



# The Ottoman Empire

*By Eman M. Elshaikh*

The Ottoman Empire stretched across Asia, Europe, and Africa beginning in the late thirteenth century. Centuries later, its growth slowed and it transformed in many ways.

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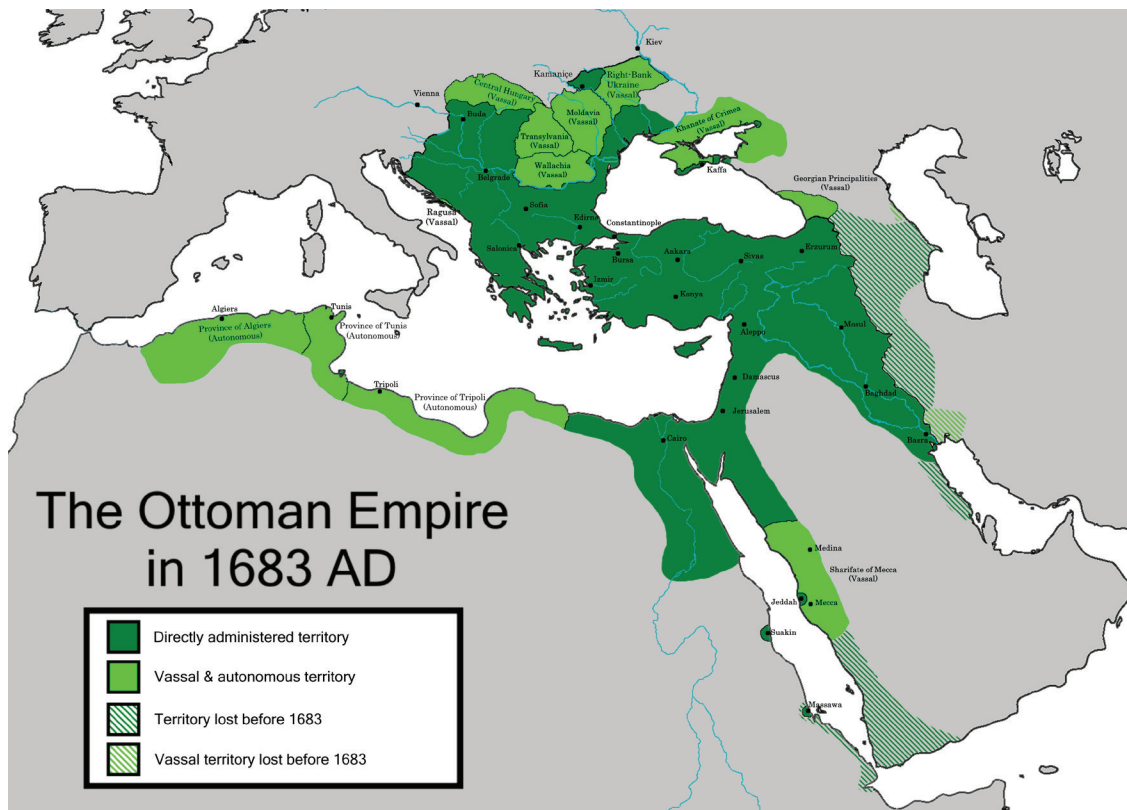


## Transformations and new directions

The Ottoman Empire was founded in 1299. It was based in modern-day Turkey. It took over the city of Constantinople in 1453. Today the city is Istanbul, Turkey. The Ottoman Empire also took over land in the Balkans in southeastern Europe.

The Ottoman military was led by a force called the Janissaries. The Janissaries were made up of young male enslaved Christians. They were trained to be elite fighters.

The Ottoman Empire reached its greatest size in the late 1600s. It included parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa. It lasted until 1922. It was one of the largest and most long-lasting empires in world history.



*The Ottoman Empire at its greatest extent.* By Chamboz, CC BY-SA 4.0.

## Transformations and new directions

The 1700s was a time of change for the empire. It had grown large under powerful leaders called sultans. The sultans claimed the title of Caliph and acted as Islamic religious leaders. The sultans became less powerful in this century.

Lower officials in the government gained more power. The central government was less strong. Regional governments were given more power. This was very different from Europe at the time. Most European kings had total power over their countries.

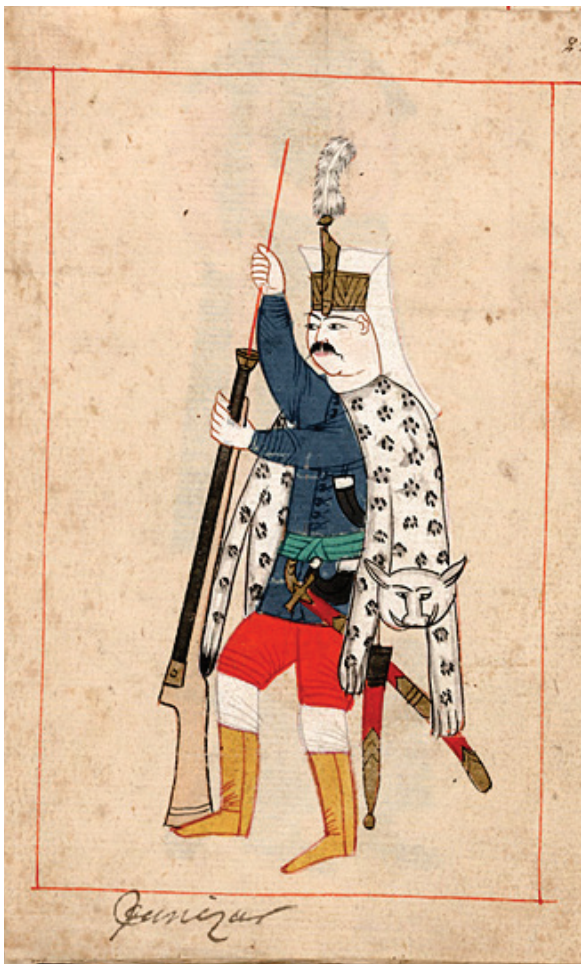
## An empire of nations

The Ottoman Empire had many different people living in it. There were different religions and ethnic groups. There was no united identity.

Islam did play a big part in the empire. The empire based its power on religion. Religious scholars played an important role in the government. Non-Muslims usually had a lower place in society than Muslims.

## Ottoman hierarchies

Some people had more power in Ottoman society than others. Religious scholars and people in the military and government were on top.



Left: [Depiction of a janissary from a book about costumes](#) from the late seventeenth century. Public domain.

Right: [Illustration of recruitment of Christian boys for the devşirme](#). Ottoman miniature painting, 1558. By Ali Amir Beg, public domain.

The lower class included merchants, farmers, and sailors. There were many different types of people in these classes. They could be wealthy or poor. They could be peasants or townspeople.

People also were able to move between classes. They could move up in society based on their own work.

Women depended on the men in their families for money and power. Islamic law gave women certain rights. They could get divorced or inherit money. They could also start schools or mosques.

## **The Ottomans and the world**

The Ottoman Empire bordered many other states. It fought with some of them. The Safavid Empire was located to the east in modern-day Iran. The Ottomans and Safavids fought based on their beliefs in Islam.

In the 1700s, the Ottomans became more connected with European countries. They looked to Europe for new ideas and technologies. They brought in foreign goods.

There was a problem, though. People used to carry goods through the Ottoman Empire. They traveled paths known as the Silk Road between Europe and Asia. The trade made the Ottoman Empire rich. In the 1700s, ships began to travel new routes. Fewer people needed to travel along the Silk Road. The power of the Ottoman Empire faded.



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The author of this article is Eman M. Elshaikh. She is a writer, researcher, and teacher who has taught K-12 and undergraduates in the United States and in the Middle East and written for many different audiences. She teaches writing at the University of Chicago, where she also completed her master's in social sciences, focusing on history and anthropology. She was previously a World History Fellow at Khan Academy, where she worked closely with the College Board to develop curriculum for AP World History.

## Image credits

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**Depiction of a janissary from a book** about costumes from the late seventeenth century. Public domain. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ralamb\\_Janissary\\_1.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ralamb_Janissary_1.jpg)

**Illustration of recruitment of Christian boys** for the devsirme. Ottoman miniature painting, 1558. By Ali Amir Beg, public domain. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Janissary\\_Recruitment\\_in\\_the\\_Balkans-Suleymanname.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Janissary_Recruitment_in_the_Balkans-Suleymanname.jpg)



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