Countering 'Local Discord' with 'Imperial Servitude': Mehmed Zeki Pasha's Defense of Mihrali Bey

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Context

The two-folio ciphered telegram sent by Mehmed Zeki Pasha serves as an illustrative case study of the Hamidian era.[1] Written at a time when the order to serve in Yemen induced dread among the Anatolian populace, the document highlights the exceptional willingness of Mihrali Bey to mobilize for this perilous frontier. However, a closer reading exposes a layer beyond simple military logistics, the text functions as a sophisticated defense mechanism. Mehmed Zeki Pasha's utilization of this correspondence may be interpreted as an effort not only to shield his protégé from the structural tensions arising from tribal settlement, but also quite possibly, from the fierce bureaucratic factionalism in Istanbul, thereby demonstrating the rectitude of his stance and dismissing any potential accusations of administrative failure.

The discursive strategy employed by Mehmed Zeki Pasha reveals the depth of the bureaucratic rift within the Ottoman center. By labeling Mihrali Bey's local accusers as "ill-wishers of the state" (*bed-ḫᵛāhān-ı devlet*), the Marshal reframes local complaints as treachery against the regime. This rhetorical maneuver is also visible in his sharp juxtaposition of Mihrali Bey against the "gentlemen excellencies" (*efendiler ḥażarātı*)[2] and the "expelled" (*maṭrūd*) Fuad Pasha. The specific reference to Fuad Pasha, a former Marshal stripped of his rank and exiled to Damascus in 1902 for his opposition to the Palace circles,[3] may be considered to serve as a critical marker of political alignment. By dissociating Mihrali from the *efendiler* and the disgraced Fuad, Mehmed Zeki Pasha

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1 This telegram was sent by Mehmed Zeki Pasha, the marshal of the fourth army, to the mabeyn chief scribe on August 22, 1905. Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi (DABOA), Y.PRK.ASK., 232-23, 20 Jumada al-Akhirah 1323 [August 22, 1905].

2 The term *efendi*, as a form of address for the literate and educated class, gained widespread use following the Tanzimat Edict, becoming integrated with the civil bureaucracy through the designation *kalem efendileri* (gentlemen of the offices) as the bureaucracy became institutionalized (see Carter Vaughn Findley, *Ottoman Civil Officialdom: A Social History* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989], 26). Given this historical development, it can be argued that the expression *efendiler ḥażarātı* in the document targets civil bureaucrats who were opponents of the Palace or members of the Young Turk movement, and is employed with a pejorative connotation within the text.

3 Ahmet Yadi, "Müşir Deli Fuad Paşa'nın Petersburg Fevkalâde Elçiliği (1894)," *Karadeniz Araştırmaları* 21, no. 82 (2024): 474.

positions his protégé within the "loyalist" camp of the Palace.[4] Thus, the defense of a tribal chief in Sivas becomes a proxy war against the Marshal's own bureaucratic rivals in the capital.

Beyond the immediate bureaucratic maneuvering, the document allows for a dual-layered reading regarding the nature of "loyalty" in the Hamidian tribal zone. On the part of the tribal chief, Mihrali Bey's professed eagerness to sacrifice his life (*fedā-yı cism u cān*) for the Yemen campaign may be interpreted not merely as blind devotion, but potentially as a strategic exit. Facing mounting legal and social pressure in Sivas – where his settlement had likely disrupted local power balances – volunteering for a distant frontier offered a dignified way to distance himself from local vendettas while securing imperial favor. In this sense, his "enthusiasm" (*kemāl-i muṭāvaʿat u heves*) might be read as a calculated survival strategy. Simultaneously, regarding the Marshal, the staunch defense of the chieftain appears to be a strategic effort to reinforce his own position in the eyes of the Palace. By framing the local tension as a conflict between 'loyal servants' – represented by his protégé – and "treacherous rivals," the Marshal effectively dissociates himself from the discord. This suggests that his defense of Mihrali was likely a calculated maneuver to consolidate his own faction's standing against both provincial and central rivals, rather than a mere administrative duty.

To conclude, the 1905 cipher illustrates how Mehmed Zeki Pasha's patronage network likely functioned as a reciprocal shield against both central and local instabilities. The correspondence suggests that military mobilization possessed a distinct political utility, serving as a mechanism for the tribal chief to evade local risks while enabling the Marshal to consolidate his faction's standing. However, it is crucial to note that such projections remain interpretive. Rather than offering definitive conclusions, this document merely provides subtle clues conducive to speculation regarding the intersection of survival strategies and high-level patronage. Therefore, a complete

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4 For a detailed account of Mehmed Zeki Pasha's career, which illustrates his long tenure and close relationship with Sultan Abdülhamid II, and his subsequent inability to work in harmony with the Unionist (CUP) government following the 1913 coup, see Cengiz Çakaloğlu, "Müşîr Mehmed Zeki Paşa (1835-1929)" (PhD diss., Atatürk University, 1999), 30, 274.

interpretation necessitates the examination of additional documentation regarding both the period and the specific actors involved.

Transcription

[1r]

Hüve // Baş Kitābete // Dördüncü Ordu-yı Hümāyūnları Müşīriyetinden //

Şifre C fī 8 aġustos sene 321 Mihrʿalī beg ʿan-aṣıl Ḳarṣ dāḫilinde Ḳarapapaḳ ʿaşīretindendir // mesʾele-i zāʾilede Ḳarṣ ordusunda uġur-ı meyāmin-mevfūr ḥażret-i pādişāhide pek ziyāde // yararlıḳ göstermişdir baʿde'l-mesʾele ʿaşīretiyle berāber Sivasa hicret iderek Sivas // merkezine on beş sāʿat mesāfede Ḳānḳām[5] *nāḥiyesi dāḫilinde iskān olunmuşdur // teşkīlātdan berü kendüsi hīç bir ṭarafa gitmemiş ve alay başında mevcūd bulunmuşdur // teşkīlāt-ı müteyemminede bir alay teşkīl itdigi içün Sivas vilāyeti dāḫilinde raḳīb ve bed-ḫᵛāhları // çoġalub ʿaleyhinde şikāyetden ḫālī ḳalmadıḳlarından kendüsüne neṣāyiḥ-i lāzime icrāsıçün // bā-irāde-i seniye-yi mülūkāne iki defʿa muvaḳḳaten merkez ordū-yı hümāyūna celb olunmuşdur kendüsünüñ // efendiler ḥażarātına ve maṭrūd Fuʾāda bir gūne münāsebeti ḳatʿiyyen olmamalıdır bu aḫbār // ṣırf ruḳabā ve ḫuṣamāsınıñ eṯer-i siʿāyet ve iftirāsı olmaḳ gerekdir çünki bu ḫaber u rivāyeti // īmā ve işrāb ider şimdiye ḳadar hīç bir ḥāl u ḥareketi aṣlā ḥüsn-i istiḥbār olunmamışdır // Yemene meʾmūriyyeti ḥaḳḳındaki irāde-i seniyye-i ḥażret-i pādişāhī kendüsine teblīġ olundıġı ānda // uġur-ı hümāyūn ḥażret-i ḫilāfet-penāhīde fedā-yı cism u cihāna*[6] *ḥāżır ve müşṭāḳ oldıġından baḥiṯle // ve bu ḥavālī ḫalḳınıñ Yemenden mütedehhiş olmasına raġmen kemāl-i muṭāvaʿat u hevesle bir ḳaç // gün ẓarfında mükemmel altı yüz silāḥ altına celb ve serīʿan ḥarekete bir şevḳ-i vicdānī // irāʾe eylemiş ve niẓāmiye ve redīf ḳıṭaʿātından daha sürʿat ve intiżāmla ṭoplanaraḳ // İskenderūna ḳadar gitdigi yollarda rıżā-yı hümāyūn-ı ḥażret-i żıll'u-llāhīye münāfī bir ḥareketde*

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5 The place name here appears with the spelling *Ḳānḳām*. However, considering the context and particularly the '15-hour distance' indicated in the document, it is highly probable that the scribe erroneously recorded the name *Ḳānḳāl* (i.e., Kangal), a district of Sivas province in Türkiye, in this form.

6 It is written as *cihān* in the document, but according to the context it should be *cān* (i.e., life).

[2r] *bulunmadıḳları güzer-gāhda bulunan meʾmūrīn-i mülkiyye ve ʿaskeriyyeden taḥkīk ḳılınmışdır bed-ḫᵛāhān-ı // devlet bu alaylar degil Yemen ḥattā bu ordu dāḫilinde bile ʿınde'l-īcāb ictimāʿa meyl // ü müsāraʿat göstermeyecekleri ümīd u iʿtiḳādında iken bu ümīd u iʿtiḳādıñ mertebe-i // buṭlānı bu kere de teẓāhür idince artıḳ ḳalblerinde açılan cerīḥa-yı teʾesṣürātıñ böyle bir // ṭaḳım isnādāt u müftereyātla kesb-i iltiyām itmesine çalışmaḳdadırlar meʾmūldür ki Yemeni // iṭāʿat ve ārzū ile alaylarından birini altı yüz mükemmel atlı ile silāḥ altına celb // ve Yemene göndermek üzre merkez ordu-yı hümāyūnlarına munṭaẓaman göndermiş olan Ḥaydarānlı // reʾisi Ḥüseyin pāşā ḥaḳḳında da gerek İngilizler ve Ermeniler ve gerek bunlara mütemāyil olub // fikr ü emelleriniñ tervīcine ḫādim olanlar bir ṭaḳım isnādāt-ı ġaraż-kārānede bulunurlar // el-ḥāṣıl ḳullarınıñ şimdiye ḳadar vukūʿbulan tecrübe ve taḥḳīḳāt-i kemterāneme göre böyle bir // ḳuvve-i cesīmeniñ ʿınde'l-īcāb vücūdundan devlet-i ʿaliyyece bir istifāde vuḳūʿuna meydān // virmemek zaʿm-ı fāsidiyle ümerā ve rüʾesāyı bir ṭaḳım müftereyāta hedef itmek ṣūretiyle // kendülerini naẓar-ı ʿālīde maḳhūr vesāʾika-yi yeʾs u nedāmetle ḫilāf-ı ṣadāḳat u ʿubūdiyet // aḥvāle mecbūr eylemek içün pek ziyāde çalışıldıġı añlaşılmaḳda ise de kāffe-i umūrda // oldıġı gibi ʿilm-i ʿālem-ārā-yi ḥaẓret-i ẓıll'u-llāh-ı aʿẓāmī bu bābdaki ḥaḳāyıḳı da tamāmiyle muḥīṭ // bulundıġına naẓaran īcābı herhālde vā-beste-yi reʾy-i fermān-ı iṣābet-beyān ḥażret-i velī-niʿmet-i bī-minnet // efendidir ol bābda // fī 20 cemāẕiye'l-āḫire sene 323 ve fī 9 aġustos sene 321 //*

Yāver-i ekrem-i ḥażret-i şehr-i yārī dördüncü ordu-yı hümāyūn müşīri Meḥmed Ẕekī

Translation

He [Allah]

To the Chief Scribe

Cipher from the Marshalship of the Fourth Imperial Army

R[eply] date 8 August year [1]321.[7] Mihrali Bey is originally from the Karapapak tribe from Kars. In the past issue,[8] in the Kars army, he showed very much utility in the

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7 This date corresponds to August 21, 1905, in the Gregorian calendar.

abundantly blessed path of His Excellency the Padishah. After the issue, migrating to Sivas together with his tribe, he was settled within the Kankam subdistrict, fifteen hours' distance from the Sivas center. Since the organization [formation of Hamidiye Regiments], he himself has not gone to any side, and he has been present at the head of the regiment. Because he formed a regiment in [this] auspicious organization, his rivals and ill-wishers within the Sivas province having multiplied and not having refrained from complaints against him; in order to execute the necessary counsels to him, he was summoned temporarily twice to the center of the imperial army by the imperial decree of the sovereign. His relations with the "Gentlemen Excellencies" and the expelled Fuad must absolutely not exist in any way. These reports must be purely the work of slander and calumny of his rivals and adversaries. Because this news and rumor implies and suggests [this situation]. Until now, no state or action of his has ever been well-reported [received via good intelligence]. The moment the Supreme Decree of His Excellency the Padishah regarding the Yemen assignment was notified to him, mentioning that he is ready and eager to sacrifice body and life in the auspicious path of His Excellency the Refuge of the Caliphate, and despite the people of this region being terrified of Yemen, with complete obedience and enthusiasm, within a few days, recruiting [summoning under arms] six hundred perfect [men] and showing a conscientious zeal for rapid movement, and gathering with greater speed and order than the regular [Nizamiye] and reserve [Redif] detachments, on the roads he traveled as far as Alexandretta [İskenderun], that they were not found in an action contrary to the consent of His Excellency the Shadow of God [the Padishah] has been verified by the civil and military officials located on the route. The State's ill-wishers, while in the hope and belief that these regiments would not show inclination and speed to gather when necessary, not [only] to Yemen, but even within this army; when the degree of invalidity of this hope and belief manifested itself this time as well, now [they] are

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8 This "issue" likely refers to the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, also known as the War of '93. Although Mihrali Bey is a figure whose biography is intertwined with legend and reality, it is considered that he rose to fame following his distinguished service during the War of '93. See Erkan Aslan, "Sözlü Gelenekte Folklorikleşen Anlatıların Gerçeklik Algısı: Mihrali Bey Örneği," *Selçuk Türkiyat* 65 (August 2025): 91-92.

striving for the wound of affliction opened in their hearts to acquire healing through such a set of imputations and slanders. It is hoped that recruiting under arms with six hundred perfect horsemen one of the regiments that [accepted] Yemen with obedience and desire and having sent [it] regularly to the Centers of the Imperial Army to be sent to Yemen, regarding the Haydaranlı chief Hüseyin Pasha as well; both the English and the Armenians, and those who have inclined towards them and serve the promotion of their ideas and ambitions, make a set of spiteful imputations.

In short, according to my humble experience and investigations thus far, it is evident that significant efforts are being made to target commanders and leaders with various slanders. These efforts stem from a malicious presumption aimed at preventing the Sublime State from benefiting from the abundance of such a massive force when necessary. By inducing despair and regret, [these detractors] seek to compel the leaders into conduct contrary to loyalty and servitude, thereby rendering them disgraced in the Supreme View. Although this is the case, as it is in all matters, considering that the world-adorning knowledge of His Excellency the Shadow of the Almighty God, has completely encompassed the truths in this regard as well, the requirement [of the matter] depends in any case on the opinion of the owner of the edict declaring correctness, the benefactor without obligation, His Excellency the Master. [I am ending the letter] upon this manner...

On 20 Jumada al-Akhirah, year [1]323 and on 9 August, year [1]321.[9]

His Imperial Majesty's Aide-de-Camp, Marshal of the Fourth Imperial Army, Mehmed Zeki

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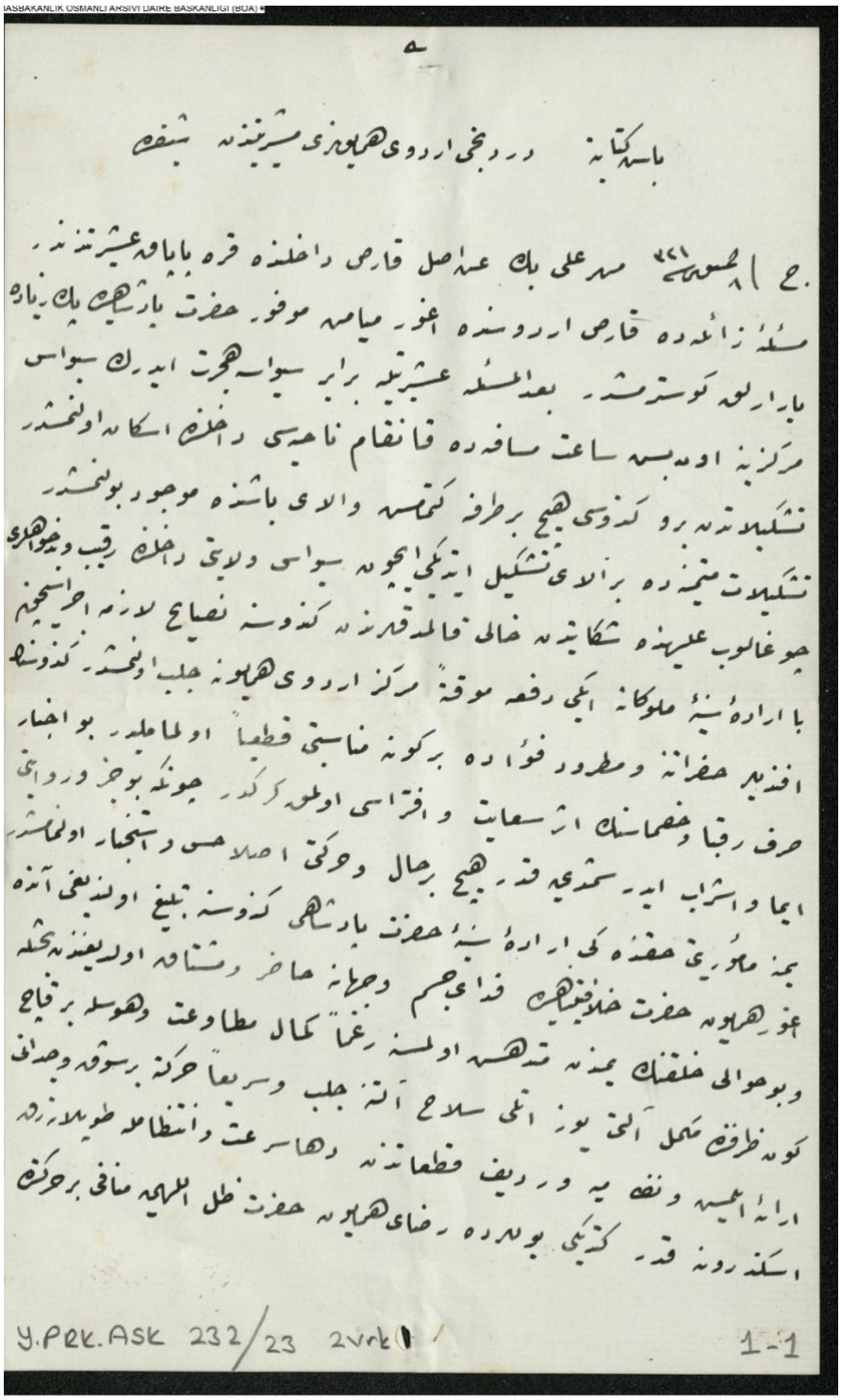
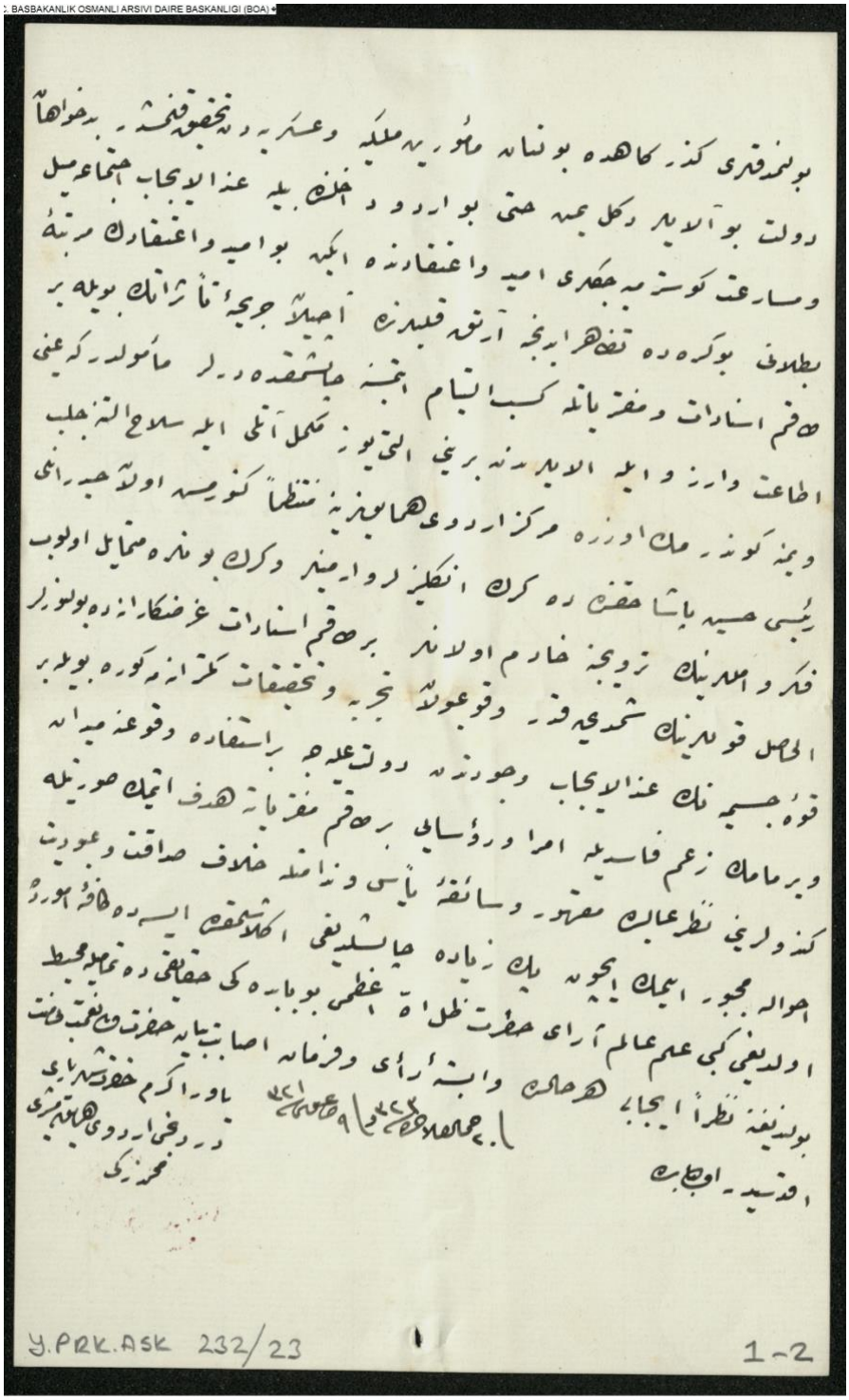
9 The first date mentioned in the line is written according to the Hijri calendar, and the second according to the Rumi calendar; both correspond to the same day: August 22, 1905.

Facsimile 1



Y.PRK.ASK.00232.00023.001

Facsimile 2



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