

**ABOLISHMENT OF THE CALIPHATE  
AND  
TURKEY'S TRANSFORMATION TO MODERN STATE**

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**Introduction**

Ottoman Caliphate was abolished by the resolution adopted by Turkish National Assembly on 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1924. Caliphate which was allegedly obtained by Ottoman Sultans in 1517, used to be utilized as an important factor in foreign political relations since invasion of Crimea by the Russians. During the reign of Abdulhamid II, this institution played a very important role in both domestic and foreign politics. The Caliphate which had been transformed into sovereignty after Prophet Mohammed and his four successor Caliphs, and assumes that the power to reign can be used only by those Muslim Sovereigns who best protects the Muslim Society and religion of their reign. It could not always refrain from serving to the interests of the foreign powers when it is important. In fact, the Caliphate served to the interests and benefits of British in the events such as Great Cavalry Soldier Rebellion in 1857 in India, also in attempts made by British to explore and establish new colonies in Africa 1858, and encouragement of Afghanistan to declare war against Russia on the behalf of Ottoman Empire in 1877<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cezmi Eraslan, *Abdulhamid II ve İslam Birliđi*, Istanbul 1992, pp 65-72.

### The Importance of the Caliphate in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Abdulhamid II understood that he can use the Caliphate as a political trump against the countries which had a vast number of Muslim colonies, when he saw its spiritual power on the Muslim world from the reports of embassies, and concerns of British. Thus, he successfully managed to use the Caliphate as an important versatile weapon in policies for the Islamic Unity. For the countries such as Britain, France and Russia which once used to colonized Islamic countries, declaration of war by the Caliphate whom they assume to correspond to the Pope of the Moslem World, was accepted as a great menace. Indeed, Abdulhamid II always kept this weapon that he well knew that he had no chance to use, on the agenda, by threatening to use it<sup>2</sup>. The awareness that the Caliphate was the administrative center of Islam, reached to an extent that Abdülhamid II was raised to "sainthood" level for his people. Here it must be pointed out that sects which received support in almost every aspects from the Sultan, played important roles. We must promptly state that efforts by Abdulhamid II were effective on Muslims in South West Asia and India. When those Muslims who cherished Abdulhamid II very well, could not appropriate his successor, the new Caliph easily, besides they demand good treatment for Abdulhamid II from the new rulers<sup>3</sup>.

The Caliphate continued to serve the politics after reign of Abdulhamid II. While it is mentioned about religious life of Muslims who were left to the reign of Italians in the Ouchy (18<sup>th</sup> October 1912) Treaty which was signed with Italians at the end of Tripolitanien War, a reflection of Article 3 of the Küçük Kaynarca Treaty of 1774, was observed. Ottoman Empire which was ousted by both groups at the beginning of World War I, was included into allied forces thanks to influence of the Caliphate which Germans tried to make use of in the riots in China in 1900, and provided that Ottoman Army must be put in order. Although the benefit expected from the declared holy war could not be obtained, efforts by German spies towards this end continued du-

<sup>2</sup> For above mentioned approach of Abdulhamid II, see Ayşe Osmanoğlu, **Babam Sultan Abdülhamid**, Istanbul 1983.

<sup>3</sup> Eraslan, **Ibid.** p. 361.

ring the War. According to British archives, German spies, together with Turkish intelligence staff, continued this kind of activities especially in Central Asia untill 1920-21<sup>4</sup>.

However, we must not forget that during post - 1909 era, dominance of Ottomanism in state politics and relative lack of importance attached to Muslim world with respect to past, significantly decreased popularity and effectiveness of the Caliphate, both in the country and in the Muslim world. The fact that administrators of the Party of Union and Progress were declared to be atheists and freemasons by British propaganda, assisted colonist countries inactivate the call for the holy war by the Caliphate very much.

Actually, myriad of Muslim Soldiers who were fighting in the armies of Entente Powers were so enslaved by the negative propaganda that they believe that "they are fighting to save the Caliph which was enslaved by atheist members of Party of Union and Progress"<sup>5</sup>.

We also see that Caliphate assumed important roles in the struggle for saving the Turkish nation whose land was almost completely invaded, and human rights are fully violated at the end of World War I. The fact that religious elements and the Caliphate have been still dominant in domestic politics, image created in the mind's of Turkish people by the efforts of gaining an Islamic shape to the education and social life, played an important role in success of the national struggle.

### **Era of the War for Independence**

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, in his first speech delivered in Turkish Great National Assembly opened on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1920, determined purpose of the struggle as "taking measures which save the Caliphate and the Sultanate from the pressure of foreign powers, eliminate slavery and destruction of Ottoman Empire". The Pasha also emphasized that in addition to this purpose, the organization to be established in accordance with Islam, and indicated that Is-

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<sup>4</sup> Documents of British Foreign Office have extensive information above mentioned matter. See FO 371 / 6243.

<sup>5</sup> Erol Güngör, *İslamın Bugünkü Meseleleri*, Istanbul 1989, pp. 177-200.

lamic understanding is still the most important measure of legitimacy in Turkish Society by stating that: "we support that our exultant assembly directly intervene in all activities of our nation by taking into consideration of the principles of Islam which attach too much importance and give authority to unification of the people's ballots"<sup>6</sup>. This principle became official as a first article of the Constitutional Law : "Turkish Great National Assembly was established under the oath taken for ensuring life and freedom (of the Muslim majority) within the national borders and rescuing the Sultanate".

The determination of the objective of this kind has an important role in causing a majority of Turkish people to give support to the national struggle. However, the fact that upon the pressure of the British, especially Ottoman government headed by Damad Ferid Pasha awarded juridical decisions declaring those who participated into the national struggle as non-Muslim; sending irregular forces called "Army of Caliphate" against national forces, arose indignation amongs Turkish people against the Sultanate. The fact that Sultan Vahdettin who, at the very beginning, saw struggle endeavored by young commanders in Anatolia, also doubted purpose of those people who conducted the national struggle, and showed an inclination and tendency towards the party who are enemy of them, caused the Sultan and Caliphate receive great reactions. In fact, Mustafa Kemal Pasha's mind, as the leader personage of the national struggle and new order efforts, there was no place for the posts such as Sultanate and Caliphate. He thought that Turkish society has been being exploited and abused due to this religious post. Nevertheless, at the opening ceremony of the assembly, the first signs of this notion appeared : "After we accomplished rescuing the Caliphate and Sultanate, when His Majesty, our sovereign, our Sultan and the Caliph of Muslims is embraced by his own nation as a free and single entity out of reach of every kind of pressure and force, His Majesty shall take its superior and respectful position within

<sup>6</sup> Speech dated 24<sup>th</sup> April 1920 delivered in Turkish Great National Assembly "speech on governmental organization." *Atatürk'ün Söylev ve Demeçleri I*, Ankara 1997, p. 62; Samet Ağaoğlu, *Kuvayi Milliye Ruhu*, Ankara 1981, p. 36; Kazım Öztürk, *Atatürk'ün TBMM Açık ve Gizli Oturumlarındaki Konuşmaları I*, Ankara 1990, pp. 73-74.

the framework of the laws to be adopted by this prosperous national assembly”<sup>7</sup>.

What was stated above is that Ottoman rule cannot re-establish its domination with its own power, and that it was not a force any more. According to the resolution of the National Assembly, when the nation was liberated by the national movement, Sultan – Caliph’s position will be determined by the National Assembly. This new system was the messenger of the establishment of a new state. Except for the highness of the positions, Vahdettin’s behaviours, which created reactions, and his persistence to send a representative to Lausanne Peace Conference while the National Assembly was progressing in the way to the success very well, created an opportunity to break off all relationships between Sultan and the Government in Istanbul and those conducting national movement. It is clear that then with the Constitution on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1921, sovereignty was unconditionally given to the nation, Sultanate became null and void. The Constitution was very special with this feature of officially declaring the system of Republic even though not naming it. For this reason, it was claimed that Mustafa Kemal Pasha declared the system of Republic without negotiating with his colleagues as required. One of these claims was made by Kazım Karabekir Pasha who was one of the most important actors of the national movement. However, Mustafa Kemal Pasha who acted out when time and environment was convenient, stated in a telegram sent on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1921 that “there is nothing to describe the republic yet, and assessments towards to this end are only assumptions”<sup>8</sup>.

As a result, event of separating the Sultanate and the Caliphate and abolishment of the Sultanate, headed by Mustafa Kemal Pasha, was realized on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1922. Upon unnecessary extension of debates in the concerning commission, words of Mustafa Kemal Pasha indicated his determination on this matter : “The matter is an expression of a fait accompli reality. This shall, in any case, happen. When those people gathered here, the assembly

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<sup>7</sup> *Söylev ve Demeçler* I, p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, *Nutuk* I, İstanbul 1973, p. 119.

and everybody takes the matter as natural, they shall, in my opinion, be better. Otherwise, this fact shall be expressed within its framework. But some heads shall probably be cut"<sup>9</sup>. After Vahidettin to whom only Caliphate was left, took asylum with British since he thought "his life was in danger" on 16<sup>th</sup> November 1922 and went to Malta, the Great National Assembly, with a decree of The Ministry of Islamic Law, elected Abdülmecid Efendi as Caliph.

### **The Caliphate in the Republican Era**

The fact that Ankara was adopted as capital city on 13<sup>th</sup> October 1923 and declaration of the Republic of Turkey on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1923 officially symbolized the realization of a new state in Turkey, which was then very different from the former regime in every aspect. However some circles who are very disturbed by declaration of the Republic, even some personages who struggled shoulder to shoulder with Mustafa Kemal Pasha in the Turkish Liberation War, exhibited their opposition by gathering around Abdülmecid Efendi whose official post is dependent on the Turkish Great National Assembly and giving support to him. The Caliph received courage from these facts and assumed more loose attitudes which are contrary to the administration of the Republic.

The possibility that the Caliph became stronger with the circles gathered around him and a power which might oppose his evolutions he would initiate seriously concerned Mustafa Kemal Pasha. As mentioned above, there was no place for such posts in Mustafa Kemal Pasha's plans for his program for a new Turkey. Indeed Mustafa Kemal Pasha had dictated the same to Mazhar Müfit, who was one of his colleagues even at an early stage of National Liberation War at the time of Erzurum Congress<sup>10</sup>.

By abolishing the Sultanate Turkish People recognized "no regime of government other than the government of the Turkish Great National Assembly within the national borders" with a resolution adopted on 2<sup>nd</sup> November

<sup>9</sup> Atatürk, *Nutuk II*, p. 691.

<sup>10</sup> M. Müfit Kansu, *Erzurum'dan Ölümüne Kadar Atatürkle Beraber I*, Ankara 1988, pp. 131 - 132.

1922, made Istanbul Government as a permanent part of history since 16<sup>th</sup> March 1920<sup>11</sup>. It was very clear that Mustafa Kemal Pasha was about to abolish the Caliphate which was the most important remainder of the past. The time to act would be determined by Mustafa Kemal Pasha who had well grabbed the "spirit of the public" which was the determinant notion of the developments in 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, it was observed that those countries- particularly England - which had Muslim colonies and Muslim countries observed the developments and sought opportunities for intervening in a suitable environment.

The first step came from England that had feared the power of Caliphate the most. A letter which was send under the signatures of Emir Ali and Ağa Khan from London on 24<sup>th</sup> November 1923 to Prime Minister, İsmet İnönü, but it was published in Istanbul Press before reaching him, expedited the process of abolishing the Caliphate. The fact that the writers of this letter were Emir Ali who was Royal British Consultant and state judge, and Ağa Han, leader of İsmailiyye who was also working for British Intelligence<sup>12</sup>, felt that there was a plot by British behind this event during the debates in Turkish Great National Assembly. The Assembly took the matter of Caliphate as its own domestic matter, and strongly reacted to the intervention. Rauf Bey who opposed its abolishment and stated his conscience loyalty to the Caliphate during the debates, stated that "Authority of all Muslim World is Caliph and Caliphate, if somebody in this national assembly which adopted its basic principles intends to intervene in its administration by giving material authority to the Caliphate above the Turkish nation, Our Friends, this government has right to say please do not be insolent, this is not your duty. It immediately performs its duties. Otherwise, after we declare that Caliph and the Caliphate is the Caliph of the Islam, if Muslim Indians say what kind of rights this man has over us, then we must accept that they are right<sup>13</sup>".

<sup>11</sup> Suna Kili - A. Şeref Gözübüyük, *Türk Anayasa Metinleri*, İstanbul 1985, p. 95.

<sup>12</sup> Mîme Kemal Öke, *Hilafet Hareketleri*, Ankara 1991, pp. 98 - 100.

<sup>13</sup> For extensive information on these debates, please see Mustafa Bıyıklı, *Hilafetin Kaldırılmasının Türkiye'de ve İslam Dünyasındaki Yankıları*, İstanbul Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Basılmamış Yüksek Lisans Tezi, İstanbul 1997; Öke *Ibid.*, p. 102.

As understood, even those supporters of the Caliphate certified and accepted that the Caliph had to, at that time, deal with only spiritual matters. Yusuf Akçura, an historian and intellectual, also suggested that : "As long as the Caliphate is in the hands of the Turkish nation and based on power and authority of the Turkish Great National Assembly, it is an institution that shall be useful for us in every event. But our friends, these conditions must be so. Otherwise an institution which would probably be useful for us and entire Muslim World may be harmful for both, the Islamic World and us as a whole"<sup>14</sup>.

Contrary to these notions, some of the Islamist Deputies in the Assembly and especially press suggested that influence of Turkey shall be zero with abolishment of Caliphate. Again, contrary to this notion, there are also some deputies who suggested that a myriad of Turkish people died in the riots occurred for supporting the Caliphate, however it would be a great mistake to give power to the enemies by abolishing the post.

On the one hand, Mustafa Kemal Pasha, during an interview he made in İzmit Kasr (Palace) on 16 - 17 January 1923, with representatives of leading newspapers in Istanbul such as Vakit, Tevhid-i Efkâr, İleri, İktidâr, Tanin and Akşam etc. stated that "In our opinion, the matter is settled. Unless he (the Caliph) is not occupied with this matter and those who plan to obtain interest out of the Caliph do not act differently, the matter is settled down" and further warned the supporters of caliphate to be in peace and quiet<sup>15</sup>.

### **The Last Step to the Abolishment of the Caliphate**

On the other hand, Abdülmecid Efendi went on to Friday Prayers with the attitude of a president, used title of Khan in his correspondence and tried to create an image that he has an influence covering all Muslim World. Finally fact that he demanded support from the government by stating that his allowance is not adequate for the functions he has to perform, activated Mustafa Kemal Pasha.

<sup>14</sup> Öke, *Ibid.*, p. 112. The concern as to the weapon can be against us with intervention from outside.

<sup>15</sup> Arı İnan, *Gazi Mustafa Kemal Atatürk'ün 1923 Eskişehir - İzmit Konuşmaları*, Ankara 1996, pp. 70 - 72.



Attitudes of Prime Minister İnönü and President Mustafa Kemal Pasha were clear from the telegrams exchanged by and between each other on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1924. İnönü stated that he felt sorry with the negative articles published in the press and especially with the fact that members of government coming to Istanbul visited him, and he wanted that assistance promised by the Ministry of Finance to the Caliphate must be realized. And Mustafa Kemal Pasha, taking this opportunity stated that "the Caliph follows the attitudes of the Sultans in his life, and misunderstandings in the press result therefrom". Then he declared to the World that Caliph and the Caliphate "has no meaning and existence in both politics and religion"<sup>16</sup>. Mustafa Kemal Pasha who considers the Caliphate as a historical figure, claimed that the Caliphate "exposes existence and liberation of Republic of Turkey" with his attitudes and relations and stated that Caliph cannot have a personal treasury and "an amount which must certainly be lower than allowance of the President must be allocated" for his living at a reasonable standard. The Caliph must have exactly known who he was and what his post was, and be satisfied with it.

Eventually, the matter reached the ultimate stage with law proposition about "Abolishment of the Caliphate and exile of the Ottoman Dynasty from Turkey" given by Urfa Deputy Şeyh Saffet Efendi and 53 deputies on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1924.

In this proposal, it was explained that the Caliphate could not get out of double acts or functions in Turkey and with its current status it shall pose a danger for the existence of Turkey and since the Caliphate also means "ruling", the Caliphate was not necessary in addition to the existing Islamic Government. On the other hand, it was also noted that the Dynasty shall be more dangerous for the existence of Turkey, under the disguise of the Caliphate, with past experiences<sup>17</sup>. After miscellaneous notions of which were in favor and against the Caliphate, The Minister of Justice, Seyyid Bey stated his ideas for abolishment of the Caliphate that the Caliphate stays over their way

<sup>16</sup> Nutuk, II, pp. 846 - 48.

<sup>17</sup> TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, II, Devre II, İçtima Senesi VII, p. 27 - 29; Seçil Akgün, *Hilafetin Kaldırılması ve Laiklik (1924 - 1928)*, Ankara (undated), pp. 176-178.

not as a religious matter but a political matter, since assistance of the Muslims to each other is within the religious framework, such assistance shall continue whether the Caliphate exists or not<sup>18</sup>. Finally after this speech, which was very effective on the deputies, Prime Minister İsmet İnönü closed the debate by saying that "Love of Turkey in the Muslim World did not result from the fact that Turkey is the country where the Caliphate is located, but from the services that Turkey provided for the Muslim World", Turkey may be a single entity in domestic and foreign policies, such singularity is also valid for the other Muslims<sup>19</sup>.

As a result of voting performed, it was adopted with law nr. 431 of the Turkish Great National Assembly that the Caliphate was abolished, and since it was the inherent in the meaning and concept of the Government and Republic, the post of Caliphate was abolished<sup>20</sup>. It was also adopted that the members of the Ottoman Dynasty must be deported from the territory of Turkey. The same day, it was also adopted that the Ministry of Islamic Law and Foundations was abolished and "unification of the education" was adopted and all connections of the Republic of Turkey with Ottoman Empire were completely eliminated.

It is noteworthy that besides the abolishment of the Caliphate, "eternal prohibition" of the members of Ottoman Dynasty within the territory of Turkey, also covered those people born from the women of the Dynasty<sup>21</sup>. However existence of the Dynasty of the old state with a post though without authority, possibly create doubts existence of the new system and the Republic. It is very clear that there are some people who shall oppose the arrangements so made. It is not possible to expect that in a country which was burnt and destroyed after a long period of war, of which the resources were used to their end, the thing would not be immediately settled. It would be possible

<sup>18</sup> TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, II, Devre II, İçtima Senesi VII, pp. 40 - 61

<sup>19</sup> Akgün, Hilafet, p. 190.

<sup>20</sup> TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, II, Devre II, İçtima Senesi VII, pp. 68 - 69, Suna Kili - A. Şeref Gözübüyük, Türk Anayasa Metinleri, İstanbul 1985, pp. 106 - 107.

<sup>21</sup> Killi - Gözübüyük, Anayasa Metinleri, p. 106.

that the opponents may have abuse this situation and gathered around the Caliph or members of the Dynasty. The abolishment of the Caliphate and exile of the Dynasty and thus destruction of their hope to return, can be evaluated as a sign that Republic of Turkey shall burn the ships and continue in this direction.

Movement observed at the beginning in the Muslim World with abolishment of the Caliphate, declarations of new Caliphs and congresses left to the silence. Abdülmecid Efendi died in Paris on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1944. During this complex period of the world's history, it did not draw attention very much.

### **Conclusion**

The Caliphate which had a great role in both domestic and foreign politics during the last years of the Ottoman Empire, has become out of date as a result of a political resolution which was suitable for the political context it might have. In the fact that the Turkish Great National Assembly easily adopted abolishment of the Caliphate in spite of some debates, determination of both Mustafa Kemal Pasha and members of the Government for not returning to the old regime but keeping up with level of contemporary civilization. However, it was also observed that in any event, abolishment of the Caliphate by the new Republic of Turkey which struggled for completion of the existence and liberation both in Turkey and at the international platform, eliminated the possibility that it would be abused by the countries - especially England - that have Muslim colonies. As for some criticisms that it must not have been abolished and kept as a symbolic post, we recommend owners of such criticisms should remember political conditions of that period. As for the approaches suggesting that the Caliphate had a capability that even today it might be useful in our relations with Muslim countries, we think that it must be kept in mind that the relations between the countries in the world only depend on mutual benefits.

Abolishment of the Caliphate, was the most important step in the efforts to dominate not religious post but will of the nation in the administration of the state. In fact, it is impossible to accept a spiritual authority as the Caliphate within the scope of a secular state understanding. With the laws of Uni-

fication of the Education and abolishing the Ministry of Islamic Law and Foundations which were adopted on the same day, an important step was taken in the transition from the religious community to a national community. With all these steps, the legal base of a national, secular, democratic and modern state has been completed.

## ÖZET

Hilafet Osmanlı devletinin iç ve dış siyasetinde bilhassa II. Abdülhamid döneminde çok önemli bir rol oynamıştır. Fakat yabancı devletlerin çıkarlarına hizmet etmekten hiçbir zaman kurtulamamıştır. Hilafet birinci dünya savaşı sonunda toprakları işgal edilen Türk milletinin kurtuluş mücadelesinde de önemli rol oynamıştır. Zira halkın zihninde dini unsurların ve hilafetin baskın bir yeri vardı.

20 Ocak 1921 Teşkilat-ı Esasiye Kanunu'nun hakimiyeti kayıtsız şartsız millete vermesi ile saltanatın gereksiz bir hale geldiği açıktır. Ankara'nın 13 Ekim 1923'te başkent olarak belirlenmesi ve 29 Ekim'de Cumhuriyet'in ilanı, Türkiye'de eski rejimden tamamen farklı yeni bir devletin kuruluşunun gerçekleştiğini resmen ortaya koymuştur.

Sonuçta 3 Mart 1924 tarihinde Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi'nde yapılan oylama ile halifelik kaldırılmıştı. Halieliğin kaldırılması Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin eski yönetim anlayışı ile bağlarını kopardığını ve bu yönde devam edeceğini gösteren en manalı işaret olarak değerlendirilebilir.

Hilafetin kaldırılması devlet yönetiminde dini makamların belirleyiciliği yerine milletin iradesini koyma çabalarındaki en önemli adımdır. Bu adımla millî, lâik, demokratik ve modern bir devletin kanuni temelleri tamamlanmış olmaktadır.

## Anahtar Kelimeler

Atatürk, Modern Devlet, Hilafet, Türk Dış Politikası, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti.

### ABSTRACT

Caliphate had played a very important in both domestic and foreign polities of Ottoman Empire, especially during the reign of Abdulhamid II, but It could not always refrain from serving to the interests of the foreign powers.

We also see that Caliphate assumed important roles in the struggle for saving the Turkish nation whose land was almost completely invaded at the end of World War I. The fact that religious elements and the Caliphate have been still dominant in the mind's of Turkish people. It is clear that with the Constitution on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1921. Sovereignty was unconditionally given to the nation and the Sultanate became null and void.

The fact that Ankara was adopted as capital city on 13<sup>th</sup> October 1923 and declaration of the Republic of Turkey on, 29<sup>th</sup> October 1923 officially symbolized the realization of a new state in Turkey, which was then very diferent from the former regime in every aspect. As a result of voting performed, in 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1924, in the Turkish Great National Assembly the Calphate was abolished, The abolishment of the Caliphate can be evaluated as the most meaningful sign that Republic of Turkey shall burn the ships and continue in this direction.

Abolishment of the Caliphate, was the most important step in the efforts to dominate not religious post but will of the nation in the administration of the state. With this step, the most important legal bases of a national, secular, democratic and modern state has been completed.

### Key Words

Atatürk, Modern State, The Caliphate, Turkish Foreign Policy, Turkish Republic.