Ottoman Diplomacy

Conventional or Unconventional?

Edited by
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# Contents

**Preface** vii

**Notes on the Contributors** ix

## Introduction

1. The Ottoman Attitude toward Diplomacy
   *A. Nuri Yurdusev*

2. Early Ottoman Diplomacy: Ad Hoc Period
   *Bülent Arı*

3. A Case Study in Renaissance Diplomacy: the Agreement between Innocent VIII and Bayezid II on Djem Sultan
   *Halil İnalçık*

4. Ottoman Diplomacy at Karlowitz
   *Rifa‘at Ali Abou-El-Haj*

5. Diplomatic Integration with Europe before Selim III
   *G. R. Berridge*

6. The Adoption and Use of Permanent Diplomacy
   *Ömer Kürkçüoğlu*

7. Dragomans and Oriental Secretaries in the British Embassy in Istanbul
   *G. R. Berridge*

8. Studying Ottoman Diplomacy: a Review of the Sources
   *Esin Yurdusev*

**Index** 194
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The idea for preparing this collection on Ottoman diplomacy was born out of a discussion I had with Geoff Berridge some years ago. We were talking about the possibility of incorporating people who were studying diplomacy in Turkey into an international network of students of diplomacy. Then our talk proceeded to the Ottoman Empire and its diplomacy. I suggested that a collection on Ottoman diplomacy might be a good starting point. Geoff agreed and stood by me throughout all stages of the book. Words are not enough to express my gratitude to him.

After I had the idea for the book, I began to teach a course on Ottoman Diplomacy and the European States System in the Department of International Relations of the Middle East Technical University, Ankara. Over the years, I increasingly felt the need for a comprehensive book on Ottoman diplomacy. The present book, which has ended up having a narrower and shorter scope than I had originally planned, does not claim fully to meet that need. Yet I hope that it is a start.

Two of the chapters, Chapter 3 by Halil İnalcık and Chapter 4 by Rifa‘at Ali Abou-El-Haj, were published earlier in the *Journal of Turkish Studies* (1979) and the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (1967), respectively. I am grateful to both authors for their permissions to reproduce the articles here.

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The purpose of this book is to explore some aspects of Ottoman diplomacy from the viewpoint of how it is formulated and conducted. Ottoman diplomacy has been a rather under-researched area. Although we have a well-established literature on the social, economical, political and to some extent cultural systems of the Ottoman Empire, studies dealing with its external relations are comparatively scarce, and very few of these have been devoted to an analysis of diplomacy.

Usually, when the international relations of the Ottoman Empire are studied, the focus does not extend beyond narrative diplomatic history and the careers of individual Ottoman statesmen. Indeed, ‘Ottoman diplomacy’, to many scholars, means no more than Ottoman foreign policy. Issues such as how the Ottoman Empire formulated its policies vis-à-vis other states or empires and how it carried out its policies, what sort of means and instruments were used to conduct diplomacy and who were the agents carrying out those policies have been widely neglected.

From the very beginning to its collapse in the early twentieth century, the Ottoman Empire had interactions with Europe that were unbroken and intensive. These interactions ranged from warlike encounters to peaceful cooperation and ranged through economics, politics, culture, trade and diplomacy. The economic and political interactions of the Empire with Europe, the integration of the Ottoman economy into the expanding European economy and the attempts to Europeanize the Ottoman polity have been the subject of historical studies. However, a comprehensive history of the relations between the Ottoman Empire and the European states system is yet to be written.

A more pessimistic picture appears when we look at those few studies dealing with the external relations of the Ottoman Empire. Whether
these deal generally with Ottoman diplomacy or with a particular period in time, they usually rest on a mistaken assumption. This is that the
Ottoman Empire was an Islamic or Shari'a state that conducted its external
affairs on the basis of a conception of Dâr al-Islam (the abode of Islam)
versus Dâr al-Harb (the abode of the infidels) which involved a permanent
state of war. The Empire consequently, so it is argued, conducted its
external policies with a view to constant expansion. Given that it was
an expansionist polity that could conceive of nothing but a permanent
state of war with other polities, little room remained for normal peaceful
interactions. Therefore the logical conclusion is that there was actually
no such thing as Ottoman diplomacy.

Diplomacy is generally defined as the peaceful relations of political
bodies that are defined in terms of equality and reciprocity. It is true
that diplomacy cannot be separated from the foreign policies of states
and the mutual relations among them. In other words, diplomacy is
closely interwoven with international relations and foreign policy. But
diplomacy is not identical with foreign policy and international rela-
tions. While diplomacy is an instrument of foreign policy for individual
states, it constitutes an institution of the international system. Conven-
tionally speaking, diplomacy signifies the reciprocal exchange of resident
ambassadors, multilateral conferences, detailed rules of procedure and
protocol, immunities and privileges for the diplomatists, a diplomatic
corps, explicit rules of ranking and precedence, professional training and
recruitment, some common diplomatic language, elegant and subtle
styles and tactful manners.

Ottoman diplomacy was not like this, or so it is conventionally assumed.
It had many ‘unconventional’ characteristics. The Ottoman Empire did
not establish resident ambassadors abroad to reciprocate the actions of the
European states that sent envoys to reside in Istanbul from the begin-
ning of the sixteenth century. The first Ottoman resident ambassador
was established, in London, only in 1793. Until about the eighteenth
century, the Empire did not recognize the principle of the equality of
sovereignties. Ottoman statesmen did not participate in the multilateral
conferences that were held from the late fifteenth century onwards. The
Empire was frequently uncomfortable with the rules of procedure and
protocol common in Europe. Though the ambassadors in Istanbul were
granted immunities and privileges under the Capitulations, from time to
time they were put in the prison of the Seven Towers. The Capitulations
themselves were, after all, unilateral rather than bilateral instruments.
Precedence within the diplomatic corps in Istanbul was a function of the
whim of the Sultan or Grand Vizier. And finally, a body of professionally
trained diplomatists, fluent in the diplomatic language of the time and adept in the conventional styles and manners of diplomacy, did not seriously begin to emerge before the mid-nineteenth century. These are some of the more obvious of the so-called ‘unconventional’ features of Ottoman diplomacy and those on which attention is customarily focused. However, its practice was more complex than this.

The Ottoman Empire was a composite polity with multilingual, multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities. It ruled over a vast area that extended from Central Europe to Transcaucasia, from Poland to Yemen, and from Morocco to the Persian Gulf. The Empire lasted for over six centuries, from the Late Medieval period to the twentieth century. An empire like this cannot be reduced to sweeping generalizations of constant expansionism, a permanent state of war between the Dâr al-Islam and Dâr al-Harb, the absolutism of the Sultans and the nomadic behaviour or barbarism of the Turk. It may serve the purpose of simplicity, but it does not do justice to the historical record. Similarly, an analysis of Ottoman diplomacy needs more than such conceptualizations as the Sultan’s contempt for the states of Europe, ‘Islamic religious conservatism’, the unilateral grant of Capitulations and the Seven Towers.

In fact, Ottoman diplomacy combined both conventional and unconventional characteristics. European resident ambassadors were not reciprocated, but the fact remains that they were allowed to reside in Istanbul. Ottoman envoys and ambassadors were frequently sent abroad on an ad hoc basis for various reasons of protocol and expediency. The Capitulations were unilateral instruments, but they included reciprocal clauses. Ottoman statesmen may not have been among the participants at multilateral conferences, yet they were at the conference leading to the Second Holy League at the end of the fifteenth century, which was perhaps the earliest of multilateral conferences. It is true that the Empire did not have a professionally trained body of diplomatists, but Ottoman negotiators did well on various occasions. The Ottoman Empire may even be said to have had its own distinctive institutions or mechanisms of diplomacy such as the Capitulations, the sefaretnâmes and the dragomans.

When we refrain from the sweeping conceptual and historical generalizations and do justice to the complexity of the Empire and its historical practice, then I think we will identify some other characteristics of Ottoman diplomacy. We shall, for example, learn that the Capitulations were not just mere commercial privileges for foreign merchants, but also instruments regulating the relations between the Ottoman Empire and other states, a mechanism that paved the way for modern
consular establishments. We shall also learn that the sefaretnâmes were not mere ambassadorial reports, but effective instruments of modernization in the Ottoman Empire, something which shows the link between domestic and international affairs. We will see that the dragomans were in fact part of the diplomatic corps, not just translators or interpreters.

Modern students of diplomacy may also benefit from a careful study of Ottoman diplomacy. When it is noticed that the Empire shifted between conventional and unconventional diplomacy and when the nature and development of ‘diplomatic’ relations between Europe and the Ottoman Empire is examined, they will realize that diplomacy as an institution of the states system has not had a linear evolution. At the end, the distinction between ‘conventional’ and ‘unconventional’ diplomacy will fade away.

This book, then, aims to be a starting point for the study of Ottoman diplomacy that extends beyond narrative histories of foreign policy. The first two chapters deal with the general characteristics of Ottoman diplomacy in its classical age. While Chapter 1 examines the nature of the Ottoman Empire and its attitude towards the European states system and modern diplomacy, Chapter 2 analyses the basic features and conduct of Ottoman diplomacy during what might be called the ad hoc period. The next two chapters provide case studies. The first of these (Chapter 3) comes from the late fifteenth century, when modern diplomacy was in its beginnings and the Ottoman Empire became a fully imperial system. The second (Chapter 4) comes from the late seventeenth century, when modern diplomacy was well on the way to full institutionalization in Europe and the Ottoman Empire came to the end of its period of greatness. These cases show that Ottoman diplomacy was not carried out on the basis of exclusivism or a conservatism based upon religion.

Against this background, then, it is argued that the Ottoman Empire was, contrary to the conventional view, fully integrated into European diplomacy before Selim III (Chapter 5). Examining the adoption and use of permanent diplomacy from the late eighteenth century to the twentieth century, Chapter 6 shows that Ottoman diplomacy performed fairly well despite the Empire’s steady decline. When that ‘unconventional’ mechanism of Ottoman diplomacy, the body of native dragomans, became something of a nuisance, we see that it not only led to the establishment of the Translation Department at the Sublime Porte, but to other expedients. These are illustrated in Chapter 7, which deals with the early nineteenth-century attempt to anglicize the drogmanat of the British embassy in Istanbul. Finally, a general overview of the sources for the study of Ottoman diplomacy is made in Chapter 8.
This chapter discusses the Ottoman attitude toward diplomacy as an institution of the modern international system as it emerged from its European basis via the formation of the European states system. The distinctive nature of diplomacy as an institution of the modern international system is said to be the establishment of resident embassies first in the Italian city-states and then at other European courts. The Ottoman attitude toward resident diplomacy has been described as at best exclusive and repudiatory, at worst dismissive and derisory. In this chapter, those orthodox views have been critically examined and it has been suggested that it is more meaningful and historically correct to describe the Ottoman attitude toward diplomacy as favourable and not formally but practically reciprocating.

In what follows, I shall first present the prevalent view that the Ottoman Empire, which sent her first resident ambassador to London in 1793, had a negative attitude toward diplomacy due to the ‘Islamic’ character of the Empire. I shall examine in detail why that attitude has been considered negative, and argue that this view is based upon some misunderstandings with regard to both the Ottoman Empire and diplomacy. When dealing with the Ottoman attitude, I shall suggest, besides the so-called ‘Islamic’ character of the Empire, that one should take into consideration the nature and development of the modern European states system in general and its institution of diplomacy in particular, the ‘imperial’ feature of the Ottoman Empire and its position vis-à-vis the modern European states system, and the mutual perceptions of the Europeans and Ottomans vis-à-vis each other. Finally, in order to be able to better evaluate the Ottoman attitude towards resident embassies, I shall stress that one needs to consider the matter from a comparative perspective.
The ‘Islamic’ Ottoman distancing himself from the ‘Infidel’ European

According to the prevalent view the Ottomans, being faithful to Islamic precepts, distanced themselves from the infidel Europeans and, adopting a negative attitude toward (European) diplomacy, refused to send resident missions to the European capitals until the late eighteenth century. At this point the Empire had lost its strength in comparison to the European powers and had to establish resident embassies as part of its reform attempts. On the other hand, the major European states sent their resident ambassadors to Istanbul from the sixteenth century onwards as soon as resident embassies became common Europe-wide. As the European ambassadors were received by the Sublime Porte, but not reciprocated, the Ottoman Empire followed a unilateral diplomacy towards European states. As an Islamic empire, so it is argued, she carried out her relations with the Europeans on the basis of the conception of a permanent (actual or potential) state of war.

The view that the Ottoman Empire had a negative attitude toward the modern European (residential) diplomacy runs on the following logic. First, the Ottoman Empire was an Islamic polity. Secondly, the Ottomans had a sense of the absolute superiority of Islam and consequently a contempt for Christian Europe. Thirdly, Islam required the Empire to conduct its external relations within the framework of the dichotomy of Dâr al-Islam (where Islamic law obtains and the Muslims live under the law of Islam) versus Dâr al-Harb (where the infidels live outside the law of Islam and with which the Muslims are at war). This dichotomy thus envisaged a permanent state of war between the two ends. Fourthly, the Sublime Porte therefore repudiated resident diplomacy of Europe, which involved some sort of equality and secular relations, raison d’état, among the relevant parties.

These interpretations are based upon the assumption that the Ottomans adopted an orthodox version of Islam. In this version, not only are the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims described to be in a state of continuous conflict, but also a Muslim is, by definition, considered to have an absolute superiority over a non-Muslim person. Therefore one cannot expect normal peaceful (diplomatic) relations and reciprocal exchange of resident representatives between Muslims and non-Muslims.

One can see such evaluations in the writings of many eminent scholars. According to Hurewitz, for example, unilateralism between the Ottoman Empire and Europe furnished the Sultans of the day with ‘a means of expressing
contempt for the emerging nation-states of Europe’. The European unilateralism was, he goes on, perceived by the Ottoman Empire as an ‘acknowledgement of its superiority’ by the European states. Then he grounds such notions on the basis of the prevalent orthodoxy: ‘as a universal religion [Islam, and thus the Ottoman Empire] remained theoretically at war with the infidel world.’\(^1\) With a belief in permanent war with, the inferiority of and contempt for the emerging European nation-states, the Ottomans cannot of course have been expected to have a positive attitude toward diplomacy, described as the principal institution of those very nation-states of Europe.

It was the combination of Ottoman military might and traditional Islamic learning that, argued Lewis forcefully, led the Ottomans to have a sense of the ‘immeasurable and immutable superiority of their own way of life’, and caused them ‘to despise the barbarous Western infidel from an attitude of correct doctrine’. The concept of the jihad (holy war) divided the world into ‘two great zones, the house of Islam and the house of war, with a perpetual state of war, or at best truce, between them’\(^2\). When there is a perpetual state of war, of course, there is no room for the conduct of regular diplomacy.

Years later, Anderson repeated the same argument. The reason why the Ottoman Empire did not feel any need for organized diplomatic relations with Europe was, to him, not only because it controlled a huge territory and the greatest military resources, but also because of its ‘unshakable sense of superiority to the entire Christian world’. The lack of interest in any active Turkish diplomatic relations with Europe resulted from a deep-seated view of the world which drew a clear dividing-line, one impossible to cross, between the ‘abode of Islam’ and the outside non-Muslim world, the ‘abode of war’. Between these different worlds relations must always be those of actual or at least potential hostility. It was the duty of the ruling Sultan, at least in principle, to extend so far as he could the area controlled by true believers at the expense of that ruled by Christian infidels. An attitude of this kind, backed by all the great weight of Islamic religious conservatism, made diplomatic relations of what was now the normal European kind impossible. By sending permanent representatives to the courts of Europe the Ottomans would have been accepting a kind of regular and established contact with the west which denied their most deeply held assumptions, which implied an at least partial renunciation of the inherent superiority to the Christian world…”\(^3\)
Anderson thus presents us with a picture of the Ottoman Empire as having no interest in diplomatic relations with Europe, with a deep-seated vision of the world in terms of the Dâr al-Islam versus Dâr al-Harb dichotomy, devoid of regular contacts and besieged by the great weight of Islamic religious conservatism. In his analysis, one does not find any discussion of those terms in Islamic law, what is meant by Islamic religious conservatism and what the historical record could tell us about the existence or absence of ‘diplomatic’ relations and regular contacts between the Ottoman Empire and Europe. It is simply suggested that the Porte was detached from the European courts and rejected diplomacy.

We find similar interpretations in Naff’s account, though he in many ways provides us with a more comprehensive and balanced view. Naff too begins with the argument that the Ottoman Empire was an Islamic polity and the Ottomans had a sense of superiority to the Europeans. The source of Ottoman unilateralism was their ‘conviction of the superiority and self-sufficiency of True Believers’. They continued to harbour the Muslim feelings of superiority well into the eighteenth century and conducted their relations with Europe under the guiding principle of ‘the inadmissibility of equality between Dâr al-Islam (the abode of Islam) and Dâr al-Harb (the abode of war, i.e. the Christian West)’. In their external relations, the Ottomans assumed the Islamic world-view according to which ‘any Muslim community/state is, theoretically, morally superior to all other societies’ and the Muslims were under the obligation of jihad, to wage holy war against the abode of war until the ideal of a single universal Muslim community under a single law was realized. It was because of their Muslim prejudices that they ‘refused to employ the infidel lingua franca of European diplomacy’ and because of their view of the inferiority of Christian Europe that the Capitulations were unilaterally granted and European rulers were not accorded equality of sovereignty with the Sultans.

The Ottoman Empire thus, unequivocally states Naff, implemented the rules and precepts of Islam or Shari’a in all governmental and administrative affairs, both internally and externally. It is worth while to quote his words:

Ottoman thinking in diplomacy, as in all matters of government, derived from the Muslim concept of the state, which was rooted in the Shari’a (Holy Law); traditionally, the Shari’a provided for all the exigencies of life and government, thus making the Muslim state, in theory, self-sufficient. In this sense, the Ottoman Empire was pre-eminently a Shari’a state. The Ottomans clung stubbornly to the
illusion of Islam’s innate moral and cultural superiority over Christian Europe. They expressed this belief in their ideas of self-sufficiency and in their practice of non-reciprocal diplomacy. The Muslim prejudice that whatever was western was tainted prevented the Ottomans from wholly accepting or imitating western ways.9

Though Naff joins those who depict the conduct of Ottoman diplomacy in terms of a Dâr al-Islam versus Dâr al-Harb duality, as pointed out earlier, he is more comprehensive and balanced. He acknowledges that the boundaries between the so-called Ottoman Dâr al-Islam and the European Dâr al-Harb were not altogether impenetrable.10 He notes that this picture begins to change from the beginning of the eighteenth century. Although Ottoman statesmen still maintained feelings of superiority to Europe even in the eighteenth century, they began to move towards integration with the European states system. This meant a more positive attitude for diplomacy as seen in the acceptance of the equality of sovereignty and reciprocity of relations, the adoption of European diplomatic communications and usages, and recognition of some aspects of the European law of nations, including extraterritoriality.11

In any case, for Naff as well, we see that the argument of being an Islamic polity and conducting its internal and external governmental affairs according to the doctrine of Shari’â is valid with regard to the Ottoman Empire, at least, until the eighteenth century. This conventional argument has not been advanced only by ‘western’ scholars. It is prevalent among Turkish scholars, too. Kuran may be taken as a typical example. He argued that the Ottoman Empire did not establish resident embassies in the European capitals because Europe was, for the Ottomans, part of Dâr al-Harb. Following the law of Islam according to which the Christian and Muslim states are not considered equal and it is not right to sign peace treaties with the infidels, it was only natural for the Ottoman Empire not to exchange resident ambassadors. They even considered, so he argues, that it was not right for a Muslim to stay in infidel lands for long periods.12

So it seems obvious. The Ottoman Empire was not only a polity that happened to be established by Muslims, it was also an empire of devoted Muslims. These Muslims were devoted in the sense that for them Islam encompassed every corner of life and they organized their polity strictly under the guidance of Islamic precepts. Both their internal and external governmental or administrative affairs were determined in the light of the law of Islam, namely the Shari’â. In support of this conventional view, it is frequently asserted that Islam, unlike Christianity which mainly deals
with private and other-worldly affairs, has rules for both public and private affairs; in other words state and religion are not separated in Islam and thus not in the Ottoman Empire.\textsuperscript{13} Since the state, polity, is defined by religion, it was not, so it is argued, easy for the Ottomans to transcend Islamic exclusivism and consequently establish diplomatic relations with non-Muslims. This attitude and policy lasted until the eighteenth century or even well into the nineteenth century. To sum up, then, the Ottoman Empire had a negative attitude toward the diplomacy of the European states system, at least until the eighteenth century.

A corollary of this view is that the Ottoman Empire had a negative attitude toward diplomacy because she was outside the European states system of which diplomacy is conventionally considered to be one of the principal institutions. The Ottoman Empire as an Islamic state was not a member of the European states system. Having a world-view that prescribed a permanent state of war and being outside the European system, then, it was considered to be normal for the Ottoman Empire to have a negative attitude toward diplomacy. We must here briefly recapture the development of diplomacy and the European states system that formed the basis of the modern world-wide international system.

**Diplomacy and the European states system**

A comprehensive definition of diplomacy may be given as ‘the conduct of relations between states and other entities with standing in world politics by official agents and by peaceful means’. It includes both the formulation and execution of foreign policy. It is the system and art of communication between sovereign states and its chief function is negotiation.\textsuperscript{14} Diplomacy, then, relates to peaceful relations; war is not diplomacy. It involves mutual dependence, permanent relations, living together, the need for the other, some idea of equality and mutual recognition. Diplomacy as such is considered to be one of the principal institutions of the modern European states system as it emerged and developed together with sovereign territorial states in Europe from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries onwards.

The historical development of diplomacy has conventionally been traced as the emergence of resident embassies in the Renaissance Italy of the fifteenth century, its spread northward and adoption by the major European states in the sixteenth century, recognition of the principle of extraterritoriality in the seventeenth century, the eighteenth-century development of the diplomatic corps and the nineteenth-century settlement of the issue of ranking and precedence according to the conception