

GOVERNMENT

THE SULTAN AND THE IMPERIAL COUNCIL

To a larger extent than the kings of contemporary Western governments, the Sultan is central to the Ottoman system.¹ His theoretical powers are absolute; he is the only one authorized to pass binding laws, and, as commander in chief of all armies and appointer of his own government, he can enforce them (McCarthy 109).² In practice, the Sultan's powers are checked by the people around him: having spent his life within the walls of the **Topkapi palace**, he relies on bureaucrats and scribes to inform him; he is influenced by members of his **harem**, who are politically savvy and leverage their close relationship with him; and he must consider the interests of powerful institutions, such as the Janissaries.³ Perhaps wary of these interests, Mahmud II has so far presented himself as conservative and pious.⁴ However, he is gradually filling government posts with people loyal to him, suggesting he may be consolidating power.⁵

The Sultan's authority is acted upon by his **Imperial Council**--the central government of the Ottoman Empire. It is composed mainly of viziers, and headed by the Grand Vizier, who represents the Sultan's interests in the council.⁶ Other members of the Imperial Council have varied over time, but for the purpose of this committee, all delegates will be considered part of the Imperial Council.

¹ Justin McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks: An Introductory History to 1923* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 107.

² Ibid, 109.

³ Ibid, 161-4.

⁴ Ibid, 291-2.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs, A History* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 25.

PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT AND INCREASING LOCAL POWERS

Populated by a variety of peoples, the Ottoman Empire's success is largely due to its ability to "co-opt and incorporate into the state the social groups that [rebel] against it."⁷ In other words, the Empire must negotiate power with local elites in cases where complete conquest is impossible. The nearest provinces to Istanbul (the Balkans and Western Anatolia) are controlled by governors appointed from the central administration. However, more distant regions, such as Eastern Anatolia, Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, Wallachia (Romania), Moldavia and the Maghrib, are more difficult for the central government to maintain, and thus local power structures and authorities are often retained to promote economic and political stability.⁸ The Mamluks who controlled Egypt under the Ottomans until recently are an example of such an arrangement.⁹

This strategy of retaining local governments in remote regions has its downfalls. Many local leaders fail to fulfil their duties to the Empire, such as paying taxes or sending soldiers in times of war.¹⁰ In the last century, new developments have led to an increase in rebellions of local leaders, particularly in Arab regions. The expansion of the designation "Pasha" in the Mid-18th Century allowed local Arabs to rise to higher levels of Ottoman government, threatening Ottoman control of Arab lands.¹¹ The central government itself has been weakened by corruption, particularly on the part of the **Janissary Corps** (as discussed below).¹² The inability of this government to defend the provinces from internal uprisings and European attacks has led Ottoman subjects to doubt the power of the Empire, and increasingly rely on local

⁷ Sevket Pamuk, "Institutional Change and the Longevity of the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1800," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 35, no. 2 (Autumn 2004), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3656813>, accessed December 27, 228.

⁸ Ibid, 230.

⁹ Rogan, *The Arabs, A History*, 22.

¹⁰ McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 171.

¹¹ Rogan, *The Arabs, A History*, 43.

¹² McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 165.

authorities.¹³ New forms of weaponry have allowed untrained peasants to become more effective warriors, making successful revolt “more possible, therefore more likely”--particularly in remote regions of the Empire, in which rebellions have time to grow before the government can mobilize forces to intervene.¹⁴

One of the most recent and severe examples of such a rebellion is that of the Wahhabis, a religious movement in central Arabia, which managed to gain control of the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina in the province of the Hijaz, between the years of 1806 and 1818.¹⁵ The Wahhabis were defeated not by the main Ottoman Turkish Army or the Janissary Corps, but by the army of Muhammad Ali Pasha, acting under the leadership of his son, Ibrahim.¹⁶ The fact that Muhammad Ali Pasha delayed sending troops to combat the Wahhabis for six years, in favour of achieving his own objectives, serves as further indication of the Ottomans’ crumbling authority over their provinces.¹⁷

ECONOMY

TAX COLLECTION: THE ILTIZAM SYSTEM

Agricultural produce is the main source of tax revenue, which is collected through the Iltizam system.¹⁸ Under this system, the rights to collect tax on certain assets within a region (often but not necessarily agricultural) are auctioned off to the highest bidder, who is then able to control taxation, as long as they pay a portion of their revenues to the government.¹⁹ By the 18th century, up to 10,000 individuals living in the provinces controlled a majority of the state’s

¹³ Rogan, *The Arabs, A History*, 44.

¹⁴ McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 166-7.

¹⁵ Ibid, 105.

¹⁶ Rogan, *The Arabs, A History*, 70.

¹⁷ Ibid, 68.

¹⁸ McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 114.

¹⁹ “Timar,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/timar>, accessed December 31, 2018.

tax revenues.²⁰ This semi-privatization has led to significant levels of corruption, and the levying of unrealistically high taxes to improve profit. However, it can also be argued that the interdependence of central government and provincial shareholders promotes stronger allegiance to the central government within the provinces, despite the state's fading military power.²¹

GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION AND ECONOMIC POLICY

The Ottomans do not have an overall economic strategy; government policy is based on the priorities of state survival, civil order and just Islamic society.²² The result of this paradigm is selective interventionism, with the government acting to regulate markets, ensure availability of goods, and maximize its own profit.²³ The government prioritizes a stable market, rather than an expanding market;²⁴ free markets are feared for their potential to lower prices, bankrupt craftsmen, cheapen the quality of goods, or result in monopolies.²⁵ Trades are organized by guilds, supported by the government, which maintain quality control and fix prices.²⁶ These guilds are both sustained and threatened by foreign trade; exports of locally produced goods can potentially lead to shortages, inflating prices of raw materials.²⁷ Thus, the Empire often restrains merchants, enacting temporary prohibitions of exports to prevent domestic shortages.²⁸

²⁰ Pamuk, "Institutional Change and the Longevity of the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1800," 241.

²¹ Pamuk, "Institutional Change and the Longevity of the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1800," 241.

²² McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 141.

²³ Pamuk, "Institutional Change and the Longevity of the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1800," 236.

²⁴ McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 142.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 140.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 138.

²⁷ Pamuk, "Institutional Change and the Longevity of the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1800," 234.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 235.

PROBLEMS OF ECONOMIC CONSERVATISM

Without the input of landowners, merchants, manufacturers and money-changers, the central bureaucracy's economic interventions, taken with the aim of preserving "traditional order and its own position within it," have led to economic stagnancy.²⁹ Unlike in Europe, **mercantilism** never developed in the Ottoman Empire, nor did capitalism or an industrial revolution.³⁰ Instead, the pursuit of a stable market, rather than an expanding one, has resulted in an economy that "remain[s] at best approximately at the same level as it had always been."³¹ This rigid economic system has created problems in the past, when it was unable to quickly adapt to inflation in surrounding markets, caused by the discovery of the New World.³² Currently, the industrial revolution is allowing European nations to manufacture products much more cheaply than the handmade goods of Ottoman tradesmen—a problem which, if left unchecked, could result in "unemployment, economic dependency and commercial deterioration."³³

An economic system not designed to independently expand relies on imperial expansion for growth, and thus the Ottoman economy has also been damaged by the end of the Empire's conquests. The end of Ottoman expansion in the 17th century appears to coincide with the Empire's first experience of "problems of overpopulation and large-scale unemployment."³⁴ Easy conquests which yield new territories and resources have given way to prolonged wars in Eastern Europe and Iran, which drain the treasury without yielding any major economic or territorial gains.³⁵

²⁹ Ibid, 229.

³⁰ McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 141.

³¹ Ibid, 142, 155.

³² Ibid, 152.

³³ Ibid, 157.

³⁴ Ibid, 151.

³⁵ Ibid, 152.

MILITARY

The Ottoman military is primarily a land power, consisting mainly of two central forces: the larger Turkish militia, and the more powerful Janissary Corps.³⁶ Unlike European armies, or the growing Egyptian army of Muhammad Ali Pasha, soldiers are not drawn from peasants, who are considered “too passive and dull for military service;” rather, the military is a distinct class.³⁷

MILITARY DECLINE

The defeat of the Ottomans by the Russians at the battle of Carlowitz in 1699 was, in retrospect, a sign of the Ottoman military’s deficiencies in the face of Europe’s developing military tactics and weaponry.³⁸ The battle marked the beginning of a period of defeats against European armies, and the end of Ottoman Imperial expansion.³⁹ Once a formidable force, the primitive tactics of the Janissary and **Sipahi Corps** were no match for modern methods of war based on infantry and fortification.⁴⁰ In addition to lacking European tactical developments—including a pyramidal chain of command, and the drilling of men to achieve unified action—the Ottomans’ agrarian economy leaves them unable to manufacture modern weapons.⁴¹ The Empire is also unable to finance the expenses of a modern army. Whereas it was once possible to allot **timars** to military leaders, where they could train and finance their own troops, this system is not suitable to the many foot soldiers of an infantry based army, who expect the kind of regular payment that the treasury cannot afford.⁴² The navy is in no better situation; always

³⁶ Rogan, *The Arabs, A History*, 27.

³⁷ Ibid, 72.

³⁸ McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 190.

³⁹ Rogan, *The Arabs, A History*, 72.

⁴⁰ McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 148.

⁴¹ Ibid, 148-9.

⁴² Ibid, 154.

the “second service” of the Ottoman military,⁴³ it has not kept up to the rapid and often expensive technological advancements of warships.⁴⁴ In July 1770, the Russian navy, itself not a renowned force, was able to destroy the Ottoman fleet in its own waters, in the Battle of Cesme—clear evidence of the extent of the disparity that has grown between Ottoman and European naval forces.⁴⁵

THE JANISSARIES AND ATTEMPTS AT REFORM

Ironically, any attempts at military reform have been prevented by a military caste itself—namely, the Janissary Corps. Once a “model of **meritocracy**,” made of soldiers selected through the **devshirme** system for their physical and mental ability,⁴⁶ the Janissaries have become more of a social class and political force than a functioning army. Beginning in the early 18th century, the Janissaries were allowed to take wives and enrol their sons in military schools, effectively ending the devshirme system, and the discipline it entailed.⁴⁷ Current members of the Corps are able to take on other employment while remaining on the military payroll, despite not providing any military service; many avoid military action by sending ill-trained substitutes to fight wars in their place, or simply by ignoring the Sultan’s call to battle.⁴⁸ Concentrated in Istanbul and provincial capitals, the Janissaries have profound political influence; they are feared rather than relied upon by Sultans, who are even expected to pay the Corps “accession money” upon taking the throne, to secure their support.⁴⁹

The Janissaries, perhaps rightfully, feel threatened by any systematic reforms, and thus use their power to prevent such changes from occurring, as can be seen in their response to

⁴³ Ibid, 125.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 154.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 156.

⁴⁶ McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 126.

⁴⁷ Rogan, *The Arabs, A History*, 72.

⁴⁸ McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 164.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 163-4.

initiatives undertaken by Sultan Selim III in the late 18th century. A “cautious reformer,” Selim III invited retired French and Prussian officers to Istanbul.⁵⁰ Their advice and training resulted in the creation of the “Nizam-i-Cedid,” or “New Order” Army (also called the Nizami Army).⁵¹ Nizami soldiers were drawn from Anatolian peasants, and drilled in European methods of war such as square formation and bayonet charges.⁵² Though successful in battle, they were unpopular among the Janissary Corps, who saw them as a threat. Although Selim III disbanded the Nizami Army to appease the Janissaries, the Corps overthrew him nonetheless in 1807, and briefly replaced him with his cousin, Mustafa IV.⁵³ Mustafa himself was deposed in a coup initiated by Balkan governors, who support military reform to protect them from Eastern European advances, and replaced him with the current Sultan, Mahmud II.⁵⁴ After the Janissary Corps regained control, Mahmud II was allowed to remain in power only because he did not attempt to resist the reestablishment of traditional order.⁵⁵ Thus, the Janissaries, though ineffective fighters and unpopular among the people, remain a considerable force to be reckoned with in attempts to reform the Empire, militarily or otherwise.⁵⁶

RELATIONS WITH EUROPE

As the gateway to the Silk Road, the Ottoman Empire has long-standing relations with most European powers, including Italian city-states, France, the Netherlands and England.⁵⁷ Historically, trading partners have been granted **capitulations**: rights to trade under imperial protection with a reduction in customs duties, as well as consuls’ guaranteed freedom of

⁵⁰ Ibid, 290.

⁵¹ Rogan, 72.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Rogan, *The Arabs, A History*, 72.

⁵⁴ McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 291.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 292.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 135.

action, imperial protection, and tax exemption.⁵⁸ Communities of people from countries who hold capitulations have been allowed to function separately from the Ottoman cities in which they live, with similar levels of freedom as a religious millet.⁵⁹ Capitulations are not only used to promote trade and foreign diplomacy; they are also withheld from political rivals--notably Austria-Hungary and Russia, whose interest in the Balkans puts them in frequent conflict with the Ottomans.⁶⁰

As has been revealed throughout this background guide, the Empire's failure to keep up with recent economic and technological developments--particularly capitalism and the Industrial Revolution--is resulting in a shift in power between the Ottomans and Europeans. It follows that relations between these parties would also change. Such changes have already been foreshadowed by Napoleon's three-year occupation of Egypt, achieved after mere hours of fighting against Ottoman forces, dispelled only through British intervention.⁶¹ On a smaller scale, capitulations, once a sign of the Empire's favour, have become a threat to the Empire itself, as European economies grow stronger, affecting the balance in trade.⁶²

WHERE WE ARE NOW: GREECE

This committee begins in March 1821. A nationalist uprising in the Greek provinces of the Empire has been initiated by the Filiki Etairia, or "Society of Friends"—an organization promoting Greek independence.⁶³ The Greek community is distinct, and united by a shared language, faith and history. Thus, the incident exemplifies the danger of nationalism, a growing phenomenon in the Ottoman Empire and Europe: it can inspire "a whole population to rise up

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 136.

⁶⁰ Bridge and Bullen

⁶¹ Rogan, *The Arabs, A History*, 65.

⁶² McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 136.

⁶³ Rogan, *The Arabs, A History*, 73.

against their...rulers.”⁶⁴ Though the uprising began on the Southern Peloponnesian Peninsula, it is rapidly spreading to central Greece, Macedonia, the Aegean Islands, and Crete, resulting in a war on several fronts. The uprising has drawn the attention of European powers, who are torn between popular support of the Greeks as the remnants of a classical civilization, and the pragmatic need to maintain the Balance of Power by supporting the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire.⁶⁵ The Ottomans have requested the aid of Muhammad Ali Pasha in suppressing the Greeks. Though he has consented, it remains to be seen whether this non-conforming governor will indeed obey the commands of his Sultan and the Imperial Council, and for how long he can be kept within the fold.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 74.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

1. How should the central government reassert authority over the provinces? Should it continue to cooperate with unruly local leaders, or seek to replace them with new power structures, at the risk of provoking instability or even civil war?
2. How can the economy be revitalized? Should the focus be placed on pursuing military conquests to expand markets, or should economic reform be attempted? How could reform be enacted without threatening social stability or the hierarchy atop which the government sits?
3. Given the limited financial resources of the Ottoman Empire, how can the military be reformed to compete with those of European rivals? How can these reforms be achieved in a way that either appeases the Janissaries, or overcomes them?
4. How should the Imperial Council approach Muhammad Ali Pasha—a leader who has successfully defended the Empire, but on his own terms? Should his insolence be punished before it can manifest into something more dangerous, or can his potential be harnessed? How can his power be weakened?

GLOSSARY OF TERMS:

Capitulations: not a form of surrender, but rather special privileges granted to trading partners by the Ottoman Empire, which include the right to trade under imperial protection, reductions in customs duties, and the granting of similar status to a millet to citizens of that country living within the Empire. Initially, when the Ottoman Empire exported more than it imported, capitulations were beneficial, and used as a political tool, granted to allies and withheld from enemies; they are now becoming a threat to the Ottoman economy, as trade conditions change to favour European countries.⁶⁶

Devshirme: “boy levy;” originally a training system and tool of assimilation, in which Christian boys were taken from their families into slavery, converted to Islam, and trained for military or civil service, ultimately becoming members of the bureaucracy or the Janissary Corps.⁶⁷ This system was phased out by the 18th Century, when members of the Janissary Corps were permitted to take wives and have sons, resulting in the devshirme becoming a hereditary Military caste rather than a meritocracy.⁶⁸

Harem: female companions of the Sultan, selected for their intelligence as well as their beauty; hugely influential, as confidantes of the Sultan, and sometimes mothers of the future Sultan. Many have acted as the leaders of factions and participated in political battles.⁶⁹

Imperial Council: the most important members of the central bureaucracy, of which the main members were viziers (akin to governors), led by the Grand Vizir, who represents the Sultan on the Council.⁷⁰

Janissary Corps (Janissaries): an elite infantry force originally consisting of members of the devshirme, with an *Agha*, or commander, appointed by the Imperial Council

⁶⁶ McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 135-6.

⁶⁷ Rogan, *The Arabs, A History*, 26.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 72.

⁶⁹ McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 162.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 113.

Sipahi Corps (Sipahis): an elite cavalry corps, primarily composed of Turkish soldiers recruited by the timar system, led by an *Agha* appointed by the Imperial Council.

Medrese: the highest institutions of learning in the Ottoman Empire, they are closely affiliated with mosques; people who attended them were known as members of the “ulema,” or learned class, and could become muftis (Islamic scholars who effectively dictated the application of Sharia, or Islamic law, to Ottoman society), kadis (judges who enforced Islamic and secular law in the provinces) or teachers. Thus, power was closely linked to Islamic institutions in the Empire.⁷¹

Mercantilism: an economic theory that suggests there is a limited amount of wealth in the world, and a nation’s economic success depends on its ability to export more than it imports in order to make profits; though this system was adopted in Europe, where it eventually led to the development of capitalism, it was never adopted by the Ottomans.⁷²

Meritocracy: a governmental system whereby power is attained through demonstration of ability, rather than inheritance.

Timars: a means of compensating Ottoman military leaders for their service, by giving them land upon which they could quarter their soldiers, and from which they could collect taxes, on the condition that they serve in the Sultan’s army when needed, and police the region themselves.⁷³ Timars were usually located in more central regions--they were not used in remote areas, to avoid economic disruption and unrest.⁷⁴ The timar system began to be phased out by the 17th century, and replaced with tax farms, but timars already given have been passed down through inheritance, and many are held by members of the devshirme.⁷⁵

⁷¹ McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 119-20.

⁷² Pamuk, “Institutional Change and the Longevity of the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1800,” 235.

⁷³ McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 115.

⁷⁴ Pamuk, “Institutional Change and the Longevity of the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1800,” 230.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 240.

Topkapi palace: the Imperial Palace. Located in Istanbul, it houses the Imperial Council, the Sultan and his harem. Since the end of the 16th century, members of the Ottoman royal family have been raised within the palace confines, to prevent them from organizing rival factions within the provinces. This has led to leaders who, though well educated, lack real-world experience of their own Empire and its problems.⁷⁶

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⁷⁶ McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks*, 161.