CHAPTER 2

The Eighteenth Century
Defining the Crisis

The traditional accounts of the eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire focus on wars, the end of territorial expansion, and socioeconomic and military weakness—all taken as clear indications of decline. An alternative “eventful history” of the same century, however, requires attention to internal rather than external developments. In her analysis of this period, Karen Barkey examines the structural changes put into motion by the events of 1703, 1730, and 1808. She goes on to compare the Edirne incident and the Patrona Halil rebellion to the revolutions of 1848 in Europe. Indeed, these events can be understood as turning points in state-society transformations (or “readjustments” as Barkey calls them) in the eighteenth century. For this study, it is also important to include the 1740 market revolt in Istanbul. This book is based on the premise that the long term, combined impact of these events set the stage for Selim’s new measures and policies as manifestations of a perceived threat of unruly elements of the population and a desire to control them more effectively.

The beginning of the eighteenth century was marked by the return of the Ottoman court to Istanbul from Edirne in 1703. This shift initiated a process of unprecedented building activity and urban change in Istanbul; government efforts to reassert the physical presence and authority of the Ottoman sultan in the imperial capital were crucial to the formation of the new urban environment. Throughout the eighteenth century, the government tightened existing laws and promulgated new ones to regulate urban life in the city, utilizing its police force, composed mostly of janissaries, to ensure conformity. As I discuss in more detail in the following sections, these regulations often attributed crime and the disturbance of public order to the influx of migrants into the city. Current scholarship portrays these migrants largely as peasants and

1 Barkey, Empire of Difference, pp. 197–225. For an overview of the period, see also Zarinebaf, Crime and Punishment.
2 Barkey, Empire of Difference, p. 201.
5 For example, the attitude toward Albanians deteriorated especially after the involvement of some Albanian migrants in the Patrona Halil rebellion in 1730. According to one estimate,
unemployed vagrants, prone to riot and rebellion. As such, it overlooks the complex social networks that facilitated migration and the finding of employment, shelter, and contacts in the city. It also ignores the evidence that some migrants were rich and came to Istanbul to live a better life and even to take advantage of the amenities and political opportunities that the city offered to the affluent. Indeed, those who sat in positions of power most likely considered these wealthy immigrants as upstarts, but they also felt the challenges they posed.

The fear of crime and the need to control it played a major role in the emergence of state policies to regulate urban life in Istanbul, especially following the Patrona Halil rebellion in 1730 and the market revolt in 1740. There are repeated references in contemporary sources and government regulations to swelling crime, disorder, and chaos, and the need for careful surveillance of popular rituals and places of social gathering in the city. During the second half of the century, Osman III (r. 1754–57), Mustafa III (r. 1757–74), and Abdülhamid I (r. 1774–89) engaged in frequent social legislation such as sartorial laws, prohibitions on luxury goods and markers of distinction, and restrictions on women’s appearance in public spaces. They also tried to regulate population movements by limiting the issuance of travel documents and building permits.

Selim III’s urban policies were influenced by these earlier attempts to exercise some control over the populace of the city; they were especially influenced by those of his father Mustafa III and his uncle Abdülhamid I. Therefore, I begin this section with an overview of the historical background of the alleged relationship between migration into the greater Istanbul area and the maintenance of public order in the city, together with the factors that might have contributed to the Ottoman government’s ultimate inability to prevent uncontrolled migration.

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7 I use the term government to refer to the alliance or hegemonic bloc that made up the Ottoman administration; my aim is to emphasize its fluidity and shifting social base. The