Sultan Suleiman II and the Ottoman Empire in Crisis: A Study of Reign and Reform, 1687-1691

Part I: The Sultan of the Gilded Cage: A Portrait of Suleiman II

The Forty-Year Shadow: The Prince in the Kafes

Sultan Suleiman II ascended the Ottoman throne under circumstances as dramatic as they were unforeseen, emerging from nearly four decades of seclusion to lead an empire on the verge of collapse. Born on April 15, 1642, at the Topkapi Palace in Constantinople, he was the son of the volatile Sultan Ibrahim and Saliha Dilasub Sultan, a woman of Serbian origin.[1] His early life was immediately cast in the shadow of the dynasty's brutal politics. He was a mere six years old when his father was deposed and executed in 1648, a traumatic event that paved the way for the accession of his slightly older half-brother, Mehmed IV.[3] In 1651, the young prince Suleiman was consigned to the *Kafes*, the gilded cage that would be his home, his classroom, and his prison for the next thirty-six years.[2]

The institution of the *Kafes* was a 17th-century solution to a perennial Ottoman problem: the fratricidal succession struggles that had frequently plunged the empire into civil war.[5] Replacing the older tradition where princes governed provinces and gained invaluable administrative and military experience, the *Kafes* system confined all potential male heirs to a luxurious but isolated set of apartments within the Imperial Harem. Under constant surveillance, the princes were kept from the levers of power, ensuring the security of the reigning sultan and the continuity of the Osman dynasty.[5] This stability, however, was purchased at a steep price. The system produced a generation of rulers who came to the throne profoundly ill-prepared, with no experience in governance, no understanding of military affairs, and no knowledge of the world beyond the palace walls.[5] Their formal education often ceased in their adolescence, and their society was limited to the company of harem women, slaves, and eunuchs, fostering an environment ripe for psychological distress.[4] Suleiman II's confinement was the longest of any Ottoman heir who eventually reached the

throne, making him the ultimate product of this unique and deeply flawed system.[7] For nearly forty years, while his brother Mehmed IV reigned, Suleiman lived in enforced obscurity. Despite the severe limitations, he did receive a private education from palace tutors, an endeavor in which his mother, Saliha Dilasub Sultan, described as an intelligent and pious woman, took a particular interest.[7] Yet this education was purely theoretical, a collection of knowledge without the context of practical application.

The very existence of Suleiman II at the moment of crisis in 1687 personified the profound, paradoxical consequences of the *Kafes*. The system had been designed to prevent one existential threat—civil war among heirs—but in doing so, it cultivated another: the accession of inexperienced and psychologically scarred rulers at moments when the empire most needed strength and sagacity. The primary objective of the *Kafes* was to ensure a prince survived to succeed, thereby avoiding a dynastic collapse. The direct result, however, was the severing of the vital link between the future ruler and the military and administrative structures of the state. Suleiman II's nearly four-decade isolation made him the ultimate case study of this systemic outcome. He ascended the throne precisely as the system intended: alive, but utterly unprepared to command an empire locked in a catastrophic war. His entire reign, and his response to its challenges, must be understood through the lens of this profound, state-sanctioned handicap.

The Unlikely Accession: From Captivity to the Throne

The chain of events that propelled Suleiman II from the quiet solitude of the *Kafes* to the pinnacle of imperial power was forged in the crucible of military disaster. By 1687, the Ottoman Empire was reeling from the Great Turkish War, a conflict initiated after the failed Siege of Vienna in 1683. A Holy League of European powers, led by the Habsburg Empire, had seized the offensive, systematically dismantling Ottoman control in Eastern Europe.[9] The breaking point came on August 12, 1687, at the Second Battle of Mohács. The Ottoman army suffered a devastating defeat, a blow so severe that it shattered morale and triggered a full-scale mutiny among the troops.[10]

The mutinous army, blaming the sultan and his commanders for the string of humiliating losses, abandoned the front and marched on the capital.[10] Their target was Sultan Mehmed IV, a ruler who had long been criticized for his perceived indifference to state affairs in favor of his passion for hunting.[12] In Constantinople, the political elite, including leading statesmen and the ulema (religious scholars), recognized the existential threat posed by the approaching army. Orchestrated by the astute *kaymakam* (deputy Grand Vizier) Köprülü Fazıl Mustafa Pasha, they convened and concluded that only the deposition of Mehmed IV could appease the soldiers and prevent the state from dissolving into anarchy.[14] On November 8, 1687, Mehmed IV was formally dethroned and placed under arrest in the Topkapi Palace, the same palace where his brother had been held captive for decades.[7]

For Suleiman, the summons to the throne was a moment of sheer terror. After forty years of living under the constant, unspoken threat of execution—the fate of many a confined

prince—he could not believe that his elevation was real. When palace officials arrived at the *Kafes* to escort him to the throne room, he was convinced it was a ruse, and that he was being led to his death. He reportedly resisted his attendants, and it required significant persuasion from his mother and high-ranking officials to assure him that he was now the Padishah.[7] This poignant episode vividly illustrates the deep psychological trauma inflicted by the *Kafes*, which had conditioned the new sultan to expect death, not power, at the hands of his keepers. His accession was not a strategic selection of a competent leader but a procedural necessity born of sheer desperation. The elevation of a completely unknown and unprepared prince laid bare the collapse of the traditional Ottoman power structure. The military, through its mutiny, had become the primary agent of political change, usurping a prerogative once held by the sultan. The choice of Suleiman was dictated not by merit but by the established principle of agnatic seniority; he was simply the next brother in line.[5] The ruling elite embraced him precisely because he was a political vacuum—untainted by the recent failures, lacking a power base, and seemingly pliable.[4] They were not seeking a dynamic ruler who might challenge their own authority, but a legitimate figurehead to stabilize the political order. In this, Suleiman's enthronement was a symptom of the very disease afflicting the empire: a paralyzed central authority, a dominant and rebellious military, and a succession system that had come to prioritize the mere biological survival of an heir over his competence to rule.

Character and Governance of a Reluctant Ruler

Despite the debilitating circumstances of his upbringing, Suleiman II proved to be a man of considerable personal integrity and quiet strength. Contemporary and later Ottoman sources consistently portray him as possessing virtues that stood in stark contrast to the corruption and decay of his era. He was described as pious, gentle (halim selim), just, generous to a fault, and possessed of a deep, sorrowful patriotism.[8] His religious devotion was profound; a follower of the Halveti Sufi order, he was reputed to have never missed a ritual prayer and would rise in reverence at the mention of God or the Prophet.[15] The empire's military defeats affected him personally; he was said to have wept while praying for the success of his armies.[15] His generosity was legendary within the court, with accounts telling of how he would immediately gift an item of his own clothing to anyone who admired it.[8]

Acutely aware of the immense gap in his knowledge and experience, Suleiman II adopted a style of governance that was both pragmatic and revolutionary for its time: conscious and total delegation to the most capable individual he could find.[4] After an initial period of chaos under ineffectual viziers, he made the single most important decision of his reign. In 1689, on the advice of his advisors, he appointed Köprülü Fazıl Mustafa Pasha as Grand Vizier and granted him unprecedented authority, a "free hand in the government," to save the state.[2] This was not an act of abdication but a deliberate choice to subordinate his own authority to that of an expert administrator and commander, recognizing that this was the empire's only path to survival. He actively supported his Grand Vizier's radical reforms, most famously by ordering all the gold and silver objects in the palace treasury to be sent to the mint and struck

into coins to pay the troops and stabilize the state's finances—a powerful symbolic and practical demonstration of his commitment.[14]

In a remarkable paradox, Suleiman II's greatest weakness—his near-total lack of practical experience—became the empire's greatest asset during his short reign. His profound awareness of his own limitations freed him from the hubris and political baggage that might have encumbered a more traditionally raised ruler. A sultan groomed for power might have interfered in the Grand Vizier's reforms, appointed unqualified favorites to high office, or jealously guarded his own prerogatives. Suleiman, possessing no court faction and harboring no illusions about his own abilities, was immune to these temptations.[4] His motivations were patriotic and religious duty, unclouded by personal ambition, allowing him to make the most rational choice for the empire's welfare. By empowering Fazıl Mustafa Pasha so completely, he effectively bypassed his own deficiencies and installed a highly competent crisis manager at the helm of the state. His "failure" to be a conventional, hands-on monarch was precisely what enabled the temporary, but critical, recovery. His reign is a testament to the idea that in a moment of extreme crisis, the wisdom to recognize one's own incompetence and empower expertise can be the most effective form of leadership.

The Final Years and Historical Legacy

Sultan Suleiman II's brief, four-year reign was a constant struggle against both external enemies and his own failing health. He suffered from a severe illness, likely dropsy (istiska), which left him bedridden for the final two years of his life.[2] Nevertheless, his sense of duty and patriotism was so strong that he insisted on accompanying the army on campaign in both 1689 and 1691. He believed his presence, even if confined to a palanquin, would serve as a crucial morale boost for the soldiers fighting to defend the realm.[7] This image of the ailing sultan enduring the hardships of the road to inspire his troops is a powerful testament to his character.

His final journey was in June 1691, when he traveled with the army as far as Edirne. There, his health gave out completely. He died on June 22, 1691, at the age of 49, and was succeeded by his younger brother, Ahmed II.[1] His body was returned to Constantinople and interred in the tomb complex of the Süleymaniye Mosque, laid to rest beside his illustrious namesake, Suleiman the Magnificent.[16]

In the grand sweep of Ottoman history, Suleiman II is often a "forgotten sultan," a brief entry between longer and more dramatic reigns.[4] His rule was too short to be defined by the construction of grand mosques or the glory of lasting conquests. He left no children to carry on his direct line, further contributing to his relative obscurity.[2] Yet, his legacy is one of surprising and profound significance. He inherited an empire at its absolute nadir—militarily defeated, politically anarchic, and economically shattered—and presided over a remarkable, albeit ephemeral, turnaround. His reign stands as a "glimmer of hope" in one of the empire's darkest periods, proving that the Ottoman state still possessed the institutional resilience and human capital, embodied by the Köprülü family, to pull itself back from the brink of

annihilation.[4] He is best remembered as the "reluctant ruler who answered history's call," a poignant example of duty and patriotism triumphing over the profound disadvantages of circumstance.[4]

Part II: The Empire at a Crossroads: Crisis and Reform (1687-1691)

The Bleeding Frontier: The Great Turkish War

When Suleiman II was brought forth from the *Kafes* in November 1687, he inherited not just a throne but a catastrophic multi-front war. The Ottoman Empire was deep into the fifth year of the Great Turkish War, a conflict it was decisively losing against the combined might of the Holy League.[9] The military initiative lay entirely with the European powers. On the main front in the Balkans, Habsburg armies were systematically conquering Ottoman Hungary, a process catastrophically accelerated by their victory at the Second Battle of Mohács just months before his accession.[9] Simultaneously, the Republic of Venice was seizing imperial territories in the Morea (the Peloponnese peninsula) and along the Dalmatian coast. To the north, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth threatened the Danubian principalities, while the Tsardom of Russia, having joined the league in 1686, opened a new and draining front against the Crimean Khanate, a key Ottoman vassal state.[10]

The military collapse continued unabated through the first year of the new sultan's reign. The defeat at Mohács had shattered the Ottoman field army, and the subsequent mutiny paralyzed any effective response. Fortresses that had been in Ottoman hands for over a century and a half began to fall in rapid succession. The strategic stronghold of Eğri (Eger) in Hungary was lost in November 1687.[18] The most devastating blow, however, came on September 8, 1688, with the capture of Belgrade by Habsburg forces.[7] This was a loss of immense strategic and symbolic importance. Belgrade was the key to the Balkans, and its fall opened the empire's heartlands to invasion. Austrian armies, often aided by local Serbian insurgents, pushed south into Serbia, Bosnia, and Wallachia, threatening the core of Ottoman power in Europe.[7]

The appointment of Köprülü Fazıl Mustafa Pasha as Grand Vizier in late 1689 marked the definitive turning point of the war. After ruthlessly restoring order within the army and the capital, he launched a brilliantly executed counter-offensive in the summer of 1690.[2] The Ottoman army, revitalized and disciplined by his reforms, swept northward. The cities of Niš, Smederevo, and Vidin were recaptured, driving the Austrians out of Serbia.[14] The campaign's crowning achievement was the swift and successful siege of Belgrade itself. From October 2 to 8, 1690, Ottoman forces besieged the city. The siege concluded dramatically when an

Ottoman artillery shell struck the main Austrian powder magazine, causing a catastrophic explosion that breached the defenses and forced the garrison to surrender.[18] The recapture of Belgrade was a stunning victory that restored the critical Danube defensive line, provided an immeasurable boost to Ottoman morale, and signaled that the empire was not yet defeated.[19]

Year	Date/Period	Event	Front	Outcome & Significance
1687	August 12	Second Battle of Mohács	Habsburg (Hungary)	Decisive Holy League victory; Ottoman army routed, leading to mutiny.
	September	Fall of Valpo and Pojega	Habsburg (Slavonia)	Continued collapse of Ottoman defenses in Hungary and Slavonia.
	November 8	Deposition of Mehmed IV	Internal	Sultan Suleiman II accedes to the throne amid military and political chaos.
	November	Fall of Eğri (Eger)	Habsburg (Hungary)	Loss of a key strategic fortress in northern Hungary.
1688	September 8	Fall of Belgrade	Habsburg (Serbia)	Catastrophic loss; Belgrade, the key to the Balkans, is captured by the Austrians.
	Late 1688	Habsburg advance	Habsburg (Balkans)	Austrian forces, aided by Serbian militia, push deep into Serbia, Bosnia, and Wallachia.
1689	October 25	Appointment of Köprülü Fazıl Mustafa Pasha	Internal	A highly capable Grand Vizier is given full authority to reform the state and army.
1690	Summer	Ottoman	Habsburg	Revitalized

		Counter-Offensive	(Balkans)	Ottoman army recaptures Niš, Vidin, and Smederevo.
	October 2–8	Recapture of Belgrade	Habsburg (Serbia)	Decisive Ottoman victory; the crucial Danube defensive line is restored.
1691	June 22	Death of Suleiman II	Internal	Sultan Suleiman II dies in Edirne; succeeded by Ahmed II.
	August 19	Battle of Slankamen	Habsburg (Hungary)	Grand Vizier Fazıl Mustafa Pasha is killed in action; Ottoman army is defeated.

The Fractured Realm: Internal Crises

The military disasters on the frontier were mirrored by a profound and violent breakdown of order within the empire's core. The deposition of Mehmed IV did not usher in a period of stability; rather, it unleashed months of anarchy in the capital. The early part of Suleiman II's reign was dominated by the very mutiny that had brought him to power.[11] The state treasury was so depleted by the war that it was unable to pay the traditional accession donative (cülus bahşişi) owed to the Janissaries and other soldiers, fueling their rage.[7] Rebel soldiers went on a rampage, murdering the Grand Vizier Abaza Siyavuş Pasha and looting parts of the city. The chaos reached its peak in an event known as the "Sancak Vak'ası" (Incident of the Standard), where the exasperated and terrified civilian population of Constantinople, led by the city's artisans and merchants, marched on the palace demanding that the sacred standard of the Prophet be brought out as a call to restore order and suppress the military rabble.[7]

This political turmoil was a symptom of a deeper socio-economic collapse. The immense financial strain of the long and unsuccessful war had pushed the Ottoman fiscal system to its breaking point.[23] The government resorted to desperate measures, levying crushing emergency taxes (imdadiyye), repeatedly debasing the silver coinage (leading to rampant inflation), and engaging in arbitrary confiscations of wealth.[6] The empire's fundamentally agrarian economy, reliant on the production of millions of smallholding peasant families, could not sustain such pressure.[25]

The consequences for the rural population were devastating. Crushed by confiscatory

taxation levied by corrupt provincial officials and tax farmers, countless peasants were forced to abandon their lands and livelihoods. This mass flight from the countryside, a phenomenon known as çiftbozan ("breaking of the yoke-pair"), had a twofold effect: it drastically reduced food production, leading to shortages in the cities, and it eviscerated the state's primary tax base.[24] These displaced and desperate peasants often had little choice but to turn to banditry, joining rebel bands known as *Jelalis* and *levends* that terrorized the countryside, further disrupting agriculture and administration.[6]

The military defeats on the frontier and the socio-economic collapse in the heartlands were not merely parallel crises; they were locked in a mutually reinforcing spiral of decay. The demands of the external war necessitated immense resources in manpower and money. To meet these demands, the central government empowered a corrupt administrative class to extract wealth from the provinces through any means necessary. This predatory exploitation destroyed the agricultural foundation of the empire, leading to social breakdown and a shrinking tax base. A bankrupt treasury and an anarchic countryside, in turn, made it impossible to properly pay, supply, and discipline the army on the frontier. This led to low morale, desertions, mutinies, and further military defeats. Each new defeat on the battlefield only intensified the state's desperation, restarting the vicious cycle. It was this interconnected web of military, fiscal, and administrative decay that Köprülü Fazıl Mustafa Pasha was appointed to untangle. His reforms were not a piecemeal effort but a direct and systematic attempt to break this cycle by treating its constituent parts as a single, unified challenge.

The Köprülü Resurgence: The Reforms of Fazıl Mustafa Pasha

At the moment of the empire's deepest despair, Sultan Suleiman II made the pivotal decision to entrust the state to Köprülüzade Fazıl Mustafa Pasha. Appointed Grand Vizier on October 25, 1689, Fazıl Mustafa was the scion of the most distinguished family of Ottoman administrators, a son of the legendary Köprülü Mehmed Pasha.[14] Highly educated, pious, and possessing extensive military and administrative experience, he was granted extraordinary powers by the sultan to enact the sweeping reforms necessary to save the empire from dissolution.[11]

His first priority was to restore the state's fiscal solvency. His most significant and lasting reform was the complete overhaul of the *cizye*, the poll tax levied on the empire's non-Muslim subjects. He abolished the old system of collective assessment, where entire communities were taxed as a block—a method that was inefficient, prone to corruption, and devastating to communities whose populations had shrunk due to war or plague.[19] In its place, he instituted a centralized and more equitable system in 1691. A new Cizye Accounting Department (Cizye Muhasebesi Kalemi) was created to oversee all collections, cutting out layers of corrupt middlemen. The tax was now to be assessed on individual adult males according to three distinct wealth categories, ensuring a more progressive and predictable stream of revenue for the state.[28] Alongside this structural reform, he took immediate steps to replenish the empty treasury by halting all non-essential expenditures, purging corrupt financial officials, and, with

the sultan's blessing, melting down precious metal objects from the palace to mint new coins.[14]

Feature	Pre-1691 System	Post-1691 Reform (under Fazıl Mustafa Pasha)
Assessment Basis	Collective (per community)	Individual (per adult, non-Muslim male)
Collection Method	Decentralized, managed by various provincial officials and tax farmers; prone to corruption.	Centralized, managed by the newly created Cizye Accounting Department (Cizye Muhasebesi Kalemi).
Tax Structure	Inconsistent and often arbitrary, varying by region and collector.	Standardized across three wealth-based tiers (esnâf-ı selâse).
Tax Tiers & Rates	Not applicable.	- **Âlâ** (Rich): 4 *şerifi* gold - **Evsat** (Middle-Income): 2 *şerifi* gold - **Ednâ** (Poor): 1 *şerifi* gold

Fazıl Mustafa Pasha's reforms extended deep into the administrative and military fabric of the state. Following the ruthless tradition of his father, he summarily removed and, in many cases, executed incompetent and corrupt officials at all levels of government, replacing them with men chosen for their loyalty and ability.[19] To restore discipline and fiscal integrity to the army, he implemented strict military payrolls, meticulously purging the names of "ghost soldiers" to prevent officers from illegally pocketing the salaries of deceased or non-existent troops.[19] He then rebuilt the army's manpower by proclaiming a general mobilization of Muslim subjects and drafting fresh, hardy troops from the Kurdish and Yörük tribes of Anatolia.[19] Recognizing that the abuse of power in the provinces was a root cause of social unrest, he established councils of local notables to act as a check on the authority of governors.[19] In a move that demonstrated both pragmatism and justice, he also improved the condition of the empire's Christian subjects by making it easier for them to obtain permits to repair and rebuild their churches.[19]

An Ephemeral Recovery: The State of the Empire in 1691

By the beginning of 1691, the combined efforts of a self-aware sultan and his brilliant Grand Vizier had achieved a remarkable, if temporary, stabilization of the Ottoman state. The treasury was on its way to solvency, the army was disciplined, paid, and effective, and the stunning recapture of Belgrade had dramatically reversed the momentum of the Great Turkish War.[11] The empire, which had seemed on the verge of complete collapse just two years prior, had been pulled back from the brink. A sense of hope and possibility, absent for nearly a

decade, returned to the Ottoman court.

In the summer of 1691, seeking to press his advantage, Fazıl Mustafa Pasha led the revitalized Ottoman army on another major campaign into Habsburg-held Hungary. On August 19, 1691, his army clashed with a formidable Habsburg force commanded by Margrave Louis of Baden at the Battle of Slankamen, near the confluence of the Danube and Tisza rivers.[18] In the midst of a fierce and closely contested battle, Fazıl Mustafa Pasha was struck and killed by a stray bullet.[14] The death of the Grand Vizier, the heart and mind of the Ottoman war effort, instantly broke the morale of his troops. The Ottoman lines wavered and then collapsed, leading to a catastrophic defeat.[14]

The death of Fazıl Mustafa Pasha on the battlefield was a far greater blow to the empire than the military loss itself. It brought the Köprülü resurgence to an abrupt and tragic end. The entire project of reform and recovery had been driven by the energy, intellect, and authority of this single, indispensable man. His death decapitated the reform movement and shattered the momentum that had been so painstakingly built since 1689.

The reign of Suleiman II and the vizierate of Fazıl Mustafa Pasha thus stand as a crucial case study in the dynamics of Ottoman decline and resilience. The period demonstrates the inherent fragility of a recovery that is dependent on the extraordinary abilities of individuals rather than on deep, institutionalized change. The astonishingly rapid turnaround between 1689 and 1691 proved that the Ottoman state still possessed a latent capacity for renewal, but the immediate collapse of this project the moment its architect was removed from the field revealed a fatal weakness. The underlying systemic problems of the empire—its unwieldy bureaucracy, its vulnerability to corruption, and its dependence on the chance emergence of brilliant leaders—had been suppressed, not solved. The recovery was a testament to the character of two men: a sultan wise enough to delegate and a vizier brilliant enough to execute. The subsequent return to a posture of defense and eventual defeat was a testament to the enduring weaknesses of the system they had briefly managed to master.

Conclusion

The reign of Sultan Suleiman II, though lasting less than four years, represents a uniquely compelling chapter in the history of the Ottoman Empire. He was a ruler defined by paradox: a product of the debilitating *Kafes* system who presided over a period of vigorous reform; a man with no practical experience who made the wisest possible choice of leadership; a reluctant and ailing sovereign whose short tenure provided a critical, if temporary, reprieve for an empire in mortal danger.

His personal story is a poignant illustration of the human cost of the Ottoman dynastic system, emerging from a lifetime of isolated captivity with his sense of duty and piety intact. His most significant act as sultan was to recognize his own limitations and empower Köprülü Fazıl Mustafa Pasha, a decision that enabled a remarkable resurgence. Under their joint, if unequal, stewardship, the Ottoman state was pulled back from the abyss. The military was reformed, the treasury stabilized, and the strategic initiative in the Great Turkish War was, for a brief

moment, reclaimed with the recapture of Belgrade.
Simultaneously, the state of the empire during this period highlights the profound structural crises of the late 17th century. The interconnected nature of military defeat, economic collapse, and social anarchy had created a vicious cycle that threatened to consume the state entirely. The Köprülü reforms were a rational and comprehensive attempt to break this cycle, addressing fiscal, administrative, and military decay as a unified problem.
Ultimately, the era of Suleiman II serves as a powerful demonstration of both the residual strengths and the fundamental fragilities of the late-classical Ottoman system. It revealed that the empire still possessed the human capital and institutional memory to mount a formidable recovery. However, the tragic death of Fazıl Mustafa Pasha at the Battle of Slankamen underscored the perilous dependence of this recovery on a single, indispensable individual. The reforms had suppressed the symptoms of decline but had not had time to cure the underlying disease. The period of 1687 to 1691 was therefore not a lasting turning point, but an ephemeral moment of stabilization—a testament to what was still possible for the Ottoman state, and a foreshadowing of the immense challenges that lay ahead on its long path of transformation.

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