Religious Prerogatives and Policing the Poor in Two Ottoman Contexts

In autumn 1844, a group of thirteen people found themselves among numerous peasants being sent back to their home villages. These thirteen people, and many of the other peasants being transported, had been caught begging in Cairo. Chained together with other peasants in groups of two and loaded onto a boat that made its way up the Nile, they were headed back to work the land. These thirteen beggars did not have in their hands the necessary tadhkira (permission letters allowing peasants to be out of their home villages) and were considered to be sturdy, or able to work (qadir ‘ala iktisab). But other beggars apprehended in the streets of Cairo at this same juncture (those from the countryside as well as people from the city), found themselves facing a different fate. After a medical examination at the police station where doctors determined that they were deserving of care, they were sent on to the state-run shelter of Mahall al-Fuqara’. Documents recounting the admission of the poor into this shelter noted that each beggar was to be provided with rations and care “out of the charity of the Khedive.” Beggars could be released from the shelter only if someone was able to vouch for their good conduct and future abstinence from begging. The exile of peasants caught begging in Cairo and the internment of others into this state-run shelter were in compliance with newly introduced prohibitions on begging in Cairo.¹

¹ For the thirteen beggars, see the Dabtiyya (police) series, L 2/1/1/15/3, October 17, 1844, Egyptian National Archives, Cairo. Joseph Hekekyan, a British-trained engineer employed by Egypt’s ruler Muhammad Ali to oversee numerous industrial projects, described the methods of transporting peasants back to their villages in Hekekyan Papers, 1843, II, fol. 120, British Museum, London. Accounts of beggars being admitted into the shelter of Mahall al-Fuqara’ (“Place of the Poor”) and family members seeking to gain their release are found in the Dabtiyya series of the Egyptian National Archives, for example, L 2/1/1/23/1, October 9, 1844; L 2/1/1/17/22, September 28, 1844. The term khedive was a title that Egypt’s governors began to utilize in the nineteenth century.
On the day when the Darülaceze shelter in Istanbul celebrated its official opening in 1896, it already housed 240 persons (with a capacity for 800), including poor women formerly in the care of the Women’s Hospital (the Nisa Hastanesi), women and children from a home for widows, and sick and invalid beggars removed from the streets of the city. Residents who entered this institution had to pass under a statement praising Sultan Abdul Hamid II, the shelter’s founder, for establishing a structure in which “the grief-stricken cripple” would receive abundant care.2

The first full-scale prohibitions on begging were decreed in Istanbul during the 1880s. The purposes of the Darülaceze were multiple. In addition to serving as a shelter, it had facilities for vocational training, an orphanage, and a hospital. Beggars were admitted to this shelter after a thorough investigation confirming that they had no one to provide for them and were unable to work. Those with relatives who could vouch for their good conduct were released into their care. But if they were caught begging again, they were to be detained in the shelter. Sturdy males identified as vagrants were put to work.3

A fifty-year time span and the Mediterranean Sea separate the above accounts of Cairo and Istanbul. What explains the particular policies pursued by officials in these two urban areas? What insights might the analysis of such strictures on the public presence of the poor offer? To what extent were policies of poor relief grounded in religious imperatives, and how did, conversely, practices initiated in the nineteenth century represent new secular attitudes toward the poor and their public visibility? This article argues that the two sets of strategies initiated in mid-nineteenth-century Cairo and late-nineteenth-century Istanbul were strikingly similar. However, they took place at different times due to the economic and demographic circumstances of each city. Both strategies represent, at their core, an Islamic ideology that the deserving poor merited care. They both also demonstrate that the ruler (the Egyptian khedive in one case and the Ottoman sultan in the other) was the source of this care. Finally, both approaches to

3 The appendix of Yıldırım, _Istanbul Darülaceze_, 363–365, includes the rules and regulations for admittance to Darülaceze, as well as details about the expulsion of the nonresident sturdy poor from Istanbul.
poor relief illustrate how, with guidance from religious discourses and prerogatives, the police and modern institutions were utilized to regulate the public presence of the poor and provide them with care.

PROVISIONS FOR THE POOR Assistance to the poor is an obligation within Islam. In an ideal world, people freely give alms to the needy, provide for their own kin, and help their less-fortunate neighbors. But because these forms of relief are not always available nor always adequate, Islamic society also had institutions funded through religious endowments to serve as a safety net. Such institutions provided food for the poor—as in the case of soup kitchens. Facilities such as mosques, shelters, and sufí lodges also gave short-term refuge to the desperately needy. For the most part, as Peirce and other scholars have shown, larger imperially funded mosques and their accompanying institutions (hospitals, schools, and soup kitchens) were placed in administratively and religiously important cities. Hence, except for any officially subsidized sufí lodges, rural areas and smaller villages and towns were entirely dependent upon local largess and familial and communal forms of aid.4

Cairo, like Istanbul, was important enough to have imperially funded religious endowments. As a locus of power from the Fatimid (969–1171) era onward, it saw the construction of many important mosque complexes. The Al-Azhar mosque, for example, served as a distribution point for food. Students studying at Al-Azhar university, religious scholars, and the families of people affiliated with the university received certain allotments of food on a regular basis well into the nineteenth century. Other structures, created as endowments in the Mamluk era (1250–1517), like Al-Azhar, continued to provide assistance long after their original founders had passed away. The mosque complex of Qalawun, a Mamluk sultan of the thirteenth century, another example of an imperially funded religious endowment, contained a hospital, the

Maristan, that continued to serve the sick and needy until the early nineteenth century. Parts of it functioned as health clinics in the twentieth century.\(^5\)

The structures established as religious endowments gave sustenance to the needy and medical attention to the desperately ill. Other actions, such as royalty’s distribution of food and money on special occasions, though ephemeral, brought prestige to the benefactors and ensured some relief for the needy. As Sabra shows, during emergencies (such as famines and other forms of dearth), rulers of Mamluk Egypt found ways to distribute food to those who needed it. The poor-relief services available until the nineteenth century, however, were stop-gap measures, intended to provide a modicum of food or refuge for a short time. Furthermore, they were decentralized.\(^6\)

Istanbul, as the Ottoman capital, was a central showcase of benevolence. Mosques, endowed by rulers, members of their families, and important statesmen, graced (and still grace) the hills overlooking the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus Straits. Many of the prominent mosques have hospitals, schools, and soup kitchens. Evliya, a seventeenth-century Ottoman traveler, remarked on the immense scale of imperial charity in Istanbul, noting that the imaret (soup kitchens) of this city were the best and most extensive that he had seen in his travels in eighteen dominions for fifty-one years.\(^7\)

Public spaces in the city were also important sites for ceremonies of “giving.” Distribution of food and money marked victories, the birth of a sultan’s son, and other imperially significant occasions. The government also provided pensioners’ funds and assistance to the widows and families of soldiers. However, as in Cairo, Istanbul had no centralized poor relief until well into the nineteenth century.

**Regulating the Poor** Although both Cairo and Istanbul lacked centralized poor relief, both locales attempted to control the movement and public presence of the poor in other ways, such as

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expelling peasants from urban areas to ensure that the poor did not put a strain on the cities’ resources and monitoring access through checkpoints and other means. The Ottomans tried to control the mobility of the peasantry and their access to the city of Istanbul through use of tezkeres (like the Egyptian tadhkira) and checkpoints. Their efforts to control migration, however, were in vain. Calls for enforcement of the tezkere restrictions occur with great frequency, as well as admonitions of ships’ captains who, instead of transporting the unemployed and undesirable nonresident poor away from Istanbul as they were supposed to do, deposited them close to Istanbul where they returned again. Sometimes punishment for idle city residents was hard labor, such as work as galley slaves on ships. Granting explicit permission to beg was another way to establish control over the poor in Cairo and Istanbul. For centuries, Istanbul’s municipal authorities issued licenses to beggars, and further regulation of beggars through the guild system allowed authorities to tax and control them.\(^8\)

Officials built these monitoring or regulating practices in Istanbul and Cairo upon centuries-old efforts (reminiscent of practices in early Christian medieval Europe) to distinguish between “deserving” beggars and the sturdy poor who took advantage of sympathetic fellow Muslims. As early as the first centuries of Islam, the muhtasib (or market inspector) had the authority to expel sturdy beggars from the mosques where they congregated. He also had the right to confiscate their belongings and hire them out to work. Although the Qur’an mandated that the poor were to receive care, hadith (the sayings and actions attributed to Muhammad) warned that fraudulent beggars were to be punished in hell.\(^9\)

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Such legal authorities as the sixteenth-century Ottoman shaykh al-Islam Ebu Su’ud Efendi grappled with the problem of begging and the virtues of charity. He saw no contradiction in forbidding troublesome beggars from gathering at mosques, but praising those who gave them alms. By the mid-nineteenth century in Egypt, and by the end of the nineteenth century in Istanbul, the state began to control the public presence of the poor more forcefully. Giving alms was no longer a simple question of piety. The more centralized and bureaucratized forms of assistance that emerged were sometimes due to economic and social circumstances—for instance, the idle poor often being an eyesore or, in the case of Egypt, convenient labor for government projects. These developments replicated poor relief in early modern Europe.  

The effect of political and economic transformations on poor relief Centralization of poor-relief services in Cairo and Istanbul went hand in hand with other developments in state formation. But the economic and political circumstances of these two locales also determined divergent policies.

Egypt’s escalated interventions in the activities of the Egyptian populace (and, thereby, the lives of the needy) followed the rise to power of Muhammad Ali, an Ottoman officer who established himself as governor of Egypt in 1805. Seeking to maximize profit from Egypt’s manpower and agricultural riches, his government centralized administrative offices, streamlined taxation procedures, and created an army. Concern about peasants’ absconding from debts, taxes, and agricultural responsibilities; efforts to capture military deserters (when conscription had just been introduced); and a new attention to health and sanitation sparked innovative policies toward the itinerant poor. Periodic sweeps of the city’s public spaces resulted in the arrest and deportation of nonresident and the arrest and admittance of the “deserving poor” into state-run shelters. Demands for workers in nascent forms of industry brought the forced employment of the idle poor.


11 Judith Tucker describes economic, social, and political changes underway in nineteenth-century Egypt and their effect on the populace in Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt (Cambridge, 1985). Demands for labor are addressed by European observers such as John Bowring, “Report on Egypt and Candia” (PRO/FO 78/381), Public Record Office.
These efforts required new institutions and new personnel to implement the policies. The thirteenth-century Maristan, still in use as a hospital at that point, was converted into a shelter for the poor in 1844. A subsequent shelter, Takiyat Tulun, was established in 1847. A range of government-appointed personnel, including police officers, neighborhood shaykhs, nightwatchmen, employees of poor shelters, and health officials enacted the government’s new policies toward the poor. The police department (the Dabtiyya) lay at the center of these new practices. Beggars and other idle persons collected in government sweeps of the streets were first brought to the police department for medical examinations and checks of their proper place of residency. The poor who sought assistance (such as medical aid or a place of shelter) also presented themselves to this office.\(^{12}\)

Peasant migration to the city and draft dodgers were not the only reasons behind increased attention to urban spaces; efforts to remove rubbish, fill in stagnant ponds, promote public health—including vaccination programs and quarantines—and improve the aesthetics of such cities as Cairo and Alexandria were significant as well. New knowledge about the spread of disease underlined the need to identify individuals as sources of infection.\(^{13}\)

In Egypt, especially Cairo, demands for labor (in nascent industry and agricultural areas) and efforts to control peasant flight (due to the need for tax revenues and military conscripts) meant increased attention to the whereabouts and productive potential of the population. In the matter of charity, clearing the streets of the unsightly poor and ensuring that only the “deserving” poor from among them received assistance came to the forefront.

Early nineteenth-century Istanbul witnessed similar changes. The reform efforts of Sultan Mahmud II (1808–1839), intended to strengthen the empire, included an emphasis on administrative

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centralization throughout the Ottoman Empire, as well as the reorganization of offices and responsibilities in the city of Istanbul. In 1826, the police were separated from the army, and the muhtasib was given broader policing functions. The central government appointed headmen (muhtar) and lieutenants (kahya) in each neighborhood of the city under the authority of the muhtasib. Muhtars, who were required to register the inhabitants of their neighborhoods, supplanted the power and jurisdiction of prior systems, such as the guilds and religious leaders. The police were responsible for maintaining order—including the expulsion of vagrants—and fighting fires, which were frequent in Istanbul, because of the predominantly wooden houses.

The new administrative structures in the first half of the nineteenth century, coupled with the existing shelters and soup kitchens from an earlier period, assumed a relatively stable population. However, the disruptions that struck the Ottoman Empire during the second half of the nineteenth century and the growing numbers of migrants and refugees due to the Russo-Turkish War of 1877/78 and the loss of territory in Southeastern Europe necessitated new institutions to deal with the poor. Many of the people who became dislocated due to war were women and children who, prior to this era, could often rely on the safety net of the family and the familiarity of a neighborhood or kin network for support. The needs of the refugees who flooded into Istanbul were so great that a Muhacir Komisyonu (Refugee Commission) was established in 1877 to help provide emergency relief and shelter. The refugees were clearly visible in the streets and mosques of Istanbul (unlike those of the Crimean War, who had been resettled almost immediately along the Black Sea and in Anatolia). European travelers described them taking shelter in mosques, their scant belongings piled up at their feet. The Refugee Commission resettled many of them outside of Istanbul.\(^\text{14}\)

At the same time that government and municipal authorities in Istanbul made efforts to address the demands of those in need, Istanbul’s city-planning commission set about modernizing the city. The construction of parks, public squares, and broad thoroughfares and attention to issues of public health and sanitation

intensified the imperative to clear public spaces of prostitutes, beggars, and vagrants.\footnote{Zeyneb Çelik, The Remaking of Istanbul: Portrait of an Ottoman City in the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley, 1986).}

Sultan Abdul Hamid II’s foundation of Darülcape in 1896 allowed Istanbul’s authorities to enforce strictures on the public presence of the poor. Darülcape served not only as a shelter and a means to remove the unsightly and troublesome poor from public spaces but also as a temporary shelter for refugees and a vocational-training site for Istanbul’s poor and orphans. The Istanbul police, like those in Cairo, were a primary intermediary between the public and this poorhouse. Its officers rounded up beggars and brought them to the shelter. Police departments also received requests from individuals to be admitted to Darülcape.\footnote{Numerous documents in the series DH EUM THR (the Interior Ministry’s Office of General Security) of the Ottoman Archives in Istanbul contain accounts of the poor’s requests for assistance through the office of the police and accounts of the arrest and internment or expulsion of other beggars.}

Demands for labor were a primary catalyst behind new policies toward the poor in mid-nineteenth-century Cairo. Early to mid-nineteenth-century Istanbul, however, did not face the kind of industrialization that escalated such demands for labor. Nor did it face great population pressures or mass exodus from rural areas. Furthermore, the existence of a larger number of imperially funded soup kitchens and other forms of safety nets for the poor meant that relief recipients were not subject to the same regulation as those in Cairo. Only at the end of the nineteenth century, when the arrival of refugees began to tax the charitable capacity of existing institutions (and the sympathies of Istanbul’s residents) did major policy changes occur.

THE RULER’S CENTRALITY TO CHARITY Expelling the unsightly and potentially dangerous poor from urban areas such as Cairo and Istanbul was a centuries-old policy, but aid to the desperately poor, though existent, was not on the government’s agenda until the nineteenth century. Yet, even though the eventual centralization of offices and responsibilities (primarily in the form of the police) seemed to imply secularization, some aspects of care for the poor and practices of poor relief remained grounded in religious prerogatives and discourses.
In the centuries before the nineteenth century, religious endowments had been the chief means of financing the institutions that cared for the poor. In early nineteenth-century Egypt, however, the state began to take a more active role. It established poor houses, hospitals, an orphanage, a foundling home, and appeals for admittance to any one of them went to the Egyptian ruler, the khedive. Along with their altruistic goals, these institutions also highlighted the importance of a healthy population, and advertised Egypt’s rulers as responsible for charity. At this juncture in history, when Egyptian rule was becoming hereditary (in the line of the family of Muhammad Ali), creating an image of the khedive as the source of beneficence served both religious and political ends. It was an act of legitimation.

The situation was not dissimilar in Istanbul, where Sultan Abdul Hamid II’s public profile as the provider of charity was evident in the numerous institutions and practices of benevolence that he introduced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Özbek has shown, Abdul Hamid II’s effort to portray himself as a beneficent ruler just as a democratic movement challenged his rule, and elite groups were establishing their own charitable activities, was a shrewd political move. The sultan’s actions also represented a reassertion of his religious role, in conjunction with his self-endorsement as caliph and his advocacy of pan-Islamic movements in the Middle East and other Islamic regions.\(^\text{17}\)

His establishment of the Darülaceze and the Darulhayr-i Ali (an orphanage founded in 1899) occurred with much fanfare and publicity. The Darülaceze—created as a religious endowment with funds coming from Abdul Hamid II, public subscription, and numerous government agencies—symbolically emphasized the legitimacy of Abdul Hamid II as the sultan of a multireligious and multi-ethnic political empire. Because the poor of all three major religions were welcome within this shelter, the grounds included a mosque, a synagogue, and a church. In 1899, Abdul Hamid II also established an orphanage, again symbolically putting himself at the center of providing for the needy.\(^\text{18}\)


\(^{18}\) For the Ottoman Empire’s loss of territory and nationalist uprisings, see Eric Zürcher, *Turkey, A Modern History* (London, 1993), 80–137. On the various forms of assistance that the
State-sponsored charity in nineteenth-century Cairo and Istanbul served more than those in need. Rulers in both places imbued their charitable acts with religious rhetoric that drew attention to themselves as benefactors. Simultaneously, their activities made use of new—and arguably secular—apparatuses (such as the police) to enforce new policies, thus illustrating that the religious and the secular could exist side by side.

Although Muhammad Ali and Abdul Hamid II’s actions followed a precedent of prior rulers’ benevolence (through religious endowments), the kind of poor-relief projects that they initiated were eminently compatible with certain practical goals. The priority may have been to rid the streets of the poor, but the poor received care nonetheless. These policies placed both ruler and state at the center of charity and placed the police in a role of fulfilling religious recommendations regarding the poor while doing their civic duty. The actions of state and local officials (like the actions of municipal officials in early modern Europe) demonstrated a high degree of pragmatism. But policies in Cairo and Europe also represented a particular response to a specific need that took them beyond core religious ideals of benevolence as mandated in Islam. When the public presence of the poor became an eyesore or represented a threat to the social order, and when the idleness of the “sturdy” poor threatened the success of economic projects, “charity” took on new meanings and new forms.
