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Ottomans and Caliphate

The caliphate's question is one of the most important chronic problems in the Islamic history. What matters to us here is the final phase of it; we mean the phase during which Othman family claimed to be entitle to the Caliphate, or what is known as the Ottoman Caliphate. In fact, this phase continues to cast its shadow and consequences on our present until now.

It is worth mentioning here that the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood group was in 1928; i. e. only four years after the abolition of the Ottoman State in (1924 AD) by "Kemal Ataturk". Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the group, confirmed that his establishment was in response to the abolition of the Caliphate. Therefore, the group adopted the slogan of reviving the Caliphate again. This approach would be followed by most groups of political Islam, from Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami, i. e. the Islamic Liberation Party, and ending to ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria group).

The truth is that the issue of transferring the Caliphate to the sultans of the Othman family as it seen by Turk, or Ottomans claim to hold the Caliphate as seen by the Arabs is, so far, one of the controversial matters at both the historical and the political levels.

One of the most controversial points in this regard is the illegality of the transfer of the Caliphate to the Sultans of the Othman family. Because that contradicts to the jurisprudence doctrine that the Caliphate shall be from the Arabs. In fact, any follower for the Islamic history will notice how the extent of this rule is respected throughout the time and the variables of the Islamic Caliphate, as the Rightly Guided Caliphate was from the Arabs, as well as the Umayyad Caliphate, whether in Damascus or Andalusia. In addition to Abbasid Caliphate, whether in Baghdad or in Cairo.

Hence the Caliphs were from the Arabs in general, and the Caliphate transfer to the Othman family is a subject of constant controversy and criticism. The Ottomans justified the question of transferring the Caliphate from the Arabs to the Turk with the fatwas of necessity issued by some muftis that most of them were Turk. As they tried to find a legitimate justification for the situation under the urgency of necessity, the weak power of Arabs and the strength of the Turk and their appearance as the protectors of Islam. It is permissible therefore to break the jurisprudential doctrine, and to transfer the Caliphate to the Othman family. However, the debate has not been broken out throughout history, especially with the weakness of the Ottoman State. Indeed, at the beginning of the twentieth century, "Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi" demanded the return of an Arab Caliphate.

The question of the legality of the Caliphate transfer to the Turkish component was not the only controversial issue, yet there are intense debates among historians about the Caliphate's transition to the Sultans of the Othman family, or even those Sultans interest in the Caliphate Title.

Turkish historians promote the idea of Abbasi's last Caliph that moved to Istanbul After Ottomans entered Egypt. As the Abbasid Caliph pledged allegiance to the Ottoman Sultan, and then the Caliphate was transferred to the Othman family. Those historians disagree among themselves about the Sultan to whom the Caliphate was transferred; is it "Selim I", "Suleiman al-Qanaawy", or even one of the Sultans after that.

However, the interesting thing is that most of the contemporary Arab sources for the entry of the Ottomans into Egypt, on top of them "Ibn Iyas", do not refer to the issue of pledging allegiance of the Abbasid Caliph and the transfer of the Caliphate to the Sultans of the Othman family. Moreover, the Ottomans preferred the title "Sultan" to the title "Caliph". Therefore, we will notice that the title of Sultan is more common in general, whether in Arab or Turkish sources. This is because the Ottomans preferred the principle of power, and the word Sultan symbolizes that principle.

Most of the sober studies on the issue of the Caliphate suggest that the Ottoman Sultans did not care much to the title of "Caliph". As the Caliphate had lost its appeal and historical role, especially with the fall of Baghdad by the Tatars. Thus, the Mamelukes Sultans intended to revive the Abbasid Caliphate in Egypt, but in a new approach, where the Caliph was deprived of the temporal power "matters of politics" that became in the hands of the Mamelukes and the Caliph was turned to be a religious symbol that merely was pledging allegiance to the Mamelukes Sultans, granted them the blessing, and blessing the armies before they went to war.

Thus, when the Ottomans entered Egypt, the Abbasid Caliph was just a religious symbol that was politically powerless. So, many researchers see that the Ottoman Sultans - even if the transfer of the Caliphate to them was legitimately- did not give much care to the Caliphate because it had lost its political appeal. The process of reviving the Caliphate in political terms has only taken place then in the nineteenth century. It was particularly crystallized in the era of Sultan "Abdul Hamid II", when he attempted to encounter the weakness that spread through the body of and circulated the Ottoman State that it was called "the sick man of Europe". And as he tried to annoy the European counties - especially Russia - that he considered himself as the Spiritual leader of Muslims in Russia, and to wrangle with Britain by claiming the spiritual supremacy over the Muslims in India that was the most important British colony at that time.

This is how the Ottomans attempted to revive the Caliphate for political reasons and to assert their political power over their nationals, as well as their spiritual supremacy over Muslims around the world. However, developments of situations and the defeat of the Ottoman State in the World War I led to the abolition of the Caliphate and trying to establish modern Turkey on secular grounds by Kemal Ataturk.