

DECLINE OF A “MYTH”: PERSPECTIVES ON THE OTTOMAN “DECLINE”

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“For, although one may be very strong in armed forces,
yet in entering a province one has always
need of the goodwill of the natives.”

(Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1532)

Abstract

Few themes are more important to or controversial in the current historical research into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the Ottoman Empire than “decline.” An older, still axiomatic position sketched out most famously by Bernard Lewis places the imperial history in the framework of three and a half centuries of “inevitable decline.” An alternate approach, originating in the works of western historians such as Fernand Braudel, Roger Owen, Linda Darling, and Gábor Ágoston, to name but few, begins with the basic question of how an empire can sustain over three centuries of unrelenting decline. Locating itself in the latter alternative approach, the aim of this project is to shed light on the inadequacies of the declinist historiographical model by focusing on the Ottoman administrative practices in the western/Habsburg frontier with a special reference to the Köprülü restoration in the second half of the seventeenth century. This work suggests that although the Ottoman writers and the modern historians have argued about an Ottoman decline in the period, political and military achievements of the Köprülü viziers and flexible policies of the Ottoman pashas in the frontier prove the opposite.

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Bir “Mit”in Çöküşü: Osmanlı “Gerileyişi” Üzerine Perspektifler

Özet

Son zamanlarda on yedinci ve on sekizinci yüzyıl Osmanlı tarihi üzerine yapılan araştırmalar özellikle Osmanlı “gerilemesi” tezi üzerine yoğunlaşmaktadır. Bernard Lewis ve takipçisi tarihçilerin ısrarla vurguladığı eski ve halen yaygın genel kanaat Osmanlı’nın son üç yüz elli yılını “kaçınılmaz gerileme ve çöküşü” tezi çerçevesinde yorumlar. Buna karşılık, Fernand Braudel, Roger Owen, Linda Darling, Gábor Ágoston gibi batılı tarihçiler tarafından ortaya konan alternatif yaklaşım ise bir imparatorluğun üç yüz yıl boyunca çökmesinin mümkün olup olmadığı ve şayet öyleyse, imparatorluğun bu sürekli çöküşe nasıl dayandığı sorusuyla başlar. Bu alternatif yaklaşım çerçevesinde konuyu ele alan elinizdeki mevcut çalışmanın amacı, Köprülü restorasyonu denilen on yedinci yüzyılın ikincisi yarısında Habsburg serhadinde uygulanan politikalar ışığı altında gerilemeci tarih yazımının noksanlıklarına değinmektir. Her ne kadar kimi Osmanlı yazarları ve modern tarihçiler söz konusu dönemde açık bir gerilemenin varlığından bahsetse de, Köprülü ailesinden gelen vezirlerin elde ettiği siyasi ve askeri başarıların yanı sıra serhat boylarındaki Osmanlı paşaların yürüttüğü esnek politikaların bu iddianın aksini gösterdiği vurgulanmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, gerileme tezi, on yedinci yüzyıl, Köprülü ailesi, serhat.*

Introduction

While the notion of history as progress stands largely discredited today among historians less notice was given to the myth of decline. For the most part of the Ottoman history, it is still dominant paradigm in the historiography to evaluate the last three centuries of the empire in “decline” vis-à-vis “progressing” European powers. So far, only a few scholars have attempted to criticize this readily accepted paradigm and tried to provide alternative perspectives to reconstruct the Ottoman past. This is not an easy task at all. On the one hand, there are pitfalls of the Eurocentric explanations of global history. On the other, there are contemporary Ottoman writers, who put numerous accounts promoting

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the idea of decline in the Ottoman imperial system. Besides, the premature characteristics of the Ottoman studies and still unexplored records in the archives made it enormously difficult for the modern historian to have a substantial idea on various aspects of the Ottoman organization. With the lack of this ground, it is hard for the historian to downplay the decline paradigm and put the Ottoman experience into a more nuanced and well-balanced global context with a clear definition of its own imperial logic and methods.¹

One of the examples to illustrate how the decline paradigm is still at work in the modern scholarship can be detached in Alan Palmer’s widely-read popular book, *The Decline and the Fall of the Ottoman Empire*, in which the prolific English author took the failure of the Ottomans in taking Vienna in 1683 as a starting point for the Ottoman “decline” and ended it with the abolition of the sultanate in 1922 by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk).² While it is certainly not an academic work, the author’s understanding of the last three centuries of the Ottoman Empire was clearly shaped by abundant academic studies. According to this literature, incompetent rulers came to power after Suleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520-1566) and failed to control the vast territorial and financial resources of the centralized empire. The Ottoman finances had suffered as a result of the price revolution that was triggered by the influx of American silver into the European and the Ottoman markets in the late sixteenth century. Military decline ensued after the disastrous defeat of the Ottoman army in the second siege of Vienna in 1683. Besides, the bigotry that dominated the religious and educational institutions accelerated the long and inevitable decline of the empire. Nineteenth-century Ottoman history was the history of the western/modern reforms that could not yet prevent the death of the “sick man of Europe.”³ The Ottoman Empire, eventually, collapsed after the First World

¹ For earlier discussions on the decline paradigm in Ottoman context see Jonathan Grant, “Rethinking the Ottoman Decline: Military Technology Diffusion in the Ottoman Empire, Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries,” *Journal of World History*, 10/1 (1999), pp. 179-201; Caroline Finkel, “The Treacherous Cleverness of Hindsight: Myths of Ottoman Decay,” in *Re-Orienting the Renaissance: Cultural Exchange with the East*. Gerald M. Maclean (ed.), (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 148-174.

² Alan Palmer, *The Decline and the Fall of the Ottoman Empire*. (London: John Murray, 1993). The work was translated into Turkish with a different title that insinuates the present historiographical discussion: *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nun Son Üç yüz Yılı* [The Last Three Centuries of the Ottoman Empire], trans. Belkıs Çorakçı Dişbudak (İstanbul: Ekonomik Yayınlar, 1993; reprint, Türkiye İş Bankası Yayınları, 2003).

³ For a discussion on this notion see Douglas A. Howard, “With Gibbon in the Garden: Decline, Death and the Sick Man of Europe,” *Fides et Historia* 26 (1994), pp. 22-34; Aslı Çırakman,

War; and modern Turkey, indifferent to its Ottoman past, was established in the model of a western, secular, and democratic republic.⁴

This still axiomatic position sketched out most famously by Bernard Lewis places the Ottoman's imperial history in the framework of three and a half centuries of not only political, military, and economic but also social and cultural decline. The period in question that resulted in the victory of the Christian West (with a vague denomination), according to Lewis, has led first to a humiliation among Muslims and then to an aggressive hatred towards the West in Islamic societies. Lewis, therefore, recommended modern researchers in their current analysis on the roots of "Islamic terrorism," to look back at the last centuries of the Islamic history.⁵ On the other hand, Lewis' expertise on Ottoman history particularly led him and his followers to trace back the decline of the Ottomans into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with a special reference to the accounts known as *nasihat-nâmes* ("advice for kings"). It is proved that authors of these accounts or as Lewis once hailed them as the "Ottoman observers of the Ottoman decline," had didactic and, to some extent, pragmatic purposes in their writings in which they glorified the needs of the "great" Ottoman sultans and provided lessons from the past for problems they faced. While the idea of the "golden age," with its implicit references to the early period of Islam, *Asr-i Sa'âdet* ("the period of felicity"), was regarded by Muslims as the "pure and ideal" period, the acceptance of such arguments was common and easy among the contemporaries and even some of the modern historians.⁶ However, as this paper aims to demonstrate, many of these Ottoman

From the 'Terror of the World' to the 'Sick Man of Europe': European Images of Ottoman Empire and Society from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth. (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

⁴ For a recent analysis on such fabrication of the Turkish official history in the early republican era see Büşra Eranlı, *İktidar ve Tarih: Türkiye'de "Resmî Tarih" Tezinin Oluşumu, 1929-1937* [Power and History: The Formation of the 'Official History' Thesis in Turkey], (İstanbul: Afa, 1993); Howard, "With Gibbon in the Garden: Decline, Death and the Sick Man of Europe," pp. 30-33.

⁵ Lewis expressed this idea in many of his publications: *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982); *What Went Wrong?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); *The Crisis of Islam* (New York: Modern Library, 2003).

⁶ Bahaddin Yediyıldız, "Batılılaşmanın Temelleri Üzerine Bazı Düşünceler [Some Thoughts on the Origins of the Westernization]," *Birinci Milli Türkoloji Kongresi – Tebliğler*. (İstanbul, Kervan Yayınları, 1980), p. 332; Cemal Kafadar, "The Myth of the Golden Age: Ottoman Historical Consciousness in the Post--Süleymanic Era," in *Süleyman the Second and His Time*. Halil İnalcık and Cemal Kafadar (eds.), (İstanbul: The ISIS Press, 1993), pp. 37- 48.

authors had personal agendas in their efforts to reform the state and indeed their proposals had not always practical values. It is also argued that attempts to evaluate strengths and weakness of the Ottoman power in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries based on these accounts are futile efforts. What it needs to be done, as it was exemplified in the second part of this paper, is to look at particular themes in the Ottoman history in the early modern period and to evaluate it with its own terms.

The Decline Theme in the Ottoman History

Criticized being a teleological construction of the Ottoman past (and Islamic societies in general) the decline paradigm has not only long kept scholars apathetic to analyzing many peculiarities of the long-lived Ottoman imperial organization, but also blinded the comparative historians to analyze the Ottoman history within a larger framework.⁷ In addition to the paradigm in question, the inclination of modern Ottoman historians to treat their subject-matter as “unique,” “different,” “incomparable,” and “incommensurable”, as argued by Abou-El-Haj, has not allowed for a dialogue with other regions and disciplines.⁸ Furthermore, the tendency among Ottomanists to perceive the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a parenthesis between “golden age” and “modernization” has also affected the historical research in a negative manner.⁹

Beginning from the 1970s, however, historians from different schools and traditions have begun to put new perspectives and insights on the administrative, financial, military, and intellectual histories of the empire. M. G. S. Hodgson, an eminent scholar of Islamic history, considered the replacement of the new institutions in the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the old ones as indications of the Ottoman power and ability.¹⁰ Following the same line of argumentation, Fernand Braudel wrote that “how then is one to believe that all cities, ancient and restored, or new and sometimes

⁷ Linda T. Darling, *Revenue-Raising and Legitimacy—Tax Collection and Finance Administration in the Ottoman Empire, 1550-1660*. (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 4-7.

⁸ Rifa`at `Ali Abou-El-Haj, *Formation of the Modern State: The Ottoman Empire Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1991), p. 2.

⁹ Such criticism to the Ottoman historiography was first put by Çağlar Keyder and Huricihan İslamoğlu in their article, “Agenda for the Ottoman History,” *Review*, I/1 (1977), pp. 31-55.

¹⁰ M. G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam, Volume 3: The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 126.

very close to the western pattern, could possibly have prospered in a Turkey supposedly in decline? Why should something generally considered to be a sign of progress here be thought a sign of deterioration?”¹¹ Economic historian Roger Owen criticized the notion of the economic decline in the Middle East for the period 1500-1800.¹² Halil İnalçık, the doyen of the Ottoman history, published an article on the seventeenth century Ottoman finance and military with a title, “Military and Fiscal Transformation in the Ottoman Empire, 1600-1700,” that credited the period in question with the term transformation, rather than decline.¹³ In his seminal work on the seventeenth century, Ottoman historian Suraiya Faroqhi has urged the modern scholars to deal not only with the collapse of the Ottomans but also with significant elements that kept them in power for about three hundred years.¹⁴ Along with these studies, Edward Said’s *Orientalism*¹⁵ and its dramatic effects on the intellectual life in the following decades have formed an important background for the then growing criticism against the “declinist” literature.¹⁶ According to Said, historians have to abandon the Eurocentric views that contributed essentially to the self-identification of the West, and should make an effort to establish new paradigms to understand the historical developments regarding the Middle East.

The interest that this revisionist approach brought to the Ottoman history coincided with the developments in Turkish national and international politics. The conflicts in the Balkans and the Middle East and the compromise of the modern Turkish state with its Ottoman past have augmented the demand for analytical, multi-dimensional works on the Ottoman Empire. Inspired by this

¹¹ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism Fifteenth-Eighteenth Century: The Perspective of the World*. (California: University of California Press, 1992 [originally in French, 1979]), p. 469.

¹² Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800-1914*. (New York: Methuen, 1981), particularly, pp. 1-23. For an earlier criticism of the author see “The Middle East in the Eighteenth Century – An ‘Islamic’ Society in Decline? A Critique of Gibb and Bowen’s *Islamic Society and the West*,” *Review of Middle East Studies* 1 (1975), pp. 101-112.

¹³ Halil İnalçık, “Military and Fiscal Transformation in the Ottoman Empire, 1600-1700,” *Archivum Ottomanicum* 6 (1980), pp. 283-337. İnalçık, however, took a rather “declinist” position later on in his interpretation of historical developments in the early seventeenth century in his *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1914*, Halil İnalçık and Donald Quataert (eds.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 22.

¹⁴ Suraiya Faroqhi, “Crisis and Change, 1590–1699,” in *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1914*. Halil İnalçık – Donald Quataert (eds.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 414.

¹⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism*. (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

¹⁶ I used term “declinists” to describe writers who asserted that things were getting worse.

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recent political and cultural re-orientation and aforementioned seminal studies, a significant number of Ottomanists have attempted to analyze the past from different angles. Some of the historians in this group have focused on *how* the classical Ottoman system, i.e., the *timar* (land tenure) and *devshirme* (practice of recruitment) institutions changed¹⁷ while some others have discussed the military and technological capacities of the Ottoman power in the period. For instance, in his study on the Ottoman military technology in the seventeenth century, Jonathan Grant reached a conclusion that not only the Ottomans but also the Venetians were late-comers to the idea of galleon fleets: In the late 1640s and early 1650s, the Ottomans increased their vessels and the Venetians, recognizing the vital role of sailing warships by this time, began building their own in 1667. In Grant’s view, “throughout the first half of the eighteenth century the Ottomans maintained a naval balance with the Venetian forces.”¹⁸ Moreover, Ágoston’s study on the firearms in early modern period has also proved that the Ottomans kept their superior position in firepower and logistics over the Austrian Habsburgs and Venetians until the very end of the seventeenth century.¹⁹ Writing on the developments of new methods of attacking and defending forts in early modern Europe, Mark L. Stein, furthermore, have argued that the Ottomans were well aware of the recent developments in European fort-building techniques and became “quite skilled at conducting sieges, as is evident from the course of their military activities during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”²⁰

The Decline in the Contemporary Accounts

Following Central Asian, Persian, and Islamic traditions, Ottoman scholars (‘ulema) and statesmen from the beginning of the empire had written numerous

¹⁷ Douglas A. Howard, “The Ottoman Timar System and its Transformation,” Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Indiana University, 1987; I. Metin Kunt, *The Sultan’s Servants: The Transformation of Ottoman Provincial Government, 1550-1650*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

¹⁸ Grant, “Rethinking the Ottoman Decline,” pp. 187-188.

¹⁹ Gábor Ágoston, “Ottoman Artillery and European Military Technology in the Fifteenth to Seventeenth Centuries,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 47/1-2 (1994), pp. 15-48; Ágoston, *Guns for the Sultan: Military Power and the Weapons Industry in the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge, 2005), particularly chapter 2.

²⁰ Mark L. Stein, *Guarding the Frontier. Ottoman Border Forts and Garrisons in Europe*. (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), pp. 36-48.

nasihat-nâme works to provide guidance and advice to the members of the ruling class.²¹ The quantity of these accounts had dramatically increased, particularly, in the second half of the sixteenth century. The authors of these works discussed mainly the reasons for the “decline” of the imperial system and provided a number of proposals to prevent this trend. Many of them were aware of the fact that the basic institutions of the Ottoman classical system were in change. It was, in their terms, a period of “*nizâm-ı âleme ihtilâl ve reâyâ ve berâyâyâ infîâl* [revolution to the worldly order and indignation to the subjects].”²² Thus, the restoration of *dâire-i adâlet* (circle of justice)²³ and *erkân-ı erba`a* (four pillars or estates)²⁴ constitute the central themes in their proposals.²⁵ Written in 1541, *Âsafnâme* (“The Book of Asaph”) of Lütü Pařa, the grand vizier of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520-1566), was regarded as the first account in the declinist genre in the Ottoman literature.²⁶ Besides, Koçi Bey’s *Risâle* that he penned for Sultan Murad IV (r. 1623-1640)

²¹ For an overview of this genre see Agah Sırrı Levend, “Siyaset-namele,” *Türk Dili Arařtırmaları Yıllığı-Belleten* (1962), 167-194; Bernard Lewis, “Ottoman Observers of Ottoman Decline,” *Islamic Studies* 1 (1962), pp. 71-87.

²² Mehmet Öz, *Kanun-i Kadimîn Peřinde: Osmanlı’da “Çözölme” ve Gelenekçi Yorumcuları*. (İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 1997; reprint 2009), p. 16.

²³ “The Sultanate stands on its treasury. The treasury stands by good management. By injustice (*zulm*) it falls.” *Âsafnâme*, p. 35, quoted by Lewis, “Ottoman Observers of Ottoman Decline,” p. 73.

²⁴ These four social classes are the military, the learned, the merchants, and the peasants. According to the reform writers, these four classes should not be intermingled; they should keep the level of their own profession at the highest quality, and, as the organs in human body, should work together. For this theory that was probably borrowed from Ibn Khaldun see Mustafa ibn Abdullah (known as Kâtib Çelebi), *Düstüru’l-Amel li Islahi’l-Halel*, (manuscript dated 1653; it was printed in İstanbul in 1863-64), pp. 124-126. The references here are given to the printed version.

²⁵ These authors and their proposals have been subject to numerous studies including Walter Livingston Wright, *Introduction to Ottoman Statecraft: The Book of Counsel for Vezirs and Governors-Nasa’ih il-vüzera ve’l ümera of Sarı Mehmed Pasha, the Defterdar*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1935), pp. 1-55; Tayyip Gökbilgin, “XVII. Asırda Osmanlı Devleti’nde İslahat İhtiyaç ve Temayülleri ve Katip Çelebi,” in *Katip Çelebi – Hayatı ve Eserleri Hakkında İncelemeler*, Orhan Şaik Gökyay (ed.), (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1957), pp. 197-218; Pal Fodor, “State and Society, Crisis and Reform, in the 15th-17th Century Ottoman Mirror for Princes,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 40 (1986), pp. 217-40.

²⁶ Rudolf Tschudi, *Das Asafname des Lutfi Pascha: nach den Handschriften zu Wien, Dresden und Konstantinopel*. (Leipzig: W. Drugulin, 1910); Ahmet Uğur, *Asafname*. (Ankara: Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 1982); Mübahat S. Kütükoğlu, “Lütü Pařa, Âsafnâmesi, (Yeni Bir Metin Denemesi)”, *Prof. Dr. Bekir Kütükoğlu’na Armağın*. (İstanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Yayınları, 1991), pp. 49-120.

around 1630 on “the reasons of the tribulations and changes of this world” was the most famous account in this tradition.²⁷ In his work, Koçi Bey first described the state of affairs during the “golden age”, i.e., the reign of the Sultan Suleiman (the period that the aforementioned first declinist account was written on), emphasized the reasons of the decline in the imperial system, and then provided suggestions to reform it in the most traditional way. According to him, the reasons for the Ottoman decline were clear: After Sultan Suleiman, the power of the grand vizier had become limited with the involvement of other higher officials and residents of the palace (which includes women) into the imperial administration. The Ottoman classical devshirme and timar systems became defunct when “foreign” elements –that is Turks, or those not from devshirme origin- had begun to be welcomed into ruling positions. The land and the offices had been granted to the newcomers not in return for their abilities and services but because of nepotism and corruption. Scholars who had judicial responsibilities and powers were also corrupted.²⁸ In the last pages of his account, Koçi Bey proposed that, under urgent and necessary conditions, the ruler should use force to suppress the rebellions. Additionally, to prevent the uprisings of the military class, the ruler must have a limited number but obedient soldiers. Confiscation of the illegal *waqf* (pious foundation) lands and their distributions to imperial officials and paid soldiers would definitely increase the revenues of the treasury, according to Koçi Bey.²⁹

Risâles written in the latter parts of the seventeenth century had no significant changes in terms of describing the current state of the imperial system and in their proposals to solve the problems. After a meeting in the *Divan* (“Imperial Council”) on the budget deficiency issue, Katip Çelebi, a significant Ottoman bureaucrat and intellectual of the period, penned his *Düstûrû'l-‘Amel li-İslâhi'l-Halel* [The Guide to Practice for the Rectification of Defects] at around 1653. In this short essay, Katip Çelebi formulated his ideas on state, society, subjects, military, and treasury. In addition to the aforementioned causes, over-taxation and corruption in the ruling elite were the two main problems for the decline of the system in the perception of the author. To avoid a deficiency in the budget the imperial rulers should avoid luxury

²⁷ For a modern Turkish transcription of the work see Ali Kemali Aksüt, *Koçi Bey Risalesi*, (İstanbul: Vakit, 1939).

²⁸ *Risâle*, p. 20-22.

²⁹ *Risâle*, pp. 55-60.

goods.³⁰ In his memorandum written at the request of Sultan Mehmed IV (r. 1648-87), *Telhîsü'l-Beyân fî Kavânîn-i Âl-i Osman* [Abridgments of the Codes of the Ottoman Dynasty] (1669), historian Hezarfen Hüseyin Efendi repeated the previous formulas while he considered the reign of Sultan Selim (1512-1520) instead of Suleiman the Magnificent as the “golden age”. Putting a significant emphasis on “the rule of law,” Hüseyin Efendi, proposed that merit should be the only basis for distribution of offices and lands; dignity of the scholars should be restored; and judges should observe justice in their decisions.³¹

These works are illustrative of how the contemporary Ottomans perceived the problems of the imperial system and what they suggested to solve them. It should be kept in mind that medieval historian Ibn Khaldun’s theories on predetermined courses and life-spans of the states were influential on these authors and visible in their writings.³² One may argue that the decline notion in Ottoman history, long before the modern period, was the creation of the Ottomans themselves. The zenith of the Ottoman power, as these authors generally argued, was the start of the imperial decline. The pictures these authors draw were highly selective and, as the modern scholarship has proved, the proposals these declinist writers had suggested were not compatible with the internal and external developments in many occasions.³³ There was not a “golden age” as these authors had described, but these their “ideal orders,” and therefore have potential to be contextualized within the political philosophy, rather than in the political history.³⁴ Furthermore, from the point of political philosophy, one may look at their writings as exemplary efforts of revival rather than the decline.

³⁰ Kâtib Çelebi, *Düstûrî'l-Amel li-İslâhi'l-Halel*, pp. 128-139.

³¹ Hezarfen Hüseyin Efendi, *Telhîsü'l-Beyân fî Kavânîn-i Âl-i Osman*. Sevim İlgüren (ed.), (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1998); Robert Anhegger, “Hezarfen Hüseyin Efendi’nin Osmanlı Devlet Teşkilatına Dair Mülâhazaları,” *Türkiyat Mecmuası* 10 (1953), pp. 365-393.

³² Reflecting the human experience of bodily changes from childhood to maturity and the inevitable decay of physical and mental capacity in old age Ibn Khaldun made an analogy between states and human beings. For a detailed work on this idea see Cornell Fleischer, “Royal Authority, Dynastic Cyclism, and ‘Ibn Khaldunism’ in Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Letters,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 18 (1983), pp. 198-220; Ejder Okumuş, “İbn Haldun ve Osmanlı’da Çöküş Tartışmaları,” *Divan İlmî Arařtırmalar* 6 (1991), pp. 183-209.

³³ Mehmet Öz, *Kanun-i Kadimin Peşinde*, p. 113.

³⁴ Cemal Kafadar, “The Question of Ottoman Decline,” *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review* 4 (1997-8), p. 43.

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In his works on the functionality of the Ottoman reform proposals Douglas A. Howard demonstrated that the ideas of Koçi Bey were not put into practice by Murad IV, who indeed had ordered him to prepare his report, when he reformed the *timar* system in 1633-34.³⁵ Furthermore, after a close and a careful analysis of these complaints and proposals under the light of biographies of their authors it became evident that many of the declinist writers were voicing their criticisms within the official ideology and, to some extent, to protect their personal status and/or social classes.³⁶ Without putting into consideration of this aspect of the “Ottoman observers of the Ottoman decline,” modern historians who interpret the literal meaning of these accounts will be the victims of their sources.³⁷

Thus, to have more balanced views on the Ottoman system, it is required to put the European observers into the discussion. In 1668, Sir Paul Rycaut, the secretary of Lord Winchelsea, England’s ambassador to Istanbul, completed his work, *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, after spending six years in the Ottoman capital. With its multi-dimensional and relatively impartial approach this work provides a significant account to evaluate the state of the affairs in the Ottoman Empire from the perspective of a learned westerner and to compare it with the Ottoman declinist writers. In his perception, there were “no reliques of ancient justice, or generosity, of discreet government, or obedience to it, of courtesies or concord, of valour or counsel, nor yet of confidence, friendship, or generous fidelity”, and sharing the similar line with his Ottoman contemporaries, he saw a decline in the Ottoman system.³⁸ However, he continued his observations as follows:

³⁵ Howard, “The Ottoman Timar System and Its Transformation, 1563-1656,” pp. 193-98.

³⁶ Douglas A. Howard, “Ottoman Historiography and the Literature of ‘Decline’ of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.” *Journal of Asian History* 22/1 (1988), pp. 52-77; Abou-El-Haj, *Formation of the Modern State: The Ottoman Empire*, pp. 20-40.

³⁷ Caroline Finkel, “The Treacherous Cleverness of Hindsight: Myths of Ottoman Decay,” p. 153. For a recent analysis on the Ottoman *nasihat*-name that discusses their importance for the political philosophy of the Ottomans see Çoşkun Yılmaz, “Osmanlı Siyaset Düşüncesi Kaynakları ile İlgili Yeni Bir Kavramsallaştırma: İslahatnâmeler,” *Türkiye Araştırmaları Literatür Dergisi*, 1 / 2 (2003), pp. 299-338.

³⁸ Paul Rycaut, *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire. Containing the Maxims of the Turkish Politie, the most material points of the Mahometan religion, their sects and heresies, their convents and religious votaries. Their military discipline, with an exact computation of their forces both by land and sea. Illustrated with divers pieces of sculpture, representing the variety of Habits among the Turks.* London, 1668, p. 169.

But though this Empire hath many of these distempers, and begins to grow factious, and yet slothful, and desirous to avoid the occasions of war, as all governments have been which in their youth and first beginnings were eager, active, and provoked through poverty, in their riper years grown rich, and luxurious with plenty, have declined afterwards as from the meridian of their greatness and power; yet the Turks maintain still the extent of their dominions, and if they have lost ground in one place, like the sea, they have recovered it in another; it is Asia the Persians have taken from them Rivan, Schirvan, Tebris, Lyris, and Ghenge, it is but a recovery of their own dominions; if they are dispossessed in Ethiopia, of Aden, and other parts of Arabia Felix, they have recompensed themselves in Europe, by their footing in Candy, and in Hungary, by the late conquests of Newhausel, and Novigrade, and in Transilvania, by the additions of Janova and Waradin.³⁹

On the military technology and logistics capabilities of the Ottomans, Rycaut also put these insights: “The Guns are the biggest and as well cast and moulded as any in the world; for the last Expedition in Hungary there were 40 pieces of new Cannon cast and transported by way of the Black Sea, and thence by the Danube unto Belgrade and Buda.”⁴⁰ The account of this western observer is significant to be used in the discussion that the decline is a relative and generalist term hinders and its significant dimensions of the imperial systems in early modern period.⁴¹

The Köprülü Restoration: A Gap in the Decline Narrative

During the uninterrupted vizierate of the Köprülü family of Albanian origin from 1656 to 1683, the Ottoman Empire had seen long years of stable leadership, imperial restoration, and numerous military successes. Köprülü Mehmed Pasha who accepted the post at the age of seventy-one and remained in office for five years until his death in 1661, first dismissed the chief treasurer

³⁹ Rycaut, *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, p. 170.

⁴⁰ Rycaut, *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, p. 200.

⁴¹ For a discussion of other decline narratives for this period see J.K.J. Thompson, *Decline in History: The European Experience*. (London: Polity Press, 1998).

and the grand mufti, exiled the Chief Eunuch to Egypt with the full license granted him by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed IV (r. 1648-1687). With this power in hand, Mehmet Pasha executed the admiral, the commander of the Janissaries, and a tax-collector, among many others, whom he founded responsible for the fall of Lemnos, the lack of discipline in the army, and the cruelty towards the subjects respectively.⁴² While enforcing an effective governmental system Mehmed Pasha managed to curtail unnecessary expenditures. Under the strict financial policy of him and later his son, Fazıl Ahmed Pasha who was in the office for fifteen years until 1676, the imperial treasury did not suffer from the budget deficit between 1660 and 1670 in spite of many military expeditions.⁴³ Beside, implementing an interventionist policy, the Köprülü viziers succeeded to establish order in Anatolia and Transylvania. It was during this period that the Ottomans took Crete (Girit) from the Venetians after a struggle lasting for more than twenty years. In addition to this, as expressed by Rycout earlier, the Ottomans forces captured Janopol (Tr. Yanova), Nagyvárad (Varad), Érsekújvár (Uyvar), and Kamieniec (Kamianice) fortresses in Europe in about twenty years.

Before focusing on the Habsburg frontier to assess the Ottoman military power and governmental functions in this period it is appropriate to take the changes in political balance in the Ottoman-Polish and Russian frontiers in the second half of the century into consideration. The Ottoman influence extended into the lands that constitute modern Ukraine when the Cossack hetman Petr Dorošenko sought protection from the Ottoman sultan in 1669 to defend his territories against the attacks of Poles, Russians, and Crimean Tatars. In 1672, the Ottoman army, under the command of the Ottoman Sultan and the grand vizier, marched into Poland, conquered the fortress of Kamieniec and advanced as far as Lwów. With the Buczacs Treaty that was signed on October 16th, 1672, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth agreed to submit 80,000 golden coins that they promised in Lwów to urge the Ottomans to lift the siege and also to pay an annual tribute to the Porte. Podolia remained under the Ottoman rule and the Poles had to recognize the independence of the Cossacks. Although wars in the region continued afterwards and the Ottoman soldiers could not defeat Sobiesky’s army in Chotin (Hotin) in 1673, Podolia remained in the hands of

⁴² M. A. Cook (ed.), *A History of the Ottoman Empire to 1730*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 164.

⁴³ Hezarfen Hüseyin Çelebi, *Telhîsü'l-Beyân*, p. 89.

the Ottomans until 1699, and the Russian Tsar had to abandon his plans to seize the Cossack lands.⁴⁴

The rising Ottoman power at that time was not only visible the north-west of the Black Sea but also in the Central Europe. The military achievement of the Ottomans in this period forced the Habsburg rulers to organize new border zones and new methods of border defense. What Ágoston put for the sixteenth century mentioning that “the Ottoman pressure played an important role in Habsburg military-fiscal modernization and in the creation of what became known as ‘Habsburg Central Europe’”⁴⁵ was equally applicable for the second half of the seventeenth century. Six border captaincies that were established in the sixteenth century on the Ottoman frontier by the Habsburgs remained their significance in the following century. Moreover, after a successful campaign of the Ottomans into Upper Hungary in 1663 that resulted with the loss of the Érsekújvár fort, the Habsburgs had to erect another strong fort, Lipótvár, on the bank of the Vág River to defend Vienna, the imperial capital.⁴⁶ With the Treaty of Vasvár of 1664 that remained valid until 1682, the Ottoman influence in Transylvania was officially recognized by the Habsburgs for the first time.

On the other hand, the Ottomans significantly increased the number of their garrison soldiers in the Hungarian provinces in this period. The Porte had six provinces in Hungary and there were 18,043 soldiers only in three provinces (Varad, Uyvar, and Buda) in 1662-63.⁴⁷ When it comes to finance, the sixteenth and seventeenth showed no difference since the treasury of the Ottoman Hungary experienced similar financial problems. According to a treasury account of Buda for 1662-63 that Ágoston utilized in his research, only one-third of the total revenue (37,312,411 *akçe*) was collected from the territory of the Buda province, remaining dependent upon the external resources that were

⁴⁴ There are a number of primary accounts in Istanbul libraries on the Polish campaigns in this period. Among them Abdurrahman Abdi Pařa’s *Vekayiname* [the Chronicle] and Hacı Ali Efendi’s *Fetihname-i Kamanıçe* [On the Conquest of Kamanıçe] are particularly important as eyewitness accounts.

⁴⁵ Gábor Ágoston, *Guns for the Sultan*, p. 195.

⁴⁶ Géza Pálffy, “The Origins and Development of the Border Defence System against the Ottoman Empire in Hungary (Up to the Early Eighteenth Century),” in *Ottomans, Hungarians, and Habsburgs in Central Europe. The Military Confines in the Era of Ottoman Conquest*. Géza Dávid – Pál Fodor (eds.), (Leiden–Boston–Köln: Brill, 2000), pp. 56-58.

⁴⁷ Ágoston, “The Costs of the Ottoman Fortress-System in Hungary in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *Ottomans, Hungarians and Habsburgs in Central Europe. The Military Confines in the Era of Ottoman Conquest*. Géza Dávid and Pál Fodor (eds.), (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2000), pp. 208-209.

mainly received from certain Balkan regions. This amount however was much smaller than the Habsburgs spent to secure their borders against the Ottomans. To compare the logistics, the Ottomans did not have significant problems in providing food and war supplies to the Ottoman Hungary while it was a major issue for the Habsburg side.⁴⁸ These are some examples to demonstrate the strength and capabilities of the Ottoman system in the given period.

The Ottoman Frontier Administration in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century

Administration of the frontier provinces can be another theme in the efforts to ascertain the degree of success and failures of the imperial system. It is true that it was not always feasible for the Ottoman pashas in the frontiers to exchange letters with the Porte concerning each local infraction, partly because of the enormous distance and difficult roads, and partly because no one in the Ottoman capital could be familiar enough with all the ramifications of local conditions in the regions. Therefore, the Ottoman capital provided free-hand to the pashas in these lands to use the imperial authority. However, as cases below would prove, these pashas were responsible for the welfare of the subjects mainly not to loose their supports vis-à-vis the enemy at the other side of the border, the Habsburgs.

Modern scholarship on the frontier management of the Ottomans has reached to a conclusion that the Ottoman rulers did not impose ideological pressure or implement a strict rule in these particular territories. To maintain the sultan’s rule, the Ottoman capital used whatever means available including a wide use of the local elites, maintaining the pre-Ottoman local customs and regulations.⁴⁹ According to this practice, which is known as *istimalet* (lit. “to lean” or “incline in the direction of”) a classical Ottoman policy that aimed to gain the support of people through reconciliation and protection, the Ottomans paid significant attention to seek non-military and long-lasting solutions to disturbances in the newly conquered places. Thanks to this policy, the Ottomans, from the beginning of their empire, could establish centuries-long rule in non-Turkish and non-Muslim lands. A few details may help to illustrate

⁴⁸ Ágoston, pp. 225-228.

⁴⁹ Halil İnalcık, “Ottoman Methods of Conquest,” *Studia Islamica* 2 (1954), pp. 103-129; Ágoston, “A Flexible Empire: Authority and its Limits on the Ottoman Frontiers.” pp. 27-28.

this facet of the Ottoman strategy and how it was at work in the second half of the seventeenth century in the Ottoman-Habsburg frontier.

Beginning with the governorship of Aslan Pasha in Buda (1565–1566) the governors in Hungary used local languages i.e., Hungarian, Slovak, German, along with Ottoman and Latin, in their official writings.⁵⁰ To be able do so, they recruited many educated natives for the translation offices and later appointed them to significant posts in the provincial administration.⁵¹ This official stance also enabled the interaction of the Ottoman soldiers in the garrisons with the people. Seeking employment opportunities, local men and women sought to serve their new master.⁵² Zdenka Vesela-Prenosilova, a Czech historian, published an article in which she analyzed the underlying reasons for this cooperation with the Ottomans in the frontier regions.⁵³ She based her research on the Habsburg-Hungarian court and Church memorandums and pointed out that any cooperation and contact with the Muslim enemy was seen as treason and apostasy for the Habsburg officials and the clergy; the punishment was torture, flaying, and ultimately execution as in the case of Martin Juhász who fled with a Turkish prisoner from the Habsburg prison in 1659. The reason of his execution, as stated in the official account, was that “he intended to become a Turk”.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, such religious-based and Habsburg-backed propaganda

⁵⁰ Yasemin Altaylı, “Budın Pasalarının Macar Dilini Kullanımı, [The Usage of the Hungarian Language by Pashas in Budin]” *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Dergisi*, 46/1 (2006), pp. 255-269.

⁵¹ For philologists and the historians of the literature, the writings of these locals constitute important records for tracking the development of literary styles in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. See, Gustav Bayerle, *Ottoman Diplomacy in Hungary: Letters from the Pashas of Buda, 1590-1593*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), p. 5.

⁵² According to *defter*, the survey register of land, in the Uyvar province that kept in Istanbul in the Prime Ministry Ottoman Archive (BOA), Maliyeden Müdevver Defter (MAD), no. 2052, fol. 4, “Cemaat-i Katiban-ı Divan” [The List of the Provincial Secretaries], the Ottomans received help from a native named Constantine to make the list of inhabitants. For an important study on the subject see Pal Fodor, “Making a Living on the Borders: Volunteers in the Sixteenth Century Ottoman Army,” in *Ottomans, Hungarians and Habsburgs in Central Europe: the Military Confines in the Era of Ottoman Conquest*. Géza David-Pál Fodor (eds.), (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 229-264.

⁵³ Zdenka Vesela-Prenosilova, “Slovakia and the Ottoman Expansion in the 16th and 17th Centuries,” in *Ottoman Rule in Middle Europe and the Balkan in the 16th and 17th Centuries: Papers Presented at the 9th Joint Conference of the Czechoslovak-Yugoslav Historical Committee*. Jaroslav Cesar (ed.), (Prague: Czechoslovak Academia of Sciences Oriental Institute, 1978), pp. 5-44.

⁵⁴ Vesela-Prenosilova, “Slovakia and the Ottoman Expansion in the 16th and 17th Centuries,” p. 33.

and severe measures did not stop the cooperation of the people in the region with the Ottoman officials. The subjects under the Habsburg regime left their lands for the Ottoman services more frequently in the seventeenth century, and the Habsburg authorities repeatedly sending letters to their local rulers to watch cases of “Turkization” (törökösség).⁵⁵ Interactions in political, military and cultural levels between rulers and the ruled were the components of the life in the Ottoman-Habsburg frontier and it is evident for the current research that the Ottomans were still successful in implementing their classical *isti'malet* policy in the late seventeenth century.

In addition to this, the implications of the classical *daire-i adalet* (the circle of justice) concept are also visible in the Uyvar province, the northernmost Ottoman administrative in the Habsburg frontier.⁵⁶ According to this concept, the rulers were expected to behave responsibly towards their subjects, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and the subjects in return had to pay their taxes on time.⁵⁷ In a report prepared by one of the treasurers of the province, Hafız Mustafa, on the financial difficulties of the province, it is possible to see how the local ruling elite responded to the misuse of the provincial authority by the governor. In his reports dated 1673, Hafız Mustafa complained about the irresponsible attitude of the governor whom he accused of being the destroyer of the welfare of the subjects and who thus prevented them to pay their taxes in a timely manner. Keeping in mind that one should read these types of documents carefully and perhaps within the context of power relations, this direct report of the treasurer to the central administration is an indication of the working checks-and-balances system in the given period.⁵⁸ By way of supporting this argument, it is feasible to point out the case of execution of

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ For a recent study on the Ottoman rule in this province see Muhammed Fatih Çalışır, “War and Peace in the Frontier: Ottoman Rule in the Uyvar Province, 1663-1685,” Bilkent University, Unpublished MA Thesis, 2009.

⁵⁷ Halil İnalçık, “State and Ideology under Sultan Suleiman I” in *The Middle East and the Balkans under the Ottoman Empire: Essays on Economy and Society*. Halil İnalçık (ed.), (Bloomington: Indiana University Turkish Studies and Turkish Ministry of Culture Joint Series, 1993), p. 71.

⁵⁸ Ahmet Şimşirgil, “Osmanlı İdaresinde Uyvar’ın Hazine Defterleri ve Bir Bütçe Örneği,” *Güney Doğu Avrupa Araştırmaları Dergisi* 12 (1998), p. 327. The report with its facsimile was published by Mark L. Stein see his “Ottoman Bureaucratic Communication: An Example from Uyvar, 1673,” *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin* 20/1 (1996), pp. 1-15.

Sührab Pasha in 1669, who was the governor of the province at that time, with the accusation of peculation.

Furthermore, records demonstrate deduced tax rates offered to frontier population during periods of financial difficulties have an importance in the discussion. In 1674, after a big fire in the area, the pasha of Eger had exempted the inhabitants of Gyöngyös village from tax and other service obligations for four years.⁵⁹ In a document written by Defterdar Mehmet Efendi the total tax debt of the subjects living in Dolný Kamanec village near the Nitra River was reduced to sixty-nine piaster from eighty-one due to their poverty.⁶⁰ In another document kept in the Rimavska Sobota city archives, the inhabitants of the city borrowed interest-free loans from the Ottoman governor, Kapı Ađası Mustafa, to fulfill their tax duties in 1666.⁶¹

Joseph Blařkovič, who examined the Ottoman taxation system in upper Hungary, found out that the tax ratio imposed on the subjects by the Ottomans was consisting of ten percent of their annual revenues whereas the Habsburgs were demanding nineteen percent. He concluded that such an advantageous tax rate was one of the main reasons for the people living in this region to show a tendency towards the Ottoman regime.⁶² This tendency was accomplished in part by spelling out the terms of association with the Ottomans in the imperial land survey which followed all Ottoman conquests. In 1554, after the capture of the Filakovo castle by the Ottomans, leaders of approximately six hundred villages were voluntarily accepted the Ottoman rule.⁶³ A century later, after the establishment of the Uyvar province in 1663, again, the heads of more than seven hundreds and fifty villages applied to the Ottoman pasha to be the tax-payers of the empire.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Blařkovič used this document in Gyöngyös City Archive, nr. 207. See, “Osmanlılar Hâkimiyeti Devrinde Slovakya’da Vergi Sistemi Hakkında [On the Tax-system in Slovakia during Ottoman Rule],” *Tarih Arařtırmaları Dergisi*, 7/12-13 (1969), pp. 97-98.

⁶⁰ Vojtech Kopčan, “Academician Jan Rypka and Research into Osmanli Documents in Slovakia,” *Archív Orientalni* 54/3 (1986), p. 213.

⁶¹ This document was published in Josep Blařkovič, *Rimavska Soboto v čase osmansko-tureckeho panstva* [Rimavska Sobota at the time of the Ottoman-Turkish Reign], (Bratislava: Obzor, 1974), p. 199.

⁶² Blařkovič, “Osmanlılar Hâkimiyeti Devrinde Slovakya’da Vergi Sistemi Hakkında,” p. 95.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁶⁴ Yusuf Blařkovič, “Köprülü Mehmed Pasa’nin Macarca Bir Ahidnamesi [A Hungarian Ahidname of Köprülü Mehmed Pasha],” *Türkiyat Mecmuası* 15 (1968), p. 38.

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Apart from taxation, the Ottoman tolerant attitude towards different faiths was another dimension in the *istimalet* policy. While the Catholic Habsburgs tried to forcefully convert the Protestants in the region, the Ottoman rulers did not interfere with the religious practices of their subjects. Furthermore, as a letter penned in December 1680 by Mehmet Pasha, the governor of Uyvar, indicates that the Ottoman rulers gave permission to Franciscan monks arriving from the Habsburg side to seek financial resources among their followers in the Ottoman territory.⁶⁵

Some of the documents in the Slovakian city archives also provide data on population movements in the Ottoman Hungary. It is very well-known that the Ottoman and Habsburg subjects were moving to prosperous cities and villages, namely to the *hass*, private, lands of the Sultan for security and employment needs. As an *ahidname*, capitulation, written in Hungarian in 1647 demonstrates that the settlement requests of the foreigners on these lands were welcomed by the local Ottoman officials who were in need of more labor to work in the farms.⁶⁶

Conclusion

The pitfalls the Ottoman contemporary decline accounts have made it hard to draw a substantial picture of the Ottoman imperial system and society in the seventeenth century. The static image of the Ottoman organization as presented by these authors lends itself admirably to political statements in nineteenth and twentieth century contexts and led scholars like Bernard Lewis to misuse and misinterpret these accounts. Modern historian who would like to draw a substantial picture of the given period should use these accounts carefully and, if feasible, with a comparative approach.

Thanks to the revisionist attempts in Ottoman historiography in the last three decades, historians of the empire have begun to have a fundamentally different perception of the Ottoman politics and policies in the seventeenth and the following centuries. This path-breaking new perception is helpful not only to understand and appreciate the now-defunct imperial system but also of the

⁶⁵ Kopčan, “Academician Jan Rypka and Research into Osmanlı Documents in Slovakia,” p. 215.

⁶⁶ This document is preserved in Miskolc City Archive, Turkish Letter, nr. 20. Blaškovič published the document in his article, “Köprülü Mehmed Paşa’nın Macarca Bir Ahidnamesi”, p. 39.

contemporary Middle East. Challenging the decline paradigm energized modern Ottoman historians to have a comparative approach and position the Ottoman history into the global scale. It also helped to revitalize a discussion on Eurocentric approaches to history and the concept of progress itself.

Dissecting of the imperial system to evaluate particular regions and problems would enable historians to see the capacity of the Ottomans in organizing effective governing mechanisms. Given focus on the classical *istimalet* policy of the Ottomans in the Uyvar province in the Habsburg frontier during the vizierate of the Koprul family provides cases to discuss the workings and capabilities of the Ottoman system in this understudied and wrongly hailed period. Implementing flexible policies to enhance the attractiveness of affiliation of the people with the regime such as reducing the tax rates or the usage of local languages in the official writings, the Ottomans continued to implement their classical policy that had been successfully at work in the Balkans for centuries. Furthermore, the political, economic, and military achievements of the grand viziers from Koprul family in the second half of the seventeenth century stand out as a significant gap in the unsatisfactory narrative of the “Ottomans’ inevitable decline.”

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