Introduction

In marked contrast to the military and political successes of the 1300–1683 era, defeats and territorial withdrawals characterized this long eighteenth century, 1683–1798. The political structure continued to evolve steadily, taking new forms in a process that should be seen as transformation but not decline. Central rule continued in a new and more disguised fashion as negotiation more frequently than command came to assure obedience. Important changes occurred in the Ottoman economy as well: the circulation of goods began to increase; levels of personal consumption probably rose; and the world economy came to play an ever-larger role in the everyday lives of Ottoman subjects.

The wars of contraction, c. 1683–1798

On the international stage, military defeats and territorial contraction marked the era, when the imperial Ottoman state was much less successful than before. At the outset, it seems worthwhile to make several general points.

First, at bottom, the Ottoman defeats are as difficult to explain as the victories of earlier centuries. Sometime during the early sixteenth century, as the wealth of the New World poured into Europe, the military balance shifted away from the Ottomans; they lost their edge in military technology and using similar and then inferior weapons and tactics, battled European enemies. Moreover, the earlier military imbalance between offensive and defensive warfare in favor of the aggressor had worked to the Ottomans’ advantage, but now defenses became more sophisticated and vastly more expensive. Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, whose reign had seen so many successes, died before the walls of Szigetvar, poignantly symbolizing the difficulty of attacking fortified cities that had become an increasingly common feature of warfare. Further, Western economies could better afford the mounting costs of the new technologies and
defensive combat in part because of the vast infusion of wealth from
the New World. The story of Ottoman slippage and west European ascen-
dancy is vastly more complicated, of course, and is continued in the
subsequent chapters.

Second, during the eighteenth century, absolute monarchies emerged
in Europe that were growing more centralized than ever before. To a
certain extent, the Ottomans shared in this evolution but other states in
the world did not. The Iranian state weakened after a brief resurgence
in the earlier part of the century, collapsed, and failed to recover any
cohesive strength until the early twentieth century. Still further east, the
Moghul state and all of the rest of the Indian subcontinent fell under
French or British domination.

Third, the Ottoman defeats and territorial losses of the eighteenth cen-
tury were a very grim business but would have been still greater except
for the rivalries among west, east, and central European states. On a
number of occasions, European diplomats intervened in post-war ne-
gotiations with the Ottomans to prevent rivals from gaining too many
concessions, thus giving the defeated Ottomans a wedge they employed
to retain lands that otherwise would have been lost. Also, while it is easy
to think of the era as one of unmitigated disasters since there were so
many defeats and withdrawals, the force of Ottoman arms and diplo-
matic skills did win a number of successes, especially in the first half of the
period.

A century of military defeats began at Vienna in 1683 and ended with
Napoleon Bonaparte’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 (map 3). The events
immediately following the failed siege in 1683 which turned into a rout
were terrible and catastrophic for the Istanbul regime, and include the
loss of the key fortress of Belgrade and, in 1691, a military disaster at
Slankamen that was compounded by the battlefield death of the grand
vizier, Fazıl Mustafa. Elsewhere, the newly emergent Russian foe (the
Ottoman–Russian wars began in 1677) attacked the Crimea in 1689 and
captured the crucial port of Azov six years later. Yet another catastro-
phe occurred at Zenta, in 1697, at the hands of the Habsburg military
commander, Prince Eugene, of Savoy. The Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699
sealed these losses and began a new phase of Ottoman history. For the
first time, an Ottoman sovereign formally acknowledged his defeat and
the permanent loss of (rather than temporary withdrawal from) lands
conquered by his ancestors. Thus, the sultan surrendered all of Hun-
gary (except the Banat of Temesvár), as well as Transylvania, Croatia,
and Slovenia to the Habsburgs while yielding Dalmatia, the Morea, and
some Aegean islands to Venice and Podolia and the south Ukraine to
Poland. Russia, for its part, fought on until 1700 in order to again gain
Map 3: The Ottoman Empire, c. 1683–1800
Adapted from Halil İnalcık with Donald Quataert, eds., An economic and social history of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1914 (Cambridge, 1914), xxxvii.
Azov (which the Ottomans were to win and then lose again in 1736) and the regions north of the Dniester river.

Two decades later, the 1718 Treaty of Passarowitz ceded the Banat (and Belgrade again), about one-half of Serbia as well as Wallachia. Ottoman forces similarly were unsuccessful on the eastern front and, in a series of wars between 1723 and 1736, lost Azerbaijan and other lands on the Persian–Ottoman frontier. Exactly one decade later, in 1746, two centuries of war between the Ottomans and their Iranian-based rivals ended with the descent of the latter into political anarchy.

The agreement signed at Küçük Kaynarca in 1774 with the Romanovs, similar to the 1699 Karlowitz treaty, highlights the extent of the losses suffered during the eighteenth century. The 1768–1774 war, the first with Czarina Catherine the Great, included the annihilation of the Ottoman fleet in the Aegean Sea near Çeşme by Russian ships that had sailed from the Baltic Sea, through Gibraltar, and across the Mediterranean. In a sense, the vast indemnity paid was the least of the burdens imposed by the treaty. For it severed the tie between the Ottoman sultan and Crimean khan; the khans became formally independent, thus losing sultanic protection. This status left the Ottoman armies without the khan’s military forces that had been a mainstay during the eighteenth century, when they partially had filled the gap left by the decay of the Janissaries as a fighting unit (see below). Equally bad, the Ottomans also surrendered their monopolistic control over the Black Sea while giving up vast lands between the Dnieper and the Bug rivers, thereafter losing the north shore of the Black Sea. Other provisions of the treaty were to be of enormous consequence later on. Russia obtained the right both to build an Orthodox Church in Istanbul and protect those who worshiped there. Subsequently, this rather modest concession became the pretext under which Russia claimed the right to intercede on behalf of all Orthodox subjects of the sultan. In another provision of the treaty, Russia recognized the sultan as caliph of the Muslims of the Crimea. Later sultans, especially Abdülhamit II (1876–1909) expanded this caliphal claim to include not only all Ottoman subjects but also Muslims everywhere in the world (see below and chapter 6). Thus, as is evident, the 1774 Küçük Kaynarca treaty played a vital role in shaping subsequent internal and international events in the Ottoman world. The Treaty of Jassy ended another Ottoman–Russian war, that between 1787 and 1792, and acknowledged the Russian takeover of Georgia. Further, the Crimean khanate, left exposed by the 1774 treaty, now was formally annexed by the Czarist state.

Bonaparte’s motives for invading Egypt in 1798 long have been debated by historians. Was he on the road to British India, or merely blocking
Britain’s path to the future jewel in its crown? Or, as his unsuccessful march north into Palestine seems to suggest, was he seeking to replace the Ottoman Empire with his own? Regardless, the invasion marked the end of Ottoman domination of this vital and rich province along the Nile and its emergence as a separate state under Muhammad Ali Pasha and his descendants. Henceforth, Ottoman–Egyptian relations fluctuated enormously. Muhammad Ali Pasha nearly overthrew the Ottoman state during his lifetime (d. 1848), but his successors kept close ties with their nominal overlords. Nevertheless, during the nineteenth century, except for a tribute payment, Egyptian revenues no longer were at the disposal of Istanbul.

While a review of these battles, campaigns, and treaties makes apparent the pace and depth of the Ottoman defeats, the process was not quite so clear at the time. There were a number of important victories, at least during the first half of the eighteenth century. For example, although Belgrade fell just after the 1683 siege, the Ottomans recaptured it, along with Bulgaria, Serbia, and Transylvania, in their counter-offensives during 1689 and 1690. In fact Belgrade reverted to the sultan’s rule at least three times and remained in Ottoman hands until the early nineteenth century. In 1711, to give another example, an Ottoman army completely surrounded the forces of Czar Peter the Great at the Pruth river on the Moldavian border, forcing him to abandon all of his recent conquests. Several years later, the Ottomans regained the lost fortress of Azov on the Black Sea. In a 1714–1718 war with Venice, the Istanbul regime regained the Morea and retained it for more than a century, until the Greek war of independence. Ottoman forces won other important victories in 1737, against both Austrians and Russians. For several reasons, including French mediation and Habsburg fears of Russian success, the Ottomans, in the 1739 peace of Belgrade, regained all that they had surrendered to the Habsburgs in the earlier Treaty of Passarowitz. In the same year, they again obtained Azov from the Russians who withdrew all commercial and war ships from the Black Sea and also pulled out of Wallachia. Even after the disasters of the war that ended at Küçük Kaynarca, the Ottomans won some victories, compelling Russia to withdraw again from the principalities (and from the Caucasus). Catherine did so again in 1792 when she also agreed to withdraw from ports at the mouth of the Danube.

**State economic policies**

Historians have hotly debated the nature and role of state policies in Ottoman economic change. Some say that in the eighteenth century the state was too controlling, while others argue the opposite. Those in the
latter group assert that eighteenth-century regimes in Europe adopted mercantilistic policies that controlled the flow of goods and materials within and across their borders, allowing them to shape the world market in their favor and to become powerful. But, they say, the Ottoman state failed to do so in sufficient measure and, for this reason, it declined in power.

As in the past, the eighteenth-century Ottoman state claimed the right to command and move about economic resources as it deemed necessary. Experience, however, had shown the dangers of such intervention and so, after c. 1600, the state did so only selectively. But, when it did – to provide foodstuffs, raw materials, and manufactured goods for the palace, other state elites, the military, and the inhabitants of the capital city – these interventions powerfully affected producers and consumers. The effects usually were doubly disruptive and negative since the state often paid below-market prices for the goods and, often drained away all or most of a commodity, thus creating scarcities. Crops of entire areas or the manufacturing output of certain guilds were commandeered for particular purposes, for example, to supply the royal household or marching armies. On the Balkan front during the later eighteenth century, for example, nearby regions supplied the army with grain while other supplies, such as rice, coffee, and biscuits flowed from more distant Egypt and Cyprus. The state also devoted considerable energies to the feeding of the population of Istanbul, not from charitable concern but rather fear that food shortages would provoke political unrest. And so innumerable regulations dictated the transport of wheat and sheep to fill the tables of the capital’s enormous population.

Whether such policies strangled the economy during the late eighteenth-century era of wartime crisis and had a decisively negative impact on Ottoman economic development, or whether the state foundered because it was not sufficiently rigorous and mercantilist, cannot be known for certain. It is clear, however, that both sides of the debate give the state more power than it actually had. Indeed, global market forces may have affected the eighteenth-century Ottoman economy more powerfully than state policies. It thus seems more useful to look to other factors for a fuller understanding of Ottoman economic change (see chapter 7). More confidently, we can assert that, after c. 1850 (see chapter 4), the state moved away from such so-called provisioning policies and market forces played a greater role than before.

Intra-elite political life at the imperial center

During the eighteenth century, the sultan most often possessed symbolic power only, confirming changes or actions initiated by others in political
The Ottoman Empire, 1683–1798

life. Although the end of the so-called “rule of the harem” closed a famous version of female political control, elite women remained powerful. The dynasty continued to marry its daughters to ranking officials as a means of forging alliances and maintaining authority. Such support may have become even more important as power shifted out of the palace. Since at least 1656, when Sultan Mehmet IV gave over his executive powers to Grand Vizier Köprülü Mehmet Pasha, political rule had rested in the households of viziers and pashas. Also, warrior skills fell out of fashion in favor of administrative and financial skills as the exploitation of existing resources rather than acquisition of new lands became the major sources of state revenues. Hence, the vizier and pasha households furnished most office appointees, providing the now crucial financial and administrative training, and were often bound to the palace through the marriages of Ottoman princesses. Unlike the “slaves of the sultan” who had ruled earlier, these male and female elites did not remain aloof from society but were involved in its economic life through their control of pious foundations and lifetime tax farms and partnerships with merchants. The entourages of these viziers and pashas served as recruiting grounds for the new elites, providing them with employment, protection, training, and the right contacts. By the end of the seventeenth century, most domestic and foreign policy matters rested in these households.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, Sultan Mustafa II un成功fully sought to overturn this trend and reconcentrate power in his own hands and that of the palace and the military. Desperately trying to regain power and reposition himself in the political center, Mustafa II somewhat shockingly confirmed hereditary rights to timars, the financial backbone of a cavalry that already was militarily obsolete. But his coup attempt, the so-called “Edirne Event” (Edirne Vakası) of 1703, failed. Thereafter the sultan’s powers and stature were so reduced that he was required to seek the advice of “interested parties” and heed their counsel. This set of events sealed the ascendancy of the vizier–pasha households and of their allies within the religious scholarly community, the ulema, and set the tone for eighteenth-century politics at the center. And so, at a moment when many continental European states were concentrating power in the hands of the monarch, the Ottoman political structure evolved in a different direction, taking power out of the ruler’s hands.

As the sultans lost out in the struggle for domestic political supremacy, they sought new tools and techniques for maintaining their political presence. Beginning in the early eighteenth century, for example, the central state reorganized the pilgrimage routes to the Holy Cities in an effort to enhance its own legitimacy and consolidate power (see chapter 6). (It is, however, unclear if the sultan or other figures at the center initiated this action.) Developments during the so-called Tulip Period (1718–30)
more certainly illustrate the subtle means that sultans used to prop up their legitimacy. This Tulip Period, a time of extraordinary experimentation in Ottoman history, was so named by a twentieth-century historian after its frequent tulip breeding competitions. The tulip symbolized both conspicuous consumption and cross-cultural borrowings since it was an item of exchange between the Ottoman Empire, west Europe, and east Asia. Sultan Ahmet III and his Grand Vizier Ibrahim Pasha (married to Fatma, the Sultan’s daughter), as part of their effort to negotiate power, employed the weapon of consumption to dominate the Istanbul elites. Like the court of King Louis XIV at Versailles, that of the Tulip Period was one of sumptuous consumption – in the Ottoman case not only of tulips but also art, cooking, luxury goods, clothing, and the building of pleasure palaces. With this new tool – the consumption of goods – the sultan and grand vizier sought to control the vizier and pasha households in the manner of King Louis, who compelled nobles to live at the Versailles seat of power and join in financially ruinous balls and banquets. Sultan Ahmet and Ibrahim Pasha tried to lead the Istanbul elites in consumption, establishing themselves at the social center as models for emulation. By leading in consumption, they sought to enhance their political status and legitimacy as well.

Later in the eighteenth century, other sultans frequently used clothing laws in a similar effort to maintain or enhance legitimacy and power. Clothing laws – a standard feature of Ottoman and other pre-modern societies – stipulated the dress, of both body and head, that persons of different ranks, religions, and occupations should wear. For example, Muslims were told that only they could wear certain colors and fabrics that were forbidden to Christians and Jews who, for their part, were ordered to wear other colors and materials. By enacting or enforcing clothing laws, or appearing to do so, sultans presented themselves as guardians of the boundaries differentiating their subjects, as the enforcers of morality, order, and justice. Through these laws, the rulers acted to place themselves as arbitrators in the jostlings for social place, seeking to reinforce their legitimacy as sovereigns, at a time when they neither commanded armies nor actually led the bureaucracy (see also chapter 8).

**Elite–popular struggles in Istanbul**

At the political center and in other Ottoman cities were contests not only within the elites for political domination but also between the elites and the popular masses. In this struggle the famed Janissary corps played a vital role. As seen above, the Janissaries once had been an effective military force that fought at the center of armies and served as urban garrisons.
By the eighteenth century, they had become militarily ineffectual but still went to war. Their arms and training had deteriorated so sharply that the Crimean Tatars and other provincial military forces had replaced them as the fighting center of the army. The discipline and rigorous training marking this once elite fire-armed infantry had disappeared by 1700, transforming the corps from the terror of its foreign foes to the terror of the sultans. Already in the later sixteenth century, they had insulted the corpse of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent and denied his son Selim access to the throne until appropriate gifts of money had been offered. Their proximity to the sultan – serving as his bodyguards – and elite military status placed them in the tempting role of kingmakers, with a ready ability to make and unmake rulers.

Certainly during the eighteenth century if not before, the Janissaries’ primary identity shifted from that of soldiers to civilian wage earners. Their ability to live on their military salaries faded as the mounting costs of wars prevented the state from paying Janissary salaries that could keep up with inflation. As garrisons, they physically were part of the urban fabric. To counteract declining real wages, members of the garrisons developed economic connections with the people they were guarding and supervising in Istanbul and other important cities including Belgrade, Sofia, Cairo, Damascus, and points in between. There they became butchers, bakers, boatmen, porters, and worked in a number of artisanal crafts; many owned coffee houses. By the eighteenth century, Janissaries either themselves had entered these trades and businesses or had become mafia-like chieftains protecting trades for a fee. They thus came to represent the interests of the urban productive classes, including corporate guild privilege and economic protectionist policies, and were part and parcel of the urban crowd. And yet their membership in the Janissary corps meant that they were part of the elites. And further, their commander, the agha of the Janissaries, administratively was an important man, sitting on the highest councils of state. As they increasingly became part of the urban economy, the Janissaries began to pass on their elite status. Earlier prohibitions against marriage and living outside the barracks fell away and gradually the sons of city-dwelling Janissaries replaced the peasant boys of the devşirme recruitment (the last devşirme levy was in 1703). By the early eighteenth century, this fire-armed infantry had become hereditary and urban in origin, a position passed from fathers to sons who were Muslim not Christian by birth.

The elite-popular identity of the Janissaries – born among the popular classes and yet part of and linked to the elites – gave them an important role in domestic politics. They repeatedly made and unmade sultans, appointing or toppling grand viziers and other high officials, sometimes
as part of intra-elite quarrels but often on behalf of the popular classes. Until their annihilation in 1826, they often served as ramparts against elite tyrannies and a popular militia defending the interests of the people. If we consider them in this role rather than as fallen angels – corrupted elite soldiers and elements of the state apparatus run amok – then the eighteenth century becomes a golden age of popular politics in many Ottoman cities when the voice of the street, orchestrated by the Janissaries, was greater than ever before or since in Ottoman history.

**Political life in the provinces**

The shifting locus of political power in the center – from the sultans to sultanic households to the households of viziers and pashas to the streets – was paralleled by important transformations in the political life of the provinces. Overall, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, provincial political power seemed to operate more autonomously of control from the capital. Nearly everywhere the central state became *visibly* less important and local notable families more so in the everyday lives of most persons. Whole sections of the empire fell under the political domination of provincial notable families. For example, the families of the Karaosmanoğlu, Çapanoğlu, and Canıklı Ali Paşaoğlu respectively dominated the economic and political affairs of west, central, and north-east Anatolia; in the Balkan lands, Ali Pasha of Janina ruled Epirus, while Osman Pasvanoğlu of Vidin controlled the lower Danube from Belgrade to the sea. And, in the Arab provinces, the family of Süleyman the Great ruled Baghdad for the entire eighteenth century (1704–1831) as did the Jalili family in Mosul, while powerful men such as Ali Bey dominated Egypt.

These provincial notables can be placed in three groups, each reflecting a different social context. The first group descended from persons who had come to an area as centrally appointed officials and subsequently put down local roots, a marked violation of central state regulations to the contrary. Central control, indeed, had never been as extensive or thorough as the state’s own declarations had suggested. Officials did circulate from appointment to appointment, but the presence of careful land surveys and lists of rotating officials notwithstanding, not as often or regularly as the state would have preferred. Nonetheless, such appointees to positions of provincial authority, whether governors or timar holders, remained in office for shorter periods in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and longer periods during the eighteenth century. That is, by comparison with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the circulation of centrally appointed officials in the provinces slowed considerably during
the eighteenth century. Through negotiations with the center, these individuals gained the legal right to stay. Thus, for example, the al Azm family in Damascus and the Jalili family in Mosul had risen in Ottoman service as governors while, from lower-ranking posts, so had the Karaosmanoğlu dynasty in western Anatolia. In each case family members remained in formal positions of provincial power for several generations and longer.

The second group consisted of prominent notables whose families had been among the local elites of an area before the Ottoman period. In some cases the sultans had recognized their status and power at the moment of incorporation, for example, as they did with many great landholding families in Bosnia. Historians likely have underestimated the retention of local political power by such pre-Ottoman elite groups, and more of these families played an important role in the subsequent Ottoman centuries than has been credited. In another pattern, existing elite groups who originally were stripped of power gradually re-acquired political control and recognition by the state.

The third group – that seems to have existed only in the Arab provinces of the empire – consisted of slave soldiers, Mamluks, whose origins went back to medieval Islamic times. Mamluks, for example, had governed Egypt for centuries, annually importing several thousands of slaves, until their overthrow by the Ottomans in 1516–1517. During the Ottoman era, a Mamluk typically was born outside the region, enslaved through war or raids, and transported into the Ottoman world. Governors or military commanders then bought the slave in regional or local slave markets, brought him into the household as a military slave or apprentice and trained him in the administrative and military arts. Manumitted at some point in the training process, the Mamluk continued to serve the master, rose to local pre-eminence and eventually set up his own household, which he staffed through slave purchases, thus perpetuating the system. The powerful Ahmet Jezzar Pasha who ruled Sidon and Acre (1785–1805) in the Lebanon–Palestine region, and Süleyman the Great at Baghdad, each began as a Mamluk in the service of Ali Bey in Egypt.

The evolution of rule by local notables in the areas of Moldavia and Wallachia – modern-day Rumania–was unique. Local princes, at least nominally selected by the regional nobility, had served there as the “slaves and tribute payers” of the sultans, that is, as tribute-paying vassals, until after 1711, when they were removed because they had offered help to Czar Peter during his Pruth campaign. In their stead, the capital appointed powerful and rich members of the Greek Orthodox community, who lived in the so-called Fener/Phanar district of the capital. For the remainder of the century and, in fact, until the Greek war of independence, these Phanariotes ruled the two principalities with full autonomy in exchange
for tribute payments. They implemented the most brutal and oppressive rule seen in the Ottoman world, one that closely approximated serfdom. They were centrally appointed (without even nominal input from regional nobles) but ran the principalities with a totally free hand, thus appearing as exceptions in the picture being offered here.

In general, whether these provincial notables originated from central appointees, pre-Ottoman elites, or Mamluks, they built and maintained intimate ties with the local religious scholarly community of the ulema, as well as merchants and landholders. In the case of the first two notable groups – the descendants of central appointees or pre-Ottoman elites – the marriage of women from notable families was part of their process of local power accumulation. In addition, these elite women held considerable properties and tax farms and administered pious foundations in their own names. They thus wielded considerable personal power that also could be used by the family in its negotiations with local elites or with the Ottoman center.

It seems important to stress that a notable family’s establishment of authority in an area usually was not a rebellion against Ottoman central authority. Rather, local dynasts recognized the sultan and central authority in general, forwarded some taxes to the center and sent troops for imperial wars – actions that reflected the complex and fascinating interaction of mutual need existing between province and center in the eighteenth-century Ottoman world. Indeed, since the late seventeenth century, the central state had been depending on provincial notables for both the recruiting and provisioning of troops. As seen, this relationship gave considerable leverage and bargaining power to the local elites. On the other hand, the notables despatched provincial troops because they needed the central state for legitimation and, as we now shall see, their economic wellbeing as well.

Beginning in 1695, the central state developed lifetime tax farms (malikanе), a grant of the right to collect the taxes of an area in exchange for cash payments to the treasury. Very quickly, by 1703, these lifetime tax farms had spread and came into wide use in the Balkan, Anatolian, and Arab provinces alike. Malikanе are crucial for understanding how the central state maintained some control in the provinces, long after its imperial military troops had vanished from the area. Vizier and pasha households in the capital controlled the auctions of the lifetime tax farms, letting and subletting them to the local elites of the various provincial areas. In this way the Istanbul elites maintained a shared financial interest with notable families while, since they could remove this lucrative privilege, exercising control over them. Thus, in any test of power, notable families ultimately either yielded or risked losing their lifetime tax farms. The existence of
these lifetime tax farm links between the capital and the provinces thus helps to explain why the notable groups in fact usually submitted and sent troops when requested.

This pattern of negotiation, mutual recognition, and control predominated between c. 1700 and 1768 but was shaken during the remainder of the eighteenth century. The fighting in the Russo-Ottoman wars of 1768–1774 and 1787–1792 caused massive disruptions in the battle zones and everywhere imposed enormous manpower and financial strains. In this situation, the notables’ knowledge of and access to local resources became more important than ever, while the wartime chaos gave them greater latitude of action. Thus, it seems, the *malikane* system partly disintegrated, weakening provincial ties to the center. In this chaotic period, notables such as Jezzar Pasha and the Karaosmanoğlu pursued foreign policies apart from the central state, while others such as Ali Pasha of Janina and Osman Pasvanoğlu undertook separate military campaigns, sometimes against other notables and sometimes against the Russians. Some historians have considered these actions de facto efforts to break away from Ottoman suzerainty. But probably they were not, as the following suggests.

In 1808, one of the notables briefly served as grand vizier, an event that marks the power of provincial groups during this crisis period. Bayraktar Mustafa Pasha, from the Bulgarian areas along the Danube, marched on the imperial capital in an unsuccessful effort to rescue the sultan from his Janissary enemies. Once in Istanbul, he convened an assembly that included many powerful notables from the Balkan and Anatolian provinces. In the ensuing assembly, the notables negotiated with the sultan over the respective rights and power of the contending parties. A formal written document (sened-i ittifak) was prepared but, in the end, went unsigned by the sultan and most of the notables. Nonetheless, the incident illustrates the evolution of the Ottoman state to that point. On the one hand, the sultan’s need for a document ratifying the notables’ willingness to obey him suggests how independent they had become in the context of the late eighteenth-century crisis. On the other hand, the fact that the notables did affirm their support of the sultan, when they collectively held the balance of military power over the central state, suggests the continuing importance of the dynasty in economic and political life, even when the sultanate and central state were very weak. The debate over this 1808 agreement underscores the commitment of provincial notables and central elites to their ongoing reciprocal and mutually profitable relationship. The center badly needed notables’ monies, troops, and other services. The notables for their part relied on the central state and the sultan to arbitrate among the provincial elites’ competing claims by
conferring formal recognition of their political power and access to official revenue sources. These were “local Ottomans” and, in however disguised a manner, sought to be and were part of an Ottoman system.

Religious solutions to political and military weakness

Unlike the notables mentioned so far, the leaders of the Wahhabi movement (and the Saudi dynasty connected to it) categorically rejected the legitimacy of Ottoman rule. The rationale of the Wahhabi emergence must be located in the larger issue of how the non-European world, in this case areas with substantial Muslim populations, sought to deal with the terrible losses being inflicted on them. Muslim states everywhere – in North Africa, the Ottoman lands, Iran, and India – were on the defensive, losing populations and revenues in repeatedly unsuccessful confrontations with one or another European power.

During the eighteenth and subsequent centuries, writers posed the problem of weakness in two distinctly different ways and thus proposed totally dissimilar solutions. On the one hand, the first group viewed the crisis of defeat as a technical problem that could be solved by technical means. Thus, the Ottomans were weak because of technological inferiority to the Europeans. The solution therefore focused on adoption of the best military technology available, as sultans had in the past. In the eighteenth century, this meant borrowing from Europe. And so European military officers were summoned to the capital city; for example, Baron de Tott served from 1755 to 1776 in order to create a modern, rapid-fire artillery corps. Also, the Ottoman Grand Admiral Gazi Hasan Pasha sought to rebuild the fleet according to the highest and most modern standards.

On the other hand, a series of religious activists considered the crisis of defeat as a religious and moral problem, to be resolved through moral reform. This solution was presented more or less simultaneously by the Tijaniyya Sufi order in North Africa, the Wahhabis in Arabia and Shah Waliullah of Delhi on the Indian subcontinent. The three movements each offered a religious answer to the problem posed by the weakness of Islamic states in the world. The Wahhabi movement of concern here aimed to revive society by eliminating all of the allegedly un-Islamic practices that had crept in since the time of the Prophet Muhammad. In central Arabia, Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab (1703–1792) preached the need to return to the principles of early Islam as understood by the great medieval jurist ibn Hanbal. Muslims, Abdul Wahhab said, had forgotten the faith that God revealed to the Prophet.
For the Ottomans, this message posed grave risks. Early in the eighteenth century, they already had lost control of parts of the Arabian peninsula, the Yemen and Hadramaut. Followers of Abdul Wahhab then seized control of much of the rest of Arabia and raided deep into Iraq, thus threatening Ottoman sovereignty in those locations. But this Wahhabi threat was far worse than mere territorial occupation. Abdul Wahhab preached that the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina, under Ottoman protection, were filled with abominations and un-Islamic shrines. These cities, as well as the Islam of the Ottomans, were corrupt, he asserted, and needed cleansing. To do so, Abdul Wahhab allied himself with Muhammad ibn Saud, whose descendants would come to lead the Wahhabi movement, seize, sack, and purify the Holy Cities in 1803 and, more than a century later, found the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Thus, unlike most other provincial leaders, the Wahhabis denied the legitimacy of the Ottoman regime and sought to replace it with their own reformed Islamic state. And they would base their own legitimacy on these teachings and on their control of Mecca and Medina.

This fundamental challenge to Ottoman legitimacy did not go unanswered. At about the same time that Abdul Wahhab began preaching, the central government began placing greater emphasis on protecting the Holy Places and those making the sacred pilgrimage. And from the later eighteenth century the sultans increasingly articulated their role as caliph, leader of Muslims everywhere. Thus, Wahhabi successes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries helped trigger Ottoman appropriation of these religious symbols (see chapter 6).

**Suggested bibliography**

Entries marked with a * designate recommended readings for new students of the subject.


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Introduction

The present chapter focuses on international relations and addresses two complementary aspects of the place of the Ottoman Empire in the wider international community. Thus, it explores the empire’s relations with other states, empires, and nations, as well as its diplomatic strategies. The chapter offers a distinctive commentary on the global order through the Ottoman perspective. It first focuses on the changing place of the Ottoman empire in the international order, 1700–1922, as it declined from first- to second-rank status. It then examines the changing diplomatic tools employed in dealing with other states, particularly the shift from occasional to continuous methods of diplomacy. Another diplomatic tool, the caliphate, gave the Ottoman state a special religious instrument that it increasingly used for secular state purposes from the eighteenth century onwards. And finally, the chapter provides an overview of Ottoman relations with Europe, central Asia, India, and North Africa.

The Ottoman Empire in the international order, 1700–1922

The place of the Ottoman state and any political system in the international order is a function of many factors, sometimes demographic and economic power. A large and densely settled population is not always a certain barometer of political importance: consider the vast power of eighteenth-century Prussia with its tiny population and the political weakness of nineteenth-century China, the world’s most populous country at the time. In the Ottoman case, a relative decline in the global importance of its population paralleled its fading international political importance. Between 1600 and 1800, the Ottoman population slipped from being one-sixth that of western Europe to only one-tenth and from about one-eighth to one-twelfth that of China. Its relative economic importance fell even more dramatically. Ironically, the Ottomans’ peak of political
power precisely coincided with the conquest of the New World by western Europe. This event clearly placed Europe on a separate trajectory from the rest of the world and shifted the balance of power westward from the Mediterranean world to the Atlantic economies.

Globally speaking, the Ottoman state in 1500 was one of the most powerful in the world, surpassed perhaps only by China. Then the “Terror of the World,” the Ottoman Empire played a crucial role in the lives and deaths of many, quite different, states. The Ottoman Empire destroyed or outlasted the Mamluks of Egypt, the Safavid of the Iranian plateau and the Venetian Republic. It played a vital, formative role (see chapter 1) in the lifecycles of the Vienna Habsburgs and the Russian Romanovs until all three dynastic states vanished in the early twentieth century. The Ottoman state helped to define the kingship of Philip II of the Spanish Habsburgs as a crusading enterprise while exercising a less central but still key influence on the international politics of France. For the English monarchy, the distant Ottoman state was a more marginal concern.

By the eighteenth century, however, the “Terror” had become the Sick Man of Europe. Even so, as we shall see, the Ottomans remained high on the international agendas of Britain, France, Russia, Vienna, and the new states of Italy and Germany during the nineteenth century. In addition, the Ottomans were significant to the interests of many states in the Indian subcontinent, central Asia as well as North Africa. Between the Ottomans and their neighbors, from early times, there existed quite permeable frontiers with habitual diplomatic, social, cultural, and economic exchanges across them. For example, merchants with their goods moved routinely in both directions across these boundaries and the quantities exchanged became increasingly large over time (see chapter 7). European artists, architects, scientists, and soldiers of fortune frequented the Ottoman capital in search of employ in the court of the sultan and ranking notables. To give a fifteenth-century example of these cultural exchanges, recall the fine portrait of Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror by the Renaissance Venetian painter, Gentile Bellini. Three centuries later, Mozart captured this fluidity well in his opera, Escape from the Seraglio. His hero, Belmonte, disguised himself as a Spanish architect in order to enter the sultan’s palace and find his lost beloved. To the composer’s Vienna audiences, west Europeans in Istanbul were a familiar image. Istanbul, Vienna, Rome, and Paris all were attractive destinations for those seeking work and favor in the courts of the great.

Diplomatic activity is another measure of frequent exchanges across frontiers. Emissaries, on missions of greater and briefer durations and importance, commonly crossed the Ottoman frontiers in both directions. During the sixteenth century, for example, representatives of the sultans
and of the French and Hapsburg rulers visited one another’s courts to seek advantage, redress grievances and negotiate possibilities of peace and war. Two centuries later, we can count the number of diplomatic exchanges as an indicator of the tempo and pace of the cross-frontier contacts in the centuries preceding continuous, “modern” diplomacy. Thus, between 1703 and 1774, the Ottomans signed sixty-eight recorded treaties or agreements with other sovereign entities, each requiring at least a single diplomatic mission in one direction or the other. Hence, during the reign of Sultan Ahmet III (1703–1730), twenty-nine treaties or agreements were signed, including three with the Nogai Tatars and one with Iran, while Sultan Mahmut I (1730–1754) signed thirty agreements, including four with Iran and two with the Dey of Algiers (a nominal vassal of the sultan). Thus, taking the eighteenth century as our example, there clearly were frequent diplomatic contacts between the Ottoman Empire and the wider world prior to the emergence of modern diplomacy.

From occasional to continuous methods of diplomacy

A major, worldwide shift took place in the conduct of diplomacy, beginning in the Italian peninsula during the Renaissance period. While in many respects the Ottoman state participated in the changes in diplomacy from an early date, the turning point probably did not occur until the nineteenth century, when patterns and trends that had been evolving slowly came together. In sum, Ottoman diplomacy became continuous only at a relatively late date.

In the more distant past, diplomacy fairly could be characterized as ad hoc, intermittent, non-continuous, and personally highly dangerous. Seeking to conduct negotiations for a specific purpose, a ruler (in this case the sultan) assembled a specially formed mission, usually consisting of trusted government servants. Gathering the individuals together, the ruler issued directives and letters of introduction as well as the missives to be delivered. The emissaries went on their journey, arrived at the foreign court, negotiated, and returned with the results. When the group left the foreign court, the diplomatic contact between the two states ended. Thus diplomacy between states functioned only sporadically, during the weeks and months of these embassies. To personalize this pattern, consider the career of Ahmet Resmi Efendi (1700–1783). He began state service as a clerk and, after twenty-five years, was sent on a four-month mission to Vienna, on the occasion of the accession of Sultan Mustafa III. His visit ended in 1758, and he returned to Istanbul where he entered the financial offices of the state. He is somewhat unusual in that he went on more than one mission for his ruler. Thus, in 1764–1765, he traveled to Berlin,
unsuccessfully offering Frederick the Great an alliance with the Ottoman state. This type of diplomacy personally was highly risky and could result in imprisonment and even execution (but not for Ahmet Resmi). While such methods of diplomacy in general provided no principles of protection for emissaries, those to the Ottoman court received some because the Prophet Muhammad’s behavior allegedly provided the precedent for the protection of persons sent on diplomatic missions. Still, diplomats sent to Istanbul were held responsible for their sovereign’s behavior and many ended up in the Seven Towers prison (until Selim III, 1789–1807, halted the practice).

During the period of so-called “pre-modern” international relations, the Ottoman state generally employed unilateral diplomacy, that is, at the will of the sultan. There are many examples regarding Venice, the Hapsburg Empire, and Poland in which the sultan unilaterally granted peace or trade concessions at his own discretion. Such unilateral actions were standard practices in “pre-modern” diplomacy; they also can be understood to reflect the Ottoman Empire’s power at the time. And yet, Ottoman diplomacy sometimes possessed a certain bilateral quality. Back in the sixteenth century, for example, Süleyman the Magnificent treated King Francis I of France as an equal, addressing him with the title of “padishah.” Also, the Ottomans granted certain reciprocal rights in peace settlements that lent them a bilateral character, dependent on the continuing consent of both the Ottoman ruler and the other party, whether it be the Habsburg emperor or the Venetian Senate.

In “pre-modern” diplomacy, a condition of war between nations was assumed to prevail unless specifically stated otherwise. There was no recognized condition of peace, only halts in the fighting. Sultans therefore felt at liberty to resume fighting at will and without warning. In the Ottoman world, this notion of permanent war found its theoretical justification in the Islamic division of the world between the House of War and the House of Islam. It needs to be stressed that the same notion of permanent war prevailed elsewhere, for example, in China and Europe, where it received different legal justifications. Until 1711, agreements to end fighting with European states were limited to one, two, five, seven, eight, twenty, or twenty-five years of peace. Eternal peace first appeared in the 1711 Treaty of Pruth, but the 1739 Peace of Belgrade with Vienna relapsed to the earlier system and limited the peace to twenty-seven moon years.

The so-called capitulations played a vital role in Ottoman international relations, governing the treatment of foreigners who happened to be residing, for however long, within the sultanic domains. The concept of capitulations, based on the idea that each state possessed its own laws
too exalted for others to enjoy, was not uniquely Ottoman, and prevailed elsewhere in the world, for example in China. Hence, only Ottoman subjects normally could benefit from Ottoman law. The ruler granted capitulations to foreigners in a unilateral, non-reciprocal, manner. Although Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent usually is credited with initiating the practice, recent scholarship suggests that negotiations during his reign were not completed and it was his son Selim II who likely granted the first capitulations, to France, in 1569. In a unilateral act of generosity, friendship, and favor, and because the sultan wanted or needed certain commodities, he allowed the French king’s subjects to travel in the Ottoman lands under the king’s own laws, outside of the sultan’s legal and fiscal jurisdiction. This act, intended to benefit the Ottoman state, lapsed on the death of the sultan granting it. (Their limited character faded in 1740 when, in gratitude for diplomatic aid, capitulations to the French were made permanent.) A capitulation meant that all subjects of a foreign monarch and citizens of republics such as Venice remained under the laws of their own king or republic once the capitulatory favor had been granted. Otherwise, foreigners inside the empire had no legal protection. Persons with capitulatory status also enjoyed full exemption from Ottoman taxes and customs duties. Not surprisingly, capitulations proved popular and were requested by other Western states, especially England and Holland. Harmless enough in the sixteenth-century era of Ottoman power, they came to dangerously undermine its sovereignty later on.

As the Ottoman Empire weakened, European states twisted the capitulations into something they had never been intended to be. In the sixteenth century, only small numbers of merchants obtained these legal and tax immunities. By the eighteenth century, however, large numbers of foreigners within the empire advantageously did business thanks to these tax exempting privileges. Still worse, many Ottoman non-Muslim subjects obtained certificates (berats), granting them the tax privileges and benefits of Europeans who had capitulatory status, including exemption from the jurisdiction of the Ottoman courts. Again and again, Ottoman policy-makers sought to eliminate the capitulatory regime and its abuses, but failed to do so because of European opposition. Finally, during World War I, and over the protests of its German ally, the Young Turk leaders unilaterally suspended the capitulations. These finally were abolished in the Turkish Republic in 1923 but continued in Egypt until the late 1930s.

“Modern diplomacy,” a different form of regulating relations among states and of conducting international relations, had emerged during the late Renaissance as a way of dealing with the incessant warfare of the many principalities in the Italian peninsula. From there, modern diplomacy spread to west and central Europe by the time of the Peace of Westphalia
in 1648 and thereafter to the rest of the world. This mode of inter-state relations and diplomacy is continuous and reciprocal and rests on notions of reciprocity, extraterritoriality, and equality of sovereignty: no matter how weak or strong, each state is equal to the next when they meet on matters of international relations. The emergence of modern diplomacy coincided, more or less, with the decline in Ottoman military power and, in the later centuries, became an important tool in the Ottoman arsenal of survival.

During the negotiations for the Karlowitz treaty in 1699 and again in 1730, the Ottomans accepted French mediation on their behalf. By the late eighteenth century, Ottoman policy-makers not only accepted but actively sought mediation as well as defensive treaties of alliance. Examples include the 1798 Russian, British, and Ottoman alliance against Bonaparte, as well the 1799 tripartite defensive alliance with Britain and France. Until the nineteenth century, however, permanent diplomacy remained unidirectional as west, central, and east European states, but not the Ottoman, sent resident legations. The Istanbul government accepted European diplomats (whose reports back home are a marvelous source of Ottoman history) virtually from the time that resident missions were first developed in Europe. This refusal to send permanent emissaries may have reflected the older attitude, pre-dating permanent embassies, that only weaker princes should send a standing representative, not rulers of more powerful states. In any event, for a long time the Ottomans did not feel they needed permanent representation abroad. As seen above, reciprocity long had been present in Ottoman diplomacy and often existed on an ad hoc basis. For example, when an Ottoman subject was poorly treated in a state to which capitulatory privileges had been granted, there may have been consequences. More specifically, following the signature of the 1774 Küçük Kaynarca treaty, emissaries from the two sides traveled to their adversaries’ capital conveying letters ratifying the treaty.

During the eighteenth century, as in the past, the Ottoman court treated foreign ambassadors as guests, paying their expenses and assigning them escort officers. This behavior has been interpreted as a refusal to recognize some aspects of the new state system, saying these guests were present by invitation and on sufferance but not by right. If so, the early eighteenth-century French government also was guilty of the same reluctance since the French court in 1720 paid for the transportation and the entire six-month stay of the Ottoman emissary to Paris, one Yirmisekiz Çelebi.

Sultan Selim III is credited for initiating reciprocal and continuous relations. Beginning in 1793, he established a permanent embassy in London
and counterparts in Paris, Vienna, and Berlin within a few years. He also appointed consuls to look after commercial interests (such consulates apparently already had existed in different places after 1725). For a variety of reasons, Sultan Selim’s efforts failed and diplomatic service at the ambassadorial (but perhaps not the consular) level was suspended in the 1820s.

The “modern” Ottoman diplomatic service began taking its definitive shape in 1821. In their dealings with foreigners, the Ottoman rulers had been dependent on translators, the so-called dragomans. These dragomans mainly were recruited from the Ottoman Greek community, which possessed considerable multilingual skills because substantial Greek trading communities did business in the Mediterranean, Black Sea, Atlantic, and Indian Ocean worlds. To a lesser extent, other diaspora communities with international commercial links, notably the Armenian, possessed similar language capabilities and supplied dragomans. With the Greek war of independence, the loyalty of Ottoman Greeks generally became suspect. The Greek Patriarch of Constantinople was hung and the Greek dragomans, who had been in positions of power and sensitivity, were seen as potentially disloyal. And so, in 1821, the Ottoman government established the Translation Bureau (Tercüme Odası) to develop a new source for the recruitment of translators and end its dependence on the dragomans. This Translation Bureau, which remained very small until 1833, assumed responsibility for translations from European languages. A seemingly minor office, it quickly became the major site of political prestige and mobility within the Ottoman bureaucracy. Personnel of the Translation Bureau rose to become among the most important bureaucrats of the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, as it increasingly integrated into the international state system of continuous diplomacy. Knowledge of European languages, especially French, became a key qualification for advancement in Ottoman state service and the best place to learn was in the Translation Bureau. For many, but not all elites, proficiency in French served not merely as a symbol of cultural modernity but became virtually its content. In the eyes of such individuals, modernity meant knowledge of European languages and the lack of such tools of knowledge (incorrectly) spelled backwardness and reaction.

Sultan Mahmut II (1808–1839) formally created the Foreign Ministry and, in 1834, set up the diplomatic apparatus to allow for permanent missions abroad. The timing seems crucial for the capital city had just escaped occupation by the Russians in 1829 and by the forces of Muhammad Ali Pasha in 1833. In this crisis, the armies had failed and only diplomacy remained to save the state. Thus, the group of full-time, salaried persons – dedicated solely to conducting diplomacy on behalf of
the Ottoman state in foreign lands – owed its emergence to both long-
term evolutionary patterns and the immediate crisis of the early 1830s.

By the early 1870s, there were Ottoman embassies in Paris, London,
Vienna, and St. Petersburg, legations in Berlin, Washington, and
Florence/Rome and consulates in a number of states in North and South
America, Africa, and Asia. In 1914, the central offices of the Foreign
Ministry in Istanbul held about 150 officials. By then, there were eight
embassies – in Berlin, Paris, Rome, St. Petersburg, Tehran, London,
Washington, and Vienna. In addition, lower ranking diplomats served
in eight legations – in Athens, Stockholm, Brussels, Bucharest, Belgrade,
Sofia, Madrid, and The Hague – while more than 100 staffed the Ottoman
consular service, not including commercial agents.

Most Ottoman diplomats derived from elite backgrounds. A school
named Galatasaray Lycée (Mekteb-i Sultanı), established in 1868, became
the most important single source of Foreign Ministry officials. Instructors
offered lessons, mostly in French, from a curriculum based on that of a
French lycée. Students came from wealthy families, both Muslim and
non-Muslim, and their attendance at the school served as a key vehicle
for entry into Ottoman elite life.

Thanks to their privileged backgrounds and training, more than two-
thirds of all Foreign Ministry officials commanded two or more foreign
languages. As the century wore on, their knowledge of French became
more important and that of Persian less so, while Arabic language skills
remained stable. Thus, the content of elite education changed consider-
ably and exposure to west European culture eroded mastery of Islamic
Arabo-Persian culture.¹

Service in the Foreign Ministry was a prestigious and much sought
after career, a reflection of the importance of diplomacy in the life of
the empire. The best and the brightest of those who entered state ser-
vice chose the Foreign Ministry. Not coincidentally, the three leading
Tanzimat Grand Viziers – Mustafa Reşit, Fuat, and Ali Pashas – who
dominated the era had all been foreign ministers. And, within the foreign
service, the west European posts – particularly Paris and London – were
most prestigious, higher ranking than those in Iran, the Black Sea littoral,
the Balkans, or central Asia. This hierarchy says a great deal about the
values of the time and where cultural as well as political power resided.

Despite the dragoman crisis surrounding the Greek Revolution,
Ottoman Greeks and Armenians remained important within the Foreign

¹ For a more nuanced view of the Galatasaray school, see Benjamin C. Fortna, Impe-
rial classroom. Islam, the state, and education in the late Ottoman Empire (Oxford, 2000),
99–112.
Ministry. The same factors that had propelled them into the dragoman corps — the heavy engagement of the Armenian and Greek diaspora communities in commerce in Iran, the Mediterranean and Black Sea worlds, Europe, and South and North America — continued in force. Hence, they constituted a significant minority, some 29 percent, of all Foreign Ministry officials, a participation rate that is somewhat larger than the non-Muslims’ share of the total Ottoman population during the later nineteenth century. Slightly over-represented in the Foreign Ministry as a whole, these Ottoman Christians nonetheless did poorly, in proportion to their numbers, in terms of holding the better positions. While some did head major embassies, they mainly ended up in the minor consular posts despite the fact that they were the best-educated group. In sum, they readily entered the Foreign Ministry but did not have equal access to promotion opportunities.

The caliphate as a special tool of Ottoman diplomacy

The Ottomans possessed an unusual tool — the caliphate — in conducting diplomacy. The position of caliph originated in the seventh century CE, when the title was bestowed on political leaders — at first elective and then hereditary — of the new Islamic states after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. By 1000 CE, the caliphs had lost their political power but the position continued. During the 1000–1258 period, the caliphs served in a highly prestigious but mainly symbolic role that bound the Muslim community together, regardless of who actually held real political power in the various areas of the Islamic world. In the eyes of most Muslim jurists, the caliphate had ended in 1258 when the Mongols sacked Baghdad and murdered the last caliph. In the Ottoman era, sultans occasionally used the title of caliph but the title had ceased to carry any real significance.

In the eighteenth century, however, a different kind of caliphal position came to occupy a minor place in the Ottoman diplomatic arsenal. The latter-day caliphate began to emerge during the negotiations over the Küçük Kaynarca treaty of 1774. At that time, Russia recognized the Ottoman sultan as caliph of the Crimean Tatars. This token gesture, implying a vague kind of Ottoman religious suzerainty, was meant to camouflage the actual severing of the centuries-old tie between the sultans and the Crimean khans. That is, the Ottoman–Crimean connection was broken but not totally since the caliphal title remained, however ambiguous it may have been. The Russians in return received recognition of their own form of religious claim, the right to build and protect an Orthodox church in Istanbul, a bridgehead they later used to massively
interfere in Ottoman domestic affairs (see chapter 3). Other forces were working that promoted Ottoman usage of the new caliphal tool. On a general level, the Ottomans’ military and political power abruptly and visibly collapsed in the 1768–1774 war, one of the worst defeats in their history. Equally dangerously, the growing Wahhabi state in Arabia offered a spiritual as well as military threat that jeopardized Ottoman administration of these distant provinces. Both the spiritual claims of the Wahhabi reformers as the heirs of true Islam and their early nineteenth-century seizure of Mecca and Medina seemed to undermine Ottoman legitimacy. Thus, the treaty of 1774, the continuing decline of Ottoman military power, and the Wahhabi threat all worked to fashion the caliphal position into a negotiating tool and means of bolstering the sultans’ prestige. Essentially, the Ottoman rulers were able to make this claim to the caliphate because of their military prowess in past centuries, their longevity as a dynasty, their possession of the Muslim Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina, and because they remained the most powerful Islamic state to survive in the age of European imperialism. By the nineteenth century, large numbers of Muslims had fallen under British, Russian, and French domination in India, central Asia, and North Africa. The sultan began appealing to them and to his own subjects as caliph, as a rallying point for resistance and for loyalty. The caliphal idea – with all of its historic prestige and honor and evocation of earlier, better, Islamic times – indeed was most popular among central Asian and Indian Muslims, communities under attack by both Britain and Russia. Sultan Abdülahiz (1861–1876) already had adopted a pan-Islamic approach in his relations with other Muslim countries, appealing to a shared Islam as the basis for concerted action under his own caliphal leadership. But it was Sultan Abdülhamit II, ruling an empire that had become more Muslim than Christian in population since 1878, who most emphasized the caliphate.

Abdülahmit II first used the caliphal instrument during the Ottoman–Russian war of 1877–1878. The Russians earlier had crushed the central Asian Muslim states of Bukhara, Khiva, and Khokand, leaving the Afghans as a buffer between them and the British. After the Ottoman–Russian war began, the sultan sent a high level mission to Afghanistan to obtain help against their common Russian enemy. The emissary also visited British India where, in Bombay, Muslims gave him an enthusiastic welcome. For the rest of his reign, Sultan Abdülhamit II sent agents to work within these communities and strengthen his own position in this arena of Great Power politics.

Many Muslim heads of state, including the Uzbek khans, the Crimean khans, and the sultans of Sumatra in the East Indies acknowledged the Ottoman ruler as caliph. And they sometimes also recognized the
Ottomans as their temporal leaders. For example, the ruler of Kashgar in central Asia is said to have issued coins bearing the Ottoman sultan’s name during the nineteenth century, while the Afghan emirs, acknowledging the sultan as successor of the true caliphs, agreed to read his name at the Friday prayer.

Although we cannot know how effectively the caliphate cemented the sultan’s hold on his own subjects, it is clear that the caliphal appeal ultimately did not have a major impact on the loyalties of Muslims under the domination of Britain, France, and Russia. In 1914, the Ottoman caliph/sultan issued a call for a holy war (jihad) against his French, British, and Russian enemies, appealing to their Muslim subjects to revolt. In the end they did not, despite three decades of propaganda. Indeed many served, if sometimes unwillingly, in the armies of the caliph’s enemies.

Ottoman relations with states in Europe, Iran, central Asia, India, and North Africa: relations with Europe

The Ottoman relationship with Europe changed considerably over time. It certainly was one characterized by war: between c. 1463 and 1918, the Ottomans fought at least forty-three wars and thirty-one of them were with the various European states. And yet, during this time of warfare, other, co-operative relationships existed, often hidden by the ideological divisions of the age. In the sixteenth century, the Pope and other Christian theologians still thought of the broader European world as being divided into the lands of Islam under the Ottomans and the Christian world, the respublica Christiana. The latter term meant that all Latin Christian states, but not including those of Orthodox Christianity, were part of a single, theoretically unified community, despite the fact they spoke different languages and were under the rule of different monarchs. This respublica Christiana notion was dying in the sixteenth century, alive only in the minds of theologians and a few others, being replaced by the concept of nation states, loyalty to which became more important than vague sentiments of Christian unity. For example, in the sixteenth century, the French king pursued policies to enhance the power of his state, at the expense of the rest of the Christian world. And so Francis I synchronized his foreign policy with that of the Ottomans, but very carefully avoided entering into an official alliance. One season, when it was battling with the Habsburgs who were also his enemy, Francis allowed the Ottoman fleet to winter on his south coast, the present day Riviera. For that he was roundly but ineffectually vilified. (Recall that during Süleyman the Magnificent’s reign occurred the first negotiations for granting a capitulation to the King of France.) Compare Francis’ caution in dealing with
his de facto Ottoman ally and events that occurred a century and a half later. In 1688, another French king, Louis XIV, felt able to attack a fellow European Christian state, the Habsburg, at the very moment it was fighting the Ottomans. Louis received some mild rebukes but generally his actions were seen as the normal business of state. His decision marks a turning point in the evolution of the inter-state system, in Ottoman–west European relations, and the final collapse of the respublica Christiana ideal. Louis had shifted his policies abruptly. Just a few years before, he had sent troops to help the Habsburgs against the Ottoman forces at the battle at St. Gotthard (1664) and similarly had aided Venice in its fight against the Ottomans on Crete. So, 1688 clearly marks the presence of raison d'état, the principle that any behavior to protect a state was justified, as well as the more visible role of the Ottomans in the European balance of power, and the disappearance of the respublica Christiana.

Thus, in the Karlowitz negotiations of 1699 and those for the 1730 Peace of Belgrade, the French actively mediated on behalf of the Ottomans to prevent the Habsburgs from becoming too successful and upsetting the European balance of power. As the eighteenth century proceeded, west European–Ottoman relations evolved still further. The Ottomans signed formal alliances and actively fought in Egypt with one west European state, Britain, against another, France. By the mid nineteenth century, active military co-operation no longer seemed strange and during the Crimean war of 1853–1856 the Ottomans, British, and French all fought together against Russia. In 1856, the Ottoman Empire entered the “Concert of Nations,” a formal recognition of their transformation from antagonist to participant in the European state system.

One final word: while in a true sense the Ottoman state operated as one among many, using diplomacy and war in the European political arena, it nonetheless remained unique. As other states on the continent came to define themselves, they increasingly considered the Ottoman Empire to be an alien body, an “encampment on European soil.” But at the very same moment, some of them were allied with the Ottomans in a war. The legacy survives to the present; in part for this reason, I believe, the European Union continues to struggle with the application of Turkey, an important Ottoman successor state, for full membership (see chapter 10).

Relations with Iran and central Asia

West, central and east Europe, although certainly an important and intense site of Ottoman diplomacy, were not the only regions in which Ottoman diplomats conducted their business. Active diplomacy persisted for centuries with states in central Asia, Iran, India and, to the west,
North Africa. For example, between 1700 and 1774, Iranian monarchs sent embassies to the Ottoman state on eighteen separate occasions. Despite their frequency and their importance, these relationships largely have been overlooked in scholarly publications on Ottoman history.

As in earlier times, the Ottoman sultans during the eighteenth century intermittently established diplomatic ties with the rulers at Samarkand, Bukhara, Balkh, and Khiva in the borderlands between Iran and central Asia. Often, the one or the other sent emissaries on the occasion of an accession to the throne or to discuss attacks on common enemies, first the Iranians but in later centuries, the Russians. Very often, the emissaries of Muslim states to the Ottoman court included pilgrimage to the Holy Cities in their itinerary. For example, an Uzbek khan sent an ambassador to Sultan Mustafa II who in the meantime had been dethroned. So the emissary presented his credentials and gifts to Sultan Ahmet III in 1703, went on the pilgrimage and in 1706 returned home. Another emissary quickly followed, sent by the succeeding khan to announce his own accession and congratulate Ahmet III. This person also made the pilgrimage before returning. During the early 1720s there were two additional Uzbek embassies but then none until 1777. Diplomatic contacts with the Khiva Uzbek khans of the Aral Sea area dated from the second half of the sixteenth century. The 1683 debacle at Vienna prompted an embassy to discuss the possibility of aid, while there were other embassies in 1732, 1736, and 1738. The catastrophe of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774 also sparked a flurry of diplomacy between the Ottoman and central Asian rulers, who all feared continued Russian expansion. The Uzbek khan at Bukhara sent two emissaries in 1780; one died in Konya after making the pilgrimage but the other returned safely. Sultan Abdülhamit I sent valuable gifts along with his credentials (in Persian) to the Bukhara ruler. This mission and several to the Kazakh khans and to the Kirgiz were part of his grand diplomatic offensive to gain support for the retaking of the Crimea. One of the sultan’s emissaries to Bukhara, in 1787, then traveled to Afghanistan and, in 1790, re-established relations between the Ottoman and Afghan rulers.

**Relations with rulers in India**

Rulers from various states in the Indian subcontinent regularly dispatched emissaries to Istanbul during the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, often on the occasion of their accession. There is a famous, perhaps apocryphal, story of a letter from the great Moghul Emperor Humayun to Süleyman the Magnificent in 1548. Many states in India, including the Moghul, sent emissaries during the eighteenth century, for example, in
1716, 1722, and 1747, often to obtain Ottoman aid in wars against Iran. A ruler on the Malabar coast ordered an emissary to Istanbul in 1777, seeking help against local Zoroastrian enemies. He sent two elephants as a gift, via Suez. One died en route but the other was presented to the sultan and lived out its days in the Ottoman capital. In 1780, the sister of a south Indian ruler arrived, asking for Ottoman help against the Portuguese and the English. Sultans Abdülhamit I and Selim III both concluded frequent political and commercial agreements with the Mysore sultanate in southern India, then enmeshed in the middle of the French–British struggle for the subcontinent. On one occasion, the Mysore ruler, Tipu Sultan, requested Ottoman intercession since, temporarily, they were allies of the British against Bonaparte in Egypt. Thus, at a moment at the end of the eighteenth century, Ottoman–British diplomacy was working both in the eastern Mediterranean and in the Indian subcontinent.

**Relations with North African states**

Political relations between Istanbul and the western North African states changed considerably over time. In the sixteenth century, the areas just east of Morocco had been provinces under direct control, but after local military commanders seized power during the seventeenth century, they became vassal states of varying sorts. Overall, Ottoman diplomacy in the region either sought to regulate the behavior of their nominal vassals or mediate in struggles among the vassals or between one of these and the neighboring sultanate of Fez, in modern Morocco. The North African states had found an important source of income in piracy and made their livings preying on shipping. The 1699 Karlowitz treaty, however, required Istanbul to more energetically protect signatories’ ships from attacks by North African corsairs. Thus forced to take action against his own vassals, Sultan Ahmet III in 1718 coerced the Dey of Algiers into halting his attacks on Austrian shipping. As mediators, the Ottomans often intervened in disputes between Fez and the Algerians, for example, in 1699. To obtain military supplies and political aid, the Moroccan sultan sent gifts to Istanbul in 1761, 1766, and 1786. In 1766, he was seeking support against French attacks but in 1783 he inquired as to what kind of aid he might offer in the Ottomans’ own struggle against the Russians. At this same moment, his Algerian rivals also were sending gifts to Sultan Abdülhamit I.

A fascinating example of Ottoman diplomacy in the western Mediterranean occurred in the late eighteenth century. Recall that in the 1768–1774 war, the Russians had sailed from the Baltic Sea, into the Mediterranean, and into the Aegean Sea, to destroy the Ottoman fleet at Çeşme.
(They also burned Beirut.) When the second war with Czarina Catherine erupted, the sultan appealed to the Moroccan ruler to block Gibraltar and keep out the Russians while, in 1787–1788, an Ottoman legation negotiated with Spain to achieve the same goal.

Suggested bibliography

Entries marked with a * designate recommended readings for new students of the subject.


Farooqhi, Naimur Rahman. *Mughal–Ottoman relations* (Delhi, 1989).


Parvev, Ivan. *Habsburgs and Ottomans between Vienna and Belgrade* (New York, 1995).
