Regulating urban life in Istanbul constituted a major concern for the Ottoman authorities throughout the eighteenth century. In this section, I focus on the early years of Selim III’s reign, from his accession in 1789 until 1792/93, after which the reform agenda shifted significantly to military reforms and the challenge of funding them. A comprehensive account of Sultan Selim’s reign and reforms, commonly known as the New Order (Nizām-i Cedid), is not within the scope of this study. Rather, my focus is on the prolonged crisis and increased policing in Istanbul, which, to a large extent, have been overlooked in Ottoman scholarship. After presenting a brief discussion of Selim III’s reign, I examine patterns of continuity and change in relation to earlier regulations on public order in the city. I argue that the policies implemented during the early 1790s reveal an unprecedented emphasis on the policing and surveillance of the population and marginal groups. The severity with which enhanced regulations were implemented, as well as the increased regularity of surveillance, presumably also implied increased violence against the populace in the form of exemplary punishments and an increase in the fear of unpredictable selective punishments.

Before Selim’s birth on 24 December 1761, his uncle Abdülhamid was the only surviving heir to the Ottoman throne. At that time, Abdülhamid was confined to the palace and had no sons: Selim’s birth was accompanied by celebrations that lasted for an entire week. The chief astrologer Müneccimbaşi İsmail Çınari declared that he would be a world-conqueror like his namesake, the great Sultan Selim I. He was welcomed as the long-awaited auspicious prince who would continue the Ottoman lineage. When his father

1 Two recent doctoral dissertations explore Selim’s reign in its various details. See Yaycıoğlu, “The Provincial Challenge,” and Aysel Yıldız, “Vaka-yı Selimiyye.”

2 Enver Ziya Karal’s work is the only exception that I am aware of. He draws attention to issues of public order in a separate section under administrative reform. Karal, “Selim III’ün Hatt-i Hümayunları,” especially pp. 95–122. In his prominent study of the reign of Sultan Selim, Stanford J. Shaw focuses mainly on the post-1792 period; his discussion of urban policies in Istanbul under the section on wartime reforms is only three pages long. Shaw, Between Old and New, pp. 75–78.

3 See Zilfi, Women and Slavery, p. 91.

Mustafa III died following the Ottoman defeat by the Russians in 1774, Selim was thirteen years old and exceptionally well educated as a prince. In addition to his formal education, he sometimes attended meetings of the Imperial Council and military inspections with his father, in preparation for his future career as the Ottoman sultan. When his uncle Abdülhamid succeeded to the throne, Selim became the only surviving heir of the Ottoman dynasty (his nephews, princes Mustafa and Mahmud were born in 1779 and 1785, respectively). Sultan Abdülhamid had spent the better part of his life in isolation in the palace until he became sultan at the age of forty-nine. He spared the young Selim strict confinement to the palace and allowed him to go out on some occasions. Thanks to these opportunities, Selim met with the leading statesmen of the period, including the Şeyhülislām Ataullah Efendi, Grand Vizier Halil Hamid Pasha, and the commander of the janissaries. In addition, he corresponded with the representatives of foreign states in the city through his companions in the palace.

In 1785, the Grand Vizier Halil Hamid Pasha failed in a plot to dethrone Sultan Abdülhamid, supposedly to replace him with the young prince. Although Selim’s own involvement in the plot has never been established, Abdülhamid strictly confined Selim to his quarters in the palace. This period in isolation has been associated with an increasing impatience on the part of Selim to become sultan to initiate his reforms. His correspondence with Louis XVI, inspired by the hope of securing French support against the Russians, is perhaps the most celebrated event of Selim’s years in confinement.

Selim did not have any children. His infertility has sometimes been associated with a failed attempt to poison him following the plot in 1785. After he became sultan, he dedicated himself to the care of prince Mustafa and especially the young Mahmud, who was only four when his father died. Following in Abdülhamid’s footsteps, Selim did not confine his nephews to isolation in the palace, and was especially concerned about their good health as the only


