The Changing Balance of Power in the Eighteenth Century

CENTRAL AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES

In the seventh century the Arabs created a new world into which other peoples were drawn. In the nineteenth and twentieth, they were themselves drawn into a new world created in western Europe. This of course is too simple a way of describing a very complicated process, and the explanations of it can be too simple too.

One explanation which is commonly given would run like this: by the eighteenth century the ancient kingdoms of the Muslim world and the societies they ruled were in decline, while the strength of Europe was growing, and this made possible an expansion of goods, ideas and power which led to the imposition of European control, and then to a revival of the strength and vitality of Arab societies in a new form.

The idea of decline is a difficult one to use, however. Some Ottoman writers themselves used it. From the late sixteenth century onwards, those who compared what they saw around them with what they believed to have existed earlier often said that things were not what they had been in an earlier age of justice, and the institutions and code of social morality on which Ottoman strength had rested were in decay. Some of them read Ibn Khaldun; in the seventeenth century the historian Naima reflected some of his ideas, and in the eighteenth part of his Muqaddima was translated into Turkish.

For such writers, the remedy lay in a return to the institutions of the real or imagined golden age. For Sari Mehmed Pasha (d. 1717), at one time treasurer or defterdar, writing at the beginning of the eighteenth century, what was important was that the old distinction between rulers and ruled should be restored and that the rulers should act justly:

The entering of the rezya into the military class must be avoided carefully. Disorder
is sure to come when those who are not sons or grandsons of sipahis are all at once made into sipahis... Let [the officials] neither oppress the poor reaya nor cause them to be vexed by the demand for new impositions in addition to the well-known yearly taxes which they are accustomed to give... The people of the provinces and dwellers in the towns should be protected and preserved by the removal of injustices and very great attention should be paid to making prosperous the condition of the subjects... Yet too much indulgence must not be shown to the reaya.¹

Rather than speaking of decline, it might be more correct to say that what had occurred was an adjustment of Ottoman methods of rule and the balance of power within the empire to changing circumstances. By the end of the eighteenth century the Ottoman dynasty had existed for 500 years and had been ruling most of the Arab countries for almost 300; it was only to be expected that its ways of government and the extent of its control would change from one place and time to another.

There were two kinds of change which were particularly important by the eighteenth century. In the central government of Istanbul, power had tended to move from the household of the sultan to an oligarchy of high civil officials in or around the offices of the grand vizir. Although different groups among them competed for power, they were linked with each other, and with the high dignitaries of the judicial and religious service, in more than one way. They had a common culture, in which there were Arabic and Persian as well as Turkish elements. They shared a concern for the strength and welfare of the empire and the society which it protected. They were not held aloof from society, as the household slaves had been, but were involved in its economic life through their control of religious endowments and tax-farms, and association with merchants for investment in trade and land.

The professional army also had been drawn into society; janissaries became merchants and artisans, and merchants and artisans acquired membership or affiliation with janissary corps. This process was connected, as cause and as effect, with the other important change: the emergence in the provincial capitals of local ruling groups, which were able to control the tax-resources of the provinces and use them to form their own local armies. Such groups existed in most provincial capitals, except those which could be easily controlled from Istanbul. They could be of different kinds. In some places there were ruling families, with their households and dependants; their members were able to obtain recognition from Istanbul from one generation to another. In others, there were self-perpetuating groups of mamluks: these were men from the Balkans or Caucasus who had come to a city as military slaves or apprentices in the household of a governor or army commander, had risen to important positions in the local government or army, and been able to pass their power on to other members of the same group. Such local rulers were able to make alliances of interests with merchants, land-holders and ulama of the city. They maintained the order which was necessary for the prosperity of the city, and in return they profited from it.

This was the situation in most of the Ottoman provinces in Anatolia and Europe, except for those which could be easily reached from Istanbul, and in virtually all the Arab provinces. Aleppo in northern Syria, lying as it did on a major imperial road, and with comparatively easy access from Istanbul, remained under direct control; but in Baghdad and at Acre on the coast of Palestine members of mamluk groups held the post of governor; in Damascus and Mosul, families which had risen in the Ottoman service were able to fill the office of governor for several generations. In Hijaz, the sharifs of Mecca, a family claiming descent from the Prophet, ruled the holy cities, although there was an Ottoman governor at Jidda on the coast. In Yemen, there was no longer an Ottoman presence, and such central authority as did exist was in the hands of a family of imams recognized by the Zaydi inhabitants.

In Egypt the situation was more complicated. There was still a governor sent from Istanbul, and not allowed to remain too long in case he should acquire too much power; but most high offices, and control of the tax-farms, had fallen into the hands first of rival groups of mamluks and army officers, and then of one of them. In the three Ottoman provinces in the Maghrib, leaders of the local armies had seized power in one way or another. In Tripoli and Tunis, military commanders created dynasties, recognized by Istanbul as governors but holding the local title of bey. In Algiers, the military corps appointed successive rulers (the deys); but in time the dey was able to create a group of high officials which was able to perpetuate itself and keep the office of dey in its hands. In all three, officials, army officers and merchants had been united at first by the common interest of equipping privateering ships (the 'Barbary pirates') to capture the ships of European states with which the Ottoman sultan was at war and sell their goods; but this practice had virtually come to an end by the late eighteenth century.

However great these changes, they should not be exaggerated. In Istanbul the sultan still had final power. Even the strongest official could be deposed and executed, and his goods confiscated; the sultan’s officials were still
regarded as his 'slaves'. With some exceptions, even the strongest local rulers were content to remain within the Ottoman system; they were 'local Ottomans', not independent monarchs. The Ottoman state was not alien to them, it was still the embodiment of the Muslim community (or at least of a large part of it). Local rulers could have their own dealings with foreign powers, but they would use their strength to further the major interests and defend the frontiers of the empire. Moreover, the central government still had a residue of strength in most parts of the empire. It could give or withhold formal recognition; even the bey of Tunis and the dey of Algiers wished to be formally invested by the sultan as governor. It could make use of rivalries between different provinces, or different members of a family or a mamluk group, or between the provincial ruler and local notables. Where it could use the great imperial roads or the searoutes of the eastern Mediterranean, it could send an army to reassert its power; this happened in Egypt, briefly, in the 1780s. The pilgrimage, organized by the governor of Damascus, carrying gifts from Istanbul to the inhabitants of the holy cities, guarded by an Ottoman force, moving down a road maintained by Ottoman garrisons, was still an annual assertion of Ottoman sovereignty all along the way from Istanbul through Syria and western Arabia to the heart of the Muslim world.

A new balance of forces had been created in the empire. It was precarious, and each party to it tried to increase its power when it could; but it was able to maintain an alliance of interests between central government, provincial Ottomans, and the social groups which possessed wealth and prestige, the merchants and 'ulama. There is evidence that in some regions this combination of strong local governments and active urban elites maintained or increased agricultural production, the basis of urban prosperity and of the strength of governments. This seems to have happened in the European provinces; the growth of population in central Europe increased the demand for foodstuffs and raw materials, and the Balkan provinces were able to meet it. In Tunisia and Algeria grain and hides were produced for export to Marseille and Livorno; in northern Palestine and western Anatolia cotton production increased to meet the demand from France. In most provinces, however, control by the local government and its urban allies did not extend far from the cities. In the Maghrib, Ottoman power did not spread far inland into the high plateau. In the Fertile Crescent, some tribes of camel-breeding nomads had moved northwards from central Arabia; the area used for pasture expanded at the expense of

that used for cultivation, and so did the area in which tribal leaders rather than urban officials controlled the cultivators who remained.

In lands beyond the frontier of the empire processes of the same kind had taken place. In Oman a new ruling family, which at first claimed the imamate of the Ibadis, established themselves at Masqat on the coast, and an alliance of rulers and merchants was able to spread Omani trade around the coasts of the Indian Ocean. In other parts of the Gulf, Kuwait, Bahrain and some smaller ones, ruling families linked closely with merchant communities emerged. In the Sudan, to the south of Egypt, there were two longlived sultanates: one, that of the Funji, lay in the fertile land between the Blue and White Niles, where trade-routes running from Egypt to Ethiopia crossed those going from west Africa to the Red Sea; the other was that of Darfur, lying west of the Nile, on a trade-route which went from west Africa to Egypt.

In Morocco, the extreme Maghrib, the 'Alawis had been ruling since the middle of the seventeenth century, but without the firmly based military or bureaucratic strength which even the local Ottoman rulers could rely on. Like their predecessors, they could never wholly dominate the city of Fez with its powerful merchant families, its 'ulama clustered around the Qarawiyyin mosque, and its saintly families guarding the shrines of their ancestors; outside the cities they could at best manage to control parts of the countryside by political manipulation and the prestige of their descent. Being insecurely based, their strength fluctuated; great at the beginning of the eighteenth century, it then grew weaker, but was reviving in the second half of the century.

ARAB OTTOMAN SOCIETY AND CULTURE

In the eighteenth century, the imprint of Ottoman power and culture upon the Arab provinces appears to have gone deeper. It took root in the cities by way of what have been called 'local Ottoman' families and groups. On the one hand, military commanders and civil officials settled in provincial capitals and founded families or households which were able to retain positions in the Ottoman service from one generation to another; the local ruling families and Mamluk groups were only the upper level of a phenomenon which also existed at other levels. Some of them held positions in the local administration, some acquired wealth through the acquisition of tax-farms, and some sent their sons to local religious schools and from there into the legal service. On the other hand, members of local families
with a tradition of religious learning tended increasingly to obtain posts in the religious and legal service, and through this to acquire control over waqfs, including the most lucrative ones which had been established for the benefit of the holy cities or of institutions founded by the sultans; many of these were diverted from their original purpose to private use. It has been estimated that, while there were seventy-five official positions in the religio-legal system in Damascus in the early eighteenth century, by the middle of the century the number had risen to over three hundred. A concomitant of this was that many local families which by tradition adhered to the Shafi‘i or Maliki madhhab came to accept the Hanafi code, the one which was officially recognized by the Ottoman sultans. (This does not appear to have occurred in the Maghrib, however; there the bulk of the population, except for those of Turkish origin, remained Maliki.)

By the late eighteenth century, therefore, there existed, at least in some of the great Arab cities, powerful and more or less permanent families of local ‘notables’, some of them more Turkish and others more Arab. An expression of their power and stability was the construction of elaborate houses and palaces in Algiers, Tunis, Damascus and elsewhere. One of the most magnificent was the ‘Azm palace in Damascus, a group of rooms and suites built around two courtyards, one for the men of the family and their visitors, the other for women and domestic life. On a smaller scale, but still splendid, were the houses built in Judayda, a Christian quarter in Aleppo, by families enriched through the growing trade with Europe. In the mountains of south Lebanon the palace of the amir of Lebanon, Bashir II, was built by artisans from Damascus; an unexpected urban palace on a distant hillside. Such houses were built by local architects and craftsmen, and architectural design and style were expressions of local traditions, but here too, as in the mosques, the influence of Ottoman decorative styles was to be seen, particularly in the use of tiles; mingled with this there was a certain imitation of European styles, as in wall-paintings, and the use of Bohemian glass and other goods manufactured in Europe for the Middle Eastern market. In Tunis, a French traveller in the early part of the century found that the ancient palace of the bey, the Bardo, had been provided with furniture in the Italian style.

The survival and social power of the families of notables were bound up with the local schools. A study of Cairo has suggested that a considerable part of the male population — perhaps as many as half — may have been literate, but few of the women. This implies that the elementary schools, the kuttabs, were numerous. At a higher level, a historian of the time mentions about twenty madrasas and the same number of mosques where higher teaching was carried on. The central institution, the Azhar mosque, seems to have flourished at the expense of some of the smaller and less well-endowed mosques and madrasas; it drew students from Syria, Tunisia, Morocco and the regions of the upper Nile. In the same way, in Tunis the Zaytuna mosque grew in size and importance during the century; its library was enlarged, and its endowments were supplemented by the proceeds of the jizya, the poll tax on non-Muslims.

In such higher schools, the ancient curriculum was still followed. The most important studies were Qur‘anic exegesis, Hadith and fiqh, for which collections of fatwas as well as formal treatises were used; linguistic subjects were studied as an introduction to them. The basic doctrines of religion were taught mainly in later compendia, and the works of Ibn ‘Arabi and other Sufis seem to have been widely read. Such rational sciences as mathematics and astronomy were studied and taught for the most part outside the formal curriculum, but there seems to have been great interest in them.

Within the limits of a rather rigid and unchanging curriculum, there was still room for literary production of high quality. In Tunis, a family founded by a Turkish soldier who had come to the country with the Ottoman expeditionary force in the sixteenth century produced four men in successive generations, all of them called Muhammad Bayram, who were well-known scholars and Hanafi muftis. In Syria, the family founded by Murad, the Naqshbandi from central Asia, also held the office of Hanafi mufti for more than one generation. One of them, Muhammad Khalil al-Muradi (1769–91), carried on a specifically Syrian tradition of collecting biographies of men of learning and renown; his biographical dictionary covers the twelfth Islamic century.

For help in collecting biographies, Muradi turned to a famous scholar resident in Egypt, Murtada al-Zabidi (1732–91). His letter expresses the self-consciousness of one who is aware that he stands at the end of a long tradition which must be preserved:

When I was in Istanbul with one of its great men . . . there was talk of history, and its decline in our age, and the lack of concern for it among the men of this time, although it is the greatest of the arts; we lamented it sadly.2

Of Indian origin, Zabidi had lived for a time in Zabid in Yemen, an important stopping-place on the route from south and south-east Asia to the holy cities, and a significant centre of learning at the time; he had
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moved to Cairo, and from there his influence radiated far and wide, because of his reputation for having the power of intercession, and through his writings. Among them were works on Hadith, a commentary on Ghazali’s Ihya ‘ulum al-din, and a great Arabic lexicon.

Murtada al-Zabidi in his turn asked a younger scholar, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti (1753–1825) to help him in collecting biographical material, and this was the impulse which turned his mind to the writing of history; in due course he was to produce the last great chronicle in the traditional style, covering not only political events but also the lives of scholars and famous men.

In the Shi‘i world, too, the tradition of high learning continued, but scholars were sharply divided. Throughout most of the century the Akhbari school of thought was dominant among the scholars of the holy cities, but towards the end there was a revival of the Usuli school, under the influence of two important scholars, Muhammad Baqir al-Bihbahi (d. 1791) and Ja‘far Kashif al-Ghita (c. 1741–1812); supported by the local rulers in Iraq and Iran, for whom the flexibility of the Usulis offered some advantages, this was to become once more the leading school. The Akhbariyia continued to be strong in some regions of the Gulf, however. Towards the end of the century both Usulis and Akhbaris were challenged by a new movement, the Shaykhiyya, which grew out of the mystical tradition, that of spiritual interpretation of the holy books, which was endemic in Shi‘ism: this was condemned by both the other schools, and regarded as outside the bounds of imami Shi‘ism.

There is no indication that the thought either of Sunnis or of Shi‘is was penetrated at this time by the new ideas which were emerging in Europe. Some of the Syrian and Lebanese priests who had acquired a knowledge of Latin, Italian or French were aware of the Catholic theology and the European scholarship of their time. A few of them taught in Europe, and became scholars of European reputation: the most famous was Yusuf al-Sim‘ani (Joseph Assemani, 1687–1768), a Maronite from Lebanon, a student of Syriac and Arabic manuscripts who became librarian of the Vatican Library.

THE WORLD OF ISLAM

Whether they lived within the Ottoman Empire or outside its frontiers, those who professed faith in Islam and lived through the medium of the Arabic language had something in common which was deeper than political allegiance or shared interests. Among them, and between them and those who spoke Turkish or Persian or the other languages of the Muslim world, there was the common sense of belonging to an enduring and unshaken world created by the final revelation of God through the Prophet Muhammad, and expressing itself in different forms of thought and social activity: the Qur’an, the Traditions of the Prophet, the system of law or ideal social behaviour, the Sufi orders oriented towards the tombs of their founders, the schools, the travels of scholars in search of learning, the circulation of books, the fast of Ramadan, observed at the same time and in the same way by Muslims everywhere, and the pilgrimage which brought many thousands from all over the Muslim world to Mecca at the same moment of the year. All these activities preserved the sense of belonging to a world which contained all that was necessary for welfare in this life and salvation in the next.

Once more, a structure which lasts for ages must be expected to change, and the Abode of Islam as it existed in the eighteenth century was different in many ways from what it had been earlier. One wave of change came from the far east of the Muslim world, from northern India, where the other great Sunni dynasty, the Mughals, ruled Muslims and Hindus. Here a number of thinkers, of whom the most famous was Shah Waliullah of Delhi (1703–62), were teaching that rulers should rule in accordance with the precepts of Islam, and that Islam should be purified by teachers using their ijtihad on the basis of the Qur’an and Hadith; the different madhhab should be merged in a single system of morality and law, and the deviations of the Sufis should be kept within their bounds. Scholars and ideas moving westwards from India met and mingled with others in the great schools and in the holy cities at the time of pilgrimage, and from this mingling there came a strengthening of that kind of Sufism which laid its emphasis on strict observance of the shari‘a, no matter how far advanced a Muslim might be on the road which led to experience of God. The Naqshbandiya had spread earlier from central Asia and India into the Ottoman countries, and its influence was growing. Another order, the Tijaniyya, was founded in Algeria and Morocco by a teacher returning from Mecca and Cairo, and spread into West Africa.

There was another movement which might have seemed of less importance at the time, but was to have wider significance later. It arose in central Arabia in the early eighteenth century, when a religious reformer, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1703–92), began to preach the need for Muslims to return to the teaching of Islam as understood by the followers
of Ibn Hanbal: strict obedience to the Qur'an and Hadith as they were interpreted by responsible scholars in each generation, and rejection of all that could be regarded as illegitimate innovations. Among these innovations was the reverence given to dead saints as intercessors with God, and the special devotions of the Sufi orders. The reformer made an alliance with Muhammad ibn Sa'ud, ruler of a small market town, Dir'iyya, and this led to the formation of a state which claimed to live under the guidance of the shari'a and tried to bring the pastoral tribes all around it under its guidance too. In so doing it asserted the interests of the frail urban society of the oases against the pastoral hinterland, but at the same time it rejected the claims of the Ottomans to be the protectors of the authentic Islam. By the first years of the nineteenth century the armies of the new state had expanded; they had sacked the Shi'i shrines in south-western Iraq and occupied the holy cities of Hijaz.

CHANGING RELATIONS WITH EUROPE

Living, growing, self-sufficient and unchallenged as the world of Islam may have seemed to most of those who belonged to it, by the last quarter of the eighteenth century at least some members of the Ottoman elite knew that it was threatened by forces which were bringing about a change in its relations with the world around it. The Ottoman government had always been aware of a world beyond itself: to the east, the Shi'i Empire of Iran and beyond that the empire of the Mughals; to the north and west, the Christian states. From an early time it had been brought into contact with western and central Europe; it controlled the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, and its western frontier lay in the basin of the Danube. The contacts were not only those of enmity. That certainly existed, when the Ottoman fleet fought the Venetians and Spaniards for control of the Mediterranean, and the army came to the gates of Vienna; to that extent, the relationship could be expressed in terms of crusade on the one side and jihad on the other. There were other kinds of relationship, however. Trade was mainly carried on by European merchants, Venetians and Genoese in the earlier Ottoman centuries, British and French in the eighteenth. There were alliances with European kings who shared a common enemy with the sultan; in particular with France against the Habsburgs of Austria and Spain. In 1569 France was given concessions (Capitulations), regulating the activities of merchants and missionaries; these were modelled upon earlier privileges given to merchants of some of the Italian cities, and were later given to other European powers. The main states of Europe had permanent embassies and consulates in the empire, which became part of the states-system of Europe, although it did not itself send permanent missions to European capitals until much later. (In the same way, Morocco and England had good relations when both were hostile to Spain.)

Until the middle of the eighteenth century, the relationship could still be regarded by the Ottomans as being broadly one of equal strength. In the late fifteenth the disciplined professional army of the sultan, using firearms, had been a match for any in Europe. In the seventeenth the Ottomans made their last great conquest, the island of Crete, taken from the Venetians. By the early eighteenth, they were dealing with European states on a level of diplomatic equality, instead of the superiority which they had been able to maintain at an earlier time, and their army was regarded as having fallen behind others in organization, tactics and the use of weapons, although not so far behind that efforts could not be made to strengthen it within the existing system of institutions. Trade was still carried on within the bounds of the Capitulations.

In the last quarter of the century, however, the situation began to change rapidly and dramatically, as the gap between the technical skills of some western and northern European countries and those of the rest of the world grew wider. During the centuries of Ottoman rule there had been no advance in technology and a decline in the level of scientific knowledge and understanding. Apart from a few Greeks and others educated in Italy, there was little knowledge of the languages of western Europe or of the scientific and technical advances being made there. The astronomical theories associated with the name of Copernicus were mentioned for the first time, and even then only briefly, in Turkish at the end of the seventeenth century, and the advances in European medicine were only slowly coming to be known in the eighteenth.

Some countries of Europe had now moved on to a different level of power. Plague had ceased to ravage the cities of Europe as quarantine systems took effect, and the introduction of maize and the extension of cultivated land ended the threat of famine and made it possible to feed a larger population. Improvements in the construction of ships and the art of navigation had taken European sailors and merchants into all the oceans of the world, and led to the establishment of trading points and colonies. Trade and the exploitation of the mines and fields of the colonies had given rise to an accumulation of capital, which was being used to produce
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manufactured goods in new ways and on a larger scale. The growth of population and wealth made it possible for governments to maintain larger armies and navies. Thus some of the countries of western Europe – England, France and The Netherlands in particular – had embarked on a process of continuous accumulation of resources, while the Ottoman countries, like other parts of Asia and Africa, were still living in a situation in which population was held down by plague and famine, and in some places had decreased, and production did not generate the capital necessary for fundamental changes in its methods or any increase in the organized power of the government.

The growth in the military power of western Europe was not yet felt directly. In the western Mediterranean, Spanish power had waned, and the dey of Algiers was able in 1792 to capture Oran, which had been in Spanish hands; in the eastern Mediterranean, Venetian power was in decline, and that of England and France was not yet felt. The danger seemed to come from the north and east. Russia, whose army and government had been reorganized on western lines, was advancing southwards. In a decisive war with the Ottomans (1768–74), a fleet under Russian command sailed the eastern Mediterranean, and a Russian army occupied the Crimea, which was annexed to the Russian Empire a few years later. From this time the Black Sea ceased to be an Ottoman lake; the new Russian port of Odessa became a centre of trade.

Far to the east, in India, something no less ominous was beginning. European ships had first rounded the Cape of Good Hope in the late fifteenth century, and European trading posts had gradually been established on the coasts of India, in the Gulf and on the islands of south-east Asia, but for the next century or more their trade was limited. The Cape route was long and hazardous, and spices and other Asian goods were still sent by the Gulf or Red Sea to the cities of the Middle East, to be sold in the local markets or distributed further west and north. Europe wanted to buy spices but had little to offer in return, and its ships and merchants in the Indian Ocean were largely occupied in buying and selling between Asian ports. In the early seventeenth century the spice trade was diversified round the Cape by the Dutch; but to some extent the loss to Ottoman merchants was made up by the new trade in coffee, grown in Yemen and distributed over the western world by merchants in Cairo. Later, European trading companies began to expand beyond their ports and become tax-collectors and virtual rulers of wide areas. The Dutch East India Company extended its control in Indonesia, and the British company took over the administration of a large region of the Mughal Empire, Bengal, in the 1760s.

By the last years of the eighteenth century, the nature of European trade with the Middle East and the Maghrib was clearly changing. Some groups of Arab merchants and sailors were still able to keep their position in the trade of the Indian Ocean, in particular those of Oman, whose activities and power spread on the east African coast. In general, however, exchanges between different regions of the world fell into the hands of European merchants and shipowners; English ships came to Mokha on the coast of Yemen to buy coffee; spices of Asia were brought to the Middle East by European merchants. Not only merchants but also producers felt the challenge. Goods produced in Europe, or under European control in the colonies of Asia and the New World, began to compete with those of the Middle East both in the European and in the Middle Eastern market. The coffee of Martinique was cheaper than that of Yemen, and the merchants who handled it had better commercial techniques than those of Cairo; they also had a monopoly of the European markets. By the late eighteenth century Mokha coffee had virtually lost the European trade, and was facing the competition of coffee from the Antilles in Cairo, Tunis and Istanbul. Sugar from the Antilles, refined in Marseille, was threatening the sugar industry of Egypt. French textiles of good quality were being bought by ordinary men and women as well as courts. In return, Europe was buying for the most part raw materials: silk of Lebanon and cotton of northern Palestine, grain of Algeria and Tunisia, hides of Morocco.

So far as trade with Europe was concerned, the countries of the Middle East and the Maghrib were moving into the position of being mainly suppliers of raw materials and buyers of finished products. The effects of this were still limited, however. Trade with Europe was less important for the economies of the Arab countries than that with the countries further east, or that which passed by the Nile or Saharan routes between the Mediterranean coastlands and Africa; the main effect may have been to lessen the trade between different parts of the Ottoman Empire in those goods in which Europe was becoming a competitor.

However limited, it was a sign of a displacement of power. If British ships came as far as Mokha, they might come further up the Red Sea and threaten the security of the holy cities and the revenues of Egypt; the expansion of British power in Bengal, a region with a large Muslim population and part of the Mughal Empire, was known at least to the Ottoman ruling group. The Russian occupation of the Crimea, a land of
mainly Muslim population, ruled by a dynasty closely connected with the Ottomans, and the movements of the Russian fleet in the Mediterranean were more widely known. By the end of the century there was a growing awareness of the dangers. Among ordinary people it found expression in Messianic prophecies, among the Ottoman élite in the idea that something must be done. Occasional embassies to the courts of Europe, meetings with European diplomats and travellers, had brought some knowledge of the changes taking place in western Europe. It became clear to some of the high Ottoman officials that the defences of the empire needed to be strengthened. Some attempts were made to introduce corps with a modern training and equipment into the army and navy, and in the 1790s, on the initiative of a new sultan, Selim III (1789–1807), a more sustained effort was made to create a new model army; but in the end it came to nothing, because the creation of a new army, and the fiscal reforms which it involved, threatened too many powerful interests.