The fall of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the Republic of Turkey

I. Why look at Ottoman History?

In an era in which the modern day republic of Turkey appears to be moving away from nearly a century of secularism, it is useful to look at the last century of Ottoman history to see if and how such leanings have developed and either failed or blossomed. One could argue that the current radicalization of Turkey, and the government’s reaction to it, is but part of a repeating cycle that stretches back at least to Janissary resistance to the various attempts to modernize (read here westernize) the Ottoman armed forces in the Napoleonic era. Whether cyclical or not, a deeper understanding of the Ottoman past helps to illuminate the problems of the Turkish present.

II. Introduction

The Ottoman Empire served as the secular expression of Islam as a nation state for nearly six hundred years, from the overthrow of the residual Roman Empire in 1452 to its own fall in 1920 and replacement by the secular Republic of Turkey. This introduction looks at the rise and fall of the Empire, primarily focusing on the last century of the Empire, from 1800-1920. The central point is that the Empire was too full of religious and political contradictions to go on indefinitely. Rising religious fervor and political conservatism conflicted with the growing need to encourage the large numbers of non-Muslims in the Empire to fight and pay for it. Turkish scholars and leaders attempted to modernize where they could, while the forces of reaction, such as the Janissaries and the religious communities fought to preserve their prerogatives by appealing to increasingly radicalized visions of their faith. In the end, with the vassal states gone, secularism, if not exactly westernism, won out under the pressure of modern warfare. Nevertheless, the cycles of secularism and revolutionary fervor continue unabated.

With the fall of Constantinople in 1452, the Ottomans took over the legacy of the Byzantine Empire, while stepping into a leadership role in the Muslim world which had been empty since the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258 ended centralized Arab leadership. Ottoman expansion continued in all
directions, flowing like water until it met resistance in the form of the Persian Empire; the Tatars and Russians; the Poles and Hapsburgs; coastal Arabs and Ethiopians, as well as the Sahara desert.

While the Turks expanded into the Balkans and to the north and east, the Muslim world was in decline elsewhere, particularly in Spain and India. Andalusia, the then intellectual center of Islam, returned to Christianity fifty years after the fall of Constantinople. Those events, and the discovery of the Americas, sparked the Italian Renaissance, which eventually spread to the North, and provided Europe with the intellectual and technical means to conquer much of the world, and to confront, defeat, and roll back the Islamic presence on its borders. The two most powerful Turkish invasions of Europe, in 1529 and 1683, were turned back at the very gates of Vienna (as well as at Malta and through the naval victory at Lepanto), and following the second defeat, Europe went on the counteroffensive. The Renaissance and the Enlightenment released political, military, and economic forces which the now aging Ottoman feudal system was ill equipped to resist. In addition to the external pressure, the Empire was also fragmented internally, with the various regions under the command of leaders who were primarily interested in the accumulation of more power to themselves. The increasing decentralization of power in the Empire is a key point in understanding why it eventually contracted and fell.

III. The Ottoman Empire at the crisis point: The Porte in 1800

By the 19th Century, Ottoman leaders, in the belief that their Army was the key weak point, lavished their main efforts on its modernization. Fix the Army, they thought, and all would be well. Given the primacy of Western European’s in land warfare, the Porte looked in that direction for help, and were prepared to try Western methods in an attempt to modernize their armed forces. The first efforts, the Nizam e Jedid (New Model Army) brought in western experts to train the Ottoman Army in modern methods of warfare. While helpful, the Nizam was heavily resisted by reactionary forces, including the fames Janissaries, and was imperfectly implemented. Although the Army was undoubtedly in need of reform (the Janissaries, in particular, had not significantly changed their ways, or weapons, in
centuries, and formed a sort of king-making Praetorian Guard, backward looking and reactionary), the bigger point was that the Army was just part of a larger, failing political and economic system which threatened to destroy the Empire. Complete reform across society would be necessary in order to save it.

By the 1820’s, a political attempt at “Newness” was started with the implementation of the “Tanzimat” reforms. Tanzimat, or “Auspicious Re-ordering” proceeded on various fronts. Efforts were made to expand the tax base, which was heretofore based on contributions from non-Muslims in accordance with Muslim law.¹ Worthy of note is that, at every stage, and every field, reform had to be in compliance with Muslim law, and justified in terms of Islam. For example, a search had to be made, which found no Muslim law preventing the service of non-Muslims in the Army, before the move could be made. In the reverse direction, efforts were made to integrate Christians willingly into the armed forces, which had, other than irregular forces, been dominated by Muslims or Christian converts. For centuries the burden of full time warfare had rested on a relatively diminishing Ottoman core. One goal of the reforms, therefore, was to give the minorities more of a stake in the success of the Empire.

IV. Destruction from the periphery and the centre

While attempting to broaden the Empire culturally and build buy in from the periphery, efforts were made to centralize control of the empire, which still ostensibly stretched from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. The problems with this were numerous, and the effort ultimately failed. A perceived weakening of the Ottoman central power encouraged strongmen in the distant provinces to go their own way and become ever more independent from Constantinople. Further, the peripheral areas were more subject to influence and intervention by the western powers that they bordered. The French Revolution, for example, spread directly to the Empire in the form of Napoleon’s 1798 invasion of Egypt. Although repulsed with British assistance, the ideology and instability caused by the French presence directly

¹ Finkel, 447.
impacted the rebellion of Egyptian leader Mehmet Ali. Fractious leaders such as Ali and the governor of Silistria (Northern Bulgaria) Bayrakdar Mustafa, as well as Muslim ethnic groups such as the Mamelukes were gradually brought back into line with Istanbul by the efforts of Sultan Mahmud, in the case of the Mamelukes with notable clerical support. Fractiousness at the centre was stamped out in part with the dissolution of the Janissaries, by force, in several phases culminating in 1826, and followed up by suppression of those orders of Dervishes most connected with the anti-reformers.

The reforms, brought about with the help, and under the observance, of the western powers, were certain to have an impact on Turkish and Muslim identities. The reforms were far reaching and turned out to have significantly greater impact than Selim’s purely military reforms. On the other hand, the western powers had a greater role in internal matters, and internal problems of governance became international problems. The Gulhane edict of 1839 attempted to rationalize reform in terms of an Islamic state. This meant the development of a formal governing process from the Sultan downwards, as well as a promise of equity before the law, and an appeal to a broader Ottoman identity rather than a narrow Turkish one. For the first time, paper money was introduced throughout the Empire as an attempt to end the practice of debasing metal currency in order to fight inflation. The tax base was also widened in a simultaneous effort to raise more money and widen the stake in government for non-Turks.

Islam continued to be a vital part of the identity of Ottoman Turks as well as a justification for their leadership role over all Muslims. As mentioned earlier, an Islamic context and religious framework underwrote all of the major reforms, and successive Sultan’s continued to emphasize their place at the head of an Islamic order. Unfortunately, it was precisely this clinging to Islam which encouraged nationalism, and ultimately the secession of the various vassal kingdoms.

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2 Finkel, 450.
Conflict over the Holy Places of Jerusalem, primarily between France and Russia, dragged the Ottoman state into the Crimean War in 1854. The Treaty of Paris, which ended the war in 1856, brought the Empire recognition as a European great power, but clearly a second tier one, since the rights of the Russians, French, British, and others to interfere internally (especially where Christians were involved) grew as a result. The 1856 edict of freedom of religion was used by outsiders as a stick with which to beat the Ottoman state whenever it was felt that the Islamic government was non-compliant.

V. Resistance to Change

These efforts at reform, however unevenly applied, began to meet significant resistance from disparate quarters. Clerics, who had over the previous centuries been severely reduced in influence, gathered enough power to successfully demand the ousting of Resid Pasha, on the grounds that his French inspired reforms on the banking system flew in the face of Islamic Law. In 1849, the leading cleric in Mecca declared the Ottomans to be “polytheists” and the Tanzimat to be counter to Islam. Tanzimat efforts to limit slavery and promote a form of religious equality were also excoriated. A growing political movement, the Young Ottomans, kept up the pressure (event after their suppression in 1867) to place Islam as the centerpiece of Ottoman culture and reform. The result was a return to prominence of the Muslim clerics, and a fading of the Ottoman identity into an Islamic one.

In the end, economic crises combined with the social dislocation of Muslims caused by the Tanzimat reforms to cause the overthrow of the Sultan Abdulaziz in 1863 and his eventual replacement by Abdulhamid “the damned” led to a more conservative, and violent path. Attempts to create a wider Ottoman identity resulted in the splitting away of the various vassal nations within the Empire, particularly with the connivance of the western powers. Greece was the first to split away, with the support of the British and Russians. Later in the century, the other Balkan nations followed the Greek lead. The atrocities against Bulgarians in the 1870s led to significant friction with the Russians, and the

3 Finkel, 489.
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eventual loss of part of Bulgaria, and, ultimately, to the independence of all of the Empire’s Balkan provinces by the second decade of the 20th century. With the gradual loss of outliers, however, the Empire became more Turkish and less Christian, and succeeding Sultans attempted to make their interpretation of Islam a source of group pride equal to the nationalisms of Europe. The move away from a multi-faith empire converted, instead, into a simultaneous effort to assume a leadership role over all Muslims, particularly through control of the Holy Places (in this case, Jerusalem, Mecca, and Medina).

VI. The First World War, the breakup of the Empire, and the role of the West

Following the arrival of the German battle cruiser Goeben and the cruiser Breslau in Autumn, 1914, the Ottoman Empire sealed its fate by joining the Central Powers. Notable successes such as the repulse of the Gallipoli invasion in 1915-16 could not hide the fact that the army of the divine Porte could not survive an extended conflict with the west. As British forces rolled the Ottomans back, the challenge became how to use local Arab forces to support allied efforts without inflaming a region wide Jihad which would engulf all parties. This was done by using the Hashemite Sheiks of Mecca as allies, with the promise that they would take a leading role in the post Ottoman Arab world. In spite of the efforts of T.E. Lawrence and others, this was an alliance and a promise that the allies had no intention of fully honoring. His efforts there, in Palestine, and in stirring uprisings among the Druze tribes of what is now Syria/Lebanon, though somewhat useful militarily, were not to be rewarded. In 1916, France and the UK had agreed to a post war division of the Middle East into two spheres. This was done by the Sykes-Picot treaty, which became notorious for the nonchalance with which borders were drawn. A line was to be drawn from the “e” in Acre to the “k” in Kirkuk, with areas to the north going to France, and those to the south going to the UK. Having set these standards (ignoring the third player, the Hashemite Sheiks of Mecca), both parties proceeded to do their best to secure more than had been agreed to. T.E. Lawrence and his Arab Forces pressed on toward Damascus, while General Allenby’s forces took
Jerusalem and quickly quelled French claims to co-rule the area. The identification of oil reserves in Northern Iraq pushed the British claim westwards, (the British claim was not resolved between the UK, France, and the U.S. until 1931.) At the same time French fought, unsuccessfully, to push their influence south, into the area known as Palestine.

These acts were validated by the Paris Peace Conference (1919), the Sevres agreement (1920), the treaty of San Remo (1922), and the Lausanne Treaty (1923), which, between the four, ended the Ottoman Empire, established the Turkish State in lieu of the Sultanate, and assigned mandate status to the former Ottoman Arab states, with responsibility for said mandates resting with the UK and France. Those countries had emphasized ethnic differences, rather than religious justification, to achieve the breakup of the Ottoman dominions. However, by breaking the Arabs away, they removed much of the religious identity from the Empire as well, and this further facilitated the secularization of the new Republic of Turkey under the control of the “Young Turks”, who are discussed below.

VII. Repression, Reaction, and the Young Turks

The sheer repressiveness of Sultanic rule (particularly the role of the Sultan Abdulhamid) in the late 19th Century combined with increased exposure to western ideas and thoughts, and the renewed emphasis on a Turkish, rather than Ottoman, identity led to renewed resistance, this time in the shape of the secular “Young Turks”, who eventually gained power and ended the Sultanate after the failures of the First World War. Concurrent efforts to appeal as leaders of the whole of the Muslim world failed both in Africa (which was outside the Empire in any case) and with other subject peoples, such as the Albanians, but most importantly the Arabs, who had been uniformly shut out of leadership roles in the

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4 The Young Turks’ formal political name was the “Committee of Union and Progress,” and slowly developed from an intellectual think tank into a pragmatic political organization, in spite of official government repression. The Young Turk’s insistence on a new, modern constitution for Turkey was manifest in the Anatolian revolution of 1905-1907, which, although it was repressed, laid the foundation for the secular takeover of the state after World War One.
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Empire.\textsuperscript{5} In the case of the Arabs, however, it took an outside force to shake down the traditional allegiance to the Ottoman Sultan as Muslim Caliph. That force was provided by the British, who became heavily involved in Arab life as a result of the First World War. The efforts of T.E. Lawrence and the empowerment of the house of Saud are well known, and resulted in a splitting off of the Arab peoples from Turkish control.

In retrospect, it would appear that the Secular/Turkish nationalist of the Young Turks (led eventually by Mustapha Kemal Ataturk) crushed political Islam as a force. However, the Tanzimat period (particularly its ending) showed the power of the clerics in politics, when allowed to flourish, and when combined with a desire to return to Islamic roots on the part of political leaders. These ideas would find their outlet, not in the remnant Ottoman state, but in its former components, particularly to the south, in Saudi Arabia, and to the east, in Iran. The latent power of Islam in Turkey did not re-emerge as a political force until the beginning of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.

**Bibliography**


\textsuperscript{5} Late Ottoman policies allowed Arabic to be taught in schools and Arabs to serve in the Parliament, but it was a case of too little, too late.