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## From Divine Ruler to Modern Monarch

The Ideal of the Ottoman Sultan in the Nineteenth Century

### 1. How to Determine the Qualities of an Ideal Sultan?

When I was an adjunct faculty member at the Free University of Berlin in 1999, a student in the Islamic studies MA program approached me one day. He was somewhat distressed about the fact that the oral defence exam for his master's degree did not turn out as he had hoped. Students in Germany generally decide on three subject areas, with each of their examiners and the questions in the oral exam expected to come from these three areas. I cannot recall the exact details of the line of questioning from one of the professors, which he described to me as a 'surprise attack'. What I do remember, however, is a question that will concern me in this essay, both in terms of its content and its formulation.

The question went like this: 'What does a caliph look like?' (*Wie sieht ein Kalif aus?*). Apparently, the fact that the question was asked in the present tense made it even more confusing. The student, who was actually quite brilliant, was perplexed at the question and did not know what to say, and the professor did not guide him towards an answer. As we later determined, the answer expected by the professor revolved around the formulations in Islamic political writings regarding a potential caliph's physical appearance. The eligibility requirements for a caliph include, among other things, that he should have "good health in [his] faculties of hearing, sight, and speech" and that he should be "sound of limb."<sup>1</sup>

The codification of the requirements that a caliph had to meet goes back to the eleventh-century formulations of the political theorist al-Mawardi of Basra (d. 1058) in his book on governance, *al-Ahkam al-sultaniyyah*. One may find it odd at first that the guidelines given by al-Mawardi relate to a caliph's physical appearance. However, these jurisprudential prerequisites have an obvious pragmatic aspect to them, in that they are concerned with the

1 Abu'l-Hasan 'Ali ibn Muhammad ibn Habib al-Basri, *al-Ahkam as-Sultaniyyah. The Laws of Islamic Governance*, trans. A. Yate (London, 1996), 12.

establishment of a sound authority. A ruler who was ‘just’ (al-Mawardi’s first condition) or ‘benevolent’ would be equipped with the qualities that every ruler was expected to possess, but he also needed to be knowledgeable (his second condition) and, moreover, to have a strong constitution. The rationale behind these conditions of al-Mawardi is generally interpreted as the necessity of ensuring that the caliph is capable of carrying out state business appropriately. All of the above-mentioned components are very much part of the real-life mechanism by which one establishes authority. Ideally, all qualifications and circumstances need to reinforce the authority of the ruler, which in turn would serve to legitimate his rule.

Although *al-Ahkam*’s direct impact on Ottoman political theory was not extensive, the work no doubt had an indirect influence, since it had already exerted a vast impact on Sunni political theory in general. Yet, even if the juridical codification by al-Mawardi of the necessary qualifications of a caliph (which took place approximately three centuries after the rise of Islam) may have had a role in shaping the perception of the ideal Islamic ruler, one should not miss the distinction between the conditions he listed and the actual perceptions regarding the ideal sultan. Although the eligibility requirements were thought to be generally legally binding, they did not necessarily reflect the specific characteristics of an ideal sultan at any given point in time. The ultimate goal of all sovereigns – to meet the expectations of an ideal ruler and to solidly establish their legitimacy – involved a far more lively process and required constant negotiation with several pressure groups. The ideal of the sultan was very much subject to the conditions of the time, and it was shaped and reshaped, constantly determined and re-determined, through negotiation.

The nineteenth-century ideals concerning an Ottoman sultan that I will describe in this article obviously constituted the last chapter of a long story that took shape according to the changing political and cultural spirit of the times. The Ottoman ruler was merely the leader of a modest principality in the early fourteenth century. Yet, in only one and a half centuries, the chiefdom became a mighty empire, with the much-coveted city of Constantinople as the seat of the throne.

A century later, the Süleymanic age (1520–1566) and the following decades saw the theorization of a new sort of rulership that went along with an expanding constituency of subjects to rule over. Lands with a Muslim majority were annexed to the empire only in the first half of the sixteenth century. As was examined in detail by H. Yılmaz in a recent dissertation, a boom in political literature occurred during the second half of the sixteenth century. This body of texts, which comprised both works originally composed in Ottoman Turkish and works translated from Arabic and Persian, developed a theoretical framework that defined the new guidelines

for the ideal ruler of a world empire. Yılmaz remarks that morality and piety featured as one of the most important criteria for the ideal sultan of the mighty Ottoman Empire at that time. Then again, most of the theorists contributing to this framework seemed to have belonged to the Sufi circles.<sup>2</sup>

In exploring the notions of an ideal sultan, a few problems pertaining to the sources arise. While the 'normative' or 'norm-setting' sources, such as the *mirrors* for princes, may well be a natural place to start when determining how the ideal sultan was defined, one needs to be aware of a few fallacies that these sources entail. First of all, the mirror authors were not only reflecting the ideal character-traits that were commonly expected from the rulers, but also prescribing ideals according to their own world-view. I acknowledge that once normative sources found resonance with the prevailing sentiments, the prescriptions would inevitably gain authority and, hence, penetrate current political discourse and eventually, through some circuitous mechanism, shape the expectations of the people too. But then one needs to be aware that there is a very fine line separating descriptions of readily available views about an ideal sultan and prescriptions stemming from personal conviction.

Also, some authors who penned political advice literature rose from the ranks of the bureaucracy and were, therefore, equipped with pragmatic knowledge of how the administration of the state functioned and hence in all probability realistically reflected the expectations of an ideal sultan. However, the works of others clearly took the approach of referring to the Islamic canons, not to mention the many treatises written along the lines of the Persian government tradition, that were in circulation in the Ottoman world. The discourses employed in normative sources tend, by their very nature, to make us believe that such codified ideals were timeless, whereas, as mentioned earlier, the expectations were actually shaped by constant negotiation.

Last, but not least, these texts are far from being an all-encompassing portrait of a real-life sultan. Take for example Mehmed II (r. 1444–1446, 1451–1481), who, for whatever reason, visited a church in the Pera district of Istanbul during mass and revealed himself to be very much interested in church rituals, even inquiring about the organization of the church. This anecdote was told by a Christian contemporary, who praised the sultan as a frank and benevolent ruler in an account he wrote about the customs of the Turks. Now, it is obvious that the sultan sought to obtain the approval of a group of his subjects through this kind of conduct. Yet, it is hardly probable

2 H. Yılmaz, *The Sultan and the Sultanate. Envisioning Rulership in the Age of Süleymân the Lawgiver (1520–1566)*, Ph.D. Diss. (Harvard University, 2005).

that one would find a counsel in a mirror for princes advising the sultan to show interest in the religious rites of non-Muslim subjects as a strategy to obtain their popular acceptance.<sup>3</sup>

It would probably be naive to expect a legitimate and comprehensive description of an ideal sultan in one source. While ‘normative’ sources only paint an incomplete picture of the ideal sultan, as we move into the nineteenth century it becomes irrelevant whether or not the normative sources presented an appropriate depiction of the ideal sultan, since by then mirrors for princes that focused on advising the ruler on how to govern and how to work on his image had fallen out of fashion.

Some ideals (such as being a ‘just’ ruler), interwoven with the factual support,<sup>4</sup> that is, the responses of the political authority to the daily demands of the people (such as the ways in which ‘justice’ was enforced), were indeed universal, or they endured at least nominally for centuries. However, negotiation, even with regard to these well-known ideals, continued to take place between various constituencies, including groups such as the common folk, regional power magnates, men of the pen, and men of law. Each group had different and changing expectations of an ideal sultan, and constant negotiation inevitably brought new aspects to these time-honoured concepts and ideals. Hence, despite the rhetorical commonalities, most likely a ‘just sultan’ evoked somewhat different expectations for a non-Muslim Ottoman subject of the sixteenth century, as compared to the nineteenth century.

Finally, we traditionally suppose that the political legitimacy of a ruler is primarily sustained through the relation between the ruler and the ruled, which did have a definitive impact on the specifics of the ideal sultan. However, as the world became a place in which royalties were informed about each other as never before, rulers now also became concerned with what a modern public relations specialist would call ‘image problems’. We shall see below that as the nineteenth century drew on, transnational political and cultural expectations also became increasingly influential in determining the ideal qualities of an Ottoman sultan.

Therefore, a clearer picture of the ideal sultan in the nineteenth century will emerge if one takes the initiative to collect the diverse empirical data. Most importantly, since information regarding real-life sultans became unprecedentedly abundant during the nineteenth century, reconstructing the

3 Georgius de Hungaria, *Tractatus de moribus, conditionibus et nequicia turcorum. Traktat über die Sitten, die Lebensverhältnisse und die Arglist der Türken*, trans. and ed. R. Klockow (Köln et al., 1993 [original edition 1481]), 225–227.

4 For a clarification of this concept see my “Legitimizing the Ottoman Sultanate: A Framework for Historical Analysis”, in *Legitimizing the Order. The Ottoman Rhetoric of State Power*, ed. H. T. Karateke and M. Reinkowski (Leiden, 2005), 13–52.

ideal Ottoman sultan from the available memoirs and other accounts will be the most promising approach to the topic.

## 2. What Was a Nineteenth-century Sultan Like? – Demystified and Accessible

It would be safe to assume that one of the foremost factors that shaped the perceptions about an ideal sultan was the prestige and authority that the office of the sultan enjoyed. Sultans with stronger or weaker personalities and with authoritarian or lenient ruling styles did come and go, but the general prestige of the sultan's office overrode this variability. One of the main elements that contributed to this prestige in traditional pre-modern monarchies was the 'mystique' surrounding the office of royalty and the supernatural attributions attached to it. Yet, the prestige of monarchs and monarchies in general gradually decreased during the course of the eighteenth century, and the Ottoman dynasty was no exception to this trend. Simultaneously, monarchic rule also underwent demystification. This phenomenon had an impact on all the major monarchies of the world ruled by personages who at least partially legitimized themselves through their claim to a divine right to rule. This line of thought gradually ceded its place to other means of legitimization that came to characterize a 'modern monarch'.

The Ottoman sultans, too, strove to keep up with the ideals of a modern monarch in the nineteenth century. The expectations were concerned with the personal as well as public qualifications of rulers, and they were primarily moulded by the concept of an enlightened and civilized monarch, which crystallized before and around this time. Rulers now justified their rule by claiming to be the servants of the state and the subjects; they no longer simply declared themselves sovereigns by divine right. Laws were introduced to promote equal treatment of the subjects – ideally without discrimination based on religious or ethnic affiliation. Capital punishment was no longer contingent upon two words easily pronounced by the sovereign. Modernization of the administration and the promotion of a general education system were also on the agenda of the ideal monarch.

As a consequence of the above-mentioned demystification process, the sultan became a much more visible and accessible figure during the course of the nineteenth century. The change was evident in many aspects, but was especially noticeable when it came to interactions with European diplomats, who during and after Abdülmecid's reign (1839–1861) began conferring with the sultan about politics: a dialogue that would never have taken place between these two parties prior to the nineteenth century. Earlier, negotiation of political issues was the domain of the Grand Vizier or the Minister

of Foreign Affairs. Sultans had never discussed political issues with an envoy during an audience. Moreover, subsequent to this development, individuals who did not belong to a diplomatic emissary or were not signed up for one in order to enter the presence of the sultan, for the first time found it possible to have an audience with him. Usually, during this time, the arrangement still occurred through the mediation of a diplomatic individual, but that soon changed as well. By the end of the nineteenth century, random travellers of somewhat 'noble' background were, with the help of some intervention, able to arrange a meeting with the sultan.

The first of a few instances in which a sultan dined at the same table with a foreign individual took place during Abdülaziz' reign (1861–1876). Members of foreign royal families did not customarily visit the Ottoman throne-city prior to the 1840s, but as this manner of dynastic courtesy became more-or-less routine, new customs pertaining to the sultan's behaviour were also introduced. Traditionally, up until the reign of Mahmud II (1808–1839), the sultan had taken his meals alone, accompanied only by the private head tutor of his childhood (*baş lala*).<sup>5</sup> If he attended a feast at the mansion of a high-ranking statesman – which occurred extremely rarely – he would eat alone at a separate table.<sup>6</sup> Despite this long-standing custom, Abdülaziz not only invited the Prince of Wales to the imperial palace during the latter's visit to Istanbul in 1861, but also sat and dined at the same table with him, together with the Grand Vizier, ministers of the Ottoman Cabinet, the British ambassador, and military officers.<sup>7</sup> Such a liberal attitude, exhibited by a sultan for the first time, was indeed extraordinary and paved the way for subsequent meals that the sultans shared with members of royal dynasties and diplomats. The peak of this kind of liberality was probably Abdülhamid II's presence at the dinner table some fifteen years later with a group of Ottoman officers at the Ministry of War on the fifteenth anniversary of his enthronement (1876). It was no wonder that, because of its unusualness, one of the sultan's aides evaluated the occasion as "happening for the first time in Ottoman history."<sup>8</sup>

During this time the sultans also began to make appearances at the grand openings of important public institutions. Mahmud II made a speech at the

5 Tayyazade Ata, *Tarih-i Ata*, vol. 1 (Istanbul, 1875), 193–194.

6 See the following document from the Prime Ministry Ottoman State Archives, Istanbul, Cevdet-Saray 4614 (no date, 1720s) for Ahmed III's (r. 1703–1730) visit to Mehmed Pasha's mansion. The Pasha, a prominent figure of this period, was chief secretary to the grand vizier in internal affairs (*sadaret kethudası*) and was married to the grand vizier's daughter.

7 A. Cevdet, *Tezâkir 13–20*, ed. C. Baysun (Ankara, 1991), 246; idem, *Maruzat*, ed. Y. Halaçoğlu (Istanbul, 1980), 41.

8 Sait Pasha (Eğinli), "Hatırat", *Türklük* 5 (August 1939), 400–403, 400.

inauguration of the new imperial medical school in 1838 (*Tıbbiye-i adliyye-i shahane*). His son Abdülmecid paid a visit in 1840 to the High Council (*Mecelis-i vala*) in its new building, and made it his custom to visit the council and give an opening statement every year. Later, a box was built for the sultan in the meeting hall.<sup>9</sup> Abdülaziz attended the opening ceremony of the Council of State (*Shura-yı devlet*)<sup>10</sup> in 1868, and subsequent sultans also frequented opening events of institutions whose initial purpose was the service of the public good.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the sultans adopted another new habit, or rather they updated the old habit, of visiting the imperial territories with an entirely new itinerary. They now travelled to places in the empire that their predecessors had never seen, at least not in such a context. Helmut von Moltke, who later became the Prussian Chief of Staff, took part in a 39 day journey that Mahmud II, who was the first to go on such trips, embarked upon from the end of April to the beginning of June in 1837. The journey took them as far as Varna and Silistra, and Moltke later wrote in a letter that, before Mahmud II, “the likelihood of a sultan’s travelling to the empire’s villages in the Balkans was comparable to that of an oyster abandoning its cliff or a tortoise leaving its shell.” When the sultan and his retinue were passing through Greek villages in the Balkans – as the young Prussian officer vividly related – the villagers gathered on the roofs to welcome the *vasileus*. Mahmud even stood next to his private secretary while the latter read speeches on his behalf to the non-Muslim inhabitants in some of the villages of that region. In these speeches, he emphasized the connection between a ruler and his subjects, and he also promised to repair their churches.<sup>11</sup> While sultans had travelled to certain places in Istanbul’s proximity before, going on a journey to Rumelia in order to demonstrate such a strong personal involvement, striving to unite the ethnic and national elements of an empire that had long been exhibiting the signs of disintegration, was clearly the product of a new mindset. A treatise written to commemorate the trip taken by Mahmud’s son Abdülmecid to Crete in 1846 described the Sultan’s undertaking as an endeavour to get to know his subjects more closely.<sup>12</sup> His successor Abdülaziz travelled as far as Egypt, to become the first sultan to see this land since its capture by the Ottomans, and undertook, again for the first time, a 33-day trip to European capitals including Paris, London, and Vienna. With the exception of Abdülhamid II, all

9 *Taqvim-i veqayi* 195, 11 Muharrem 1256 (15 March 1840); quoted in M. Seyitdanlioğlu, *Tanzimat devrinde Meclis-i Vâlâ, 1838–1868* (Ankara, 1994), 44, 131.

10 Seyitdanlioğlu, *Meclis-i Vâlâ*, 59.

11 [H. v. Moltke], *Briefe über Zustände und Begebenheiten in der Türkei aus den Jahren 1835 bis 1839* (Berlin et al., 1841), 137 ff.

12 *Seyahatname-i hümayun* ([Istanbul], [1262/1846]).



the sultans of this period travelled with agendas that would have been atypical in the previous centuries.<sup>13</sup>

As a matter of fact, the sultans' personal attitude towards, and communication with, their subjects during ceremonial encounters also took on new shapes. Popular gestures such as returning the salutations of the crowds during a ceremony by the waving of the hand took a long time to become the norm. That sultans generally had not even cast a glance towards the spectators during ceremonial processions, let alone greeted them or waved to them, became a frequent *topos* in travel accounts before and around the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Charles MacFarlane, for instance, narrated in his *Constantinople in 1828* that the crowd that gathered during a procession was "as still as death."<sup>15</sup> It is true that cheering and shouting were gestures that were not particularly welcome in the Ottoman culture. Although we know of individual cases where the onlookers shouted acclamations to the sultan,<sup>16</sup> it does not seem to have been customary to do so in Istanbul. As late as in the 1830s, special guards still patrolled the crowds of onlookers during the processions and chastised or punished those who expressed their sentiments too effusively.<sup>17</sup> In 1863, however, when Abdülaziz was returning from his aforementioned journey to Egypt, he was received with cheering ovations at the Izmir and Istanbul harbours. The historian Ahmed Cevdet recounts that the Sultan was pleasantly surprised at the acclamations he received, which were a departure from the expected 'official silence'.<sup>18</sup> The incident is an indication that a new sort of relationship between the sultan and his subjects was developing.

The transformation of this relationship was detectable in other spheres as well. Even Abdülhamid II, before he became paranoid about his security and

13 For a detailed examination of the topic see my forthcoming article "On the Mobility of the Ottoman Sultan".

14 See for example H. Christmas, *The Sultan of Turkey, Abdul Medjid Khan. A Brief Memoir of His Life and Reign. With Notices of the Country, its Army, Navy, & Present Prospects* (London, 1854), 24–25. In fact, we have evidence that Mehmed III, for instance, "cast his merciful and compassionate glance at the onlookers and captivated their hearts," in the historian Selaniki's words, during a procession as early as 1595. M. Selaniki, *Tarih-i Selaniki*, ed. M. İpşirli, vol. 2 (Istanbul: 1994), 456. One should remember that Mehmed III's public appearance occurred after a two-year hiatus of sultanic participation in any public event during the final years of his father Murad III's reign.

15 Ch. MacFarlane, *Constantinople in 1828. A Residence of Sixteen Months in the Turkish Capital and Provinces*, vol. 1 (London, 1829), 499; cf. L. Bunel, *Jérusalem. La côte de Syrie et Constantinople en 1853* (Paris, 1854).

16 D. Mehmed Bey, *Neticet ül-vekayi. Yeniçeri Ocağının kaldırılışı ve II. Mahmud'un Edirne seyahati*, ed. Ş. Mutlu (Istanbul, 1994), 84.

17 *Taqvim-i veqayi* 74, 19 Şevval 1249 (31 December 1833).

18 Cevdet, *Tezâkir* 13–20, 264; cf. A. Kemâlî Aksüt, *Sultan Azizin Mısır ve Avrupa seyahati* ([Istanbul], 1944), 81 and L. Gardey, *Voyage du Sultan Abd-ul-Aziz de Stamboul au Caire* (Paris, 1865).



sequestered himself in his palace, started out as a rather easy-going character. It is difficult to imagine that of all people Abdülhamid, who came to be famous for his extreme mistrustfulness, would let the common folk waiting at the entrance of the imperial palace to be admitted into the palace gardens for a leisurely stroll during the first months of his reign.<sup>19</sup> Such a gesture had never been heard of before, let alone from the later suspicious Abdülhamid, and it may have been one of the first instances that common inhabitants of Istanbul were allowed access to the imperial palace grounds.

The modern monarch, that is the sultan, was no longer a transcendent figure, a 'being' sanctified by God whose likeness his subjects would consider themselves blessed to behold if they ever got so lucky. He increasingly became a much more visible personage. For the first time, his image was now seen in public spaces. Mahmud II, for example, had his portrait displayed in governmental offices – and not only in Istanbul, but in places as far as Egypt – with an accompanying pompous ceremony.<sup>20</sup> A newly created ornament in the 1830s, which was designed to be worn on a chain around the neck, bore the portrait of the sultan.<sup>21</sup> Abdülaziz did not fail to follow suit and have his portrait hung in governmental offices and, remarkably, at the Sublime Porte as well.<sup>22</sup> The following anecdote recounted by a well-informed journalist demonstrates the degree to which the new visibility of the sultan changed his relationship to the people residing in places farther from the throne city, who otherwise would never have been able to even imagine what the sultan actually looked like:

“A governor from Salonika obtained by chance a portrait of Sultan Abdülaziz in the first years of his reign. He then travelled with his princely retinue to every city, every small corner or village in his province, summoned the notables, had them kiss the sultan's likeness, and made a scribe record the people who did so. After returning to his governmental residence, he submitted the list of names, along with a detailed report, to Istanbul. The actual clerk who was charged with this task himself related this incident to me.”<sup>23</sup>

19 *The Times* (London) 28947 (21 May 1877), 6.

20 H. Karateke, “Einige Bemerkungen zu den osmanischen Insignia Imperialia – insbesondere des 19. Jahrhunderts”, in *Scripta Ottomanica et Res Altaicae. Festschrift für Barbara Kellner-Heinkele zu ihrem 60. Geburtstag*, ed. I. Hauenschild (Wiesbaden, 2002), 195–208.

21 E. Eldem, *Pride and Privilege. A History of Ottoman Orders, Medals and Decorations* (Istanbul, 2004), 126.

22 M. Memduh, *Mir'at-ı şu'unat* (Izmir, 1910), 146–147.

23 My free translation from [A. D. Mordtmann], *Stambul und das moderne Türken-thum*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1877–1878), 25.

### 3. An International Audience

Thanks to the spread of printed media, monarchs became much better informed about the world of their counterparts in other lands. This awareness and interconnectedness was instrumental in shaping the conception of the ideal modern ruler. The following account illustrates the possible means by which an Ottoman sultan's idea of a modern monarch could have been influenced. A Viennese doctor, Sigmund Spitzer, who spent time in Abdülmecid's palace as chief physician from 1845 to 1850, kept a diary during his tenure at the palace. A selection from this journal, which apparently was not meant to be published, was edited and published after both the sultan and the physician had passed away. Spitzer reported that Abdülmecid, a passionate follower of the highly popular French magazines of the time such as *L'Illustration* (first issue 1843), once told him, pointing to a glamorous gravure of Isabella II, the Queen of Spain, that he preferred the garments of European women to those of his own female relatives, and that the relationship between European men and women seemed much more enviable to him.<sup>24</sup> The complete veracity of Spitzer's account may be questioned, but we do know from other sources as well that the sultan was well-informed of the trans-cultural images, social environments, and monarchical ideals pertaining to other sovereigns of the world.

The new concepts of what a good ruler ought to be like were dominated by European standards and imagery, and the Ottoman state, which chose to be part of that world-system, was in no way exempt from its requirements. In the same way that the ideals of democracy are dominating the political discourse of our own day – and almost no ruler can afford to avoid the promotion of democracy in one form or another – the rulers of the nineteenth century were under constant pressure to meet the expectations of their times. The Ottoman state and the sultan rapidly adapted to the prevailing mid-nineteenth-century political symbolism and imagery. Sultan Abdülmecid accepted, for the first time, a *Légion d'honneur* offered to him by Napoleon III after the Crimean War in 1855. Selim Deringil's studies demonstrate how the Ottoman dynasty kept up with the imagery and ideals of the modern monarchy in the last decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup>

24 S. Spitzer, "Am Hofe Sultan Abdul Medjid's", *Deutsche Rundschau* 99, ed. Th. Gomperz (1899), 115–138, 124.

25 S. Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains. Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire 1876–1909* (London–New York, 1998); see also idem, "Abdülhamid dönemi Osmanlı imparatorluğu'nda simgesel ve törensel doku: 'Görünmeden görünmek'", *Toplum ve Bilim* 62 (1993), 34–55; idem, "II. Abdülhamid döneminde Osmanlı dış ilişkilerinde 'imaj' saptantısı", in *Sultan II. Abdülhamid ve devri semineri 27–29 Mayıs 1992 – Bildiriler* (Istanbul, 1994), 149–163; idem, "The Invention of Tradition as Public

Furthermore, the ideal modern monarch was to be known as a personage who was steeped in the all-important French culture (preferably spoke the language himself), well-versed in Western classical music (preferably composed pieces himself), had an interest in theatre (preferably owned a theatre-house at his palace and had theatre troops stage plays for him), and so on and so forth. A British author by the name of Adrian Gilson compiled the biographies of two monarchs of the mid-nineteenth century from – as the author puts it – “the eastern extremities of Europe,” Tsar Nicholas I and sultan Abdülmecid, in a book published in 1853. The section on the Sultan begins with the headings “Abdul Medjid’s Love of Literature” and “His Patronage of the French Drama.” The text continues as follows:

“It is not alone from political motives that Abdul Medjid favours the development of civilization; he understands it and loves it. He shows, above all, a great liking for the men and institutions of France. He has made a careful study of the French language. The magnificent present which he offered to one of the greatest of French poets has not been forgotten – a homage from royalty to the literary genius of the country. All the French classical authors are familiar to him, and latterly he caused the *Malade Imaginaire* and the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* to be played before him.”<sup>26</sup>

The European audience was also very much interested in the status of non-Muslims living under Ottoman rule. That the sultan should treat all his subjects equally and should not differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims was, in accordance with the imperial edict of the *Tanzimat*, one of the commitments expected of him. Take the French poet and writer Alphonse de Lamartine, who in his *History of Turkey* – a book, published during the years of the Crimean War, which secured him favour in the eyes of the sultan as well as some financial remuneration – promoted the issue with a paragraph that he claimed was a quotation from Abdülmecid’s own speech:

“To make the political, civil, and religious conditions so equal between Mussulmen and Christians of every denomination throughout the empire, that there no longer would be under the laws of the Sultan but one and the same people under different races and religions. In a word, to nationalize all the fragments of nations that cover the soil of Turkey by so much impartiality, amenity, equality and toleration, that each of these populations should find its honour, its conscience, its security, interested in concurring towards the maintenance of the empire in a species of monarchical confederation under the auspices of the Sultan.”<sup>27</sup>

Image in the Late Ottoman Empire 1808 to 1908”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35 (1993) 1, 1–27.

26 A. Gilson, *The Czar and the Sultan; or, Nicholas and Abdul Medjid: Their Private Lives and Public Actions. To Which is Added, The Turks in Europe: Their Rise and Decadence*, by Francis Bouvet (London, 1853), 84.

27 A. de Lamartine, *History of Turkey* (New York, 1855), 18 [Original French: *Histoire de la Turquie* (Paris, 1854)].

Other themes that recurred in the writings of popular European authors further elucidate desirable aspects of the ruler of a country that was known to be modernizing. The sultans after the 1840s were also frequently praised for not having their subjects executed without due legal process.<sup>28</sup> The sultan's powers in this area were indeed curtailed by the *Tanzimat firman* of 1839, which clearly represented a new interpretation of the sovereign's authority. What is striking, however, is that the views regarding this practice of arbitrary executions changed in the following 75 years so profoundly that, by the 1910s, Mehmed V would completely dissociate himself from any similar exercise of authority, to the extent that he showed reluctance to visit his grandfather's tomb on the grounds that Mahmud II had been a cruel ruler who had decimated the Janissary corps in a bloody clash. Mehmed V's condemnation of his grandfather's policies or Abdülhamid II's attitude when he declared, while in exile in Salonika, that the Ottomans, alluding to his forefathers, had not been able to progress because they had wasted their valuable time on warriorship (*cengaverlik*)<sup>29</sup> should not necessarily be viewed as the appropriation of a form of orientalist discourse, but rather as a result of a determined will to be part of a joint civilization project.

The increased accessibility of the sultan resulted in a bulk of memoirs and travel literature in which the authors recounted their personal experiences with the sultan. Of course, an element of orientalism was still prevalent, but now the sultan was no longer a *completely* imagined character conjured up at the writing desk. Abdülhamid II, who ruled for more than thirty years from 1876, had a library that contained many of the accounts from travellers who had an audience with him and wrote about their experiences. The sultan was clearly working on the image of a modern, civilized monarch with his distinctly courteous manner towards foreign guests during audiences, and made it a point to show them the 'fancy and modern' parts of his palace. He was even able to obtain feedback through their published writings. Drawings and pictures of some of the rooms at Yıldız Palace, which looked no different than the chambers of Versailles, would also adorn the pages of popular illustrated magazines around this time.

Giving permission to foreign private individuals for a visit to the Topkapı Palace, however, was a practice that started as early as Mahmud II's reign. Obviously, the sultan himself did not meet with the guests; he was spending most of his time at either the Beşiktaş or the Beylerbeyi mansion at this time

28 See for example the reference to "Abdülmeçid's forbidding the execution of converts from Islam" in the footnote of an otherwise irrelevant book: Ahmed ibn Hemdem the Ketkhoda, called Sohailee, *Turkish Evening Entertainments. The Wonders of Remarkable Incidents and the Rarities of Anecdotes*, trans. from the Turkish by J. P. Brown (New York, 1850), 263.

29 Z. Shakir, *Sultan Hamid'in son günleri* (Istanbul, 1943), 53.

anyway. But, the fact that such a visit was now possible – and actually so popular that some sight-seeing guides of the early 1850s would even list the Topkapı palace as a tourist attraction<sup>30</sup> – is quite telling. Access was only possible with a *firman* obtained through an official application made to the Sublime Porte by the tourists' embassies. While the guests had to pay a fee for the *firman*, obtaining the permission was apparently not all that difficult.<sup>31</sup> Making the palace accessible to tourists may be understood partly as an attempt to revise the long-standing fantastical myths held by the European imagination regarding this 'mysterious' location.

In one way or another, the Ottoman sultans were working to change the image of the 'terrible Turk' that had been so prevalent in Europe. The effort seems to be manifest especially with Sultan Abdülmecid who, ruling from 1839 to 1861 as a young and energetic man, was a true and bold embodiment of the modern ideals of rulership. One should not forget that participation in the European mode of modernization had not yet been widely perceived as an offensive enterprise at this point, and the Ottoman ruling elite were not yet that sceptical towards all things European.

#### 4. Conclusion

At a time when some present-day historians are attempting to rescue history writing from the dominant Eurocentric perspective of the past two centuries, this article may appear to have depicted the perceptions concerning an ideal sultan in the nineteenth century as unduly influenced by extensive European political and cultural pressure. I wonder, however, if undertaking such a revisionist historiography may pose the danger of unwittingly assuming an overly sceptical approach. Since we have become too cautious about imposing one dominant culture's views upon historiography, we may actually find ourselves becoming, and a-historically so, more sceptical towards that 'infamous source' of modernization than the Ottoman elite themselves

30 Services maritimes des messageries nationales, ed., *Les paquebots du Levant, guide des voyageurs des paquebots-poste de la Méditerranée* (Paris, 1853), 111, 122.

31 G. Zachariä, *Reise in den Orient in den Jahren 1837 und 1838 [...]* (Heidelberg, 1840), 285–286; Ch. White, *Three Years in Constantinople or, Domestic Manners of the Turks in 1844*, vol. 1 (London, 1845), 12 ff.; cf. É. Thouvenel, "Constantinople sous Abdul-Medjid", *Revue des deux mondes*, 4<sup>e</sup> série, 21 (1840), 68–89, 78; A. de Valon, "La Turquie sous Abdul-Medjid: Constantinople, le sultan, la société en 1845", *Revue des deux mondes* 22 (1845), 177–214, 204; A. Smith, *A Month at Constantinople* (London, 1850), 96: "... a speculating *valet-de-place* procures the ferman, and then goes about to the different hotels with a list, to which the tourists add their names. By this means the expense is lessened to a comparatively small sum, as a ferman admits any number of persons".

were. Clearly, a proper de-orientalization of nineteenth-century history would only be possible by reconstructing the mindset of the Ottomans. There is reason to believe that the Ottoman elite regarded the nineteenth-century modernization attempts as a step taken in the direction of a *common* universal civilization project. The concept of westernization had not yet taken on offensive connotations for non-Europeans, and hopes were high. Once the Ottomans politically, economically and (inevitably) culturally engaged themselves with the world-system, transformation in every aspect of life, including the shaping of the ideal qualities of an Ottoman ruler, was just a matter of time.

The 'universal civilization project' had a direct impact on the monarchies. With the rise of nationalism, among other things, empires were thrown into a state of desperate crisis in the nineteenth century. One of the items on the agenda of the corresponding rescue enterprises was to create a transformed modern monarchy that would rule these segregated nations through new lines of communication with them. While the project was primarily shaped and led by European monarchies, those attempts were embraced wholeheartedly by many sovereigns of the world. The fact that the appropriation of the ideals of a modern monarchy came so rapidly and easily to the Ottomans is one of the indications that they regarded it as a project in which they also had a hand. Of course, one might also argue that it is exactly the power and success of cultural imperialism that would cause its target to labour under the illusion that they themselves had conceived of the concept that was being imposed on them, so as to make the process less troublesome. However that encounter might be defined, we should be careful while formulating our post-Said, post-twentieth-century, and all-too-sceptical views on a reconstruction of the cultural relationship between Ottomans and Europeans.

This is not to argue that the sultans completely abandoned the traditional means of legitimizing their rule. While it was the primary aim of this article to demonstrate the new forms that the ideals concerning a monarch took on and how they manifested themselves in the context of different audiences; the ruler in question was, after all, the sultan of the Ottomans, and he further claimed to be the caliph of all Muslims. Undoubtedly, the overarching rhetoric of the ideal sultan, in essence, derived from the five-hundred-something years of the Ottoman ruling experience. On the other hand, it would be safe to assume that the expectations of his subjects were also evolving – either through a transformation of the definitions of older concepts or through the new *Zeitgeist* and the new expectations it brought. As the anecdote mentioned earlier in the article suggests, while it was perhaps quite unusual for Abdülhamid II to admit the common folk gathered at the gates of his palace into the imperial gardens, it was equally unusual for the common people to come to ask for something like that.

While religiosity and a religious rhetoric were still, as ever, a powerful factor in securing legitimacy, the fact that the sultan's personal religiosity ceased to play a role in the political ideology of the empire was in part because of the aforementioned demystification of the sultan's persona that occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The contrast is particularly evident in comparison with the political theory of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which had highly moralistic contours. Individuals may well have wished to see the sultan somewhat more or somewhat less religious, but notions such as the belief that the sultan's piety had ramifications for the historical course of events were no longer acceptable in political philosophy. The genre of advice literature, which was rooted in the Islamo-Persian governance traditions and had blossomed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, disappeared completely; it actually disappeared even earlier, although a parallel genre proposing pragmatic solutions to the problems of the government continued to exist. It is almost certain that the falling out of fashion of the all-too-sultan-centred political theory of previous centuries had to do with the new definitions and ideals that the sultan's office took on. Most significantly, the sultan's office became freer and freer of divine connotations in the formulations of political theory. Consequently, the centrality of the sultan's personage became possibly less crucial to Ottoman politics.