

Pan-Islamism of Abdul Hamid II: Ideology and Its Diplomatic Application

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Abstract

This article examines the ideology of Pan-Islamism during the reign of the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II as a tool of domestic and foreign policy. The author analyzes the historical context of the transition from liberal-constitutional reforms to an authoritarian model of governance following the dissolution of parliament in 1878. Special attention is paid to the transformation of the institution of the Caliphate into an official state doctrine aimed at consolidating the Empire's Muslim population and exerting diplomatic pressure on European colonial powers. The study emphasizes the pragmatic nature of the Pan-Islamist strategy, which, despite its symbolic significance, was limited by the systemic crisis and the military-political weakness of the Ottoman state at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, Abdul Hamid II, Pan-Islamism, Caliphate, Constitution of 1876, Eastern Question, diplomacy, Young Turks, political legitimization, ideological crisis.

In the second half of the 1870s, the Ottoman Empire entered a period of deep and prolonged political crisis, which necessitated a search for new ideological foundations for state power. The series of palace coups in 1876, the short-lived nature of the constitutional experiment, and growing internal instability created the conditions under which Abdul Hamid II, upon coming to power, was forced to abandon a liberal course and turn to alternative mechanisms for state consolidation. Increased pressure from

European powers within the framework of the Eastern Question, the internationalization of the issue of Christian minorities, and the rise of national liberation movements significantly limited the capabilities of traditional diplomacy. Under these circumstances, the ideology of Pan-Islamism, drawing upon the institution of the Caliphate, was transformed by the Sultan into a vital tool for the internal mobilization of the Muslim population and, simultaneously, into a means of foreign policy influence, which was actively utilized in Ottoman diplomatic practice during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The beginning of Abdul Hamid II's reign was preceded by a sharp domestic and international crisis, caused by a series of palace coups and a dramatic escalation of the Eastern Question. In May 1876, a group of reformist dignitaries led by Midhat Pasha deposed Sultan Abdulaziz and enthroned Murad V, whose reign proved short-lived due to his mental state. By August 1876, power had passed to Abdul Hamid II, who, under pressure from liberal circles, was forced to proclaim the first Ottoman Constitution on December 23, 1876. However, the constitutional experiment failed to halt the increasing foreign interference in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire. Mass uprisings of the Christian population in Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Bulgaria, the insurgencies in Serbia and Montenegro, and subsequently the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 clearly demonstrated the vulnerability of the Ottoman state to external challenges. The defeat in the war and the decisions of the Berlin Congress of 1878—which led to the loss of significant territories in the Balkans, the formation of the autonomous Principality of Bulgaria, as well as the Austrian occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the British occupation of Cyprus—marked a qualitative turning point in the Empire's international standing. Under these new conditions, the previous strategy of relying on European powers lost its effectiveness, which objectively pushed Abdul Hamid II toward seeking alternative forms of political and ideological legitimacy for his power.

The initial political program of Abdul Hamid II, presented in the early months of his reign, was distinctly reformist in nature and included constitutional transformations, the fight against corruption, the rehabilitation of the financial system, and the strengthening of the Ottoman Empire's international standing. The Sultan actively supported the drafting of the 1876 Constitution and the convening of parliament, which created an impression of his commitment to a liberal-constitutional course. Simultaneously, Abdul Hamid II began to form his own political circle, promoting individuals personally loyal to him to key state positions and gradually tightening control over the administrative apparatus. During this period, his tactic of interacting with reformist forces combined a demonstrative support for constitutional institutions with a consistent consolidation of personal power. A characteristic symptom of this shift in political course was the dismissal and exile of Midhat Pasha in February 1877, although the Sultan formally continued to observe constitutional procedures and convened the first Ottoman Parliament in March of the same year.

The first Ottoman Parliament, which commenced its sessions in March 1877, consisted of 119 deputies, 71 of whom were Muslims and 48 non-Muslims. It displayed an unexpectedly high degree of political independence. During parliamentary sessions, the deputies openly raised issues of corruption, administrative inefficiency, and the dire financial state of the Empire. Such activity caused growing irritation for Sultan Abdul Hamid II, who increasingly viewed the parliament not as a tool for reform, but as a potential threat to his supreme authority.

The formal pretext for the suspension of parliamentary activity was the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, which concluded with a heavy defeat for the Ottoman Empire and significant territorial losses. In February 1878, Abdul Hamid II announced the indefinite dissolution of parliament, citing the extraordinary circumstances of wartime; while the constitution formally remained in place, it effectively ceased to

function. The loss of extensive territories and the undermining of the Empire's international prestige prompted the Sultan to seek new mechanisms for strengthening his power. This created the prerequisites for abandoning the liberal-constitutional model and transitioning toward an ideological legitimization of governance based on traditional Islamic principles, which subsequently took shape as the doctrine of Pan-Islamism.

Despite the principle of equality for all Ottoman subjects regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation-as declared in the 1876 Constitution-the constitutional process was effectively interrupted as early as 1878. Sultan Abdul Hamid II dissolved the parliament (Meclis-i Umumî), which was not convened again until the Revolution of 1908, and the provisions of the constitution lost their practical significance, although it was never formally abolished. Leaders of the liberal-constitutional movement from among the high Ottoman bureaucracy, including Midhat Pasha, faced disgrace and repression. Thus, the constitutional experiment was brought to an end, and the state system entered a phase of profound political transformation.

A significant manifestation of the escalating internal crisis during the reign of Abdul Hamid II was the emergence of opposition political structures, the most notable of which was the secret society "Union and Progress" (İttihat ve Terakki), founded in 1889. Its ranks brought together members of the military and civilian elite who expressed dissatisfaction with the Sultan's authoritarian course and his departure from constitutional principles. Initially, the organization was part of the Young Turk movement and aimed to overthrow Abdul Hamid II and restore the constitutional order. Increased censorship and police control led to the discovery of the society's activities, forcing its members to continue their political struggle in exile, using printed publications as the primary tool for disseminating their ideas. The emergence of the Young Turk opposition clearly demonstrated that the Sultan's Pan-Islamist and

authoritarian policies failed to secure internal consensus and instead gave rise to a resilient alternative within Ottoman society.

The evolution of the state administration system during the reign of Abdul Hamid II occurred under conditions where constitutional norms were formally preserved while the Sultan's personal power was effectively strengthened. The Constitution of 1876 provided guarantees for basic civil rights and the creation of a bicameral parliament; however, it simultaneously vested the monarch with broad powers, including the right to dissolve parliament and control the executive branch. After 1878, constitutional institutions lost their real significance, and state governance took on a distinctly centralized and authoritarian character. Under these circumstances, the recourse to Islamic symbols and the institution of the Caliphate became a vital element in the political legitimization of power. Pan-Islamism, therefore, performed not only an ideological function but also a compensatory one, substituting for the weakened mechanisms of representative power and civil loyalty.

As noted by I. L. Fadeeva, Abdul Hamid II viewed Pan-Islamism-an ideology relatively new to the Ottoman Empire-primarily as a tool for strengthening his own power. Pan-Islamism, as a religious-political doctrine, was also known in other Muslim countries and envisioned the formation of a conventional "Islamic civilization" that would unite diverse Muslim societies. Within this framework, while exercising direct governance over the state, the Sultan simultaneously acted as the Caliph and the spiritual head of the entire Muslim world.

Against the backdrop of a deepening socio-political and ideological crisis, Abdul Hamid II made the concept of Pan-Islamism one of the key elements of his domestic and foreign policy. Pan-Islamism envisioned the consolidation of the Muslim world under the leadership of the Ottoman Sultan in his capacity as the Caliph-the spiritual leader of the faithful-and was viewed as a means of strengthening state stability and legitimizing

supreme authority. Although the title of Caliph had belonged to Ottoman Sultans since the 16th century, following Selim I's conquest of Egypt and the transfer of the symbolic regalia of the Caliphate to Istanbul, it was precisely during the reign of Abdul Hamid II that this idea acquired special political significance and was elevated to the rank of official state ideology. Within the framework of this doctrine, the Sultan sought to maintain the loyalty of the Empire's Muslim population while expanding his influence over Muslim communities beyond its borders, including the Muslims of Russia, India, Indonesia, Egypt, and North Africa.

The emphasis on the Caliphate status held a dual significance for Abdul Hamid II. On one hand, it served as an instrument for strengthening the domestic legitimacy of his power in the context of abandoning constitutional mechanisms and curtailing representative institutions. On the other hand, appealing to the role of the Caliph allowed the Sultan to utilize the religious factor as a means of foreign policy influence over the Muslim populations of other states, including those under the colonial dependence of European powers. At the same time, Pan-Islamist rhetoric was combined with a pragmatic diplomacy based on an assessment of the real balance of power on the international stage. Recognizing the military-political weakness of the Ottoman Empire, the Sultan sought to avoid direct confrontation with the leading European powers and emphasized the non-aggressive nature of Pan-Islamist policy, which was oriented more toward symbolic and ideological influence rather than open confrontation.

Thus, Pan-Islamism during the reign of Abdul Hamid II represented a pragmatic political-ideological strategy that took shape amidst the crisis of the Ottomanist model and the curtailing of constitutional institutions. Appealing to the Sultan's status as Caliph allowed the religious factor to be utilized as a tool for strengthening domestic legitimacy and consolidating the Empire's Muslim population against the backdrop of territorial and demographic shifts. At the same time, Pan-Islamism held foreign policy

significance, providing the Ottoman Empire with the capacity for symbolic and diplomatic influence over Muslim communities beyond its borders. However, the effectiveness of this doctrine was limited by internal contradictions and the state's military-political weakness, which defined its predominantly compensatory character.

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