

Ottoman Reforms in the Tanzimat Era



74 ▼ Sultan Abdul Mejid, IMPERIAL RESCRIPT

Serious efforts to reverse the Ottoman Empire's political and military decline can be traced back to the reign of Selim III (r. 1789–1807), who sought to revitalize the Ottoman army by importing foreign officers, updating weapons, and tightening discipline. These modest reforms were bitterly opposed by many Islamic religious leaders and by the janissaries, once the elite of the Ottoman army, but now mainly concerned with protecting their privileges. As a result, Selim was deposed in 1807 and then murdered. Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839) achieved some permanent military and administrative reforms, largely because of his destruction of the reactionary janissary corps in 1826 and his success in weakening some of the authority of conservative Islamic judges. Despite his efforts, his armies were badly defeated when he sent them into battle against the forces of the Egyptian pasha Muhammad Ali in 1832 and 1839. Yet another era of reform began during the reign of Abdul Mejid (r. 1839–1861). Inspired by the sultan's foreign minister and later grand vizier, Mustafa Reshid, it came to be known as the era of *Tanzimat*, which literally means restructuring. This movement, which maintained its momentum until the reign of Abdul Hamid II (r. 1876–1909), sought to save the empire by administrative reform, expansion of education, and the adoption of Western legal concepts and practices.

Two of the most important documents in the Tanzimat Era were proclamations issued by Sultan Abdul Mejid. The first, known as the Noble Rescript, was issued shortly after he became sultan in 1839. In it he committed himself to ending government corruption, confirming the rights of non-Muslims, and protecting all subjects from arbitrary arrest. Seventeen years later, in 1856, he made a second, broader statement, known as the Imperial Rescript. This represented the high point of efforts to reform the Ottoman Empire while maintaining its authoritarian government and traditional mix of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish subjects.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What benefits were the sultan's non-Muslim subjects to receive as a result of this proclamation?
2. What efforts were to be made to improve the empire's system of justice?
3. What do the decrees dealing with the economy suggest about the state of the empire's economic situation?
4. To what extent does this document extend meaningful political rights to the sultan's subjects?
5. In what respects does this document reflect Western liberal ideals of individual freedom and religious toleration?

Let it be done as herein set forth. . . . It being now my desire to renew and enlarge still more the new Institutions ordained with the view of establishing a state of things conformable with the dignity of my Empire and — . . . by the kind and friendly assistance of the Great Powers, my noble Allies,¹ . . . The guarantees promised on our part by the Hatti-Humaïoun of Gülhané,² and in conformity with the Tanzimat, . . . are today confirmed and consolidated, and efficacious measures shall be taken in order that they may have their full and entire effect.

All the privileges and spiritual immunities granted by my ancestors from time immemorial, and at subsequent dates, to all Christian communities or other non-Muslim persuasions established in my empire, under my protection, shall be confirmed and maintained.

Every Christian or other non-Muslim community shall be bound within a fixed period, and with the concurrence of a commission composed . . . of members of its own body, to proceed with my high approbation and under the inspection of my Sublime Porte,³ to examine into its actual immunities and privileges, and to discuss and submit to my Sublime Porte the reforms required by the progress of civilization and of the age. The powers conceded to the Christian Patriarchs and Bishops⁴ by the Sultan Mehmed II⁵ and his successors, shall be made to harmonize with the new position which my generous and beneficent intentions ensure to these communities. . . . The ecclesiastical dues, of whatever sort of nature they be, shall be abolished and replaced by fixed revenues of the Patriarchs and heads of communities. . . . In the towns, small boroughs, and villages, where the whole population is of the same religion, no obstacle shall be offered to the repair, according to their original plan, of buildings set

apart for religious worship, for schools, for hospitals, and for cemeteries. . . .

Every distinction or designation tending to make any class whatever of the subjects of my Empire inferior to another class, on account of their religion, language, or race, shall be forever effaced from Administrative Protocol. The law shall be put in force against the use of any injurious or offensive term, either among private individuals or on the part of the authorities. . . .

As all forms of religion are and shall be free to be professed in my dominions, no subject of my Empire shall be hindered in the exercise of the religion that he professes. . . . No one shall be compelled to change their religion . . . and . . . all the subjects of my Empire, without distinction of nationality, shall be admissible to public employments. . . . All the subjects of my Empire, without distinction, shall be received into the civil or military schools of the government. . . . Moreover every community is authorized to establish public schools of science, art, and industry. . . .

All commercial, correctional, and criminal suits between Muslims and Christian or other non-Muslim subjects, or between Christian or other non-Muslims of different sects, shall be referred to Mixed Tribunals. The proceedings of these Tribunals shall be public; the parties shall be confronted, and shall produce their witnesses whose testimony shall be received, without distinction, upon an oath taken according to the religious law of each sect. . . .

Penal, correctional, and commercial laws, and rules of procedure for the Mixed Tribunals, shall be drawn up as soon as possible, and formed into a code. . . . Proceedings shall be taken, for the reform of the penitentiary system. . . .

The organization of the police . . . shall be revised in such a manner as to give to all the peace-

¹During the Crimean War (1853–1856) the Ottoman Empire was allied with Great Britain and France against Russia. France and Great Britain at the time were encouraging Ottoman military reform to offset the power of Russia in the region.

²This refers to the Noble Rescript of 1839.

³"Sublime Porte" refers to the building that housed the grand vizier and other high officials of the Ottoman state. It

is a translation of the Turkish words *Bab-i Ali*, or "high gate." The term is used to refer to Ottoman leadership much the same way that the "White House" refers to the American presidency.

⁴The reference is to ruling officials of the Greek and Armenian churches in the Ottoman Empire.

⁵Ottoman ruler from 1451 to 1481.

able subjects of my Empire the strongest guarantees for the safety both of their persons and property. . . . Christian subjects, and those of other non-Muslim sects, . . . shall, as well as Muslims, be subject to the obligations of the Law of Recruitment [for military service]. The principle of obtaining substitutes, or of purchasing exemption, shall be admitted.

Proceedings shall be taken for a reform in the constitution of the Provincial and Communal Councils, in order to ensure fairness in the choice of the deputies of the Muslim, Christian, and other communities, and freedom of voting in the Councils. . . .

As the laws regulating the purchase, sale, and disposal of real property are common to all the subjects of my Empire, it shall be lawful for foreigners to possess landed property in my dominions. . . .

The taxes are to be levied under the same denomination from all the subjects of my Empire, without distinction of class or of religion. The most prompt and energetic means for remedying the abuses in collecting the taxes, and especially the tithes, shall be considered. The system of di-

rect collection shall gradually, and as soon as possible, be substituted for the plan of farming,⁶ in all the branches of the revenues of the state.

A special law having been already passed, which declares that the budget of the revenue and the expenditure of the state shall be drawn up and made known every year, the said law shall be most scrupulously observed. . . .

The heads of each community and a delegate, designated by my Sublime Porte, shall be summoned to take part in the deliberations of the Supreme Council of Justice on all occasions which might interest the generality of the subjects of my Empire. . . .

Steps shall be taken for the formation of banks and other similar institutions, so as to effect a reform in the monetary and financial system, as well as to create funds to be employed in augmenting the sources of the material wealth of my empire.

Everything that can impede commerce or agriculture shall be abolished. To accomplish these objects means shall be sought to profit by science, the art, and the funds of Europe, and thus gradually to execute them.

⁶Tax farming, in which the government contracted with private financiers who collected taxes for a profit.