

# The Ottoman Empire Heading into the First World War

- Strong and effective central authority was essential to the Islamic empires (including the Ottoman Empire), and political theorists never tired of emphasizing the importance of rulers who were diligent, virtuous and just. The Ottomans were fortunate in having a series of talented sultans for three centuries (13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries).
- As with many civilizations, religious and political tensions existed throughout the empire's existence.
  - Eman M. Elshaikh, a graduate student with *Chicago University* writes:

“Ottoman elites also became more connected to global cultural movements, particularly the Enlightenment. Translations became more widely available with the Ottoman adoption of the printing press in the 1720s. Together, these trends of military and technological innovation and cultural worldliness gave rise to a series of reforms of education, the military, and finance beginning in the 1830s. Called the *Tanzimat*, these reforms were also a response to the diversity of the empire. They gave civil rights to minorities, including the guarantee for Armenian and Syrian Christians, Jews, and other millets (communities of different religious and ethnic minorities) to practice their religion. However, religious conservatives challenged these trends, insisting that the rise of secular education and other reforms were harming Ottoman society.”

    - The Wahhabi movement arose out of the Arabian Peninsula that denounced the Ottomans as dangerous religious innovators who were unfit to rule.
    - In 1742, conservative religious groups forced the closure of the Ottoman printing press (an Ottoman printing press was not permanently opened until 1784).
- The 18<sup>th</sup> century rise of Western Europe (particularly its control of international markets) led to the decline in the Ottoman Empire. Elshaikh explains:

“In a parallel development, Ottoman elites also began buying many global products and following trends from abroad. They collected foreign art, luxury goods, and foods. Personal spending likely rose across the different social classes. Foreign goods became more common.

As it had done in the past, the Ottoman state played a crucial role in this circulation of goods. Many of those living in the empire continued to be engaged in the production and distribution of food, raw materials, and other goods, in much the same way as Arabs had for centuries. The state did its best to ensure that state officials, military employees, and people living in the capital had access to what they needed. Silk Road trade networks had enriched the Ottomans for centuries. But new sea routes that bypassed Ottoman trade routes shifted the power away. This is not to say that regional trade networks ended during the eighteenth century, but the global sea networks that strengthened after the sixteenth century transformed the prestige and position of the Ottoman Empire. **With a reduction in overland trade in favor of trade along global networks and with newly established colonies in Asia, European power grew as Ottoman power faded.**"

- As long as the empire was expanding, they were able to finance their armies and bureaucratise with fresh resources extracted from newly conquered lands. When expansion slowed, ceased, or reversed, they faced the problem of supporting their institutions with limited resources.
  - Long, costly wars between the Ottomans and the Hapsburgs of Europe had exhausted their treasury. As early as 1589 the Ottomans tried to pay the Janissaries with debased coinage, provoking a mutiny.
  - European military was advancing so rapidly that the Ottomans could not keep up. Having not developed their own military industry, the empire was forced to buy their weapons from European powers. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Ottoman Navy was no longer building its own ships, opting to buy vessels from neighbouring shipyards.
- A problem emerged for the Ottomans concerning fighting amongst competing members of the ruling family all vying for power. Once fratricide was no longer an option, the Ottomans tried confining the prince's in the palace which had some dramatic negative effects.
  - Isolated, the princes did not have opportunities to gain experience in government, but were manipulated in various plots and intrigues by various factions maneuvering to bring a favourable candidate to power. This allowed for the emergence of bad sultans including Ibrahim the Crazy (1640-1648) who was eventually deposed and murdered for his high taxes and extravagant spending.

- However, Professor Rashid Khalid writes in *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine*:<sup>1</sup>

The much more rapid pace of transformation in the advanced countries of Western Europe and North America compared to the rest of the world during the modern industrial era led many outside observers, including some eminent scholars, to mistakenly claim that Middle Eastern societies, including Palestine, were stagnant and unchanging, or even “in decline.”<sup>7</sup> We now know from many indices that this was by no means the case: a growing body of solidly grounded historical work based on Ottoman, Palestinian, Israeli, and Western sources completely refutes these false notions.<sup>8</sup> However, recent scholarship on Palestine in

- In 1876 a group of radical dissidents from the Ottoman bureaucracy sized power in a coup, installing Abdul Hamid II as sultan (reigned 1876-1909). Convinced of the need to check the sultan’s power, the reformers persuaded the new sultan to accept a new constitution that limited his authority and established a representative government. Within a year the sultan suspended the constitution, dissolved parliament, exiled many of the reformers/liberals and executed others.



Sultan Abdul Hamid II

- For the next 30 years Sultan Abdul Hamid II ruled autocratically in an effort to rescue the empire from dismemberment by European powers. He continued to develop the army and administration, and he oversaw the formation of a police force, educational reforms, economic development, and the construction of railroads.
- Hamid II had many liberal opposition groups. Ironically, as the sultan encouraged educational reforms he ensured his bureaucrats and soldiers learned about modern science and technology, as well as European political, social and cultural traditions. Educated subjects became to believe that the biggest problem for the Ottoman Empire was the unchecked power of the sultan.

<sup>1</sup>Rashid Khalid, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine*, (Picador: 2020), 20.  
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- The *Young Turk Party* emerged in 1889 from exiled Ottomans living in Paris. The Young Turks promoted universal suffrage, equality before the law, freedom of religion, free public education, secularization of the state, and the emancipation of women.
- In 1908, the Young Turks inspired an army coup that forced Sultan Abdul Hamid II to restore parliament and the 1876 constitution. Hamid II was removed from power in 1908, and Mehmed V Rasid became sultan, but with no power. The Young Turk area had begun.
- When the First World War broke out, the Ottoman's joined the Central Powers (Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire).
  - Mehmed V died four months before the end of the First World War. He was succeeded by Mehmed VI (reigned 1918-1922), the last sultan of the Ottoman Empire.

Sources: Jerry H. Bentley and Herb F. Ziegler. *Traditions & Encounters*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 2006.  
 Rashid Khalid, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine*. Picador: 2020.

