>مجلس مذکورہ بالا کے مخصوص منسلک و ترقی کے سبب سے</p> <p>مجلس مذکورہ بالا کے مخصوص منسلک و ترقی کے سبب سے</p>		
تاریخ	تاریخ	تاریخ
بیت	بیت	بیت

Cabinet decision regarding the reinstatement of conscription examinations in November 1908  
(BOA, MV. 122 / 10 – 4 Zilkade 1326 / 28 November 1908)



زورنال نومروسی		١٣٢٧ ١٣٢٧ TELEGRAMME L'état n'accepte aucuns responsabilités à raison du service de la télégraphie				متوسط مرکز	
سوق نومروسی	٢٨٩					مخرج مرکزی	١٤
ارسال تاریخی						کشیده ایدن مأمور	
ارسال ساعتی						اخذ ایدن مأمور	
سوق مأموری						اخذ تاریخی وساعتی	
کلمات	١٧٩	غروب	معلی تاریخی	ساعت	دقیقه	روز و یا شب	طریق
N° du dépôt	١٧٩	Group	Date du dépôt	Heures	Minutes	Matin ou Soir	Voies

DH.MKT 2761/74

صد لفظیہ



جریہ لفظیہ شد امری اوزرینہ ایلی یوز فقارہ فقوز تولدیلرندن اجباراً  
 طبعاً علومہ اجرای امتحانی خصوصاً جهت عدم دن وقوعیولہ اصرار دور  
 عدالت و صورتیہ منافعه چونکہ ایلی یوز فقارہ فقوز تولدیلرندن  
 اصحابہ لربی اخذ آید کلرندن اتصال اولادہ طبعیہ امتحانہ نہ محال قلمو  
 و اوج یوز لیدی لیبہ و غیرین وقتن برسن اولہ بان اولوب دیک برار اولہ  
 و یا مجلس معبوتاندن مقصدہ بر قانوننامہ ایل نقشہ ایل طبعیہ ایل لیبہ  
 نفعات جدیدہ نہ ماقبلہ شمول اول طبعیہ بنا طبعیہ نہ امتحانن معفو  
 طبعیہ و نہ بلیدن شر اول طبعیہ اخذ حکم قانون مدنیہ توفیقاً اوج یوز لیدی  
 الی قرعیدن اجباراً اجرای امتحانہ عدالتن دطبعیہ استاجولہ اھالیسندن  
 سابقہ تحماتہ دن فرقی اول طبعیہ قانون اساسیہ ایلی ماردن مصلح اول طبعیہ  
 حالہ شد فقوز دن اولادہ طبعیہ علوم اصواتن امتحانن دعوتن اول  
 داعیدہ لیبہ ایلیں اصوات و عدالتن اصواتن لیبہ عدالتن و اصواتن  
 توفیقاً فقوزہ اتصالن مصلحہ اصواتن و عدالتن اصواتن لیبہ نامہ اصواتن  
 جمہورہ بانجامہ اصواتن و عدالتن اصواتن لیبہ نامہ اصواتن

Petition written by Mehmed Rashid, the head of the Abdullah Pasha medrese in Damascus (BOA, DH.MKT. 2761 / 74 – 16 Safer 1327 / 9 March 1909)