

The Conflict of Balances in the Mediterranean Region and its Repercussions on the Map of the Ottoman-European Conflict in North Africa in the 19th Century

Metin Şerifoğlu¹, Abdullatif Meshref²

Abstract

This paper explores the imperialist expansion in the Mediterranean basin and its influence on the Ottoman-European conflict map in North Africa during the 19th century. This era marked significant Western imperialist growth across the Mediterranean and Ottoman territories. North Africa became a key battleground where the Ottoman Empire clashed with European powers competing for colonies in the region. Following the Berlin Conference of 1878, the Ottoman Empire recognized the strategic importance of North Africa in resisting European colonial ambitions, particularly their efforts to access Central Africa's resources by exploiting Ottoman territories. European nations, while united in their imperialist goals, competed fiercely due to divergent interests, leading to international conflicts and shifts in regional balances. This research aims to analyze the nature and background of imperialist expansion in the Mediterranean and its implications for the Ottoman-European conflict. Using a methodology combining deconstruction, historical analysis, and comparative studies, the research draws on Ottoman documents, newspapers, and a range of Turkish, Arab, and Western sources for an objective examination. The findings highlight two key conclusions: first, the imperialist expansion in the Mediterranean was deeply rooted in crusading colonial motives aimed at controlling global resources; second, North Africa played a pivotal role in shaping regional and international dynamics in the late 19th century.

Keywords: *Ottoman Empire, European powers, Mediterranean, North Africa, Berlin Conference.*

Introduction

The Ottoman Empire, due to its geopolitical and strategic position, became a focal point for European and Russian ambitions, particularly in the second half of the 19th century. Industrialized European nations pursued an imperialist policy to secure raw materials and markets for their products, transforming the concept of colonization into imperialism during this period (Kodaman, 1989, p. 22). While both terms share connotations, colonization refers to extending sovereignty over new territories, often involving migration, as exemplified by European settlements in the Americas. Imperialism, however, is characterized by military intervention and the expansion of power politics outside Europe, driven by the economic conditions of the Industrial Revolution (Kızıltoprak, 2008, p. 11).

The Eastern Question, encompassing European strategies to weaken and divide the Ottoman Empire, played a central role in implementing imperialist policies (Mansoor et al., 2020). Regions like North Africa, the Middle East, and the Balkans became theaters of conflict due to their strategic significance. European nations, led initially by Britain, France, Russia, and Austria, and later joined by Germany and Italy, sought to exploit Ottoman lands for political, economic, and cultural gains, often clashing with one another in their pursuits.

Colonial and imperialist activities were closely intertwined with missionary endeavors, aimed at both political domination and cultural influence (Küçük, 2005, p. 39). European countries leveraged foreign schools and missionary institutions to align minorities within the Ottoman Empire with their interests, often under the guise of providing protection. This period saw accelerated colonial efforts, notably following the geographical discoveries, as nations like Britain, France, and Spain established vast global colonies.

¹ Assoc.Prof. Mardin Artuklu University- Turkey, Email: metinserifoglu@artuklu.edu.tr, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5828-2157>

² Assistant Professor of Modern and Contemporary "Political" History at Mardin Artuklu University. abdellatifmeshref@artuklu.edu.tr, <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0791-9603>

By the late 19th century, "new imperialism" had gained momentum, fueled by technological advancements and the race for colonies in Africa. Strategic locations like North Africa and the Red Sea coast emerged as key points of contention. For example, France's colonization of Tunisia in 1881 and Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1882 intensified rivalries, reshaping the balance of power in the region (Kızıltoprak, 2008, p. 13). These dynamics underscore how European imperialist policies against the Ottoman Empire, facilitated by economic institutions, missionary schools, and political agreements, significantly altered the region's geopolitical landscape.

Political Developments in the Mediterranean Basin and Their Effects on International Balances

The significant economic and political transformations in Europe following the French Revolution led to the colonization of numerous regions outside Europe. European countries undertook these colonization efforts to explore and exploit the wealth they knew existed in distant lands but had been unable to access. Consequently, the Mediterranean and its surrounding areas became increasingly vital from the early 19th century due to their heightened political, economic, and strategic importance (Ateş, 1982, pp. 203-211). The expansion of colonial activities, both in the Mediterranean and globally, resulted in competition and conflicts among colonizing powers. European nations sought new territories beyond their borders to expand production, access raw materials, and establish markets and sources of capital. This made the Mediterranean particularly significant as a gateway to Africa and the Middle East (Zaim, 1990, p. 52). By the late 19th century, European expansionism had intensified, playing a crucial role in creating a new international order in the Mediterranean region. European powers had brought vast areas of Africa, Asia, and the Americas under their control, with nearly nine-tenths of Africa and substantial parts of Asia under European dominance by the century's end (Seyirci, 2000, p. 75).

The Ottoman Empire, labeled the "sick man of Europe," drew particular interest from European powers. Regions under Ottoman control, such as North Africa, the Mediterranean islands, the Balkans, and the Straits, became prime targets for European ambitions. The loss of the Ottoman Empire's fertile territories in Europe during the second half of the 19th century reshaped the political map and established a new regional order (Ateş, 1982, pp. 203-211). European strategies aimed at partitioning Ottoman lands prompted alliances, military buildups, and the establishment of new balances in the Mediterranean and North Africa (Ruf, 1975, p. 67). From the mid-19th century, European interference in Ottoman internal affairs escalated, threatening the empire's sovereignty and future. Domestic issues increasingly turned into international concerns, influencing Ottoman foreign policy (Tuncer, 2000, p. 87). The Ottoman Empire, struggling to preserve its existence, faced numerous challenges in the Mediterranean, particularly after the French occupation of Algeria. The Ottomans focused on safeguarding their remaining territories (Ateş, 1982, p. 208). During the latter half of the 19th century, instability in the Mediterranean intensified. The Syrian question, sparked by conflicting European interests in the Damascus region, exemplified this tension. Initially a local issue, it gained international significance due to the involvement of France and Britain, who exploited Druze-Maronite tensions to provoke unrest. This culminated in the 1860 Druze-Maronite revolt, prompting European military intervention. In response, a committee of representatives from five major powers and the Ottoman Empire established a new administrative framework for Lebanon, known as the Mutasarrifate of Mount Lebanon, in 1861. While this resolution addressed the immediate crisis, it undermined Ottoman authority and foreshadowed future regional challenges (Gökbilgin, 1946, pp. 641-703).

The Ottoman Empire also faced challenges in Egypt, where Ismail Pasha's tenure as governor weakened Ottoman-Egyptian relations. The construction of the Suez Canal (1859–1869) further complicated matters. The canal transformed the Mediterranean into an open sea, linking it with the Red Sea and shortening global trade routes. This increased Egypt's strategic importance and turned the region into a battleground for colonial rivalry, particularly between Britain and France (Çeşmecioğlu, 2003, p. 123). The opening of the Suez Canal introduced new geopolitical dynamics. Britain, seeking to control the canal and surrounding regions, established a base in Cyprus. An agreement between Britain and the Ottoman Empire in 1878 granted Britain administrative rights over Cyprus, marking the beginning of British rule on the island (Uçarol, 1987, p. 353).

The Mediterranean witnessed further shifts with the rise of new powers like Italy and Germany. Their colonial ambitions introduced fresh competition in the region, leading to significant political developments. Italy's seizure of Tripoli and the Dodecanese Islands, as well as its war with the Ottoman Empire in 1911, set the stage for broader conflicts, ultimately contributing to the outbreak of World War I (Esmer, 1944, pp. 21-22).

The Berlin Conference and Its Effects on Ottoman Policy and the Situation in North Africa

The Importance of the Berlin Conference and Its Impact on Ottoman Policy:

The Berlin Conference was convened to resolve the Ottoman-Russian War, yet its outcomes extended beyond the immediate conflict. It not only reshaped the balance of power in the Mediterranean and other regions but also significantly influenced Ottoman-European relations. At the conference, the Treaty of Ayastefanos was revised, and a new balance of power was established, replacing the preexisting imbalance in Europe. This reconfiguration was designed to protect the interests of the major European powers at the expense of the Ottoman Empire, facilitating the division of Ottoman territories (Erim, 1953, pp. 403-423). The Ottoman Empire became the focus of the six Great Powers at the Berlin Conference. In essence, the conference served as an international forum to negotiate the partition of the Ottoman Empire, encompassing its entire territory. Britain, a principal proponent of this partition, had already established a presence in Cyprus at the time of the Berlin Treaty. Historically, the Ottoman Empire had relied on alliances with major powers to shield itself from Russian aggression. However, the Berlin Conference revealed that these powers were also intent on exploiting and partitioning Ottoman territories. This realization marked a turning point in Ottoman foreign policy (Erim, 1953, pp. 425-427).

As a result of the Berlin Conference, the Ottoman Empire lost 287,510 square kilometers of territory. Its sovereignty over regions such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Cyprus became nominal, with these areas remaining Ottoman only on paper. Additionally, the empire was compelled to undertake reforms in regions like the Balkans and Eastern Anatolia, communicating these changes to European powers. However, Ottoman authority in these areas was effectively diminished, leading to increased European interference in its internal affairs (Esmer, 1944, pp. 21-22; Karal, 1996, pp. 91-94). The Berlin Conference also set the stage for new challenges, including the Bulgarian and Albanian questions, which contributed to the emergence of new states and conflicts in the region. For instance, the Armenian question evolved from a bilateral Ottoman-Russian issue into an international matter involving the six Great Powers. These developments accelerated the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, particularly in the Balkans (Esmer, 1944, p. 23). The treaty exacerbated rivalries among the Great Powers in the Mediterranean and Balkan regions, transforming North Africa into a hotspot for recurring crises. Many issues raised at the Berlin Conference remained unresolved, leading to subsequent conflicts. The disintegration of Ottoman territories in favor of European powers began with the Eastern Question in 1875, the Ottoman-Russian War of 1878, and the Berlin Conference's resolutions (Karal, 1996, pp. 91-94).

During this period, Britain shifted its Mediterranean policy. Initially advocating for the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire, Britain transitioned to a strategy aimed at dismantling Ottoman holdings. This approach sought to secure Britain's dominance in the Mediterranean by controlling strategic locations along the Indian trade route and warm seas under Ottoman control (Debidour, 1912, p. 32). The opening of the Suez Canal heightened British interest in the region, as the canal became a critical juncture in global trade routes. Strategically, it was the most vital link on the trade route to India (Debidour, 1912, p. 45). At the same time, European nations sought to exploit the Ottoman Empire's financial bankruptcy, internal revolts, and reform challenges (Tukin, 1947, p. 138).

Anti-Ottoman rhetoric in the European press, often sensationalized under titles such as "The Beginning of the End," influenced public opinion, particularly in Britain, where perceptions of an imminent Ottoman collapse gained traction. These shifts significantly altered the Mediterranean's balance of power. At the Berlin Conference, British delegates proposed Austria-Hungary's temporary occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Tukin, 1947, pp. 136, 232). Meanwhile, France delayed taking advantage of concessions granted by Britain and Germany, fearing Italian encroachment in Tunisia. By 1881, however, France

established a protectorate in Tunisia through the Treaty of Ksar Said, thereby solidifying its position in a strategically crucial region between the eastern and western Mediterranean (Karal, 1996, pp. 91-94). France's move had far-reaching consequences. By securing Tunisia, France not only strengthened its strategic foothold in the Mediterranean but also consolidated its position in Algeria. Meanwhile, Britain solidified its control over the Indian trade route through a network of strategic locations, including Gibraltar, Malta, Cyprus, the Suez Canal, and Aden. These developments reshaped Mediterranean and North African geopolitics, adding new dimensions to interstate relations and colonial competition.

General Foreign Policy of the Ottoman Empire after the Berlin Conference

In the early years of his reign, Sultan Abdul Hamid II faced the severe repercussions of the Ottoman-Russian War, a catastrophic conflict for the Ottoman state that resulted in the loss of significant territories in the Balkans. Sultan Abdul Hamid II consistently considered the bitter outcomes of this war when shaping his foreign policy in the years that followed. He developed a distinctive approach to diplomacy, which he articulated by stating: "It is useful to take into account the views of the great European powers of that period, referred to as the 'Deauville Exaltation,' towards the Ottoman Empire" (Hilali, 2004, p. 15). After the Treaty of Berlin, the major European powers abandoned their previous policy of preserving the Ottoman Empire's territorial integrity, instead initiating efforts to dismantle the state. This shift significantly increased the challenges to the survival of the Ottoman Empire. Abdul Hamid II regarded Britain as the greatest threat, believing that it had abandoned the Ottoman Empire during the Ottoman-Russian War and was now intent on partitioning its territories. These concerns were validated by Britain's administration of Cyprus in 1878 and its occupation of Egypt in 1882. Similarly, France, another power with ambitions to carve up Ottoman lands, occupied Tunisia in 1881 (Akarli, 1976, p. 63).

Sultan Abdul Hamid II expressed his distrust of Britain with these words: "Among the great powers, the British are the most to be feared. For them, promises are worthless. Lord Granville stated in November 1882 that 'Britain will not change its Egyptian policy, and that what is written in our decree will remain in force.' In July of the same year, Admiral Seymour declared that the British had no intention of occupying Egypt or infringing on Egyptian rights. Yet, when British troops entered Egypt in August, they claimed it was to protect the authority of the Khedive. Rebellious England soon forgot its promises. In the end, we were helpless." (BOA, YA. HUS, 167/92). During this turbulent period, Abdul Hamid II sought to prevent the further disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Acknowledging the political and economic fragility of the state, he evaluated each foreign power individually and tailored his policies accordingly. He resisted countries such as Britain, France, Italy, and Austria, adopting a strategy of occasional concessions in peripheral regions where resistance was untenable. With Russia perceived as an immediate threat, Abdul Hamid II's policy sought to contain its influence as much as possible. On the other hand, Germany was viewed as a crucial ally, offering a counterbalance to the other great powers. Consequently, friendly relations with Germany were consistently maintained (Akarli, 1976, p. 89).

In the Balkans, Abdul Hamid II sought to maintain Ottoman influence by fostering internal rivalries among the smaller Balkan states. He adopted a patronizing approach toward these states, particularly antagonistic toward Greece. Encouraging discord among Balkan states was a deliberate policy to weaken their collective strength (BOA, YA. HUS, 167/92). In his dealings with the great powers, Abdul Hamid II often exploited their rivalries, using them as leverage to protect Ottoman interests. His primary objective was to preserve the territorial integrity of the empire. However, his ability to protect provinces distant from the Ottoman center of power was limited. During this era, the Ottoman state's primary focus was simply on its survival (Hilali, 2004, p. 57). Abdul Hamid II consistently favored a peaceful foreign policy, recognizing that the weakened state of the empire left few alternatives. He emphasized diplomacy and sought to resolve conflicts through negotiation rather than confrontation. Understanding the critical role of intelligence in international relations, he established a sophisticated and costly intelligence network to monitor global developments and respond proactively (Engin, 2007, pp. 24-30).

While Sultan Abdul Hamid II generally adhered to pacifism and compromise in foreign affairs, he was willing to engage in military action when unavoidable. For example, the Ottoman-Greek War of 1897 demonstrated his readiness to act decisively when confident of victory. He avoided wars with uncertain

outcomes, particularly against major powers. In summary, Abdul Hamid II pursued a neutral, independent, and predominantly peaceful foreign policy. His approach occasionally involved compromise and, at times, subtle threats, all while skillfully manipulating the rivalries among the great powers to the Ottoman Empire's advantage (Engin, 2007, p. 26).

Implications of the Berlin Conference for North Africa:

The French Occupation of Tunisia and Italy's Reaction

The first significant impact of the Berlin Conference on North Africa was the French occupation of Tunisia. By the latter half of the 19th century, Tunisia had fallen under the economic and financial influence of Britain, France, and Italy. Simultaneously, the Ottoman Empire attempted to strengthen its ties with Tunisia, but the severe defeat it faced in the Ottoman-Russian War hindered these efforts. Italy, anticipating an opportunity, aspired to seize Tunisia. However, France made decisive moves against Tunisia, especially after consolidating its hold on Algeria. The Berlin Conference of 1878 provided France with the pretext to pursue its ambitions in Tunisia (Karal, 1996, pp. 137–145). German Chancellor Bismarck, during the Berlin Conference, suggested that France, defeated in Alsace-Lorraine, should focus on Tunisia to distract itself from its losses. Britain, seeking to avert French opposition to its colonization of Cyprus, supported France's claim to Tunisia. Consequently, this Ottoman territory became a bargaining chip among the great powers. The Mediterranean, meanwhile, emerged as a theater of rivalry between France and Italy, particularly after the Berlin Conference intensified their competition over Tunisia (Bardin, 1979, p. 201).

Tunisia's economic ties to Europe, especially France and Britain, heightened its strategic importance. British capitalists held concessions for railway, gas, and waterworks in Tunisia, while French financiers had established credit institutions and provided loans to the Bey of Tunis (Bardin, 1979, p. 217). Italians, meanwhile, were predominantly agricultural laborers. By 1880, Tunisia hosted 10,000 Italians, 2,000 French nationals, and 8,000 Algerians. This foreign influence enabled British, French, and Italian consuls to shape the Bey's governance, leading to rivalry among these nations (Çaycı, 1995, p. 15).

The Tunisian question became central to North Africa's colonial movements and the France-Italy conflict. European powers at the Berlin Conference exploited Italy's ambitions in Tunisia (Çaycı, 1995, p. 22). While Britain initially sought an alliance with France, it later proposed a Mediterranean Treaty to Italy in March 1879, encouraging Italy to focus on North Africa. Bismarck and Russia also recommended that Italy seize Ottoman territories such as Tunisia or Albania. However, Italian Prime Minister Cairoli declined, citing the potential strain on Franco-Italian relations (Bardin, 1979, p. 211).

With British and German backing, France capitalized on the Ottoman Empire's internal crises. Using minor border incidents as justification, French troops invaded Tunisia from Algeria in April 1881. By May, the Treaty of Bardo formalized Tunisia as a French protectorate. This marked France's acquisition of another North African colony, further diminishing the Ottoman Empire's holdings. While the Ottomans strongly protested, their lack of power rendered them unable to prevent the occupation. Italy, equally powerless to counter France's actions, shifted its focus toward aligning with Germany against French expansion in North Africa (Bayur, 1942, pp. 335–340).

The British Occupation of Egypt and the Position of Other Countries:

The disputes between France and Britain over Egypt caused significant concern for Khedive Ismail Pasha. The Egyptian financial crisis exacerbated these tensions, with Ismail Pasha struggling to manage mounting debts. Having sold his shares in the Suez Canal, he resorted to short-term loans at exorbitant interest rates of up to 30%. Despite his efforts, Egypt's debts had ballooned to 91 million pounds by 1875 (Kızıltoprak, 2008, p. 20). During this period, British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli remarked that "the key to India is not Egypt or the Suez Canal, but Istanbul," signaling a shift in British foreign policy. In April 1877, Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire, prompting Britain to threaten intervention to halt Russia's advances. Germany's Chancellor Bismarck encouraged Britain to invade Egypt, suggesting it would trigger a conflict

between Britain and Russia over Mediterranean dominance, leaving Germany as Europe's foremost power (Kızıltoprak, 2008, p. 23).

In 1882, Britain exploited a popular uprising in Egypt to justify its occupation. After reaching a tentative agreement with France, British warships anchored at Alexandria in May, and British troops landed in Port Said in August. By September, British forces had captured Cairo, effectively establishing control over Egypt (Uçarol, 1989, pp. 151–152).

Although the occupation was presented as temporary, European countries viewed it with skepticism. France, having lost its influence in Egypt to Britain, adjusted its policies. It aligned with the Ottoman Empire in opposing Britain's efforts to partition Ottoman territories. Meanwhile, the Ottoman Empire formally protested the British occupation of Egypt but, recognizing its limitations, agreed to a temporary arrangement with Britain in 1885. Under this agreement, Britain pledged to withdraw once order was restored in Egypt, though its control persisted de facto (Bayur, 1942, p. 53). The British occupation of Egypt marked another significant outcome of the Berlin Conference. From 1882 onward, Egypt's connection to the Ottoman Empire weakened, leaving its administration firmly under British control, albeit unofficially.

The Impact of the 1905 Moroccan Crisis on the North African Region

Germany sought to challenge the 1904 Anglo-French Entente by exploiting the Moroccan question, creating crises to undermine their alliance. These tensions culminated in two major Moroccan crises (1905 and 1911), which significantly influenced North African geopolitics and contributed to Italy's invasion of Tripolitania (Julien, 1980, p. 243). The first Moroccan crisis began in 1905, triggered by German Emperor Wilhelm II's visit to Morocco. Germany aimed to disrupt Franco-British cooperation and sought to draw France closer to Germany through Russian mediation. French newspapers described the potential "Tunisification" of Morocco, suggesting parallels with Tunisia's transformation into a French protectorate. Tensions escalated, with Britain staunchly supporting France against Germany. To ease the crisis, France and Germany agreed to negotiate, resulting in a preliminary settlement in July 1905. France was granted the responsibility of maintaining order near the Algerian border, while Morocco's territorial integrity and independence were upheld (Debidour, 1912, pp. 27–28). The 1906 Algeiras Conference further solidified the Franco-British alliance, with Britain, Russia, and Italy supporting France against Germany. The principle of an "open door" for trade in Morocco was established, although France retained significant influence. The conference outcomes deepened the Anglo-French Entente and isolated Germany diplomatically (Çaycı, 1995, pp. 112–167).

The Moroccan crises marked a turning point in European relations and North African geopolitics. They not only reinforced Franco-British ties with their strategic agreement that signed between them in 1904 but also highlighted the intensifying rivalries that would eventually lead to the First World War (Julien, 1980, p. 249).

Italian Foreign Policy in the Mediterranean and Its Colonial Background:

Italy's Accession to the Triple Alliance and Its Impact

Colonization was one of the most important factors shaping Italian foreign policy. Italy sought settlements and workplaces for its growing population, raw material resources, and markets for its industry. This colonial policy brought it into conflict with other colonial powers. Italy aimed to reach an agreement with Germany, which dominated the European continent, to achieve these goals. Additionally, France's occupation of Tunisia played a key role in Italy joining the German-Austrian alliance. During this period, German Prime Minister Bismarck, wary of a potential Russian-French alliance, formed the Triple Alliance in 1882, including Italy alongside the Austro-Hungarian-German bloc. The Triple Alliance was not merely the result of Bismarck's diplomatic efforts—he had earlier encouraged France to seize Tunisia, perhaps to mend relations with France after the bitterness of 1870. Despite these overtures, France's occupation of Tunisia ultimately forced Italy into the alliance (Karal, 1996, p. 81).

The Triple Alliance was primarily a defense treaty targeting French strategy. According to the first article, the parties agreed not to form alliances against each other and to consult on mutual political and economic concerns. The second article stated that if France attacked Italy unprovoked, the other allies would assist Italy. Similarly, the third article required Italy to support Germany in the event of an unprovoked French attack. Notably, Italy declared that the alliance was not directed against Britain. Regarding this, London Ambassador Rustem Pasha remarked: "The Italian Prime Minister's visit to German Prince Bismarck, the German-Austrian-Italian alliance, and Italy's intentions regarding Albania, Egypt, and Tripoli may lead to a possible war between Germany and France..." (BOA, Y. EE, 51/49).

Unsatisfied with France's settlement in Tunisia, Italy not only joined the Triple Alliance but also cooperated with Britain in colonial matters. Germany encouraged this cooperation. Under the terms of the Triple Pact renewed on February 20, 1887, Germany pledged to support Italy militarily if France expanded in North Africa and attacked Italy (P. Renouvin, 1947, p. 435). For Italy, the Triple Alliance provided moral prestige and international recognition. It allowed Italy to view itself as a great power while diminishing its fear of France. The agreement effectively isolated France against Germany in Europe and affirmed Germany's dominance on the continent (BOA, Y. EE, 51/49).

The Mediterranean Treaty between Britain, Italy, and Austria

Bismarck encouraged Italy to reach an agreement with Britain, which was desperately in need of support against France in the Mediterranean. This was achieved through the Anglo-Italian Treaty, signed on 12 February 1887, with the following terms:

- The treaty aimed to maintain the status quo in the Mediterranean, Adriatic, Aegean, and Red Sea. Any deterioration of this status quo to the detriment of the parties would be prevented.
- Italy would support Britain in Egypt, while Britain would assist Italy in North Africa, particularly in Tripolitania (West).
- In the event of a conflict in the Mediterranean, both sides would support each other.

As a result of this agreement, Italy not only secured Britain's acceptance of its colonial demands but also gained the support of the British Navy in the Mediterranean (BOA, Y. EE, 51/49). As mentioned earlier, multiple agreements were concluded between Britain, Italy, Austria-Hungary, and Austria in February and March 1887 concerning the Mediterranean. Crispi's assumption of the position of Prime Minister of Italy in July 1887 accelerated cooperation during the year. Crispi's main goal was to establish Italy as one of Europe's great powers and to play a significant role in European diplomacy (Terrasse, 2001, p. 188). Convinced that the Ottoman Empire would soon collapse, Francesco Crispi sought to ensure that Italy would receive a share of its legacy (BOA, Y. EE, 51/49). The Second Mediterranean Treaty, concluded between the three countries on 12 December 1887, aimed to prevent Russia from gaining access to the Mediterranean. Consequently, the three countries were particularly interested in Ottoman territories in Rumeli, Anatolia, and Africa. This interest was closely tied to the 1878 Cyprus Treaty, which Britain had signed with the Ottoman Empire. Broadly speaking, the new policy that Britain began to pursue against the Ottoman Empire after 1878 can be summarized as follows (Morsy, 1984, p. 273).

Italy's Colonial Policy in Africa

Italy, emboldened by its ambitions as a superpower, embarked on a series of movements within Africa. However, it did not receive the expected support from other countries for its colonial policy. Italy was particularly frustrated, especially as many colonies geographically close to it were already under the control of other European powers. France had occupied Tunisia, Britain had settled in Egypt, and the Adriatic coast was under Austro-Hungarian control. Additionally, the Balkans became an arena of conflict between Austria-Hungary and Russia. In short, there were no territories left for Italy to exploit in its neighborhood (BOA, Y. EE, 43/83).

As a result, Italy was forced to look farther into Africa. In 1885, Italy occupied Massawa, a northern port of Abyssinia on the Red Sea coast. However, settling there proved difficult, as Italian troops faced fierce resistance from local tribes. Despite these challenges, Italy finally managed to establish a foothold in 1889 through an agreement with the Abyssinian Emperor Menelik II. However, Italy was unable to establish itself as a colonial power in the region due to the strength of local resistance. This led Italy to refocus its efforts on the Mediterranean, viewing Ottoman lands as the easiest area for expansion (P. Renouvin, 1947, p. 466).

Faced with resistance in Abyssinia, Italy appealed to its allies for assistance in its colonization efforts, asserting that it would not renew its alliances unless it was allocated a share of Ottoman territories in the Mediterranean. Bismarck's reaction to this was blunt. He stated that the Triple Alliance was not intended for colonization but for maintaining European peace, and that Europe could not afford to enter a full-scale war over Italy's ambitions in Morocco, the Red Sea, Tunisia, Egypt, or any other part of the world. Bismarck commented: "The Italians want others to jump into the water for their own benefit, without getting their toes wet" (Kızıltoprak, 2008, p. 214-215). As a result, Bismarck requested that Italy renew its treaty with France, which Italy did on 20 February 1887. This renewal allowed Italy to force its allies to accept its colonial demands. Austria-Hungary, which did not want conflict with France, supported Italy's demands for the Eastern Mediterranean, while Germany, which sought to avoid confrontation with Russia and involvement in the Balkans, supported Italy's demands for the Western Mediterranean. Thus, the Triple Alliance was renewed, and Italy made significant progress in its colonial activities (BOA, Y. PRK. TKM, 11/35).

Effects of the Berlin Conference on the Question of Western Tripoli

Italy, which emerged from the Berlin Conference without achieving any gains, sought to compensate for the losses it had suffered after France's occupation of Tunisia. This time, Italy set its sights on Tripoli to fulfill its colonial ambitions, which became more evident after the British occupation of Egypt (Prosin, 2001, p. 301). The Ottoman Empire felt the need to approach the Italian government following reports from the French press about Italy's intentions to occupy Western Tripoli, requesting clarification from Italian authorities. In November 1884, Italy began making significant moves towards Western Tripoli, and in the summer and autumn of 1885, the Italian press reported Italy's intention to enter the region. On the other hand, France, which supported the Ottoman Empire's position on the Tripoli issue, closely monitored Italy's movements with caution (Çaycı, 1995, p. 100-105). In this context, Safwat Pasha commented: "When the Berlin Conference was held, it was said that the Italians were seeking to seize Tripoli, based on statements from Lord Salisbury and Washington. However, the French delegate, Monsieur Corti, argued that this was not feasible, as France had significant interests in Algeria. He further stated in his memorandum that, because the Italians were planning to extend a railway to Sudan, their occupation of Tripoli would not only disturb the security of French Algeria but also conflict with broader European interests, given its proximity to Egypt and the British route to India. It was thus deemed inappropriate to leave Tripoli in such a state, and competent provincial governors should be dispatched to the region" (BOA, Y. EE, 43/83).

Meanwhile, after settling in Tunisia, France turned its attention to the Tunisian-Tripolitanian border, where over 100,000 Tunisian refugees, who had resisted French occupation, took refuge in Tripoli. These refugees hoped the Ottoman Empire would intervene in Tunisian events. In response, the Ottoman administration ensured favorable treatment for the refugees and reinforced its military presence in Tripoli to maintain order, prevent some Bedouin tribes from joining the resistance, and counter any possible French or Italian actions. By the end of 1884, most Tunisian refugees had returned home (Martel, 1965, p. 32-33). In 1887, the Mediterranean Treaty was signed between Italy and Britain. According to this agreement, Italy was to support Britain in Egypt, while Britain would assist Italy if a third country, such as France, invaded Tripoli. The two nations pledged to cooperate in maintaining the status quo in the Mediterranean, the Aegean, and North Africa. With France's occupation of Tunisia, Ottoman-French relations soured, and tensions between the two powers began to affect the situation in North Africa. A resistance movement against France even began in southern Tunisia (Prosin, 2001, p. 307). France believed it could counter Italy's ambitions in Tripoli with support from other European powers and was pleased to see the Ottoman Empire

remain suspicious of Italy. France was keen to sustain these suspicions (Çaycı, 1995, p. 111). Consequently, Britain's colonization of Egypt and Italy's ambitions in Tripoli forced the Ottoman Empire to be more vigilant in dealing with France's actions in North Africa (BOA, Y. A. HUS, 208/66).

In light of these challenges, the Ottoman Empire was compelled to send military forces to Western Tripoli. Sultan Abdul Hamid II attempted to intervene in Tunisia based on the theory of the Islamic League, which he considered necessary to preserve the authority of the Caliphate and the unity of the Islamic nation. Abdul Hamid II's actions were a constant concern for French authorities in North Africa, and France also worried about Italy's interests in Western Tripoli. To safeguard its interests, France sought to protect the border between Tunisia and Western Tripoli by allowing local tribes to move freely across the border, avoiding the use of French army units. This strategy ensured the tribes' loyalty and protection from external threats (BOA, Y. A. HUS, 208/66). France also organized three expeditions to southern Tunisia, bringing the controlling tribes into submission. In 1884, France exempted these tribes from taxation and appointed them as the Makhzen tribe to guard the border between Tunisia and Western Tripoli, maintaining a level of autonomy under traditional tribal leadership. However, this tribal system proved ineffective, and by 1888, it was replaced by a new Makhzen organization based on military authority (Martel, 1965, p. 7-33).

The Ottoman-European Conflict South of North Africa and Its Repercussions

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire began to pay close attention to the Sahara, primarily due to economic reasons. The wealthy who traveled from Central Africa to the coast and then to Europe were more artisans than producers. Valuable trade resources such as raw gold, ostrich feathers, and ivory were exchanged for chewing gum, natron, and gazelle horns. While the feather trade lost value with the opening of South African markets, where feathers were more easily obtained, slaves brought from Central Africa remained an important source of trade revenue for Tripoli West (Pinon, 1912, p. 312). As a natural consequence of the Ottomans' establishment of order in Tripoli West, the number of caravan journeys increased, and Tripoli gained in importance. The caravans' access to Tripoli, the shortest route geographically, and Sudanese goods, led to regular voyages by ships carrying European products to the port of Tripoli. Tripoli West, the Sahara, and Sudan became increasingly significant trading centers. Except for the Jafara part of Tripoli and the Jabal al-Akhdar area in Benghazi, the rest of Tripoli was desert and part of the Sahara Desert. Therefore, the sources of income that sustained people's livelihoods remained modest (Prosin, 2001, p. 290).

Under these challenging circumstances, the Desert and Sudan transit route through the province's borders provided many benefits. In this regard, the Sahara and Sudan trade were vital to the economic life of the province. Another reason for the Ottoman interest in the desert was that maintaining order and public safety in the province was only possible by controlling the main oases in the Tripoli desert. Only in this way could the movements of the large Bedouin tribes living in the desert be controlled. In fact, the establishment of Ottoman rule in Tripoli was solidified through the Ottomans' control over the Marzuq and Ghadames tribes (Rossi, 1974, p. 297).

With the French occupation of Tunisia in 1881 and the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, the question of Tripoli's borders, which until then had not held significant territorial value, became a matter of great importance among the conflicting states in North Africa and the Mediterranean. As a result, the Ottoman Empire sought to ensure the security of its territories and influence by preventing other states from occupying these regions (BOA, Y. A. HUS, 208/66). The territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire had been guaranteed by the great European powers at the Berlin Conference, and the inter-state rivalry restrained European states from openly encroaching on Ottoman territory. However, changes in the status quo by European powers for their own benefit at the expense of the Ottoman Empire led to international conflicts (BOA, Y. EE, 43/83).

As a result, France was only able to place Tunisia under its protection after receiving help and support from European countries. Britain, on the other hand, always claimed that its occupation of Egypt was temporary. Until World War I, Britain was particularly keen not to challenge the Ottoman Empire's rule. Consequently, the rivalry between the great European powers intensified, with the formation of blocs and individual

actions taken against the Ottoman Empire. Since Tripoli's borders with Tunisia and Egypt were connected to the Mediterranean balance, they led to de facto interventions from these countries. On the other hand, the vague borders of the Sahara Desert, which were not effectively occupied, allowed for activities in these areas (Çaycı, 1995, p. 116). The behavior of European countries seeking to take advantage of this opportunity contributed to the clarification of the Ottoman desert policy and led to the emergence of the Tripoli Question in 1882. In this context, it is noted that the Ottoman state began to take an interest in the Sahara to ensure the security of Tripoli West and began to pursue a policy in this region. In fact, the Ottoman presence in North Africa maintained its influence in the Sahara until the end of 1918 (Martel, 1965, p. 22).

First Ottoman-French Treaty

The Ottoman State did not learn of the agreement signed between France and Italy in December 1900 until a year later and requested confirmation from its embassies in Paris and Rome regarding the authenticity of the news. In its response dated 28 January 1902, the Embassy in Rome explained the nature of the agreement, stating that since 1899, the Italian government had made the following assurances: "The Italian Government does not intend to expand into Tripoli as long as the territorial integrity of Tripoli is legally recognized and as long as the balance in the Mediterranean remains unchanged" (Debidour, 1912, p. 64). However, the Italian government would take action if there was an imbalance in the Mediterranean and would not allow any other country to stabilize Tripoli. After stating that the Italian guarantee was based on maintaining the status quo, the ambassador concluded his report by stating that there was no current movement against Tripoli (Çaycı, 1995, p. 112-121).

The Ottoman Empire decided to protest the Franco-Italian agreement before the signatories of the Berlin Treaty. To this end, the Ottoman Empire informed its embassies in London, Berlin, Vienna, and St. Petersburg that an agreement between France and Italy had been signed regarding Tripoli, that such an agreement would upset the existing balances in the Mediterranean basin, and that any aggression against Tripoli would undermine the basic principle of the Berlin Treaty that guaranteed the territorial integrity of the Ottoman state. The Ottoman Empire requested clarifying information from these countries regarding the matter (BOA, Y. A. HUS, 424/74).

According to the British Foreign Secretary, this agreement was not a Franco-Italian alliance but merely a confirmation of the 1898 treaty, and France clarified that Tripoli did not fall within its sphere of interest in the region. Since the British government favored maintaining the status quo in the Mediterranean, this view did not change. The Ottoman Embassy in London informed the government that it agreed with the British Foreign Secretary's view that the agreement was not an alliance targeting Tripoli (BOA, Y. A. HUS, 424/74).

Once the positions of the Great Powers on this issue became clear, Sultan Abdul Hamid II personally met with the French ambassador to discuss a number of issues, including the question of Tripoli West and the southern Sahara. On 24 January 1902, Sultan Abdul Hamid II detailed the views of former French ambassadors Montebello and Cambon on the issue of Tripoli remaining under Ottoman sovereignty (Bardin, 1979, p. 176). The Sultan emphasized the dangers of Italy's proximity to Tunisia and its potential repercussions. He stated that since France and Italy had agreed on the issue of Tripoli, Italy must be prevented from acting unilaterally. France instructed its ambassador not to enter into negotiations with the Ottoman Empire on this matter, revealing the true nature of France's position on Western Tripoli and the southern Sahara.

Since the High Porte believed Tripoli was under threat, it sought guarantees from Italy not to encroach on Tripoli and requested France's assistance in this regard (Çaycı, 1995, p. 112-121). In the meantime, Italy declared that it aimed to preserve the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire and only sought to develop its trade in Tripoli and the southern Sahara, stressing that losing Tripoli would be dangerous for Italy. Despite these clarifications, repeated political attempts by Italy revealed that the Ottoman Empire was seriously concerned about the possibility of Italy deploying troops in Tripoli West. Given the seriousness of this threat, the Ottoman Empire sought to cooperate with France from 1883 to 1899 (BOA, İ. HUS, 94/1319 Za.-022).

When the Ottoman state learned of the agreement signed between France and Italy in December 1900, it instructed its ambassador in Paris, Munir Bey, to seek assurances from France to oppose any Italian encroachment on Western Tripolitania. As a signatory to the Treaties of Paris and Berlin, which guaranteed the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire, Ottoman Ambassador Munir Bey sought to determine France's position on this issue. When it became clear that the terms of the agreement with France on Tripoli were unfavorable to the Ottoman Empire and would harm its sovereign rights, the High Council instructed Munir Bey to stop the preparatory work before the French Ministry on this matter. As a result, the Ottoman-French treaty that had been attempted in the first three months of 1902 could not be realized. However, in the same year, two new agreements were signed between the Ottoman and French states regarding the balance of the Mediterranean Sea and the Sahara Desert (BOA, İ. HUS, 94/1319 Za.-022).

The Ottoman State's Policy Towards Tripoli West and South of the Sahara

During the period of Ottoman rule beginning in 1835, Tripoli was governed by governors directly appointed by the Ottoman Empire. In 1864, Tripoli West was transformed into a wilayat under the 1864 law on wilayat, but new administrative arrangements were made with the 1877 law, which separated Benghazi, Derna, and its surrounding areas from Tripoli West, making it an independent Sanjak directly subordinate to Istanbul (Tevfik, 1960, p. 147). From that point onward, the main concern of Tripoli's viceroys was to re-establish Ottoman sovereignty over the vast territories stretching from the Tripolitanian coast to the Sahara Desert. Significant efforts were made, especially during the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, to expand Ottoman rule into the interior of Africa. With France's declaration of Tunisia as its colony, the Ottoman government again fortified Tripoli to remain vigilant against any potential threat. In 1881, the strategically important areas of Tripoli West and Benghazi were reinforced.

Another important measure taken was the complete separation of Benghazi from Tripoli Province, making it a completely independent Sanjak from Tripoli West Province in 1888. On the other hand, due to the treaty signed between France and Italy, it was decided in 1902 that West Tripoli would be a free zone. During this period, Sultan Abdul Hamid II did not give the Italians the opportunity to realize their ambitions in Tripoli. He ordered measures to be taken against the threat of possible Italian occupation of West Tripoli, and efforts to find more effective ways to confront and obstruct Italian activities were underway. Sultan Abdul Hamid II did not want a war with Italy over these territories but sought to thwart Italian colonialist ambitions within western Tripoli by fueling the conflict of interests between the colonial powers (BOA, İ. HUS, 75/14). Italy, however, demanded certain privileges in the state of Tripoli in a memorandum sent to the High Council in 1905. To prevent these demands, Sultan Abdul Hamid II encouraged France not to grant Italy the requested concessions, but the Ottoman state was forced to accept Italian demands due to a lack of sufficient diplomatic support. After Italy was granted these privileges, Prime Minister Forte told the French Foreign Minister, "I am now certain that we will be able to occupy Tripoli easily" (Süleyman, 2021, p. 66-67).

In this context, it can be said that Sultan Abdul Hamid II's policy to prevent imperialist designs on Tripoli and the southern Sahara was often ineffective and inefficient. During this time, France managed to obtain the tender for the western port of Tripoli, which angered Italy and led to protests from Italy. This resulted in a major backlash against France. Italian activity increased day by day in Benghazi, which was the Mediterranean gateway to sub-Saharan and Central Africa. Although both sides recognized each other's rights and laws over the colonized areas through secret agreements, the British claim that the port of Salloum belonged to Egypt made the Italians fear losing Benghazi to the British (BOA, İ. HUS, 39/11).

On the other hand, the Ottoman Empire rejected the concessions demanded by Italy in Benghazi between 1906 and 1909 in order to confront Italian imperialism and European imperialism in the Mediterranean region, the sub-Saharan region, and Central Africa. Abdul Hamid II rejected the Italian demands because he believed that accepting them would conflict with German and British interests in Iraq, leading to harm for Italian interests in Tripoli and Benghazi. Additionally, as a military measure against Italy's colonial ambitions, and to strengthen the forces in Tripoli, Abdul Hamid II increased the number of brigades to 20,000, expanded the colonial organization to 50,000, and stockpiled 40,000 Martini and Schneider rifles for these auxiliary forces (Tercüman-ı Hakikat, 11 September 1911). Abdul Hamid II did not grant the

Italians the privileges they wanted at the time and took various political, military, and strategic measures. However, thanks to the privileges granted to them, the Italians were able to dominate the economic life of the country. They also sought to achieve cultural conquest through the schools they opened, although Abdul Hamid II's policy was to monitor this. The Ottomans could do little because of their commitment to the terms of the privileges granted to Italy (Abdülhamid, 1984, p. 190).

Sultan Abdul Hamid II was aware of the possible reaction in the Islamic world if he ceded the lands of Tripoli West, where the population was almost entirely Muslim, to Italy. He understood the damage this could cause to both the state and his personal position, so he was very cautious about Italian activities in Benghazi. He also supported the Senussi movement, seeing it as a powerful force capable of organizing resistance and a comprehensive jihad against the Italian occupation in Benghazi, Tripoli, and other desert areas, as well as in the rest of the Sahara. Therefore, he did not hesitate to send weapons, guns, and ammunition to the Senussi movement (Abdülhamid, 1984, p. 158). Sultan Abdul Hamid II also ordered the establishment of outposts in Tripoli West and sent a detachment in 1906 through the Ottoman Foreign Ministry to prevent French encroachments and establish outposts in the region south of the Sahara. However, this Ottoman policy did not yield any positive and effective results. On 17 July 1909, French forces occupied Wadi Tabqat in Qaniyah, and French attempts to capture Qaniyah and the surrounding areas continued until 1911 (Naci, 1912, p. 190).

Meanwhile, during the time of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, Britain joined the imperialist powers seeking a share of Tripoli, Benghazi, and the rest of the Ottoman territories in North Africa. The port of Salloum had attracted the attention of the British since their occupation of Egypt in 1882, as it was a key maritime point and a strategic gateway for Sudanese and Egyptian trade to the Mediterranean, as well as a critical defense point to protect the British occupation in Egypt. Although the British claimed that the port of Salloum belonged to Egypt and sought to control it, the Senussi in the area denied them any chance. The British found an opportunity when Italy began to occupy Tripoli West, and the new Turkish government after the coup against Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1909, with the rise of the Union and Progress Party, entered into a political crisis, ceding the port of Salloum to the British. Thus, Western Tripoli fell into Italian hands in 1911, and the entire North African region came under European colonial imperialism, with the Ottomans withdrawing from the area, as well as from the desert regions leading to Central Africa (Naci, 1912, p. 192-193).

Conclusion

By 1587, North Africa consisted of three provinces, collectively known as the 'Joints of the West'. This marked the end of the first phase of conflict between the Ottoman Empire and Europe. The Western Hearths played a crucial role in shaping the Ottoman Empire's naval power in the Western Mediterranean. Ottoman sailors stationed in these regions controlled the Strait of Gibraltar, the only entry and exit point to the Mediterranean at the time, providing invaluable support for the state's Mediterranean trade and ensuring its safety. Each of the western coastal states, which were key to Ottoman maritime navigation, was governed by a Baylai appointed from Istanbul. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the Ottoman Empire was engaged in a significant struggle with the powerful states of Europe. It recognized that the Western Hearth had the capacity to protect itself and saw no issue with allowing these regions a degree of freedom in their relations with European countries. Since its submission to Ottoman rule, North Africa had maintained a particularly strong position in the navigation of the Western Mediterranean. In 1798, the British defeated the French at the Battle of Abu Bakr, gaining the first level of influence in the Mediterranean. However, with the end of the threat posed by Napoleon Bonaparte following the 'Wars of Alliance', European powers shifted their focus to neutralizing Algerian naval power in the early 19th century. In 1878, the Congress of Berlin affirmed the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire, but this also marked the beginning of its gradual disintegration. Soon after, France invaded Tunisia in 1881, and Britain invaded Egypt in 1882. The Ottoman Empire was unable to prevent the legal loss of these two territories due to its weakened state and the fact that Tunisia and Egypt had already been de facto independent for forty years. However, the Ottoman Empire's sovereignty over Tripoli was much stronger in 1911, when Italy began its offensive. At this point, the foreign policy of the Ottoman Empire in the late

19th and early 20th centuries was fraught with challenges. The Ottomans were well aware of Italy's ambitions in North Africa, especially towards Tripoli, and there is evidence that Sultan Abdul Hamid II had fully recognized this long-term threat.

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