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AN OTTOMAN INTELLIGENCE REPORT FROM THE MID SIXTEENTH-CENTURY INDIAN OCEAN

Giancarlo CASALE*

In Professor Tekin’s memorial volume *Uygurlardan Osmanlıya* published in 2005, I presented an article in which I attempted to reconstruct the career of Sefer Reis, a previously unknown Ottoman corsair from the mid sixteenth-century Indian Ocean.¹ Based on copious references to him in contemporary Portuguese chronicles and archival documents, I argued that Sefer, despite his anonymity today, was actually one of the most important Ottoman seamen of the sixteenth century. Frustratingly, however, in making this case I was unable to provide much in the way of corroborating Ottoman evidence about Sefer, as most Turkish-language sources proved curiously silent in his regard. In fact, an extensive search of Ottoman narrative sources from the period failed to uncover a single reference to him;² and while his name does appear in some entries of the *Mühimme Defterleri* of the Başbakanlık State Archives, these date only from the turn of the 1560s, just a few years before Sefer’s death in 1565.³

Recently, however, I have come across a relatively lengthy reference to Sefer in a much older surviving *Mühimme Defteri*, housed separately from the main Başbakanlık collection in the archives of Istanbul’s Topkapı Palace Museum.⁴ This document predates the first mention of Sefer in Portuguese sources by nearly a decade, and thus provides some otherwise unknowable details about the earliest years of the corsair’s career. At the same time, it sheds a rare beam of light on the still dimly understood institutional mechanisms of Ottoman intelligence gathering in the Indian Ocean - and provides some hints about why so little evidence of the empire’s intelligence apparatus in this distant part of the world has survived in the historical record down to our own times. Given its importance, a full transcription of the document and a translation into modern English appear below, followed by an extended analysis of its contents:

³ Although the oldest *mühimme* registers in the Başbakanlık archives date from the late 1550s, there are many gaps in the collection until the mid 1560s, when they become more or less comprehensive. For an extensive discussion of the *mühimme* registers, see Uriel Heyd, *Ottoman Documents on Palestine 1552-1615: A Study of the Firman according to the Mühimme Defteri* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960).
⁴ This “discovery” is due entirely to the fact that a transcription (complete with index) of the full register of the Topkapı *Mühimme* has been recently published. See Halil Sahilioglu, ed., *Topkapı Sarayı Arşivi H.951-952 Tarihi ve E-12321 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri* (İstanbul: IRCICA, 2002).

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Translation:
T.S.M.A. E.12321 Mühimme Defteri, Fol. 55b
[Edict #] 119

This was written on the 13th of Ramazan 951 [Dec. 28th, 1544] in Edirne, during the time
[of the grand vizierate] of Süleyman Pasha, and was given to Hüseyn, the chief messenger of
the governor-general of Egypt, in a sealed envelope.

An Imperial Edict to the Governor-general of Egypt:

You sent a letter to my Sublime Threshold informing us that a fleet of five galleys had set
out from Suez, and that a captain named Sefer was appointed as their commander and sent
[with these ships] to Jiddah and to the lands of Yemen. He arrived first in Jiddah, from whence
the governor of Jiddah sent him on to Zebid after hearing of trouble between the governor of
Zebid and the [Zeydi] Imam. Then [in Zebid], it was learned that the [Portuguese] infidels had
sent a ship to Massawa [so Sefer went there to look for it]. But since [this infidel ship] had
already left again [by the time Sefer got there], after searching [for it] in Sewakin and the
surrounding regions and finding nothing, he returned to Jiddah and has now arrived safely in
Suez.

You also informed us that according to the report of the above-mentioned Sefer, a
renegade Arab by the name of Müdt, from the Kingdom of Fez in the western provinces, had
allied with the [Portuguese] infidels and had been awarded the admiralty of Hormuz. He is now
preparing a fleet of sixty vessels with the intention of sailing to Massawa [on the African coast]
and building a fortress there.

[Sefer also reported] that a fleet of infidels had invaded Ceylon, and that the local ruler’s
brother had rebelled against him and driven him out of his kingdom with their help. However,
the above-mentioned ruler then gathered an army and reconquered his kingdom, putting his
brother and the infidels to the sword, and capturing and burning their ships.

In addition, you informed us that news arrived from the Governor of Jiddah that Abbas,
the nephew of Mujahid, had gathered a large army and had attacked Ethiopia, and that the
infidels had been defeated and had fled to the mountains. Abbas has now gained the confidence
of the people, and has reestablished control over the territories previously held by Mujahid.

You also reported that biscuit, grain, and three-months advance wages have been
distributed to the 500 garrison troops who are being sent to Zebid with Şüca‘, the Sancak begi
of Aden, and that these men set sail on a royal galleon on the 12th of the month of Cümad al-
evvel (July 31st, 1544).

Everything that has been reported has been understood in full by my Imperial Intellect.
And I order that, in the future, you will not neglect to send to my Illustrious Threshold any
further information or news you receive in full detail, be it about the Yemen or about other
lands and regions. Know thus.

Transcription:
Fi 13 Ramazân sene 951 der Edirne der zaman-ı Süleyman Paşa
Yazılıdı
Mişr beğlerbegisinü Numuş başısı Hüseyin’e virildi kise içinde mühürülüdür
Mişr beğlerbegisin bir hukm ki
Hâliyyâ dergâh-ı mu’allâma mektûb gönderûp Sûveys’den beş pâre donanma gemisi
çikarup Sefer nâm-ı başbuğ ta’în olunup Cîdde’ye ve diyâr-ı Yemen’e gönderûp mezkûr

TUBA 31/1, 2007
The Document in Context:

With the solitary exception of a report filed by the famous corsair Selman Reis in 1525, the above document is the earliest known Ottoman archival source to make extensive reference to affairs in the Indian Ocean.\(^5\) In terms of specific information about Sefer’s career, it shows that by 1544 the corsair was in command of a fleet of five war galleys, and was responsible for conducting patrols between the Ottoman arsenal in Suez and the port of Zebid (or Mocha) in the Yemen. Since the Ottomans had established a permanent military presence in the southern Red Sea region only a few years prior to the drafting of this document - as a result of Hadim Suleyman Pasha’s conquest of the Yemen while returning from his expedition to India in 1538 - Sefer’s prominent role at this early date should be considered a detail of some significance.\(^6\) Until the late 1540s, nearly all of the senior military and administrative positions in the Red Sea and the Yemen were held by veterans of Hadim Suleyman’s Indian campaign, so the fact that Sefer was by 1544 already in command of a fairly sizeable naval squadron (at least by Red Sea standards) indicates that he too had been a participant in this campaign. In all likelihood, it was probably thanks to this experience that Sefer was first introduced to the world of the Indian Ocean, since Hadim Suleyman’s massive fleet of some 70 vessels (by far the largest Ottoman naval force ever assembled in that region) was manned almost entirely by conscripts and volunteers originally from other parts of the empire.\(^7\)


\(^6\) On Hadim Suleyman’s expedition, see Herbert Melzig, Büyük Türk Hindistan Kapılarında: Kanuni Sultan Süleyman Devrinden Amiral Hadim Süleyman Paşanın Hind Seferi (Istanbul, 1943).

\(^7\) For a first-hand account of this campaign by an anonymous Venetian seaman conscripted into service, see “Particular Relation of the Expedition of Soleymang Pacha from Suez to India against the Portuguese at Diu, Written...
These new details raise questions about a hypothesis I presented in my earlier article, namely that Sefer possibly hailed from a family of Jewish converts to Islam, and inherited his profession as a corsair from his father. This speculation was based on several Portuguese reports from India composed between 1546 and 1547, which claimed that a corsair operating out of the Red Sea whom they referred to as “Sinan the Jew” had fallen victim to a fatal illness, and had subsequently been replaced at the head of his fleet by his own son (supposedly as the result of a direct order from the sultan). Our new document does not necessarily disprove this theory, but it does show that Sefer was already an Ottoman naval officer in his own right long before this date. Unfortunately, there are no other surviving mâ¬hümmê defterleri from later in 1540s that might be used either to verify or disprove these Portuguese claims.

At any rate, the information provided in our document about Sefer is in some sense less interesting than the information provided by Sefer. Specifically, we learn from the text that Sefer, upon his return to Suez after a routine naval patrol, submitted a lengthy report to the governor of Egypt with news about conditions across a surprisingly wide geographical range, stretching from Ceylan to Hormuz. This report was accompanied by a separate dispatch filed by the governor of Jiddah, which focused more specifically on political developments closer to home in the Horn of Africa and the Yemen. Together, these two reports would have provided the Ottoman administration in Egypt with a fairly comprehensive snapshot of current events across the western Indian Ocean.

Admittedly, some of the information contained within these two reports appears to have been based more on rumor and innuendo than on “actionable intelligence.” There is no evidence in any contemporary Portuguese source, for example, of a planned invasion of East Africa on anything resembling the scale suggested by Sefer; nor is there any reason to believe that the Portuguese would ever have considered awarding the prestigious captaincy of Hormuz to a Moroccan renegade. On the other hand, the Portuguese had indeed sent a small relief squadron to Massava in 1544, which tangled briefly with an Ottoman coastal patrol from Aden during its outgoing journey. Three years earlier, in 1541, the Portuguese had organized a much larger expedition (numbering some 40 vessels in all) which had not only landed a considerable force of infantry in Massava, but had sailed the length of the Red Sea, and even attempted a direct attack on the Ottoman arsenal in Suez. Against such an unsettled background, therefore, any rumors that Lisbon was entertaining the possibility of another major military undertaking would have seemed perfectly credible at the time.

Meanwhile, other elements of the twin reports from Sefer and the governor of Jiddah are not only verifiable but surprisingly up-to-date. Sefer’s discussion of events in Ceylon quite clearly refers to a struggle between Bhuvaneka Bahu VII, king of Kotte, and his brother Mayadunne, king of Sitawaka, the former supported by the Portuguese and the latter

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8 For the text of these Portuguese letters about these events written by Manuel de Vasconcelos from Cannamos between 1546 and 1547, see Elaine Sanceau, ed., Collecção de São Luizão (Lisbon: Centro de Estudos Historicos Ultramarinos, 1973-1983), vol. 3, pp. 341, 353, and 373.
9 See Serjeant, Hadrami Chronicles, p. 104.
supported by the Mappillias from Malabar. The fact that Sefer was so well informed about these recent developments - and considered them important enough to pass on to his superiors - shows that the strategic alliance forged in the 1530s between Hadim Suleyman Pasha and the powerful Mappilla corsairs of India’s Malabar coast was still a factor in Indian Ocean politics well into the following decade.

Similarly, the information supplied by the governor of Jiddah about events in the Horn of Africa accurately reflects the most recent developments in that troubled region. There, beginning in the late 1530s, the Ottomans had actively supported Emir Ahmed Grañ al-Mujahid, the Muslim ruler of Zeyla, in his armed struggle against the Christian Emperor of Ethiopia, a Portuguese client. By 1542, Ahmed Grañ and his Ottoman allies had won a series of crucial battles, and seemed on the verge of a decisive victory. Then, however, a dispute between the Emir and the commander of the Ottoman auxiliaries led the Ottomans to abruptly withdraw and return to the Yemen, allowing the Christians to regroup and eventually overwhelm and kill Ahmed Grañ in battle. Subsequently, just as the report from the governor of Jiddah states, Ahmed Grañ’s nephew Abbas was able to reconstitute his uncle’s army, and recover most of his territories even without direct assistance from the Ottomans.

Finally, the “Imam” referred to in the governor’s report is the Zeydi Imam Sherefeddin, who controlled most of the Yemeni highlands in the interior of the province until his death later in the 1540s. He and the Ottomans had a testy relationship punctuated by violent outbursts, of which the incident in 1544 was only one of numerous instances. In later decades, following the contested accession of the Imam’s son al-Mutahhar after 1547, conflict with the Zeydis became so serious that it more than once nearly spelled the end of Ottoman rule in the Yemen. It therefore comes as no surprise that the Ottomans were already keeping a close eye on things at this early date.

Ottoman Intelligence Gathering in the Indian Ocean

As should by now be clear, the twin reports from Sefer Reis and the governor of Jiddah would have provided Ottoman authorities with a quite extensive picture of recent events in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, the way in which the reports are described in our mühtimme document suggests that they were by no means isolated dispatches, but rather part of an ongoing intelligence gathering effort, designed to provide the Ottoman government with constantly updated information about this important southeastern frontier. Yet, if such a sophisticated intelligence gathering infrastructure really was in place, why has so little evidence of it survived in other Ottoman documents from the period? Even for later decades of the sixteenth century, when the documentation of the mühtimme registers is much more

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comprehensive than it is for the 1540s, references to the Indian Ocean are so scarce that virtually everything we know today about Ottoman involvement there has been gleaned not from the mühimmes but from contemporary Portuguese sources. Why?

Part of the problem undoubtedly has to do with a structural limitation of the Mühimme Defterleri themselves, which are after all our main archival source for Ottoman foreign policy during this period. Like so many other types of Ottoman administrative records, the mühimmes include only the outgoing directives sent by the sultan to his officials in the provinces. Incoming reports were never copied down in the pages of the registers, and in their original form (as individual letters) these reports have survived to modern times only in a handful of cases. In their absence, historians are forced to rely instead on the brief summaries of their contents (such as the one in our present document) which appear embedded within the text of the sultan's outgoing rescripts.

As potentially serious as this limitation is, however, it does not on its own adequately explain the almost total lack of information about the Indian Ocean found within the pages of the mühimme registers. It is certainly true that the original incoming letters from provincial officials must have been significantly more detailed than their mühimme summaries, but as a general rule these summaries still do provide at least some indication of the original letter's contents. With regard to other frontier areas of the empire, such as the marches of Iran or the borderlands of Central Europe, the mühimmes in fact contain ample references to the activities of Ottoman spies, or to intelligence gathering efforts by provincial officials. Only in the case of the Indian Ocean (with a few notable exceptions) are the sources nearly silent, for reasons that have never been adequately explained.

Happily, our document provides at least a partial answer to this riddle. Specifically, its text makes clear that Sefer's report on conditions in the Indian Ocean was not sent directly to Istanbul, but was instead addressed to the governor of Egypt, who then included a synopsis of its contents in his own subsequent dispatch to the sultan. The document preserved in the mühimme defteri of 1544 is therefore not merely a summary, but a "summary of a summary," separated by at least two stages of transmission from the original letter sent by Sefer.

This makes a certain amount of sense given what we know about the special administrative role played by Egypt as an intermediary between the central government and its frontier to the southeast. Unlike any other provincial city in the empire, Cairo functioned as something of a second capital, with its own divan and administrative hierarchy that mimicked the organization of the imperial center in Istanbul. As Ottoman rule was gradually extended into south Arabia and the Horn of Africa, Cairo retained a measure of authority over these lands even after they were formally reorganized as independent Ottoman provinces. Throughout the second half of the sixteenth century, the provincial administrations of Yemen and Habesh were financed by the Egyptian treasury, and staffed largely by appointees from Cairo.15

Thus, it would appear that the Ottoman Empire's Indian Ocean provinces were separated from the imperial center not only by a vast physical distance, but also by a formidable

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bureaucratic barrier. As a result, intelligence reports and administrative dispatches sent from the Red Sea by officials like Sefer Reis probably made it only as far as Cairo, where they were presumably stored in some provincial archive which has since disappeared. The peculiar silence of the Ottoman archives on issues related to the Indian Ocean can therefore be explained as a symptom of the peculiar bureaucratic status assigned to this corner of the empire, which was effectively governed from Egypt rather than from Istanbul. Tellingly, there are today only two original reports from Ottoman officials in the Indian Ocean that are known to have been housed in Turkish archives: 1) The previously mentioned 1525 report of the corsair Selman Reis, filed when the administration of Egypt was in chaos following Ahmed Pasha’s rebellion; 16 2) A letter from Lutfi Reis, an Ottoman envoy to the Sultanate of Aceh, which is embedded within a piece of diplomatic correspondence explicitly addressed to the Ottoman sultan.17 Both of these documents probably owe their survival to the unusual historical circumstances under which they were drafted, which allowed them to bypass the ordinary train of transmission to Istanbul via Egypt.

Yet further evidence for the existence of a separate archive in Cairo, in which intelligence on the Indian Ocean was routinely gathered and stored, is provided by a chance reference in the famous chronicle of Selaniki. He records that in the year 1586, the Egyptian Beglerbegi wrote a letter to the sultan from Cairo, reporting that the Portuguese had recently attacked a fortress on an island [Socotra] “in an area of the Ocean Sea 160 miles off the coast of Aden, as recorded in the maps of the late Suleyman Pasha, conquer of Yemen and Aden.”18 This seems to suggest that Hadim Suleyman Pasha actually compiled his own navigational charts during the course of his journey to Gujarat in 1538, and then left them in Egypt for use by his successors. In so doing, might he have been trying to create an Ottoman version of Portugal’s Casa da India, in which maps and geographical information about the Indian Ocean would be collected and constantly updated? If so, this would explain why Hadim Suleyman’s own first-hand account of his sea campaign to India is the only one missing from a lengthy series of his dispatches today preserved in the Topkapı Palace archives.19

This would also probably explain why Ottoman narrative sources are so laconic when it comes to the career of Sefer Reis. Unlike other Ottoman fleet commanders such as Piri Reis or Seydi Ali Reis (or for that matter Hadim Suleyman Pasha himself), all of whom traveled to the Indian Ocean after they had already become established figures at the imperial capital, Sefer was from the start a frontiersman who took his orders from Cairo, not Istanbul. Even though his career at sea was in the end every bit as successful -if not more so- than these better-known colleagues from the Mediterranean, he may simply have been too far removed from the bureaucracy of the metropol to attract the attention of imperial chroniclers.

19 See Fevzi Kurtoglu, “Hadım Süleyman Paşa’nın Mektubları ve Belgradın muhasar planı,” Belleten 9 (1940): 53-87