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## OTTOMAN URBAN PRIVACY IN LIGHT OF DISASTER RECOVERY

### Abstract

This article examines the relationship between state and society in the Ottoman Empire during the 17th and 18th centuries by examining concepts and practices of privacy. Fatwas of Ottoman jurists reveal certain principles ordering the division of urban areas into public and private spaces. The article explores their application during the rebuilding of Damascus after its devastation by an earthquake in 1759. Archival sources disclose the priorities that guided the state in reconstructing a ruined provincial capital: religious values; a concern for the inhabitants' well-being; and, rather prominently, an intent to maintain a dichotomy between public and private. In this the Ottomans were different from their contemporary European counterparts, who often took advantage of major disasters to reshape relations between rulers and subjects. This divergence is demonstrated in this article by comparing post-1759 Damascus with London after the Great Fire of 1666 and Lisbon after the 1755 earthquake.

Ignore this part - you don't need an abstract for your essays

My first paragraph sets the scene: I tell a story that attracts attention and is an example of issues that would come up a little later in the article.

Three hours before sunrise on an October night in 1759, Mikha'il Burayk, a Greek Orthodox resident of Damascus, was fast asleep. He woke up suddenly when everything around him started shaking. As the destruction caused by the nocturnal earthquake that interrupted Burayk's sleep was discovered, cries were heard all over the city: many houses had been razed, and parts of the Umayyad and other mosques were damaged. The disaster turned out to be a prelude to another, more violent one to strike a month later. On an evening in late November, a "mighty and fearsome earthquake" again hit the city. "Walls were torn down, foundations weakened, minarets of mosques collapsed, and the Umayyad mosque, with its minarets, domes, and baths was destroyed." Many other buildings, including the Greek Orthodox church, were also ruined, and fires broke out all over the city. A mass exodus followed, involving people of all faiths and social backgrounds who had lost their homes. In gardens surrounding the city, the evacuees set up huts as provisional lodging.<sup>1</sup>

With the city in ruin, Ottoman authorities embarked on a swift yet carefully planned reconstruction effort. Impressive in scope, it involved a massive employment of manpower and equipment. In many ways it resembled another rebuilding effort that had taken place only four years earlier, in Lisbon. On 1 November 1755 a mighty earthquake shook the city, followed by a tsunami and fires that broke out all over the Portuguese

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In this paragraph I give relevance to the story above by connecting it to a larger picture: not only Damascus, but Europe experienced similar issues.

Giving your ideas a greater context than the one you plan to focus on in the paragraph generally serves the purpose of the "so what" question: you should read my article because what I'm about to tell you is relevant beyond the particular case study of Ottoman Damascus.

capital. Houses of worship were destroyed; numerous people lost their homes and fled the devastated city. There, too, the authorities made plans to reconstruct the city. Yet there were some profound differences between Lisbon and Damascus in the nature of government involvement and the execution of rebuilding. They reflected certain dissimilarities between the two states in their perceived roles vis-à-vis their respective societies, as well as a marked divergence in their views of public and private.

This study examines the reconstruction of Damascus in the wake of the 1759 earthquake. It argues that popular Ottoman norms of privacy were a central factor in determining the state's priorities when choosing which areas to restore and whether to implement changes to the urban landscape. The state had various motivations for rebuilding the city: a desire to emphasize its Islamic nature; a need to reassert authority and prevent chaos; a concern for sultanic property, which reflected the ruler's prestige and patronage; and an interest in the well-being of subjects. As the discussion here will show, these considerations were closely related to one another and inextricably tied to a public-private dichotomy that the state sought to maintain. In 17th- and 18th-century western Europe, changing concepts of privacy help explain why authorities there saw earthquakes and fires as occasions for introducing social innovations and transforming relationships between rulers and ruled. In the Ottoman Empire, however, sultans regarded disasters as opportunities to enhance their authority and prestige rather than to challenge existing spatial arrangements and social conventions.

Privacy is a flexible concept that has been construed in various ways in different times and places. A division of space into "private" and "public" domains has existed in almost every society, yet where one ends and the other begins, and how rigid the divisions are, has been the subject of constant reinterpretation. Privacy itself has had multiple facets: it might refer to one's rights over one's body and the secrets of the mind; to certain activities that one typically performs alone or with a select group of partners, such as washing, eating, praying, or reading; to physical divisions between one's home, its immediate vicinity, and the world beyond; and, more broadly, to places—visible and intangible—that were outside the purview of the state. This study deals with the last two aspects in the Ottoman urban world of the 17th and 18th centuries. How these aspects of privacy were defined in the Ottoman context and understood by the state and its subjects has been the focus of very few studies and represents a lacuna in our knowledge of Ottoman society.<sup>2</sup> In the present discussion, I look at concepts of spatial privacy formulated by chief religious scholars of the empire (*şeyhülislāms*). I then examine their practical application by evaluating Ottoman reports related to the reconstruction of Damascus following the 1759 earthquakes. The evidence has a great deal to tell us about Ottoman privacy, the state's role in urban public space, and the authorities' perceived responsibility for preserving this public role.

#### PUBLIC, PRIVATE, AND SEMIPRIVATE: ISLAMIC AND OTTOMAN CONCEPTS

Islamic concepts of privacy have roots in the early days of Islam. From the beginning, Muslim scholars generally agreed that households should have a space inaccessible to outsiders that would be protected as such by law. Up to the 9th century, these scholars shared an "occupancy-based conception of privacy," meaning that the classification of a

First sentence explains the general topic of this essay.  
The first highlighted section is my main argument: what this essay is going to tell you.  
The next two highlighted sections are my sub-arguments, or those that I will use to demonstrate my main point. The parts in between explain how I get to these two sub-arguments.

Most of this paragraph is again background information about privacy, an issue I plan to talk about in this paper.

This part (from "this study") tells you why this paragraph is relevant: because I am talking about privacy in the Ottoman world.  
Having explained the importance of privacy, the highlighted section tells you what I will actually say about it in this article.

The last sentence of the section is again my "so what" question: I explain why this discussion is important, and what broader insights it might help us reach.

From here the actual discussion begins.