

## **Crime, bandits, and community: how public panic shaped the social control of territory in the Ottoman Empire**

This study explores the role of crime, bandits, and public panic in the nineteenth century Ottoman society by using archival documents and employing a comparative perspective. In addition to the social bandit concept of Eric Hobsbawm, there is an introduction of two new banditry forms in this study—opportunistic bandits and imagined bandits. The comparison of different bandits clarifies that social bandits and opportunistic bandits aggravated public panic and produced imagined bandits. Hence, public panic and the dissent of local people unveiled through rumors about the imagined bandits. The exploration of different forms of bandits in the Ottoman Empire is a response to the vexed issue concerning the challenges in the social control of territories in a multiethnic and multi-religious empire. This study provides new conceptual tools to rethink about the spatial dimensions in the emergence of bandits. This article shows that spatial factors in the social control of territory can be influenced by the reaction of local people from bottom-to-top and, in doing so, the spatial factors can determine the response of state authority. The present study, therefore, unveils the power relationship in the social control of territory whether it is manifested by physical force or public panic.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Bandits have played critical roles throughout history in affecting social geographies in terms of the structure of social life, political order, and cultural change (Koliopoulos 1987; Cassia 1993; Gallant 1999). This article brings the role of bandits to the fore in the Ottoman Empire to demonstrate how the social dynamics of everyday life and the political agendas of various groups were under the serious influence of public violence and public panic among the multi-ethnic and

multi-religious communities of the Ottoman society. Therefore, this study attempts to resolve the vexed question of the complex relationship between bandits, local communities, and the empire through identifying the critical importance of spatial factors. In exploring the role of bandits in the contention-ridden Ottoman towns and villages, I clarify why bandits emerged and impacted society in various ways. For this aim, I analyze how they became formidable authorities on the imperial periphery; how the central state authority responded to the challenges posed by the bandits and the dissent of local communities; and what the spatial processes that determined the form of bandit activity were.

Crime in rural life can change and determine the dynamics between the state and society. Like other imperial rules challenged by social and political tumults, the Ottoman Empire was also severely impacted by organized crime and violence in the nineteenth century. Socioeconomic difficulties in the center and administrative misrule in the periphery were notorious in transforming the social and political landscapes of the rural life in the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century. The increase in the number of bandits in this era created great concerns in addition to the sociopolitical dissent that the Sublime Porte<sup>1</sup>— hereafter Porte—had to overcome. Due to the ferocious attacks of bandits, public safety was one of the main concerns of the rural communities. However, the bandits did not only imply social unrest and public unsafety. The political conflicts, ethnic and religious motives in the age of nationalism created trouble for the Ottoman officialdom. The uprisings against the Ottoman authority were eventually violent and subversive, which created numerous victims. The Ottoman Empire suppressed the resistance and hindered the prevalence of bandits through implementing non-violent reforms on one hand and taking violent measures on the other. The fierce plans of the Porte aimed to reconsolidate its authority in the periphery with a violent response against bandits while its soft policies aimed to support victims.

I pose three main arguments in this article. First, engaging with some arguments of the social bandit theory, I argue that the bandits have different forms according to (i) their source of emergence, (ii) principal actors, (iii) principal goals, (iv) targets, and (v) spatial factors. The one-dimensional perspective about bandits results in overlooking the micro dynamics of each violent attack or suppression. This also limits our ability to contextualize the challenges in social and political life, and the different priorities of the rural community and the state. Second, in addition to social bandits, I introduce two other main bandit forms, which are *opportunist bandits* and *imagined bandits*. The social bandits are the outcomes of deep social, political and cultural dissent that form the identities of bandits and incite them to violently realize their goals. Different from the social bandits, the opportunist bandits do not have any concerns about social injustice, ethnic, or religious identity of their victims. The satisfaction of basic needs through extortion or raids was a common feature for the opportunist bandits to dominate the communities as a formidable local authority. The opportunist bandits emerged from a fragile political and social context and benefited from the circumstances to attain maximum benefit through the use of violence. In this regard, the social bandits principally undermined the political and social order of the Ottoman authority and diminished its power as a legitimate and just authority. Conversely, the opportunist bandits principally undermined public safety through theft, raids, and engaging in ordinary criminal activities in rural areas. The impotence of the state in the face of great dissents and the prevalence of both social bandits and opportunist bandits created public panic among the civilian members of community who provoked the creation of claims, rumors, and unverified allegations concerning the approaching banditry threat. These unconfirmed assertions exacerbated public panic and increased social pressure in the networks of rural habitus. Therefore, the communities under severe risk of public panic generated *imagined bandits* as if there were a real banditry threat. The spatial conditions of dissent, the spatial opportunities of

public unsafety, and the spatial imaginations of public panic determined the factors that created the social bandits, opportunist bandits, and imagined bandits respectively.

I used archival documents that I derived from the Ottoman Archives located in *Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivleri*,<sup>2</sup> Prime Ministerial Ottoman Archive, in Istanbul. I also consulted the *Fonds of Dahiliye Nezareti* (Ministry of Interior Affairs), *Meclis-i Vala*, (The Legislative and Supreme Council), *Hatt-i Hümayun* (The Imperial Rescript Collection), *Hariciye Nezareti* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and *Sadaret Mektubi Kalemi Belgeleri* (Documents of Grand Vizier's Office). All archival documents are cited in the endnotes. The documents in this study cover the Tanzimat period broadly and analyze this era starting from the 1830s. My geographical scope is limited to the Balkans that contained different ethnic and religious communities in the rural areas of the Ottoman Empire, including dozens of different ethnicities in addition to Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities.

First, I briefly introduce the conditions in the social control of territories in the Ottoman Empire during the Tanzimat era. Second, I present the theoretical discussion concerning the bandits, the priorities of community and state within a spatial context. The following two sections introduce the activities of (i) social bandits, as well as the (ii) opportunist and imagined bandits, respectively. I conclude my remarks regarding the role of history to grasp perplexing dynamics of contentious societies and the direction of future research in the social control of territories.

## **THE SOCIAL CONTROL OF TERRITORY**

The changing dynamics of relationships and multifaceted social networks shaped the Ottoman space in terms of material and political contestation. In line with this argument, Yaycioglu (2016: 12) points out that “the relationship between the empire and the provinces is not a binary story about center and periphery. The Ottoman Empire appears as a relatively integrated unit,

entangled through ties, institutions, and relationships that were continuously renegotiated by many actors.” The process in the spatializing politics within the state-territory context is not a one-way street nor does it follow a route shaped from top to bottom (Agnew 2016). In fact, the relationship between bandits, community, and the state shows that the conflicting actors in the center and the periphery shaped the form of this relationship together. The centrality of power in the social control of territory is also related to the assumptions concerning the Ottoman space. Brummett (2015: 8) portrays the Ottoman space under Sultan’s domains as a “complex form of possession and identity, dependent not entirely what on what was actually, but also on what was imagined, remembered, depicted, hoped for, and then visualized in textual and pictorial sources such as maps and travel accounts.” This was another way in which the social control of territory demonstrated the power of the empire. Hence, “a well-run war suggested a well-run empire; and geography was a factor that had an impact on both war and imperial administration” (Anastasopoulos 2013: 125). However, the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century also changed the approach of Ottoman Empire towards the social control of territory and produced more severe and frequent responses to control the territory that formed “the spatial attachments of the inhabitants of state” (Kadercan 2017: 368).

The socio-economic and administrative reform attempts of the Ottoman governance transformed this route into a symbolic arena in which the weak and strong parts of the Ottoman Empire conflated through intensive policy changes within a time span of three centuries. The extensive reforms during the reign of Sultan Mahmud II (1808-1839) brought important changes into the administrative, fiscal, and military areas (Levy 1971; Shaw 1975; Findley 1980). Indeed, this prudent and challenging era was the harbinger of a more organized and centralized reform period. The declaration of a binding document addressing the concerns of various communities in the Ottoman Empire, even including the Sultan himself, was inevitable in the first half of the

nineteenth century. Several remarkable reform packages including the Imperial Rescript of 1856<sup>3</sup> followed the declaration of the Edict of Gülhane in 1839, and this trend finally reached its peak in 1876 with the announcement of the first Ottoman constitution. Some of the fundamental values of equality and justice through embracing the rule of law marked all these struggles to keep the Empire united and to prevent sociopolitical decadence. This transformation in the social, political, administrative, legal, and intellectual sphere, as a result, ushered a new phase in the nineteenth century. This phase was eventually called Tanzimat, in other words, reorganization.

Aksan (2013: 414) mentioned that “the first decade of the Tanzimat reform unfolded as a contest between the traditional rural land-holders and the new centralising bureaucracy.” Moreover, these reforms led to dissent among local elites and peasants (Aksan 2013: 429). The Tanzimat period was a crucial era to uncover the spatial dynamics of territory and the rule of Ottoman Empire. In this context, Kadercan (2017) points out that “the centuries-old territorial design of the Ottoman Empire eventually clashed with the new order that the Ottoman modernizing elites tried to impose upon the space–politics–society nexus especially in the second half of the nineteenth century” (Kadercan 2017: 162). The Tanzimat reforms included some flexible and pragmatic approaches based on the balance between the needs of people and the strategy of the Ottoman Empire. Kadercan (2017: 158) contextualizes this policy balance as a grand strategy for expansion in the space-society-politics nexus. The Porte was aware that the corrupt rulers were rampant in the periphery that also increased social dissent in the rural areas. Therefore, the Porte changed the local rulers of towns in many uprisings in which the bandits played certain roles. The endeavors of the Porte to change the place of notorious governors aimed to convey the message to the local public that the Porte recognized the concerns of dissident people and put some efforts to restore the rule of law. Nevertheless, the cases presented below show that this ostensible attempt of the Porte was a very dysfunctional method because the

fundamental reason of uprisings and public concerns remained mostly unresolved and unrevealed. This chaotic social atmosphere provided the necessary conditions for the opportunist bandits who extorted, robbed, and attacked the innocent people for a material need. Finally, the increasing violence in the remote towns and villages inspired the people to create imagined bandits as both a reaction to crime and violence and a demand for state intervention to restore social order.

The social control of territory is a central issue for the sovereignty of state. The lack of capacity in the social control of space also signifies the lack of power of state institutions that may eventually break trust between the people and the state authority. In this regard, Horowitz (2004) goes one step further and argues that “space is crucial to the definition of a state, and once boundaries are demarcated, it is extraordinarily difficult to alter them. Boundaries are inscribed both on paper and on the ground with boundary markers” (477). The bandits, therefore, are unyielding actors posing risks against the boundaries of state and the existence of it.

## **THE FORMS OF BANDITS: PUBLIC TROUBLE AND PUBLIC PANIC WITHIN A SPATIAL CONTEXT**

The “preconditions underlying the authority and unity of the state since its inception has been that the supreme authority within each independent regnum should be recognized as having no rivals within its own territories.” (Neocleous 2003: 411). The territorial sovereignty of the state is a principal factor when rethinking it within a spatial context of relational networks (Painter 2010). What if the sovereignty of the state is defied by outlaws, rebels, bandits, or insurgents? Lilyblad (2014) states that in such a situation, illicit authorities emerge in the territories because the limited statehood is operative with the lack of a prevalent authority providing fundamental and necessary security needs (Lilyblad 2014). The vacuum in the social control of territory is filled by

other non-state authorities who do not only control territory, at least for a certain period, but also create authority without establishing institutions through using violence, threat, and intimidation. Bandits are the examples of such authoritarian figures, whether they are embraced by the local community or despised by them. When the issue is bandits, “the power and influence of myth and image far exceed that of social reality” (Slatta 1987: 8). This is the reason that our case study offers three different banditry forms based on different motives. Exploring bandits within a criminal context reveals both the influence of local people in shaping the decision of state to respond against banditry and the spatial dynamics of territory where the bandits flourish.

Barkey (2008:10) highlighted that “imperial state–periphery relationships are not direct relationships between state and individual subjects; rather, intermediate bodies, networks, and elites mediate the relationships.” In the mediation process of these relationships, the social control of territory depends not only the agencies themselves, but also the particularities of territory itself. Similarly, Anastasopoulos (2013: 125) paid attention to the role of spatial dynamics in the Ottoman Empire over the state and communities in the times of war; he stated:

Geography was not merely a natural agent, but had an important secondary political dimension: the distant (in psychological, but for many provinces also in physical terms) center of power, which during the war formally had moved from the capital to the imperial camp near or beyond the frontiers, issued decrees through which it made demands, often urgent ones, in trying to address needs that arose from the progress of war.

Social bandits revolted against the state because of social, political, and cultural concerns. Yet, different from the social bandits, the opportunist bandits abused the fragile social and political context and attacked innocent people to extort them mainly for their survival. Therefore, violence employed both by the social and opportunist bandits and the suppression of the Ottoman

Empire created public panic. As a result, the imagined bandits were the manifestation of this public panic, which were expressed in the minds of local community as if they were real bandits. From this point of view, the imagined bandits were idiosyncratic structures of social life that emerged with the surge of public panic and the spread of rumors, claims, and allegations. The important point is that the cases and the forms of bandits represented in this study provide a basis to question the arguments raised through the well-known social banditry theory of Eric Hobsbawm. He stated:

The point about social bandits is that they are peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported. This relation between the ordinary peasant and the rebel, outlaw and robber is what makes social banditry interesting and significant ... Social banditry of this kind is one of the most universal social phenomena known to history (Hobsbawm 1969: 20).

Limiting the bandits within a polarized socioeconomic context may remain an enigma to understand the deep and complex relationships among the actors of polity and social life. As Hobsbawm argued, the sympathy for the bandits by the peasants, reveals only a small part of the entire story. This is the reason that we need to go beyond this narrative to portray banditry issue meticulously. The whole story coincides with several fluid and transforming determinants that shaped different forms of bandits, various reactions of communities, and the priorities of state.

The many cases explored in this article show that the perplexity of social and political conditions, the changing and sometimes-conflicting relationships among the three agencies—the bandits, the community and the state—pose serious questions about the universal validity of

social bandit theory. Even though I will provide social banditry examples in this study which are different from Hobsbawm, I argue that it is challenging to evaluate bandits separately from their environmental contexts which include political and cultural concerns as well. This is the reason that I redefine the social bandit by broadening its scope with the inclusion of the political and cultural concerns of those militant rebels in addition to social concerns.

The following cases illuminate the social, political and cultural concerns conflated in the emergence of social bandits. The violent and bloody attacks of social bandits and opportunist bandits shaped the perceptions of power among the fragile communities at the helm of state impotence. The public unsafety was under the pressure of public uncertainty because of the heterogeneous character of the various bandit groups. The sometimes-conflicting perceptions in the entire society made the public dissent more visible at the collective level. Therefore, the imagined bandits gained a strong foothold among the community members of periphery and remote areas through rumors and public unsafety. The imagined bandit was not able to target anyone as an illusory figure of public panic. Nevertheless, the message conveyed through the creation of imagined bandits by the local community was clear as it signified the weakness of state authority and the fragility of public safety. These two determinants also distinguished the character of imagined bandits in the theoretical framework of bandit forms that I develop in this study.

I utilize a micro-sociological approach to find answers for macro-sociological questions related to the social control of territory. For this reason, five factors determine my methodological classification: (i) the source of emergence of a bandit group, (ii) principal actors/perpetuators, (iii) principal goals, (iv) the targeted subjects, and (v) spatial factors (Table 1 here).

Table 1- The forms of bandits

<b>Determinants of Bandit Forms</b>	<b>SOCIAL BANDITS</b>	<b>OPPORTUNIST BANDITS</b>	<b>IMAGINED BANDITS</b>
<b>The source of emergence</b>	Dissent about the identity and condition of bandit group	Public unsafety and the need for subsistence	Public panic
<b>Principal actors/perpetuators</b>	Bandits and community	Bandits	Community
<b>Principal goals</b>	Defiance of the ruling authority	Satisfaction of the needs to survive	Request of state support to be protected by the bandits
<b>Principal targeted-subjects</b>	The ruling authority	Anyone who has subsistence and can be robbed	No actual targeted subjects, but rumors and claims
<b>Spatial factors</b>	Spatial conditions of dissent	Spatial opportunities of public unsafety	Spatial imaginations of public panic

**SOCIAL BANDITS: GREAT CONCERNS IN THE EVERYDAY LIFE**

Corrupt practices manifested themselves in different guises in many public spheres so much so that saving a bandit member was an issue of bribe and secret allegations between the state officials and relatives of the bandits. For example, the father of Kostandi offered a bribe to Lieutenant Selim Ağa with the help of Anagonos in order to release his son from prison who was jailed for banditry activities. However, when this news reached the Porte, Lieutenant Selim Ağa, the father of Kostandi and Anagonos were interrogated because of the related corruption case.<sup>4</sup>

An iniquitous taxation system was one of the most powerful symbols of socioeconomic vulnerabilities for the tax-paying subjects who were mostly the peasants and obliged to pay precise tax charges on time. The contentious tax resistance movement in the periphery was one of the leading and common reasons that enforced the Porte to rearrange the amount of tax and its payment time. The deference of tax payment was tolerated from time to time when the *reaya*<sup>5</sup> was not able to pay it. The *reaya* became the victims of corruption at the hands of rapacious local rulers, *mütesellim*, and later *mutasarrıf*, who collected tax according to the legal contracts that they signed with the Porte (Wallerstein, Decdeli and Kasaba 1987: 90). This is one of the main reasons that the collection of tax and its organization were germane and central to understand the roots of resistance and the reaction of state.

One of the first and most remarkable tax uprising episodes in the Tanzimat era occurred in Niš in 1841. Thousands of peasants left their homes and migrated to the Principality of Serbia because of their tax concerns. Leaving homelands behind was shattering, which transformed dissent into violent action aimed at the local authority of the Ottoman rule. Most importantly, their solicitous movement conveyed a symbolic and yet an alarming message for the Porte. Specifically, these social upheavals could have been enduring in contrary to the hopes and expectations fostered by the declaration of the Edict of Gülhane in 1839 that aimed to create a more integrated and egalitarian society. In fact, the social dissents in Niš were discernible before

the revolt. The first signal of the social unrest echoed in the streets of town just a few months before migrating to the Principality of Serbia. The grievous tax concerns of the peasants gave the uprising the required mobilization from the bottom. Besides, some of the reactionary notables of the town, whose powerful social status was seriously at risk with the codes imposed by the Edict, gave an impetus to the former (Uzun 2002: 37). More than two thousand people gathered in a church located in the suburb of Niš and asked for the tax registers from the local governments to examine whether the tax ratios were split up accurately (Uzun 2002: 37-38). Even though they received the tax registers, which remained with them for two days, they were not ultimately convinced that the tax was calculated correctly according to the codes of the Edict (Uzun 2002: 47). Their claim was clear and straightforward: Any claim for extra tax collection was a violation of the Edict. The bandits and the peasants, who were overwhelmingly Orthodox Christians, acted together in their fights against the local Ottoman authorities to resolve their tax problems and erode the malpractice of the local elites, who were perceived by the rebels as the principal creators of grievous social problems.

The *reaya* demanded the removal of the notorious state officials from the government. This included the aggressive Sabri Pasha, and afterwards the Albanian origin tax collectors. The other demands were related to the compensation of damages because the Albanian irregular soldiers fired the houses of *reaya* and seized their goods. They also asked for the prevention of the brigandage activities related to theft and violence in the region. The Porte accepted most of the requests asserted by the subjects in order to convince the migrated peasants to turn back with their animals from the Principality of Serbia to their homes. All these demands would be tolerated and were perceived as reasonable wishes by the Porte, so they were accepted with a nonchalant stature. Nevertheless, the Porte immediately rejected one of the crucial requests of the subjects. This was about the organization of tax collection. The subjects asked for the right of

selection of the tax collectors among the people from their own communities. This had already broken the trust between the resisting local community and the central state authority—the Porte—and brought dubious approaches and verdicts in such requests. Shortly after the agreement between the Porte and the *reaya*, the subjects and more than 50,000 animals moved their homes to the villages and towns of the Niš province in 1841 (Uzun 2002: 77-78). The conflicts had not been resolved completely as the attacks of bandits led to more insurgents in the following decades. However, the ingravescient social problems were postponed at least for a while.

The lower group in the socio-economic stratification of Ottoman society, mostly the tax-paying peasants, was the most vulnerable group as it happened in the case of Niš, Çarşamba and Vidin; however, they were not the only victims of the taxation system. Although it rarely occurred, the nobles were also enforced to respond to the needs of the Porte even during the difficult times when they could not afford to respond to these requests. Zeynelabidin, a religious notable, was victimized when the pirates seized his 60,000 kilos of wheat and the local bandits looted three farms that he owned. Even under these severe conditions, he managed to send one hundred equipped irregular light cavalries with their leaders to fight for the Ottoman Empire, but there were limits to his capabilities. He could not fulfil another request when the Ottoman local officials asked him to dispatch 268,000 kilos of wheat again. There was nothing left except preparing a petition to be sent directly to the Porte about his incapability to fulfill these requests. He explicitly mentioned in the petition that he was ruined not only because of the attacks of bandits but also by the cumbersome tax requests that also significantly diminished his economic power. According to Zeynelabidin, this was the time for the resonation of the Sultan's mercy that should have been geared towards his incapacity.<sup>6</sup> The frugality in the resources was the norm in the lives of most subjects, if not all. Conversely, there were limits of obedience towards authority while the types of obedience could be different from each other. The acts of writing petitions to

the Porte and pleading for forgiveness of the Sultan, as Zeynelabidin did, characterized the socioeconomic fragility between the Sultan and his economically powerful subjects in the attribution of those social dissents. The reaction of the nobles also implied the decreasing power of the Ottoman Empire, which was defied twice. First, the attacks of the bandits brought a significant social and economic burden. Second, the Porte had to deal with the dismay of the peasants and even the notables who were not reluctant to express their loss and desperation in the face of state incapacity.

The provinces were exposed to the violence of social bandits shortly after the declaration of the Edict of Gülhane. However, the attacks of insurgents were not the only cause of social unrest. The local Ottoman officials played a greater role in imperiling the social unrest because of the corrupt bureaucrats and implementations in the periphery. Nevertheless, the central offices of the Porte did not entirely ignore the complaining letters and petitions about the misconduct of local bureaucrats. One of these letters reached Istanbul in 1856 and the Porte promptly sent an urgent notification to the İslimye<sup>7</sup> province ordering the elimination of the unjust policies and unacceptable behaviors of the local authorities towards subjects immediately.<sup>8</sup> The Porte strictly abolished the violation of the rule of law and demonstrated harsh reactions from time to time against its officials by punishing them. Nevertheless, the Ottoman Empire faced large challenges when punishing bureaucrats; by changing their posts they could not eliminate the great dissents in the periphery. Indeed, enforcing the state representative in the periphery to embrace the ethical codes of lawfulness was more puzzling than revising and making the necessary laws in the central offices of the Porte in Istanbul. The administrative malpractice took its focal position as an applied philosophy, and the local people did not remain silent to show their reactions. This time Karlovo, a town in central Bulgaria, was in the center of the accusing claims, which targeted the deputy governor of the town because he refused to clean out the streets from the victims'

corpses who lost their lives during the attacks of social bandits. It was argued that the governor asked for extra-charges from the *reaya* to do his job.<sup>9</sup>

The penetration of the social bandits into local law enforcement agencies was one of the remarkable examples demonstrating the relationship between the dissent in periphery and the impotence of the central state authority. The subjects and some of the local bureaucrats reported such illegal collaborations to the Porte. However, the Porte was suspicious of cooperation between the state forces and bandits. This was the reason that the central government generally opened an inquiry before taking its final decision regarding the claims about the infiltration of bandits into the state's military and police forces. For instance, a letter issued on November 11, 1850 asked for more information for the investigation of a *zaptieh*, police force, that was accused of being the head of a social bandit group at the same time.<sup>10</sup> In order to stymie such scandals, the Porte warned the local governors to hire *zaptiehs* from "honorable" and "trustworthy" people.<sup>11</sup> The concerns of the officials in respect to the activities of social bandits were critically alarming. These claims would have put the authority of the Ottoman Empire under severe risk. The Porte sent the Interior Minister secretary Mümtaz Efendi to the provinces in the Balkan region in the same year to report the social context in the conflicting areas.<sup>12</sup> Those claims show that the very fabric of dissent in the rural community life spurred and mobilized social bandits from the bottom. The character of mobilization demonstrates that the reaction of social bandits could find alternative methods to corrode the state from inside through transforming the leader of social bandits into a *zaptieh*.

The story of the religious noble Zeynelabidin narrated above was a form of passive obedience towards the mightier authority of the state when he accepted the requests of the Porte, whereas he also complained about his challenging situation and even implicitly referred to the ineffectiveness of the state in guaranteeing public safety. His passive obedience, which was

conflated with reaction and local concerns, tersely explicated the contentious relationship between the absolute authority and the reactionary elites. In contrast, the active resistance drew a different portrait of power balance, as much of the community in a town or village did not belong to a socioeconomically distinguished group, but a lower social class that paid their taxes and revolted against social injustice. Such a reactionary uprising reverberated after the attacks of social bandits against the appointed pashas and mütesellims. Debar, a sanjak center of the Scutari province, became disreputable with one of these attacks; the stifling atmosphere of the town sustained extensively in the nineteenth century. Mütesellims of this town, as was the case in many other towns in the region, were notoriously unwelcomed figures of the Ottoman governance. The tense socio-political dynamic in the periphery provided the rationalized and psychological aspirations to the social bandits of Debar when they targeted mütesellims, local notables, and governors. Mecnun Talib Bey was an ideal candidate for their attacks, who had recently been appointed as the new mütesellim of Debar. The bandits had taken him hostage in May 1836.<sup>13</sup> Mütesellim was not the only accused Ottoman official in such attacks. The similar perceptions fostered vengeance and hatred toward one of the highest militaries and administrative officers. The heated accusations materialized violently when the bandits of Shkodra kidnapped the governor Muhassil Hafiz Pasha.<sup>14</sup> The spring of 1836 provoked the spark of public disorder with the advancement of the Debar bandits from Ohrid to Monastir.<sup>15</sup> The bandits of Shkodra and Debar alarmed other mütesellims of the neighbor towns. Accordingly, after receiving this notification, the mütesellims of Mat and Tirana, who were residing in Lezhë at that time, anxiously took their positions to deter the rebels and wait for the *asâkir-i muntazama*, the reformed regular army of the Sultan, from Salonika under the control of Iskender Pasha.<sup>16</sup> Employing troops to launch a fierce assault against the social bandits was one of the common methods, which was applied by the Porte extensively to re-establish social order when its

authority was tested and even defied by the bandits. This expected measure was implemented when dozens of troops were sent to Debar with the approval of Sultan Mahmud II. Conversely, the resisting social bandits changed the reason for their uprising in the face of the approaching formidable and decisive Ottoman army. The bandits' verdict demonstrated a rationalized and obligatory change in their behaviors when considering the bandits' impotence against one of the most powerful regular army factions of the Ottoman Empire. This was clear in their declaration: "We did not rebel to make a war; our resistance is based on religious purposes."<sup>17</sup> After this implicit submission, the troops of Ismet Pasha and the governor Mahmud Hamdi Pasha sealed the fate of Debar by sustaining the safety of town under the rule of Porte in a short period of time.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the social bandits did not vanish in the region in that year. The command of Sultan's *hatt-i sharif* was proof of this concern. The *hatt-i sharif* uttered the urgent need to consign soldiers to Monastir, which was one of the most significant socio-political centers of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, to repress a recently erupted resistance. The social bandits of Shkodra were destroyed severely in the autumn of 1835.<sup>19</sup> After a few years of this suppression, the social bandits of Debar and Shkodra induced their activities; however, many of them perished due to the intensified military operations of the Porte in the winter of 1839.<sup>20</sup>

The risks to the territorial integrity of the state posed by these attacks produced potential scenarios that could be seen only during the great wars with enormous social and political effects. The letter sent from the periphery to the center demystifies this fact by stating that if the bandits of Shikora were brought under control, the persistence of social order in all of Albania could have been attained and the submission of subjects to the Sultan's decrees could have been guaranteed.<sup>21</sup> Regardless, the Porte mostly limited the scope of counter policies against the bandits by imposing mostly military measures. The Porte did not attempt the implementation of radical land reforms to ameliorate the great concerns of peasants in the villages. When steps were

taken to resolve the concerns of local misrule, the common solution was to appoint the governor to a punishment post. Thus, the violent and repressive response of the Empire against the rebellious attempts was followed by a demand to reappoint a new mütesellim to the towns, as occurred in the case of the Debar resistance.<sup>22</sup>

The social bandit examples presented above aimed to undermine the ruling authority because of the dissents that shaped the identity of resisting bandits through deep social problems of the region including corruption, social injustice, public issues, and tax governance. For this reason, they resisted and attacked the state officials and local nobles. Furthermore, these social bandit groups gained a more formidable character with the ethnic and religious sentiments, which intensified the level and number of uprisings particularly after the second half of the nineteenth century until the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Bulgarians, Serbs, Montenegrins, Greeks, Macedonians, Albanians, and Bosnians organized numerous attacks in the Balkans against the Ottoman authority with the help of bandits to gain independence from the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, the opportunist bandits targeted both the state forces and civilians without distinguishing ethnic or religious identities of their victims. The opportunist bandits presented in the next section show that their attacks increased the already-fragile public unsafety in the region and fostered public panic that led to the creation of imagined bandits.

### **OPPORTUNIST AND IMAGINED BANDITS: PUBLIC PANIC IN THE EVERYDAY LIFE**

Opportunist bandits do not consider ethnic or religious identity of their victims when they attack them. For example, Sheikh Feyzulah Efendi from the Rufai Tarikat, which was a respected Sufi sect in the region founded by Ahmed Ar Rifa'i, was in despair due to the attacks of the opportunist bandits. His house in Çatalca was looted and despoiled in 1852.<sup>23</sup> The complaints of

the important local elites sent the central government into a state of agitation. After the dramatic case of Sheikh Feyzulah Efendi, the Porte sent a letter to the local officials of Çatalca. However, the Porte was not able to constitute a sea change in the power dynamics of provinces to guarantee public safety and prevent such attacks. The letter of the Porte only ordered to be more heedful in such cases in the Sanjak of Tirhala.<sup>24</sup> The activities of the opportunist bandits continued in the Eastern Bulgaria through several incidents and attacks. For instance, violence and social upheaval afflicted Razgrad<sup>25</sup> and Sozopol.<sup>26 27</sup> In 1856, the opportunist bandits raided a flat of a family in Gabrova, in central Bulgaria.<sup>28</sup> Another group of opportunist bandit extorted the goods of Hüseyin who was a customs official of Durrës<sup>29</sup> port in 1856.<sup>30</sup> In the 1850s, the Bulgarian-origin opportunist bandits were notorious in the region.

The opportunist bandits were in urgent need of material sources to survive so looting and robbing were the most employed practices. For example, a year after the Durrës incident, Revil, a Jewish subject became the victim of opportunist bandits. His house in Toyran in Salonika was robbed. The Porte immediately started an investigation to punish the members of this bandit group.<sup>31</sup> The increasing number of investigations was the main indicator of the challenges that the Porte attempted to overcome to maintain public safety in everyday life. The Porte recommended more caution in such incidents. Regardless, in many cases, the Porte could not convict the robbers; however, there were some occasions in which the Porte was able to return the stolen goods of victims. For example, the students registered in religious institutions to educate the future religious class of the Empire became victims of the bandits, but many of these victims were fortunate enough to have their goods returned. Abdullah Efendi and his friends were part of this fortunate group when several bandits on their way to Şumnu attacked them.<sup>32</sup> The Ottoman government gave back the stolen goods and their money after chasing the opportunist bandit group and arresting them.<sup>33</sup>

The Serbian opportunist bandits crossed into the Ottoman Empire from the Principality of Serbia and targeted the Serbian peasants in the border villages and towns. Brichte Todosve from Nova Varoš was one of these peasants. First, the bandits beat him ferociously, seized his 36 goats, and brought them to Serbia in 1874. Brichte was not the only victim; his neighbors, Baiik and Ispeeyo, were also the targets of the bandits. Their eight horses and nine bulls ended up in the hands of the same bandit group.<sup>34</sup> These attacks created fundamental fragilities in social life, so much so that a home of a peasant would be the target of an opportunist bandit in the dark silence of dawn. For instance, the Serbian bandits raided the house of Vasilya from Macik village of Nova Varoš in the very early morning. The bandit members beat him savagely and shot his wife in front of him. They also seized a large portion of the goods, cattle, and money of the other residents in the village. The Christian subjects tragically suffered from the attacks of their co-religious bandit groups. Around 300 opportunist bandits in Nova Varoš entered numerous villages and engaged in an intense, small war with the military forces of the Ottoman governance. Ottoman rulers opened the blocked roads and sustained public security in the region at a high cost; however, the Porte could not eliminate the opportunist bandits permanently in the region. A few Serbian bandits lost their lives in the armed conflicts that occurred between the Serbian bandits and the Ottoman forces, whereas the others managed to flee.<sup>35</sup> The next year, different opportunist bandits attacked<sup>36</sup> different locations in Northern Bulgaria, particularly in Svishtov,<sup>37</sup> Pleven,<sup>38</sup> Lovech,<sup>39</sup> and Sevlievo.<sup>40</sup>

The opportunist bandits, who resided in the recently founded Greek State, crossed into the Ottoman border for ransom, extortion, and homicide. Indeed, these activities became chronic and normalized criminal occurrences starting from the 1850s within the Ottoman and Greek border.<sup>41</sup> A non-Muslim subject, who was working in the *chiflik* of Erbeyli, was kidnapped and taken to the rugged and remote mountains of Greece. He was robbed and left hopeless. Nothing remained

except to seek justice, requesting the arrest of the opportunist bandits upon his return to Avrethisar, the center of Kilkis, which is about 31 miles away from Salonika. The Porte opened an immediate inquiry to identify the offenders and compensated the victimized man financially.<sup>42</sup> The ransom was the leitmotiv in kidnapping cases. Nevertheless, paying the ransom did not always guarantee the freedom of victims. A year later from the robbery, a kidnapped person from the village of Cuma<sup>43</sup> was found dead even though the ransom was paid to the opportunist bandits.<sup>44</sup> Locals were not only the victims of opportunist bandits, the Greek state also produced assertions that bandit members, who committed crimes in Greece, were under the protection of Ottoman officials. The security forces of the customs house in Greece asserted that Kaspasta, who was the head of his own bandit, used the office of the Ottoman officials as a shelter. The Porte first opened an inquiry; however, after this verdict, the Porte perceived the claim as a distorted truth so decided not to punish any officials.<sup>45</sup>

There are many ways to define the heterogeneous identity of the bandits. It is a sad truth that one of these paths made them the victims of injustice, inequality, poverty and all forms of violence deployed against them, as shown in the previous section through the examples of social bandits. On the other hand, other accounts rendered different bandits the prominent figures of aggression, roughness, intimidation, and sometimes oppression. The incidents and crimes committed against the innocent people particularly by the opportunist bandits leveraged public panic, which also created the praised and cursed stories about the bandits at the same time. This dilemma stimulated the combination of myth and reality about them in the same story who became the complex and yet mostly unresolved figures of rural landscape. The perplexing social status of the bandits resulted in the spread of rumors about them and deteriorated the already fragile situation of the community life.

The rumors and claims constituted treacherous conditions and challenged the realms of

public safety and state authority. One of these examples occurred when rumors spread regarding the arrival of the bandits of Sfakia from Crete to the islands of the southern Aegean Sea in 1858.<sup>46</sup> A considerable amount of information was disseminated swiftly between different communities and villages concerning the approaching threat of bandits. However, many of those claims were in vain, erroneous, or not verified, as had happened in the case of the bandits from Sfakia. A few months after this incident, the zaptiehs of Salonica were blamed for being the former bandit members. The Porte investigated the case and found the claim to be null and void.<sup>47</sup> After three years, similar rumors circulated in the neighbor settlements, indicating that the bandits shook Skopje and the villages close to the town. However, again the Ottoman officials declared the rumor to be untrue.<sup>48</sup> These allegations were understandable, if not easily discernible at the first glance, because producing reactions for self-defense against a serious threat is a collective and rationalized behavior when the state authority is unable to eliminate that threat.

Angelov et. al. (2013) put forth the notion that different geographical patterns are shaped by material and immaterial factors. For example, he distinguished that “material geographies (amenable to quantitative and mathematical methodologies), imagined or mental geographies (that invite discursive and ideological analysis), and the harder to define category of ‘lived space’ that is the hybrid product of social, intellectual, and bodily experiences” (Angelov et. al. 2013: 12-13). The imagined bandits, in this context, reflected the outcry of local people who needed the help of imperial power to guarantee the safety of living periphery. This outcry resonates both in the material and imagined geographies. As Withers (2009: 650) mentioned space “is not simply a location or local, but site of wider networks” in which the meaning of subaltern is contested. The reaction of community in the production of imagined bandits explicates the relationship in the nexus of space-society-politics.

In the Ottoman Empire, “the authority relations flow from the central state to the local elites and from them to the local populations” (Barkey 2008: 10). Yet this hierarchical flow of authoritative relations does not signify the flow of power relations because the imagined bandits show that local populations were not passive segments of authority-power nexus in the spatial dynamic of social control. In this context, Tilly (1977) criticizes the Durkheimian approach of social control. Different from Durkheim, Tilly perceives real contenders as active agencies who strive for their interests and power. The creation of imagined bandit by the local population is a process to strive for their interests and gain empowerment thereof. Tilly (1977: 2) comes to the conclusion that “collective action brings benefits, in the form of collective goods.” The dissent created by social and imagined bandits, as a result, contribute to the creation of collective action by creating imagined bandits in the conundrum of public panic. Thus, the imagined bandits signify the challenge of living under unsafe conditions on the one hand and the need of attaining public safety with the intervention of state authority on the other. The need for public safety by local populations creates venues to attain protection as a form of collective goods. The in-group’s formulation of an imagined place consists of its own ideals and values that target the eradication of undesired elements from the territory (Egbert et al. 2016). The imagined bandits demonstrate the need of an imagined territory in which social control of that territory is sustained by state authority through cleansing unwanted bandit groups.

The increasing level of public panic in everyday life due to the attacks of the social bandits and opportunist bandits led to the creation of imagined bandits. The spatial conditions of dissent played a role in the creation of social bandits and the spatial opportunities of public unsafety consolidated the authority of opportunist bandits. The unconfirmed rumors and claims prevailed and shaped the local public culture through which the imagined bandits spread fear and fostered public panic in the villages and towns. Thus, the spatial imaginations of public panic

brought imagined bandits to the fore as the key concept in reflecting both the hopelessness of community and their collective fear. The loss of social order in some areas or the weakness of state authority in the social control of territories contributed to the process of the emergence of imagined bandits. On the other hand, the Ottoman Empire sent armies to the villages and towns when local communities drafted letters and asked for the direct intervention of the central government in Istanbul. In doing so, the local community became active agencies by shaping the social control of territories. Therefore, the local community structured power relations from bottom-to-top in the social control of territories and the imagined bandits were one of clearest examples of this horizontal relationship. Violence of the bandits against the civilians and innocents was the determining force behind the imagined bandits. Furthermore, the weakened state power increased the significance of these threats and risks posed by the social bandits and opportunist bandits. The state officials struggled to overcome the threat of bandits as they were under the influence of local assertions and claims. All these struggles implied that they strove for an imagined figure. Public unsafety, thus, became perilous and common in the everyday life and played a stimulating role in the consolidation of imagined bandits.

## **CONCLUSION**

Challenging the overgeneralization imposed by the social banditry concept, the present study introduced two main banditry forms—opportunist bandits and the imagined bandits and evaluated them through spatial factors. The social bandits brought great concerns of the communities into the social, political, and cultural realms of rural life that shaped the identities of bandits as well. The spatial conditions of dissent contributed to their empowerment as leading local figures. In contrast, the opportunist bandits targeted the civilians through committing heinous crimes without any concerns about the ethnic or religious identities of their victims. Different from the

social bandits, the survival needs and the struggle to consolidate their local authority through notorious violent attacks are the main characteristics of the opportunist bandits. The attacks of the opportunist bandits exacerbated violence and public panic while crystallizing the state's inability to guarantee public safety and overcome the socio-political tumult in rural life. The spatial opportunities of public unsafety, therefore, were the main determinants in the emergence of opportunist bandits. The tamed rural towns witnessed the seeds of violence sown by bandits, rebels, and overreactions of the local Ottoman rulers to sustain reconciliation and compliance.

Crime and public panic created particularly by the opportunist bandits, and the incapacity and over-reaction of state authority, resulted in many rumors in the local community. The extensive and unverified claims about the bandits constituted a clear demand by the local and civilian community. That demand conveyed the need of protection by the state or a mightier force in the face of approaching pernicious risks. The imagined bandits, therefore, were the outcomes of uncontrolled public panic due to the lack of fundamental public safety in the rural habitus. The spatial imaginations of public panic played a greater role in the creation of imagined bandits. After the Ottoman officials' investigation, the Porte either denied or unconfirmed many of the assertions about the approaching bandit danger. However, uncovering the rumors completely in such cases was not an easy task because the local bureaucrats in the periphery did not always apply the rules and obligations dictated by the Porte. This was the reason that social control of territories did not follow solely a top-to-bottom route, but a bottom-to-top route also shaped the conditions in the social control of territories as we learn from the example of imagined bandits. The allegations between oppressive elites and solid corruption networks among the local Ottoman officials created dissent and disappointment among the central government officials of the Porte. The dependence of the Porte on the secret information leaked by the notoriously unfaithful bureaucrats in the periphery rendered the Porte's authority more fragile. There was a

widespread belief that many zaptiehs were also the members of bandit groups, as noted in the cases. The gap between the local authority and the central control mechanism of the state over the periphery created the required habitus to distort the truth by the local Ottoman officials as well. All these factors made the social control of territories both challenging and a vital reason of intervention of the state authority.

The need to extend the definition of social bandit is underscored in this study with the inclusion of political and cultural concerns to explicate the bandits in the context of spatial factors. In addition, the two bandit forms, the opportunist and imagined bandits, derived from the examination of various cases through considering the determining factors in the classification process. Drawing major conclusions about the bandits is a detrimental attempt to conceive the dynamic, multifaceted, and contentious social structure from which the bandits emerge. The three bandit forms presented in this study explain an important portion of bewildering socio-political panorama of rural life in the Ottoman Balkans during the Tanzimat era and challenges endured regarding the social control of territories. In this context, future studies about the bandits and social agencies may benefit from embracing a multi-layered method and using micro perspectives in the detection of nuances and complex relationships of the spatial factors that shape social, political, and cultural life. In doing so, we may develop novel concepts to illuminate the challenging conditions of public panic, the reaction of people, and the response of state authority.

## **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> The Sublime Porte signifies *Bâb-ı Âli*, which literally means the high gate and used as a metonym for the central Ottoman government in Istanbul.

<sup>2</sup> BOA hereafter.

<sup>3</sup> The Edict of 1856 in the era of Abdülmecid I was a progressive document based on the equality principle to create Ottomanism as an umbrella and inclusive term so much so that *vatandaş*, fellow-citizen, was used first-time in the Edict while referring to the Ottoman subjects. The fundamental rights of the non-Muslims were recognised and the Edict also enforced the conscription of non-Muslims into the army. From this point of view, it minimised, at least in principle, the social and legal differences among different religious communities to strengthen the cultural fabrics of Ottomanism.

<sup>4</sup> BAO. MVL. 911/32, 19 Receb 1274 – 5 March 1858.

<sup>5</sup> *Reaya* traditionally means the tax-paying subjects, but in the nineteenth century there was a common tendency to use the term for the non-Muslim subjects. *Tebaa*, the entire Ottoman subjects, also remained in practice in the era of Ottomanism that aimed to harmonise different communities within the melting pot of Ottoman identity.

<sup>6</sup> BOA. C.DH. 30/1460, 29 Z.Hicce 1255 – 4 March 1840. The system of petition widened the scope justice and strengthened the relationship between the Sultan and his subjects. For more information about the role of petition see Yuval Ben-Bassat, *Petitioning the Sultan: Protests and Justice in Late Ottoman Palestine*. (London: I.B Tauris), 182.

<sup>7</sup> Sliven present name

<sup>8</sup> BOA. A.MKT.UM. 238/99, 5 Şevval 1272 - 9 June 1856.

<sup>9</sup> BOA. A.MKT.UM. 413/46, 19 Z.hicce 1276 – 8 July 1860.

<sup>10</sup> BOA. A.MKT.UM. 38/95, 8 Muharrem 1267 – 13 November 1850.

<sup>11</sup> BOA. A.MKT.UM. 296/68, 19 R.Ahir 1274 – 7 December 1857

<sup>12</sup> BOA. HAT 408/21251 F, 13 Z.hicce 1254 – 27 February 1839.

- <sup>13</sup> BOA. HAT 405/21176 B, 25 Ramadan 1251- 14 January 1836 and HAT 405- 21176 A, 27 Ramadan 1251 – 16 January 1836.
- <sup>14</sup> BOA. HAT 414/2146, 29 Zilhicce 1251 – 16 April 1836.
- <sup>15</sup> Bitola present name.
- <sup>16</sup> BOA. HAT 408/21246 O, 19 R.Ahir 1251 – 14 August 1835.
- <sup>17</sup> BOA. HAT 408/21246 H, 17 R.ahir 1251 – 12 August 1835.
- <sup>18</sup> BOA. HAT 408/21246 A, 21 Receb 1251 – 12 November 1835 and HAT 408 21246 B, 21 R.Ahir 1251 – 16 August 1835.
- <sup>19</sup> BOA. HAT 422/21739 C, 25 C.ahir 1251 – 18 October 1835.
- <sup>20</sup> BOA. HAT 413/21454 B, 29 Z.hicce 1254 – 15 March 1839.
- <sup>21</sup> BOA. HAT 413/21455 N, 26 Safer 1251 – 23 June 1835.
- <sup>22</sup> BOA. HAT 408/21251 F, 13 Z.hicce 1254 – 27 February 1839.
- <sup>23</sup> BOA. A.MKT.MHM. 755-88. 2 Ramadan 1268-20 *June 1852*.
- <sup>24</sup> BOA. A.MKT.MHM. 756-31. 2 Ramadan 1269 - 9 June 1853.
- <sup>25</sup> Hezargrad in Ottoman Turkish.
- <sup>26</sup> BOA. Ahyolu in Ottoman Turkish.
- <sup>27</sup> BOA. A.MKT.UM. 237/98, 22 Ramadan 1272 – 27 May 1856.  
BOA. A.MKT.UM. 238/40. 27 Ramadan 1272 – 1 June 1856.
- <sup>28</sup> BOA. A.MKT.UM. 232-84. 9 Şevval 1272 – 13 June 1856.
- <sup>29</sup> Dıraç in Ottoman Turkish.
- <sup>30</sup> BOA. A.MKT.UM. 241-29 23 Şevval 1272 – 27 June 1856.
- <sup>31</sup> BOA. HR.MKT. 205/24, 13 Muharrem 1274 – 3 September 1857.
- <sup>32</sup> The present name is Shumen, a town in the region of Deliorman, the north-eastern part of Bulgaria.
- <sup>33</sup> BOA. A.MKT.UM. 258/12, 22 Safer 1273 – 22 February 1856.
- <sup>34</sup> BOA. HR. SYS. 250/1-221, 29 Ramadan 1291 – 9 November 1874.

- <sup>35</sup> BOA. HR.SYS. 250-1/96, 8 R.evvel 1292 – 14 April 1875.
- <sup>36</sup> BOA. A.MKT.UM. 242-85. 5 Z.kade 1272 – 8 July 1876.
- <sup>37</sup> Zıştovi in Ottoman Turkish.
- <sup>38</sup> Plevne in Ottoman Turkish.
- <sup>39</sup> Northern Lofça in Ottoman Turkish.
- <sup>40</sup> Selvi in Ottoman Turkish.
- <sup>41</sup> BOA. A.MKT.UM. 57/72, 27 C.evvel 1267 – 30 March 1851.
- <sup>42</sup> BOA. A.MKT.UM. 313/4, 11 Ramadan 1274 – 25 April 1858.
- <sup>43</sup> The village is located in the Blagoevgrad Province in Southern Bulgaria.
- <sup>44</sup> BOA. A.MKT.UM. 385/22, 1 C.ahir 1276 – 26 December 1859.
- <sup>45</sup> BOA. HR.MKT. 317/2, 9 C.Ahir 1276 – 3 January 1860.
- <sup>46</sup> BOA. A.MKT.UM. 317/4, 12 Z.kade 1274 – 24 June 1858.
- <sup>47</sup> BOA. A.MKT.UM. 322/94, 28 Muharrem 1275 – 7 September 1858.
- <sup>48</sup> BOA. A.MKT.UM. 487/24, 19 Muharrem 1278 – 27 July 1861.

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