



Summary :

Tanzimat is the term we use to describe a series of edicts and processes aiming at reorganizing the administration and the finances of the Ottoman Empire as well as its relations with its subjects, Muslims and non-Muslims, with the ultimate purpose to safeguard its survival.

Date

1839-1876

Geographical Location

Ottoman Empire

1. Introduction

Tanzimat is the term we use to describe a series of edicts aiming at reorganizing the administration and the finances of the Empire as well as its relations with its subjects, Muslims and non-Muslims, with the ultimate purpose to safeguard its survival. These texts are the Imperial Decree of the Rose Garden (*Gülhane Hatt-i Şerif*), named by the garden of the palace where it was announced, in 1839, and the decree for the Enhancement of the Reforms (*Islahat Fermanı*) in 1856. Finally, although 1871 and the death of Âli Paşa, **Grand Vizier** and powerful man of the period, is being considered as the end of this process, we could extend the period till 1876, when the Ottoman constitution was declared, as the peak of this trajectory. At the same time, the opening of the first Ottoman parliament, even though it was short-lived, laid the foundations for the subsequent developments.

2. Toward the reforms

The need for reforms in the Empire had been felt much earlier. Since the second failed siege of Vienna, in 1683 and the rout of the Ottomans, which was ratified by the Karlovic treaty in 1699, it was clear to the administration that something had changed regarding its relations with its subjects and the West. Very much interrelated, these two aspects had not been given significant attention until then. New ways were necessary in order to inhibit the discontent of the subjects and to confront the threat that the Christian Powers represented. Certainly, the 18th century, despite the partial embodiment of non-Muslim leading groups (Greek-orthodox [Phanariots](#) and Armenian *amiras*) and some rare attempts to reorganize the administration, was marked by even more Ottoman defeats. At the end of the century, in the very same year when the French Revolution broke out, an ambitious and well-disposed Sultan, who was going to associate himself with the first systematic reform program of the Empire, ascended to the throne. Selim III had realized the necessity of a modern army which would be trained according to Western principles and practices. Therefore, bypassing the corps of the once dreadful [Janissaries](#), who nevertheless had been charged with the military defeats to a large extent, he called European trainers and founded a large barracks, called Selimiye, away from the old [Istanbul](#), on the Asian side, where he aspired to create a new army (*Nizam-i Cedid*). Although his initiative had poor results, it did bring him into an open conflict with the Janissaries, who had vested interests in the commercial and craftsmen guilds of Istanbul and in the provinces as well, and who finally managed to eliminate him in 1807. Henceforth begins a process, which will lead to the Tanzimat. Moustafa IV, who remained in power for few months, was replaced by Mahmud II, son of Abdülhamid I, who soon revealed his intentions to continue and broaden his cousin's Selim III work.

The reforms that he introduced, and which prepared the ground for the first decree of 1839, can and must be seen in the light of the conflict between local notables and the central administration. During the 18th century and taking advantage of the weakness or unwillingness of the centre to impose absolute control in the provinces, many of these elders known as [ayans](#) managed to establish a hereditary right in assignments such as tax-collection or provincial administration, which, until then, were rented on an annual basis to the higher bidder, a system which is known as tax farming (*iltizam*). The most famous of the *ayans* at the end of 18th and the beginning of 19th century, Osman Pasvandoğlu in Vidin and Ali Paşa Tepelenli in Jannina, were for a long time greatly appreciated by the Sublime Porte, since, despite the fact that they had established a personalized authority, in reality they had created conditions of



some prosperity for Muslims and non-Muslims subjects.¹ When, however, it became clear that these notables intended to claim autonomy, the Porte started reacting. The new Sultan Mahmud II played a crucial role in this process. He overpowered one by one all the ambitious leaders of the Ottoman provinces and in 1826 he took the most decisive step, by annihilating the Janissaries corps. The Benevolent Event (*Vaka-i Hayriye*), although one of the common euphemisms used to describe a dramatic event, as it was the slaughter in cold blood of thousands of people, has been recorded as a most positive development in Ottoman historiography.² The Sultan proceeded in this act by taking on a huge risk, since he found himself without an army. The same year in Navarino he would find himself without a fleet.

It was impossible to heal these wounds in a short time and to make up for the losses with the European fashioned troops that Selim III had set up with no particular success and now Mahmud II was trying to reestablish. This resulted into a series of military defeats, first against the Russians, which would lead to the treaty of Adrianople in 1829, and then against the Egyptian troops of Ibrahim Paşa, son of Kavalalı Mehmed Ali Paşa who had managed to maintain and strengthen in Egypt his autonomy against the Sultan. The latter, just before he died, saw the Egyptian troops reach the walls of the capital, seeking for revenge for not having achieved the expected gains from their participation in the war against the Greeks and claiming the dream of every war-lord, namely to take possession of the imperial throne. The young Abdülmecid, first-born son of the Sultan, ascended to the throne, while in the meantime the long-standing enemy of the Ottomans, the Russians, had intervened this time in order to save their perennial opponent. Under these circumstances of despair, the powerful man of the Tanzimat era, Grand Vizier Mustafa Reşid Paşa, would announce in 1839 the first edict which would guarantee the life, honor and equality of all subjects of the Sultan.

Therefore, the Reforms should be considered as the outcome of many factors. It would be a mistake to assume, as it was the fashion among American Ottomanists in the 1960s, that the sole cause must be sought for in the international conjuncture and the pressure of Christian Powers.³ At the same time, this shift of the Ottoman administration constitutes the crystallization of procedures that had been put on decades ago, as it is clear from the above. Moreover, while it is true that Mahmud's reign laid the foundations of a tolerant policy, the first academies were founded and new westernized ways were adopted, nevertheless the decisive attitude of Mustafa Reşid Paşa implied the beginning of a new era. This period would be marked by the domination of important viziers, who, despite the fact that they were in favor of the presence of capable sultans in the throne, it was themselves who drew the basic lines of policy. This resulted in the partial shift of decision-making from the Palace to the Sublime Porte, a course which Mahmud II had tried to prevent and which would be definitely suspended after 1878 together with, as many argue, the reforms themselves, by his grandson Abdülhamid.

3. The Tanzimat era

This atmosphere of relief but also, of perplexity that prevailed after the declaration of *Hatt-i Şerif* in 1839 was not going to last for long. The Ottoman administration tried in a short time to reverse centuries-long practices. The text of the declaration contained abstract pledges for the equality among the Sultan's subjects, yet describing the subjects not as individuals or citizens, but as members of ethno-religious communities.

The abstract promises were put into practice, though. For instance, the Sublime Porte announced the abolition of a series of obligations that burdened only the non-Muslims, the main of which was the collection of the poll tax (*cizye*), but also providing unpaid labor in public works or accommodation to government employees, obligations which were reminiscent of feudal relations. Furthermore, the administration, with a very ambitious move, abolished the tax-farming system in order to replace it with direct levy from government employees, the *muhassıl*, who would be assigned the duty to define the amount to be levied, to collect it and to send it directly to the Porte. In other words, the administration aimed by one move to by-pass, therefore to weaken, the local notables who held an intermediary role and to maximize its revenues. Besides, under these circumstances, one of the main motives for the reforms was the rationatization of the public revenues collection.

Things, however, were not that easy. With these cosmogonic changes, the administration managed to displease everyone. The Muslims could not put up with the idea of their equation to non-Muslims, since it meant the total reversal of the values under which they were brought up, while the non-Muslims, taking the declarations at face value, particularly in the Balkans, demanded under the



influence of nationalisms their rights, protesting against the government employees who would evaluate their income, but mainly turning against the Muslim notables, the *ağas* as well as the Christian ones, both of which used to oppress them. The Muslim *ağas* initially also reacted fiercely; later on, however, they took advantage of the universal guarantees of life and property and the establishment of local representation mechanisms, which began to emerge, in order to obtain property deeds on possessions they held according to custom, as well as to figure, thanks to their influence, as representatives of the local population.

Many of the Christians resorted to the same practice. Others, yet, interestingly, deeming that the state in its effort to centralize the administration had turned its back to them, decided to address their own communities and, instead of intermediaries between the latter and the central administration, declare themselves national leaders. This process, that had begun earlier and was going to continue, largely explains the participation of notables in the revolutionary movements. One can perceive the dimensions of confusion by adding to the conflicting interests the weakness of the state to recruit the staff that would supervise and promote the changes. Soon, riots burst out in Niş in 1840, in [Ayvalık](#) in 1842, in Vidin and Aleppo in 1850. The riots, apart from their violent suppression, often took the shape of ethno-religious conflicts of Albanian Muslims against Christian Slavs in the Balkans,⁴ or Muslims/Arabs against Armenians and Orthodox Arabs in the Middle East.⁵ During the same period, again partly thanks to foreign pressure and partly as a result of domestic reasons, two very important developments took place. The first one is the Treaty of Balta Limanı signed in 1838 with the British government, a treaty which put an end to monopolies in all sectors of the Ottoman economy (collection of taxes, imposition of customs rates, fixing the prices of agricultural products) and allowed free competition to Ottoman subjects and foreigners in all markets of the East. Again, of course, this procedure would not go smoothly. This time, the opposition came from the Greek-Orthodox and Armenian merchants and money-lenders who, with the support of their Muslim protectors in the administration, managed to thwart for years the implementation of the new arrangements, creating conditions of confusion. Gradually, nevertheless, the foreign firms, after having realized that it would be impossible to get round the local Christians and their networks, decided, despite the competition which did not stop troubling their relations, to cooperate with many of them, in order to utilize their knowledge on the local markets. After 1880, in a period when the British had lost their leadership in international trade, the foreign firms needed less and less the children and the grandchildren of the old money-lenders, since free trade, especially after the imposition of an International Public Debt Administration on the Empire's public finance in 1881, had been consolidated.

The other important development was the institutional recognition by the Ottomans of new ethno-religious groups, and particularly of the Catholics in 1830 and the Protestants in 1850, under the pressure of the French and the British respectively. This recognition paved the way to missionary activity, which took the form of the foundation of schools, publication of books in the vernaculars of different communities as well as proselytising efforts. The latter was favored by the legal recognition of equality between Muslims and non-Muslims with the introduction of the new penal code and the decision of the Ottoman administration in 1844 to prohibit the punishment for apostacising from Islam, a most radical movement, as it was a direct transgression of Islamic law.

What must be emphasized as a consequence of the above developments is that in the domain of economy, as well as in social relations and education, the Christians, having always received a relevant support on the part of local diplomatic delegations, had become much more visible, something that irritated the Muslim populations and to a large extent concurred to the inter-communal violence we described. The administration itself, unable to withstand this pressure, was compelled to give way. In 1841 already, the reforms that had been announced were suspended, the poll tax and the tax-farming were restored, Mustafa Reşid Paşa was removed from office and the conservatives prevailed again. However, just like every innovation, this period had also left its indelible mark onto the Ottoman administration and society. Important schools had been already founded, the Military Academy (*Mekteb-i Harbiye*) and the Medical School in 1834, while, in 1858, the Academy of Administration would be founded (*Mekteb-i Mülkiye*). When, after the Crimean War, in a much more favorable environment for the Empire, which could take pride at being among the winners, the Grand Vezier Âli Paşa, protégé of Mustafa Reshid, proclaimed the *Islahat Fermanı*, as a further enhancement of the reforms and proof of the good intentions of the administration, the government had in its disposal the appropriate staff which would implement the spirit of the reforms. This is evident in a series of personalities that would play a decisive role during this period. The most well-known is Midhat Pasha, who served as a *vali* of the *vilayet* of Danube and of the vilayet of Baghdad, two regions who were considered to be models for the further implementation of the reforms.

The new model of administration was described in every detail in the Law on Provincial administration (*Vilayet Nizamnamesi*) in



1864. The new bill was an adaptation of the French model by Fuad Paşa, the other significant Grand Vezier of the *Tanzimat* as well as protégé of the pioneer Mustafa Reşid Paşa. Two things are worth noting here: the one is the enlargement of the jurisdiction of the local governors, who from now on would be entitled to a fixed salary provided by the central administration and would be transferred according to its needs. Until then, the collection of taxes, justice and public order were responsibilities belonging to different people: to the *ağa*, to the *kadi* and the to the military commander of the region. Certainly, there was the office of the governor (*müşir paşa* for the *vilayet*, *ferik paşa* for the *sancak*) with limited administrative duties. The common feature of all these offices was that their holders did not receive a salary but collected occasional fees, embezzling often their office and oppressing the local population. After all, they themselves often originated from the region and the central administration only legitimized their de facto authority. Already, since the first phase of the *Tanzimat*, efforts were made to boost the office of the prefect-governor, to which the command of the regional troops was also attached, and to convert all offices into salaried ones. Nevertheless, for reasons already described, this effort failed. However, in the second phase of the reforms, conditions were mature for such changes. The governors, who were now salaried, as all the provincial officials, ruled at the top of a mechanism, which was a miniature of the central government, with a qualified department for foreign affairs, economy, and education. Of course, the system even at its best did not avoid recoil, corruption and discontinuity, while after 1878, due to the imposition by Abdülhamid of an authoritarian personalized power, was constantly undermined by a parallel system of informers and favorites, who got round the hierarchy and addressed to the Sultan himself.

The other important element is the formation of a similar hierarchical system of local representation, starting from the level of the *kaza* (which were renamed *kaymakamlık*), moving up to the *sancak* (*mutasarrıflık*) and ending up to the *vilayet*. At every level, the setting up of a council (*meclis*) was planned, in which, apart from the high-ranking executives of the administration, religious and lay representatives of the local populations, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, would also participate. Thus, the non-Muslim populations, were through their representatives in position to participate in the decision-making. Of course, as we assessed for the *ağas*, Christian notables also monopolized the office personally or through their representatives (*mutesselim*), but it is doubtful whether their presence in these councils had any substantial effect.

In the second phase of the *Tanzimat*, however, things were much different. With the declaration of the *Islahat Fermani*, the religious leaders of the non-Muslims were informed that every community had to convene a general assembly, in which both the clergy and the laity would participate, and to work out an internal regulation (*nizamname*) on the basis of which they would distribute the duties of the committees within the community as well as the relations with the Ottoman administration. The latter tried, through the involvement of lay representatives, which were at the same time members of the bureaucracy, to impose a hierarchy within every community similar to the one that was in effect for the administration as a whole. To achieve its purpose, it pursued to promote a clear segregation between spiritual and lay affairs. The former would stay under the jurisdiction of the church, while the latter would remain under the absolute control of the laity. The ultimate purpose, as it has been claimed,⁶ of the administration was to restrict the clergy into their religious duties and through the secularization of the communal structures to be able, in time, to assimilate them by conveying to the state affairs pertinent education, family and civil law. Thus, the clerics would be salaried and the occasional payments, which were the rule until then, would be prohibited. Besides, on the occasion of the Patriarch's election, participation was safeguarded for delegates who would be appointed by regional communities from all over the Empire.

However, these momentous changes should not be interpreted simply as involvement and imposition by the state to the affairs of the communities, within which conflictual conditions had been already emerged, with a group of young bureaucrats embracing the Reforms that gave them the possibility to reverse the power monopoly of the traditional leading groups. The Armenians, who had already initiated their own course for the elaboration of a constitution, which would allow for more participation to the guilds and to the 'young Armenians', as the young educated abroad bureaucratic *amiras* were called, submitted their text to the Porte in 1860, but received an approval only in 1863. The Greek-Orthodox, after stormy discussions, the resignation of a Patriarch and many members of the Holy Synod, submitted their text which was approved in 1862. The Jews, at last, where the laymen soon made their presence felt in cases such as the Levantine merchants, known as *francos*, with Eduardo Kamodo being the leading figure, but also under the influence of the French dominated *Alliance Israélite*, had their own regulation approved in 1865, yet without prevailing completely against the conservatives rabbinical circles.

Despite the fact that in the Armenian community the implementation of the constitution was suspended few years later, restored and



then suspended for good in 1892, while the conflicts in the Jewish community made the election of a Chief Rabbi (*Haham başı*) impossible for years, the basic weakness of the reforms was the ambiguous attitude towards the clergy. On the one hand, there was an effort to restrain them to their religious duties, while, on the other hand, both the Patriarch or the Chief Rabbi at the capital and the Metropolitans or the Rabbis in the provinces became (though less in the case of the Jews, for whom this hierarchy was not familiar), guarantors of the Reforms and, therefore, especially since they participated in all kinds of assemblies, not only religious but also political leaders of their communities.⁷ This ambiguity has led to two different assessments of the reforms among historians. On the one hand, there are those who consider that the Tanzimat created or at least confirmed these conditions of communal autonomy which would allow to the non-Muslims to enjoy a decentralized administration.⁸ On the contrary, there are those who support exactly the opposite, namely that with the Tanzimat the state imposed its centralized structures and crushed the pre-existing conditions of autonomy.⁹ Both aspects converge, however, to the conclusion that these developments led to the strengthening of nationalism and the emergence of secessionist movements.

Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that there is nothing teleological in this process. A third approach emphasizes both the capacity of the state administration to learn from its own mistakes and the cooperation of local Christian elite groups. Relevant studies have shown that in regions such as Thrace, where the construction of railways and any kind of infrastructure that would make the already developed communication with central Europe much easier was to the best interest of these groups, the state was able to attract the contribution of the local people and that led to conditions of prosperity from which everyone benefited. On the contrary, in regions like central Anatolia, where not only there was no contribution, but also there were reactions from the local Muslim notables, the result was different.¹⁰

Therefore, it is a fact that for many decades, at least until the turn of the 20th century, and despite the authoritarian character of Abdülhamid's power, many among the Greek-Orthodox leading groups saw their interests identified with the longevity of the Empire. After all, a part of contemporary historiography considers Abdülhamid's era as a following up, in a way, and not as a suspension of the Reforms.¹¹ This is hardly surprising, since the institutions that the Tanzimat produced would collapse definitely only after the [Young Turks Revolution](#), in 1908, and the restoration of the 1876 constitution, which the same Sultan had suspended 33 years ago.

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Glossary :


	ağa
A title given to military officials of high rank in the Ottoman Empire. From the 17th - and particularly the 18th- century the title bore also powerful Muslims who did not have any immediate military capacity.	
	grand vizier
Highest government official in the Ottoman Empire, second only to the Sultan. Before the 19th century he led the Ottoman army to war, when the Sultan could not go. He had vast administrative, legislative and judiciary responsibilities. During the reforms of the 19th century the office became even more important, as the grand vizier became in fact the head of the Ottoman government, very similar to the prime minister.	
	iltizam



The system of tax farming in the Ottoman Empire, according to which the taxes owed to the state were farmed by auction to private individuals, who had the right to collect them.

 [kadi](#)


Office that combined judicial, notarial and administrative duties. The kadi, who held court at the kaza's seat, registered all legal acts and documents in the court's codices (sicil). The kadi passed judgement based on the saria (the holy law of Islam), taking also into consideration the kanun (sultan law) and the customary law (örf). Resort to his court had all the subjects of the Empire. The kadi had also administrative duties, which he performed in collaboration with the officials of the kaza., and he had to supervise tax collection.

 [kaza](#)

The basic grade of the Ottoman provincial administration. It included the surrounding region of a city or a town. During the late Ottoman Period it is identified with the kaymakamlık.

 [sancak \(liva\)](#)

Medium sized unit of provincial administration of the Ottoman state, throughout its history. A subdivision of the early Ottoman eyalet (or beylerbeylik) and the later Ottoman vilayet. In the late Ottoman Period it was known also as mutasarrıflık.

 [vali](#)

Governor of the vilayet, the larger administrative unit in the Ottoman provincial administration system. Vali had extensive executive, administrative and judicial authority.

 [vilayet \(valilik\)](#)

The larger administrative unit in the Ottoman provincial administration system. The large provinces of the Ottoman Empire were previously called eyalet. The new regulation of 1864 introduced the vilayet as an equivalent of the French département - albeit of smaller size. The governor of the vilayet was called vali and had extensive authority.