

Dhimmis in the ottoman empire essay examples

[History](#), [Empires](#)



\n[[toc title="Table of Contents"](#)]\n

\n \t

1. [Dhimmis in the Ottoman Empire](#) \n \t
2. [What are the Dhimmis?](#) \n \t
3. [Society and Nature of the Dhimmis communities](#) \n \t
4. [The Ottoman Dhimmis](#) \n \t
5. [Conclusion](#) \n \t
6. [Bibliography](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

Dhimmis in the Ottoman Empire

In ancient history, several records indicate that religious groups have migrated into nations from time to time to escape persecution. In the Middle East, the dhimmis or the non-Muslims became prominent in several Islamic regions as they migrated from their homelands due to persecution. However, like other religions, they were considered a separate entity from the main state due to their conflicting religions. Nevertheless, the dhimmis gained various treatments while in the Muslim territories, which is notable even up to the Ottoman Empire. This paper focuses on the nature and influence of the dhimmis in the Ottoman Empire's quest for power and dominance. In order to achieve the objectives raised in this paper, this study would also include the following categories - the definition of dhimmis, the society and nature of the dhimmis, and finally, their influence to the Ottoman Empire. A short summary would be included to explain the uniqueness of the dhimmis in the Ottoman Empire and its current situation today.

What are the Dhimmis?

The history of the dhimmis or the non-Muslims in a Muslim state is written in various reference books and historical documents, which is also supported by the teachings of Islam and its Holy Book, Qu'ran. However, there are some books which explain how Islam and Dhimmi first came into contact in the Middle East. Bat Ye'or's *Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide* wrote the first beginnings of the Dhimmi, tracing them from the Jewish communities in Medina and the Arabian Oases. Muslims slowly eliminated Jewish communities throughout the region, eventually removing the Jews from Medina in 624-627. However, the sieges led Prophet Muhammad to the oasis of Khaybar. The Jewish peasants surrendered after the siege, leading to an agreement between the two parties. Ye'or noted that Muhammad and the Jews from Khaybar agreed to a "dhimma", which founded the concept of the "dhimmi" class. Muhammad allowed the Jews to continue their activities in the land; however, they are to do so as tenants. Muhammad demanded that their harvest is to be divided, the half going to the Muslim forces or else they would be forced away from their farms and possessions. In exchange, Muhammad granted the dhimma his protection from raiding the land. A jizya or a tribute is surrendered to Muhammad to ensure their constant submission. Muhammad acknowledged his promise to these groups, protecting them from other Bedouin rebels. Ye'or further explains in his book that other dhimma pacts were done throughout the region, allowing co-existence to exist between the Muslims and the non-Muslims¹.

Juan Eduardo Campo's article pertaining the dhimmis for the "Encyclopedia

of Islam” summarizes the entire dhimmis background, even adding the comparison between a dhimmi and a non-Muslim. In his definition, dhimmis were non-Muslims that have a regulated status that can be compared to a regular Muslim citizen. Although it does not appear at the Quran, the term Dhimmi appears in the Hadith. Campo noted that in the Quran, a verse defines the dhimmis. In Quran Chapter 9, Verse 29, the verse commands all Muslims to “ fight those who have previously received revelation and do not believe in God or in the Last Days, who do not forbid that which God and his Prophet have forbidden, and who do not believe in the true religion, until they agree to pay the Jizya in humility.” The verse then notes that the dhimmi status is not directly about non-Muslims who reside in the Muslim territories, rather it directs to those religious members who submits to the Islamic dominance in the region. Campos also noted that dhimmis groups were often left alone without specific rules from the Muslim state. 2

Society and Nature of the Dhimmis communities

In the book written by Geert Jan van Gelder and Ed de Moor entitled “ The Middle East and Europe: Encounters and Exchanges”, they cited that Muslims have little knowledge of the non-Muslims or the dhimmis as noted in the distinctions set upon by their religion. Even if the Muslims have to charge the non-Muslims as noted by Ye’or’s narration, they are unaware as to how their arrangement came to be. The two authors even noted that some Muslims even argue as to what a “ dhimmi” should be defined, contradicting Campo’s definition of the dhimmis. They noted that the Muslims often find it hard to define the non-Muslims due to the interpretations in the Qu’ran and the fiqh. According to the Qu’ran, non-Muslims do not confess to a unique God, they

do not see Muhammad as the Prophet, and finally, they do not accept the teachings written in the Qu'ran. The Qu'ran also believes that there are only two groups of non-Muslims; Jews and Christians. Other religions such as Zoroastrians, Sabians and the polytheists are primitive religious and cannot be considered practiced religions. The Qu'ran also noted that non-Muslims were sub-divided into two: those who believe in one God, and those who believe in two or more Gods. While these could be considered theological assertions from the Qu'ran, it still expresses the Muslim ideas of non-Muslims or the dhimmis in those periods. On another sentiment, the two authors also noted that there is also the distinction regarding dar al-islam and ahl al-kitab. Only dhimmis can be considered the ahl al-kitab or those from outside Muslim territories. Dhimmi communities are also kept with their own autonomy while in Muslim territory, and are given with their own jurisdiction rights in accordance to their religions. 4

The Ottoman Dhimmis

The Ottoman Empire is noted for its utmost adherence to Islam, especially as it applies Islamic principles to comprise its laws and traditions. Michael Youssef's book "Revolt Against Modernity: Muslim Zealots and the West," noted that the Ottoman Empire hosted several religious, ethnic, and national groups such as the Turks, Tartars, Kurds, Arabs, Mameluks, Bosnians, Albanians, Bulgarians, Slavs, Armenians, Jews, and many others. However, the Christians and the Jews were often grouped to each other, labelling them as "dhimmis". For the Ottomans Youssef writes, are modern Muslim activists who would view Islam as a deviance to their religions. Ottomans believe that the dhimmis only believed the initial revelations presented to them through

their sacred texts, unlike Islam which embraces God's revelations to Muhammad.

Nevertheless, Youssef describes that Ottoman Muslims believed that the dhimmis were inferior in both mind and capacity as compared to the Muslims. He also notes that if dhimmis prefer to convert to Islam, he would leave his previous millet or religious grouping and join the Muslim millet. Millets in the Ottoman Empire were divided into four: Muslims, Jews, Greek Orthodox, and the Armenians. There was also the fifth millet which comprises the Catholics. Youssef also pointed out that by the time the Ottoman Empire began to weaken, European nations declared their capacity to protect dhimmis groups. Various dhimmis groups eventually moved to these European nations such as the Catholics, who went to France; and the Armenian Protestants, who went to the United States⁵.

Benjamin Braude's article " Foundation Myths of the Millet System" explains the background of the Millet or religious groups that became prominent in the Ottoman Empire noted in Youssef's work. According to Braude, the millet is groups of people with a common religion. While the term is used to define religious groups, the Quran notes that the millet is pre-Islamic communities or the millat Ibrahim: The people of Abraham. This term could then mean they are Jews, Christians, or Muslims. In the Ottoman pre-text, the millet is used to denote the communities within the Empire, allowing them to distinguish the dhimmis communities. Braude notes that the millet does not immediately mean they are non-Muslims per say like how dhimmis are not all non-Muslims. Throughout the article, Braude explains why the Ottomans preferred to use the term millet to refer to non-Muslims. He also agrees with

other authors that the Ottoman Empire did not have an overall administrative system that would deal with non-Muslims. 6

The history of the Dhimmis during the Ottoman Rule can be read in Michael Winter's book " Egyptian Society under Ottoman Rule, 1517-1798". Winter begins his narration in the first period of the Ottoman Period under Sultan Selim, who managed to conquer Cairo in 1517. He noted that dhimmis in Cairo were deported to Turkey under the surgun system or the banishment system, which in contrast to Youssef's narration noted that the dhimmis were treated as an inferior group. Many saw the deportation as a harsh cruelty in the part of the Ottomans, but many have to agree that it was not anti-Jewish. The non-Muslim communities saw the Ottoman action to be an acknowledgement of their talents as majority of the deportees were merchants, craftsmen, and clerks who then could use their talents once they reach the main land. Christians who were also deported out of Egypt were sent to Istanbul to act as clerks for the Treasury. In the first few years of the Ottoman rule in Egypt, Winter notes that there was no change in the nature of dhimmis communities even when the appointment of Kha'ir Bey. Bey was the first Ottoman governor assigned in Egypt in 1517, contradicting Youssef's statements that the dhimmis were forced out of their homes and forced to accept rights. Records indicated that Kha'ir Bey was very strict in his position as governor as he had ordered the punishments of his employees from the Treasury found stealing and counterfeiting. Although he was not considered anti-dhimmi, his cruelty became legendary for both non-Muslims and Muslims. However, by the time Selim died in 1520, the Jews became vulnerable for anti-dhimmi groups and a target of the Janissaries.

The Janissaries noted that they have the right to pillage Cairo in lieu of an old custom, but this was argued by several emirs. The Janissaries did not back down from their threat against the dhimmi Jews as they threatened to pillage several dhimmis populate towns. It was only until the Janissaries left Cairo due to a large sum did the Jewish dhimmis became safe. Winter continues on to discuss the dhimmi situation in Egypt by identifying some of the policies applied by the Ottoman Empire to the Egyptian dhimmis such as the Qanun-name-I Misir created by Ibrahim Pasha, the Grand Vizier. According to the Qanun, dhimmi advisers are dismissed from their duties and are expected to return to their respective territories. The narration also explained the situation of the dhimmi communities after its first few years of rule, from the taxes they have to pay up to the dhimmi customs and traditions. 7

Daniel Schroeter's article " Changing Relationship between Jews and the Ottoman State" noted that the dhimmis were not recorded in some periods, which would explain why there is only a general background in the dhimmis in the Ottoman Empire noted from Youssef, Winter and Braude's works. However, it is visible that the dhimmi Jews have played a key role in Tripoli and in the several villages near the Tripolitania region. Although they were considered dhimmis, the Jews and other religious groups that falls in this category, met different applications of the classification in different places. By the time the Ottomans reclaimed the Libyan territories, the dhimmis were restored back to their Ottoman situations. The Jewish dhimmis surrounding Tripoli were stripped of their legal status. However, there have been evidences that the Tanzimat reforms did not do many effects to Jewish life in Libya although the reforms pushed for equality for both sides. Jews

continued to pay the Jizya and were continuously opposed in building their synagogues. Schroeter even noted that there were others who found their freedom away from the dhimmi classifications especially those who decided to live in the Jabal Nafusa range. As years went on, Jewish dhimmis were persecuted by the Turks who tried to control their reclaimed territories from the rebels, supporting how hard treatment was to the dhimmi communities noted in the sources above. 8

Yaron Ben-Naeh's book " Jews in the Realm of the Sultans: Ottoman Jewish Society in the Seventeenth Century" expressed how the Ottoman Empire treated their dhimmis through their laws, which was not truly explained in the Winter book as it concentrated in the political aspect of the dhimmis in the Egyptian territory. Ben-Naeh noted that the Ottoman Empire had three laws: the sari'a or the religious law, the kanun or the sultanic law, and the common law that reflects how dhimmis communities were judged in other states. The three laws enabled the foundation of the dhimmi communities that collectively follows a set of conditions to ensure that they are both safe through their protection, and pay their dues in return. Ben-Naeh continues on to his narration by indicating that the Ottoman Empire even exercised the payment of poll tax ritual to ensure that non-Muslims knew their place in the kingdom. Restrictions were placed to the dhimmi communities, written in the Conditions of Umar. The regulations prevented dhimmis from upgrading their homes, worshipping their religion, own slaves, and even own weaponry for protection. There were even restrictions set on clothing, allowing dhimmis to only use a state-specified measurement and color. Kadis and muhtesibs were known to enforce the dhimmi restrictions, ensuring that they would be

tried in court. Dhimmis in the Ottoman period were also treated badly in courts, especially in terms of punishment and inheritances⁹. Abdul Allah Ahmad Na'im supported Ben-Naeb's notion that dhimmis were mistreated even by the local courts, noting in his book "Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a" that dhimmis often have to go to courts that would be fair to them to get a more favourable judgement. He even added that there were also chances that women could easily obtain divorce from the Shari'a courts in comparison in getting judgement from the authorities, which was not written in Ben-Naeb's book¹⁰

Conclusion

As of today, the dhimmis continues to exist in several Middle Eastern regions even after the demise of the Ottoman Empire. In comparison to the present day dhimmis, the dhimmis in the Ottoman Empire enjoyed protected privileges from the Muslim government as long as they continue to pay their taxes and respect their agreement with the government. However, the dhimmis communities nowadays not only become subjected into violence by Muslim extremists such as the Taliban, but they are also regarded in indifference. Nevertheless, there are still Islamic groups nowadays that respect the similarities and differences of the Muslims and the non-Muslims such as the Muslim Brotherhood. These sources can equip the readers with a better understanding of the non-Muslim societies in Muslim territories, and further analyze how these two clashing societies meet in a common point to ensure they live in harmony.

Bibliography

Ben-Naeh, Yaron. Jews in the Realm of the Sultans: Ottoman Jewish Society in the Seventeenth

Century. Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2008.

Braude, Benjamin. " Foundation Myths of the Millet System." In Christians and Jews of the

Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society, edited by Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, 69-87. Teaneck, NJ: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1982.

Campo, Juan Eduardo. Encyclopedia of Islam. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009.

Na'im, Abd Allah Ahmad. Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a.

Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Schroeter, Daniel. " The Changing Relationship between the Jews of the Arab Middle East and

the Ottoman State in the Nineteenth Century" in Jews, Turks, Ottomans: A Shared History, Fifteenth Through the Twentieth Century, edited by Avigdor Levy, 88-107. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002.

Van Gelder, Geert Jan & de Moor, Ed. The Middle East and Europe: Encounters and

Exchanges. Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1992.

Winter, Michael. Egyptian Society Under Ottoman Rule, 1517-1798. New York: Routledge,

1992.

Ye'or, Bat. Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide. Cranbury, NJ:
Associated
University Presses, 2002.

----- . The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians Under Islam. Cranbury, NJ:
Associated
University Presses, 2005.

Youssef, Michael. Revolt Against Modernity: Muslim Zealots and the West.
Leiden: Brill
Archive, 1985.