

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Sultan Abdul Hamid II

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Sultan Abdul Hamid II inherited an empire that was bankrupt. Beginning with the Crimean War (1853-1856), the Ottoman debt mounted steadily. The burden of keeping a large standing army and modernizing it in the face of perpetual foreign threats required continued borrowing, so that by 1878 the public debt stood at more than 13.5 billion *kurush*. The cost of servicing this enormous debt was more than 1.4 billion *kurush*, a sum equal to 70% of all revenues. The heavy debt burden cast a long shadow on all aspects of the Sultan's reign, including international relations, education, agriculture and political reform.

A militarily and economically weak Ottoman Empire was the object of European imperial ambitions. Russia had emerged as a major Eurasian power, having swallowed up the Turkoman territories of Central Asia and the Caucasus. The Russian Czar desired open access to the warm waters of the Mediterranean to become a player in the great game of world domination. But the Ottoman Empire, sitting astride a wide arc extending from the Adriatic Sea to the borders of Persia, blocked this access. To achieve his aims and pressure the Ottomans into giving him concessions, the Czar used a combination of direct military threats and indirect pressure through his Serbian and Bulgar surrogates. France, after occupying Algeria, had her eyes on Morocco and Tunisia. The Italians wanted Libya. The empire of Austria-Hungary sought Bosnia-Herzegovina. The interests of Great Britain lay in Egypt and in the control of access routes to her Indian Empire. Only Germany, which had emerged as the dominant power on the continent under Bismarck, preferred the status quo. But she too was willing to sacrifice Ottoman territorial integrity to preserve her interests. Realizing that a war between Russia and Austria-Hungary over their competing ambitions in the Balkans would force him to take sides and shatter his domination of continental Europe, the Kaiser of Germany engineered an alliance between himself, the Emperor of Austria-Hungary and the Czar of Russia. This alliance was called the League of Three Emperors.

In the nationalistic mosaic of 19th century Europe, the Ottomans stood alone in their insistence on maintaining a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-national state. But the all too apparent fissures in the empire, along national and religious lines were an invitation to foreign meddling. The European powers, using these religious and ethnic divisions as political opportunities, were determined to swallow up the Ottoman Empire. A bankrupt Ottoman state, dubbed the "sick man of Europe" by the Czar, could not defend itself and was constantly looking for allies who would guarantee its territorial integrity. Against these heavy odds, Sultan Abdul Hamid waged a valiant struggle to rescue the empire, if he could, or at least salvage its core Islamic component if he lost the predominantly Christian provinces. In this pursuit,

he substituted diplomacy for war, playing off the ambitions of one European power against another, compromising where he could and buying time to reform the institutions that held the empire together. To a large extent, he succeeded. But he had arrived on the stage of history too late. His autocratic style won him the displeasure of his people. And the very success of his reforms set in motion powerful forces that ultimately toppled him from power and led the empire to its demise.

Abdul Hamid II (1842-1918) was the son of Sultan Abdul Majid (1823-1861) and a Circassian mother. As a child, he received an education worthy of a caliph and Sultan. His tutors included some of the leading ulema and shaykhs of Istanbul. He was well versed in the Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet and in the Hanafi school of Fiqh. He was trained in Sufi practices as well, particularly the Naqshbandi and Helveti orders, which had a significant following in the empire. As a prince, he sought out bankers, diplomats and leaders of the Tanzeemat reforms, discussing with them issues that affected the empire and in the process, he acquired a broad understanding of economics, administration and international politics. As a young man, he was retiring in nature, avoiding the frivolities that so often consumed other princes. He was fastidious in prayer, reclusive by nature, pious in his religious observances and charitable in disposition. These qualities were to serve him well later, endearing him to the Muslim masses worldwide and enabling him, for the first time in the 19th century, to provide a semblance of political focus for the global Islamic community.

Immediately after his accession, Sultan Abdul Hamid came up against the Russian ambitions in the Balkans. The Czar, declaring himself the champion of all Slavs and the protector of the Eastern Orthodox Church, encouraged an insurrection in Serbia. The Ottomans successfully put down the uprising in 1876. Realizing that active intervention on behalf of the Serbs carried a risk of war with Austria-Hungary, the Czar shifted his focus to Bulgaria. The excuse for intervention was the supposed mistreatment of Christian Bulgars by the Ottomans, while the objective was the creation of a greater Bulgaria, under Russian domination, extending south from the Danube all the way to the Aegean Sea. The western shores of the Black Sea would then be under Russian domination and the armed forces of the Czar would have access to the Mediterranean. However, this plan too required the cooperation of the Austrians. During the Crimean War of 1853-1856, Austrian troops had occupied Romania with the connivance of the Russians. For Russian troops to reach Bulgaria, they would have to cross Romania, now under Hapsburg domination. Fearing that overlapping Russian and Austrian ambitions might lead to war, Bismarck of Germany proposed a division of the Ottoman Empire, with Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia going to the Hapsburgs while Romania and an enlarged Bulgaria would come under Russian domination. The British, fearing that a further expansion of Austrian and Russian influence towards the Mediterranean would threaten their own interests, opposed this plan and proposed instead a conference in Istanbul to reconcile the competing ambitions of the powers.

At the Istanbul Conference, held in November 1876, Britain proposed a series of "reforms" which, while mollifying Russia and Austria-Hungary, would keep them out of the Mediterranean. Bulgaria, while nominally staying within the Ottoman Empire, was to be partitioned into two provinces. The governor of each province would be a Christian, appointed with the concurrence of the European powers. Except for tobacco and customs duty, all revenues would go to the provincial government. The judicial system would be overhauled and new judges appointed with the approval of the powers. Separate police forces would be created for Christian and Muslim villages. Ottoman troops would be withdrawn from the province and their place taken up by Belgian troops. Britain proposed similar "reforms" for Bosnia-Herzegovina, where Austria-Hungary would provide oversight for their implementation. These proposals, if implemented, would have meant virtual independence for both Bulgaria and Bosnia-Herzegovina and would have legalized the intervention of the powers into the affairs of these two important Ottoman provinces.

The Bulgarian issue had emerged as an important one due to a Russian engineered insurrection in that province. The Bulgars captured a large number of towns and slaughtered thousands of Turks. Unable to control the uprising, the Ottoman governor of the province, Nadim Pasha, organized local militias to protect Muslim villages. Massacres and counter massacres followed. The Europeans, always quick to point fingers when Christians were killed, while closing their eyes to massacres of Muslims, played up the Christian casualties. In the British parliament, Gladstone, in a rousing speech, referred to the Ottomans as “the unspeakable Turks” and demanded a concerted European action to curb the Ottomans. The Czar threatened military action unless sweeping reforms were implemented in the province under Russian supervision.

To preempt the European powers, the Ottoman Porte (the vizierate) pushed for the promulgation of a constitution that would remove any pretext for foreign intervention. At the request of Midhat Pasha, Chairman of the Council of State, Sultan Abdul Hamid authorized the formation of a Constitution Commission. Working round the clock, the Commission produced a constitution, which embodied far-reaching reforms and touched on every aspect of Ottoman administration.

While retaining the ultimate authority of the Caliph/Sultan and his privileges to mint coins and have his name invoked in the Friday khutba, the reforms guaranteed individual liberty to all citizens, equality before the law, freedom of worship, sanctity of privacy, the right to property and protection from arbitrary arrest. There was to be no discrimination in government jobs and the civil service was to be a meritocracy. A two-tier Parliament was established after the pattern of the liberal European monarchies with a lower house, *majlis e mebusan*, consisting of elected delegates and a smaller upper house, *majlis e ayan*, whose members were appointed by the Sultan. Freedom of expression within the Parliament and immunity from prosecution of the deputies for their views was guaranteed. The Sultan appointed the grand vizier and the council of ministers. The grand vizier, as the chief executive officer of the empire, presided over the meetings of the ministers and coordinated their activities. In times of emergency, such as those involving the security of the state, he could issue emergency orders. The Parliament had the authority to approve annual budgets, provide oversight for the expenditures of the various ministries and enforce fiscal discipline. It was empowered to ratify legislation initiated by the Council of Ministers. If ratified, the legislation was then submitted to the Sultan, through the grand vizier, for his final approval. The Council of State, which had come into existence during the earlier phases of the *tanzimat*, was retained to provide assistance to the parliament and the Council of Ministers in the drafting, preparation and documentation of legislation.

The deputies of the lower house were elected and had a term of four years, whereas those of the upper house were appointed by the Sultan for life. Except in matters of personal law, wherein the Shariah and *millet* courts were retained, the jurisdiction of secular courts was expanded to cover all aspects of life. Representative councils were retained at the provincial, district and county levels to provide inputs on education, agriculture, trade and commerce. A Supreme Court was set up with the authority to try wayward judges, members of the parliament and ministers. Islam remained the state religion but freedom of worship was guaranteed to all millets. All citizens were henceforth to be considered Ottomans, irrespective of their ethnic or religious affiliation. Each *millet* was free to elect its own representative council and organize its internal affairs. Thus a major move was made towards parliamentary democracy that provided a voice to the people, guaranteed individual rights and took significant steps towards mollifying European concerns about the rights of Christians in the empire. To implement the reforms, Sultan Abdul Hamid appointed Midhat Pasha, who had served as chairman of the Council of State and the principal architect of the reforms, as the grand vizier.

The European powers were not interested in reforming the Ottoman Empire. The disaffection of the Christians was merely a pretext for intervention into Ottoman affairs. Russia, in particular, was not satisfied with anything less than an outlet to the Mediterranean. At the Istanbul Conference, the European powers backed Russian demands to divide up Bulgaria and Bosnia-Herzegovina and administer them under European oversight. Sultan Abdul Hamid knew the military vulnerability of the empire and sought to avoid war. In addition to promulgating the constitution in December 1876, he forwarded his own plan to appoint an inquiry commission, with international participation, to look into charges of atrocities in Bulgaria and punish those responsible. Midhat Pasha, who was serving as the principal Ottoman negotiator with the powers, did not present these plans at the conference, but instead submitted the European demands to the Ottoman parliament. The newly elected representatives were furious at this affront to Ottoman sovereignty and rejected the demands. The Istanbul Conference broke up in disarray.

Even as negotiations were underway at the Istanbul Conference (December 1876-January 1877) and the Ottoman parliament met (March 1877) to implement the reforms, the Russians made active preparations for war. The Czar bought the neutrality of the Austria-Hungary Empire by promising them the principality of Bosnia-Herzegovina and hegemony over Serbia. The Austrian military contingent stationed in Rumania since 1854 was withdrawn, clearing the way for a Russian advance upon Istanbul through Rumania and Bulgaria. The British too, signaled their neutrality in the event of a Russian-Turkish war by declaring that they would not interfere as long as the status of the Straits or Istanbul was unaltered. Germany, whose principal preoccupation was avoidance of war between Austria and Russia, went along with Austrian neutrality. Thus the road was cleared for the Czar's army to invade the territories of its neighbor to the south.

The Russians began the war in May 1877 with an attack on the Ottoman eastern provinces. The following month, in June 1877, they opened a second front in the west across the Danube River. The Russian invasion was in clear violation of the Treaty of Paris, signed in 1856 at the conclusion of the Crimean War, by which the European powers had collectively guaranteed the integrity of the Ottoman Empire. But this was the age of colonialism. Each treaty that the Europeans signed with the Ottomans was but a ruse to subvert and occupy additional Ottoman territory.

The Russian objective in the east was a rapid drive on the city of Erzurum, from where they could cut a swath through southern Anatolia and Syria to the Mediterranean, isolating the Turkish heartland. In the west, the goal was a rapid drive on Istanbul through Rumania and Bulgaria to force the Turks to capitulate before the European powers changed their mind about their professed neutrality. The Ottomans, even though they had spent large sums on armaments since the Crimean War, were hampered by a lack of trained officers. The Czar, through skillful propaganda as the self-proclaimed protector of the Eastern Orthodox Church, took full advantage of the disaffection of the large Christian population in the Balkans. In the eastern sector too, he incited the hitherto peaceful Armenians to harass the Ottoman armies.

Aided by local Christians, the initial advance of the Russian armies was swift. Ardahan fell in May 1877; the Ottomans lost a sizable number of men and material. On the western front, the garrison town of Sistova fell in June. Advance contingents of Russian troops crossed the Shipka Pass, captured Sofia and Nicopolis and threatened Erdirne.

Large-scale massacres of Muslim peasants followed each of the Russian conquests. The Russians distributed guns and ammunition captured from the retreating Ottomans to the local Christians who turned on their Muslim neighbors. Village after village witnessed horror scenes of mass killings. The haggard survivors of the slaughter streamed towards Istanbul. Over 250,000 refugees entered Istanbul

and Anatolia in the first three months of the Russian campaigns. Over the next two years (1877-1879), this number doubled, imposing a tremendous burden on Ottoman resources. This was the first of the large-scale massacres of Balkan Muslims, which continued on and off for more than a hundred years, culminating in the Serbian massacres of Bosnians in 1990-1992.

These early reverses shocked the Ottomans. The Porte appealed to the European powers under terms of the Paris Treaty to pressure the Russians to withdraw. The replies from Austria and Germany were vague. The British cabinet issued equally vague statements and did nothing to deter the Czar.

Meanwhile, the Russian aggression had to be met. The Sultan's response was characteristically Islamic. He took out the Prophet's mantle from the Topkapi palace, declared the resistance to Russia a jihad, proclaimed himself a ghazi after the example of the early Ottoman Sultans and appealed to Muslims worldwide for support. This pattern of appeal to the global Muslim community was to be repeated, time and again, during the reign of Abdul Hamid.

The response from the Turks, Arabs and Albanians was overwhelming. Men came out in droves to join the armed forces. Women offered their jewelry to finance the war effort. The Sultan selected the best available generals for the defensive campaigns. Ahmed Muhtar Pasha was appointed the commander of the eastern forces. Muhtar reorganized his troops, dispersed over the eastern districts, and stopped the Russian advance at Kars. On the western front, Sulaiman Pasha was appointed the commander, while the defense of the Bulgarian passes was delegated to Osman Pasha. Sulaiman brought reinforcements by sea to Alexandropolis, swiftly moved north through western Bulgaria and drove the Russians back across the Shipka Pass. The Russians regrouped and with a large horde of over 100,000 men, backed by the main Romanian regiments, made a thrust at the strategic town of Plevna. Meanwhile, Osman Pasha had reinforced the town, built a fortress, dug trenches and had brought in heavy guns to defend the surrounding terrain. From this bastion, he held off repeated assaults by the combined Russian-Romanian forces, earning for himself and his men the admiration of Europeans and the gratitude of his fellow countrymen. The Sultan, in recognition of this heroic defense, conferred the title of ghazi on Osman Pasha.

The front lines were stable throughout the summer of 1877. But with the passage of time, the weight of the vast Russian Empire and of their Christian sympathizers within the Ottoman Empire, began to be felt. By October 1877, the Ottoman lines began to crack. On the eastern front, Kars fell in November, although Mohtar Pasha was able to withdraw the bulk of his forces to Erzurum. Azerbaijan, Armenia and eastern Anatolia were in Russian hands. On the western front, the heroic defense of Plevna continued. The Russians surrounded the garrison and cut off the supplies of food, hoping to starve the defenders into submission. Despite the lack of food and the harsh winter, the Ottomans held on, hoping for fresh reinforcements from Istanbul. But the Russian juggernaut tightened. In December, Osman Pasha ordered his troops to fight their way out. In hand to hand combat, over 30,000 Ottoman troops died. Thousands more perished in the icy mountainous terrain. Plevna surrendered. Showing no mercy, the Russians and their Romanian comrades butchered the survivors in the city.

With the fall of Plevna, the bulk of the Russian army was free to move southward. Sofia and Erdirne fell in rapid succession. An advanced detachment under Grand Duke Nicholas reached the outskirts of Istanbul. The capital city, already swollen with hundreds of thousands of refugees, braced for an assault. The rapid advance of the Russian armies towards Istanbul caused an alarm in Vienna and London. Should the Russians occupy the empire, the Ottomans would default on their loans to the European bankers. Panic set in in the London financial markets. Realizing the threat to its financial interests and its imperial interests in Egypt, the British cabinet issued a stern warning to the Russians not to advance on the Straits. A humbled Sultan Abdul Hamid wrote to Queen Victoria asking her to arrange an armistice

and requesting the British fleet to anchor in Istanbul as insurance against Russian occupation. The Czar, exhausted from his campaigns against the Turks, was in no position to wage a wider war with Britain and Austria-Hungary. He wrote to the Sultan assuring him that the Russians had no intention of occupying Istanbul.

In March 1878, the Russians and the Ottomans signed a Treaty at San Stefano, a small village located on the outskirts of Istanbul. By its terms, the Ottomans ceded the districts of Kars, Ardahan and Batum in the east to Russia. The Straits would be open to Russian shipping. The independence of Rumania, Montenegro, Serbia and Bulgaria was acknowledged. Montenegro and Serbia were expanded to include large portions of Bosnia and Albania. Bulgaria was rewarded with all of eastern Rumelia and northern Thrace and its territories grew more than three fold to extend from the Danube River to the Aegean Sea. The dream of the Czars to create a Balkan political landscape dominated by Russia was fulfilled. The Ottomans agreed to pay a war indemnity of 24 billion kurush to the Czar over a period of 100 years. Summarily, the terms were nothing short of surrender by the Ottomans.

The Treaty of San Stefano was unacceptable to the other European powers. Britain and France were opposed to a Russian dominated Bulgaria extending to the Aegean Sea. Austria objected to Russian influence over Serbia and Montenegro. Bismarck of Germany, allied with Austria and Russia in the League of the Three Emperors, realized that unless rapid steps were taken to defuse the situation, war might erupt between his two allies. Therefore, he agreed to convene a conference of the principal powers in Berlin, in which all the terms of the Treaty of San Stefano would be renegotiated. The Treaty of Berlin, which concluded in July 1878, divided Bulgaria into three parts. The northern part would be autonomous under Russian guidance but would pay an annual tribute to the Sultan. The second part, east Rumelia, would be under Ottoman control but with a mixed Muslim-Christian administration supervised by the powers. The southern part, consisting of Thrace and southern Rumelia were returned to direct Ottoman administration. Bosnia-Herzegovina was placed under Austrian control. The independence of Montenegro and Serbia was affirmed. As a "precaution" against further Russian military pressure against the Porte, Britain occupied Cyprus on the pretext that it could rapidly respond to any future threats by the Czar. Ottoman war indemnities to Russia were reduced to 350,000 kurush annually for 100 years. The Conference of Berlin thus sealed the fate of the Ottoman Empire in Europe with only a rump swath of territory left to link Istanbul with Albania. To the east, the Ottomans lost several districts in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Perhaps, as significantly, the cost of the war exhausted them financially. The war indemnities to Russia added to the already crippling debt payments to European bankers.

The Russian invasion of 1877-1878 and its aftermath had a profound impact on the young Sultan. Abdul Hamid realized the futility of holding on to European territories in which the Christians were a majority. His Christian vassals had rebelled and had aided the Russians, despite the reforms instituted under the *tanzimat* and despite the representation given to them in the new Ottoman parliament. He was deeply disappointed with the principal powers which had let down the Ottomans despite their treaty obligations. It became apparent that the principal powers desired nothing less than total dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. These fears were soon confirmed by French moves on North Africa and British moves on Egypt. The war had brought hundreds of thousands of Muslim refugees into Istanbul, fleeing the mass slaughter that followed the Russian advance. Having lost everything in their flight, these refugees were extremely bitter towards their Christian neighbors. These factors made the Sultan turn his back on Europe and reorient his focus towards the Muslim Middle East.

The question before the Sultan was this: How could the Caliph disengage from Christian Europe without humiliation so that the Muslim core of the Empire was preserved and provided a nucleus for future Islamic political renewal? This was a paradigm shift for the Ottomans who had carved out their European empire (1350-1453) long before their thrust into Syria, Egypt and Arabia (1517).

The Sultan's tilt towards the Islamic Middle East contrasted with the main thrust of the *tanzimat* towards multi-religious Ottomanism and introduced an element of tension in the Ottoman governing circles which persisted well into the 20th century. Ottomanism was also challenged by the rising tide of nationalism in the Balkans. This introduced a second element of tension in the empire. A third element of tension was traditionalism versus modernism. There were those in the empire, the *ulema* and the *kadis*, who desired a slow evolution of society and its institutions from its Islamic past. And there were those among the more secular men of the *tanzimat* and the non-Muslim *millet*s, who desired a more secular approach. These tensions were exacerbated by the continuing imperial ambitions of the European powers.

To save what was left of the empire, the Sultan desired a faster modernization of the empire using a centralized approach. The men of the *tanzimat*, too, desired reforms, but despite the experience of the war and the letdown by the Christians in the Balkans, they persisted in the belief that constitutionalism was the best way to bring about change. The two approaches were bound to clash, and they did. And in its aftermath, the empire first moved towards autocracy and pan-Islamism and then swung back towards parliamentary rule and secularism.

The stipulations of the Berlin Treaty and the intentions of the principal powers to respect Ottoman sovereignty were soon tested in Tunisia. The North African territories around Tunis were long under the control of local *beys*. The Ottomans had maintained nominal control over the *beys* through a provincial governor and a military garrison. The French, after consolidating their hold on Algeria (1830), extended their ambitions to Tunisia. The first moves were made on the economic and financial fronts. The free spending *beys* borrowed heavily from the French bankers and soon found themselves in so much debt that they could not make payments on the interest and principal. To extract the debt payments, the European powers established the Tunisian Debt Commission in 1869 and assumed control of its public services as well as raw materials. In 1881, the British offered Tunisia to the French to buy their acquiescence to British occupation of Cyprus. Realizing that a refusal would mean Tunisia would be offered to the Italians, the French army moved into Tunis and declared it a French "protectorate". Sultan Abdul Hamid protested under terms of the Berlin Treaty, but in *realpolitik* only the voice of the powerful speaks. The European powers turned a deaf ear to the Sultan's pleas.

More serious was the British occupation of Egypt, the jewel of the Ottoman Empire. By 1878, the focus of global history had shifted from the Mediterranean to Asia. The interests of Great Britain were now focused on its Indian Empire. British interests lay in controlling the sea-lanes to India. That meant control of Egypt, which was still nominally an Ottoman province. Egypt was the cultural center of the empire and was, until its occupation by Sultan Selim I, the seat of the Caliphate. It was the most populous of the Ottoman provinces and the gateway to Africa.

Economic penetration was the means for British entry into Egypt, as it was for the French occupation of Tunisia. The Khedives of Egypt, Sait and Ismail, had contracted huge loans at enormous discounts, first to build the Suez Canal, then to support their own lavish life styles. By 1875, the debt had increased to 100 million British pounds and it required more than two thirds of all Egyptian revenues to keep the debts serviced. The financial condition of Egypt was thus a mirror image of that of the Ottoman Empire. When the Egyptians defaulted in their debt payments, the European powers formed the Egyptian Debt

Commission with the authority to confiscate specific revenues. To ensure compliance, the powers imposed an Armenian nationalist as the prime minister of Egypt, while an Englishman became the finance minister and a Frenchman, the minister of public works.

The stipulations of the Egyptian Debt Commission meant the effective surrender of Egyptian sovereignty to the Europeans, which caused a public uproar. Riding on popular resentment, a group of Egyptian army officers forced the Khedive to remove the foreigners in the ministry and appoint Egyptians instead. When the Khedive dismissed the foreigners, the British and French, in consortium, demanded that Khedive Ismail be replaced by his son Tawfiq who was more compliant and more willing to accept the British-French terms. However, since Egypt was technically an Ottoman province, the dismissal of a Khedive still required the consent of the Sultan in Istanbul. Sultan Abdul Hamid at first vacillated, but he had no choice; Ismail was dismissed and Tawfiq was appointed in his place.

The Sultan sent a delegation to Cairo to discuss and resolve the financial issues with the European powers. While negotiations were going on, a combined armada of British and French navies appeared off the coast of Alexandria to put pressure on the negotiators. This was like pouring oil on a fire. Egyptian nationalist sentiment flared up and mob violence claimed the lives of several foreigners. This was the pretext the British were waiting for. Using the excuse of protecting European lives, the British navy bombarded the undefended city of Alexandria, killing several hundred people. The French, who had initially demanded military action against Egypt, became concerned that a combined assault would only propel Britain into a dominant position in Egypt and pulled out of the alliance. Undaunted, a British force landed in Alexandria and after occupying the city, moved on Cairo. On September 3, 1882, the nationalist Egyptian forces met the invaders at the battle of Tel el Kabir but were defeated. Four days later the British army was in Cairo.

The loss of Tunisia to France and of Egypt to Britain meant that the Ottoman Empire was now an Asian entity consisting of its Anatolian heartland and the Arab provinces of Syria, Iraq and Arabia. The war with Russia and the loss of Egypt and Tunisia had cost the Empire more than 60% of its population. There was a large influx of Muslim refugees from the Balkans. These refugees, having lost everything they had, were extremely hostile to the Christians and were determined to continue their struggle against Russia.

The suffering of the Balkan Muslims elicited sympathy among Muslims elsewhere in the empire and was the first reason for pushing popular opinion in the direction of Islamic solidarity. A second reason for increasing pan-Islamic tendencies was the early upbringing of the Sultan himself. As a young man Sultan Abdul Hamid was trained by the leading ulema and shaykhs of the time. He was a pious man who avoided frivolities, was austere, kept his prayers and observed the injunctions of the Qur'an and Sunnah. By instinct and by training, the Sultan was disposed to seek closer ties with the Muslim world.

The third was an upsurge of revivalist feeling among the Muslims worldwide, expressed most fervently by the Mahdi of the Sudan (d.1884). The Tijaniya movement in the Maghrib and the Sanusiya movement in Libya increased religious fervor amongst the Muslims of North Africa. In Afghanistan and Central Asia, the rhetoric of Jamaluddin Afghani had aroused pan-Islamic passions. In the Caucasus, resistance to Russian aggression was led by the Naqshbandi Sufi tareeqa. With the arrest of Shaykh Shamayl (1854), the movement had gone underground but antipathy towards Russian rule continued.

A fourth reason was popular resentment at the economic exploitation of the empire through public debt and the Capitulations. The public debt, incurred at enormous discounts, crippled the Ottomans, consuming at times as much as 80% of all revenues. The Capitulations were used to obtain favorable

trading terms for mass-produced European goods. The young and undercapitalized Ottoman industries could not compete with the European products, so the empire stayed primarily a supplier of raw materials to Europe while consuming goods manufactured in Western Europe and America.

Lastly, with the advance of colonialism, vast areas of the Islamic world had come under European domination. France in North Africa, Russia in Central Asia, Britain in India and Austria-Hungary in Bosnia had large Muslim populations under their rule. These powers were as vulnerable with respect to their Muslim subjects as were the Ottomans with respect to their Christian subjects. The Ottoman Sultan was also the Caliph of Islam. He occupied a position in the Islamic religious-political space similar to that of the Pope in Rome with respect to Roman Catholics. The prestige of this position could be used to pressure the Christian European powers and make them take their hands off the only remaining independent Islamic state.

Conviction, hardened by realpolitik, impelled the Sultan to don the mantle of caliph with unapologetic openness. Abdul Hamid made a concerted effort to cultivate close relationships with Muslims not just in the empire but in Muslim India and Central Asia as well. He insisted on exercising his privilege, as caliph, of appointing the principal religious dignitaries in the Balkans. Writers like Namuk Kamal emphasized the Islamic origins of the empire and the contributions that the Turks had made to the continuing unfolding of Islamic civilization. The Sultan made it a point to go for Friday congregational prayers at the Aya Sophia in an open carriage so that the public would see him. Ramadan, the month of fasting, became a special month of celebration. Each evening, before breaking the fast at sunset, the Sultan sat on a brocade chair in the hall of audience. Lining the hall on either side were rows of shaykhs, ulema and visiting dignitaries. The Sultan made it a point to invite some commoners to join him for the breaking of the fast so as to establish religious rapport with the masses.

The European powers viewed these moves with suspicion but were powerless to stop them. Implied in this assertive religious posture was the threat that any further moves against the domains of the caliph might result in a worldwide uprising of Muslims against their colonial masters. Wherever there was the slightest injury to Muslims, whether it was in Russia, British India, or French Africa, the Sultan sent a note of protest to the concerned power, thereby earning the respect and religious loyalty of Muslims worldwide. The British were particularly concerned about the huge number of Muslims in India and made their own propaganda efforts to portray themselves as friends and protectors of the Ottoman Empire. The Sultan welcomed Muslim dignitaries from all over the world into his palace where they were received with the honor and prestige reserved for heads of state. One of the principal dignitaries so received was Jamaluddin Afghani, a reformer from Afghanistan, who traveled throughout the Muslim world to forge political and cultural unity among Muslims. Religious fervor rose and the Sultan won the support of the ulema worldwide and established his legitimacy in the eyes of a majority of his subjects and also of a large number of Muslims globally. Muslims around the world looked to him for guidance in matters ranging from religious observances to the wearing of the fez.

The benefit of this assertive religious posture was that it kept the European powers off balance for more than a quarter century. The empire was at relative peace. The European powers, instead of seeking military occupation and colonial rule, were content to compete with each other for economic benefits, raw materials and markets. The price paid for this pan-Islamic tilt was that it took away whatever pretence the empire had as a multi-religious state. The disaffection of the Christian minorities grew, even as the reforms of the *tanzimat* gathered momentum, providing equal opportunities for the *millets*.

Sultan Abdul Hamid was convinced that the only way to modernize the empire was through a centralized structure directed by his own person. This conviction was reinforced by the events of the first two years of his reign. He was deeply disappointed by Grand Vizier Midhat Pasha, widely credited as

the father of the Ottoman Parliament, over his handling of negotiations at the Istanbul Conference of 1876. Midhat's own experience with the European powers had led him to take a hard stand at the Conference against the better counsel of the Sultan in favor of continued negotiations and compromise. The breakdown of the Conference led to the Russian invasion and a humiliating defeat. In addition, the politicians in the Parliament were more interested in enhancing their own political careers than finding solutions to the pressing issues facing the empire. The Christian nationalists used the floor of the Parliament as a platform to air their own demands for autonomy for their regions, or independence. In January 1878, with the Russian army approaching Istanbul, the Sultan sought the counsel of the Parliament to invite the British fleet into Istanbul harbor as a precautionary deterrent to a Russian occupation of the capital. Instead of counsel, the Sultan got lectures from petty citizens about the conduct of the war. A disillusioned Sultan lost his faith in the integrity of the bureaucrats and concluded that the empire was not yet ready for parliamentary democracy, that the best chance for a survival of the empire was through a centralized structure directed by himself. In February 1878, he dissolved the Parliament in accordance with provisions of the Constitution and directly assumed all powers.

What emerged in place of parliamentary rule was a highly centralized structure centered on the palace. The Sultan was the focus of authority and power. The centralization of power required that there be intermediaries between himself and the bureaucrats. The Sultan drew upon a model that had evolved in the earlier Islamic empires. Just as earlier caliphs had used hajibs to distance themselves from the ammah, so did Sultan Abdul Hamid use the mabayeen (intermediaries) to convey his wishes to the civil servants. Mabayeen means in between. This was the equivalent of the hajibs who had, in earlier centuries, separated the caliphs and Sultans from the ammah, the common folk.

The principal mabayeen and the chief of staff of the Sultan's staff, was called mabayeen mushiri. Between 1878 and 1897 this post was held by Ghazi Osman Pasha, who had distinguished himself at the battle of Plevna (1877) and had earned the respect and confidence of the Sultan. He was a distinguished general. Ghazi Osman Pasha was a principal influence on the Sultan in matters relating to the army and foreign affairs. The mabayeen mushiri chaired the Privy Council, consisting of retired army officers and high-ranking bureaucrats, who provided advice to the Sultan on important matters. Next in closeness to the Sultan was the katip or the scribe who communicated the Sultan's commands to the bureaucrats and influenced the Sultan through his involvement in the communication process. The harem had its own influence on the Sultan through the chief eunuch or the agha. These three positions were the principal mabayeen between the Sultan and the outside world.

Abdul Hamid kept a close watch on all of his appointees, as well as on the extensive bureaucracy in the state, through an efficient system of police and spy network. The police functions were centralized and the department not only had the authority to maintain law and order, but to conduct surveillance on travelers, the press and writers. The Sultan, to keep himself informed of the minutest happenings in the empire, entrusted the Police Ministry only to his most trusted confidants. In addition, various advisors served him in matters of personal finance and foreign affairs.

The executive, legislative and judiciary functions were combined in the office of the grand vizier. The grand vizier was responsible for coordinating the affairs of state and of the work of the ministries. The grand vizier presided over ministerial meetings and chaired the important commissions established by the Sultan such as the commission on refugees. Among the important ministries were the Ministry of Internal affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the War Ministry, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Awqaf and the Ministry of Public Works. The legislative arm of the state, the Council of State, worked through the grand vizier, as did the Ministry of Justice, which provided oversight for the secular courts. One of the most successful of the grand viziers

during the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid was Mehmet Sait Pasha. He served in that capacity seven times between 1878 and 1909 and was twice called upon by the Young Turks to assume the position of the chief executive after Abdul Hamid was deposed.

The Shaykh ul Islam, as the chief religious functionary of the state, had oversight authority over mosques, madrasas, orphanages and religious publications. He interpreted the Shariah and ensured that its dictates were implemented in the Shariah courts. The shaykh, along with the grand vizier, the khedive of Egypt and the prince of Bulgaria formed the highest echelon of functionaries at the court of the Sultan.

The modernization programs sought by Abdul Hamid required sufficient funds for their implementation. The Sultan was hamstrung by the enormous accumulated debt that he had inherited. In 1876, the foreign debt alone stood at over 12 billion kurush. The Russian-Turkish war of 1876-1878 and its aftermath added another 4 billion kurush to this enormous burden. Together with unpaid interest, the total foreign debt stood at 23 billion kurush. In addition, the internal debt stood at another four billion kurush. Interest payments alone consumed more than 80% of the budget.

There was a real possibility that the Ottomans would succumb to this debt burden just as had Egypt and Tunisia. Sultan Abdul Hamid's first priority was to renegotiate the loans in conjunction with much needed economic reforms. Through negotiations, the total foreign debt was reduced from 23 billion to 12 billion kurush. The interest payments were negotiated down to about 20% of the budget. In return, specific revenues from tobacco, spirits, silk, salt, document fees and tributes from Bulgaria, Montenegro, Cyprus and Greece were turned over a Public Debt Commission consisting of representatives from the principal European powers and Ottoman functionaries.

To compensate for the lost revenues, the Sultan embarked upon a wide range of economic reforms. He instituted a budgetary process and established an audit department. The department heads were encouraged to trim their budgets. The Sultan removed his personal expenses from the budget and met them through his own resources. The privy purses of the princes were reduced. To increase revenues, agriculture and industrialization were encouraged. An agricultural bank was established to provide low interest loans to farmers. Surplus from the bank was used to finance education, to meet extraordinary budget requirements such as refugee resettlement and to pay for modernization of the armed forces. Foreign investment was encouraged for building railroads, telegraph lines and building silk, tobacco and fabric processing factories. The Hijaz railroad, linking Damascus with Madina, was built entirely with domestic funds and contributions from Muslims worldwide, facilitating the movement of pilgrims from the eastern Mediterranean regions to Mecca and Madina. The net result of these reforms was that the Sultan succeeded in holding debt payments to about 7% of the budget while increasing revenues by almost 40% between 1878 and 1908, the last year of his reign. A side benefit of industrialization was that the European powers were deflected from seeking political military hegemony over the Ottomans to economic competition for mutual benefit.

The needs of the armed forces, and a civilian bureaucracy required to administer the vast empire, demanded an efficient, trained work force. Sultan Abdul Hamid knew that the Ottomans could not catch up with the West unless the educational system was reformed and expanded. Education was therefore given the highest priority. The Sultan saw it that the education reforms that were initiated during the *tanzeemat* were completed during his reign. Since the debt burden was overwhelming, the Sultan invested from his personal resources to upgrade the standards of education in the Muslim religious schools, expanding their syllabus to include instruction in physics and mathematics. The *millet* schools as well as the missionary schools run by foreigners witnessed a similar increase in attendance. A surtax of 39% on agricultural produce was imposed, with two thirds of the revenues so generated earmarked for

agricultural improvements and the remaining one-third for public education. Enrollment in the army Rushdiye schools was greatly expanded. The army took the lead in improving technical education. With a better cadre of students available, the War Academy, the Army Engineering School, the Army Medical School and the Merchant Marine School embarked on a program of modernization. Army instructors from Germany and agricultural instructors from France were brought in to upgrade the faculty. Enrollment in the technical schools increased four fold. The University of Istanbul was reopened in 1900 with the faculties of Mathematics, Physical Sciences, Religion and Social Sciences. Performance-based examinations replaced the old system of favoritism for admission to the technical schools and the university. The Sultan's educational reforms opened the doors to children of the less affluent classes giving them an opportunity to compete for the higher posts in civil service and the army. Predictably, the rise of an educated class which sprang from the lower ranks of society gave rise to demands for increased political participation and ultimately led to the Young Turk revolution and the overthrow of the Sultan himself (1909).

The greatest tribute to Sultan Abdul Hamid is that even today many Muslims around the world invoke his name with nostalgia for a bygone era when a venerated caliph provided a semblance of political focus for the global Islamic community and gave it a sense of universal brotherhood. Muslims as far away as India and Nigeria looked to him for guidance in matters small and large. His office radiated religious, political, cultural and social influence across the Islamic world. The Ottoman fez became not only a hat for the Turks but for Indian Muslims, Egyptians, Moroccans and Malaysians. His failure was that he pursued his modernization program through a highly centralized, personal style, which opened him to charges of despotism. He came on the stage of history at a time when the empire was bankrupt and could not defend itself against its many enemies. In the face of aggression from without and sabotage from within, hammered by forces of nationalism and weakened by internal terrorism from some of the millets, he waged a valiant battle to preserve what was left of the once mighty empire. In this effort, he was partially successful, preserving its Islamic core for forty years and keeping the empire out of a major war for as long. But his methods and the internal tensions built up by the very modernization processes he had fostered, finally did him in.

One Response to *Sultan Abdul Hamid II*

Sultan Abdül Hamid – Hero or villain? | Turkey File says:

August 8, 2015 at 3:14 pm

[...] according to Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, seeing himself as the inheritor of a sacred trust to preserve his 600-year-old Empire, Abdül [...]

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