THE LAST IMARET? AN IMPERIAL OTTOMAN FIRMAN
FROM 1308/1890

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Ottoman *imarets* or public kitchens are usually described as one of a complex of buildings centered on a mosque and including other institutions like schools, the founder’s tomb, a caravansaray, or a bath. They were built throughout the empire, mostly in towns, in larger numbers in Anatolia and the Balkans than in the Arab provinces. The majority were built before the year 1600, and some continued to function for decades and even centuries. All imarets prepared meals to distribute at no charge to a mixed clientele of mosque employees, *medrese* teachers and students, Sufis, government officials on the move, travelers of other types, and local indigents. In some places, non-Muslims received food as well, a fact mentioned both in Muslim Ottoman sources and in the accounts of non-Muslims. However, imarets do not appear to have served food to military units, nor to have been incorporated into military operations in any way. The longstanding and widespread occurrence of imarets, as well as the variety of their clients and the longevity of their operations, all suggest that closer and more extensive research on the establishment and maintenance of these kitchens will lead to new understandings of Ottoman policies of expansion, settlement and governance.

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1 This article is based on a paper presented at a colloquium in May 2008 honoring the fortieth anniversary of the death of Professor Uriel Heyd. It is most appropriate that it should be included in this volume in honor of Professor Amnon Cohen, since Heyd was one of Cohen’s teachers, and Cohen was one of mine. Heyd’s work taught me to read Ottoman firmans closely, even though I never was fortunate enough to study with him directly (See Uriel Heyd, *Ottoman Documents on Palestine 1552–1611* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960]). Amnon Cohen first introduced me to the study of Middle Eastern history and, years later, guided me through the complexities of reading Ottoman *kadi sicilleri*. This article is dedicated to him in thanks for many years of collegial support and friendship. This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (Grant # 657/07).

For much of Ottoman history imarets served meals to a wide variety of diners, yet they were not open to all comers. Rather, most of their clients were people to whom the right to eat in a particular institution had been assigned specifically, or whose professional or social status allowed them to claim such a right temporarily when they came within the proximity of an imaret. Often, the endowment deeds that described the conditions of a kitchen’s establishment and terms of operation specified what groups of people would have a right to a meal. By the late 19th century, however, the reform initiatives of the Tanzimat, begun under Sultan Mahmud II (1808–1839) and continued by his successors, had altered—to a greater or lesser extent—the character and form of institutions associated with the dynasty and Ottoman administration, including those providing social and welfare services. Modern government offices were created to undertake the functions once provided through private endowments and began to compete with the latter, if not replace them. Moreover, notions of entitlement and cultural practices were changing. All these developments affected the public kitchens as well.

During the last quarter of the 19th century, however, the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1909) was characterized by a renewed emphasis on the personal beneficence of the sultan and by his various and widespread charitable endeavors. The present article discusses the establishment of one imaret in late 19th-century Istanbul, the last one known thus for to have been planned during the Ottoman era. A document dated A.H. 1308/1890 CE, found by chance in the Prime Minister’s Ottoman Archives (Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi) in Istanbul, contains detailed plans for the construction and operation of a public kitchen to be built in the Beşiktaş neighborhood of Istanbul. This foundation document reveals continuities