

Introduction

The Caliphate Then and Now

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In Memory of Jalila Sbaï (1965-2020)

Jalila Sbaï was the inspiration for this project devoted to the caliphate in history. Our goal was not to cover the exhaustiveness of this subject, which spans nearly fifteen centuries, but to perceive the successive temporalities which see the Caliphate idea appear or disappear.

This is evidenced by the call for papers that we wrote together:

“There is a large scholarly literature on the Caliphate, especially in recent years. Obviously political news has a lot to do with it. Our project aims to show that the idea of the caliphate is most often the product of feedback, of an invention of tradition, that is to say of the definition of a project by claiming to a more distant and more prestigious period.

“Thus the term caliphate is not attested in contemporary sources until the end of the 7th century, while the term “Commander of the Believers” was used for the first leaders of the Islamic community after the death of the Prophet. It only became common in the last decades of the Umayyad dynasty. It is in the first time of the Abbasids that it became an essential stake of power and is used retroactively for the first four leaders of the community. Thus the first definition of the caliphate turns out to be largely an invention of tradition.

“When the Abbasid Caliphate gradually ceases to be an effective power, it nevertheless serves as an instrument of legitimization for the powers in place (sultanates). At the same time the *ulama* compose a vast “must-be” literature on the functions of the caliphate that bears little relation to the actual realities of the caliphate of their time. It will nevertheless have a very strong influence on subsequent conceptions of the caliphate.

“The second great time of elaboration is that of the Ottoman Caliphate. After the conquest of Egypt, the Ottoman sultans adopted in their titles a certain number of attributes of the caliphate. The same is true for other major Sunni Muslim powers like the Great Mogul in India.

“In the last quarter of the XVIIIth century, the Ottomans were led to reinvest the notion of the caliphate in the face of the European threat. We can say that

the Ottoman Caliphate, during its last period, was a kind of co-production between Europeans and Ottomans within the framework of the emergence of a new geographical and geopolitical reality, the Muslim world. Here again we are largely within the framework of an invention of tradition.

“The suppression of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924 and the inability to define a new one have produced a new literature on the subject, ranging from its denial as a religious requirement or its modernization in the new reality through the new idea of Islamic State.

“The last era concerns the one that began in the second half of the XXth century with the use of the caliphate idea as a political utopia in the face of imperialism. All Sunni Islamist movements make more or less reference to this “missing” institution while being unable to produce it. Nevertheless, this will lead to the murderous project of the current Islamic State. We thus have a new invention of tradition within the framework of the political mobilization of religious affects.”

Various authors contacted were kind enough to contribute to this undertaking. The work was being finalized in September 2020 when Jalila abruptly left us. The suddenness of her disappearance meant that she alone had the final version. The publication project was then delayed due to the impossibility of accessing her work computer kept by her family. Access to the content of her computer being compromised, the editors of the journal *Hespéris-Tamuda* then asked for the reconstruction of this publication.

Mrs. Dima Alsajdeya was kind enough to take over the task of coordinating this new version, which is different from the first. It was impossible to find the participation of Jalila Sbaï. Some participants have withdrawn their texts while other contributors have joined the new project. As was clearly indicated in the original draft, this file is far from exhaustive. It brings a series of distinct points of view insisting on the duality between the history of the institution which is transformed according to the specific needs of each era, and the timeless affirmation of this supreme magistracy in what is commonly called Muslim law.

Current works on the first decades of Islam show that the historical account of the first times of Islam elaborated during the Abbasid period must be widely questioned, even if, of course, the existence and the mission of the Prophet remain. The essential historical reading is not there to invalidate the doctrinal content that was developed from the VIIIth century. The first concerns the caliphate as it is practiced, the second as it should be.

The plurality of caliphates in subsequent periods and then the suppression of the Abbasid Caliphate of Baghdad by the Mongols led to a sort of devaluation of the historical institution. Admittedly, the caliphate titles are found in the titles of

the great Sunni Muslim sovereigns, but they are not highlighted. Belonging to the descendants of Genghis Khan often appears more prestigious.

The second half of the XVIIIth century saw the emergence, in the context of conflicting relations with Christian Europe, of a new interpretation of the institution which would tend to be defined as a “spiritual” power endowed with powers of religious administration. This is the Ottoman caliphate, the other caliphates having gradually ceased to exist with the notable exception of the Moroccan Commander of the Faithful who could be defined as “the Sultan is caliph in his domains” as the king of France was emperor in his kingdom.

The co-production with colonial Europe continued in the elaboration among Muslim reformers of a definition of the institution which gradually distinguished itself from the real Ottoman caliphate doomed to disappear in 1923. After the failure of the ephemeral attempt of King Hussein of the Hejaz to re-establish the caliphate for its own benefit, we are frankly entering the realm of political utopia. Various Islamist movements, the Muslim Brotherhood for example, but above all the Hizb al-tahrir, have made it one of the watchwords of their political programs. But for triumphant Arab nationalism, the caliphate idea is identified with the Ottoman caliphate placed practically under the same plan as European colonialism.

The Islamists then preferred to speak of the Islamic State, which resulted in an attempt at caliphal concretization/resurrection with the “Islamic State in Iraq and Sham” in 2014.

This final version only has a relationship with the historical institution through a few verbal references and the same is true for the doctrinal content.

Thus the caliphal idea seems each time to dissolve into historical realities while powerfully asserting itself as an idea. It is this paradox that can be discerned in these contributions.