

A Report on the Reign of Sultan Mustafa IV and the Ottoman Crisis of 1807-1808

A Chronological Matrix of the Ottoman Crises, 1807-1808

Date	Internal Politics (The Palace & Constantinople)	Military & Provincial (Janissary & Ayan)	International Diplomacy (Napoleonic Wars)
Feb 1807	Selim III's authority is catastrophically shaken. "Hysteria in the city". ¹ French Ambassador Sébastiani actively organizes the capital's defense. ¹	Dardanelles fortifications are publicly exposed as "not effective". ¹ The military's confidence in Selim's <i>Nizam-i Cedid</i> is shattered. ³	'İngiliz Vakası' (English Event) ¹ : A British fleet under Admiral Duckworth breaches the Dardanelles ⁴ , anchoring off Constantinople. ⁴ The Anglo-Turkish War (1807-1809) is active. ⁵
May 1807	(May 29) Sultan Selim III is deposed. ⁶ Mustafa IV is enthroned. ⁷ Köse Musa and Şeyhülislâm Ataullah secure a <i>fetva</i> for the deposition. ⁸ (May 31) An "unprecedented" <i>Hüccet-i Şer'iyye</i> is issued, granting the rebels legal immunity from prosecution. ¹⁰	Kabakçı Mustafa Rebellion ¹¹ : <i>Yamaks</i> (auxiliary levies) revolt, killing a minister over new uniforms. ¹³ Köse Musa Pasha sabotages the defense by refusing to deploy <i>Nizam-i Cedid</i> troops. ¹¹ The <i>Nizam-i Cedid</i> army is formally "disbanded" and "dispersed". ⁶	The French ambassador, Sébastiani, is initially alarmed by the coup but is placated when the new regime confirms its pro-French alignment. ¹⁵
July 1807	Anarchy reigns in	Surviving <i>Nizam-i</i>	Treaty of Tilsit (July 7)

	Constantinople. ¹ Mustafa IV's rule is described as "symbolic" ¹⁰ as the state purges reformers. ⁷	<i>Cedid</i> reformers flee to the Balkans, seeking refuge with Alemdar Mustafa Pasha in Rusçuk. ¹⁰ Janissaries are granted new privileges and power. ¹⁹	²⁰ : Napoleon I "betrays" the Ottoman Empire ¹⁶ , allying with Tsar Alexander I. Secret articles discuss the <i>partition</i> of the Ottoman Empire. ¹⁰ The Porte is "stunned" by this betrayal. ¹⁶
Aug 1807	The new regime, diplomatically isolated by Tilsit, "surrenders its foreign policy to France totally". ¹⁵ French influence becomes paramount. ¹⁵	Armistice of Slobozia (Aug. 20) ²² : A truce is signed with Russia. This <i>fatally</i> frees the powerful, reform-minded Danubian army, including Alemdar Mustafa Pasha, to turn its attention from the front to the capital. ²³	The Russo-Turkish War (1806–1812) is temporarily paused, releasing tens of thousands of troops from the front. ¹⁰
July 1808	(July 28) Mustafa IV, learning of Alemdar's goal to restore Selim, orders the execution of <i>both</i> Selim III & Prince Mahmud. ⁷ Selim III is murdered. ²⁵ Prince Mahmud escapes. ²⁶ Mustafa IV is deposed; Mahmud II is enthroned. ²³	Alemdar Incident ¹ : Alemdar Mustafa Pasha marches on Constantinople with 15,000 <i>ayan</i> soldiers. ²² The rebel leader Kabakçı Mustafa is assassinated on Alemdar's orders. ²² Alemdar takes the capital and is appointed Grand Vizier. ²⁹	N/A (Internal power struggle).
Nov 1808	(Nov 16) Mahmud II orders the execution of the deposed Mustafa IV. ²³ This leaves Mahmud as the sole surviving male of the Ottoman dynasty. ³⁰	Janissaries revolt <i>again</i> , this time against Alemdar Mustafa Pasha's new reforms. ⁷ Alemdar, the Grand Vizier, is killed in an explosion at his palace. ²⁹ Mustafa IV is	N/A (Internal power struggle).

		executed specifically to prevent the Janissaries from restoring him to the throne. ³²	
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Part I: The Sultan (Mustafa IV)

1. The Prince in the Shadows: Formation and Character

1.1. From the Kafes to the Throne: The Education of a Prince

Sultan Mustafa IV was born in Constantinople on September 8, 1779, the son of Sultan Abdülhamid I and Sineperver Sultan.¹⁰ His father died when he was ten, and he and his younger half-brother, Mahmud (the future Mahmud II), were placed under the care of their cousin, Sultan Selim III.¹⁰ Sources indicate that Selim III, who was childless, "treated them favorably" ²³ and with "utmost care and compassion" ¹⁰, raising them as his own children. This favorable treatment, however, could not alter the fundamental nature of his upbringing, which was defined by the institution of the *Kafes* (literally "the cage").³³ The *Kafes* was the section of the Imperial Harem where potential male heirs to the throne were kept under a form of comfortable house arrest and constant surveillance.³³ This system had been instituted in the 17th century to replace the older, destabilizing practice of systematic fratricide, thereby ensuring dynastic continuity.³³ But this security came at a severe cost. Confinement to the *Kafes* "marked the end of their education" ³³, isolating princes from any practical training in military, administrative, or foreign affairs. As a result, the institution often produced sultans who were "less than stellar" in their qualifications ³⁴, having spent decades in isolation, detached from the world they were suddenly expected to rule. Mustafa IV, as the elder prince ²³, was first in line to the throne and a product of this debilitating system.

1.2. A Historiographical Reckoning: Re-evaluating the "Fanatic"

The historical portrayal of Mustafa IV is deeply divided, presenting two irreconcilable portraits of the man. This contradiction is not merely a dispute over details but a fundamental conflict in historiography, rooted in the political legitimacy of the regime that succeeded him.

1.2.1. The Traditional Portrait: An "Ambitious Man of Low Intelligence"

The dominant narrative, particularly in Western sources and those derived from the pro-Mahmud II era, is exceptionally harsh. Mustafa IV is described as "greedy, cunning and a nervous man" who, unlike his cultivated cousin Selim, "preferred to live a life of pleasure rather than to be educated".¹⁹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, summarizing this long-held view, terms him "a fanatical and ambitious man of low intelligence".¹⁷ Other accounts dismiss him as a "half-witted cousin".³⁵

In this interpretation, Mustafa IV was the perfect instrument for the "reactionary conservative coalition" ¹⁷ of Janissaries and conservative *ulema* (religious scholars) who sought to overthrow Selim III. His "low intelligence" made him easily manipulated by the anti-reformist plotters, while his "fanatical" opposition to Selim's European-style reforms and his personal "ambition" ¹⁷ made him a willing and active participant in the 1807 coup.

1.2.2. The Revisionist View: A "Supporter of Innovation Under the Table"

A significant revisionist perspective, primarily advanced by modern Turkish historians, argues that this traditional portrait is "not true" ¹⁰ and is, in fact, a politically motivated caricature.

This view contends that Mustafa IV's authority was "never... complete" ¹⁰ from the moment he took the throne; he was a ruler trapped by the "endless political turmoil" ¹⁰ and the very men who had enthroned him.¹⁰

This perspective cites specific evidence to argue that Mustafa IV was, like his predecessor, a "supporter of innovation and modernism".¹⁰

- First, even as *şehzade* (prince), he had received a detailed report from the senior military bureaucrat Koca Sekbanbaşı, which *praised* the *Nizam-i Cedid* (New Order) army and explained its "necessity".²² This suggests he was not ignorant of the reforms' purpose.
- Second, upon becoming Sultan, he "did not dissolve the reformers but, on the contrary, employed them in official services".¹⁰ He attempted to create a "relatively peaceful environment by giving duties to statesmen from both" the modernist and traditionalist camps.¹⁰
- Third, some sources contend the idea of reviving the *Nizam-i Cedid* "was not abandoned" and that Mustafa IV "supported this under the table".¹⁰ He allegedly assigned Süleyman Agha, a former trainer from the Levend Barracks, to continue this work quietly.²²
- Finally, his "close attention to the Mühendislikhane" (the Imperial School of Military Engineering) and his plan to "place trained soldiers in the Artillery Barracks in Taksim" are presented as proof of his modernist, not reactionary, intentions.¹⁰

Reconciling these two views suggests a third, more nuanced reality. The traditional portrait of Mustafa IV as a "half-witted fanatic" is almost certainly a product of "victor's history".¹⁷ The

"victor," Mahmud II ²⁸, built his entire reign on the reforms of Selim III ⁷ and had to legitimize his own accession, which was achieved by deposing and ultimately executing his own brother.¹⁷ To do this, Mustafa IV *had* to be remembered as an illegitimate, incompetent, and fanatical reactionary. The revisionist view, while perhaps overly charitable, provides evidence that Mustafa IV was not an ideologue. He was a political *opportunist* ¹⁹, a product of the *Kafes* ³³, who was intelligent enough to be "cunning" ¹⁹ but lacked the character, education, or power base to be a true sovereign. He was a survivor, not a ruler, and he was caught between the reactionaries who enthroned him and a pragmatic, private understanding that the reforms they hated were, in fact, necessary.²²

2. The 1807 Coup: Complicity and Accession

2.1. "Deceiving His Uncle": The Secret Alliance

Mustafa IV's path to the throne was paved with active conspiracy. Despite being Selim III's "favourite crown prince" ¹⁹, he "deceived his uncle and co-operated with the rebels" to seize power.¹⁹ This was not a case of the throne being passively offered to him; he was an integral part of the plot.

The popular uprising led by the *yamak* (auxiliary soldier) Kabakçı Mustafa ¹¹ was not a spontaneous, bottom-up event. It was the "muscle" for a high-level palace coup, orchestrated by a triumvirate of anti-reformist leaders. While the main Ottoman army was on the Russian front ¹¹, the anti-reformist Deputy Grand Vizier, Köse Musa Pasha, "remained... in Istanbul".³⁷ It is "allegedly" that Köse Musa was "secretly in agreement with Prince Mustafa" ³⁷, coordinating the plot from within the government. This alliance—Mustafa (the dynastic heir), Köse Musa (the bureaucracy), and *Şeyhülislâm* Topal Ataullah Efendi (the clergy) ⁸—leveraged the genuine, popular discontent of the Janissaries ³⁸ and *yamaks* ¹⁴ to execute a "top-down" overthrow of the state. Mustafa IV was not a passive beneficiary; he was a conspirator.

2.2. The Accession of May 29, 1807

On May 29, 1807, following the issuance of a *fetva* (religious decree) by Ataullah Efendi ⁸, Selim III was deposed.⁷ The reformer sultan "withdrew to the harem" ³⁹ and formally "pledged fidelity to his cousin as the new sultan".²³

A revealing and "curious" event occurred during this transfer of power. Selim III, in despair, "attempted to commit suicide," but "Mustafa spared his life by smashing the cup of poison that his cousin tried to drink".²³ This act, which might appear as mercy, was one of cold political calculation. In May 1807, Mustafa's legitimacy, however thin, *depended* on Selim's

living, formal, and voluntary-seeming abdication.²³ Had Selim died that day, it would have been viewed as regicide, delegitimizing Mustafa's new reign before it began. He needed Selim *alive* as a prisoner to legitimize the transition.

This calculation is proven by its reversal 14 months later. In July 1808, when the reformist general Alemdar Mustafa Pasha marched on the capital *specifically to restore Selim*²⁵, Selim's life was no longer a political asset but the single greatest threat to Mustafa's rule. Mustafa, without hesitation, "desperately ordered the executions" of Selim and his brother Mahmud.⁷ The decision to "spare" Selim in 1807 and the decision to *murder* him in 1808 were the *same* political act: securing the throne by any means necessary. This demonstrates the "cunning" ¹⁹ that coexisted with his political weakness.

3. The Sultan of the Reaction: The 14-Month Reign

3.1. Authorizing the Counter-Reform

Mustafa IV's brief reign was defined by his immediate and total reversal of Selim III's "New Order" (*Nizam-i Cedid*). His first acts were to reward his co-conspirators and consolidate the reaction. He "effectively pardoned the rebels" ⁷ who had brought him to power and "allied himself with the Janissaries" ⁷, the very institution Selim had tried to replace.

Under his authority, Selim's reforms were "ended".¹⁷ The *Nizam-i Cedid* army, the centerpiece of the reforms, was officially "disbanded" ⁷ and its troops "dispersed".⁶ European embassies, which Selim had established as a "window to the West," were "dismantled".⁶ A purge of reformers began; anyone who "appeared to support Selim" was hunted down, and many were "caught and executed".⁷ In their place, the Janissaries "gained power again" ¹⁹ and were "given many privileges" ¹⁹, restoring the old military and political order.

3.2. The Hücet-i Şer'iyye of May 31, 1807: The Surrender of Sovereignty

Any illusion that Mustafa IV was in command of this new government was shattered just two days after his accession. On May 31, 1807, an "unprecedented" ¹⁰ event occurred. The leaders of the coup, acutely aware that "new rulers had punished the putschists... in all incidences of previous coups" ¹⁰, demanded a guarantee for their own lives.

They forced the new Sultan to participate in the issuing of a "*hücet-i şer'iyye*" (a formal court decision or religious-legal document).¹⁰ This document, which Mustafa IV was compelled to "take an oath and" "sign" ¹⁰, explicitly stated "that the sultan would not hold them responsible for the coup".¹⁰

This was a formal, legal surrender of sovereignty. The absolute authority of the Sultan, the

foundational principle of the Ottoman state ⁴¹, was nullified. The *hüccet* transferred de facto power *from* the Sultan to the rebel leaders, giving them legal and religious immunity for their sedition. It institutionalized the coup and confirmed that Mustafa IV was a puppet. His reign was "only a symbolic one" ¹⁰ because the "rebellious Kabakci Mustafa and his men" were, from that day forward, legally empowered to "interven[e] the governmental administrations" ¹⁹ without fear of reprisal. This document was the legal bedrock of the "anarchy" ¹ that defined his 14-month rule.

3.3. Navigating the Tilsit Betrayal

The 1807 coup had been executed on a staunchly pro-French, anti-British/Russian platform.¹⁵ Mustafa IV's government had "surrendered its foreign policy to France totally".¹⁵ Yet, just six weeks after his accession, this singular foreign policy pillar collapsed.

On July 7, 1807, his sole ally, Napoleon I, met Tsar Alexander I on a raft in the Neman River and signed the Treaty of Tilsit.²⁰ This treaty was a stunning betrayal. Napoleon "abandoned" his Turkish ally ¹⁶ and made peace with Russia. Worse, secret articles of the treaty laid out plans for the *partition* of the Ottoman Empire ¹⁰, with Russia to be given Moldavia, Wallachia, and Bulgaria.¹⁰ When rumors of this reached Constantinople, the government was "stunned" and "upset".¹⁶ The event left Mustafa IV's regime in a state of total diplomatic isolation, "upset" at being abandoned by the very power they had reoriented the empire to support.¹⁶

4. The 1808 Dénouement: Fratricide and Deposition

4.1. Alemdar at the Gates: The Order for Fratricide

The internal and external blunders of Mustafa IV's regime came to a head in July 1808. The pro-reformist *ayan* (provincial notable) Alemdar Mustafa Pasha, now free from the Russian front, marched on Constantinople with 15,000 soldiers.²² His stated intention was to depose Mustafa IV and restore Selim III to the throne.¹⁷

When Mustafa IV was "informed of Bayrakdar's intentions" ¹⁷, he made a final, "desperate" ²⁷ and monstrous political gamble. He gave the order to execute *both* of the other remaining Ottoman males in the palace: the deposed Selim III and his own 23-year-old half-brother, Prince Mahmud.⁷

This was not an act of random panic; it was a reversion to the archaic, pre-Kafes logic of dynastic security. As ²⁴ explicitly notes, Mustafa's goal was "to remain as the only male in the Ottoman dynasty." He gambled that if he was the *only* living member of the House of Osman, Alemdar's army—regardless of its loyalties—would be *forced* to accept him as Sultan. Their

only alternative would be to *end the Ottoman dynasty itself*, an act that was politically and religiously unthinkable. It was a cold, "cunning" ¹⁹ gambit to present the empire with a *fait accompli*.

4.2. The Execution of Selim III and the Escape of Mahmud II

The "last man standing" gambit was almost successful. The assassins stormed the harem apartments and succeeded in finding and strangling Selim III.²⁵ They then hunted for Prince Mahmud.

Mahmud's survival was a pivotal, dramatic moment that changed Ottoman history. He was "safely kept hidden by his mother" ²⁸ and loyal servants. "Most famously, a Georgian harem girl named Cevri Kalfa" ²⁶ and other servants physically blocked the assassins and helped the prince "escape to the roof" of the harem ²⁶ just moments before the killers broke in.

Believing both his rivals were dead, Mustafa IV "ascended his throne" ²³ and, in a "vain hope that it would deter them" ⁷, had his guards "show the rebels Selim's body" ⁷, which they "promptly tossed... into the palace's inner courtyard".²³ This grotesque display was meant to be his political checkmate. But "just as the rebels demanded that Mustafa 'yield his place to a worthier', Mahmud revealed himself" ²³, having been found by Alemdar's men. Mustafa's gambit had failed. He was "immediately deposed" on July 28, 1808, and arrested.⁷

5. The Final Act: The Execution of a Sultan

Mustafa IV was deposed and "lived in confinement" ¹⁷, placed back in the *Kafes* ³³ from which he had emerged 14 months prior. But his story was not over.

In November 1808, the political winds shifted yet again. The Janissaries, who had been suppressed by Alemdar Mustafa Pasha, rose in revolt *again*—this time against Alemdar's *new* set of reforms.⁷ The Janissaries "assaulted the high walls" of the palace ³⁰, killed Alemdar in a massive explosion ²⁹, and marched on the palace with the explicit goal "to reinstate Mustafa IV".³⁰

The new Sultan, Mahmud II, had "learned from the disasters of 1807".³⁵ He had personally witnessed his brother's "last man standing" gambit and now faced the exact same threat: as long as Mustafa IV was alive, he was a living, breathing alternative, a tool for the Janissaries. Mahmud II, "cautious" ³⁵ but ruthless, applied the "bloody lesson" his brother had taught him. On November 16, 1808, he "had his brother put to death" ³⁰, strangled on his orders.¹⁷

This act "left Mahmud the last surviving male Osman".³⁰ Mustafa IV's execution was the *successful* implementation of the very political logic he himself had *failed* to complete. By committing fratricide, Mahmud II secured his throne, ended the 18-month cycle of coups, and cleared the way for his own brutal, but ultimately transformative, reign.

Part II: The Empire (1807-1808)

6. The Prelude to Collapse: The 'İngiliz Vakası' (The English Event)

6.1. Admiral Duckworth's Forcing of the Dardanelles (February 1807)

The crisis of Mustafa IV's reign was precipitated by a profound military and diplomatic humiliation. In 1806, Sultan Selim III, under the powerful influence of the French Ambassador General Horace Sébastiani ², had pivoted the empire's foreign policy toward Napoleonic France. This act was a direct challenge to Russia and Britain, plunging the empire into the Anglo-Turkish War.⁵

In response, the British government sought to "intimidate the Sublime Porte".³ On the morning of February 19, 1807, a British naval squadron under the command of Admiral Sir John Duckworth ⁴ achieved what was widely believed to be impossible: he "forced the Dardanelles" ⁴, sailing his ships "with such ease" ¹ past the imposing but "not effective" ¹ Ottoman fortresses. Duckworth's fleet anchored in the Sea of Marmora, "opposite Constantinople," where he "threatened to bombard" the imperial capital.⁴

6.2. The Crisis of Confidence and the Rise of French Influence

The psychological and political impact on the capital was immediate and catastrophic. The event "exposed the vulnerability of the throne" ¹ and "created hysteria in the city".¹ The public, which had been assured of the Dardanelles' strength, was now gripped by panic over the "very real possibility that the city's wooden houses would burn to the ground".¹

Into this vacuum of leadership and "confusion and despair" ¹ stepped General Sébastiani. With the "encouragement" of the Sultan ¹, Sébastiani, along with a group of "200" French officers and engineers ¹, effectively "organized the defense of Constantinople".² While Ottoman diplomats cleverly stalled the British with negotiations, Sébastiani directed the frenzied reinforcement of the city's defenses. Admiral Duckworth, realizing he was being "stalled" ⁴ and lacked the "appropriate troops" for a land invasion ⁴, was forced to retreat. On March 3, he "audaciously sailed back through the Dardanelles" ⁴, failing in his primary objective ⁵ but having fatally wounded the prestige of the Sultan.

This *İngiliz Vakası* (English Event) was the proximate cause of the May 1807 coup. Selim III's entire 18-year political project, the *Nizam-i Cedid* ⁴⁸, was a military modernization program justified by the need to defend the empire from European powers. Duckworth's maneuver was

a catastrophic, public humiliation that *proved* to all of Selim's critics that his decade-long, expensive, and socially-disruptive reforms ¹³ had *failed*. Worse, the man who *did* successfully organize the capital's defense was not the Sultan, but the *French* ambassador.² This demonstrated that the reforms were both impious, as the *ulema* claimed ⁶, and ineffective. There is a "direct correlation" ³; this event created the "anarchy" ¹ that the reactionary forces needed to destroy him.

7. The Anatomy of a Reactionary Coup (May 1807)

7.1. The Yamak Revolt: Kabakçı Mustafa

The spark that ignited the coup came on May 25, 1807. The Minister of the Bosphorus, Raif Mehmet, attempted to enforce an order "to persuade the yamaks to wear the new uniforms" of the *Nizam-i Cedid*.¹¹ The *yamaks*—a special class of soldiers, unlike Janissaries, who were recruited from the Black Sea Region ¹¹—viewed this as a "threat" ¹² and a final step toward being converted into a European-style, "Muscovite" army. They refused, proclaiming "We are about to be converted to Muscovite, not Janissary" ¹⁴, and killed the minister.¹³ They "then began marching to İstanbul".¹³ They elected a sergeant from Rize, Kabakçı Mustafa, as their leader ¹¹, and a popular insurrection was born. But this insurrection would have been "an easy matter to suppress" ¹³ had it not been for a high-level conspiracy operating in parallel.

7.2. The "Triumvirate of Reaction": The Alliance of Kabakçı, Köse Musa, and Ataullah Efendi

The success of the 1807 coup was not an accident; it was a coordinated operation by three distinct factions who together formed a "Triumvirate of Reaction" against the New Order.

1. **The Street (Kabakçı and the Janissaries):** Kabakçı's *yamaks* ¹³ provided the "muscle." As they marched, their numbers "increased with accretion of many people including janissaries" ¹¹ who were already in the capital. Their motives were ideological and financial: they were "jealous of their privileges" ³⁸, opposed "western style" training ¹¹, and resented the new taxes levied to pay for the *Nizam-i Cedid*.¹³
2. **The Bureaucracy (Köse Musa):** Köse Musa Pasha, the *Sadaret Kahyası* (a position "roughly equivalent to interior minister" ¹¹), provided the *strategic sabotage*. He was a known opponent of the reforms.³⁷ At the critical moment, with "the camp of well trained Nizamı cedit troops... nearby" ¹³, Köse Musa "refused to use the modern troops against the yamaks".¹¹ The "pacifist" Sultan Selim III "approved Köse Musa" ¹¹, fatally sealing his

own doom. This was a deliberate act of treason from within the Porte.

3. **The Clergy (Ataullah Efendi):** *Şeyhülislâm* Topal Ataullah Mehmed Efendi ⁴⁹ provided the *legal and moral justification*. The *ulema* (religious class) had long opposed the reforms.⁶ While some of this was based on religious conservatism, it was also a power struggle; Selim's reforms included regulations on the *ulema* class itself, which was beset by "bribery or nepotism".¹⁴ Ataullah Efendi issued the critical *fetva* (religious edict) that legitimized the deposition.⁸ This decree accused Selim III of "forcing people to follow the laws of the West," "infringing the principles of the shari'a" ⁹, and "failing to respect Islam's religion and the Ottomans' tradition".⁶

7.3. The Failure of the Nizam-i Cedid Army

The great paradox of 1807 is the failure of the *Nizam-i Cedid* army ⁴⁸—a force created *specifically* to counterbalance the Janissaries ⁴⁸—to defend its creator. This failure was threefold:

1. **Strategic:** The "main bulk of the army" was on the Russian front ¹¹, far from the capital.
2. **Political:** The troops that *were* available "nearby" ¹³ were deliberately "not permitted to join the fight" ⁸ by the treacherous Köse Musa.¹¹
3. **Societal:** The *Nizam-i Cedid* was an isolated reform. It was "created outside the established army and had almost no effect on it".⁵² It was "left without the context" of the necessary, broader social and economic reforms. As such, it was "left to stand alone against the entrenched ruling class and Janissary corps" ⁵² and was simply "overwhelmed by its opponents".⁵¹

8. The Interregnum of Anarchy: A State in Suspension (1807-1808)

8.1. The Janissary Republic: The Rule of the Mob

The 14-month reign of Mustafa IV was not a government; it was a power vacuum. "Anarchy reigned over the city".¹ The Sultan's authority was purely "symbolic" ¹⁰, as he had legally signed away his power in the *Hüccet-i Şer'iyye*.¹⁰

The *de facto* rulers were the rebel leaders.¹⁹ While Kabakçı Mustafa was the public face, he himself was "under the influence of Köse Musa and the Sheikh ul-Islam".¹¹ The Janissaries, having "gained power again" ¹⁹, terrorized the capital. The city was beset by "gunfights... quarrels... plunder and robbery, as well as harassment and rape of women" ⁴⁶ as the restored old guard settled scores and re-established their monopolies.

8.2. The Systematic Dismantling of the Nizam-i Cedid

This chaos was not without purpose. It provided cover for a *programmatic counter-reform*. The *Nizam-i Cedid* reforms were "abolished".²⁵ This was not just about dispersing the army⁶; it was about destroying the new state-building apparatus Selim had created. The "New Order"⁴⁸ had included its own "private treasury"⁴⁸ to finance the military, bypassing the corrupt traditional systems. The counter-reform was a *restoration* of those systems, returning power to the Janissaries¹⁹ and the entrenched elites who had "vested interests in the preservation of the old institutions".⁵¹

9. The Empire Adrift: International Humiliation and Isolation

9.1. The Eclipse of Sovereignty: Sébastiani's 'Reign'

The new reactionary government, having "surrendered its foreign policy to France totally"¹⁵, found itself a French puppet. General Sébastiani's influence became "dominant".¹⁵ He "established control over the domestic affairs"¹⁵ to a shocking degree, his influence ranging from "treaties... [to the] appointment of mayor to Baghdad, killing of the Diwan translator; even the exile of statesmen".¹⁵ On September 11, 1807, the regime even executed the interpreter of the Divan, Saribeyzade Aleko, for giving state secrets to the enemy; this act "strained relations with France" precisely because Aleko was under Sébastiani's "patronage".²³

9.2. The Tilsit Betrayal (July 7, 1807)

This humiliating subservience to France was rendered pointless just weeks into Mustafa IV's reign. At the Treaty of Tilsit, Napoleon "abandoned" his Turkish ally.¹⁶ In secret, Napoleon and Tsar Alexander I discussed the full-scale *partition* of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰ The plan would have given Wallachia, Moldavia, and Bulgaria to Russia, while France would take Albania and the Peloponnese.¹⁰ When news of this leaked, the Porte was "stunned" and "upset"¹⁶, finding itself completely isolated and betrayed by its only protector.

9.3. The Armistice of Slobozia (August 20, 1807): The Fatal Blunder

Distracted, isolated, and facing a collapse of army discipline on the front¹⁰, the new

government made its greatest strategic error. On August 20, 1807, it signed an eight-month armistice with Russia.¹⁰

The 1807 coup had *only* been possible because the loyalist, reform-minded Danubian army was *occupied* fighting the Russians.¹¹ This armistice "freed Mustafa Pasha, a pro-reformist commander stationed on the Danube [Alemdar], to march his army back to Constantinople".²³ The regime in Istanbul, in its diplomatic weakness, had just unleashed the very army that would come to destroy it.

10. The Provincial Counter-Stroke: The Rise of the Ayan

10.1. The 'Rusçuk Yaranı' (Ruse Companions)

The collapse of central authority in Constantinople⁵⁴ and the purge of reformers¹⁷ led to the formation of a government-in-exile. "Sultan Selim III's supporters in the army"¹⁰ and the "surviving Nizam-i Cedid supporters"²⁴ "escaped... and sought refuge at Alemdar Mustafa Pasha".¹⁰ Alemdar was the powerful *ayan* (provincial notable) of Rusçuk²⁹, one of the "local notables in the Ottoman Empire" who had risen to "form de facto local dynasties".⁵⁵ In Rusçuk, these reformers formed a "secret political club called Rusçuk Yaranı (Ruse Companions)".¹⁰ This group, composed of bureaucrats and intellectual elites, allied with Alemdar and "encouraged him"¹⁰ to march on the capital with the stated goal of "put[ting] Sultan Selim III back on the throne".¹⁰

10.2. Alemdar Mustafa Pasha: An Analysis of the Motives of a Kingmaker

The standard historical view casts Alemdar Mustafa Pasha as a "pro-reformist commander"²³ and a "strong supporter" of Selim III's reforms.²⁹ However, his true motives were far more complex and rooted in a different power struggle.

A deeper analysis suggests Alemdar "was *not* committed to the New Order project nor to Selim III himself".⁵⁸ In fact, one source contends he "had never been favorably disposed toward the Nizam-i Cedid".⁵⁹ His primary motivation was the preservation of his own power as a provincial *ayan*. The *ayan* "in Rumelia (the Balkan section of the empire) played an important part in Ottoman affairs, often defying the central authority".⁵⁵ Alemdar, one of the most powerful of these "valley lords"⁵⁵, saw the new Janissary-led government in Istanbul as a *direct threat* to the "growing freedom of action of provincial notables like him".⁵⁹

Therefore, the "Alemdar Incident"¹ was *not* a simple ideological war of Reform vs. Reaction. It was a *power struggle* between the *provinces* (the *ayan*) and the *center* (the Janissary-puppet government). Alemdar "allied himself with the supporters of the New Order"⁵⁸ and the *Rusçuk*

*Yarani*⁵⁷ as a flag of convenience, using "Restore Selim" as a *casus belli* to justify his march on the capital.²² His goal was to "establish... himself as the foremost notable on the Danubian front"⁵⁸ and become the *de facto* "Dictator" of the empire.²⁹

This is proven by his actions *after* he took the city and installed Mahmud II. His first priority was to convene a conference of *ayan* and force the new, young Sultan to sign the *Sened-i İttifak* (Charter of Alliance) in October 1808.²⁴ This document, an Ottoman "Magna Carta," was a contract that "defined and guaranteed" the *ayan*'s rights *against* the central government.²⁴ This was not a reformist act; it was a feudal one, cementing the power of the provincial notables.

11. Coda: The Legacy of the 1807-1808 Crisis

The 14-month period of Mustafa IV's reign was a crucible that forged the next 30 years of Ottoman history. The chaotic inter-regnum demonstrated three critical, unavoidable truths to the surviving Ottoman leadership:

1. **Selim's reforms had failed because they were too narrow.** A modern army could not be "left to stand alone against the entrenched ruling class"⁵² and "was left without the context" of broader societal, economic, and political reforms.⁵²
2. **The Janissary corps was an existential threat.** It had devolved from an elite fighting force into a "corrupt"³⁵, "conservative, traditionalist"⁷ "military arm of reaction".⁵² It was now clear that the empire and the Janissaries could not co-exist; one would have to be destroyed.
3. **The *ayan* had emerged as a "third force"** in imperial politics.⁵⁵ They were powerful enough to challenge both the Sultan and the Janissaries, and their power would also need to be broken if the state was to be re-centralized.

The chaos of 1807-1808—which saw the deposition of one sultan (Selim III), the installation and deposition of a second (Mustafa IV), and the murder of both a former sultan (Selim III) and a sitting Grand Vizier (Alemdar Pasha)—led directly to the accession of Mahmud II.²⁸

Mahmud II "learned from the disasters of 1807".³⁵ He had watched the Janissaries murder Selim III and Alemdar Mustafa Pasha, and had been forced to order the execution of his own brother to survive. The "fate" of the *Nizam-i Cedid* "showed those reformers who survived the importance of destroying the military arm of reaction".⁵² The brief, tragic, and violent reign of Mustafa IV was the final, bloody lesson that made the *Vaka-i Hayriye* (the 1826 "Auspicious Incident" and the total annihilation of the Janissary corps³⁵) not just possible, but inevitable.

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