Abdülbahad II, the Shiites of Iraq, and the idea of Islamic unity

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Abstract

The present paper intends to analyze the idea of Islamic unity introduced by Sultan Abdülhamid II. To be more specific, the paper is an investigation into why and how the concept of Pan-Islamism was developed by the Ottoman sultan. The paper hypothesizes that while the Ottoman Caliphate was under the pressure of internal and external crises, Sultan Abdülhamid II adopted the policy of unity in Islam, i.e. Pan-Islamism, so far as to use the potential capacities in the Islamic world, including the seminaries and the Shia scholars, as means to do away with the problems during his caliphate.

Keywords: Ottoman, Iraq, Shiites, Islamic unity, Pan-Islamism, Abdülhamid II.
Introduction

The era of the rule of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909) as the 33rd Ottoman caliph can be considered as one of the most significant and decisive eras in the internal and external policies adopted by the Ottoman Caliphate. The partition of the territories under the reign of the Ottoman Empire, on the one hand, and the existence of different political movements, on the other hand, had decisive impacts on the status of this grand empire during the very period of time, which lasted for 33 years. The dissolution of the first constitutional monarchy in 1876 and the beginning of the internal autocracy on the one hand and emergence of the concept of Islamic unity in an aim to solve the problems faced by the caliphate on the other hand are the most influential events which occurred during this era. Under such conditions, it was clearly evident that the acceptance of the mentioned policy by the Shiite societies, especially the state of Iran as the only Shia government in the world of Islam, as well as the Shia scholars living in the shrine cities was of significant importance. The analysis of the documents in the Ottoman Chancellery indicates that due to the historical disputes between Iranian and Ottoman governments, Sultan Abdülhamid II didn't hold out much hope for the approval to his plan by the Iranian side. However, as a historical opportunity, the Shia society of Iraq, and especially the Shia scholars and clergymen living in this territory, could be the targets for the enforcement of the policy. The influence of the Shia religious leaders in the shrine cities in the world of Islam, on the one hand, and the dominance of the Ottoman authorities over this territory, on the other hand, encouraged the Ottoman sultan to make ultimate use of such a capacity.

The Shia society of Iraq in the 19th century

Iraq, with Baghdad being its capital city, was considered as the easternmost territory under the Ottoman Empire. This state had always been the locus of the Ottoman authorities’ attention owing to such characteristics as being distant from the center of the Empire, adjacency to the borders of Iran as the most powerful Shia government, and the close cultural – religious interrelations with the Iranians. Despite the fact that it is very hard to give an exact statistic of the number of Shiites in Iraq in late 19th century due to the policies of the Ottoman government to conceal the number of the Shia people in this country, it seems, however, that Shiites constituted the major population of Baghdad and Basra provinces (Cole, 1986: 462). Between 1722 through 1763 AD, hundreds of the families which bore a connection of a kind to the religious scholars left Iran for Iraq. On the other hand, throughout the 19th century, the tribes residing in the south of Iraq were increasingly converting their religion from Sunni Islam to Shia Islam (Litvak, 1992: 142). Moreover, the religious status of Najaf and Karbala cities and the importance thereof as the most significant Shia centers for science and belief had an importance role in the spread of Shiism among the tribes living in the southern parts of Iraq. The status of these two cities as the centers for grain storage made them communicating channels among the tribes during the 19th century (Nakash, 2003: 123). Before the mid-nineteenth century Hillah was the biggest market for the tribes to exchange goods. At the same time, this city was considered as the most important center for the propagation of Shiism among the tribes. According to Nafisi, “Although Hillah was not one of the holy cities for the Shia Muslims, it was recognized as one of the most significant bases for the propagation of Shiism among the tribes” (Nafisi, 1973: 47). The outcome of these events was the improvement of the
seminaries and the effective presence of the Shia scholars in the political and social transformations in Iraq (Enayat, 2001: 228; Al-Alawi, 2005: 102). Naturally, the spread of Shiism and strengthening the Shia seminaries in Iraq was not overlooked by the Ottoman governors. To the Ottoman authorities’ minds, these events could be serious predicaments to the legitimacy of their government in Iraq (Cetinsaya, 2005: 561). In general, at the end of the 1880s and the early 1890s, all the reports were indicative of a real threat for the Ottomans, making the Sublime Porte adopt a strict policy towards the Iraqi Shiites (BOA,YEE 18/553/610/93). The first practical measure taken by the Ottoman sultan regarding this problem was to depose the governor of Baghdad on June 1891 AD. Issuing this order was the consequence of the incoming reports from Iraq on the increasing penetration of the Iranians in Baghdad. At the same time, receiving some news about the widespread presence of the Shiites in the sixth division made Sultan Abdülhamid II very agitated and distraught. After conducting the needed consulting and investigations, the Sultan gave some orders to the commanders of the armies and the Grand Vizier (= Prime Minister), according to which it was determined that the Shia soldiers be transferred to the other armies and only the Sunni soldiers remain in Baghdad (Cetinsaya, 1990: 45).

Another measure taken was to educate and propagate the Sunni religion. Sultan Abdülhamid II decided to establish a school in Istanbul for the seminarians studying the theological sciences. He believed that as many needed seminarians as possible should be brought to Istanbul to be well educated under the supervision of the scholars who were appointed by the Shaykh al-Islām. By the way, it had been determined that after finishing their educations and changing the religion, they should get a suitable allowance to help them do their mission in their birth places (Boa, Irade-Dahiliye, no.98525, 29 cemaziyelevvel, 1309-31dec).

The idea of Islamic unity

It seems that at the very time, i.e. from the mid-1880s henceforth, Abdülhamid II adopted the policy of the unity of the Shia-Sunni religions as a long-term solution to settle the problems concerning the Iraqi Shiites. On late August 1886, Sultan Abdülhamid II entered into negotiations, via two of his confidants named Cevdet Pasa and Yusuf Pasa, with Mirza Hasan Shaikh al-Ra’is, one of the dissidents of the Iranian government living in Istanbul. It seems that Abdülhamid II also has asked Cevdet Pasa and Yusuf Pasa to give their points of view about this issue. Therefore, Cevdet Pasa, the famous researcher and the then Minister of Justice, prepared a report on the matter and announced therein his full support for the policy of Shia-Sunni unification. Specifying the evolutionary process of the Shia religion and its present status, he asserts that under the leadership of the Ottoman Caliph as well as the support of the Shia ulama and scholars, the idea of Shia-Sunni unity could be put into practice as against the tyranny of the oppressors and the rule of Nasrani communities. It seems the Ottoman authorities of the time well understood the power and status of the Shia scholars and ulama as well as the roles thereof in the political and social transformations at national and regional scales, the power which reveled at its best with regard to the Régie Pact (Abrahamian, 2003: 94). Cevdet Pasa maintains that, to put this notion into action, at least three major measures should be taken. First, the holy graves of the Ahl al-bayt in Al-Baqi’i Cemetery located in Medina and are considered by the Shia and Sunni communities as holy places must be fixed and reconstructed and decorated with
special ornaments. Second, the scholars and ulama residing in the Holy Shrines should improve their relations with the Sunni communities and validate the legitimacy of the Ottoman Empire. And third, the Ottoman Empire must pay special attention to improve the welfare and the general conditions of the Holy Shrines (BOA, YEE, 18/553/610/93/38, for Cevdet Pasa, 1823-95). To help actualize the idea of unity in Islam, Sultan Abdülhamid II decided to enter into negotiations with the Shia ulama. In so doing, he invited Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn Asadābādī to Istanbul in the summer of 1892 AD (Keddie, 1972: 481).

**Inviting Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn Asadābādī**

Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn Asadābādī was one of the figures who had previously sent a few letters to Sultan Abdülhamid II, urging him to put the idea of Pan-Islamism into practice and let the Muslims unite. In the late summer of 1892 AD, Asadābādī stepped into Istanbul, being warmly welcomed by Sultan Abdülhamid II. For the fulfilment of the mentioned policy, the Sultan commanded that a special council under the supervision of Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn Asadābādī begin its activities. Sayyid Jamāl sent hundreds of letters to notable Shia ulama in most parts of the Islamic world. He also established an association made of a number of Shiites and the Shia ulama residing in the Holy Shrines (Jamali, 2000: 58), in the first session of which Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn asked all the participants to send letters to their friends, relatives and acquaintances in Iran and the Holy Shrines, generally, and to the Shia ulama living in India, Balkh, Turkestan and the Arabic lands, specifically, and let them know of the beneficence and the generosity of the Ottoman Caliph towards all the Muslims, no matter what groups they belong to or what they believe in. Then, they should be informed that if the Shia ulama join this Islamic unity, the Sultan would bestow his special attention on them and give each of them a certain amount of allowance depending on their statuses. Moreover, he would order the Ottoman authorities to treat the Iranians in Mecca and Medina equally with their own people, and as a matter of gratitude for the great contribution the Shia ulama as well as Iran’s state, he would grant them the shrine cities of Iraq as a gift (Keddie, 1966: 46-47). However, it seems that these actions were not left without reactions. Having informed of these measures and specially the correspondence between the association and the Shia ulama, Iran’s ambassador in Istanbul as well as the Iranian consulate in Baghdad sent a detailed report to Iran (Jamali, 2000: 60). Following this, Iran’s ambassador in Istanbul demanded Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn be exiled. On the other hand, due to some certain reasons led to strains in the relationship between Sultan Abdülhamid II and Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn until the end of 1895 AD, After the assassination of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar by Mirza Reza Kermani, Iran’s pressures on the Ottoman state increased. The Iranian authorities wanted the Ottomans to surrender Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn to Iran. Although the Sultan never surrendered Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn to Iran, he remained in Istanbul much like a real prisoner until his death on the March of 1897 AD.

**Conclusion**

It can be conjectured that the idea of Islamic unity or Pan-Islamism introduced by Sultan Abdülhamid II was an immediate consequence of the conditions of the time. It seems that this movement was more political-cultural in nature than merely religious. The weakness of the Ottoman Empire and the excellence of the European states on the one hand and the
numerous internal problems on the other hand made the Ottoman Sultan renew his power through redefining the religious identity of the Ottoman caliphate. The analysis of the available documents in the Ottoman archives shows that the major aims of the idea of Islamic unity put forward by Sultan Abdülhamid II were the vulnerability and weakness in the Ottoman government, strengthening the foundations of the religious caliphate to overcome the available crises, as well as using the fame and the status of the Shia ulama and scholars including Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn as means to fulfil that goal. In other words, Abdülhamid II considered the idea of unity as a strategy or means to strengthen the foundations of the Ottoman monarchy and become the caliph of all Muslims. However, there is no doubt that in the minds of the activists pursuing the policy of the Islamic unity like Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn in that era, the benefits of the Ottoman Empire and the Islamic world were hardly contradictory. By supporting the idea of Islamic unity, Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn intended to help revive Islam and the Muslims’ dignity. Anyway, despite his optimism about the success of this plan, the policy of Islamic unity at the time of Sultan Abdülhamid II could not influence the Islamic world as it had been expected to; therefore, it was nipped in the bud.
References


BBA.Y.E.E. (Basbakanlik Arsivi, Yildiz Evraki).

BOA (Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi).


