Ottoman and Islamic Enslavement from a Global Perspective: Theory, Methodology, Practice

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In Brief: Contextualizing Enslavement

This essay aims to put the history of enslavement in Muslim-majority societies into several contexts. Given current research trends, a global perspective springs to mind first, intending to demonstrate that despite differences, great resemblances existed among enslaving systems across continents, oceans, and cultures. Over centuries, arguably even millennia, similar methods were being employed to coerce the migration of millions of people from weaker societies into stronger enslaving economies, where women and men of young and older age were being subjugated, often using violence and exploiting their labor and sexuality. So further below, we briefly examine if and how the existing body of theory[1] can provide new insights into the history of Ottoman and Islamic enslavement. Another context will stretch the time-space dimension to include the contemporary history of the Arabic-speaking Levant, with the recent horrific revival of enslavement under the so-called Islamic Caliphate. But let us begin with the third conceptual context, that which embeds enslavement and the slave trade almost naturally within the broader notion of asymmetric dependencies.

The concept of asymmetric dependency puts enslavement on a scalable *continuum*, together with other social phenomena involving inequal-

[1] For a fuller discussion of theoretical models of enslavement, see my "Models of Global Enslavement," in Stephan Conermann and Gül Şen (eds.), *Slave and Slave Agency in the Ottoman Empire*, Göttingen: Bonn University Press at V&R unipress, 2020, 31–51.

ity, discrimination, and coercion. As I have suggested elsewhere,[2] we need to move from the *master-slave dyad* to an *enslaver-enslaved relationship*, while still recognizing that enslavement was the most extreme form of domination and dependency. Legal bondage was, in almost all known historical cases, a dynamic socio-economic formation, namely an *involuntary relationship* of *mutual dependence* between two quite *unequal* partners. Within this broad definition, there were certainly cases in which enslaved persons had little impact on their lives, while there were other situations in which they had considerable agency vis-à-vis their enslavers. In all cases, the ability of the enslaved to produce some leverage over enslavers depended on the extent to which they could withhold their labor and/or sexuality in order to achieve minimum living standards. Their *agency* was service-denial based, be it in the fields, the mines, or the household. That was the complex nature of what I call the enslaved-enslaver *attachment*.[3]

A fourth context is labor history, since it can be accommodated on the free-unfree spectrum of employment and exploitation. So if enslavement is considered as a type of labor, its constituent sub-forms—i.e., industrial, agricultural, home and service labor, as well as formal, informal, and household-based work—become more clearly comprehensible and subject to analysis within labor and lifecycle theory. The slave trade would then be viewed and analyzed as coerced labor migration[4] and part of globalized workforce movements. This in turn would lead to the next context that of diaspora communities which such forced migrations created and sustained. Here, socio-cultural interpretations could lead the endeavor, supplying a whole range of practices that sought to sooth the traumas of uprooting and dislocation, and to empower congregations of enslaved and freed persons.[5] The final context embeds the world of enslavement in a broader Ottoman societal setting. This would inevita-

2 Ehud R. Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in Islamic Middle East*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2007, 32–33.
3 Ibid., 24–33.
4 Ibid., 38–43.
5 Ibid., 44–47.

bly link up with the study of other marginalized groups, affecting the chronology and cartography of Ottoman social history. One such outcome will bring into the conversation the politics of sexuality until the present day, considering, for example, the practice of Shi^{c}i temporary *mut^{c}a* marriage as a form of legalized prostitution.[6]

But we also need to examine enslavement in Muslim-majority societies in a more internally differentiated way, not just within the aforementioned analytic contexts. Categories of difference have an important role in reshaping the scholarly view about enslavement. Hence, awareness of the gender, race, and class biases is essential when we approach enslaving societies. Groups of enslaved persons were socio-economically stratified and formed an integral part of the power structure. In Ottoman, Qajar,[7] and other Muslim-majority societies, enslaved men and women were embedded within the military-administrative elite, as were also enslaved domestic servants within elite households. Agricultural and menial laborers formed a class of bonded workers in central and provincial economies, laboring alongside non-bonded, though not entirely free, workers. If most enslaved members of the officeholding elite (Ottoman *kul* and Qajar *gholam*, and *ghulām-i shāhī*) were male and white, the majority of menial unfree workers were African women.

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6 See, for example, the case of Mashhad in Iran becoming a popular site for Iraqi sex tourism due to that Shi^{c}i practice (*The Guardian*, 7 May 2015, "Prayer, food, sex and water parks in Iran's holy city of Mashhad,": https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/may/07/prayer-food-sex-and-water-parks-in-irans-holy-city-of-mashhad; last accessed 30 August 2018). See also numerous references to that situation on Twitter under hashtag #مشهد_تايلندتشي (Mashhad is Shi^{c}ism's Thailand), see especially, 27–28 August 2018, e.g.: Daniel Amir Retweeted, "Lots of tweets using a hashtag #مشهد_تايلندتشي to call out temporary marriage practices in the holy city. I can't retweet a lot of the images, because they're too rude" (last accessed 31 January 2019). This info is based on Raz Zimt, "Mashhad is the Thailand of the Shi^{c}a: Sex Tourism on Iranian Social Media," *BeeHive*, published by the Moshe Dayan Center, Tel Aviv University, 4 October 2018.

7 All the information in the current paper about Iranian enslavement and the slave trade draws on Behnaz Mirzai, *Slavery and Emancipation in Iran, 1800–1929*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017.

Whereas we have for the past two decades come to view enslaved people as populating a *continuum* rather than classified into binaries,[8] we need to move more intensely toward an understanding of these socio-economic relationships. Recently, efforts have been put into extending the notion of an enslavement *continuum* to a similar view of post-emancipation realities.[9] Clearly, freedom and citizenship in post-Ottoman and post-Qajar societies were not well-defined or absolute, but rather evolving notions that were being negotiated and battled in the newly emerging national states of the MENA region. It is important to note that these were obviously gendered issues, given the fact that women transitioned from bondage into a male-dominated reality of severely impaired legal, economic, and socio-cultural freedom. Observing the impediments imposed on freed women, and the dangers they were exposed to, Ceyda Karamursel asserts that, like in similar post-emancipation societies, "women were released from slavery into a new kind of subordination and dependence."[10] In other words, I would say that women were released from enslavement to face another, uphill struggle, for equal rights in the new post-Ottoman states.

Thus, an overall context-driven view would lead us to a more nuanced and better articulated analysis of enslavement; it would also enable a better understanding of enslaved *agency*.[11] Earlier notions of such agency were predicated on the assumption that only resistance and open rebellion constituted agency, especially in writings about enslavement and the slave trade in the Atlantic world. Work on non-Atlantic enslavement has brought to the fore milder forms of resistance,

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8 Ehud R. Toledano, "The Concept of Slavery in Ottoman and Other Muslim Societies: Dichotomy or Continuum?" in Miura Toru and John Edward Philips (eds.), *Slave Elites in the Middle East and Africa: A Comparative Study*, London and NY: Kegan Paul International, 2000: 159–176.

9 See my "Enslavement and Freedom in Transition: MENA Societies from Empires to National States," *Journal of Global Slavery*, 2 (2017): 104–110.

10 Ceyda Karamursel, "The Uncertainties of Freedom: The Second Constitutional Era and the End of Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire," *Journal of Women's History*, Volume 28, Number 3 (Fall 2016): 143–145 (quote is from 143).

11 See my recent views on the debate over *effective agency* in "Enslavement and Freedom in Transition."

representing enslaved agency, while parallel studies on US and Latin America have also come to credit similar forms of withholding labor, including abscondence, removing work tools, feigning illness, passive slowdowns, and committing criminalized acts of murder, arson, and sabotage.[12] These were reflected mostly in individual, spontaneous subversive action, rather than in organized, strategized antislavery agendas. One can examine also intentional versus unintended acts of defiance. To these forms of resistance we should also add clinging to origin culture practices, such as in the lodges of African enslaved and freed women in Istanbul, African festivals in Izmir; in these one can actually find an organized and deliberate form of resistance.[13]

These multiple contexts cohere well with the trends in enslavement studies over the past decade or so. That venerable field of research, more than a century-old, is known to go through cycles of intensity, direction, and scholarly production. Thus we transitioned from an early interest in ancient slavery to an emphasis on the Atlantic world, having arrived in the mid-2000s at a new, third phase. This shift may be called the "comparative turn" in enslavement studies. Manifested in the three latest volumes of the *Cambridge World History of Slavery*, a canonical series, it opened up the field for work on the wide range of unfreedom in societies across global time-space dimensions and a wealth of social, economic, and cultural practices. Exploring periods from antiquity, through medieval times, to the early modern and modern eras, and spanning five continents, the Cambridge project is being edited by leading scholars

12 Forms of "soft resistance" are discussed in my *As If Silent and Absent*, "Chapter 2: Leaving a Violated Bond," 60–107.

13 Günver Güneş, "Kölelikten Özgülüğe: İzmir'de Zenciler ve Zenci Folkloru," *Toplumsal Tarih*, 11 (1999); Ehud R. Toledano, "The Fusion of *Zar-Bori* and Sufi *Zikr* as Performance: Enslaved Africans in the Ottoman Empire," in A. Öztürkmen, E. B. Vitz (eds.), *Medieval and Early Modern Performance in the Eastern Mediterranean*, Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2014, 216–240; Michael Ferguson, *The African Presence in Late Ottoman Izmir and Beyond* (unpublished PhD dissertation, McGill University, 2014), pp. 41–5; Michael Ferguson and Ehud R. Toledano, "Ottoman Slavery and Abolition in the Nineteenth-Century," in David Eltis, Stanley L. Engerman, David Richardson, and Seymour Drescher (eds.), *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, Vol. 4 (1804-present), Cambridge University Press, 2016, 215–217.

such as Stanley Engerman, David Eltis, David Richardson, and Seymour Drescher.[14] The order of the volumes is not chronological, as volume 3 on the early modern period was published in 2011, volume 4 on the modern era in 2017, and volume 2 on the medieval period is in advanced stages of preparation, but should not be expected to appear before 2020.

As could be expected, the shift of focus to a global review of enslavement has invited scholars with theoretical inclinations to offer models for explaining the many varieties of human bondage in history. It is not surprising, therefore, that we have been witnessing a pike in new overarching theories, in a field that has, in past cycles, offered several broader models for interpreting and explaining the complex and highly diverse history of enslavement. So before looking into some of these past and present attempts at abstraction, we need to connect our historical work to more recent, even contemporary, forms of legally practiced and religiously-sanctioned enslavement in a Muslim-majority social context, that of the self-styled Islamic State (a.k.a. IS, ISIS, ISIL, and the Caliphate).

Fast Forward: Revival of the Heinous Practice

Although historians write about the past, their carefully researched and reasoned narratives address contemporary audiences.[15] With attempts to understand and explain events and processes in the past, most historians aim their messages at the issues on the agenda of their time and, less often, place. Overt or tacit value judgments are present in almost all products professional historians float on the various media of dissemination. These are for the most part political, frequently thinly disguised preferences in support of an ideology or a more specific line of policy. But they

[14] David Eltis, Stanley L. Engerman, et al. (eds.), *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, Volumes 2 (in preparation), 3 (published in 2011, in preparation from the early 2000s, beginning to reflect the shifting view on global, comparative enslavement), and 4 (2017).

[15] In this, I generally follow Hayden White's half-century old propositions. See, for example, his *The Practical Past*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014.