

FROM CENTRALIZATION TO MODERNIZATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE 1830s REFORMS AND TANZIMAT IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE (1830–1876) A BRITISH PRESS PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper studies the Ottoman reforms of the 1830s and the Tanzimat reforms of 1839–1876. It compares them and looks at how the Ottoman Empire slowly moved from a traditional centralized system to a system with more European-style changes in administration, law, and society. The reform initiatives Ottoman society happened during a difficult time, with political problems, a weak army, and strong pressure from the Great Powers. Facing these challenges, Ottoman leaders tried in different ways to change and improve the old system.

The methodology followed adopts a historical-analytical and comparative approach, using nineteenth-century British newspapers such as Morning Post, Tralee Chronicle, Pall Mall Gazette, and West Kent Guardian. These sources are supported by modern scholarly literature on Ottoman political and social developments. The findings reveal that most of the reforms of the 1830s remained within the traditional Ottoman system where the focus was on the army and administrative control. The Tanzimat reforms were a step further and introduced certain secular ideals and new institutions informed by Western models.

Keywords: Tanzimat, modernization, British press, historical comparison.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire was going through a very serious crisis. This crisis had its roots in the weak economy, an undisciplined army, and a government that did not work well, while Western powers were putting constant pressure on the empire. The local administration was broken, so as a result, local governors became strong and acted independently, which went against the interests of the central government. As a consequence, a fragmented system of governance was created, which obstructed the effective implementation of central policies. Even the fiscal system appeared unstable and disorganized, due to the lack of centralization and efficiency, which limited the state's ability to collect revenues and to maintain a functional administration.⁸²

In this context, a series of reforms was undertaken that aimed to recover order and to replace the disordered state structure, which had been shaken by the consequences of the recent crises. The goal of these reforms was to enable the Ottoman Empire to build an administrative and institutional structure compatible with European models, so that the sultanate would function on more modern and rational bases. This period represents an important phase of the reorganization of the empire, which at that time had lost its institutional cohesion and was facing the ever-increasing superiority of Europe, which was already operating on a new concept of civilization and had taken the political and cultural initiative in the international arena.⁸³

⁸² Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700–1922*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 79–81.

⁸³ Halil İnalcık, *Devlet-i 'Alîyye, Studime mbi Perandorinë Osmane IV*, (Tiranë: Fan Noli, 2023), 16.

The Reforms of the 1830s in the Ottoman Empire: Historical Context, Key Developments, and Institutional Transformations

Historical Context and Structural Challenges

Since the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774), the main challenge for the Ottoman Empire has been the preservation of its territorial integrity and the securing of its existence as an international power. This problem intensified with the beginning of rivalries among the Great Powers, which aimed to expand their influence in Southeastern Europe and in the territories along the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean.⁸⁴ The elites of the Ottoman Empire were aware of the critical need for reforms in the institutions and social life, understanding that without essential changes, the Empire would not be able to withstand external pressure and internal challenges.⁸⁵ However, this issue caused internal debate among the Ottoman elites, who, despite the awareness of the Empire's critical condition, were not willing to sacrifice their privileges and their favors. This shows that the concerns of the Ottoman Empire were not external crises, they had internal causes. Internal struggles shaped many of the early reforms as much as those from abroad.

The Military Reform of Selim III: Nizam-i Cedid and the Modernization of the Armed Forces

The determining factor that motivated the reform movements in the Ottoman Empire was the necessity for the improvement and strengthening of the military capacities in accordance with the contemporary standards that had already been put into practice by the Western powers. Sultan Selim III was one of the first Ottoman leaders who showed a strong will for the modernization and improvement of the Ottoman Empire, representing one of the earliest proponents of systematic modernization within the Ottoman state. The first reforms were focused on the army, particularly on the janissary corps, who previously constituted the main pillar of the Ottoman military forces. However, widespread corruption and declining discipline had significantly reduced their effectiveness. In order to restore the functionality of the corps, new rules were implemented: recruitment was opened to a broader group of individuals, a structured hierarchy was created, and salaries began to be paid regularly according to ranks and abilities. Training became mandatory and organized, while military duties were clearly separated from administrative ones. At the same time, the sipahis were subjected to stricter control; disciplinary measures were enforced, and the granting of timars became more meritocratic, being detached from connections based on favor or friendship (1789).⁸⁶ These reforms, although they did not mark an immediate transformation, represented important steps toward the modernization of the Ottoman military and administrative structures.

The janissary corps confronting foreign powers, could not avoid defeat, yet they still kept control over what mattered to them and resisted the reforms proposed by Sultan Selim III. Their positions and the support they had from the ruling groups in Istanbul helped them stay powerful.⁸⁷ To address this challenge, in the year 1794, Selim III created a new infantry corps, known as the Nizam-i Cedid (New Order, New System). This corps was trained according to European methods by French, English, and German officers, had separate financial resources, and its recruits were selected mainly from Anatolia.⁸⁸ In accordance with this, Selim III considered the adoption of European military advancements necessary,⁸⁹ demonstrating a pro-Western attitude. In 1795, a military school was established for the training of specialized

⁸⁴ Robert Mantran, *Historia e Perandorisë Osmane*, (Tiranë: Dituria, 2004), 393.

⁸⁵ Charles dhe Barbara Jelavich, *Themelimi i Shteteve Kombëtare të Ballkanit 1804-1920*, (Tiranë: Dituria, 2004), 97.

⁸⁶ Mantran, *Historia*, 398.

⁸⁷ Ibrahim Gashi, *Reformat në Perandorinë Osmane dhe shqiptarët (1792-1876)*, (Tiranë: Alsar, 2021), 39.

⁸⁸ Mantran, *Historia*, 398.

⁸⁹ Misha Glenny, *The Balkans, 1804-1999, Nationalism, war and the great powers*, (London: Granta Books, 2000), 73.

officers, especially in artillery. The reforms were not limited to the land army; they also included the Ottoman navy. The naval school was modernized, a marine medical school was established, and in the naval fleet, military duties were clearly separated from administrative ones.⁹⁰ Through the adoption of European practices and the organization of administrative and military structures, the elementary foundations for the modernization of the Ottoman Empire were established, demonstrating a clear commitment of the Ottoman government to adopt the technological and strategic advancements of the time.

Military, Administrative, and Cultural Transformations under Mahmud II

Sultan Mahmud II, the main leader of the first period of the reforms of the 1830s, continued efforts to modernize the Ottoman Empire in a manner similar to Sultan Selim III. He focused his efforts not only on reforming the army, which was no longer effective, but also on the modernization of the state administration, laws, and cultural structures. In May 1826, Mahmud II requested the adoption of a European code for training, uniforms, and firearms handling. The janissaries' refusal to comply led to their revolt, which was suppressed by the new army equipped with modern rifles. On 18 June 1826, the janissary corps was completely destroyed in the event known as the Vaka-i Hayriye (Blessed Event), marking the final abolition of this corps. Following this event, the Ottoman army and state administration adopted European-style uniforms, while the foundations were laid for the modernization of military, naval, and state laws, as well as for broader administrative and cultural transformations in the Ottoman Empire.⁹¹

One of the main objectives of these reforms was the concentration of all power in the hands of the sultan, eliminating intermediary authorities both in the capital and in the provinces, and consolidating central control over the political and administrative structures of the Ottoman Empire.⁹² Unlike Selim III, Mahmud II positioned his supporters in key posts of the central government and in the various military corps, consolidating control over state structures. He gained the main support of the ulema through backing traditional religious schools. To ensure the financing of the new military forces, a new tax was established, known as the Rusumat-i Cihadiyye (War Tax), which was collected from the shops and markets of the cities.⁹³ One of the most important institutions from a military perspective was the Military Sciences School (Mekteb-i Ulum-i Harbiye), established in 1834. The school was modeled as closely as possible on the French system, with a dominant role of foreign instructors in teaching. The use of a foreign language, primarily French, was considered one of the main priorities of all academic and training programs.⁹⁴

Mahmud II's administrative investment had particular significance, being considered a key pillar of the state. Within the framework of innovations in the central administration, the Sublime Porte, which functioned as the central government and had previously been headed by the Grand Vizier, received the title of Prime Minister (Basvekil). The titles of officials changed; directorates were transformed into ministries, while directors became ministers. In terms of executive structuring, a council of ministers was established, resembling a modern government cabinet. Another step toward Europeanization was the establishment of a school for translators, known as the Translation Office (Tercuman Odası), aimed at preparing specialists capable of communication and administration at the international level. In November 1836, Sultan Mahmud II created the Office of the Undersecretary (Müstesar). About a year later, within the framework of a series of significant reforms, the traditional offices of the Secretary of

⁹⁰ Mantran, *Historia*, 398.

⁹¹ Alan Palmer, *The Decline and fall of the Ottoman Empire*, (London: John Murray Publishers Ltd, 1995), 91.

⁹² Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1961), 88.

⁹³ Mantran, *Historia*, 414.

⁹⁴ Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 83.

Correspondence and the Receiver were separated into distinct branches for domestic and foreign affairs, which were subsequently placed under the authority of the respective ministries. Together with the Translation Office of the Sublime Porte and the Imperial Divan Office, which now included the Section for Important Affairs (Mühimme Odası), as well as the diplomatic and consular services, the complete organizational structure of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was established in 1839.⁹⁵ Sultan Mahmud II symbolized the adoption of reforms through his own behavior, wearing European-style attire, particularly the fez on his head.⁹⁶ This new regulation had a universal character and aimed to standardize the appearance of all officials, eliminating visual indicators of profession, rank, or religion. The fez, coat, and trousers became the new “uniform” of the official classes, reflecting the spirit of modernization.⁹⁷ Overall, the reforms of Mahmud II were superficial, closely linked to the military and European-style clothing, but they did not address the main problems of the Ottoman Empire, which arose from Islamization (Suffolk Chronicle, 1862). Sultan Mahmud II faced strong and persistent opposition, primarily due to the radical measures he sought to implement and the determination with which he demanded their general recognition by the highest religious, civil, and military authorities of the Ottoman Empire (Dublin Evening Post, 1856). Unlike the Tanzimat reforms, the reforms of the 1830s were carried out within the limits of Ottoman tradition and did not aim at a radical transformation of the state structure, but rather at its reinforcement. The main objectives were the modernization and strengthening of the army, the consolidation of central authority, the fight against corruption, and the neutralization of local figures who had established independent power within the Empire. These reforms constituted more a phase of administrative efforts and experimentation than a process of full institutionalization. During this period, the sultans retained the monopoly of power and exercised authority in a centralized manner, without sharing political influence with the bureaucratic elites or the grand viziers.

The Tanzimat Reforms: Historical Context, Key Developments, and Institutional Transformations

Even though Mahmud II took some improvement measures, the Ottoman Empire did not have the chance or space to get better in the areas where problems were deeply rooted. So, even though the process was gradual, more serious reforms were needed. As a result, on the eve of the Tanzimat, the Ottoman Empire continued to face internal instability and numerous administrative and economic challenges.

According to the Ottoman historiographical convention, the period of the Tanzimat reforms spans from 1839 to 1876, when the first Ottoman constitution was proclaimed. This reformist phase is closely associated with Sultan Abdülmecid I, the successor of Mahmud II, who diligently continued the modernization policies initiated by his father.⁹⁸ In comparison with his predecessor, who was solely an advocate of Western practices, Abdülmecid was surrounded by a group of Western-educated Ottoman bureaucrats, who believed that modernism offered the best means for long-term survival,⁹⁹ the main figures were Mustafa Reşid Pasha, Mehmed Emin Ali Pasha, and Mithat Pasha.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Carter V. Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire: The Sublime Porte, 1789–1922*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 139.

⁹⁶ Georges Castellan, *Historia e Ballkanit*, (Tiranë: Çabej, 1991), 290.

⁹⁷ Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire*, 148–149.

⁹⁸ Gashi, *Reformat*, 56.

⁹⁹ *Gale Researcher Guide for: Tanzimat Reforms and Modernization in the Ottoman Empire*, (N.p.: Gale, Cengage Learning, 2018), 6.

¹⁰⁰ Mantran, *Historia*, 430.

The Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane (1839)

On 3 November 1839, Sultan Abdülmecid I proclaimed the Imperial Edict of Gülhane (Hatt-ı Şerif-i Gülhane), which marked the beginning of a broad reform program within the Ottoman Empire. This fundamental act is considered the foundation of a new modernizing period, which in Ottoman historiography is known as the Tanzimat. The term Tanzimat is the plural of the Arabic word *tanzim*, meaning “establishment in order” or “reorganization.”¹⁰¹ From this perspective, the Tanzimat movement represented a deliberate effort to restructure the administration, legislation, and state institutions, with the aim of aligning the Ottoman Empire with the political and social standards of Western Europe. This edict essentially contained the most sincere promises for fair and equitable governance, both in the administrative and economic aspects of the Ottoman Empire (Tralee Chronicle, 1861).

Regarding the objectives of that edict, it proclaimed four fundamental principles:

The guarantee of the life, honor, and property of the subjects

A regular taxation system

A system of military recruitment

Equality before the law for all subjects, regardless of their religion.¹⁰²

One of the reforms to be implemented was the abolition of corruption and the sale of offices, which were considered the main cause of the decline of the Ottoman Empire (West Kent Guardian, 1839). Regarding the military recruitment system, the enlistment of soldiers was to be conducted in proportion to the population of each region, and appropriate measures were to be taken to limit the period of military service to four or five years.¹⁰³ These regulations were not drafted by the ulemas, but by bureaucrats who were directly engaged in the governance of the country and aimed to create practical solutions for the needs of the state.¹⁰⁴ Such examples are Mustafa Reşid Pasha, the inspirer of the Imperial Edict of Gülhane, who, based on a successful diplomatic career, was able to contribute ideas influenced by the West; Mehmed Ali Pasha, as the drafter of the Imperial Edict of Hatt-ı Hümayun of 1856; and lastly, but not least in importance, Mithat Pasha, who concluded the Tanzimat reform period with the proclamation of the Ottoman Constitution in 1876.¹⁰⁵ Their role was crucial in the drafting and proclamation of these edicts, which aimed to stabilize the internal situation of the Ottoman Empire and to strengthen its integrity on the international stage. These initiatives were guided by Western-oriented strategies and policies, reflecting the goal of modernizing institutions and aligning with the standards of European states.

The Hatt-ı Hümayun (1856)

Since the slow speed of implementation of reforms allowed opportunities for reactions and even opposition, which was rooted in the inherited Ottoman tradition and its ideological and political mindset, the Treaty of Paris of 1856 once again emphasized the necessity of reforming the Empire. The decree issued in connection with the outcomes of this treaty was the Imperial Edict of Hatt-ı Hümayun of 1856. The most significant aspect of this edict was the improvement of the status of the non-Muslim population of the Empire, granting them equality in tax payments and in all other aspects of life. The major guarantees of the Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane, of 1839, were confirmed and reinforced. The *jizya* tax previously imposed on non-Muslims was abolished. Measures were established to prevent the confiscation of the property of the accused, and Christians were to be included in administrative councils, state service, and military

¹⁰¹ Mantran, *Historia*, 427.

¹⁰² Erik J. Zürcher, *Historia e Turqisë*, (Tiranë: Dituria, 2013), 61.

¹⁰³ İnalcık, *Devlet-i*, 191.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 197.

¹⁰⁵ Mantran, *Historia*, 429-431.

schools.¹⁰⁶ In terms of religious buildings, in villages where the population follows a single faith, the restoration of churches, schools, hospitals, and cemeteries was to be permitted. New construction projects were to be submitted to the Sublime Porte for approval within a specified timeframe. Regarding civic equality, all subjects, without distinction, were to be eligible for public offices based on merit and ability. In the field of justice, commercial, criminal, and correctional cases involving Muslims and Christians were to be determined by mixed courts, with public hearings, and witnesses of any faith were to be accepted under oath according to their own religious laws. Laws against corruption were to be applied to all subjects, regardless of faith or position. Monetary reform, the establishment of banks and public credit institutions, as well as the construction of roads and canals to facilitate trade and agriculture, were also to be undertaken. In this process, European experiences and practices were to be utilized (Morning Post, 1856). The *rayah* (meaning “flocks” or “protected subjects,” according to the literal meaning of the term) were no longer to be considered *rayah* nor referred to as such, as the Sultan stated: “All titles and distinctions that may indicate a difference between one class of my subjects as inferior and another as superior shall be permanently removed from all documents of my imperial chancery. Furthermore, it is strictly forbidden, for both officials and private individuals, to use insulting or degrading terms, and violators shall be punished (Rochdale Observer, 1856). In addition to these points, Christians were to be granted secure land ownership, arbitrary power of provincial governors was to be limited, and central authority strengthened. With all these reform measures, it was clear that they would not be welcomed or respected by all Ottoman subjects. They would not suit individuals and classes that would lose their privileges but would be embraced by those social groups that would be liberated from a condition of dependency. This decree was proclaimed with firm determination and would be enforced by force if necessary, in the face of opposition or rebellion against its implementation (Dublin Evening Post, 1856).

Reformative Advancements of the Tanzimat Era

A significant achievement in the modernization of the Ottoman Empire was the Penal Code of 1858, which was based on the Napoleonic Code of 1810, setting aside traditional Islamic punishments. On this occasion, a French-style court system was established, comprising first-instance courts and appellate courts, which formed the initial hierarchy of a secular judicial system within the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰⁷ The 1850s and 1860s were characterized by continuous efforts to improve the communication and transportation system within the Ottoman Empire. In 1855, the telegraph reached Constantinople, placing the capital in direct contact with the major cities of Europe and accelerating diplomatic and commercial exchanges. By 1860, the construction of railways began, which played a key role in strengthening the Porte’s relations with Balkan governments and foreign powers, facilitating the circulation of information, goods, and people, and contributing to the economic and administrative modernization of the Empire.¹⁰⁸ Additionally, in Sultan Abdülmecid I’s reign, coastal towns, ports, and settlements along principal trade routes experienced a drastic transformation in their physical properties as well as economic circumstances.¹⁰⁹

One of the key elements of the Tanzimat reforms was the secularization of the education system. In 1869, a new Public Education Regulation was adopted, based on the recommendations of the French Ministry of Education. According to this regulation, a three-tiered education system was established: *Rüşdiye* schools (secondary schools for adolescents), located in every major village

¹⁰⁶ Gashi, *Reformat*, 145-146.

¹⁰⁷ Dr. Ihsan Yilmaz, *Muslim laws, Politics and Society in Modern Nation States*, (UK: Ashgate, 2005), 90.

¹⁰⁸ Jelavich, *Themelimi*, 105.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 455.

or city district; İdadiye schools (middle-cycle schools), in all cities; and colleges known as Sultaniye schools (imperial schools), modeled on French lycées, situated in each provincial capital. In 1868, the Galatasaray Lycée was opened, which used French as the language of instruction and aimed to provide a modern secondary-level education.¹¹⁰

The Tanzimat period reached its high point with the Ottoman Constitution of 1876, written by Mithat Pasha during Sultan Abdulhamid II's rule. The sultan kept most of the power, but the parliament also had some roles, showing an effort to involve more people in politics.¹¹¹ The Ottoman Parliament had two parts: the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies.¹¹² The constitution was not a full change, but it was an important step, showing both the goals and limits of the Ottoman state.

The Tanzimat reforms could not achieve full results due to numerous obstructive influences, especially two factors; on the one hand, the Ottoman administration was filled with corrupt officials who abused their positions for personal gain and obstructed the implementation of reforms in practice, and on the other hand, the ambassadors of foreign powers, involved in various political rivalries, intervened in the internal affairs of the Empire, attempting to prevail over one another through intrigues and political pressure (Pall Mall Gazette, 1876). We can clearly observe that the Tanzimat reforms were designed to enable the improvement of Ottoman administration and institutions, gradually bringing them closer to the standards of the Great Powers. In addition, with the Edicts of Gülhane and the Hatt-i Hümayun, integration of society as one part of the changes represented another step change at the roots of the empire, something which had not been practical in the reforms of the 1830s. Instead, the reforms of the 1830s consisted of efforts to change the existing system, a change that was considered necessary for the empire to preserve its place in the world.

Conclusion

This study provides two insights for Ottoman modernization practice. First, the reforms of the 1830s and the Tanzimat reforms can be seen as two stages of a broader process, but at their core they were not the same. Their way of development was different, and their goals toward a result were also different. Second, the clear differences between them are seen in the types of institutions they created, in the circumstances that became the triggers, and in their interactions with existing Ottoman traditions.

The reforms of the 1830s were mostly practical in nature. They focused on improving the army, strengthening central authority, and increasing the effectiveness of administration, which were essential for social and political stability. At the same time, they remained closely linked to the existing political and cultural framework. The Tanzimat reforms went further. They introduced more structured institutional changes and some elements of secularization. Two factors need to be highlighted as especially important in shaping these reforms and the way they were applied. One is the role of different actors, including the sultan, state officials, and individuals who had experience with Western institutions, as well as international actors. The other is external political and economic pressure. For these reasons, the process of Ottoman modernization did not follow a straight path. It developed through a kind of balance. On one hand, Western ideas and practices were introduced. On the other hand, important elements of the traditional system were preserved, such as the symbolic role of the sultan and the position of Islam. This helps to understand why many reforms were only partially implemented and why broader participation remained limited.

¹¹⁰ Jelavich, *Themelimi*, 106.

¹¹¹ Jelavich, *Themelimi*, 109.

¹¹² *Introduction to Turkish Law*, (Netherlands: Kluwer Law International, 2011), 20.

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