

The Issue of the Khilafat and the Turkish Debates of 1924¹⁾

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Abstract

After having revisited the legacy of the last Ottoman khalifes, Abdulhamid II, Mehmed Rehad Vahdeddin and Abdulmajid, this article tries to answer the following question: why the suppression of the khilafat, which took place shortly after the abolition of the Ottoman Sultanate and which undeniably constituted a further step in the establishment of the Kemalist dictatorship, was so easy to carry out. Why, while other Kemalist “reforms”, such as the imposition of the Western-style hat, provoked massive contests throughout Anatolia, the abolition of the khilafat did not trigger a mass-reaction? Why the last defenders of the khilafat were some marginalized Westernised members of the intelligentsia and not the ulema or Islamist intellectuals? The answer to this complex question seems to quite simple: if the suppression of the khilafat required only a couple of days, the reason was that this more than millenary institution was a *de facto* anachronism in Turkey of 1924.

Keywords: Khilafat, Kemalism, Islam, Secularism, Turkey

Any debate on the issue of the khilafat in Turkey of today would sound odd, since almost no political or religious actor demands the re-establishment of this institution gone down in the history almost one century ago. In this regard the situation of Turkey of 2000's contrasts sharply with that of the 1960's -1990's. During these conflicted decades, some actors such as the Kaplanci group advocated for the restoration of the khilafat and many authors with a religious and/or Islamist sensibility, such as Mustafa Müftüoğlu, Kadir Misirli, Abdurrahman Dilipak or Sadik Albayrak, have opened a widely polemical debate on the conditions of the suppression of the Khilafat in 1924. Those authors have suggested that not only the Turkish secularism has been a forced one, but that the Kemalist historical discourse has been nothing more than synonymous of a “shameful-history-lying” (*yalan söyleyen tarih utansin*). According to them, the Kemalists have destroyed a glorious Ottoman past in order to westernize the country and have denied their own legacy of the 1919-1922 War of Independence during which they have widely used religious arguments and discourses in order to win popular support. They have also pointed out that the suppression of the khilafat was a decisive landmark in a highly coercive

process against the *ulema*, religious brotherhoods and more broadly speaking, against the believers. Whatever their ideological standpoint and their polemical ambitions might have been, these authors were to a large extent right in their empirical observations: the War of Independence headed by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) had indeed been conducted in the name of the liberation of the “imprisoned” Sultan-Khalife and the “turbaned moujahids” have effectively played a crucial role in the war-mobilization. There is also no doubt that Mustafa Kemal has used, throughout all historical stages of the war, a highly religious symbolism. Even in 1922, when he was strong enough to suppress the sultanate and threaten those who opposed this radical measure of beheading them, he still felt the necessity to promise to preserve the khilafat. According to him, thanks to the exercise of the national sovereignty by the nation (in fact, by himself), the khilafat could finally become a “genuinely Turkish” institution and serve its noble, i.e., national and de-politicized religious purposes. Ismet İnönü, regime’s *de facto* second man, has expressed a similar position.

The Legacy of the Past Caliphs

By opening the debate on the end of the khilafat, the dissident school that I mentioned above, did not ambition to re-establish the khilafat; it simply denounced and condemned the process of westernization imposed through use of coercion on the Muslim population. According to the main thinkers and historians of this school, the abolition of the khilafat was an act of capitulation to the Western powers and has long lastingly weakened both Turkishness and the Muslim *umma*. There is no need to discuss here these arguments in depth and to demonstrate that they are a part of a wider ideological construction. Regardless his or her opinion on these arguments, for a historian of today, however, the issue would be a totally different one: why the suppression of the khilafat, which undeniably constituted a further step in the establishment of the Kemalist dictatorship, was so easy to carry out. Why, while other Kemalist “reforms,” such as the imposition of the Western-style hat, provoked massive contests throughout Anatolia, the abolition of the khilafat did not trigger a mass-reaction? The answer I will be tempted to give to this complex question is simple: if the suppression of the khilafat required only a couple of days, the reason was that this more than millenary institution was a *de facto* anachronism in Turkey of 1924.

Since the conquest of Egypt (and the title of the caliph) by Selim I in 1516, *in fact*, the khilafat as an institution has been seldom used in order to legitimize the Ottoman power. Of course, there have been some exceptions contradicting this general rule. The institution of khilafat has been mobilized against the Shia Iran or against Russian or Western conquerors in Caucasia, Egypt or North Africa; but in the every-day life of the Ottoman domestic or foreign policies, the khilafat was simply one of the frameworks, and not the sole nor the most important one, within which the Ottomans sultans acted. And even as one of their frameworks, the

khilafat was not always “operational.” Throughout the 19th Century, the Muslims of Caucasus expected the “armies of the khilafat” which, actually, never were there when they needed against the Tsar’s well-equipped armies and Cossacks.

But what made the khilafat an anachronism was not only this historical legacy; the three last sultan-caliphs left a rather very negative balance-sheet of their rule and were widely hated by the westernized liberal or nationalist Ottoman or Turkish intelligentsia. The long khilafat of Abdulhamid II (1876-1909), which broke up with the legacy of the Tanzimat reforms (1839-1876) has been dominated by the Sultan-Khalife’s ambitions to realize an “Ottoman restoration.” In spite of its claim to the authenticity, however, this restoration was synonymous of importation of a model of an autocratic and absolutist “ancient régime” from Europe (cf. on this notion: Martin Malia’s work on Russia and the history of the world revolutions). During his very long rule, the Sultan has openly promoted a pan-islamist ideology and actively used the institution of khilafat as a source of legitimization of his absolute power. But the concrete outcomes of this pan-Islamism, which, by the way, had an openly negative and colonial vision of the Arab provinces of the Empire, were very modest. Sultan Hamid’s rule has been particularly marked by the massacres of the Armenians (1894-1896) and the establishment of the Kurdish Tribal cavalries, called Hamidiyye, in the Eastern provinces. It has been perceived as a repressive period which ended with the 1908 Young Turk pronunciamiento.

The successor of Sultan Abdulhamid, Mehmed Rechad (1909-1918), had a rather pale personality and was nothing more than a powerless instance of legitimization of single-party dictatorship of the Committee Union and Progress. To give a single evidence of this extreme weakness, I would recall here that as the head of the state he has been informed of the entry of the Ottoman Empire in the WWI only after the first hostilities against Russia decided unilaterally by the main leaders of Committee Union and Progress. The short rule of Mehmed Rechad has been marked by the proclamation of the Jihad in the wake of the Ottoman participation to the war alongside Germany and Austria, two non-Muslim countries, and the Armenian genocide of 1915. The Jihad that he has proclaimed and which has been maliciously labeled the “German jihad” by France and Great Britain has had almost no impact in the Muslim war. The Muslims in Russia, in India and the Arabs in North Africa did not rebel *en masse* against their colonial masters; and to aggravate further the isolation of the caliph, the Arab uprising of 1916, which has been widely supported, or even prepared by the British authorities, has almost totally annihilated the Ottoman presence in the Arab world. Thus, the khilafat was *de facto* condemned to limit itself to a narrowed Turkish-Kurdish territory.

The third caliph, Vahdeddin (1918-1922), ruled largely under the British occupation and had no space for an autonomous action in order to impose himself in the framework of this territory. That was under the official instructions of the khilafat and in the name of the caliph that some armed groups rebelled against the still weakly established authority of Mustafa Kemal, leader of the nationalist resistance. This dissident general has been condemned to death

in *abstentia* also in the name of the caliph. Even before his run from Istanbul on board a British ship, Vahdeddin was considered as the number One internal enemy of the Turkish nation by the Kemalist government. His extremely passive legacy could but weaken the moral authority of his successor, Abdulmajid.

Abdulmajid (1922-1924) found himself in a rather odd situation in the sense that he was the only caliph who did not have at the same time the title of sultan. He was also the only caliph in the history of Islam who acted under a republic which had monopolized not only the political power, but also the control of the entire religious establishment. As there was no historical precedent to this strange khilafat, no one had a clear idea of his prerogatives and field of competences. Thus, one can easily explain that when the Kemalist power decided to hasten the “revolutionary process” through the expulsion of Abdulmejid from Turkey, neither the caliph as a person nor the khilafat as an institution could defend themselves. They had neither enough moral authority nor internal dynamics to oppose to the Kemalist power. After all, Abdulmajid could, even after his expulsion from Turkey, still present himself as the legitimate caliph and ask for allegiance of the Muslims throughout the world. But as the head of a *de facto* dead institution, he had no vitality to formulate such a claim and almost no partisan to follow him.

Why the Kemalists decided, less than two years after the abrogation of the Sultanate, to abolish the khilafat and why did they acted suddenly in such a quick move? As Sadik Albayrak has rightly pointed out, one of the reasons was that the presence of the khilafat maintained Istanbul as the model of imperial city even after the end of the Empire and posed a symbolic challenge to the monopoly of Ankara as the new capital of the country. The second reason was that the Kemalist inner circle needed a deep-rooted but extremely weak “enemy” in order to “hasten the revolution” and eliminate any kind of internal opposition, which was indeed winning some strength in the country. The khilafat was the perfect enemy not because it was strong, but quite on the contrary, it was extremely weak and the Kemalist power knew perfectly that it would surrender without any resistance. And it also knew that its surrender would, inevitably, weaken all the opposition movements. The khilafat was also the perfect enemy because it symbolized a past history that the Kemalist inner circle associated with the “Asiatic darkness,” corruption and decline of the “Turkishness.” As the Kemalists did see themselves as the founding generation of a new, i.e., the only true history of the “Turkishness” together with the grandiose period of the pre-history, they could not accept the existence of another challenging historical legitimacy. The khilafat was not the only incarnation of the past history. The religious brotherhoods, banned in 1925, and the Arabic scripts, banned in 1928, were other institutions that have been eliminated during the coming three years.

Combining Revolution and Theology: the Kemalist Rhetoric

As I suggested above, the khilafat was already a dead-body by its suppression. One could thus reasonably expect that its suppression would not provoke any major debate or real opposition in Turkey of 1924. Indeed, the debate lasted for an extremely short period, but it was also extremely tense. The salvo has been opened by a weak opposition which tempted to preserve the khilafat as a historical legacy and as a symbol of national glory. Some deputies, such Rauf Bey, have even suggested to transfer the title to the Great National Assembly in order to preserve this institution which would, according to him, only strengthen the Turkish nation. But in a very short time, the debate took the shape of a rather one-sided offensive engaged by the Kemalist authorities in Ankara. The Kemalists used a double, nationalist (and therefore anti-Ottoman)-revolutionary and theological rhetoric. An article of Yunus Nadi, that one can describe as the mercenary pen of the Kemalist inner circle, illustrates boldly the first rhetoric. In his article, Nadi accused the Ottoman dynasty of pushing the “damage and betrayal to the nation to the extent of embracing its vilest enemies.” After having add once again that “the caliphs and the sultans have united themselves with the enemy,” Nadi continued in the following terms: “In our opinion, there is no higher instance than the Turkishness. We are henceforth happy to join the greatest of prophecies, our Turkishness.” He concluded his remarks by saluting “the Turk and the Turkishness.”

In reality, the use of such a radical and violent rhetoric meant simply that the Kemalist inner circle did need no further argument in order to abolish the khilafat. Still, a religious and theological rhetoric has been also used in order to convince that abandoning the Khilfat was not synonymous of abandoning Islam as religion. Ismet Pacha (Inönü), has made it clear: “the rules/laws (*ahkam*) of Islam will not suffer from the abrogation of the khilafat. The rules/laws (*hükümler*) of Islam will continue to be applied. We have to explain this to those who are not convinced by this fact.” But the main theological discourse on the suppression of the khilafat has been delivered by Mehmed Seyid Bey, an alim and a former professor at the Faculty of Law, who was then holding the title of the ministry of Justice. According to this highly sophisticated orator, who seems to have carefully prepared and documented his speech, the Ottoman khilafat was not a legitimate one. Going beyond the Ottoman case, Seyid Bey also explained that all the caliphs who occupied the position after the first four caliphs known as *Rachidun* (al-Khulāfa al-Rāshidūn, well-guided caliphs), were illegitimate in the sense that they have usurped the title and the institution. The minister put a few times emphasis on the fact that a dynastic rule of succession in office was in a complete contradiction with the very principle of the khilafat, based on the designation of the most qualified one as ruler by the community. Moreover, according to him, the Ottomans have not only conquered the khilafat through force, and thus usurped the title, but they have also confiscated and usurped the sovereignty of the Turkish nation. Finally, in an impressive lapsus in a country where the Turkish nationalism was

becoming an official ideology, or even a new religion, and any expression of Kurdishness had to be criminalized only one year later, Seyid Bey explained to the deputies of the Turkish National great Assembly that the true *ulema* of Muslim world, among them those of Kurdistan, never accepted the authenticity of the Ottoman khilafat: “Gentlemen. We shouldn’t get it wrong because we will not be able to have the Muslim world to get it wrong. There are many knowledgeable men among them. They are much more learned than us. They do possess the books of Islam. Do these knowledgeable men of India, Egypt, Yemen, Najaf and Kurdistan not know what the khilafat of Islam means? No *alim* from these localities accepts the khilafat of our sultans from a religious point of view.”

Thus, it was according to Seyid Bey a total illusion to think that the preservation of the khilafat would strengthen the Turkish nation; on the contrary, it would only create a hoax serving ultimately to discredit the Turks in the Muslim world.

It is in fact paradoxical to see the Kemalist authorities to use so insistently the theological register in order to legitimize the decision to suppress a henceforth exclusively religious institution. But it is quite easy to understand this paradox: the Kemalist inner circle, to start with Mustafa Kemal, had in fact a solid theological knowledge as well as what one could call a philosophy of history. Using theology in a historical perspective also meant to accuse their opponents of being heirs of a history made of usurpation and dynastic betrayal to the very message of the Prophet and to the electoral praxis of the first four caliphs. Thus, either they had to acknowledge that they were ignorant of history of Islam and therefore accept the religious/theological superiority of the Kemalist discourse, or they had to assume the legacy of the past at the cost of becoming themselves usurpers.

Defending the Khilafat: Counter-Arguments

Who were the defenders of the khilafat and what were their arguments? Some of these defenders were not from Turkey. Throughout the Muslim world, in fact, some committees have been formed in order to fight for the liberation of Istanbul, siege of the khilafat, from the British occupation. One of them was the Indian khilafat movement headed namely by the brothers Shuhat and Muhammed Ali and Abul Kalam Azad, who have been among the main supporters of the Turkish War of Independence. The Indian committee has also contributed financially to Mustafa Kemal’s war efforts. For this movement, the suppression of the khilafat by Mustafa Kemal was no less than a betrayal both to his own promises and to the trust of the Indian Muslims. Agha Khan, who was the leader of the Ismailiyya and had therefore nothing to do with the Sunni Islam, was also among the public defenders of the khilafat, among other reasons because he considered it as a unifying symbol of the Muslim world.

The letter of Agha Khan to Mustafa Kemal has been published by the Istanbul press, which has also widely covered other reactions coming from India. This press, which was keen to

preserve the centrality of Istanbul in the newly formed Turkish republic, was also, to some extent at least, against the Kemalist power. If there is no doubt that Mustafa Kemal and his close collaborators adored Istanbul and considered it as the symbol of the Turkish proud, they also suspected this “Byzantine” capital of being far too much cosmopolitan and corrupted. Istanbul, host by the past of a “decadent” dynasty which “betrayed the nation,” was also the main city where the non-Muslim minorities were massively present and liberal political currents still active. And since the fall of Union and Progress in autumn 1918, Istanbul used to express itself through its press, that the Kemalists considered as the main opposition force, or even as a threat to their rule. No wonder thus, that this press had been silenced already by 1924-1925 partly because its’ alleged support to the Khilafat.

Among the public figures who defended the khilafat as institution (and not necessarily the caliph Abdulmajid as person), one could mention Rauf (Orbay) Bey, a Turkish military hero and for a short while Prime Minister of Mustafa Kemal. His position illustrates also the attitude and sorrow of many other politicians who have been marginalized by Kemal’s ascension. Although a rather conservative politician, Rauf had no specific religious arguments to defend the khilafat as such. For him, the khilafat was a historical institution that the Turks could simply not afford to lose. According to Rauf, the suppression of the khilafat would diminish the prestige and impact of Turkey. Finally, the former Prime minister (who had to flee to Great Britain after his condemnation to 10 years of imprisonment in 1926) was obviously shocked by the brutality of the Kemalist discourse.

Among other public figures who defended the Khilafat one can mention Lutfi Fikri (Düsünsel) and Hüseyin Cahid (Yalçın), who were representatives of a broader category of intellectuals. Lütfi Fikri was most probably a Kurdish Alevi (and therefore had no theological link with Sunnism). He was known as a liberal thinker with no confirmed religious conviction and could not, in any case, be accused of being a “reactionary.” In 1924, during the debate of the abolition of the khilafat, he was chairing the Bar of Istanbul. Hüseyin Cahid, a well-know Unionist journalist, was a convinced Turkish nationalist. He was deeply influenced by Social-Darwinism. He has during and after the Unionist rule defended the Armenian genocide later on become a translator of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. Cahid was a well-known non-believer.

Why a liberal politician, who has always been against the Committee Union and Progress, and an ultra-nationalist intellectual, who was always a strong defender of this Committee, joined their efforts to oppose the suppression of the khilafat, an institution they really did not care about? The reason was quite easy to understand: the khilafat was the very last institution that could, if not prevent, at least counter-balance the total victory of Kemalist inner circle. The support they were giving to the khilafat was a paradoxical one in the sense that it was not a religiously or theologically argued one, but rather a politically founded one. Through their intervention, the khilafat was ceasing to be simply a religious institution in order to become a fully political instrument.

The Kurdish Reaction

The last actor to defend the khilafat was the Kurdish religious brotherhoods, namely the nakshbandiyya. We don't have enough material to evaluate the degree of the support that the Kurdish sheikhs brought to the cause of the khilafat, but we know that it was also a paradoxical one in the sense that Kurdistan has always been at the periphery of the Ottoman Empire. It is true that the Kurds have been widely solicited (and attracted) by the Hamidian pan-Islamist policy and later on many Kurdish tribes (and some Kurdish religious authorities) have participated to the Armenian genocide. It is equally true that many Kurdish religious figures occupied an important place in the Ottoman religious establishment or, during the later periods, played an important role in the formation of an Islamic/islamist thought (one could mention namely Ahmed Naim Babanzade and Said-i Nursi, also known as Said-i Kurdî, founder of an important school of thought known as *nurculuk* as well as a milieu called *nurcu*). Still, what one could define as the "Kurdish Islam" was not only shafite in comparison to the official state's *madhab* which was (and still is) hanefite, but was also by and large determined by a web of *tarikats* (*tariqat*) and structures and was evolving in a context largely independent from the khilafat. Finally, the Kurdish nationalism, which was thus passing through a process of politization and radicalization, was offering other perspectives than the sole religious ones to the Kurdish society.

Still, for the sheikhs of the Kurdish Nakshbandiyya, the institution of khilafat had a paramount importance in the sense that that was the khilafat which made Turkey a Muslim country. For many of them, the khilafat was not a simple institution, but also the protector of all Islamic institutions and social structures, including their brotherhoods and medreses. The survival of the autonomy of the Kurdish Islam itself depended on the survival of the khilafat. Therefore, many of them considered the preservation of the khilafat as one of the conditions of the attachment of the Kurds to Turkey. The well-known Sheikh Said from the Naqshbandiyya Brotherhood, has repeated this symbolic link in a various of occasions. For him, the ulema of Islam and the Caliphs were in charge of the very application of premises of Islam and Islam was at the very basis of the union between the Kurds and the Turks. The Turks have broken it. Now, the Kurds must take their own destiny in charge.

There is no doubt that the abolition of the khilafat has tremendously increased discontent among the Kurdish sheikhs (and many Kurdish tribal leaders and intellectuals), who were already convinced that the Kemalists betrayed their original promises to establish a fraternity between the Kurds and the Turks and liberate the Southern Kurdistan passed under British domination (and de facto attached to Iraq already by 1918/1919 before its *de jure* attachment in 1926). The issue of the khilafat was for them not a theological issue but an issue of identity, belonging and allegiance. Whether remaining within Turkey or opting for secession depended, at least partly, on the Ankara government's attitude towards the khilafat. The answer to this

dilemma come in 1925, one year after the abolition of the khilafat, through a massive uprising prepared by a nationalist (and largely westernized) committee of independence but led by the above-mentioned Cheikh Said. According to Martin van Bruinessen, the well-known specialist of the Kurdish issue “*An attempt was made to establish contact with the exiled ex-sultan Vahaddedin. If this Sultan-Khalife were to give the support to the uprising, the chances of its success would be better.*” The former-Sultan could do nothing more than to express his sorrow for the fate of his Kurdish “subjects,” as it is related by a French diplomatic telegraph. Partly because he had no battalions to send to the battlefield, and partly probably he knew that any public support from his part would have worsened the situation of the Kurds. The revolt has been brutally suppressed and Cheikh Said executed in the same year of 1925.

Khilafat in 1924, Khilafat Today

To sum up, the debate on the abolition of khilafat did not oppose an exclusively religiously motivated group to the anti-religious secularist Kemalists as one could expect it. As the astonishing discourse of Seyid Bey shows it, the religious oppositions were not the only ones, not even the main ones, to mobilize theological arguments. For the Kemalist inner circle, the use of such arguments was destined to build a historical and political syntax criminalizing the Ottoman dynasty, but also, the “Ottomanism” as such. Attacking the already inert khilafat was an easy and quick way to impose the ideology of Kemalist *tabula rasa* on the society. On the other hand, those who defended the khilafat didn’t do so on the basis of theological arguments. They were, very much rightly, scared of a total authoritarian triumph of Mustafa Kemal and wanted to limit his hegemonic position.

The khilafat itself has remained rather a very passive actor during the entirety of this process. I am not aware of a single document emanating from the khilafat or from the caliph Abdulmecid himself in order to defend this institution. Without any credibility nor vital force, the Ottoman khilafat was doomed to become a part of the Ottoman *ancien régime* and disappeared simply in a couple of days after four centuries of existence. Neither the conferences across the world, nor the campaigns in India, in Indonesia or in South Africa, could allow its survival in exile or its re-establishment in another Muslim country for the simple reason that they could not fill it with a political or theological sense or with a social/political need.

I am naturally aware of the discussions going on since 1924 on the khilafat and the projects aiming at its re-establishment in an Arab country or outside the Arab world. Of course, a scholar should be careful about the future and in any case refrain from making predictions. Still, I don’t have the impression that by April 2011, date of writing of this article, the conditions of the re-establishment of a khilafat do exist in the Muslim world, not only because this world is, by and large, fragmented and divided alongside states’ borders and various internal and interstate conflicts, but because such a project does not answer to any political, theological and

social demand coming from the Muslim societies and therefore, fails to become hegemonic among them. Moreover, one should not forget that in spite of the emotional charge contained in the term of *umma*, no single Muslim society can be apprehended through an exclusive criterion of religion. As the other societies, the Muslim societies are plural and complex ones. Their future will depend on their capacity to assume and to manage peacefully this plurality and complexity and not on a political formula reducing them to their sole religious belonging. Finally, large sectors of the Muslim societies, including those supporting an inter-Muslim solidarity, do not necessarily aspire at the constitution of a politically united Muslim world.

One should also raise the issue of the very meaning of the khilafat. What would be the functions of such an institution? Conquering the political power in the name of Islam and succession of prophet in his responsibilities as head of state? Or, assuming religious/theological functions as the late unfortunate Abdulmajid did during the last year of the existence of the khilafat? The first option requires political force (and potentially use of violence against those who are opposed to such ideas), in order to unify Muslim world or at least parts of it under a single Empire. Such a political enterprise is not, and cannot, in itself, be a religious/theological one. As every historian knows it, the Ottoman Empire was before everything else a *state* and the Ottoman sultans ruled, more through the techniques of by-passing of the sharia than through the sharia itself. As its predecessors, the Ottoman Empire was a Muslim Empire, but was not necessarily a *religious* Empire based on the premises of *din*. From al-Mawardi (10-11th Century) to ibn Khaldoun (14-15th Century) or to Cevdet Pacha (19th Century), all the Muslim jurists and thinkers were well aware of this fundamental contradiction marking any Muslim state. They knew that a Muslim state was before everything else a state.

The second option, i.e., creation of a khilafat for religious/theological needs would require a quite strong institutional imaginary. Such a khilafat would simply mean the constitution of an entirely new kind of institution. One should in fact not forget that, with the brief exception of Abdulmajid's khilafat, the khilafat as a body separated from political power has not existed by the past. Therefore, the khilafat did not produce a theological knowledge or norms (if not rituals of the *bay'a*). Under the Ottoman rule, for instance, the organs of production of religious/theological knowledge were the Ottoman state organs and producers of this knowledge have always been Ottoman state servants. Who will be the servants of a new khilafat if it is not confounded with a state apparatus? And by which means it will produce knowledge, interpretations, rules, laws, norms, rituals... applicable in the Muslim society? The invention of a "meaning" for an institution of a new kind will, in any case, be but a heavy task.

Thus, in a highly unpredictable world, the issue of the khilafat can interest scholars only as an institution of the past and not as a project for the future. Such an interest, however, is also useful to understand the present world. Throughout the 20th Century and even in the very contemporary Muslim world, religious institutions or groups and actors other than the khilafat, such as the religious brotherhoods (*tariqats*), different forms of *volkislam*, religious middle

class-networks, Muslim intelligentsias, continue to play a very active role both in Turkey and other Muslims states. Some of these actors are also politically active; they act as agencies of resistance or as producers of obedience to the state. Their vitality can be explained either by the fact that they are deeply rooted in the societies, or that they could renew themselves and propose new meanings to understand a changing world and act accordingly. Understanding their vitality is also a way of understanding, in contrast, the reasons of the total collapse of the khilafat only in a couple of days in March 1924.

Notes

- 1) Some ideas presented in this article have been discussed in a previous text on the issue: "Au-delà de l'abolition du Khalifat, Laïcité, Etat-Nation et contestation kurde," *Les Annales de l'Autre Islam*, n°2, 1994, pp. 225-235.