

Mahmud II (130105)

Mahmud II (Maḥmūd, r. 1223–55/1808–39) was the Ottoman sultan who initiated radical and lasting reforms in the final century of the empire's existence. He was born at Topkapı Palace on 13 Ramazan (Ramaḍān) 1199/20 July 1785, the youngest of the twelve sons of Sultan Abdülhamid I (ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, r. 1187–1203/1774–89). He succeeded Mustafa IV (Muṣṭafā, r. 1222–3/1807–8) on 4 Cemaziülahır (Jumādā II) 1223/28 July 1808, following an armed coup led by the provincial governor Alemdar Mustafa Paşa (ʿAlemdār Muṣṭafā, d. 1223/1808). Alemdar Mustafa, also known as Bayrakdar (Bayraqdār) Mustafa Paşa, had aimed to restore the formerly deposed sultan Selim III (Selīm, r. 1203–22/1789–1807) to the throne. In the course of the coup, however, Selim was assassinated, Mustafa was deposed, and Mahmud was declared sultan. Upon coming to power, Mahmud had no natural allies and was a mere pawn in the hands of Alemdar Mustafa Paşa, who became grand vizier (Finkel, 422).

Volatile conditions in the Ottoman capital coincided with provincial disturbances and centrifugal moves by powerful local notables (*ayan*). Centre and periphery were united, albeit temporarily, in a Sened-i İttifak (Sened-i İttifāq, "Deed of Agreement," 1223/1808). This deed shifted the balance of power away from the sultan and towards government officers (twenty-one signatories) and provincial notables (four signatories). It proposed a form of power-sharing whereby provincial notables took on a number of responsibilities to the state, but also installed their successors in perpetuity. However, it never came into effect. In late Ramazan 1223/

mid-November 1808, Alemdar Mustafa Paşa's government was overthrown in a popular uprising led by the janissaries of İstanbul, who stood to lose the most from the proposed reforms. In the ensuing fighting, Mahmud II ordered the execution of his brother, Mustafa, and so remained the only male in the Ottoman dynasty.

Internal instability was coupled with foreign crises with Britain (5 January 1809 peace) and Russia (the 1220–7/1806–12 Russo-Ottoman war). With respect to the janissaries, Mahmud II took careful measures aimed at co-opting their leadership and avoiding open provocation. It would be another eighteen years until the sultan managed to prevail decisively and abolish the corps, an episode which became known as "the Auspicious Event" (Vak'a-i Hayriye, Vaq'a' Khayriye) in the aftermath of what proved to be their last rebellion, on 8 Zilkade (Dhū l-Qa'da) 1241/14 June 1826. This date clearly divides Mahmud II's reign into two distinct periods. What the two periods share is the sultan's drive for centralisation and autocratic power. At times, in the provinces, this translated into open war against powerful local notables, such as Tepedelenli Ali of Yanya, who was executed in 1822. Throughout his reign, Mahmud II continuously attempted, with partial success, to convert local magnates into state servants.

The removal of the janissaries from the political scene all but eliminated the previously strong position of the *ulema* (*ʿulamāʾ*, religious scholars), who had frequently been party to their rebellions. It also allowed the sultan to implement reforms in a range of areas where Selim III had tried and failed. The military was his most immediate concern. The recently founded corps of Eşkinciyan (Mounted Yeomen),