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### From *Şikayet* to Political Discourse and ‘Public Opinion’: Petitioning Practices to the King-Crane Commission

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# From *Şikayet* to Political Discourse and ‘Public Opinion’: Petitioning Practices to the King-Crane Commission

Yuval Ben-Bassat and Fruma Zachs\*

**ABSTRACT** *The King-Crane Commission, named after its two chairs, Henry Churchill King (1858-1934) and Charles R. Crane (1858-1939), was an American investigative commission set up to explore possible political arrangements for the former Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I and the collapse of the Empire. While most research has dealt with the issue of whether the petitions submitted to the King-Crane Commission were a genuine manifestation of ‘public opinion’ or merely manipulations by interested elite parties, this article shifts the focus beyond this debate. We argue that a textual analysis of these petitions can shed light on the transformation of the traditional Ottoman form of appeal into a modern political tool used to recruit and generate ‘public opinion’ and foster modern political discourse. We first present a historical overview of petitioning in the Ottoman Empire and the key changes in petitioning practices in the last half of the nineteenth century. We then discuss the King-Crane petitions and highlight their differences from traditional petitions, as well as their contribution to the emerging national discourse in Greater Syria. We show that petitions shifted toward stances that were more ideological and political in nature, a development that coincided with the collapse of the Empire.*

## Introduction

The King-Crane Commission, named after its two chairs, Henry Churchill King (1858-1934) and Charles R. Crane (1858-1939), was an American investigative commission set up to explore possible political arrangements of the former Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I and the collapse of the Empire.<sup>1</sup> The Commission travelled for a month throughout southern Turkey and Greater Syria in the summer of 1919 before going to Istanbul to write its final report.<sup>2</sup> The report was submitted to the American delegation to the

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Grossi, Maren Milligan, and Ted Waddelow, “Restoring Lost Voices of Self-Determination,” *King-Crane Commission Digital Archival Collection, Oberlin College Archives* (August 2011), at <http://www.oberlin.edu/library/digital/king-crane/intro.html> (last accessed on 11.02.14); for a full interactive map of the Commission’s tour, see <http://www.oberlin.edu/library/digital/king-crane/map.html> (last accessed on 11.02.14).

<sup>2</sup> Initially the Commission was designed to be an international mission involving representatives from the victorious Allied Powers, similar to other fact-finding commissions established as part of the Paris Peace Conference to make the necessary arrangements after the defeat of the Central Powers.

peace talks in Paris and then to the White House, but its recommendations never materialized and with the passing of time it was largely forgotten. Nonetheless, it has attracted much attention in the literature dealing with post-Ottoman policies in the Middle East over the years.<sup>3</sup>

During its investigative journey the King-Crane Commission met with 442 delegations<sup>4</sup> and received 1,863 petitions from individuals and groups.<sup>5</sup> The Commission's report states that as it "progressed northward the petitions became more numerous, due to the increased time afforded for knowledge of the Commission's coming, for the preparation of petitions, for the activities of propaganda agents, and for the natural crystallization of public opinion."<sup>6</sup> The Commission used the petitions to assess the people's preferences with regards to the region's future after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>7</sup> It assumed that petitioning was the best way to evaluate public opinion and it encouraged the local population to do so either in writing or orally during meetings with the Commission during its tour in the region.<sup>8</sup>

However, as suggested in the quotation above, there is evidence that the petitions were not spontaneous and that most were formulated by interested parties who circulated prepared texts and statements that appeared in the petitions on a mass scale.<sup>9</sup> Such political wrangling and attempts to marshal public opinion are perhaps not surprising if we consider the

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Eventually, however, as a result of French and British foot-dragging, it became an exclusively American commission. See Grossi et al., "Restoring Lost Voices of Self-Determination."

<sup>3</sup> Harry N. Howard, "An American Experiment in Peacemaking: The King-Crane Commission," *The Moslem World* 32/2 (April 1942), 122-146; idem, *The King-Crane Commission: An American Inquiry in the Middle East* (Beirut: Khayats, 1963); E. Knee, "The King-Crane Commission of 1919: The Articulation of Political Anti-Zionism," *American Jewish Archives* 29 (1977), 22-54; James Gelvin, "The Ironic Legacy of the King-Crane Commission," in Lesch, David W. (ed.), *The Middle East and the United States*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1996, 13-29; idem, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California, 1998), 150-153; Michael Reimer, "The King-Crane Commission at the Juncture of Politics and Historiography," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 15/2 (2006), 129-150.

<sup>4</sup> Grossi et al., "Restoring Lost Voices of Self-Determination."

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> See the full text of the Commission's report at: *The Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080526055304/http://www.ipcri.org/files/kingcrane.html> (last accessed on 11.02.14).

<sup>7</sup> Not all the petitions can be accessed today and they are not held in one single collection, even though an attempt to locate, document, and preserve the petitions is currently being undertaken by the Oberlin College Archives.

<sup>8</sup> Howard M. Sachar, *The Emergence of the Middle East, 1914-1924* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1969), 267-268.

<sup>9</sup> James Gelvin, "Demonstrating Communities in Post-Ottoman Syria," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 25/1 (1994), 32-33; idem, *Divided Loyalties*, 260-286. Howard writes with respect to the representativeness of the petitions that "[t]here were some qualifications to the general accuracy of these reflections of popular sentiment. In the first place, the number of petitions from the various sections of Syria was not proportional to their respective populations [...]. Secondly, 'the number of petitions from the different religious organizations' was 'not proportional to the numerical strength of the religious faiths' [...]. Thirdly, many petitions revealed 'the influence of organized propaganda,' as was sometimes indicated by verbal similarities or identical wording, sometimes by printed forms, and finally by the use of models. There was also external evidence of pressure and propaganda, for instance when 'the same Arab agent was observed in four cities in Palestine, assisting in the preparation of petitions [...]. Finally, the value of the individual petitions varied with the number of signatures, although mere numbers could not be taken as the sole criterion." See Howard, *The King-Crane Commission*, 142-143.

magnitude of the political developments at that historical moment. Nevertheless, it immediately raises the issue of why the Americans chose such a methodology to evaluate the wishes of the people of Greater Syria.

In his memoirs, David Lloyd George (1863-1945), the British Prime Minister at the time, provides a partial explanation:

[US President Woodrow Wilson] suggested that the fittest men that could be obtained should be selected to form an Inter-Allied Commission to go to Syria, extending their inquiries, if they led them beyond the confines of Syria. Their object should be to elucidate the state of opinion and the soil to be worked on by any mandatory. They should be asked to come back and tell the Conference what they found with regard to these matters. He made the suggestion, not because he lacked confidence in the experts whose views he had heard, such as Dr. Howard Bliss and General Allenby. These, however, had been involved in some way with the population, with special objects either educational or military. If we were to send a Commission with no previous contact with Syria, it would, at any rate, convince the world that the Conference had tried to do all it could to find the most *scientific* [our emphasis] basis possible for a settlement...He would send it with *carte blanche* to tell the facts as they found them.<sup>10</sup>

The Commission itself also stipulated why petitions were believed to represent the people's views, despite reservations on the part of its members (see Appendix 1). It outlined its mission as follows:

To meet in conference individuals and delegations who should represent all the significant groups in the various communities, and so to obtain as far as possible the opinions and desires of the whole people. The process itself was inevitably a kind of political education for the people, and besides actually bringing out the desires of the people, had at least further value in the simple consciousness that their wishes were being sought. We were not blind to the fact that there was considerable propaganda; that often much pressure was put upon individuals and groups; that sometimes delegations were prevented from reaching the Commission; and that the representative authority of many petitions was questionable. But the Commission believes that these anomalous elements in the petitions tend to cancel one another when the whole country is taken into account, and that, as in the composite photograph, certain great, common emphases are unmistakable.<sup>11</sup>

Members of the King-Crane Commission were perfectly aware that most petitions were initiated by political actors like Emir Faysal (1885-1933) and his followers. In one place they wrote that:

The 1863 petitions received by the American Commission in Syria and the summary tables prepared from them cannot of course be regarded as a mathematically accurate analysis of the real desires of the peoples of Syria. There are at least five unavoidable difficulties that have qualified their accuracy...Yet despite these five qualifications, it is believed that the petitions as summarized present a fairly accurate analysis of present political opinion in Syria. The great majority of irregularities offset one another.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Harry N. Howard, *The King-Crane Commission: An American Inquiry in the Middle East* (Beirut: [Khayats], 1963), 32-33.

<sup>11</sup> Harry N. Howard, "An American Experiment in Peacemaking: The King-Crane Commission," *The Moslem World* 32/2 (April 1942), 133 (a quote from the commission's report as published in 1922 in *The Editor and Publisher*).

<sup>12</sup> <http://web.archive.org/web/20080526055304/http://www.ipcri.org/files/kingcrane.html> (last accessed on 11.02.14)

Given the above, it is clear that Wilson considered that the best way to determine the future of Syria and to evaluate the wishes of its people was to apply a “scientific” method. The Americans perceived “public opinion” as a “gross aggregate of individual opinions freely expressed rather than a consentient position articulated by an elite.”<sup>13</sup> Hence, consistent with Wilson’s agenda of self-determination, the members of the Commission believed that petitioning was the most productive way to determine what the “public” in Greater Syria wanted. The time-honored practice of petitioning was familiar to the locals who made extensive use of it during Ottoman times, admittedly under different circumstances and for different aims.

In this article, we historicize the King-Crane petitions and discuss their aims and influence. We argue that the change in the nature of petitioning in Greater Syria toward stances that were more ideological and political in nature reflected a turning point in the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, as can best be seen in the case of petitions submitted to the King-Crane Commission. These petitions were based on political considerations, demands, and arguments, unlike past petitions addressed to the Sultan. As will be discussed below, they differed from traditional Ottoman petitions in many respects and characteristics.

Drawing on arguments presented by David Zaret in his article on petitions during the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England, our intention is to show that petitions such as those presented to the King-Crane Commission were not only “an extension or revival of well-accepted principles of petitioning” that previously existed during the Ottoman era.<sup>14</sup> Rather, they also included changes that “violated traditional restrictions on the expression of grievance in petitions.”<sup>15</sup> This shift did not occur overnight. During the preceding decades, the well-known Ottoman traditional practice of petitioning (generically known as *şikayet*) had developed in “new directions that altered the content as well as the scope of political communication.”<sup>16</sup> We first present a historical overview of petitioning in the Ottoman Empire and the key changes in petitioning practices. We then discuss the King-Crane petitions and highlight their differences from traditional petitions, as well as their contribution to the emerging national discourse in Greater Syria. We show that petitions shifted toward stances that were more ideological and political in nature, a development that coincided with the collapse of the Empire.

## **Petitions and Public Opinion**

Petitions to authorities, as Christa Hämmerle noted in her work on nineteenth century Austria-Hungary, transform “in response to rapidly changing historical conditions”<sup>17</sup> and respond to changes in *zeitgeist*.<sup>18</sup> The nineteenth century also witnessed a gradual shift in the nature of Ottoman petitions. This shift was influenced primarily by political developments, the introduction of new technologies and means of communication, Ottoman reforms during this period, and changing state-subject relations. In the decade between the Young Turk Revolution and the end of Abdülhamid’s regime in 1908/9, and the final collapse of the

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<sup>13</sup> Reimer, “The King–Crane Commission at the Juncture of Politics and Historiography,” 135.

<sup>14</sup> David Zaret, “Petitions and the ‘Invention’ of Public Opinion in the English Revolution,” *American Journal of Sociology* 101/6 (1996), 1506.

<sup>15</sup> Zaret, “Petitions and the ‘Invention’ of Public Opinion in the English Revolution,” 1506.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 1498.

<sup>17</sup> Christa Hämmerle, “Requests, Complaints, Demands: Preliminary Thoughts on the Petitioning Letters of Lower-Class Austrian Women, 1865-1918,” in Bland, Caroline and Máire Cross (eds.), *Gender and Politics in the Age of Letter-Writing, 1750-2000* (Burlington, VT, 2004), 116.

<sup>18</sup> Hämmerle, “Requests, Complaints, Demands,” 116 (quoting Susanne Ettl).

Ottoman Empire in 1918, petitions quickly changed from a traditionally private/confidential mode of communication between subjects and ruler into a public “vehicle for political messages”. As Zaret points out, whereas “communicative rules for petitioning permitted expression of grievance [...] only in a restricted form that has little in common with modern conceptions of the public sphere as a forum for free and open debate over conflicting political goals”<sup>19</sup>; “[t]he printing of petitions as propaganda not only increased the scope of communication but also created novel practices that simultaneously constitute and invoke the authority of public opinion in political discourse.”<sup>20</sup>

To date, much of the debate regarding the King-Crane petitions has concentrated on whether they were a spontaneous expression of indigenous opinion or a product of a centrally directed campaign run by the government of Faysal and other interested parties. While Gelvin argues that in the King-Crane petitions only the voice of the elite was important,<sup>21</sup> Reimer stresses that “if this had been the case, King-Crane would have pursued a very different itinerary than the one that took them to many non-elite communities.”<sup>22</sup> Although both points of view are important in order to historicize the King-Crane petitions, it is useful to shift the focus of discussion beyond this debate. We argue that a textual analysis of these petitions can shed light on the transformation of the traditional Ottoman form of appeal into a modern political tool used to recruit and generate “public opinion” and foster modern political discourse.

Public opinion is a very elusive term and there is no clear consensual definition. In our usage, public opinion is an indicator of “transformations in social structure, economic and political reform, and technological advances” of given societies at different times.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, public opinion does not necessarily reflect the will of the people but rather is often used by elite groups as leverage to gain legitimacy or to promote ideological or even “national” agendas.

Cengiz Kırılı stresses that “public opinion” in the Ottoman Empire differed in its essence and meaning from the Western concept. He argues that there were various kinds of “public opinion” in the Empire, all difficult to measure, one of which was information gathered by government agents from individual informers in cafés in Istanbul in the mid-nineteenth century. Kırılı, moreover, argues that in the Ottoman Empire:

[I]t makes little sense to make a clear-cut distinction between mere opinions and public opinion. These mere opinions that Habermas relegated to the “sediment of history” were not private exercises but utterances produced in the intimate atmosphere of public sociability. Every individual opinion articulated in a public setting incited comment from others, then further disseminated through the word of mouth and ultimately contributed to the formation of public opinion.<sup>24</sup>

By contrast, we view the notion of “public opinion” in the Ottoman Empire at this time as a collective act by a group or several groups of people who were committed or recruited to a political cause. In the second half of the nineteenth century, various developments gradually enabled the emergence of something more akin to “public opinion” as that term is widely

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 1517.

<sup>20</sup> Zaret, “Petitions and the “Invention” of Public Opinion in the English Revolution,” 1502.

<sup>21</sup> Gelvin, “Ironical Legacy,” 17.

<sup>22</sup> Reimer, “The King-Crane Commission at the Juncture of Politics and Historiography,” 135.

<sup>23</sup> Susan Herbst, “On the Disappearance of Groups: 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Conceptions of Public Opinion,” in Glasser, Theodore L. and Charles T. Salmon (eds.), *Public Opinion and the Communication of Consent* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1995), 92.

<sup>24</sup> See Cengiz Kırılı, “Coffeehouses: Public Opinion in the Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Empire,” in Salvatore, Armando and Dale Eickelman (eds.), *Public Islam and the Common Good*, 95-96.

understood today. These developments included the spread of journalism, growing literacy, the penetration of Western ideas and concepts, the changing status of the Empire's subjects and their more rapid channels of communication with the imperial center, and finally the short-lived experiment in parliamentary life and constitutionalism.

Alongside these developments, the traditional familiar institution of petitions constituted a mechanism which could help take the pulse of the masses in the Empire and measure the subjects' mood. For example, *arz-i mahzar*, the traditional mass petition, morphed in the nineteenth century into a tool to express urban politics and schisms and hence came to reflect a type of "public opinion", as discussed below. Hence, even though the main role of petitions was not to evaluate "public opinion", changes occurring during the nineteenth century turned them into a potent vehicle for this task. The King-Crane petitions, which differed from traditional Ottoman petitions, contributed to the emerging national discourse in Greater Syria and to what became an experiment in "public opinion".

### *Traditional Modes of Petitioning prior to the Nineteenth Century*

The institution of petitioning the Ottoman Sultan by the Empire's subjects had very deep historical roots which went back as far as the Empire's early centuries.<sup>25</sup> This institution was not a unique Ottoman or Islamic invention but has existed in other societies since writing was invented,<sup>26</sup> although in the Islamic world it took on its own special characteristics.

Petitions to the ruler enabled subjects to "let off steam", feel that someone was attuned to their distress and suffering, and appeal personally to the ruler, which was otherwise impossible given the unbalanced power relationship between them. For rulers it was an efficient way to keep an eye on developments in their domains, maintain open channels of direct communication with the masses, and monitor the activity of the bureaucracy. The institution of petitioning, moreover, allowed absolute rulers to divert criticism and possible anger and frustration away from them in cases of corruption, misbehavior, misdeeds, and immoral behavior while laying the blame on the group of intermediaries between the masses and the throne. Finally, it served as a mechanism that contributed to the rulers' image as just and benevolent sovereigns who cared about the security and well-being of their subjects. In the Islamic world these notions were part of the "circle of equity", an important concept dominating the political sphere which was adopted from pre-Islamic societies.<sup>27</sup>

Despite clear differences from the "classical" Islamic institution of the *mazalim* courts, the Ottomans inherited this tradition and the institution of petitioning the ruler. They made broad use of it at both the provincial and imperial levels. As the head of the state, the source of its legitimacy and the embodiment of its just rule, the Sultan was always willing to accept petitions from commoners.<sup>28</sup> Other than being an important tool for the Sultans to gain

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<sup>25</sup> For instance, see Suraiya Faruqi, "Political Initiatives 'From the Bottom Up' in the Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Empire: Some Evidence for Their Existence," in Faruqi, Suraiya (ed.), *Coping with the State: Political Conflict and Crime in the Ottoman Empire, 1550-1720* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1995), 1-11; Eyal Ginio, "Patronage, Intervention and Violence in the Legal Process in Eighteenth-Century Salonica and Its Province," in Ron Shaham (ed.), *Law, Custom, and Statute in the Muslim World* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 111-130.

<sup>26</sup> For example, on petitions sent by native populations in the British Commonwealth, see Ravi De Costa, "Identity, Authority, and the Moral Worlds of Indigenous Petitions," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48/3 (2006), 669-698.

<sup>27</sup> Linda Darling, *A History of Social Justice and Political Power in the Middle East: The Circle of Justice from Mesopotamia to Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2013), 1-8.

<sup>28</sup> For a nuanced view of the Ottoman concept of "justice," see Boğaç A. Ergene, "On Ottoman Justice: Interpretations in Conflict (1600-1800)," *Islamic Law and Society* 8/1 (2001), 52-87. Enforcement of justice in the Ottoman Empire was one of the cornerstones of legitimacy and order. It

legitimacy<sup>29</sup> and to strengthen their image as just and benevolent Islamic rulers, the workings of this institution were consistent with the structure of the Ottoman Empire as a patrimonial society, in which the Sultan was considered the “father” of his subjects and constituted the authority personally responsible for their welfare.<sup>30</sup> Subjects could send a petition to the imperial center through the *kadı* of a nearby town or ask a representative or delegation to travel to Istanbul to submit the petition in person.<sup>31</sup> At times, petitions could also be submitted to the governor of a province who held special *mazalim* sessions similar to these held at the imperial level but on a local level, with the participation of the local *kadı*.<sup>32</sup>

Theoretically (and often in practice as well), every Ottoman subject, even the simplest peasant in the most remote province, had the right to submit a petition to the Sultan and beg for justice, in person, through a representative, or by sending a petition.<sup>33</sup> The Imperial Council (*Divan-ı Hümayun*), discussed the complaints.<sup>34</sup> Sending a representative or a delegation to Istanbul to submit a petition was a complicated and expensive process, given the barriers of geography, the situation on the roads, and the means of transportation. Not surprisingly, in many cases petitions were written in the name of a group of people and not by individuals who sought to promote their own specific interests. Beyond reducing the costs involved, it was often assumed that a collective approach would be better received in Istanbul and had a better chance of leading to results for the petitioners. Appearance in person at the Sultan’s court was easier for people with considerable means at their disposal or for people who lived relatively close to Istanbul.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, prior to the nineteenth century the commonly used institution of petitioning the Sultan was conducted and constructed in a very restricted way which represented norms of secrecy between ruler and ruled (even though many of the petitions were collective). Its main usage was to complain about injustice and abuse of power by officials and low to middle rank bureaucrats. Its political overtones - though definitely present<sup>36</sup> - were subtle and indirect and

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was meant to protect the subjects, the *reaya*, from abuse of power and exploitation, i.e. preventing *zulm* in the first place. Ottoman justice had a dual nature. The sultans and the administration were obliged to govern according to the *shari‘a*, but at the same time the sultans themselves were the embodiment of justice and functioned as last and supreme resort of justice through the institution of petitioning. The enforcement of justice was believed to please God’s will.

<sup>29</sup> In this regard, Gottfried Hagen writes that legitimacy is “the result of continuous negotiation between ruler and ruled”, a remark which might explain the importance of the petitioning system to both the urban elite and the Empire in the period discussed here. See Gottfried Hagen, “Legitimacy and World Order,” in Karateke, Hakan T. and Maurus Reinkowski (eds.), *Legitimizing the Order: The Ottoman Rhetoric of State Power* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), 55; Hakan T. Karateke, “Legitimizing the Ottoman Sultanate: A Framework for Historical Analysis,” *Legitimizing the Order: The Ottoman Rhetoric of State Power*, pp. 13-52.

<sup>30</sup> Şerif Mardin, “Power, Civil Society, and Culture in the Ottoman Empire,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 11 (1969), 260.

<sup>31</sup> Faroqhi, “Political Initiatives ‘From the Bottom Up’,” 10.

<sup>32</sup> For instance, see Michael Ursinus, *Grievance Administration (Şikayet) in an Ottoman Province: The Kaymakam of Rumelia’s ‘Record Book of Complaints’ of 1781-1783* (London and New-York: Routledge, 2005), 37.

<sup>33</sup> Suraiya Faroqhi, “Political Activity among Ottoman Taxpayers and the Problem of Sultanate Legitimation (1570-1650),” *Coping with the State*, 14 (“the Ottoman political system rested on the premise that anyone, man or woman, might turn to the ruler to ask for a redress of grievances”).

<sup>34</sup> Uriel Heyd, *Ottoman Documents on Palestine, 1552-1615: A Study of the Firman according to the Mühimme Defteri* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 14.

<sup>35</sup> Faroqhi, “Political Activity among Ottoman Taxpayers,” 14.

<sup>36</sup> Faroqhi, Suraiya, “Introduction,” *Coping with the State*, xv.



the institution's rules were upheld and preserved by both sides. These dynamics gradually changed as a result of the reforms of the nineteenth century and the need to adapt petitions to the *zeitgeist*.

### *Changes in the Nineteenth Century*

The massive reforms and efforts at modernization in the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century gradually endowed it with many of the characteristics of a modern bureaucratic state, despite the lingering effects of the previous patrimonial system. Under such circumstances, it would make sense to assume that the traditional institution of petitioning the ruler would lose its importance and give way to other more modern and regularized means of pursuing justice and redress from the state, its representatives and institutions.<sup>37</sup> These reforms included the establishment of *nizamiye* courts with several tiers of appeal in the Empire's provinces and their differentiation from the *shari'a* courts, the codification of Muslim religious law starting in 1869 and throughout the 1870s (the *Mecelle*), the introduction of several European-inspired legal codes, the establishment of modern-styled state ministries, the setting up of administrative councils in the provinces in several instances, and even the short-lived parliament and constitution of the mid-1870s.

Nevertheless, numerous petitions were still sent to Istanbul from the provinces during this period and petitions became a tool to conduct politics vis-à-vis the central government, especially as regards the urban populations in the Empire's provinces.<sup>38</sup> Hence, the institution of petitioning the Ottoman ruler did not lose its relevance, but rather took on new importance and went through a process of transformation. In part, this process was assisted and facilitated by new technologies and means of communication (i.e., postal services and the telegraph) which reduced to a minimum the limitations of geography and physical barriers and enabled every Ottoman subject to contact Istanbul quickly and relatively cheaply in order to demand redress, a process which previously had been much harder physically and had required great efforts and means.

Another factor was the more centralized nature of the state headed by the Sultan, which was perceived by the subjects as the addressee of their complaints. The changing state-subject relationships and the state's growing interference in its subjects' lives also played an important role. The state regulated a growing number of aspects of people's daily lives and introduced reforms which undermined previous habits, norms and practices in areas as varied as tax collection, registration of land, conscription, censuses, policing, health and the like. As such, many more people had a reason to make complaints in relation to which they perceived the state headed by the Sultan as the addressee.

Petitions were thus sent to the imperial center concerning almost every issue affecting the local population, large or small, instead of going through other legal and administrative channels. In part this was motivated by the petitioners' hope to leverage their advantages in

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<sup>37</sup> The fact that there are no major works dealing with petitions to the Sultan from the nineteenth century, in contrast to the scholarship on this institution in previous centuries might be an indication that most historians of the period assume this institution had indeed lost its crucial place in the Ottoman judicial-political system.

<sup>38</sup> On this increase, see Roderick H. Davison, "The Advent of the Electric Telegraph in the Ottoman Empire: How Morse's Invention was Introduced at the Time of the Crimean War," in idem, *Essays in Ottoman and Turkish History, 1774-1923: The Impact of the West* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), 148; for an example of a study on petitions from the nineteenth century and their meaning in the context of the reformed state, see M. Erdem Kabadayı, "Petitioning as Political Action: Petitioning Practices of Workers in Ottoman Factories," in Eleni Gara, M. Erdem Kabadayı, and Christoph K. Neumann (eds.), *Popular Protest and Political Participation in the Ottoman Empire – Studies in Honor of Suraiya Faroqhi* (Istanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2011), 57-74.

existing arguments and conflicts. The large number of petitions may however have also stemmed from the growing labyrinth of Ottoman institutions which confused the subjects, who preferred to utilize an institution they were familiar with. Another reason was the high fees demanded in other judicial institutions such as the *nizamiye* courts, in which cases also required the hiring of attorneys.<sup>39</sup> Finally, the various reforms and the changes they brought about also prompted individual subjects and collectives to attempt to preserve their former rights, privileges and exemptions which they had acquired over the years with or without official sanctions.

At the same time, as part of the Sultans' endeavor to maintain their legitimacy in the face of growing bureaucratic intervention in the everyday life of their subjects, the mechanism of petitioning was used as a way to sustain the Sultan's image as the benevolent father of his subjects. Petitions were perceived as an efficient mechanism to create an image of a caring and protective ruler who could be reached personally and who tried to mitigate the hardships of his subjects, whose concerns were allegedly at the top of his agenda.

Finally, the personality of certain Sultans such as Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909), an autocrat who was known to be highly suspicious and who ruled in a centralized manner, is another factor to be considered with regard to the multiplication of petitions and the continued relevance of the institution of appealing to the ruler.<sup>40</sup> As part of the paternalistic attitude of Abdülhamid II and his attempt to boost his image as the father of his subjects, he even established a special department (*Maruzat-ı Rikabiye Dairesi*) to handle the petitions submitted to him.<sup>41</sup>

The massive number of petitions from the provinces to the center in Istanbul must be considered in light of the transformations and developments discussed above. To cite one example, landowners in the region of the town of Jaffa in Palestine's central coast, which belonged to the *mutasarrıflık* of Jerusalem, were preoccupied for several years with an issue that led to considerable lingering tension with the central government. At stake were *miri* (state-owned) lands in the town's immediate environment which over the years had gradually come to be seen as *mülk* (privately owned) land, a step which was unlawfully accepted by local Ottoman officials and was concretized when these lands were bought and sold, as well as in the type of taxes levied on the owners of these lands. The conflict was triggered when the state took steps to revert the classification of these lands to their original status as part of its effort to reorganize the tax collection and the register lands over the names of their holders.

In a massive petition sent in July 1891 by 58 Muslim and Christian landowners from Jaffa to the Grand Vizier, the government's decision to treat the land of Jaffa as *mülk* rather than as *miri* was contested. The petition argued that the supervisor of *Defter-i Hakanî* (the Ottoman imperial register of land revenues) in Beirut, Zekati Efendi, ordered the *tapu* (the

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<sup>39</sup> Avi Rubin, *Ottoman Nizamiye Courts: Law and Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 106.

<sup>40</sup> On Abdülhamid's policies with regards to the questions of his image and legitimacy as a ruler, see Selim Deringil, "Legitimacy Structures in the Ottoman State: The Reign of Abdülhamit II (1876-1909)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23 (1991), 345-359; Özbek, Nadir, "Philanthropic Activity, Ottoman Patriotism, and the Hamidian Regime, 1876-1909," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37 (2005), 59-81; Teyfur Erdoğdu, "Civil Officialdom and the Problem of Legitimacy in the Ottoman Empire (1876-1922)," *Legitimizing the Order: The Ottoman Rhetoric of State Power*, 213-232.

<sup>41</sup> Tahsin Paşa, *Abdülhamit Yıldız Hatıraları* (Abdülhamid's Yıldız Palace Memories) (Istanbul: Ahmet Halit Kitaphanesi, 1931), 31 [in Turkish]; Hakan T. Karateke, *Padişahım Çok Yaşa! Osmanlı Devletinin Son Yüzyılında Merasimler* (Long Live the Sultan! Ceremonies in the Ottoman Empire during its Last Century) (Istanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2004), 119-121 [in Turkish].

Ottoman land registration bureau) official in Jaffa to change existing policy with regards to Jaffa's lands, a step which the petitioners claimed was illegal, violated Islamic laws of inheritance, and negated the accepted practice approved by past rulers.<sup>42</sup> A few months later another mass petition, signed by Jaffa's Nakibüleşraf and thirty-eight other people was sent to the Grand Vizier, arguing that the same Zekati Efendi had initiated a new land survey in Jaffa as part of a plan to carry out a programme of land reform. The petitioners stressed again that they had documentary proof that they legally owned the land in Jaffa and that the survey was illegal in their eyes.<sup>43</sup>

These two petitions sent from Jaffa by groups with shared interests who strove to preserve their former rights vis-à-vis the Ottoman authorities demonstrate the changing nature of petitions in the nineteenth century. As argued above, the use of petitions had always contained a kernel of political activity. However, the coming together of dozens of members of Jaffa's elite in an attempt to repeal policies and plans promoted by state officials can be seen as a precursor of what Zaret terms a violation of "traditional restrictions on the expression of grievance in petitions".<sup>44</sup> Compared with past practices, the tone of their petition was rather argumentative. They questioned state policies, argued with their implementation and challenged their rationale. Nonetheless, they did so only with regards to local administrative matters directly influencing the petitioners and their region, and not beyond. In their own words:

It is known, based on jurisprudence, that a person does not have to prove ownership over something which he possesses or prove the way in which he received it...Hence we ask for the issuance of an imperial order which will forbid unfair treatment of our property, something which does not correspond to the religious and *nizami* laws, both of which are the sources of the rulership's continuation [*madar qawm al-mulk*] and the preservation of public order and the people's well being.<sup>45</sup>

Another new feature of petitions to Istanbul in the second half of the nineteenth century is that they became a tool in the hands of the provincial urban populations to conduct local politics vis-à-vis the imperial center, rather than serving primarily as a judicial mechanism to complain about injustices, wrongdoing, and misconduct by the low-ranking Ottoman bureaucracy and the administration. Coalitions of notables signed numerous petitions in support of candidates for certain positions and against their rivals, to complain about the conduct of members of rival coalitions, request to upgrade or change the status of their city, or preserve traditional privileges, rights, and concessions. For example, in the town of Gaza in the southern part of the *mutasarrıflık* of Jerusalem, urban coalitions sent numerous petitions against each other from the 1870s to the 1890s. In one case, "Islamic jurists, the *muhtar*, respected elders and notables from Gaza" sent a joint petition to protest the practices of the *mufti* of Gaza at the time, Ahmad Muhyi al-Din Efendi, of the Husayni family. They argued that he had oppressed the people and exhibited poor conduct, and demanded that he should be replaced by Muhammad Saqallah who was "a respectful and honest man."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi* (Prime Minister Ottoman Archive, henceforth BOA), *Hariciye Nezareti* (Foreign Ministry, henceforth HR), *Tercüme Odası* (Translation Bureau, henceforth TO), 396/16, 17 Temmuz 1307 [29 July 1891]; the *mutasarrıflık* of Jerusalem was subordinated to the District of Beirut in several areas, such as land registration (*Defter-i Hakanî*), the second instance of appeal in the *nizamiye* courts, etc.

<sup>43</sup> BOA. HR TO, 397/24, 24 Nisan 1308 [6 May 1892].

<sup>44</sup> Zaret, "Petitions and the 'Invention' of Public Opinion in the English Revolution," 1506.

<sup>45</sup> BOA. HR TO, 396/16.

<sup>46</sup> BOA HR TO, 461/83, 13 September 1876 [archival date; note that the translation of the petition from Arabic into Ottoman Turkish produced by the Translation Bureau in the Ottoman Foreign

The opposing group counterattacked with a petition sent some months later, signed by nineteen “Islamic jurists and notables”, which asked the government to dismiss mufti Muhammad Saqallah for lack of religious knowledge and general incompetence. They claimed that they had already presented the issue and demanded the reinstatement of Ahmad Muhyi al-Din Efendi to the post of mufti.<sup>47</sup> The new mufti himself applied to the Sadaret to examine allegations against him which appeared in the newspaper al-Jawa’ib, and demanded a government inquiry into the running of this newspaper, hinting that the preceding mufti and his supporters were behind this publication.<sup>48</sup>

Thus in the nineteenth century petitions increasingly served as a political intermediary of sorts for some segments of the population - urbanites in particular - rather than for complaints about injustices or abuse of power, as had been the case in the traditional institution of petitioning. Yet despite this difference from traditional complaints, the collective petitions still represented specific groups within society. They were not motivated by ideology or an agenda which provided a common denominator for wider segments. A major boost in the transformation from traditional petitioning to modern practices of petitioning occurred after the introduction of a parliamentary regime in 1908, when the Sultan ceased to be the addressee for complaints and actual power was no longer in his hands.

#### *Changes in the Decade between 1908 and 1918*

The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the abolishment of Abdülhamid’s censorship were accompanied by the reinstatement of parliamentary life, the enactment of the postponed constitution of 1876, and the lifting of the ban on free press and political activity. All these developments brought about important changes in the nature of petitions.<sup>49</sup> At this point, Sultans became only figureheads and held little actual power. Thus, whereas the past petitions had been referred to the Sultan and had been seen as a tool to obtain his benevolence and mercy while granting him much needed legitimacy, now they were mainly addressed to the Council of State, the Parliament, and the different Ministries to obtain political rights, preserve privileges vis-à-vis other groups in society and within groups, and ensure civil equity and constitutional rights. Hence, the discourse shifted to focus on constitutional and civil rights, the rule of law, and the defects of the former system. It was only natural that the familiar institution of petitioning would serve as a medium through which new discourses were negotiated. In other words, as the political reality changed, so did the petitions.

A case in point concerns the village of Masmiyya, some twenty-five kilometers northeast of Gaza in the *kaza* (sub-district) bearing the same name, and the Bedouin group of al-Wuhaydat, who were both fighting over land known as al-Mukhayzin. The conflict led to a trial and the submission of dozens of petitions to Istanbul by both parties, though particularly

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Ministry states that the original had no date] (from Gaza to Bab-ı Âli); see also Johann Büssow, *Hamidian Palestine: Politics and Society in the District of Jerusalem, 1872–1908* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 289.

<sup>47</sup> BOA HR TO, 553/88, 7 Teşrinisani 1292 [November 19, 1876].

<sup>48</sup> BOA HR TO, 554/30, 28 January 1877 (archival date; the translation of the letter bears no date). On this weekly newspaper, which first appeared in Istanbul in 1860 on the initiative of the Lebanese intellectual Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq with the backing of the Ottoman Empire, see Filib di Tarrazi, *Ta’rikh al-ahafa al-‘arabiyya* (The History of Arab Press), Vol. I (Beirut: al-Matba‘a al-Adabiyya, 1913), 61–64 [in Arabic].

<sup>49</sup> Hanssen in fact argues that “many of the political phenomena of the Faysal period were a continuation of the party politics that developed in the wake of the Young Turk revolution.” See Jens Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut: The Making of a Provincial Capital* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 76, fn. 80.

by the villagers. Briefly, the villagers claimed that they had cultivated the land for hundreds of years whereas the Bedouins had taken possession of it illegally during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1908/9). The Bedouins were accused of having obtained illegal title deeds for the land through their connections in Gaza, which prompted the villagers to take the matter to court. Interestingly, the villagers' petitions castigated the Abdülhamid era using a new discourse characteristic of the post-Hamidian period, a decision which was doubtless motivated by flattery. The petitions framed the previous era as one of darkness and tyranny, whereas the new post-Revolution era was described as the dawn of a new age.<sup>50</sup>

This case is illustrative of the transformation from justice through ad hoc Sultanic prerogative to constitutional and civil law. The petitions make a novel reference to constitutional rights, equity, the new age in the Empire's history, and the subjects' right to be protected by the rule of law.<sup>51</sup> As pointed out by Michelle Campos in her analysis of the changing discourse among the Empire's subjects in the period after the Revolution, "Ottoman citizens studied and cited the constitution and other revolutionary 'sacred texts' that endowed them with political power, and they utilized a variety of tools to exercise and preserve that power."<sup>52</sup> Given that the Bedouins and villagers in question were most probably illiterate and could not have written such complicated texts alone, it is likely that their petitions were written by *arzuhalciler* (public scribes who wrote petitions and letters) who used the discourse, language and vocabulary circulating in the urban milieus to express their clients' views.

Some petitions during this period were even published in the press that mushroomed in the Levant in the aftermath of the Revolution, a phenomenon which for the most part had not been possible in the previous era.<sup>53</sup> Although such messages in the public sphere still expressed support for the Ottoman Empire, this was another departure from the traditional mode of secrecy toward a means of enlisting and generating public opinion. Nonetheless, the people's recruitment to stand behind certain ideas which appeared in the printed press was still rather limited and passive. After so many years of political oppression, censorship, lack of free press, and inability to organize on a political basis this was almost inevitable. In addition, literacy rates were still very low, there was no developed tradition of civil activity, and the overarching notion of pan-Islamic ideology during the times of Abdülhamid II hindered mobilization in the name of competing ideologies. Moreover, the regime in the Empire in 1913 which was led by the Committee of Union and Progress manifested very little patience with any kind of political and ideological activity or acts of civil disobedience. In the King-Crane petitions, on the other hand, there was more active participation, as well as mass recruitment of a range of signatories from different places and backgrounds. It was only then that the full-scale transformation of petitions – including a transformation in their structure – took place, turning them into a modern political instrument representing the emergence of mass politics.

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<sup>50</sup> BOA HR TO, 401/58, 22 Kânunusani 1325 [2 February 1910] (villagers of al-Masmiyya to the Ministry of the Interior).

<sup>51</sup> BOA DH MUI, 77-1/24, 9 Şubat 1325 [22 February 1910] (villagers of al-Masmiyya to the Parliament).

<sup>52</sup> Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 6.

<sup>53</sup> On the rise of the press in Greater Syria in the aftermath of the Revolution, see Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 53-59, 120-121.

## Petitions in the Service of Ideology: Towards Modern Public Opinion?

In a situation in which there was neither a Sultan nor an Empire, the more or less unified construction of traditional petitions which had prevailed until this time splintered into many variants. The ability to submit petitions more freely made it possible to promote national, civic and patriotic agendas, notions and ideas, and to use ideology as a common denominator between members of different groups. Once again, the petitions reflected changing historical conditions and the shifting *zeitgeist*.

The petitions submitted to the King-Crane Commission (at least those obtainable at various archives) are mostly collective and very few are personal. At first glance the King-Crane petitions appear similar to the traditional Ottoman *arz-i mahzar*. However, a thorough examination reveals major changes both in the structure and in the content of these petitions. Before discussing some general characteristics of the King-Crane petitions, it will be worth quoting at length from one example:

Demands of the people of the Province of Halab<sup>54</sup>

1. We demand complete political independence without tutelage and protection in the region extending from the Taurus Mountains in the north, Aqaba in the south, the River Euphrates in the East until its termination (Abu-Kamal), and in the west the Mediterranean Sea.
2. We demand that the government of this Syrian land be under a monarch [*mulkiyya*], with a civilian [*madaniyya*] representative regime which will include its provinces in a widely decentralized manner and will be protected in its domains under his honorable Emir Faysal.
3. We protest against article 22 of the Convention of the League of Nations which imposes upon us a state [mandate], and if this protest is not accepted, we will consider the issue of mandatory rule as a manifestation of scientific and economic aid which is not connected to our complete independence.
4. We ask for the help mentioned above from the US.
5. If the United States refuses our demands, we will demand the above mentioned help from England in the framework of previous conditions.
6. We refuse help from France under any circumstances, and we will not recognize any of the rights [*hukuk*] which it calls for in any part of our country.
7. We refuse the demands of the Zionists who turn Palestine into their national home and we refuse that they will immigrate there.
8. We demand that Palestine and the western coastal region, including Lebanon which is part of Syria should not be divided. We demand to keep the unity of the country and not to accept any kind of division under any circumstances...  
[...]
10. We protest in the strongest possible way against any agreement that divides our country Syria...

One of the most important features in the King-Crane petitions was the wide-scale circulation of printed formulaic petitions which previously had been very rare (see Appendix 2).<sup>55</sup> Ottoman petitions were for the most part handwritten, usually with the help of *arzuhalciler*,

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<sup>54</sup> See a typewritten mass petition from Aleppo in the King-Crane Commission Digital Collection in the Oberlin College archives' website (Appendix 2).

<sup>55</sup> For more on the printing of petitions in Greek-speaking regions which gained independence from the Ottomans during the early Tanzimat period and were not subject to Ottoman censorship or other restrictions, see Evthymois Papataxiarchis, "Reconfiguring the Ottoman Political Imagination: Petitioning and Print Culture in the Early Tanzimat," in Antonis Anastasopoulos (ed.), *Political Initiatives 'From the Bottom Up': Halcyon Days in Crete VII, A Symposium Held in Rathymno 9-11 January 2009* (Rathymno: Crete University Press, 2012), 191-226.

professional petition and letter writers. Now printing was widely used for “parrot petitioning”<sup>56</sup> i.e., the production of messages with almost identical wording which only required the petitioner’s signature. Such petitions, which were widely circulated, had not been available during the Ottoman era. The closest equivalent at the time had been the repeated submission of similar petitions by the same petitioners.

This led to the submission of identical petitions with high numbers of signatories. Such petitions were less diversified than in earlier eras, when each petition had been unique in some way (despite the widespread availability of manuals for writing petitions and the formulaic way in which they were written).<sup>57</sup>

Signature campaigns were mounted to collect the names of large numbers of people on a given petition. Thus, while the average number of signatures on petitions submitted to the King-Crane Commission was 49, some petitions had thousands of signatures. In total more than 91,000 signatures were collected for petitions submitted to the Commission.<sup>58</sup> Although the submission of collective petitions was not new, the number of signatures on these petitions, the submission of similar petitions from different regions, and the quantity of collective petitions may all have helped to create an imagined community and a shared sense of identity between people of different localities.

Compared to past practices, there were also considerable changes with regard to the way signatures were presented and how the petitions were signed. For example, in many petitions the signatures are divided hierarchically into a group of notables followed by the signatures of numerous people who authorized the notables to act in their name, a structure which resembles a legal document (see Appendix 2.2). This apparently gave the document more political weight and the appearance of being the act of an organized representative body which speaks in the name of different segments of society, both the elite and the common people. Ottoman petitions had not been presented in such a way, although there had been a tendency to put dignitaries such as the local *Nakibüleşraf* at the top of the list.

Another innovation was the appearance of stamped signatures without the petitioners’ details (see Appendix 3), or people’s signatures that appeared individually without a seal (see Appendices 4 and 5). Previously, petitioners had usually signed with their personal seal which incorporated their name in a stylistic manner, and their title was specified by the petition-writer (e.g., first *muhtar* of a certain village, etc.). Signatures without seals had appeared during the Ottoman era for the most part only in telegraphs. Possibly the current inclusion of seals was done to inflate the number of petitioners and to give the petition extra weight (see Appendix 1). At the same time, these stylistic development were designed to give petitions a more authentic and representative appearance. People’s names became the main voice in petitioning rather than having mediators speak for them (*muhtarlar*, sheikhs, and other notables). This may reflect process of pluralism in petitioning practices, which is indicative of the changing dynamics of a civil society in the making. This change in the petitions shows the departure from an imperial mode of petitioning to a more plural and less restrictive mode. One of its consequences was the ability to speak in the name of a national ideology.

The King-Crane petitions also echoed the disappearance of the Ottoman Empire and the growing room for maneuver enjoyed by petitioners. The petitions were now addressed to an

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<sup>56</sup> On the notion of parrot petitioning and its significance, see Zaret, “Petitions and the ‘Invention’ of Public Opinion in the English Revolution,” 1521-1523.

<sup>57</sup> On manuals for writing petitions and letters during this period, see Yuval Ben-Bassat and Fruma Zachs, “Manuals of Correspondence in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Greater Syria: Between the Arzuhalci and the Advent of Popular Letter Writing,” *Turkish Historical Review* IV/1 (Spring 2013), 1-25.

<sup>58</sup> <http://web.archive.org/web/20080526055304/http://www.ipcri.org/files/kingcrane.html> (last accessed on 11.02.14)

outside foreign audience rather than to the imperial regime. For example, given that the empire had collapsed, petitions were no longer written on paper bearing the imperial stamp tax. This suggests that many of the petitions were not written by *arzuhalciler* in accordance with traditional patterns but were rather formulated more freely by members of the educated elite, who broke with traditional patterns of writing, before often being reproduced and duplicated. Hence, there was now more than one style of petition writing.

In terms of their content, the King-Crane petitions once again diverged considerably from earlier petitions. In the past, petitions had been much more formulaic and adhered to very strict modes of expression and codes of flattery. Within the King-Crane petitions, in contrast, there are considerable differences in eloquence and style across the various documents.<sup>59</sup> Many of the King-Crane petitions start with headers which define their content, such as “the demands of the residents of the district of Halab” (see Appendix 2). The structure of many other petitions resembles a modern legal document, with articles stipulating demands presented below the title. Other innovations include the use of formulas such as “we the undersigned..,” and the word ‘statement’ at times appears above the demands. Moreover, the tone of many petitions was a demand rather than a plea or flattery (“we demand,” “we refuse,” “we object”) (see Appendix 4). Occasionally, there are also cases of letters written in a personal style by individuals making various requests, suggestions and complaints.

All of these modes of expression would have been unimaginable in approaches to the Sultan and the imperial center, where petitioners deliberately affected to assume a humble posture and beg for the ruler’s mercy. Moreover, the type of justice now demanded was a fair political arrangement - as each group of petitioners understood it - rather than justice from the ruler achieved by eliminating abuse, malpractice or corruption.

Finally, many of the petitions were submitted by representatives of societies, clubs, organizations and parties (*al-Nadi al-‘Arabi*, *Jam‘iyyat al-‘Ummal*, *Hizb al-‘Ahd*, the *New Syria National League*) and not by *muhtars* of villages and neighborhoods, sheikhs, or masters of guilds, as had been the case during the Ottoman era. This tends to confirm Howard’s suggestion that there was now a wider base of participation, including new players representing different groups in society above the local level.<sup>60</sup> Forerunners of this phenomenon were seen during the years after the Young Turk Revolution but not of this magnitude.

Thus overall, the King-Crane petitions reveal political maneuvering and initiatives as well as the emergence of a civil discourse on the part of the elite. They differed from traditional petitions in their addressees, initiators, form, structure, demands and mode of submission. Moreover, they were based on political and ideological considerations, demands, and arguments, unlike past petitions which had been addressed to the Sultan. The more the demands and the justifications appearing in the King-Crane petitions were coherent and consistent, the more likely that they were initiated by interested parties such as Faysal’s constituents to boost the legitimacy of their claims vis-à-vis the Commission. Faysal’s supporters, for instance, used various tactics and maneuvering to collect signatures on pre-planned petitions as an effective tool to enhance his legitimacy and image as representative and protector of the public. Although these petitions did not represent the ‘true’ voice of ‘public opinion,’ they are significant in their attempts to promote a political cross-regional ideology.

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<sup>59</sup> It should be noted that telegraphs - unlike letters - were already less formulaic during the Ottoman period. This was due to the need for conciseness, since charges were levied per word.

<sup>60</sup> Howard, *The King-Crane Commission*, 143.



## Conclusion

This article described the ways in which petitioning in Ottoman Syria evolved from a traditional vehicle reflecting norms of secrecy between a ruler and his subjects into a political tactic that reflecting larger cross-regional campaigns. The flexibility and fluidity of petitions illustrates adaptation to existing political circumstances and prevalent social structures, as well as people's growing ability to read and write.

Textual analysis of the King-Crane petitions sheds light on the transformation of the traditional Ottoman form of appeal into a modern political tool, used to recruit and generate public opinion and foster a modern political collective discourse in the post-Ottoman era. The petitions addressed to the King-Crane Commission represented a new experience for the masses and the elite, which involved a process of reimagining and reconfiguring their collective. The destruction of the Ottoman Empire as a political entity, the meddling of the Great Powers in the affairs of Greater Syria, and attempts by the local people to forge new political and social structures all paved the way for a transformation of the institution of petitioning into a political tool. The act of organizing and submitting petitions motivated by ideological considerations had an enormous impact on Syrian society. Even though collective petitioning campaigns were orchestrated by the elite, educating the people to join in this endeavor gave them a taste of what it was like to take part in modern political expression.<sup>61</sup>

Thus the King-Crane petitions helped advance the political imagination of a Syrian entity, a process which was highly significant for the national development of modern Syria. Petitions played a key role in this process, even though they did not always 'authentically' represent the aspirations of the masses. They helped to consolidate a political discourse grounded in reference to a Syrian national sphere. They may also have served to bridge the transformation from Ottoman rule to the establishment of a modern national Arab state in Syria between 1918 and 1920.

Recent research on petitioning practices in the newly established Turkish Republic of the 1920s indicates that "[p]etitioning mediated between political elites' need for political legitimacy and people's concerns regarding their social, political, and economic experiences."<sup>62</sup> Petitions were an important tool that enabled people to negotiate "political, social, and ideological transformations taking place at this formative historical juncture."<sup>63</sup> In future research, scholars should thoroughly examine petitions not only as separate case studies but rather across time and space. The changing nature of petitions and their flexibility in response to shifting contexts demonstrates that they constitute an important archival source for identifying social, political and conceptual transformations which occurred within the Ottoman Empire and in its former Arab provinces in the post-Ottoman era.

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<sup>61</sup> Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, 35.

<sup>62</sup> Yiğit Akın, "Reconsidering State, Party, and Society in Early Republican Turkey: Politics of Petitioning," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39 (2007), 442.

<sup>63</sup> Akın, "Reconsidering State, Party, and Society in Early Republican Turkey," 449.

## Appendices

### *Appendix 1:*

The King-Crane Commission's Reservations regarding the Petitions it received

Source:

*The Internet Archive,*

<http://web.archive.org/web/20080526055304/http://www.ipcri.org/files/kingcrane.html>

(last accessed on 11.02.14).

### “SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANT CONCLUSIONS

#### I. The Value of the Petitions as an Estimate of Public Opinion in Syria:

The 1863 petitions received by the American Commission in Syria and the summary tables prepared from them cannot of course be regarded as a mathematically accurate analysis of the real desires of the peoples of Syria. There are at least five unavoidable difficulties that have qualified their accuracy.

1. The number of the petitions from the different sections of Syria is not proportional to their respective populations, e. g., O. E. T. A. [Note: These initials stand for “Occupied Enemy Territory Administration,” but are commonly used as a word, “Oeta,” as “British Oeta,” “French Oeta,” or “Arab Oeta.”] South, with thirteen cities at which delegations were received is represented by only 260 petitions, while 1,157 petitions were received from O. E. T. A. East, in which but eight cities were visited. As the Commission progressed northward the petitions became more numerous, due to the increased time afforded for knowledge of the Commission's coming, for the preparation of petitions, for the activities of propaganda agents, and for the natural crystallization of public opinion.
2. The number of petitions from the different religious organizations is not proportional to the numerical strength of the religious faiths. This is especially true of the verbal requests made by delegations. In O. E. T. A. South, for instance, on account of the number of sects of the Christian faith, 53 delegations of Christians were received, and only eighteen delegations of Moslems, whereas the Moslem population is fully eight times as large as that of the Christian. This disparity does not, however, hold for the total number of petitions, verbal and written, as it was corrected in part by the large number of petitions from Moslem villages presented to the Commission at Aleppo and other northeastern points.
3. A number of petitions show clearly the influence of organized propaganda. This is sometimes evidenced in the petitions themselves by numerous similarities of phrasing, by many identical wordings, and by a few instances in which printed forms, obviously intended as models for written documents, have been signed and given to the Commission. In addition to the internal evidence, there were also many external indications of systematic efforts to influence the character of the petitions. The same Arab agent was observed in four cities of Palestine, assisting in the preparation of petitions. Similar activities on the part of French sympathizers were observed in Beirut.
4. In addition to this general propaganda, which was entirely legitimate as well as natural and inevitable, it is certain that a small number of petitions were fraudulently secured. In two cases the signatures were in the same handwriting. Three instances of “repeater” signatures were discovered. In addition, the seals of new organizations, purporting to be Trade Unions of Beirut, were discovered to have been ordered by the same propaganda agent a few days before the arrival of the Commission. All possible precautions were taken to insure authenticity of petitions and signatures, but in view of the character of the Commission's

survey and the limited facilities for close checking, the genuineness of all cannot be guaranteed.

5. The value of the individual petitions varies also with the number of signatures, although mere numbers cannot be taken as the only criterion. For example, some petitions signed by only a small Municipal Council may represent a larger public opinion than a petition signed by a thousand villagers. The number of signatures is 91,079;\* 26,324 for the Petitions of O. E. T. A. South, 26,884 for the Petitions of O. E. T. A. West, and 37,871 for the Petitions of O. E. T. A. East. This represents a general average of 49 signatures for each petition. The number of signatures varies widely from this average, but the totals for the different programs are fairly well equalized.

Yet despite these five qualifications, it is believed that the petitions as summarized present a fairly accurate analysis of present political opinion in Syria. The great majority of irregularities offset one another. The preponderance of Christian petitions in Palestine is balanced by the flood of Moslem appeals at Aleppo. The activities of French sympathizers in Tripoli probably did not influence the character of the petitions presented much more than the contrary efforts of the Independent Program representatives in Amman.

The petitions are certainly representative. As the classified list of delegations received by the Commission clearly indicates, the petitions came front a wide range of political, economic, social, and religious classes and organizations. It was generally known throughout Syria that the American Commission would receive in confidence any documents that any individual or group should care to present. In the few cities in which the military authorities sought to exert control, directly or indirectly, over the delegations, without exception the opposition parties found opportunities to present their ideas to the Commission, if not always orally, at least in writing.

*\*NOTE:* These figures indicate the magnitude of the popular interest in the Commission's work and the vast amount of material it had to handle. The reader should again be reminded that "O. E. T. A. South" was British, or Palestine, "O. E. T. A. West" was French, or Syrian; "O. E. T. A. East" was Arab, and "O. E. T. A. North" was French."

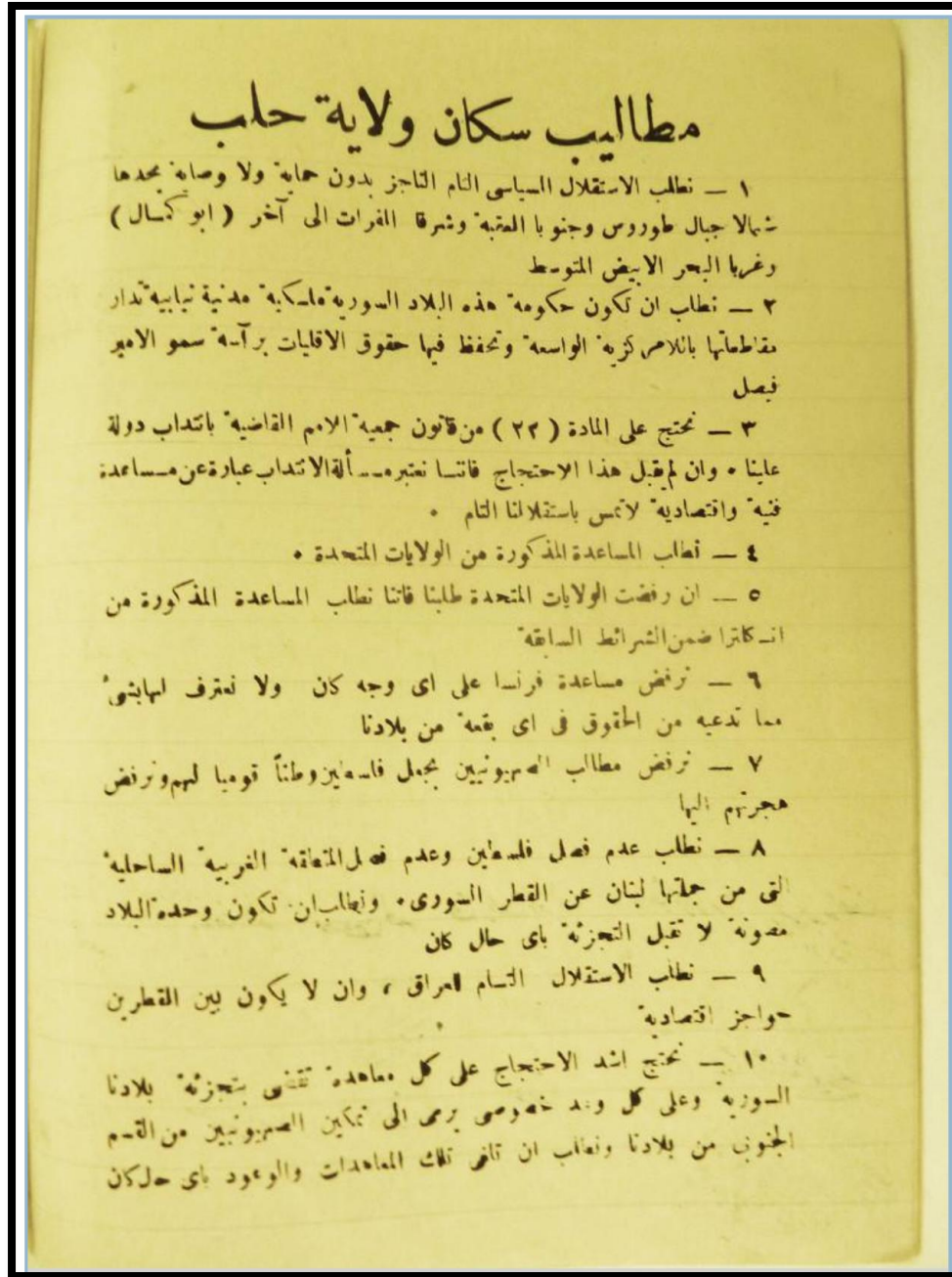
Appendix 2:

A Typewritten Mass Petition from Aleppo (taken from the Lybyer Papers, University of Illinois)

Source:

*The King-Crane Commission Digital Collection*, Oberlin College Archives, <http://dcollections.oberlin.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/kingcrane/id/2088/rec/20> (last accessed on 14.02.14).

Note the demands raised by the “people of the Province of Halab”. Such printed petitions were widely circulated by interested parties who collected signatures, and became “parrot petitions”.



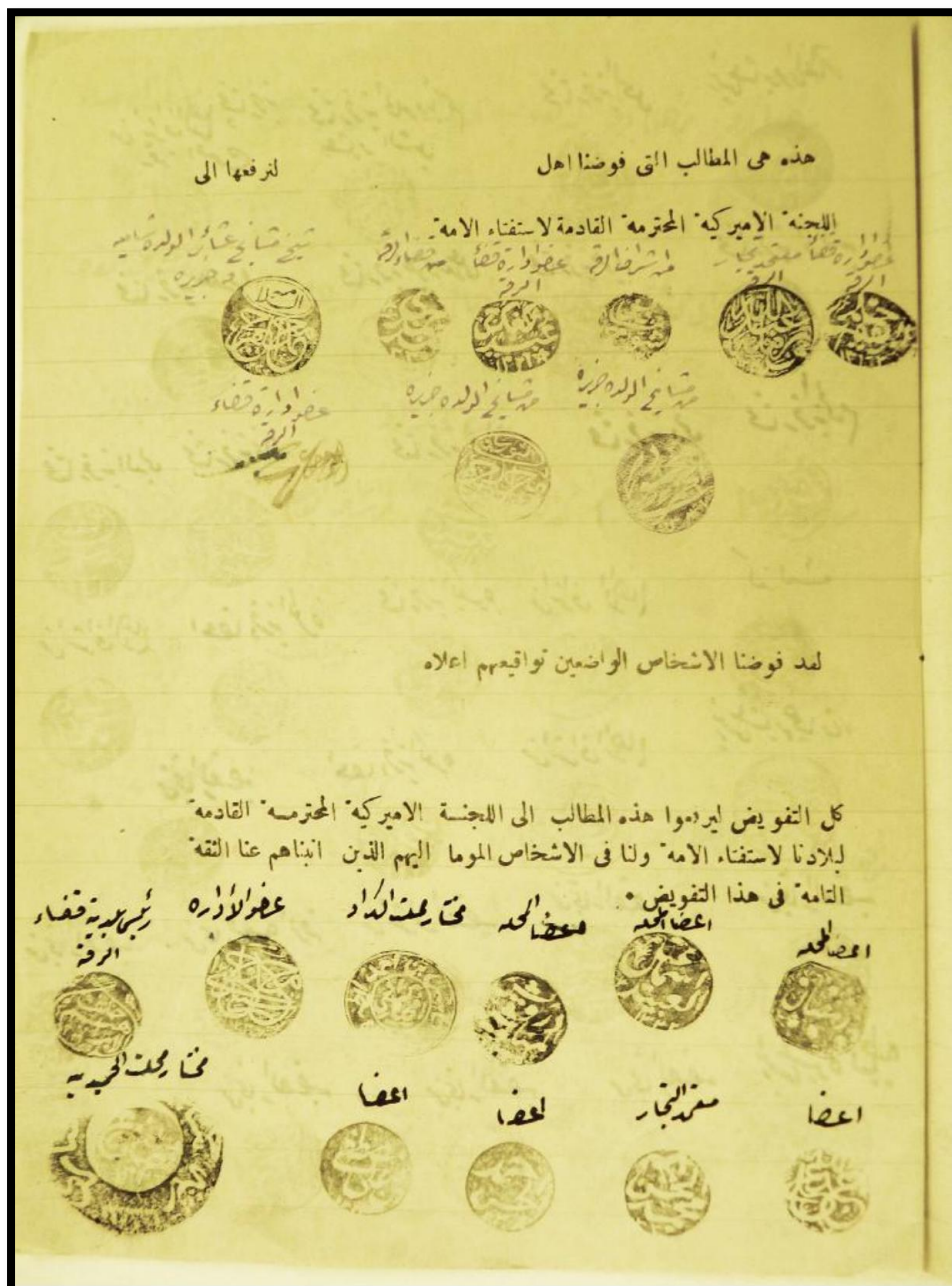
Appendix 2.2:

The Signatures attached to the Mass Petition from Aleppo (taken from the Lybyer Papers, University of Illinois)

Source:

*The King-Crane Commission Digital Collection*, Oberlin College Archives, <http://dcollections.oberlin.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/kingcrane/id/2088/rec/20> (last accessed on 14.02.14).

Note how the signatures are divided hierarchically into a group of notables followed by signatures of people who authorized the notables to act in their name, a structure which resembles a legal document. The signatures themselves resemble signatures on mass petitions (*arz-i mahzar*) during the Ottoman period, in that they have a seal bearing the names of the petitioners (from amongst the notables) as well as their title.



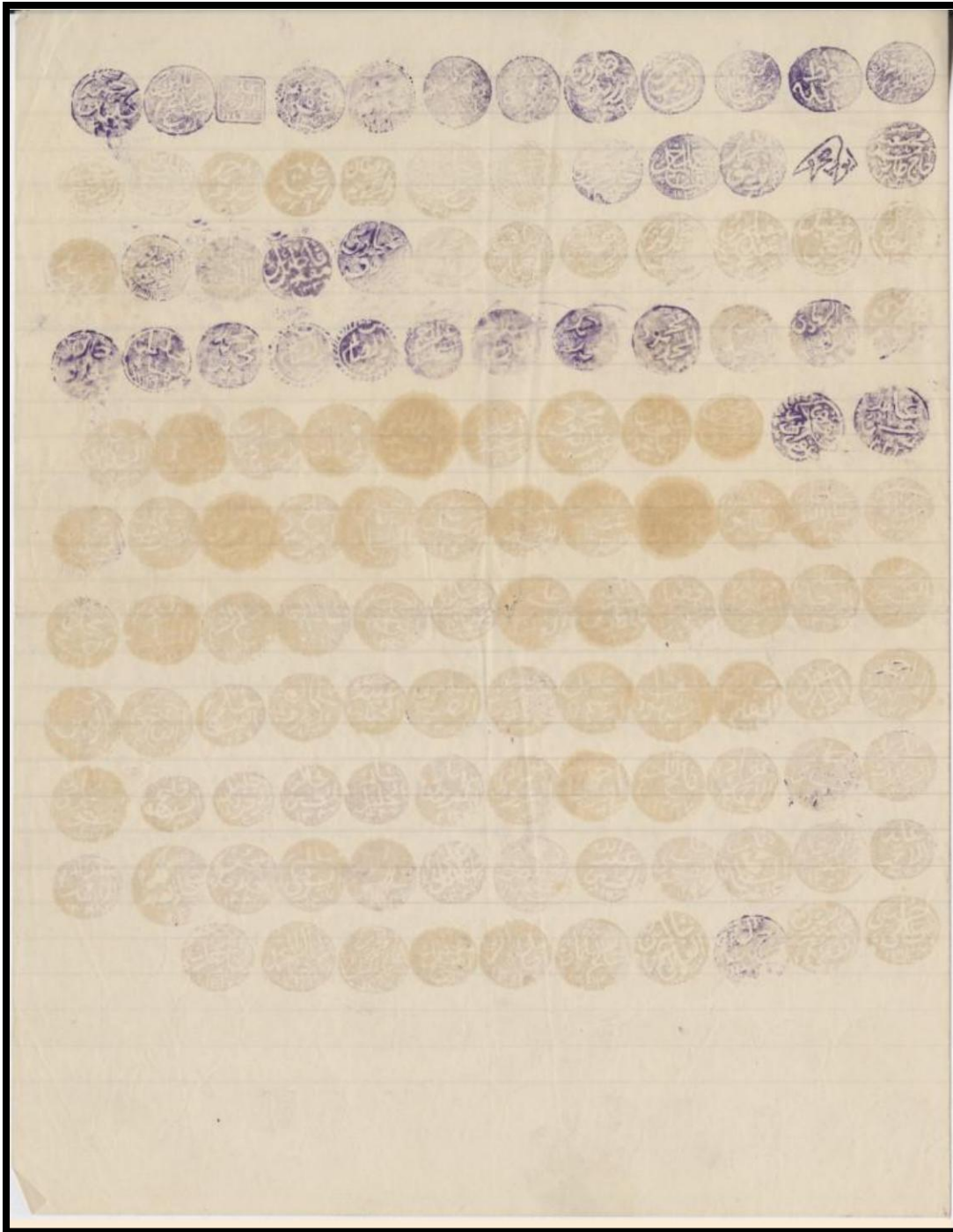


*Appendix 3:*

Signatures in the Form of Seals without Additional Writing Affixed to a Mass Petition by al-Nadi al-Arabi (the Arab Society) in Amman (taken from King Papers, Oberlin College Archives)

Source:

*The King-Crane Commission Digital Collection*, Oberlin College Archives, <http://dcollections.oberlin.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/kingcrane/id/552/rec/1> <http://dcollections.oberlin.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/kingcrane/id/552/rec/1> (last accessed on 14.02.14).



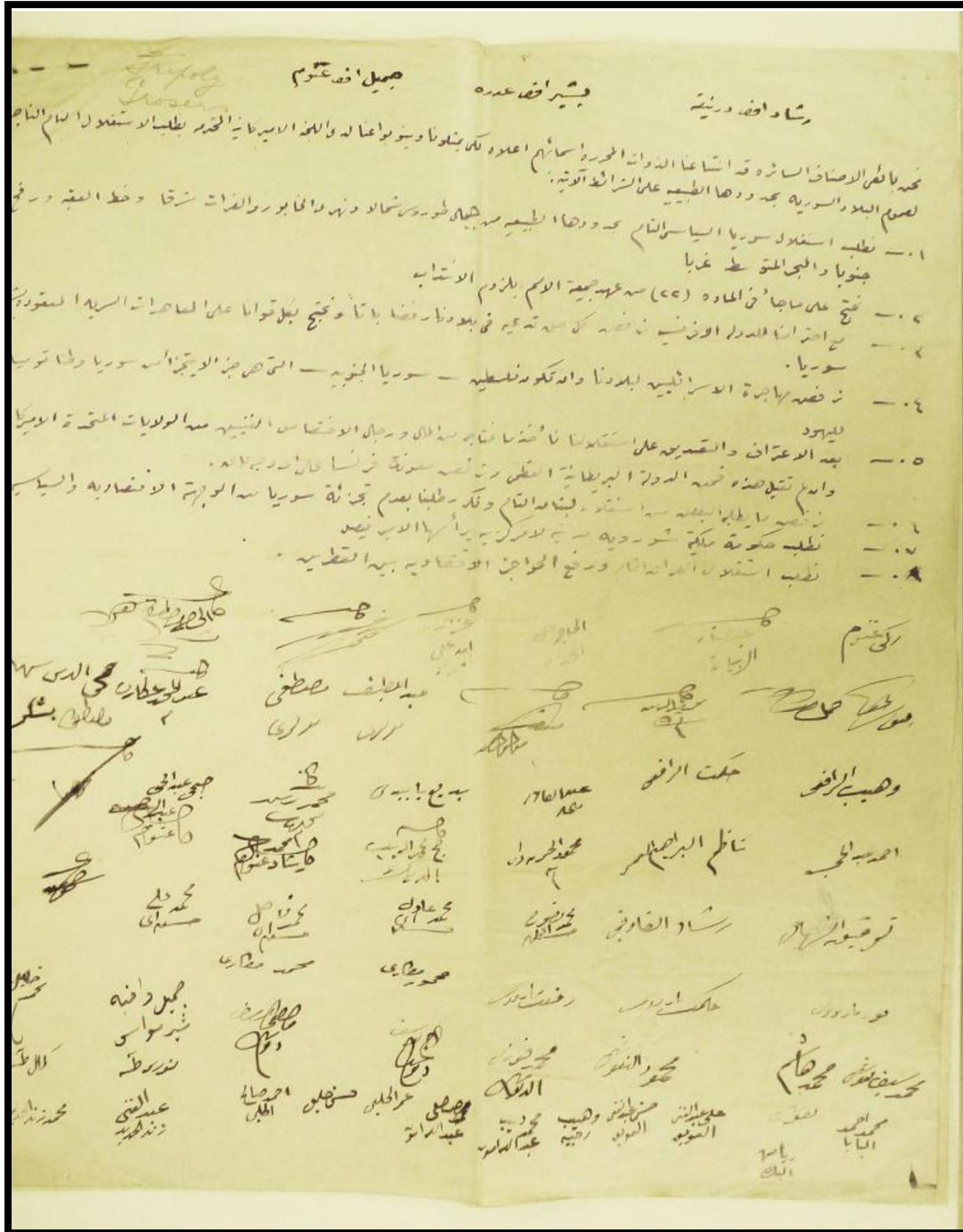
Appendix 4:

A Mass Petition by the Grocers of Tripoli (taken from the Lybyer Papers, University of Illinois)

Source:

The King-Crane Commission Digital Collection, Oberlin College Archives, <http://dcollections.oberlin.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/kingcrane/id/2153/rec/46> (last accessed on 14.02.14).

Note the assertive tone of the petition that lists the grocers' demands





Appendix 5:

A Petition by the Ashrafs of Beirut to Protest a Decision by the French Military Authorities to Unilaterally Nominate a Naqib al-Ashraf (taken from the Lybyer Papers, University of Illinois)

Source:

*The King-Crane Commission Digital Collection*, Oberlin College Archives, <http://dcollections.oberlin.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/kingcrane/id/2091/rec/76> (last accessed on 14.02.2014).

Note the personal signatures without seals on this petition.

