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Local Legitimacy and Tax Policy: Qaids as Part of a Composite State in Colonial Tunisia¹

In modern North Africa, the qaid embodied the two essential functions of the state: tax collection and law enforcement. From the late 16th century, in the two Ottoman provinces of Tunis and Algiers as well as in Morocco, the qaid usually occupied a temporary function, he was merely a man sent from the capital to carry out tax-collecting missions amongst faraway tribes or regions. He was in many ways the provisional representative of the state. From the eighteenth century onwards, the function of qaid became a permanent one, as North African rulers began to appoint members of the local notability to the position. It also became ambiguous; although the qaid continued to represent the state at the level of a city or tribe, he also came to represent regions at the level of the state. In his new capacity of regional governor, the qaid must therefore be understood as one of the main actors of North-African state-building.

¹ I am grateful to the editorial board and to M'hamed Oualdi and Youssef Ben Ismail for their advice. I am also particularly thankful to Chloë Mayoux for her invaluable help with this article.

In Tunisia, an Ottoman province since 1574–75, this shift occurred in a period of reforms. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Husainid dynasty obtained an unprecedented level of autonomy from the Sublime Porte.² Whilst continuing to recognize the sovereignty of the Sultan in Constantinople, the Tunisian dynasty created a de facto autonomous State composed of the Bey, his ministers, and the servants appointed by Beylical decree. In the 1870s, the Prime Minister Khayr al-Din Pasha introduced administrative reforms in the province of Tunis, based on the Ottoman and French models.³ The sedentarization of tribes, the professionalization of the qaids, and the standardization of the tax system all were parts of a state-building process that ended in the colonial period. In the precolonial reformist context (1830's-1870's), the qaid took on the role of a “genuine official” – a label coined by Haim Gerber in his classic study of the Sanjaq of Jerusalem.⁴ Gerber's expression refers to men who, having mingled with the “local aristocracy” in the initial moments of their career, become fully part of the capital's bureaucratic elite.

When the French imposed a protectorate over Tunisia in 1881, they left the existing Tunisian administrative infrastructure mostly untouched. The institution of the qaid itself remained largely unaltered throughout this transition, with the sole exception that qaids were supervised and at times

² Asma Moalla, *The Regency of Tunis and the Ottoman Porte, 1777-1814: Army and government of a North-Africa Ottoman eyalet at the end of the eighteenth century* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004).

³ Mongi Smida, *Khereddine, ministre réformateur. 1873-1877*, (Tunis: Maison tunisienne de l'édition, 1970) ; Gérard S. Van Krieken, *Khayr al Dîn et la Tunisie (1850-1881)* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976).

⁴ Haim Gerber, *State and Society in the Ottoman Empire* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 40.

even commanded by civil controllers (French officials represented the colonial power of France, under the supervision of the resident general, at the head of the French administration).⁵ In addition to these local colonial controllers, the centralized *direction des affaires indigènes* managed the appointment, control and payment of the qaidal corps. The Tunisian state thus became a composite state, split between a new colonial bureaucracy built on the French administrative model and a set of persisting Beylical institutions left untouched by protectorate authorities. French authorities abolished some public administrations, such as the foreign affairs ministry, that had become useless under colonial rule. The institution of the qaid, however, remained. Indeed, the qaid's fiscal and police prerogatives made him an indispensable tool for maintaining order in colonial Tunisia.

This article argues that the composite nature of the state is not merely relevant on a national scale, with a government divided between colonial administration and traditional state institutions. This “divided rule” was a result of the maintenance of the bey's sovereignty, as Mary Lewis has eloquently demonstrated in her recent book.⁶ The state's composite nature is also observable within the different regional administrations that constituted it, so that colonial Tunisia appears more contrasted and decentralized than what classical approaches suggest. John Eliot used the concept of composite states to describe the early modern Iberian monarchy

⁵ Elisabeth Mouilleau, *Fonctionnaires de la République et artisans de l'Empire. Le cas des Contrôleurs civils en Tunisie (1881-1956)* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 2000).

⁶ Mary D. Lewis, *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881-1938* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

as a union of heterogeneous local and legal structures.⁷ Other historians of the Iberian Peninsula have further enriched this notion to highlight the strong autonomy of local powers, despite a legal link with the sovereign, in order to decenter the history of the state by focusing on the modes of organization and interactions between different 'poles' forming a 'polycentric monarchy'.⁸ In this respect, this article highlights a new scale of regional analysis, in contrast to colonial history that has very often been centered around the political capitals of the Maghreb. It thus builds on recent scholarly trends focusing on « overcome[ing] the centripetal forces of Cairo and Alexandria », and emphasizing the « significance of geographically peripheral places and regions » in Egyptian historiography.⁹

I highlight the local autonomy of the qaid's administration through the example of taxation in Beja, a rural province located in Northwestern Tunisia, between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1930s. This case study reveals the nuances of the relationship between the colonial state and Beylical institutions. It also sheds light on rural-urban relations and Tunisian state-building. I thus propose to re-assess an historiography of colonial Tunisia that was overly focused on the French administration or national movements thereby reducing the qaid to a feudal role. More broadly, I seek to contribute to the history of a central figure in the Middle Eastern

⁷ John H. Elliott, "A Europe of Composite Monarchies", *Past & Present* 137 (1997) : 48-71.

⁸ Pedro Cardim et al. (éd.), *Polycentric monarchies: how did early modern Spain and Portugal achieve and maintain a global hegemony ?* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2013).

⁹ Lucia Carminati, Mohamed Gamal-Eldin, "Decentering Egyptian Historiography: Provincializing Geographies, Methodologies, and Sources," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, no.1 (2021): 107-111.

historiography since the classic study of Albert Hourani on the “politics of notables”.¹⁰ Hourani has stressed the fundamental role played by urban notables (*a’yān*) as intermediaries between the central imperial authority and the local population, and highlighted the fact that their social power was independent from that of the ruler. This article, on the other hand, examines their professionalization and considers them as a new kind of civil servants.

I will focus on Beja in order to explore how governors have shown resistance to tax standardization through a discourse calling for a more decentralized policy. Beja is a region partly representative of the Tunisian countryside more broadly. The city and its surroundings constituted a very fertile region. Beja itself was referred to as the country’s breadbasket¹¹ - an attribute further enhanced by colonization and the mechanization it introduced, which concentrated agriculture on industrial grain farming. The fertility of the soil and the frequency of rainfall protected the region from droughts, which were regularly devastating in the southern regions. As a result, most of Tunisia's wheat, the country's main crop, came from the northwest.¹² There were other eminent agricultural regions, such as the olive-growing areas of the Sahel, but these have received more attention

¹⁰ Albert Hourani, “Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables” In *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle-East: The Nineteenth Century*, eds. William R. Polk and Richard L. Chambers, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 41-68.

¹¹ Ahmed Kassab, *L'évolution de la vie rurale dans les régions de la Moyenne Medjerda et de Béja-Mateur* (Tunis: Publications de l'Université de Tunis, 1979).

¹² Emile Violard, *La Tunisie du Nord. Les contrôles civils de Souk El Arba, Béja, Tunis, Bizerte et Grombalia* (Tunis: Imprimerie Moderne, 1906) ; Protectorat français. Direction générale de l’agriculture, *L’agriculture en Tunisie* (Bourg: imp. De Victor Berthod, 1931).

from Tunisian scholars, if only because they were the regions of origin national movement leaders such as Habib Bourguiba.¹³

The 1930's also offers a particularly interesting perspective, given the major changes that were enacted in Tunisia's tax policy during this period. The abolition of the canonical tax on cereals ('*ushr*') was followed by the abolition of tax farming as a payment system for quids in the context of the Great Depression. These two reforms took place within the framework of a new fiscal policy of the French protectorate.¹⁴ Until the 1930s, France maintained the Beylical tax system which focused mainly on agricultural production and disproportionately affected Tunisian peasants. The '*ushr*' was one of the main taxes alongside the *qānūn*, a tax on olive oil. In the face of the economic crisis, however, taxation shifted towards Europeans and new industrial economic sectors. Direct taxes on wages and salaries took on an essential role compared to agricultural taxes. Reforming the taxes pertaining to agricultural production and abolishing tax-farming was part of a wider movement towards a taxation system that was better adapted to the evolution of the Tunisian economy. I focus on these two reforms in particular because they had the greatest impact on the quids, the Tunisian peasantry and agricultural activity, while the other mainly affected the cities, Europeans and salaried workers.

¹³ See rural cases cited by Ali Mahjoubi, *Les origines du mouvement national en Tunisie* (Tunis: Université de Tunis, 1982).

¹⁴ Nouredine Douigi, "La politique fiscale du protectorat français en Tunisie (1884-1939)", *Revue d'histoire maghrébine* 23, nos. 81-82 (1996) : 183-200.

For all these reasons, this case study is indicative of a transformation of the state in its relations with the countryside and local powers. Although this focus will not prevent us from making comparisons with qaid's elsewhere in the region. In order to veer away from the traditional historiography of colonial Tunisia, this article starts by drawing links between Ottoman studies on the one hand, and the existing literature around qaid's and local power in North Africa on the other (section 1). This latter literature is written in Arabic and too often ignored by colonial historical approaches. Turning to local archives and using different agricultural districts as case-studies, I will then look at the method of collection and subsequent abolition of the *'ushr* tax (section 2). The final section of this paper is dedicated to analyzing the reform of the qaid's salary. All three sections will pay particular attention to the language used by qaid's in order to emphasize the particularity of their role as civil servants.

A Brief History of the Qaid

By analyzing the discourse and practices of the qaid administration in the context of colonial Tunisia, I wish to take a different approach than the historiographical debates based primarily on colonial history, European rivalry and the emergence of national movements in Tunisia.¹⁵ According to

¹⁵ Charles-André Julien, *L'Afrique du Nord en marche, Algérie-Tunisie-Maroc, 1880-1952*

this classic perspective, the quids constituted a feudal and self-interested notable class who embodied and exemplified the collaboration with colonial authorities. In this view, the qaid's legitimacy had been undermined by systematic abuses in the collection of taxes, which led to their replacement after independence by a new political elite stemming from the nationalist intelligentsia. Following recent studies on the imperial transition in Tunisia, I will opt instead for a framework that I deem more apt - that of the Ottoman Empire. These works insist on the inscription of the Ottoman province of Tunisia in the whole empire, through legal links but also family networks.¹⁶ From an administrative perspective, the protectorate retained institutions, like the qaid, that were still those of an Ottoman province. Its provincial scale thereby provides an ideal framework for comparison with studies focused on the Middle East's Arab provinces, even in a colonial context, as well as offering alternative models to the binary opposition between central and local power.

In North Africa and in Morocco in particular, the opposition between center and peripheries was envisaged through the warlike relationship between tribes and the Sultan's state, the Makhzen. After the independence, Moroccan historians strongly criticized the colonial epistemology and shed light on the more subtle, and at times contradictory dynamics of negotiation and obedience between the tribes and the Makhzen, whose legitimacy the

(Paris: Omnibus, 2002); Kenneth Perkins, *A history of Modern Tunisia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ M'hamed Oualdi, *A Slave Between Empires: A Transimperial History of North Africa* (New York : Columbia University Press, 2020).

tribes ultimately recognized.¹⁷ Many subsequent studies have confirmed the existence of alliances between the sovereign power and tribes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁸ In the Tunisian historiography, tribes appearance in the scholarly literature is less pronounced, except for some regional monographs studying local societies based on important colonial documentation.¹⁹ Tunisia is often presented, like in Jean Ganiage's work, as a small province of the Ottoman Empire that – as it tried to counter European ambitions – attempted to reform its taxation system and administration along the lines of the Ottoman Tanzimat, but to no avail.

More recently, historians renewed Jean Ganiage's approach; they have begun to utilize local sources in Arabic to overcome Eurocentrism and examine the endogenous dynamics of state-building in Tunisia. More precisely, scholars have studied the relationship between local communities and the central government through nineteenth century economic and fiscal crises, reducing European actors' agencies on it. Indeed, in these times, the Beylik of Tunis had to tackle several shifts in weather patterns, alongside a decline in its commercial activity, and difficulties in collecting taxes. For this last mission, as early as the eighteenth century, the state could rely on a

¹⁷ Abdallah Laroui, *Les origines sociales et culturelles du nationalisme marocain (1830-1912)* (Paris: Maspéro, 1977); Germain Ayache, *Études d'histoire marocaine* (Rabat: Société marocaine des éditeurs réunis, 1979).

¹⁸ See the literature review in Muḥammad al-'Ayādī, "Al-Madrasa al-Tārīhiyya al-Maghribiyya al-Hadītha al-Mujtam'a: Ishkāliyyāt wa-l-Mafāhīm", in *Dirāsāt fī-l-Mujtama' wa-l-Tārīḥ wa-l-Dīn* (Casablanca : Fondation du Roi Abdulaziz al Saud, 2014).

¹⁹ Sālim Labyaḍ, *Mujtama' al-Qabīla : al-Binā' al-Ijtimā'ī wa Taḥawwūlātuhu fī Tūnis : Dirāsa fī Qabīlat 'Akāra* (Tunis: al-Miṭba'a al-maghāribiyya li-l-ṭibā'a wa-l-nashr wa-l-ishhār, 2006) ; Al-Ṭayyib al-Nafātī, *Mujtama' al-Waṭan al-Qabalī Zaman al-Isti'mār al-Faransī : Dirāsa fī Wāqi' Fuqarā' al-Aryāf 1881-1956* (Tunis: Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, 2012) ; Muḥammad al-Ḥamāṣ, *al-Isti'mār al-Faransī wa Qabā'il al-Wasaṭ wa-l-Janūb bi-l-Bilād al-Tūnsiyya (1881-1950)* (Tunis : Markaz al-Nashr al-Jāmi'ī, 2008).

strong network of local quids allied with powerful families in Tunis.²⁰

Abdelhamid Hénia's book on the South-Western Tunisian region of the Jerid describes attempts by the beys to strengthen central power by replacing local chiefs (or shaykhs) with quids in order to levy taxes.²¹ Thus, when Ahmad Bey (r. 1837-55) imposed a tax reform in the 1840s, he appointed one qaid for the entire region of Jerid, instead of the previous multitude of shaykhs. However, this system created too much antagonism between local societies and the state and numerous abuses of power, which led to the ruin of the region.

Furthermore, the professionalization of the quids remained mostly incomplete. In the mid-nineteenth century, quids came from the military and administrative corps of the Mamluks, the European slaves in the service of the bey of Tunis. M'hamed Oualdi has shown that the qaidal titles given to Mamluks were more an official title than a regional administrative charge, like the fiscal responsibility of geographical districts. There were quids of the Jews, quids of the customs, etc.²² In addition, the qaid had often bought his way into office (the *iltizām* system of tax farming), so that, as Jean Ganiage remarked, they "considered their charges more as profits than as

²⁰ Salwā Hwīdī, *Dirāsa li-fi'at al-Qiyād "al-Thānwiyyīn" min Khilāl Namūdhaj al-Qiyād Muḥammad b. Naṣr b. Malūka* in Hassine-Raouf Hamza, Ali Nouredine, Adel Ben Youssef, Thouraya Belkahia Karoui, *Le personnel de l'État dans la Tunisie moderne et contemporaine* (Tunis: Amal éditions, 2011).

²¹ Abdelhamid Hénia, *Le Grid, ses rapports avec le beylik de Tunis (1676-1840)* (Tunis: Publications de l'Université de Tunis, 1980).

²² M'hamed Oualdi, *Eclaves et maîtres : Les mamelouks au service des beys de Tunis du XVIIe siècle aux années 1880* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011).

administrative jobs."²³ However, Ganiage's analysis is questionable. Although the qaid remained a 'venal' occupation more than a true profession, new rules formalized their service. In 1860, a law regulating the status of governors (*qānūn khidmat al-'ummāl*) was promulgated to determine the mandatory appointment by the bey, the rights and duties of the qaids and the moral obligations attached to their service.²⁴ As was the case for the Fundamental Pact (*'ahd al-amān*) (1857) or the Constitution (1861), the great rebellion of 1864 suspended the enforcement of this text. That same year, the main tax (*majba*) was increased twofold and popular riots targeted specifically the Mamluk qaids because they were perceived as "foreign" by these same tribes they pressed for taxation.²⁵ Abdelhamid Hénia describes the aftermath of the 1864 revolt as a period of "notabilization" of the qaid.²⁶ Tunisian notables gradually replaced Mamluks; they were native to local tribes and regions, and sought to find new revenues by providing services to the state.

In 1881, at the onset of the French protectorate, most qaids, who were now notables in the Houranian sense, proved somewhat distrustful of the colonial state. Throughout the colonial period, historians have depicted qaids in a rather unfavorable light. In this view, the qaids allied themselves with the French in an attempt to increase their personal profits to the detriment

²³ Jean Ganiage, *Les origines du protectorat français en Tunisie (1861-1881)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959), 133.

²⁴ Archives Nationales de Tunisie (ANT), H, 55, Status of the *'ummāl*.

²⁵ Oualdi, *Esclaves et maîtres*, 325-50.

²⁶ Abdelhamid Hénia : « Introduction » in Abdelhamid Hénia (éd.), *Être notable au Maghreb : Dynamique des configurations notabilliaires* (Tunis : Institut de recherche sur le Maghreb contemporain, 2006), 16.

of most Tunisians. While Julia Clancy-Smith and Arnold Green have shown the withdrawal tactics of the ulama to minimizing their collaboration with the colonial authorities,²⁷ other historians have portrayed the qaid office as one of the main pillars of French colonial domination in Tunisia.²⁸ According to colonial sources and taxpayer petitions, quids were the champions of tax abuse and took advantage of French presence to establish their own brand of “despotism” (*zulm*).²⁹ The colonial alliance finally discredited them after independence in 1956 and a large proportion of qaidal families were excluded from the new state administration.³⁰ The quids’ intrinsically conservative nature was to be blamed for their passivity when faced with the changes brought on by the colonial state and nationalist movements. Still according to this line of argument, both of them held a monopoly over the initiative of reforms.³¹ Very few scholars have seriously considered the role of the qaid as a civil servant, either as a potential guarantor of the public interest, or at the very least as a political - rather than solely self-interested - actor.

However, this is how Albert Hourani presented the notable of the nineteenth-century Middle East, a local political actor with whom the state

²⁷ Julia Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint. Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) ; Arnold Green, *The Tunisian Ulama - 1873-1915, Social Structure and Response to ideological currents*, (Leiden: Brill, 1978).

²⁸ Ali Mahjoubi, *Les origines du mouvement national*, 92 ; ‘Adnān al-Manṣar, *Istrāṭīġiyyā al-Haymana, al-hHimāya al-Faransiyya wa Mu’assasāt al-Dawla al-Tūnsiyya* (Sousse, Tunisia: Faculté de lettres et de Sciences humaines de Sousse, 2003), 367.

²⁹ al-Ḥamāṣ, *al-Isti’mār al-Faransī wa Qabā’il al-Wasaṭ wa-l-Janūb*, 286.

³⁰ Khalifa Chater, “Changements politiques et exclusion lors de la décolonisation: le cas du Makhzen en Tunisie (1954-1959),” *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 69, no. 2 (2004) : 63-75.

³¹ Lisa Anderson. *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830-1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

had to deal to reach the local population. I argue against the claim that qajids were merely local notables who subserviently collaborated with colonial authorities. Rather, they must be understood as officials with fiscal prerogatives who defended what I call a form of "local legitimacy." This legitimacy stemmed from their attempt to reconcile local specificities with fiscal policies and public interest. This is partly the line sketched by Hourani's thesis; notables maintained ambivalent relations of dependence and resistance vis-à-vis the state, whether that state is Ottoman, Tunisian or French. Admittedly, by pitting the notables' "conservatism" against the external state's "modernity," Hourani's paradigm runs the risk of becoming excessively binary.³² Extending this 'politics' of the notables into the twentieth century, and complementing this approach with more recent work on the history of the Ottoman provinces, I will discuss this tendency of the notables towards conservatism by showing another type of discourse based on the general interest.

The historiography of the Ottoman Empire provides the tools to reassess the relationship between the qajid and the central state, in particular with regards to taxation. In both early modern and modern history scholarship, an impressive set of local monographs aimed at highlighting a "bottom-up view of Ottoman history" that challenges the "strong state paradigm" initially made tempting by the centralized nature of the Ottoman state.³³ More

³² See Gelvin, James L. "The 'Politics of Notables' Forty Years After," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, 40, no. 1 (2006): 19-29.

³³ Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus*,

particularly, this new conception of the articulation between imperial and local power was conducted through a renewed study of taxation, which brought the study of notables to the fore. Historians have linked the sociology of local governors with the features of tax farming. As early as in the sixteenth century, the system of tax farming led to a paradox identified by Metin I. Kunt: "The candidate who could afford a large retinue while out of office could get a position and therefore have official revenues with which to increase his household".³⁴ Much like the Tunisian qaid, the Ottoman governor was a potentate at the head of a local household and was on the lookout for ways to make profit. As Linda Darling has pointed out, however, this did not prevent the central government from adapting its tax policies through petitions from residents and from adjusting its demands to local specificities.³⁵ In the nineteenth century, this mode of negotiation was still valid, because the Sublime Porte could not cut the state off from the "local bases of economic and political power without compensating them adequately."³⁶ At a time when the Ottoman Empire was gradually putting an end to tax farming, the Ottoman Government had to find intermediate solutions adapted to each situation.

Therefore, given that local elites constantly challenged the administrative control of the state, the study of tax farming sheds light on the opposition

1700-1900 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 2.

³⁴ I. Metin Kunt, *The Sultan's Servants: The transformation of Ottoman Provincial Government, 1550-1650* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 77.

³⁵ Linda T. Darling, *Revenue-raising and legitimacy: Tax Collection and Finance Administration in the Ottoman Empire. 1560-1660* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 281.

³⁶ John K. Bragg, *Ottoman Notables and Participatory Politics. Tanzimat Reform in Tokaet, 1839-1876* (London, New York: Routledge, 2014), 5.

between the central state and local authorities. This is why Dina Rizk Khoury invites us to overcome the opposition between a (strong) centralized state and a (weak) decentralized state.³⁷ More explicitly, as Ehud R. Toledano emphasizes, the process of “localization” (i.e. the promotion of Arab or other native elites) was accompanied by a parallel process of “ottomanization” (their integration within Ottoman political culture) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³⁸ In a practical way, the notables were studied as “partners,” as early as the eighteenth century, of the imperial government, rather than as its adversaries.³⁹ Taxation was one of the means of “lengthy negotiation” between the central power and local Ottomanized elites.⁴⁰ The essential idea of Ottoman provincial studies was indeed that of negotiation. Yet one should ask, can this be applied to a colonial context? Can French colonial power be likened - with regards to its relationship with local authorities - to the Ottoman Empire? Do Arab notables have a comparable attitude towards Istanbul or Paris, two imperial capitals?

Admitting the differences in scale, some trends from Ottoman history are relevant to this Tunisian study. The comparison between these two contexts is not new. Jens Hanssen, Thomas Philipp, and Stefan Weber advocate the idea of a “grammar of difference” (inherited from new imperial history) in the

³⁷ Dina Rizk Khoury, *State and Provincial society in the Ottoman Empire: Mosul, 1540-1834* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 10.

³⁸ Ehud R. Toledano, “The Emergence of Ottoman-Local Elites (1700-1900): A Framework for Research,” in *Middle Eastern Politics and Ideas. A History from Within*, ed. Ilan Pappé and Moshe Maoz (London: I. B. Tauris, 1997), 154.

³⁹ Ali Yaycioglu, *Partners of the Empire: The Crisis of the Ottoman Order in the Age of Revolutions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

⁴⁰ Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine*, 19.

Ottoman context.⁴¹ Two concrete objects are considered significant to reassess the relationship between center and periphery both in North African and Ottoman context. The first is the distribution of fiscal resources because, according to Randi Deguilhem, these constitute the true measure of local autonomy.⁴² The second object refers to the institutions responsible for collecting such resources, with Jens Hanssen underlining the multiplication of local councils, inspections, commissions above the governors that "channel the centre-periphery relations into *in situ* institutions" in the nineteenth century.⁴³

During the colonial period, Tunisia imperfectly followed this pattern. Since the protectorate treaty of 1881, its legal link with the Sublime Porte had been broken. The French preferred to abolish intermediary institutions and favor a more vertical and concentrated administration, in line with their plan of domination. Nevertheless, as outlined above, Ottoman historiography provides us these two useful ideas for Tunisian history. First, the relevance of taxation as an indicator of autonomy and as a process subjected to negotiation. Second, quids, much like Ottoman governors, tended to compare provinces with each other in order to highlight the specificity of

⁴¹ "Did the benevolent *tanzīmāt* reforms (*Tanzīmāt-l ḥayriye*) turn the Ottoman Empire into a colonial empire? Is it time to 'mainstream' the Ottoman Empire and integrate it into academic debates on imperialism and colonialism elsewhere in the world, or would we abandon the specificities of the historical Ottoman context?" Jens Hanssen, Thomas Philipp, and Stefan Weber, "Towards a New Urban Paradigm," in *The Empire in the city: Arab Provincial Capitals in the late Ottoman Empire*, (Würzburg, Germany: Ergon Verlag, 2002), 6.

⁴² According to Randi Deguilhem, "True localism expresses the degree of self-sufficiency, self-determination and solidarity in a society, not just the origins of its rulers or the degree to which external control is successfully resisted"; Randi Deguilhem, « "Centralized Authority and Local Decisional Power," » in Hanssen et al, *The Empire in the City*, 219.

⁴³ Jens Hanssen, "Practices of Integration - Center-Periphery Relations in the Ottoman Empire," in Jens Hanssen et al, *The Empire in the City*, 56.

their own region and subsequently adapt rules that had been adopted at the imperial level.⁴⁴ Looking at their discourse regarding the state, the function of Ottoman governors appears to be a real professional occupation with a specific administrative *savoir-faire*.

The sources exploited by students/scholars of Ottoman studies are also worthy of attention. I wish to emphasize the need to rebuild an “emic perspective”⁴⁵ through the archives of local actors in order to counterbalance our dependence on colonial or foreign sources which tend to present the fiscal regime of Ottoman provinces as chaotic and inefficient. For the Ottoman Empire, judicial sources overstate the logic of conflicts between the central state and local elites. John Bragg used *shari`a* court records, which he calls “prosaic archives,” to better understand the participation of local elites (who staff and oversee *shari`a* courts) in imperial reforms.⁴⁶ Haïm Gerber circumvented the lack of historical chronicles on Jerusalem – a scarcity that also afflicts colonial Tunisia – by studying the minutes of the *mejlis-i Idāre* of the Sanjaq of Jerusalem.⁴⁷ This administrative council was responsible for collecting taxes, which made it a space for negotiations and conflicts between collectors and citizens. However, these local archives do not provide an infallible access to the minds of local actors, since the

⁴⁴ Marc Aymes, « Affaires courantes pour marcheurs d'empire : Le métier d'administrateur dans les provinces ottomanes au xixe siècle, » *Genèses* 72, no. 3 (2008): 4-25.

⁴⁵ For the Bedouins, see Johann Büssow, Kurt Franz, and Stefan Leder, “The Arab East and the Bedouin Component in Modern History: Emerging Perspectives on the Arid Lands as a Social Space,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 58, no. 1-2 (2015): 1-19.

⁴⁶ Bragg, *Ottoman Notables*, 6.

⁴⁷ Gerber, *State and Society*.

centralization of the state goes hand in hand with the centralization of the archives. As Marc Aymes points out, these local archives tend to speak the same language and use the same administrative categories as the state.⁴⁸ However, despite these biases, it is possible to grasp the "localist ideology of resistance"⁴⁹ through some of the arguments contained in specific documentation. Petitions for example are particularly valuable. They show variations in the interpretations of the law between the Bedouins and the State, through the nature of the dispute with the state (land tenure, tax collection, military conscription...) but, more essentially, through the moral vocabulary and values used to support the request, particularly that of justice.⁵⁰ Through the study of this language, John Chalcraft shows that the state was not only a place of oppression but "the referee and locus of claim making."⁵¹

I also wish to highlight a source that is both local and central: the correspondence between qajids and the high officials of Tunis, held at the National Archives of Tunisia. These letters (circulars, acknowledgements of receipt, daily reports) are subject to strict regulation, but at the same time they allowed qajids to freely express their specific needs, as well as their personal conceptions of the public interest. This correspondence is kept in

⁴⁸ Marc Aymes, *A Provincial History of the Ottoman Empire: Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2014).

⁴⁹ Johann Büssow, "Street Politics in Damascus: Kinship and Other Social Categories as Bases of Political Action, 1830-1841," *History of the Family* 16, no. 2 (2011): 108-25.

⁵⁰ Yuval Ben-Bassat, "Bedouin Petitions from Late Ottoman Palestine: Evaluating the Effects of Sedentarization," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 58, no. 1-2 (2015): 135-62.

⁵¹ John Chalcraft, "Engaging the state: Peasants and Petitions in Egypt on the Eve of Colonial Rule," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37, no. 3 (2005): 303-25.

the archives of the civil controllers (in the diplomatic archives in Nantes, France, and in the National Archives of Tunisia, in Tunis) but also in the archives of the *Section d'État*, the office of the Prime Minister. In the latter case, they are organized thematically - for example, by fiscal issues. The correspondence was written in Arabic, with a brief French translation, often authored by a secretary and signed by the qaid. All of it was handwritten, although some of the Prime Minister's circulars were printed in Arabic. Civil controllers could annotate on each piece of mail they checked.

Many subjects were mentioned in this correspondence: police reports, judicial decisions, economic bulletins, the appointment and management of civil officials, etc. Fiscal matters occupied an important place and were representative of the form of this correspondence. More importantly, the issue of the remuneration of civil servants was particularly revealing of the daily work of the qaid and his conception of the general interest. In explaining the inadequacy of their remuneration, they listed all the functions that fell under their authority and their intrinsic contribution to public service. In this respect, qaids presented themselves as actors of the state, at the head of a small administration, rather than as mere spokespersons of notability. Unfortunately, we are often forced to use a comparative lexical analysis of their arguments, not least because of the lack of biographical information on these qaids. This shortcoming derives from archival logics; the files of the National Archives of Tunis are arranged thematically, for instance according to different types of taxes. The information on qaids

themselves, on the other hand, must be explored by consulting their personal files – which are often incomplete, and even nonexistent in the case of the many qaidats of lesser importance or shorter mandates. Only additional *in situ* surveys could make up for this deficiency.

On a broader scale, administrative sources give us some features of the qaidal corps. In the mid-1930s, the number of *caïdats* (the districts of a caïd) was reduced from 80 to 35.⁵² The qaidats were generally literate but without dedicated training, they were recruited from conservative social forces and landowners and, in the military territories of the South, among local leaders, appointed in particular for their warrior skills. However, in the 1930s, the corps was socially heterogeneous, insofar as it included members of the Beylical aristocracy, elites from Tunis, but also powerful local families or tribal chiefs. At this respect, the Tunisian corps is more precociously bureaucratized than in Morocco, where the qaidats often came from the region they lead. Tunisia rather followed the Algerian model, even if, as Colette Establet has shown for the nineteenth century, the qaid has remained an ambivalent figure, somewhere between the civil servant and the tribal chief.⁵³

The Discourse of Local Legitimacy

⁵² For these details, see Arthur Girault, *Principes de colonisation et de législation coloniale. La Tunisie et le Maroc* (Paris: Sirey, 1936) and Antoine Perrier, “La liberté des protégés: Souverains, ministres et serviteurs des monarchies marocaine et tunisienne sous protectorat français (1881-1956)” (PhD, Sciences Po, 2019), 292.

⁵³ Colette Establet, *Être caïd dans l’Algérie coloniale* (Paris: éditions du CNRS, 1991).

With this in mind, the article turns to the history of tax reform in the Beja district between the two World Wars. The canonical grain tax is a perfect example of negotiation between the state and local elites. Regarding the commissions set up locally to determine the basis for this tax, the qaid defended the legitimacy of actors from the "country" (*waṭan*), to calculate the tax. The exercise of tax sovereignty was therefore shared between various actors, in the name of a common ideal of public service and the interest of the inhabitants.

The *'ushr* (in French sources "achour") represented the tithe or tenth in Islamic law. Although not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an, it is part of a number of canonical taxes established by the Prophet Muhammad on fruits and cereals. Depending on the Islamic legal school under consideration, its exact amount, its beneficiaries or whether it serves as alms (or *zakāt*) were subject to debate.⁵⁴ In the case of Jerusalem, Gerber explains that this "main land tax" was impossible to collect through a direct system of a tax collection (the *emanet* system), despite an attempt to do so during the Tanzimat.⁵⁵ This tax required many small-scale collectors in close contact with local farmers to calculate the tax base. In Tunisia, the *'ushr* had to be proportional to the volume of harvests. Its irregularity throughout the years allowed the quids, according to Ganiage, to impose a system of corruption-based

⁵⁴ T. Sato,, "'Ushr," in: *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Second Edition. Consulted online on 26 August 2019 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/9789004206106_eifo_COM_1309>.

⁵⁵ Gerber, *State and Society*, 48.

distribution which essentially burdened the poorest peasants.⁵⁶ In 1856, the Muhammad Bey transformed this into a fixed contribution calculated on the cultivated acreage, and no longer on the product of the harvest. However, the methods of calculating this acreage, the extent of which varied greatly with weather conditions, led to further complaints and abuses⁵⁷.

These conflicts led the Tunisian government to create local commissions in 1868 in order to calculate the tax rate according to which the quids could collect the *'ushr*.⁵⁸ These local institutions decided on the size of plots or exemptions for certain crops. France maintained them in the early years of the protectorate. From April 4, 1903 onwards, the state compensated the members of this commission in the hope of guaranteeing their independence from farmers and to prevent any attempts of bribery.⁵⁹ The commissions were locally composed of members appointed by the prime minister (the Tunisian chief of government) on the proposal of each qaid, and chosen from amongst the honorable and competent persons of the qaidship (mainly the notables, *a'yān*).⁶⁰ While civil controllers could attend commissions and monitor their decisions,⁶¹ local Tunisian actors carried out most of the day-to-day tasks. These tax calculation commissions were at the heart of the relationship between central and local government and they symbolized a

⁵⁶ Ganiage, *Les origines du protectorat*, 99.

⁵⁷ Van Krieken, *Khayr al Dîn et la Tunisie*, 200.

⁵⁸ ANT, E, 23/1, Note for the Secretary General to the Director of Finance, 7 August 1901.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ ANT, E, 23/1, Circular of the Prime Minister to the quids, March 6, 1909.

⁶¹ ANT, E, 23/1, Circular of the Resident General to Civil Controllers, April 3, 1901.

logic of negotiation defended by the qaid and undermined by the colonial power when the latter imposed standard rates at the national scale.

This can be illustrated by studying a letter from the qaid of Teboursouk (a small municipality south of Béja which fell within the jurisdiction of the same district) to the director of finance of the protectorate, a French administrator whose role was equivalent to that of a finance minister of Tunisia. In this letter, dated May 17, 1909, the qaid presented tax collection as a mission intrinsically carried out in consultation with local actors. In the original version of his letter (which was partially translated in French but I refer to the Arabic text due to simplifications or rewriting of certain passages by the colonial interpreter), he recalled that the prime minister asked him to designate the "suitable" persons to compose the commission, in particular for the positions of chairpersons, intendant (*amīn*), or clerks (*'udūl*).⁶² However, it would appear that the appointed committee did not take the qaid's suggestions into account. In his reaction, the qaid protested, first by presenting a moral argument:

Your first letter showed confidence (*thiqa*) in your auxiliary the qaid and your clemency (*ra'fa*) towards the [Tunisian] subjects, after which you cancelled the effects (*abṭala*) of this confidence by the content of the second letter. In this case, taking into account the qaid's opinion means encouraging his advice (*nuṣḥ*), his wise judgment (*ḥazm*) and his concern

⁶² ANT, E, 23/1, Letter from the qaid of Teboursouk to the Director of Finance, May 17, 1909.

for service (*i'tinā' bi-l-khidma*). You thus increase his consideration (*i'tibār*) in the eyes of the inhabitants.

All the elements of a political Islamic axiology were here brought together: the need for advice was a canonical obligation of a sovereign, as evidenced in the Sunni legal tradition and in the literature of mirror of princes.⁶³ The *khidma* (service) was a common value for all public servants within the Tunisian monarchy, based on continuity, public interest and personal abnegation. The qaid therefore spoke to the French director as an advisor would address his prince. He added that his local power closely depended on the consideration given to him by the sovereign or his representatives. Respecting his opinion was therefore in the interest of central government.

The qaid's second argument highlighted the local legitimacy of the commission's members. He referred to a "*lajna min al-'aml*" (literally a "commission from the qaidship"), which the French administration translated as "local commission." The qaid also mentioned a "*lajna waṭan*" ("country commission"), the same institution but with an emphasis on its local origin. In effect, the qaid alluded to a commission composed of local men, the "*ahl al-waṭan*." The word *waṭan* refers to the homeland, the place of birth or the small country, the *balad* (*bled* in local dialect). The argument put forward by the qaid was pragmatic. In his view, such a commission could contribute to "facilitate the operation of the public service (*al-suhūla fī-l-khidma*)" because

⁶³ Makram Abbas, *Islam et politique à l'âge classique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009). For an example of such literature in North Africa, see ETTY TEREM, "Navigating Modernity: Lessons in Government and Statecraft in Precolonial Morocco," *Mediterranean Studies* 25, no. 1 (2017): 76-97.

local members knew which seeds (*badhra*) were sowed in their lands. The qaid added that he endeavored to be irreproachable in the eyes of both the administration and the inhabitants who knew him. He also outlined the virtuous effects of reputation and local knowledge on agricultural engineering, and claimed towards the end of his argument that the local commission would save on travel expenditures that should have been paid to foreign members. He concluded that taxation is most effective in the context of *in situ* control by local men and relevant inhabitants.

In the same vein, the qaid presented its qaidship as a specific territory maladjusted for uniform legislation from the capital city. The qaid asserted that it was a “self-evident fact” (*shay’ ṭaffif*) that seeding methods change according to location, rainfall and soil type, and that therefore “it is not possible for a collector (*amīn*) from a place other than this one (*min al-jihā ghayr al-latī huwa minhā*) to know all the local circumstances that allowed him to establish [his report] accurately (*ḥaqīqan*).” The criterion for local membership is rudimentary and vague; one should come from somewhere in the district. In nineteenth century Damascus, Johann Büssow notes that the use in petitions from residents of the phrase “local people” (*ahl al-bilād*) implied a political purpose. Indeed, this expression refers to Muslims specifically, as opposed to Christians in a multi-faith context.⁶⁴ By analogy, I suggest that the frequent use of the word *waṭan* was also political in a colonial context, because it could distinguish the inhabitants of the qaidship

⁶⁴ Büssow, “Street Politics in Damascus,” 115.

not only from "foreigners" who had come from the capital or from another part of Tunisia, but also from French settlers.

The qaid's letter presented participation in tax collection by the country's men as necessary to the qaidship as well as to the state itself. A "*waṭan* commission" would guarantee the "integrity" (*qawām*) of the treatment of peasants (*fallāḥ*) in order to avoid anything that could harm "the state's share" (*ḥaqq al-dawla*, in the sense of the lion's share) in relation to the "inhabitants' share" (*ḥaqq al-ahālī*). For the qaid in short, an effective commission was beneficial to both the state and the inhabitants of the qaidship. As a result, the qaid appeared as a civil servant, adopting a common bureaucratic language of financial efficiency with the director of finance. He explained that the local expertise of the inhabitants would be necessary as long as there was no "school that would concretely teach how to determine the surface area (*qays*), surveying (*misāḥa*) and sowing (*badhr*) for all regions of Tunisia." The legitimacy of local actors was therefore essentially based on a pragmatic argument, in addition to the moral need for consultation. The qaid of Téboursoúk highlighted the contradictions of a centralizing policy desired by the colonial power but lacking the concrete means to achieve its purposes. In the absence of a professional corps of surveyors, the notables from the country remained essential. If we ignore what happened next in this exchange of opinions, it is noteworthy that the Téboursoúk qaid presented himself as the champion of both local and state interests.

Thirty years later, the Tunisian government would come to abolish the cereal tax, which was considered to be unequal, as part of a rural development program initiated by the protectorate in 1935.⁶⁵ This measure aimed to correct the growing inequalities between small Tunisian farmers and French settlers which were due to the global economic crisis. The wheat economy, mainly destined for export to France, was particularly affected. The collapse of wheat prices, the difficulty of selling agricultural production in France, combined with several years of drought, caused famines.⁶⁶ In this context, inequalities between Tunisians and French were glaring. The settlers monopolized the most fertile land and the modern agricultural techniques, through mechanization. As a result, while a few hundred French settlers produced 2 million quintals of wheat from 170,000 hectares, 250 to 350,000 Tunisian fellahs produced only 1.8 million quintals from 600 to 650,000 hectares.⁶⁷ In addition, the French paid a tiny amount of tax compared to the Tunisians - for example, they owed only one tenth of the *'ushr*. From 1936 onwards, when the Front Populaire (an alliance of left-wing movements) came to power in France with a policy designed to reduce social inequalities in North Africa, the colonial state took a series of measures to intervene in the regulation of the economy and to help disenfranchised peasants.

⁶⁵ Al-Ḥamāṣ, *al-Isti'mār al-Faransī wa Qabā'il al-Wasaṭ wa-l-Janūb*, 267.

⁶⁶ Jean Poncet, "La Crise des années 30 et ses répercussions sur la colonisation française en Tunisie," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 63, nos. 232-233 (1976) : 622-627.

⁶⁷ Poncet, "La crise des années 1930", 624.

The decree of December 26, 1935 abolished the “achour tax on cereals and legumes” .⁶⁸ The prime minister's circular and the acknowledgement of receipt of this circular by the qaid provide insight into how the measure was received at the local level. The official speech is contained in the circular of January, 13, 1936 addressed by Prime Minister al-Hadi al-Akhwa. The reform was aimed at “improving the situation of peasants” (*taḥsīn mu‘tabar fī ḥālat al-fallāḥīn*), especially the smallholder (*aṣghār*). The taxes that replaced the ‘*ushr* were based on real capital (animal and grain) rather than on the expected number of crops or plot size. In other words, the state imposed a uniform mathematical measure that no longer depended on how grain was grown or on weather conditions. As a consequence, the power of Tunis no longer depended on the local knowledge that the qaid of Téboursouk considered essential.

The letter in which the Béja qaid, Muhammad al-Zawari, acknowledged receipt of these instructions emphasized his role as representative, but also the consultative nature of this mode of governance. He brought together “khalifats [delegate of the qaid, either in his court, in the city or the countryside], shaykhs [leaders of tribes or very small towns], elders and peasants of the Béja khalifat [the city of Béja], the heads of sectors (*‘umda*)” i.e. the local actors with whom he governed, to announce the news.⁶⁹ His letter did not purport to mask the climate of economic concern of 1936. At the meeting where he announced the abolition of the tax, those present

⁶⁸ ANT, E, 23/8, Undated secret intelligence note.

⁶⁹ ANT, E, 23/8, Letter from the qaid de Béja to the Prime Minister, January 16, 1936.

expressed “hopes for a better future and a recovery of the situation of the peasants (*bādiya*).”⁷⁰ The qaid reported the suppression of the *‘ushr* announced by the civil controller, insisting, once again, on the importance of consultation:

“We met at the civil control headquarters. The session was opened by the civil controller with a presentation (*baṣṭ*) that went into great detail (*mushab*) about the interest of this reform, the overwhelming benefits (*ghazīr*) for all and in particular for small farmers. He drew attention to the commendable behavior (*ḥamīd*) of the government, which never stops working with consultation (*nuṣḥ*) and clemency (*ra’fa*).”

These last two words, already present in the 1909 letter from the qaid of Teboursouk, were not mentioned in the French translation. They nevertheless allude to the political ideal of good governance in the Islamic tradition, a common language assumed by Muslim scholars and state actors like the qaid. In his study of Muhammad al-Zawari, Adnen Mansar describes the qaid as a zealous henchman of French domination across his qaidal positions in the country.⁷¹ Zawari emphasized with vivid and suggestive expressions the colonial propaganda: the word *mushab* can mean not only prolific but also talkative, overly long, just as *ghazīr* is not far from overabundant or overflowing, like river water or rain.⁷² Unconditional

⁷⁰ The word usually refers to the Bedouin steppe but, in this context, it is definitely the countryside.

⁷¹ Adnan Mansar « Pouvoir caïdal et régime colonial en Tunisie dans l’entre-deux-guerres : le cas Zouari, » *Rawafid* 5 (1999-2000) : 41-76.

⁷² Marcelin Beaussier, *Dictionnaire pratique arabe-français* (Algiers, 1887), 473. This dictionary does not mention *mushab*.

collaboration with the French was thus obvious but the qaid also addressed his letter to the prime minister when he expressed his concerns for the economic situation in his district. Indeed, the removal of the “achour” did not help the qaid's affairs, as was illustrated by the protest of his successor the following year.

The Abolition of Tax Farming: A State Within a State

Until 1937, the qaid's salary was proportional to the taxes he levied. Scholars had often interpreted this system as an invitation to the misappropriation of tax funds; however it appeared to be more complex than a mere vestige of feudalism. Another letter from the Béja qaid shows that the qaid was at the head of a small administration, making them a part of the composite state. He took care of the salaries of the employees and paid for office supplies with his own financial resources, that is, without any support from the State.

In the Ottoman taxation system, the prevalent method of remuneration is tax farming (*iltizām*), a common system throughout the Ottoman Empire with medieval origins in the system of *iqṭā'*.⁷³ *Iqṭā'* was the concession granted by Mamluk princes to their servants on a territory in which they benefitted from taxes on and ownership of the land. It must be distinguished from the

⁷³ Claude Cahen considered the comparison between *iqṭā'* and feudalism, despite strong similarities, irrelevant. “L'évolution de l'*iqṭā'* du IXe au XIIIe siècle : contribution à une histoire comparée des sociétés médiévales,” *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 8, no. 1 (1953) : 25-52.

Ottoman *timar*, which did not imply a right of ownership of the land.⁷⁴ In Tunisia, the tax concession, very similar to the *timar*, did not entail any property rights for its beneficiaries. The *iltizām* presented many tax disadvantages for the central power, leading the bey Hammuda Pasha to reform it at the beginning of the nineteenth century, while it had already been abolished in Egypt in the early 1810's.⁷⁵ This system never fully satisfied the Tunisian state although it had the advantage of not paying wages directly from the government budget. As a consequence, the qaids had to take care of their entire administration with their own resources.

However, the colonial power decided on a reform to improve the financial reliability of tax collection.⁷⁶ The purpose of this reform was also political, as tax issues constituted an important reason behind popular discontent during this period. The Destour, a nationalist party created in 1920, made the issue of unequal taxation between the French and Tunisians the cornerstone of its anti-colonial program.⁷⁷ In the 1930s, the leader of the Neo-Destour (a new political formation resulting from a split with the old Destour leadership), Habib Bourguiba, stood up for small farmers ruined by the crisis and blamed colonial authorities for the famines.⁷⁸ If the peasant forces remained passive actors compared to the urban elites or the workers' movements, their

⁷⁴ Nicolas Michel, *L'Égypte des villages autour du 16ème siècle* (Paris: Peeters, 2018), 105.

⁷⁵ Robert Hunter, *Egypt under the Khedives - 1805-1879: From Household Government to Modern Bureaucracy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984), 19.

⁷⁶ Perrier, « La liberté des protégés », 292.

⁷⁷ *La Tunisie Martyre, ses revendications* (Paris: Jouve and Cie, 1920).

⁷⁸ Mahjoubi, *Les origines du mouvement national*, 542.

discontent contributed to the unpopularity of the protectorate.⁷⁹ The fiscal reform, which extended taxes to Europeans, also intended to moralize the collection systems. A section of the quids themselves were in favor of this reform, which was synonymous with professionalization, and which held the promise of greater economic security and social recognition thanks to the new administrative salary.⁸⁰ Economic conditions having slightly improved by 1936, this facilitated the promulgation of the beylical decree of May 31, 1937, which gave the quids a legal status and a direct salary. The government was proceeding cautiously; by no means did it turn the quids into civil servants. Indeed, protectorate authorities were keen to maintain full freedom in the appointment of quids. The Inspector General of Administrative Services Charles Saumagne wrote in 1937: “[the qaid] is a trusted man chosen by the prince to represent him personally, to whom he agrees to pay taxes, which he appoints to the policing, who does not enjoy a salary leading to membership of the Welfare Society, and whom the Prince dismisses whenever he wishes.”⁸¹ This is why the decree did not replace tax leasing with a single salary but gave all the quids a choice between two forms of remuneration.

A letter from the qaid of the Hammama (a large tribe in southwest Tunisia)⁸² shows how the qaid received this reform. In his letter, the tribal

⁷⁹ Mouldi Lahmar, “La ‘révolte du pain’ dans la campagne tunisienne. Notables, ouvriers et Fellahs,” *Esprit* 100, no. 4 (1985) : 9-19.

⁸⁰ Perrier, « *La liberté des protégés*, » 306.

⁸¹ The Welfare society was a kind of mutual pension fund for Tunisian civil servants. ANT, A, 201/67, note of January 25, 1937.

⁸² Mustapha Tlili, “Ahmed Ben Youssef des Hamâma : Itinéraire d’un notable de milieu tribal

governor describes the reform as that of a “beneficent government (*janāb al-ḥukūma al-khayriyya*)” which has endowed the governors of the kingdom (*‘ummāl al-mamlaka*) with a regular income (*dakhl rāji’*) as a salary (*murattab*).”.⁸³ He explains that the qaid had the choice “between two options” (*amarayn*), the first consisting in exercising a “deduction (*baqā’*)” on the taxes (*ḍarā’ib*) owed to them,” allowing to retain the old organization of tax farming. The other choice was formulated as a “compensation for this salary by a qaid’s pay” (*ta’wīḍ dhalika bi-jirāyya qā’ida*). It is this latter option that the qaid chose.

That this decree coincided with the abolition of the *‘ushr* tax led to a tricky situation in the opinion of the qaid of Béja/Beja. A long letter he wrote reveals the importance in the qaidship of what I call a “state within the state” , i.e. each region had its own autonomous administration based on the model of the state. This letter could be compared with a contemporary letter from the qaid of Kairouan, another large agricultural region of Tunisia, a little further south, 50km from the east coast. The discourse of the qaid of Béja could indeed be interpreted as a desire for state decentralization (although it must be noted that the word is mostly an anachronism) insofar as it condemned the inappropriateness of a uniform tax legislation throughout Tunisia. The unfortunate fate of Beja, the cereal qaidship par excellence, was

au xix^e siècle”, in Abdelhamid Hénia, *Être notable au Maghreb*, 220-27.

⁸³ Centre des archives diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), 1/TU/1V/2498, Letter from the qaid of the Ḥammāma to the Prime Minister, 23 December 1937.

emphasized by the qaid Muhammad al-‘Ajimi in his letter of January 8, 1939 to the prime minister:

“This new status (*al-niḡām al-jadīd*) fixed a percentage of the tax levies [in the event that the qaid chose to be paid according to the “first option”, as mentioned above]. But there is no doubt that the Béja qaidship is above all a rural qaidship (*‘aml fallāḡī qabl kull shay’*), where a large part of the taxes (*ḡarā’ib*) that can be levied in other qaidships such as the *qānūn* (tax on olive and date trees) or those on olives, palm trees, resources of the continent or sulphate for seeds do not exist. As a result, the qaid will be prejudiced (*sayaḡrimu*) from the beginning of this year by the abolition of the collection of ‘*ushr*’.⁸⁴

This passage provides us with a key insight into the issue of resource sharing as part of the relationship between local authorities and the state. The abolition of one tax, and its subsequent replacement by another, could favor one territory or prejudice another. Colonial public policies were not yet constrained by “spatial planning,” which required the equal distribution of resources among the territories. Spatial planning was to gain traction only in post-1945 French public policy. The disadvantages that were soon to emerge from abolishing the cereal tax reflected not only the colonial authoritarian decision-making process, but also the *raison d’être* of the tax farming system. Despite the numerous abuses of the quids, it was a way of adapting

⁸⁴ ANT, E, 3/24, Letter from the qaid of Béja to the Prime Minister, 8 January 1939.

each qaid's income to the rural features of his territory, in the absence of a fixed salary.

These rural characteristics appeared even more clearly in the complaint of the qaid of Kairouan. A few weeks after the Béja qaid, the qaid Nasr b. Sa'id b. Qasr wrote to the prime minister to draw a link between the low salary and the very particular climatic conditions of those years. In his letter he described "the crisis" (*al-azma*), "low rainfall" (*qillat al-amṭār*), and the "lack of sunshine" (*faqdan ra'n*) which has also hit his "colleagues" (*zumalā'*) in others qaidships in western Tunisia.⁸⁵ The local resources of Tunisian civil servants were fundamentally agricultural resources and therefore subject to the vagaries of the seasons. He added "our [tax] share needed to carry out our fundamental missions (*qiyām ma'mūriyyatinā*) has become superficial (*ṭafīf*)." It is striking that both the Béja and the Kairouan qaid use the same word "*ṭafīf*" to describe the share of tax revenue left to them by the state. It is also clear that the alternative qaid's pay was insufficient to compensate for this loss of income.

In many cases, the problem of low salaries for local governors was correlated with their private wealth. It is because they were poorly paid that the qaid needed to be already rich in order to carry out their duties. Public and private money thus merged into a practice associated with personal enrichment. Naturally, the Béja qaid justified this need for money in terms of public service missions which, if we put aside the assessment of the grounds

⁸⁵ CADN, 1/TU/AV/2493/3, Letter from the qaid of Kairouan to the Prime Minister, January 17, 1938.

to his needs, give us an insight into the state-within-the-state that the qaid managed:

The administration of the qaidship (*idārat al-'aml*) is composed of two khalifats, seven titular secretaries (*kataba rasmiyyīn*), in addition to assistants (*mu'āwanīn*) for all administrative, judicial, executive and military services (*al-khidmāt al-idāriyya wa-l-'adaliyya wa-l-tanfīdh wa-l-ḥarbiyya*), those of civil registry, finance, real estate fund (*ṣundūq al-'iqāriyya*), religious archives (*ṣundūq tawthīq al-dīniyya*), public works, health and forestry administration (*idāra al-ṣiḥḥa wa-l-ghābāt*) and all the rest.⁸⁶

What the qaid described here is an administration (as he himself puts it, albeit in the plural form, *idārāt*), a small state representing an annual correspondence of 5714 letters which, amongst other things, issued poverty certificates (*shahādāt al-latī tasallum li-l-fuqarā'*) for the poor who came to knock on the door of his office. The archives of the qaidships in Tunis contain the personal files of secretaries, and the latter are not very numerous; at any one time, the qaid of the Hammama had five secretaries.⁸⁷ However small in number, these agents nevertheless provided vital local services to the inhabitants of the qaidship. The poverty certificates, for example, were mandatory to obtain any social assistance from the state or other benevolent associations. Telephone expenses, office supplies and building maintenance

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ ANT, A, 82/4, Letter from the qaid of the Hammāma to the Prime Minister, November 7, 1941.

also all fell under the responsibility of the qaid. Kairouan's qaid also regretted that his low income “hindered his ability to carry out administrative tasks (*qabaḍa ‘an al-qiyām*) such as [public] works, handling things or secretarial work (*katābiyya*).”⁸⁸

There is still a limit to the way in which these letters can be interpreted, and that is the alarmist trope of administrative writing which consists of exaggerating a situation to capture the attention and hopefully gain better advantages from the central government.⁸⁹ This exaggeration was a communication strategy, but the few colonial statistics on the salaries of the quids to which we have access confirm their weakness. At the end of the 1930s, the salary of a qaid at the top of the administrative scale (28,500 francs) remained much lower than the salary which the staff representatives demanded at the very least in 1936 to be considered “honourable” (40,000 francs).⁹⁰ In general, the entire Beylical bureaucracy was paid poorly compared to colonial officials. For example, a French janitor at the 5th level of the public works administration earned the same salary as a professor at the Great Mosque.⁹¹ The qaid's complaint was partly based on credible facts which allowed him to associate local particularities and public interest in his arguments.

⁸⁸ CADN, 1/TU/AV/2493/3, Letter from the qaid of Kairouan to the Prime Minister, January 17, 1938.

⁸⁹ For the Moroccan case, see Nicolas Michel, *Une économie de subsistances. Le Maroc précolonial* (Cairo: IFAO, 1997).

⁹⁰ CADN, 1/TU/1V/2553, Administrative note (1936).

⁹¹ Comparison between a note around 1937 (in CADN, 1TU/1V/2012) about the remuneration of religious dignitaries and the table on the salary of auxiliaries to the public works management (c. 1942) (CADN, 1/TU/2V/7561).

This inadequate remuneration had political consequences both for the qaid himself and, above all, for the government. The two letters reveal a logic of negotiation between local and central authorities, for example in a warning - almost a threat - from the Kairouan qaid writing to the prime minister: "If the government does not care about us (*idh lam tahattama al-ḥukūma bi-amrinā*), the shares on taxes will remain low, it will no longer be able to cope with the necessities, and he will have to go into debt." At this very moment, "there is no doubt that authority will collapse in the eyes of public opinion" (*isqāṭ al-nufūdh fī naẓar al-'āmma*). The government has a duty to support its qaids financially, otherwise the authority of the state will be diminished. Here, the interests of the qaids and Tunis are interdependent. The governor of Kairouan left little choice here to the prime minister who was obliged to trust his appreciation of local realities and the stability of his representative in the qaidship. In making such claims, the qaid presented himself neither as a notable nor as a landowner, but as a civil servant who must lead a personal administration that he maintained with his own money. The political nature of the qaid service is even more explicit in the case of the Béja's qaid. In this context, he reminded the prime minister of the meaning of his obedience:

There is no doubt that [all these duties] benefit the sovereignty of both governments (*fawā'id ta'ūdu 'alā siyādat al-ḥukūmatayn*) and the interest of inhabitants of different kinds (*maṣlaḥat al-sukkān 'alā ikhtilāf ajnāsihim*).

Evidently, the two governments referred to are France and Tunisia (both operating in Tunisia), although less mention was made of the colonial power in the qaid's letters. *Maṣlaḥa*, as referring to the common good or public interest in Sunni legal tradition, is another recurring word in the political vocabulary of the time.⁹² Despite local peculiarities, the qaid thought of himself as a part of the state since he used the same rhetoric of all state agents to defend their rights, regardless of the nature of their administration.

Conclusion

The figure of the notable has marked more than fifty years of research on Middle East history. As spokespersons for the rural world and as intermediaries with the state, the notables had grassroots authority in a local community.⁹³ During the nineteenth century, state-building was a process rooted in antagonism, negotiation and inclusion of notables. As in Egypt, two paradigmatic figures opposed each other and embodied the tensions between the local and the central, the bureaucrat (the Effendi) of the capital and the notable of the province.⁹⁴ By focusing on colonial Tunisia in the first half of the twentieth century, another historical trend, less well known in the Middle East, appears: the professionalization of the notable or, at least, of

⁹² Felicitas Opwis, *Maṣlaḥa and the Purpose of the Law : Islamic Discourse on Legal Change from the 4th/10th to 8th/14th century* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2010).

⁹³ Nathan Brown "Peasants and Notables in Egyptian Politics." *Middle Eastern Studies* 26, no. 2 (1990): p. 145-160.

⁹⁴ James Whidden, *Monarchy and Modernity in Egypt. Politics, Islam and Neo-Colonialism between the Wars* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

the functions that notables occupied, such as that of qaid. The reform of the salary of the qaids increasingly assimilated them to civil servants at the head of real public services. The opposition between notable and bureaucrat no longer summarized the tensions between central and local. Such tensions took place in the different administrations of a composite state, in which local offices retained a certain margin of autonomy, despite strong legal and financial links with the state.

From a colonial history perspective, the study of the qaids' correspondence shows that the synthesis between the interest of the country (*waṭan*) and the laws of the state was the result of a provincial mode of operation that preceded colonization. More precisely, it was inherited from the reforms of the nineteenth century. In this respect, the qaidal government is another indication of "Ottoman legacy" in Tunisia.⁹⁵ Such a case-study thus demonstrates the relevance of a connection between Ottoman studies and colonial studies, especially for Tunisia and, perhaps more broadly, for Algeria, two former Ottoman provinces. The example of Beja also highlights the significance of the local and rural scales to grasp state-building processes in North Africa, which remained a predominantly rural region throughout the colonial period.

In a sense, the existence of a state-within-the-state rendered the qaid an advocate of decentralization. The legitimacy of concerted power depended on local skills, which derived their knowledge from their experience of the

⁹⁵ Leon C. Brown (ed.), *Imperial Legacy: the Ottoman Imprint of the Balkans and the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Oualdi, *A Slave Between Empires*.

land and people. As a result, the qaids did not represent a local elite who resisted political change which was supposed to come only from the colonial state. They were also civil servants rooted in a geographical context, with a particular vision of public affairs. The central power and local elites were united by the same language, the morality of good government, although this language may well have concealed private interests. Thus, it is too simplistic to oppose the central power's drive towards modernization and an alleged passive resistance at the level of local qaids.

During the interwar period, the Tunisian colonial state encouraged forced-march centralization, excluding local elites and notables. The qaid was then forced by this process of centralization to become the privileged champion of local interests, whilst remaining a representative of the state. The word "*ahālī*" (people), whose interests the qaid claimed to defend, refers certainly to the men of *waṭan*, as opposed to the capital. But in the colonial context, it also refers to "indigenous Tunisians," as opposed to French controllers and settlers. The qaids were essential actors of the state; they were, simultaneously, officials appointed by the government, spokespersons for their country, and in some instances even defenders of Tunisian interests against French policies. An historiography, either focused on the Destour or on the colonial state, has attempted to explain the qaid's role in terms of vested interests only. As I have shown, however, the qaid also embodied a "local" way of thinking about the state, a claim for decentralization that

certainly survived as a resistance to further centralization policies in Bourguiba's post-independence Tunisia.