Sultan Mahmud I and the Ottoman Empire (1730–1754): Sovereignty, Resilience, and the Dawn of Ottoman Modernity

Part I: The Sovereign – A Portrait of Sultan Mahmud I (1730–1754)

The 24-year reign of Sultan Mahmud I (r. 1730–1754) stands as a critical juncture in Ottoman history, an era that definitively refutes the anachronistic "Ottoman Decline Thesis".[1] To understand the profound military and cultural achievements of this period, one must first analyze the sovereign himself. Mahmud I, the 24th Ottoman sultan and 89th Muslim caliph, was a ruler whose personality, intellect, and political cunning were forged in 27 years of palace confinement. His reign was a direct reflection of his formation: patient, indirect, intellectual, and strategically adaptive. He ascended a throne consumed by popular revolt and successfully navigated the empire through existential wars on two fronts, initiating a new cultural and military era.

Section 1. The Prince in the Gilded Cage: Formation of a Hunchback Sultan

The single most formative experience of Mahmud I's life was not in governance or war, but in the 27-year seclusion of the Topkapı Palace. This long confinement, the *Kafes* (Cage), forged a ruler who was not a warrior, but a patient, observant, and intellectual artisan-sultan, whose character is key to understanding his reign's priorities.

Mahmud I was born at Edirne Palace on August 2, 1696, the eldest son of Sultan Mustafa II and Saliha Sultan.[3] His early childhood was that of a privileged prince, and he began his formal education in Edirne on May 18, 1702, with lessons from prominent scholars.[4] This life ended abruptly in 1703 when his father was deposed in the "Edirne Incident," a Janissary-led uprising.[5] The young Mahmud, along with his mother and siblings, was brought to Istanbul and "locked up in Kafes" at the Topkapı Palace by his uncle, the new Sultan Ahmed III.[3]

He would remain in this gilded cage for 27 years, his entire adult life, until his sudden accession at the age of 34.[3] This confinement was fraught with "dangers" [4]; a prince in the *Kafes* lived under the constant threat of execution, his survival dependent on the whims of the reigning sultan. This environment did not breed a man of action, but one of profound patience, caution, and introversion. He learned to observe, to listen, and to wait—skills that would prove essential in the first chaotic weeks of his rule.[3]

This long isolation was not an intellectual void. Mahmud I cultivated a rich inner life, developing skills that defined him as an intellectual and an artisan. He was a "skilled goldsmith" [5], a highly technical and meticulous craft. He was also a devoted poet, writing in both Turkish and Arabic under the *nom-de-plume* Sabkatī, meaning "the one who precedes".[5] He continued to "play chess... and deal with music," demonstrating a refined cultural palate.[4] He also developed a "humped back" [4], a physical ailment that likely reinforced his preference for the intellectual and courtly arts over the physical demands of military campaigning.

This "quiet prince" [7], forged in the *Kafes*, was the man who inherited the empire in 1730. His personality is the key to his reign. His subsequent actions—such as delegating daily government affairs to his viziers [4], his deep fascination with "elaborate gadgetry" [9], and his lavish cultural patronage [10]—are a direct continuation of the man he became in confinement. A man who spent three decades as a poet and goldsmith [5] would naturally be more inclined to commission the revolutionary Nuruosmaniye Mosque [12] or a technically complex, jewel-encrusted musket [9] than to personally lead armies in the field. His life prepared him to be a patron and a final arbiter, not a day-to-day manager or a general.

Section 2. Enthronement in Chaos: Navigating the Patrona Halil Rebellion

Mahmud I's accession to the throne was a masterclass in the patient, calculated politics he had perfected in the *Kafes*. He was not chosen in an orderly succession but thrust into power by a violent popular revolt, navigating an existential threat to the dynasty by appearing to submit to the rebels while methodically engineering their destruction.

In 1730, the "Patrona Halil Rebellion," a popular uprising of "very low-ranking soldiers" [3], artisans, and Janissaries, brought the lavish "Tulip Era" to a bloody end.[3] The revolt was fueled by popular resentment against new taxes and the elite's "aping of Western manners".[13] The rebels forced the abdication of Mahmud's uncle, Sultan Ahmed III.[3]

Mahmud I, then 34, was led to the throne, with the "chief coup plotters" present at his enthronement ceremony.[3] For nearly two months, the impertinent Patrona Halil, a former Janissary, was the virtual "master of the capital".[13] He rode with the new sultan to his girding ceremony, dictated government appointments (such as attempting to make his associate, a Greek butcher named Yanaki, the Hospodar of Moldavia), and forced Mahmud I to rescind taxes and order the destruction of mansions.[13]

As the deposed Ahmed III retired to the palace chambers where he would die six years later [3], he gave his nephew critical advice: "Do not succumb to your vizier... Always investigate their situation... Do your deeds yourself; don't trust anyone else... this happened to us because... we left the state affairs to others. You take charge yourself!".[3]

Mahmud I, however, was a prisoner of the rebels [13] and had no independent power base. To follow this advice literally would have been suicidal. Instead, he applied the lessons of his 27-year confinement: patience, observation, and calculated appeasement. He *appeared* to be a puppet. When the rebels demanded the destruction of the Tulip Era's symbols, specifically the Sadabad district, Mahmud engaged in a masterful compromise. He "did not consent to the burning of the pavilions" but "agreed to have them destroyed," a subtle distinction that preserved the nearby town of Nevşehir from the flames.[3]

While appearing subservient, Mahmud I and his supporters identified a critical weakness in the rebellion: the deep "jealousy which the officers of the Janissaries felt towards Patrona".[14] The established, high-ranking military elite deeply resented this "very low-ranking" soldier [3] who had usurped their power. Mahmud let Patrona's "impertinent" rule [13] fester, alienating the very establishment he needed to survive.

Having patiently built a coalition with the disgruntled Janissary officers, Mahmud I waited for the precise moment to strike.[7] On November 25, 1730, Patrona Halil was summoned to the palace for a *Divan* (council) under the pretense of planning a war against Russia. He was ambushed and "killed in the sultan's presence".[14] This was the signal for a ruthless and organized purge. 7,000 of Patrona's supporters were hunted down and put to death.[14] Within 46 days of the rebellion's start, Mahmud I had "erase[d] the traces of the coup" and restored order.[3] He had not "done his deeds himself" as his uncle advised, but had brilliantly unleashed the established power of the Janissary corps against the rabble, a victory for the *Kafes*-honed strategy of patience.

Section 3. The Inner Circle: Power Dynamics at Topkapı Palace

Having survived his trial by fire, Mahmud I constructed a unique power structure designed for stability and control. The "shadow government" of his mother, the Valide Saliha Sultan, and the Chief Black Eunuch, Hacı Beşir Agha, was not a sign of the sultan's weakness, but a deliberate and necessary strategy for managing the state. He used this inner circle to handle the day-to-day mechanisms of power, freeing him to act as the ultimate arbiter on grand strategy.

Coming from the *Kafes*, Mahmud I had no personal allies or experience in government.[4] He could trust only the two most permanent, institutionalized figures in the palace:

1. **Valide Saliha Sultan**: Mahmud's mother was his most "reliable and influential ally".[16] She was a woman of "political experience" who possessed a "network of alliances which she had built up over the years" *before* his accession.[16] Her political weight was so significant that Patrona Halil himself "thought it necessary to have an interview with" her

during the rebellion.[16]

2. **Hacı Beşir Agha**: The Chief Black Eunuch, a Naqshbandi sheikh, had presided over the harem since 1717 and "bore considerable skills in politics".[3] He was one of the "closest advisers to the sultan" and "closely cooperated" with Saliha Sultan.[3]

This Saliha-Beşir axis formed the stable core of Mahmud I's government. This was crucial because Mahmud I, taking his uncle's advice [3] to heart, "frequently changed the grand viziers" in his early reign.[16] He was determined to prevent any one pasha from accumulating the power that Nevşehirli Ibrahim Pasha had during the Tulip Era. This *intentional instability* at the Porte (the Grand Vizier's office) *required* a stable, permanent center of power elsewhere. The Saliha-Beşir axis *was* that center.

Their influence was tangible and became a subject of complaint.[16] The system operated on influence-peddling; for example, Grand Vizier Kabakulak Ibrahim Pasha (1731) "had to pay a considerable sum to Saliha and Beşir Agha to secure his position".[16] This was the mechanism by which the revolving door of viziers was managed, providing continuity while the sultan remained above the political fray.

Despite this delegation, Mahmud I was no puppet. He masterfully balanced the *Palace* (Saliha/Beşir) against the *Porte* (his pashas). He personally "used to attend the diwan meetings and listen to the problems of the people" [3] and "consulted with those who had knowledge in important matters".[3] The record shows he was the ultimate decision-maker on grand strategy. In 1733, he made the critical decision to *continue* the war with Iran, *dismissing* the pro-peace Grand Vizier Topal Osman Pasha to do so.[6] Later, he dismissed the successful general Hekimoğlu Ali Pasha after a military setback, despite Beşir Agha's support for him.[6] This demonstrates his mastery of the system: Saliha and Beşir Agha might influence who was *appointed* [16], but only the Sultan decided *policy* and *dismissed* those who failed him.

Section 4. Patron of a New Age: The Birth of Ottoman Baroque

Freed from daily administration by his inner circle, Mahmud I dedicated his energy to the pursuits he had cultivated in the *Kafes*: intellectualism, artistry, and technology. His personal patronage was not mere indulgence; it was a deliberate political project to define a new "Ottoman modernity".[9] His commissions were conscious acts of dynastic "rebranding" after the trauma of 1730, projecting an image of a sophisticated, modern, and victorious empire.

His personal taste is perfectly encapsulated in a single object: a magnificent, gold-plated, and jewel-encrusted flintlock musket commissioned early in his reign.[9] This was no mere trinket; it was a metaphor for his entire reign. The musket integrated three key elements:

1. **Western Technology**: The *flintlock mechanism* itself represented the new, Western-derived military technology he was simultaneously importing to reform his army.[17]
2. **Imperial Splendor**: The gold, diamonds (forming his *tughra* or seal), and precious stones represented the traditional role of the Sultan as a lavish patron of Eastern arts,

projecting immense wealth and dynastic power.[9]

3. **Intellectualism**: The musket contained hidden compartments in its stock holding "a pen and penknife" and an "ornate dagger".[9] This represented the personal identity of the artisan-sultan himself—the poet (Sabkatī) [5] and the intellectual.

This fascination with technology and intellectualism extended to his public works. He was a "wise ruler" [3] who "focused on domestic issues and construction".[3] He resuscitated the printing press that the rebels of 1730 had suspended and established a new paper factory.[18] He was a major patron of libraries, adding one to the Hagia Sophia complex (along with a fountain and school) [10], and founding other major libraries at Galatasaray and Fatih.[6]

His most enduring legacy is the "Ottoman Baroque" style, which his reign brought to its zenith.[20] This was a "hybrid vocabulary" [22], deliberately promoted by the court [20], that fused European Baroque forms (undulating cornices, scrolls, shells, C and S curves, and perfectly round arches) [12] with traditional Ottoman building types.

The pinnacle of this new style was the Nuruosmaniye ("Light of Osman") Complex, which he began in 1748.[11] This was the *first royal mosque complex* built in over a century, a "visible expression of the dynasty's efforts to reaffirm its power".[11] Its architecture, the most "authentic example" of Ottoman Baroque [22], was revolutionary:

- It featured the *first and unique* semi-elliptical courtyard in Ottoman history.[12]
- It had an apse-like mihrab alcove, a clear Western influence.[23]
- It was flooded with light from 174 windows.[24]
- The architect was Simeon Kalfa, a non-Muslim of Greek origin.[9]

The timing and nature of this commission were deeply political. Mahmud I did not begin this grand project, the first royal mosque in a hundred years, until 1748. He had been on the throne for 18 years. He waited until *after* his major wars were won. The authority and funds [11] for the Nuruosmaniye came *after* the stunning victory over Austria at Belgrade (1739) [25] and the ideological victory over Iran at Kerden (1746).[26]

The Nuruosmaniye, therefore, stands as a *victory monument*. By commissioning a *non-Muslim* architect [12] to build the dynasty's primary *mosque* in a radical *European-influenced* style, Mahmud I was projecting a new, victorious, and cosmopolitan imperial image. He was signaling that the Ottoman Empire could defeat Europe on the battlefield (Grocka) and simultaneously co-opt its aesthetic vocabulary to create a new, distinctly "Ottoman modernity".[9]

After 24 years of stable and successful rule, Mahmud I died on December 13, 1754, at the age of 58. After attending Friday prayer, he was returning to the palace on horseback when he collapsed, dying in the arms of his entourage.[3] He was buried in the Tomb of Turhan Sultan at the New Mosque in Istanbul.[4]

Part II: The Empire – A Resilient State in Transition

(1730–1754)

The Ottoman Empire during the reign of Mahmud I (1730–1754) is a case study in resilience. Modern academic consensus has firmly rejected the older "Ottoman Decline Thesis" [1], positing instead that the 18th-century empire "continued to maintain a flexible and strong economy, society and military".[2] Mahmud I's reign is perhaps the strongest evidence for this re-evaluation. He inherited a state in chaos, immediately faced two-front wars against the era's most formidable military powers—Nader Shah's Iran and the combined empires of Habsburg Austria and Romanov Russia—and emerged victorious, with the empire's borders and ideological legitimacy secured. This success was underpinned by a period of targeted military reform, innovative cultural patronage, and a flexible, adaptive political economy.

Section 5. The Eastern Frontier: The Impasse with Nader Shah’s Iran

The grueling, multi-phase war with Afsharid Iran was the longest and most complex military challenge of Mahmud I's reign. This was not merely a border dispute; it was an ideological and theological conflict for supremacy in the Islamic world. The final peace treaty, while a military stalemate, represented a crucial doctrinal victory for Mahmud I and his claim to the Sunni Caliphate.

The antagonist was Nader Shah, "the last great ruler of Iranian history" [3], a military genius [27] who dreamed of an empire stretching from the Indus to the Bosphorus.[26] He funded his Ottoman campaigns by invading Mughal India.[29]

The war came in two phases. The first (1730–1736) was an inheritance from the previous reign. The front was highly volatile. Ottoman armies, led by generals like Hekimoğlu Ali Pasha, captured Tabriz and Urmia.[3] However, the Ottomans also suffered major setbacks. The brilliant Ottoman general Topal Osman Pasha won a victory at Samarra in 1733 but was later defeated and killed at the Battle of Kirkuk.[3] This phase of the war ended badly for the Ottomans after Nader Shah's decisive victory at the Battle of Arpaçay (Baghavard) in 1735, which forced them to concede Armenia and Georgia.[32]

Nader Shah, after his Indian campaigns, declared a new war (1743–1746). This time, his goals were both territorial (he demanded the surrender of Baghdad) [28] and religious. He besieged major Ottoman cities, including Mosul [28] and Kars.[3] The Ottoman defense proved resilient. At Kars, the guard Hacı Ahmed Pasha brilliantly anticipated Nader's siege tactics, securing the city's water supply and forcing Nader to lift the siege after two months.[3]

The core *casus belli* of this second war, however, was ideological. Nader Shah's central demand was that the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph formally recognize the *Ja'fari* (Twelver Shia) school of jurisprudence as a *fifth orthodox school (madhhab)* of Islam, equal to the four established Sunni schools.[26] This was a direct, existential attack on the religious foundation of the Ottoman Empire and the Sultan's authority as the protector of Sunni Islam. Had Mahmud I

accepted, it would have shattered his religious legitimacy and elevated Nader Shah to a peer. The Ottoman ulema understood this, preparing for a "holy war" against the Persian "heretics".[29]

The war ultimately ended in a stalemate, largely because Nader Shah's brutal policies were causing his own army and empire to disintegrate from internal revolts.[28] The resulting **Treaty of Kerden (1746)** was, on paper, a *status quo ante bellum*.[29] It restored the borders to those defined by the 1639 Treaty of Zuhab.[26]

While the military result was a draw, the *political* result was a decisive Ottoman victory. Nader Shah received *none* of his demands. Baghdad remained firmly in Ottoman hands [29], and, most critically, Nader Shah was forced to *abandon all his religious demands*.[26] Mahmud I had given up no territory and, by refusing to buckle on the Ja'fari question, had successfully defended Ottoman religious orthodoxy against the most powerful military commander of the century. The treaty stabilized the eastern frontier for decades and cemented the Ottoman Sultan's status as the unchallengeable center of Sunni Islam.

Section 6. The Western Frontier: The Great Reversal and the Treaty of Belgrade

The 1735–1739 war on the western frontier was the most significant *external* event of Mahmud I's reign. The conflict, culminating in a decisive Ottoman victory at the Battle of Grocka and the humiliating Austrian concessions in the Treaty of Belgrade, represents a complete refutation of the 18th-century "Ottoman decline" narrative. It demonstrated profound military resilience and diplomatic savvy.

The war began in 1735 as a Russo-Turkish conflict, sparked by Russia's ongoing "struggle for access to the Black Sea" [36] and raids by Ottoman-aligned Crimean Tatars.[36] In 1737, the Habsburg monarchy joined its Russian ally, opening a second front.[36]

The Ottoman Empire was now fighting a massive, two-front war: Nader Shah in the East and the combined power of Austria and Russia in the West. The war on the Russian front was a mixed success for Russia; its armies captured key fortresses like Azov and Ochakov [37], but their forces were so decimated by plague, disease, and supply issues that they "lost tens of thousands" [37], rendering their victories hollow.[36]

On the Austrian front, however, the Ottomans achieved a "stunning defeat" of the Habsburgs.[37] The decisive engagement was the **Battle of Grocka** on July 22, 1739.[40] The Ottoman army, led by the Grand Vizier, met the Austrian army under Marshal Wallis. The Ottomans secured superior positions and, after a day of "fiercely fought, daylong encounter" [41], "heavily shattered" the Austrian forces.[40] The Austrians fled in disarray back to Belgrade, which the victorious Ottoman army promptly besieged.[40]

Facing military catastrophe, Austria panicked and scrambled for a separate peace.[39] The resulting **Treaty of Belgrade (1739)** was the most favorable treaty the Ottomans had signed in a century and a "great reversal" of their previous losses.[39]

- **Territorial Reversal**: Austria was forced to *cede* all the territories it had gained from the Ottomans at the Treaty of Passarowitz in 1718. This included the entire Kingdom of Serbia (with the crucial fortress of Belgrade) and Oltenia (Little Walachia).[25] Austria "renounc[ed] the strong position in the Balkans" it had held for two decades.[39]
- **Russian Humiliation**: Abandoned by their Austrian ally and with their own armies exhausted [38], the militarily successful Russians were forced into a "disappointing peace".[39] They were allowed to keep a demilitarized Azov, but were *explicitly forbidden* from building or maintaining *any* warships on the Sea of Azov or the Black Sea. They could only trade on the Black Sea using *Ottoman* ships.[39]
- **Geopolitical Impact**: The treaty reaffirmed the Black Sea as a "Turkish lake" (*Türk gölü*), a status it would hold for the last time in history.[44]

The treaty was a stunning victory that disproves any narrative of "inevitable decline".[43] The empire had successfully fought a two-front war, decisively defeating one of Europe's great powers and neutralizing the other.

Table 1: The Great Reversal: Passarowitz (1718) vs. Belgrade (1739)		
Territorial/Political Point	**Outcome of Passarowitz (1718)**	**Outcome of Belgrade (1739)**
Belgrade & Northern Serbia	Lost by Ottomans to Austria	**Regained** by Ottomans from Austria [25]
Oltenia (Little Walachia)	Lost by Ottomans to Austria	**Regained** by Ottomans from Austria [39]
Banat of Craiova	Lost by Ottomans to Austria	**Regained** by Ottomans from Austria [25]
Russian Black Sea Access	Restricted	Heavily restricted; no fleet allowed [39]
Status of Azov	-	Ceded to Russia, but *demilitarized* [39]

This diplomatic triumph, however, contained the seeds of a future problem. The treaty was achieved through the mediation of France.[44] As a "reward" for this service, in 1740 Mahmud I made the French *capitulations*—a set of trade and legal privileges—*süresiz* (perpetual, or unlimited in time).[44] In the short term, this was a brilliant move, securing the 1739 victory and cementing an alliance with France against the Habsburgs and Russians. In the long term, these perpetual capitulations would be exploited by European powers in the 19th century to undermine Ottoman economic and legal sovereignty. Mahmud I's greatest diplomatic triumph inadvertently created a tool for the empire's future economic subjugation.

Section 7. The New Model Army: Early Experiments in Modernization

The stunning victory at Belgrade in 1739 was not "dumb luck".[46] It was, in part, the direct result of targeted, Western-style military reforms that Mahmud I had initiated, demonstrating the empire's capacity for adaptation. The reign continued the Western-style reforms of the Tulip Era [47], but, having learned from the 1730 rebellion, focused them on the *military*.[8]
The most successful of these reforms was that of the *Humbaracı* (Mortar) corps. The project was initiated by the forward-thinking Grand Vizier Hekimoğlu Ali Pasha.[17] To lead it, he hired a high-profile French renegade officer, Claude Alexandre, Count of Bonneval. Bonneval converted to Islam, took the name Humbaracı Ahmed Pasha, and was "appointed to organise and command the Turkish artillery".[17] He established a new, modern artillery corps in Üsküdar, training around 300 bombardiers (many brought from Bosnia) in modern European artillery and mortar tactics.[18] This new, professionalized corps saw action in the war against Austria and "contribut[ed] to the Austrian defeat".[48] The victory at Belgrade was, therefore, a direct consequence of a successful military modernization program.
However, the limits of 18th-century reform are revealed by a crucial paradox: the success of the *Humbaracı* corps versus the failure of the *Hendesehane*.

- **The *Hendesehane*** (School of Engineering) was established in 1734 in Üsküdar during the vizierate of Topal Osman Pasha.[52] This was a revolutionary attempt to *institutionalize* Western knowledge by creating a school to teach "classes related to Civil Engineering" and modern military engineering.[52] This project *failed*. It was "closed after three years due to the opposition of the Janissaries".[52]

Why did the artillery *corps* succeed while the *school* failed? The answer defines the "rules" of reform under Mahmud I.

1. Bonneval's *Humbaracı* corps was a *parallel* institution. It was self-contained, used foreign-born soldiers (Bosnians), and was housed in a separate barracks (Üsküdar).[18] It *augmented* the existing army but did not *threaten* the institutional power of the Janissaries.
2. The *Hendesehane*, by contrast, was an *educational* institution designed to create a *new class* of Ottoman-Muslim military engineers trained in Western, "infidel" methods.

This *institutionalization* of Western knowledge was a *direct existential threat* to the Janissary corps [52], whose power was based on their monopoly on traditional military roles and education. The Janissaries, therefore, crushed the *school* [52] but tolerated the *corps*. This demonstrates that Mahmud I's reforms could only be *tactical additions* to the "Old Regime".[1] He could not enact *structural replacements*. True, deep modernization would have to wait until a future sultan, Mahmud II, was willing and able to destroy the Janissary corps itself.[50]

Section 8. The Internal State: Economy, Society, and Administration

Internally, the empire under Mahmud I was defined by the "Ottoman Old Regime" [1], a flexible and adaptive socio-economic system that has been misunderstood by older "decline"

narratives. The two dominant features of this era—the *malikāne* tax-farm system and the rise of the *ayan* (provincial notables)—were not signs of weakness, but the core components of a resilient 18th-century political economy.

The central economic institution was the ***malikāne***, or life-term tax farm, instituted in 1695.[1] Under this system, the state auctioned off the *life-term* right to tax a specific revenue source (like a district or a customs post).[1] The winner paid a large lump sum upfront and guaranteed a stable annual payment, providing the treasury with the predictable revenue it needed to fund its massive armies.[1]

This *malikāne* system *directly caused* the rise of the ***ayan***, or provincial notables.[54] These notables—who could be local military men, religious scholars, or wealthy urban gentry [55]—were the ones who bought the tax farms. In doing so, they became wealthy and powerful *de facto* local rulers.[57]

The old "decline" narrative framed this decentralization as a "breakdown" of central authority. The evidence, however, suggests this was a mutually beneficial and deliberate system.1 The ayan were not "warlords" stealing power; they were partners in governance, formally and legally "tied... to the Ottoman state" through the malikāne contract.1 This flexible, "outsourced" administrative model was highly adaptive. The central state got its cash and "more effective... local government and taxation".1 The ayan received immense wealth and, crucially, state-sanctioned legitimacy. This system, which defined the 18th century, was not a sign of weakness but of pragmatic flexibility.

This same pragmatic, hands-on management is visible in the empire's social policies. The diverse society of religious communities (*millets*)—including Orthodox Christians, Armenians, and Jews [58]—was not governed by a simple, passive "tolerance," as the traditional "millet system" concept held.[62] Modern historiography, based on a closer reading of 18th-century sources, reveals a far more active and political process.[62]

During this period (the "Second Stage" of *millet* relations), the Ottoman state became *more* involved, not less. The government "increased their reliance" on the Orthodox and Armenian Patriarchs in Istanbul and *actively strengthened* the authority of these religious leaders.[62] This was not an act of abstract tolerance. It was an *anxious, active political strategy*. The state was deeply concerned by *foreign Catholic missionaries* (e.g., French) who were aggressively proselytizing and attempting to convert Ottoman Christian subjects.[62] This was seen as a *political threat*—an attempt by rival European powers to create a "fifth column" of subjects loyal to a foreign power. Mahmud I's government, therefore, engaged in sophisticated indirect rule: it *empowered* its *own* non-Muslim elites (the Patriarchs), turning them into *agents of the state* to police their own communities and prevent this foreign-sponsored religious subversion.

Section 9. Conclusion: The Legacy of a Resilient Reign

Sultan Mahmud I inherited an empire in flames, its capital in the hands of a mob and its

legitimacy shattered.[3] Over a 24-year reign [4], he stabilized the state, secured its borders against its most dangerous rivals, and presided over a cultural renaissance.
His reign stands as a powerful corrective to the "Ottoman Decline Thesis." The empire he led demonstrated profound resilience and adaptability.[2]

- **Politically**, he was a master of the *Kafes*-honed "quiet" arts. He deftly navigated the 1730 rebellion, creating a stable internal power structure (Saliha Sultan and Beşir Agha) [16] that allowed him to balance competing factions and remain the ultimate arbiter.[6]
- **Militarily**, his reign was one of stunning success. He fought the combined empires of Austria and Russia, and the military genius Nader Shah, and emerged victorious. The **Treaty of Belgrade (1739)** was a "great reversal" that restored Ottoman dominance in the Balkans.[25] The **Treaty of Kerden (1746)** was a decisive *ideological* victory that affirmed the Sultan's caliphal authority.[26]
- **Structurally**, these victories were not accidents. They were the result of targeted *military reform* (the *Humbaracı* corps) [17] and a *flexible political economy* (the *malikāne-ayan* system) [1] that effectively funded the state. His reign also demonstrated the *limits* of 18th-century reform, as seen in the Janissary-led destruction of the *Hendesehane* engineering school.[52]
- **Culturally**, Mahmud I was the great patron of the "Ottoman Baroque".[20] The Nuruosmaniye Mosque, the first royal mosque in a century, stands as a testament to his reign's self-image: victorious, modern, cosmopolitan, and pious.[11]

The 35-year period of his father (Mustafa II) and uncle (Ahmed III) has been described as a "sunny summer day during autumn".[3] If so, the reign of Mahmud I was the full heat of that sun. He took a state in crisis and bequeathed a stable, victorious, and culturally vibrant empire to his successor.[8] He was the Hunchback Sultan [4], the goldsmith and poet from the *Kafes* [4], who proved to be one of the most effective and resilient rulers of the 18th century.

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