

CONFERENCE PAPER

Diplomatic Relations and Healthcare Services: A Historical Document on Iran–Ottoman Interactions in the Late Nineteenth Century

Abstract

The relationship between Iran and the Ottoman Empire has involved both peaceful and conflictual interactions throughout history. Meanwhile, ongoing social, cultural, and scientific exchanges facilitated the migration of intellectuals, particularly physicians and pharmacists, from Iran to Ottoman territories. During the late Ottoman era, Istanbul emerged as a multiethnic and international city, housing a significant Iranian population that required specialized medical and healthcare services. This article examines a historical document related to the activities of the Iranian Embassy physician in Istanbul, emphasizing both the diplomatic and healthcare aspects of these interactions. The findings reveal that ensuring the health of Iranian migrants was not just a humanitarian issue but also a critical element in strengthening diplomatic relations between the two states.

Key words: History of Medicine, Health Diplomacy, Iran, Ottoman Empire, Delivery of Health

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Introduction

Relations between Iran and the Ottoman Empire have a long and complex history. Historical sources indicate that these relations have consisted of a mix of peace, alliances, rivalries, and wars throughout various periods (Moeini Rodbali, and Keshavarz Bayzaei, 2020). As neighboring powers, both empires aspired to leadership in the Islamic world and frequently engaged in political and military conflicts. However, shared cultural, linguistic, and religious elements facilitated ongoing scientific and social exchanges between them. One significant aspect of these interactions was the migration of Iranian intellectuals to Ottoman territories. Physicians, pharmacists, and scholars from various fields, motivated by religious, social, or professional opportunities, settled in cities such as Istanbul, Bursa, and Edirne (Mohammadi, Shojaeinia, and Zarghamian Azad, 2024). This migration not only enhanced the transmission of knowledge and expertise but also contributed to the establishment of a transnational scientific network within the Islamic world (Khabiry, Ahansazan, and Ahansazan, 2018).

By the nineteenth century, Istanbul, as the capital of the Ottoman Empire, had transformed into a cosmopolitan city, home to diverse ethnic and religious minorities, as well as large groups of foreign residents. Iranians, particularly due to the expansion of diplomatic and commercial relations, represented a significant presence in the city (Yıldırım, 2010). This community required adequate healthcare and medical services, as migrants—often facing different climates and living conditions—were particularly vulnerable to illness. In this context, providing medical services specifically for the Iranian community in Istanbul was not only a humanitarian and social necessity but also a form of soft diplomacy. This article examines an archival document from 1891 to explore how both governments addressed this health need and its diplomatic implications.

Methods

The research method employed in this study is based on the analysis of a historical document. The document under review is an official letter from the physician of the Iranian Embassy in Istanbul to the city's municipality, dated 1891 (Figure 1). This document has been analyzed descriptively and interpretively within the framework of the literature on diplomacy and the history of medicine (Sarina, 2010).

Findings

The document, dated 21 *Sha' bān* 1308 *AH* / 1 April 1891 *CE*, records correspondence between the Iranian Embassy physician, *Dr. Makris Effendi*, and the Istanbul municipality. In this letter, the physician proposed that the Seririyât Surgical Hospital in Beyoğlu be designated as the medical center for Iranians residing in Istanbul (Sarina, 2010).



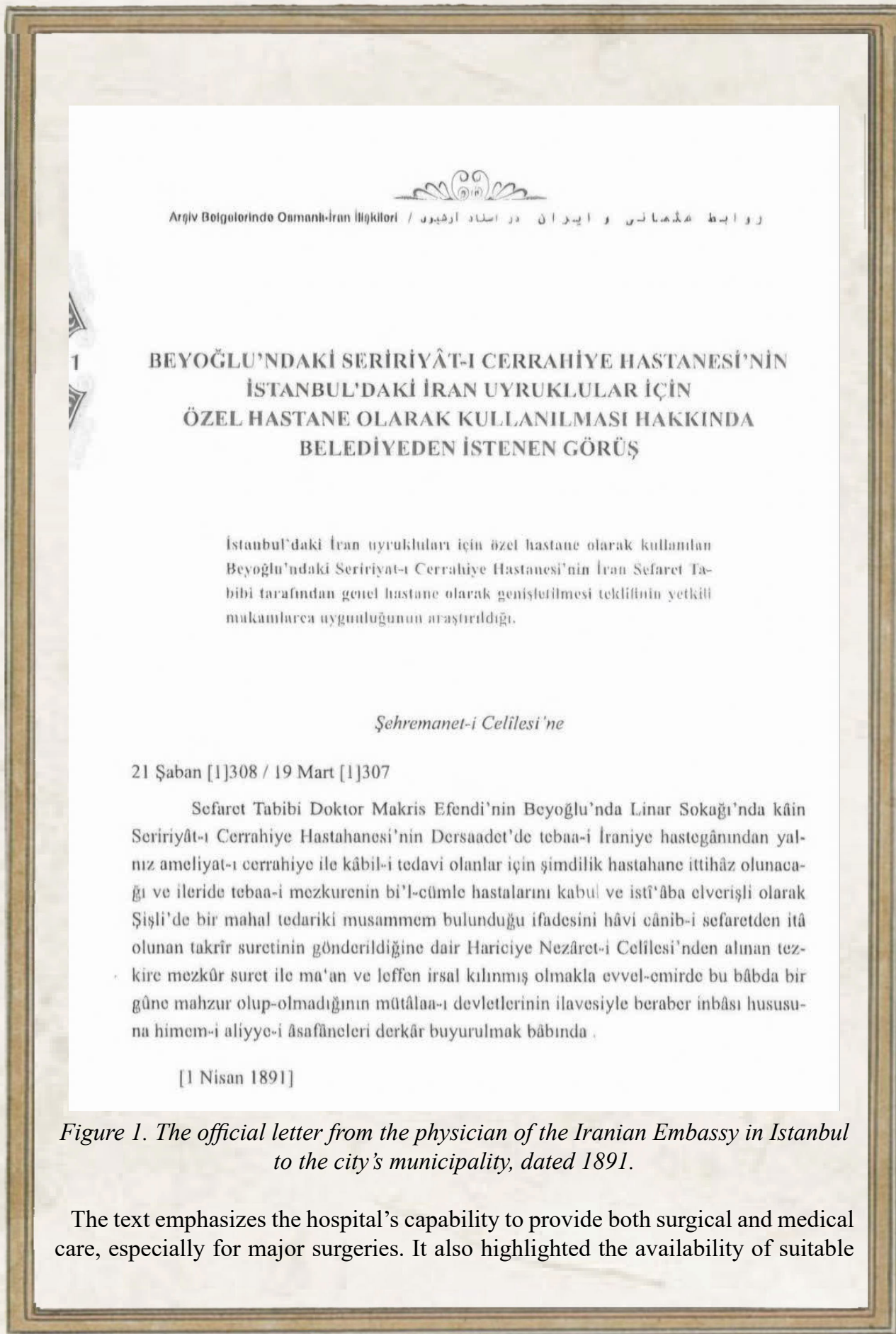


Figure 1. The official letter from the physician of the Iranian Embassy in Istanbul to the city's municipality, dated 1891.

The text emphasizes the hospital's capability to provide both surgical and medical care, especially for major surgeries. It also highlighted the availability of suitable

space in the Şişli district for the potential establishment and expansion of such healthcare facilities. The Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs consulted the municipality regarding the feasibility of establishing a hospital and pharmacy specifically for Iranians.

A translated excerpt of the document reads:

“The proposal to use the Seririyât Surgical Hospital in Beyoğlu as a special hospital for Iranian residents was put forward by the physician of the Iranian Embassy and is under review by the relevant authorities... Dr. Makris Effendi reported that the Seririyât Hospital on Lınar Street in Beyoğlu could accommodate Iranian patients. It was also emphasized that in the Şişli district, suitable space is available for the establishment and expansion of such healthcare services...” (Sarina, 2010).

This report indicates that, by the late nineteenth century, the health of Iranians in Istanbul had become a subject of formal diplomatic engagement, discussed among various Ottoman authorities and the Iranian Embassy.

Discussion

The examined document holds multilayered significance and can be analyzed from three perspectives:

1. Health Diplomacy: Iran’s initiative to ensure the health of its citizens abroad illustrates an early form of “*health diplomacy*.” Even in the nineteenth century, the well-being of expatriates was considered part of Iran’s foreign policy agenda.

2. Ottoman Healthcare and Internationalization: The willingness of the Ottoman Empire to consider Iran’s proposal reflects its increasingly international approach to healthcare. Istanbul, as a global city, already hosted Greeks, Armenians, Jews, and Europeans, many of whom had access to specific medical facilities. Extending similar arrangements to Iranians highlights the recognized status of this group within Ottoman society.

3. The Social Role of Migrant Physicians: *Dr. Makris Effendi*, as physician of the Iranian Embassy, acted not only as a medical practitioner but also as a mediator between health, politics, and diplomacy. This underscores the pivotal role physicians could play in bridging states and societies, thereby elevating their significance in international relations.

The choice of *Beyoğlu* and *Şişli* was significant. *Beyoğlu* was then the center for European and foreign residents, featuring modern hospitals, while *Şişli* was an emerging district with potential for institutional growth. By proposing these locations, there was a clear intention to provide healthcare of international standards for Iranian migrants. In a broader global context, this document reflects similar developments in other regions. In Europe, governments created hospitals and clinics for their nationals living abroad. Likewise, similar initiatives were undertaken in Egypt and India to protect migrant communities. These examples highlight a global trend where healthcare has become a tool of diplomacy. Further research is needed to investigate the outcomes of this document.

Conclusion

The analyzed document provides clear evidence of cooperation between Iran and the Ottoman Empire in the realm of health and medicine. It reveals that:

- Nineteenth-century Iran actively sought to protect the health of its expatriates.
- The Ottoman Empire, adopting a flexible approach, accommodated this request and incorporated Iranian healthcare needs into its urban and medical policies.
- Embassy physicians played a crucial role in linking politics and public health.

These findings highlight the broader conclusion that health and medicine can serve as effective tools of diplomacy. The historical experience of Iran and the Ottoman Empire offers valuable insights for future research in the emerging field of “*medical diplomacy*.” Further comparative studies—examining similar documents from the Qajar and Ottoman periods or exploring policies of other states—could shed new light on this phenomenon.

In conclusion, this document stands as a valuable example of the intersection between diplomacy and public health in the late nineteenth century, demonstrating that even amidst political tensions, medical services could provide a bridge for cooperation between states. This document is not only a testament to the forgotten cooperation between Iran and the Ottoman Empire, but also a reminder that in interstate relations, human health and well-being can build a bridge beyond political conflicts.

Authors’ Contribution

Maryam Sadat Bodala: Conceptualization, Writing, Investigation, Methodology; Hamed Ahansazan: Writing, Review and Editing, Conceptualization; Narges Tajik: Writing, Review and Editing, Conceptualization. All authors read and approved the final version of the work.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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