

Some Considerations on the Silk Road Policy of the Ottoman State

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Abstract: Beginning from the thirteenth century increasing demand of silk and silk products in Europe has boosted the value and the trade of these products. Especially from the thirteenth to eighteenth century the use and spread of silk from China to Europe as commercial merchandise among European countries also comprised the wealth source of the mentioned countries. The Silk Road had a great importance in the development of this trade activity. In the policy of the Ottomans to capture major centres of the Silk Road like Ankara, Osmancık, Amasya and Erzincan lay the awareness of the importance of this trade road. Consequently, it was politic activities of the Ottomans on the road to Tabriz that had brought Bayezid I and Tamerlane to Ankara War in 1402. The desire to dominate the trade road continued in the following periods. It became one of the major factors designating the Oriental policy of the Ottoman State. This presentation will analyse initiatives that the Ottomans had undertaken to dominate and increase commercial function of the Silk Road, the activities that Ottomans had performed to invigorate the trade activities even at the time when the road lost its importance, in other words, the Silk Road policy of the Ottomans.

Keywords: the Silk Road, the Ottoman Empire, Central Asia, the Silk Road Policy, trade.

Nowadays the name, the the Silk Road, reminds people of endless roads, steep mountain passages, caravans and merchants hurrying for transporting their burdens to the markets, and of course, their valuable cargoes including silk, pomegranates, spices and other commercial merchandises.

Being a cradle for many civilizations, the Silk Road took its name from its main commercial commodity, the silk, transported between China, Middle East and European countries (Bozkurt, 2000, p. 369). This commercial path was used not only for silk trade but also for transportation in general. Today, we also know that ambassadors, scholars and artisans used this very road in the past (See. Stavisky, 2002, p.401). Therefore, while a source of wealth was flowing from east to west, in the meantime cultural interactions used to occur.

Main route of the Silk Road consisted of land routes that connected China to the Middle East and over Iran to Mesopotamia, finally to Antioch and Tyre harbours in the Mediterranean Coast (Bozkurt, 2000, p. 369). Bringing together several civilizations, this road also had various routes on sea. Because of the routes, leading to several countries, and the commercial importance of the Silk Road, it became a moot for many countries of Eurasia for centuries (See. İnalçık, 2008, p.189).

At this point, following questions arise: How did the importance of this road in question affect the Ottoman Empire? In other words, did

the Ottoman Empire have a policy regarding the Silk Road especially during the 15th and the 16th century? In this document, we will try to clarify these questions. First, it is necessary to remark that beginning with settlement of Crusaders in Syria silk fabrics began to be met with approval and this caused silk to be among international exchange commodities around Western countries from the 13th century to the 18th century. However, through the end of 13th century, because of intricacies taking place in Mongol Empire, Iranian silk took the place of Chinese silk, called pongee (İnalçık, 2000b, pp. 269-270). While Ottomans used to buy their silk from China, later on they started to buy from Baghdad and Damascus. Main reason for this change was both that China was distant and that there were other production centres in cities within Ottoman borders (Dalsar, 1960, pp. 22-23). However, this situation did not cause the road lose any of its importance. As we mentioned earlier, this road was not only used for trade but also for different purposes.

Virtually, the Silk Road has an important role not only for Ottoman history but also from the point of Turkish history in general. Since Turks dominated this trade road from China to the Mediterranean Sea for years and this situation caused realization in terms of both economic and cultural wealth. For this reason, Halil İnalçık refers to the Empires of Gokturk, Seljuk and Ottomans as “silk empires”. According to him, Turks was the ones who transported silk and other commercial commodities to Iran and West (İnalçık, 2008, pp.185-186, see. Buryakov, 2002, pp. 421-435). At this point, following question rises. Which cities did The Silk Road of the Ottoman Empire pass through? First, we should indicate that during Seljuk reign the silk was taken from areas in southern parts of the Caspian Sea. During Ilkhanid period, route of

Sultaniye – Erzurum – Sivas – Konya – Istanbul directions was used and after the foundation of the Ottoman Empire the route of Erzurum – Erzincan – Tokat – Amasya - Bursa was preferred. This road was the main route of the Silk Road. Previously used Trabzon -Istanbul sea route, however, was not preferred a lot (İnalcık, 2003, p. 130). At the same time, it is necessary to emphasize that silk products used to be transported through Tebriz – Erzincan - Sivas road to Konya or sent to Ayas in the Gulf of Iskenderun (İnalcık, 2000b, pp. 269-270., See. İnalcık, 2008, p. 214).

The Silk Road had great contribution to the fact that commercial activities increased in Ottoman cities and they became necessary in the world trade. There are many examples of Ottoman cities that became more alive economically thanks to the Silk Road. However, Bursa has a distinct position among these cities (see. Ergenç, 2006, pp. 212-238). Caravans used to reach Bursa through the main Silk Road via Tabriz-Erzurum-Tokat route (İnalcık, 1992a, pp.448-449). This city was not only a place where silk and silk fabrics were traded but also a place for other merchandises such as musk, rhubarb and Chinese porcelain coming from the Middle East (İnalcık, 2003, p. 131). Bursa was also an important city for European industry. Especially Italian merchants competed for trade in Bursa market and they exchanged their thin fleece wool fabrics with silk fabrics here. Iranian merchants, on the other hand, brought back to their country Bursa's fabric like velour and velure (see. Öz, 1946, 1951), Frankish baizes, gold, silver or copper were taken (İnalcık, 1996a, p. 197). This trade provided Ottoman economy with a great income source but also affected Iranian economy and Iran market

was stirred with gold and silvers earned from Ottoman markets (İnalçık, 2000a, p. 363).

As mentioned above, Bursa in a sense rose into a position of trade centre for Iranian and European merchants where they connected with each other. The real reason why Bursa was aimed for transformation into a centre for sericulture was to retain control of the Silk Road and take possession of production centres in Iran (İnalçık, 2000a, p. 363). Later on in Bursa that became a centre in the field of sericulture, Beyazid the Second contributed by building two huge inns known as Koza Inn (see.Kaplanoglu-Elbas, 2008.; İnalçık, 2008, p. 239) and Piriñ Inn (See. İnalçık, 2000a, p. 363) in parallel with sericulture activities. Bursa the time of Bayezid II economically important city. According to tahrir register of 1487 Bursa income from customs was 186.666 akçe. (see. The Prime Minister Ottoman Archive, Tahrir Defteri, Nr. 23, p.33).

In addition to trade capacity of Bursa, it was important as a city where customs duty was taken for Iranian silk. The reason for such importance was that customs duty was only existent in two places, Tokat and Bursa. A second customs duty in Tokat caused disapprobation later on and led Akkoyunlus to destroy Tokat (1472)(İnalçık, 1996b, p. 209.; 2000b, p. 282.; 2008, p. 233). Consequently, now we can talk about how certain economic reasons affected Ottoman politics and its Silk Road policy in this sense.

Ottoman Empire just like previous Turkish-Islamic states prioritized having wealthy resources economically and planned its political activities in this sense. Likewise, during the second half of the 14th century, the Ottoman Empire conquered Ankara, Osmançık, Amasya

and Erzincan just because of their importance in controlling the Silk Road (İnalcık, 2000b, p.274; İnalcık, 2000a, p. 363.; İnalcık, 1996b, p. 209). Likewise, exportation of Iran silk through Tabriz-Konya-Denizli caravan route to Ephesus and Milet during the 1400s induced Yıldırım Bayezid in 1390 to annex Ephesus and other west Anatolia harbours in empire's borders and to conquer other exportation centers of Anatolia (İnalcık, 2000b, p. 275). Virtually, one of the reasons that involved Yıldırım Beyazid with Timur in 1402 Ankara Battle was their struggle for dominance on this trade route (İnalcık, 2000b, p. 274). It was for the same reason that Timur wanted to deprive Crimea and Byzantium of Iran silk trade by destroying Saray and Astrakhan which were important silk trade centres near Altınordu in 1390 state of war before Ankara battle (İnalcık, 2008, p. 212).

Ecumenical attitudes of Ottomans on the Silk Road continued in following eras. Such that, Ottomans struggled for keeping the Silk Road active and completely under their control. Yavuz Sultan Selim's conquest of Tabriz (1514) (see. Celâl-zâde Mustafa, 1990, p. 382.; Hoca Sadedin Efendi, 1979, p. 216-221) and request of Gilan, one of Iran's wealthy sericulture state, for protectorate by Ottomans were all results of these political attempts (İnalcık, 2000b, p. 275.; 2000a, p. 363). The fact that the wealthiest trade route was subdued by Ottomans contributed to Ottoman economy so much and even in the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566) this was main financial sources of conquest movements (İnalcık, 2003, p. 39). Especially, between 1525 and 1571 the Ottoman Empire became politically a world state with the help of this financial income. Because during the period in question Ottoman Empire not only directed world politics with its relations mainly with France,

Spain and Holland but also struggled against the Portuguese in Sumatra, India (İnalçık, 2001-2002, p. 27., see. Uzunçarşılı, 1988, p. 397-400.; Özbaran, (1978), p. 65-146).

In the 16th century, considering policy of the Ottoman Empire regarding the Silk Road, it is possible to say that quite interesting developments were experienced. That is to say, silk was used as a political tool between the Ottoman Empire and especially Iran from time to time; this situation resulted in serious economic losses. Likewise, planning to incapacitate Iran economically, Yavuz Sultan Selim imposed an embargo on any silk importations and banned raw silk trade (see also. İnalçık, 2000a, p. 363.; 1999, p. 91.; Faroqhi, 2003, p. 104.; Dalsar, 1960, p.132-133.; İnalçık, 2008, p.233-234), his struggle for complete stoppage of Iran's exportation of silk goods to Europe; these were important developments of the period. According to an open order, no matter Turkish, Iranian or Arab whoever had Iran silk in his/her stock, their goods would be expropriated. This situation, projected in order to deprive the enemy of its sources, resulted in a great reaction from public opinion. This process also affected other countries conducting silk trade. Such that after a while, the Italians made some attempts on doing business through Astarabad - Caspian Sea - Astrakhan route. Later on the English also embarked on a quest for such a trade route regarding India and Iran trade goods (İnalçık, 2000b, p. 281-282).

With Suleiman the Magnificent ascending to the throne (1520) embargo period ended. In this period, not only relations concerning silk trade turned to normal, but also deficits of merchants were accommodated. However, under his reign several campaigns were made towards Azerbaijan in order to control the silk production areas directly.

Iran campaigns in 1533-36, 1548-50 and 1553-55 and conquest of Tabriz twice (1534, 1548) (See. Gökbilgin, 1957, p. 449-482) were indicators of this intention (See. İnalçık, 2000b, pp. 282-283). Thanks to these campaigns, silk trade route was completely taken under control, also Basra-Baghdad-Aleppo spice route was also taken and this enabled Ottoman settlement in the Middle East definitely. Especially establishment of Baghdad governor was an important step from the point of securing trade routes (Emecen, 1994, p. 38). In this period, along with taking trade routes under control, protection of trade caravans along the way was important for the Ottoman Empire. In the event of an attack against caravans or stealing of silk goods, the government used to examine the situation thoroughly and tried to compensate the loss of commodity owners (see. *6 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri*, 1995, p. 276-277).

In the 16th century, although it was a more privileged era concerning silk trade and the Silk Road, government was unsparing in taking precautions against situations affecting its benefits. Including period of Suleiman the Magnificent, silk was used as a powerful economic weapon during wartimes, this situation resulted in bans on importation and exportation mutually. Bans in question damaged economies of both countries (İnalçık, 2000a, p. 363). This economic competition resulted in for merchants from both countries to be followed by the state carefully. Especially, Iranian merchants in Ottoman borders were followed carefully. As far as we learn from records, the jobs of Iranians coming to Ottoman country and information about whether they actually came for trade were delicate subjects under state supervision (see. *12 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri*, 1996, pp. 129, 140-141, 420).

During late period of Suleiman the Magnificent, by taking its old boom back, silk trade continued to be forefront over following years. However, during the second half of 16th century, emerging Russian threat imperilled this trade and resulted in Astrakhan campaign (1562) (for detailed information on Astrakhan battle see. Kurat, 1972, p. 237-239.; İnalçık, 1993, p. 423). The most important reason of this campaign was the fact that Pilgrims coming from Caucasia and Middle East used to stop by Astrakhan and Russians prevented these visits (See. Kırımı El-Hac Abdulgaffar, 1343, p.111.; for an example on this issue. *7 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri* 1998, p.325, 327, 375.; Facsimile, Volume I, 667, 671 numbered provisions.; Facsimile, Volume II, 2723 numbered provisions). This campaign, for not only eliminating Russian threat but also keeping pilgrimage route under control, after a while revived the project canalization of Don-Volga.

According to the project, two fortresses would be built between these two rivers, Don and Volga, and they would be connected with a channel. In this way, it would be possible to send supplies and ammo directly with ships from Black Sea to Caspian Sea and east campaign would be eased and control over the inner sections of Iran would be possible (see. İnalçık, 1948, pp. 367-372).

This was because possibly one of the most important projects that Sokullu Mehmet Pasha wanted to fulfill in terms of strategic and geopolitical ideals was taking the control of historical trade and pilgrimage roads starting from the Middle East and reaching west (Emecen, 1994, p. 41). This campaign, not only political but also economical (See. İnalçık, 2001-2002, p. 27.; Uzunçarşılı, (1988, pp. 33-38), resulted in a failure because of certain facts (1596) (for reasons

about why battle was failed, see. İnalçık, 1992b, p. 748.; Gündoğdu, 1997, p. 298.; Şimşir, 1997, p. 304). However, only after 1578-90s, control over trade roads was accomplished and until 1603-05, main silk production areas were in Ottoman control (İnalçık, 2000b, pp. 282-283).

Procurement of silk need of West through Iran and Ottoman Empire was a significant source of income for both Iran and Ottoman economies. Being aware of this situation, Shah Abbas the Great (1587-1629), imposed an embargo on the Ottoman Empire regarding silk trade. His intention was to change route of the Silk Road, shift towards the Indian Ocean, and thus damage Ottoman Empire economically (İnalçık, 2000b, pp. 300-306). One of the attempts made on this issue was that he made an agreement with the English in 1610 in order to show cheapness of this road by sending 200 cargoes of silk to Lisbon. Against this situation, the Ottoman Empire did not remain silent and warned the English government and consequently silk ban on Ottomans was annulled. Along with all these developments, the English continued to buy silk from Benderabbas, even the French started to procure silk through Persian Gulf and Suret (India) at the end of the 17th century (İnalçık, 2000a, pp. 363-364). As a result, this political competition between Ottomans and Iran turned into an economic warfare in this way, while Iranians banned silk exportation; Ottomans stopped gold and silver forwarding to Iran. However, after the death of Abbas the Great (1629) this policy was ceased (İnalçık, 2000b, pp. 300-306.; see also. İnalçık, 2003, p. 50.; 2000a, p. 363.; 2001-2002, p. 28-29.; Emecen, 1994, pp. 47-48).

When it comes to the second half of 17th century, it seemed that the Silk Road policy of Ottoman Empire shifted to a different channel. In

this period, Izmir retrieved a status that could compete with Aleppo and Sidon harbors¹. Main reason of this situation was the fact that some Iranian and European merchants chose Foça and Izmir since tax was taken from silk in Bursa. This situation of silk trade continued in 18th century, too and Erzurum-Tokat-İzmir route became an active trade road. After a while, this commercial boom caused Ottoman silk to become competitive in quantity and quality compared to Iran silk and demanded in Europe in the 18th century. Regarding this issue, the Ottoman Empire applied the policy of exportation quota to meet the local demands (İnalçık, 2000a, p. 364).

Consequently, we can say that Ottoman Empire used to be an important state not only in political platform but also in world trade. From time to time, prominence of commercial life, and thus economy, dominated the political activities of the state. Controlling the both elements brought Ottoman Empire into an exceptional position financially among world states. Especially with its feature as an *entrepôt*, bonded warehouse, where eastern and western merchandises were exchanged (See. İnalçık 2001-2002, pp. 26-27), Ottoman Empire was also the melting pot of both cultures and civilizations. In this sense, The Silk Road was not only a trade route but also remarkable as a way of interaction between eastern and western cultures.

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¹ About Izmir's becoming an important trade city, see. İnalçık, 2001-2002, p. 28.; Arı, 1999, p. 497.

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