



CHAPTER 1

Central Political Reforms and Local Responses

The military defeats suffered by the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century and the invasion of Egypt by Napoleon in 1798 ushered in a new era in the Middle East. It appeared to local observers that European forces suddenly were more powerful and certainly were more expansionist. By no means did this perception lead local inhabitants to assume the overall superiority of European culture, politics, or civilization. The defeats, however, did result in a certain amount of soul-searching by government officials and intellectuals. Many responses were proposed and sometimes adopted, although not always successfully. One of the lessons drawn out of the defeats by some Ottoman officials was the need to modernize the empire and its bureaucracy.

The Tanzimat was a period of reform that began in the 1830s and lasted through the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I (*Tanzimat* is a Turkish word meaning "reorganization" or "restructuring"). In response to the decreasing military, political, and economic power of the empire, reformers (first the Young Ottomans, and later the Young Turks) embarked on a series of programs to modernize the imperial government and the way officials related to subject people across the various lands under imperial rule.

The notion of "modernity" was not easily or completely definable, but to government officials—especially those trained in Europe or European schools—modernity meant an increase in central government control and a shift from treating the population as "subjects" to treating them as "citizens."

Without assuming radical and rapid changes, we can still observe that such changes were attempted by studying the first three documents in this chapter. The first document, the *Hatt-ı-Serif* decree, proposed a reform project to secularize the Ottoman courts and bring a greater degree of central control over the administration of the empire. The second was an imperial decree presented to an Ottoman official in the province of Mosul (in modern-day

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northern Iraq) with regard to the nomadic tribes that predominated the region. The opinion of the Bedouins expressed here provides valuable clues as to how some Ottoman officials understood the goals of the Tanzimat.

The third document, from the writings of the satirist Mirza Malkum Khan, provides glimpses of internal criticism of the Iranian government's and Muslim intellectuals' responses to European incursions. Malkum satirizes both groups and lampoons their efforts as half-hearted attempts to hold on to bygone days and waning powers. Although the great majority of the Iranian population probably disagreed—or at best partially agreed—with him, his satire is still important because it provides a critical perspective on the encounter between the Middle East and Europe.

Responding to the Tanzimat reforms as well as to the growth of European cultural influence in the Middle East, several Muslim intellectuals and religious reformers sought to influence the outcomes of these changes in ways that fit their own worldview. Two key Islamic voices responding to European imperialism are those of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (document 4) and his disciple Muhammad 'Abduh. Both men confronted an environment in which Islam and local cultures faced external pressure and criticism—direct and indirect. While some Muslim thinkers preferred to reject all attempts at reconciliation with European ways of life, these two sought some accommodation between the technological superiority of the West and their notion of Islamic society, traditions, and mores. Regardless of the degree of their success or failure, both thinkers were influential in shaping this cross-civilization dialogue and remain icons in the Muslim world.

The last document in this chapter indicates how after some seventy years of reform, one minority—the Jewish community in Baghdad—evaluated the modernization of the Ottoman Empire.

1. The Hatt-ı-Serif Decree Initiates the Tanzimat, or Reform, Period in the Ottoman Empire, November 3, 1839

In the Tanzimat period of Ottoman history, attempts were made to modernize the empire and enable it to withstand European imperialist pressures. The aim of the Hatt-ı-Serif decree—clothed as it was in the religious legitimacy of the Shari'a—was to allow the Ottomans to establish a stronger central government by means of reforms in the tax collection and military service systems. The purpose of these reforms was to weaken provincial governors' holds on their territories and simultaneously provide the central Ottoman government with more resources with which to face the European military and political might. The reforms were never fully

Translated by Halil İnalcik, from the Ottoman text in *Takvim-i Vekayi* as reproduced in *Tanzimat* (Istanbul, 1940) after p. 48; checked, against the text in Latin Turkish characters in A. Şerif Gözaliyik and Suna Kili, eds., *Türk Analyses Mevzileri* (Ankara, 1957), pp. 3–5, a text that appeared in *Dünya*, 1st ser. 1: 4–7. This document may also be found in J. C. Kurewitz, *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 269–271.

implemented, but more important than any immediate changes was the fact that this decree initiated the period of Tanzimat, which lasted through the end of World War I, and whose impact went beyond military and political matters to touch social and cultural aspects of life in the Ottoman Empire.

Discussion Questions

- i. What are the reforms that the Hatt-ı Şerif sought to bring about in terms of taxes, and what changes would that bring about in land ownership?
- ii. What are the premises upon which these reforms were based?
- iii. How does the change in military conscription policy change the relationship between citizen and state?

All the world knows that since the first days of the Ottoman State, the lofty principles of the Qur'an and the rules of the Şariat were always perfectly observed. Our mighty Sultanate reached the highest degree of strength and power, and all its subjects [the highest degree] of ease and prosperity. But in the last one hundred and fifty years, because of a succession of difficulties and diverse causes, the sacred Şariat was not obeyed nor were the beneficent regulations followed; consequently, the former strength and prosperity have changed into weakness and poverty. It is evident that countries not governed by the laws of the Şariat cannot survive.

From the very first day of our accession to the throne, our thoughts have been devoted exclusively to the development of the empire and the promotion of the prosperity of the people. Therefore, if the geographical position of the Ottoman provinces, the fertility of the soil, and the aptitude and intelligence of the inhabitants are considered, it is manifest that, by striving to find appropriate means, the desired results will, with the aid of God, be realized within five or ten years. Thus, full of confidence in the help of the Most High and certain of the support of our Prophet, we deem it necessary and important from now on to introduce new legislation to achieve effective administration of the Ottoman Government and Provinces. Thus the principles of the requisite legislation are three:

1. The guarantees promising to our subjects perfect security for life, honor, and property.
2. A regular system of assessing taxes.
3. An equally regular system for the conscription of requisite troops and the duration of their service.

Indeed there is nothing more precious in this world than life and honor. What man, however much his character may be against violence, can prevent himself from having recourse to it, and thereby injure the government and the country, if his life and honor are endangered? If, on the contrary, he enjoys perfect security,

it is clear that he will not depart from the ways of loyalty and all his actions will contribute to the welfare of the government and of the people.

If there is an absence of security for property, everyone remains indifferent to his state and his community; no one interests himself in the prosperity of the country, absorbed as he is in his own troubles and worries. If, on the contrary, the individual feels complete security about his possessions, then he will become preoccupied with his own affairs, which he will seek to expand, and his devotion and love for his state and his community will steadily grow and will undoubtedly spur him into becoming a useful member of society.

Tax assessment is also one of the most important matters to regulate. A state, for the defense of its territory, manifestly needs to maintain an army and provide other services, the costs of which can be defrayed only by taxes levied on its subjects. Although, thank God, our Empire has already been relieved of the affliction of monopolies, the harmful practice of tax-farming [*iltizam*], which never yielded any fruitful results, still prevails. This amounts to handing over the financial and political affairs of a country to the whims of an ordinary man and perhaps to the grasp of force and oppression, for if the tax-farmer is not of good character he will be interested only in his own profit and will behave oppressively. It is therefore necessary that from now on every subject of the Empire should be taxed according to his fortune and his means, and that he should be saved from [any] further exaction. It is also necessary that special laws should fix and limit the expenses of our land and sea forces.

Military matters, as already pointed out, are among the most important affairs of state, and it is the inescapable duty of all the people to provide soldiers for the defense of the fatherland [*vatan*]. It is therefore necessary to frame regulations on the contingents that each locality should furnish according to the requirements of the time, and to reduce the term of military service to four or five years. Such legislation will put an end to the old practice, still in force, of recruiting soldiers without consideration of the size of the population in any locality, more conscripts being taken from some places and fewer from others. This practice has been throwing agriculture and trade into harmful disarray. Moreover, those who are recruited to lifetime military service suffer despair and contribute to the depopulation of the country.

In brief, unless such regulations are promulgated, power, prosperity, security, and peace may not be expected, and the basic principles [of the projected reforms] must be those enumerated above.

Thus, from now on, every defendant shall be entitled to a public hearing, according to the rules of the Şariat, after inquiry and examination; and without the pronouncement of a regular sentence no one may secretly or publicly put another to death by poison or by any other means. No one shall be allowed to attack the honor of any other person whatsoever. Every one shall possess his property of every kind and may dispose of it freely, without let or hindrance from any person whatsoever; and the innocent heirs of a criminal shall not be deprived of their hereditary rights as a result of the confiscation of the property of such a criminal. The Muslim and non-Muslim subjects of our lofty Sultanate shall, without exception, enjoy our imperial concessions. Therefore we grant

of Bedouins [nomadic tribes] with those urbane people who live in the cities and villages, one will note the complexity in the customs of city-folk. In contrast, it will be noted that in comparison to the original creation of man and his internal self, the way of life of Bedouins is simple. In fact, the primitive and original state of man is most likely the same as that of the Bedouin. However, God has graced human beings with a characteristic that is absent from any other [species]. According to this characteristic, man cannot remain in his original state of creation but should prepare all that is needed for his food, drink, and clothing, and after this he must gather knowledge and develop commerce and other human necessities. He seeks to obtain other necessities as well, and every time he reaches a stage of acquisition, then he sees the need to advance and progress beyond what he had in the past. [...] Thus, it is apparent that even if the first state of man is to be a Bedouin, urbanity is a characteristic that cannot be separated from him. For the human being has become civilized [...] and the virtues of humanity cannot be attained except through the path of urbanization and civilization. Those who surpass their brethren and control all elements of this world, completely or partially, are those who live in the cities and who are civilized.

After proving that this is the case, we would like to explain and specify the reasons those people demand to remain in this state [of being Bedouins]. They remain in this state of deprivation of the virtues of humanity and the characteristics of civilization for several reasons. The first is that these people are ignorant of the state of the world and the nations. Because of their ignorance we have found our fathers desiring to stay unchanged in the state to which they were born. Secondly, the basis of the wealth of the tribes and clans is animals—in particular camels—and since it is difficult to manage and raise animals and camels in the cities—where they cannot find pasture—the people remain in their original state of being. [...] The third reason is that the mentioned peoples are like wild animals who enjoy what they have gotten used to in terms of stealing and raiding the property of others of their own people and killing them. This has become a reason for their wildness and their insistence on staying in the state of Bedouinism. It should be obvious that the first reason—which is ignorance and illiteracy—is an ugly and unacceptable characteristic in all the creatures of this world. And the second reason is the subordination [to tradition] characteristic of animals, and it is contrary to the image according to which man was created, for God has created the human being to be the most honorable of all creatures, and He made all breathing creatures subservient to him. He who is a Bedouin has become accustomed to the opposite of this natural order, so that although he used to be over other creatures, he has become subservient.

The truth is that this fallen state is an insult to humanity, and accordingly if we investigate the immense harm these tribes cause to each other, we will find that it has no equivalence in magnitude. For the human being has been commanded to protect those of his kind and treat them well, and is not commanded to do the opposite. In fact, all the religions command this [good

perfect security to all the populations of our Empire in their lives, their honor, and their properties, according to the sacred law.

As for the other points, decisions must be taken by majority vote. To this end, the members of the Council of Judicial Ordinances [Medlis-i Ahkam-i Adliyye], enlarged by new members as may be found necessary, to whom will be joined on certain days that we shall determine our Ministers and the high officials of the Empire, will assemble for the purpose of framing laws to regulate the security of life and property and the assessment of taxes. Every one participating in the Council will express his ideas and give his advice freely.

2. An Ottoman Government Decree Defines the Official Notion of the "Modern" Citizen, June 19, 1870

Derived in part from knowledge about the way the French, British, and Austrian governments functioned, and in part from local needs and established customs, these Tanzimat reforms attempted to extend the reach of the Ottoman government internally while allowing it to face external threats. This document seeks to draw an irrevocable distinction between "primitive" nomadic tribes—Bedouins—and "urbane" people who live in cities and villages. It makes strong value judgments about each category and provides a clear-cut recommendation for dealing with the Bedouins. Pay particular attention to the language used to describe each group, and question the characterizations. Think about likely reasons behind the creation of the two categories. Do not assume that the author is describing reality in an objective manner. What ideological motivation do you think lies behind this depiction of the Bedouin way of life?

Discussion Questions

- In comparing the lifestyle of Bedouins and city-folks, what characteristics did the author attribute to each?
- Why were Bedouins refusing to acquiesce to the pressure to become sedentary citizens of the Ottoman Empire?
- From the point of view of an Ottoman official who is a strong adherent to the Tanzimat, why should the refusal of the Bedouins be construed as a threat to the government and its attempts to redefine modern citizenship?

To the model of proverbs and peers, His Excellency Firhan Pasha Zayd 'Alwa. It is known that if one compares the tribes and people who live in the lifestyle

Ottoman government decree issued to the Amir of Sham, His Excellency Firhan Pasha, June 19, 1870. Ottoman archives of Directorate General of State Archives at the Prime Ministry (Tapu Tahrir: Mosul, 1869–1872). Translated by Akram Khater.