



Mirza Malkam Khan's Political Actions: A Focus on His Time in Istanbul (Based on Newly Discovered Documents)

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Extended abstract

Mirza Malkam Khan Nazim al-Dowleh was one of the most prominent reformist intellectuals of Qajar-era Iran, leaving a deep and lasting mark on the political, diplomatic, and intellectual landscape of the Naseri period. While his official activities and diplomatic missions in both Iran and Europe—particularly in London—have received scholarly attention, the period of his political life that coincided with his exile to the Ottoman Empire remains largely underexplored. This article aims to revisit this critical and formative phase in Malkam Khan's career through the lens of unpublished archival documents from Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The study specifically seeks to answer two interrelated questions: How did the Qajar and Ottoman states engage with Malkam Khan during this period? And how did he respond to their shifting approaches and expectations? Additionally, the article examines Malkam Khan's political behavior within the broader context of the reformist currents that emerged in both Iran and the Ottoman Empire during the mid to late nineteenth century.

Previous studies have investigated Malkam Khan's reformist ideas, his contributions to the dissemination of concepts such as the rule of law, constitutional government, and state-building, as well as his ties with Western institutions and the British government. However, his activities in Istanbul have remained peripheral to these inquiries. A small number of studies—for instance, an article by Gholam-Ali Pashazadeh—have noted his limited involvement with Ottoman reform (Tanzimat) initiatives, but no comprehensive analysis based on formal diplomatic archives has yet been conducted. This study, drawing upon unpublished materials preserved in the holdings of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, endeavors to construct a documented and critical narrative of Malkam Khan's political position and agency during this underexamined period.

This article adopts a critical historiographical approach combined with “thick description,” relying on in-depth archival content analysis to reconstruct the multilayered relationships between Malkam Khan, the Qajar government, and the Ottoman authorities. The primary sources used include official correspondence, diplomatic communications, embassy reports, and personal letters written by Malkam



himself. By integrating these diverse sources, the study provides a nuanced account of Malkam Khan's political posture and the contextual pressures shaping his actions. The archival evidence clearly reveals that both the Qajar and Ottoman states adopted dual, and often contradictory, policies toward Malkam Khan. On one hand, his reformist political ideas and modernist outlook challenged traditional structures of authority, leading to his dismissal and exile. On the other hand, the same governments frequently sought to utilize his diplomatic expertise and intellectual capabilities. In practice, both Iran and the Ottoman Empire oscillated between rejecting Malkam Khan and instrumentalizing him, depending on their shifting political priorities.

During his forced residence in Baghdad and later in Istanbul, Malkam remained intellectually and politically engaged, despite severe restrictions on his movement and financial resources. He maintained correspondence with several prominent figures of the Ottoman Tanzimat movement, including Fuad Pasha and Ali Pasha. Drawing on their experiences, he sought to apply the Ottoman model of administrative reform to the Iranian context. Moreover, the support he received from reform-minded Iranian officials, such as Mirza Hossein Khan Mushir al-Dowleh, underscores Malkam's continued relevance and influence within segments of the Qajar political elite. One of the most revealing patterns of this period lies in the Qajar state's ambivalence. While it had exiled Malkam Khan, it remained deeply concerned about his growing connections with foreign powers, especially Russia and the Ottoman Empire. When reports surfaced that he might be considering entry into the Ottoman administrative service or even accepting Ottoman citizenship, the Iranian court responded with strong objections. Yet, Malkam repeatedly expressed his loyalty to the Iranian government, formally requesting the payment of overdue salaries and offering to return to official service.

At the level of political thought, Malkam's intellectual output during this time reflected a sustained engagement with ideas of reform and modernization. Inspired by the Ottoman experience, he drafted proposals for fiscal restructuring, educational reform, and administrative reorganization in Iran. Initiatives such as the introduction of paper money, rational financial planning, and the establishment of a consultative assembly (majles) all trace their roots to this period. After relocating to London, he continued to pursue this reformist agenda, frequently invoking the Tanzimat as a model for Iranian modernization in both his writings and diplomatic conversations with British statesmen.

An analysis of archival documents and diplomatic reports makes it clear that during his time in the Ottoman Empire, Mirza Malkam Khan was by no means excluded from the political sphere. On the contrary, he managed to remain an active political actor by strategically leveraging the geographic and political context of Istanbul. The dual and often contradictory attitudes of the Qajar and Ottoman governments toward him reflected the deeper struggle between tradition and modernity that characterized Iran's transitional era. Despite repeated episodes of marginalization and exile, Malkam succeeded in carving out a place for himself on both regional and international stages. He became a vital link between Iranian reformists and Ottoman modernists, playing a unique intermediary role in the exchange of reformist ideas across borders. A closer study of this period reveals that the encounter with modernity in nineteenth-century Iran



was not merely theoretical or discursive; rather, it unfolded through concrete diplomatic interactions and the practice of real-world politics. In this context, Mirza Malkam Khan emerges as one of the most vivid and representative figures of the complex and often contradictory dynamics that shaped the making of modern Iran.

Keywords: Qajar Dynasty, Ottoman Empire, Mirza Malkam Khan, Istanbul, Newly Discovered Documents.



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