

Resurrecting *Homo Ottomanicus*: The Constants and Variables of Ottoman Identity

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Homo Ottomanicus'u Yeniden Canlandırma: Osmanlı Kimliğinin Sabitleri ve Değişkenleri

Öz ■ “Osmanlı kimdir” sorusuna hâlihazırda birçok ilginç cevap verilmiş olsa da, söz konusu cevaplar, çoğunlukla Osmanlı toplumunun renkli doğasını yansıtmakla yetinmekte ve dolayısıyla aslında soyut bir kavram olan Osmanlı kimliği mefhumunu anlamamızı zorlaştırmaktadır. Bu makalede özcü yaklaşımlardan sakınılarak *homo ottomanicus*'u elle tutulur bir şekilde tanımlayabilmemize yarayacak somut kıstaslar tespit edilmeye çalışılmıştır. Öncelikle Osmanlı toplumu, birbirinden çeşitli sınırlarla ayrılmış fertlerin ayrı ayrı bir ögesini teşkil ettiği bir matris gibi düşünülmüştür. Daha sonra, seçilmiş bir vakanın teşrih edilmesinden yola çıkılarak, imparatorluk tebaasından herhangi bir ferdin kimliğinin, söz konusu matriste işgal ettiği yere göre şekillendiği önerilmiştir. Bunun yanında, söz konusu sınırlardan sadece mali ve hukuki olanların daha katı ve nispeten daha fazla somutlaştırılabildiği önerilmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, kimlik, yabancılar, vergiler, hukuki statü

In a thought-provoking article on writing biographies for the pre-modern Middle East, a prominent scholar has observed that “all our recent investigations into the eighteenth and early nineteenth century point to the survival of “Ottomanism” as long as it remained studiously undefined, ‘a principled forgetfulness’ that thinly veiled its arbitrariness.”¹ It is true that the harder one tries to identify what constitutes an Ottoman prior to the nineteenth century, the more elusive the

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1 Virginia Aksan, “The Question of Writing Pre-modern Biographies of the Middle”, *Auto/Biography and the Construction of Identity and Community in the Middle East* ed. Mary Ann Fay (New York: Palgrave 2001), 191-200, esp. 195.

Ottomans seem to become. At the same time, the question of “who is an Ottoman” has already yielded some very interesting results. In search of *homo ottomanicus*, several colleagues, like early modern taxonomists, have brought forward a wide variety of colorful specimens. For example, in the volume edited by Meropi Anastasiadou and Bernard Heyberger alone we find descriptions of the following candidates: a Christian notable from Ohrid; a Muslim sheikh from Bitola; a Greek priest from Serres; a Kurdish emir; and two members of two Greek bourgeois families, one from Alexandria, the other from the central Peloponnese.² These case studies not only originate from various corners of the Ottoman Empire, they also cover an extended period of time, ranging from the seventeenth until the early twentieth century. Collecting specimens was part and parcel of what was known as “natural history” during the Enlightenment, and natural historians at the time struggled with the same question as Ottoman historians today: each specimen seems worth collecting in its own right, but how does the collection further our understanding of the species?

If we are going to compare any number of individual candidates, then at least there needs to be some sort of agreement on the basic points of comparison. This article is intended as an attempt to explore systematically whether we can identify any constants and variables for our discussion about “Ottoman identity”. Dissection was part and parcel of the early modern exploration of the natural environment, so in the course of this exercise we cannot avoid getting our hands dirty. In order to study the anatomy of *homo ottomanicus*, like the British resurrectionists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we therefore need to disinter at least one corpse.

Anatomizing homo ottomanicus

The single specimen I propose to dissect was a man whose lifetime spanned the second half of the eighteenth century, and the first quarter of the nineteenth. He was born in Aleppo in 1172 of the *hijrī* calendar (i.e. 1758 C.E.), and after several years of on-the-job training, he followed in his father’s professional footsteps. Our anonymous corpse, whose name will be revealed below, spoke Arabic, Turkish, and a few other languages. This was vital in his line of work, which was connected with Aleppo’s long-distance trade. It is clear that he was well-connected in the city, and that he was intimately familiar with the practice of Islamic law, but he was not a Muslim. Which of these aspects of our John Doe’s

2 Meropi Anastasiadou and Bernard Heyberger, eds., *Figures anonymes, figures d’élite: Pour une anatomie de l’Homo ottomanicus* (Istanbul: Isis 1999).

life may have been essential to his identity, and which were secondary? The fact that we have so little information to work with should not deter us, because this is the case for the vast majority of people living in the Ottoman Empire. So now I suggest that we attempt to weigh the aforementioned characteristics from an Ottoman perspective.

First of all, it seems important to distinguish identity as a personal matter from group identity. When we examine Ottoman individuals, we need to establish which elements of her/his (presumed) identity might have been personal, and which were connected with the most abstract group level, that of “Ottoman belonging”. It is the personal elements I propose to label ‘variables’ and the “Ottoman” elements I suggest we call ‘constants’.

Not each and every aspect of John Doe’s life needs to be examined here in equal detail, because several are easily recognizable as variables. For example, knowledge of Islamic law cannot possibly have been very important for the identity formation of *homo ottomanicus*. The same is true for his connections with local elites, which certainly tell us something about this individual, but very little about the concept of Ottomanism *avant la lettre* which we are trying to define. Similarly an individual’s profession undoubtedly contributed to his or her personal identity, and in many cases it also linked them to society in general and to the state in particular. The guilds, of course, are a prime example of such a professional context, which must have had a significant influence on the identity of its members. However, not all professions were organized in this way, and it is not clear whether having a job to begin with should be a defining element of “Ottoman identity”. Despite the unquestionable significance of the group with regard to professions, I propose that we consider whatever individual Ottomans did for a living a private matter.

The same is true for one’s place of residence, i.e. an urban or a rural environment. In principle, Ottoman identity should accommodate both habitats, and all other possibilities not covered by them. Having said this, it might be worth reflecting on the similarities brought to light by the practitioners of peasant studies between the living conditions of rural communities all over the world. The lives of Ottoman peasants may have been more similar to those of Mexican peasants, for example, than of Ottoman city slickers. I am not saying that we should leave peasants out of the equation altogether – on the contrary, but if we want to keep them in, it means that our definition of Ottoman identity will need to be based on case studies of farmers too. This is easier said than done, of course, because the sources do not necessarily cooperate, but a discussion based on city dwellers alone would result in a too one-sided picture of *homo ottomanicus*.

Another obvious variable is the time in which our candidate lived. Some have equated the archetypal Ottoman with “the Ottoman citizen”, which implicitly limits the discussion to the Tanzimat, because that is when the concept of citizenship became relevant for the Ottomans.³ I disagree with this; after all, the whole Ghazi debate about the early Ottomans also revolves around issues of identity. In that context the question is whether or not being a warrior of the faith was a defining element for the founders of the dynasty. Why then, should we disregard the period between 1300 and the 1830s? In other words, the times undoubtedly influenced the identity of individual Ottomans, and even the identity of “the” Ottoman, but I don’t think he or she lived in any particular period.

As for the color of our specimen’s skin, he would most probably have been described scientifically as “Caucasian”, a description which, at that time, included West Africa and did not necessarily say anything about skin tone. Although this is conveniently vague, the importance of race for the concept of the archetypal Ottoman must be addressed more concretely. There were also black Ottomans, after all, not only the powerful chief eunuchs in Istanbul, but also the black fortune-tellers of Aleppo, who largely remain anonymous because they seldom appear in the sources. On this point demographics implicitly enter the discussion; because they almost certainly formed a minority in the Ottoman Empire, black people can certainly be regarded as Ottomans, but it seems far-fetched to claim that *homo ottomanicus* was black by definition. Race, too, therefore must be considered a variable, rather than a constant.

So far I have tried consistently to say “he or she” whenever this seemed appropriate. It is useful therefore also explicitly to address the importance of gender for an Ottoman identity. It is tempting to think that the state organization was dominated by men, and that, from a fiscal point of view, women were less important. Does this mean that the quintessential Ottoman is more likely to be a male rather than female? I do not think so. The state was certainly not indifferent to its female subjects, be they Muslims or non-Muslims. If the state had not cared at all, Ottoman women would have been able to leave the country, for example, and settle abroad. This was not the case, however, not even for non-Muslim women married to foreigners. The reason was not exclusively biological in the sense that the Ottoman government had to hold on to its female subjects as the mothers of future generations of Ottomans. Ottoman subjects, men and women, were also part of larger structures – families, fiscal units, religious communities, etc. – which formed the fabric of society; if individuals had the freedom to leave

³ Ursinus’ article in *Ibid.*

these structures, then that undermined society as a whole.⁴ The main point of this part of the discussion is that in gender we have found yet another variable for the construction of Ottoman identity.

In the dissection of our John Doe, we have cut through quite a bit of soft tissue, and all we have discovered is a bunch of variables: profession, habitat, even gender. Each was important for the identity formation of individual Ottomans, but not for any “species” we could call Ottoman. In search of something firmer, let’s look more closely at the criterion of languages. Judging by the published case studies I have read, the candidates spoke Arabic, Greek, Turkish, Kurdish, or Serbian – or any combination of these tongues. We should of course add Armenian and Hebrew, and probably a few more languages. Is any one of these more important than the others? Probably not, but the linguistic mosaic of the eastern Mediterranean does seem to be particularly Ottoman. I therefore suggest that *homo ottomanicus* had to be a native speaker of at least one of the languages which were indigenous to the Ottoman Empire. This might lead to discussions about whether or not Italian, for example, counts as an “indigenous” language. For the present purpose the most important thing is that we seem to have found our first constant.

The same logic could be applied to another criterion; the fact that our anonymous specimen was a non-Muslim. It seems obvious that this does not disqualify him as a potential archetypal Ottoman. Yes, there were differences between the legal status of Muslims and non-Muslims. In theory they ceased to exist after the promulgation of the Gülhane Edict of 1839 made all Ottomans equal before the law, but in practice these differences undoubtedly persisted afterwards. Again, for individual Ottomans it probably mattered a great deal that they were part of a particular community, be it the Jewish millet in Palestine or the *eşraf* faction formed by the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad in Aleppo. Nevertheless, I believe that these differences are less important than the common administrative framework of which they were a part. So instead of identifying the Ottoman with any particular officially recognized group in society, I would argue that being part of (at least) one of these groups is an essential element of Ottoman identity.

If language and affiliation can be considered part of the skeleton of *homo*

4 See, for example, the case of Mrs. Pentlow, the Greek widow of an English merchant in seventeenth-century Izmir, described by Merlijn Olton, “Towards Classifying Avantias: A Study of Two Cases involving the English and Dutch Nations in Seventeenth-Century Izmir,” in *Friends and Rivals in the East: Studies in Anglo-Dutch Relations in the Levant from the Seventeenth to the Early Nineteenth Century*, eds., Alastair Hamilton, et al., (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 159-186, esp. 174-185.

ottomanicus, the question of birth place was probably the back bone. On 6 Shawwal 1285/19 January 1869, the Ottoman government passed the law on the Ottoman nationality. In particular the first and last of its nine articles are worth remembering here. The first article states that “every individual born from an Ottoman father and an Ottoman mother, or solely from an Ottoman father, is an Ottoman subject.” The ninth article states that “every individual living in Ottoman territory is considered an Ottoman subject and treated accordingly unless his status as a foreigner is duly established.” These clauses are not much different from how most Western countries defined their subjects, and it is easy to assume that this particular law, like many other legal reforms of the Tanzimat, was the product of Westernization.⁵ Two unconnected sets of evidence suggest that this was not the case. The first concerns the way foreigners were described in some Ottoman sources. In particular I am referring to the residence permits issued to members of the Dutch community in Istanbul in the early decades of the eighteenth century. We know that such permits already existed much earlier, because in a recent article Vera Constantini them for late sixteenth-century Cyprus. The phrase she found in the Venetian sources was *fare sigiletto et cogetto*.⁶ While we know little details about this procedure, two legal documents, *sicills* and *hüccets*, thus are mentioned explicitly. By the beginning of the eighteenth century it was possible to have a document drawn up in Italian at an embassy and to submit it to the Ottoman chancery for a kind of visa. These visas are very short, and the only thing they confirm explicitly is that the person described in the document was “originally” from Holland. The Arabic *asl*, literally “root”, is generally used. Documents with the same wording were issued to Dutchmen who, back in Amsterdam, were generally called “Portuguese Jews”. From what follows it should become clear that the roots referred to by the Ottoman chancery actually constitute birth right.

Occasionally, these documents were also applied for by people for whom they were not intended, like Greek merchants from Izmir who had settled in Amsterdam. Once they had obtained citizenship there, they asked to be recognized as Dutch merchants by the Dutch trade authorities. Legally, it was difficult for the

5 J.H. Kramers, *Strafrechtspraak over Nederlanders in Turkije* [Criminal Law regarding Dutchmen in Turkey] (Amsterdam, 1915), Appendix C, 222-223: ‘Note verbale circulaire’ issued by the Porte to all foreign legations in Istanbul on 8 February 1869 (in French).

6 Vera Constantini, “Venetian Trade and the Boundaries of Legality in Early Modern Ottoman Cyprus,” in *Merchants in the Ottoman Empire* eds. Suraiya Faroqhi and Gilles-Veinstein, (Louvain: Peeters, 2008), 35-46, esp. 40.

Dutch government to deny such requests, with the somewhat strange result that, for example, a man called Joannis Pringos from Zagora in Thessaly, now called himself Johannes Brink and styled himself a Dutchman. This was all fine and well as long as Pringos/Brink remained in Europe, but as soon as he set foot on Ottoman soil the Turkish government considered him an Ottoman again. This happened in 1776, when Pringos applied for a document from the Dutch embassy in Istanbul, which would proclaim him a Dutchman by birth. The embassy refused, because granting the request would undoubtedly have resulted in a dispute with the Porte. The Ottoman government, the ambassador explained, “granting such request [for visa] on good faith, if I would vouch for Brink as a true Dutchman by birth”, but “such a document would be of no use to him, as soon as the [Ottoman] government discovers and recognizes that he was the same [man] who was born in Zagora.”⁷ In the end a very Ottoman solution was found; Pringos’ business partner in Istanbul, a man called Dimitri Fronimo, was a Dutch protégé, and he was allowed to register two servants under his *berât*.⁸ The embassy thus registered Pringos as Fronimo’s servant, and applied for a *yol emri*, precisely the type of document the Ottoman government was using more and more to monitor the movements of merchants like Fronimo and Pringos.⁹ The case of the Greeks of Amsterdam supports the view that the concept of “right of birth” was a decisive identity signifier, at least from the state’s point of view.

Does this mean that our man, who was born and raised in Aleppo, might indeed have belonged to the *genus of homo ottomanicus*? Before I answer this question, it is time to reveal the identity of our corpse. In the Ottoman sources – in one tax document and a single chronicle to be precise¹⁰ – he is described as “signior

7 Chargé d’affaires Tor to Fagel, 4 November 1776 [in Dutch], in J.G. Nanninga, *Bronnen tot de Geschiedenis van den Levantschen Handel: Vierde deel: 1765-1826. Eerste stuk* [Sources for the History of the Dutch Levant Trade: Part 4: 1765-1826. First Section] (The Hague, 1964), 233.

8 Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Istanbul (BOA), Ecnebi Defteri (A.DVN.DVE) 22/1 (Felemenk), page 406, entry 1760, dated 17 Cumādā I 1187/6 August 1773.

9 M.H. van den Boogert, “Ottoman Greek in the Dutch Levant Trade: Collective Strategy and Individual Practice (c. 1750-1821),” in *The Ottomans and Trade* eds. Ebru Boyar and Kate Fleet, (Rome: l’Istituto per l’Oriente 2006) [= *Oriente Moderno* XXV (LXXXVI), n.s. 1-2006], 129-147, esp. 133. In Istanbul, separate registers were kept for *yol emris* issued to *berâtlis* in the second half of the eighteenth century, e.g. BOA, A.DVN.DVE 51.

10 Dutch National Archives, The Hague, Legation Archives Turkey, file 1266: Document in Arabic issued by Hasan Efendi *al-kharrājjī* on 19 Ramadan 1198/6 August 1784 at the request of van Maseijk, whose nickname Jacky is mentioned. Cf. ‘Abbūd, *Al-Murtād fī ta’rikh Halab wa-Baghdād*, page 53 (line 8): “al-sinyūr Jākī” (in the preceding lines

Jacky”, because Jacky was the nickname of Jan van Maseijk, the son of Nicolaas van Maseijk and his English wife, Elizabeth. He was born in Aleppo on Christmas Day 1758, and baptized there on 16 September 1759.¹¹ Nicolaas van Maseijk was the Dutch consul at the time, and after his death, on 28 February 1784, Jan succeeded him. He spoke several European languages, as well as Arabic, Turkish, Armenian, and Hebrew. Although his Dutch was perfectly fluent too, he may never have set foot in the Netherlands, because he seems to have spent his entire life in Syria, travelling only to Istanbul for business, and possibly to Jerusalem as a tourist. While there are no paintings of him, it is highly likely that he wore the local dress for most of his life, although on official occasions he must have changed to European clothing. He was a respected figure in Aleppo, with excellent connections in government circles. When Napoleon invaded Egypt, for example, all French and Dutch merchants in the Levant suddenly became Ottoman enemies, but Van Maseijk was left unharmed, and could even intervene with the authorities on behalf of the French consul, who was imprisoned in Aleppo during this time. The Dutchman does not appear to have married, and none of the sources mention any children. Jan van Maseijk died in Aleppo on 18 April 1826.¹²

The Ottomans and the “Other”

It is not clear how Jan van Maseijk might have defined himself. To Ottomans, he may have described himself simply as a “Frank”. In theory that generic Ottoman term for all Europeans referred to their countries of origin, but in Van Maseijk’s case strictly speaking that did not apply; his mother was English and his father Dutch, but Van Maseijk was born in Aleppo and may never have visited either of his motherlands. Even among “Franks” it would not have been easy to pick one appropriate label for him. After all, Jan van Maseijk was the vice-consul for Naples, Sweden, and Denmark, as well as full consul for the Dutch Republic. Since he had succeeded his father in that office, and most of his time was spent serving the interests of the Dutch, we may assume that his principal professional loyalty was to Holland. At the same time, he was so far removed from the

it is made clear that this is the name of the Dutch [‘Felemenk’] consul). Van Maseijk mentions his own linguistic skills in a letter to E. Edwards at Tripoli dated 27 April 1768 (in English), which is kept in [English] National Archives, London, State Papers 110/74 (IV).

11 The National Archives, London, State Papers 110/70: Register of marriages, baptisms, and burials in Aleppo, 1756-1800, not paginated, entries ordered chronologically.

12 Otto Schutte, *Repertorium der Nederlandse vertegen woordigers, residerende in het buitenland, 1584-1810* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 354.

Netherlands that we should probably not project on him any strong emotions or political opinions about the country. This seems to be supported by Van Maseijk's response to dramatic political changes "at home"; when Napoleon overran the Dutch Republic in 1795 and renamed his client state the Batavian Republic, for example, Van Maseijk effortlessly served the new regime, and when the republic became a kingdom in 1806, the consul in Aleppo dispassionately continued to do his work on its behalf. The consul seems to have been equally unaffected when the kingdom was dissolved again in 1810 (when it was formally annexed by France), and then restored between 1813 and 1815, but now with a Dutch king chosen from the most prominent family of former republicans.

In all likelihood the House of Osman formed a more tangible part of Jan van Maseijk's life than the House of Orange. Both the Ottoman and the European sources agree that Jan van Maseijk was not an Ottoman, however. In the Turkish and Arabic documents he is described either as a *mustemin* (i.e. a temporary resident) or a consul (i.e. a representative of a foreign nation). Both labels explicitly indicate that Van Maseijk was not a subject of the sultan. Nevertheless, he is an instructive specimen; strictly speaking, he may not belong for our collection, but the grounds for his exclusion also shed light on criteria for inclusion. In the course of the eighteenth century, the Ottoman authorities became increasingly preoccupied with the precise delineation (or delimitation) of the status of foreigner. As the military balance of power shifted more and more in favor of the West and several European powers (including Russia) presented themselves as the protectors of groups of non-Muslim Ottomans, the Sublime Porte was struggling to redefine the boundaries of the legal concept of *aman*. From the Ottoman perspective, any foreigners (usually men) who had married an Ottoman subject (usually women) were close to crossing the line between *mustemin* and *zimmi*. The same was true for foreigners who owned real property in the Ottoman Empire, because that suggested that their residence might not be temporary; again, this blurred the line between *mustemins* and *zimmis*, and the Porte made several attempts to clarify these fiscal and legal categories. Jan van Maseijk appears to have remained unmarried, so that was never an issue in his case, but the permanency of his residence in Aleppo might have been, if he had not had a diplomatic status his whole life.

Conclusion

Ottoman society was characterized by the multitude of official divisions of its members in sub-groups. On the highest level the division between Muslims and non-Muslims had become more pronounced after the first centuries of the Ottoman Empire's existence. The Muslims had a military (*askeri*) class and a civil

(*reaya*) class, to which the bureaucrats (*ilmiye*) were eventually added as a separate class. The differences between these classes were fiscal and legal in nature. On a social level, the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (*eşraf*) formed a kind of Muslim “nobility of the blood”. This group, which also enjoyed legal and fiscal privileges, had an elevated social position in Ottoman society. At the same time, the *eşraf* were a mixed group in a socio-economic sense, the group including learned muftis, wealthy merchants, as well as simple shoemakers. Among the non-Muslims, there were “local” non-Muslims and foreigners, who all enjoyed the same legal status regardless of their religious affiliations. Among the Ottoman non-Muslims, Christians and Jews represented the largest sub-categories, but these too were sub-divided. The indigenous Ottoman Jews were joined by Jews from Spain after 1492; although technically foreigners, they settled in the Ottoman Empire as new subjects of the sultan. The Christians were even more diverse from the beginning and the situation became even more complex at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when most of these communities experienced schisms. As a result of missionary activities coordinated in Rome, many “Eastern Christian” communities split into an Orthodox and a Catholic faction that passionately fought each other to gain control over local churches and the communal administration, as well as positions in the clerical hierarchy. All these groups, be they Muslim or non-Muslim, were connected directly or indirectly with the Ottoman state and their members were all part of Ottoman society, even if some of them were not Ottomans. Ottoman society was a framework, a grid composed of a multitude of boundary patterns. There were all kinds of fiscal divisions; different legal statuses; social classes; religious communities; professional organizations; ethnic groups - and many other sub-groups, each with distinct identity markers, some of which were administrative (fiscal and/or legal) and therefore invisible, while other, for example dress, were more eye-catching and may have had immediate effects on every-day social relations between members of various groups.

A typical Ottoman was a man or a woman who was born in the Ottoman Empire and whose parents were Ottoman subjects, and who permanently resided in the Ottoman Empire. She or he could have had any of a number of skin colors, and could easily have had Central Asian facial characteristics (from the slanting eyes of the Mongols to the fair hair and blue eyes of the Abkhaze and the Georgians). At the same time it seems safe to say that his or her most distinguishing features would *not* have been South Asian, Southeast Asian, or East Asian. Our model Ottoman belonged to one of the Empire’s many confessional groups and spoke at least one of the Empire’s many languages as his or her mother tongue. “The” Ottoman also paid taxes to the imperial treasury. From the perspective

of the Ottoman government, these were probably the most fundamental criteria - the constants that we set out to identify. Depending on the circumstances of individual Ottomans, a number of variables then formed additional layers of their identity. These ranged from their living environment (urban/rural) to professional affiliations and such private elements as sexuality. Only by describing and analysing the lives of more individual Ottomans can we sketch out and fill in the Ottoman identity grid, which should bring us closer to understanding the complex nature of *homo ottomanicus*.

Resurrecting Homo Ottomanicus: The Constants and Variables of Ottoman Identity

Abstract ■ The question of “who is an Ottoman” has already yielded interesting answers, but they principally seem to reflect the multifaceted nature of the Ottoman Empire itself and therefore do not bring us much closer to an understanding of the abstract concept of Ottoman identity. While trying not to be essentialist, this article aims to establish some concrete criteria for our definition of *homo ottomanicus*. The anatomization of one individual case suggests that Ottoman identity was the product of a societal grid composed of a multitude of boundaries, only the fiscal and legal ones of which tended to be rigid and relatively objectifiable.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, identity, foreigners, taxes, legal status

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