



The Development of the Toponym "Deir az-Zūr": A Historical and Etymological Study

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Abstract

This article examines the historical and etymological development of the toponym "Deir az-Zūr," a region in eastern Syria. Drawing on Islamic-era sources, Ottoman archives, and modern scholarship, it explores how geography, climate, and administrative transformations, particularly during the Ottoman Tanzīmāt reforms shaped the evolution of the region's name. The analysis traces the earliest reference to *dair* (monastery) in Christian and Islamic traditions, the multiple descriptors attached during the Islamic period, and the influence of Ottoman policy in formalizing the name "Deir az-Zūr." Competing theories regarding the origin of *az-Zūr* are also evaluated, from folk etymologies and linguistic derivations to geographical interpretations. The study finds that while the name has deep historical roots, it was only officially standardized during the Ottoman administrative reorganization of the 19th century. This case study demonstrates how toponyms not only reflect historical memory and local culture but also respond to political imperatives and geographical realities.

Keywords: Deir az-Zūr; Toponymy; Ottoman Empire; Tanzīmāt; Historical Linguistics.

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji perkembangan historis dan etimologis toponim "Deir az-Zūr", sebuah wilayah di Suriah timur. Berdasarkan sumber-sumber era Islam, arsip Utsmaniyah, dan kajian modern, artikel ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana geografi, iklim, dan transformasi administratif, khususnya selama reformasi Tanzīmāt Utsmaniyah, membentuk evolusi nama wilayah tersebut. Analisis ini menelusuri referensi paling awal untuk "dair" (biara) dalam tradisi Kristen dan Islam, berbagai deskriptor yang digunakan selama periode Islam, dan pengaruh kebijakan Utsmaniyah dalam memformalkan nama "Deir az-Zūr". Berbagai teori yang bersaing mengenai asal-usul "az-Zūr" juga dievaluasi, mulai dari etimologi rakyat dan derivasi linguistik hingga interpretasi geografis. Studi ini menemukan bahwa meskipun nama tersebut memiliki akar sejarah yang dalam, nama tersebut baru dibakukan secara resmi selama reorganisasi administratif Utsmaniyah pada abad ke-19. Studi kasus ini menunjukkan bagaimana toponim tidak hanya mencerminkan ingatan sejarah dan budaya lokal, tetapi juga merespons imperatif politik dan realitas geografis.

Kata Kunci: Deir az-Zur; Toponim; Kekaisaran Ottoman; Tanzīmāt; Linguistik Sejarah.

1. Introduction

The subprovince of Deir az-Zūr (mutaşarrıflık), situated in eastern Syria, historically encompassed a vast expanse of territory extending from Palmyra in the west to the borders of present-day southern Turkey and Iraq in the north and east. This region, marked by the flow of the Euphrates and its tributary the Hābūr, has long been known for its fertile plains, pastoral richness, and ecological diversity, providing a favorable habitat for both sedentary agriculturalists and nomadic Bedouin tribes. Socially, the region was characterized by a tribal structure in which kinship networks and seasonal mobility played central roles in political and economic organization (Chatty, 2010). Due to its strategic location along key trade and

pilgrimage routes connecting Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and the Levant, Deir az-Zūr became a site of contention and control throughout successive empires, especially during the centralizing reforms of the Ottoman Tanẓīmāt (1839–1876) and the autocratic consolidation of the Hamidian era (1876–1909) (Khoury, 1983).

From a literary and linguistic standpoint, the toponym "Deir az-Zūr" is both layered and contested. The term "Deir", traditionally understood as denoting a Christian monastery in Arabic lexicons, has been the subject of historical debate, with sources such as Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1311) and Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 1229) providing contrasting definitions and topographic contexts (Ibn Manẓūr, 1968; Yāqūt Ibn-ʿAbdallāh ar-Rūmī al-Ḥamawī, 1993). Despite assumptions of Christian monastic origins, archaeological excavations in the area have not revealed any definitive ecclesiastical structures, challenging the literal reading of the term. This ambiguity is compounded by a series of local oral traditions, place-specific designations, and Ottoman administrative terms that emerged over centuries, further obscuring a straightforward historical lineage for the toponym (Bernhardsson, 2005).

The inconsistencies and conflicting narratives surrounding the evolution of the name "Deir az-Zūr" are a major concern in this study. While most historical studies acknowledge the name's usage in late Ottoman records, few have attempted to reconcile the multiple etymologies Christian, Syriac-Aramaic, Arabic, and Turkish or to trace how the compound name became standardised during the Tanẓīmāt era. The conflation of Deir az-Zūr with other similarly named Ottoman provinces, such as Şehrizer, has also led to administrative confusion in archival sources, highlighting a gap in both historiography and toponymic studies (Kurban, 2016). Furthermore, competing interpretations by local historians such as Aḥmed Šūḥān and ʿAlī Ḥasan Mūsā underscore the need for a more systematic approach to the question (A. Ḥ. Mūsā, 1999).

The purpose of this research is to examine the historical and etymological development of the name "Deir az-Zūr" by critically analyzing a wide range of sources from medieval Arabic geographies to Ottoman administrative documents and modern historiographical debates. In doing so, the study seeks to clarify how socio-political transformations, such as the Tanẓīmāt and increasing Ottoman bureaucratization, contributed to the standardization of regional toponymy. The role of geographical features (e.g., the Euphrates' tilt or zūr) and climatic patterns is also considered, particularly in relation to how local identity and environmental perception shape and are shaped by place-names.

Starting from the above problem, this article argues that the toponym "Deir az-Zūr" cannot be fully understood without situating it within the broader imperial, environmental, and cultural histories of the region. Rather than reflecting a single origin or etymological root, the name evolved through a series of reinterpretations that mirrored the changing political realities and cultural landscapes of the Middle East. By mapping the shifts in nomenclature against socio-political change, the study contributes to the broader field of toponymy as a historical discipline and sheds light on the power of names in articulating authority, memory, and identity.

2. Method

This study adopts a historical-analytical methodology, drawing on both primary and secondary sources to reconstruct the development of the toponym Deir az-Zūr. The research focuses on a diachronic approach to linguistic and administrative changes in the region's nomenclature, with particular attention to Ottoman-era reforms and their effects on local identity (Albert Hourani, 1981; Itzchak Weismann, 2005).

Primary sources include Ottoman archival materials such as firmāns, sāl-nāmes (provincial yearbooks), memoranda, and administrative correspondence, many of which are preserved in the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi/BOA (Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives, Istanbul). Special attention is paid to inconsistencies in the use of the name Deir az-Zūr across time and regions, especially in comparison with similar-sounding territories like Şehrızor. In addition, topographical maps, reports by Ottoman governors (mutaşarrıfı), and lāyiḥa-style administrative treatises have been analyzed to trace the formalization of the name (BOA; Uzunçarşılı, 1988).

Secondary sources include regional histories authored by local historians such as ʿAbd-al-Karīm al-Futaiḥ, Aḥmad Šūḥān, and ʿAlī Ḥasan Mūsā, as well as geographical dictionaries compiled by classical Islamic scholars like Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī and Ibn Manẓūr. Their interpretations and terminological distinctions provide a basis for understanding how local usage differed from administrative designation. Etymological insight was also drawn from works in Aramaic and Syriac linguistics to assess potential pre-Islamic influences, especially regarding the terms Ġadīra, Šūrā, and other toponyms that may have merged into the compound name Deir az-Zūr over time.

In addition to textual analysis, the research integrates geographical and environmental data to establish the significance of topographical and climatic conditions in the historical settlement and naming of the region. Cartographic and environmental references from the late 19th and early 20th centuries support the assessment of the region's strategic and ecological context (Aubréville, 1949). The triangulation of philological, archival, and environmental evidence enables a multifaceted examination of how the toponym Deir az-Zūr emerged, transformed, and eventually became institutionalized as a reflection of larger political and cultural forces (Eugene L. Rogan, 2000; Faroqhi, 2000).

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Dair az-Zūr: Geography

From a geographical point of view, Dair az-Zūr is part of the Ġazīra, stretching between the major provinces of Aleppo, Diyārbakir, and Mosul. It includes the smaller towns of Virānşehir, Mardin, Ra's al-ʿAin, and Nuşaybīn (İsmāʿīl Ḥaḳḳī, 1904). The region is located at Longitude 40.10° East and Latitude 30.20° North, 225 m above sea level (Şemseddīn Sāmī, 1898). It is bordered by Diyārbakir, Mardin, Urfa, and Aleppo to the north, by Ḥamā, Ḥimş, Palmyra and aš-Šām to the west, and by Baghdad and Mosul to the east and south. Between 1890 and 1908 (i.e., at a time relevant to this thesis), its land area was approximately 100.000 km². Although the majority of the region is located within the Syrian Desert (al-Bādīya), the defining

topographical feature of Dair az-Zūr is the Euphrates river, which runs through the district, from ar-Raqqa to the Syrian border with Iraq (BOA). The Ḥābūr, a tributary of the Euphrates, is an important secondary river. Furthermore, it is the major water source for the region surrounding the ʿAbd-al-ʿAzīz Mountain, whose mild climate allows for extensive woodland and orchard cover and provides perfect breeding and pasture land for cattle and sheep, used especially by local tribes such as the Šammar (BOA).

Dair az-Zūr is surrounded by several mountains; in addition to ʿAbd -al-ʿAzīz, the most important are Sinğār, Kawkab, the Palmyra mountain ranges, Bal`ās and al-Bušrā, located in the aš- Šām Desert (Velud, 1945). This diverse landscape, interspersed with rivers and mountains, greatly contributed to the development of Dair az-Zūr's population. For the Bedouins, the regional topography provides water and grazing grounds for their animals, while allowing sedentary cultivation of crops such as wheat, cotton, and beets.

3.2. Dair az-Zūr: Climatic Conditions

The climatic conditions of Dair az-Zūr are an important factor in understanding the life of nomadic tribes, who formed the majority of the region's inhabitants. Tribal communities were more significantly affected by severe weather events than the general (settled) population. Tribal communities find it especially difficult to respond to them due to the lack of economic and environmental resources. This was compounded by the fact that areas with stable, mild climates were usually suitable for agriculture and thus were often settled by farming communities. This left the harshest terrain available to nomadic tribes. In Dair az-Zūr, areas of more predictable and gentler climate were used to cultivate various crops, especially tobacco, cotton and sesame seeds. The brief summary of local climate below is meant to contextualise the life of the Bedouin and to highlight how the local environment made it challenging.

Generally, the climate in the Dair az-Zūr can be characterized by high heat and severe droughts, with the temperatures in the summer reaching between 45-56° C. Conversely, in the winter the temperatures are quite cold, frequently reaching freezing point. The terrain of Dair az-Zūr can be divided into three topographic areas, each with distinct climatic conditions. The first area includes the Bādiyat aš-šām, located on the east of the Euphrates River. This area predominantly comprises desert; as such, it is characterized by continental dry climate, with very high temperatures in the summer during the day and very low in winter at night (Cuinet, 1891).

The second area is the Bādiyat al-Ğazīra, a plain corresponding to aš-Šāmiya on the other side of the Euphrates River. This is the area of the Ḥabūr River valley, characterized by its moderate climate, warmer in the summer and cold in the winter. The third area is the Euphrates Valley, characterized again by a desert climate: very hot in the summer and very cold in the winter. Cold, northerly winds blow during winter, with multi-directional, but mainly easterly, dusty winds during summer and early autumn. The average rainfall is about 200 mm (Rāmī Waḥīd, 2008).

3.3. The Evolution of Deir az-Zūr's Toponymy

The name of Dair az-Zūr changed throughout history, and there are discrepancies between the "official" name and that used by the local people. Presenting an overview of these changes highlight the clear impact the Tanẓīmāt reforms had on the region, touching something as fundamental as regional toponymy and providing an unprecedented degree of standardisation.

3.3.1. *Early Origins of "Deir": The Christian Monastery Hypothesis*

One of the earliest names of the region known historically is Dair, which Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1311) defined as a Christian monastery (Manẓūr et al., 1997). Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 1229) agrees that a 'Dair' is the place where monks worship, but defines it further as being located in deserts or mountains, not in a city (as a Christian place of worship in a city is called a church) (Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, 1993). However, descriptions of Dair az-Zūr in historical and geographical texts contradict this theory, as it is not located in a desert or on the top of a mountain. 'Abd-al-Karīm al-Futaiḥ and Aḥmed Šūḥān—the Dair az-Zūr historians have described it is an artificial hill or 'tell'. This tell was excavated in 1968 and, although no evidence for a monastery was found, 'Abd-al-Karīm al-Futaiḥ did not rule out the existence of one in the pre-Islamic period, as much of the population in the Euphrates Valley used to be Christian before the advent of Islam. The specifics of Christian architectural terminology (and whether Dair az-Zūr was truly a "Dair") aside, we know that in the Islamic era, the city was only known as Dair, with no other name associated with it ('Abd-al-Karīm al-Futaiḥ, 1983). Despite archaeological excavations near modern Deir az-Zūr, no definitive remains of an actual monastery have been found, leaving the original referent of *Deir* in this case open to interpretation

3.3.2. *Islamic Era Toponyms: The Evolution of Deir's Name*

During the Islamic period, the settlement was commonly referred to simply as "Deir", the Arabic word for "monastery." This naming reflects the continuity of Christian monastic presence or at least the lingering memory of it, as was common in many place names throughout the Levant following the Islamic conquests (Le Strange, 1890). As time progressed, various epithets were attached to distinguish the site or to reflect particular local characteristics. One such name was "Deir ar-Rummān", meaning "Monastery of the Pomegranates," a reference to the region's abundance of pomegranate orchards (Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, 1993). Another variant, "Dair Shu'arā", or "Monastery of the Poets," appears in local tradition due to the notable number of poets said to have originated from the area (Šūḥān, 1985a). Similarly, 'Alī Ḥasan Mūsā later referred to it as "Dair al-'Aṣāfir", or "Monastery of the Birds," inspired by the flocks of birds inhabiting the region's fertile riverbanks and groves (Alī Ḥasan Mūsā, 1999).

Despite these Islamic-era names, historian Aḥmad Sūsa emphasizes the antiquity of the settlement, citing that some of its earliest designations—such as "Šūrā" and "Ġadīra" are of Syriac origin, indicating the town's pre-Islamic, Christian, and possibly Aramaic-speaking heritage (Aḥmad Sūsa, 1980). According to medieval

Islamic accounts, during the Umayyad period, Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān is said to have renamed the area from Ġadīra to Dair Ḥitlīf (Šūḥān, 1985b), although this designation remains obscure in other sources and might have been local or short-lived. Aḥmad Šūḥān also suggests that the term “Deir” itself may be a linguistic transformation—*taḥrīf*—of older Aramaic or Syriac place names in the region, such as Ġadīra or Bārta, which, through oral tradition and administrative standardization, eventually became simplified into the name “Deir” (Šūḥān, 1985b). This progression culminated in the modern form “Deir az-Zūr”, combining the ancient monastic toponym with a likely reference to the surrounding natural environment, possibly derived from the Arabic “zūr”, meaning riverbank or wooded area, though this latter etymology remains debated.

3.3.3. Ottoman Influence: The Formation of Deir ar-Raḥba

During the early Ottoman period, particularly following the conquest of Syria in the early 16th century (1516), the toponymic configuration of the region underwent notable transformation. One significant development was the emergence of the compound name “Dair ar-Raḥba”, which linked the term Dair (“monastery”) to the nearby Raḥba Fortress, an ancient castle located south of modern-day al-Mayādīn on the western bank of the Euphrates (Al-Futaiḥ, 1983; Douwes, 2000).

The fortress of ar-Raḥba had long been a strategic point of military and administrative control in the Middle Euphrates region, having served both under the Ayyubids and Mamluks prior to the Ottomans. The Ottomans repurposed this historical stronghold into a regional military garrison, which led to the spread of the name Raḥba in administrative designations for the surrounding area (BOA; Humphreys, 1977).

The designation “Dair ar-Raḥba” appears with increasing frequency in Ottoman cadastral registers (*tahrir defterleri*) and provincial reports (*salnames*) of the 16th and 17th centuries. These sources reflect Ottoman attempts to administratively define and tax the region using recognizable landmarks like Raḥba. Notably, Ottoman scribes often spelled Raḥba with a final ه (هـ) rather than the classical ح (ح), indicating a possible phonetic or orthographic adaptation in Turkish bureaucratic style (BOA; Suraiya Faruqi, 2006).

Despite this, the use of Dair ar-Raḥba as an official toponym is contested. The local historian ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Futaiḥ strongly disputes this nomenclature. In his influential work on the history of Deir az-Zūr, he argues that the region continued to be known simply as “Dair” throughout much of the Ottoman period and that the name Dair ar-Raḥba was a retrospective imposition by later Turkish historians, especially during the reign of Sultan Süleymān I (r. 1520–1566), when Ottoman chroniclers sought to link the site to Raḥba for strategic or cartographic clarity (Al-Futaiḥ, 1983). He further suggests that this naming was subsequently adopted by Arab historians such as Muḥammad ibn aṭ-Ṭabbākh al-Ḥalabī, who may have uncritically followed Ottoman designations in their historical narratives (Muḥammad Rāghib aṭ-Ṭabbākh, 1923).

However, this hypothesis is weakened by the consistent appearance of Dair ar-Raḥba in numerous archival Ottoman documents from the 16th century onward, including military correspondences and provincial surveys. These attest to its widespread bureaucratic usage, which cannot be entirely attributed to post-facto historiographical reinterpretation (BOA).

It is important to note that the name "Dair ar-Raḥba" may not have represented exclusive or everyday usage. In both official and colloquial discourse, the city was often referred to simply as "Dair", especially in oral Bedouin contexts. In the 17th century, Ottoman reports and European travelers alike noted the presence of semi-nomadic populations—primarily Bedouin tribes and mukhallifīn (outlaws, tax evaders)—in the region, who identified themselves as "Dairiyyīn" or "people of Dair" (Carsten Niebuhr, 1792; Douwes, 2000).

By the early 19th century, the city had acquired yet another epithet: "Dair aš-Šu'arā", or "Monastery of the Poets." This name was in common use among inhabitants of Ḥimṣ and Damascus, possibly in reference to the literary reputation of some tribal poets from the region or as a romanticized exonym reflecting a pastoral ideal (Al-ʿAẓm, 1912). This designation, though never adopted administratively, persisted in literary and oral traditions, further complicating the layered toponymy of the region.

3.3.4. The Origin of "az-Zūr": Competing Theories

The plurality of toponyms perhaps underscores a certain degree of administrative confusion attached to the region. By contrast, after the promulgation of the Ottoman provincial law in 1864, when Dair az-Zūr was promoted to the status of a *Livā*, this new administrative unit was described in Ottoman documents as the az-Zūr *Livā*, marking the beginning of the name used until this day. Historians and researchers disagree on the origin of the word "az-Zūr". According to ʿAbd-al-Karīm al-Futaiḥ, it derives from a name used by some Arab tribes that came from the Arabian Peninsula to the Euphrates several centuries ago, settling on the Syrian side of the Euphrates, between the old residence of Balʿās in the north and the town of ʿĀna on the Euphrates in the south. On the other hand, others posit that the name "Zūr" was given to the area in the Ayyubid era (ʿAbd-al-Karīm al-Futaiḥ, 1983), derived from the roar of the lion, because of the presence of lions in the past in this place. Still others argue that it comes from the Turkish word "Zūr", meaning "difficulty".

An alternative theory was given by Meḥmed Hilāl, erstwhile governor of Dair az-Zūr, who in his *lāyiḥa Lūḳāṭūʿzeheb fī asārīʾl-arab* pointed out that "az-Zūr" referred to the flow of the Euphrates river: as the river heads eastward, it bends towards the south for a short period before turning back to the east. The flow of the river around this tilt is called Zūr. Thus, Dair az-Zūr would mean "Monastery of the Tilt". The multitude of local toponyms occasionally complicates research related to the region. A particular difficulty in tracing the region through historical Ottoman document is presented by the potential confusion between the names of Sancaḳ Şehrizer and Sancaḳ az-Zūr.

The similarity between the two often led to administrative errors in official correspondence and confusion between the names of the appointed administrators in the two areas. For example, an Ottoman memorandum written in 1908/1909 mentioned that Takīyyüddīn (Arab. Taqī ad-Dīn) Paşa was appointed as a Governor in Dair az-Zūr after the death of Hüseyn Rüşdī Paşa in 1867. However, this name is mentioned neither in the relevant the official provincial yearbooks (Sālnāme) nor in other sources available on the administration of Dair az-Zūr (BOA).

Rather, Takīyyüddīn Paşa seems to have been appointed as a governor (mutaşarrıf) of Şehriaz-Zūr (Kerkük) in 1867, and not Dair az-Zūr (Yūsuf ‘Abd-ar-Rahmān Mar’aşlī, 2006), while his brother, Hüseyn Rüşdī Paşa, was later (1878) appointed to Dair az-Zūr. Seemingly the anonymous writer of the memorandum was not aware of the difference of names between the two regions.

Furthermore, in written communication, the place names of Dair az-Zūr and Şehrizer were often confused. As a result, mail destined for one was often delivered to the other, no doubt causing much confusion to the administration. To prevent this, on 2nd January 1893, the *mutaşarrıf* of Dair az-Zūr, Şālih Paşa sent a letter to the interior ministry, stating the problem and asking the central administration to change the name of one of the *livās* (BOA). He recommended that the name of Sancak Şehrizer should be changed to Kerkük (Cengiz Eroğlu, Murat Babuçoğlu, Orhan Özdi, 2012) 1893, which eventually happened on March 14, 1893. The decision, which was approved by the central government and the sultan, was communicated by the Mosul province with a letter addressed to the Kerkük district on March 21, 1893. Subsequently, the name of Şehrizer was abandoned and the ancient name Kerkük was always used in official correspondence (BOA).

On the other hand, the name of “az-Zūr” remained unchanged until the Tanzīmāt era, when the compound form “Dair az-Zūr” became the standard used by the Ottoman administration. Afterwards, it is clear that the compound name “Dair az-Zūr” applied to this region. For instance, an Ottoman document refers to weapons being brought to various Ottoman provinces, including Dair az-Zūr: “*Memālik-i Şahane’ye vuku bulan esliha idhālatına dair, Viyana Sefareti’nden gönderilen cedvelde mūnderic Arslānbey nam mahallin İzmīd, Deyr-i zor’unda Zor Sancakları dahilinde olduğu*” (Regarding the intervention that took place in the memālik-i ğahane, the table sent from the Vienna Embassy mentioned that the area called Rslānbey is included in the Zor Sancak in Deyr-i Zor) (BOA).

This narrative, though accepted by most historians, has been disputed by some. Ġassān Ḥafāġī as-Sīrah ad-Ḍahabīya considers the compound name of the Dair az-Zūr *livā* to date back only to the time of Faişal al-Awwal b. al-Ḥusain, a governor of Syria in the 1920s (Ġassān al-Şaiḥ Ḥafāġī, 2019). Conversely, in his book *Dair az-Zūr*, ‘Alī Ḥasan Mūsā argues that the name of the city of Dair az-Zūr emerged around 1864, when the Ottomans created a second tier of their administrative regional divisions and made the city of Dair az-Zūr the center of a Sancak.

In the same year, Süreyya Paşa, then the governor of Aleppo, made Dair az-Zūr a district of the Aleppo province. However, although he used a compound name

of Dair, the district was generally known then as *sancağ az-Zūr*, not *Dair az-Zūr*. Such discrepancies demonstrate that there is much confusion over the precise origin of the compound name of *Dair az-Zūr*, and its usage was only standardised during the *Tanzīmāt* period. However, it is certain that it dates to the Ottoman period and that it was not an officially recognised name until the late Ottoman Empire.

3.4. The Implications of Toponymy for Local Identity and Administrative Policy

Toponyms such as "Deir az-Zūr" are not merely geographical labels, but rather cultural and political constructs that embody layers of historical memory, power relations, and communal identity. Place names act as symbolic anchors that bind communities to the landscape they inhabit (Azaryahu, 1996). In this context, the transformation of the name from older designations like *Deir*, *Deir ar-Rummān*, or *Deir ash-Shu‘arā’* to the formalized Ottoman name *Deir az-Zūr* reflects a deeper shift from vernacular naming to centralized state nomenclature.

Locally, various segments of the population, particularly tribal communities, continued to use older or colloquial forms of the name in oral traditions and everyday speech. Among Bedouin groups, the region was often referred to simply as *Deir*, without the Ottoman-era compound suffix. This illustrates a degree of divergence between local identity, shaped by oral memory and ecological familiarity, and official state classifications imposed from above (Chatty, 2010). Names such as *Deir ar-Rummān* or *Deir ash-Shu‘arā’* conveyed rich associations with local agriculture, poetic heritage, or fauna elements of local life erased in more neutral, administrative designations. The imposition of standardized names also carried symbolic weight, often perceived as part of state-building or centralizing processes. In various parts of the Middle East, postcolonial states renamed towns and districts to reflect new nationalist narratives. Yet, in the case of *Deir az-Zūr*, the Ottoman name endured, indicating that some imperial toponyms were eventually adopted and legitimated by subsequent regimes and local populations alike (Schayegh, 2015).

Beyond issues of cultural symbolism, toponymy has had concrete implications for legal and administrative governance. During the *Tanzīmāt* reforms, the codification of the name *Deir az-Zūr* served the Ottoman state's goal of reinforcing control over its peripheral provinces, particularly those inhabited by semi-nomadic populations. As Eugene Rogan (2000) has noted, Ottoman reforms of the late 19th century sought to remap and reorganize provincial territories as part of broader bureaucratic centralization. Naming and renaming was integral to this process. The administrative standardization of a name like *Deir az-Zūr* facilitated the compilation of cadastral registers, the distribution of tax responsibilities, and the implementation of new systems of land tenure. Ottoman documents increasingly used the term "az-Zūr Sancağ" in fiscal records, yearbooks (*salnāme*), and military correspondence, demonstrating how toponymy shaped the bureaucratic landscape (Suraiya Faroqhi, 2006). In modern Syria, many Ottoman-era administrative names have persisted in official records and public discourse, reflecting the durability of toponyms within state structures.

The confusion between *Sancağ Şehrizer* and *Sancağ az-Zūr*, as discussed in

earlier sections, further highlights the significance of precise naming. These confusions were not merely clerical errors, but pointed to the fragility of state control in frontier regions and the reliance on toponyms to delineate political authority. As Timothy Mitchell argues, place names are not neutral signifiers; they are part of a broader techno-political project wherein the state uses scientific and bureaucratic tools such as maps, statistics, and censuses to regulate people and territory. In this sense, the act of naming becomes an act of governance (Mitchell, 2020).

The evolution and standardization of the name *Deir az-Zūr* thus represent more than historical or linguistic developments they reflect a contested process of identity formation, memory, and political control. While rooted in local history and oral culture, the region's toponymy was redefined through imperial and later national administrative agendas. This case study underscores how place names function not only as geographical references, but as instruments of statecraft and social organization.

4. Conclusion

The evolution of the name "Deir az-Zūr" is emblematic of the region's multifaceted history, reflecting the complex socio-political and cultural transformations that have shaped it over the centuries. From its early association with Christian monasteries and pre-Islamic influences to the various names of the Islamic era and the administrative reforms of the Ottoman period, each iteration of the name tells a story of the diverse peoples and powers that have ruled the area.

The standardization of the name "Deir az-Zūr" during the *Tanzīmāt* period not only highlights the influence of Ottoman centralization, but also serves as evidence of the importance of toponyms in the construction of regional identity. The competing theories about the origin of "az-Zūr"-whether linked to local tribes, natural features, or administrative designations-illustrate how place names are deeply intertwined with historical memory and geographical realities.

Ultimately, the name "Deir az-Zūr" encapsulates a long history of cultural convergence, administrative adaptation, and linguistic evolution. By tracing the region's shifting toponymy, this study underscores the importance of place names not only as geographic markers, but also as symbols of the broader historical processes that continue to shape Deir az-Zūr's identity and heritage today.

5. Bibliography

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