

# Authoritarianism and Constitutionalism Combined: Ahmed Midhat Efendi Between the Sultan and the *Kanun-i Esasi*

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The outstanding intellectual figure of the late Ottoman Empire, the famous novelist, journalist and publisher Ahmed Midhat Efendi (1844-1912) is known as an admirer of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1842-1918) and a backer of his authoritarian regime (1876-1908). Despite his close affiliation with authoritarian Hamidian policies, Ahmed Midhat always propagated the vital importance of the first Ottoman constitution (1876) and tried to convince the Sultan to take steps in this direction. This article examines the dual character of Ahmed Midhat's political opinions, which was able to combine Hamidian autocracy and the constitutional regime. His famous work *Üss-i İnkılab* (1878) and his booklet *Tavzib-i Kelam ve Tasrib-i Meram* (1880) will be examined in order to find a more accurate portrait of Ahmed Midhat's political stance and to gain insight into the intellectual aura of the first constitutional regime.

## *The Many Faces of Ahmed Midhat Efendi*

Scholars of Ottoman intellectual history have tried to draw a consistent portrait of Ahmed Midhat Efendi, who had seemingly contradictory views regarding the political regime. Although a master of languages and a careful student of Western culture, Ahmed Midhat Efendi obviously was a loyal defendant of the traditional and religious norms of Ottoman society.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmed Midhat Efendi wrote a supplementary essay defending the harmony of Islam and modern sciences in *Niza'-i İlm ü Din 1-4* (Istanbul: Tercüman-i Hakikat Matbaası, 1313-18 [1895-1900]), which was his critical Turkish translation of John William Draper's *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*. Strauss notes that Ahmed Midhat serialized in his newspaper *Tercüman-i Hakikat* two works written in defence of Islam by the mufti of St. Petersburg, Ataullah Bayezitoff (1846-1911). Johann Strauss, "Kütüp ve Resail-i Mevkute': Printing and Publishing in a Multi-Ethnic Society," in *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy*, ed. Elisabeth Özdalga (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 228. Another example of Ahmed Midhat's religious writings is an 1883 polemic with the American missionary Henry Otis Dwight (1843-1917). A series of articles appearing in the *Tercüman-i Hakikat* under the title "Müdafaa" (Defence) provoked sharp reactions because Ahmed Midhat violently attacked not only the missionaries but also the fundamentals of Western Christianity. He published the series under the title *Müdafaa: Ehl-i İslâmî Nasranyete Dâvet Edenlere Karşı Kaleme Alınmıştır* (Istanbul, 1300); see *ibid*, 242.

Carter V. Findley identified Ahmed Midhat as Sultan Abdülhamid II's collaborator and publicist, who on the one hand is easily branded as a conservative, but on the other had progressive convictions. Findley stressed Ahmed Midhat's belief in the preference of social, economic and cultural change, in contrast to the progressive ideologues who took constitutionalism as their "symbol of western modernity."<sup>2</sup> The prolific author was definitely one of the vanguard supporters of women's emancipation, yet he was also an intolerant critic of the "overwesternized" men of high society, whom he caricatured in his well-known fictive characters of *Felâtn Bey* and *Sururi Efendi*.<sup>3</sup> As part of this critical stand, he wrote an essay on European good manners.<sup>4</sup> According to Mardin, Ahmed Midhat was a modernist eager to appropriate Western technology, but not lifestyle. He was a populist intellectual of humble descent who, therefore, faded into the background among the arrogant liberal constitutionalist group of the New Ottomans (*Yeni Osmanlılar*) and became a supporter of Sultan Abdülhamid II.<sup>5</sup>

Ironically, it was Midhat Pasha (1822-1884), the leading political figure of the Ottoman constitutionalists, on becoming Grandvizier (1876-1877) and opening the way to the promulgation of the constitution, who took Ahmed Efendi into state service and gave him his name,<sup>6</sup> according to an old bureaucratic tradition. Ahmed Midhat Efendi began his early career in Ruscuk (Ruse) as a protégé of Midhat Pasha, then the governor of the model *vilayet* of Tuna. After Midhat Pasha's fall and exile, Ahmed Midhat Efendi, just having been made director of the *Matbaa-i Amire* (Imperial Printing Office), turned against his mentor and praised the Sultan in his writings.<sup>7</sup>

Ahmed Midhat Efendi's relation with the Sultan could be described as a collaboration. This is especially convincing when we remember not only his state service, but also that he was chosen to be sent highly decorated by the Sultan to international events like the congress of orientologists in Stockholm and the World Exhibition in Paris, both in 1888.

Şükrü Hanioglu analyzed two articles written by Ahmed Midhat in 1878 in which the Ottoman intellectual defended the regime of Abdülhamid II. In his article "İstibdad,"<sup>8</sup> Ahmed Midhat made a distinction between autocracy and abso-

<sup>2</sup> Carter Vaughn Findley, "An Ottoman Occidental in Europe: Ahmed Midhat Meets Madame Gülnar, 1889," *American Historical Review* 103.1 (February 1998), 21.

<sup>3</sup> See Şerif Mardin's careful literary examination of the characters in Ahmed Midhat's novel struggling with the dilemmas brought on by the dualism of traditional and modern life in "Tanzimat'tan Sonra Aşırı Batılılaşma," in id., *Türk Modernleşmesi* (Istanbul: İletişim, 1991), 21-79.

<sup>4</sup> *Avrupa Adâb-i Muâşeret-i yahud Alafranga* (Istanbul: İkdâm Matbaası, 1312 [1894-5]).

<sup>5</sup> Mardin, *Türk Modernleşmesi*, 59.

<sup>6</sup> Roderic H. Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire, 1856-1876* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 153-154.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 402.

<sup>8</sup> *Tercüman-i Hakikat*, July 3, 1878.

lutism: According to him, absolutism was synonymous with lawlessness. An absolutist government would be the consequence of corrupt statesmen. In another article entitled "Hürriyet-i Kanuniye,"<sup>9</sup> law is defined as the representation of the general custom, while the ruler upholding it is characterized as a just ruler. People obedient to the just ruler are defined as "free people." The antithetical system to just rule is absolutism, which, again, would result from a selfish group of bureaucrats misusing freedom in pursuit of their self-interest. Hanioglu in his analysis further claims that Ahmed Midhat's opinions on the difference between autocracy and absolutism affected his European friends like Sidney Whitman, who wrote an article entitled "Abdul Hamid an Autocrat not a Despot."<sup>10</sup> This, of course, was met by disagreement in many of the Young Turks' writings.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, Ahmed Midhat defended the bureaucracy in the columns of his newspaper against Teodor Kasap (1835-1905), the liberal editor of *İstikbal* and *Diyojen*, who had opposed the idea of selecting the members of parliament with the help of his bureaucrats. Kasap had written that "consultation" did not mean the consulting process between the Sultan and his appointed officials, but that the people had both the right and maturity to elect their representatives themselves. Before concluding with the argument that the Ottoman case had no similarity to the French constitutional revolution, Ahmed Midhat, answered Kasap by writing that "there is no aristocracy in the Ottoman case. The state and the nation are not different at all. Statesmen are chosen from simple citizens. Does this not mean that the government is in the hands of the nation itself?"<sup>12</sup>

### Hilafgiran and Tarafgiran in Ahmed Midhat's Üss-i İnkılab (1878)

Ahmed Midhat's *Üss-i İnkılab* (Base of Reform) was written on orders of the Sultan, who wanted him to defend the policies after the closing down of parliament, to justify the exiling of the constitutionalist ex-grand vizier Midhat Paşa, and to explain the Ottoman defeat in the Russian war. Ahmed Midhat's book praised the Sultan's liberalistic acts and policies, and described him as the father of freedom and liberty whenever he mentioned his name. Ahmed Midhat wrote that "the germ of freedom which fell on the fertile soil of public opinion did not find a fruitful place of ideas and could nourish itself only in the thoughts of his majesty Abdülhamid II, and the first leaf to blossom from this germ of freedom was his imperial rescript published at the beginning of his imperial enthronement."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Tercüman-i Hakikat*, July 4, 1878.

<sup>10</sup> *New York Herald*, Paris, August 17, 1896.

<sup>11</sup> M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 27.

<sup>12</sup> Tank Zafer Tunaya, "Osmanlı Basını ve Kanun-i Esasî, in *Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e Türkiye Ansiklopedisi*," 6 vols. (Istanbul: İletişim, 1985), 1:73.

<sup>13</sup> Ahmed Mithat, *Üss-i İnkılab. Kısm-i Sani. Cülus-i Hümayundan Birinci Seneye Kadar* (Istanbul: Takvim-i Vekayi Matbaası, 1295), 2:177.

He categorized the political positions in society toward the *Kanun-i Esasi*, the constitution, into two parties, *hilafgirani* and *tarafgirani*, the adversaries and the adherents, both divided into two subsidiary groups. A part of the *hilafgirani* saw the constitutional monarchy as “*bid’at*,” an innovation or novelty without roots in traditional practice. According to them, the representation of non-Muslims in the parliament was irreconcilable with Islam. Another part of the *hilafgirani* did not see the constitution as a *bid’at*, but politically harmful (*siyaseten muzır*). The *tarafgirani*, on the other hand, who favored the parliament’s use of power within the limits of the constitution, were also divided into two groups. One group thought that a constitution was something not to be granted by the state, but to be realized by the people. Therefore, the constitution and its supplementary laws had to be realized by the people, not decreed by the statesmen. The second group of the *tarafgirani*, with whom Ahmed Midhat identified himself, argued that the Ottoman constitution could not be compared with European constitutions because it was granted by the state; therefore, naturally, the laws had to be prepared by the state, too.<sup>14</sup> After this brief introduction to the political groupings in accordance with their stance toward the constitution, Ahmed Midhat continued with a more detailed analysis that described the adversaries and adherents of the constitution and discussed their arguments.

Constitutional monarchy, Ahmed Midhat argued, is not a religiously inadmissible innovation (*bid’at*). The clear definition of the rights of all social groups and classes under Islamic law was identical with constitutionalism itself. Ahmed Midhat presented many examples from the Koran, the Hadith, the early history of Islam and, furthermore, pointed to the marginal position in the diplomatic arena of the Ottoman state in order to defend the Islamic nature of constitutional monarchy including the representation of non-Muslims in the parliament. After that, he criticized the deportation to the Mediterranean Islands of some members of the *ulema* who were agitating against the constitution. According to Ahmed Midhat, it was exaggerated to call these opponents “traitors” as long as the constitution had not been realized.<sup>15</sup>

Ahmed Midhat criticized the arguments of the second group of *hilafgirani*, who, he wrote, thought that the constitutional monarchy was harmful (*muzır*) because it limited the rights of the Sultan (*bukuk-i hazret-i padişahiye tabdid*). Ahmed Midhat argued that writing down all the rights of the Sultan in a constitution did not limit these prerogatives, but confirmed and secured them (*bukuk-i padişahi tabdid edilmiş olmaz, teyid ve temin edilmiş olur*). If a ruler was patriotic enough to seek his personal interests in the general interests of his people, he would demand the constitution by himself, like the current Sultan who, according to Ahmed Midhat, had made freedom his motto (*bükümdar-i hürriyet-şiarımız*). On the other

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 179

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 180-186.

hand, if a Sultan saw himself superior to his people and even mankind, he would consider the mere word “freedom” to be blasphemy as the former Sultan Abdülaziz Han did. It had happened during the time of the authoritarian regime that the once befriended peoples of the Balkans had become enemies of the Ottoman state; and thereafter all subsequent attempts of reconciliation came too late, he argued.<sup>16</sup> Ahmed Midhat attacked the opponents whom he described as “eager to gain the favor of the Sultan by opposing the constitution.”<sup>17</sup> He gave as strange an example as Namık Kemal, who is known for his liberal political thinking, but once wrote to the Sultan that the constitution “touches, above all, the holy rights of the Sultan” (*herşeyden ziyade hukuk-i seniyye-i şehinşabilerine dokunuyor*).<sup>18</sup>

The first group of the *tarafgiran* thought that constitution had to be achieved by the people and not given by the state, and that the people had to work out the constitution by themselves. Ahmed Midhat calls this group “people of extremist thoughts” (*efkar-i mufrita erbabı*). These extremists, according to him, did not have the right to compare the Ottoman case with the European case because of the nature of the Ottoman state: the Ottoman Sultan was in the position to adopt the constitution in the name of the state and in the name of the nation.

Ahmed Midhat situated himself in the second group of the *tarafgiran*, a moderate fraction which legitimated the granting of the constitution by the Sultan stating that there never had been a European ruler who admired freedom so much (*hürriyet-perver*) as did Abdülhamid II. Even the fact that the Sultan had commissioned him, Ahmed Midhat, to write the book *Üss-i İnkılab* is interpreted by its writer as further evidence for the Sultan’s rejection of absolutism and for the fundamental difference between the Sultan and the rulers of Europe.

Addressing the first group of the *tarafgiran*, whom he defined as being of the opinion that a constitution had to be achieved by the people, Ahmed Midhat insisted that there was no problem with a constitution granted by the Sultan: As the Sultan had no obligation to grant the people the constitution, there was no reason that should hinder the sovereign from commissioning the preparation of the constitution (which, Ahmed Midhat said, was essentially a work of jurisdiction) to the statesmen (*heyet-i erkân-i devlet*) instead of leaving it to the people.<sup>19</sup> Especially interesting is the explanation given by Ahmed Midhat as an answer to those who regarded the Ottoman constitution as deficient and whom he therefore considered as extremist adherents of constitutionalism. Not only, he wrote, should the constitution be evaluated in accord with the historical and contemporary political circumstances of the Ottoman Empire, but in addition, in accordance to the limits of Islamic law. Islamic jurisprudence should be taken into account. In his an-

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 186-189.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 189-194.

swer to one of those whom Ahmed Midhat considered extremist constitutionalists, Teodor Kasap Efendi, he explained the British and French paths to their respective constitutions and showed the incompatibility of these examples with the Ottoman case.<sup>20</sup> Ahmed Midhat admitted that constitutions were made by the people and not granted by the state in Europe; but he explained this with the circumstance that Europe never had seen a ruler such as Abdülhamid II, who was an admirer of freedom. Therefore, Ahmed Midhat concluded, there was no reason to blame the statesmen who prepared the constitution without the participation of the people.

### *Tavzih-i Kelam ve Tasrih-i Meram (1880)*

A reconsideration of Ahmed Midhat's opinions on constitutionalism can be found in the booklet *Tavzih-i Kelam ve Tasrih-i Meram* (Exposition of Word and Expression of Aspiration) published in 1880.<sup>21</sup> This short work shows that Ahmed Midhat's opinions on constitutionalism are more complex and have a far more sophisticated character than hitherto assumed.

This booklet was written about two years after *Üss-i İnkılab*. It argued against rumors that the Sultan wanted to reinstate the constitution and reopen the parliament, but that some ministers and bureaucrats were opposing his will. After such rumors had emerged from letters written from Istanbul and were circulating in the European press, Ahmed Midhat presented this pamphlet to the palace. İsmail Kara notes on the importance of the booklet that it has to be seen as complementary to *Üss-i İnkılab*, and requires us to reconsider the arguments bluntly characterizing Ahmed Midhat Efendi as an unconditional supporter of Sultan Abdülhamid, an adherent of his despotism and a opponent of constitutional government.<sup>22</sup>

The title chosen by him for this booklet leaves the impression that Ahmed Midhat intended to clarify his views on the constitution he had expressed in his earlier book *Üss-i İnkılab*. The key argument of those who argue against the constitution was that Islamic law protected the independence of the Sultan more than did the *Kanun-i Esasi* and that the latter was harmful to the Sultan's rule because it infringed on the Sultan's rights by limiting them. Ahmed Midhat's booklet argued against this view. In four chapters, it tries to reaffirm the importance of the constitutional regime for the Sultan.

<sup>20</sup> "Muharir-i Fakir Ahmed Midhat'ın Rodos'tan Yazıp İttihad Gazetesi'ne Dercettirdiği Mektuptur," in Ahmed Midhat, *Üss-i İnkılab*, 2:245-254.

<sup>21</sup> Ahmed Midhat, "Tavzih-i Kelam ve Tasrih-i Meram (8.5.1296)," transcription published in *Hilafet Risaleleri*, ed. İsmail Kara, 4 vols. (Istanbul, Klasik 2002), 1:111-138.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. the concise summary and analysis of Ahmed Midhat's booklet by İsmail Kara, *Hilafet Risaleleri*, 1:11-13.

In the foreword, Ahmed Midhat called for awareness of the intrigues of some circles in Istanbul (*mehâfil ve mecâmi*) working against the constitutional regime who gained advantage from the above-mentioned rumors. In this context, he argued bluntly that it was the Sultan's utmost desire to resummon the parliament. He also did not fail to characterize the Sultan as an admirer of, and even the father of freedom (*hürriyet-i vicdanı ve sadakat-i lisanı gerçekten sever bir padişah-i hürriyet-perver, şebriyar-i hürriyet-şiarımız ve hükümdar-i ebu'l-abrarımız*).

In the first chapter of his booklet, entitled "*Şer'an mesele-i hilafet*," Ahmed Midhat proposed that the *Kanun-i Esasi* was a kind of religious law and had to be protected by the Sultan. The condition of submission to the caliph in religious law was his ordering the good and forbidding the evil (*emr-i bi'l-maruf ve nehy-i 'an'il-münker*). This religious law at the same time defined the rights and obligations of the caliph, and the very act of defining was not directed against the liberty of the caliph. Defamation of the constitution was, therefore, defamation of religious law. Abdülhamid is here again described not as a tyrant, but as the grantor of freedom. A constitution would be his bodiless political guard (*Kanun-i Esasi-i müñif dabi bir muhafız-i manevi-i siyasi olacağı*), as was the religious law. And it was for that reason that the Sultan himself protected the constitution from the assaults of its opponents.

In the second chapter "*Siyaseten Mesele-i Hükümrani*," Ahmed Midhat tried to explain the similarity of constitution and religious law. Decisions made by parliaments were like "*icma-i ümmet*," the consensus of Muslims, one of the four fundamental pillars of canonical law. If *icma-i ümmet* accepted a decision and the Sultan consented, this decision would become law. The rights and responsibilities adopted in European constitutions were similar to those of the caliph and the ummah, the community of believers, in Islamic law. Opposing the *Kanun-i Esasi* with the argument that it limited the rights and responsibilities of the Sultan was like forgetting that Islamic law likewise limited the rights and responsibilities of the caliph. Additionally, both the *Kanun-i Esasi* and Islamic law protected the rights and responsibilities of the Sultan by delimiting and delineating them. Both were like a wall that protects a garden by creating an obstacle to any trespassing and thereby protecting the garden from assaults coming from outside. A constitution protects a ruler so powerfully, said Ahmed Midhat, that even an elected president, like the French one, was obeyed like a dynasty with a legitimizing tradition of hundreds of years. In countries with a constitution, rebellions and revolts, he claimed, were very rarely seen. As the British example demonstrated, constitutional regimes were not bound to result in democracy or end in a republic (*cumhur/ hükümet-i cumhuriyye*). In the end, the constitution did not restrict the rights of a ruler, but protected them to the degree that it formed a mutual declaration (*sened-i müteakabil*) in which the ruler promised just rule to the nation and the nation, obedience to the ruler.

According to the third chapter, "*Kanun-i Esasi'nin Vaz'ındaki Tehlike veya Menfaat,*" there is no danger but only advantage in creating a constitution. The constitution does not delimitate the Sultan's prerogatives vis-à-vis the council of ministers and the parliament, but strengthens him against both of them and the people by resting on law. The Ottoman state is a *Rechtsstaat* because so many laws are enforced there. But is it possible to be a *Rechtsstaat* without a constitution? A constitution serves as a guide for jurisprudence. The Sultan does not have to accept any parliamentary decision; he can reject them or even close the parliament because of its insistence on a certain decision. Even in the absence of a constitution, the Sultan does not decide on his own but by asking advice from his ministers and commanders. Even God asked the souls of human beings "Am I not your Lord?" at the beginning of creation and the souls answered "Yes." Another fact, according to Ahmed Midhat, was that the people were more moved by love and loyalty than they could possibly be any council of ministers. Those who opposed the opening of the parliament out of concern for the Sultan's rights were neglecting to consider the situation of the council of ministers: With its executive power, the cabinet was in constant danger of slipping into despotism. Because of the small number of ministers, the cabinet was able to unite in a matter against the state and people. By adopting illegitimate means, the cabinet could extend its power. The summoned representatives of the people would be a more accurate and more secure source of information for the Sultan. This would also be in accord with the habits of former Sultans: In earlier times, Sultans traveled the provinces by themselves or they sent loyal servants to collect information.

In "*Kanun-i Esasi'nin Mabvündaki Menfaat ve Tehlike,*" the fourth chapter, Ahmed Midhat explained the pros and cons of abolishing the constitutional regime. Whereas the Sultan would not be affected by the absence of a constitution, the ministers and officials would mostly benefit. It was they who opposed any attempt of reinstating the constitution in order to escape from control, supervision and accountability to the parliament. Ahmed Midhat also argued that it would be dangerous to simply abolish the constitution after having granted the people the taste of freedom of thought.

Another problem for Ahmed Midhat was the Europeans, who did not and were unwilling to understand the extent of freedom Islamic law granted Christians. This was because they themselves were intolerant towards non-Christians and therefore assumed that Islam had the same negative attitude. Whereas in some places, like Romania and Bulgaria, Muslims benefited from a constitution and the rights it granted, the absence of one in the Ottoman state created a considerable danger and prepared the ground for opposition. The nihilist movement angering the Russian government was gaining ground exactly because of this reason, the absence of a constitution. By mentioning the support for Russian nihilists in Europe, Ahmed Midhat covertly tried to intimidate the Sultan. Ahmed Midhat asked in this context whether it was a virtue to make millions of people

willing and grateful slaves (*kemal-i minnetle abrarane kul etmek*) or to make them hostile in slavery (*esirane dūşman etmek*), and concluded that being considerate of the glory and honor of the caliph was a religious duty for all his loyal servants.

### *Between Constitutionalism and Autocracy*

Looking closer at his diagnosis, Ahmed Midhat turns out an autocratic loyalist who believed in “legal autocracy.” According to him, the best guarantee for the preservation of autocratic power was the establishment of clearly delineated responsibilities and rights, both for the Sultan and the people. After stressing the rights of the Sultan (*padişah hukuku*), Ahmed Midhat argued that the constitution would grant the advantages and avoid the disadvantages of autocratic rights. Anchoring these rights in a constitution did not mean limiting these rights but rather strengthening them. A constitution would not restrict the rights of the Sultan, but secure and reinforce them. By being written down and thus fixed, the divine rights of His Majesty would not just be kept in the minds and thoughts, but remain under the commitment of and contract with the people.<sup>23</sup>

Ahmed Midhat usually blamed disastrous government politics and harmful administrative action on ignorant, selfish and corrupt bureaucrats who allegedly had obstructed the ruler’s true intentions or had deliberately kept him uninformed. Positive reforms and concessions, on the other hand, were attributed to the personal efforts and perseverance of the sovereign himself. Ahmed Midhat clearly shared the traditional deep-seated belief in the personal goodness and power of the Sultan and the sinister role of his servitors.

The ideal was to return to the autocracy of old, where the population was both consulted by the Sultan and in direct contact with him without bureaucratic interference and with its personal liberty protected. The rule of law and autocracy he deemed to be compatible. The observance of legality in the bureaucratic and social realm, Ahmed Midhat would have us believe, was not necessarily synonymous with a Western-style political constitution curtailing the rights and powers of the autocratic ruler. Even with the constitution, the autocrat does not share his political power with anybody; they are not in conflict. The monarch was not bound by anything nor curtailed in his right to change the administrative order whenever he deemed it necessary. The Sultan remained the sole sovereign source of power and hence retained his freedom to alter the political order at any given time. The requirement of legality was absolute and thereby transcended any particular administrative structure.

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<sup>23</sup> “Hukuk-i mezkurun kaffesi Kanun-i esasi’ye derc olunduktan sonra Hukuk-i Padişahî tahdid edilmiş olmaz, teyid ve temin edilmiş olur.” Ahmed Midhat, *Üss-i İnkılab*, 2:187.

### *The Constitutional Autocrat*

Here we have a contradiction: The Sultan's power would continue to be unlimited in that he would retain the right to change the existing form of government at any time, yet the rule of law was to prevail. Would the ruler not be bound by the law, too, and thus cease to be autocratic? Ahmed Midhat continued to profess his faith in the autocrat's personal and unlimited rule. The notions of legality and popular consultation (*meşveret*) were to bridge the gap between the two irreconcilables. No matter how fervently Ahmed Midhat believed in the supremacy of legality, his pragmatism forbade him to point to the inevitable consequences for the Sultan's power.

According to Ahmed Midhat, Ottoman methods of government were still maintained by unwritten laws called "*teamiil-i kadim*", which were still stronger than written laws. Society needed to see these unwritten laws as a "concrete law" (*müşabhas kanun*) in the form of a very man, who must be the ruler. The ruler is the embodied law, the law in person (*şahsi kanun* or *kanun şahsi*).<sup>24</sup> The people's deep-seated faith in the ideals of truth, justice and moral order required "a living incarnation of law" in a single person.

The supreme power of the autocrat was not subject to the law; in fact, law was seen as incompatible with real authority and the exercise of free will. Instead, the law was to be an expression of the autocrat's free will and thus free to be changed, to serve the autocratic power. According to the opponents of the constitution, those who sought to replace power with the authority of the law were condemned to failure.

Although reserving all political and final decisions for the autocratic power, Ahmed Midhat sought to convince the Sultan of the need for national representation, which would help to determine the needs and wishes of the population. Listening to different opinions, he argued, might prove more useful than dangerous. Truth is born from the conflict of ideas. Such a concept of political representation, he believed, was compatible with autocracy. In his eyes, the right of permanent participation in legislation would make the throne more stable and secure. His objective was a type of legal autocracy in which the wall of bureaucratic arbitrariness, ignorance and disunity that separated the Sultan from the people would be torn down through some form of popular consultation and through legal checks on the workings of the government bureaucracy. He wanted to preserve the essence of autocracy while altering some of its nonessential forms.

Ahmed Midhat underhandedly warned the Sultan that unless reforms were implemented and the natural desires of the people satisfied; change would come through revolution. In both of his works on constitutionalism, he tried to convince the Sultan to affirm the constitution and not to abolish it. He defended

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<sup>24</sup> Ahmed Midhat, *Üss-i İnkılab*, 2:114.

constitutionalism not by opposing the Sultan, but by trying to win him over. His use of accolades for the Sultan such as *bürriyet-perver*, *ebu'l-abrar*, *bürriyet-şiar* was intended to convince him that he had made the right choice when granting the people a constitution.

### *Understanding Ahmed Midhat Efendi's Political Position*

After the Sultan had established himself safely on his throne some years later, Ahmed Midhat's writings about the sovereign no longer included phrases of freedom. In Ahmed Midhat's personal letters he sent after that time to the Sultan – these letters can be consulted in the Başbakanlık Arşivi in Istanbul (BOA) – Abdülhamid II figures as the holy caliph, the shadow of God on earth, while the writer describes himself as his humble servant who prays to the Lord for the health and sublimity of His Majesty.<sup>25</sup> Ahmed Midhat was presenting his books to the court with respects and compliments not only to the Sultan, but also to the head of the Sultan's clerks.<sup>26</sup> He used these opportunities to beg for some benefits for his friends and family. Sometimes he was successful. Thus, the gravestone of the famous writer and poet Muallim Naci (1850-1893) was paid for from the personal treasury of the Sultan, after a petition by Ahmed Midhat Efendi who was, we should hasten to add, the father-in-law of Muallim Naci.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> “Atebe-i kudst-meretebe-i bilafet-i İslamiyyenin abd-i sâdıki olmak zaten dâreynde medâr-i necât bir imtiyaz-ı cihan-derecât iken, bu defa cihanşumul olan inayât-i celile-i cenâb-i bilafetpenâbilerine bu aciz bendenin bir kuta madalya ile taltifi hususundaki irade-i merâbim-ıfâde-i hazret-i velinimet-i azamîleri dû çeşm-i minnetdârât-i kemterânemi eşk-i sürûr u cübûr ile tarsî” derecesinde kullarını sevindirmiş olduğundan biçbir zaman lisan-i sadakat-i bendegânemin gafil olmadığı temâmi-i afiyet ve tevâfir-i izz ü iclâl-i cenâb-i zullullahileri duasına bir kat dâba muvâzabet-i memlûkânemi müstevcib olmuş idiğü mübât-i âlem-ârâ-yı şebriyarileri buyrulmakda. Olbabda ve kâtibe-i avâlde emr ü ferman ve lutf u ibsan şevkellü kudretlû ve kâffe-i enâma merhametlû padişabımız, padişab-ı avâtıf-penâb ve şebînşab-i merâbim-iktinab efendimiz hazretlerinizdir. Fi 3 Cemazıyyelevvel 1305 Karantınalar Başkatibi Ahmed Midhat kulları,” BOA, Y.MTV 31/34, 1305 C 3 [January 17, 1888]. Ahmed Midhat here is expressing his gratitude for being honored with a silver medal of favor (Gümüş İmtiyaz Madalyası).

<sup>26</sup> “Mabeyn-i Humayun-i Cenab-i Müllukane Başkitabet-i Celilesine, Maruz-i bende-i kemineliridiri ki,/ Selçukîlik ve Osmanlılık ünvanlarıyla Asya'nın müntebâ-yı şarkından Afrika'nın müntebâ-yı garbına kadar cihan şan ve şerefle doldurmuş olan Türk kavim-i necibinin fezâil-i celile-i İslamiyye ile imtizac eden uluvv-i ablakı üzerine bi'l-ibtina, acizane kaleme almış olduğum büyük roman kütübhaneye hümayun-i cenab-i bilafetpenâbiye vaz'a layık görülür ise masrûft-i himem-i celile-i dâver-i fehmîleri buyrulmak niyazıyla – zat-i sûtûde-sıfat-i devletleri için olan nüsha ile beraber – takdime cesaret edilmiştir. Bu romanın Avrupa alem-i edebiyatınca dahi mazhar-i takdir olmuş ve nam-i nacizaneme gazetelerde bendler yazılmış bulunması kendimce değil, mücerred cümlemizin muallim-i hakikisi olan zat-i hikmetsimât-i cenab-i şebriyarının cümle-i âsâr-i terakkıyât-i hümayunlarından bulunmak haysiyetiyle medar-i mübâhât addeylerim [...] 21 Mayıs 1310 [June 2, 1894] / Ahmed Midhat.” BOA, Y.MTV 96/98, 1311 ZA 28.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.: “Naci merhumun kabri üzerine bir taş vaz'ı familya balkınca arzu edilerek bu babda müsaade-i celile-i cenab-i şebriyarının itisalsali hususunda dahi inayet-i kerime-i âsafâneleri rica olunur. Herhalde emr ü ferman hazret-i veliyyü'l-emrindir.” Under the petition, the clerk noted

Obviously, Ahmed Midhat's ideas went out of fashion a good while before the constitutional revolution of 1908. He was much criticized for his book *Üss-i İnkılab*.<sup>28</sup> Once named as a "writing machine with forty horse power,"<sup>29</sup> he abandoned his pen for years until he published the novel *Jön Türk* as a serial in his newspaper soon after the revolution. *Jön Türk* was the first novel to feature the Young Turks as its subject matter. It began with the announcement that "the readers who like the Young Turks, the lovely servants of our fatherland, will enjoy the novel."<sup>30</sup> The plot begins in the year 1897 and touches on many political pressures of the authoritarian Hamidian regime, such as censorship, informers, control of personal letters, torture, and to exile.<sup>31</sup> In his last writings, he openly recalled the Hamidian era as an absolutist era (*istibdat devri*) and defended himself against accusations of being a propagandist of Abdülhamid II.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Ali Kemal accused him of being an opportunist and a "timeserver" (*ber devrin adamı*).<sup>33</sup>

Although sent into retirement just after the revolution from his office as the vice-president of the council for health issues (*Medis-i Sıbhıye Reis-i Sâıtsı*), the post-Hamidian period provided new opportunities for Ahmed Midhat Efendi, with which his last novel must have helped him a lot. He taught history at university (*darülfünun*) and became member of some academic foundations, such as the Society for Islamic Teaching (*Cemiyet-i Tedrisiye-i İslamiye*). He also taught at the high school of Darüşşafaka, where he died of a heart attack on December 15, 1912.

While some described Ahmed Midhat as having been in fear of the Sultan and having kept his desire of the abolishment of Abdülhamid's rule to himself,<sup>34</sup> the last official historian of the Ottoman state, Abdurrahman Şeref (1853-1925), wrote an article *in memoriam* of Ahmed Midhat soon after his death in which he excused the intellectual's political stance as having been the result of his surroundings and the requirements of his time (*mubitin tesirine ve zamanenin ilcaatına atfolunmak*). He remarked that Ahmed Midhat's political articles were not deeply

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the will of the Sultan: "Mütevcaffa-yı mûmâileybin kabri üzerine bir taş vaz'ı Hazine-i Hassa'ya tebliğ olunmuşdur. Fi 3 Zilhicce 1311 [7 June 1894]."

<sup>28</sup> Münir Süleyman Çapanoğlu, *İdeal Gazeteci, Efendi Babamız Ahmet Mithat* (Istanbul: Gazeteciler Cemiyeti Yayınları, 1964), 19.

<sup>29</sup> Teodor Kasap was the first to use this expression to describe him; see Cevdet Kudret, *Ahmet Mithat* (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Basımevi, 1962), 45.

<sup>30</sup> "[V]atanın sevgili hâdimleri olan Jön Türkleri seven kârilerimiz Jön Türk romanını da seve seve okuyacak [...]," *Tercüman-i Hakikat*, no.9875, September 10, 1324 [1908], as mentioned by Alaattin Karaca, "Ahmet Midhat Efendi'nin Jön Türk Adlı Romanı," *Türkoloji Dergisi* 9.1 (1991), 121-141; here: 124.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-138.

<sup>32</sup> H.T. Us, "Ahmed Midhat Kendini Nasıl Savunuyordu?," in *ibid.*, 195-203.

<sup>33</sup> Çapanoğlu, *İdeal Gazeteci*, 39-40.

<sup>34</sup> Çapanoğlu, *İdeal Gazeteci*, 20, 43.

analytical (*derin bir vukûf hiss olunmaz*), and, additionally, that nobody had been harmed by his political stance but himself.<sup>35</sup>

It was not only his reputation among constitutionalists that he lost during the Hamidian era. Ahmed Midhat's books were seized by the censorship office, despite his title as director of the imperial printing office and his being the Sultan's loyal servitor. The copies of one of his books, "Kıssadan Hisse," were confiscated because they were deemed "administratively harmful and objectionable" (*idareten mazarrat ve mahzurdan gayrisalim*),<sup>36</sup> and the copies of another book of his, "Sabık Şura-yı Devlet Bidayet Mahkemesi Reisi Said Bey ve Ahmed Midhat Efendi arasında Münazara," were confiscated for "including harmful political and moral points" (*siyaseten ve ablaken bazı nukât-i muzırrayı şamil*).<sup>37</sup>

Ahmed Midhat Efendi was the most popular modern Ottoman encyclopedist and novelist of the nineteenth century. But his distancing himself from Midhat Pasha and his political support of the Sultan, who was an unpopular figure in Turkish historiography before the 1980s, sufficed as a reason for widespread disinterest in research on Ahmed Midhat's life and work.<sup>38</sup> There is still much uninvestigated material in his countless writings that might contribute to a better understanding of the political thoughts of this important Ottoman intellectual.

<sup>35</sup> "İşbu etvârından hiçbir ferd manen ve maddeten zarardide olmamış, eğer ondan bir leke kalmış ise sırf nefsine ait ve munhasır bulunmuşdur," Abdurrahman Şeref, "Ahmed Midhat Efendi," *Tarih-i Osmanî Encümeni Mecmuası*, no. 18, February 1, 1328 [1913], 1113-1119; here: 1118.

<sup>36</sup> BOA, MF.MKT 660/23, 1320 C 16 [September 20, 1902].

<sup>37</sup> BOA, MF.MKT 666/49, 1320 B 3 [October 6, 1902].

<sup>38</sup> Nükhet Esen-Erol Köroğlu (ed.), *Merhaba Ey Mubarrir! Ahmet Midhat Üzerine Eleştirel Yazılar* (Istanbul: Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2006), 2-3. Köroğlu binds Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar's critics to Ahmed Midhat Efendi to the same reason. "Tanpınar'a göre Ahmet Midhat: Esere Hayattan Girmek Yahut Eseri Hayatla Yargılamak," in *ibid.*, 329-337; here: 333.

