Representations of the Ottoman Empire in the West: Abdülhamid II’s Portrait in the French Press

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Abstract: This article examines representations of Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II in the French press. Analyzing these representations will help one to better understand the Western perceptions of the Ottoman Empire and the Orient. This study is based on the analysis of selected French newspapers such as L’Illustration, Le Journal Illustré, Le Monde Illustré, L’Univers Illustré and Le Petit Journal, as well as other secondary sources (articles and books). Using a critical discourse analysis, this study aims to comprehend how the West, particularly the French press, positioned Abdülhamid II and the Ottoman Empire and how it evolved over time. The analysis of the coverage of Abdülhamid II’s accession to power and, afterwards, his portrait as a Sultan demonstrates not only the struggle of the European powers (especially France and Britain) to gain supremacy over the Ottoman Empire but also the orientalist discourse of the French press with regard to Abdülhamid II. While the coverage of Abdülhamid II’s enthronement ceremony contains both positive and negative representations of the Sultan and the Ottoman Empire, a negative approach was adopted mostly in the coverage of his portrait after his accession to power as Abdülhamid II, as he adopted a policy of balance vis-à-vis the European powers. Overall, the French representations of Abdülhamid II and the Ottoman Empire shed light on the rivalries among the European powers over the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the 19th century.

Keywords: Abdülhamid II; Ottoman Empire; French press; orientalism; Eastern question; the West

1. Introduction

Abdülhamid II was the 34th Ottoman Sultan and he reigned from 1876 to 1908. He is considered one of the most important political figures of the 19th century. This consideration can be better understood if one takes into account the role he played in Turkish history and the critical developments of this “long century”. Opinions on Abdülhamid’s rule are divided between two opposite views. Some scholars consider him as an oppressor, and his rule is labeled an authoritarian and repressive one (Müftüoğlu 1981; Kutlu 2007; Turan 2008; Koloğlu 1987), while others believe that he was a great savior of the Turks (Kısakürek 1965). These competing views about the Sultan also reflect an emotional division in which “each camp tends to conceive the other as a representative of a hostile world view, as if they live in separate worlds” (Akarlı 1993, p. 11).

Whatever the personality and the rule of Abdülhamid II, the situation in which he ascended to the throne was in a period when the Ottoman Empire was struggling to survive. This period was also crucial to many developments shaping the modern Middle East. Indeed, this period was considered by some scholars as “the twilight of a six-hundred-year empire during which the centrifugal forces of nationalism buttressed by rival imperialisms clashed with the state’s desperate efforts to self-preserve, resulting in a great deal of bloodshed” (Schick 2018, p. 48). This perspective of the Ottoman Empire that was in inevitable decline or portrayed in a humiliating manner vis-à-vis the West in terms of power structures of the 19th century is partly associated with the Western perceptions of
the Orient. More specifically, this vision of the Ottoman Empire was based on the “Eastern Question school”. This scholarly tradition tends to take into account the Ottoman state only as a factor of the “balance of power” in European policy formulations (Trumpener 1968; Trumpener 2005). Hobsbawm presents an example of this perception and states that “by the standards of nineteenth century liberalism, [the Ottoman state was] anomalous, obsolete, and doomed by history and progress. The Ottoman Empire was the most obvious evolutionary fossil” (Hobsbawm 1990, p. 38). This tendency to regard the Ottoman Empire as a completely passive actor reflects the Western orientalist vision that considers the Orient to be inferior to Western civilization. This image of the Ottoman state that was in inevitable decline did not allow one to comprehend fully the power dynamics of the 19th century. Deringil points out that “even after the days of its greatness were long over, the Sublime State continued to exist as a thorn in the side of a Europe which expected its demise at any moment, and stubbornly refused to die” (Deringil 1998, p. 1).

Indeed, Abdülhamid II elaborated a pragmatic foreign policy that aimed at contributing to the survival of the Ottomans. According to Hanoğlu:

Following the Congress of Berlin, Abdülhamid II pursued a pragmatic policy of noncommitment. Since the empire was militarily weak and domestically vulnerable, Ottoman leverage over the other Great Powers lay in exploiting their common fear of a disruption of the balance of power in Europe as a result of any one power gaining control or influence over the Ottoman territories. Accordingly, the sultan sought to stave off threats toward Ottoman territorial integrity and pressures for administrative reforms in favor of particular ethno-religious groups by playing off one Great Power against the other—without, however, committing the empire to an alliance with any one power or alignment of powers. (Hanoğlu 2010, p. 129)

One cannot understand this pragmatic policy without taking into account the particular characteristics of the last quarter of the 19th century when Abdülhamid II was on the throne. Indeed, at the turn of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire began to lose power and disintegrate. When Abdülhamid ascended to the throne as the 34th Ottoman Sultan, European states had already begun to compete for influence on the lands of this empire, which was in decline (Ülman 1985, p. 276). In the second half of the 19th century, European states were in a race for supremacy, both in Europe and across the world. In this situation, the Ottoman Empire lost territory in the Balkans, resulting in Russia and Austria expanding their territory. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that even within this process of decline, the Ottoman Empire was striving to survive despite the power of European expansionism. Abdülhamid II strove to maintain a policy of balance or status quo vis-à-vis the European powers. This policy was central to his foreign policy making and to his attempt to ensure the survival of the Ottoman Empire.

Taking into consideration this background, this article examines the coverage of Abdülhamid II’s accession to power in the French press through a critical discourse analysis (CDA). This method considers discursive practices as an important form of social interactions including the constitution of identities (Wodak and Meyer 2009). In this study the discourse-historical strand of CDA is adopted. This approach takes into consideration the particular context and the historical background of the analyzed texts. It aims at studying the demarcations of identity in the texts. Within this study, two discursive strategies are utilized, namely, predication and argumentation (Reisigl and Wodak 2011). Predication will help to demonstrate how the Ottoman Empire, Abdülhamid II, and Islam are used and referred to in the texts. Then, argumentation will allow us to uncover the main arguments that are utilized in legitimizing the representations of actors and events in the texts. Interpreting the discourse adopted in the French newspapers L’Illustration, Le Petit Journal, Le Journal Illustré, Le Monde Illustré, and L’Univers Illustré will help one to comprehend how the Ottoman Empire and Abdülhamid II were discursively represented by the French press.

The analysis of the coverage of Abdülhamid II’s accession to power and, afterwards, his portrait as a Sultan demonstrates not only the struggle of the European powers (es-
icularly France and Britain) to gain supremacy over the Ottoman Empire, but also the orientalist discourse of the French press with regard to Abdülhamid II. While the coverage of Abdülhamid II’s enthronement ceremony contains both positive and negative representations of the Sultan and the Ottoman Empire, a mostly negative (i.e., derogatory) approach was adopted in the coverage of his portrait after his accession to power, as Abdülhamid II adopted a policy of balance vis-à-vis the European powers. Overall, the French representations of Abdülhamid II and the Ottoman Empire shed light on the rivalries among the European powers over the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the 19th century. This article begins with a presentation of the orientalism concept and the Eastern question in order to comprehend Western perceptions of the Ottoman Empire and Abdülhamid II. These concepts are useful in making sense of the discursive representations in the French press. Following this, Abdülhamid II and his role within the Ottoman Empire–West relations are discussed in order to describe the political conditions that help one to grasp the discursive representations of the Ottoman Empire. The last part outlines the main elements of the French press representations of the Ottoman Empire and Abdülhamid II. In this part, the news about Abdülhamid II’s accession to power and his portrait as a political leader are examined.

2. Said’s Orientalism and the “Eastern Question”: The West vis-à-vis the Ottoman Empire and Abdülhamid II

How can Said’s orientalism and the Eastern question help us to better grasp the French representations of Abdülhamid II and the Ottoman Empire? In this section, the main elements of orientalism will be underscored and the Eastern question will be outlined in relation to orientalism. In fact, orientalism provides an intellectual basis for the so-called “Eastern question”. Edward Said’s pioneering critical work *Orientalism* defines this concept as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident” (Said 1979, p. 2). This distinction is a fundamental aspect of the orientalist vision. From his perspective, Said claims that orientalism might be thought of as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1979, p. 3).

The main element of orientalism is the construction of a binary opposition between the West and the Orient. This binary opposition legitimizes the hegemony and the superiority of the West over the Orient’s lands, ways of thinking, and living. Orientalism, as defined by Said, is a Eurocentric approach that treats the East as the opposite of the West, alien to Europe, and an unwanted, unloved Other. Thus, the West looks down on the East. Another factor that enables this marginalization is that the West has a geopolitically central position in world politics. The West achieved its superiority over the East by exploiting it (Said 1979, pp. 5–6). Therefore, the ideas of the Western domination of and superiority over the Orient can be regarded as the two important elements that should be underlined in examining Western perceptions of the Orient. Put differently, orientalism is characterized by a humiliating approach towards the Orient and an ambition of domination and control of it. These two elements constituted a mentality that tried to legitimize not only European interventionism in Ottoman internal affairs, but also European occupation and, ultimately, the partition of the Ottoman territories. This process of partition is called the “Eastern Question” by some authors (Ülman 1985, p. 272). According to Rogne-Schumacher:

The “Eastern Question” refers to the events and the complex set of dynamics related to Europe’s experience of and stake in the decline in political military and economic power and regional significance of the Ottoman Empire from the latter half of the eighteenth century to the formation of modern Turkey in 1923. (Rogne-Schumacher 2014, p. 65)

Said highlights the fact that orientalism was primarily a British and French cultural enterprise concerning the whole of India and the Levant (Said 1979, p. 4). In this context, it should be noted that Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 established a specific type of interest for France in the future of the Ottoman Empire with “the ob-
jective of a permanent solution to the Eastern Question that would ultimately benefit France’s economic and political goals” (Rogne-Schumacher 2023, p. 10). In addition, the British involvement in the Eastern Question resembles that of France’s in the sense that “British traders and warships turned the Mediterranean into, as the saying went, a “British lake” (Rogne-Schumacher 2023, p. 11). Abdülhamid II was well aware of the colonial ambitions of Western powers over the Ottoman lands and of the instrumentalization of the protection of non-Muslim subjects within the Ottoman Empire with the aim of achieving European objectives over the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, the main preoccupation of the new Sultan was to maintain the autonomy of the Ottoman state under the increasing European interventions on internal questions (Deringil 1985, p. 304). Indeed, even though he took over a weakening state, during his reign, Abdülhamid II strove to protect Ottoman lands from foreign interventions. European powers saw the existence of the Ottoman Empire, which ruled over vast lands, as a major obstacle to their imperialist policies.

Therefore, considering this framework, it is possible to assume that the idea of Western domination of the Orient (Ottoman lands) and a humiliating approach with regard to the Orient can be regarded as the two most important elements. These are central elements in Said’s orientalism and can be analyzed in the French press representations of the Ottoman Empire and Abdülhamid II.

3. Abdülhamid II and His Role in the Ottoman Empire–West Relations

This section will help the reader to understand the evolution of the French representations of Abdülhamid II and the Ottoman Empire. For this purpose, it is essential to outline Abdülhamid II’s accession to the throne and his foreign policy. Abdülhamid II’s accession to the throne was preceded by some extraordinary events. Indeed, Sultan Abdulaziz, the 32nd Ottoman Sultan, was deposed by a coup in May 1876 and martyred. This coup d’état was carried out by pro-reform bureaucrats (Hanioğlu 2010, p. 111). Among these high-ranking Ottoman officials were Midhat Pasha (the chief advocate of constitutional and parliamentary checks on sultanic authority in this period), Hussein Avni Pasha (Minister of War), and Sheikh al-Islam Hasan Hayrullah Efendi (Gündoğdu 2019, p. 26).

Therefore, Sultan Abdulaziz’s nephew, Murad V, who was known as a pro-reform prince, ascended to the throne. However, Murad V was mentally incapable of ruling. Then, Midhat Pasha, known for his pro-reform position, had a secret meeting with Sultan Murad V’s younger brother, Abdülhamid II, and the prince promised Midhat Pasha to promulgate a constitution once installed as Sultan (Fortna 2008, p. 43). Abdülhamid II replaced Murad V on the throne on 31 August 1876. The new Sultan promulgated the Constitution on 23 December 1876 in the Sublime Porte. The discussions between Abdülhamid and Midhat Pasha allowed the future Sultan to make some revisions to the draft Constitution: he did not accept Midhat Pasha’s proposition that the Constitution should be guaranteed by the European states. After the entry into force of the Constitution, the Sultan sent Midhat Pasha into exile according to Article 113 of the Constitution (Gündoğdu 2019, p. 35). Abdülhamid II remained deeply suspicious of the European powers’ ambitions over the Ottoman Empire after his accession to power.

The Sultan observed more closely the penetration policies of the Western powers into the Ottoman Empire during the Istanbul Conference that started on December 23, 1876. This Conference was an occasion for the new Sultan to observe the motivations of the European powers.

During the conference of the great states in Istanbul, Sultan Abdülhamid saw that their intention was not to guarantee the legal order of the Christian subjects as they had claimed, but initially to remove their autonomy and subsequently their independence, destroying the Ottoman state. Thus, they would penetrate the administration of the disintegrating states as they wished and acquire new markets. (Gündoğdu 2019, p. 87)

The Sublime Porte did not accept the decisions of the Istanbul Conference and declared that it would consider them invalid (Ülman 1985, p. 282). This was an important event
that had a deep impact on Abdülhamid II’s conception of the European powers’ intentions. Indeed, as Russia maintained its protectorate over the Orthodox subjects of the Sultan, France strove to assert its particular influence over the Catholics of the Levant. These interferences from external actors under the pretext of protecting the religious rights of non-Muslim Ottoman subjects were not only detrimental to the authority of the Sultan’s government, but also facilitated the European powers to promote their own particular interests among those groups (Yasamee 1996, p. 12). After this conference, it was evident to the Sultan that the very existence of the Ottoman Empire was questioned by the Western powers and it faced the problem of survival. Indeed,

Abdülhamid believed that all Powers but Germany were hostile, and that the British in particular were bent upon the Ottoman Empire’s destruction. His pessimism was rooted in his experience of the Eastern Crisis of 1875–1878, when, as he believed, the Empire had been deliberately abandoned by its erstwhile allies. The British, the French and the Austrians had combined with Russia at the 1876 Constantinople Conference to bring forward a program of reforms intended to destroy the Empire from within; when rebuffed, they had abandoned the Empire to an unequal war with Russia; in 1878, following the Empire’s defeat, they had again combined with Russia to produce the Treaty of Berlin, despoiling the Empire of substantial European and Asiatic territories in what amounted to a form of preliminary partition. (Yasamee 1996, p. 44)

According the Treaty of Berlin, Serbia, Montenegro, and Romania became completely independent. Eastern Rumelia and Bulgaria were established as autonomous provinces. The Treaty demanded special reforms that would ultimately pave the way to autonomy for the Bulgarians of Macedonia and the Armenians of Anatolia. The administration of Cyprus was given to Britain. Moreover, during the Berlin Conference, France had prepared the occupation of Tunisia and French troops occupied this country on May 12, 1881 and established a protectorate. Therefore, at the end of the Ottoman–Russian War (1877–78), the Ottoman state had lost 230,000 square kilometers of its territories and over a fifth of its inhabitants (Fortna 2008, pp. 46–47). Sultan Abdülhamid II took necessary lessons from this war and would follow a prudent policy in order to prevent the state from entering into another conflict (Gündoğdu 2019, p. 65). Another lesson that the Sultan drew from the results of the 1877–78 war was an extreme wariness of the motivations of the Great Powers. Abdülhamid II saw that Britain and France, in particular, were looking for the partition of the Empire, as the course of events showed this tendency.

The empire’s Crimean War allies Britain and France had abandoned their former policy of working to uphold its territorial integrity and were now helping themselves to its real estate. The British, showing a more focused interest on the Eastern Mediterranean after the opening of the Suez Canal, took Cyprus as a result of the Berlin Treaty, and would soon use the pretext of the Urabi uprising to occupy Egypt in 1882; France, although considerably weakened after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, seized Tunisia in 1881. Abdülhamid saw this new turn of events as a betrayal. (Fortna 2008, pp. 47–48)

In this context, Abdülhamid II had formulated his own vision of how the Empire must conduct its relations with the European powers. By taking into consideration the Ottoman Empire’s political and military weakness, Abdülhamid II strove to maintain a strategy of diplomatic independence and an effective foreign policy that could allow for the survival of the Ottoman state. In order to prevent the partition of the Empire among the Great Powers, the Sultan adopted a policy of exploiting their mutual rivalries (Yasamee 1996, p. 108). Abdülhamid II had tried to assert some degree of diplomatic independence by forming an alliance with Germany, which had no established interests in the Near East. Furthermore, Kaiser Wilhelm I believed that British and French penetration in the Near East should be restricted (Gündoğdu 2019, p. 83). This alliance with Germany had been facilitated by the decision of Abdülhamid to engage in military cooperation after 1881. In particular, the
Sultan demanded a military delegation from Germany, and this delegation came to the Ottoman state in 1882. This military cooperation provided fertile ground for strengthening Ottoman–German political and diplomatic relations, with the German Emperor Wilhelm II (1888–1918) first visiting the Ottoman lands in 1889 and again in 1898. These visits highlighted the Ottoman–German cooperation and were seen by Abdülhamid II as an instrument of balance vis-à-vis major European powers. While Russia, Britain, and France had occupied a part of the Ottoman territory during the first visit of Wilhelm II, Germany was not interested in following colonial policies in the Ottoman territories. Indeed, Britain occupied Egypt, France had taken over Tunisia, Russia had annexed Batumi, Kars, and Ardahan, and Austria controlled Bosnia and Herzegovina (Gündoğdu 2019, p. 93).

4. Representations of Abdülhamid II and the Ottoman Empire in the French Press

In this section, the main elements of representations of the Ottoman Empire, Abdülhamid II, and his policies vis-à-vis the European powers are outlined. The coverage of the French press between 1876 and 1898 was analyzed in order to understand the factors that underpinned the representations of Abdülhamid II and the Ottoman Empire. For this purpose, the French newspapers L’Illustration, Le Monde Illustré, L’Univers Illustré, and Le Petit Journal were examined. In particular, our objective is to unravel the discursive strategies used in the texts. It is possible to see in the texts the reflections of the two elements of the orientalism mentioned above. These two elements consisted of the Western rivalries for the domination of the Orient and a derogatory approach in the French representations with regards to Abdülhamid II and the Ottoman Empire. One might observe that the coverage of Abdülhamid II’s enthronement ceremony contains both positive and negative representations of the Sultan. Yet the coverage of the French press after the Sultan’s accession to power adopted a mostly negative and derogatory approach as the Sultan strove to follow a balanced policy vis-à-vis the European powers. While the rivalries among the European powers underscored their quest for penetration and eventually the domination of the Ottoman lands, the humiliating approach adopted by the French press illustrates that Abdülhamid II’s foreign policy has been considered to be detrimental to the European (i.e., French) interests in the region.

A closer look at the French press demonstrates that the news about the Sultan’s accession to the throne received considerable attention, and the religious nature of the enthronement ceremony is particularly emphasized in the texts. The image of a “religious leader of the religious Empire” was highlighted for describing Abdülhamid II’s enthronement. In the texts of L’Illustration, detailed pictures of Abdülhamid’s ascension to the throne are presented and it is underlined that the enthronement ceremony was held in Eyüp Sultan Mosque and Hz. It is mentioned that this mosque was named after Eyüp Ensari, who hosted Prophet Muhammad in his home. It is stated that an ulema, an Istanbul judge, Sheikh al-Islam, and religious scholars attended the enthronement ceremony (L’Illustration 30.09.1876a, p. 214).

The sheikh of the Mevlevi dervishes from Konya ties the sword of Osman, the founder of the current dynasty, to the new sultan’s belt. This is the consecration of the title of successor to the caliphs. This ceremony was held in the Eyüp Mosque, located on the shores of the Golden Horn, the port of Istanbul. It is a very revered place in Istanbul and, according to legend, it was built on the site where the dead body of Eyüp al-Ansari, the prophet’s companion and student, was found during the siege of the city in 668. (L’Illustration 30.09.1876b, p. 214)

Similarly, in the weekly newspaper Le Monde Illustré, Abdülhamid II’s ceremony was given extensive coverage and the enthronement of the new Sultan of the Ottoman Empire was covered with full-page pictures. A picture of the guards in the Eyüp Mosque is given a full page, and Sultan Abdülhamid II’s sword girding and entrance to the mosque are also given a full page (Le Monde Illustré 23.09.1876, pp. 196–97). Sultan Abdülhamid’s accession to the throne and the sword-girding ceremony were recorded in full detail: the enthusiastic greeting of the people on the streets, the route the Sultan took on his way to the Eyüp
Mosque, and the description of the skies and the men with him. Detailed information is even given about the Eyüp Mosque: “It is hoped that the Sultan, depicted with this glorious arrival, will bring peace in the future and especially end the ongoing hostility between the Turks and the Serbs (…) The European diplomacy forced finally the Ottoman Government to the suspension of weapons. This Government was rejecting this suspension for the reasons that we consider unacceptable” (Le Monde Illustré 23.09.1876, p. 198).

Looking at the details provided by other newspapers, it is clear that the enthronement ceremony was particularly lavish. As in the previous news, information is given about the Eyüp Mosque and it is stated that only Muslims could attend the ceremony. It is extensively stated that the ceremony was awe-inspiring and that the boats used in the ceremony were fascinating. It is also emphasized that there was considerable contradiction between these celebrations and the fear created by the Ottoman Empire in Europe—referring to the Ottoman–Serbian War. Moreover, the news states that it is hoped that the new Sultan will initiate a period of peace and détente (Le Monde Illustré 23.09.1876, p. 198).

The L’Univers Illustré newspaper, dated September 9, 1876, reported that Abdülhamid ascended to the throne under the title “Événements d’Orient” (Events in the Orient), with the following statements:

An important event took place in Istanbul on the last day of August. Murad V was dethroned with the fatwa of Shaykh al-Islam. Sultan’s II. His brother named Abdülhamid was declared sultan. This was not a fiction, it was a necessary step. For several weeks, news about the state of Murad V’s physical and mental health had spread. Abdülhamid is Abdülmecid’s second son and two years younger than his brother Murad V. He was born on September 22, 1842. In the newspapers that cover news about Turkey, it is stated that he is intelligent, energetic and not against reforms. But we have the right to give ourselves time to form an opinion about the new leader of the people. Let’s not forget that we have talked about the dazed drunkenness of a poor man who was now locked in the Çırağan Palace and occupied the throne of the sultans for three months, again in a not very positive way in these pages. We present to our readers the engraved version of the new sultan’s photograph coming from Istanbul—in the headline. (L’Univers Illustré 09.09.1876, p. 582)

In the newspaper Le Journal Illustré, it is stated that “if the Sultan can keep himself away from the perfumes du harem, maybe he can save the empire that is melting on all sides” (Le Journal Illustré 10.09.1876, p. 210). In another issue of the newspaper L’Univers Illustré, under the title “Événements d’Orient”, it is emphasized that the new Sultan was a very religious person: “The successor of Murad V, who practiced his religion with great enthusiasm, deserves all the sympathy of the ulama and the pious” (L’Univers Illustré 21.10.1876, p. 678). On the other hand, the same text includes the following statements:

In one of our engravings, we see Sultan Abdülhamid coming out of prayer in the Eyüp Mosque, where the tomb of Muhammad’s companion is located (…) The guards are equipped with magnificent equipment and instill fear. The sultan, who did not pay the interest on his debt, knew how to find the money needed for the gold-embroidered uniforms, ostentatious ornaments and gilded halberds of the palace guards (…) To perform the sultan prayer every day, he went either to the Eyüp Mosque, where the grave of Muhammad’s companion is located, or to the Mosque of II. He goes to the mosque where Mehmed’s grave is located. On the fifteenth day of Ramadan, the sultan went to Topkapı and ordered the Cardigan (the Prophet’s cardigan) to be exhibited to Muslims until the Eid day. The grand vizier, sheik al-Islam, ministers, senior state officials, land and sea officers attended this ceremony with great solemnity. (L’Univers Illustré 21.10.1876, p. 678)

When all of these texts are examined, it is clear that Abdülhamid’s ascension to the throne was followed step by step by the French press. The religious character of the ceremony and its magnificence are emphasized. Although the French press coverage of the
enthronement ceremony is mostly descriptive, it is possible to detect a disdainful approach towards both the Ottoman state and Abdülhamid II within the texts. An example of this derogatory vision highlights that “the sultan, who did not pay the interest on his debt, knew how to find the money needed for the gold-embroidered uniforms, ostentatious ornaments and gilded halberds of the palace guards”. Furthermore, it is also stated that “the European diplomacy forced the Ottoman Government for the suspension of weapons”. Here, European diplomacy was presented as a defender of peace, and the Ottoman Government were opposed to ending the conflict. These are examples of derogatory representations of Abdülhamid II and the Ottoman state in the French press.

*Le Journal Illustré* newspaper, dated 6 May 1877, reported the portraits of Abdülhamid II and Tsar Alexander II. Indeed, the Russian Tsar declared war on the Ottoman state and the Turkish–Russian War began. A description and a comparison of the two political leaders were presented in the text.

The Tsar Alexander is very sympathetic to France. In fact, The Russian tsar is known for the liberal reforms he has implemented in the last fifteen years and his closeness to France. He is also a very strong person and likes the progress. He was involved in this war absolutely for humanitarian reasons. It aims to protect the Slavs and Christians oppressed under Muslim fanaticism. (...) Sultan Abdülhamid, the madness of Murad and the tragic end of Abdulaziz forced him to govern a difficult people (...). These two leaders claim waging holy war. (*Le Journal Illustré* 06.05.1877, p. 146)

Here, the French press points out that the Russian Tsar had taken “absolutely humanitarian considerations” when he declared the war on the Ottoman Empire and was striving for protecting “the Christians oppressed under the Muslim fanaticism”. Therefore, Abdülhamid II and his government were charged with “Muslim fanaticism”. This discourse adopted by the French press mirrors the orientalist discourse of the French government. Indeed, France was expressing the same concerns when interfering in the Ottoman Empire’s internal affairs under the pretext of protecting Catholic subjects from the Sultan in the Levant.

 Conversely, considering the British occupation of Egypt, the French press took a rather different approach because it considered that the Sultan could intervene in order to prevent the British occupation. In an article titled “*Portrait du Sultan*” (Portrait of the Sultan), it is stated that “Abdülhamid II is challenging Europe and he is responsible for the pains in the Orient and he is also responsible for the events of which Europeans are victims”, emphasizing the situation in Egypt. It is pointed out that the Sultan played a central role in the events in which Europeans were victimized. Indeed, this discourse used in the French press demonstrates that Europeans portrayed Christians living in Ottoman lands as victims. It should be underlined that the European powers had instrumentalized the protection of the Christian subjects of the Sultan with the objective of penetrating into Ottoman lands. For this purpose, Russia asserted a religious protectorate over the Sultan’s Orthodox subjects, and France asserted a similar protectorate over the Catholics of the Levant (*Yasamee 1996*, p. 46). Additionally, the text includes the following statement: “The government of Sublime Porte opposed in every possible way the convening of a conference that would put an end to the problems in Egypt” (*Le Portrait du Sultan*, p. 211). It is also stated that Abdülhamid thought he had the situation under control, but it is implied that this was unrealistic. The timing of this news is remarkable. Essentially, the news is dated 2 July 1882, nine days before July 11, when Egypt was occupied by the British. Therefore, France was worried about the occupation of Egypt by Britain, and Abdülhamid II decided to organize a conference to discuss the issue.

The French press continued to criticize the British occupation of Egypt. In the news titled “*Un protecteur*” (A protector) in *Le Petit Journal*, it is mentioned that the British occupied Egypt under the pretext of protection and that the local government could not even elect its delegates without asking the British. In the news, with a picture of a British soldier stepping on a Turkish soldier, it is seen that the Ottoman soldier had to kneel
and was clearly humiliated (Le Petit Journal 11.02.1893, p. 48). When the content of the news is examined, the resentment of the French towards Britain’s occupation policy is expressed. “We recognize the usual movements of the British. When they are interested in an island or a region, they settle there and make it British territory.” If the British are being opposed, then they hypocritically say that they have come to protect, not to conquer. The article criticized Britain’s efforts to legitimize its occupation and underlined the derogatory discourse used by Britain with regard to the people whose lands it aimed to colonize and dominate: “You see clearly, we would not leave these poor people to their own devices, sir, what would they be like without us! (...) This is what happened in Egypt, where Britain had great interests and ultimately took control” (Le Petit Journal 11.02.1893, p. 48).

The newspaper stated that “Britain invited France when it was impossible to carry out this invasion, but when it realized that it was possible to capture Egypt after only a few days of occupation, it settled here” (Le Petit Journal 11.02.1893, p. 48). From these statements, it can be interpreted that France felt “deceived” by Britain when it occupied Egypt. It is also stated that Britain did not keep its promises to France and French interests were damaged due to this occupation. Three points stand out in these newspapers regarding the Egyptian crisis. The first is the open struggle between France and Britain in their race to penetrate Ottoman lands. The second is that it is surprising that France criticized Britain for occupying Egypt, because France occupied Tunisia for quite similar reasons in 1881, before the British occupation of Egypt. The occupation of Ottoman lands under the pretext of “protection” is an indication and reflection of French colonialism and an orientalist mentality.

The third aspect concerns Abdülhamid II’s balance policy. It was stated in the news that “the government of Sublime Porte opposed in every possible way the convening of a conference that would put an end to the problems in Egypt”. One could ask the following question: Why did Abdülhamid II not want to intervene militarily in the crisis in Egypt (1881–1882)? Indeed, the crisis began with the rebellion of colonel Ahmed Urabi. When the situation in Egypt became chaotic, Abdülhamid II removed Khedive Ismail Pasha and replaced him with his son, Tevfik Pasha. Urabi was reinstated as War Minister and he sent the European deputies to their homelands. This policy obliged France and Britain to take other measures to control the situation in Egypt. On 30 May 1882, Britain and France invited the great powers and the Ottoman government to a conference in Istanbul in order to discuss the terms and they urged the Sultan to join the conference and to accept the proposal for an Ottoman expedition to Egypt. Abdülhamid II was not in favor of accepting this proposal. Indeed,

To Abdülhamid, however, the Anglo–French invitation was a source of considerable embarrassment. Not only did it implicitly restrict his established right of independent intervention, but, much more important, it coincided with a decisive shift in his own attitude away from the notion of Ottoman military action. (Yasamee 1996, p. 95)

The Sultan believed that any military intervention in Egypt would be another destructive process for the Ottoman state. Having experienced the catastrophic consequences of the Ottoman–Russian War (1877–78), Abdülhamid II was reticent to send an Ottoman expedition to Egypt and he avoided another military conflict. He was also conscious of the fact that “Britain and France will ensure that any intervention fails” (Yasamee 1996, p. 96). Therefore, he refused to join the conference, which convened without him on 25 June and attempted to find a political solution.

It is possible to comprehend the rivalry among the European powers over the Ottoman Empire in another newspaper. In an article titled “Une paire d’amis” (A pair of Friends), Abdülhamid and German Emperor Wilhem II’s friendship is emphasized and it is said that Abdülhamid II was relying on his German counterpart (L’Illustration 22.10.1898, p. 260). When the details of the news are examined, the French press considers this rapprochement with a denigratory approach and sarcastic expressions are used to describe Abdülhamid II.
On the one hand, the Kaiser, well-dressed, not yet in his forties, above average height, strong stance, energetic, cool-headed and warrior-like appearance, with a mixture of British and German blood, aware of his own power, and with a proud and protective air; On the other side, a man with slumped shoulders, a weak posture, although it is not obvious from his stance, he is actually fifty-five years old, with a skinny appearance, pale skin, and a heavy look with worried eyes. These are the differences between the physical characteristics of these two autocrats. The first one rules over a population of forty-three million, and the second one, including the countries under its control, over a population of at least forty-seven million people. Abdülhamid seems to rely on the Kaiser. *(L’Illustration 22.10.1898, p. 260)*

In the image used in the news, old Abdülhamid can only stand by holding on to the arm of the German emperor. The main message of the visual used in this news report might read: “The sick and old Ottoman State can only survive by relying on the arm of young and strong Germany”. While it is emphasized that Abdülhamid is “a leader who is helpless and in need of Germany’s support”, Germany’s strong stance against this weak leader is highlighted. Wilhelm II made three visits to the Ottoman Empire in 1889, 1898, and 1917. It seems that the Ottoman–German rapprochement reached its highest level during the reign of Wilhelm II.

As pointed out in the previous section, Abdülhamid’s increasing suspicions about other European states (especially Britain and France) after the Ottoman–Russian War played a major role in his rapprochement with Germany. German Emperor Wilhelm II’s second visit was more comprehensive and longer than his first visit. Wilhem II visited Haifa, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and places such as the Church of Kamame, Prophet David’s tomb and mosques, and a Syrian orphanage, and he attended the opening ceremony of the German Church (Erlöserkirche). Therefore, it can be claimed that the French press considered this German–Ottoman rapprochement as being against the French interest in the Levant. If we take into account the emphasis on religious elements during the visit, any potential interference by Germany in this region with the instrumentalization of the Christian subjects of the Sultan could pose a threat to French interests. Indeed, as previously noted, France cultivated special links with the Catholics living in the Levant, and the creation of a German zone of influence in this region would intensify the rivalry among the European powers.

On the other hand, Abdülhamid II and the German Emperor were characterized as autocrats. In addition, Abdülhamid II was described as “a man with slumped shoulders, a weak posture, although it is not obvious from his stance, he is actually fifty-five years old, with a skinny appearance, pale skin, and a heavy look with worried eyes”. These representations of Abdülhamid II reflect how the French press describe not only the physical characteristics of the Sultan in an increasingly humiliating manner, but also shed light on the resentment of France with regard to the German–Ottoman rapprochement. The expression “strange rapprochement” is used to describe the visit of the German Emperor. One could rightly ask the following question: Why is it a “strange” rapprochement? In fact, we already know that there had been military cooperation between Germany and the Ottoman Empire for the reorganization of the Turkish army since 1882. In addition, we know that this was not the first visit made by the German Emperor to Ottoman lands, and he managed to deepen the military cooperation between the two states during his first visit (1889). As mentioned in the previous section, Abdülhamid II had adopted a policy of balance that would enable a certain degree of diplomatic independence by exploiting the mutual rivalries among the European powers. Of course, for the French press, the only thing that makes the German-Ottoman rapprochement ‘strange’ is that it may threaten or at least cause problems for French interests in the Near East.
5. Conclusions

This article examined the representations of the Ottoman Empire and Abdülhamid II in the French press at the turn of the 19th century and the evolution of these representations by highlighting the historical context of the Ottoman–European relations at that time. The analysis showed that the portrait of Abdülhamid II received a considerable amount of attention in the French press. Moreover, the analysis identified two central elements of orientalism in the text of the French newspapers: the quest for the European penetration and domination of the Orient (i.e., Ottoman territories) and the humiliating approach towards Abdülhamid II and the Ottoman Empire. The analysis of the French press sheds light on the European rivalries in gaining supremacy and securing their own interests in the Ottoman lands, particularly in the Near East. The examination of the French press’s coverage of the Turkish–Russian War of 1877–78 and the British occupation of Egypt (1882) demonstrated the contradictory attitude of France with regard to these two developments in the Near East. On the one hand, the French press considers it “absolutely humanitarian” to declare war on the Ottoman Empire under the pretext of protecting the Christian Orthodox subjects of the Sultan. On the other hand, the French press consider it “hypocritical” to occupy and establish a British “protectorate” in the region. This reaction of the French press to the British occupation of Egypt becomes even more contradictory when we take into consideration the fact that the French occupied Tunisia (1881) and established a French protectorate just one year before the British occupation of Egypt (1882). The Sultan’s passive policy during this occupation was also criticized. The analysis of the French reaction to the German Emperor’s visit to the Ottoman lands reflected the resentment and discomfort that France experienced because of this rapprochement of Germany to the Ottoman Empire; this resentment is evident in the disdainful discourse used in describing the visit as a “strange” event and Abdülhamid II’s policy of forging and deepening his alliance with Germany.

The analysis of the French press coverage of Abdülhamid II and the Ottoman Empire also demonstrated that while the coverage of Abdülhamid II’s enthronement ceremony contains both positive and negative representations of the Ottoman Empire and the Sultan, the coverage of the French press after the Sultan’s accession to power adopted mostly a negative and derogatory approach, as the Sultan strove to adopt a balanced policy or the policy of exploiting the rivalries among the European powers in order to prevent the destruction of the Empire. As pointed out in the previous sections, by orientalist representations, we mean a humiliating and denigratory approach towards Abdülhamid II and the Ottoman Empire. It might be construed that orientalist representations of Abdülhamid II and the Ottoman Empire are used in the French press’s coverage of the Sultan’s accession to power. These representations include the following sentence: “the sultan, who did not pay the interest on his debt, knew how to find the money needed for the gold-embroidered uniforms”, or the affirmations that assume “the European diplomacy forced the Ottoman Empire to the ceasefire in the Balkans” and “if the Sultan can keep himself away from the perfumes du harem, maybe he can save the empire that is melting on all sides”. These are examples of the orientalist representations that can be found in the French press. However, as Abdülhamid adopted a policy of balance or status quo vis-à-vis the European powers (particularly after the Ottoman–Russian War of 1877–78), one could consider that the French press’s representations became more humiliating. Consequently, Abdülhamid II was described as “an autocrat” and “the principal responsible of the pain in the Orient”, and it was posited that “he challenged Europe” and “he is responsible for the events of which Europeans are victims”. This shift in the discursive representations of Abdülhamid II might be attributed to his balance policy that aimed at maintaining a relative diplomatic independence and ensuring the survival of the Ottoman state.

Author Contributions: Both authors contributed equally to all sections of the article. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.
Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes
1 For recent studies that shed light on the reign of Abdülhamid II from different perspectives see (Özbek 2002), (Özcan 1997), (Kırmızı 2007), (Tekin 2009) and (Çetinsaya 2016).
2 On the Ottoman Empire as a distinct international order see (Balcı 2021) and (Balcı and Kardaş 2023).
3 It should be remembered that France invaded also Algeria in 1830. For an analysis of Algeria’s behavior of remaining within the declining Ottoman order see (Balcı 2022).

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