reform in the Ottoman Empire

The idea and practice of reform existed among the members of the Ottoman elite from the 16th century. In fact, the Ottoman government underwent substantial and deliberate political and economic changes from that time until the late 18th century. From the late 18th century onward, however, Ottoman reforms began to be modeled primarily on European examples. Since the 1839 Gülhane Imperial Edict, which marked the beginning of the Tanzimat or Ottoman reform period (1839–76), the scope and goals of Ottoman reform not only became more comprehensive but also began to be self-consciously Eurocentric, relying on the notion of Western superiority.

Between the 16th and 18th centuries, a number of Ottoman bureaucrats and intellectuals, such as Mustafa Ali and Koçi Bey, argued for reform, urging for a return to the so-called "classical age" of Sultan Süleyman I (r. 1520–66), and writing about the perceived decline of the Ottoman classical system. Yet there is now an emerging consensus among scholars of Ottoman history that what several Ottoman bureaucrats considered a decline was rather a broader social and economic transformation of the empire due to external and internal pressures. Changes that occurred in the Ottoman state during this time, which included a degree of decentralization paralleled by an increasing specialization of administrative bureaucracy, was perceived as a decline, but this was due to the perspective of certain members of the Ottoman elite who had been negatively affected by these transformations.

The reforms in the taxation system, military technology, bureaucratic recruitment, and sultanic authority, especially under the leadership of sultans Osman II (r. 1618–22) and Murad IV (r. 1623–40) or the Köprüli dynasty of grand viziers, helped maintain the Ottoman state during its many periods of crisis. With the enthronement of Sultan Selim III (r. 1789–1807), however, the period of modern, Western reform began. Selim initiated a more systematic and ambitious program of reform, openly inquiring into and adopting European models, and focusing especially on technology, education, and the military. It was during this period that the opposition to some of the reforms by vested social and political interests, led by the janissaries, led to the 1826 Auspicious Incident, in which the Janissary corps was destroyed in a bloody domestic conflict under the reformist rule of Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–39). With the abolition of the Janissaries, Sultan Mahmud II implemented an intense series of reforms, centralizing the government, restructuring the military and administration, establishing new educational institutions, and introducing European-style dress and head coverings.

The Gülhane Imperial Edict (Gülhane Hattı Hümayun) of 1839 became a turning point in the history of Ottoman reforms in the sense that it declared European-modeled reforms as the primary goal of the bureaucracy. The Gülhane Edict initiated what is called the Tanzimat period, when a set of legal, administrative, and fiscal reforms were implemented in order to strengthen the Ottoman state and make it a member of the new European diplomatic order. There is a strong line of continuity of reform before and after the Gülhane Imperial Edict. The difference from the earlier reform efforts, however, lies in the way the Gülhane Edict was designed to enhance the central government's control by empowering the bureaucracy while changing and reshaping the relationship between the sultan and his subjects. The promised new legal system of the edict was intended to gradually reduce the arbitrary powers of the sultan and ensure full rights and equality to non-Muslims under the reinterpretation of Islamic law, or sharia. Moreover, by the Gülhane Edict, Ottoman bureaucrats declared a long-term commitment to "self-civilizing" reforms in harmony with the standards of Europe as a basis for peaceful relations with the European powers. It was hoped that the image of the Ottoman state as a reformed and civilized polity would enable the Ottomans to garner support from England and France in the face of numerous external and internal pressures, among them Russia's attempts to influence or control Christian subjects within the Ottoman Empire and the Egyptian province's demands for autonomy.

Although the Gülhane Imperial Edict gave full legitimacy to the reformist bureaucrats and inspired further acts of reform, its implementation involved a gradual process during which the old institutions and customs were allowed to end naturally rather than being eradicated. Traditional Islamic courts or educational institutions were not abolished but were left to become the weaker part of a new two-pronged Ottoman legal and social structure. For example, while new European-style schools were established during the Tanzimat, the old madrasa schools continued to function, but with dramatic decreases in their social prestige and economic base. Meanwhile, although legal equality of all subjects was declared, different religious communities continued to have separate religious laws and privileges. More importantly, interventions by the European powers to protect the privileges of the
Christian minorities prevented their assuming full political equality, since existing systems of privilege often gave them greater freedoms and powers than the empire's Muslim subjects. Thus the edict's implementation for the next three decades fell short of its intended goals.

By the end of the 19th century, reforms allowed the Ottoman state to have greater control over its own provinces with greater administrative efficiency, technological capability, and international legitimacy, even though many in Europe began to call the Ottoman state the "sick man of Europe." In fact, the Ottoman Empire managed to survive the 19th century as the only Muslim empire to also be part of the European balance of power system. The durability, diplomatic achievements, and centralized government of the Ottoman Empire were indicative of the successes of its reformist bureaucracy. Despite these reform achievements, however, the intensifying imperialist threat posed by the European powers, coupled with the inability of the Ottoman government to control its non-Muslim populations, led to a weakening of the Ottoman state in comparison to the European powers it sought to emulate. Ottoman reformists of the second half of the 19th century often complained that it was European interventions in the domestic affairs of the empire that prevented the success of their comprehensive programs to make the empire economically richer and militarily more powerful. While disillusioned by European interventions and imperialism, the Ottoman elite continued to call for more radicalized European-style reforms and the new generation of the elite, especially the Young Ottomans and the Young Turks, called for a constitution and other political reforms to save the Ottoman state from extinction.

While the call for reform remained strong, an intra-Ottoman conflict over the nature, vision, and scope of these European-inspired reforms also began to materialize. Symbolized by the disagreements between the Young Turks and the regime of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909), the Ottoman reform conflict may be understood in part by looking to the hotly debated questions of the reformers: Was the empire going to follow a British, French, or German model of reform? What were the real secrets of European progress and power? From the mid-19th century until the end of the empire in the 1920s, these questions were intensely debated among Ottoman intellectuals, leading to the proliferation of competing reform agendas, all advocating a more rapid program of change and sharper ideological justifications. Thus the ideological programs of change in the writings of Namık Kemal and Ahmed Midhat Efendi led to more differentiated reform ideologies such as the Westernism of Abdullah Cevdet and the Islamism of Mehmed Akif Ersoy. The Westernist thread in the reformist tradition of the Ottoman Muslim elite continued into the early years of the Turkish Republic, which experimented with one of the most comprehensive westernization programs of the 20th century.

Further Information


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