

What Did Abdulhamid II Identify as the Principal Threats to his Caliphate?

Written by Rupert Black

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RUPERT BLACK, JUL 11 2011

Since the conquest of the Hijaz in the sixteenth century, the position of the Ottoman Sultan as Caliph of all Muslims was “*one of the foundation stones of Ottoman legitimization ideology*”[1]. When Abdulhamid assumed the throne on 31st August 1876, he based his claim on three traditionally recognised justifications: firstly, his ancestor was Suleyman the Magnificent, who had received the responsibility of Caliph from the last Abbasid Caliph in 1517, secondly, it was based on the Umayyad claim of ‘divine will’, and thirdly, any Muslim ruler who could claim the power to protect the umma, based on Hanafist thinking, and as Suleyman had done, could claim the seat of Halife-i Muslimin[2]. His policy was partly aimed at the European Powers, who had Muslim subjects in many parts of their empires, such as the British in India, but it was also aimed at strengthening the support of the Muslims peoples of the Empire, who were under ideological attack[3]. The late nineteenth century was a period in which monarchies had to legitimate their existence against a backdrop of proto-nationalist calls for self-determination and rule. However, the Ottoman Empire was the only remaining independent Muslim power, and so Abdulhamid’s ascension was vested with prestige and accepted by the majority of Muslims inside and outside the Empire. But, it was for precisely this reason that opposition emerged to his claim.

The prestige that was vested in the seat of Caliph rested on the physical strength and success of the Empire, as it had done during the reign of Suleyman the Magnificent. Unlike his ancestor, Abdulhamid was unable to guarantee either: the disastrous war with Russia and the overt partition of the Empire concluded at the Congress of Berlin had brought his main basis of authority into question. This widespread loss in confidence crystallised opinion that the Caliphate should rest in Mecca, not the Porte[4]. These threats were based on the Sultan’s explicitly paranoid conception of Arab separatism and its ties with British intentions in the region. In the early years of his reign, he identified several principal threats to his Caliphate: *firstly*, the growing trend in British and Arab public thought that his seat was illegitimate, *secondly*, British dealings with Hijazi Arabs seeking independence, and *thirdly*, from the deposed Khedive of Egypt, who sparked a trend by publishing and circulating anti-Caliphal propaganda. The period this paper will examine begins with his ascension to the throne in 1876 up to the Egyptian Crisis of 1882.

The first vocal opposition to the Ottoman-Caliph came in 1877 in Britain[5]. His authority was publicly debated by retired civil servants, MPs and publicists. We can be certain that Abdulhamid was aware of this discussion for two reasons: firstly, his “morbid strain of insecurity and suspicious-mindedness”[6] made him overly receptive to any potential threat or challenge, especially one emanating from one the Great Powers, and secondly, the fact that he was such an assiduous student of European press. All of the attacks were aimed at his hereditary claim to the throne. George Birdwood, among others, stated that the Abbasid Caliphate in Egypt was not proven to be of holy descent, but more importantly, Ottoman Sultans could not claim the title of Caliph as they were not descendants of the Quraysh, the tribe of the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore it was heretical, illegal and the Amirs of Mecca should possess it. Others spoke out in support of the Ottoman claim. A orientalist scholar, G.P. Badger, argued on the grounds of practicality, saying that it should not be chosen from the Quraysh as they exert barely any influence outside the Hijaz and Abdulhamid has the right of any ‘pretender’ to the seat, thus making his rule legitimate. Although the Porte did not act to intervene in this debate, it aired views that challenged the very basis on which he ruled over his subjects.

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The views of Abdulhamid's proponents were in line with official British policy aimed at ensuring the loyalty of its Muslim subjects by maintaining the status quo. The arguments put forward by the opponents did, however, highlight an important point to British foreign policy makers. Since his ascension after the Balkan Crisis, Indian Muslims were displaying anxiety towards the Empire, to the detriment of British interests. The fact that this debate was public "almost certainly reflected the degree of anxiety caused by these stirrings of ominous portent with which the Ottomans were only too familiar"[7]. Britain was not the only place in which the talk of an Arab Caliphate was gaining currency, there were also stirrings inside the Empire.

Abdulhamid was aware of dangerous anti-Caliphate debate emerging from within the Ottoman Empire. The defeat against Russia precipitated Arab dissent in Syria[8]. Faced with the potential collapse of the Empire, the issue of the Ottoman-Caliphate was raised at a meeting with the Syrian Amir Abdulqadir, regarding the future of the vilayet. Although at the meeting the Amir himself was opposed to subverting the authority of Abdulhamid, his correspondence with a Lebanese Maronite notable, Yusuf Bek Karam, is revealing. In the event of a successful insurrection leading to the independence of the Arab provinces, he would install himself as ruler. Abdulhamid got wind of the meetings via the French consul in Istanbul, who Abdulqadir's cousin was communicating with. What alarmed Abdulhamid the most was that the insurrection may be backed by the French government. This leads on to the major threat that Abdulhamid saw to his Caliphate – foreign intrigue, in particular, the reports of British dealings in the Hijaz.

"By the 1880s, the primary external threat to the unity of the empire was seen to emanate from that ever-present bête noire of late Ottoman politics – 'British intrigue'...The Hijaz, distant and vulnerable, was the object of the Sultan's worst fears, the most recurring theme in them being the spectre of an 'Arab Caliphate'"[9]. In 1879, the Sultan received a report through Layard, a consul in Istanbul, that there existed a secret society seeking to free all Muslims of Christian control and they saw him as the main target for these activities. They apparently differed from the Syrian plot in one important aspect, that of the transference of the Caliphate from the Porte to Medina. Although evidence supporting the existence of this group is scant, they raised the important issue of Hijazi dissent towards Abdulhamid. Though genuinely concerned, he was not much surprised, as the recent Bedouin raids on Hajj caravans had suggested to him the beginnings of Arab Muslim antagonism.

The reports most probably stemmed from the intentions of Hussein Pasha to subvert Ottoman authority by cultivating the support of Britain in the name of the independence of the Hijazi vilayet and the return of the Caliphate to the Sharifs of Mecca[10]. The Sultan was not opposed to his Vali's winning the support of foreign powers, indeed he actively promulgated it, as he did not want foreign powers, many of whose citizens attended the Hajj, issuing consular complaints. "If the Ottoman sultan were to have credibility in the eyes of Muslims as the 'Protector of the Faithful' he had to be seen to be providing for their wellbeing. This meant, above all guaranteeing the security of the pilgrimage to the holy cities"[11]. Ali Bey had been thrown out of office for not courting the foreign consuls in Jedda. However, under this banner, Hussein Pasha began correspondence with British officials in 1879 stating his unwavering allegiance to any plans they had for the Hijaz. It would be logical to suggest that the British withdrawal of protection following the Treaty of Berlin also added a great deal to the Sultan's "*paranoid obsession*"[12]. Although the British were wary of disrupting the status quo, any extension of Ottoman authority over the Hijaz into the Persian Gulf would seriously threaten their interests in India. As such, Hussein's offerings were listened to cautiously, but seriously. They "eventually came to realise that Abdulhamid's preoccupation with the Caliphate was as much a reflection of his domestic insecurities as of his international ambitions: the British...learned to play upon his fears of a rival Arab Caliph"[13]. So, in this vain, they accepted Hussein's proposals in 1880 to send emissaries to Afghanistan as a measure for the British to quell Muslim antagonism, as well as court the officials of the holy cities. They were also motivated by general support for the Ottoman subject peoples' right to autonomy, as shown in the Egyptian Crisis in the early 1880s. However, in 1880, Hussein Pasha was mysteriously assassinated and the plot came to end, although "this was not possibly a coincidence"[14]. Ultimately, this led him to envisage plans such as the Hijaz Railway, to curry favour with subjects who viewed as subversive and open to the influence by the Foreign Powers.

Another principal threat that Abdulhamid identified came from the deposed Khedive of Egypt, Ismail Pasha, who had begun an anti-Caliphal campaign in 1879 outside the Empire in Italy[15]. The motive for his attack was more personal than it was ideological, however, that the Sultan took this threat seriously is evidenced by his immediate suppression

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of his two publications. Unsurprisingly, the Khedive's arguments were that the Caliphate was illegitimate and should reside in Egypt as it had previously. His second publication was more revolutionary, condoning the active overthrow of Abdulhamid by the ulama. He also criticised the incumbent's despotic leadership, suggesting that because of this, non-adherence to his authority by his Muslim subjects was not a sin. The publications did not reach the Hijaz, they were suppressed just in time by the Grand Vizier, but they were seen by the Vali of Syria. This not only raised the question of the problems that may arise from the circulation of anti-Caliphal propaganda, it also prompted others to follow suit. Louis Sabunji, a Syrian priest, and a prolific editor of previously pro-Ottoman publications such as *al-nahlah*, began releasing a pamphlet, *al-Khilafa*, that "particularly provoked Abdulhamid"[16]. The Porte had openly denigrated the Caliphate to all Muslims and followed on by inciting Ottoman and Indian Muslims to revolt against his position. It also frequently reported incidents of Arab disaffection within the Empire. The Sultan immediately banned its publication, which had impressively been circulated in Arabia, India and Iran. He saw it as so much of a threat that the Porte began propagandistically publishing its own pro-Ottoman newspapers, *al-Ghayra* and *al-Cawaib* (which also served against any designs foreign powers had in the borderlands)[17].

In conclusion, Abdulhamid perceived threats from several quarters. There were British interests at stake, such as the protection of their colony in India, which led them to entertain ideas of Arab separatism. This threat was the primary driving force behind all of Abdulhamid's thinking during this period, such as the building of the Hijaz Railway and also a Hijaz Fleet in the Gulf, and would ultimately lead to the British exercising that entertained aspiration during the First World War. The khedive's writings in exile sanctioned revolt that would not be sinful to Islam, with extremely destructive effects in Egypt. Although events leading up to the 1880s, such as the Treaty of Berlin that partitioned the Empire and removed British protection, were the main reasons that led to much of this idea of separatism and the transference of Caliphate, perhaps one could suggest that the biggest threat to Abdulhamid at this time was his overarching paranoia that only a minority of ministers agreed with.

[1] Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains*, (London, 1998), p 46.

[2] Buzpinar, Ş. T., 'Opposition to the Ottoman Caliphate in the early years of Abdulhamid II', *Die Welt des Islams*, xxxvi(I), (1996),

[3] Hourani, A., *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1789-1939*, (London, 1963), p 107.

[4] Buzpinar, Ş. T., 'Opposition to the Ottoman Caliphate in the early years of Abdulhamid II', *Die Welt des Islams*, xxxvi(I), (1996)

[5] Buzpinar, Ş. T., 'Opposition to the Ottoman Caliphate in the early years of Abdulhamid II', *Die Welt des Islams*, xxxvi(I), (1996)

[6] F. A. K. Yasamee, *Ottoman Diplomacy. Abdülhamid II and the Berlin Settlement 1878-1888*, (İstanbul, 1996), p 19

[7] Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains*, (London, 1998), p 54

[8] Buzpinar, Ş. T., 'Opposition to the Ottoman Caliphate in the early years of Abdulhamid II', *Die Welt des Islams*, xxxvi(I), (1996)

[9] Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains*, (London, 1998), p 61

[10] Buzpinar, Ş. T., 'The Hijaz, Abdulhamid II and Amir Hussein's secret dealings with the British', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 31(1), (1995).

[11] Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains*, (London, 1998), p 60

[12] F. A. K. Yasamee, *Ottoman Diplomacy. Abdülhamid II and the Berlin Settlement 1878-1888*, (İstanbul, 1996), p

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[13] F. A. K. Yasamee, *Ottoman Diplomacy*. p 49

[14] F. A. K. Yasamee, *Ottoman Diplomacy*, p 89

[15] Buzpinar, Ş. T., 'Opposition to the Ottoman Caliphate in the early years of Abdulhamid II', *Die Welt des Islams*, xxxvi(l), (1996)

[16] Buzpinar, Ş. T., 'Opposition to the Ottoman Caliphate in the early years of Abdulhamid II', *Die Welt des Islams*, xxxvi(l), (1996), p 78

[17] Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains*, (London, 1998), p 61

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