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The Attitude of the Ottoman State Towards the French Campaign on Egypt and Algeria: A Comparative Study

Abstract

This study examines the French campaigns on Egypt and Algeria within the broader context of European colonial expansion, which was not exclusive to France but represented a wider Western imperial drive of the era. As Egypt and Algeria were among the provinces affiliated with the Ottoman Empire, the campaigns elicited direct condemnation from the Porte, despite French attempts—on both occasions—to present them as actions unrelated to Ottoman sovereignty and justified by local circumstances. The Ottoman State rejected these arguments, recognizing them as diplomatic tools designed to legitimize French intervention and secure Ottoman neutrality.Despite the differences in timing, geopolitical conditions, and regional environments, the Ottoman Empire ultimately adopted positions toward both campaigns and mobilized the means available at the time in an effort to regain its authority over these territories. Through a comparative approach, this study aims to reveal the variations in Ottoman responses to the two invasions, the motivations behind them, and the broader implications of French expansion for the empire's declining power and territorial integrity.

Keywords: *Ottoman Empire, Egypt, Algeria, French Campaign, Comparative Study.*

Osmanlı Devleti'nin Mısır ve Cezayir'e Yönelik Fransız Seferlerine Tutumu: Karşılaştırmalı Bir İnceleme

Öz

Bu çalışma, Mısır ve Cezayir'e yönelik Fransız seferlerini, dönemin yalnızca Fransa'ya özgü olmayan, daha geniş çaplı Avrupa sömürgeci genişlemesinin bağlamı içerisinde ele almaktadır. Mısır ve Cezayir'in Osmanlı Devleti'ne bağlı eyaletler olması, söz konusu seferlerin Babıâli tarafından doğrudan kınanmasına yol açmış; buna karşın Fransa her iki durumda da saldırının Osmanlı egemenliğine karşı olmadığı ve yerel koşullara dayalı gerekçelere sahip bulunduğu iddiasıyla İstanbul'u ikna etmeye çalışmıştır. Osmanlı Devleti, bu iddiaların Fransız müdahalesini meşrulaştırmayı ve Osmanlı'nın tarafsızlığını güvence altına almayı amaçlayan diplomatik araçlar olduğunu görerek reddetmiştir. Zamanlama, jeopolitik şartlar ve bölgesel dinamikler arasındaki farklılıklara rağmen Osmanlı Devleti her iki sefer karşısında da bir tutum benimsemiş ve elindeki imkânları seferber ederek bu topraklar üzerindeki otoritesini geri kazanmaya çalışmıştır.

Karşılaştırmalı bir yaklaşımla yürütülen bu çalışma, Osmanlı Devleti'nin iki işgale verdiği tepkiler arasındaki farklılıkları, bunların ardındaki motivasyonları ve Fransız yayılmacılığının imparatorluğun zayıflayan gücü ile toprak bütünlüğü üzerindeki sonuçlarını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Osmanlı Devleti, Mısır, Cezayir,Fransız Seferi, Karşılaştırmalı Çalışma.*

Introduction

The Ottoman Empire's stance toward the French campaigns against Egypt and Algeria was shaped by a combination of internal dynamics, external pressures, and the broader European context. During both invasions, the Empire initially adopted a position of cautious observation, following developments from a distance while awaiting favorable conditions that might compel or enable it to respond more decisively. Despite this similar starting point, its reactions in the two cases diverged significantly. In Egypt, once the situation demanded action, the Ottoman government took a clear position and declared war on France without hesitation. Conversely, in Algeria, Ottoman involvement was limited to weak and largely symbolic diplomatic gestures aimed at mediating or containing the crisis rather than engaging militarily. This contrast may be attributed to differences in the geopolitical environment. In the Egyptian campaign, the Empire received external support and found allies willing to cooperate militarily against French advancement. In Algeria, however, it faced the situation alone, lacking international backing, which weakened its response and ultimately confined it to minimal intervention. The significance of this study is multifaceted. It contributes to historical clarity by situating the French campaigns in Egypt and Algeria within the broader context of European colonial expansion and the progressive weakening of the Ottoman political system. By doing so, it challenges conventional narratives that portray the Empire as merely passive, instead highlighting its strategic decision-making and the active—albeit constrained—attempts to defend imperial sovereignty. Through a comparative analysis of the Egyptian and Algerian cases, the research further illuminates how shifting regional and global power structures during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries influenced colonial encounters, resistance, and the emergence of new geopolitical realities. Additionally, this study interrogates French colonial discourse and propaganda, evaluating the role of diplomatic justification and its real impact on Ottoman policy. Ultimately, it offers an analytical framework for understanding how declining empires confront existential threats under dynamic international conditions, a topic that holds persistent relevance for both historical scholarship and contemporary global studies.

The research problem centers on the paradoxical divergence in the Ottoman Empire's responses to two comparable French colonial campaigns: the invasion of Egypt in 1798 and the invasion of Algeria in 1830. Although both provinces were under Ottoman sovereignty and France justified its actions in similar terms while encouraging Ottoman neutrality, the Empire

declared formal war in the Egyptian case but limited itself to weak diplomatic protest in Algeria. The core issue lies in explaining this discrepancy by examining the relationship between the Empire's internal conditions, the geopolitical environment of Europe, and the availability—or absence—of supportive external alliances.

The study hypothesizes that the contrasting Ottoman responses were shaped not primarily by French diplomatic rhetoric, but by the presence or absence of decisive European military alliances. In the Egyptian campaign, coordination with European powers—particularly Britain—provided the necessary military support and incentive to confront France directly and ultimately expel it from the region. In contrast, during the Algerian campaign, the Empire faced increasing internal fragility and found no major European ally willing to intervene. The tacit acceptance of French expansion within the prevailing discourse of the "Sick Man of Europe" further constrained Ottoman action, leading to a passive and largely ineffective diplomatic stance.

Methodologically, this research adopts a comparative historical analysis. It systematically examines primary sources such as Ottoman state documents, French diplomatic correspondence, and international treaties, alongside relevant secondary academic literature. A comparative framework is constructed in which the two campaigns are evaluated across several variables: the Empire's internal capacity, the European geopolitical environment, the availability of alliances, local resistance, and French strategic justification. Through process tracing, the sequence of decisions and events in each case is analyzed to identify causal mechanisms that shaped the Empire's differing responses. Finally, the findings are contextualized within broader patterns of European imperial rivalry and Ottoman decline to produce a comprehensive and nuanced interpretation.

The Ottoman Stance Towards the French Campaign Against Egypt

The Ottoman Empire maintained amicable relations with France even during the rule of the French Directory. Sultan Selim III formally recognized the French Republic in 1794, despite objections from several European powers. His decision was influenced partly by admiration for the ideals of the French Revolution and the strength of the French military, which led to the recruitment of French officers to train the Ottoman army—cooperation that continued even as France prepared its Egyptian expedition (Kaddoura, 1975).

Nevertheless, France launched its campaign without notifying the Ottoman court, fully aware of Egypt's strategic importance as a key province in the eastern Mediterranean and a central hub of international trade (Kaddoura, 1975). For this reason, the Directory government sought to construct diplomatic justifications to assure the Sultan that the expedition targeted the

Mamluks rather than the Ottoman State itself. Similarly, when planning the Algerian expedition, France attempted to present the Regency of Algiers as rebellious towards the Sultan in hopes of obtaining authorization for the invasion—but failed to secure such approval. These efforts were primarily intended to prevent an Ottoman response and preserve French interests in both regions.

During the Egyptian campaign, France relied heavily on its diplomatic representation in Istanbul. Foreign Minister Talleyrand, confident in the success of the operation, reassured the Directory that opposition would be minimal, writing that *"the Directory government should fear nothing, as there will be no opposition to our taking possession of Egypt"* (Laissus, 1998, p. 134). He initially expressed willingness to travel to Istanbul to defend the plan but later withdrew. In response, the government appointed the former ambassador Descorches to persuade the Sultan that the operation was directed only against the Mamluks. His mission, however, became unnecessary when news arrived that the Ottoman Empire had already declared war, leading to the cancellation of the embassy (Laissus, 1998). At first, the Ottoman State refrained from a decisive position regarding the invasion and hesitated to sever diplomatic relations with France. England and Russia exerted pressure through their ambassadors to push the Sultan towards war, especially after Alexandria fell into French hands. Selim III summoned the French chargé d'affaires to provide clarification, but he denied knowledge of the campaign.

The decisive turning point was the Battle of Abukir, in which Admiral Nelson destroyed the French fleet, leaving only four ships to escape to Malta in August 1798 (Battesti, 1998, p. 93). The loss severed communication between Egypt and France, convincing the Sultan that conditions were favorable for military action. Britain and Russia subsequently pledged military assistance, strengthening the Ottoman decision to declare war (Juchereau, n.d.).

Consequently, the Empire declared war one month after Abukir, in September 1798. This contradicted Napoleon's claim that his mission was to liberate Egypt from the Mamluks on behalf of the Sultan. Twelve days later, Selim III issued a manifesto explaining the reasons for war. In it he stated:

"After the news of the campaign against Egypt arrived, we summoned the French chargé d'affaires, Ruffin, to provide explanations, but he answered and said he knew nothing… we requested Said Ali Efendi to seek clarification in Paris, yet Talleyrand assured him that no campaign was headed towards Egypt; indeed, he claimed the fleet was bound for Malta… therefore, the Ottoman State had no choice but to take up arms against those who invaded its provinces" (Omar, 1975, p. 113).

Subsequently, the French consul and his staff were detained, their assets confiscated, and firmans were dispatched across Ottoman provinces ordering the imprisonment of all French nationals and the declaration of war (Omar, 1975). Even after hostilities began, Napoleon attempted to convince the Sultan to reverse the declaration. On November 9, 1798, he sent letters to the ambassador in Istanbul, including messages addressed to Grand Vizier Yusuf Pasha, emphasizing the historical friendship between the two states and urging reconsideration. As no reply was received, Napoleon dispatched Beauchamp alongside Ottoman officials in Alexandria to deliver messages and negotiate the release of French prisoners. He also instructed Beauchamp to warn the Porte of British, Russian, and Austrian ambitions to divide Ottoman territories (Hasna, 2006). However, Beauchamp never reached Istanbul, as he was intercepted by the British on the orders of Selim III, who had by then secured alliances with European powers and fully committed to the war effort. This situation contrasts sharply with the Algerian campaign of 1830, during which Sultan Mahmud II stood isolated without allies willing to intervene.

The International Alliance Against France

Following the Ottoman declaration of war on France and the failure of French diplomatic attempts to maintain Ottoman neutrality, the Porte sought to secure international support by forming an alliance with powers opposed to France. Both England and Russia—through their representatives in Istanbul—expressed willingness to assist the Ottoman State in expelling French forces from Egypt.

The first formal agreement toward creating an anti-French coalition was concluded with Russia through negotiations between the Russian ambassador and the Reis Efendi in July 1798 (Omar, 1975). While discussions with the Ottomans were taking place, Russia was simultaneously negotiating with Britain to expand the alliance. The resulting treaty, signed on December 25, 1798, was structured as an eight-year defensive-offensive pact containing both public and secret clauses. The public clauses established that the Ottoman Empire and Russia would share the same allies and enemies throughout the duration of the agreement, while maintaining sovereignty over their respective territories, including Ottoman provinces such as Egypt. Thus, the treaty was framed as defensive in intent, aiming to preserve territorial integrity rather than initiate armed conflict.

The secret clauses, however, were more substantial. Russia committed to providing the Ottoman Empire with twelve warships, and if required, to reinforce it with between seventy-five and eighty thousand soldiers. In return, the Ottomans agreed—exceptionally—to allow Russian warships passage through the Straits (Alshanawi, 1948). After negotiations concluded,

Sultan Selim III and Tsar Paul I ratified the treaty. Ironically, it was Napoleon's invasion of Egypt that directly facilitated Russo-Ottoman rapprochement, despite Russia being historically one of the Empire's most persistent adversaries prior to Paul I's reign.

Russia did not limit its efforts to bilateral cooperation. It urged several European powers—including Britain, Prussia, and Austria—to join the coalition against France. Britain was the first to respond, entering the Russo-Ottoman alliance on January 5, 1799. The agreement affirmed:

"His Majesty the King of Britain, who is bound to the Emperor of Russia by the bonds of a close alliance, has now, in this alliance (concluded between Britain and the Ottoman State), joined the defensive alliance recently concluded between the Ottoman Sultan and the Tsar of Russia."

The Anglo-Ottoman treaty reaffirmed the public terms of the Russo-Ottoman pact, while adding new obligations. It required coordinated Anglo-Ottoman military operations to expel the French from Egypt, and the Sultan pledged to close all Ottoman ports to French commerce. Britain, in turn, committed the support of its navy, while the Ottomans assembled an army of approximately 100,000 soldiers.

The Kingdom of Naples joined the alliance shortly after, signing a treaty on January 21, 1799. Austria followed on January 24, 1799, entering the coalition after suffering significant losses in Italy. Prussia, however, declined to participate (Omar, 1975). In summary, the anti-French coalition consisted of the Ottoman Empire—defending its Egyptian province—alongside Russia, Britain, Naples, and Austria. Each member entered the alliance with distinct motives, yet collectively they formed a united front against French expansion. With the diplomatic and military structure of the alliance established, the question that emerges is how Egyptians themselves responded to Ottoman efforts to assist in the expulsion of the French.

The Echo of the Ottoman Stance in Egypt

Although Napoleon attempted to win the support of Egyptians—particularly the inhabitants of Cairo—through conciliatory measures such as participating in local festivities, attending the celebration of the Nile flood on 18 August 1798, and joining the Mawlid al-Nabi festivities on 24 August of the same year, even distributing money on the occasion, these actions did not achieve the desired impact. He also upheld the traditional practice of appointing an *Amir al-Hajj* during the pilgrimage season in an elaborate ceremony (Bernard, 1993). Despite such gestures, they were overshadowed by heavy taxation and other oppressive practices, which fueled resentment among the population rather than appeasing them.

The Egyptians waited only for an opportunity to express their anger. The Ottoman declaration of war against France in September 1798 provided precisely that opening, as it signaled to Egyptians that resistance would be religiously and politically legitimate. Accordingly, uprisings erupted in Cairo on 21 October 1798, reflecting popular support for the Ottoman position and loyalty to the seat of the Islamic Caliphate (Laissus, 1998). Napoleon's attempts to detach Egypt from the Ottoman sphere proved unsuccessful.

The Cairo uprising centered around Al-Azhar Mosque, led predominantly by its scholars, who transformed it into the headquarters of the revolt. The rebels initially achieved notable successes, pushing back French forces in several districts and even killing the governor, General Dupuy, during Napoleon's absence from the capital (Laissus, 1998). When news reached him, Napoleon returned swiftly to Cairo and ordered an assault on the Al-Azhar quarter. The district was bombarded, routes were blocked, and the rebels were ultimately besieged. The French then stormed Al-Azhar Mosque. Al-Jabarti provides a vivid account of the event, stating:

"Then those rams entered Al-Azhar Mosque, riding their horses. They entered through the main gate and exited through the second gate… They trampled through it with their shoes… tied their horses in its prayer niche and wreaked havoc… They tore books and Qur'ans, throwing them on the ground, trampling them with their feet and shoes" (Laissus, 1998, p. 137).

Due to French military superiority in equipment and numbers, the uprising was suppressed within three days. Retribution followed swiftly, with the execution of those involved, including scholars. In the end, Egyptians bore the full cost of the revolt—one driven by loyalty to the Ottoman center and rejection of foreign domination.

The Ottoman Empire learned of the outbreak of hostilities between Algeria and France on 2 August 1827 through a memorandum submitted by the French ambassador in Istanbul. In this note, France justified military action by referring to the insult made against the French consul in Algiers, stating that refusal of a formal apology made war inevitable. It further informed the Porte that Algerian coasts had already been blockaded and invoked Article XI of the 1740 treaty with the Ottoman Empire as legal basis for intervention.

Initially, the Ottomans adopted a passive stance, choosing not to intervene directly. This decision was taken in a council chaired by the Grand Vizier and attended by Kapudan-ı Derya Hüsrev Pasha, at a time when the Empire was already burdened by the Morea uprising, the destruction of its navy at Navarino in December 1827, and renewed conflict with Russia. Moreover, confidence persisted that Algeria could withstand France as it had in earlier confrontations. Thus, Istanbul limited itself to requesting information through the Mufti of

Algeria residing in Izmir, Khalil Efendi, directing him to report on the situation and motives of the conflict (Almajmueat 3190, n.d.).

Dey Hussein responded with an explanation of the causes of war and asked permission to recruit Janissaries from Izmir to reinforce his forces. The request was approved, and provincial authorities were instructed to facilitate volunteers travelling to Algeria (Almajmueat 3190, n.d.). With negotiations between France and Algiers failing and the Russo-Ottoman war ending with the Treaty of Adrianople (1829), the Porte reconsidered its position. Rather than military involvement, it sought a diplomatic settlement by dispatching Khalil Efendi to Algiers on an unofficial peace mission (Almajmueat 3190, n.d.). He was further instructed to urge neutrality in the concurrent Austrian–Moroccan dispute.

Khalil Efendi arrived in late November 1829 aboard the English vessel *Bloss*. He proposed sending an Algerian delegation to Paris to apologize for the Deval incident and the seizure of the ship *La Provence*, though Dey Hussein initially rejected the idea and threatened his life. With mediation by the British consul, he eventually allowed negotiations to proceed, permitting Khalil Efendi to meet La Bretonnière, commander of the French blockade. On 10 December 1829, the Dey's conditions were communicated, including refusal to rebuild La Calle fort, rejection of French monopoly on Annaba trade, payment for coral fishing rights, and maintenance of prior treaties (Almajmueat 3190, n.d.). Despite British support, La Bretonnière dismissed the proposals as repetitive, and Paris rejected them as unacceptable. Khalil Efendi received official notice of refusal on 31 January 1830 and left Algeria in June, having failed in his mission.

Meanwhile, in Istanbul, French ambassador Guilleminot secretly met with Ottoman Chief Scribe Pertev Efendi, proposing that the Empire launch a punitive expedition against the Regency of Algiers, led by Mehmed Ali of Egypt with French support. If refused, France warned it would proceed with military action independently. The Ottomans rejected the offer, insisting that no campaign should be launched against a province still acknowledging Ottoman sovereignty (Kuran, 1970, pp. 45–46).

Following this failure, the British consul Gordon proposed a mixed Ottoman–French commission to settle the conflict. Sultan Mahmud II approved and appointed Tahir Pasha to travel to Algiers in March 1830, though his departure was delayed by French hesitation to provide an accompanying official. Instead, a letter was attached for the French fleet commander, requesting cooperation (Shewitem, 1992, p. 120).

Tahir Pasha departed Istanbul on 16 April 1830 aboard *Nesim al-Zafar*, carrying both the French letter and a royal memorandum outlining his responsibilities. The instructions included

negotiation with the blockade commander, requesting a fully empowered French representative if talks stalled, warning Algerian elites of the dangers of war, and—if negotiations failed—reporting to the Sultan (Kuran, 1970, p. 55). However, he was denied entry to Algiers by French orders and was likewise refused landing rights in Tunis, whose Bey had been warned against aiding the Ottoman envoy. Consequently, he redirected to Toulon, where he attempted diplomatic engagement but received no response.

French Minister of War *de Ghaisnes* later admitted: *"When I learned of Tahar Pasha's travel, I issued an order to prevent his entry into Algeria… this measure removed one of the major obstacles facing the expedition"* (Grammont, 1973, p. 399). This confirms that French diplomacy deliberately obstructed Ottoman mediation.

Tahir Pasha then reported to Mahmud II, informing him of his detention in Toulon and warning of French troop movements heading to Algeria. Following the conquest of Algiers, Polignac sent a memorandum to Istanbul on 17–18 July 1830 outlining French demands. Ambassador Guilleminot, however, presented only sections emphasizing financial compensation and framed it as justification for retaining Algeria (Khatt-ı Hümayun, n.d.).

French proposals included nominal Ottoman suzerainty over Algeria but under a dual supervisory scheme limiting local power. Conditions required dismantling Algiers' defenses, prohibiting naval reconstruction, expulsion of Ottoman troops, and granting France control of Annaba and influence over Constantine. In exchange, France waived compensation claims, conditional upon the Ottomans assuming Algerian debt and damage costs. Both sides were to avoid territorial expansion without mutual approval.

The Porte was prepared to accept most terms except indemnities due to financial strain, but evidence indicates France intended permanent occupation. The Ottoman government later attempted to revive the issue after political change in France, but was bluntly told that the Empire no longer possessed rights over Algeria. In response, the Ottomans argued that French seizure of Algerian wealth was itself sufficient compensation and demanded restitution of sovereignty. Britain, however, unlike in Egypt, declined to support Ottoman claims and advised only submitting further memoranda, which went unanswered (Kuran, 1970).

Efforts were renewed in 1834, sending Mustafa Rashid Pasha to Paris and Namık Pasha to London to lobby diplomatically, though no progress ensued. Recognizing diplomatic failure, the Empire contemplated limited military intervention to restore Algeria and halt French expansion. Yet, England's refusal to assist—as it had in Egypt—prevented action. Istanbul instead attempted to aid Ahmed Bey of Constantine, though French threats to Tunis impeded supply routes (Bey, Khouja & Bouadarba, 1981).

Conclusion

From the comparison presented, it becomes evident that the Ottoman Empire's position toward the French campaigns in Egypt (1798–1801) and Algeria (1830) directly mirrored its fluctuating internal capacity and the shifting dynamics of the international environment. In the case of Egypt, the Empire succeeded—both diplomatically and militarily—in confronting France. This success was largely enabled by the formation of strategic alliances with key European powers such as Britain, Russia, and Austria, as well as the widespread Egyptian resistance that erupted in response to French occupation. These combined pressures facilitated the temporary restoration of Ottoman authority in Egypt before the emergence of Muhammad Ali and the evolution of his autonomous rule.

In contrast, the Algerian case unfolded under an entirely different historical climate. By 1830, the Ottoman Empire was depicted in European political discourse as the "sick man," struggling under the weight of administrative weakness and internal disturbance. Unlike in Egypt, no European power offered substantial backing against the French expedition; some even negotiated privately with France over potential divisions of Ottoman territories. Domestic instability deepened this vulnerability, particularly conflicts within North African provinces—such as Tunis—where political tensions obstructed crucial military support intended for Algeria. As a result, the Empire's assistance to Algeria remained largely symbolic and insufficient to halt French expansion.

Therefore, the comparative reading of both experiences reveals not merely a difference in outcome but a broader decline in the Empire's geopolitical agency. The contrast illustrates a transition from an international actor capable of mobilizing alliances and restoring imperial authority, to one increasingly constrained by external pressures and internal fragmentation. Ultimately, these events mark a turning point in Ottoman history, signaling the diminishing ability of the Empire to defend its frontiers and highlighting the accelerating shift in Mediterranean and global power structures between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

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