“TAKING BACK” THE CALIPHATE: SHARĪF HUSAYN IBN ‘ALĪ, MUSTAFA KEMAL AND THE OTTOMAN CALIPHATE

BY

JOSHUA TEITELBAUM

Tel Aviv

It has been established elsewhere that gaining the Caliphate for the Hāshimite family was a consuming interest for the Sharīf of Mecca, Husayn b. ‘Ali, and his son ‘Abdallāh. The desire to take the Caliphate played a cardinal role in his decision to revolt against the Ottomans. As Husayn would have it, he was revolting not to establish a kingdom in the Hijāz, and not simply a large Arab state, but to establish a replacement Islamic polity, in which the Arabs, led by the Hāshimites, would take their rightful place.

Bolstered by a position held by many Arab intellectuals and political leaders, namely, that the Caliphate should be held by Quraysh, that within Quraysh it should be held by the Prophet’s house, and that the ashraf of Mecca were the most qualified, Husayn sought British help. Through a series of British blunders, he was encouraged to believe that he had the backing of England for his project.

Husayn eventually claimed the Caliphate for himself in March

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1 See Joshua Teitelbaum, “Sharif Husayn ibn Ali and the Hashemite Vision of the Post-Ottoman Order: From Chieftaincy to Suzerainty,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 34 (January 1998), pp. 103-122. The primary sources used in the present article consist mostly of the al-Qibla newspaper and archival documents from the British Public Record Office, Kew. To the best of my knowledge, Turkish archival sources for the period under discussion are not available to researchers.


3 This has been widely discussed; see, for example, Kedourie, pp. 16-20.

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1924, when it was abolished by the Kemalist government. But this was only the final chapter in a fascinating episode: Husayn’s attempt to have the Ottoman family or the Turkish nationalists grant him the Caliphate, and what may have been nationalist exploration of the possibility of “exporting” that office. This is a story of a coalescing of interests of two former enemies, as they faced a common adversary, the British. But there were also several internal factors that moved Hāshimites and Kemalists to seek common cause.

The Turkish Nationalists, the Sultanate, and the Caliphate

In July 1918 Sultan Mehmet V died and was replaced by Vahdettin, who took the name Mehmet Vahdettin VI. On 30 October, his representatives signed the Armistice of Mudros which ended hostilities between the Entente and the Ottomans. The armistice was a full capitulation, including the occupation of the straits, the demobilization and disarmament of the Ottoman army, and permission for the victorious armies to occupy any place in the empire which threatened their security. Vahdettin was determined to appease the Entente in order to achieve a peace treaty favorable to Istanbul. His weltanschauung was that of the dynast, concerned for the position of the Ottoman family as the holder of the Caliphate and Istanbul as the seat of that institution. As such, he followed an anti-nationalist policy.⁴

In Anatolia, the nationalists, led by Mustafa Kemal Paşa (Atatürk), set about organizing resistance to the occupation of Turkey, and were ultimately responsible for the defeat of the Greeks, who had invaded Turkey in May 1919.

Although the Sultan-Caliph was known to be following a policy of appeasement, he still remained an important symbol of the glorious Ottoman past. In April 1920 the nationalist Grand National Assembly met in Ankara, with the purported aim of supporting the Sultan-Caliph. His reaction was to sentence Mustafa Kemal