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The "Maghreb Caliphate" between Colonialism and Panislamism

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A. Introduction

The question of the Caliphate was central to both the Ottoman presence in the Middle East and North Africa, and the Arab nationalist challenge to this presence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During the First World War, the major elements of Caliphate politics involved the War itself, colonization of the Muslim world by the European powers, including Britain, France, Italy, Spain and Germany, and the Ottoman Empire's response to these developments. These three factors, which are also largely responsible for the formation of the modern Middle East, produced two particular challenges to the status quo surrounding the Caliphate: an attempt by France to devise a "*Maghreb* Caliphate" in North-west Africa, and an "Arab Caliphate" planned by Britain in the eastern Middle East, to which the Ottomans responded by asserting the existing Caliphate's legitimacy and authority in the Muslim world. Included among the pro-Ottoman actors were some of the leading *ulema* of the *Maghreb*, such as Sheikh Ismail Safayihi (1856-1918) and Sheikh Salih Sharif Tunusi (1869-1920) who worked for the Ottoman *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*. This paper analyzes the French project of the *Maghreb* Caliphate represented by King Yussuf of Morocco during World War I and its significance in terms of the Ottoman Caliphate.

B. European Imperialism and the Ottoman Caliphate

Starting from the 1870s, the greatest concern for the Ottoman loyalists in the periphery was the looming disintegration of the Muslim world as a result of European colonialism. For them the only way out of this crisis

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lay in the unification of the *ummah* under the leadership of the Ottoman Caliphate. They found a strong leader in the person of the Turkish Sultan Abdülhamid II, who constantly emphasized the significance of the Caliphate in his foreign policy during his long reign (1876-1909). A second element of his strategy through which he tried to unite Muslims around his leadership was the protection of the Holy Land in Arabia. Therefore, Sultan Abdülhamid placed special emphasis on the development of the *Hijaz* (southern Arabia where Mecca is located) in order to establish himself as the true Caliph of the Muslims and the guardian of the holy shrines in Mecca and Medina (which was one of the Caliph's most important prerogatives in history and theory). As less expensive and more efficient transportation (epitomized by the *Hijaz* railway that was completed between 1900 and 1908) facilitated the pilgrimage to the holy sites and greatly increased the number of pilgrims, the Holy Land also helped the Sultan legitimize his claim for the universal leadership of the Muslim world (Landau 1971: 134). He also used the railway and telegraph technology as instruments of his centralization policies to connect the Arab territories to the Caliphal center (İnalcık 1988: 75). Moreover, the availability of modern, advanced education and written information (in the form of newspapers, journals, pamphlets and books) fostered the intellectual development and political awareness of both the pilgrims and the general population. Thus, the idea (and policy) of the political and cultural unification of Muslims (*İttihad-ı İslam*) became an important topic of discussion in every corner of the Muslim world thanks to the impact of the media, education and transportation technologies, especially during the last quarter of the 19th century when the *Hajj* (the annual Muslim pilgrimage) became a political, as well as a religious, gathering (Karpat 2001: 244-45).

However, a radical change took place in British policy towards the Ottoman Empire in the late 1870s, especially after the Liberal Party under Gladstone's leadership came to power in 1880 (İnalcık 1988: 75). When Britain occupied Cyprus in 1878 and Egypt in 1882 the Ottomans began to see Britain as an aggressive enemy like Russia. This development led to further Ottoman emphasis on the Caliphate, which became the foundation of Sultan Abdülhamid's foreign policy. Sultan Abdülhamid was largely successful in his dual aim of manipulating the tensions among European powers and promoting Islamic unity through the Caliphate. By doing so, he not only kept his Empire out of a large-scale military conflict with

the imperialist powers but also mobilized Muslims as far away as India in the Caliphate's cause by successfully identifying the Ottoman and Muslim interests, especially drawing on such symbols of Islam as the holy shrines in the *Hijaz*. As Donald Smith (1974: 21) points out, "the fact that Muslims in India, thousands of miles from Constantinople, could be moved so profoundly by the threat to these symbols (i.e., the holy places and the Caliphate) and mobilized in such large numbers for militant anti-government activity, is a dramatic illustration of the potency of religion in the process of mass politicization."

The rise of the Caliph's political and ideological power and the increased political consciousness of the Muslim populations were alarming developments for European imperialists. In particular, Britain and France both began to see the Caliphate as the biggest threat to their colonial presence in the Muslim world in the last quarter of the 19th century. This concern was shared by the Dutch government: the Dutch expressed their concern to the British regarding the growing desire among Muslims for unification, which would be "harmful for all Christian states" (Özcan 1998: 52). The British and French foreign services sponsored the media (such as the *Punjab Times* and *Akhbar-i Am* in India and *al-Jazeera al-Misriyya* and *al-Qahira* newspapers in Egypt) in order to disseminate in their colonies the idea of the illegitimacy of the Ottoman Caliphate, which would also be asserted by some 'academic' studies done by Orientalists working for their governments (e.g. Toynbee 1927, Samné 1919). Moreover, faced with the possibility of resistance in Libya and the parts of Central Asia under their occupation, the Italian and Russian Foreign Services would later join the European imperialists in their propaganda to undermine the Ottoman Caliphate through their own scholar-officials (e.g. Nallino 1917, Barthold 1912). However, due to the sheer size of the Muslim population under its administration, it was Britain that was most concerned about the Caliphate, and particularly Sultan Abdülhamid II's policies in its support.

Like the European powers, the Unionists in Istanbul who dethroned Abdülhamid II in 1909 were unwilling to support the Caliph and his religious dignitary, the *Şeyhülislam*, in domestic politics. However, the Unionists were also aware of their significance in international politics, from which they tried to benefit when the occasion arose, by claiming that the Caliph and the *Şeyhülislam* had religious authority over the Muslim subjects of other governments. The CUP was able to insert several privileges for the

Ottoman religious leaders into the treaties they made with Austria (over Bosnia, in 1908), with Italy (over Libya in 1912), and with Bulgaria and Greece (in 1913) (see Arnold 1965: 177, 178; Nallino 1917: 282-83). The last attempt by the CUP to exploit the Caliph's ideological power occurred when the Turkish sultan published a *jihad fatwa* against the Allies during World War I in which he, as Caliph, called upon all Muslims to fight against the Allies.

The Great War and the Caliphate

Prior to World War I, which broke out on July 28th 1914, the Entente Powers (Britain, France and Russia) were afraid that the Ottoman Empire would side with Germany –and rightly so, because the German Kaiser Wilhelm II had developed close relations with both Abdülhamid II and the Unionists. The Allies were particularly concerned that as the leader of the Muslim world, the Caliph-Sultan Mehmed V could declare *jihad* (holy war) against them, which could pose a great danger for Britain, France and Russia (and Italy who joined them in 1915) in their colonies (Monroe 1963: 24ff). Germany and the Ottoman Empire signed a secret Treaty of Alliance on August 2nd 1914, by which the Germans aimed to benefit from the Caliph's prestige in the Muslim world (in order to prevent the Allies from consolidating the Western front with colonial troops by instigating revolts in Muslim colonies)[1] in return for military aid to the Ottomans (Fromkin 2001: 45-50; see also Trumpener 1968).

When Britain refused to deliver a warship (which the Ottomans had paid for) to the Ottoman government and instead added it to the British navy, the pro-German CUP government declared war against the Allies and attacked two Russian ports in the Black Sea on October 29th 1914. Two weeks later, the Caliph's *fatwa*, also signed by 29 members of the *ulema* including the current and former *Şeyhülislams*, declared a "Great *Jihad*." It stated that joining the war (on the Ottoman side) was a religious duty for Muslims, and that if a (Muslim) soldier attacked the army of the Caliph of Islam or of one of his allies, he would be punished in the afterlife.[2] The

1 In a top-secret telegraph to the Ottoman Grand Vizier Said Halim Pasha on August 5th 1914, Wilhelm II assured the Ottomans of a definite victory, and added: "The Caliphate's power is great enough to incite all the Muslims of the world to rise up [against the Allies]" (quoted in Satan 2008: 41).

2 The text of the *fatwa* was published in the official gazette *Takvim-i Vekayi*, November 23rd, 1330 [1914].

fatwa was also read out in mosques and disseminated all over the Muslim world. Meanwhile, the CUP started organizing various "revolutionary societies," initiated particularly by the War Minister Enver Pasha via the *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* (Ottoman Secret Service), in order to instigate uprisings in the Muslim regions occupied by the Allies (Stoddard 1963).

The Caliph's *fatwa* increased German expectations from their Muslim ally and was also embraced by the Ottoman loyalists who envisaged a unified Muslim *ummah* under the Caliph's banner. The declaration of *jihad* also led to the increase in the publications on the subject, particularly from a pro-Ottoman perspective, in North Africa. For example, the Tunisian activist-scholar Tunusi, who also had close relations with the *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*, wrote a pamphlet in Arabic entitled "The Truth about *Jihad*" (1915), which was immediately translated into German, French and Turkish, and distributed in Europe and the Middle East.

Though the *jihad fatwa* and the *Teşkilat*'s activities would remain largely ineffective, the Allies were alarmed by these developments. Thus, the Caliphate was once more a significant matter of discussion among Britain, France and Russia, which is particularly evident in the two famous secret treaties signed by the Allies during the War, the Treaty of Constantinople (April 1915) and the Sykes-Picot Agreement (May 1916). In these agreements, they partitioned the Middle East among themselves. The Allies also agreed that the Ottoman Caliphate should be destroyed; the French and the British, in particular, were interested in creating an 'Arab Caliphate' under their own control (Cleveland 2000: 159-60, Goldschmidt 2005: 213).[3]

C. French Colonialism and the "Maghreb Caliphate"

During the 19th and early 20th centuries France, Britain's greatest rival in colonialism, was also competing with Italy, Spain (and later Germany) in colonizing Africa. The French had come to control much of north-western Africa before World War I, though French colonialism in the region had started more than a century previously: Napoleon Bonaparte had invaded

3 To appeal to American, Russian and German Jewry, the British also promised the establishment of a Jewish settlement in Palestine with the famous Balfour Declaration in 1917. Britain and France later formalized their agreement in San Remo on April 25th, 1920 whereby France held the mandate over Syria and Lebanon, and Britain over Iraq and Palestine (Nevakivi 1969: 260).

Egypt for a short period (1798-1801), before being defeated by the Ottomans with British help; France then occupied Algeria in 1830 and Tunisia in 1881, after which it began to compete with Britain on the colonization of Egypt, and with Spain in Morocco. Confident that the Ottoman Empire would soon collapse, the British were willing to leave the French alone in western Africa providing they secured their own position in the east. Lord Cromer, then consul-general in Cairo, wrote in June 1903 that:

> The agony of these decadent Oriental States such as Turkey and Persia is prolonged owing to the dissension and rivalry amongst the possible heirs to the succession... I think it would be found in practice that if once the French succession were secured, the agony of Morocco would not be of long duration (quoted in Nevakivi 1969: 1).

In 1904, the French government signed what is known as the *Entente Cordiale* with the British, who had already occupied Egypt in 1882, thus giving a free hand to the French in Morocco and the British in Egypt. The same year, France reached a similar agreement with the Spanish, who had invaded the northern and western parts of Morocco and partitioned the country accordingly; and another one with Italy, that would soon colonize Libya. France also signed a treaty with Germany in 1911, which recognized German interests in North Africa and ended its opposition to the French colonization of Morocco. France and Spain renewed their agreement in 1912 by clearly defining their respective rights and spheres of influence in Morocco (*American Journal of International Law*, 1913: 357-59). Consequently, France took full control of the Moroccan government and much of its territory as well as Algeria and Tunisia.

Previously, all of North Africa -except for Tunisia and Morocco- as well as the Sudan had formally belonged to the Ottoman Empire. French colonial activities in the region ended the traditional friendly relations between the two empires in the last quarter of the 19th century. Until then, Ottoman modernization, especially in the military and educational fields, was essentially inspired by France (and French philosophy), and carried out by French military experts (see Chapter 2), but the occupation of Ottoman-Muslim territories in Africa led to the deterioration of relations between them and to the replacement of France by Germany as the main partner for the Ottomans –though Sultan Abdülhamid's foreign policy remained mostly neutral in the struggle between the European powers (Eraslan 1995). As the only strong Muslim state, the Ottoman Empire was an ideal

partner for the Germans, who cooperated with and helped the Ottomans particularly in military and economic modernization –and reaped the fruits of this cooperation in World War I. The impact of Germany's statist-nationalist model was even more apparent in the modernism of the Young Turks after Abdülhamid II (Karpat 2001: 264).

On the other hand, the main factor that delayed the colonization of the *Maghreb* (North-western Africa, including Libya) was the close cooperation between the Ottomans and the Sanusiyya, a politically-oriented religious order founded by Sayyid Muhammad ibn 'Ali al-Sanusi (1787-1860) and based in the *Maghreb*, against European imperialism during the last quarter of the 19th century:

> ... the Sanusi had acquired a pivotal role in the Ottoman strategy to defend North Africa and the Sahara against French and Italian advances and to protect the approaches to the Hijaz. Ottoman assistance helped the Sanusi to strengthen their social position in Libya and become the dominant political group there; the Sanusi, in turn, helped the caliph-sultan [Abdülhamid II] maintain his authority in North Africa and assure Istanbul's communication with Chad, Bornu and so on. This cooperation was based both on a mutual interest and a certain ideological Islamic affinity... (Karpat 2001: 264).

This cooperation continued even after Sultan Abdülhamid had been deposed by the Young Turks. The CUP's most powerful leader Enver Pasha (who was also the commander of Ottoman forces in Libya in 1912) and the Sanusi leader Ahmad al-Sharif were good friends; and over three hundred Sanusi officers were trained in Turkish military schools (Abun-Nasr 1987: 321-22).[4] The Sanusi were also active in Morocco and helped establish mutual relations between the Ottoman Caliphate and the (Shia) Sharifian dynasty (est. 1659) there. These efforts, however, were not very successful because Abdülhamid II wanted them to recognize him as their Caliph whereas the Moroccan sultans wanted to remain independent, which they failed to do as a result of the French invasion of 1904. Though the Young Turks sent officers to Morocco where they succeeded in organizing a resistance against the French and the Spanish armies before and during World War I, this cooperation was also limited (El-Moudden 1995$_a$).

4 The Sanusi, who fought against the Italians before and during World War I, also took control of Libya after independence, with Muhammad al-Sanusi's grandson Idris I becoming king in 1951; he was overthrown by a military coup led by Muammar al-Qaddafi in 1969.

The "Maghreb Caliphate"

The French protectorate in Morocco (1912-1956) established by the Treaty of Fez, preserved the position of the Sultan, Yussuf ibn Hassan (1912-1927), but left him with little authority, the real ruler of the country being the French resident-general, Marshal Hubert Lyautey (1912-1925), who initiated all royal decrees and nominated all high functionaries (Abun-Nasr 1987: 373). In addition to ruling the country and exploiting its natural resources, the French also tried to install a "Caliphate" in Morocco in order to establish ideological control of the Muslim populations in their colonies throughout the whole of Africa and the Middle East. They were aware that after Abdülhamid II the Ottoman Caliphate had weakened while, at the same time, they were concerned that the British would soon have their own puppet-caliph in Arabia (see below). Therefore, the French government sought an opportunity of installing a Caliph under their direct control. This opportunity was offered by World War I when the Ottoman Caliph's call for *jihad* largely failed and Sharif Hussein of Mecca, who would later declare himself Caliph, was preparing for independence with Britain's assistance. In this context, for France King Yussuf of Morocco stood out as the best candidate for Caliph, because the Sharifian ruling family (also known as Alaouite) had been claiming since the establishment of their dynasty in the mid-17th century that they were a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima.[5]

There is little information in historical sources on the "Moroccan Caliphate",[6] largely because this project was never accomplished. When, as we shall see below, alternative Arab caliphs were not recognized by the wider Muslim world and the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in Turkey in 1924 was followed by unsuccessful attempts to elect a new Caliph, France (and Britain) abandoned their caliphate projects. Nevertheless, they continued to try to create their own caliphates during World War I. In the *Maghreb*, the project was carried out by the French resident-general Lyautey and Foreign Minister Delcassé, who anticipated in early 1915 that

5 For an examination of Ottoman-Moroccan relations and the significance of the Caliphate for them during the 16th and 17th centuries, see El-Moudden (1995$_b$).

6 Many local rulers also bore the title of 'Caliph' in the *Maghrib*; but in the North African context it means Viceroy (or Deputy), and only refers to the Sultan's regional governors. In pre-colonial Morocco, it was used more particularly for the formal representatives of the Sultan in Marrakech, Fès and Meknès, the old "imperial" capitals.

the ongoing Battle of the Dardanelles between Britain and the Ottoman Empire would soon end in an Ottoman defeat and the invasion of Istanbul by the Allies, which would then put an end to the Ottoman Caliphate and pave the way for an alternative one. They knew that Britain was getting ready to nominate Sharif Hussein as Caliph, which they thought would be worse for France than the existing situation (Bayur 1983, III: 298).

Therefore, Marshal Lyautey suggested that it was in their best interests to install the Moroccan Sultan as the "Caliph of the West" (*Maghreb*) who would be the head of the Muslims in French colonies once the "Eastern Caliphate" (Istanbul) was no more. Aware of the difficulties involved in appointing a religious leader for the Muslims, the French justified their plan by claiming that religious problems would play a significant role in shaping the future of the Muslim countries, which required that there should be a "spiritual leadership" to solve their problems. They also reasoned that the future of the French Empire in North Africa was closely related to their degree of control over the (future) Caliphate. They thus planned to nominate as Caliph the Moroccan Sultan, who, they claimed, was already recognized as caliph in Algeria and Tunisia as well as in his own country (Bayur 1983, III: 297-301). Once this plan was sketched out, the idea of a Moroccan caliphate was actively propagated by the French media during the autumn of 1915 (see *e.g. Le Matin*, November 10th 1915).

Istanbul was apparently aware of this plan, as evidenced by the fact that some pro-Ottoman activist-intellectuals in North Africa, such as Abdulaziz Jawish (1876-1929) and Salih Sharif Tunusi (1869-1920), both of whom were Islamic scholars from Tunisia and had close ties to the CUP (being members of the *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*), immediately responded to the French propaganda by publishing articles and books reflecting the Ottoman point of view. Nevertheless, Istanbul was more concerned about the British plans to install an Arab caliph in the Holy Land of Islam than the French plans to install one in the *Maghreb,* which was largely out of Ottoman reach. Moreover, though the Ottomans initially considered it dangerous, one year later the French gave up on their *Maghreb* caliphate plans and made a deal with the British resulting in the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement signed in May 1916, which gave France control of Syria (see above) in return for giving Britain a free hand in the rest of the Arab world and in its plans for an Arab caliphate.

Conclusion

The aborted project of the "*Maghreb* caliphate" was part of a larger political and ideological struggle in an historical context that was shaped by the impact of European colonialism in the early 20th century and of World War I as well as the Ottoman Empire's response to these. Like the British project of creating an "Arab caliphate," the French project of installing the Moroccan King Yusuf as the "Western Caliph" presented a challenge to the authority of the Ottoman Caliph in the Muslim world. France (and Britain) sponsored the media in both Europe and the Middle East (including India) in order to disseminate their anti-Ottoman propaganda. In response, the Ottomans re-asserted the legitimacy and authority of the Ottoman Caliph over all Muslims.

The historical roots of this struggle go back to the last quarter of the 19th century. The Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909) emphasized the Caliphate's significance in his foreign policy and invested in the *Hijaz* to further the centralization of the Empire and establish himself as the supreme ruler of the Muslim world while at the same time preserving the balance of power between his Empire and the Europeans. The relative success of his policy alarmed the European powers, especially Britain and France, who had a large Muslim population in their colonies. With the Hamidian era coming to an end, the Caliphate's power and prestige declined. However, even the Young Turks, who had deposed Sultan Abdülhamid II and weakened the Caliphate in Istanbul, were aware of the Caliphate's significance in international politics. They thus tried to benefit from the Caliph's prestige (ideological power) among Muslims. To this end, they had the Caliph (Mehmed Reşad) declare *jihad* against the Entente powers during World War I. Also, the *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* (Ottoman secret service) arranged various activities in British and French colonies in order to muster the Muslims there in opposition to the Allies. Some North African activist-intellectuals, including particularly the three Tunisian scholars, Abdulaziz Jawish, Sheikh Ismail Safayihi and Salih Sharif Tunusi, participated in these activities. They also published books and articles in support of the Ottoman Caliphate against both Europeans and Arab nationalists. However, their political and intellectual efforts would not be of much help as the Empire lost the Great War and France and Britain had occupied the whole of the Middle East by the end of 1918.

In the wake of World War I, France was competing with Britain, Italy, Spain and (later) Germany over the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa. Before the start of the Great War, however, France made agreements with all of them (except Germany) and colonized portions of these Muslim lands. Though the Ottoman-Sanusi cooperation, which had started earlier during the Hamidian period, had delayed the colonization of the *Maghreb*, France was able by 1912 to invade Algeria and Morocco and partition the latter with Spain. The French colonial administration then planned to install the current Moroccan King Yusuf, over whom they had full control, as the Caliph in *Maghreb*. The French justified this plan by arguing that religion would be an important factor in shaping the future of the Muslims, and that they needed a 'spiritual authority' in that regard because the "Eastern Caliphate" (in Istanbul) was no longer effective. According to the plan, the Caliph would be the head of the Muslims in French colonies. Clearly, this project aimed to come up with an alternative to the (prospective) "Arab Caliph" (King Hussein of *Hijaz*) to be installed by the British as well as to the Ottoman Caliph. The French thus intended to counter-balance the British plans to have a spiritual Muslim leader under their control in the eastern parts of the Middle East. Though they later abandoned their plans due to a deal they made with the British, the French project of the "*Maghreb* Caliphate" indicates the Caliphate's significance in terms of the political struggle between the European colonialists and the Ottomans before and during World War I.

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