



## **Reflections of Midhat Pasha's Modernist Thoughts and Practices among Iranian Political Elites**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Midhat Pasha is one of the renowned Ottoman statesmen of 19<sup>th</sup> century. He is known as the father of the First Constitutional system and Author of the 1876 Constitution. The present paper is an attempt to study the reflections of his thoughts and practices among Iranian elites and statesmen of his time. The findings of the research indicate that although his ideas and practices drew the attention of many Iranian statesmen and intellectuals, they could never be considered a base for a major change in political atmosphere in Iran due to structural obstacles. Nevertheless, Pasha's measures drew the attention of Qajar reformist as well as conservative statesmen who closely watched the developments in the Ottoman Empire.*

**Keywords:** *Midhat Pasha, modernism, Iran, intellectual, elite, Ottoman Empire*

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## Mithat Paşa'nın İranlı Devlet adamları üzerinde etkili olan Modernist Düşünceleri

### ÖZET

*Osmanlı Devleti'nin 19.yy'da ileri gelen devlet adamlarından birisi Mithat Paşa'dır. O, Birinci Meşrûtiyet'in babası ünvanıyla ünlü; ve 1876 Anayasası'nın kurucusu olarak da tanınmaktadır. Bu makale de, onun düşünce ve anlayışının İranlı devlet adamları üzerindeki etkileri değerlendirilecektir. Araştırmalar sırasında ortaya çıkarılan bulgular, Mithat Paşa'nın düşüncelerinin ve uygulamalarının birçok İranlı devlet adamının ilgisini çektiğini göstermektedir. Fakat İran'ın sosyal ve siyasi yapısı gereği bu düşünceler, orada hiç bir zaman etkili olamamıştır. Buna mükabil Mithat Paşa'nın çalışmalarına, hem Kaçar'lı mûhafazakâr, hem de reformist devlet adamları dikkât etmekte ve onunla ilgili haberleri, takip etmekteydiler.*

**Anahtar kavramlar:** Mithat Paşa, Reform, İran, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Elit kesim, Entelektüel



## INTRODUCTION

Iran and Ottoman Empire, due to geographical proximity and many historical commonalities, have always been mutually influenced by their respective cultural, political, social and economic developments. Hence, mutual influence is undeniable. As much as the Iranian society has been influenced by developments in the Ottoman Empire, the latter has been influenced by the developments in Iran. Ottoman statesmen, intellectuals and traders were the intermediary links between the two societies. The trips, migrations and exchanges between the Iranian and Ottoman peoples in the shortest possible time transferred the impacts of developments in one society to the other.

Due to the proximity of Ottoman Empire to the West, the Turks before the Iranians were exposed to international developments. Naturally, they faced the challenges of encountering the Western and modern developments before the Iranians did. Either positive or negative, this reality should not be ignored when the relations of the two nations are studied. Given the above considerations, a cursory look at the contemporary history of the two countries would demonstrate a kind of similarity in the history of their developments and thoughts, which underlines the existence of common problems and questions among the elites and scholars of the two states.

The Iranian and Ottoman political and intellectual elites have had many exchanges in different periods. Amir Kabir, Mirza Hossein Khan Sepahsalar, Malkam...are among the Iranian thinkers who had close ties with Ottoman thinkers such as Mustafa Rashid Pasha, Ali Pasha, Foad Pasha and Midhat Pasha. The present paper is an attempt to study the reflection and impact of political thoughts and actions of one contemporary Ottoman statesman, Midhat Pasha, on his Iranian contemporary thinkers.

The personality of Midhat Pasha, as a modernist administrator of the Ottoman administration, who pursued reformist changes for consolidation of the Ottoman Empire against domestic and foreign threats, was always admired by reformist and modernist Iranian intellectuals such as Mirza Hossein Khan Sepahsalar, Mirza Malkam Khan... On the other hand, the executives who were opposed to change and reform, both in Iran and Ottoman Empire, tried to depict a negative image of Midhat Pasha.



It should be borne in mind that since Midhat Pasha was the Ottoman grand vizier in 19<sup>th</sup> century and played a significant role in the developments of the Ottoman Empire, some of his measures, particularly when he was the governor of Baghdad, were not approved of by the Iranians and hence some of the Iranian historians have harshly criticized him for those measures. Surprisingly, Nateq maintains that one of the “calamities for Iran” was Midhat Pasha’s appointment as Grand Vizier or chief minister in 1872 .However, his complaint is against some of the measures taken by Midhat Pasha along Iranian borders to provoke the Urumiyeh Christians as well as Midhat’s encroachment upon some parts of the Iranian northwestern border territories Nateq, maintains that these measures were a sign of “Midhat Pasha’s deep animosity against Iran”. As a matter of fact, Midhat’s measures should be analyzed within the broader chain of Iran-Ottoman border disputes, not beyond that. Therefore, it seems that Homa Nateq’s assessment of Pasha’s measures and his projection as an adamant enemy of Iran who wanted to “wreck havoc with the fate of Iranians”<sup>1</sup> is not fair, for one cannot find any other referent for this issue than Midhat Pasha playing the role of an Ottoman administrator in Iran-Ottoman border disputes<sup>2</sup>. Even one can say that Midhat Pasha was in favor of modernist reforms in Iran and made some efforts in this respect.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, he established friendly relations with Mirza Hossein Khan Sepahsalar and warmly welcomed and hosted Nasser al-Din Shah in his trip to the holy Shrines and made his utmost efforts to win the support of the Iranian monarch for the reformist front in Iran, headed by figures such as Mirza Hossein Khan in order to prepare the grounds for reforms in Iran<sup>4</sup>

Without any doubt, one of the main links for transmission of ideas and thoughts of Midhat Pasha to Iran was Mirza Hossein Khan Sepahsalar. For about twelve years (1275-1287 Hegira), he served in different positions such as plenipotentiary ambassador and ambassador of Iran in Istanbul. Mirza Hossein Khan arrived in Istanbul, nineteen years after the beginning of reforms (Tanzimat era) and two years after the issuance of the decree for reforms. During his stay in Istanbul he developed friendly relations with luminaries such as Ali Pasha, Monif Pasha, Foad Pasha and Midhat Pasha and was a close witness to attempts of the said bureaucrats to reform their administration (government system). During his service as Iranian envoy to Istanbul, Mirza Hossein Khan was influenced by the reforms and also reported them to the Iranian

<sup>1</sup>Homa, Nateq, *Cultural Record of the West in Iran (Persian)*, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed., Mo’aseseh Entesharati Ma’aser Pajuhan., 2001, Tehran, pp..207

<sup>2</sup>Fereydun ,Adamiyat, *The Idea of Progress and Rule of Law in Sepahsalar Era (Persian)*, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed., Kharazami Publishers. 1972, Tehran, pp.419

<sup>3</sup> See: Adamiyat: 1972, pp. 217.

<sup>4</sup> Nasser al-Din Shah Qajar, *Travelogue of Trip to Holy Shrines (Persian)*, 1984, Tehran, Attar.



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government. Hence, his reformist ideas which he followed after coming back to Iran from Istanbul, were under the influence the thoughts of luminaries such as Foad Pasha, Ali Pasha and Midhat Pasha.<sup>1</sup> In his letters, he supported the reformist currents in the Ottoman Empire. He also supported establishment of the Parliament, preparation of the constitution and Constitutional government and somehow encouraged the Iranian government to lunch reforms in order to get out of the existing crises (for some of these letters and reports, see: <sup>2</sup> Some of his reports are given below.

.....“These days the Western governments firmly force the Ottoman government to launch various reforms in governmental affairs. Although the insistence and emphasis of the foreign governments in the beginning seemed to be unpleasant and undesirable, these reforms will finally lead to redemption, progress and welfare...because they themselves would not willingly undertake major reforms as it is prevailing in the West. Since most of the countries because of their own interests do not want Istanbul’s position to get out of the authority of the Ottoman Empire and fall into the hands of another country, they insist Istanbul to reform their structures in accordance with the needs of the modern age for the survival of the Ottoman Empire itself... What I mean to say is that the insistence of the Western countries on Ottoman reforms will finally be in the interests of the Ottoman government and nation.”<sup>3</sup> After his return to Iran, Mirza Hossein Khan, following the Ottoman reforms line, established mosques, schools and libraries <sup>4</sup>

The simultaneity of premiership of Moshir ul-Dulleh in Iran and Midhat Pasha (both were Grand Viziers in their respective countries) in the Ottoman Empire raised hopes among many intellectuals and modernists that the presence of the two figures as the heads of government of the two countries would lead to desirable developments and improvement in the sociopolitical conditions of Iran and the Ottoman Empire. Mirza Malkam Khan, a sincere friend of Mirza Hossein Khan and an admirer of Midhat Pasha, paid attention to this event and in an optimistic letter to Moshir ul-Dulleh encouraged him to make maximum use of the existing opportunity:

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<sup>1</sup> Adamiyat tried to understate the influence of Ottoman developments on Mirza Hossein Khan, but in many places he has directly but unwillingly has referred to this influence. See: Fereydun Adamiyat, , *The Idea of Freedom and Prelude to Constitutional Movement*, 1961,P. 58; Adamiyat, 1972, p. 127; pp. 156-157; For the influence of Ottoman developments on Mirza Hossein Khan also see: Khan, Malek Sassani, 1975, pp. 73-95

<sup>2</sup> Adamiyat, 1972, pp. 13,134, 136

<sup>3</sup> Adamiyat, pp.134,

<sup>4</sup> Haji Zein ul-Abedin, Maraghei, *Ibrahim Beik’s Memoires (Persian)*, 1978,Sepideh,pp.91; Ahmad Khan Malek Sassani, *Policymakers of Qajar Era (Persian)*, 1975, Tehran, Hedayat and Babak Publishers.,pp.95



“The breaking news is that Midhat Pasha has been appointed as Grand Vizier and hence there is an opportunity for you in two regards...[Midhat Pasha] will undertake and perform many great tasks, which will be new for us. One of our privileges is that you are our Grand Vizier...Midhat Pasha will take great measures to reform the Ottoman government and will be your rival in the world. Now, the Western observers will pay attention to the comparison between the two Grand Viziers...In sum, a desirable arena for rivalry has emerged. If he stays in power, he will undertake major tasks. He will extend railroads to many places and will construct a bank in every Ottoman village... Aren't these events enough to prove that our today's world is totally different from that of forty years ago?<sup>1</sup> (It seems that Mirza Malkam Khan had a more precise understanding of political thoughts and ideas of Midhat Pasha. As an admirer of Midhat Pasha, Malkam Khan, in some of his letters to Iran's ministry of foreign affairs, reported a precise analysis (of weak and strong points) of Midhat Pasha's political performance. Regarding the Western approach to reforms in the Ottoman Empire, Malkam wrote:

“The point that the renowned Western interventionists make is that it is unfair and below human dignity that the Western governments remain indifferent to evils and oppressions stemming from the type of administration of the best territory of the world. The new idea is that they don't merely support the Christian nations, but they maintain that they should free the oppressed peoples, either Muslim or Christian, from the clutches of oppressors. This is why they either uproot the Ottoman government or will force it to introduce major changes in its principles<sup>2</sup>

Analyzing Midhat Pasha's attempts to reform the Ottoman governmental system, Malkam Khan writes:

“During a few days of his tenure as Grand Vizier, Midhat Pasha performed disciplined tasks. Although in my opinion his Constitution suffered from serious shortcomings and was very harmful, it was a deliberate measure to repel the interference of Western governments. In order to undermine the interventions of the West, particularly in order to repel and defeat Russia, it was not possible to have a better Asian constitution than what he introduced. All Westerners argued that the Ottoman government should not be pushed further by asking it to give guarantees and should be left to itself for some time to decide independently to check the outcome of the

<sup>1</sup> Ibrahim, Safai, *Historical Letters (Persian)*, 1976, Tehran, Babak., pp.14-16

<sup>2</sup> Nourani, Fereshteh, *A Study of Mirza Malkam Khan Nazem ul-Mulk's Thoughts (Persian)*, 1973, Tehran, Sherkat Sahami Ketabhai Jibi and Franklin Publishers., pp.161



new reforms... What has is really astonishing and has disturbed the Russian government is that the Ottoman government due to this constitution is much ahead of Russia in freedom and reforms”<sup>1</sup>

Although Mirza Malkam Khan offered a proper analysis of reformist programs of Midhat Pasha, his optimism about Mirza Hossein Khan and his ability to use the available opportunity in order to launch reform programs in Iran similar to those launched by Midhat Pasha in the Ottoman Empire was not concomitant with the historical developments in Iran, for the Iranian Court was not interested in structural changes and reform. For instance, Mirza Hossein Khan tried to expose Nasser al-Din Shah to developments in Europe and Ottoman Empire and the advantages of the rule of law and Parliament through arranging his trips to Europe and holy Shrines. Also by arranging the Shah’s trips to the holy Shrines, Mirza Hossein, with the help of Midhat Pasha, tried to bring to the notice of the Shah the achievements accomplished through reforms launched by Midhat Pasha in Baghdad to encourage him to promote rule of law and reform plans in Iran. However, the Shah was enchanted with those achievements only temporarily and immediately after his return to Iran forgot everything. The following is one of the reports of Amin ul-Dulleh on the results of a trip of Nasser al-Din shah to the holy Shrines:

“All are waiting to see the results of Nasser al-Din Shah’s observations in the Ottoman Empire regarding the shortcomings and defects of the political system in Iran and the achievements in the Ottoman Empire as well as the new points he noticed... And His vehicle arrived, he dismissed Mostoufi al-Mamalik and sent him to Iraq which was his homeland. Moshir ul-Dulleh was appointed as minister of Justice and in charge of Endowment Organization; there were some changes in the government offices without making any fundamental changes. One of the confidants of the Shah narrated: among the notes in the Shah’s travelogue, I came across a note regarding his trip to Baghdad writing: a flag must be hoisted at the top of the soldiers’ tents. Seemingly, the governmental concepts and principles of governance which have been implemented during the mission of Midhat Pasha that has increased the income of the Ottoman Empire from Iraq to an amount equal to the entire tax collected in Iran as well as the reforms in the army, schools, shipbuilding, textiles, etc. all in all have skipped the sublime

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<sup>1</sup>See: Malkam Khan, 1294 hegira, in Nourani, pp.161



vision of His Majesty who has only noted down the hoisting of a red flag at the top of the troops tents”<sup>1</sup>

Those at the top of the power structure in Iran did not have any interest in political change and reforms. Hence, from the very beginning, the Court and courtiers approached the reform plans of Sepahsalar through suspicion. Finally, the opponents through plots and seditions prepared the grounds for his dismissal by the Shah from the political scene. Ironically, Midhat Pasha’s fate in the Ottoman Empire was similar to that of Sepahsalar, but was more tragic.

The opponents of Sepahsalar accused him of imitating the developments of the Ottoman Empire, particularly he was accused of following Midhat Pasha, who was known among Iranian courtiers as a person who betrayed his benefactor (Sultan Abdul-Aziz). The opponents of reforms in Iran were inclined to accuse Midhat Pasha and his colleagues as the main culprit in the death of Sultan Abdul-Aziz to undermine the position of Iranian reformists through tarnishing the image of Midhat Pasha because the Iranian reformists were trying to duplicate his plans in Iran. One of these opponents was Mohammad Hassan Khan E’temad ul-Saltaneh who was at odds with Mirza Hossein Khan and of course was not interested in Midhat Pasha either. In some of his writings he clearly accused Midhat Pasha of killing Sultan Abdul-Aziz<sup>2, 3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Amin ul-Douleh, *Political Memoires, compiled by Hafez Farmanfarmaian, under the supervision of Iraj Afshar*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., 1991, Tehran, Amir Kabir.pp,28

<sup>2</sup> E’temad ul-Saltaneh, Mohammad Hassan Khan, Hegira, *Al-Ma’athir wal-Athar*, 1311H, Dar ul-Taba’ah Doulati.pp,279

<sup>3</sup> It is pertinent here to mention that some of the Iranian officials considered Midhat Pasha as a symbol of reckless confrontation with the Shah and a role-model for those who were disappointed at reforms and were thinking of overthrowing the king. The following is a passage from the Memoires of Ehtesham ul-Saltaneh (grandson of Fath Ali Shah), a renowned statesman of the Qajar era: “while we were visiting the house of Muzafar ul-Din Shah and were discussing the establishment of Parliament Club and its management, we also touched the country’s affairs and the Shah’s plots. It was said that with the survival of the King, the Parliament and Constitutionalism are both threatened every moment. I said: ‘I am committed to what I propose and am responsible for its implementation. However, the burden of persuading the Shah to resign will remain on your shoulders; in case he refrains from resignation, I personally commit myself to prepare the grounds for his removal. They asked how do commit yourself to individually convince the Shah to resign or abdicate? I said: ‘...As soon as you assure me, I straight forward ask for an appointment with the Shah from here and will tell him the reasons why his insistence and resistance if not causing the dismantling of monarchism in Iran will definitely cause him and his sons to lose the throne and crown (their reign). I will tell him: You had better resign yourself, appoint the Crown Prince as successor and also appoint a vicegerent until the Crown Princes comes of age and in order to take all aspects into consideration it would be advisable to appoint Alireza Khan Azud ul-Mulk as vicegerent. In this case, enough salary will be allocated to you which be approved by the Parliament to be paid to you for lifetime. I will personally accompany your delegation up to the border’. If he rejects my benevolent proposal and resists, since the Zarand division which is in charge of



However, some Ottoman historians such as Ismail Haqi Uzun Charshili, Enver Zia Karal...maintain that the Sultan committed suicide. On the other hand, E'temad ul-Saltanah was inclined to introduce Midhat Pasha as a killer of his benefactor. Through the same manner, he questioned the credibility of Moshir ul-Duleh who was an advocate of Midhat's thoughts in Iran. In the course of the 1298 H. developments, only one day after the dubious death of Sepahsalar, he wrote:

“Today, the king was saying, he [Mirza Hossein Khan] disrespected me [Shah] a lot...The Shah was expressing his regret only superficially, but he was not really grieved, for he said: this man was in a situation that only death was its solution and he was always disturbing us – he was somehow like Midhat Pasha. It meant betraying his benefactor”<sup>1</sup> E'temad ul-Saltanah, ignored the announcement of Constitution by Midhat Pasha and even did not mention this significant event which took place in Iran's neighborhood in the *Iran* newspaper which was a government-run newspaper<sup>2</sup> under his supervision. On the other hand, he fully covered the arrest and trial of Midhat Pasha in the aftermath of Sultan Abdul Aziz's death both in the *Iran* newspaper and in his works.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, *Akhtar* newspaper besides fully covering reformation developments in the Ottoman Empire, published a translation of the 1876 Ottoman Constitution<sup>4</sup>

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security of Tehran is under the supervision of my brother, before going to the king, I will make the necessary arrangements to prepare the division to watch the royal palace and be ready for further measures. In that case, I will be the Midhat Pasha of the Shah and will force him to resign by relying on military force” (Memoires of Ehtesahm ul-Saltaneh).

<sup>1</sup> E'temad ul-Saltaneh, Mohammad Hassan Khan, 1971, Daily Memoires of ,pp.140-141

<sup>2</sup> See: Rezvani, Mohammad Esmail, *Introduction to Iran Newspaper*, 1995, Vol. 1.

<sup>3</sup> See: E'temad ul-Saltaneh, Tarikh Montazem Nasser, Vol. 3, PP. 2028-2029; *Rouznameh Khaterat*, Events of 1298 hegira; Al-Ma'athir wal-Athar, P. 279.

<sup>4</sup> Akhtar, No. 4, Volume 3, Muharam 1294 hegira, Akhtar newspaper ,1999, Tehran, Iran National Library.



## CONCLUSION

The Iranian modernists and intellectuals had a special interest in Midhat Pasha and his reforms and tried to somehow launch similar reform programs in Iran. Those who could help and the ones in power (such as Mirza Hossein Khan Sepahsalar) spared no efforts to accomplish this task, but did not achieve much. The reason for their failure was structural obstacles that did not allow modernization and reformation of the Iranian government system. If the Qajar monarchy had to agree with the reforms, in the first place, it should have agreed with limitation of the king's power through establishment of the Parliament, cabinet, and other democratic institutions to pave the way for distribution of power. But, a despotic king only thinks of totalitarianism which is in contradiction with the establishment of institutions that limit the king's power. Hence, despite the arrival and diffusion of the modernist ideas in Iran which were similar to those of Midhat Pasha in the Ottoman Empire, these ideas, due to structural hurdles, did not lead to fundamental changes in Iran.

It goes without saying that the modernist ideas of Midhat Pasha faced serious obstacles in the Ottoman Empire and Hamidi despotism by limiting the activities of neo-Ottomanists and other constitutionalists contained the 1876 Constitutional movement, preventing any major change in the Ottoman governmental structure. Also by banishing the constitutionalists, including Midhat Pasha, and his tragic assassination in Taef, he added another tragedy to the pages of Ottoman reformation history.



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