



RESEARCH ARTICLE

RETROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS OF NIZAM-I CEDID IN THE OTTOMAN MILITARY DURING THE ERA OF MAHMUD II (1808-1839)

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Abstract

The military history of the Ottoman Empire in the early 19th century is often narrated through the dramatic account of the Vaka-i Hayriye (1826) event, namely the dissolution of the Janissary Corps. This perspective, however, tends to overshadow the continuity of the concepts and doctrines associated with Nizam-i Cedid that were inherited from the reign of Selim III. Such a framing creates a historiographical gap, which indicates that Mahmud II's reforms represented a completely new beginning, disconnected from earlier attempts at modernization. This qualitative study aimed to examine the continuity, modernization and adaptation of Nizam-i Cedid elements, mainly organizational structure, recruitment mechanisms and military education, inherent in Mahmud II's reform agenda. This study's research design involved historical investigation and content analysis, whereby data were collected primarily through documentation that focused on selected reliable sources. The descriptive analysis involved internal and external criticism of relevant documents and historical texts. Findings suggest that Mahmud II's reforms were not a radical departure but rather a strategic continuity that integrated the Nizam-i Cedid principles into new military formations, such as the Segban-i Cedid and Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammadiye. These reforms demonstrate that the Ottoman military's strength lay in its capacity to balance the ideals of modernization with political demands, organizational discipline and the geopolitical context at that time.

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This historical interpretation contributes to Ottoman historiography by suggesting that Mahmud II's military reforms should be understood as a layered process of evolution rather than an isolated revolution. It underscores the fact that institutional reforms in a state never occur in a vacuum but are rooted in the continuity of redefined ideas consistent with the visions of political thinkers. It is suggested that future research should adopt a more holistic historical analysis that incorporates recruitment data, military expenditure and cross-civilizational comparisons with Western reforms. Such an approach would provide deeper insight into the dynamics of Ottoman military development appearing in various timelines.

Introduction:-

The Ottoman military history witnessed a turbulent phase in the 19th century, which saw a time that tested the endurance of the well-established Janissary institution and created opportunities for bold attempts to restructure the very foundations of state power. At this crossroads between tradition and modernity lay the legacy of Nizam-i Cedid, a military modernization initiative introduced by Selim III, which reached fuller maturity only under Mahmud II's reign (1808–1839). Mahmud II's reforms are often interpreted primarily through the lens of the Vaka-i Hayriye (1826) event, namely the dissolution of the Janissary Corps. However, the continuity of the principles, organizational framework and Nizam-i Cedid's doctrines has rarely been explored in depth. This study is a retrospective inquiry that intends to recover the hidden legacy by tracing the subtle connections between Selim III's reformist vision and Mahmud II's modernization strategies aimed at establishing a disciplined, modern and centrally directed army, while simultaneously embedding the modernization concept into the wider governance framework.

Ottoman historiography generally emphasises on the dramatic episode of the Vaka-i Hayriye event when narrating Mahmud II's reforms. Stephanov (2019) had highlighted the political and symbolic dimensions of power, while Andic and Andic (2014) had assessed the successes and failures of institutional restructuring. However, the element of continuity through military formations, such as the Segban-i Cedid and the Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammadiye, still demands in-depth examination, especially with respect to tactical adaptation, modernization of artillery structures, recruitment reforms and establishment of military educational institutions.

Biçer (2020) and Simsek (2005) provided valuable insight into the post-Vaka-i Hayriye period, but they failed to integrate institutional, geopolitical and central power perspectives in a unified analytical framework. Two central issues had culminated from this scholarly discourse that has enlightened the present study. First, historical narratives often separate Mahmud II's reforms from the Nizam-i Cedid's legacy by presenting them as a disengagement instead of a continuation of Selim III's earlier modernization efforts. Second, there is a notable absence of detailed research into the military-historical elements, such as organizational structures, weapons technology and recruitment mechanisms, that originated in Nizam-i Cedid and subsequently adapted or modified in the socio-political context during Mahmud II's reign. This absence has led to innumerable perspectives on Ottoman military evolution. A retrospective analysis that integrates military, political and institutional dimensions into a comprehensive academic narrative would suffice to address these gaps.

Scope of the Study:-

Mahmud II's military reforms are often directly associated with the dissolution of the Janissaries in 1826, usually referred to as the Vaka-i Hayriye event or The Auspicious Incident, without being clearly linked to the influence or incorporation of elements from Nizam-i Cedid. There are elements of ambiguity in the historical sources as to whether Nizam-i Cedid's principles, structures, training and organizational features were maintained or modified during Mahmud II's reign. Kia (58: 2017), a famous historian, begged to differ by saying:

“Alemdar Mustafa Pasha reorganized the disbanded Nizam-i Cedid (Nizam-i Jedid), the modern army created by Selim III, under the new name Segban-i Cedid (New Segbans, or the new Dog Keepers). He also tried to reform the Janissary Corps by prohibiting the dissolution of their positions, restoring the traditional system of seniority and demanding that they receive modern training”.

Nizam-i Cedid's continuity was never completely severed as it persisted through various attempts and new adaptations, though it was often overlooked in historiographical discourse. The ambiguity surrounding the relationship between Selim III's modernization initiatives and Mahmud II's strategies raises a central question as to whether Mahmud II's reforms should be regarded as an evolutionary continuity adapted to the political context of his era, or as a radical departure that dismantled earlier traditions. This uncertainty creates an analytical gap in

efforts to understand the foundations of 19th century Ottoman military reforms, making it a critical issue that requires a thorough retrospective inquiry.

Therefore, this study aimed to construct a comprehensive analytical narrative to explain how Nizam-i Cedid became the foundation for Ottoman military modernization during Mahmud II's reign (1808–1839). The objectives included a detailed mapping of the structure, doctrines and operational mechanisms inherited from Selim III's reforms, and tracing the adaptation and modification of these elements in Mahmud II's policy framework. The study also connected institutional analysis with the broader political, fiscal and strategic centralization of authority that drove reform.

The Vaka-i Hayriye event of 1826 is treated as a strategic moment of transition that closed the chapter of the Janissary Corps while paving the way for a new, more structured, centralized and agile military system capable of responding to the geopolitical challenges of the 19th century. This study's objectives integrate three main dimensions, namely institution, governance and transitional moments, to generate a historiographical interpretation that considers whether Mahmud II's reforms represent a continuation of Nizam-i Cedid ideals or a decisive departure from older traditions. This qualitative study used a historical research design and content analysis to collect data. Documentation served as the main data source by focusing on selected reliable sources. This study employed a descriptive data analysis approach that combined internal and external criticisms of relevant documents and historical texts. This framework allowed the study to move beyond empirical facts and consider intellectual narratives and the geopolitical context that shaped the landscape of Ottoman military reform.

The Nizam-i Cedid Military System:-

The Nizam-i Cedid (New Order) military force emerged in the late 18th century as Selim III's bold attempt to modernize the Ottoman military. Its establishment was not merely a military project, but rather a manifestation of structural and intellectual transformations. It involved the creation of new institutions, introduction of modern combat tactics and the systematic use of economic resources to strengthen central authority (Zürcher, 2024). However, these efforts faced strong resistance from the Janissary Corps and conservative groups, who viewed it as a threat to their traditional privileges.

Political tensions escalated, and on 29 May 1807 the Nizam-i Cedid was dissolved, coinciding with the deposition of Selim III (Kia, 2017). Although forcibly removed from the political stage, its legacy and conceptual framework endured, serving as a source of inspiration for later Ottoman reforms. Mahmud II sought to revive the ideals of Nizam-i Cedid with greater caution, while recognizing that the effectiveness of reforms initiated by his predecessors had been limited. This vision of modernization received support from sections of the elite who understood the necessity of military reform for the empire's survival.

The core principle of Mahmud II's reforms emphasises on professionalism. The new military force, known as Segban-i Cedid, was incorporated into the existing kapikulu military structure, while deliberately avoiding the name "Nizam-i Cedid" in order not to provoke the Janissary Corps (Shaw & Shaw, 1977). Its nucleus consisted of 3,000 rapid-fire infantrymen under the command of Kadi Abdurrahman Pasha, supported by surviving veterans of the Nizam-i Cedid. Orders were immediately issued to recruit volunteers from all over the empire, which witnessed approximately 5,000 initial registrations.

In addition, the artillery (Topçu) and the artillery wagon corps (Top Arabacıları), originally established during Selim III's reign, were revived. Mahmud II further consolidated and instilled confidence in these units by increasing salaries, supplying new equipment and enlarging their numbers, thereby creating more loyal and effective combat formations. Meanwhile, the Ottoman navy underwent significant reorganization under Grand Admiral Koca Hüsrev Mehmed Pasha. Among his key initiatives was the replacement of Greek sailors from the Aegean islands with Muslim recruits, who were offered high wages and favourable service terms to ensure compliance with the intensive training and strict discipline required. This process was reinforced in 1827, when Topal İzzet Mehmed Pasha assumed the post of Grand Admiral and continued the major restructuring of the Ottoman fleet by focusing on the recruitment of Muslim sailors from the Black Sea coast and the Syrian provinces, thereby fully replacing Greek manpower in the empire's maritime service (Dal, 2016).

The strength of Nizam-i Cedid and its successor-unit was also founded in the willingness to adopt advanced military technology. The Segban-i Cedid focused on certain tactics, such as the use of rapid-fire muskets, while Selim III's

earlier innovations in reorganizing the artillery and artillery wagon corps along Prussian lines in 1793 were further developed under Mahmud II with expanded manpower and improved efficiency (Zürcher, 2024). A cavalry artillery unit of 1,000 men was established, trained and organized according to Western military standards. Artillery workshops, naval shipyards and a gunpowder factory at Azadlı were reorganized with the assistance of foreign technicians, while modern weaponry, such as heavy cannons, long-range rifles, and small arms were procured directly from Europe. The Muallem Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammadiye's structure, which emerged after the dissolution of the Janissaries in 1826, stipulated that each regiment was to possess 12 cannons and 12 musket-equipped companies, as this would enable the Ottoman army to compete with European battlefield formations (Levy, 1971).

Mahmud II also introduced fundamental changes to military recruitment procedures and systems. Recruitment of volunteers continued for the Segban-i Cedid, although Nizam-i Cedid, and later the Mansure army had long been dissolved (Şahin & Keleş, 2019). Recruitment proceeded rapidly in Istanbul, with eligibility criteria set at ages 15 to 30 and a service period of 12 years. The redif (army reserve) system was also introduced, with a mandatory requirement that each province supply a battalion (Shaw & Shaw, 1977). Eligible rural men underwent periodic training while residing at home, receiving wages and serving five years of active duty followed by seven years in the reserves. This system was organized in accordance with the demographic and agricultural needs of each Ottoman province at the time.

The success of military reforms cannot be achieved without a strong foundation in education. Hence, Mahmud II placed great emphasis on the establishment of modern military education institutions. The engineering schools founded during Selim III's era, namely the Mühendishane-i Bahri-i Hümayun (Imperial Naval Engineering School) and Mühendishane-i Berri-i Hümayun (Imperial Army Engineering School), were expanded and restructured in terms of curriculum and facilities (Yeni & Tabakcıoğlu, 2023).

In March 1827, Mahmud II established the Tıbhane (Military Medical School), followed by the Cerrahhane (School of Surgery) in 1832, and the Mekteb-i Şahane-i Tıbbiye (Imperial School of Medicine) in 1839 (Zürcher, 2024). The Muzika-i Hümayun Mektebi was founded in 1836, and it trained regimental bands with the aim of instilling discipline and esprit de corps in the new army. In the same year, Mahmud II established the Mekteb-i Ulum-u Harbiye (School of Military Sciences) to address the shortage of trained officers, and it became the empire's leading technical institution that offered advanced courses in engineering, geometry, mathematics and military sciences. A Talimhane (Special Training Centre) was also created to train youths who were not yet of age to enlist in the Mansure army, and this initiative ensured the continuity of a skilled human resource base for the future.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the Nizam-i Cedid military system, and the subsequent Segban-i Cedid and Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammadiye forces, were not merely a framework for tactical reforms, rather a centralised project that combined political vision, organisational discipline and large-scale modernisation strategies (Şahin & Keleş, 2019). These reforms demonstrated that a state's strength does not reside solely on bravery in the battlefield, but also on the capacity to adapt its military structure to meet technological, economic and educational demands consistent with international developments. The Ottoman Empire, through the continuity of ideas from Selim III to Mahmud II, strongly suggests that the legacy of modernisation cannot be erased even if certain institutions were abolished. Instead, this modernisation was able to re-emerge in a more developed and effective form, thus, laying the foundation for a military modernisation era that shaped the Ottoman Empire's political and social direction in the 19th century.

The History of Mahmud II's Reign:-

When Mahmud II ascended the throne on 28 July 1808, the Ottoman Empire was caught between its old legacy and the shadows of a future that demanded reform. Mahmud II was not merely the heir to the throne, but a leader who understood that the Ottoman grandeur could only be restored if it had the courage to sever outdated traditions. He recognised that true reform did not simply involve introducing new institutions, but required the destruction of old frameworks that hindered the flow of change.

Hence, Mahmud II began his reign with careful planning, gathering supporters, placing loyal figures in every branch of administration, and managing the political game with the precision of a strategist. Mahmud II centralised power in the hands of the palace for almost the first two decades of his rule by gradually stripping the regional notables (derebeys) and the conservative elite of their autonomy. Senior officers of the Janissary Corps were replaced with

men more loyal to the palace, such as Hüseyin Aga, while political rivals, like Mehmet Sait Halet Efendi, were eliminated, giving Mahmud II the space to shape his map of authority without interference. The traditional powers of the military and religious elite were curtailed and replaced by a modern bureaucracy under the control of Sublime Porte (Shaw & Shaw, 1977; Doğan, 2013). Fixed salaries were introduced for officials, the penal code was revised to ensure justice regardless of rank, and arbitrary punishments were abolished, which were all measures aimed at building a cleaner and more orderly central government.

Mahmud II continued his modernisation efforts after the dissolution of the Janissary Corps in 1826 by dismantling other institutions closely linked with the corps. His primary target was the Bektashi Dervish order, a Sufi brotherhood that had long served as a spiritual supporter and a source of social legitimacy for the Janissaries. On 10 July 1826, its highest-ranked leaders were executed, while its lodges were destroyed (Öyük, 2024). Their property and assets were confiscated and handed over to other religious scholars to be converted into mosques, schools and public facilities, consistent with Mahmud II's vision of eradicating Janissary influence on social and religious life.

This forced the Bektashi Order to operate underground, but it endured and was revived after Mahmud II's death, even expanding again until it was ultimately dissolved along with other Dervish Orders by the Republic of Turkey. However, its remnants never completely disappeared and continued in secrecy into the modern era. Similarly, smaller units allied with the Janissaries, such as the yamak auxiliary troops and the acemi oğlans, were also disbanded, which led to the closing down of the entire military and social network that once supported Janissary power and influence.

Mahmud II, in the final years of his reign, turned his attention to breaking the power of the provincial notables, or derebeys, who for centuries had exercised autonomy beyond the direct control of the palace. He confiscated the fief lands of the derebeys through calculated measures, which were then formally restored to the central government but in practice it was often transferred to private entrepreneurs who used them as capital to expand economic and commercial activity.

This policy was also accompanied by attempts to restore direct Ottoman rule over Arab provinces far from the capital, although they encountered challenges when trying to implement the policies. Rebellion by the Su'ud family in the Hijaz region could only be suppressed with military assistance from Egypt under the command of Ibrahim Pasha, son of Muhammad Ali (Habeeb et al., 2012). Likewise, in Syria, the governor of Aleppo succeeded in reducing the influence of most local notables between 1815 and 1820. In Iraq, although influential advisers, such as Halet Efendi, sought to exploit divisions among the Mamluks, their political strength remained so entrenched that direct Ottoman rule could only be fully restored after the death of Davut Pasha in 1828 (Salibi, 1979).

Mahmud II had strategically weakened the governors' power by transferring many of their functions to officials sent from Istanbul who were directly accountable to the central government. However, this approach was later realigned towards forming cooperation with the governors, which restored part of their authority while ensuring the dominance of central control. This evolving policy eventually took a firmer shape through the Provincial Regulation of 1858, which defined governors as the sole agents of the central government in the Ottoman provinces (Shaw & Shaw, 1977).

The Vaka-i Hayriye Incident: Dissolution of the Janissary Corps (1826):-

The year 1826 in the history of the Ottoman Empire stands as a moment that shook the foundations of traditional Ottoman authority. The event, remembered as the Vaka-i Hayriye ("The Auspicious Incident"), witnessed Sultan Mahmud II bringing an end to the Janissary Corps, a centuries-old military institution that had once served as the empire's shield but eventually became an obstacle to reform (Shaw & Shaw, 1977).

Mahmud II had carefully strategized the emplacement of loyal and trusted men in key positions, secured the approval of religious scholars, and spread narratives of Janissary's decline among the people. The spark of change was ignited with the introduction of the Eşkıncıyan Corps, basically a European-style trained unit, which provoked the anger of the Janissaries and triggered a rebellion (Güripek & Akar, 2021). On 15 June 1826, the Janissary barracks at Et Meydanı were surrounded, set ablaze and their occupants eliminated. The following day had witnessed the erasure from history of an institution that once dominated the Ottoman political and military order for centuries.

Elimination of the Janissary was not merely a restructuring of the army, but the opening of a new chapter. On 16 June 1826, the same decree that dissolved the Janissary Corps also established the Muallem Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammadiye ("The Victorious Soldiers of Muhammad") (Zürcher, 2024). This new military force, led by Aga Hüseyin Pasha as its first serasker, had adopted a modern discipline framework inspired by the Nizam-ı Cedid model. Recruitment advanced quickly and within three days one regiment of about 1,500 men was formed in Istanbul (Shaw & Shaw, 1977). The military corps was modernized along the French military model under the leadership of Hüsrev Mehmed Pasha, and by 1828, the Ottoman army fielded 50 active battalions with tens of thousands of soldiers. In 1841, the corps was renamed the Asakir-i Nizamiye-i Şahane, which symbolized the full embrace of the Ottoman military's modernization.

Nevertheless, the road to reform had been paved earlier by the bold leadership of Alemdar Mustafa Pasha. As a provincial notable from the Danube region, he played a crucial role in elevating Mahmud II, the cousin of Selim III, to the Ottoman throne on 28 July 1808. Though rooted in Ottoman tradition, he recognized that the empire's survival depended on reform. He secured the support of provincial notables through the Sened-i İttifak (Charter of Alliance) signed on 7 October 1808 in his efforts to initiate reform measures (Türker, 2024). He cautiously revived the spirit of the Nizam-ı Cedid under the name Segban-i Cedit, a musket-bearing force disguised under the traditional Segban label to avoid Janissary opposition. However, his fears were eventually realised as their public appearance provoked a rebellion that claimed his life on 15 November 1808, and also at the same time, dissolving the Segban-i Cedit (Şahin & Keleş, 2019).

The Vaka-i Hayriye event marked a clear demarcation between an era of traditional military order laden with symbols of entrenched authority and the beginning of a new order grounded in modern discipline and Western influence. The dissolution of the Janissary Corps not only removed an institution crucial to Ottoman governance, but also eliminated the obstacles that hindered state reform. Mahmud II's strategy that combined the elements of political strength, religious sanction and social narrative, had demonstrated that modernization required the courage to dismantle outdated legacies in order to create structures more responsive and adaptive to changing times. This event was not merely a military purge but a manifestation of a mature reformist vision that signified the start of Ottoman modernization whose echoes would later resonate in Islamic political and military history.

Conclusion:-

This study traced the continuity and modernization of Nizam-i Cedid from the time of Selim III to that of Mahmud II, while emphasizing that Mahmud II's military reforms cannot be fully understood without considering the institutional and doctrinal legacy inherited from his predecessor. This retrospective analysis demonstrates that Mahmud II's modernization strategy was not a different starting point, but rather a strategic continuation that conveniently adapted to the political realities, geopolitical challenges and central authority's needs of the early 19th century. The Vaka-i Hayriye event marked the definitive end of the old order, and simultaneously opened the passage for the adoption of Nizam-i Cedid ideas in a new form, namely the Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammadiye. Hence, the Ottoman military's fortitude when facing modernization lay in the courage to abolish outdated traditions and the ability to integrate modern ideals with the practical needs of the state.

There remains an avenue for more focused future research although this study provides an overview of the Nizam-i Cedid's continuity during Mahmud II's reign. The discussion can be expanded via a holistic analysis of recruitment data, troop strength and military expenditure, in order to empirically compare differences between Selim III's era and that of Mahmud II (Shaw & Shaw, 1977). Furthermore, cross-civilizational comparisons between Ottoman military reforms and Western modernization, mainly in Prussia and France, can enrich the understanding of the sources of inspiration and the adaptation of military strategies. A more in-depth study on the role of military educational institutions that can help shape leadership and professionalism in the new military structure can also provide added perspective on the relationship between military reform and human resource development in national governance.

This study offers significant contributions to Ottoman historiography by addressing the gap on the continuity of Nizam-i Cedid in Mahmud II's modernization efforts. It provides an analytical framework that combines the military, institutional and political history dimensions from an academic perspective, thereby strengthening the narrative of 19th century modernization as a process of evolution rather than mere revolution. The findings, from a practical standpoint, imply that institutional reforms in any state require long-term strategies capable of adapting original ideals to current socio-political contexts. Theoretically, this study emphasises that the continuity of ideas is

often the key to successful reform, even when the original institutions have been abolished. Therefore, this study not only enriches the discourse on Ottoman history, but also inspires contemporary debates on institutional modernization and meaningful strategies of state reform.

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