

**THE DECLINE OF THE OTTOMAN CALIPHATE AND THE PROCESS OF  
SECULARIZATION IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD UNDER WESTERN INFLUENCE**

**Boltaev Okhun**

Asia International University

Email: [9690798@gmail.com](mailto:9690798@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** This article analyzes the political decline of the Ottoman Caliphate and the processes of secularization that emerged in the Islamic world under the influence of Western imperial expansion from the late 18th to the early 20th century. It examines the impact of the Küçük Kaynarca Treaty, the incorporation of Muslim territories into Western empires, the rise of Pan-Islamism, and the policies of Sultan Abdulhamid II. The study highlights how the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 marked the beginning of a new era characterized by the formation of nation-states in the Muslim world, drawing on relevant historical sources.

**Keywords:** Ottoman Caliphate, Western colonialism, Pan-Islamism, Abdulhamid II, Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, Dār al-Ḥarb, Sharia, Sunni–Shia division, modernization, secularization, Islamic political thought, Muslim societies, international relations, religious–political institutions, First World War.

From the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, the Islamic world experienced profound upheavals marked by deep transformations in political and religious institutions and the emergence of new ideological paradigms. At the center of these changes stood the Ottoman Caliphate, which for centuries had served as the symbolic and political pillar of the Muslim world. The expansion of Western colonialism, the advancement of military technologies, the formation of modern state structures, the adoption of new principles in international politics, and the spread of internal modernization in Muslim societies directly influenced the fate of the caliphate. The caliphate's gradual distancing from political power, its transformation into a largely symbolic institution, and its eventual abolition signaled the beginning of a new era not only in Turkish history but in the entire Islamic world.

The institution of the caliphate emerged after the death of the Prophet Muhammad as a mechanism for governing the Muslim community, and from the outset it combined both religious and political authority. However, disputes over the succession of Ali led to the first major schism in Islamic history—the division between Sunnis and Shi'is. While Sunnis recognized the first four caliphs as legitimate successors of the Prophet, Shi'is maintained that legitimate succession belonged only to Ali and his descendants. This disagreement was not merely theological; it had a lasting impact on the development of Islamic political institutions. Moreover, the Islamic intellectual tradition lacked the Western-style dichotomy between “religious” and “secular,” or “church” and “state.” Because the Sharia combined religious, legal, political, economic, and ethical norms, the Muslim community historically functioned as an integrated unity of “religion and state.”

By the eighteenth century, increasing Western military and political pressure on the Muslim world compelled the caliphate to assume a new role in international relations. The Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774) was among the earliest examples of this shift. The treaty declared the Crimean Tatars politically independent from the Ottoman Empire, but obliged them to recognize the Ottoman caliph in religious matters. This reflected Western attempts to interpret Islam

through the lens of the Western church–state dichotomy. In reality, the caliphate—unlike the Papacy—had always combined religious and political authority. Western Orientalists nevertheless drew false analogies between the two institutions, interpreting the caliphate as a purely “spiritual office,” which fundamentally contradicted Islamic political thought. Such misunderstandings produced significant political consequences, particularly as they were used to justify colonial rule.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, large parts of the Muslim world fell under Western imperial control. Millions of Muslims found themselves living under non-Muslim rulers after the British conquest of India, the French occupation of Algeria and Tunisia, and the Russian expansion into the Caucasus and Central Asia. This situation had no precedent in classical Sharia discussions. According to traditional jurisprudence, lands ruled by non-Muslims were classified as *Dār al-Ḥarb*—“the abode of war”—and recovering them through jihad was considered a religious obligation. Yet given the political and military reality of the time, neither Muslim states nor Muslim populations were capable of pursuing this theoretical obligation. This divergence between classical doctrine and historical circumstances generated profound tensions.

With the collapse of major Sunni Muslim powers one after another, the Ottoman Empire remained the only significant political force in the Muslim world. This elevated the symbolic value of the caliphate. A title that had long been largely ceremonial began to acquire renewed political significance, especially during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II. He skillfully exploited Western misconceptions about the caliphate to foster Muslim unity against colonial domination. Promoting the idea of Pan-Islamism, he sought to strengthen ties with Muslims across Asia and Africa, expanded diplomatic contacts, and built the Hejaz Railway to consolidate control over Mecca and Medina. Although his policies alarmed Western powers, they resonated deeply within the Muslim world.

The modern revival of the caliphate contributed to a strengthening of religious–political identity among Muslims, increased solidarity, and a heightened sense of resistance to Western colonialism. Yet these developments could not resolve the Ottoman Empire’s internal crises, including economic stagnation, administrative instability, and the rise of nationalism. After the First World War, the fragmentation of the empire, the division of Ottoman lands among European powers, and the rise of Turkish nationalism contributed to the final collapse of the caliphal system.

On 3 March 1924, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey abolished the caliphate, thereby bringing an end to a centuries-old political–religious institution. This decision marked a turning point not only in Turkish history but also in the history of the Islamic world. The abolition of the caliphate encouraged the rise of the nation-state model across Muslim-majority regions, the adoption of secular educational systems, the modernization of legal structures, and the establishment of new principles in international relations. It also led to the replacement of Pan-Islamist ideas with nationalism, territorial identity, and political movements rooted in local interests.

Thus, the historical developments of the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries demonstrate how the caliphate gradually diverged from its original functions, how Western political influence left deep marks on the Muslim world, and how the reinterpretation of religious and political institutions ushered in a process of secularization. The abolition of the caliphate inaugurated a

new historical phase—the era of nation-states in the Muslim world. Today, the caliphate is studied as a historical and intellectual phenomenon rather than a viable political model, yet its legacy continues to occupy an important symbolic place in the political consciousness of Muslim societies.

## REFERENCES

1. Arnold, T. W. *The Caliphate*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924.
2. Toynbee, A. J. *A Study of History*. London: Oxford University Press, 1934–1961.
3. Gibb, H. A. R. *Whither Islam? A Survey of Modern Movements in the Moslem World*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1932.
4. Hodgson, M. G. S. *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*. Vol. 3. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.
5. Keddie, Nikki R. *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.
6. Karpat, Kemal H. *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
7. Shaw, Stanford J., and Ezel Kural Shaw. *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*. Vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
8. Zürcher, Erik J. *Turkey: A Modern History*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2004.
9. Lewis, Bernard. *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
10. Lapidus, Ira M. *A History of Islamic Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.