

OSMANLI ARAŞTIRMALARI
V

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HALİL İNALCIK — NEJAT GÖYÜNÇ

HEATH W. LOWRY

THE JOURNAL OF OTTOMAN STUDIES
V

İstanbul - 1986

MIDHAT PAŞA AND OTTOMAN FOREIGN RELATIONS

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Midhat Paşa is best known for his work in domestic administration. His major achievements were probably the successful administration of the Tuna and the Baghdad vilayets, and the elaboration of the constitution of 1876. Yet at certain points in his career, Midhat Paşa had an important role to play in Ottoman foreign relations. This is particularly true of his short but eventful grand vezirate from 19 December 1876 to 5 February 1877. It is true also, though to a lesser extent, of his period as governor of the Tuna vilayet from 1864 to 1867, and of his brief tenure as grand vezir in 1872.

Until his appointment as vali in 1864, Ahmed Şefik Midhat had served as clerk or secretary in various government offices and on various government commissions. By 1861 he became vali of the eyalet of Niş. All his experience was in domestic affairs. He had spent only six months outside the Ottoman Empire, having visited Paris, London, Vienna, and Brussels during a leave of absence or vacation in 1868, when he was already 35 years old. He began to learn French at about that time, and his knowledge of it was never perfect¹. Compared to contemporaries of his like Âli Paşa, Fuad Paşa, Safvet Paşa, and others, he was always at a disadvantage with regard to foreign experience and the knowledge of French. But he was the equal of any of them in his devotion to the Ottoman state and to its preservation and improvement. He was less a negotiator than a man of action, and his actions to preserve and strengthen the state brought him sometimes to a point where he

¹ Ali Haydar Midhat, ed., *Midhat Paşa: Hayat-ı siyasiyesi*, vol. 1: *Tab-sıra-i ibret* (Istanbul, 1325), pp. 12-13.

had a strong impact on Ottoman foreign relations. His service as vali in the Balkans illustrates this point.

As vali of the Tuna vilayet, with his capital at Ruşuk, Midhat showed himself to be a vigorous opponent of any Bulgarian separatist movement. He had already embarked on this path as governor in Niş. Bulgarian nationalism, meanwhile, was increasing in strength. Furthermore, it was supported and encouraged from outside the boundaries of the new Tuna vilayet, by groups operating from the privileged provinces of Serbia and Wallachia (Eflak). In addition, there was pan-Slav support from Russia and, probably, also from the Russian ambassador in Istanbul, Ignatyev. All this agitation threatened to hasten the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Midhat acted against it in several ways. One was by ruthless suppression of revolt, wherever it occurred. He got a reputation for severity from this². Another, and more general way, was to provide just administration and to promote economic development, so that the inhabitants of the vilayet would not be tempted to join in rebellion³. A third way was to try to establish in the vilayet a good, modern school system so that Bulgarians would not be sent to Russia for schooling and so be influenced by Russian and pan-Slavic ideas⁴. Although some useful reform in elementary education was achieved, the complete system that Midhat envisioned was not carried out in his time.

The result of his three years as vali of the Tuna vilayet was to establish Midhat as a strong Ottoman patriot and a firm anti-Russian. The grand vezir Âli Paşa told the British ambassador in 1867 that Midhat's energetic measures had, he hoped, frustrated Russia's work and countered plans for luring Bulgarians into rebellion⁵. Possibly Russian displeasure with Midhat's actions led Âli

² Alois Hajek, *Bulgarien unter der Türkenherrschaft* (Stuttgart, 1925), pp. 235-36.

³ Midhat's governorship is treated in A.H. Midhat, *Tabsıra-i ibret*, pp. 26-58, in A.H. Midhat, *The Life of Midhat Pasha* (London, 1903), pp. 37-47; and in the account of Midhat's personal secretary, Clician Vassif, *Son Altesse Midhat Pacha* (Paris, 1909), pp. 10-14.

⁴ A.H. Midhat, *Life*, pp. 41-2; idem, *Tabsıra-i ibret*, pp. 42-3.

⁵ Public Record Office, London (hereafter PRO), FO 78/1962, Lyons (Constantinople) to Stanley No. 303, conf., 9 July 1867.

to transfer him in 1867 back to Istanbul, although this is not certain⁶. It may have been that the international tensions became too great because of Midhat's actions. At times he did act abruptly, causing international complaints. The most serious such occasion was when his gendarmes were ordered to seize two Slavic agitators on board an Austrian steamer, the *Germania*, in the Danube. Even though the Austrian consul approved, the gun battle and arrest that ensued aroused much furor⁷. On the other hand, Midhat was cordial to Prince Karl of Romania, and they got along well⁸. It is ironic, after all his anti-Russian activity, that Turks were said to have thought Russia's invasion in 1877-78 was aided by the roads Midhat had built in Bulgaria when he was vali⁹.

Midhat Paşa was next closely involved in Ottoman foreign relations when he was grand vezir, between 31 July and 18 October 1872. He had in the interim spent a year as president of the Council of State, and three years as vali of Baghdad, again occupied almost exclusively with domestic affairs. But when he was appointed grand vezir by Sultan Abdülaziz, he was at once a symbol of a new approach to foreign relations as well as to domestic administration. For the contrast between Midhat Paşa and his rival and opponent whom he replaced, Mahmud Nedim Paşa, could not have been greater. Mahmud Nedim had developed a reputation for chaotic administration and for the constant shifting of officials¹⁰. He also was known for his cooperation with, and reliance on, the Russian ambassador, whose influence was so great that he was sometimes called by the populace «Sultan Ignatyev.» This was the period after the defeat of

6 Andreas D. Mordtmann, *Stambul und das moderne Türkenenthum* (Leipzig, 1877-78), I, pp. 137-38.

7 United States National Archives, State Department Records, Turkey 20, Morris (Constantinople) to Seward No. 224, August 1867; A.H. Midhat, *Life*, pp. 45-46; idem, *Tabsira-i ibret*, pp. 55-58; Sommerville Story, ed., *The Memoirs of Ismail Kemal Bey* (London, 1920). p. 32.

8 *Aus dem Leben König Karls von Rumänien* (Stuttgart, 1894-1900), I, pp. 137-38.

9 Gabriel Charmes, «La situation de la Turquie,» *Revue des deux mondes* 47 (3rd period) (15 October 1881), p. 754.

10 Roderic H. Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire, 1856-1876* (Princeton, 1963), pp. 280-86.

France by Prussia, the period when Russia had successfully denounced the Paris treaty limitations on her Black Sea armaments. French influence at the Porte and the Palace was almost nonexistent now, Russian influence vastly increased, and Mahmud Nedim had accepted this. Midhat Paşa, however, was no less anti-Russian than he had been earlier. Ignatyev knew this. He tried in vain to block Midhat's appointment to the grand vezirate. Having failed in that, he tried to get rid of Midhat. When it happened, Ignatyev gave himself credit for Midhat's fall, even though it seems more likely that the Khedive Ismail and Palace officials were the real cause¹¹.

Midhat's most significant efforts to combat Russian influence took the form of trying to strengthen the Empire and to hold it together. But his grand vezirate was short — eighty days — so that his actual accomplishment was little. The major task was to keep the various peoples of the Empire, especially of the Balkans, from trying to set up autonomous or independent regimes, or from cooperating with outside powers in rebellion against the Sultan. Ignatyev, of course, was trying to encourage such risings in various spots of the Balkans. He also felt that Russia must control Istanbul, either by controlling the Ottoman government or by annexation, and he wanted to make the Greeks, Armenians, and Bulgarians of the capital into Russian allies in case the Sultan should become anti-Russian¹². Gorchakov, however, the Russian foreign minister, claimed to want the Ottoman Empire kept intact. But he advised Rustem Paşa, the Ottoman ambassador to St. Petersburg, that the best way for the Ottoman Empire to preserve its independence was through an entente with Russia to escape the pressure of western powers; he was sure, said Gorchakov, that the Sultan realized this¹³.

11 PRO, FO 78/2218, Elliot (Constantinople) to Granville No. 162 conf., 30 August 1872; Angelo Sammarco, *Histoire de l'Égypte moderne* (Cairo, 1937), III, pp. 217-19; N.P. Ignatyev, «Zapiski Grapha N.P. Ignatyeva (1864-1874),» *Izvestia Ministerstva Inostrannykh Del*, 1915, I, pp. 148-50.

12 Alexander Onou, «The Memoirs of Count N. Ignatyev,» *Slavonic Review* 10: 29 (December 1931), p. 389.

13 Dışişleri Bakanlığı Hazine-i Evrak, Istanbul (hereafter DBHE), dosya: 452, Rustem (Hombourg) private to Mehmed Cemil Paşa, 14 September 1872.

Midhat's plans to preserve the Empire against Russian-sponsored partition, or too close a Russian embrace, went in two directions. One was preliminary discussion of a constitutional government of some sort. This idea was not far advanced before Midhat was dismissed; it never came to the stage of a concrete proposal. The other direction was to form a federal structure for the Empire, modeled somewhat after the newly-created German Empire of 1871. In this scheme, the privileged provinces like Serbia and Romania would be tied to the Ottoman Empire in the same way as Bavaria and Baden were tied to the German Empire. They would have considerable local autonomy in some respects, but their armed forces would be under the command of the Sultan. This plan for a federalized Empire was actually proposed to the ambassadors of the great powers, but only by the foreign minister Halil Şerif Paşa a few weeks after Midhat's dismissal. The initial British and Austrian reactions were favorable, but of course Russian reaction was completely adverse. The same was true of the Serb and Romanian governments¹⁴. So the plan for a federalized Empire disappeared shortly after Midhat was forced out of the grand vezirate. Instead, nationalist agitation continued among various Balkan groups.

At some time during the next three years, between 1872 and 1875, Midhat Paşa seems to have won the confidence of Sir Henry Elliot, the British ambassador. It would be interesting to know more about their relationship, which is not well recorded either in Elliot's despatches to his government in London, or in Midhat's memoirs published by his son Ali Haydar Midhat. By the end of 1875, at any rate, Midhat's views on the necessity of a constitution were well known to Elliot¹⁵. Midhat seems to have been lining up great-power support for a reform of the Empire from within. It was also, obviously, anti-Russian support. Elliot came to have high regard for Midhat. George Washburn, the president of Robert College, later

14 PRO, FO 78/2220, Elliot to Granville No. 259 conf., 13 November 1872; Ignatyev, «Zapiski,» 1915, I, pp. 170-72; Nicholas Jorga, ed., *Correspondance diplomatique roumaine sous le roi Charles Ier* (Paris, 1923), No. 225, 12 November 1872, to No. 238, 12 December 1872, pp. 95-99.

15 PRO, FO 78/2391, Elliot to Derby No. 831 and No. 832, both conf., both 14 December 1875.

reported that Sir Henry Elliot «had absolute faith in him.» (Washburn himself, who once spent two days on an Austrian steamer with Midhat, was himself captivated by him.¹⁶) British backing would naturally be helpful for any reform tending to institute a parliamentary system. But the planning that Midhat and his colleagues undertook for the overthrow of Mahmud Nedim as grand vezir, for the deposition of Sultan Abdülaziz, and for the planning of a constitution in 1876 was carried out on their own. It owed nothing to foreign initiative or support.

Yet the events of 1876, even though they were internal, had of course a major impact on Ottoman foreign relations. This was the year when the revolt in Herzegovina and Bosnia, begun the year before, had increased in size; when the Bulgarian risings took place; when the French and German consuls in Salonika were killed by an excited Muslim mob; when Serbia and Montenegro went to war against their sovereign, the Sultan; and when the Great Powers of Europe, seeking to settle the Balkan situation, proposed the Berlin memorandum. The overthrow of Sultan Abdülaziz came by chance just one day before the Berlin memorandum was to have been presented¹⁷. That result probably had not been planned by Midhat and his fellow conspirators. But the powers were certainly taken aback by the deposition.

The constitution of 1876, also of course primarily an internal matter, inevitably was to have an impact on Ottoman foreign relations as well. There is no evidence that Midhat Paşa looked on a constitution as merely a diplomatic weapon. He had thought far too long about it, from 1872 on, as a measure to curb the autocracy of the Sultan¹⁸. But a constitution providing for a parliament was to help Ottoman foreign relations in two ways, both of which were mentioned in the «Manifesto of the Muslim Patriots» written by Midhat or by his adviser Odian Efendi and circulated to foreign

16 George Washburn, *Fifty Years in Constantinople* (Boston, 1909), p. 111.

17 B.H. Sumner *Russia and the Balkans, 1870-1880* (Oxford, 1937), p. 168.

18 Davison, *Reform*, p. 361 summarizes the evidence.

powers in March, 1876¹⁹. First, under a good monarch and a representative chamber there would be no racial struggles; the separatisms of minority peoples that threatened to break up the Empire and to attract foreign support would be quieted. Second, great powers could be shown that their intervention in Ottoman internal affairs was only harmful to Ottoman tranquillity and development; the Empire could reform itself and needed no outsiders to advise or to supervise.

The constitution was first used as a diplomatic weapon in October 1876. On October 12 Safvet Paşa, the foreign minister, sent word to all Ottoman ambassadors and ministers abroad that work was proceeding on a constitution under Midhat Paşa's chairmanship. Already, he said, an elective assembly and an appointive senate had been decided on²⁰. In this fashion the European powers were notified that their intervention in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire was unnecessary.

But the powers insisted on such intervention. Under great pressure, the Porte yielded, and accepted a conference of representatives of the powers to meet in Constantinople. Safvet Paşa's telegram accepting the conference said that the Porte agreed providing that the integrity and independence of the Ottoman Empire were preserved²¹. Midhat's constitution was not yet completed and approved by the Sultan Abdülhamid II. Whether it would be done before the Constantinople Conference met was not sure. But finally on December 18, 1876, the news was published that the Sultan had approved the constitution²². And on the next day the author of the constitution, Midhat Paşa, was appointed grand vezir. He was now in a position to use the constitution to influence Ottoman foreign relations. It is important to repeat again that this was not the reason for the constitution. The reason was to place a parliamentary control on autocracy. European diplomats in some cases pretended that the

19 It was published only after Abdülaziz's deposition. Stamboul, 2 June 1876, carried the full text.

20 *Das Staatsarchiv* 31 (1877), No. 5862.

21 DBHE, Karton S 108, dosya 27, Safvet to Musurus (London) tel. No. 45, 562/198, 20 November 1876.

22 *Levant Herald*, 18 December 1876.

constitution was a sham, or a trick, to deceive the great powers and blook their efforts to reform Ottoman administration. This view was advanced particularly by Ignatyev, who had already told Safvet Paşa that the constitution was a fraud, and was inadmissible. Safvet had rightly replied that the constitution was under consideration long before any plans for a Constantinople Conference²³. In no way was the consitution fraudulent. Yet possibly it could be used as a diplomatic weapon.

The attempt to use the constitution in this way was made on December 23, 1876. On that day the constitution was solemnly promulgated in a ceremony at the Sublime Porte. At the same time, the first plenary session of the Tersane (or Constantinople) Conference was meeting. Midhat Paşa as grand vezir had undoubtedly coordinated the arrangements with Safvet Paşa, who was presiding at the Tersane Conference. When guns boomed outside to announce the promulgation, Safvet announced the constitution to the Conference members. He emphasized the value and the extent of the new reform, which took away any need for suggestions on reform by foreign powers²⁴. But the effort to cut short or divert the attention of the conference was in vain. Although some historians have said it was expected that the constitution would weaken the effect of the Conference, it is hard to imagine that Midhat Paşa really expected that this would happen²⁵. The conference, in fact, did not even consider the constitution, but proceeded to put forward a plan worked out ahead of time by the European powers.

When the constitution failed to persuade the Conference that its further meetings would be useless, Midhat tried to use the constitution in another way. His ultimate object was the same: to avoid interference by the powers in the matter of Ottoman reforms, and to allow the Porte to do the reforming itself, under the new parliamentary system. He sent to France and Britain a secret envoy, his long-time associate Odian Efendi. Supposedly Odian was going

23 PRO, FO 78/2467, Elliot to Derb No. 1331, 4 December 1876.

24 Protocol of 23 December 1876 session in *Staatsarchiv* 31 (1877), No. 5949.

25 So says Ahmed Midhat, *Üss-i inkılâb* (Istanbul, 1294-95), II, pp. 202-203.

to explore the possibility of a loan. But actually his mission had two other purposes. The first was to explain to the governments in Paris and London why it was impossible for the Porte to accept the Conference proposals, especially European supervision, or «guarantees», as the Europeans called it. The second was to propose that the European powers officially endorse the new Ottoman constitution, and guarantee the new parliamentary system. The carrying out of the constitution, the working out of the new system of government, would then itself be sufficient reform for the Ottoman Empire.

This was a curious and somewhat risky proposal. It apparently had the approval of Sultan Abdülhamid and of the ministers. But it meant that a foreign stamp of approval would be put on the new Ottoman government, and it might open up possibilities of foreign intervention in the future. Midhat was quite sincere in his view²⁶. He repeated it, publicly, two years later when he was in exile. «This constitution, I must acknowledge, does not and cannot have by itself the stability and the authority of the old European constitutions», he wrote; «but this lack of authority can very easily be remedied by Europe. Europe, which has so often harassed the Porte with its interventions, often unjust, would have here a perfectly legitimate opportunity to exercise an active supervision for the execution of this Constitution, which summarizes all the steps forward that are possible in the East. This collective supervision would have in addition the effect of neutralizing the activity of Russia in the East, activity which up to the present has been carried on only for her own advantage and to the great detriment of European interests²⁷».

In January of 1877, while the Tersane Conference was in session, Odian spent time seeing both British and French ministers. He was in constant communication with the grand vezir himself, Midhat. He carried out Midhat's instructions to say that «We are firmly resolved to accept in no way, even with certain modifications, the pro-

26 Bekir Sıtkı Baykal, «Midhat Paşa'nın gizli bir siyasi teşebbüsü,» in *Türk Tarih Kurumu, III. Türk Tarih Kongresi...*, 1948 (Ankara, 1948), pp. 470-477.

27 Midhat Paşa, «La Turquie, son passé, son avenir,» *Revue scientifique de la France*, 2nd series, VII: 49 (8 June 1878), pp. 1153-54.

position concerning the International Commission», which was proposed by the powers to supervise Ottoman reforms²⁸. Odian even felt that Disraëli rather liked Midhat's idea of having the Ottoman constitution guaranteed by the powers²⁹. But in the end, both the British and the French governments refused to consider the proposal. Instead, they advised the Porte to accept the modified recommendations of the Tersane Conference. Midhat's secret attempt at diplomacy had failed.

When the Conference persisted in presenting its proposals for supervised reform to the Ottoman government, Midhat Paşa called a general council (meclis-i umumî) to consider them. He must have anticipated that the Council would reject the Conference's proposals, and he obviously was aware that rejection might be followed by an attack by the armed forces of one or more powers. At this point Midhat was receiving differing advice from two sides. Lord Salisbury, one of the British delegates to the Conference, strongly appealed to Midhat to encourage acceptance of the Conference proposals. At this «crucial moment», said Salisbury to Midhat, «the loss or the salvation of your fatherland rests in your hands». A Russian war, warned Salisbury, «will infallibly result in the obliteration of the Ottoman Empire in Europe»³⁰. But from Paris and London, Midhat was receiving advice from Odian Efendi and from Musurus Paşa, the Ottoman ambassador, that French and British opinion was becoming favorable to the Porte, and that although Britain would not aid the Empire if Russia attacked, neither would it use coercion against the Empire³¹. Sultan Abdülhamid, at the same time, sent a private message to Salisbury saying that he, unlike Midhat, saw no real objection to the Conference proposals; but, said Abdülhamid, he was afraid of being deposed and could not

28 DBHE, Karton S 108, dosya 27, Grand Vezir to Odian, tel. No. 6, 5 January 1877.

29 DBHE, Karton S 108, dosya 27, Odian to Grand Vezir, tel., 8 January 1877.

30 DBHE, Karton S 108, dosya 27, Salisbury (Pera) to Midhat, conf., 17 January 1877.

31 DBHE, Karton S 108, dosya 27, Musurus tel. to Safvet No. 6440/20, 11 January 1877, and Odian tel. to Grand Vezir from Paris, No. 30, 14 January 1877.

manage his ministers, so he begged Salisbury to soften the proposals somewhat³².

An exceptionally large *meclis-i umumî* of 237 (perhaps more) met on January 18 in Istanbul. According to reports of some who were present, Midhat opened the meeting with a summary of events since the rising in the Herzegovina a year and a half before. He then outlined the danger of a war which Russia might launch, and some other power might join. He also said that Europe, during such a war, might cut off financial credits and military supplies that the Empire needed. It does not sound, from these reports, like a war-mongering speech. Midhat, say the reports further, was vigorously opposed by more warlike members of the council. Finally, the council rejected, almost unanimously, the Conference proposals. It was willing to continue negotiations with the powers on the bases proposed by the Ottoman ministers, including, possibly, laying the constitution before the conference for its approval³³. Safvet Paşa formally reported the action of the *meclis-i umumî* to the Tersane Conference on January 20. But the delegates were unwilling to negotiate on the Ottoman basis. As the powers had already threatened to do, they ordered their plenipotentiaries to leave Istanbul immediately.

In this fashion Midhat Paşa's conduct of Ottoman foreign policy reached an impasse. A few days later the situation was summarized by Safvet Paşa in a long despatch which Ottoman ambassadors were instructed to communicate to the governments of Europe. Safvet described two of the European demands — that the powers participate in choosing governors for certain Balkan areas, and that an International Commission supervise provincial administration — as incompatible with Ottoman sovereignty. «An Assembly of the chief men of the nation», continued Safvet, «to the number of 200, was summoned, under the presidency of the Grand Vezir, who drew a

32 PRO, FO 78/2676, Salisbury to Derby No. 117, secret, from Pera, 16 January 1877.

33 There are a number of different accounts of the *meclis-i umumî*, none of them based on minutes. This summary is from PRO, FO 78/2565, Elliot to Derby No. 52, 19 January 1877. Elliot says his account is based on the reports of «several of those who were present.»

true and impartial picture of the situation, without in any way disguising the sufferings and perils to which the country might some day find itself exposed by its resistance to the final wishes of Europe. The Assembly, after examining and discussing the question, unanimously resolved to reject the two measures demanded by Europe, declaring that it was preferable to submit to direct sacrifices, and to confront all possible dangers, rather than to consent to their country's disgrace»³⁴.

The decision thus made by Midhat and his ministers, confirmed by the general council, and approved by Sultan Abdülhamid II, risked war with Russia. Three months later, the war came. It ended in Ottoman defeat and the harsh treaty of San Stefano. In the light of these events, it may be that Midhat's policy of opposition to the proposals of the great powers of Europe was a mistake. He was obviously hoping that disagreements among the great powers would prevent any attack on the Ottoman Empire. Such a hope did not turn into reality. Later Midhat Paşa was blamed by others as the cause of the war. Among those who blamed him were Cevdet Paşa and Sultan Abdülhamid II, neither of whom liked Midhat³⁵. «In the end», said Cevdet, «the Russians came up to the gates of Istanbul»³⁶. But well before the war began, and long before it ended, Midhat had been dismissed by Sultan Abdülhamid and sent into exile, on February 5, 1877. The exile came not because Abdülhamid disagreed with Midhat on foreign policy, however, but because the Sultan feared Midhat as a potential rival and as one who might depose him, as his two predecessors had been deposed. Abdülhamid maintained, however, that Midhat was not a good grand vezir. «Midhat had great faults and no qualities», said the Sultan to the British dragoman a year later³⁷. The Sultan was at best half

34 DBHE, Karton S108, dosya 27, Safvet's circular to Ottoman representatives to the six European powers, No. 46280/17, 25 January 1877. This quotation is from E. Hertslet, *The Map of Europe by Treaty*, IV (London, 1891), p. 2548.

35 İbnülemin Mahmud Kemal İnal, *Osmanlı devrinde son sadrazamlar* (Istanbul, 1940-53), pp. 349-51.

36 *ibid.*, p. 351, citing Cevdet Paşa, *Tezâkir*.

37 PRO, FO 195/1199, Sandison to Layard, conf., from Therapia, 25 June 1878.

right. Midhat had faults, without question, but he also had great virtues.

This brief summary of some of the occasions when Midhat Paşa had a strong potential or actual influence on Ottoman foreign relations points up three major problems of the Ottoman Empire and its foreign relations in that period. 1) The Empire was a non-national, or multi-national, state in an age of growing nationalism among many of its subjects. How could it be saved? Would equality, justice, and good government be sufficient? 2) The great powers of Europe, sometimes for humanitarian reasons but more often for selfish reasons, intervened in Ottoman affairs. How could such intervention be avoided and the independence and sovereignty of the Empire maintained? 3) The major opponent and the greatest military danger was Russia. How could the danger be avoided? Could disagreements among the powers stop the threat? Midhat recognized, and dealt with, all three problems. He found no solutions. The problems, it turned out, were bigger than any statesman, even than Midhat Paşa.