

## THE HUMAN ASPECTS OF THE HEJAZ RAILWAY PROJECT

**Aliye Fatma Mataracı**

International University of Sarajevo

### **Abstract**

This article, based on the monographs of the Hejaz Railway Project, aims to underline the significance attributed to the Hejaz Railway project not only by its initiator, the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II, who referred to it as “his old dream” but for all the parties who directly or indirectly contributed to its actualization, regardless of ethnic and religious divisions, not only from the Ottoman lands but also from all over the world. To focus on the significance of the human investment in the actualization of the project, this work will start with its technicalities generously shared by the aforementioned monographs. Mainly based on Ottoman and British archival sources, these works provide a very detailed depiction of the Hejaz Railway Project. In this depiction, this work will focus on the human aspects of the project: the human investment and belief in the project despite all its hardships, scarcity of sources and resources, whether they may be financial, physical, or natural. In this regard, it may not be wrong to refer to the project as a “miracle” as well. The human investment in the Hejaz Railway Project is covered in the current related literature but not particularly focused on by any work. This work thus aims to bring the human aspect of this project to the forefront to provide a new angle on the topic.

**Keywords:** The Hejaz Railway; human aspects; Sultan Abdülhamid II; donations; construction; defense

## Introduction

*“The Hejaz Railway, I have been dreaming about for so long,  
is finally coming true.”*

The line above belongs to the initiator of the Hejaz Railway Project, the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II (reign 31 August 1876 – 27 April 1909), who referred to it as his old dream in his book titled *Siyasi Hatıratım (My Political Memoirs)*, 1984, p. 123). Every project, starting with a dream, requires a certain level of emotional, physical, financial, and natural investment for its actualization and maintenance. This work, focusing on the human aspects of the Hejaz Railway Project, aims to underline the significance attributed to it by not only its initiator but also all the other parties who directly or indirectly contributed to the actualization of this project, not only from the Ottoman lands but from all over the world, regardless of religious and ethnic divisions. Focusing on the human aspects of the project crystallizes the investment and belief in it. When all the hardships, such as scarcity of sources and resources as well as losses, related to the actualization of the project are considered, the Hejaz Railway appears as a miracle – a miracle that still exists and functions at least partially.

To underline the significance of the human aspects of the Hejaz Railway Project, this work will start with its technicalities generously shared by a number of monographs, which appeared in Turkish Historiography since 1990. Before these monographs, academic publications about the Hejaz Railway were mainly short articles without any reference to related literature and/or archival documents (Artuk, 1964; Artuk, 1977; Erkin, 1948; Toydemir, 1948). Despite the comparative large magnitude of the research and publications about the Hejaz Railway by Western scholars until the 1990s, these works mainly failed to refer to the Ottoman Archival documents which should be considered crucial, as the construction of the railway was an Ottoman project (Auler Paşa, 1906; Landau, 1971; Ochsen-

wald, 1980). It was several scholars from Turkey who first, and only after the 1990s, acknowledged the significance of the Ottoman archival sources in their efforts to provide detailed accounts of the Hejaz Railway Project (Gülsoy, 1994; 2010, Hülügü, 2008; Özyüksel, 2000). Their works are mainly based on Ottoman archival sources, newspapers, and journals, in addition to British archival sources and secondary sources written by Western and Ottoman scholars of the time. Nevertheless, all these publications focus mainly on the political and/or religious significance of the project. In this regard, this work brings a new angle to the available literature on the Hejaz Railway Project by focusing on the human aspect.

Based on his lifetime experience, Sultan Abdulhamid II considered the construction of railroads in the Ottoman lands vital for military and strategic purposes, especially regarding the mobilization of campaigns during a state of war or unrest. During the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78), which fell in the early days of his reign, Sultan Abdülhamid II had witnessed the usefulness of the Istanbul–Plovdiv railroad in the mobilization of troops (Gülsoy, 1994, p. 40). As a reflection of his enthusiasm, he ordered an expansion of the railway lines. Upon his order, the lines increased from 1,145 km in length before 1878 to 3,700 km in total, 1,193 km in Rumelia and 2,507 km in Anatolia (Yılmaz, 2011). In addition to the services the construction of a railroad network would provide in military terms, the Sultan was aware of its economic benefits and also political advantages for consolidating his authority, especially in the regions of the periphery (Sultan Abdülhamid, 1984, p. 94).

The construction of the Hejaz Railway involved one more motivation which was portrayed as the main objective of the project to the public: to facilitate the pilgrimage to the Holy Land. So far, the long and costly journey of the pilgrims was accompanied by contagious diseases, water shortages, long delays, and attacks by nomadic Arabs tribes, namely the Bedouins. The Hejaz Railway should diminish all these obstacles to the

Muslim pilgrimage, not only the physical hardships but also of the costs of the pilgrimage. The facilitation of the journey was expected to increase the number of the pilgrims and serve the unity and solidarity of the Muslim world, in addition to strengthening the Sultan's influence as the Caliph (Gülsoy, 1994, pp. 41-43).

### **The Origins of the Hejaz Railway**

The initial proposals for the construction of a railway in the Hejaz Region were made during the reign of Sultan Abdülazîz (1861-1876). Dr. Charles F. Zimpel, an American engineer of German origin, prepared a proposal to connect the Red Sea to Damascus. His proposal was rejected because of two main reasons: First, the possible opposition of the Arab tribes living along the planned railway line, and second, the high costs of the project. The latter was more impactful than the former due to the financial hardships of the Ottoman Empire. Subsequent proposals by German, British, and Ottoman parties followed the initial one by Zimpel. They were commonly underlining the strategic significance of a railway project in the region for the Ottoman State with common main arguments involving a possible increase in the economic and military operations of the Ottoman State and hence, control and protection of the region against possible threats from outside. A railway project was also considered a possible solution to the aforementioned sanitary and security problems the pilgrims were facing during the pilgrimage. It was also seen as preventive of security problems on the pilgrimage turning into political issues that could threaten the stability of the Ottoman Empire (Gülsoy, 1994; Hülagü 2011).

By the time Sultan Abdülhamid II succeeded to the throne, domestic and foreign pressures were overwhelming, particularly the Europeans' policy of partitioning the Ottoman Empire, which materialized into the broad definition of the Ottoman Empire as "the sick man of Europe." In the face of the subsequent insatiable demands proposed by this policy, Sultan Abdülhamid

II predicted that telegraph and rail lines could fortify his central authority by expanding and facilitating communication and transportation across the Ottoman territory. Therefore, the Sultan approved the Hejaz Railway project, presuming that the railway would help improve the defense of the empire against foreign attacks and pave the way for international diplomacy (Gülsoy, 1994, pp. 40-41; Hülagü 2011, p. xvii).

On May 2, 1900, Sultan Abdülhamid II issued an imperial edict, *İrade*, which sowed the last of the greatest Ottoman imperial endeavors, “the Hamidiye Hejaz Railway Project.” The word “Hamidiye,” which literally means “belonging to Hamid,” was dropped after his dethronement on April 27, 1909, and the project started to be referred to as “the Hejaz Railway.” Consequently, the rail lines were laid from Damascus to Mecca and Medina – the Holy Cities of Islam – in the Hejaz region. However, the Ottoman government did not own the lines but classified them as community property in the body of *waqf*, an asset donated for being held in perpetual trust for socially beneficial causes (Özyüksel, 2002, p. 474).

### **Objectives of the Hejaz Railway Project**

The aim of the Hejaz Railway Project was to connect Istanbul and Medina and it was believed to facilitate the pilgrims’ journey to the Holy Cities, particularly Mecca. Upon completion, the Hejaz lines were considered to provide the pilgrims with a more comfortable and safer journey. The main mode of transportation to the Holy Cities used to be camel caravans with an approximate duration of the pilgrimage journey of two months; the distance between Damascus and Medina took 40 days by camel. The harsh weather conditions were compounded by scattered regional settlements and armed groups who exacerbated the conditions of the journey on the way. Figures from British reports show that 2,500 to 3,000 of pilgrims of a total of 80,000 preferred land travel to the Hejaz. The rails were expected to draw more pilgrims away from land travel which involved harder conditions.

The successful construction of the Hejaz Railway reduced the travel time of the 1,200 km journey to three days. The travel schedule was set to coordinate with the prayer times. One compartment of the train was assigned as a place of worship and an Imam was appointed to lead the prayers. For four years, from its launch on September 1, 1908 (the 32nd anniversary of Abdulhamid II's accession to the throne) to 1912, the Hejaz Railway transported 30,000 pilgrims to Medina from distant Ottoman lands. However, it was not only the pilgrims who rode the trains. At the time, the Hejaz Railway also came to serve the *Surre Alayı*, the annual procession of Imperial Gifts sent to the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina (Hülagü, 2011). The number of passengers skyrocketed and was recorded as high as 300,000 per year. Increasing the prestige of the Caliphate and facilitating the mobilization of troops when necessary and strengthening the Ottoman side against the European powers were among the strategic objectives of the project as well.

### **Construction of the Hejaz Railway**

All Ottoman railways, with the only exception of the Hejaz Railway, were built and operated by foreigners. In this regard, the Hejaz Railway stands out as an exceptional part of the history of the Ottoman railway system since it was completed mainly by Turkish labor under foreign management (Hülagü, 2011, p. xx). The employees that worked in the construction of the railway in the Muslim Holy Cities were primarily Muslim because the guardians of the sanctity of Mecca and Medina required that the Christian workforce does not engage in the project after the Medain Saleh. As a result, the 300-km rail lines in southern Medina were constructed exclusively by Muslim engineers and laborers.

Generally speaking, hundreds of workers and railway engineers worked in the construction and the majority of the railroad was built by a multi-ethnic workforce composed of mainly Syrians, Iraqis, and Turkish soldiers. The

soldiers who participated in the construction were rewarded with bonuses in accordance with their positions and discharged from military service a year earlier than regular soldiers (Gülsoy, 2010, pp. 123-129). Turks, Syrians, and Iraqis, who together comprised a workforce of over 5,000 men, succeeded in completing the railroad in eight years, despite diseases, overwhelming changes in weather, and poor working conditions which cost the lives of hundreds of workers. In addition, numerous station buildings, bridges, and culverts were built by Italian, Greek, and Montenegrin workers (Kargılı, 2014).

Not only the construction, but also the maintenance, and patrolling of the railway lines presented enormous difficulties because of tribal hostilities and the physical terrain. Before World War I, armed groups near the construction zone continuously attacked the railroad. Several forts were erected along the route to counter these attacks and sustain the railroad. In addition to the attacks on the Hejaz Railway, variations in the terrain along the route of the construction imposed serious setbacks. The shortage of water caused workers difficulties, while heavy rain flooded the construction site at times, washed away bridges and banks, and corroded the lines. With the added complications of overwhelming changes in weather and shortages of water, serious impediments were imposed on the construction. Despite all these complications, the project continued, and the construction of the Hejaz Railway also saw the the following construction projects: One locomotive maintenance center, 2,666 stone bridges and overpasses, seven iron bridges, nine tunnels, 96 stations, seven ponds, 37 cisterns, one hospital in Tabuk and Ma'an, small factories in Haifa, Deraa and Ma'an, one foundry and pipe workshop and a number of warehouses.

### **Financing of the Hejaz Railway**

Such a big project required great financial means as well. The estimated cost of the railway, which was originally planned to be extended to Mecca,

was 4 million liras equal to 18% of the total expenditure in the Ottoman state budget in 1901 and 15% of the total expenditure in the Ottoman state budget in 1909 (Gülsoy, 2010, p. 81; Ochsenswald, 1973, p. 130). It was impossible for the Ottoman budget to finance such a project since the state was in deficit each year due to financial instability, even struggling to pay the salaries of civil servants. A solution had to be found outside the treasury. Sultan Abdülhamid II had no intention of asking for foreign help, therefore he used the religious aspect of the railroad as an argument for the Ottoman Empire to be in charge of operation and construction, rather than a foreign-controlled private company (Ochsenswald, 1973, p. 130). Unlike other Ottoman railways that relied on foreign loans, the financing of the Hejaz Railway Project was determined to be Muslim by design: The Hejaz Railway was to be constructed as a common project and pride of the Muslims. Hence, the Sultan turned to the Muslims of the world for support.

In May 1900, Sultan Abdülhamid II started the donation campaign by contributing 50,000 Turkish liras and announcing to all Muslims that the Hejaz Project needed their donations. The response, which eventually covered around one-third of the income of the railroad, was quite far-reaching: bureaucrats, officers, civil servants, merchants, and many other Muslims from various milieus inside and outside of the Ottoman Empire, Algeria, Sudan, Egypt, India, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, to name a few, sent considerable generous donations for the Hejaz Project. Oschenwald (1973) categorizes the Muslims providing funds for the railway into three different groups: 1. Ottomans who were forced to provide money; 2. Ottomans who voluntarily donated; 3. Muslims who lived outside the Empire (pp. 130-131). I use the donations by Bosnian Muslims for the Hejaz Railway Project to exemplify the second and third category since Bosnia and Herzegovina was Ottoman territory, albeit under Austro-Hungarian administration between 1900 and 1908, from the beginning of the construction until the completion of the line to Medina, in addition to the level of the engagement of the Muslims from Europe.

Karčić (2014) provides detailed information about the Bosnian Muslim donations based on the contemporary media coverage of the project. The construction of the railway and its progress was covered by Bosnian Muslim publications such as *Behar* and *Bošnjak* and a committee was established for collecting voluntary contributions in Sarajevo (Karčić, 2014). The donors' names were listed in these publications and a number of Bosnian Muslims were reported as being awarded with silver and nickel medals for their donations (pp. 187-189). Karčić (2014) interprets the Bosnian Muslim participation in the project as an effort to reinforce the "spiritual ties with the seat of the Caliphate in Istanbul," rather than with the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, although Bosnia and Herzegovina was still Ottoman territory until the Austro-Hungarian annexation in 1908. This interpretation underlines the significance attributed to the Caliphate's status as the "dreamer" of the project, rather than his title as the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, regarding the Muslim engagement with the project. Whether this observation reflects the actual perception of Muslim Bosnian donors and/or the Muslim donors from other parts of the world requires further research.

Along with voluntary donations, the Ottoman Empire used various fundraising activities: A common example was the payroll deduction imposed on civil servants. In return, they received a Hejaz Railway medallion made of gold, silver, or lead, according to the amount deducted. In addition to the medallion, contributors were granted a *berat*, an Ottoman imperial certificate that could be inherited by their heirs, as a form of encouragement and symbol of their imposed donation and contribution to the holy cause. The Ottoman government collected the donations through a subscription company and allocated everything they received to the construction of the railroad (Landau, 1971). All these donations and many more failed to be mentioned in this article, leaving no doubt that the construction of the Hejaz Railway was financed by a broader Muslim community in different parts of the world regardless of ethnic identity, rather than entirely by the Ottoman subjects and local/national finance and assistance.

## **Finalization of the Hejaz Railway Project**

The Sultan's "old dream" came true with the conclusion of construction after eight years. Despite overwhelming difficulties, the Ottoman Empire finally launched the Hejaz Railway, with approximately 1,464 kilometers of tracks. The Hejaz Railway, passing through rough desert regions, followed a longitudinal route within the Ottoman territory: a train could run from Damascus to Deraa in the South, continue across Transjordan via Zerqa and Qatrana, pass through Ma'an into Northwestern Arabia, and finally reach Medina via Zat al-Haj and Al-Ula. In addition, several extensions connected major coastal cities to inland cities, the line connecting Haifa and Deraa being one of them.

Istanbul was eventually connected to southern territories, such as Syria, Hejaz, and Jordan with the Hejaz Railway and its connecting lines. Within his lifetime, Sultan Abdülhamid II witnessed the completion of an enormous construction project that laid 5,792 kilometers of rails. All the lines, with the only exception of Mâ'an Tabuk, were opened on September 1, the anniversary of Sultan Abdulhamid II's accession to the Ottoman throne. The opening dates of each line in chronological order are 1. Muzeirib-Deraa (September 1, 1901), 2. Deraa-Zerqa (September 1, 1902), 3. Damascus-Zerqa-Amman (September 1, 1903), 4. Amman-Ma'an (September 1, 1904), 5. Mâ'an Tabuk (late 1906), 6. Tarek-Medain Saleh (September 1, 1907), 7. Medain Saleh-Medina (September 1, 1908).

During the First World War, the Hejaz Railway was transferred to the control of military administration right after the declaration of mobilization on August 2, 1914, before the Ottoman Empire entered World War I. This brought the closure of the railway to public transportation and hence, the pilgrimage, which caused serious economic problems in the Hejaz region. By October 7, 1916, the administration and control of the Hejaz Railway were transferred to the Ministry of Defense. The maintenance of the rail-

way during the years of war was even harder. It was problematic to provide coal, oil, and water for the trains; as a result, wood started to be used as a replacement for coal which brought the need to establish additional lines to reach and carry wood.

The areas in the southeastern provinces and the Arabian Peninsula saw tremendous military activity during the First World War. Soon after the war broke out, the Ottoman Empire had serious concerns regarding towns with Arabic-speaking majorities, especially the Holy Cities Mecca and Medina, and the main objective of the Ottoman army was to keep the British out of Egypt and the Suez Canal. The railroads provided a great opportunity to transport the Ottoman army into the Arabian heartland. In particular, it provided the Medina Military Division defending the Hejaz region with provisions and munitions from Damascus. Sharif Hussein, the Amir of Mecca, being an influential figure in the region, declared a revolt in 1916 to establish his rule (Gülsoy, 2011).

Fahreddin Pasha was sent by the Ottoman State to Medina in 1916 to defend the city against this rebellion ignited by the British. He managed to defend the city for a little longer than two-and-half years, despite a serious lack of resources, and thus came to be known as “the Lion of the Desert.” During the occupation, he also sent many of the relics from Masjid al-Nabawi to Istanbul under military protection to prevent looting. Today, these relics are being preserved at the Topkapı Palace. When the Ottoman Empire signed the Armistice of Mudros on October 30, 1918, the pasha had to leave Medina, but he refused and continued to defend the city for 72 days until they ran out of food, medicine, and ammunition (Gülsoy, 2010, pp. 162-170; Kargılı, 2014, p. 212). Even this individual incident is self-explanatory in terms of the significance of the human aspects, not only regarding the actualization of the Hejaz Railway Project but also its protection and preservation.

## Conclusion

The human aspect appears at all the stages of the Hejaz Railway, beginning with the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II's old dream and following with all the efforts put into its financing, construction, protection, preservation, and renovation coming all the way to today, despite all the constraints faced during both peace and war times. Sultan Abdülhamid II's old dream, which was a concrete expression of his pan-Islamist ideas, turned out to be an Islamic project executed successfully. It can be argued that all starts with a dream, but it is also a fact that not all dreams turn into projects and even though they may be, not all are finalized successfully. Although the construction of the Hejaz Railway stemmed from diplomatic, political, and religious motives, it was thanks to the human belief in the project that its engines kept running.

## References

- Artuk, C. (1977). Hicaz Demiryollari Madalyalari. In VII. *Türk Tarih Kongresi Bildirileri*, II, Ankara, Turkey, 25-29 Eylül, 1970, (pp. 785-791). Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu.
- Artuk, I. (1964). *Hicaz Demiryolu'nun Yapilmasi ve Bu Munasebetle Basilan Madalyalar*. Istanbul Arkeoloji Muzeleri Yilligi. 11-12, 73-78.
- Auler Paşa, (2019). *Hicaz Demiryolu İnşa Edilirken -II (Maan – El-Ulâ Hattı)* (Esref Bengi Ozbilen, Trans.). Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları. (Original work published 1908)
- Auler Paşa. (2017). *Hicaz Demiryolu İnşa Edilirken-I (Şam–Maan Hattı)* (Esref Bengi Ozbilen, Trans.). Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları. (Original work published 1906)
- Erkin, O. (1948). Demiryolu Tarihcesinden: Hicaz Demiryolu. *Demiryollar Dergisi*, 269, 21-25.
- Gülsoy, U. (2010). *Kutsal Proje: Ortadoğu'da Osmanlı Demiryolları*. Istanbul: Timaş Yayınları.
- Gülsoy, U. (1994). *Hicaz Demiryolu*. Istanbul: Eren.

- Hulagu, M. M. (2011). *The Hejaz Railway: The Construction of a New Hope*. New York: Blue Dome Press.
- Kadić, A., Sluiter, A. (Eds.). (2014). *Conference Proceedings of Kaiser i Sultan: Berlinsko-Bagdadska i Hidzaska Zeljeznica/Kaiser and Sultan: The Berlin-Baghdad and Hejaz Railways*. Sarajevo: Institute for Islamic Tradition of Bosniaks.
- Karčić, H. (2014). Supporting the Caliph's Project: Bosnian Muslims and Hejaz Railways. In *Conference proceedings of Kaiser and Sultan: The Berlin-Baghdad and Hejaz Railway: Panel Discussion on the Centenary of the First World War, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, October 29, 2014* (pp. 175-191). Sarajevo: Institute for Islamic Tradition of Bosniaks.
- Kargili, M. (2014). *Kutsal Yolculuk: Kartpostallarla Hac Yolu/The Holy Journey: The Hajj Route Through Postcards*. Istanbul: Denizler Kitabevi.
- Landau, J. M. (1971). *The Hejaz Railway and the Muslim Pilgrimage: A Case of Ottoman Political Propaganda*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- NABATAEA.NET. (2018). History of the Hejaz Railway. Retrieved from <http://nabataea.net/hejazhistory.html>
- Nuri, O., Refik, A. (1911). *Abdülhamid-i sani ve devr-i saltanatı: hayat-ı husüsiye ve siyasisesi*, II. Istanbul: Kitabhane-i İslam ve Askeri İ. Hilmi.
- Ochsenwald, W. L. (1973). The Financing of the Hijaz Railroad. *Die Welt Des Islams*, 14(1/4), 129–149. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1570027>
- Ochsenwald, W. L. (1980). *The Hijaz Railroad*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Özyüksel, M. (2002). Hicaz Demiryolu. In H. Celâl Güzel, K. Çiçek, S. Koca (Eds.), *Türkler*, Vol. 14, Ankara: Yeni Türkiye Yayınları.
- Sultan Abdülhamid, *Siyasi Hatıratım*, Istanbul, 1984.
- Toydemir, S. (1948). Hicaz Demiryolu İnsaati Tarihinden, *Demiryollar Dergisi*, 275-78, 65-68.
- Yılmaz, Ö. F. (2011). Sultan İkinci Abdulhamid Han'ın Hicaz Demiryolu Projesi. Istanbul: Çamlıca.