

Arda Akıncı

SURVEILLING THE REVOLUTIONARIES: ARMENIAN
REVOLUTIONARIES, SPATIAL POLITICS, AND
INTELLIGENCE ACTIVITIES IN THE LATE NINETEENTH-
CENTURY OTTOMAN EMPIRE

Abstract

This paper, by focusing on a secret report delivered by the Ottoman High Commissioner in Egypt—Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha—to the imperial center regarding the Armenian revolutionaries' movements, aims to examine three important phenomena of the late Ottoman history. The first goal is to reveal the revolutionary mobilities in the late Ottoman Empire by tracking how said revolutionaries took advantage of the borderlands to mobilize themselves. Second, this particular research serves as an indicator of the spatial politics in the late nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire by exposing how the imperial center governed a multi-layered administrative borderland region of Egypt—a semi-autonomous Khedivate. Finally, this paper seeks to confront traditional historiography on the intelligence activities during the reign of Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909). By doing so, this paper demonstrates how the intelligence organization stretched from the administrative center to the frontiers and borderlands of the Ottoman Empire, contrary to the common assumptions in the existing literature.



On 4 November 1890, Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha—the Ottoman High Commissioner in Egypt—sent one of his weekly reports to Istanbul.¹ Since the beginning of his appointment to Egypt, Ahmed Muhtar Pasha had been providing intelligence and political reports weekly.² In doing so, he was following standard practice for commissioners. Nonetheless, the content of his report dating 4 November was peculiar. In his report, Ahmed Muhtar Pasha stated “[Armenian] Agitators . . . traveled here [Egypt] from there [Istanbul] and joined their co-conspirators.”³ Furthermore, the intelligence that Ahmed Muhtar Pasha managed to gather indicated that the Armenian revolutionaries were intending to reach the Ottoman province of Van not by the direct overland route across the Levant, but by traveling through the Red Sea, around the

Arda Akıncı is a PhD Candidate in the Department of History and
Civilization at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. Email:
Arda.Akinci@eui.eu

Arabian peninsula to the Persian Gulf, and then through *Acemistan* (Iran).⁴

The route that the Armenian revolutionaries – or as the official document refer to them, the *agitators* – decided to take made this report peculiar among all those hundreds of weekly correspondences. After all, traveling from Istanbul to the province of Van through Egypt, the Persian Gulf, and Iran was neither common nor the shortest route. This interesting choice must have also caught the attention of the Ottoman High Commissioner who thus decided to report it to the Office of Sultan's Chief Intimate (*Serkurenay-ı Şehriyâri*). While trying to make sense of why the Armenians might have taken this route, Gazi Muhtar Pasha claims, "When carefully considered, it seems they took such an unusual and remote path either because they were not brave enough to cross via the Black Sea or the Aegean Sea thanks to the military precautions, or because they envisaged more Armenians might enjoin them in *Acemistan*."⁵ Unusual though it may be, the Armenian revolutionaries' alternative itinerary from Istanbul to the province of Van, and the consequent intelligence report of Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha, provides insight into three major issues relating to the mobility of revolutionaries, spatial politics, and intelligence-gathering activities in the late Ottoman Empire.

To begin with, the route that Armenian revolutionaries took to reach the province of Van gives significant clues about revolutionary mobilities and the use of imperial frontiers in the late nineteenth century. In many cases, revolutionary ideologies have been closely associated with intellectual capitals such as London, Paris, and, in the case of the Ottoman Empire, Salonica and Istanbul. However, for revolutionaries of various stripes, the frontiers of empires were crucially important spaces, as has been amply shown by the recent work in the emerging field of borderland studies.⁶

In the case of Armenian revolutionaries, too, the borderlands of the empires presented significant opportunities for mobility. At the expense of generalization, it can be argued that the Ottoman imperial administration exercised relatively less authority – and in some cases, none at all – in its borderlands at the turn of the twentieth century. This is especially the case of the Khedivate of Egypt, which was already an autonomous region governed by the Muhammed Ali Pasha dynasty, and under British occupation since 1882, when Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha sent his report to the imperial capital. Similarly, the province of Van constituted a part of the eastern border of the Ottoman Empire with Russia, where cross-border revolutionary activities frequently

emerged. As such, while the route that Armenian revolutionaries followed was quite unusual, the regions under question were no stranger to such activities.

As a result, it is safe to argue that for the Armenian revolutionaries, regardless of where their revolutionary ideologies originated, the borderlands of the Ottoman Empire constituted the crucial spaces for them to pursue their ideas. Whether it be the Khedivate of Egypt or the province of Van, they often operated in frontier regions where the imperial authority was weak. As the document reveals, the revolutionaries not only used this unusual route to reach the province of Van but also took advantage of the lack of imperial authority to gather financial support through an Armenian Church in Egypt, along with recruiting more followers on their way to Van.

The second major issue that Gazi Muhtar Pasha's report tells us involved a peculiar aspect of the spatial politics during the reign of Abdülhamid II (r.1876–1909). At the end of the nineteenth century, the Khedivate of Egypt was a multilayered administrative region in which many actors existed, but few exercised real authority. By the end of 1890, that is, when the intelligence report arrived in Istanbul, the Khedivate of Egypt was an autonomous region of the Ottoman Empire, ruled by khedives. Even though the khedives were appointed by the Ottoman sovereign, they were only selected from among the descendants of Muhammad Ali of Egypt, which meant the Ottoman imperial administration had very little power over the Khedivate. Furthermore, after a series of crises involving the Suez loan repayments and 'Urabi Pasha's revolt, Great Britain invaded and occupied Egypt in 1882, making Ottoman sovereignty even more attenuated.

Against this background, the appointment of Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha as the Ottoman High Commissioner to Egypt, which was a result of the bilateral agreement between the Ottomans and the British, became a turning point for the governance of the Khedivate. While both powers appointed a commissioner to discuss the terms of British withdrawal from Egypt, the role that Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha played as the representative of the Ottoman imperial administration turned out to be crucial. When he was appointed alongside his British counterpart Sir Henry Drummond Wolf in 1885, Gazi Muhtar Pasha probably did not imagine remaining in Egypt for more than twenty years. But the negotiations for the British military evacuation from Egypt were never concluded, and in the meantime, Gazi Muhtar Pasha's presence played a crucial role in reasserting

Ottoman sovereignty over the territory.

During this long period, Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha acted not only as the High Commissioner but also as the symbol of Ottoman authority and sovereignty over Egypt, making a statement to both the Khedive and the British. The symbolic power that Ahmed Muhtar Pasha carried helped the Ottoman imperial administration to govern Egypt through indirect means. On top of his weekly intelligence and political reports, the Ottoman High Commissioner also became the advisor to Khedive Abbas II in 1892, which allowed Gazi Muhtar Pasha to have a greater influence on the daily governance of the country on behalf of the sultan.⁷

Thus, by augmenting his initial role as the high commissioner, Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha's presence in Egypt became a unique example of how the Ottoman Empire managed an administrative division under its sovereignty, which was simultaneously governed by multiple layers of extra-Ottoman powers. The strategic move to appoint a representative to negotiate with an invading third party turned out to be a solution to the Ottoman imperial administration's crisis of government.

The final aspect of Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha's report relates to the organization and understanding of secret intelligence during the reign of Abdülhamid II. In much of the existing secondary literature on this subject, Hamidian secret intelligence is portrayed as a product of the "paranoid" and "oppressive" nature of Abdülhamid II himself and focused quite narrowly on the intelligence reports—known also as *jurnal* in Turkish—created in the imperial capital. The secondary literature presents the *journals* and the spies that produced them—or *hafiyye*—as a part of the corrupt political environment in the Ottoman Empire during the late nineteenth century.

However, this report is a significant example of how intelligence activities during the late nineteenth century were becoming more institutionalized and, to a certain extent, professionalized. First and foremost, this report shows that the Ottoman intelligence system was not limited to the imperial capital and the surveillance of its bureaucrats. On the contrary, as the report reveals, Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha had been informed by local spies about the routes that the Armenian revolutionaries had taken, where they had met, and even the amount of money they had received from the public funds of the Armenian Church.

Furthermore, in his report, Gazi Muhtar Pasha stated that the

Armenian “plotters” were expected to go either to Alexandria or Port Said to travel around the Persian Gulf to reach the province of Van. The High Commissioner mentions that he already informed more reliable men to carry out a secret investigation to learn where the Armenians’ next destination would be. As an additional measure, the pasha also states that the postal ferries will be under surveillance. Finally, he notes that any information arising from the investigations will be shared once again with the authorities in the capital.

Hence, the commissioner’s report hints at extremely crucial information regarding the Ottoman secret intelligence missions. First of all, the argument that has long dominated intelligence studies in the late Ottoman Empire, namely that spying was nothing more than a tool of oppression resulting from the personal paranoia of the sultan, turns out to be misleading. While acknowledging that the personality of the sultan might have played a role in the intelligence activities, especially those in the imperial capital, the intelligence organization and network of the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century was under a period of transformation—parallel to the development of other secret services in the Western world. The imperial administration managed to hire and employ spies not only to surveil the personal rivals of the sultan but also as a significant defense and security mechanism.

Moreover, this report argues against the existing literature’s narrow approach to secret missions during the reign of Abdülhamid II, which has assumed they were limited to the imperial capital and treated state espionage either as a mean to “gain the favor of the Sultan” or else, the Sultan’s personal device rather than as an integral part of the state mechanism. Contrary to the common understanding in the literature, the Ottoman imperial administration and its bureaucrats—whether the High Commissioner or, as other documents reveal, the provincial governors—hired spies to track and surveil anyone who constituted a threat in the minds of the imperial elites. As a result, through this document, it is possible to argue that Ottoman intelligence activities had been covering the frontiers of the empire as much as the center and were designed as a defense mechanism created by the imperial administration to counter threats in places where it did not exercise absolute power—as in the case of Egypt.

In conclusion, the report that Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha submitted to the Office of Sultan’s Chief Intimate (*Serkurenây-ı Şehriyâri*) presents an important opportunity to reflect on the borderlands of the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century. It not only reveals the mindset of imperial bureaucrats regarding the

revolutionary activities in the frontiers but also provides an insight into the empire's administrative structure. While the borderlands of the empire were regions of increased revolutionary mobility at the turn of the century, the Khedivate of Egypt was also a unique example of how the Ottoman Empire managed the safety and security of a region that had assumed a multilayered administrative character. Although Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha had originally been appointed and entrusted with a more limited set of tasks in Egypt, in the following years his position turned out to be the most important representative of Ottoman sovereignty in the region. Finally, the report also gives a peculiar insight into the management and organization of the intelligence-gathering activities in the late nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire by shedding light on one of the blind spots of the Hamidian era.



PRIMARY SOURCE

Fol. 240, file 108, doc. no. 4. Fon Yıldız Hususi Maruzat (Y.A.HUS). Ottoman Archives, Directorate of State Archives, Presidency of the Republic of Turkey (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi [BOA]). (Translated by Arda Akıncı)

H-27-03-1308: Presentation of the letter sent by Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha in Egypt, addressing the Office of Sultan's Chief Intimate containing intelligence and explanations regarding the actions and movement of the Armenian agitator committee in Istanbul.

My humble, confidential report, addressed to the Office of Grand Vizier, dated today and numbered 416, is below, to be presented to the Sultan. The final decision and order belong to his Majesty the Sultan, in any case, and every condition.

Dated 21 Rebiülevvel 308 and 23 Teşrinievvel 306 [4 November 1890].

His Servant

Gazi Ahmed Muhtar

Agitators, who are in contact with members of the renowned Armenian malice committee in Istanbul, traveled here [Egypt] from there [Istanbul] and joined their co-conspirators. They gathered in the church two days ago and took an oath: receiving around 800 liras from the public funds. It is reported that more than a hundred of the plotters took the *chemin du fer* from Alexandria either to Suez or Port Said to reach the province of Van, via the Persian Gulf and through *Acemistan* [Iran], to commit their malice. Besides the local officers, others among the reliable have been instructed to carry out a secret investigation and careful observation [of their movements]. Needless to say, I will communicate anything worthy of attention that comes out of the investigation.

When carefully considered, it seems, they took such an unusual and remote path [to Van] either because they were not brave enough to cross via the Black Sea or the Aegean thanks to the military precautions, or because they envisaged more Armenians might enjoin them in *Acemistan*. The fact that they have taken a road close to India, furthermore, has been worthy of attention given its vicinity of the Batum Road [to Van]. Moreover, given the situation, the postal ferries will be under surveillance. Yet, the final decision and order belong to your Highness the Grand Vizier alone. [Your servant will act] accordingly.

NOTES

¹ Fol. 240, file 108, doc. no. 3/1 (23 Teşrinievvel 1306/4 November 1890), Fon Yıldız Hususi Maruzat (Y.A.HUS), Ottoman Archives, Directorate of State Archives, Presidency of the Republic of Turkey (BOA), Istanbul.

² Sultan Abdülhamid II appointed Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha to Egypt in 1885 to carry out the negotiations of British withdrawal from Egypt. The negotiations continued with his British counterpart for some time yet bearing no palpable results. After the negotiations deadlocked and his British counterpart left Egypt, Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha remained in the Khedivate of Egypt – with the same position and title – until 1908. Only after the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 was he allowed to return to Istanbul.

³ Fol. 240, file 108, doc. no. 4/1 (23 Teşrinievvel 1306/4 November 1890), Y.A.HUS, BOA.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ For some examples concerning the Ottoman borderlands in the last decade, see Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz, eds., *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Ramazan Hakki Öztan and Alp Yenen, eds., *Age of Rogues: Rebels, Revolutionaries and Racketeers at the Frontiers of Empires* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021); Lucien J. Frary and Mara Kozelsky, eds., *Russian-Ottoman Borderlands: The Eastern Question Reconsidered* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014); Linda Darling, "The Mediterranean as a Borderland," *Review of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 1 (2012): 54–63.

⁷ Duncan Perry, *The Politics of Terror: The Macedonian Liberation Movements, 1893–1903* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988).