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ABDULHAMID II AND THE OTTOMAN DEFENCE PROBLEM

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I

Abdulhamid II (1876-1909) needed no reminding that he faced a serious defence problem. His Empire was repeatedly and successfully invaded: by Russia, Serbia and Montenegro in 1877-8, by France in 1881 (Tunis), by Britain in 1882 (Egypt), and by Italy and Bulgaria in 1885 (Massowa, Eastern Rumelia). Border skirmishes and tribal incursions aside, the Sultan succeeded in repelling invasion only once: in 1827, when the aggressor was Greece. To complete this picture of military vulnerability, it is necessary to recall the blatant involvement of neighbouring states in the various internal revolts in Crete and Macedonia, and the success and the regularity with which European Great Powers resorted to naval demonstrations as a means of resolving diplomatic disputes with the Ottoman Empire.

Abdulhamid did not lack means of defence. He inherited a large army supplied with modern weapons; he made it bigger and gave it more modern weapons. There is no space here to recapitulate his military reforms; suffice it to say that

throughout his reign military expenditures were the largest single item in the Ottoman budget, regularly accounting for some 40% of total expenditure, and that in addition the large sums spent on projects like the Bagdad and Hedjaz railways were expected to yield a military return(1). Abdulhamid regarded a powerful army as a necessity, and refused to entertain the suggestion that a reduction in military expenditures might benefit the economy:

Those who say such things are resigned to a foreign protectorate; they have no religious or national feelings left and they think only of their personal interests. Anyone who owns a farm procures a watchman and a watchdog before setting down to cultivation; for in the absence of a watchman wild beasts may damage the farm, or another person may come...and take it over(2).

In contrast, Abdulhamid was generally accused of neglecting his navy. So far as the large battle-fleet he inherited from his predecessor Abdulaziz was concerned, the charge was justified: the warships were left to decay, and Abdulhamid knew it(3). Contemporaries attributed this wilful neglect to internal politics: it was suggested that Abdulhamid suspected his navy of constitutionalist sympathies. It seems as likely that his motives were financial: Abdulaziz's ambitious naval programme had been a principal cause of the Ottoman bankruptcy of 1875(4). Be that as it may, neglect of the fleet did not imply a complete abandonment of naval defence; torpedoes, mines and shore batteries offered a

partial substitute for a fleet, and they were much cheaper. Even otherwise critical observers of the Sultan's naval policy conceded that the torpedo-boat flotilla was kept up to scratch, while Abdulhamid appears to have been confident that his measures were sufficient for the purposes of defence:

America's posture is not offensive but defensive, and she has therefore decided to protect her shores with fixed torpedoes...As we too will assume the defensive rather than the offensive, we must consider the means of installing fixed torpedoes(5).

The Dardanelles at least could be rendered impregnable, as a succession of British investigations in the 1890s confirmed(6).

II

In Abdulhamid's view, it was not the size or the state of the Ottoman Empire's armed forces which constituted the essence of the defence problem; it was the scale of the task imposed upon those forces by geography. The Ottoman Empire was spreadeagled over three continents. It possessed lengthy, exposed and widely separated land frontiers; it also possessed an extended and exposed coastline which stretched for several thousand miles through the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, the Adriatic, the Aegean, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. The Ottoman Empire was consequently vulnerable to invasion from numerous quarters, and faced numerous potential aggressors: all the European Great

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right questionable, and in the event Abdulhamid declined to enforce it(9). The reimposition of Ottoman military control in the Rodop mountains as a result of the 1886 Eastern Rumelian settlement went some way to redress this state of affairs, and Abdulhamid himself stressed the Rodop's "extraordinary importance from the point of view of military science"(10); nonetheless, the quid pro quo was Bulgaria's military absorption of Eastern Rumelia, with the consequence that the Ottoman Empire henceforth faced a threat of Bulgarian invasion from two directions - south-east towards Edirne and the capital, and south-west into Macedonia. In this connection it may be noted that around 1900 the Sultan's military advisers predicted that a Bulgarian invasion of Macedonia might reach Salonika in seven days(11).

Elsewhere in the Balkan peninsula the situation was little better. Austria-Hungary's occupation of Bosnia-Hercegovina had deprived the Ottoman Empire of a vital defensive redoubt, while her acquisition of a right of garrison in the sancak of Novi Pazar had left Salonika exposed to invasion from the north; the Sultan's sole military security was Austria-Hungary's promise to seek his permission before stationing garrisons south of the strategic Ragozna range, "the gateway of Salonika"(12). In the south of the peninsula, on the other hand, the protracted diplomatic struggle waged between 1878 and 1881 over the Treaty of Berlin's territorial award to Greece did at least ensure that

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the strategic points of Janina and Metzovo remained in Ottoman hands, and the outcome of successive military encounters from 1878 onwards showed that the Empire had little to fear from Greece on her own(13). This was small comfort. The Ottoman Empire's ability to repel aggression by a single Balkan state was not seriously questioned; the danger was that conflict with a single Balkan state would expose the Empire to simultaneous attacks by other Balkan states, and in these circumstances the prospects for a successful defence appear to have been viewed as problematical at best(14). In sum, the Ottoman Empire was indefensible in the Balkans: to appreciate the significance of this fact for the Sultan and his advisers it is sufficient to recall their frequently-expressed conviction that the loss of the Empire's remaining Balkan territories would precipitate the loss of Istanbul and the consequent collapse of the Ottoman Empire as a whole(15).

The Berlin settlement had also exposed the Ottoman Empire in Asia Minor. Russia's acquisition of the provinces of Kars and Ardahan, and her subsequent militarisation of the Black Sea port of Batum, had placed her in a position to invade southwards towards Mosul, and from thence to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean(16). There was little the Sultan could do to remedy this. Russia knew that the status quo favoured herself, and used

the threat of invasion to forestall any attempt to alter it: in this fashion she periodically impeded the strengthening of Ottoman forces and fortifications in eastern Anatolia, and saw to it that the Bagdad railway was kept away from her frontiers(17).

The Ottoman Empire's land frontiers exposed it to the risk of invasion in the Balkans and Asia Minor; its coastline exposed it everywhere, and added Britain, France and Italy to the list of potential aggressors. The Red Sea exposed the Hedjaz to the threat of British invasion from Egypt; the Mediterranean exposed Syria to France, and Tripolitania to Italy. Direct sea-borne invasion was not the only danger: from quite an early stage in his reign Abdulhamid foresaw the possibility that sea powers like Britain might wage war through the encouragement of subversion, particularly in the Ottoman Empire's Arab territories(18). To give one instance, General Graham's Red Sea expedition of 1884 led Abdulhamid to order internal security measures in the Hedjaz, as well as the strengthening of Ottoman land and naval forces in the region(19). There was also the problem of ensuring the Empire's own sea communications with such outlying provinces as Tripolitania - a point of some importance, given the poor state of the Empire's internal communications on land, and its consequent reliance upon sea transport for the movement of troops over long distances(20). The need to secure sea communications

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with North Africa obliged Abdulhamid to retain Crete, a troublesome possession which he would otherwise have willingly surrendered - particularly in 1881, when there was a prospect of trading Crete for the retention of Epirus and Thessaly(21).

One consequence of this mass of problems was that Ottoman forces were dispersed over a wide area. The Empire was effectively obliged to maintain seven armies, respectively based at Istanbul, Edirne, Salonika, Sivas, Damascus, Bagdad, and the Yemen, not to speak of additional garrisons in Tripolitania and Crete(22). This impeded mobilisation and the concentration of forces against an attacker, a problem made worse by the poor state of the Empire's internal communications: in the absence of railways troops had to be marched or transported by sea, with the consequence, as Abdulhamid noted, that "whereas it is possible to mobilise and concentrate forces at any point of Germany's frontiers within eight to ten days, it is clear that forces could not be concentrated over the same distance here in less than twenty"(23). The army's numerous supplementary duties were a further burden, as Abdulhamid pointed out:

The protection of the Balkan, Anatolian and Arabian frontiers, the maintenance of law and order in sensitive regions like the Yemen and Crete, support for the gendarmerie in suppressing brigandage in other provinces, and the collection of taxes in certain provinces all require troops(24).

Some steps could be taken to alleviate these problems.

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Simple expansion of the armed forces aside, the construction of strategic railways in the Balkans and Ottoman Asia offered a partial solution to the problems of slow mobilization and over-extension; so did the recruitment of supplementary forces like the Hamidiye light cavalry in eastern Anatolia and the possibility that the defence of Tripolitania might be entrusted to purely local forces(25). Nonetheless, the essentials of the problem remained unchanged down to 1908.

III

The most obvious means of reducing the Ottoman Empire's military risks would have been an alliance with one or other of the European Great Powers or Great Power blocs. The general case for such an alliance was frequently canvassed and well understood: isolation exposed the Ottoman Empire to attack by all and sundry; an alliance would protect it both against its Great Power ally's enemies and against its Great Power ally itself - ideally, against all. There was also the consideration that the security of an alliance might enable the Sultan to reduce the burden of his military expenditures(26). There was no lack of potential allies. Anglo-Russian competition remained the dominant feature of the Eastern Question down to the late 1890s, and until then, both Britain and Russia could be considered as

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rival suitors; there were also hopes that Germany and Austria-Hungary might present themselves as a third alternative. Furthermore, the Ottoman Empire had something to offer a potential ally: the geographical ability to intervene in European conflicts, an army strong enough to count in a European war, and - in the case of Anglo-Russian conflict - control of the Straits. And yet the outcome of all discussions was that Abdulhamid rejected a Great Power alliance; his reasons served to underline the scale and the intractability of the Ottoman defence problem.

Advocates of a British alliance had little difficulty in establishing a plausible political case: they argued that Britain and the Ottoman Empire were bound by a common interest in resisting Russia's expansion in the Near East and Asia, that Britain needed the Ottoman Empire as a barrier against Russia, and that she required the support of the Caliphate in her dealings with her own Moslem subjects(27). It may be doubted that Abdulhamid was convinced by this case, but be that as it may, his fundamental objection was not political, but military: as he frequently pointed out, "England does not possess sufficient land forces", and her sea power would be of little assistance in repelling a Russian land invasion in Asia, or a Russian-supported attack by the Balkan states in

Europe:

"As there is no need to explain, Russia is the Empire's neighbour, and whenever she wishes she can send powerful forces and occupy the Empire's Anatolian provinces as far as Mosul and Bagdad. Furthermore, although there exists in Bulgaria a party which is opposed to Russia, the greater part of the population looks to Russia and favours her. Similarly, the entire population of Montenegro is given over to her, and even a section of the population of Serbia and Rumania is pro-Russian" (28).

Even convinced Anglophiles like the Grand Vizier Kamil Pasa recognised the force of this argument: "while admitting that the British Empire is a great maritime power, and in case of hostilities could attack the entire Russian Black Sea fleet, this would not suffice to prevent Russia's invasion towards the interior" (29). Kamil toyed with various solutions. A British commitment to furnish land forces of a specified - and substantial - size for the defence of Anatolia was one; another was the suggestion that an alliance be made conditional upon the adhesion of a third Power, France and Austria-Hungary being the obvious candidates for this role. Neither solution was very convincing: in particular, the notion of a tripartite anti-Russian alliance ran into the objection that while third Powers might be willing and able to resist Russia in the Balkans and at the Straits, none shared Britain's interest in the defence of Ottoman Asia (30). Kamil was reduced to the argument that the mere existence of an Anglo-Ottoman alliance would deter Russia

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from aggression - in effect, that it would serve as a bluff which would not be called; alternatively, he argued that failure to conclude an alliance would destroy Britain's confidence in the Ottoman Empire and encourage her to subvert it - a tacit admission that the only Great Power against whom Britain could protect the Ottoman Empire was Britain herself (31).

The alternative notion of alliance with Russia against Britain encountered similar difficulties. Here, too, it was possible to make a political case: the existence of an overwhelmingly powerful neighbour was a fact which the Ottoman Empire would do well to recognise; Russia might be brought to see that a strong and friendly Ottoman Empire was the best guarantor of her Black Sea security; after 1878 it could plausibly be argued that it was Britain, rather than Russia, which posed the chief threat to the Ottoman Empire's independence and territorial integrity; Russia and the Ottoman Empire had common interests as autocracies (32). Certainly Abdulhamid showed greater sympathy for this political case than for that for alliance with Britain; but this sympathy was never sufficient to overcome the military objections. Just as British sea power could not protect the Ottoman Empire against Russian land assault, so Russia's armies could not defend the Sultan's territories against British naval attack. As Kamil Pasa argued:

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In the event of war England will be able to incite neighbouring peoples against the Ottoman Empire and attack the Ottoman coasts with her fleet. Even if the Ottoman fleet were united with the Russian fleet, and even were they able simply to block the entry of the English fleet into the Black Sea, it goes without saying that this would scarcely damage England's territory. Thus an alliance between the Ottoman and Russian Empires may be considered beneficial to Russia and extremely damaging to the Ottoman Empire(33).

An alliance with Russia might make sense if it were joined by a major naval Power, and in this connection there is evidence that in 1886 Abdulhamid studied the prospects for a defensive alliance with Russia and France. The projected arrangement explicitly provided for the defence of the Ottoman Empire's Mediterranean coasts, islands and harbours, and obliged France and Russia to furnish naval forces for their defence in the event of attack. In the event this proposal was not pursued, and it is not clear whether the grounds upon which it was abandoned were political or military(34).

Neither Britain nor Russia could protect the Ottoman Empire against the other, and alliance with either was ruled out on military grounds. Abdulhamid summed the position up as follows:

To whichever of these two Powers, England or Russia, [the Ottoman Empire] shows an inclination, it will encounter the other's violent hostility. Should it assume a course other than

neutrality, it is clear that in the one case, the small Balkan governments of Serbia, Montenegro and Greece - Russia's semi-vanguard - will attack, and by creating numerous difficulties, they will spread our forces considerably. In the other case, however, the English will seek to force the Straits by sending their fleet to Basra in order to...compel the Empire to ally with them, and they will try to create various troubles on the coasts of Anatolia and Syria(35).

There remained the possibility of alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary. Abdulhamid's failure to pursue this possibility appears surprising, given his persistent efforts to cultivate Germany's diplomatic support, his employment of German instructors in his army and navy, and his favouring of Germany in such matters as arms contracts and railway concessions(36). Only once did he make Germany an explicit offer of a military alliance: during the winter of 1891-2, at the very beginning of his cultivation of Germany. The proposal in question envisaged an offensive and defensive alliance between the Ottoman Empire, Germany and Austria-Hungary. No specific terms were proposed, however, and Germany and Austria-Hungary's rejection of the offer in principle precluded any detailed discussions. However, a memorandum dictated by Abdulhamid at the time provides a few pointers to his thinking. The memorandum stressed the Empire's need for external support against the threat, real enough at the time, of Anglo-Russian partnership in Armenian issues and Anglo-French cooperation in the Egyptian question; it also

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emphasized the Empire's vulnerability both to a Russian-inspired attack by the Balkan states and to a further Austro-Hungarian advance towards Salonika(37). In sum, the Sultan sought political guarantees from Germany and Austria-Hungary against Britain, Russia and France, and a military guarantee in the Balkans. The military guarantee could be furnished only by Austria-Hungary; Germany's role was that of political guarantor of an Austro-Ottoman understanding.

No further approaches were made to Germany; from discussions held in 1897-8 on the subject of a possible Ottoman entry into the Triple Alliance or the Anglo-Italo-Austrian Mediterranean accords it is possible to infer why. Politically, an alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary could be directed against any other Power; militarily, it could be directed only against Russia, and here it encountered the objection that neither Germany nor Austria-Hungary could protect the Ottoman Empire against a Russian invasion of Anatolia(38). True, Abdulhamid and some of his advisers occasionally indicated that they would favour a war between the Central Powers and Russia, and doubtless it would have been convenient for the Ottoman Empire if Germany and Austria-Hungary had knocked Russia out; but this did not necessitate Ottoman participation in the conflict(39).

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The only alliances which appeared to make military sense to Abdulhamid were regional arrangements with the Empire's smaller neighbours. The possibility of an alliance with some or all of the Balkan states was periodically considered, and on at least two occasions seriously pursued. Though the details of these transactions remain somewhat obscure, there is sufficient evidence to indicate the military value which Abdulhamid placed upon them. First and foremost, a Balkan alliance would secure the Ottoman Empire against aggression by the Balkan states themselves; in the second place, it would deprive potentially hostile Great Powers like Austria-Hungary and Russia of the possibility of using the Balkan states to further their own designs against the Ottoman Empire. A ring of threatening neighbours could be transformed into a protective screen; in effect, the Ottoman Empire could push its frontiers back to the Danube and beyond. The considerations which frustrated this conception were not military but political. The Balkan states proved unwilling to acknowledge any substantial community of interest with the Ottoman Empire; they also demanded, as the price for an alliance, conditions which Abdulhamid could scarcely accept: extensive political concessions to their

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non-nationals within the Ottoman Empire, autonomy for Albania or Macedonia, and even - in Bulgaria's case - the transformation of the Ottoman Empire into a dual Ottoman-Bulgarian monarchy(40).

The first serious Balkan initiative for which evidence exists was a proposal made by Abdulhamid at the beginning of 1886 for a military alliance with Bulgaria. Though detailed negotiations were limited to the Empire and Bulgaria, there is evidence that Abdulhamid contemplated a broader scheme embracing Serbia, Rumania and perhaps Greece as well(41). The immediate occasion for the initiative was the need to redefine Ottoman-Bulgarian relations following the Eastern Russian revolt and the Serbo-Bulgarian war of 1885, the Sultan's deeper motive, however, was his fear that these Balkan developments could lead to intensifying Great Power competition and a war between Russia and Austria-Hungary(42). As originally formulated by Abdulhamid, the alliance would have brought about Bulgaria's military reincorporation into the Ottoman Empire: the Bulgarian army was to be considered a part of the Ottoman army, the Sultan was to be considered its Commander-in-Chief, Bulgarian and Ottoman forces were to guard each other's frontiers in peacetime, and in wartime the two armies were to mobilize in step. In addition one division of the Bulgarian army was to be available for service within the Ottoman Empire in peacetime(43). As concluded on 31 January 1886,

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the terms of the alliance were less sweeping: it was agreed that in the event of an external attack upon Bulgaria or Eastern Rumania, the Sultan would place as many troops as required at Bulgaria's disposal, and that Bulgaria would reciprocate in the event of external aggression against the Sultan's European provinces. In the event, a change in political circumstances meant that the alliance was never ratified(44).

Abdulhamid returned to the idea of a Balkan alliance in 1897, when he put forward proposals for a series of parallel military understandings between the Ottoman Empire and Serbia, Rumania and Bulgaria(45). The proposals were made immediately before and after the Greco-Ottoman war of that year; doubtless they were motivated in part by the desire to isolate Greece and to forestall a Balkan combination against the Ottoman Empire, but there are also indications of a desire to secure the Ottoman Empire against Russia and Austria-Hungary in the longer term. The Sultan's Ministers emphasized the desirability of "liberating the small governments of the Balkans from the influences of other Powers", while the Secret Palace Secretary Izzet Bey spoke of the need to secure the independence of the Balkan states and the Ottoman Empire against Russia in the event of the future dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy:

As soon as Franz Joseph dies, Russia will attack and smash the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. After that, Serbia and Bulgaria will

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be only two soup-spoonfuls for Russia. When she has swallowed you, then it will be our turn and then it will be all up with us... (46).

The terms of the proposed alliances with Bulgaria, Rumania and Serbia closely resembled the abortive Ottoman-Bulgarian arrangement of 1886; the Sultan offered to defend the Balkan states against external aggression if they would agree to similarly defend the Ottoman Empire in Europe (47). Once again, however, the project proved abortive: none of the three Balkan states approached appears to have regarded the Sultan's overtures as anything more than an opportunity to extract political concessions from the Ottoman Empire, and in any case, Serbia and Bulgaria wanted alliance against Bulgaria, not with her (48). It was ten years before Abdulhamid returned to the possibility of a Balkan alliance. In 1907 and 1908 he made fresh approaches to Rumania, Greece and Serbia. These appear to have been inspired by the Ottoman Empire's current problems in Macedonia, and to have been directed in the first instance towards an anti-Bulgarian understanding; at the same time, however, Abdulhamid continued to stress the anti-Russian and anti-Austro-Hungarian implications of a Balkan alliance. In this instance, his diplomacy was cut short by the Young Turk Revolution of July 1908 (49).

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Abdulhamid's view of his Empire's defence problem explains a great deal about his foreign policy. It accounts for his consistent reluctance to resort to force in international disputes, even when the immediate military and political odds appeared to be favourable. The Ottoman Empire was exposed to too many potential enemies in too many quarters; any conflict, however local its origins, could easily develop into the Sultan's nightmare of "a major war against numerous enemies" - a war which the Ottoman Empire could not hope to win, and which would in all probability destroy it entirely. Hence - at least in part - the refusal to intervene in Egypt in 1882, to occupy Eastern Rumelia in 1885, and to offer a military response to Bulgaria's blatant patronage of IMRO in the early 1900s. Losses of marginal territory and prestige had to be accepted; the alternative was worse. The defence problem also explains Abdulhamid's decision to adopt a stance of "moderation and neutrality" towards the rival European Great Powers: given that no Great Power alliance could protect the Ottoman Empire, it was foolish to take sides in Great Power quarrels, or to place the Empire in a position where it might be forced to take sides. Hence the failure of British and

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British attempts to establish a "leading influence" in Istanbul between 1878 and 1897, even when - as in 1897 - the British held out the bait of a withdrawal from Egypt.

That said, a foreign policy could not be based solely upon a military negative, and in Abdulhamid's view of the defence problem ruled out certain diplomatic options if not out guarantee success with others. By and large the strategy of "neutrality and moderation" did prove successful, at least until the late 1890s, but its success depended upon the existence of Great Power divisions and balances which Abdulhamid was able to manipulate. Russia and Britain cancelled each other out at the Straits, as did Russia and Austria-Hungary in the Balkans, Britain and France in Egypt, and France and Italy in Tripolitania, while Germany's peculiar position in European politics offered an indirect guarantee against hostile Great Power combinations. Abdulhamid had no intention of offering his alliance to any of the Great Powers, but he could exploit the possibility that he might do so to attract and repel Powers according to circumstance. After 1897 these securities disappeared, and took away the Sultan's freedom of manoeuvre: Austria-Hungary made up her Balkan quarrel with Russia, Italy settled with France, and Britain was reconciled to France and Russia. Abdulhamid could do nothing: his legacy to his Young Turk successors was an unresolved defence problem and an

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exhausted diplomacy.

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