



## Abolitionism and the African Slave Trade in the Ottoman Empire (1857–1922)

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This chapter discusses the history of abolitionism in the Ottoman Empire from its beginning in the mid-nineteenth century to the Empire's demise in the early twentieth century. It starts by presenting a revised history of abolition by contextualizing it as part of growing British political and economic influence in the Ottoman Empire. The abolitionist era began in 1857 when, largely under British pressure, the Ottoman government prohibited the slave trade. As the nineteenth century progressed, the Ottoman state signed international agreements that further outlined their obligations to rescue and care for emancipated slaves.

Subsequently, this chapter looks specifically at Ahmed Şefik Midhat Pasha (1822–1883), one of the leading Ottoman statesmen of the reform era of the nineteenth century, and a noted proponent of abolition.<sup>1</sup> It provides an overview of his reputed abolitionist activities in the broader context of his career and life as a prominent politician. Specifically, it examines Midhat's activities at the time of the ascension of Abdülhamid II, and the clauses of the first Ottoman constitution of 1876 related to slavery, and assesses if Midhat was, as is conventionally believed, committed to the abolition of slavery.

Finally, from an analysis of Ottoman newspapers of the time, this chapter surveys general attitudes in Ottoman society about slavery and sub-Saharan Africans. The opinions expressed in these newspapers both reflected and

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<sup>1</sup>Y.H. Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and its demise, 1800–1909* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 128.

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informed the negative perceptions of Africans held by the readers and the Ottoman officials tasked with policing, rescuing, and manumitting the enslaved. These articles show that recognition of the humanity of emancipated Africans was seldom compatible with emerging concepts of Western-influenced Ottoman liberal reform and citizenship.

## THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire became increasingly dependent on foreign aid and trade as it accumulated large foreign debt, and as military losses and nationalist uprisings continued to shrink its borders. While the creation of a modern, centralized state was the main intention of the Ottoman government, the implementation of westernizing reforms in this period was incomplete. As a result, contemporary political, social, and economic orders were a hybrid mix of Ottoman and ‘modern,’ Western European forms of government. In the midst of this transformation were two seemingly contradictory events: the slave trade reached its climax at the same time as the dawning of the age of abolition and unprecedented efforts to halt it. The ongoing attempts to resolve these underlying tensions is the focus of this chapter.

## SLAVERY IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

There were in fact many practices in the Ottoman Empire that could be considered as falling broadly within the framework of ‘slavery’ or ‘unfreedom,’ including imprisonment, indebted sharecropping, and various kinds of conjugal unions.<sup>2</sup> This chapter focuses on legal enslavement. Sharia (or Islamic Law), the foundation and legal basis for slavery in the Ottoman Empire, granted a person ownership over another, meaning the owner had rights to the slave’s labour, property, and reproduction. However, scriptural prescriptions did not always reflect social practice; the experiences of slaves in Ottoman society varied dramatically. The first and arguably most important way that slaves were classified in the Ottoman Empire was the distinction between elite and non-elite slaves, or rather, between military-administrative slaves and their wives and consorts, labelled *kul/harem* slaves, and domestic or menial slavery. Though it did not fully end, *kul/harem* slavery slowly came to account for a smaller segment of the entire slave population in the nineteenth century, owing largely to the demise of one of the main mechanisms for recruitment into this class—the *devşirme*, the state collection of young Christian boys by the imperial palace.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This section borrows from Michael Ferguson and Ehud R. Toledano, ‘Slavery and Emancipation in the late Ottoman Empire’ in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery: Volume 4*, ed. David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 174–96.

<sup>3</sup> R. Brunschvig, ‘Abd’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P.J. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

Slaves were also classified along gender lines. In the nineteenth century, most slaves (roughly two-thirds) were women who worked in domestic positions, though some eventually became wives or concubines in elite households. As Madeline Zilfi notes, female slaves were inherently more vulnerable in their positions, largely because they could not attain ‘independence’ on their own but were attached to their husband and his household.<sup>4</sup> Threat of sexual violence perpetrated by their owners, and the lack of control over one’s reproductive abilities put female slaves in a much more precarious position than male slaves. At the same time, many of the female slaves who bore the children of their enslavers gained a special status, that of ‘mother of a child’ (Turkish: *ummuveled*; Arabic: *umm walad*), which meant they were not to be sold, and that they and their children would be set free after the death of their enslaver. However, this was only the case if the father recognized the child as his own.

Slaves in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire were also classified according to their origin and ethnic/racial backgrounds. Generally, African slaves were more likely to be enslaved in domestic and menial tasks, and not taken on as wives or concubines. Furthermore, their options for working their way up the socio-political ladder, whether inside or outside the household, were more limited than, for example, slaves of Circassian or Georgian origin. Other factors also shaped the Ottoman slave experience, including the class and type of employment the enslaver had, and where and how they lived, whether in urban, rural, or nomadic environments. *Kul/harem* slaves in elite households in Istanbul had relatively better opportunities, social mobility, and quality of life. As Ehud R. Toledano argues, domestic slaves outside of Istanbul, owned by non-elite peoples, likely had it the worst.<sup>5</sup> This chapter focuses on the predominant type of bondage in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire—that of African non-elite slavery. This was also the form of bondage that received most attention from abolitionists and politicians.

## AFRICAN SLAVERY TO THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

The trade in Africans during the nineteenth century was carried out along four routes, although these were flexible and often changed and overlapped.<sup>6</sup> Historically, one of the main routes that brought African slaves to the Ottoman

<sup>4</sup>M.C. Zilfi, *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire: The Design of Difference* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 104.

<sup>5</sup>Ehud R. Toledano, ‘Enslavement in the Ottoman Empire in the Early Modern Period’ in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery: Volume 3*, ed. D. Eltis and S.L. Engerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 29.

<sup>6</sup>The following passages draw on: Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade*, 14–54, 57, 205, 238, 240–4; Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 39–42; Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 71; Michael La Rue, ‘Frontiers of Enslavement: Bagirmi and the Trans-Saharan Slave Routes’ in *Slavery on the Frontiers of Islam*, ed. Paul E. Lovejoy (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2004), 31; and most recently, John Wright, *The Trans-Saharan Slave Trade* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 125–6.

Empire was down the Nile Valley. Owing to British influence in Egypt since the early nineteenth century, the trade there was prohibited and regulated much earlier than elsewhere in the empire. While the flow of slaves north from Cairo to ports such as Alexandria was reduced over the century, internal Egyptian slave trades and slavery continued regardless of regulations. Another route by which slaves were transported from sub-Saharan Africa to Ottoman lands was by the Red Sea, which served the pilgrims to Mecca and Medina. The Ottoman Empire also drew slaves from East Africa as far south as Zanzibar. Finally, in the mid-nineteenth century, the trans-Saharan route to North African ports like Benghazi and smaller ports such as Derna experienced a dramatic growth.

On all routes, African slaves were moved under gruelling conditions, by land, in caravans containing dozens to hundreds of slaves, often carrying cargoes of ostrich feathers, animal hides, and canuba wax. Slaves were often sold and traded as opportunities arose at oases and other mid-way points. Some were destined for local clients, staying within Africa, while others were loaded onto ships in African ports bound to the northern tier of the Ottoman Empire, with docking for refuelling in the Mediterranean islands. What's more, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 effectively connected the Red Sea and Mediterranean slave trade networks. From that point onwards, it was possible to load slaves onto ships along the Red Sea coast and move them north to Mediterranean port cities. There were two main slave markets for Africans in the Ottoman Empire: Istanbul and the Hijaz. As the imperial capital, Istanbul and its numerous palaces were constantly looking to replenish their slave population. The Hijaz, comprising the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina, was the site of an impressive amount of trade surrounding the annual pilgrimage (*Hajj*). Indeed, all major Ottoman cities and ports, including Cairo, Tripoli, Benghazi, Salonika, Izmir, Bursa, Beirut, and Basra, saw the arrival of slaves directly from the interior of Africa.

The enslaved Africans transported across these routes were likely acquired through war, kidnapping, purchase at internal markets, or instability within a given region. Environmental factors often played a role in this instability; for example, the trans-Saharan route was dramatically affected by the unique condition of Lake Chad, which recedes to a fraction of its size annually in the hot season, causing food scarcity and instability. Conversely, in the rainy season, Lake Chad was surrounded by numerous plantation-like farms using slave labour.

Furthermore, as noted above, the moment British anti-slave trade policing began in Ottoman lands, the slave trade grew to its largest documented rate. While the reasons for this are still unclear, this growth was in large part a result of the introduction of steamships in the nineteenth century. Whereas wooden, dhow-like boats were the main means of transport in Ottoman seas in earlier centuries, steam ships were more reliable and quicker. Despite the fact that many steamers were foreign-owned and operated, they are known to have carried slaves whether wittingly or not.

Approximately 16,000–18,000 men and women were transported into the Ottoman Empire per year during the peak years of the nineteenth century, that is, from the 1840s to 1860s.<sup>7</sup> Ralph Austen estimates that the total volume of slaves from Africa into Ottoman territories is as follows: from Swahili coasts to the Ottoman Middle East and India: 313,000; across the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden: 492,000; into Ottoman Egypt: 362,000; and into Ottoman North Africa (Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya): 350,000. Thus, a rough estimate for the number of slaves transported to the Ottoman Empire in this period is 1.3 million.

### PROHIBITION(S) OF THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

Western European (chiefly British) pressure was the main force behind the Ottoman decision to participate in the abolitionist movement. After establishing anti-slavery treaties in the early nineteenth century with West African rulers, and effectively beginning to enforce anti-slaving measures for the Atlantic trade, British and other European powers gradually extended their surveillance to other parts of coastal Africa, including Ottoman territory.<sup>8</sup> From mid-century, the British began to pressure governments worldwide to halt the trade in African slaves. By this time, the Ottoman state had grown dependent on British, French, and other European powers for financial, technical, and military support. Western powers used this dependency as leverage to shape Ottoman government policies.<sup>9</sup> Finally, bowing to pressure in 1857, the Ottoman sultan issued an edict acquiescing to the foreign abolitionist movement. Significantly, however, the decree only sought to abolish the slave trade, as slavery was not only permitted in the Quran but was also a central means of expanding one's household and creating networks of dependence in Ottoman society.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, by the mid-nineteenth century, the Ottoman state was

<sup>7</sup>The most reliable work on this subject is that by Ralph Austen, 'The 19th Century Islamic Slave Trade from East Africa (Swahili and Red Sea Coasts): A Tentative Census,' *Slavery and Abolition* 9, no. 3 (1988): 21–44; and 'The Mediterranean Islamic Slave Trade out of Africa: A Tentative Census,' *Slavery and Abolition* 13, no. 1 (1992): 214–48. See also Thomas M. Rick's thorough consideration in 'Slaves and Slave Traders in the Persian Gulf, 18th and 19th Centuries: An Assessment,' *Slavery and Abolition* 9, no. 3 (1988): 60–70. For Lovejoy's higher numbers and criticism of Austen's figures, see Paul Lovejoy, 'Commercial Sectors in the Economy of the Nineteenth-Century Central Sudan: The Trans-Saharan Trade and the Desert-Side Salt Trade,' *African Economic History* 13 (1984), 87–116; and Paul Lovejoy, 'The nineteenth-century slave trade,' in *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup>Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*, 252–77.

<sup>9</sup>D.C. Blaisdell, *European Financial Control in the Ottoman Empire: a study of the establishment, activities, and significance of the administration of the Ottoman public debt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929).

<sup>10</sup>Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 112.

developing policies and bureaucratic procedures aimed at halting the transportation of enslaved Africans into Ottoman lands.

The prohibition of the African slave trade in 1857 forced slave traffickers to adapt to a new set of circumstances. It was no longer possible to openly transport slaves through major ports to waiting slave markets. The trade thus moved 'underground,' which arguably increased the suffering of the slaves themselves. For example, whereas previously slaves could be transported above-deck across the Mediterranean, now they were forced into hidden compartments in the ballast in case of inspection by British officials. In some ways, this undermined the very purpose of the prohibition. There were also loopholes in the regulations for transporting slaves. For example, slave traders often acted as regular passengers aboard steamships in plain sight of the authorities. If questioned about his activities, a slave trader would tell inquiring authorities that the women were his wives and would show forged travel documents to bolster his case.<sup>11</sup> In these situations, authorities had little recourse.

Another major treaty was *The Anglo-Ottoman Convention for the Suppression of the Black Slave Trade*, enacted in 1880. As Y. Hakan Erdem notes, from this point it was strictly illegal to import and export enslaved Africans in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, while British and Ottoman authorities negotiated mutual rights of search and seizure of suspected vessels transporting slaves in the Ottoman Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and parts of the coast of East Africa, this agreement did not extend to the Mediterranean. It has been suggested that this omission was intentional as the British suspected that their own steamers were illegally carrying slaves.<sup>13</sup>

Since the 1880 Anglo-Ottoman treaty specified that slave traders were to be prosecuted under Ottoman law, the Ottoman government drafted laws in 1882 and 1883 placing restrictions on the slave trade and delineating punishments. As Erdem observes, the British were aware that slave dealers were being treated kindly by Ottoman courts. Clear restrictions and penalties were laid out in these draft laws to force local judges to act.<sup>14</sup> However, when they were passed to the Sultan Abdülhamid II (r.1876–1909) for his assent, none was ever given. It was only under pressure from the looming Brussels Anti-Slavery Conference in 1899 that assent was finally given, creating a clear mandate for enforcement in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>15</sup>

Doubtless, the intra-Ottoman struggle to form a coherent policy that both the government functionaries and the sultan himself could agree upon was both intense and complicated. At times, the sultan was willing to sign it, and at other times he was hesitant, believing it would represent a loss of Ottoman sovereignty and tarnish his image. Ottoman reformers, including Midhat Pasha

<sup>11</sup> Ehud R. Toledano, *As if Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 118–24.

<sup>12</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 135.

<sup>13</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 136.

<sup>14</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 136.

<sup>15</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 137.

(discussed below), had a difficult task in balancing the permissibility of slavery in religious texts with the imperatives of the state and abolitionists to end the slave trade. In 1890, the Ottoman government took part in its first multilateral treaty against the slave trade as part of the General Act of the Brussels Conference. This act was largely a repetition of the articles included in the Ottoman law signed in 1889, and, thus, does not represent a drastic change but rather an international commitment to act. However, one key article of the treaty did have a dramatic effect on the actions of the Ottoman government, namely, that the emancipating state must act to establish places of care for rescued African slaves.<sup>16</sup> This article contributed to growing numbers of emancipated slaves arriving in large cities across the empire, a subject reflected in local newspapers, as highlighted below.

In 1908, following the Young Turk coup, one of the first acts of the new ruling regime was to rid the imperial palace of all of its harem slaves. In the same year, they also prohibited the sale of Circassian slaves in the empire.<sup>17</sup> Yet, those in power did not take action to end slavery itself. Definitive prohibition occurred only through a binding international agreement enforced well after the end of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. In 1955, Turkey formally abolished slavery after signing on to the League of Nations' 1926 Slavery Convention.<sup>18</sup>

### ABOLITIONISTS IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE: THE CASE OF MIDHAT PASHA (1822–1883)

There is, unfortunately, a general absence of detailed biographical information about statesmen of the Ottoman Empire during the abolition period, nor were there any prominent abolitionist groups active in the late Ottoman Empire. These two factors hinder our ability to understand whether abolitionism was a concern of high-ranking politicians or the general populace. As well, the memoirs of notable Ottoman statesmen from this period are few and far between, and the available works make little or no mention of slavery.<sup>19</sup> With so little material available to historians, the prevalence of abolitionism among late Ottoman lawmakers is largely unknown. Thus, the career of the only well-known Ottoman statesman with any traces of abolitionist instincts must be examined. Midhat Pasha was regarded as the leading reformer and abolitionist

<sup>16</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 144–6. British and Ottoman officials doubtless used the word 'rescue' to imply that their intervention would have a positive impact on the lives of enslaved Africans. I employ the term here only for the sake of grammatical simplicity—not to suggest the same.

<sup>17</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 150–1.

<sup>18</sup> United Nations, 'Slavery Convention, signed at Geneva on 25 September 1926, and amended by the Protocol, New York, 7 December 1953,' *United Nations Treaty Collection*, vol. 212 (7 July 1955): 17, [http://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg\\_no=XVIII-2&chapter=18&lang=en](http://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XVIII-2&chapter=18&lang=en), date accessed 14 January 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Zilfi, *Women and Slavery*, 229.



amongst highest ranking Ottoman officials in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> What follows is an examination of Midhat's career, which both refines and expands on the existing discussions of his position as an abolitionist.

Before proceeding, it is important to acknowledge that the common, Western understanding of 'abolitionist' is culturally and historically specific. Midhat was not, for example, an Ottoman William Wilberforce. The actions of Ottoman politicians must be understood within their own specific context, involving a different historical backdrop, and a different set of morals, ethics, and attitudes about a different kind of slavery. Midhat was a reformer highly influenced by developments in Western Europe, and he was arguably one of the greatest statesmen and constitutionalists of the late nineteenth century. He also had a complicated relationship with slavery. Just as slavery permeated Ottoman society on different levels, so it did, too, within Midhat's life. Thus, his career and home life present a series of apparent contradictions: while pursuing western-style political reform and abolitionism, Midhat was simultaneously—and according to Ottoman political rhetoric—a slave or servant of the sultan, had purchased his second wife from a slave market, and was rumoured to have traded slaves, as well.<sup>21</sup> Despite this, in his obituary in *The Times of London*, Sir Henry Elliot, former British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, noted that Midhat's work as a reformer 'aligned with English liberal views.'<sup>22</sup>

Like many who worked their way into the upper echelons of the late Ottoman state's bureaucracy, Midhat came from a respectable family, and his father was part of the *ulema*, or Islamic scholar class. At 10 years old, he reportedly became a *hafız* (someone who has memorized the Quran), a rather remarkable feat.<sup>23</sup> After holding various positions at the lower rungs of the state bureaucracy, Midhat eventually rose to prominence as an effective administrator. Instead of staying in Istanbul to maintain favour with patrons, according to custom, he chose to take posts in far flung Ottoman provinces. For this reason, unlike his peers, Midhat had an excellent grasp on the daily workings of the Empire and experiences of those living across its vast lands.<sup>24</sup> However, gaining this intimate knowledge of the provinces cost him patronage and the prowess to navigate the complex web of political alliances in Istanbul, which would later play a role in his ouster and exile.

In the 1840s, Midhat began an impressive career in the service of the state. His career can be divided into four phrases: he first served as a member of

<sup>20</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 128.

<sup>21</sup> Describing oneself as slave or servant of the sultan was a common practice, which by the early twentieth century was criticized by contemporary political thinkers. See, for example, Mehmed Said Paşa, *Gazeteci Lisani*, ed. and trans. Ersin Özarslan (Ankara: Gazi Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi, 2008), 24. My thanks to Alp Eren Topal for this reference.

<sup>22</sup> H. Elliot, 'Midhat Pasha,' *The Times* (London, England), 15 January 1885, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> R.H. Davison, 'Midhat Pasha' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P.J. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Stanford J. Shaw and E.K. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 67.



numerous commissions and councils, and as an investigator (largely of corruption and mismanagement of specific provinces); he then held two appointments as *grand vizier* (prime minister); and finally, he served as head of the commission tasked with drafting the first and only Ottoman constitution.<sup>25</sup> Between each posting, Midhat took numerous trips to Western Europe. As Stanford J. Shaw notes, in 1858, disillusioned by the fact that corruption in the bureaucracy was going unpunished, Midhat went to Europe to ‘observe European civilization and draw from the experience in subsequent years.’<sup>26</sup> He spent six months in 1858 in Paris, London, Brussels, and Vienna, learning French and gaining first-hand knowledge of Western European politics. It was during this period that Midhat likely became acquainted with the Western European abolitionist movement.

Additionally, Midhat’s position as the governor of Baghdad (1868–1872) exemplifies his skills as a pre-eminent Ottoman reformer. He undertook dramatic steps to modernize and reorganize the city’s administration. For example, he reformed the municipal council of Baghdad, instituted new laws regarding private property, and made efforts to include many locals in positions of power within his administration. He improved city streets by paving and lighting them, constructed a water supply system, wool and cotton mills, and a clothing factory. He also improved other aspects of Baghdad’s infrastructure, including the creation of new tramways, schools, a hospital, and a bank for small-scale agriculturalists. He also founded Iraq’s first newspaper.<sup>27</sup> His legacy in Iraq is still recognized today as one of the pivotal moments in the country’s modernization.<sup>28</sup>

### MIDHAT AS GOVERNOR AND THE ISSUE OF SLAVERY

While governor of Baghdad, Midhat, also worked to combat the slave trade, or, as Erdem notes, he consistently demonstrated to the British a willingness to be an active ally against it.<sup>29</sup> For example, in 1871, upon hearing of ongoing sales of African slaves in the Persian Gulf at Basra, Midhat sent local officials in Basra copies of the official document banning the slave trade to remind them of the rules and regulations related to the trade. This was the typical response of Ottoman governors to British pressure to halt slave trading in their provinces, and to more generally assuage British concerns.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Davison, ‘Midhat Pasha.’

<sup>26</sup> Shaw and Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire*, 67.

<sup>27</sup> Davison, ‘Midhat Pasha’; see also, G. Çetinsaya, *Ottoman Administration of Iraq, 1890–1908* (London: Routledge, 2006), 8–10.

<sup>28</sup> E. Ceylan, *The Ottoman Origins of Modern Iraq Political Reform, Modernization and Development in the Nineteenth-Century Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 81–4.

<sup>29</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 131.

<sup>30</sup> Midhat Pasha to Herbert, no. 7 (translation), 25 January 1871, FO 84/1341/29, National Archives, Kew (hereafter NA).

However, evidence suggests that Midhat acted rather differently towards the slave trade while he was the governor of Syria in 1880. In this instance, British authorities learnt that Midhat had given two enslaved girls to a local dignitary while on his way to Mecca.<sup>31</sup> Despite British officials learning of Midhat's actions, they chose not to address the issue with him. Indeed, specific instructions were given by the British Ambassador 'for the present, [to refrain] from making representations [to the *grand vizier*] on these subjects.'<sup>32</sup> British inaction here can be understood in two ways. First, they saw that Midhat was an effective administrator in Syria, a reformer and modernizer, and did not want to publicly smear one of their strongest allies. Second, and as noted by Erdem, they might have believed that this information about Midhat was leaked to them intentionally, as part of a diplomatic ploy by the sultan to tarnish the image of one of his biggest political rivals.<sup>33</sup>

Midhat's transaction of female slaves was more likely one of the many ways an Ottoman governor worked to maintain favour with local notables and would not have been viewed as unusual. Midhat had to engage with locals on their terms. Participating in the slave trade demonstrated his authority, benevolence, and power through this conspicuous consumption. Indeed, he managed the situation in Syria so effectively that the sultan reportedly began to worry that Midhat was plotting to become an autonomous ruler of that Ottoman province, and to establish a hereditary dynasty like that of Mehmed Ali Pasha in Ottoman Egypt.<sup>34</sup> These were probably not the first or last slaves Midhat gave as gifts during his career. Such accounts complicate the image of Midhat, and of Ottoman abolitionism as a whole.

### MIDHAT, THE ASCENSION OF ABDÜLHAMID II, THE CONSTITUTION, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR ABOLITION?

During his time as a high-ranking minister in Istanbul in 1876, working closely with the newly ascended Sultan Abdülhamid II, Midhat's supposed abolitionist credentials—claimed by contemporary British observers and later his son—came to the fore. First, according to his son Ali Haydar Midhat, who wrote a detailed biography of his father, Midhat had drafted the new sultan's speech from the throne, which included a call for abolition. However, this section was reportedly removed by the sultan:

The buying and selling of slaves being contrary to the prescriptions of the [Islamic Law], We hereby enfranchise the slaves and eunuchs of Our Palace, and declare that henceforth all the trade in slaves, whether purchase or sale, is hereby formally forbidden in Our Empire, and a date will be fixed for the gradual emancipation of

<sup>31</sup> Salisbury to Layard, 27 January 1880, FO 84/1570/15–16, NA.

<sup>32</sup> Salisbury to Layard, 15 March 1880, FO 84/1570/34–35, NA.

<sup>33</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 131.

<sup>34</sup> Davison, 'Midhat Pasha.'

all existing slaves, and special measures will be adopted to prevent any return of slavery.<sup>35</sup>

However, Erdem has convincingly shown that the wording of the draft speech printed in the original Ottoman Turkish version of the biography is rather different from the English translation. It does not call for the same general abolition but singles out prohibiting the sale of slaves whose origins are impossible to confirm (as only non-Muslims were legally enslavable, according to Islamic Law). The explanation for the differences in each version likely has more to do with the son's effort to secure his father's legacy as an abolitionist in the minds of western readers than anything else.<sup>36</sup>

Midhat's reformist style of governance, influenced by western ideas, was demonstrated next in the creation of the first Ottoman constitution in 1876. Under growing international pressure due to unrest in some of the empire's Balkan provinces, increasingly fraught relations with the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and a war-ready Russia looming nearby, the Ottoman government agreed to hold a multinational conference to bring all of these issues to a resolution at once. Midhat, perhaps seeing an opportunity, used the conference to justify pushing for the implementation of a western-style constitution for the Ottoman Empire. It appears Midhat believed that a constitution would demonstrate to the other European empires that the Ottoman government intended to rule justly, with a 'modern' system of governance. This would allow the Empire to legitimize its continued control over the increasingly unstable Balkan provinces.<sup>37</sup> While Midhat led the constitutional commission, he was hindered by a large number of conservative members more closely allied with the sultan. As a result, any progressive reforms he wanted to include were essentially diluted by the other members. For example, though Midhat wanted government ministers to be directly accountable to a future parliament elected by voters, in the final draft, ministers remained responsible to the Sultan, as they had been traditionally.<sup>38</sup>

The Ottoman constitution, proclaimed on 23 December 1876, was composed of 119 articles, and as Shaw notes, was not entirely the set of western-style reforms reported by foreign observers (and subsequently repeated in the historiography). It provided for the separation of legislative, judicial, and executive powers 'much more in form than fact.'<sup>39</sup> The question of slavery was never actually addressed in the document itself. Despite not having an article

<sup>35</sup> A.H. Midhat, *The Life of Midhat Pasha* (London: J. Murray, 1903), 108; also cited in Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 126.

<sup>36</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 127.

<sup>37</sup> Shaw and Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire*, 173–4. For the full text, see 'The Ottoman Constitution, Promulgated the 7th Zilbridje, 1293 (11/23 December, 1876),' *The American Journal of International Law* 2, no. 4 (1908): 367–87.

<sup>38</sup> Shaw and Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire*, 174.

<sup>39</sup> Shaw and Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire*, 175.

relating to the abolition of slavery per se, there are at least two articles that impacted the legality of slavery.

First, Article 11 gave individual liberty to all Ottoman subjects. This article entirely ignored the question of slavery and, thus, seems contradictory to the still-existing social and legal practices of slavery. Fanny Davis argues that Article 11 gave slaves theoretical freedom, but in practice, nothing changed.<sup>40</sup> That Africans continued to be enslaved despite the constitutional declaration that all Ottoman subjects were free suggests that they were not viewed as full members of Ottoman society. This clause in no way affected the relationship of the enslaver and enslaved. However, another constitutional article essentially reinforced slavery, a circumstance that has gone unnoticed by both Erdem and Davis. Article 21 declares the privacy of the home inviolable.<sup>41</sup> Ensuring that the domicile was the private realm of the head of household had important implications.<sup>42</sup> The state and its laws would not interfere in domestic matters, in essence reaffirming the right of household heads to buy and own multiple slaves and slave-wives, with assurance that they could do so regardless of any prohibition on the slave trade. This article thus ensured that the practice of slavery would continue in private. Indeed, this legally coded phrasing maintaining domestic slavery was employed at the same time in non-Ottoman Muslim lands, as well. Sarah Ghabrial has shown that French colonizers of Algeria maintained power and favour of local notables by similarly enshrining in law the rights of households to maintain domestic slavery, thus ensuring their continued compliance with colonial rule.<sup>43</sup> A similar practice has been noted by Ahmad Sikainga for Sudan, where British officials referred complaints by Sudanese women to local religious courts, likewise helping to shore up support of male heads of household by tacitly reinforcing domestic slavery.<sup>44</sup>

While it is debatable whether Midhat really pushed for abolition in the speech from the throne, Erdem has shown that a document (likely written by Midhat) sent out in February 1877 to the governors reasserting the prohibition of the slave trade does carry a strong abolitionist tone. In this letter, the writer explains in detail that the slave trade had been ended for humanitarian reasons, and because the newly proclaimed constitution of 1876 made all Ottoman subjects 'free.' Erdem notes that the seeming contradictory nature of this letter is 'tantamount to a total non-recognition of the institution.'<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> F. Davis, *The Ottoman Lady: A Social History from 1718 to 1918* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 113.

<sup>41</sup> 'The Ottoman Constitution,' 367–87.

<sup>42</sup> Shaw and Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire*, 177.

<sup>43</sup> Sarah Ghabrial, "'Histoire d'une petite négresse": "Slave-wives" of the Mزاب, Algeria (1890–1905)' in *Slavery in the Islamic World*, ed. M.A. Fay (New York: Palgrave, forthcoming 2018).

<sup>44</sup> A.A. Sikainga, 'Shari'a's Courts and the Manumission of Female Slaves in the Sudan, 1898–1939,' *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28, 1 (1995): 1–24.

<sup>45</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 130.

Midhat's work on the constitution was largely made irrelevant when the sultan chose ultimately to enhance his own personal power instead. Citing both foreign and domestic instabilities, the sultan indefinitely prorogued the Ottoman parliament and suspended the constitution in 1878. Two years later, in 1880, the transition to autocracy was complete when any pretence that the constitution would be restored was dropped.<sup>46</sup> During the period, Midhat was forced into exile by the sultan. Midhat then spent time in various European capitals lobbying for the Ottoman Empire. In his later life, there is no evidence to suggest he continued to work for abolition.

### SLAVERY WITHIN MIDHAT'S LIFE

Despite his reputation as a progressive reformer with abolitionist tendencies, Midhat had purchased his second wife. This is what Madeline Zilfi refers to as Midhat's 'Jeffersonian moment'.<sup>47</sup> When Midhat was sent to Baghdad to become governor, his first wife, Fatma Naima, stayed behind in Istanbul. It was during this time as governor of Baghdad that he acquired a second wife, unbeknownst to the first.<sup>48</sup> Midhat's sister reportedly acted as his scout (*görüücü*), visiting different markets and harems before selecting a 17-year-old Circassian woman named Şehriban. Midhat, who was 50 years old at the time, paid a hefty sum of 2000 gold coins for her.<sup>49</sup> This seeming contradiction has been noted in the existing historiography. Fanny Davis argues that neither one of his wives was a 'slave wife as both were literate, schooled and he trusted them so much he gave them power of attorney while in exile in Izmir'.<sup>50</sup> This may have been true, but despite other methods of attaining a second wife, such as marrying the daughter of one of his friends or fellow administrators (a common practice), he chose to purchase a young slave to be his wife. This reveals Midhat's complicated relationship with slavery: in a moment when he could have avoided the institution, he actively chose to participate in it.

### PERCEPTIONS OF ENSLAVED AND EMANCIPATED AFRICANS IN DAILY LIFE: THE CASE OF IZMİR

It is impossible to capture how the average person thought about African slavery in the late Ottoman Empire due the scant source material. However, we can glean important indications of general opinion on these matters in the late Ottoman Empire's second city, Izmir. This chapter will now turn to examine the attitudes in Ottoman society about slavery, and representations of sub-Saharan Africans in Ottoman newspapers from Izmir. *Hizmet* and *Ahenk* were

<sup>46</sup> E.J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 80.

<sup>47</sup> Zilfi, *Women and Slavery*, 229.

<sup>48</sup> Davis, *The Ottoman Lady*, 90.

<sup>49</sup> Davis, *The Ottoman Lady*, 107.

<sup>50</sup> Davis, *The Ottoman Lady*, 90; Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 132.

not only the most popular Ottoman-language newspapers in late-nineteenth-century Izmir, but enjoyed widespread readership throughout western Anatolia, as well.<sup>51</sup> It was these newspapers that, in the 1890s, published articles criticizing African practices at the annual religious festival known as the Calf Festival (Turkish: *Dana Bayramı*). This is not surprising, as Izmir arguably had the highest concentration of emancipated slaves in the late nineteenth century.<sup>52</sup> In publishing these articles, both newspapers reflected and informed the negative perceptions of the local populace and Ottoman officials tasked with policing, rescuing, and manumitting enslaved Africans. The two newspapers, *Hizmet* and *Ahenk*, are examined together here, as the editor for both was Tevfik Nevzat (1865–1905), a former lawyer and schoolteacher who was deeply influenced by both Western philosophies and the writings of Namık Kemal, one of the founders of the highly influential Young Ottoman political movement.<sup>53</sup>

Nevzat's influential newspaper articles criticizing African practices at their annual festival demonstrate the tension between emerging Ottoman concepts of belonging, identity, and citizenship, and the integration of emancipated Africans into Ottoman society. The impressions of African residents of Izmir, revealed in the pages of both newspapers, were focused on their 'wild' and 'savage' behaviour, stemming from a perceived lack of culture and civility. The subtext was, largely, that if Africans would only convert to Islam and act 'respectably,' they would be imbued with a greater humanity. Abolition seemingly initiated, or at least magnified, popular Ottoman perceptions of emancipated Africans, especially in the absence of the acculturation and guidance typically provided by a former master. Thus, much like Midhat Pasha, Nevzat's visions of reform and liberalism were still restrained within the existing discursive limits of Ottoman society.

This emerging political philosophy of the Young Ottoman movement to which Nevzat adhered centred on the fusing of European liberalism with Ottoman and Muslim socio-political traditions. Its founder, Namık Kemal, believed that the reform policies of the mid-nineteenth century (known as the *Tanzimat*) were a superficial adoption of European practices, and that real reform had to come through the development of a constitutional representative government that instilled in the populace a sense of loyalty and belonging to the state. Western liberal concepts of progress, freedom, and citizenship were translated into indigenous, Ottoman political parlance.<sup>54</sup> Thus, Nevzat's aim in writing about the Calf Festival was to explain to his readers that the customs celebrated by African inhabitants of Izmir were contrary to the forma-

<sup>51</sup> Ö.F. Huyugüzel, *Izmir'de edebiyat ve fikir hareketleri* (Izmir: Izmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi Kültür Yayını, 2001), 24; Z. Arıkan, *Izmir başından seçmeler 1872–1922*, vol. 1 (Izmir: Izmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi Kültür Yayını, 2001), 4.

<sup>52</sup> M. Ferguson, 'The African Presence in Late Ottoman Izmir and Beyond,' (PhD diss., McGill University, 2014), Chapter 2.

<sup>53</sup> Huyugüzel, *Izmir'de edebiyat ve fikir hareketleri*, 54.

<sup>54</sup> Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 71.

tion of a modern, European-influenced, liberal society, and should be prohibited.

The Calf Festival of Izmir was in fact one of many similar 'festivals' that both enslaved and liberated Africans celebrated in Ottoman lands.<sup>55</sup> Its existence shows that Africans brought with them cultural practices from their places of origin and sought to maintain a spiritual connection with their homeland cultures. While the particular festival described below took place in Izmir, there is enough resonance with other festivals in Istanbul, Cairo, Chania on Crete, and in North African ports to suggest that similar practices occurred throughout the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The annual festival occurred in May, and took place over three days, over three consecutive weekends, atop a hill overlooking the city of Izmir, where emancipated Africans lived. On the first day of the celebration, the community dressed in white and formed a procession that wound through the streets to collect donations for the upcoming festival, led by the *godya* (elsewhere known as a *kollbaşı*), or the female spiritual leader of the community. The procession chanted traditional songs in African languages as they marched. On the following weekend, the African community used the collected donations to buy a young calf. They decorated the calf (or calves) and paraded it through the streets, singing and dancing along the way. On the Friday of the following week came the final part of the event. It was on this day that the celebrations reached their climax. The *godya* had sacrificed the decorated calf in front of the African community. The participants then each marked themselves with blood from the calf. With the ceremony completed, the Africans then cooked and ate the calf. After the feast, there was dancing and merrymaking. The festival was a public spectacle in the late nineteenth century, as people of all backgrounds stood on rooftops, climbed trees, and packed the streets to see the parade.<sup>56</sup>

Toledano has shown that the core element of the ceremonies, parades, and festivals of the Africans in Izmir bears the hallmarks of the *Zar/Bori* possession and healing rituals.<sup>57</sup> *Zar* (East African) and *Bori* (West African) are two names applied to the various female-led, trance-based, socio-religious practices involving communication with spirits that afflicted mostly women. Thus, *Zar/Bori* was a cultural component that enslaved Africans brought with them to Ottoman lands, much like the way that core elements of *Vodou* were brought to St. Domingue (Haiti), *Candomblé* to Brazil, and other regions to which enslaved Africans were trafficked, especially in large numbers. The prevalence of spirit possession rituals amongst communities of enslaved and emancipated Africans

<sup>55</sup> The following section is based on: Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 173–6; Toledano, *As if Silent and Absent*, 212–17; and Ferguson, 'The African Presence in Late Ottoman Izmir,' 139–47. For studies on *Zar/Bori* see, A. Al-Safi, I.M. Lewis, and S. Hurreiz, eds., *Women's Medicine: The Zar-Bori Cult in Africa and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), and J. Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

<sup>56</sup> Ferguson, 'The African Presence in Late Ottoman Izmir,' 139–47.

<sup>57</sup> Toledano, *As if Silent and Absent*, 212–17.



suggests that it was not only a cultural link to their place of origin, but a critical strategy of communal healing for the difficulties they experienced in foreign lands. These rituals also created group cohesion that enabled adaptation to the new circumstances. In addition, the Calf Festival ceremonies centred African women, thus empowering them in a society where they were usually disempowered.

The most significant newspaper article by Nevzat criticizing the Calf Festival is an editorial that appeared in *Hizmet*, dated 3 May 1894. The editorial argued that a critical examination of the Calf Festival revealed that it lacked any historical or ancestral foundation. Rather, it was the result of groundless beliefs—an ignorance that should be pitied and banned.<sup>58</sup> His use of the word ‘*cehalet*’ to mean ‘ignorance’ carried a religious connotation, implying that the Africans were much like the benighted peoples of Arabia prior to the rise of Islam: ignorant not of their own fault, but simply needing to be shown the way.<sup>59</sup> The editorial also demonstrated that the emancipated Africans were not only a religious ‘other,’ but racially distinct, as well. The author noted a feeling of sadness and surprise in learning that 4000 to 5000 ‘of our well behaved white people’ had recently participated in the Calf Festival alongside 400 to 500 Africans.<sup>60</sup> By referring to white people as ‘well-behaved,’ the opposite terms were thus logically projected onto the Africans: wild and unruly.

The editorial further indicated that African women from the African neighbourhoods had previously travelled to the largely foreign-dominated suburb of Bornova, where they undertook ‘improper’ activities that involved ‘our people’—a reference to the Calf Festival and to *Zar/Bori* practices. Nevzat’s allusion to Bornova, an opulent suburb inhabited by successful business people, was deliberate, and was employed to conjure up the image of a bastion of western order and civilization threatened by wild, unruly peoples. The article concluded by re-emphasizing that the Calf Festival was grounded in unacceptable and ignorant beliefs, and the author recommended that the brothers and fathers of participating women, African or otherwise, should prevent them from visiting these ‘unsuitable neighbourhoods’ in Izmir.<sup>61</sup> In giving such instructions, this newspaper article reveals both the power and importance of the Calf Festival to Africans, and the perceived need to maintain established law and order, in public and private spaces, for the state. The command to control women was given to husbands and brothers who were both the most likely readers of the newspaper, and those traditionally charged in Ottoman society with disciplining family members, including wives and children. The fact that the newspaper gave this directive reflects how important Nevzat perceived the order of public space to be. By the article’s logic, then, a modern European city

<sup>58</sup> *Hizmet* (Izmir), 4 May 1894, 2.

<sup>59</sup> N. Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 34.

<sup>60</sup> *Hizmet* (Izmir), 4 May 1894, 2.

<sup>61</sup> *Hizmet*, 28 May 1894, 2.

was no place for disturbances brought about by Africans, and these practices should be immediately suppressed.

Other articles in Nevzat's newspapers followed a similar line of thought. In another from *Hizmet*, dated 4 May 1894, he began with the sentence '[s]peaking of ignorance, we feel sorry for those light witted and silly people who gather together [for the Calf Festival],' and concluded with, 'we feel pity for those who take pleasure from the Calf Festival [...].'<sup>62</sup> Similarly, an article in *Ahenk* from 28 May 1894 noted that the prohibition of the 'base and unacceptable' festival was enacted as a result of a few frightful and 'inappropriate situations' that arose involving women, which ran contrary to 'public decency.'<sup>63</sup> Just like the editorial published in *Hizmet* one year earlier, this article directly connects the concept of public decency with the actions and behaviour of emancipated African women. Nevzat's message was clear: a modernizing Ottoman society had no place for women dancing and celebrating in public. To him, Africans threatened the maintenance of public order and traditional gender roles.

As Nilüfer Göle notes for this period, '[w]esternization and the arousal of "civilizational" consciousness was directly dependent upon the relationship between the sexes, the allocation of space, and lifestyles.' These concerns, expressed in newspaper articles, reflect the drive of reformists to shape the emancipated Africans of Izmir into proper, modern inhabitants reflective of a civilized European city. Thus, for Nevzat, formerly enslaved Africans could attain Ottoman identity only if they shed their traditions and beliefs brought with them from Africa and adopted local versions of religious devotion and culture. Equally as important as abolition, then, were the efforts to ensure emancipated Africans to adopt and accept norms in Ottoman society.

## CONCLUSION

The nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire had a complicated and contradictory relationship with slavery and abolition. Backed by the permissibility of slavery in the Quran, slavery was engrained in the social fabric of Ottoman society. The push for the abolition of the slave trade came largely from foreign governments and was often met with ambivalence by Ottoman officials. The treaties signed between these foreign powers and the sultan did not have the desired effect. Slavery as an institution was never questioned and remained legal until the end of the Empire in 1922.

Midhat Pasha's life demonstrates this complicated relationship with slavery. While tasked as governor with halting the slave trade, Midhat bought a slave and took her as his second wife. While he may have favoured abolition in private, his actions as a leading statesmen showed little to reflect that. Even if

<sup>62</sup> *Hizmet*, 28 May 1894, 1.

<sup>63</sup> *Ahenk* (Izmir), 22 April 1895, 2–3.

he wanted to act, it seems there were too many other factors, not least religious support for slavery, the sultan, and the status quo.

The era of emancipation brought unprecedented numbers of freed Africans to Ottoman cities like Izmir. Local newspapers give the impression that many, including liberal-minded reformers, regarded overtly 'African' practices, especially the annual Calf Festival, as inimical to Izmir society and Ottoman civilization. The arguments raised by Nevzat against the actions of Africans can be seen as a product of the tension between previous practices of acculturation under slavery, and a social and political reluctance or inability to integrate Africans after emancipation. Despite recent developments in the historiography, slavery remains relatively understudied and unacknowledged in public discourse in Turkey. Midhat Pasha is openly celebrated not as an abolitionist, but as a modernizer who tried to establish democracy through constitution. Tevfik Nevzat is recognized as Izmir's first newspaperman. The descendants of the emancipated Africans still live in Izmir and face a near total non-recognition of their unique history as well as discrimination in their daily lives. While the abolition of slavery was fully enacted, its legacy still impacts Turkish society today.

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