The Last Caliph and the Twilight of the House of Osman: A Comprehensive Analysis of Abdulmejid II and the Transition from Empire to Republic (1922–1924)

1. Introduction: The Paradox of the Interregnum

The period between November 1922 and March 1924 in the history of the late Ottoman Empire and the nascent Turkish Republic constitutes a unique historical interregnum—a time of dual sovereignty, ideological collision, and profound structural transformation. At the center of this vortex stood Abdulmejid II, a figure of tragic elegance and paradoxical significance. As the 37th Head of the Imperial House of Osman and the 101st Caliph in succession to Abu Bakr [1], Abdulmejid II was the protagonist in the final act of a dynasty that had ruled for six centuries. Yet, he was a ruler without a throne, a Commander of the Faithful stripped of his army, and a monarch in a state that was aggressively transitioning into a secular republic.

This report provides an exhaustive examination of this pivotal era, focusing equally on the biography of the man—an artist, intellectual, and reluctant politician—and the geopolitical entity he nominally headed. The "Empire" during the rule of Abdulmejid II was a phantom state, legally dissolved yet spiritually potent, existing in the shadow of the rising Grand National Assembly in Ankara. This analysis explores the friction between the "Republican Caliphate"—an experiment in separating spiritual and temporal authority—and the imperatives of the Turkish nation-state.

The narrative of Abdulmejid II is not merely a biographical footnote; it is the story of the incompatibility between the universalist claims of the Islamic Caliphate and the territorial definition of the modern nation-state. It is a study in the aesthetics of power, the brutality of political modernization, and the enduring legacy of a dynasty that ended not in blood, but in a train station at dawn.

2. The Prince in the Gilded Cage: Early Life and

Intellectual Formation (1868–1918)

To understand the conduct of Abdulmejid II during his brief and turbulent caliphate, one must examine the crucible of his early life. Born on May 29, 1868, at the Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul [2], he was the son of Sultan Abdulaziz and Hayranidil Kadın.[4] His upbringing coincided with the *Tanzimat* era, a period of intense Westernization and modernization within the Ottoman state, a duality that would come to define his own character and eventual political demise.

2.1 The Kafes System and the Psychology of Confinement

Following the established Ottoman custom of the late empire, Abdulmejid was subjected to the *kafes* (cage) system. While not the dungeon-like imprisonment of earlier centuries, this confinement meant that for the first forty years of his life, he was effectively a prisoner of state within the palace precincts.[3] He was barred from public political life and subjected to the strict surveillance of the reigning Sultans—first his uncle, then his brother, and primarily his cousin, the paranoid and autocratic Abdulhamid II.

This confinement had a profound psychological impact. It insulated the prince from the gritty, compromised realities of political administration and governance. While the empire bled territory in the Balkans and faced financial ruin under the Public Debt Administration, Abdulmejid existed in a hermetically sealed environment of high culture. His understanding of the state was theoretical, romantic, and deeply aesthetic.[3] He did not learn the art of the deal; he learned the art of the canvas. This detachment would later prove fatal when he attempted to navigate the ruthless politics of the Turkish War of Independence.

2.2 Education and the "Gentle Scholar"

Despite—or perhaps because of—his isolation, Abdulmejid cultivated a formidable intellect. He was tutored privately in the palace, mastering a curriculum that bridged the divide between East and West. He was fluent in French, the *lingua franca* of the European aristocracy, as well as German, Persian, and Arabic.[2]

His persona was that of a "gentle and scholarly man".[3] Unlike the austere and often dour image of traditional Ottoman monarchs, Abdulmejid fashioned himself as a European gentleman-prince. He was an avid collector of butterflies, an activity he pursued for the last twenty years of his life, signaling a patience and attention to detail that contrasted with the chaotic governance of the dying empire.[6]

2.3 The Shadow of Sultan Abdulaziz

The legacy of his father, Sultan Abdulaziz, loomed large over Abdulmejid's life. Abdulaziz was the first Ottoman Sultan to travel to Western Europe on a diplomatic mission (visiting London and Paris in 1867) and was a patron of the arts.[5] However, Abdulaziz was deposed in 1876 and died shortly thereafter under suspicious circumstances (officially suicide, though rumors of assassination persisted). This trauma deeply affected Abdulmejid, instilling in him a wariness of palace coups and a keen sense of the fragility of dynastic power. It also reinforced his commitment to his father's pro-Western cultural agenda, which he viewed as the only path to civilizational survival for the Ottomans.

3. The Artist-Prince: Cultural Patronage as Political Statement

One cannot analyze Abdulmejid II solely as a political figure; he was, by vocation and passion, a professional artist. In the history of Islamic leadership, he stands unique as a Caliph who was also an accomplished painter in the Western easel tradition. This was not a hobby; it was central to his identity and his conception of what a modern Caliphate could look like.

3.1 The Ottoman Artists' Society and Modernity

Abdulmejid served as the Chairman of the Ottoman Artists' Society (*Osmanlı Ressamlar Cemiyeti*), placing him at the vanguard of the Empire's cultural modernization.[6] He was the patron of the "Generation of 1914," a group of painters including Ibrahim Çallı and Namık İsmail, who introduced impressionism and other modern techniques to Turkish art.
His patronage was a form of "soft power." Even after the deposition of Abdulhamid II in 1908, which ostensibly reduced the power of the palace, Abdulmejid used his freedom to organize meetings of poets, painters, and intellectuals.[7] He sponsored the "Galatasaray Exhibitions," the premier art events of the era. Through these activities, he built a constituency among the Istanbul intelligentsia that was distinct from the political base of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP).

3.2 Analysis of Key Artistic Works

His paintings offer a window into his worldview—a synthesis of Ottoman tradition and French aestheticism.

Work	Description & Significance
Goethe in the Harem	Perhaps his most famous work. It depicts his wife reading the German poet Goethe in a harem setting. It is a powerful visual manifesto of his modernism: the harem is not a place of odalisques and indolence, but of intellectual engagement with high European culture.[5]
Fog	A landscape noted for its atmospheric depth and impressionistic technique, revealing his debt to the French Barbizon school.[5]
May Roses	An oil on canvas depicting a pale-skinned woman with a fan, challenging conservative social mores regarding the depiction of women. It signals a "creative revolution" and a break from traditional Islamic prohibitions on figurative art.[5]
Self Portrait (1943)	Painted in exile, showing the aged Caliph with a brush, reaffirming his identity as an artist even after the loss of his throne.[5]

3.3 Scientific Analysis and Technique

Recent scientific studies conducted by the Sakıp Sabancı Museum in collaboration with Sabancı University have shed light on his technical proficiency. Analysis of the pigment layers, texture, and canvas structure reveals a sophisticated understanding of European oil painting techniques.[6] He was not an amateur copying styles; he was a trained practitioner using the same materials and methods as his counterparts in Paris.

3.4 The Pierre Loti Connection

Abdulmejid was an "ardent Francophile" and maintained a close friendship with Pierre Loti, the French novelist and naval officer known for his romanticized defense of the Ottoman Empire.[5] Abdulmejid gifted Loti two framed paintings, which remain in the Pierre Loti Museum House in Rochefort today.[6] This relationship highlights Abdulmejid's strategy of using personal diplomacy with Western cultural figures to garner sympathy for the Ottoman cause, a strategy that would continue into his exile.

4. The Road to the Throne: The Crown Prince and the

War of Independence (1918–1922)

In July 1918, following the death of Mehmed V and the accession of Mehmed VI Vahideddin, Abdulmejid became the Crown Prince (*Veliahd*).[3] This elevation thrust him from the studio into the center of a geopolitical catastrophe.

4.1 The Collapse of the Empire

The Ottoman Empire ended World War I on the losing side. The Armistice of Mudros (October 1918) led to the occupation of Istanbul by Allied forces. The Treaty of Sèvres (1920) proposed the partition of the empire's heartland. During these dark years, the palace government of Mehmed VI was widely perceived as collaborating with the British occupiers to preserve the dynasty's position.

4.2 Abdulmejid's Secret Sympathies

Unlike the Sultan, Abdulmejid maintained a discreet distance from the collaborationist policies of the Damat Ferid Pasha government. He was known to be sympathetic to the Turkish National Movement organizing in Anatolia under Mustafa Kemal.[3]
While he could not openly rebel against the Sultan—the head of his family and his sovereign—Abdulmejid cultivated an image of patriotic dignity. He reportedly criticized the Treaty of Sèvres in private circles and maintained contacts with nationalist agents in Istanbul. This "good cop, bad cop" dynamic within the dynasty meant that when the Nationalists eventually triumphed, Abdulmejid was the only member of the House of Osman who retained any credibility in the eyes of the Ankara government.

5. The Great Rupture: The Abolition of the Sultanate (November 1922)

The victory of the Turkish National Movement in 1922 created a crisis of sovereignty. Turkey had two governments: the imperial government in occupied Istanbul and the Grand National Assembly (TBMM) in Ankara. The Allies invited both to the peace conference in Lausanne, a maneuver intended to divide the Turks. Mustafa Kemal responded with a decisive revolutionary stroke: the abolition of the Sultanate.

5.1 The Legal Separation of Powers

On November 1, 1922, the Grand National Assembly passed a historic decree. For the first time in Islamic history, the temporal power (*Sultanate*) was legally separated from the spiritual authority (*Caliphate*).[9] The Sultanate was abolished, ending six centuries of Ottoman rule. The rationale was explicitly populist: sovereignty belonged to the nation (represented by the Assembly), while the Caliphate was a supra-national institution belonging to the Ummah.

5.2 The Deposition of Vahideddin

Sultan Mehmed VI Vahideddin, now stripped of his temporal power and fearing for his life amid accusations of treason, fled Istanbul on November 17, 1922. He was smuggled out of the back door of the Dolmabahçe Palace and boarded the British battleship *HMS Malaya*.[9]
This flight was framed by the Ankara government as an abdication. The Assembly declared that Vahideddin had "deposed himself" by seeking the protection of a foreign power and leaving the abode of Islam.[9] A *fatwa* (religious decree) was issued to legitimize his removal, citing his inability to protect the interests of Muslims and his collaboration with enemies.[13]

5.3 The "Election" of a Caliph

With the throne vacant, the TBMM moved to fill the Caliphate, but on its own terms. On November 18-19, 1922, the Assembly held a vote to elect a new Caliph from among the princes of the House of Osman. This was an unprecedented event: a democratic parliament electing the Vicar of the Prophet.
The results of the vote were decisive:

- **Candidate:** Abdulmejid II
- **Votes in Favor:** 148
- **Total Deputies Present:** 162 [4]
- **Abstentions/Others:** 14

Abdulmejid was chosen not for his political acumen, but for his "gentle" reputation and his lack of direct involvement in the disastrous policies of the previous Sultan.[3]

6. The Republican Caliphate: Anatomy of an Anomaly (1922–1924)

The sixteen months of Abdulmejid II's caliphate represent a unique constitutional experiment. Turkey was effectively a republic (proclaimed officially in October 1923), yet it hosted a Caliph who commanded the spiritual allegiance of hundreds of millions of Muslims worldwide.

6.1 Defining the Role: *Halîfe-i Müslimîn*

The Ankara government imposed strict conditions on Abdulmejid's investiture. He was stripped of the title *Padishah*. He was forbidden from using the title *Emîrü'l-Mü'minîn* (Commander of the Faithful), as "command" implied political authority which now resided solely in the TBMM. Instead, he was designated *Halîfe-i Müslimîn* (Caliph of the Muslims).[4]
The investiture ceremony was stripped of its imperial pomp. There was no procession to the Tomb of Eyüp Sultan for the girding of the sword. Instead, the ceremony took place within the Topkapı Palace, and the new Caliph wore a simple frock coat rather than imperial robes, symbolizing his reduced status as a spiritual figurehead rather than a monarch.[4]

6.2 The Struggle for Protocol and Prestige

Despite the restrictions, Abdulmejid II struggled to accept his diminished role. Raised in the protocol of the imperial court, he found it difficult to act as a mere functionary of a republican parliament.
The Military Band Incident: Tensions flared early on when the Caliph requested the retention of a military band unit. The Ankara government, led by figures like Refet Bele, viewed this as an attempt to maintain the trappings of sovereignty. Abdulmejid was reportedly furious when the unit was transferred from Istanbul to Ankara, viewing it as a deliberate humiliation.[4]
The Friday Processions: Abdulmejid continued to hold elaborate *Selamlik* processions for Friday prayers. He would travel to mosques in Fatih or Ayasofya in imperial carriages, dressed in military uniforms, with crowds cheering him in the streets. To the radical republicans in Ankara, these scenes were terrifying. They looked less like religious observance and more like political rallies for a restoration of the monarchy. The popularity of the Caliph in Istanbul—a city that had always been skeptical of the Anatolian revolutionaries—was seen as a direct threat to the legitimacy of the Republic.[5]

6.3 Finances and the Budget Debates

The Caliphate possessed no independent source of revenue. The dynasty's vast properties had been placed under state supervision. Abdulmejid was entirely dependent on a stipend voted on by the Grand National Assembly.
This financial dependency was used as a weapon by the opposition. In budget debates, deputies would question why the impoverished Turkish state, recovering from a decade of war, should subsidize the lavish lifestyle of a "symbolic" figure.[4] Abdulmejid's requests for funds to maintain the palaces and the harem were met with scorn in the press.

6.4 The "Vatican Model" vs. Republican Reality

Some intellectuals and aides to Mustafa Kemal initially argued for a "Vatican Model." They suggested that a spiritual Caliphate, divested of political power, could serve as a powerful tool for Turkish soft power, uniting the world's Muslims under Turkish spiritual leadership much as the Pope united Catholics.[15]
However, Mustafa Kemal and the hardline secularists rejected this. They argued that in Islam, spiritual and temporal authority were historically fused. A "spiritual" Caliph was a theological contradiction that would inevitably seek to regain political power. As long as the institution existed, it would be a rallying point for reactionaries and a "Trojan horse" for foreign intervention.

7. The Geopolitics of Faith: The Khilafat Movement and the "Aga Khan Letter"

The fate of Abdulmejid II was sealed not only by domestic Turkish politics but by the complexities of international relations, specifically the involvement of Indian Muslims.

7.1 The Khilafat Movement

During the Turkish War of Independence, the Khilafat Movement in British India had been a crucial source of moral and financial support for the Turks. Indian Muslims pressured the British government to treat the Ottomans leniently, viewing the preservation of the Caliphate as a religious duty.[16]
However, after the victory, this support became a liability. The Indian Muslims viewed the Caliphate as a universal Islamic institution, whereas the Turkish Nationalists viewed it as a domestic Turkish institution subject to the will of the nation.

7.2 The Crisis of November 1923

The turning point came on November 24, 1923, when two prominent Indian Muslim leaders—the Aga Khan III (Imam of the Ismailis) and Syed Ameer Ali—sent a letter to İsmet İnönü, the Turkish Prime Minister.[16]
The Content: The signatories argued that the separation of the Caliphate from the Sultanate had increased its significance for Muslims generally. They begged the Turkish government to "place the Caliphate on a basis which would command the confidence and esteem of the Muslim nations," implying that the Caliph should be granted more autonomy and dignity.[19]

The Leak: Before the letter reached İnönü, it was leaked to the Istanbul press. Newspapers like *Tanin*, *Ikdam*, and *Tevhid-i Efkar* published it, causing a sensation.[20]
The Reaction: Ankara was furious. The Aga Khan was a known loyalist to the British Crown. Mustafa Kemal interpreted the letter not as a friendly intervention, but as a British plot to undermine the Turkish Republic using the Caliphate as a wedge.[16] The logic was clear: if the Caliphate allowed foreigners like the Aga Khan to dictate Turkish policy, then the Caliphate was incompatible with Turkish sovereignty.
The "Aga Khan Letter" incident provided the perfect pretext for the Kemalists. They could now argue that the Caliphate was a tool of foreign imperialism.

8. The Abolition: The End of 13 Centuries (March 3, 1924)

By early 1924, Mustafa Kemal had decided that the dual power structure could no longer endure. The Republic required a unified executive and a secular identity.

8.1 The Legislative Maneuver

On March 3, 1924, the Grand National Assembly convened for a session that would change the face of the Islamic world. The debate was triggered during budget negotiations, but quickly turned existential.
Sheikh Saffet Efendi, the deputy from Urfa, along with 53 other peers, submitted a legislative proposal demanding the abolition of the Caliphate, arguing that it was "not necessary anymore" and that the "Caliphate" was now inherent in the meaning and spirit of the Republic itself.[4]

8.2 The Law of Abolition

The Assembly passed *Law No. 431*, "On the Abolition of the Caliphate and the Expulsion of the Ottoman Dynasty." The key provisions were:

1. The Caliphate was abolished.
2. Abdulmejid II was deposed.
3. All members of the Ottoman dynasty (men, women, and children) were stripped of their citizenship and ordered to leave Turkey within days.
4. All imperial properties were confiscated by the state.[3]

This law was part of a "revolutionary package" passed the same day, which also abolished the Ministry of Sharia and Foundations and unified the educational system under secular state control, effectively ending the influence of religious scholars (ulema) on the state.

9. Into the Night: Exile and the European Years (1924–1944)

The execution of the decree was swift and brutal. The Ankara government feared that any delay might allow crowds to gather and defend the Caliph.

9.1 The Departure from Çatalca

On the night of March 3, the Governor of Istanbul and the Chief of Police arrived at Dolmabahçe Palace. Abdulmejid was informed that he had to leave immediately. Despite the shock, the family packed hurriedly. At 5:00 AM on March 4, 1924, Abdulmejid, his wives, his son Ömer Faruk, and his daughter Dürrüşehvar were driven in secret to the Çatalca train station, located far outside the city center, to avoid public demonstrations.[4]
It is noted in historical anecdotes that the station master at Çatalca, a Jewish citizen, opened the waiting room and treated the deposed family with great kindness, offering them tea while they waited for the Simplon Orient Express—a poignant moment of humanity in a harsh political eviction.[4]

9.2 Financial Destitution and the Nizam's Rescue

The family arrived in Switzerland, then moved to Nice, France. Their financial situation was catastrophic. The Turkish government had provided a one-time payment of only £1,000 and one-way passports.[21] The family had to sell their jewelry and personal heirlooms just to survive the first few months.
Rescue came from Hyderabad. Mir Osman Ali Khan, the Nizam of Hyderabad and reputedly the richest man in the world, issued a *Farman* granting Abdulmejid a monthly allowance of £300 (some sources suggest varying amounts or lump sums, but the support was substantial).[1] This financial lifeline allowed Abdulmejid to maintain a dignified, if modest, existence in Nice and later Paris.

9.3 Political Activity in Exile

Initially, Abdulmejid did not go quietly. From Switzerland, he issued a statement attacking Mustafa Kemal's government, calling it "irreligious" and urging Muslims to revive the Caliphate.[23] However, the Turkish government exerted diplomatic pressure on Switzerland, forcing him to tone down his rhetoric and eventually move to France, where he was kept under

surveillance but allowed to live peacefully.

9.4 Dynastic Alliances: The Hyderabad Marriages

In a bid to secure the future of the dynasty, Abdulmejid negotiated a significant alliance with the Nizam of Hyderabad. In 1931, in Nice, his daughter Princess Dürrüşehvar was married to Azam Jah, the Nizam's eldest son and heir. Simultaneously, Princess Niloufer (a great-granddaughter of Murad V) married the Nizam's second son, Moazzam Jah.[22]
This union was politically charged. It united the spiritual prestige of the Ottoman Caliphate with the immense material wealth of the Hyderabad state. There was widespread speculation—and British anxiety—that a son born of Dürrüşehvar and Azam Jah could eventually lay claim to the Caliphate, creating a new center of Islamic power in India.[25]

10. The Long Epilogue: Death and the Burial Crisis (1944–1954)

Abdulmejid II lived out his final years in Paris, residing at a house in the 16th arrondissement. He returned to his first loves: painting and prayer. He was a regular attendee at the Grand Mosque of Paris, where he prayed with the community, a humble figure who had once been the ultimate authority for that very community.[4]

10.1 Death in Paris

On August 23, 1944, as Allied forces were liberating Paris from Nazi occupation, Abdulmejid II died of a heart attack.[3] His death went largely unnoticed by a world engulfed in war.

10.2 The Struggle for Repatriation

The tragedy of Abdulmejid did not end with his death. His final wish was to be buried in Istanbul, alongside his ancestors. His daughter Dürrüşehvar petitioned the Turkish government repeatedly for permission to repatriate his body. However, President İsmet İnönü and the CHP government remained adamant: the laws of exile applied even to the dead. They feared that the Caliph’s tomb would become a shrine for monarchists and religious reactionaries.[4]

10.3 Ten Years in Limbo

For a decade, the embalmed body of the last Caliph remained in a storage room at the Grand Mosque of Paris.[26] It was a grotesque and humiliating limbo for a figure of his stature.
Finally, in 1954, the family realized that the Turkish door was closed. Princess Niloufer and Dürrüşehvar used their connections with Pakistani leaders (specifically Governor-General Ghulam Muhammad) to petition King Saud of Saudi Arabia.[24]

10.4 Burial in Medina

King Saud granted permission. The body was transported to Medina, the City of the Prophet. Abdulmejid II was laid to rest in the Jannat al-Baqi cemetery, the resting place of the Prophet's family and companions.[4] It was a fitting, if unintended, end: the last Caliph returned to the spiritual source of his office, far from the imperial capital he had lost.

11. Conclusion: The Legacy of the Last Caliph

The rule of Abdulmejid II (1922–1924) was a historical anomaly, a brief bridge between the Age of Empires and the Age of Nations. He was a man of high culture and gentle disposition, ill-suited for the brutal political knife-fight of the post-Ottoman transition.
His legacy is threefold:

1. **Cultural:** He proved that Ottoman identity could be seamlessly integrated with Western modernity, leaving behind a corpus of art that challenges the stereotype of the "backward" Oriental despot.
2. **Political:** His deposition marked the definitive end of Pan-Islamism as a state policy for Turkey. By abolishing the Caliphate, the Turkish Republic signaled that it prioritized national sovereignty over religious universalism.
3. **Religious:** The void left by the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 continues to resonate in the Islamic world. The "crisis of authority" in modern Sunni Islam can be traced directly back to that chaotic session in the Grand National Assembly and the train that departed Çatalca station.

Abdulmejid II was the last phantom of a 600-year-old dream. In his silent dignity, his refusal to incite civil war, and his dedication to art in the face of destitution, he provided the House of Osman with a finale that was tragic, but undeniably honorable.

Chronological Data Table

Date	Event	Context/Impact

May 29, 1868	Birth of Abdulmejid II	Born at Dolmabahçe Palace to Sultan Abdulaziz.
July 4, 1918	Becomes Crown Prince	Accession of Mehmed VI Vahideddin.
Nov 1, 1922	Abolition of Sultanate	TBMM separates Sultanate and Caliphate.
Nov 17, 1922	Flight of Vahideddin	Mehmed VI leaves on *HMS Malaya*.
Nov 19, 1922	Election as Caliph	Elected by TBMM (148/162 votes).
Nov 24, 1923	Aga Khan Letter	Letter to İnönü leaks, triggering crisis.
Mar 3, 1924	Abolition of Caliphate	Law No. 431 passed; dynasty exiled.
Mar 4, 1924	Exile	Departure from Çatalca station to Switzerland.
Aug 23, 1944	Death	Dies of heart attack in Paris.
1954	Burial	Buried in Medina after 10 years in Paris Mosque.

Key Figures Directory

Name	**Role**	**Relationship to Abdulmejid II**
Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk)	President of Republic	The architect of his deposition and the abolition.
Pierre Loti	French Novelist	Personal friend and recipient of his paintings.
Nizam of Hyderabad	Indian Ruler	Financial savior and father-in-law to his daughter.
Refet Bele	Nationalist General	Primary antagonist in Istanbul protocol disputes.
Dürrüşehvar Sultan	Daughter	Kept his memory alive; married into Hyderabad royalty.
Sheikh Saffet Efendi	MP from Urfa	Proposed the law to abolish the Caliphate.

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