

# 1914: when imperial Germany reinvented the caliphate...by Michel Gurfinkiel



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At the beginning of the Great War, say the German strategists, the Muslim world will be the decisive factor. They rely on jihad to bend the British, the French and the Russians in the East. This will leave traces.

“It is lawful to shed the blood of infidels – with the exception of those who are our friends. Grab infidels and kill them wherever you can. Whoever kills even one of the infidels who dominate us ... will be rewarded by God. Let every Muslim swear to kill at least three to four. A Daesh sermon against Christians or Yazidis? A manifesto to prepare for the massacre of Bataclan? A Hamas call against Israel? No. This text dates from the last weeks of 1914. Written in Arabic, it was printed

in Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman Empire. And it will be distributed throughout the Muslim world by emissaries Turkish, but also German. In the name of Sultan Mehmed V, who is also the Caliph of the Sunnis...?

The ambassador of the United States to Constantinople, Henry Morgenthau, obtained a copy. Representative of a neutral power, he discusses with his German counterpart, Baron Konrad von Wagenheim. He confided: "In the war that has just begun, the Muslim world will be the decisive factor." Morgenthau notes in 1918: "Comfortably seated in his office overlooking the Bosphorus, shooting at a big black cigar, Wagenheim revealed to me a plan to lift Muslim fanatical masses against Christians."

In 1914, almost the entire Muslim world, with the exception of the Ottoman Empire (25 million, of which 20 million Muslims), Persia (10 million) and Afghanistan (5 million) passed under the control of European Christian powers. Some 70 million Muslims, mostly Sunni, live in British India, 40 million in the Dutch Indies, 15 million in British North-East Africa (Egypt and Sudan), 15 million in the Russian Empire, 10 million in French North Africa, about fifteen million in French, British, Belgian and German sub-Saharan Africa, 2 million in the Balkans. In total, nearly 170 million faithful, out of a little more than 200 million, are thus "captive". Wagenheim is right: for a religion that has long found its main justification in military conquest, this situation is unbearable. But can the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph really stir up a "holy war"? Or to put the question more precisely: is the Sultan a credible caliph?

Originally, the caliphs were the "successors" (khilafat in Arabic) of the Prophet, chosen from his relatives: companions in arms or parents. The fifth caliph, Muawiyah, transforms the caliphate into a hereditary monarchy. His dynasty, the Umayyad, reigns for nearly a century, from 661 to 750, conquers new lands, from Spain to India, and probably gives

Islam its definitive form as a religion. Reversed in the Middle East by the Abbassids, the Umayyads are maintained in Spain. To these two rival families based on the same "tradition" (Sunnah) soon opposes a third dynasty, the Fatimids, which seizes Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and the Levant. The latter are "Shiites" (Shiatu Ali, "supporters of Ali"): unlike the "Sunnis", they believe that the supreme power can only return to the descendants of the Prophet, through his daughter Fatima and his son-in-law Ali, the fourth caliph.

The three dynasties compete magnificently for several centuries. In the 10th century, Cordoba, the Umayyad capital of Spain, has nearly 500,000 inhabitants, and Baghdad, the Abbasid capital, more than a million. Cairo, the Fatimid capital, reaches 300,000 inhabitants in the eleventh century. But little by little, power goes everywhere to "sultans", military leaders of Turkish, Kurdish or Berber origin: the Umayyad caliphate died in 1031, the Fatimid in 1171. As for the Abbasid caliphate, transferred to Cairo in 1261 it survived nominally until the early sixteenth century under the protection of the Mameluks. In 1517, the Ottoman Sultan Selim I conquered Egypt: Mohamed al-Mutakawil III, the last Abbasid caliph, abdicated in his favor and passed on his insignia, the Sword and the Coat of the Prophet. Selim I and his heirs accept title and honors, but intend to remain above all temporal rulers: they delegate religious authority to a cleric, Sheikh al-Islam.

Paradoxically, it is the double geopolitical decline of the Ottoman Empire and the Muslim world, from the eighteenth century, which restores its importance to the caliphate. For two reasons at least.

- Until 1800, the Ottoman Empire, straddling Europe and the East, has as many subjects or Christian vassals as Muslim subjects. But Muslims become majority in a weakened Empire, after the progressive loss of the European provinces. In this new context, the caliphate becomes a factor of unity, beyond

the ethnic or linguistic differences between Turkish, Kurdish and Arab Muslims. And therefore of political legitimacy.

- By emphasizing his caliph dignity, the Ottoman sultan poses as “pope” of a Muslim world enslaved or vassalized. In terms of today, we would say that it has a significant “soft power”, especially through the pious fraternities (tariqat) that structure the popular devotion. This allows it to negotiate unceasingly the survival of its states against the promise, more or less tacit, to contribute to the tranquility of colonial empires. Or conversely against the threat of a religious conflagration.

The “califal restoration” became a coherent policy, “pan-Islamism” only under the last true Ottoman ruler, Abd-ul-Hamid II (1876-1909). At the moment when William II, Emperor of Germany, offers him a kind of economic and military protectorate. The Sultan, who is considered disreputable in most European countries for covering the massacres of Armenians, can only accept. The most tangible sign of this alliance is the Berlin-Bagdad railway line, which began construction in 1903.

Abdul Hamid II was overthrown in 1909. But ultra-nationalist officers, trained by the Germans, seized power in Constantinople in 1913. At their head, the dashing Enver Pasha. When the Great War broke out in 1914, the junta aligned itself with the Central Empires. Berlin sends generals, officers and engineers to supervise the Turkish army, as well as weapons and equipment. This contributed to many successes: the Germano-Ottomans invaded Sinai in 1915, drove the Allies back to the Dardanelles in 1915, and drove the British back to Mesopotamia in 1916. But the card should be the holy war.

For the German strategists, it is above all to take the Allies on the back: to threaten the Russians from Asia, to drive Britain out of India and the Suez Canal, and to snatch the North Africa to the French. The Ottomans dream of founding a

new universal Muslim empire, more powerful than that of Selim I. Enver Pasha has another dream: to reunite all Turkish peoples, from the Bosphorus to the Gobi Desert, into one nation-state.

The plan is funded by Berlin, in gold marks. Constantinople activates the tariqat. German adventurers – Max von Oppenheim, Wilhelm Wassmuss – go out into the field to coordinate operations. Knowing perfectly the local languages ??or cultures, impassive, indefatigable, they are the equivalents of Lawrence of Arabia. In addition to being successful, the British devote themselves to bestselling novels: John Buchan's *Thirty-Nine Steps*, published in 1915, and his sequel, published in 1916, *Greenmantle*. Does this grand design result in failure? Yes and no. Yes, because universal jihad does not break out in 1915 or 1916, as planned. Yes, because the Ottomans were finally defeated in 1918, just like their German protectors. Yes, because Mustafa Kemal, the general who saves Turkey in 1919, abolishes the sultanate in 1922 and the caliphate in 1923.

No, because the calls of Mehmed V contribute to the loyalty of Ottoman Muslims, including Arabs, until the last days of the conflict: the "Great Revolt" directed by Lawrence seduces in fact only the Sherif of Mecca and some Bedouins. No, more sinister, because anti-Christian propaganda leads to the massacre of Armenians first, then Greeks and Assyrians.

But the real impact of the German plan is measured in the longer term. The German-Turkish propaganda of 1914 prepares the minds for what will soon be called anti-colonialism. In the very heart of the Muslim world, the 1914 attempt modernized and cleared the notion of caliphate, beyond the decay of its Ottoman rulers. Tarikat preach throughout the twentieth century, the establishment or restoration of a theocracy. And they are reaching their goal more and more often.

In January 2014, almost a hundred years after the exhortation of Mehmed V's jihad, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed "Islamic State" in Raqqa in eastern Syria. Six months later, he claims the title of caliph. Is he dead in 2017, as we said? Is he on the run, having changed his name or face? All assumptions are allowed. But what is certain is that the caliphate did not fade with him.