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Mahmud (II)

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**The First Shift in (Modern) Ruler Visibility:  
the Reign of Mahmud II (1808–39)**

*Introduction*

In 1810, according to John Hobhouse, a British traveller present, along with Lord Byron, at the British ambassador's farewell audience with Mahmud II, the sultan was an aloof figure, who did not engage in any eye contact with his foreign guests. The whole ceremonial setting in which the two sides met (the Reception Room in the Topkapı Palace's Third Court (*Arz Odası*)) was entirely non-Western, including the sultan's attire, made of yellow satin. The sultan's hands were 'glittering with diamond rings' and he had an 'air of indescribable majesty'. Foreigners were incorporated into this setting by having to don Ottoman clothes ('pelisses') over their own. The audience was difficult to arrange and brief, subject to the will of the Janissaries. Not surprisingly, the treatment of the visitors was anything but deferential. They were whisked in and out of the room in short order.<sup>1</sup>

In 1829, according to Adolphus Slade, a British military officer, present at the British ambassador's audience with Mahmud II, the sultan received the visitors with 'great simplicity'. Personally, he was 'divested of sultanic pomp'. Slade went on to describe the sultan's appearance in the following terms: 'Instead of robes of golden tissue, and a cashmere turban concealed by precious stones, he wore a plain blue military cloak and trousers, with no other ornament than a diamond chelengk [aigrette] in his fez, and steel spurs on his Wellington boots'. This encounter took place in an audience tent, in Büyükdere, on the outskirts of Istanbul, prior to a Western-style military review. Büyükdere, in addition to having an open field conducive to military exercises, was also a favoured locale for ambassadorial summer retreats throughout the nineteenth century. The ambassador's arrival on this occasion, in Slade's estimation, was 'the most respectable Frank show ever exhibited to the Osmanleys'.<sup>2</sup>

Though barely two decades apart, these two audiences seem vastly different.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this chapter is to inquire into the causes and consequences, single events and long-term processes of change in the

6-36

**RULER VISIBILITY AND POPULAR  
BELONGING IN THE OTTOMAN  
EMPIRE, 1808–1908**

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