Islam and the legitimation of power: the Mahdi-revolt in the Sudan
Peters, R.

Published in:
Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
The authority of any state is, in the last instance, founded on physical force. Force alone, however, is not sufficient. A viable administration presupposes a general conviction that the existence and the maintenance of the state is necessary for the public weal and is in everybody's interest. When this conviction is absent, which may be the case e.g. in newly conquered and occupied territories, a government is compelled to fall back on the use of brutal force. This, however, is an anomalous situation. In general, the use of force is minimised because of the existence of a common ideology, shared by the majority of the people, which justifies the existence and functioning of the state. Now, such an ideology contains a basic contradiction. On the one hand, it must legitimise the state and the way it is governed by its rulers. On the other hand, it must, in order to be universally accepted, pay some attention to the needs and problems of its subjects, e.g. by setting standards for just and equitable government. However, more often than not, rulers do not live up to these standards. In order to fulfill its stabilising role, such an ideology must deal with this problem in such a way as to give a certain satisfaction to the ruled, without endangering the position of the government and the rulers.

The topic of this article will be how Sunnite Islamic political theory has come to grips with this problem and how it was affected by it. I shall do so by analysing a discussion in connexion with a particular event, a revolt of Moslems against Moslems, during which both parties brought forward arguments taken almost exclusively from Islamic political theory. This polemic, one of the last of its kind, is part of the ideological struggle between the followers of the Sudanese Mahdi and the supporters of the Turco-Egyptian government in the Sudan. It remained...
totally within the framework of Islam and was unaffected by Western political ideas and concepts.

Basically a *Herrschaftsideologie*, the pivot of Islamic political theory, as found in the works on *kalām* and *fiqh*, is the duty of obedience to the ruler. Besides K. 4:59 ("O ye who have believed, obey God and obey the messenger and those of you who have the command.") there are legion Traditions to the same effect. To mention but a few: "Obedience is obligatory on you, even if an Abyssinian slave with a head like a raisin (or: with his nose cut off) be put in command over you", and: "You are obliged to hear and to obey in prosperity and adversity, willingly or unwillingly, and even when you are treated unjustly." This duty, however, is not unrestricted. Its limits are to be found in the Tradition: "Obedience is a duty as long as one is not ordered to do what is sinful (bi-l-ma'ṣīyāh) and if one is ordered to do what is sinful, then there is no obedience." Some authors, however, have clung to the old Murdji'ite position that obedience is due as long as the ruler remains nominally a Moslem. As a consequence of his right to be obeyed, the ruler may fight those that resist his orders and rise against him.

Islamic constitutional theory lays down a number of qualifications for the ruler, the caliph. He must be just (ʿadl, in its technical legal sense), capable of interpreting the sacred texts, competent in administration and warfare, able-bodied and of Qura-shite descent. His main task is to uphold religion and to rule according to the *shari`a*. He must be appointed either by an oath of allegiance (bay`ah) on the part of people of influence (ahl al-hall wa-l-ʿaqd) or by designation on the part of his predecessor. The legitimacy of succession by usurpation, however, was already recognized in an early period. Only the Shafi`ites maintained that a ruler forfeited his right to rule for immorality, injustice or heterodoxy, but they shrank from its consequences: armed rebellion. The other schools held that a caliph could not lose his right to rule. The subjects, then, had to console themselves with the thought that an unjust and tyrannical ruler would surely be punished in the Hereafter. As one Tradition has it: "Do not abuse [people of] authority, for if they act rightly, they will receive recompense and you must be grateful. However, if they act wrongly, the responsibility is theirs and you must patiently endure it. They are a punishment that God inflicts upon whomsoever He will. Meet, therefore, God's punishment not with furious rage, but with humble submission." Some authors deal with the problem whether Moslems are bound to assist their ruler in fighting rebels. They hold that

2 See e.g. the words of the Shafi`ite theologian al-ʿĀmidī (d. 631/1233-4): "They [the Moslems] have the right to depose him (...), when there is on his part something that leads to disturbance in the affairs of the religion and the situation of the Moslems or in that for the sake of which an Imām is appointed. If they are not able to depose him and to install another because of his superior power and enormous equipment and if that [his deposition] would lead to corruption of the world and to the loss of lives and if its evil consequences are more certain than the evil consequences of obeying him, then it is possible to commit the less evil of the two acts in order to avoid the greater." Sayf al-Ḥaqq al-ʿĀmidī, Ghiyāt al-mārām fī l-ʿilm al-kalām, ed. by Ḥasan Maḥmūd ʿAbd al-Lāli, Cairo: Al-Maṭāṣsir wa-l-Madīn al-Markām, 1391/1971, 385–6.
this duty exists only when the ruler is just, not when he is unjust. This does not mean, however, that in the latter case they are allowed to help the rebels.

After the Mongol conquest of Baghdad, which put an end to the Abbasid Caliphate, scholars had to accommodate their theory to the existing political situation. The actual exercise of power became for them the main criterion for the legitimacy of authority. Ibn Djama al-Din (d. 1333) asserts that Muslims must render obedience to a ruler who has come to power by sheer force, even if he does not possess the necessary qualifications, “in order that the unity of Muslims may be preserved.” Simultaneously the Hanafite-Maturidite doctrine, which restricted the caliphate in the true sense of the word to the first Rightly Guided Caliphs (al-khulafa’ al-rashidun), gained wide acceptance. It was founded on the Tradition: “The caliphate will last thirty years, then, afterwards, there will be kingship (mulk).” But caliph or not, the ruler had to be obeyed for fear of civil strife (fitnah) and anarchy. The social and political order was to be maintained at any price, since, as the Prophet has said: “Thirty years of tyranny are better than one hour of civil strife.”

When the actual rulers could not claim anymore to be caliphs, religious sanction to authority had to be sought elsewhere. It was found in the theory that all power was of divine origin, a theory that can be traced back to pre-Islamic, Sassanian times. Already under the early Abbasids this theory had a certain influence, as can be seen from their titles. Instead of khalifat rasul Allâh they began to call themselves khalifat Allâh and zill Allâh fi l-ard. In the handbooks for rulers, the Mirrors for Princes, a literary genre that became popular after the disintegration of the empire, this theory of the God-founded power of the ruler played a fundamental role. Political authority was regarded as the sole means to maintain social order in view of man’s natural inclination to greed and violence. Therefore it was seen as a divine institution. Consequently, the religious character of obedience to the ruler was emphasized. On the other hand the ruler was exhorted to be just towards his subjects and to act according to the sharfah. But apart from these general exhortations the prevailing theories contained little to satisfy the needs of the subjects.

No religion, however, is a monolithic and homogeneous body of ideas. This is also true for Islam. Besides the official, scriptural Islam of the ruling classes, there exists popular religion, more adapted to the needs of the common people, with characteristic features such as saint-worship, magic and millenarian expectations. These expectations, embodied in the belief in the coming of the Mahdi, are important in this connexion. According to this belief, the Mahdi would rise towards the end of Time and conquer the whole earth in order to establish Islamic rule. He would put an end to injustice and tyranny and fill the earth with equity and justice.


His advent would inaugurate a period of prosperity and righteousness, lasting till Doomsday. Obviously, such a belief is attractive in times of social and political crises. On the one hand it can give people comfort and hope that their misery will not last forever. In that case it may lead to resignation and quietism. On the other hand it can serve as a revolutionary ideology whenever a leader arises, claiming to be the expected Mahdi and revolting against the existing political order. Islamic history has known many movements of this kind.

One of the last of these movements was the one led by Muhammad Ahmad Ibn 'Abd Allâh (1834–85) in the Sudan. In 1881 he proclaimed that he was the expected Mahdi, sent by God. He claimed that he had seen the Prophet in a vision, while being free from legal impediments such as sleep, ecstasy, drunkenness or insanity. The Prophet then sat him on his throne, girded him with his sword, purified his heart and filled it with faith, wisdom and knowledge and finally declared that God had bestowed upon Muhammad Ahmad the Supreme Caliphate (al-khilaflah al-kubra) and the mahdiship. Furthermore he informed him that he would conquer the world for Islam in order to restore the Sunnah of the Prophet.

Before long he had gathered followers and rose in rebellion against the Turco-Egyptian government of the Sudan. Muhammad Ahmad’s principal argument for opposing the government was that God had installed him as the Supreme Caliph and that, consequently, all other rulers had to recognise him as the Mahdi and submit to him. If they would not do so, they were to be regarded as “unbelievers who had to be fought, since they acted against the commands of the messenger to follow us [Muhammad Ahmad] and were bent on extinguishing God’s Light (cf. K. 9:32), through which He wants to make His justice visible”. Moreover, the Turco-Egyptian rulers — the Turks, as Muhammad Ahmad used to call them — had deviated from the true religion and did not rule according to God’s commands. They acted unjustly and tyrannically towards the Sudanese population and had taken “unbelievers as patrons to the exclusion of God”, asking “their assistance in shedding the blood of the Community of Mohammad”.

About a year after the outbreak of the Mahdist revolt, the governor of the Sudan, 'Abd al-Qâdir Hilmi Pasha, having suffered several serious defeats, asked the leading, pro-governmental 'ulama’ to compose treatises against the Mahdi to incite the Sudanese to remain loyal to the existing government. A number of these treatises were published in the summer of 1882. More than a year later, on 21 Manshurat al-Imâm al-Mahdi, Omdurman 1304 (1886–7), I, 20; Na’ûm Shuqayr, Tarîkh al-Sûdân al-qadîm wa-l-hadîth wa-djughrîshiyatuh, Cairo, Matba‘at al-Ma‘arif, 1903, III, 134.
5 Manshurî, II, 277; Shuqayr, III, 349. It is worthy of note that all madhhabs agree that in fighting Moslem rebels, unlike in fighting unbelievers, the help of non-Moslems may not be sought. The Hanafites hold that this is only allowed in case of necessity.
6 Al-nasîhah al-‘ammah li-ahl al-hlam ‘an mukhâlafat al-‘uqûd’ain wa-l-khutût ‘ain al-‘amal al-imâm (General advice to the people of Islam not to oppose the rulers and not to shirk [the duty of] obedience to the imam), by Ahmad al-Azhari ibn Ismail, shaykh al-Islâm of Western Sudan; text publ. in Shuqayr, III, 383–91 and in ‘Abd Allah ‘Ali Ibrahim, Al-imam Bayn al-Mahdi wa-l-ulama‘, Khartum, Shu‘bat Abû Abâs al-Sûdân, Diwân al-Kharjûm, 1968, 49–57; this treatise was finished in Shu‘bân 1299 (June/July 1882).
7 Risâlah fi ba‘çlan da‘wâ Muhammad Ahmad al-mutamadd (Treatise on the invalidity of the
Islam and the Legitimation of Power

September 1883 (18 Dhul-Qa'dah 1300), the 'ulama' of al-Azhari issued a fatwa to the same effect at the request of the Egyptian government.

A major part of these tracts was devoted to the refutation of Muhammad Ahmad's claims to be the expected Mahdi. With this aspect I shall not deal here. Of more interest within the framework of this article, are the arguments in support of the legitimacy of Turco-Egyptian rule. They fall in with 19th century official Ottoman policy, that tended to emphasize the religious character of Ottoman rule and to revive the idea of the caliphate. Lawful authority, the Sudanese 'ulama' asserted, was in the hands of the caliph in Istanbul and his lieutenant (nā'ib), the khedive of Egypt. Obedience is due to them as a religious obligation, since their power derives from God. Shāhīr al-Ghazzī, muftī of the Western Sudan, opens his treatise with the following words:

“In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Praise belongs to God, who has made authority a divine mystery and a religious and legal ordinance, and who has made obedience to it a binding obligation and an undisputable command. ( . . . ) Know, o Brethren ( . . . ) that religion and authority are inseparable brothers, for religion is the foundation whereas authority protects it and keeps it erect. Now, that which is not protected will perish and lack support. Therefore, religion can only exist through authority (sulṭān). The sultan then is really the one that protects the Religion and guards the lands of the Muslims. He is the shadow of God on His earth. Through him can the recommended and obligatory religious practices be carried out. He is God's deputy (khālid) over His creation and the trusted guardiun of what is due to Him. He has elected him from among His creatures and He has ordered them to obey him.”

Claim of Muhammad Ahmad, the self-styled Mahdi, written by Shāhīr al-Ghazzī, muftī at the Court of Appeal in Khartum; text publ. in Shuwayr, III, 375–382.

Hādy al-mustāfiṭ al-bayyān al-Mahdī wa-l-mustahāfdī (Guidance for him who seeks it, to the explanation of [the difference between] the true and the false mahdī), written by Muḥammad al-Asmī al-Daftī, shaykh al-Islām of the Eastern Sudan; according to Ibrāhīm Fawzī (Kīthāb al-Salām bayyān yaday Gordon wa-kitābener, Cairo, Maṭba'at al-Adīb wa-l-Muṣīyad, 1319 [1901], I, 247) it was the first pamphlet to be composed against the Mahdi. Shuwayr (III, 374) mentions it, but does not give the text, which seems to be lost (cf. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Sa‘īd, Māshiṣṣīrī al-Mahdīyyah, Beirut, Dār al-Dīrī, 1979, 333, n. 1, where the text of Muhammad Ahmad's reply dated 28 Shu‘bān 1299 (15 July 1882) is published). Finally Shuwayr (II, 374) lists a poem (nā‘īyah) by Muḥammad Sharīf, of which he publishes some lines. Apparently more treatises in refutation of Muḥammad Ahmad's claims have been written, since in a letter dated 26 Shu‘bān 1299 (10 September 1882) addressed to the people of Ubayḍ, Muḥammad Ahmad mentions letters (khutūb) "written to criticize and to refute us" by Ahmad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Walī-'ūthma al-Azhari, Hūṣayn Mājdī, Shāhīr al-Ghazzī, Muḥammad al-Khūdīqī, Walad Ḥāṭīk, Walad al-Dāfil a.o. During the siege of Khartum, on 23 Dhul-Qa’dah 1301 (14 September 1884), the leading ulama' of Khartum wrote an anti-Mahdi letter on the instigation of Gordon, addressed to two followers of the Mahdi: ‘Abd al-Qādir Ibrāhīm and Wad Nūjīmī. It was signed by Muṣīr Muḥammad, Muḥammad Amin al-Dārī, Shāhīr al-Ghazzī, Hūṣayn Mājdī and Muḥammad al-Khūdīqī; Engl. transl. in The Journals of Major General C. G. Gordon, C. B. at Khartoum, ed. by A. E. Hake (London, Kegan Paul and Trench, 1885), 410–20.

9 Shuwayr, III, 375.
Then he quotes the relevant Koranic verses and Traditions with regard to obedience, and concludes the chapter by summoning the Sudanese “to return to harmony and agreement”, since “the consequence of dissension, strife and enmity is destruction and ruin.”

In another treatise, composed by the mufti at the Court of Appeal in Khartum, Aḥmad al-Azhari (d. 1882), a similar line of argumentation is used. The author also invokes the classical theory with regard to the caliphate without, however, mentioning the condition of Qurashi descent:

“They (the ‘ulamā’) have also laid down that his [the caliph’s] bay'a cannot be withdrawn and that his designation (‘ahd) cannot be revoked, unless he orders someone to become an unbeliever, or becomes an unbeliever himself. If he does not become an unbeliever, he cannot be deposed (...), not even when he loses his justice (fadlAllah) and is to be described as a sinner (falāq)”.10

Further he writes:

“In short, the Imam, who is the successor (khilafah) of the messenger of God, is alive today and his state is functioning in good order, supported by his ministers. All the people of Islam pronounce the khutbah from the pulpits in his name and pray for his victory and success. As a result of his presence and the functioning of his state, life and property of all the inhabitants of the state are protected. Disobedience to him, despite the fact that the qualities on the strength of which the people of authority have sworn allegiance to him do still exist, is forbidden for every Moslem”.11

In the fatwa issued by the ‘ulamā’ of al-Azhari authorities are quoted to the effect that, after his death, communications by the Prophet to men, whether they receive these in their sleep or being awake, cannot alter the established rules of the shari‘ah. One of these rules is that a caliph can only be installed either by an oath of allegiance (bay‘ah) on the part of the people of influence or by designation on the part of his predecessor. Muḥammad Aḥmad’s visions have not abrogated this and therefore the present caliph in Istanbul is to be regarded as the legitimate ruler. Muḥammad Aḥmad’s argument that the people of his region have sworn allegiance to him cannot be accepted since there are numerous Traditions declaring that when there is a caliph, a bay‘ah to another person is null and void and has no effect whatsoever. The fatwa is of political interest, since it totally ignores the British occupation of Egypt and emphasises the legitimate rule of the Ottoman sultan.12

Muḥammad Aḥmad hardly responded to these treatises. When he did, he only dealt with the arguments refuting his claims to be the expected Mahdi. In one instance, in an undated letter (probably written in the first half of 1885, after the conquest of Khartum) to the ‘ulamā’ of Egypt, he gives his opinion on the Ottoman sultanate:

10 Ibid., 385.
11 Ibid., 391.
12 Steppat, 446–7, 449 nt. 28.
"You also know that the caliphate has since long passed away since its conditions have ceased to exist. What has remained are only lofty ceremonies and momentous formalities that have nothing to do with supporting the Religion. They [the rulers] have turned themselves, their religion and their subjects over to the unbelievers, who began to act towards them as if they owned them".

In this letter he further refers to "the rulers who are (or: must be) deposed because they have killed the religion of God and have given the unbelievers a strong position, with the result that they [the rulers] have begun administering justice amongst Moslems on the basis of secular laws (qawāsm) and have turned away from the law of the Lord of the messengers." He then exhorts the 'ulamā’ to refrain from obeying the Turks in accordance with the Tradition: "No obedience is due to a creature [if this leads] to disobeying the Creator." Apparently, Muḥammad Aḥmad did not attach much importance to these constitutional questions. He believed that his mahdiship, which God had bestowed upon him, entitled him to an authority higher than any ruler in the world. If his adversaries would not recognize his mahdiship, they were unbelievers and could be fought. That they were bad rulers who did not pay heed to God's commandments, was not essential, but only additional evidence for his mission.

For propagandistic reasons, however, demonstrating that the Ottoman sultan and the Khedive could not be regarded as legitimate rulers, was a useful thing to do. The subject was taken up, independently from each other, by two authors, who both wrote their treatises in 1884. During the reign of Muḥammad Aḥmad's successor, the khalīfah ʿAbd Allāh al-Taṣawfī, both works were lithographed in Omdurman in the year 1305 H. (1887-8). Aḥmad al-ʿAwwām (d. 1884), an Egyptian who had been exiled to the Sudan for his participation in the ʿUraǧ-revolt, composed his treatise in Khartum during the siege. The other author,

13 Letter not included in the Manshūrat; copy in Durham Sudan Archive, 98/2/3.
14 A resident of Alexandria, Aḥmad al-ʿAwwām worked as an orator and propagandist for ʿUraǧ's cause. After the British occupation of Egypt he was arrested and sentenced to banishment in the Sudan by the military court in Alexandria. In Khartum he began to sympathize with the Mahdī. When he expressed his sympathies openly, Gordon had him arrested. Some time later, however, he was released and given a post as a clerk in the administration. In 1884 he was executed after it had been discovered that he had a hand in the attempted burning of an ammunition plant. Cf. Richard Hill, A bibliographical dictionary of the Sudan, 3, London, Frank Cass, 1967, 30,397; Ḥabīb Snādīn Ḥasan, Miṣr wa-t-Sūdān wa-ṣawāḥiṣ al-thawrah fi Naṣṣat al-ʿAwwām. Dirasāt muqārnah fi l-taṣawwīriyyah li-l-thawrātayn al-ʿUraǧīyyah wa-l-Mahdīyyah wa-t-taṣawwīriyyah li-l-fikr al-thawrī fi ʿaḥdāhīmā, Alexandria, Mu’assasat al-Thaqafah al-Diwan, 1971, 10-2; Shuqayr, III, 265; Fawūd, I, 45-61.

15 Naṣṣat al-ʿAwwām li-l-khāṣṣ wa-t-zamm min ikhwānīh ahl al-imām wa-t-Sūdān fī waṣīfāh līhāmāh bi-ttibāf Sayyidīnā Imām al-Zamān Muḥammad al-Mahdī al-muntazār Ṣalāh al-salām, ʿAwwām's advice to all his brethren, the people of faith and Islam, concerning their duty to become united and of one mind in following our Lord, the Imām of the Time, Muḥammad the expected Mahdī, peace be upon him), Omdurman, 1305 H. (1887-8), 98. Cf. Muḥammad Ḥabīb Snādīn, Al-ḥiṣrakah al-fakhrīyyah al-Mahdīyyah (Khartum, Diwān al-Kharṭūm, Qām al-Tālī wa-l-Nashr, 1970, 199-201). The text has also been published as an appendix to Ḥasan, Miṣr wa-t-Sūdān, 228–53. According
al-Ḥasan ibn Sa′d al-ʿAbbādī (1844–1907) wrote a book, in which he refuted the arguments of the Mahdī’s adversaries, devoting one chapter to the question whether obedience was due to the Ottoman sultan or the Egyptian khedive.

ʿAwwām’s central themes, as can be expected from a former propagandist of the ʿUrābī movement, are the division of the Moslem world, the corruption of the Turkish rulers of the Ottoman Empire and Egypt and the increasing European influence. Had the rulers acted in conformity with the prescriptions of Koran and Sunnah, he writes, the Moslems would still have been united and the Islamic world would not have become a prey to the Western powers. The rulers have furthered this development by taking unbelievers as patrons, despite clear Koranic interdictions (cf. K. 3:28; 4:144; 5:51) and allowing them to extend their influence and power. The khedive has even handed over the Sudan to the British. The result is that the sharfah is not applied anymore and that moral corruption is rampant: the rulers tolerate prostitution, bars and gambling, even in the vicinity of mosques. In such a situation the Moslems need someone, a Mahdī or a pious believer, to renovate their religion, to reunite the community and to arrange its affairs properly.

Islam forbids that Moslems fight each other. Should this happen, the Imam must mediate between the parties, as prescribed in K. 49:4 ("If two parties of the believers fight, set things right between them, and if one of the parties oppress the other, fight the one which is oppressive until it returns to the affair of God."). In the case of the Sudan war, the sultan or the khedive ought to have inquired into the arguments of the Mahdī through a committee of qualified ʿulamā’. Since they have not done so, they are worse than Pharaoh, who at least had asked Moses to produce evidence for his mission. The fact that the khedive has asked the scholars of al-Azhar for a fatwa in this matter cannot be considered as acting upon the above-mentioned Koranic order, since this was not done until two years and four months after the outbreak of hostilities, when the Egyptian army had been defeated and the Sudan had been handed over to the British.

The only instance of war between Moslems that is allowed, the author continues, is war against rebels (bughāh, khawārid) and bandits (quṭṭāf al-tārīq). However, the group that rose against the government in the Sudan, and which consists of

to the colophon, the author finished his treatise on 20 Ramaḍān 1301 (14 July 1884). After the fall of Khartum the manuscript fell in the hands of the mahdists. The taqṣīr, written by ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Salawī, relates that ʿAwwām’s treatise was read before the Mahdī and that he approved of it. During the reign of the khāliṭah ʿAbd Allāh, it was lithographed together with a commentary (taqṣīr) by Muḥammad Ibn Ibrāhīm Zahrāʾ (d. 1894), a mahdist religious notable with an Azhar training.

16 al-Ḥasan ibn Sa′d al-ʿAbbādī was born at Berber in 1884. After his training as a religious scholar, he joined the mahdist forces in an early stage of the revolt. He then served as a provincial governor. The khāliṭah ʿAbd Allāh transferred him to Omdurman, where he was made a religious notable. On the Anglo-Egyptian occupation he was appointed an Islamic judge. He died in the Hejaz while making the pilgrimage. Cf. Hill, 159, 401.

the entire Sudanese nation (ummah sudaniyyah), cannot be regarded as such, since
their leader says that the prophet has announced to him that he is the Mahdi
and that the Turks — i.e. the people of the Turkish government and their subjects that
are like them in deeds and intention, not the whole nation — are the worst unbe-
lievers of all people since they try to extinguish God’s light. According to the
sharifah their unbelief is established by the following facts: they have ceased to
act in conformity with God’s Book and the Sunnah of His messenger and follow
their own inclinations (ahwa’) instead; they neglect their Islamic subjects; they do
not administer Islamic penal law but follow the European (ifrandji) errors and
falsehoods nowadays known as political laws (qawdnat siyissiyah). As a conse-
quence immorality, wickedness and whoredom have spread in all Islamic countries
under their sway.

In this situation rebellion against the Turkish government is not only allowed,
but obligatory for all Muslims, in order to replace it by a just government that acts
upon God’s commands and prohibitions and upon the Sunnah of the prophet.
Shirking this duty amounts to approval of unbelief, which is as bad as unbelief
itself. The argument that the Ottoman sultan is the caliph in the legal sense, to
whom obedience is due and who can only be dethroned for apostasy, is not valid,
since the Ottoman sultans have never fulfilled the requirements for the caliphate.
As for the Egyptian khedive, whose government is based on delegation by the
Ottoman sultan, his rule is invalid, too, on the strength of the principle that what
is based on something invalid, is itself invalid.

Whereas ‘Awwam’s treatment of the problem is rather unsystematic and lacks
a clear line of argumentation, ‘Abbadi deals with the problem in a very consistent
and perspicuous way. Due to his thorough religious training he could defend his
case with arguments taken from the traditional and orthodox texts. He approaches
the constitutional problems of the MzafTrevolt in the chapter entitled: “Concerning
their sixth objection, that disobedience to the sultan is only allowed if he becomes
an unbeliever, that the Moslems owe allegiance to a Moslem sultan in Constantinople,
that this Mahdi and his followers have rebelled against him and that their refusal
to obey him is not permitted”18. He logically discusses the case from different
angles. In the first place he deals with the topic on the supposition that Muhammed
Ahmad is really the expected Mahdi. In that case every ruler, regardless whether he
just or not, is obliged to follow him, since the Prophet has declared that he holds
the Supreme Caliphate (al-khilafah al-kubra). Those who resist him are unjust
tyrants on the strength of the Tradition: “He [the Mahdi] will fill the earth with
justice and equity, as it was filled with injustice and tyranny.” If they do not rec-
ognise the Mahdi, they are unbelievers who must be fought according to the Tra-
dition: “Whosoever repudiates the Mahdi, is an unbeliever”19.

However, since Muhammed Ahmad’s claims were based on subjective experience
and thus an easy target for his sceptical adversaries, ‘Abbadi then proceeds to argue
his case on the assumption that Muhammed Ahmad is not the expected Mahdi. To
justify the rebellion against the government, he quotes several Malikite authors who

19 This Tradition cannot be found in any of the authoritative collections.
hold that if a just man revolts against an unjust imām, the believers are allowed to help the rebel, and even obliged to do so if the object of the rebellion is to render God's religion victorious. As for Muḥammad Ḥāmad, no one who had known him before or after the beginning of his mission, calls his justice in question, whereas the “Turkish kings” are unbelievers, or, at any rate not far from it. Obeying them is not allowed on the strength of K. 18:28 (“... and obey not anyone whose heart We have made neglectful of Our remembrance, but who follows his own desire, and whose behaviour is profligate.”) and K. 11:113 (“Lean ye not upon those who have done wrong lest the Fire touch you.”). He dwells at length on the impiety and evil deeds of the “Turks”, and especially on the fact that they admire the unbelievers and have appointed them as military commanders and administrators. Moreover, the “Turks” imitate them in dress, by wearing trousers (mantalūn) and hats, and in their customs. They even learn their languages and praise these more than Arabic, the language of the Koran and the Sunnah. They call this civilisation (tamaddun). In the field of taxation they have neglected the Islamic prescriptions and imposed excessive taxes which they ruthlessly collect with the result that many people have fled from their homes. Finally they do not take action against those scandalous deeds that are forbidden on the strength of idjmāʾ, such as the production and sale of alcoholic beverages by women in the markets, the establishment of wineshops for the unbelievers, prostitution and overt homosexual practices.

“O you Turks,” the author exclaims, “if you are not identical with the people of Lot, then the people of Lot are not far away from you!” In fact they are apostates because they deny religious prescriptions that one must necessarily know. They justify the fact that they do not observe the sharīʿah with the word freedom (ḥurriyyah), which is a word taken from the language of the European unbelievers. They have requested the “Turks” to apply this freedom in their Islamic state and this request was granted. This means that they do not feel themselves bound by God’s ordinances. As a consequence, women that ought to be secluded walk about in the markets, showing their charms and committing fornication with unbelievers. When their husbands or guardians try to prevent this, they retort: “Life is free” (al-dunya hurriyyah). In addition the “Turks” deride people who behave as Moslems by performing the sāliḥ and wearing a turban. Thus the “Turks” change God’s ordinances and abolish the prescription of the Religion.

Suppose, however, the author continues, that not only the ruler but also the rebel is unjust. The problem has been dealt with by some Malikite authorities, who held that in this case Moslems must refrain from helping either party, since God will punish one tyrant by means of the other and then deal with the one that has been left. It is not allowed to fight the rebels because of the possibility that their revolt is provoked by the ruler’s impiety (fisq) or injustice (djawr). In the Sudanese situation this means that Moslems may not help the Turks against the Mahdī, since they are unanimously regarded as unjust tyrants. Shaykh Muḥammad Ṣillaysh, one of the important Aṣzhar scholars, has issued a fatwā to the effect that fighting the Turks is permissible under the leadership of any Moslem and obligatory if the revolt is led by a just man.

20 Muḥammad Ṣillaysh (1802–1882) was since 1854 the Malikite mufti of Egypt. In spite of
Only when the ruler is just is rebellion against him forbidden. In that case it is incumbent upon the Moslems to assist the ruler, regardless whether the leader of the rebels is just or unjust. When, however, a Moslem rises against unbelievers, all Moslems must aid him. This applies to the present situation, since the English unbelievers are now the real masters in Egypt. Its governor (wali) has become a mere figurehead, whom they use as a means to attain their aims and to accustom the Moslems to their satanic laws. The Turks have handed over the Sudan to the English, who have sent Gordon as governor. The adversaries of the Mahdī have chosen the side of the unbelievers, have placed themselves under their protection and fight with them against the Islamic community, in spite of Koranic verses like: "... and God will not open for the unbelievers against the believers a way," (K. 4:141) and "O ye who have believed, do not take the unbelievers as friends rather than the believers." (K. 4:144). Therefore, their argument that they owe allegiance to a Moslem sultan in Istanbul has lost its validity.

Summarising the arguments of both parties, we find that the Ulama that supported the Turco-Egyptian government in the Sudan, built their case upon the following elements: the divine institution of authority; the fact that the Ottoman sultan was a caliph in the true sense of the word (which ran counter to the generally accepted doctrine in the 19th century); that the Moslems owe allegiance to the caliph unless he becomes an unbeliever or orders someone to do so; and that civil strife is pernicious and ruinous and ought to be staved off at any price. In as far as they were written after September 1882, they were, for obvious reasons, silent about the British occupation of Egypt. The arguments of the defenders of the Mahdist revolt centered upon the following points: that the Ottoman sultan in not a caliph; that allegiance to the ruler is only due when he is just and acts in conformity with the sharī'ah; that the sultan and the khedive, because of their neglect of the sharī'ah, their corruption, their misrule and their cooperation with the unbelievers had virtually become unbelievers; and that the Sudan was in fact ruled by the British unbelievers.

From the foregoing it will have become clear, I hope, that Islamic political theory is not a homogeneous and rigid body of doctrine. In general it functioned as a Herrschaftsideologie. But in order to serve as such, it had to proclaim ideals and deal with problems that had relevance to the subjects and could offer them comfort. Political theoreticians, therefore, had to steer between the Scylla of the Islamic ideals of just government ruling according to the prescriptions of the sharī'ah and the Charybdis of sanctioning the existing political order. The course they followed varied and depended to a large extent upon the political situation in their times and upon their personal loyalties. This tension between ideal and practical considerations is illustrated by the case of the Alīūddī revolt. After the British occupation he was tried as a rebel. He died in prison. During the revolt he signed a fatwa, together with seven (or ten) other Azhar Ulama, to the effect that the khedive Tawfiq was unworthy of ruling Egypt because of his cooperation with the unbelievers. Cf. Alexander Schölich, Ägypten und Ägyptern. Die politische und gesellschaftliche Krise der Jahre 1878–1882 in Ägypten, Zürich/Freiburg i. Br., Atlantic Verl., n.d., 216, 350. Engl. tr. of the fatwa in A. M. Broadley, How we defended Arbi and his friends, London, Chapman and Hall, 1884, 175–7. Cf. Steppat, 447–50.
tions is evident from the various ways they circumscribed the obligation of obedi­ence to an unjust ruler — especially in assisting him in fighting Moslem rebels — and the permissibility of deposing him. Some of them allowed some scope for the Islamic ideals to be implemented in case there was a flagrant discrepancy between these ideals and actual conditions. For others, however, the commitment to these ideals amounted to no more than lip service. Nevertheless, these ideals remained alive and could be used as ideological levers by political-religious movements in order to justify opposition and revolt against the existing political order.