

**NEGOTIATING EMPIRE AT THE PERIPHERY:
CORRUPTION, BANDITRY, AND BUREAUCRATIC
ARGUMENTATION IN OTTOMAN YEMEN, 1888-1914**

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Submitted to

Central European University - Private University

Department of History

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Comparative
History

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Vienna, Austria

2024

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the dynamics of Ottoman governance in Yemen from the 1880s until the outbreak of the First World War. Specifically, it follows the controversial shaykh ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha, arguing that shocks both internal and external to the province of Yemen provided critical disruptions allowing local elites take advantage of the weakened Ottoman state to consolidate their power while employing a common language of bureaucratic argumentation that emphasized concepts like banditry, tyranny, and justice. The thesis traces ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha’s rise and fall, as he built alliances within the provincial bureaucracy and the Ottoman imperial army before eventually being ousted in 1909 amid the political turmoil following the Young Turk Revolution and the rise of Sayyid Muhammad al-Idrîsî. Additionally, it analyzes petitions from Lower Yemen (1912-1914) to illustrate how local communities articulated grievances and negotiated power within the framework of structures of Ottoman rule. Drawing mostly on primary sources from the Ottoman State Archives, this thesis emphasizes the role of bureaucratic communication in shaping governance. It challenges the simplistic view of Ottoman Yemen as a space of constant rebellion, highlighting the active political agency of both Ottoman officials and Yemeni elites in constructing their own histories. It contributes to the historiography of Ottoman Yemen by integrating new perspectives on late Ottoman imperialism and emphasizing the complexity of interactions between local, provincial, and imperial actors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No serious academic work is possible without support, and this thesis is no different in that respect. For that reason, it is fitting that I first acknowledge the endless support of my parents and grandparents for all my life's endeavors, academic and otherwise. I also thank them for their patience and assistance as I travel back and forth across the Atlantic.

I thank the many professors who inspired me and guided me throughout my undergraduate studies, preparing me for the difficult work and rigorous thinking that I have done at CEU, including Kevin Kopper, Pernille Røge, Bernard Hagerty, and, most of all, James Pickett.

When I came to CEU, I had absolutely no ability to read Ottoman Turkish, nor Arabic. This thesis would quite literally not have been possible without the patient and effective instruction of my language instructors throughout my academic life: in modern Turkish, İlknur Lider and Emrah Baki Başoğlu; in Ottoman Turkish, Csaba Göncöl, Tolga Cora, and İpek Hüner; and in Arabic, Zainab HajHasan and Rashed Daher.

I would also like to thank all my professors at CEU, especially my supervisors, Tolga Esmer and Brett Wilson, for their incisive and challenging instruction inside the classroom, for their generous help outside of it, and for their warmth and humor.

CEU is a challenging environment, to say the least, and it would not have been possible to make it this far without the camaraderie of my fellow students. Among my many valued friends and colleagues, I would like to give a special thanks to Okan Kozanoğlu and Ken Beckers for their generous help conceptualizing and editing this thesis. Above all, I thank Rana Münteha Aldemir for her constant support, indispensable companionship, and extraordinary kindness.

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Whatever You Do in Word or Deed—S.D.G.

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

I have used the IJMES transliteration system for Arabic where it is quoted, while I have opted to use a modified modern Turkish orthography elsewhere, representing long vowels with a circumflex (^) while using IJMES diacritics for hamza (') and 'ayn (') in Ottoman Turkish where it is quoted, as well as in the names of places and people. I have not used diacritics in certain words (e.g., "Sanaa," "Pasha," "Abdülhamid II") where there is a generally recognized spelling in English. All mistakes are, of course, my own.

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INTRODUCTION

Yemen occupied an unusual, although not entirely unique, place in the late Ottoman Empire. It was a new conquest in an empire that was already centuries old. In the early nineteenth century, faced with growing British encroachment on the southern flank of the empire, Ottoman troops gradually occupied the lands of southwestern Arabia. After securing the Tihama in 1849, the Ottoman presence in Yemen consisted mostly of sporadic military campaigns and a period of indirect rule in the highlands.¹ In 1872, however, an Ottoman army led by Ahmed Muhtar Pasha took Sanaa and subdued the Yemeni highlands, precipitating the reorganization of the region as the province (*vilâyet*) of Yemen. This marked a new era in the history of the region, as administrative reorganization was soon followed by attempts to impose far-reaching social and economic reforms along the lines of the Tanzimat in the newly integrated territory.² This ambitious project was faced with a harsh reality, however, as repeated revolts and conflict between key power holders strained the limited resources of the Ottoman state. However, this situation became ever more dire in 1891 with the eruption of a new wave of rebellions under the leadership of Muhammad bin Yahya al-Dîn, newly recognized as the imam (spiritual and political leader) of the Zaydi sect of Shi'i Islam, the adherents of which formed a majority of the population in the Yemeni highlands.

¹ The Tihama is the coastal plain that runs up the western side of the Arabian Peninsula. When I refer to the Tihama here, I mean the southern section, sometimes called *Tihamat 'Asîr*, stretching roughly from Jîzan to Mocha, which is also the convention used within most Ottoman sources as well as the secondary literature: Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1989), 15.

² Tanzimat, meaning “reorganizations” in Ottoman Turkish, is a term often used to describe a period of top-down political, social, economic, and religious reform within the Ottoman Empire, usually defined as lasting from the promulgation of the Rose Chamber Edict (*Gülhâne Hatt-ı Hümayûnu*) in 1839 to the First Constitutional Era in 1876. Despite the end of the Tanzimat period and the shift of political power away from the civilian bureaucracy of the Sublime Porte and into the hands of the sultan, technocratic reform remained a major component of Ottoman state policy after the dissolution of the Ottoman parliament in 1878, albeit with a new ideological focus on absolute sultanic authority and pan-Islamism: M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 72-129.

Although the Ottoman presence in Yemen survived the initial rebellion, which culminated in a dramatic siege of Sanaa, the credibility of the regime was eroded and the imamate only grew in power. An even larger rebellion centered around the imam rocked the province in 1904, leading to a protracted cycle of negotiations and revolts that only ended due to the outbreak of war with Italy in 1911. The resulting Treaty of Da‘ân expanded the authority of the imamate in the highlands, but the Ottomans would continue to rule Yemen until 1918.³

Throughout this chaotic period between the destructive rebellion of 1891 and the outbreak of the First World War, Ottoman authority was invariably fragmented and incomplete within the territory which, on paper, comprised the province of Yemen. The prevailing chaos prompted the question in Istanbul of what exactly had gone wrong in Yemen, as well as how the situation might be salvaged and Yemen turned into a secure and self-sufficient (if not profitable) province rather than a drain on the empire’s resources. As elsewhere in the empire, however, Istanbul relied upon a vast network of intermediaries to carry out the actual task of governance even as it generally attempted to carry out centralizing measures. One of these classes of intermediaries was the provincial governors, who had a significant influence on policy decisions in Yemen and in some cases developed close ties with local networks of power and influence. There was also a large cadre of Istanbul-trained administrative and legal bureaucrats, many of whom staffed various intermediate posts within the province, and others of whom were sent to various locales as inspectors by imperial or provincial inspection committees. The Ottoman imperial army was an especially important player in the Yemeni context; the necessities of counter-insurgency meant that tens of thousands of Ottoman soldiers from across the empire were typically in Yemen at any given time. Finally, a vast array of local

³ Caesar E. Farah, *The Sultan's Yemen: 19th-Century Challenges to Ottoman Rule* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), idem.

power brokers, including shaykhs,⁴ *sayyids*,⁵ and ulema (local jurists) were often the most direct connection that the Ottoman government had with the people of Yemen themselves (particularly outside of the province's handful of urban centers) with the political and spiritual influence that they wielded making them coveted partners for an Ottoman administration which was perennially underfunded and outgunned.

These classifications are a gross simplification of what was in fact a deeply complex situation of governance in which no one actor or group of actors had the ability to shape events at will, but one where an interactive process of communication and negotiation between competing interests determined the shape of "Ottoman rule" in Yemen. I focus my inquiry around the career of one powerful shaykh from the Zaydiya district of coastal Yemen, a controversial figure named 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha, who rose to regional prominence and consolidated his power, status, and wealth under the auspices of government protection from the 1890s onward, playing a key role in provincial politics and developing a close partnership with the Ottoman imperial army. I will then examine Bûnî Pasha's dramatic fall from power in August 1909 before briefly turning to consider a set of petitions written from 1912 to 1914 and originating in a rural community in Lower Yemen complaining of oppression from a local shaykh named 'Abdullah bin Qâsim al-Shahârî.⁶

By examining these cases, I argue that, during the last decades of Ottoman rule in Yemen, shocks both internal and external to the province created moments of opportunity for

⁴ Shaykh can roughly be defined as "leader" or "chief" in a Yemeni context, but beyond this, it is very difficult to generalize the role that would have been played by a shaykh in Yemen given geographical and individual variation. In the tribal context of Jabal Râzih in Upper Yemen, shaykhs generally play a practical and executive role in dealing with administrative and legal matters within a tribal territory: Shelagh Weir, *A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2007), 79-83.

⁵ A *sayyid* is a descendant of Muhammad. *Sayyids* formed a distinct social class in Yemen and wielded varying degrees of political and spiritual power: Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen*, 140-45.

⁶ Lower Yemen refers here to the southern part of the highlands, as contrasted with Upper Yemen. This division between north and south is usually placed somewhere between Sanaa and Dhamar and has ideological as well as geographical significance, as the people of Upper Yemen tended to be of the Zaydi sect and socially organized in tribes, while the people of Lower Yemen were generally Shafi'î with landlord-peasant relationships more the norm: Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen*, 12-15.

political entrepreneurs to exploit the weakness of the Ottoman state and seize economic and political power. In the case of ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha, the major revolts of 1891 and 1904, as well as the near-constant counterinsurgency in between, allowed Bûnî Pasha to successfully expand his chieftaincy by making alliances within the provincial bureaucracy and providing useful services to the Ottoman state. On the other hand, the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 fatally weakened Bûnî Pasha’s position by disrupting his connections within the Ottoman bureaucracy and military, while the rise of Sayyid Muhammad al-Idrîsî as an independent political and military force in southwest Arabia provided an opportunity for disgruntled local elites to rid themselves of Bûnî Pasha once and for all. I also argue that the bureaucratic negotiation of relationships between these local elites and the representatives of the Ottoman state was key to these shifts in power. Throughout this thesis, I analyze the discourse used by local elites, reformist inspectors, government bureaucrats, and provincial governors, arguing that the categorization and instrumentalization of discourses of law, justice, tyranny, and banditry, as well as tropes of criminality and civilization, were instrumentalized with a varying degree of success, critical to the political efforts of all the above-mentioned actors. Ottoman imperial bureaucrats, soldiers, and even local petitioners all extensively employed banditry as a category to describe acts of violence and their perpetrators. These discourses also changed somewhat over time, with the Young Turk Revolution ushering in a new vocabulary of constitutionalism and liberty and the rise of al-Idrîsî leading to a shift from the Zaydi imam as the Ottoman discursive center of “banditry” and towards al-Idrîsî himself.

0.1 Literature Review

The complex relationship between local elites, governance, and discourses of justice and power has been explored by historians of the Ottoman Empire at considerable length in pre-modern

contexts. In an early example, Andrew Gould argued in 1976 that the local rulers (*derebeys*) of Cilicia were both bandits and lords through the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, alternating between the roles of rivals and partners of the Ottoman state.⁷ In her 1994 book *Bandits and Bureaucrats*, meanwhile, Karen Barkey applies this paradigm of bandit lords to the unrest of the seventeenth century in Ottoman lands. In the process, she challenges narratives of Ottoman decline, arguing that the state's cooptation of bandits as clients was a sign of its strength and a step in the process of state development.⁸ Tolga Esmer has likewise demonstrated the blurred lines and alliances between bandits and imperial officials in the context of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Ottoman Balkans. Esmer's body of work is particularly useful for its analysis of not only the discursive construction and contestation of "banditry" but also the concrete impact of the imperial preoccupation with banditry on the lives of those caught up in networks of violence, imperial officials and ordinary subjects alike.⁹ There is thus a solid foundation of methodologically rich literature dealing with the overlap between crime and governance in an early modern Ottoman context.

In a more modern context, historians like Ryan Gingeras and Uğur Ümit Üngör have continued this theme in discussions of the ways in which independent paramilitaries and armed bands were supported by and sometimes at odds with the Ottoman state as they played key roles in the mass violence perpetrated during the First World War and beyond.¹⁰ The most important contribution to this subfield in recent years is *Age of Rogues*, an edited volume by

⁷ Andrew G. Gould, "Lords or Bandits? The Derebeys of Cilicia," *IJMES*, 7 (1976): 485–506.

⁸ Karen Barkey, *Bandits and Bureaucrats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), *idem*.

⁹ Tolga U. Esmer, "Economies of Violence, Banditry, and Governance in the Ottoman Empire around 1800," *Past & Present*, no. 224 (2014): 163–99; Tolga U. Esmer, "Notes on a Scandal: Transregional Networks of Violence, Gossip, and Imperial Sovereignty in the Late Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Empire," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58, no. 1 (2016): 99–128. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43908384>.

¹⁰ Ryan Gingeras, *Sorrowful Shores: Violence, Ethnicity, and the End of the Ottoman Empire, 1912–1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Uğur Ümit Üngör, "Rethinking the Violence of Pacification: State Formation and Bandits in Turkey, 1914–1937," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 4 (2012): 746–69; Uğur Ümit Üngör, *Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Alp Yenen and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan with contributions from historians in various fields in and adjacent to the late Ottoman world. İlkay Yılmaz's contribution to this volume is particularly significant, examining the Hamidian government's fight against anarchism through the concept of securitization, emphasizing the role of pejorative language and negative categorization in establishing social control.¹¹

What relatively limited English-language literature that exists on Ottoman Yemen has engaged lightly with the role of bureaucratic argumentation in the harnessing of political power in the province, mainly concentrating on Yemen as a site of rebellion and a perennial problem for the Ottoman state. Perhaps the most ambitious and complete political history of Ottoman Yemen is Caesar Farah's 2002 book, *The Sultan's Yemen*, which covers a broad swathe of time from the nineteenth century until the Treaty of Da'ân in 1911. In the book, Farah offers a fairly straightforward, perhaps even uncritical reading of this period in Ottoman history. Despite his blow-by-blow (even tedious) description of military events based on apparently meticulous archival research, Farah rarely offers a critical perspective on events, instead tending to regurgitate the biases and presuppositions of his sources, alternating between strangely pro-Ottoman, pro-British, and Yemeni nationalist viewpoints.¹² In so doing, he fails to transcend the epistemological frameworks of both his historical subjects and his own contemporary context. Nevertheless, he provides numerous examples of the political entrepreneurs who are the subject of this study, including a few passing references to 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha.

Perhaps the most well-known historian of Ottoman Yemen active today is Thomas Kuehn, whose historical approach sharply contrasts with Farah's in that he pays attention to the *attitudes* that shaped Ottoman policy in Yemen, as well as the symbolic order created

¹¹ İlkay Yılmaz, "Conspiracy, International Police Cooperation and the Fight against Anarchism in the Late Ottoman Empire, 1878–1908," in *Age of Rogues: Rebels, Revolutionaries and Racketeers at the Frontiers of Empires*, eds. Ramazan Hakkı Öztan and Alp Yenen (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2021): 208–234.

¹² Farah, *The Sultan's Yemen*, 240

through law. In *Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference*, he argues that the Ottoman state became increasingly willing to mark out Yemen as a place civilizationally unready for the application of modern reforms.¹³ Although Kuehn focuses on the problems of governing Yemen from a top-down perspective, he gives some attention to the work of provincial inspection committees as well as problems of corruption and bargaining with local elites, briefly mentioning ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha.¹⁴ These themes are explained through Kuehn’s overall frame of legal and discursive differentiation in Yemen. Importantly, Kuehn sees the politics of difference applied in Yemen as indicative of the province’s delineation as a colonial space. In so doing, he wades into a discussion of the late Ottoman Empire as a colonial power, which will also be briefly touched upon in this thesis.

Another important contribution to the historiography of Ottoman Yemen is Isa Blumi’s *Rethinking the Late Ottoman Empire*, a collection of essays concerning Yemen and Albania, along with a comparative introduction. Striking back against what he sees as prevailing state-centric narratives, distorted views of “premodern societies,” and a general failure among Ottoman historians to take on the lessons of postcolonial studies, Blumi repeatedly argues for the de-essentialization of categories like tribe and sect and their supposed intrinsic logics. Although he does not make a point of using the terminology of “Ottoman colonialism” as such, he emphasizes how Ottoman elites used “social typologies” to create distance between ruler and ruled, even marking out some geographies according to these typologies.¹⁵ He hardly mentions the language of banditry which was so prevalent within Ottoman sources, but it is easy to see how “bandit leaders,” “bandit tribes,” fit into this broader development of a late Ottoman elite identity. In a footnote, he specifically calls out Farah’s imprecise adoption of

¹³ Thomas Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference: Ottoman Rule in Yemen 1849-1919* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 1-21.

¹⁴ Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference*, 235.

¹⁵ Isa Blumi, *Rethinking the Late Ottoman Empire: A Comparative Social and Political History of Albania and Yemen, 1878-1918* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2003), 47.

derogatory terms for various rebels.¹⁶ Overall, Blumi's work has been very influential on this thesis, particularly in his pushing of the geographical and temporal boundaries of past studies on Ottoman Yemen.

The most relevant work focusing entirely on rebellion in late Ottoman Yemen is unpublished: a Ph.D. dissertation completed in 2004 by Vincent Steven Wilhite.¹⁷ Wilhite primarily approaches the Ottoman "problem of Yemen" through a lens of counterinsurgency. He argues that Ottoman policymakers in Yemen primarily employed two different counterinsurgency strategies, one based on "hearts-and-minds" reform and one based on punitive repression.¹⁸ Perhaps most importantly, he gives considerable attention to the use of epithets like "bandit" and evaluates this rhetoric in its historical context, although his observations on this point are relatively superficial.¹⁹ Like many others, he tends to conflate Yemen with its highlands and emphasize the sectarian aspects of the conflict.²⁰ Specifically, he claims that the driving force behind the Yemeni side of the conflict shifted from a "culture of inter-tribal war" to an ideology driven by religious and even political ends.²¹ Wilhite's analysis could have benefited from taking into account Blumi's warnings about reifying tribal and sectarian difference as the main driver of history.²² Indeed, Wilhite's bibliography is surprisingly light on secondary literature. Nevertheless, his work is valuable as perhaps the most seriously focused attempt to date to understand the Ottoman state's political and military approach to violence in Yemen.

¹⁶ Blumi, *Rethinking the Late Ottoman Empire*, 62.

¹⁷ It must be noted that Wilhite has now published this dissertation as a monograph. However, its publication is so recent that I have had no chance to access it nor to update my references to Wilhite's work accordingly: Vincent Steven Wilhite, *Guerrilla War, Counterinsurgency, and State Formation in Ottoman Yemen, 1872-1911* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2024).

¹⁸ Vincent Steven Wilhite, "Guerrilla War, Counterinsurgency, and State Formation in Ottoman Yemen," Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2003, 5-6.

¹⁹ Wilhite, "Guerrilla War," 49, 68, 219-20.

²⁰ Isa Blumi has observed that this tendency mirrors the "dominant voice in local historiography": Blumi, *Rethinking the Late Ottoman Empire*, 73.

²¹ Wilhite, "Guerrilla War," 4.

²² Compare, for instance: Blumi, *Rethinking the Late Ottoman Empire*, 72-73; Wilhite, "Guerrilla War," 14-15.

This literature review has attempted to highlight some relevant English-language literature on the relationship between crime and governance in the Ottoman Empire, as well as the most important book-length works on Ottoman Yemen. Strides have been made towards understanding the dynamic ties between “state” and “non-state” actors, as well as towards breaking down some of the essentializing discourses that played an important role in debates over Ottoman policy in Yemen, notably those having to do with tribalism and sectarianism. However, following in the footsteps of scholars like Isa Blumi, there is a clear need for research that integrates new perspectives on late Ottoman imperialism and “modernity” with a less top-down view of governance, breaking down the barriers between “state” and “non-state” actors and considering the multiplicity of actors and interests that went into shaping the actual practice of Ottoman governance. Moreover, there has been a consistent emphasis in historiography, arguably an overemphasis, on the history of the Zaydi population of Upper Yemen at the expense of Lower Yemen and the Tihama. With this thesis, I hope to help reorient this sectarian bias.

0.2 Sources and Theoretical Considerations

As previously mentioned, this thesis considers the many directions from which the practical policy of the Ottoman government in Yemen was shaped. My primary source research is thus mostly based on documents preserved in the Ottoman State Archives in Istanbul, supplemented with British diplomatic correspondence where possible. Within the Ottoman archives, I concentrate my attention on everyday forms of bureaucratic communication: memos, intelligence reports, and most importantly, petitions. Over the last few decades, historians of the Ottoman Empire have increasingly recognized the opportunities that the institution of the

petition (‘*arzuhâl* and *şikâyet*) provides for the study of the empire’s otherwise silent subjects.²³ Like so many other facets of Ottoman state-subject relations, the nineteenth century saw major changes to the petitionary system, with new technologies and the expanded role of the state increasing access to the system and growing the volume of petitions significantly.²⁴ Despite changes, however, the fundamental idea of the petitionary system remained redress for injustice.

It is thus possible to use petitions to get a glimpse of how local elites and government officials interpreted and instrumentalized discourses of justice and criminality toward their own ends. Although the third chapter of this thesis deals most directly with the practice and discourse of petitioning, petitions form an equally important part of the story of ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha, as they formed one of the main mediums of communication both for Bûnî Pasha and his allies as well as for those who opposed him. Furthermore, I conceive of “petitioning” in a broad sense, in that even those items of bureaucratic correspondence that did not explicitly take the form of petitions, such as intelligence reports, were crafted with an intended political purpose. By examining the purpose, the discursive methods, and the consequences of this kind of communication, I hope to gain a clearer picture of what exactly it meant for the Ottoman state to “rule” Yemen while also gaining some insight into what it meant to be an Ottoman subject (and ultimately citizen) throughout the turbulent final decades of the empire.

One of my aims in approaching the history of Ottoman Yemen in this way is to pivot from an approach that focuses on the struggles of the Istanbul government to *control* Yemen,

²³ Yuval Ben-Bassat, “The Ottoman Institution of Petitioning When the Sultan No Longer Reigned: a View from Post-1908 Ottoman Palestine,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 56 (2017): 88-89; see also, James E. Baldwin, “Petitioning the Sultan in Ottoman Egypt,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 75, no. 3 (2012): 499-524; James Chalcraft, “Engaging the State: Peasants and Petitions in Egypt on the Eve of Colonial Rule,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2005): 303-325; Başak Tuğ, “Gendered Subjects in Ottoman Constitutional Agreements, ca. 1740-1860,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies. Social Sciences on Contemporary Turkey* 18 (2014).

²⁴ Ben-Bassat, “The Ottoman Institution of Petitioning,” 89-90.

with Yemenis mainly playing the role of faceless rebels engaged in a never-ending, instinctual war against the Ottoman state. Instead, my focus is on the exertion of political agency within the Ottoman system, with both Ottoman officials and local elites alike being “subjects who take an active role in the construction of their own history.”²⁵

0.3 Structure

In the first half of Chapter One, I narrate the rise of ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha, considering the circumstances of his elevation by the Ottoman government and examining some of the early accusations against him before turning in the second half to a sustained analysis of this process, including the provincial and imperial conditions that allowed him to seize the political initiative. Chapter Two continues the story of Bûnî Pasha by considering the respective roles of the Young Turk Revolution and the revolt of Muhammad al-Idrîsî as moments of crisis and opportunity for political action, considering competing rhetoric which reacted to and shaped political realities. Finally, Chapter Three provides a close reading of a series of petitions from Lower Yemen, analyzing their discourses of banditry, criminality, and victimhood.

²⁵ Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 9.

CHAPTER 1: THE RISE OF ‘ABDULLAH BÛNÎ PASHA (1888-1908)

Although the era of Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II is often known for centralization and autocracy, local notables continued to play a key role in Ottoman governance, especially (but not only) in its peripheral provinces. This was the case in Yemen throughout its turbulent period of Ottoman rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the palace relied on proxies to fulfill the duties of governance and to protect against the encroachment of foreign powers, its support often rendered significant benefits to men who consistently transgressed against the principles of Islamic unity and justice on which it based its power.²⁶ In this chapter, I will focus on the elevation of one such chief, a shaykh from the Tihama named ‘Abdullah Bûnî, contextualizing his rise to power within the political context of Ottoman Yemen and the broader situation of the empire in the Hamidian Era.

Using bureaucratic correspondence and petitions, I will first narrate ‘Abdullah Bûnî’s contested rise to power before turning to an analysis of the factors allowing his successful self-aggrandizement, including the support of the Ottoman government for the unscrupulous shaykh. I argue that within the interaction between personality-driven and corrupt local stakeholders, idealist bureaucrats, provincial governors and generals, Istanbul-based ministers, and the sultan himself, the specter of rebellion and new configurations of old categories of banditry, tyranny, and justice played a key role in bureaucratic argumentation and thus reciprocally shaped decision-making at the imperial, provincial, and local levels. Moreover, I posit that ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha’s rise in power was enabled by a series of shocks in the form

²⁶ For an overview of the key concept of the Circle of Justice within Islamic history, see Linda T. Darling, “Islamic Empires, the Ottoman Empire and the Circle of Justice,” in *Constitutional Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Said Amir Arjomand (Oxford: Hart, 2008), 12-32; for a specifically nineteenth-century Ottoman focus, see Maurus Reinkowski, “The State’s Security and the Subjects’ Prosperity: Notions of Order in Ottoman Bureaucratic Correspondence (19th Century),” in *Legitimizing the Order: the Ottoman Rhetoric of State Power*, eds. Hakan Karateke and Maurus Reinkowski (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), 195-212.

of the revolts of Imam Muhammad Hamid al-Dîn and Yahya Hamid al-Dîn in 1891 and 1904, respectively, as well as the consistent pressure exerted on the Ottoman State apparatus in Yemen. The weakness of the state in the face of protracted guerrilla war became a point of leverage for Bûnî Pasha to exploit as he constructed a mutually beneficial relationship with provincial authorities, particularly the provincial governor Ahmed Feyzî Pasha.

1.1 Shaykh of Shaykhs

‘Abdullah Bûnî first appears in the archival record in a summary of inter-departmental correspondence from July 1888, where he is described as the shaykh of shaykhs (*şeyhülmeşâyih*) of the district (*kazâ*) of Zaydiya.²⁷ Other records often mention that he was also the shaykh of shaykhs of the attached sub-district of Banî Qays, and that he may have served in this role since the early 1870s, likely putting him in middle age by the period in question.²⁸ Although little can be surmised about the origins or nature of his power prior to 1888, it is clear that he already wielded significant material resources. This is not altogether surprising. The region over which ‘Abdullah Bûnî claimed influence covered essential crossroads connecting the main port city of northern Yemen at Hudayda to the arid lands of the Tihamah stretching northwards, while the lands of Banî Qays surround a key road as it climbs into the high western mountains, the fortress town of Hajja, and the highlands beyond.

The aforementioned document summarizes the circulation of recognition for services rendered to the Ottoman government by ‘Abdullah Bûnî, as well as the Zaydiya district governor (*kaymakam*), one Sâlih Efendi. Specifically, the two men “helpfully” (*i’âneten*)

²⁷ Like the word shaykh itself, *şeyhülmeşâyih/shaykh al-mashâyikh* is a rather vague term, sometimes glossed as “paramount shaykh.” It generally denotes headship over multiple other shaykhs, theoretically through bonds of respect and loyalty: Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen*, 102-106.

²⁸ DH.MUİ. 7 Rabiulevvel 1328 / 19 March 1910, s. 2.

provided ten poles for repairs being conducted on the telegraph lines in the district, which was home to a telegraph station.²⁹ The service of ‘Abdullah Bûnî and Sâlih Efendis was recognized as a “work of patriotism and the necessary duty of subjecthood and loyalty,” among other florid expressions.³⁰ Beyond this gift, the document also mentions that “Bedouin”³¹ might be needed to protect the telegraph line in the future.³² Thus, ‘Abdullah Bûnî’s first appearance in the archival record provides a slight hint regarding the situation in the district. While the civilian governor of the district, Sâlih Efendi, is also mentioned, there is a strong sense that the inclusion of his name was more *pro forma* than anything else.³³ This impression is strengthened by a message from an inspector who came to Zaydiya two years later to oversee the repair and improvement of the telegraph lines. The inspector noted that ‘Abdullah Bûnî donated ten lira for the cause, while tersely indicating that the governor, now an official named Mustafa Bey, was on the hook for the remainder of the repair expenses.³⁴ Through these instances, a picture emerges of a locally powerful shaykh, loyal to the Ottoman government and cooperative with its civilian administration. In other words, ‘Abdullah Bûnî was an exemplar of the exact kind of “natural leader” that Thomas Kuehn identifies as the cornerstone of Ottoman rule in Yemen during the 1880s, intended to make Ottoman rule “acceptable” for the local population in

²⁹ HRT.h.. 364 10 Safer 1299 / 1 January 1882.

³⁰ DH.MKT. 1519/32 25 Şevval 1305 / 5 July 1888 [*eser-i hamiyet ve mütehattim zimmet-i ‘ubûdiyeyet ve sadâkat*].

³¹ The Ottoman Turkish word used here is *‘urbân*. While this word can be most literally translated as Bedouin, it must be clarified that although the “Bedouin” may conjure images of pastoral nomads, the vast majority of groups referred to as tribes in Yemen have historically consisted of settled farmers, with some divided between settled and semi-nomadic lifestyles: Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen*, 6-9; Horst Kopp, “Land Usage and its Implications for Yemeni Agriculture,” in *Economy, Society & Culture in Contemporary Yemen*, ed. B.R. Pridham (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 41, 49. The widespread Ottoman usage of *‘urbân* in this context probably says more about the attitudes of the Ottoman bureaucratic elite toward Yemeni tribesmen and less about their actual ways of life.

³² DH.MKT. 1519/32.

³³ Sâlih’s tenure as district governor was evidently so brief as to be unrecorded within the provincial yearbooks (*salnâmes*), although a Sâlih Efendi appears as *mâl müdürü* (finance officer) from 1305 to 1308, suggesting he may have been an interim governor in the first place: *Yemen Sâlnâmesi 4* (AMal 1303/AH 1305/1887–88), 75-6; *Yemen Sâlnâmesi 5* (AMal 1304/AH 1306/1888–89), 100; *Yemen Sâlnâmesi 6* (AMal 1305/AH 1307/1889-90), 103; *Yemen Sâlnâmesi 7* (AMal 1306/AH 1308/1890-91), 128.

³⁴ Y..PRK.PT.. 8/21 2 Cemazeyilevvel 1309 / 4 December 1891.

preparation for eventual centralization and standardization.³⁵ Subsequent events, however, would complicate this image.

Upon the death of Imam Sharaf al-Dîn in 1890, an *‘âlim* (Islamic scholar) of Sanaa named Muhammad ibn Yahya Hamid al-Dîn was elected as the new Zaydi imam, taking the name al-Mansur (“the victorious”) and departing the city for the remote northern highlands.³⁶ Once there, he issued a call to the highland tribes to take up arms in a jihad against what he described as a tyrannical and godless Ottoman government.³⁷ The following year, what began as sporadic fighting in the Hajja District in the north turned into a widespread rebellion engulfing the highlands, cutting across social and apparent sectarian boundaries, thereby culminating in a siege of the provincial capital of Sanaa which only ended after a successful campaign by the province’s new governor-general, Ahmed Feyzî Pasha.³⁸ Although the imam’s large army was scattered and the government’s lines of communication restored, the government’s claim to have suppressed the rebellion merely inaugurated an extended period of guerrilla war. The rebellion of 1891 was thus a landmark moment in the history of Ottoman rule in Yemen.³⁹

Beyond its broader historical implications, though, the rebellion was undoubtedly a turning point in the life of ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha and many others like him. In a time when so many of the shaykhs of Upper Yemen, and even some of the major landlords of Lower Yemen, rallied around the imam’s standard, other key shaykhs stood by the Ottoman government and even rendered it military aid in the reconquest of the highlands. ‘Abdullah Bûnî was one such shaykh. This loyalty did not go without recognition or reward: on the contrary, he was named

³⁵ Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference*, 160.

³⁶ Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference*, 148; Farah, *The Sultan’s Yemen*, 158.

³⁷ Wilhite, “Guerrilla War,” 246-250.

³⁸ Wilhite, “Guerrilla War,” 278-299

³⁹ Wilhite sees the rebellion as part of a longer shift from limited war to total war in Yemen: “Guerrilla War,” 303-5; Kuehn, meanwhile, argues that the rebellion triggered a reassessment of the balance between “incorporation and differentiation” in the province: *Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference*, 147-8.

in a decree in December 1891 granting him the rank of *mîr-i ümerâ* (lord of lords), a rank equivalent to *beylerbeyi*, a title once given to governors of whole Ottoman provinces but by the nineteenth century effectively symbolic. However, it did carry with it the right to be called “Pasha,” the title with which ‘Abdullah Bûnî generally appeared from 1891 onward.⁴⁰

Crucially, ‘Abdullah Bûnî was nowhere near unique in these honors; there are dozens upon dozens of pages in the Ottoman archives recording the bestowal of rank and title to shaykhs for their obedience during Imam al-Mansur’s rebellion. Just in the decree granting ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha his new status, four other shaykhs from across the province were granted new (and equally vestigial) titles—one *mîr-i ümerâ*, one *istabl-i ‘âmirî müdürî* (master of the imperial stables), and two *dergâh-ı ‘âlî kapuçibaşı* (head of imperial gatekeepers)—while a handful of others received Mecîdî medals.⁴¹ ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha, however, is named first and described as having “remained loyal to the exalted government by not submitting to the bandits.”⁴² Despite the obsolescence of his new title and what seems like fairly light praise, however, there is reason to believe that this elevation was of great significance both for the government and for Bûnî Pasha himself. Selim Deringil has argued that these titles and medals were sought-after and not “treated lightly” by those who received them. This was certainly the consensus among Ottoman officials: he quotes Osman Nûrî Pasha as writing that tribal shaykhs “should be given decorations and a fuss should be made over them as these people are very fond of pomp and circumstance.”⁴³ In this light, the elevation of ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha was not simply a perfunctory recognition of a loyal subject; rather, it was a wartime measure with the

⁴⁰ İ..DH.. 1253/98371 8 Cemazeyilevvel 1309 / 10 December 1891.

⁴¹ Gustav Bayerle, *Pashas, Beks, and Effendis: A Historical Dictionary of Titles and Terms in the Ottoman Empire* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1997), 19-20, 83, 93.

⁴² İ..DH.. 1253/98371.

⁴³ Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire 1876–1909* (London and New York: I.B.Tauris, 1998), 36-37.

clear intent of integrating the local Yemeni elite into the military-administrative structure of Ottoman governance.

One more critical detail is that the elevation of the shaykhs named in the decree was enacted based on a message from Ahmed Feyzî Pasha. In December 1891, the new governor-general of Yemen and commander of the Seventh Army was in the process of clearing the highlands of rebels, having instituted martial law (*‘örfî idâre*).⁴⁴ Not only did Feyzî Pasha’s administration come to be characterized by his heavy reliance on courting local elites for tax farming and defense, but his patronage was also certainly transformative for Bûnî Pasha himself, as will be shown.

If it is so far unclear how exactly ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha benefited from his loyalty to the Ottoman state, especially in a situation where the government’s grasp on the province was so tenuous, documentary evidence from the years following 1891 provides us with some clues. First, the provincial yearbooks for Rumi years 1311 and 1313 reveal a noteworthy change: in the Banî Qays sub-district, from which ‘Abdullah Bûnî drew much of his power, the sitting sub-district superintendent (*nâhiye müdürî*), Muhammed Hulûsî Efendi, was replaced by one Ahmed Bûnî Efendi, who would remain in that role for years to come, in sharp contrast with his frequently replaced predecessors.⁴⁵ Ahmed Bûnî was even swapped between sub-district administrator roles in Banî Qays and further afield in Zuhra, creating some administrative confusion before eventually returning to Banî Qays.⁴⁶ Although I have found no explicit connection between ‘Abdullah Bûnî’s elevation and Ahmed Bûnî’s sudden and prolonged employment in lucrative posts in the local civil service, it seems reasonable to posit that ‘Abdullah leveraged his mutually friendly relationship with provincial authorities to secure a

⁴⁴ Farah, *The Sultan’s Yemen*, 170.

⁴⁵ *Yemen Sâlnâmesi* 8 (AMal 1309/AH 1311/1893-94), 160; *Yemen Sâlnâmesi* 9 (AMal 1311/AH 1313/1895-96), 286.

⁴⁶ DH.MKT. 2495/19 21 Safer 1319 / 9 June 1901; DH.MKT. 1108/9 18 Cemazeyilahir 1324 / 9 August 1906.

bureaucratic role for Ahmed, who was his cousin.⁴⁷ In the process, ‘Abdullah deepened and widened his own network of patronage and securing another ally in the civil administration.

Zaydiya’s shaykh of shaykhs gained much more from his newfound power than simply the ability to wield nepotistic influence, however. Scarcely more than a year after his promotion to *mîr-i ümerâ*, the newly minted pasha became the subject of a corruption investigation. As mentioned before, the land over which ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha held government-sanctioned dominion controlled key roads connecting the port at Hudayda to the agriculturally rich and strategically important highlands. One of the key roles that he played during the 1891 rebellion and afterward was assisting in the transportation of military materiel from Hudayda to the key fortress town of Hajja, a task which he continued to perform after the initial suppression of the rebellion. Additionally, as the government’s most powerful local agent, he would have also held the responsibility for tax collection. However, at some point in 1893, allegations of irregularities in taxation within Bûnî Pasha’s territory emerged, and higher authorities demanded a detailed accounting of the suspicious tax collection. The Zaydiya district administrative council (*meclis-i idâre*) issued two responses, both dated 19 September 1893, to inquiries from the provincial investigative committee. The administrative council, assembled according to the provincial laws of 1864 and 1871, was in this case composed of the district governor, his deputy, the finance officer, the correspondence officer (*tahrirât kâtibi*), the local mufti, and two others nominated through a somewhat opaque process. One of the main responsibilities of these councils was to provide information to higher levels of government, and it was in this function that they addressed the investigative committee.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ BEO 3623/271714 6 Şaban 1327 / 4 September 1909.

⁴⁸ Carter Vaughn Findley, “The Evolution of the System of Provincial Administration as Viewed from the Center,” in *Palestine in the Late Ottoman Period: Political, Social and Economic Transformation*, ed. David Kushner (Jerusalem and Leiden: Brill, 1986), 10-13.

In this case, the information provided was intended to exonerate ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha from any wrongdoing. The shorter of the two reports explains one questionable instance of over-taxation: according to the Zaydiya council’s narrative, after some military equipment went missing in transit from the port to the highlands, it was ordered that the losses had to be recouped in order to square accounts.⁴⁹ According to them, the following collection (which notably took place not only in the district of Zaydiya, but also in Hajja, Luhayya, and Hajur) ended up gathering some 350,000 *kuruş*. Despite providing this figure, however, the council suggests that because “the local government did not in any way interfere with the division and collection,” they could not provide detailed figures on how much money had been gathered.⁵⁰ Meanwhile the longer report addresses allegations that Bûnî Pasha levied an “unofficial” (*resmin gayri*) tariff under the name of *imrâriye*⁵¹ on coffee cargoes from the Bâjil district. The report’s authors alluded to the possibility that there may have been some wrongdoing. They nevertheless hastened to add that the sub-district where the illicit collection occurred was outside of their jurisdiction, and that, “no application nor complaint has been made in this regard to the exalted government from any quarter.”⁵² The Zaydiya administrative council’s report thus paints ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha as simultaneously above and outside of their jurisdiction while professing ignorance of the situation and providing a convenient scapegoat in the form of the “provocateur” ex-shaykh ‘Alî Zurzurî. Given what we already know about the scope of influence wielded by ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha over the civil administration, it does not require a great mental leap to imagine that these reports may not have been entirely sincere.

⁴⁹ ŞD 2261/19 19 Şevval 1311 / 25 April 1894, s. 3; according to another document, these taxes were also collected with the purported aim of supporting Ottoman reserve battalions (*redif taburları*) stationed in the area, namely those of the 64th regiment from the Anatolian towns of Ereğli and Ermenek, which arrived in Yemen in January 1893: ŞD 2261/19, s. 8; for more on the history of these reserve troops and others raised in the vicinity of Antalya, see Hatice Durgun, “1891 Yemen İsyânında Antalya Redif Alayı: Başarı ve Talihsizlikler,” [The Antalya Reserve Regiment in the Yemeni Revolt of 1891: Triumph and Misfortunes] *18. Türk Tarih Kongresi*, Ankara, Turkey, 1-5 October 2018, vol. 6, 213-232.

⁵⁰ ŞD 2261/19, s. 3 [*hükümet-i mahaliye bu taksîm ve tahsîle asla müdâhale ettirilmediğinden*].

⁵¹ Evidently derived from the word *imrâr*, meaning “passage.”

⁵² ŞD 2261/19 s. 1 [*bu bâbda hükümet-i seniyyeye hiç bir taraftan müraca‘at ve şikâyet vuku‘ bulmadığı*].

Not everybody was convinced by the equivocating reports from Zaydiya, however. The investigation rose high enough that the issue came to the attention of the Military Inspection Commission (*teftîş-i askerî komisyonu*, hereafter *TAK*), a consultative body created by Sultan Abdülhamid II in an attempt to take the initiative and address flaws in the Ottoman military revealed by Ottoman defeat in the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-8.⁵³ On 15 February 1894, the commission released on the results of an inquiry into ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha’s actions, based on reports and documents compiled by a government inspector, Nâmîk Efendi, who operated on the ground in Yemen. The scathing report produced by *TAK* paints a dire picture, emphasizing the profound injustice of the situation. Contrary to initial claims that Bûnî Pasha collected about one *riyâl*⁵⁴ for every shipment of coffee as *imrâriye*, *TAK*’s inquiry determined that the actual amount was closer to three or four *riyâls*.⁵⁵ Further, the inquiry report says that it was rumored (*tevâtüren işitilmiş*) that the Pasha carried out this collection by means of a number of African slaves, who were said to loot the cargo of those who would not pay with “force and violence.”⁵⁶ Despite a “dignified reputation,” his behavior is described as so unjust that he spread sedition thereby:

As the hypocrite himself has sought to oppress and mistreat the impoverished people and sought to continuously acquire power and wealth, because of the power and influence that he has gained in the district of Zaydiya and its vicinity, the government and local police act as his enforcers. This has been understood from the correspondence

⁵³ The *TAK* was one of a number of executive commissions created by Abdülhamid II as part of an attempt to centralize governmental decision-making under his control in the palace and take it out of the grasp of the bureaucracy of the Sublime Porte: Adem Ölmez, “Askerî Teftîş Komisyonu’nun Kuruluşu ve Faaliyetleri.” [The Establishment and Activities of the Military Inspection Commission] *Tarih Dergisi*, no. 43 (June 2012), 115-9.

⁵⁴ The Austrian Maria Theresa Thaler, widely circulated throughout the Red Sea region (especially Arabia) was often referred to locally as *riyâl*: Ghalib bin Awadh al-Qu’aiti, “The Maria Theresa Thaler in Hadhramaut: Some Reflections,” *British Yemeni Society Journal*, 18 (2010) [online version has no page numbers]; Şevket Pamuk, *A Monetary History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press), 176, 219-20.

⁵⁵ ŞD 2261/19, s. 8.

⁵⁶ ŞD 2261/19, s. 9. What exactly should be understood from this rumor is mostly a matter of speculation. Certainly, the enslavement of Africans was not uncommon in Yemen well into the twentieth century, but there is also the possibility that these men were *Akhdam*, a marginalized Yemeni ethnic group often believed to be descended from African slaves. There is at least one other documented case of a Yemeni tax farmer commanding retinues that included *Akhdam*: Isa Blumi. “The Ottoman Empire and Yemeni Politics in the *Sancağ* of Ta’izz, 1911-1918,” in *The Empire in the City: Arab Provincial Capitals in the Late Ottoman Empire*, eds. Jens Hanssen, Thomas Philipp, and Stefan Weber (Beirut and Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2002), 358-9.

with the governor's office of the aforementioned district, from the meaning of the petition attached herewith, and from the verbal statement of the native deputy governor of the aforementioned district.⁵⁷

The commissioners (informed by Nâmık Efendi) were thus acutely aware of the suspect nature of the report offered by the Zaydiya administrative council.

Rather than merely acknowledging the existence of corruption, however, the commissioners took aim directly at 'Abdullah Bûnî himself in a demand for justice. The report concludes by contrasting the pasha's gain in wealth with the state of the people of the region: "While he was once a common shaykh, he now possesses numerous orderly stone buildings within the district and a great deal of wealth and property, but this is because he secured his personal interests at the expense of the impoverished populace, as was reported."⁵⁸ The report describes his failure to deliver a detailed accounting of his taxation—along with the government's share of the profits—as displaying a clear lack of trust (*emniyetsizlik*) towards the state and a desire for "independence and a form of autonomy" (*teferrüd ve bir sûret-i müstakille*). The commissioners end their report with a reminder of the importance of the region and the necessity to act swiftly to rectify the situation and restore justice.⁵⁹

Reading the report of the Military Inspection Commission might lead one to believe that 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha was imminently headed for arrest and imprisonment, dismissal from tax farming arrangements, or at the very least, an end to active support for his continued dominance over the tribes of the Tihama north of Hudayda. After all, this indictment of the pasha's corruption bore the signatures of a few of the most respected and highly trained

⁵⁷ ŞD 2261/19, s. 8 [*kendi münâfiği fukarâ-ı âhâliye zûlm ve gadirde arayarak yevmen-fe-yevmen iktisâb-ı kuvvet ve servete çalışarak mezkûr Zeydiye kazâsı ve havâlisince câ'iz olduğu kuvvet ve nüfûzdan dolayı hükûmet ve zâbita-ı mahaliyye kendisinin vâsita-ı icrâ'iyyesi makâmında kalmakta olduğu bubâbda kazâ-ı mezkûr kaymakamlığıyla vukû' bulan muhâberât ve merbûten takdîm kılınan mazbata mü'eddâsıyla yerliden bulunan kazâ-ı mezkûr nâ'ibi efendinin ifâde-i şifâhiyyesinden anlaşılmıştır*].

⁵⁸ ŞD 2261/19, s. 9 [*ötedenberi... âdi şeyh iken şimdi kazâ dâhilinde müte'addid muntazam kârgîr binâlara ve bir hayli servet ve sâmana mâlik olması ancak menfa'at-ı şahsiyyesini ber-vech-i ma'rûz fukarâ-ı âhâlîyi ızrâr yüzünden te'mîn eylemiş olmasından ileri gelmiş*].

⁵⁹ ŞD 2261/19, s. 9.

generals in the empire, hand-picked by Sultan Abdülhamid II, infamous for his supposed absolutism. What's more, Ottoman military strength in Yemen was at a high ebb in the aftermath of the full-scale rebellion of 1891, meaning that bringing sufficient military strength to bear in order to apprehend a wayward shaykh should have been within the realm of possibility.

Despite these urgent calls for action, however, there is no evidence that the government ever moved to unseat 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha. What *is* recorded is that the pasha continued to operate as the shaykh of shaykhs of his region, not only passively accepted but actively supported by the provincial administration. Scarcely a month after the results of the investigation were released, Yemen governor-general Ahmed Feyzî Pasha informed Istanbul that, in response to an alleged attack by a member of the Sulayl tribe on 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha while he was on the road to Hajja, resulting in the death of two of his slaves, he ordered the deployment of two companies of imperial troops to the area, supposedly to avoid the spread of "sedition among the tribes" (*beyne 'l-kabâ 'il fesâd*) and to ensure the security of the roads, two common justifications for such assaults against "bandits" and "seditionists."⁶⁰ Furthermore, this incident also resulted in the dismissal of the acting district governor of Zaydiya based on the accusation that he had been actively involved in the planning of the attack on 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha. The official protested that his dismissal was unjust, but evidently to no avail.⁶¹

Further evidence for 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha's continuing favor with the government can be found in a memo from 1895, in which Ahmed Feyzî Pasha recommended that the shaykh be granted a fourth-class *Mecîdî* medal on the basis of a successful campaign in cooperation with the army to "reform and discipline" (*islâh ve te'dîb*) the Jarâbîh tribe. As will be noted elsewhere, these euphemisms were common ways of describing the violent suppression of anti-

⁶⁰ DH.ŞFR. 166/55 5 Mayıs 1310 / 17 May 1894.

⁶¹ DH.MKT. 277/49 1 Rabiulevvel 1312 / 2 September 1894.

government activity. In one (perhaps unintentionally ironic) turn of phrase, Feyzî declares confidently that the Pasha's "good service and loyalty are confirmed."⁶² The contrast between this statement and the Military Inspection Commission's report could not be starker; for the commissioners, 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha's actions were "ugly," the height of disloyalty, while for Ahmed Feyzî Pasha, the shaykh's loyalty was self-evident and worthy of reward. Soon enough, not only 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha, but also his sons Mehmed Bûnî, 'Abdulkâdir, and Muhammad Tevfik were all holders of some of the highest awards bestowed by the Sublime Porte.

1.2 Bandit Lord, Loyal Chief

In sum, by the turn of the century, 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha commanded a retinue of hundreds of fighting men, controlling what was in effect a semi-autonomous fiefdom. He dominated the key trade routes between the coffee plantations of the highlands, the large salt mines of the coastal plain, and the main Ottoman port in Yemen. He interfered with the local civil administration and exerted his influence to place members of his family in positions of power. Most seriously of all from an Ottoman perspective, he accrued significant wealth through what appears to be serious exploitation of the people under his dominion, while the share of taxes paid to the government was inconsistent at best. The question must then be posed: why did the Ottoman state support 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha's rise to power, particularly when he was such a contentious figure, well-known in some circles as a tyrant?

One potential analysis of 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha could be that he is an example of the *a'yân*, the autonomous local notables whose dominance is often said to characterize the Ottoman Empire in the long eighteenth century but whose influence was curtailed by the

⁶² DH.MKT. 406/61 12 Safer 1313 / 4 August 1895.

reforming sultans of the nineteenth century.⁶³ A less charitable interpretation might view him as an archetypal bandit lord. However, neither of these interpretations fully encapsulates the nature of his relationship with the state, nor explains his success. He certainly did not gain his power independently; the bulk of the evidence suggests that a large part of his power was derived from the support he received from the Ottoman state. I am also willing to speculate that the Ottoman government had the ability to remove him from power, but did not do so. In this way, Bûnî Pasha fits Georgi Derluguian and Timothy Earle's definition of a chief: not an actor external to states, but rather a "key political actor[] within states, operating in intermittent competition and cooperation with state structures." Crucially, Derluguian notes the active role of both the chief, maneuvering "within the interstitial spaces of states to control resource flows," and the state, which in many cases may have the power to control these resource flows or to suppress the power of the chief but chooses not to.⁶⁴ It is thus worth asking the question of why, and in what circumstances, the state would choose not to suppress the power of a chief such as 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha.

This question must first be answered with respect to Ahmed Feyzî Pasha, who was governor-general during much of 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha's tenure as shaykh of shaykhs in Zaydiya. As both provincial governor and commander of the Seventh Army, he possessed considerable executive power, and he wielded this power with impunity. In the aftermath of the 1891 rebellion, a number of inspectors (including Nâmık Efendi) were dispatched to Yemen to assess the causes of the revolt, with the most common conclusion being that its primary driver was corruption, in the form of over-taxation by local landlords in cahoots with corrupt provincial officials (including Feyzî Pasha, who had been governor of Yemen once before).⁶⁵

⁶³ See Ali Yaycıoğlu, *Partners of the Empire: The Crisis of the Ottoman Order in the Age of Revolutions* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 65-115.

⁶⁴ Georgi Derluguian and Timothy Earle, "Strong Chieftaincies Out of Weak States, or Elemental Power Unbound," *Comparative Social Research*, no. 27 (2010), 54

⁶⁵ Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference*, 153-60.

Although their conclusions and recommendations were by no means homogenous, the inspectors generally called for the suppression of the power of local shaykhs. In practice, however, the biggest opponent of this policy was Ahmed Feyzî Pasha himself, and one Yemeni chronicler even recorded that Nâmık Efendi and Feyzî Pasha's relationship grew acrimonious due to their disagreement on Nâmık's recommendation to summon and prosecute corrupt district governors.⁶⁶ On the contrary, Feyzî Pasha formed more tax-farming arrangements and informal alliances than ever before. On the one hand, this can be seen as nothing but naked greed—stories abound alluding to his corruption, including in a letter from the British Vice-Consul at Hudayda, George Richardson, who claimed that when Feyzî left Yemen in 1898, he took almost a million pound sterling with him.⁶⁷ Claims such as this must always be taken with a grain of salt, but contemporaneous sources present overwhelming evidence to suggest that Ahmed Feyzî enriched himself in his governance of Yemen, including selling civil service posts and siphoning off large portions of tax revenues for personal use.⁶⁸

Beyond the money flowing directly into Ahmed Feyzî Pasha's pockets, corruption was so endemic in the Ottoman administration of Yemen that an attempt to suppress it or push back on *status quo* policies could have serious consequences for one's own future in the province.⁶⁹ Feyzî Pasha's successor Hüseyin Hilmi Pasha would learn this the hard way; after charging into office in 1898 with a slew of planned reforms and an anti-corruption outlook, he quickly encountered difficulties. In contrast with the preceding years, in which the civilian governorship and command of the Seventh Army were combined under Ahmed Feyzî Pasha, civilian and military spheres were divided between Hüseyin Hilmi Pasha and the new commander of the Seventh Army, General 'Abdullah Pasha.

⁶⁶ Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference*, 169-70.

⁶⁷ ROY5, 501, Vice-Consul Richardson to Sir N. O'Connor, Sana'a, 5 September 1906.

⁶⁸ Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference*, 181-82.

⁶⁹ Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference*, 180-81.

If the palace's intent in separating these offices was indeed "centralization" via checks and balances, as Caesar Farah suggests, then one would have to consider the policy a success.⁷⁰ In practice, however, Hüseyin Hilmi Pasha's ability to exact change in Yemen was hamstrung by a power struggle with 'Abdullah Pasha, whose style of rule was much more akin to that of Feyzî Pasha.⁷¹ At the same time, some notables who were successfully ousted from power fostered accusations of corruption and rumors of Hüseyin Hilmi Pasha's collusion with the Young Turks. This discontent reached its climax when one disgruntled former official named Ahmed Babanî, dismissed from the civil service and charged with corruption and bribery, shot Hüseyin Hilmi Pasha once in the chest in an assassination attempt on June 6, 1900.⁷² Although he survived the attempt on his life, he was ultimately dismissed from office after a few short years, and the governorship would pass to several other men before the return of Ahmed Feyzî Pasha, by now a rather wizened old man, in 1905. Consequently, most of the changes that Hüseyin Hilmi Pasha implemented did not last very long.

The results of Hüseyin Hilmi Pasha's attempts at reforming the administration of the province of Yemen thus demonstrate one of the underlying dynamics of Ottoman rule in Yemen. The civil bureaucracy, the Ottoman military, and local notables were connected by established networks consisting of interlocking ties of loyalty and patronage. It must be stressed that these patronage networks were not static, nor in any sense primordial or "native" to Yemen; indeed, they were formed as a direct consequence of the Ottoman occupation of Yemen and constantly changed based on rapidly shifting global, imperial, provincial, and local circumstances.

⁷⁰ Farah, *The Sultan's Yemen*, Ch. 10 n. 21, 337.

⁷¹ Sinan Çakar, "Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Taşrasında İdari Bir Problem: Yemen ve Hicaz Vilâyeti Örneğinde Vali-Kumandan İkiliği (1895-1908)" [An Administrative Problem in the Ottoman Empire's Provinces: The Governor-Commander Dichotomy in the Instance of the Provinces of Yemen and Hejaz (1895-1908)], *Vakanüvis-Uluslararası Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 5/2 (2020), 545-51.

⁷² Yahya Yeşilyurt, "Hüseyin Hilmi Paşa'nın Yemen Valiliği Ve Ona Yapılan Suikast" [Hüseyin Hilmi Pasha's Governorship of Yemen and the Conspiracy That Was Made Against Him], *OTAM Ankara Üniversitesi Osmanlı Tarihi Araştırma Ve Uygulama Merkezi Dergisi* 34 (August 2013): 257-85.

However, the attempts of individuals at the imperial or provincial level to interfere with the functioning of these networks frequently had unintended consequences when those whose livelihoods were endangered sought a remedy to their situations. Although these same challenges were surely present in many Ottoman provinces, the oft-observed “thinness” of Ottoman rule in Yemen meant that the “remedies” to disempowerment were easily sought beyond the rule of the Ottoman administration, whether by taking the dramatic step of assassination or turning away from the Ottoman government entirely, perhaps embracing an imam’s call to jihad.

Any contrast in approaches to the governance of Yemen between Ahmed Feyzî Pasha and Hüseyin Hilmi Pasha cannot be perfectly mapped onto concepts of centralization and decentralization, or even their views on the civilization or uncivilization of the Yemeni people. Without doubt, Hüseyin Hilmi’s plans to move the responsibility for taxation to the village level would have been a major attempt at centralization, yet this centralization was no means to be accompanied by standardization in the sense of creating “Ottomanized” Yemenis, and his policies across the board appear to have been aimed at making Ottoman rule acceptable for the local population.⁷³ On the other hand, Feyzî’s “decentralization” in taxation practices is seemingly contradicted by his unpopular imposition of Ottoman dress uniforms and fezzes on Yemeni civil officials (a decision which Hüseyin Hilmi reversed), as well as his infamously punitive approach to governance, including the arrest and exile of numerous local notables.⁷⁴ In other words, although the two pashas had observably different approaches to governing Yemen, both interfered in networks of power and patronage in their own ways while simultaneously trying to avoid provoking further rebellion. This brings us back to the original

⁷³ Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference*, 194-96.

⁷⁴ Farah, *The Sultan’s Yemen*, 175-77.

issue: neither Ahmed Feyzî Pasha nor even Hüseyin Hilmi Pasha made any decisive move to remove ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha from power, despite his well-attested corruption.

Although personal interest was undoubtedly a factor in Ahmed Feyzî Pasha’s support for the shaykh of shaykhs of Zaydiya, it was not the only issue at play. The fact is that maintaining a strong relationship and fostering the power of loyal Yemeni shaykhs such as ‘Bûnî Pasha was seen as a military necessity by key provincial and metropolitan officials. Such a viewpoint was seemingly borne out in the cataclysmic rebellion of 1904, in which the newly elected imam, al-Mansur’s son Yahya, gathered a broad coalition over the course of the late summer and early fall, sending *isâbât*⁷⁵ (bands of salaried soldiers) across the highlands to spread the message of jihad and recruit from “among the people.” By October, the forces of the imam were launching attacks on Ottoman military installations and cutting key roads.⁷⁶ One military report describes how when the high road from Zaydiya to Hajja was cut by rebel forces, the acting commander of troops in Hudayda ordered that the road be cleared in relief of troops and supplies now trapped on the mountain path. He ordered imperial troops to attach themselves to the forces of ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha, who was described within the report as constant in his “service and loyalty” (*hidmet ve sadakat*).⁷⁷ This loyalty was proven yet again as he organized joint operations with imperial troops from up the road in Hajja. They bottled the imamic forces up in the castle of Sanjar before overwhelming them with combined assaults. While Ottoman forces took minimal casualties, they allegedly slayed all the rebels, including the father-in-law of the imam himself and other key commanders.⁷⁸ Despite the purported totality of this victory, it was just one action in a larger war. Hajja fell to rebel forces in March

⁷⁵ For a more complete overview of the important role of the *isâbât* in the Imamate after 1891, see Wilhite, “Guerrilla War,” 311-18.

⁷⁶ Wilhite, “Guerrilla War,” 378.

⁷⁷ Y..PRK.ASK. 230/74 18 Rabiulahir 1323 / 22 June 1905.

⁷⁸ Y..PRK.BŞK 73/75 14 Ramazan 1322 / 22 November 1904.

following the suicide of its commandant, Tevfik Bey.⁷⁹ The tides of war would not truly turn until Ahmed Feyzî Pasha's return to Yemen in June 1905. The subsequent campaign to retake Sanaa turned into a grueling attritional campaign that lasted all summer and ended in less than total victory when Feyzî Pasha's troops were routed before Imam Yahya's fortress at Shahâra.⁸⁰

When all was said and done, the operation on the Hajja road stood as yet another feather in the cap of 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha, who was granted the 'Osmaniye medal in the first degree (the second-highest decoration in the empire at the time) and receive a salary of 1,500 *kuruş* per month.⁸¹ Notably, he was only recommended for this award in 1906, once Ahmed Feyzî Pasha was governor again and the status quo was more or less restored in Sanaa. The request to honor 'Bûnî Pasha and his sons reveals that his personal retinue in the 1904-5 rebellion consisted of up to 200 men and that, contrary to initial descriptions of the campaign, as many as 20 of these men fell killed or wounded in battle. The request for commendation emphasized how this fight against "bandits" "actively and physically" (*fi 'len ve bedeneni*) demonstrated "his extraordinarily loyal service" (*hidemât-ı fevka 'l- 'âde-i sadâkat-kârânesi*).⁸² Importantly, given the high prestige of the recommended award, the request had to be approved directly by the grand vizier, who was at that time Mehmed Ferid Pasha. Although the requested salary was revised from 3,000 to 1,500, Ferid Pasha's response affirmed that 'Bûnî Pasha's action against the "bandits" was "worthy of exalted favor" (*şâyân-ı taltîf-i 'alî*).⁸³

This exchange between provincial and metropolitan decision-makers provides a new dimension to the previously observed dynamics of the state's favor towards 'Abdullah Bûnî

⁷⁹ Farah, *The Sultan's Yemen*, 217.

⁸⁰ Farah, *The Sultan's Yemen*, 218-25.

⁸¹ While I will not attempt to convert this sum to modern currency, it can be tentatively compared with the median salary of Istanbul-based officials of the Ottoman Foreign Ministry in the same period, calculated by Carter Findley at about 1,250 gold *kuruş*: Carter Vaughn Findley, "Economic Bases of Revolution and Repression in the Late Ottoman Empire," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28, no. 1 (1986), 84.

⁸² Y..A...RES. 136/28 15 Safer 1324 / 10 April 1906, s. 3.

⁸³ Y..A...RES. 136/28, s. 1.

Pasha. Given the power of Sultan Abdülhamid over the appointment of governors and the interference of the palace in local affairs, it is safe to say that he also gave his tacit approval to the shaykh of shaykhs's power, just as it was officially approved by the grand vizier. Considering this issue at the level of the palace and the sultan himself allows for a comparison with cases from elsewhere in the empire. 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha fits into a wider category of men who acted as loyal agents of the Ottoman state while often acting in ways contrary to its professed interests. Many of the same patterns in the complexities of imperial decision-making can be observed elsewhere. The Ottoman partnership with the Rashidi amirs of Najd, a classic example of Hamidian indirect rule, was frequently a source of disagreement between the central government and the administrations of the provinces surrounding Najd. Particularly, Rashidi attacks on communities under "direct" Ottoman jurisdiction often led to complaints from local bureaucrats, to the extent that the palace dispatched a special investigative commission in 1891 to investigate the Rashidi amir's conduct. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the report downplayed the bureaucrats' complaints and the status quo was maintained.⁸⁴

In an even more vivid example of the tension between reform-minded bureaucrats and Abdülhamid's preference for working through local notables, Shaykh Sa'dun al-Mansur al-Sa'dun of the Muntafiq tribal confederation spent the better part of the 1890s raiding settled zones and vying with rival shaykhs across southern Iraq. Although Shaykh Sa'dun is typically characterized as a rebel, a "bandit" disturbing the peace and clashing with the Ottoman provincial administration, Hala Fattah and Candan Badem have pointed out that Abdülhamid repeatedly showed favor to Shaykh Sa'dun, pardoning him multiple times and even insisting that his actions must have been produced "by the misconduct and misbehavior of some

⁸⁴ M. Talha Çiçek, "The Tribal Partners of Empire in Arabia: The Ottomans and the Rashidis of Najd, 1880–1918," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 56 (2017): 116-17.

officials.”⁸⁵ While Fattah and Badem characterize this attitude as “more charitable” than that of the provincial governors and describe the sultan as “empathizing” with Sa‘dun, I would suggest that Abdülhamid’s leniency was more driven by his overall approach to governing the empire than by any personal attachment to the rebellious shaykh. While the sultan supported reform efforts aimed at increasing the economic and administrative efficiency of the empire,⁸⁶ he also consistently inclined towards measures of conciliation and showed a willingness to subordinate the goals of centralization and “modernized” governance if it meant preserving the external and internal security of the empire. In this sense, the palace’s acceptance of the more onerous elements of ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha’s rule was no exception at all, but rather a corollary to the previously observed administrative flexibility in Yemen and elsewhere,⁸⁷ as well as leniency shown to local notables across the empire, even over the opposition of provincial administrators.⁸⁸

My point in acknowledging this pattern is not to suggest that this tendency was the singular strategy of an omnipotent autocrat, nor that it was the single cause of ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha’s rise to power. Rather, Abdülhamid II’s tendency to err on the side of conciliation and deal with local strongmen (even when it was at odds with his economic priorities and the apparent dictates of caliphal justice) was merely one factor enabling ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha to consolidate his power. Abdülhamid’s prioritization of security at the expense of other interests can be understood in part as a product of the weakness of the Ottoman state in its frontier

⁸⁵ Hala Fattah and Candan Badem, “The Sultan and the Rebel: Sa‘dun Al-Mansur’s Revolt in the Muntafiq, c. 1891-1911,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 4 (2013), 686; Gökhan Çetinsaya, *Ottoman Administration of Iraq, 1890-1908* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 92.

⁸⁶ Engin Deniz Akarlı, “The Tangled Ends of an Empire: Ottoman Encounters with the West and Problems of Westernization—an Overview,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 26, no. 3 (2006): 357-58; also see Carter Vaughn Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire: The Sublime Porte, 1789-1922* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 239-90.

⁸⁷ One representative example can be seen in the Hawran and ‘Ajlun districts of the Transjordan where, against the will of the local army commander, the central government ordered that the local population be exempted from conscription: Eugene L. Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 185-87.

⁸⁸ See Çetinsaya, *Ottoman Administration of Iraq, 1890-1908*, 71, 74-86.

regions; to apply Derluguian's analysis, the government sought a "quick fix" by working with local notables.⁸⁹ Crucially, Bûnî Pasha built the power of his chieftaincy by taking advantage of this weakness in moments of crisis, not by attacking the government but by aiding it in its hour of need. This sidelined his enemies in the moment while allowing him to damage them further in the future under government protection. This "personalistic and strategic manipulation of elemental power" allowed him to navigate and shape the multitude of competing interests, diverse agents, and circulating ideas throughout Ottoman society that created what is often simply termed "imperial policy."⁹⁰

Although the palace held significant executive power in the Hamidian era, its decision-making still relied on fragmented and sometimes conflicting information trickling in from distant provinces. Thus, the story of Bûnî Pasha cannot be properly explained without considering the textual mediation of local bureaucrats, special inspectors, and governors. As this thesis has and will continue to explore, existing tropes of banditry, sedition, loyalty, and newer ideas of reform and civilization were deployed as efficacious rhetorical devices in support of a wide variety of agendas as these actors strove for money, power, influence, justice, security, and the survival of the Ottoman state itself.

⁸⁹ Derluguian, "Strong Chieftaincies Out of Weak States," 62.

⁹⁰ Derluguian, "Strong Chieftaincies Out of Weak States," 53.

CHAPTER 2: TWO REVOLUTIONS IN YEMEN (1908-1911)

If the Hamidian period was a period of “rise” for ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha, then the years which followed the Young Turk Revolution of July 1908 saw his decline and fall. The revolution, in which the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP) successfully pressured Abdülhamid II to restore the constitution and reconvene the the Chamber of Deputies (*Meclis-i Meb ‘ûsân*), which had been “suspended” since 1878, unleashed a flurry of political energy even as it was in practice far from a clean break with the ancien régime.⁹¹ The revolution and the subsequent era of dominance for the CUP’s central committee had consequences throughout the empire, including in Yemen, where the purge and reshuffling of the provincial bureaucracy had knock-on effects in local relations of power as well as in the struggle between the Ottoman administration and the Zaydi imam, Yahya Hamid al-Dîn. At the same time, the Sufi preacher Sayyid Muhammad al-Idrîsî launched a revolt in the ‘Asîr region in the north of Yemen which grew rapidly from 1908 onwards, leading to serious consequences for the Ottoman presence in Yemen. The fallout from the Young Turk Revolution and al-Idrîsî’s revolt had grave consequences for ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha, who was ultimately deposed in August 1909 and exiled to Sanaa in 1910.

In this chapter, I continue to examine Ottoman memos, intelligence reports, and petitions concerning ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha to gain insight both into the particular dynamics of his position in the Tihama as well as into the broader situation in Ottoman Yemen. I argue that both the Young Turk Revolution and the rise of Muhammad al-Idrîsî as a locus of anti-Ottoman resistance created points of rupture that altered the dominant discourses of political argumentation in the Ottoman bureaucracy and the petitions of Ottoman citizens, integrating

⁹¹ Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 148-57.

new tropes with old ones. Constitutional rhetoric of liberty and equality under the law, as well as anti-corruption language, became an important discursive tools and symbols of allegiance to the new regime. Additionally, they both created opportunities for various local, provincial, and imperial political entrepreneurs to seize the initiative and reshape the political environment in their favor. The end result was a reshuffling of the political landscape in Ottoman Yemen, as the marginalization of certain power-brokers had secondary effects throughout their economic and social networks. With some local elites emerging strengthened, and others—including ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha himself—seriously weakened.

2.1 “Conscience, Justice, and Legitimate Constitutionalism”⁹²: The Young Turk Revolution

The first signs of trouble for ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha came within mere months of the revolution of 1908. In September, the Zaydiya administrative council sent a pointed letter of complaint to the Ministry of the Interior. This was in theory the same body that protected Bûnî Pasha from allegations of corruption in 1893, but in reality its composition was completely different, since the list of bureaucrats posted to the district had changed many times since then. The district governor, Mehmed Hâlid, had been transferred from Hajja only a month before, and it is quite possible that other members of the council were also new appointees in light of the ongoing bureaucratic purge.⁹³ The emboldened council was unsparing in their critique of the situation of parallel government that they observed in the district, where the civil bureaucracy’s functioning

⁹² Petition of ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha, DH.MUİ. 66/2, s.2.

⁹³ For more on the Unionist purges, see, for instance, Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 189-223; Mustafa İltar, “Making of the Unionist Bureaucracy: Purging the Hamidian Cadres, Rule of Law, and the Limits of the Unionist Power (1908–1910),” *Middle Eastern Studies* 59, no. 3 (2022): 377-94.

was constantly impeded by the power of ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha’s “despotic government” (*hükûmet-i müstebidde*).⁹⁴ This accusation was nothing new in itself, but the standard language of tyranny was complemented by a new register of political argumentation: “The justice and liberty granted by the constitution cannot be implemented here at all with Buni Pasha’s presence, and his domineering and despotic actions continue unabated.”⁹⁵ The council, likely under the guidance of Mehmed Hâlid, portrayed their predicament in direct relation to the lexicon of restored constitutionalism. At the same time, they made another bold challenge to the political order which was only made possible by the revolutionary moment: Bûnî Pasha, the letter claimed, was “the instrument of the graft and tyranny of General Ahmed Feyzî Pasha, who is notorious for corruption and various injustices in Yemen.”⁹⁶

Upon receiving this letter, along with an endorsement from Mehmed Hâlid, the Ministry of the Interior sent a note to the provincial government asking for a clarification of the situation.⁹⁷ Unsurprisingly, this direct denunciation of Ahmed Feyzî Pasha was not well-received in Sanaa. Within less than a month, another petition from Mehmed Hâlid made its way to the Porte. In this petition, Mehmed Hâlid revealed that he had been transferred from Zaydiya to Bayt al-Faqih District. He claimed that this sudden move was a direct consequence of the report issued by the Zaydiya administrative council under his auspices, which, according to him, “was the autonomous cause of the increase and intensification still more of the animosity and personal grudge that [Feyzî] fostered.”⁹⁸ The argumentation of this petition was simultaneously highly personal—Mehmed Hâlid asks the Ottoman government to save him

⁹⁴ DH.MKT. 2633/78 22 Ramazan 1326 / 18 October 1908.

⁹⁵ DH.MKT. 2633/78 [*Kânûn-ı Esâsinin bahş ettiği ‘adâlet ve hürriyetin buraca Bûnî Paşa’nın vücûduyla kat’iyyen tatbîkâtı kâbil olamayıp mûmâileyhin harekât-i tagallüb ve müstebidânesi elden devâm ediyor*].

⁹⁶ DH.MKT. 2633/78 [*Yemen’de irtikâb ve envâ’-ı i’tisâfât ile şöhret-şi’âr olan müşîr Ahmed Feyzî Paşa’nın vâsıta-ı irtisâ ve mezâlimi*].

⁹⁷ DH.MKT. 2633/78, s. 5.

⁹⁸ DH.İD.. 124/32 26 Zilkade 1326 / 20 December 1908 [*perverde eylediği husûmet ve ağrâz-ı şahsiyyesinin bir kat daha teşdîd ve tezyîdine bâ’is-i müstakil olmuş*].

from “being stricken with misery and poverty with my children and family in such a distant place as Yemen”⁹⁹—while expanding upon previous appeals to the values of the new regime with specific legal claims. He invoked his “right and authority to ensure the complete implementation” of the 39th article of the reinstated constitution within his jurisdiction, as well as the government’s duty to protect his rights.¹⁰⁰ Although Mehmed Hâlid did not make his legal argument explicit within the petition, the article which he invokes protected officials from arbitrary dismissal or transfer beyond statutory definitions.¹⁰¹ This set of correspondence provides a striking example of how the dynamics of bureaucratic interaction and argumentation had changed within a few short months of the reinstatement of the constitution. The rules of the game, at least on the surface, were now different.

As has already been alluded to, this change must be understood as part of the immediate aftermath of the Young Turk Revolution. When the revolution came, it caught much of the empire by surprise. In the weeks and months after the reinstatement of the constitution, the Committee for Union and Progress dispatched envoys across the Asian and African parts of the empire (which had not been privy to the intense CUP agitation that preceded the revolution in Ottoman Europe) in order to explain the new political reality from a Unionist perspective and establish local CUP branches. However, this top-down attempt to establish control of the narrative and consolidate the new regime at a provincial and local level was very often challenged by local realities. The envoys discovered that the spirit of the revolution had already been enthusiastically embraced across the empire, often in ways that were counter to the goals of the party itself. Local political entrepreneurs of all kinds established CUP branches, levied

⁹⁹ DH.İD.. 124/32 [*Yemen misillü bir mahal-i ba`idede evlâd ve `â`ilemle dûçâr-ı perîşânî ve sefâlet olmaklığıma*].

¹⁰⁰ DH.İD.. 124/32 [*Kânûn-ı esâsinin otuz dokuzuncu maddesi ahkâmının hakk-ı bendekânemde tamâmî-i tatbîkini talî`a hakk ve salâhiyetim olduđu ve madde-i mezkûre ahkâmının muhâfaza ve `adem-i tağyir ve hukûk-ı `âcizânemi siyânet ve ta`kîb-i vezâ`if-i celîleside zât-ı `âlî nezâret-penâhilerine `â`id bir keyfiyet*].

¹⁰¹ Şeref İba, Ömer Kesikbaş, A. Haluk Kurnaz, eds., *Osmanlı’dan Günümüze Türk Anayasa Metinleri* [Turkish Constitutional Texts from the Ottoman Empire to the Present Day] (Ankara: TBMM Basımevi, 2023), 37

taxes in the name of the new regime, and even began to purge provincial officials.¹⁰² The CUP aimed to clamp down on this unauthorized activity and bring all the local branches under centralized control, but this process took more than two years. In the meantime, those who managed to secure control over local branches seized the moment to agitate for the expulsion of undesired officials and even governors.¹⁰³ Yemen was no different in this respect: soldiers garrisoning Hudayda apparently kidnapped the governor (*mutasarrıf*) of the sub-district (*sancak*), Ahmed ‘İzzet Bey, and put him on an Italian liner headed for the Suez. They formed a self-declared Hudayda Committee for Union and Progress, which took upon itself the duty of replacing officials within the sub-district. Many of those who were not replaced simply resigned their posts.¹⁰⁴ In this way, all the administrative and legal officials of Hudayda were replaced in a matter of months, reflecting broader trends across the empire.¹⁰⁵

Mehmed Hâlid’s appeals to the government against the supposed corruption of ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha and Ahmed Feyzî Pasha can thus be placed within the context of a massive number of ambitious bureaucrats, military officers, and even local elites across the empire, newly empowered by the revolutionary moment in which they found themselves and claiming their rights in new ways. In challenging the sitting governor of his province and one of his most powerful allies, Mehmed Hâlid backed his claims with the political imperatives of the new regime: equitable implementation of the constitution and a corresponding cleansing of the corruption of the old regime, which was one of the key justifications for bureaucratic purges in the first months of the constitutional regime.¹⁰⁶ On the one hand, the empowerment of the

¹⁰² M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902–1908* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 282.

¹⁰³ Hanioglu, *Preparation for a Revolution*, 282-23.

¹⁰⁴ ROY5, 537, Vice-Consul Richardson to Sir G. Lowther, Hodeida, 1908.

¹⁰⁵ Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire*, 294-98; Hanioglu, *Preparation for a Revolution*, 286-88.

¹⁰⁶ İltis, “Making of the Unionist Bureaucracy,” 379; Carter Findley has observed that, indeed, corruption was not only common but a “systemic disorder” of the Ottoman administrative system during the Hamidian Era, and one that would prove hard to remedy in the Unionist Era despite the invigorated rhetoric: Carter Vaughn Findley, *Ottoman Civil Officialdom: A Social History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 301, 305, 332.

revolution certainly had its limits, as shown by Mehmed Hâlid's unceremonious transfer; on the other hand, with pressure from below (the grassroots efforts of local CUP branches) and pressure from above (the central committee's systematic purge of governors associated with the ancien régime), Ahmed Feyzî was replaced as governor by Hasan Tahsîn Pasha in mid-1908.¹⁰⁷ While this development may or may not have resulted in a change in Mehmed Hâlid's circumstances, it certainly had an impact on the life of 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha and others like him. As Hasan Kayalı has observed, patronage and personal ties with local notables were among the "premises" of the Hamidian regime, and the purges fatally undermined that premise, prompting an active response from threatened local notables, who "attempted to reaffirm their authority vis-à-vis the newly appointed officials."¹⁰⁸ Besides shifting the fundamental basis of the state, besides changing the repertoire of argumentation for Ottoman bureaucrats and ordinary citizens alike, the Young Turk Revolution also created a point of rupture in the lives of countless dismissed bureaucrats, officers, and governors which had deep reverberations through their former networks of sociability and patronage.¹⁰⁹

In an example of the afterlife of one such network, it would be hard to conclude otherwise than that Ahmed Feyzî Pasha's departure from Yemen was a blow to 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha's immediate interests. At least temporarily, the political climate shifted in Yemen. Feyzî's successor, Hasan Tahsîn Pasha, was a general of Albanian origin.¹¹⁰ Although little is known

¹⁰⁷ İ.DH.. 1470/79 19 Ramazan 1326 / 15 October 1908.

¹⁰⁸ Hasan Kayalı, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 47.

¹⁰⁹ One of the most significant victims of the purges was within the palace itself, a close advisor of Abdülhamid II named 'İzzet Pasha al-'Âbid. As a highly influential figure with many connections with Arab officials both in Istanbul and in the provinces, his exile after the revolution had a devastating effect on those who relied on his patronage: Kayalı, *Arabs and Young Turks*, 47.

¹¹⁰ There are very few mentions of Hasan Tahsîn Pasha in existing literature, with the slight exception of his role in the surrender of Salonika in the First Balkan War, generally more often a subject of nationalist (and counter-nationalist) mythmaking than serious historical inquiry. For example, see the discussion of Christos Christodoulous's "mythopoetic" biography of Tahsîn Pasha in Trine Stauning Willert, *The New Ottoman Greece in History and Fiction* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 107-109. Information on his tenure as Ottoman governor of Yemen is minimal and surely demands further research.

about Hasan Tahsîn Pasha himself, at least one Yemeni source suggests that his policy towards Imam Yahya was geared towards coexistence rather than conflict with the forces of the Imamate, leading to a kind of *de facto* decentralization.¹¹¹ This was in line with the initial policy thrust of the new regime; a plan for the division of Yemen into two provinces, with the highlands to become autonomous, was drawn up and promoted by none other than the former governor of Yemen, Hüseyin Hilmi Pasha himself, who was the new constitutional regime's first Minister of the Interior (*dahiliye nazırı*) and third grand vizier.¹¹²

Such moves towards relinquishing control of the highlands to the imam, as well as a grassroots turn against corruption, was probably foreboding for 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha. His support from the government was turning out to be more fragile than he might have hoped. In late 1908, the Ministry of the Interior received a petition bearing Bûnî Pasha's signature, claiming that he, his family, and the families of the members of his retinue who had fallen in the fighting of 1904-5 had still not received the salaries and awards that they had been promised.¹¹³ There is no evidence that this claim was ever investigated. This is further confirmation that Ottoman support may have sometimes been less valuable than those who courted it may have hoped. Hasan Kayalı This precarious situation was surely rendered even more insecure by ongoing political developments in the Tihama.

2.2 “Entering the Path of Banditry”¹¹⁴: The Revolt of Muhammad al-Idrîsî

After spending over a decade peregrinating over North Africa, studying at Al-Azhar University in Cairo and visiting the head of the Sanusi Order in Libya, the Sufi scholar and preacher

¹¹¹ Wilhite, “Guerrilla War,” 426.

¹¹² Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference*, 240-41.

¹¹³ DH.MKT. 2708/76 23 Zilhicce 1326 / 16 January 1909.

¹¹⁴ Petition of 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha, DH.MUİ. 66/2, s.2

Muhammad al-Idrîsî returned to his home in Sabya, some 30 kilometers inland of Jazan in what is now Saudi Arabia.¹¹⁵ He quickly became a larger-than-life, even saintly, figure, adjudicating disputes between tribes and preaching a return to the Islamic justice that he claimed was trampled by the corrupt and Western-influenced Ottoman state.¹¹⁶ In 1908, he declared himself imam and openly opposed the Ottoman presence in Yemen. He rapidly gained power and influence.

If ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha may have already had reason to doubt the future utility of his partnership with the Ottoman state, the rise of Muhammad al-Idrîsî as a dynamic regional warlord further complicated matters. Nevertheless, even as scores of tribal leaders flocked to al-Idrîsî’s banner, ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha maintained outward loyalty to the Ottoman state, continuing to present himself as a source of “local knowledge” and as a bulwark against a widening rebellion. In late May of 1909, he sent a telegram to Sanaa warning the governor that al-Idrîsî was gathering strength, and that not only had many shaykhs come to al-Idrîsî’s side and pledged to join him in his drive to the coast, but also that he had made a “claim to the government” (*hükûmet da‘vâsı*).¹¹⁷ This intelligence, which was relayed to Istanbul, soon proved accurate as al-Idrîsî took advantage of a massive revolt of the Zarânîq tribe south of Hudayda to strike west at the Ottoman garrisons on the coast before turning his attention south.¹¹⁸

It was in this context that a series of events concerning ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha unfolded in Zaydiya District in mid-August 1909, the details of which are uncertain and defy easy emplotment. What can be said with some certainty is that armed bands from a number of tribes

¹¹⁵ Anne K. Bang, *The Idrîsî State in ‘Asîr, 1906-1934: Politics, Religion and Personal Prestige as Statebuilding Factors in Early Twentieth-Century Arabia* (Bergen, Norway: Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1996), 68-82.

¹¹⁶ Bang, *The Idrîsî State in ‘Asîr*, 84-92.

¹¹⁷ DH.ŞFR. 415/64 6 Haziran 1325 / 19 June 1909

¹¹⁸ Farah, *The Sultan’s Yemen*, 236-38.

within ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha’s domain launched an assault on his fortified house at Rayga,¹¹⁹ leading to a fight between the tribal contingents on one side and Bûnî Pasha’s retinue, aided by imperial troops, on the other. This struggle was followed by a widening conflict between local bands and the Ottoman army. In the course of the struggle, Bûnî Pasha was brought to Hudayda by order of the government. He would remain there even after reinforcements arrived to retake Zaydiya and its environs, although there is some indication that he may have joined a military expedition against Mahwît, high in the mountains southeast of Rayga.¹²⁰

Multiple sources allege that Muhammad al-Idrîsî was involved in the incident, though the nature and extent of this involvement is disputable. However, this chapter is not so concerned with the particulars of his influence as it is with the overall effect of the rise of Idrisid power on the political situation in Yemen and how it was exploited by an array of political actors. In the weeks and months that followed the fall of ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha, several accounts of what took place were written, providing conflicting accounts pushing their own interpretations of events. The first can be described as a “top-down” narrative, framing the actions of the tribes of Zaydiya as an anti-Ottoman uprising created by Muhammad al-Idrîsî as part of his larger rebellion, while the second explained events in a “bottom-up” fashion, placing the blame for the rebellion at the feet of Bûnî Pasha. The “top-down” interpretation was the initial explanation of the British acting consul at Jeddah, George Richardson, who described how, at the “instigation” of al-Idrîsî, a group of “rebels” besieged Rayga, sacking and burning the village after inflicting heavy casualties on an Ottoman relief force and killing one of Bûnî Pasha’s sons. He described the incident as part of a broader “onslaught” of rebellion sweeping the region and threatening the security of Hudayda.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Roughly halfway between Zaydiya and Hajja in fertile land by Wadi Mawr, which flows all year round.

¹²⁰ John Baldry, “Al-Yaman and the Turkish Occupation, 1849-1914,” *Arabica* 23 (1976): 156-196.

¹²¹ File 57/1905 “Arabia: - Situation in Yemen (1905-11). Arab revolt against Turks. Imam of Sanaa’s letter to the King. Fighting in Yemen 1911. Agreement between the Turks & the Imam,” IOR/L/PS/10/68, 150r-150v.

At least one other person described the situation in similar terms: none other than ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha himself, who wrote a lengthy letter of petition to the Ministry of the Interior signed 13 January 1910. Bûnî Pasha’s version of events not only foregrounded the role of al-Idrîsî, but played on popular concepts of civilization and savagery in an attempt to restore his position vis a vis the government. Bûnî Pasha began his version of the story by melodramatically reminding the government of his past service, mentioning the awards which the Ottoman government had given him in return for what he described as “working and striving, laying down body and throwing away life sacrificially, day and night, both financially and physically in every duty of complete importance which was entrusted to me since 37 years ago, thanks and praise be to God.”¹²²

Besides simply reminding the government of his loyalty in the past, however, Bûnî Pasha also implied his present value to the state as a “natural” ruler of Yemen and a source of “local knowledge.” He described his position as paramount shaykh as passed down “from father to son from days of yore” (*mine ’l-kadîm eben ’an ced*). This language appears to be part of a conscious effort to appeal to the standard anthropological understanding of the Ottoman government about the people of Yemen. During his time as governor, Ahmed Feyzî Pasha personally promoted the idea that shaykhs like ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha were the “natural” leaders of Yemeni people.¹²³ This attitude was a common one throughout the Hamidian period, providing a “scientific” justification for the appointment of prominent shaykhs to prominent government positions and culminating in the foundation of the *aşîret mektebi* (tribal school) in Istanbul (the express purpose of which was to take youth from prominent “tribal” families and turn them into “Ottomanized” loyal subjects, thus influencing “their people” in turn).¹²⁴ In the

¹²² DH.MUİ. 66/2, s. 2 [*lehü’l-hamdü ve’l-minne otuz yedi senedenberü tevdi’ edilen her bir vazâ’if-i kemâl-i ehemiyyetle mâlen ve bedenen gece ve gündüz cânsipârâne ibrâz-ı vücûd ve ifnâ-ı ’ömür sa’y ve gayret etmekte*].

¹²³ Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference*, 186.

¹²⁴ Eugene L. Rogan, “Aşîret Mektebi: Abdülhamid II’s School for Tribes (1892-1907),” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 1 (1996), 84-87.

same year in which Bûnî Pasha wrote his petition, Yemen's provincial chief secretary (*vilâyet mektûbcusu*) Abdülğanî Senî wrote an article for the journal *Mülkiye* in which he argued that Yemen was only fit to be ruled as an Ottoman colony (*müstemleke*) on the model of Algeria or India, rather than as an ordinary province. To support this claim, he made reference to the French sociologist and anthropologist Gustave le Bon's argument for the unsuitability of European constitutionalism for the West African kingdom of Dahomey; Abdülğanî Senî saw this situation as analogous to that of Yemen, where tribes had supposedly been ruled by their shaykhs "for thousands of years."¹²⁵ 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha's justification for his rule over Banî Qays and all of Zaydiya was in effect based on the same grounds: only he and his family had ever had the ability to control the tribes, which they had done "since time immemorial" (*mine'l-kadîm*).

Moreover, 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha posited that he had unique local knowledge which allowed him to rule over the "wicked and savage" (*şerîr ve vahşî*) tribes of Banî Qays. This language played into exceedingly common attitudes held by Istanbulite elites towards the "uncivilized" people at the internal and external frontiers of the empire who were unwilling (and increasingly seen as unable) to accept the fullness of Ottoman law and reform.¹²⁶ However, Bûnî Pasha claimed to have the unique power to control these "savages." According to the petition, his supposedly primordial rule over the Banî Qays gave him "knowledge of what type of policies with which to manage Bedouin customs."¹²⁷ Historians, anthropologists, and scholars of post-colonial studies have long noted the connections between imperial

¹²⁵ Thomas Kuehn, "Ordering the Past of Ottoman Yemen, 1872–1914," *Turcica* 34 (2002): 213-14.

¹²⁶ The literature on this topic is well-established. For three of the most prominent early examples, see Christoph Herzog and Raoul Motika, "Orientalism Alla Turca: Late 19th/Early 20th Century Ottoman Voyages into the Muslim 'Outback'," *Die Welt des Islam* 40 (2000): 139-195; Ussama Makdisi, "Ottoman Orientalism," *American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 768-96; Selim Deringil, "'They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery': The Late Ottoman Empire and the Post-Colonial Debate," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45 (2003): 318-24.

¹²⁷ DH.MUİ. 66/2, s. 2 ['avâ'id-i bedevîyyeleri ne türlü siyâsiyâtla tedvîr olunmak vukûf].

intelligence-gathering, the construction of categories of colonial knowledge and the role of both metropolitan agents and local elites in contributing to the creation of this knowledge, both through the furnishing of all-important “local knowledge” and through the shaping and reproduction of colonial categories.¹²⁸ Bûnî Pasha appears to have hoped to capitalize on the government’s hunger for “local knowledge” by speaking in the imperial categories of knowledge about Yemen—tribes, shaykhs, and civilization—and framing himself as the master of them all.

This was not a unique situation in Yemen, let alone in the empire at large. Isa Blumi notes the willingness of local elites to play what he calls the “category game” by embracing the government’s language of Zaydî-Shafî‘î sectarianism, despite its general inapplicability on the ground.¹²⁹ Thomas Kuehn provides the example of a civilian district governor in Lower Yemen named İsmâ‘il Rahmî who prefaced a memorandum through an appeal to his “excellent knowledge” of the “natural qualities and dispositions” of Yemen’s people gained through many years of service.¹³⁰ According to Yemen’s provincial yearbook from AH 1308 [1890-91], besides being “zealous [and] courageous” (*gayûr [ve] şeci*), Ahmed Feyzî Pasha was appointed as governor “due to his excellent knowledge of local ways and customs and civil and military affairs.”¹³¹ What makes Bûnî Pasha’s case interesting, then, is not the fact that he employed such civilizing discourses, played the “category game,” or emphasized his command over “local knowledge,” but rather that he did so from the very fringes of the civil-bureaucratic

¹²⁸ Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda,” In *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, eds. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, 1-58 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 11-12; for a detailed study on British intelligence and the “fetishization” of local knowledge in the Middle East, see Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain’s Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹²⁹ Blumi, *Rethinking the Late Ottoman Empire*, 75-76.

¹³⁰ Thomas Kuehn, “‘We Know Nothing About Yemen!’ Ottoman Imperial Governance in Southwest Arabia and the Politics of Knowledge Production, 1871–1914,” *Journal of Arabian Studies* 8 (1), 14.

¹³¹ *Yemen Sâlnâmesi* 7 (AMal 1306/AH 1308/1890-91), 84 [*usûl ve ‘âdât-ı mahaliyye ve umûr-ı mülkiyye ve ‘askeriyyeye ma‘lûmât-ı mükemmelere bulunmaktan nâşî*]; Kuehn, “‘We Know Nothing About Yemen,’” 6.

state, displaying the depth to which these ideas truly penetrated, even in the far provinces of the empire.

Besides emphasizing his past loyalty and importance to the government as a source of local knowledge and control, ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha invoked the traditional rhetoric of lawless banditry—the fundamental, even primordial threat to the authority of the state—and applied it to the rise of al-Idrîsî. He described the events leading up to the attack on his village as initiated by the “seditious actions” (*harekât-ı fâside*) of al-Idrîsî, while the people were simply “tempted and seduced” (*iğvâ ve iğfâl*).¹³² Bûnî Pasha claimed that after establishing this control, al-Idrîsî provided the following instructions to the allied tribes: “If the shaykh of shaykhs of Zaydiya, Bûnî Pasha, and his grandson do not come to visit me, I subsequently permit you by shari‘a to spill their blood along with that of their community, and to seize their homes as well as their property, etc. Advise him accordingly.”¹³³

The language of ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha’s petition thus suggests that the people who rose up against him were simple and easily manipulable yet simultaneously scheming and avaricious. In other words, they are mainly portrayed as faceless bandits. The supposed decision of the “tribes” to follow al-Idrîsî is described as “entering the path of banditry” (*tarik-i şekâvet sülûk*). From the point where they are “seduced” by al-Idrîsî, those who rose up against Bûnî Pasha are consistently described as bandits, “rebel bands” (*cemâ‘at-ı bâğiyye*), and even as vermin (*haşerât*).¹³⁴ This language mirrored the dominant discourses of the Ottoman government by placing Bûnî Pasha’s enemies outside of the bounds of law. The idea that the “correction” of banditry and sedition through deadly force is incumbent upon just rulers has a

¹³² DH.MUİ. 66/2, s. 2.

¹³³ DH.MUİ. 66/2, s. 2 [*Zeydiye şeyhülmeşâyihî Bûnî Paşa ile büyük mahdûmu ziyâretime gelmeyecek olursa bi'l-âhire cemâ‘atıyla berâber kanları heder ve hâneleriyle eşyâ vesâ‘iresi gasb etmeniz şer‘an size tecvîz ediyorum böylece kendisine tebeyyün ve nasîhat ediniz*].

¹³⁴ DH.MUİ. 66/2, s. 2.

long history within Perso-Islamic political thought.¹³⁵ The petition is thus given more rhetorical weight by this substitution of the actual figures behind the uprising for a blank criminal type.

The only exception to this lack of identification is one “bandit” named Sâlih Mes‘ûd, an elder of the Banî Qays. The reason why he is singled out immediately becomes evident as the petition describes his villainous actions and claims that the real reason that he followed al-Idrîsî down the “path of banditry” was because he was promised the shaykhdom of Banî Qays in ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha’s stead, as well as control of the lucrative military transportation racket.¹³⁶ His inclusion serves to deepen the impression that the uprising against Bûnî Pasha was nothing but an expression of blind greed and fanaticism. Referring to Sâlih Mes‘ûd’s supposed agreement with al-Idrîsî, Bûnî Pasha wrote, “When the obstinate Bedouin saw such a situation as this, they desired rebellion even more, because, as everybody knows, the minds of the Arabs are in their eyes.”¹³⁷ Given Bûnî Pasha’s own background as the head of a semi-nomadic tribal confederation of Yemeni Arabs, this assertion appears highly ironic. However, upon closer inspection, it can be seen as the logical extension of the rhetorical thrust of the rest of the petition. Mostafa Minawi has shown how the rhetoric of savagery and ignorance was deployed strategically by the governor of the Hejaz Province to protect his control over local affairs and his corrupt partnership with the *sharîf* of Mecca.¹³⁸ In a similar sense, as ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha denigrated his enemies with delegitimizing rhetoric and ethnic stereotype, he played perfectly the part of the savvy Ottoman official who commanded a unique, decisive grasp of “local knowledge” that the central administration needed to control the “unruly

¹³⁵ Wilhite, “Guerrilla War,” 49, 226, 330-31.

¹³⁶ DH.MUİ. 66/2, s. 2.

¹³⁷ DH.MUİ. 66/2, s. 2 [Bu gibi ahvâl ‘urbân-ı mütemerride görünce ‘isyâna dahâ müstâk oldular çünkü ‘arabların ‘akılları gözlerinde olduğu herkesçe ma‘lûmdur].

¹³⁸ Mostafa Minawi, “Beyond Rhetoric: Reassessing Bedouin-Ottoman Relations along the Route of the Hijaz Telegraph Line at the End of the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 58, no. 1/2 (2015): 75-104.

Arabs,” explaining a complex situation with digestible simplicity (while serving his own interests in so doing).

By emphasizing the role of al-Idrîsî as the prime mover of the unrest, cunningly orchestrating his downfall, Bûnî Pasha perhaps hoped to gain sympathy by stoking the government’s anxieties over al-Idrîsî’s destabilizing rise. With the issue of Imam Yahya as yet unresolved in the winter of 1909-10, Istanbul now faced not one but two charismatic religious figures waging war against its administration in Yemen. Idrîsî had experienced a striking degree of success in his campaign of 1909 as many of the shaykhs of the Tihama submitted to his authority. Ultimately, an Ottoman force would check al-Idrîsî’s advance in the fall, and conclude a treaty (more of a ceasefire, in fact) with al-Idrîsî, granting him a degree of autonomy.¹³⁹ There was good reason, however, to believe that this state of affairs would not hold, and al-Idrîsî was both feared and reviled by Ottoman officials,¹⁴⁰ even in comparison to Imam Yahya, who had by this time been in a process of recurrent negotiations with Istanbul for several years as he faced challenges to his power in the highlands, both from rival claimants to the imamate and from al-Idrîsî himself. Isa Blumi has observed how the “triangular rivalry” between Yahya, al-Idrîsî, and the Ottoman government “empowered local potentates...and provided key channels of interactive space for a variety of local actors.”¹⁴¹ In this case, Bûnî Pasha displayed a sensitivity to the changing focus of the Ottoman government’s securitizing language as the apparent threat from al-Idrîsî grew increasingly serious.¹⁴² “This,” he wrote,

¹³⁹ Bang, *The Idrîsî State in ‘Asîr*, 93-95.

¹⁴⁰ Writing from a rather typical Ottoman (or rather post-Ottoman) perspective years later, the Ottoman judge-turned-peace envoy Hüseyin Kâmil (Ertur) remembered al-Idrîsî as a charlatan who spoke “idiotically and foolishly” (*ahmakça ve çocukça*): Hüseyin K. Ertur, *Tamu Yelleri: Emekli Yargıç Hüseyin Kâmil Ertur’un Anıları* [Hell Winds: the Memoirs of Retired Judge Hüseyin Kâmil Ertur], ed. Esat K. Ertur (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1994), 103-106; it is interesting to note the contrast of this perspective with the image conveyed by Shelagh Weir: “[Al-Idrîsî] was also considered a strong, wise, and generous ruler who had introduced desirable administrative reforms and infrastructural development in ‘Asîr,” Weir, *A Tribal Order*, 263-64.

¹⁴¹ Blumi, “The Ottoman Empire and Yemeni Politics,” 357.

¹⁴² A cursory, although by no means conclusive, search of the BOA suggests a drop-off in references to the Imam as *şakî-i ma’hûd* and an increase in references to al-Idrîsî as “*şakî*” in the years immediately following the Young Turk Revolution.

“cannot be permitted, acceptable, nor sanctioned by conscience, justice, and the existing legitimate constitutional order.”¹⁴³

‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha ended his petition, naturally, with a request. First, he reminded the government of the salary which it had offered him, requesting at least 20,000 of what he claimed was a promised 40,000 *riyâls*. If not to him, he suggested, than a salary ought to be given to his family of over eighty people. Second, and most importantly, he requested that he be allowed to return to Zaydiya and Banî Qays and that his property ought to be restituted according to “tribal custom” (*‘âdet-i kabâ’il*).¹⁴⁴ Although it was not stated explicitly, his request was clearly for the military to intervene on his behalf once again and restore him to his former position and to the government’s favor.

But ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha would wait in vain to be rehabilitated. Although previous scrapes with opposing forces had seen ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha escape with life, status, and property intact, this time, the government would not side with him, even long after it had reestablished control over Zaydiya. Partly, this was driven by an alternative narrative, in which Muhammad al-Idrîsî “provided assistance” but did not initiate the attack. In this narrative, which is represented in a follow-up letter by acting consul Richardson reassessing the situation, the tribes acted of their own volition to “crush the power and baneful influence” of Bûnî Pasha.¹⁴⁵ In his new report, Richardson claimed that many of the shaykhs of Zaydiya went to Muhammad al-Idrîsî of their own volition to complain of Bûnî Pasha’s illegal taxation, aided and abetted by the Ottoman state. In some respects, Richardson’s account agrees with Bûnî Pasha’s: he affirms that al-Idrîsî made arrangements with the shaykhs for a redistribution of taxation responsibilities (although the details of this agreement are different) and that al-Idrîsî

¹⁴³ DH.MUİ.. 66/2, s. 2 [*bu da vicdân ‘adalet ve meşrûtiyet-i meşrû‘a-ı mevzû‘aya insâf ve rehîn kabûl ve tecvîz olamayacağı*].

¹⁴⁴ DH.MUİ.. 66/2, s. 2.

¹⁴⁵ IOR/L/PS/10/68, 144r.

sent a threatening letter to Raygah.¹⁴⁶ Yet Richardson's account of an "inter-tribal" rising initiated due to illegal taxation is far removed from Bûnî Pasha's diagnosis of tribal greed and banditry. Perhaps more to the point, an Ottoman official who arrived in Hudayda along with reinforcing troops on 4 September reported the situation to Istanbul as it was explained to him: "Due to Buni Pasha's longstanding tyranny and persecution of the Banî Qays and Sulayl Tribes of Zaydiya, the aforementioned tribes attacked his house in Rayga with the aim of taking revenge."¹⁴⁷ As previously established, 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha's corruption had long been common knowledge, and it is very possible that this knowledge would have made it hard to justify committing government resources to restore his power.

More importantly, though, I argue that the successful removal of 'Abdullah Bûnî Pasha represents the success of an initiative led by the local shaykhs of Zaydiya. Like Bûnî Pasha, they took advantage of the rise of al-Idrîsî, but with much greater success, using his support to coordinate an uprising and quickly returning to the Ottoman government with assurances of loyalty once Bûnî Pasha had been removed from the picture. They also successfully made use of the petitionary system, leveraging connections with Istanbul strengthened by the constitutional regime. Some time after Bûnî Pasha wrote his petition, he left Hudayda and returned to Zaydiya. However, the other shaykhs moved quickly to ensure that he would not be successful in reestablishing himself in the district. Two deputies from Zaydiya dispatched a telegram to the parliament warning of the destabilizing consequences of allowing Bûnî Pasha to remain: "Although the butcher Bûnî Pasha had been expelled from our district with your exalted command, the new governor sent him back to Zaydiya. The tribes declared sedition;

¹⁴⁶ IOR/L/PS/10/68, 144r.

¹⁴⁷ BEO 3642/273127 14 Ramazan 1327 / 29 September 1909 [*Bûnî Paşa'nın ötedenberü Zeydiye'ye tâbi' Benî Keys ve Suleyl kabîlelerine zülm ve ta'addîsi hasebiyle kabâ'il-i merkûme ahz-ı intikâm maksadıyla Rîga'daki hânesine hüçûm*].

expel him from before an incident occurs between the tribes and our military brothers.”¹⁴⁸ The deputies, acting on behalf of the newly empowered Zaydiya elites, used some of the same rhetoric as ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha to argue for the opposite conclusions: in their telling, it was not al-Idrîsî, but Bûnî Pasha who was the cause of sedition and the cause of conflict between the tribes and the Ottoman military.

Whether or not this petition was the deciding factor, ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha was brought to the provincial capital at Sanaa soon after. Presumably, this was to allow him to be more closely monitored and kept far away from the unstable situation in the Tihama as Muhammad al-Idrîsî, awash in smuggled Italian materiel, renewed his insurrection in 1910 and extended his control south and southeast into the highlands at Imam Yahya’s expense.¹⁴⁹ For his part, ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha would never again be the paramount shaykh of Zaydiya. In the course of a few weeks, he went from being one of the most powerful men in the Tihama to near-imprisonment in Sanaa. Bereft of his lands, houses, property, and tribal support—even his cousin Ahmed Bûnî was said to be among those who rose up against him—he was left at the mercy of the state.¹⁵⁰ Despite everything, however, the state did not fully abandon Bûnî Pasha. Whether motivated by a genuine sense of duty to their long-time client or by the fear that poverty would motivate him to slip away once more, the Ottoman parliament approved a monthly stipend to cover the expenses of the fallen shaykh in Sanaa.¹⁵¹

To my knowledge, this is the last time that ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha’s name appears within the Ottoman archival record. Little can be said for certain about what course Bûnî Pasha’s life

¹⁴⁸ DH.MUÏ. 66/2, s. 16 [*Bûni Bāshā al-Jāni irtafa‘a min Qaḍānā bi-amrikum ‘ālī wa al-wālī al-jadīd raja‘ūhu ‘ilā al-Zaydiyya. Al-Qabā‘il a‘lānū al-fasād tasharḥam waq‘ahu qabla yaqa‘ muḥdhar bayna al-qabā‘il wa ikhwāninā al-‘askar*].

¹⁴⁹ Weir, *A Tribal Order*, 263-64; Al-Idrîsî was embraced by the Zaydi ulema of the highlands, contradicting the religious difference which Farah posits as the root of the conflict between al-Idrîsî and the imam as well as demonstrating the fluidity of sectarian divisions in Yemen, a matter which is also discussed by Isa Blumi, *Rethinking the Late Ottoman Empire*, 57-81.

¹⁵⁰ BEO 3623/271714

¹⁵¹ MV. 140/3 3 Cemazeyilevvel 1328 / 13 May 1910.

took after his detention in Sanaa. In late December of 1910, however, strange news reached vice-consul Richardson at Hudayda. Rumor had it that Bûnî Pasha, who was so often lauded for his loyalty to the Ottoman state, who had built his fortune and his name through collaboration with Ottoman officials, who had fought for decades against the imam's highland "bandits," had escaped from Sanaa. He was, it was said, headed for the north, where he would take up arms alongside Imam Yahya himself.

CHAPTER 3: PETITIONING FROM THE PERIPHERY (1912-1914)

This thesis has so far told the story of the rise and fall of ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha, considering the many layers of negotiation and communication that affected and were affected by events on the imperial, provincial, and local levels. In this chapter, I leave Bûnî Pasha and the Tihama to consider a separate case from the highlands of Lower Yemen using petitions signed by the civil and religious notables of a small rural community, describing their victimization at the hands of a rival shaykh and imploring the government to intervene on their behalf. My inquiry and analysis are focused specifically on the text of the petitions themselves, considering the rhetorical strategies and discourses found within.

Through a close reading, I argue that popular petitions formed part of the same process of bureaucratic argumentation as the memos, reports, and personal appeals encountered throughout the first two chapters of this thesis. Much like high officials and bureaucrats, petitioners in the late Ottoman periphery demanded the attention of the state using violent archetypes, defamatory rumor, performative weakness, and new vocabularies of constitutionalism, effectively adopting and exploiting the existing rhetoric circulating in the Ottoman bureaucracy. These petitions, originating from a relatively remote corner of the province of Yemen, also demonstrate the wide reach of these ideas and arguments. Finally, the presence of such petitions underscores the continued institutional and ideological importance of the Ottoman state in Yemen even after the Treaty of Da‘ân, which is treated in much of the current historiography as the endpoint of Ottoman rule in Yemen.

3.1 Two Mountains

The one case that I will examine here comes from a remote corner of Taiz, the southernmost sub-province of the province of Yemen, which was itself almost as distant from Istanbul as any region to ever fall under the rule of the Ottoman state. The case in question emerges from a set of four petitions, dated from August 1912 to July 1914, spread across two different subcollections of the papers of the Ottoman Ministry of the Interior (*Dâhiliye Nezâreti*), with the original Arabic petitions accompanied by translations into Ottoman Turkish. The first two petitions are stamped with the signatures of local jurists (ulema) and notables (*a'yan*), while all four claim to come from the people (*âhâlî*) of the community. The community in question is 'Uzlat al-Jabalayn, an area which covers the southern slopes of a steep river valley, Wadi al-Dawr, just 10 to 15 kilometers west of the walled city of Ibb.

Although the four petitions differ somewhat in content and tone, they all carry a similar message, enumerating the alleged crimes of a shaykh named 'Abdullah bin Qâsim al-Shahârî. Although the petitions do not give specific details about his biography or origins, the location associated with the shaykhs of Bayt al-Shahârî lies on the northern side of Wadi al-Dawr, perhaps only a few kilometers away from 'Uzlat al-Jabalayn. The petitioners claimed that this shaykh stole at least 200,000 *riyâls* worth of property “by force” (*cebren u kahren*), and that, “because [‘Abdullah b. Qâsim] even leveled twelve of our villages with overwhelming power, no one can take shelter in the aforementioned villages now.”¹⁵² This accusation, laying the blame for stolen property, destroyed villages, and slain townsfolk at the feet of 'Abdullah bin Qâsim, forms the core of the series of petitions, and their demands are likewise consistent. True justice, the petitioners maintained, required restitution both of the goods that had been stolen

¹⁵² DH.H... 59/15 12 Cemazeyilahir 1331 / 12 May 1913 [*kuvve-i kahhârasıyla on iki karyemizi dahî hâk ile yeksân ettirdiğinden kurâ-ı mezkûrede şimdi hiç kimse barınamıyor*].

from them, as well as “the blood money of our slain” (*maktûllarımızın diyeti*) and also required that the shaykh “be subjected to the legal punishment that he deserves.”¹⁵³ From their first petition to the last, the petitioners asserted that they had already complained and petitioned to the officials and courts at the district, sub-provincial, and provincial levels, to no avail besides “their definite promises that a military force would be dispatched.”¹⁵⁴ If the petitioners are to be believed, their complaints received no answer from the imperial Ottoman state. Yet even this small collection of petitions can provide us clues about the rhetorical strategies that local elites used to pursue their interests.

Before moving on to a discussion of the petitions themselves, a brief word must be said about the role of the *‘arzuhalci* in petition-writing in the late Ottoman Empire. Beginning in the eighteenth century, a class of paid scribes arose called *‘arzuhalcis*, who wrote petitions to the Ottoman government in sophisticated Ottoman Turkish or Arabic on behalf of those who could not.¹⁵⁵ Although the topic is still relatively unexplored, initial research suggests that a majority of petitions from Gaza and Jaffa around the turn of the twentieth century were written by *‘arzuhalcis*.¹⁵⁶ The prevalence of this practice in Yemen cannot be confirmed, and in the particular case I examine here, it cannot be confirmed whether the petitions from ‘Uzlat al-Jabalayn were written by an *‘arzuhalci* or not. The fact that the petitions were signed by multiple local jurists suggests that there were literate people within the community, but this by no means precludes the participation of an *‘arzuhalci*. The petitions must be read with this in mind; the possibility of an “outside” author does not devalue petitions as a source but merely adds another dimension that must be taken into account. Even if it is not always possible to tell

¹⁵³ DH.H... 59/15 [*müstahâk olduğu mücâzât-ı kânûniyye dûçâr edilmesi*].

¹⁵⁴ DH.H... 59/15 [*kuvve-i ‘askeriyye sevk olunacağı mevâ’id-i mukarreresi*...].

¹⁵⁵ Yuval Ben-Bassat, “The *Arzuhalcis* and the Changing Late Ottoman Urban Sphere in Gaza,” in *From the Household to the Wider World: Local Perspectives on Urban Institutions in Late Ottoman Bilad al-Sham*, eds. Yuval Ben-Bassat and Johann Buessow (Tübingen: Tübingen University Press, 2022), 127-28.

¹⁵⁶ Ben-Bassat, “The *Arzuhalcis*,” 128.

where the voice of the *‘arzuhâlcî* ends and where that of the petitioners begins, the question is not whether the rhetoric used is “genuine” or not, but rather how it reflects the dominant modes of bureaucratic argumentation that were required to mediate the “genuine” voices of the petitioners.¹⁵⁷

3.2 “From Among the Famous Bandits”

The petitioners devoted significant parts of their petitions to emphasizing the *criminality*, or perhaps more accurately, the infamy of ‘Abdullah bin Qâsim. This discursive strategy goes well beyond simply narrating events or listing the shaykh’s crimes, as one might expect. Indeed, none of the petitions narrate a chronological series of events or attempt to establish evidence of guilt. Rather, it seems that the petitioners were more focused on establishing the shaykh himself as a criminal. To do this, they used loaded terms emphasizing both the shaykh’s banditry; that is, his existence beyond the pale of law; as well as his tyranny and oppression. The petitioners used these archetypes to portray the shaykh as a scoundrel almost immediately in their first petition, introducing him as being “among the famous bandits and tyrants.”¹⁵⁸ In the second petition, he is likewise introduced as “he who commits accursedness and brigandage.”¹⁵⁹

By describing Shaykh ‘Abdullah in this way and avoiding any detailed, linear description of the circumstances or events prompting their petition, let alone describing the shaykh as a person with a history, thoughts, and motivations besides untrammelled evil, the petitioners reduced him to a transgressive archetype defined by his violence and the

¹⁵⁷ With all this in mind, I will continue to refer to the petitions’ authors as “the petitioners.”

¹⁵⁸ DH.H... 59/15 [*zaleme ve eşkıyâ-ı meşhûreden*].

¹⁵⁹ DH.H... 59/15 [*mel‘anet ve şekâvet ittihâz etmekte olan*].

illegitimacy thereof. Did those who wrote the petitions describe him like this because they believed that the Ottoman state would be more likely to act against someone described as a bandit and tyrant than to act in support of the rights of distant subjects in a property dispute or a political rivalry? Perhaps. The internal discourse of the Ottoman administrative bureaucracy was dominated by language which discursively categorized disparate acts of violence and violent actors within comprehensible types. As İlkyay Yılmaz has pointed out, discursive tropes that implied criminality and violence “widened a sphere of security” for the late Ottoman state, shaping the governmental response to a wide array of issues as a matter of defense and internal security, rather than social, economic, or labor problems.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, in 1897, “the Armenian community” presented a petition to the Ottoman government with the demand that terms such as *fesâd* (“seditionist” or “intriguer”) and *şakî* (“bandit”) no longer be used in regular administrative parlance and in newspapers to describe Armenians.¹⁶¹ While those petitioners found themselves on the receiving end of the state’s criminalizing categories, the petitioners of ‘Uzlat al-Jabalayn hoped to employ those same categories to their advantage by applying them to Shaykh ‘Abdullah bin Qâsim. Although it cannot be known whether this was a conscious choice or not, the fact remains that when the petitioners used the language of banditry and tyranny to describe the shaykh, they echoed the language of the Ottoman state in their appeal for its aid.

To confirm and explicate these archetypes, the petitioners attempted to prove their “case” against Shaykh ‘Abdullah by showing a pattern of criminality through hearsay. The first two petitions refer to three different incidents of murders (*katl*). One was the “recent” murder of two foreigners, referred to as consuls (*konsolos*) in the first petition and travelers (*seyyâh*)

¹⁶⁰ Yılmaz, “The Fight Against Anarchism,” 222-7.

¹⁶¹ As Yılmaz explains, the Ottoman government issued a decree soon after complying with the Armenians’ demands, but there was no lasting or significant changes in state or press discourses about Armenians following the decree: Yılmaz, “The Fight Against Anarchism,” 226.

in the second. The second alleged murder is said to have occurred “on the road” against the wife of a deputy of the district judge. Thirdly, the petitioners claimed that Shaykh Abdullah even “slaughtered his brother in so that he would not share his father’s inheritance.”¹⁶² The first two accusations imply that the state should act out of its own self-interest to apprehend the shaykh: the murder of the “consuls” was claimed to have caused “big trouble to the government” (*hükümetin başına büyük bir ga’ile*).¹⁶³

However, I argue that the most important role that these criminal episodes play in the ‘Uzlat al-Jabalayn petitions is to impugn the shaykh’s character. This is in line with the findings of scholars such as Leslie Peirce and Başak Tuğ, who have both studied the importance of establishing reputation in proving guilt in petitions and court cases related to sexual violence.¹⁶⁴ Tolga Esmer has also examined the weaponization of gossip among Ottoman high officials to tarnish the reputations of their rivals, especially using the language of violence and banditry.¹⁶⁵ Milen Petrov likewise presents a particularly interesting example from Danube Province in 1865 wherein a popular petition attacking the character of the district superintendent (*kazâ müdürü*) resulted in a lightened sentence for a villager recently convicted of defaming that very superintendent.¹⁶⁶ Just as in these cases, the petitioners of ‘Uzlat al-Jabalayn seem to have sought a response from the Ottoman government by using defamatory reports to show the guilt of their supposed oppressor. The stories crafted by the petitioners not only highlighted ‘Abdullah bin Qâsim’s criminality and danger to the state but also emphasized his scandalous immorality. If he is capable of robbing and murdering a high-status woman on the road or

¹⁶² DH.H... 59/15 [*pederin mîrâsına iştirâk etmemesi için kendi karındaşını katl etmiştir*].

¹⁶³ DH.H... 59/15.

¹⁶⁴ Leslie Penn Peirce, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); Tuğ, "Gendered Subjects in Ottoman Constitutional Agreements."

¹⁶⁵ Esmer, "Notes on a Scandal," *idem*.

¹⁶⁶ Milen V. Petrov, "Everyday Forms of Compliance: Subaltern Commentaries on Ottoman Reform, 1864–1868," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46, no. 4 (2004), 754-58.

slaying his own brother to usurp his inheritance, imagine what else he might do, the petitioners seem to suggest.

The petitioners strongly contrasted the shaykh's criminal, immoral, and depraved nature with their own weakness and helplessness, ratcheting up the theme of violent injustice. They repeatedly invoked the helplessness of their children, the loss of their homes, their forced migration, and their destitution (lit. empty-handedness, *sifrü'l-yed*).¹⁶⁷ Over the course of the four petitions, this theme increased in intensity and reached its peak in the fourth petition, which is notable for its concise, emotional appeal. After restating their basic claims in brief, the petitioners expressed indignation, even anger, at the failure of the government (at all levels) to act on their behalf:

Even though we have substantiated our claims in the shari'a court of Taiz with a great deal of evidence, we were not able to attain even a scrap of justice. Our impoverished condition is not taken into account. Is this justice? Our rights are trampled underfoot. Aren't we Muslim too?...The aforementioned 'Abdullah has no hesitation in cultivating our land and taking the harvest of that land. Who knows how many have starved to death? We are fleeing from the aforementioned tyrant and spending our lives in the mountains far from prosperity and civilization.¹⁶⁸

Here, the simple and emotional language of the petition serves the purpose of demonstrating the utterly helpless state of the petitioners, and their accompanying need to be delivered by the hand of the state; in the logic of the petition, the violence of the imperial state is the only antidote to the violence of oppressive local elites. Moreover, the insecurity implied by their "lives in the mountains" invokes late Ottoman social and environmental imaginaries, wherein the longstanding negative attitudes of the elite towards nomadism and rural peasantry were

¹⁶⁷ DH.H... 59/15

¹⁶⁸ DH.EUM.EMN. 88/16 [*Müdde 'ayâtımızı Ta'iz mahkeme-i şer'iyesinde beyinât-ı 'adîde ile isbât eylediğimiz hâlde 'adâletin bir zerresine bile nâ'îl olamadık fakir hâlimiz hiç kâle alınmıyor 'adâlet bu mudur hukûkumuz pâymâl oluyor bizde İslâm değilmiyiz...mûmâileyh 'Abdullah arâzimizde icrâ-ı filâhat ve mezkûr arâzînin hâsûlât-ı iktitâf etmekte hiç tereddüd etmiyor açlıktan kim bilir kaç kişi vefât etti bizde zâlim mûmâileyhden firâr ve 'umrân ve temeddünden uzak dağlarda işsiz güçsüz imrâr-ı hayât ediyoruz*].

combined with new civilizing ideas and settlement practices.¹⁶⁹ In this sense, then, the moral and legal appeal is again accompanied by deeper layers of meaning which may have appealed practically to the anxieties of the modern(izing) state. This reveals a deep sensitivity on the part of the individuals responsible for writing the petition to the “buzzwords” that would receive a response from the Ottoman government.

It is also worth making a brief aside to discuss the petitioners’ appeals to the government in the historical context of the Second Constitutional Period (*İkinci Meşrûtiyet Devri*). This thesis has already shown that the restoration of the constitution had an immediate impact upon the language of bureaucratic argumentation; Nilay Özok-Gündoğan and Yuval Ben-Bassat have both highlighted the ways in which petitioners in Diyarbakir and Palestine, respectively, adjusted their petitionary strategies in response to the changes ushered in by the revolution.¹⁷⁰ Both historians observe that the authors of popular petitions, much like bureaucrats, adopted political language that incorporated the concepts and categories of constitutional rule. The petitions from ‘Uzlat al-Jabalayn, however, applied these concepts perhaps less evenly than Özok-Gündoğan and Ben-Bassat’s examples suggest. For instance, although the middle two petitions address the Sultan, the final petition instead uses language invoking the grand vizier, requesting the “exalted grace and favor of the shelter of glory.”¹⁷¹ The final petition merges emotional appeals with amplified language of rights (*hukuk*) and duties. Now, they demand back not only their stolen property but “the return of our stolen rights.”¹⁷² “The protection of

¹⁶⁹ Chris Gratien, “The Ottoman Quagmire: Malaria, Swamps, and Settlements in the Late Ottoman Mediterranean,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 4 (2017), 82; see also, Deringil, “They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery,” 317-8; Yonca Köksal. “Coercion and Mediation: Centralization and Sedentarization of Tribes in the Ottoman Empire.” *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 3 (2006): 469–91; Nora Barakat, *Bedouin Bureaucrats: Mobility and Property in the Ottoman Empire* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023), 13-16.

¹⁷⁰ Ben-Bassat, “The Ottoman Institution of Petitioning”; Nilay Özok-Gündoğan, “A ‘Peripheral’ Approach to the 1908 Revolution in the Ottoman Empire: Land Disputes in Peasant Petitions in Post-revolutionary Diyarbakir,” in *Social Relations in Ottoman Diyarbakir, 1870–1915*, eds. Joost Jongerden and Jelle Verjeij (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 179-216.

¹⁷¹ DH.EUM.EMN. 88/16 [*lutf u inâyet-i sâmiye-i fehâmet-penâhî*].

¹⁷² DH.EUM.EMN. 88/16 [*hukuk-ı mağsûbemizin i ‘âdesi*].

our rights,” the petitioners declared, “is among the constitutional responsibilities of the Ottoman government.”¹⁷³ Ben-Bassat has argued that, in this period, the gap between law and justice no longer had to be “bridged” by the Sultan as in former times, as petitions were now often directed at the institutions of law themselves.¹⁷⁴ In this light, it makes sense that the petitioners of ‘Uzlat al-Jabalayn came to express their rights as constitutionally based while the Sublime Porte, represented by the Grand Vizier, took the place of the sultan.

However, the petitions reveal that there was a great deal of continuity along with these changes. Even though the petitioners explicitly claimed justice as their constitutional right, their accusations were phrased in far less legalistic terms than, say, the complaint of Mehmed Hâlid in 1909. Rather, their complaints were expressed through general archetypes of violence and injustice while emphasizing their own suffering and insecurity; here, the government’s constitutional obligation to return the “stolen rights” of ‘Uzlat al-Jabalayn became a synecdoche for the whole of the law, a gap which the government was expected to bridge. On this point, the petitions from ‘Uzlat al-Jabalayn seem to differ from other examples from the Second Constitutional Period. It is possible that this may have reflected a changing political climate in which the original principles of the revolution were fading to the background and being replaced by “a greater emphasis on Islam as a binding force” for the empire.¹⁷⁵

Beyond the language which they use to describe the injustice of their plight, as well as their origin at the margins of the empire, these petitions are notable for the moment in which they were written. As we have already seen, the era after the 1908 restoration of the Ottoman constitution brought with it new understandings of the social and civic composition of the empire. Additionally, the petitions of ‘Uzlat al-Jabalayn came after the Da‘an Agreement of 1911, a point at which many histories of Ottoman Yemen conclude. Despite the fact that the

¹⁷³ DH.EUM.EMN. 88/16 [*hukukumuzun muhâfazası hükûmet-i ‘Osmâniyenin vezâ’if-i esâsiyyesindedir*].

¹⁷⁴ Ben-Bassat, “The Ottoman Institution of Petitioning,” 95.

¹⁷⁵ Kayalı, *Arabs and Young Turks*, 86.

terms of that agreement applied only to a particular section of the highlands of Ottoman Yemen, and despite the fact that the Ottoman government retained a presence within that zone until it was wrested away with the rest of North Yemen at the end of the First World War, some historians of Yemen have shown a tendency to imagine the post-1911 period as moving towards an inevitably “post-Ottoman” conclusion.¹⁷⁶ On the contrary, what petitions such as these suggest is that the Ottoman government as a political idea, albeit one among many that claimed sovereignty, persisted well beyond its supposed end in 1911. Some elites still turned for aid to their distant sultan and his government, continuing to employ a changing “common language” of grievance, rumor, criminal archetypes, and constitutional rights to win the attention of their distant sovereign—even if their cries were never heard.

¹⁷⁶ This is at times the consequence of a tendency among Ottomanists to use “Yemen” as a shorthand for the (majority-Zaydi) highlands. I believe this is mostly due to an understandable belief that the primary thing that defined Ottoman Yemen was the unique challenge it posed to the empire in the form of rebellion. Rebellion is equated with the person of the imam, who is equated with the Zaydi sect. Even if we are narrating a history of *only* the imamate under Ottoman rule, however, I wonder why the story does not continue through the war and the dissolution of the empire. For examples of Da‘ân as the “end” of Ottoman Yemen, see: Farah, *The Sultan’s Yemen*; Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference*.

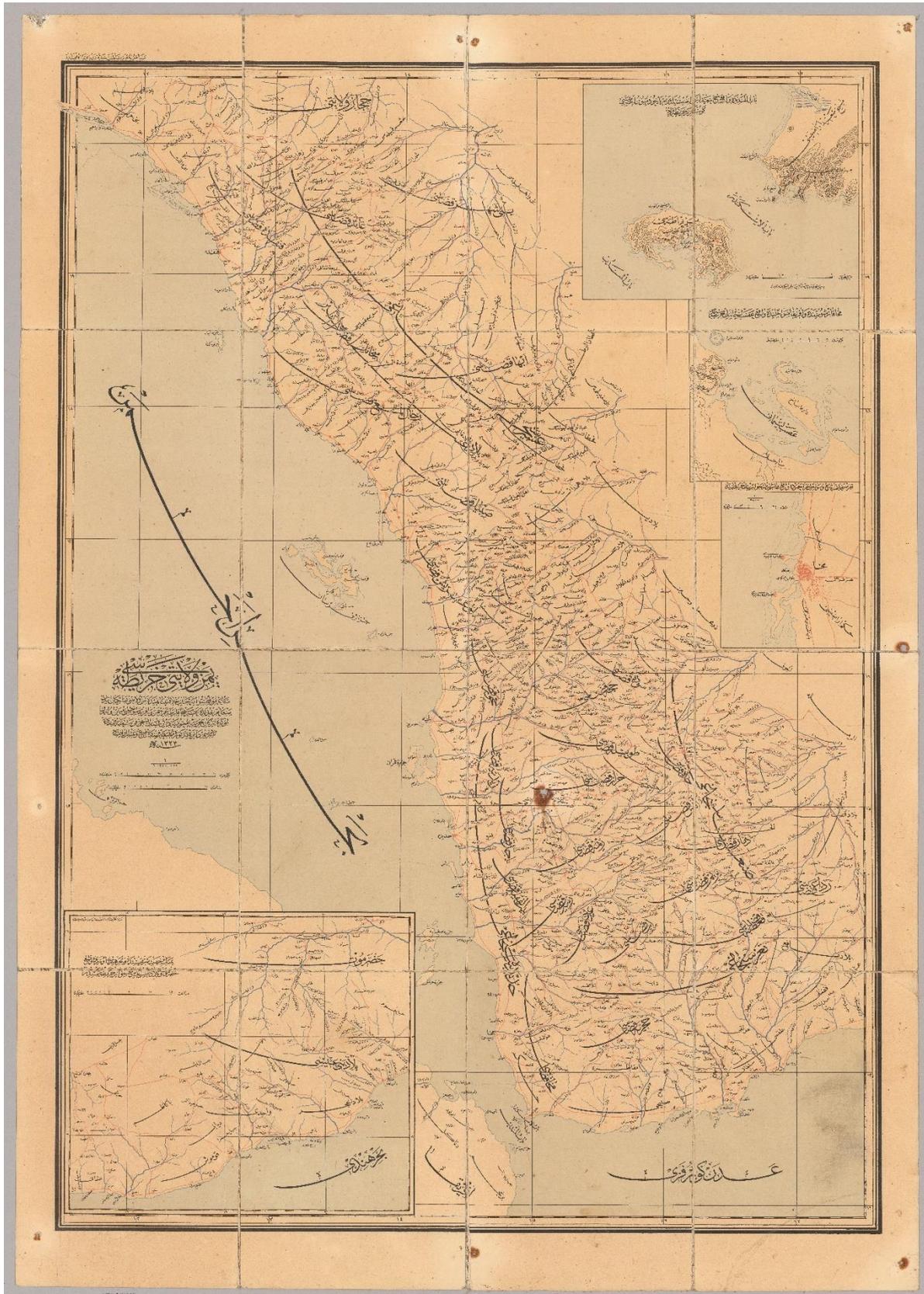
CONCLUSION

The history of Yemen under Ottoman rule has often been written as the history of a problem, a chronicle either of endless wars between the Ottomans and those who resisted them or of the Ottoman attempts to solve the intractable dilemma of bringing peace and prosperity to the province. In either case, the focus is on binary conflict and the implied *telos* is very often failure. This thesis has attempted to bypass the assumed binaries of Ottoman and non-Ottoman, bandit and shaykh, by considering the role of a multiplicity of actors in shaping the local particularities of governance as they pursued their own interests. By concentrating on the specific example of ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha, I have shown how conditions of war and rebellion created opportunities which were exploited by these actors, including Bûnî Pasha himself, to aggrandize themselves through processes of patronage and petitioning. The systemic shocks caused by the major revolts of the Zaydi imams allowed Bûnî Pasha to consolidate his chieftaincy, while the revolutionary moment following the restoration of the constitution undermined it. Finally, the revolt of Muhammad al-Idrîsî created an opportunity for the local elites disempowered by Bûnî Pasha’s dominance to throw off his domination. Throughout this entire process, bureaucratic communication and the medium of petition played a key role as the actors involved justified their actions and sought help from higher authorities. In line with this theme, the third chapter pointed to the roles played by discourses of criminality, victimhood, and constitutionalism in popular petitions sent from a rural corner of the highlands. In doing so, it corroborated observations from the previous two chapters about the instrumental role of this kind of rhetoric and suggesting that popular petitions were part of the broader discursive medium of bureaucratic argumentation.

Although this thesis has concentrated its attention mostly on ‘Abdullah Bûnî Pasha, it has not only been the story of one man. It is also the story of the merchants and farmers who

suffered under his heavy taxation, the local elites who supported him and who struggled against him, the inspectors and bureaucrats who defended and exposed him, the governors who protected him, the revolutionaries who challenged him, and even the sultan himself. It is likewise the story of the elders and ulema of 'Uzlat al-Jabalayn, as it is also of the Istanbul bureaucracy that received their petition. It is a local, provincial, regional, and imperial story without binaries or sharp distinctions between nations or sects and without predetermined outcomes. It is the story of navigating the personal dilemmas posed by a province in crisis within an empire in crisis through a thousand small choices of speech and action, and so, like all history, it is fundamentally a human story.

APPENDIX



Map of Yemen, 1907. University of Istanbul Library via David Rumsey.

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