International Journal of Islamic Thought and Research
https://e-journal.stai-ydi.ac.id/index.php/ijiter

The Ottoman Empire: Its Origins and Development

Roslan, Ansar Tohe[1]
[1]Institut Agama Islam (IAIN) Ternate
advroslan12@gmail.com.
ansartohe7@gmail.com

Article Information:
Received August 15, 2026
Revised September 28, 2026
Accepted October 28, 2026

Kata Kunci: *Kesultanan Usmani, Osman I, Ertuğrul Ghazi, imperial Islam, Tanzimat, Ottoman historiography*

Abstrak

This article examines the history of the Ottoman Empire, one of the largest and longest-lasting empires in the history of Islamic civilization and the world. Lasting for more than six centuries (c. 1299–1922), the Ottoman Empire left a profound impact on the political, social, and cultural landscapes of Southeastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. This study traces the empire's origins from a small beylik (principality) in northwestern Anatolia under the leadership of Ertuğrul Ghazi and Osman I, to its peak in the 16th century under Süleyman the Magnificent. The discussion covers the governmental, military, economic, legal, and socio-cultural dynamics that shaped the Ottoman power structure. Using library research methods and a historical-descriptive approach, this paper reveals the factors that contributed to the empire's progress and its decline. A critical analysis suggests that the dominant narrative of "decline" needs to be revised in light of more nuanced recent historiography. The Ottoman Empire was not simply the "antithesis" of Western civilization, but rather a hybrid entity that combined Turco-Mongol, Islamic, and Romano-Byzantine legacies—a complex and adaptive imperial model. Its relevance for the contemporary Islamic world lies in its lessons on managing diversity, institutional reform, and balancing tradition and modernity.

INTRODUCTION

In the history of Islamic civilization, few dynasties have survived and left as much of a mark as the Ottoman Empire (Osmanlı Devleti). From the late 13th century to the early 20th century, this empire ruled a territory stretching from the gates of Vienna to Yemen, from Algeria to the Caucasus. Its continued existence for over six centuries makes it one of the longest-lasting dynasties in world history, rivaling the Roman and Chinese Empires in terms of longevity and geographic influence (Shaw & Yapp, 2026).

However, despite this greatness, Ottoman history is often caught between two extreme narratives: on the one hand, a romantic glorification of the glory of Islam; on the other, the stigmatization of Europe as the corrupt, despotic, and anti-modern "sick man of Europe." Both of these narratives, as historians such as Caroline Finkel (2005), have criticized, are simplifications that obscure

How to cite: Roslan., Tohe, A. (2026). The Ottoman Empire: Its Origins and Development. *International Journal of Islamic Thought and Research*, *2*(2), 53-60.

E-ISSN: 3110-2662
Published by: The Institute for Research and Community Service

the true meaning of the Ottoman Empire. Modern Ottoman historiography actually show sthat this empire was a dynamic, adaptive entity, and had complex governance mechanisms a "negotiated empire" (negotiated empire), as stated by Karen Barkey (2008), which survives through flexibility and the ability to manage diversity.

This article attempts to present a more balanced and scholarly history of the Ottoman Empire. By tracing its origins, peak of glory, and the dynamics of its decline, this paper goes beyond a chronological narrative and offers a critical analysis of the structural factors that explain the empire's rise and fall. The study's significance lies in its efforts to draw lessons for the contemporary Islamic world regarding multicultural state governance, institutional reform, and adaptation to changing times.

METHOD

This study uses a library research method with a historical approach. Data were obtained from credible primary and secondary sources, including history books, scientific journal articles, and historical encyclopedias. The main sources referred to include the Encyclopedia Britannica for basic facts and periodization, Karen Barkey's (2008) work on Ottoman socio-institutional structure, and Colin Imber's (2002) study on Ottoman power structures from 1300–1650. Furthermore, Şevket Pamuk's (2020) research on Ottoman economic institutions and Caroline Finkel's (2005) historiography of decline were also used as important references. The approach used was historical-descriptive-analytical. Historical data were systematically described and then analyzed using theoretical frameworks on imperialism, institutions, and social change.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Background of the Establishment of the Ottoman Empire

To understand the birth of the Ottoman Empire, we must look at the conditions in Anatolia (Asia Minor) in the 13th century. After the Seljuk defeat by the Mongols at the Battle of Köse Dağ (1243), the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum, which ruled Anatolia, experienced a drastic decline and eventually became a vassal of the Mongol Ilkhanate. This power vacuum opened the opportunity for the emergence of various independent Turkish principalities (beyliks) in the border regions, especially in northwestern Anatolia, which bordered the weakened Byzantine Empire (Cleveland & Bunton, 2004). The rulers of these beyliks were ghazi leaders, Muslim warriors who expanded into non-Muslim territories with the spirit of jihad. The ghazi movement was the primary vehicle for early Ottoman expansion. It was in this context that the leaders of the Kayı tribe, one of the Oghuz sub-tribes that migrated from Central Asia, rose to prominence (Baer, 2021).

The Origins of the Ottoman Empire: Ertuğrul Ghazi and Osman I

Ertuğrul Ghazi and Awal Pemukiman in Söğüt

The roots of the Ottoman dynasty date back to Ertuğrul Ghazi, the leader of the Kayı tribe. According to Ottoman tradition, Ertuğrul led his followers out of Central Asia and into Anatolia to escape the Mongol invasion. There, he served the Seljuk Sultan of Rum, Alaeddin Kayqubad I, and was granted the border region of Söğüt (near modern-day Bursa, Turkey) as a settlement. Söğüt later became the power base of Ertuğrul and his family (Britannica, 2026). Ertuğrul's story is important because it confirms the legitimacy of the Ottoman dynasty as the legitimate successors of the Seljuks of Rum and as a ghazi leader instrumental in stemming Byzantine expansion. After Ertuğrul's death around 1280, his son, Osman, succeeded him.

Osman I and the Founding of the Dynasty

Osman I (1258–1326), whose name was later Arabicized as "Uthmān" and from which the term "Ottoman" is derived, was a key figure in the history of the empire. In or around 1299 (coinciding with the definitive fall of the Seljuk Turks), Osman declared the independence of his beylik from Mongol/Ilkhanate rule (Imber, 2002).

Under Osman's leadership, this initially small beylik began to expand rapidly. Osman exploited the weakness of Byzantium, which was experiencing an internal crisis and had lost much territory in Anatolia. With the support of ghazi warriors who flocked to fight against Byzantium, Osman succeeded in capturing several Byzantine fortresses and controlling strategic areas in northwestern Bithynia, including important cities such as İznik (Nicaea), İzmit, and Bursa, which would later become the first Ottoman capital (Shaw & Yapp, 2026).

The famous myth of "Osman's Dream," which foretold the glory of his dynasty, a large, shady tree shading the entire world, became a legitimizing narrative for later Ottoman sultans. Historically, however, Osman's success was largely determined by his military prowess, strategic geographic location, and ability to attract support from various Turkish and ghazi groups (Baer, 2021).

The Development of the Ottoman Empire: From Early Expansion to the Peak of Glory

Early Expansion Period (c. 1300–1453)

After Osman I, the leadership was succeeded by his son, Orhan (1324–1360). Orhan successfully conquered Bursa in 1326, which became the first Ottoman capital. Under Orhan, the government structure began to take shape: he built a professional military (including recruiting Christian mercenaries), created an administrative system, and began minting currency. Orhan also crossed into Europe, assisting the Byzantine Emperor John VI Cantacuzenus, and gained a foothold in the Thrace region (Southeastern Europe) (Shaw & Yapp, 2026).

The next sultan, Murad I (1360–1389), was the principal architect of Ottoman expansion into Europe. He conquered Adrianople (Edirne) and made it the new capital (1365). Under Murad I, the important institution of devşirme (the recruitment of Christian children for service as soldiers and civil servants) was systematically developed, and the Janissary corps (Yeniçeri) became the backbone of the Ottoman military. Murad I died at the Battle of Kosovo (1389) against a Balkan coalition, but the Ottoman victory on this battlefield paved the way for their domination of the Balkan Peninsula (Imber, 2002).

Bayezid I (1389–1402), nicknamed "Yıldırım" (Lightning) for his swift movements, brought the Ottoman Empire to the brink of collapse and glory. He expanded his power into eastern Anatolia and conquered much of Turkey. However, in 1402, the Ottoman army was crushed by Timur (Tamerlane) at the Battle of Ankara. Bayezid was captured and died in captivity, while the Ottoman Empire nearly collapsed and disintegrated in the Civil War (1402–1413). This period is known as the Fetret Devri (Ottoman Interregnum)(Shaw & Yapp, 2026).

A revival occurred under Mehmed I (1413–1421) and Murad II (1421–1444; 1446–1451), who restored stability and continued expansion. Murad II won key battles against the European coalition at Varna (1444) and Second Kosovo (1448), strengthening the Ottoman position in the Balkans(Cleveland & Bunton, 2004).

Peak of Success (1453–1566)

The peak of Ottoman power began with the conquest of Constantinople by

Mehmed II (1451–1481) on May 29, 1453. The capture of the Byzantine capital was a symbolic and strategic moment that cemented the Ottomans as a world power. Mehmed II, nicknamed Fâtih (the Conqueror), not only destroyed the legendary Theodosian Walls with massive cannons but also undertook structural transformations. He positioned himself as the "New Roman Emperor" (Kayser-i Rûm) and rebuilt Constantinople (now Istanbul) as a magnificent capital of the empire (Baer, 2021).

Mehmed II codified the law (kanunname), established government institutions, and promoted art and architecture. He also extended his rule to Serbia, Morea (Greece), Bosnia, Albania, and parts of Italy (Otranto, 1480). Historians view Mehmed II as the most transformative sultan in Ottoman history, as he laid the institutional foundations that would ensure the empire's survival for centuries (Mehmed II & Ma'shum, 2024).

Under Selim I (1512–1520), Ottoman expansion shifted eastward and southward. Selim destroyed the Mamluk dynasty in Egypt and Syria at the Battles of Marj Dabiq (1516) and Ridaniya (1517), conquering the entire Levant, Egypt, and the Hejaz. With control of Mecca and Medina, Selim I claimed the title of Caliph, the leader of the Muslim world, a title officially held by subsequent Ottoman sultans. This was a pivotal moment that transformed the Ottoman Empire from a regional sultanate into a Sunni "Caliphate" seen as the ultimate protector of Islam (Shaw & Yapp, 2026).

The height of Ottoman power was reached under Süleyman I (1520–1566), whom Europeans called "the Magnificent" and the Ottomans called Kanunî (the Lawgiver). His 46-year reign was the Ottoman "Golden Age." Süleyman expanded into Hungary, threatened Vienna (1529), conquered Iraq from the Safavids (1534), and dominated the Mediterranean with the legendary admiral Barbarossa Hayreddin Pasha. Domestically, Süleyman refined the legal system, consolidated the bureaucracy, and advanced art, literature, and architecture (Baer, 2021). The renowned architect Mimar Sinan built masterpieces such as the Süleymaniye Mosque in Istanbul during this period. The Ottoman court became a respected center of culture and civilization in both the Islamic world and Europe (Shaw & Yapp, 2026).

Factors Driving Progress

Several structural factors explain the rapid rise of the Ottoman Empire: Strategic Geographical Position. The Ottomans were situated at the crossroads of trade routes between East and West, and between the prosperous Islamic world and the declining Byzantine Empire. Expansion into Europe gave them access to new human and economic resources (Cleveland & Bunton, 2004). Effective Military System. The Ottomans developed a unique combination of feudal cavalry (sipahi) based on the timar system (granting rights to land in exchange for military service) and professional Janissary infantry recruited through the devşirme system. The Janissaries were a well-trained, disciplined force, and loyal directly to the sultan, unlike the often fragmented European feudal armies (Imber, 2002). The Devşirme System and Social Mobility. The Devşirme allowed the Ottomans to draw upon the best talent from across the empire, without being tied to a hereditary aristocracy.

Many important figures, including grand viziers, admirals, and military commanders, came from this background. This system ensured a fresh and competent bureaucracy and military (Barkey, 2008). Dual Legal System (Sharia and Kanun). The Ottomans combined Islamic law (Sharia) with secular law (kanun) issued by the sultan. This provided flexibility to respond to pragmatic needs without abandoning Islamic legitimacy. Kanun law covered various aspects of governance, taxation, and administration not specifically regulated by Sharia (Imber, 2002).

Taxation and Administrative System (Timar and Iltizam). The timar system enabled efficient regional administration without significant expenditure on the central treasury.

On the other hand, the iltizam (agricultural tax) system provided incentives for effective tax collection, although it later gave rise to corruption problems (Pamuk, 2020). The Millet System and Diversity Management. The Ottomans implemented a millet system that granted autonomy to non-Muslim religious communities (Orthodox Christians, Armenians, Jews) to manage their own internal affairs under their religious leaders (Barkey, 2008). This was a practical policy that reduced the potential for rebellion and maintained stability in a multi-ethnic empire. This policy was relatively tolerant compared to European standards at the time (Cleveland & Bunton, 2004).

The Peak of Success and the Classical System of Government

By the 16th century, Ottoman institutions had reached their classical form. Ottoman society was fundamentally divided into two main classes: the askeri (ruling class) and the reâya (commoners, mostly peasants) (Imber, 2002). The askeri included military, civil, and religious officials, and were exempt from most taxes. In contrast, the reâya paid taxes and were subject to civil and religious law (Shaw & Yapp, 2026).

The Ottoman government structure consisted of four hierarchically integrated functional institutions (Britannica, 2026): Imperial/Palace Institution (mülkiye): Headed by the sultan himself as the center of power and decision-making. Military Institution (seyfiye): Responsible for expansion, defense, and internal security. Administrative/Secretariat Institution (kalemiye): Managed the finances, administration, and records of the state. Religious/Science Institution (ilmiye): Consisting of the ulama who managed the justice system, education, and jurisprudence based on sharia and canon law. At the local level, provinces were administered by governors (beylerbeyi) who had considerable autonomy, but remained subject to central control through taxation and official rotation mechanisms (Barkey, 2008).

Factors of Decline

Ottoman historiography is dominated by a narrative of a long "decline" from the 17th to the 20th centuries. Classical historians such as Bernard Lewis describe the disintegration of the Ottoman classical structure beginning in the late 16th century, marked by corruption, incompetence, and internal divisions (Cleveland & Bunton, 2004).

However, recent historiography, often referred to as the "Ottoman revisionist school," rejects this narrative of decline as overly simplistic and deterministic. Historians such as Caroline Finkel (2005) point out that structural change and adaptation, not linear decline, occurred. Similarly, Karen Barkey (2008) sees the Ottoman Empire as an entity that survived precisely because of its flexibility and ability to negotiate with various provincial elites.

However, several factors did cause significant pressure on the Ottoman system: Economic Crisis and Inflation. The influx of silver from America via Europe caused massive inflation in the late 16th century, which eroded the fixed incomes of timar holders and state officials. The Ottomans failed to adapt to the new global monetary economy (Pamuk, 2020). Military Stalemate and European Pressure: After the second siege of Vienna (1683), the Ottomans lost their expansionary momentum. Defeat after defeat by European forces (Austria, Russia) forced the Ottomans to sign detrimental treaties, such as the Treaty of Karlowitz (1699), which marked the beginning of territorial losses in Europe (Shaw & Yapp, 2026).

Institutional Crisis, The timar system was abandoned and replaced by a more corrupt agricultural tax system (iltizam) which undermined the socio-political base in the countryside. Tax holders (mültezim) and local elites (âyan) grew stronger, reducing the sultan's direct control and weakening centralization (Barkey, 2008). Bankruptcy and Dependence on Europe, In the 19th century, the Ottomans were deeply in debt to European powers, who then established the Düyun-u Umumiye (Ottoman Public Debt Administration) which oversaw state finances, a form of colonial economic intervention (Pamuk, 2020). Failure of Fundamental Reform, Although the Tanzimat period (1839–1876) brought major reforms in administration, law, and the military, these reforms were largely an adoption of European models without profound socio-economic transformation. Balkan nationalism and separatist movements in the Christian provinces also weakened the unity of the empire (Cleveland & Bunton, 2004).

The Legacy and Influence of the Ottoman Empire

Despite its collapse in 1922, the Ottoman Empire's legacy is profound and still felt today: its influence on the Islamic world. The Ottomans were the primary protectors of Islam's two holy cities, Mecca and Medina, for over 400 years. The title of Caliph, held by the sultan, conferred broad religious and political legitimacy. To this day, the Ottoman legal and cultural legacy continues to influence its former colonies in the Middle East, the Balkans, and North Africa (Shaw & Yapp, 2026).

Influence on Modern Civilization. The Ottoman millet system, while not egalitarian, was an early example of a relatively stable multicultural and multi-religious society. Modern historians even see it as a precedent for the concept of cultural autonomy within the framework of the modern state. Furthermore, Ottoman architecture, literature, music, and cuisine left a rich cultural legacy still celebrated in Turkey and its surrounding countries (Barkey, 2008).

Geopolitical Legacy. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I resulted in the formation of modern states in the Middle East (Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel) based on the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), which remains the root of many conflicts today. The Republic of Turkey, founded in 1923, under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was both a direct inheritor and an explicit rejecter of the Ottoman legacy (Cleveland & Bunton, 2004).

Critical Analysis

Through critical analysis, several important lessons can be drawn from Ottoman history: Ottoman success was not due to "Islamic purity" but rather to adaptation and pragmatism. Ottoman success was due to their ability to adapt, adopt Byzantine and European military technology, recruit bureaucrats and soldiers from all over the world, and combine Islamic law with secular law (kanun). The thesis that Ottoman glory was solely due to Islamic piety or the purity of faith is reductionist. Their success was more a reflection of political pragmatism and institutional innovation (Baer, 2021).

Barkey (2008) emphasizes that the Ottoman Empire's strength lay in its ability to integrate diverse ethnic and religious groups into a single, flexible institutional framework. This is an important lesson that the success of a great empire is not determined by homogeneity, but by the willingness and ability to accommodate differences.

The Ottoman Decline Was Not Due to "Islamic Isolation" But to a Failure to Adapt to Global Capitalism and Nationalism

Recent historiography suggests that the Ottoman Empire did not "fall"

because of Islam, but because it failed to keep pace with the global economic shift toward industrial capitalism and the rise of nationalism among Balkan and Arab nations (Pamuk, 2020). The Ottomans remained trapped in the logic of an agrarian economy and warfare, while Europe developed industry, global trade, and the modern nation-state (Finkel, 2005).

However, it should be noted that the Ottomans also undertook major reforms (the Tanzimat) in the 19th century, which actually shows that they were not anti-modern, but that modernization came late and under European pressure (Cleveland & Bunton, 2004). Finkel (2005) adds that the popular narrative of "decline" was constructed by European and early Ottoman historians themselves to justify reforms, rather than an objective depiction of historical reality

Relevance for the Contemporary Islamic World

The Ottoman experience offers valuable lessons for the Muslim world today: Managing Diversity: The millet system demonstrated that ethnic and religious diversity could be managed within a single, albeit imperfect, political framework. This is relevant for modern Muslim states grappling with minority issues and pluralism (Barkey, 2008) .Continuous Reform: The Ottoman Empire and its Tanzimat demonstrated that reform must be carried out continuously, not only during times of crisis. Resistance to change actually hastens the collapse (Cleveland & Bunton, 2004).

Economic Independence: Dependence on European debt and intervention in the 19th century demonstrated the importance of economic independence for political independence. Modern Muslim states must build strong and independent economies to avoid falling into foreign dependence (Pamuk, 2020). Nationalism and Disintegration: Nationalism is a double-edged sword; while it can cement identity, it can also divide multicultural states. The Ottoman experience demonstrates that ethnic nationalism can destroy multiethnic empires from within (Barkey, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The Ottoman Empire was one of the most significant phenomena in Islamic and world history. From a small beylik in Anatolia under Osman I, it grew into a vast empire that spanned three continents and lasted for over six centuries. Its rise to power under Mehmed II, Selim I, and Süleyman the Magnificent in the 15th–16th centuries made it one of the world's great powers, a major protector of Sunni Islam, and a respected center of civilization.

However, from the late 17th century onward, the Ottoman Empire faced significant pressures: economic, military, and political crises. The long, linear narrative of "decline" is now rejected by modern historians, who see the period as a time of transformation and adaptation, although the empire ultimately collapsed in 1922 due to defeat in World War I and nationalist movements.

The Ottoman legacy is immense. From the millet system and canon law to its architectural imprint across the Balkans and the Middle East, the empire shaped the modern world in ways often overlooked (Sakinah & Avicena, 2025). The greatest lesson of Ottoman history is that adaptability, institutional flexibility, and managing diversity are key to a nation's longevity. The Ottoman defeat in the early 20th century also served as a reminder that isolation from global forces and economic dependence are the paths to ruin. For the Muslim world today, a critical and balanced understanding of Ottoman history is more important than simply romanticizing it.

REFERENCES

Baer, M. D. (2021). *The Ottomans: Khans, Caesars, and Caliphs*. Basic Books.

Barkey, K. (2008). *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

Britannica, E. (2026). *Ottoman Empire - Classical Society, Administration, Reforms*. https://www.britannica.com/place/Ottoman-Empire/Classical-Ottoman-society-and-administration.

Cleveland, W. L., & Bunton, M. (2004). The Ottoman and Safavid Empires. In *A History of the Modern Middle East* (4th ed., pp. 35–57). Westview Press.

Finkel, C. (2005). "The Treacherous Cleverness of Hindsight": Myths of Ottoman Decay. In G. MacLean (Ed.), *Re-Orienting the Renaissance* (pp. 148–166). Palgrave Macmillan.

Imber, C. (2002). *The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650: The Structure of Power*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Mehmed II, S., & Ma'shum, C. (2024). *Implementasi Penerapan Kebijakan Millet Pasca Penaklukan 1453*.

Pamuk, Ş. (2020). The Ottoman Empire: Institutions and Economic Change, 1500–1914. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Economics and Finance*. Oxford University Press.

Sakinah, S. Q., & Avicena, M. Z. (2025). Turki Utsmani 1299-1924: Sistem Politik, Pemerintahan, Bentuk Negara, Perkembangan Intelektual, Ilmu, Agama dan Budaya. *Tarikh: Journal of Islamic History and Civilization*, *1*(2), 224–242.

Shaw, S. J., & Yapp, M. E. (2026). Ottoman Empire. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. https://www.britannica.com/place/Ottoman-Empire.

Copyright holder:
© Roslan., Tohe, A.

First publication right:
International Journal of Islamic Thought and Research

This article is licensed under:
CC-BY-SA