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5. Reforming Muslim Politics

Rashid Rida's Visions of Caliphate and Muslim Independence

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Abstract

Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865-1935), a prolific writer and publisher who was also politically active, is generally known to Western readers as a Syrian or Lebanese-Syrian Islamic modernist. He is particularly associated with efforts to reform Islam (*islam*) during the colonial period. This essay considers some of his writings on political matters and the caliphate. This involves some of his thinking in the tumultuous era leading up to November 1922, when the Turkish National Assembly abolished the Ottoman Sultanate-Caliphate, leaving a merely spiritual Caliphate in its place; his seminal book *The Caliphate*, written in the aftermath of that action; and some of his thinking following the final abolition of the Caliphate in March 1924. While acknowledging shifts, reversals, and inconsistencies, the essay also points to a firm and constant element in Rida's agenda: enabling Muslim sovereign authority insofar as circumstances would allow. Other considerations would bend to that objective. In this respect, his reformist project on the caliphate was focused more on the circumstances of Muslims as a people than on the nature of Islam as a religion.

Keywords: Caliphate, Rashid Rida, *Islah*, Islamic revival, Islamic modernism

Introduction

This essay considers some of Rashid Rida's discussions on Muslim political affairs and the Caliphate (632-1924). Rida (1865-1935) was born in the village of Al-Qalamoun on the Mediterranean Coast of Lebanon and based in Cairo for most of his career. He is generally known as a Syrian or Syrian-Lebanese Islamic modernist or reformer. Additionally, he has been identified, albeit rather glibly, with so-called "Islamic fundamentalism." Rida's fame derives mainly from his writings and publications – for the larger part of four decades he typically published hundreds of pages annually – while he was also politically active, having dealings with some of the key figures of his day. He has sometimes been regarded as overshadowed by his more famous predecessors. These include the reformer Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897), who Rida never met but was inspired by, and Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), Rida's mentor. As post-independence Muslim nationalisms and secularisms have disenchanted many, interest in other visions for Muslim modernity has grown, and Rida's particular brand of reformist revivalism has been found worthy of new scholarly investigation, with recent years seeing a proliferation of academic discussion, writing, and translation.

Encapsulating Rida's mission is not straightforward, given the diverse range of agendas he engaged over a long period. Above all, he was an advocate of *islah*, literally rendering things in their proper or pure state, a qur'anic term whose modern usage has come to be associated with the idea of reform generally, and with al-Afghani, 'Abduh, and Rida particularly. Thus, while Rida is frequently and not inaccurately described as a "modernist," "reformer" might better align with his self-understanding or self-description. *Islah*, as such, is not inherently or distinctively modern, and it might be said that the primary sense in which Rida and his reformist predecessors were modern was that they lived in the modern world and seriously reckoned with the challenges and opportunities it provided. Rida's writings show challenges to be many and daunting: his Muslim coreligionists, or certainly their majority, were beset by factionalism, deviation, and intellectual stagnation. Most troubling, they were subjugated and quiescent in what Rida refers to as the politics of civil society or the social-civil-political realm. References to these ailments abound in Rida's works, together with a relentless emphasis on the failings of Muslim leaders in religion (*din*) and in life in this world (*dunya*). Rida perhaps saw himself with 'Abduh as filling a void in leadership, as suggested by the title of his famed journal, *Al-Manar* (1898-1935), the "beacon" or "lighthouse" that across tens of thousands of pages illuminated a path – "we have shown the way" – for those lacking guidance and afflicted ignorance.

It would not be difficult to make a case for viewing Rida as wavering, conflicted, or even opportunistic, and some commentators have alluded to this. Through shifting contingencies, his views on such matters as non-Muslims and their religions, Wahhabism, the caliphate, the Arabs vis-à-vis the Turks, Muslim leadership – such as that of Sharif Husayn of Mecca (1853/54-1931), the Ottoman Sultans, including 'Abd al-Hamid II, the Young Turks, and Mustafa Kemal (1881-1938) – and the great powers were far from uniform, and sometimes simply inconsistent. Yet Rida was constant in supporting whatever he found lending to Pan-Islam (*al-jami'ah al-islamiyyah*) – Muslim unity – along with political independence and cultural

vitality. Thus, as events developed, he would change and even reverse positions in order to maintain a focus on what was ultimately most pressing. To take one example, a one-time supporter of Sharif Husayn as the champion of Islam, he would become one of his most vehement critics. This essay seeks to draw attention to a key feature of Rida's reformist project. It was not primarily reform in a Protestant sense (see Hamzah: 98-99), or concerned principally with theology, doctrine, or even specifically "religious" matters. Rather, his endeavors on the caliphate are more concerned with the status of Muslims as a people than with that of Islam as a religion, which is not, needless to say, that he was not engaged with the latter. But that does not appear to have been the primary object when it comes to the caliphate. Considering his efforts, which consistently uphold whatever would best lend to enhancing the status of Muslims as a people, particularly regarding the preservation of their sovereign authority, might illuminate some of his evolving and shifting positions.

Rashid Rida and the Caliphate

Rida wrote and published many works on Muslim politics and the caliphate. His best-known work is *The Caliphate* (1922-23), serialized in his journal, then published as a book. Its full title is, *The Caliphate or the Supreme Imamate: Researches on Shari'ah, Governance, Society, and Reform*. Rida was prompted to write after the Turkish National Assembly abolished the Ottoman Sultanate, November 1, 1922. The last Sultan-Caliph, Wahid al-Din (Mehmed VI, r. 1918-1922), was deposed and replaced with 'Abd al-Majid II (r. 1922-24), who ruled only as Caliph. Thus, the Sultanate-Caliphate, ostensibly providing both temporal and spiritual leadership, was reduced to a merely spiritual Caliphate, which was in turn abolished sixteen months later, March 3, 1924, by the Republic of Turkey. Rida's book, written between these events, is perhaps his most prominent. It has been commented upon extensively, and is one of the most important modern works on the caliphate. It also shows the stage his evolving thinking had reached by the winter of 1922-23. Prior to that, his views had moved through various stages (see Haddad 1997).

The Reign of Sultan 'Abd al-Hamid II (1876-1909)

During the era of 'Abd al-Hamid II, Rida supported the Ottoman Sultanate-Caliphate. His writings set down several themes that he would subsequently reiterate, including criticism of Muslim factionalism and madhhabism, namely, partisanship for a school of law, and championing of Arabic. Rida was fundamentally concerned with Muslim sovereignty and the preservation of uncolonized Arab lands. This informed his call for Muslim cooperation across ethnic lines, and his view that the Ottoman Caliphate was not merely legitimate but vital. This is in spite of the fact that, as with its Umayyad and 'Abbasid predecessors, it was dynastic and, as such, contrary to Islamic teaching. Rida took an accommodating approach that might be compared to classical predecessors accommodating a "caliphate of conquest," with caliphs ruling through force, not consultation, consent, and adherence to shari'ah. With the European threat ever-present, the Ottoman Caliphate was an indispensable buffer, the Turks being the Muslims' greatest power in material terms, complementing the Arabs' spiritual preeminence. This is not a particularly remarkable stance, given that Islam is a religion of power. Rida walked the difficult line of supporting Arabism while calling for Muslim unity and rejecting ethnic prejudice as un-Islamic. To that end, he on occasion read Arab preeminence in terms of historical accident rather than inherent traits. When the Committee for Union and Progress

(CUP) – “Ittihadists” – assumed effective power in 1908, Rida initially set aside concerns about its nationalism. But he would then come to oppose its policies, accusing it of abandoning Islam and Ottomanism for nationalism, spreading heresy, turning Islamic government into European government, and sowing intrigue. In this, he adopted a stance of opposing state policy but not the state per se, treading the difficult line of holding to Ottomanism while also working for Arab unity (*Al-Manar* 12, 4 [May 19, 1909]: 279; see also Haddad 1997: 254-62).

The Deposition of ‘Abd al-Hamid II (1909)

Rida had acknowledged ‘Abd al-Hamid II’s leadership, but he welcomed the CUP’s deposition of him in April, 1909 as Islamically lawful. Writing in his journal the following month he referred to it as a great portent, lesson, and act of grace. He depicts the sultan as a tyrant who committed multiple misdeeds: “we saw that he feared everything but God” (*Al-Manar* 12, 4 [May 19, 1909]: 276-79). For Rida, deposition was a sign that God would end all tyranny, and he urged the Muslim community to unite against oppression, per the qur’anic maxim that “God does not change the condition of a people unless they change themselves” (Q 13:11). Rida then offered a dramatic and optimistic reading of the appointment of Muhammad V, then aged 64. He found in it the first instance of a shari‘ah-based process for determining a caliph since the era of the rightly-guided caliphs (632-61), twelve hundred years earlier:

Following the choice those in authority (*ulu al-amr*), and the representatives of all of the Ottoman community (*ummah*), allegiance was pledged to him. At the pledge ceremony, he said: “I am the first king of the era of the Constitution and freedom.” *We say: that his case is the first in which the pledge followed the form of the shari‘ah.* His predecessors took power merely through inheriting it. It was conferred upon him following the choice of the people who loose and bind. Allegiance to him was given through shaking hands, as with the rightly guided caliphs, not by kissing the hand and the edges of robes, as was the case with his tyrannical predecessors (*Al-Manar* 12, 4 [May 19, 1909]: 288, emphasis added).

Rida’s optimism did not last. Effective control lay not with the new sultan but with the CUP, whose vision differed greatly from his own and in whom he would lose faith (see also Busool: 105-15).

The Great War and Its Aftermath

During the First World War – “the great war” or “the war” in Rida’s discussions – fears of Ottoman collapse inclined him towards the prospect of an Arab caliphate, with Britain an ally in the endeavor. It might be observed that his views regarding Britain were not uniform. Notwithstanding the numerous criticisms he made of its empire, in this connection he envisioned an Anglo-Arab alliance, although he rejected the idea of a caliphate dependent on the British. He was apparently encouraged by what he viewed as positive indications from British officials. He was, he wrote, assured that should Turkey join with England’s enemies: “If the Arabs seize then the chance to proclaim their independence . . . Great Britain would help them in every possible way” (from a memorandum, cited in Haddad 1997: 264). Yet Rida’s views were misplaced, and, as Mahmoud Haddad notes, there was no official

confirmation of what he seems to have believed regarding British support for a caliphate and “the complete independence of Islam in its cradle” (from a memorandum, cited in Haddad 1997: 265). His positive comments on British intentions are notable, given some of his other statements about Britain’s longstanding deceitfulness and utter self-interest. The effort for greater Arab autonomy was informed by what remained to Rida’s understanding most pressing, Muslim independence and prestige. He commented that the two noble sanctuaries (Mecca and Medina) would be repairable, but destruction of Muslim honor and sovereign authority would be final. While noting that such sentiment inclined colonial Muslims towards the Ottoman Caliphate, the prospect of Ottoman demise led him to plan for Arab autonomy. This is seen in “The General Organic Law of the Arab Empire,” a program he submitted to the British in December, 1915. This suggests decentralized, constitutional rule, a temporal-spiritual division of labor, and leaves unresolved the question of who holds ultimate spiritual authority, the caliph or his advisor, the Shaykh al-Islam (Haddad 1997: 263-69).

Rida then concluded, apparently by early 1916, that the British were not supporters of an Arab caliphate. When Sharif Husayn declared an Arab revolt in June of that year, Rida supported it, again walking difficult lines because he remained loyal to the Ottoman Caliphate. Not wanting to be perceived as anti-Turkish, he separated the Caliphate from the CUP, supporting the revolt towards preserving Muslim control of the cradle of Islam. That is, in view of the apparently likely prospect of British victory in the war, he pursued a strategy for preventing more Muslim lands falling into non-Muslim hands. Years later, in 1921, Rida revealed that he had warned Husayn about declaring himself caliph, given his pledge to the Ottoman caliph, Muhammad Rashad (Mehmed V), and expressed hope that Husayn become “King of the Arabs.” Rida would later become one of Husayn’s most vehement critics (Busool: 175-218; Haddad 1997: 269-70).

After the war, Rida advocated Arab independence and Arab-Turkish cooperation, his endeavors again hinging upon the principle of independence, as for instance in a 1919 memo to Lloyd George (Rida 1923: 114-15). At this juncture, in keeping with prevailing Arab sentiment, he supported Mustafa Kemal, and he welcomed the Turkish victory over the Greeks as a defeat of crusaderism. He deemed the 1922 deposition of Wahid al-Din (Mehmed VI) sound. He found that while the new caliphate, as purely spiritual, was conceived poorly, it should be supported because those behind it, the Turks, remained the Muslims’ preeminent power relative to Europe. Thus, as before, Muslims should support them. Rida here sees the Turks’ action as a short-term step that, on the one hand, did not lead to immediate harm – if the caliphate’s temporal dimension was by that point merely nominal or fictitious, little was lost through its abolition – and, on the other hand, could be emended at an unspecified future juncture (*Al-Manar* 23, 9 [November 19, 1922]: 713-20; see also Haddad 1997: 272-73). Thus, Rida appears to prioritize the Muslims’ practical needs over the ideals of Islamic teaching.

Rida’s 1923 Book, *The Caliphate*

This is the context in which Rida then wrote what would be published as his famed book on the caliphate, its first installment appearing in the December 8, 1922, issue of *Al-Manar*. The book has been commented upon extensively over a period of many decades, and even described as the most important discussion of the caliphate since that of Abu al-Hasan al-Mawardi (d. 1058) in his seminal *The Ordinances of Governance and the Institutions of the Religion*. It

was introduced and translated into French by Henri Laoust in 1938 (other works on *The Caliphate* include: Haddad 1997, 1989, 2013; Enayat; Kerr; Willis; Ardic; Zaman; Dudoignon et al.). The work of Laoust and Rida's many other Western interpreters will not be rehearsed at length here, but certain features of the book are worth highlighting. Rida's book may be seen together with other works on the topic written during his era, including those he published (for modern views on the caliphate, see Pankhurst; Hassan). These include the Arabist, Pan-Islamist *Umm al-Qura* (1899) by 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1849-1902), presented as the proceedings of an ostensible 1898 conference convened in Mecca to replace 'Abd al-Hamid II with a Qurayshi Arab caliph based in Mecca. It became better known after Rida serialized it in the fifth volume of *Al-Manar* (1902-03).¹ Rida also published an Arabic translation of Abul Kalam Azad's Urdu *The Caliphate and the Arabian Peninsula (Khalifat aur Jazirat al-Arab)*, delivered as a speech to the Bengal Provincial Khilafat Conference in early 1920, at a time when the Indian Khalifatist movement (see Minault; Qureshi) was invested in the Ottoman Caliphate. Azad warned of British intentions in the Middle East, and deemed defense of the Ottoman Caliphate a religious duty, rejecting the notion that only an Arab caliphate was truly legitimate (Willis: 724). The treatise of 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq, published in 1925 is also notable. To the dismay of Rida and many others, 'Abd al-Raziq sensationally argued that the caliphate was an innovation, not a legal requirement of Islam, which was "a religion, not a state" (see Abdel Razek; Ali). In so doing he brought himself notoriety and great personal cost, not having had a high profile before publishing his ideas.

Rida's book has three parts: a stylistically conventional introduction (not included in Laoust's French translation); a summary of theory; and commentary on the situation in the winter of 1922-23, together with a vision of a revived caliphate. His introduction includes standard reformist rhetoric on Muslim ignorance, deviation, and weakness, and, notwithstanding the apparent implications of what he will go on to delineate, a clear affirmation that Islam fundamentally integrates twin dimensions: religion and life in this world, temporal and spiritual, virtue and material benefit.

While the title page offers the book to "the courageous Turkish people, the party of reform in the Arab and Indian lands, and the other Islamic peoples," the discussion soon turns to the Turks specifically. Following Qur'anic verses on God making people successors or caliphs on earth (*khala'if al-ard*), Rida describes his book as an investigation of how "peoples succeed (*khilafah*) others in sovereignty and rule on earth," and of "succession of individuals and dynasties amongst peoples" (1923: 2). He notes that succession may be "rightful and lawful" or "illegitimately bequeathed." Yet he does not elaborate, or, perhaps in pragmatic reticence, mark any particular caliphate as having been illegitimate. He goes on to call upon the Turkish people, advising that in spite of the Great War's traumas, its upheavals have presented Muslims and Eastern peoples with an historic opportunity. Notably, he identifies one case where this is seen:

The greatest manifestation of this opportunity has been the Turkish people's awakening from their hibernation, which has toppled the Ottoman Sultanate,

¹ See *Al-Manar* 5 (1902-03): 26-32, 65-72, 105-10, 141-46, 183-90, 223-28, 264-68, 304-8, 344-49, 381-85, 501-5, 668-78, 703-10, 771-78, 825-33, 859-64, 899-910.

their strengthening of the bond of brotherhood with the Iranian and Afghani states and disseminating the call (*da'wah*) for solidarity with other non-Arab Islamic peoples, and their success in eliminating foreign privileges and cutting back other political and financial bonds and restraints (1923: 6).

Rida urges his audience not to be reconciled to the status quo, or seduced by the Muslim masses approving of a spiritual caliphate. He avers: "Nothing causes Muslims to ruin their worldly lives and their religion more than their common people's approval of all that their governments and states do" (1923: 7). Rida brings this together with the "noble sentiments" of Muslims worn down by the burdens of colonial rule, sentiments that can be harnessed through the provision of guidance, and one imagines that he saw himself working to that end. Thus, Rida calls upon the Turks to work in concert with the Arabs towards a revived caliphate, an institution whose governance Rida depicts in apologetic terms as superior to all alternatives, including materialism, anarchism, and bolshevism. Indeed, Rida argues, the war had revealed the deficiencies of European materialistic culture to such an extent that if a *genuine* caliphate – one eliminating the oppression of some by others on the basis of wealth or race – was established, many Europeans would support it.

Here it might be helpful to distinguish Rida's critique of materialism from his views on Christian or Western culture per se. Frequently, his works distinguish authentic Christian religion as a force for good from what he saw as the avaricious, self-interested materialism of modern European culture. Further, Rida by no means regarded all Western states or leaders in negative terms, as seen in his endorsement of some of Woodrow Wilson's comments concerning the war and its aftermath. In December 1918, Rida published several of Wilson's speeches in Arabic translation, finding the president speaking with a prophetic voice. As Elizabeth Thompson has suggested, that a leading member of the ulama would express such a sentiment towards a sitting U.S. president might appear notable when viewed from the present juncture.

Rida continues the theme of the war playing a pivotal role in human history. It has revealed a turn of destiny and, he suggests, overturned established notions of European advancement and Islamic backwardness. Thus, he appeals to "living," "courageous," "thoughtful," and "wise" Turks as the Muslim people most able through their current circumstances to bring about an Islamic renaissance. To this end, he expresses his hopes that they work together with the Arabs and seize the distinctive opportunity – a theme he will reiterate – provided by the present moment. Their ability to do so hinges upon their harnessing of Islam's resources, and establishing its genuine caliphate: "O living Turkish people: Islam is the mightiest spiritual power on the earth. It is Islam that can revive the East's civilization, and save the West's civilization" (1923: 10). Rida concludes his introductory comments by highlighting what he has offered the Turkish people, his discourse establishing how the caliphate can be a source of benefit for all people, while also duly noting how the Muslims have perpetrated a crime against themselves by mismanaging it, or dislodging it from the position in which it was originally set up. He finishes on a forthright note: "take what I am giving you and be amongst the thankful, and thankfulness is but acting on it" (1923: 8). Before moving to survey classical theory, Rida provides some further context for his rationale for publishing. The issue of the caliphate had been, he notes, dormant until awoken by fast moving recent events, with the formation of a republican state devoid of a sultan yet retaining a

spiritual caliph. Here Rida emphasizes that such upheaval has led to a proliferation of discussion, much of it confused or rash. Thus, per the qur'anic commandments to "explain clearly" (Q 3:187) and not "hide the truth when you know it" (Q 2:42), Rida finds that he was duty bound under the shari'ah to elucidate its ordinances, following a rhetorical line similar to that seen in some of his other writings on controversial subjects, such as Muslim-Christian relations (see, e.g., 1905: introduction). Notably, Rida includes his support for the new Turkish government among his reasons for publishing, informed only by the always preeminent concern for "the standing of the religion and the welfare of the Muslims." He adds that nothing harms Muslims more than their servility to the strong among them (1923: 9). Again, the Muslim community more than the Islamic religion is the primary object.

Rida's Summary of Classical Theory

There is insufficient space here to go into much detail on Rida's summary of theory, to which he devotes roughly a third of his book. He draws on prominent theorists, particularly Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani (d. 1389) and al-Mawardi, but not Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328), as he sets out what he regards as orthodox teaching on the caliphate. This includes elaborations on its definition and its necessity under shari'ah, appointment and deposition of caliphs, caliphal authority, the term *jama'ah* – "group," particularly the self-identified orthodox as separated from deviationists and featuring prominently in Rida's discussion – qualifications required of caliphs and those who would elect or depose them, allegiance, obligations, and consultation. As with all who have discussed the matter, Rida reckons with a stark gap between theory and practice, the Caliphate, dynastic for almost all of its history, falling short of the elective, consensual institution that Islamic teaching upholds. He does so through characterizing the dynastic caliphates as those of necessity or tyranny, as distinct from an ideal or rightful caliphate (*imamat al-haqq*). In short, Rida divides caliphates into three categories, involving differing roles of "those who loose and bind" (see also Haddad 1997: 274), a foundational yet imprecise term connoting those qualified or empowered to contract agreements on the community's behalf. Rida notes the imprecision, and offers his own explanation:

Their being named those who loose and bind should suffice to preclude disagreement, since what that suggests is that they are the ummah's leaders, those of high rank, and the object of the great majority of the ummah's trust, inasmuch as it follows them in obeying the one who they appoint as ruler over it. Thereby, the ummah's affairs are ordered, and he is secured from the possibility of it disobeying him, and rebelling against him (1923: 11).

Under a rightful caliphate those who loose and bind are fully engaged in electing a fully qualified caliph. A caliphate of necessity is not ideal since, amongst other limitations, only some of those who loose and bind are involved, while the caliph is not fully qualified. Under a caliphate of tyranny, rule is imposed purely through force. In Rida's explication, caliphates of necessity and tyranny are allowable through the maxim that "necessity makes what is forbidden permissible" (1923: 37-38). His broad purpose is to show that the problems afflicting the Muslims' politics derive not from the caliphate per se, but rather from their corruptions of it. In particular, they have erred in turning what the rule of necessity should enable as temporary expedient into a permanent feature.

As in his other reformist works, Rida posits that Muslim weakness originates not with Islamic teaching, but with how Muslims have understood and implemented it. This includes the failure to appreciate or correctly apply principles that guided the first Muslims, as opposed to their particular rulings. What for Rida is required is to discern the intention underlying decisions rather than to replicate them. For instance, on the council appointed by ‘Umar (r. 634-644), the second caliph, to determine his successor, at issue is that the council’s views represent those of the community. This aspect, not the particulars of the council’s make up – such as it comprising six members – should be the object of attention. Here, as elsewhere, Rida takes a flexible approach and does not find early Islam providing a blueprint for the Muslim societies of his day. Taking this view, he sees Islamic society and governance as ideally consultative and consensual. Here, authority inheres in the community, not the leader, who has no special privileges over any of its members and may be called to account by any of them. Contrary to what many believed then, he stresses, the caliph “is no autocrat” (1923: 68). He notes that the Qur’an commands obedience to “those who hold authority” – the *jama‘ah*, those who represent the orthodox body of the community – not “the one who holds authority” (1923: 14). Rida also finds an abundance of evidence indicating that the caliph must consult with others over the Muslims’ affairs, finding it odd that Al-Mawardi, who he generally follows, neglected this obligation. As rule under actual caliphates was not of this nature, they are in Rida’s discussion endured imperfections, not celebrated ideals. The founder of the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750), Mu‘awiyah (r. 661-80), does come in for particular criticism, his partisan innovation of designating his son Yazid (r. 680-83) as heir marking an ominous deviation from the actions of Abu Bakr (r. 632-34), the first caliph, and his three successors during what subsequently became known as the era of the rightly-guided Caliphate (632-61).

One significant element of Rida’s summary concerns deposition, where he quotes Al-Taftazani, Al-Mawardi, and Al-Hafiz ibn Hajar (d. 1449) at length. Rida affirms a shari‘ah-based right to rebel, and forcefully critiques those in authority who smoothed the path to oppression throughout history by deferring to caliphs who, in strict terms, were illegitimate. These would particularly include Mu‘awiyah and Yazid, who emerge with no credit, signposting the Caliphate’s early derogation, Mu‘awiyah’s corruptness counterpointing Abu Bakr’s virtue. Yet there is no suggestion in Rida’s elaborations that Muslims erred in not rebelling against Mu‘awiyah, Yazid, or other Umayyad or ‘Abbasid Caliphs. As noted above, although his optimism would not last, Rida initially welcomed the 1909 deposition of ‘Abd al-Hamid II and replacement by Muhammad Rashad (Mehmed V). A little over a decade later, prompted by the 1922 deposition of the 36th and last sultan, Wahid al-Din (Mehmed VI), beyond purely theoretical discussion, Rida points to that case alone as an instance of those who loose and bind – or those who, in effect, have come to play this role – implementing their right to overturn unjust rule:

It is incumbent upon the people who loose and bind to struggle against sin and injustice and, through their actions, to reject the people who embody them and eliminate the power that they unjustly wield. This is even to be done by fighting, when it is clear to them that the benefit of doing that outweighs the harm of doing so. An example of this is eliminating the personal, autocratic form of authority, as in the Turks’ elimination of the Ottoman dynasty’s authority. Those belonging to this dynasty, in spite of their laying claim to the

Islamic Caliphate, were unjust. In most of their ordinances they followed the path that in this era people refer to as that of “absolute monarchy” (1923: 41).

The implication may be that the Great Turkish National Assembly’s action was rightful. But Rida’s rhetoric leaves no doubt that the Turkish leadership is in error regarding its intentions and proposals for what will replace the Sultanate, and how these are based on misreading or ignoring Islamic teaching.

Rida’s Vision for the Caliphate in the Aftermath of the Abolition of the Sultanate (1922)

Rida then moves to surveying the Muslims’ contemporary circumstances and prospects. His initial comments paint a sobering picture. On unity, a prerequisite for a revived caliphate and political independence, he comments: “I do not say that this, in itself, is an impossibility. I say only that I do not know of any Muslim people or group (*jama‘ah*) that treats this matter with the seriousness that it requires, and pursues a viable path to it” (1923: 52). He addresses various scenarios for the caliphate, all rendered problematic or unviable by disunity or colonialism. One figure Rida does appear inclined towards is Yemen’s Yahya bin Muhammad (d. 1948). But as a Zaydi Shi‘i, he would be a doubtful candidate for caliph. Rida notes that Yahya’s Imamate is unrecognized by neighboring states, and that its universalization is not desired.

The issue again pivots on those who loose and bind. But, as Rida puts it, those who could be considered as genuinely belonging to this group “are rarely found” (1923: 58). He reiterates that in Turkey the National Assembly has effectively taken on this role, but in turning away from the resources of Islam it has pursued an ill-conceived course. He then elaborates on difficulties seen in other Muslim lands, such as Egypt, with its effete traditionalist ulama shrinking to the corners of mosques and homes, not claiming rights, and India, where leaders of the Khalifatist movement languish in prison. Thus:

If I wish – in this circumstance – to endeavor to undertake the duty under the revealed law of establishing a universal, rightful, and just imamate [caliphate], it is necessary to first endeavor to constitute a group of people who loose and bind . . . But what is required before a universal imam can be appointed . . . is for the people . . . to unite . . . We ask here: are there people who loose and bind in the Islamic territories who have the capacity to undertake this task? . . . Yes, this is possible, although it is difficult (1923: 61).

Rida then calls upon reformist Muslims to take up this role, reprising a common distinction in his works. This separates the moderation of reform from the extremes of Europeanization and heresy on the one hand, and traditionalism on the other. In Rida’s depiction, one might say that the Europeanized are blind to Islam, traditionalists blind to modern culture. On the Europeanized, Rida does find it notable that some among them see utility in a pro forma type of caliphate, analogous to the papacy, as supporting their efforts towards establishing a “Turanian”² identity. While some commentators have found that what Rida will go on to propose could be considered akin to an Islamic papacy, when he references the papacy, his rhetoric follows a different line. Here, he does so to emphasize how the papal institution is

² Referring to various peoples speaking Ural-Altaic languages.

thoroughly at odds with Islam. On traditionalist Muslims, his comments here follow standard reformist lines: through intellectual ossification and political indifference they have enabled the Europeanized to takeover society and state.

In spite of this bleak situation – “In truth, I have little hope in the Arabs and Turks. I do not see anyone among them taking the necessary steps” (1923: 77) – Rida resists resignation, and strikes an upbeat, apologetic tone: the government of the caliphate is superior to all alternatives, while the modern era, uniquely, enables the possibility of its genuine realization. This requires harnessing and combining the material strength of the Turks (“Islam’s sharp sword”) with the firmer spiritual disposition of the Arabs (“Islam’s root”). Thus, he recommends seating the caliphate in Mosul, literally “a place where things come together” (one wonders what he would have made of the ISIS Caliphate declared in that very city around nine decades later). This, he finds, ought to be acceptable to Turks, Arabs, and Kurds alike, and he challenges them to put his idea to the test, bluntly stating that if they reject it, the matter should be reduced to its essence and the caliphate established where it belongs. But he does not elaborate on what, precisely, that would entail (1923: 78).

Looking forward, Rida proposes model programs for the caliphate that leave no doubt that Islam and its shari‘ah are fully at home in the modern world. They include a proposed work providing a foundation for Islamic positive law (*al-qawanin al-islamiyyah*). Rida also proposes a madrasah whose graduates would be qualified for the caliphal role, voiding the longstanding need to endure tyrannical, dissolute, or imperfect rulers, albeit that a caliphate of necessity would still be required temporarily. Continuing the theme, Rida brings the institution of the caliphate together with Islamic teaching on lawmaking or legislation. In all of this his goal is to debunk the notion that Islam is a barrier to progressive, modernizing developments. For instance, on new legislation as the people’s right, he rejects the claims of those who see this as novel or European: “This is the supposition of those who are ignorant of the Islamic shari‘ah’s fundamentals and the basis that they provide for legislation” (1923: 91). Some commentators have found Rida here imprecise on whether or not the law allows a domain that is free of religion, or that he raises this possibility but does not pursue it (Enayat: 68-93).

To whatever extent Rida could be seen as “freeing” law from religion, the main argument is clear: Islam not merely sanctions but demands novel legislation in the civil, criminal, political, and military domains. He repeatedly critiques clinging to the old, and rejects the idea that embracing what is new undermines rather than strengthens Islam. He does note distinctions that have been drawn between different dimensions of law. This includes distinguishing civil transactions (*mu‘amalat*) from worship (*ta‘abbud*) – not to be conflated with the broad dimension of religion (*din*) generally. He also notes provisions – for instance, concerning administration, the judiciary, politics, taxation, and war – that “beyond being informed by goodness of intention, do not have to do with worship and drawing near to God” (1923: 92). Further, he emphasizes the longstanding teaching that God has empowered the community, through those who act on its behalf, to make determinations through reasoning and opinion when “there is no prescription in the Qur’an, and no example from the Prophet to be followed” (1923: 92). Yet even whatever does not immediately have to do with worship would for Rida nonetheless fall under the rubric of religion: “the fact is that all of this is explicitly concerned with religion” (1923: 92). This does not seem remarkable, as it aligns with a standard proposition that no sphere of human activity is unconnected from God, and thus,

under Islam, all human acts involve “religion.” At the same time, numerous aspects of Rida’s discussion point towards novelty in the law. But new laws ought not to issue from mutually incompatible fatwas issued by the inept ulama of the establishment, or rulings found in the legal schools’ prescribed works. Rather, new law should issue from personal reasoning, *ijtihad*, and informed by the principles of necessity and utility: “The Islamic community cannot extricate itself from the lizard’s hole into which it has crawled but through *ijtihad*” (1923: 102). Islam, Rida avers, is a religion of self-sufficiency, and it is highly lamentable that the Muslim community has lagged and now depends on others in the technological, military, and other spheres.

Moving to consider the political implications of the Turks’ recent action, Rida finds Muslims supporting the Turks’ new caliphate – “inherently invalid, and not bringing the least benefit” (1923: 105) – only strategically. This, once again, is informed by what for Rida is the Muslims’ preeminent concern, their sovereign independence, without which Islam cannot exist (1923: 114). Thus, Muslims support the Turkish state, and regard it as representing the prophetic Caliphate, because relative to its neighbors it is strong and independent. Absent that, Rida suggests, revisiting a candidate he is inclined towards, their support would lie with Yemen’s Imam Yahya, who is better qualified than the new Turkish caliph. Rida’s point is that the “fundamental objective” is preserving the independence of the Muslim community as far as possible. Thus, ideals become secondary.

Rida’s concluding remarks, actually composed prior to the preceding articles, offer a similar combination of sobering reality and apologetic optimism to that characterizing much of his book. Notwithstanding his expressed support for the new Turkish government, he sees it erring in multiple ways in its efforts to enfeeble and terminate Islam. He argues that had its members regarded the shari‘ah with an independent spirit, “they would have found therein a superior and more comprehensive solution to any that the Constitution provided previously, or the spiritual Caliphate and government of the National Assembly provides presently” (1923: 138). But recent events have, he finds, brought to light a turn of destiny. The harms of dynastic partisanship – Umayyad, ‘Abbasid, Ottoman – the errors of the Europeanized, and the conceit of the traditionalists have all become apparent. Thus, Rida reminds his readers, “the future belongs to those who fear God,” the reformers and renewers.

Beyond Rida’s *The Caliphate*

Rida’s commentary on the caliphate did not end with his book, and a great deal could be written about his writings on the matter from 1923 onwards. These include a fatwa critical of the Turkish leadership after the Caliphate’s final abolition:

We think that Mustafa Kemal is trying to destroy all the elements and characteristics of the Turkish people except its language, simply because they are Islamic or based on Islam. He wants to extract the Turkish people from Islam, if possible, the way you might extract a hair from pastry. And if that is not possible, he would extract the Turkish people from Islam the way you might extract a barbed thorn from wool or extract the soul from the body (translated and quoted in Haddad 2013: 487-88).

Rida had also become bitingly dismissive of Sharif Husayn and his many sins, notably his usurping or plagiaristic attempt to lay claim to the Caliphate mere days after its abolition. Rida devoted considerable space in *Al-Manar* to exposing Husayn's errors, referring to someone he had formerly characterized as a champion of Islam not as "The Sharif" but simply "this man." Neither in ancient or modern history, Rida advised, had there ever been such a clear demonstration of the prophetic maxim that "whoever seeks rule should not be appointed to it" (*Al-Manar* 25, 10 [July 2, 1924]: 390-400). On different grounds, Rida was among the critics of 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq and his 1925 treatise *Islam and the Roots of Governance*. Al-Raziq argued for what Rida and many others deemed an un-Islamic innovation, seeing Islam as "a religion, not a state," and the caliphate as neither canonical nor integral to Islam. Rida was particularly galled that such ideas would emanate from an Azhari shari'ah judge.

Rida was also involved in some of the so-called Muslim congresses. Those convened to address the matter of Muslim leadership in a post-Ottoman world included the Cairo Congress on the Caliphate, convened after much delay in May 1926. Rida was involved as a planner, but did not attend in person. It appears that he came to foresee that it would not produce substantive results. In January 1925, he had written to a friend (Shakib Arslan) that the planning committee lacked "everything that is essential" (cited in Kramer: 213 n. 84). A brief commentary on the renewed invitation to the Congress that Rida published in March 1926, showed him regarding the matter with clear eyes, even while he remained supportive of the endeavor:

In spite of our conviction that the time is not right and the paths not paved for [resolving] the matter of appointing a caliph for the Muslims that the great majority would accept, we regard those calling for convening the congress as having the right to do that . . . because it is a call to a matter that is lawful, and one of public benefit (*Al-Manar* 26, 10 [March 14, 1926]: 790).

The congress would dissolve with little achieved.

Rida also touched on the caliphate in his writings on Shiism and Wahhabism. For instance, in his book *The Sunnah and the Shi'ah or the Wahhabis and the Rejectors* (1929), he refers to "the government of Ibn Sa'ud standing alone in reviving the government of the rightly-guided caliphs on the earth" (29; on his views of Wahhabism, see 1925: Lauziere: 60-94). It seems likely here that Rida again prioritized pragmatism – his concerns for Muslims as a community – over theological or theoretical consistency. He had not always been inclined towards Wahhabism. Yet in view of his priority of maintaining Muslim political sovereignty as far as possible, perhaps more than his favorable views on Hanbalism, Ibn Sa'ud had become worthy of his support.

Concluding Remarks

Rida's political engagements spanned a long and tumultuous era in which the Muslim experiences he addressed were frequently traumatizing and sometimes humiliating. The foregoing discussion has attempted to point to a consistent political stance underlying Rida's publishing and other activities. One could easily point to inconsistencies in his positions on the likes of 'Abd al-Hamid II, Muhammad Rashad (Mehmed V), the CUP, Sharif Husayn, Mustafa Kemal, the representatives of the British Empire, as well as others who might be

mentioned, and these inconsistencies may be indeed be acknowledged. At the same time, considering his project on the caliphate as ultimately driven more by concern with the circumstances and integrity of Muslims as a people or community than with theoretical coherence or constancy, or with matters of Islamic religion, might lead one to regard his efforts in a different light. Rida was consistent in lending his support to whatever he saw best enabling Muslim unity and communal integrity.

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