

## ***Héros de l'islam*, A Secularized Hagiography of a Muslim Saint or How Political Commitment Leads to Sainthood for an Iraqi Shia Religious Leader**

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*Héros de l'islam*<sup>1</sup> is the biography (*sīrat ḥāyat*) of ayatullāh Mahdī al-Khālisī (1861–1925). The author is ayatullāh's own son. The original manuscript in Arabic language, *Batal al-Islām* (Hero of Islam), has been written by Shaykh Muhammad al-Khālisī (1888–1963). *Batal al-Islām* is one of the few Iraqi sources which were able to be saved from the repeated tragedies Iraq has faced over more than thirty years. According to a UNESCO report, more than 60% of these sources have definitely disappeared during wars, repressions and subsequent lootings. It is worth mentioning that *Batal al-Islām* is not of the least importance among these sources. This book, unpublished in Arabic as well as in other languages at the time it was rescued, tells of the eventful life of ayatullāh Mahdī al-Khālisī, the highest ranking leader of the Shia in the 1920s. The recording his father's life throws light on the prevailing circumstances throughout the steps of the foundation of the political system in both Iraq and Iran. These systems were doomed to collapse. In both countries, the British had founded new institutions. In Iraq, they proclaimed an Arab nation-state in the place of former Ottoman Mesopotamian provinces (1920). They had favoured a new dynasty in Iran through the Pehlevi rule (1925). This rule was overthrown in the Islamic revolution of 1978–79 led by Khomeyni. Regarding the Iraqi state, this collapsed with the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. *Batal al-Islām* allows us to understand the present situation in both countries. In fact, the book brings to light events and stakes that happened ninety years ago and which seem to be repeated in Iraq. Therefore it gives rise to questions about the chance of success of the new Iraqi state which has been built under American patronage.

*Batal al-Islām* is not only a major historical document about fundamental events which mostly were kept hidden, but it opens up a specific cultural world. There is a real thirst for knowledge appearing nowadays about such a world. It tells us just how old are the roots of political Islam. Therefore, we are aware that an ayatollah can become a war chief leading an army of *mujāhidīn* during the 1914–16 jihad against the British invasion of Mesopotamia. The same can be seen on the occasion of the 1920 Revolution against the attribution of the Mandate over Iraq to Great Britain by the League of Nations. By reading this book, we are admitted into an intimacy with the Shia religious leadership, which holds the keys to Iraq's future and, subsequently, the fate of the mission which America entered into by occupying

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1 *La vie de l'ayatollah Mahdī al-Khālisī par son fils, Batal al-Islām*, translated from Arabic and annotated by Pierre-Jean Luizard, 2005, La Martinière, Paris, 474 p.

Iraq. This plural leadership is rarely unified and the most often, it faces fierce rivalries between its members.

We read the book as a vast historical saga. We meet Faysal, the First king of Iraq, Reza Shah, the founder of the Pehlevi dynasty in Iran, Churchill, Sharif Husayn of Mecca, and other characters who had a great impact at that time. It takes us on a journey from Baghdad to Tehran, passing through Mecca and Medina, without forgetting the Holy cities in both Iraq and Iran. It is also a touching testimony of a son for his father's memory, as a victim of History. The ideal which animates the book from beginning to end imparts an undeniably epic inspiration to the whole.

History is written by the victors. Nowhere better than in Iraq is this assertion true. The history of this country has been mainly written from British sources. Many generations of researchers found their inspiration in these sources in writing what only could be a truncated view, at a time when Iraqi sources were dramatically missing. These have been often neglected and difficult to reach in the private libraries of the major Shia religious families. Afterwards, the sources were destroyed by the regime of Saddam Hussein who was anxious to erase any Shia memory.

Shaykh Muhammad al-Khâlisî did not write a traditional biography of ulama. Neither has the book the contents for it nor the form. More obviously, the book looks like an extraordinary testimony by an actor and protagonist of the fight of that time which marked the modern History of Iraq and Iran at its key-period. It also focuses in the major part on the man who was his father in this fight. The role played by the author alongside his father appears in such a way that we are able to have a detailed vision of his own action during this period in the two countries where he lived. Shaykh Muhammad was exiled from Iraq on 29th August 1922. Then, he spent his life in Iran in exile until November 1949. In Iran, he was condemned to a second interior exile for many years. As a whole, he knew 27 years of exile and imprisonment.<sup>2</sup> We meet here the very origin of the modern Iraqi question. In the same way, we are struck by the foresight of the author regarding the fate of the Pehlevi dynasty. The exile of ayatullâh Mahdî al-Khâlisî on 30th June 1923, ten months after his son Muhammad's exile, marked the end of the political Islamic pro-independence project of the Shia religious leadership.

Shaykh Muhammad al-Khâlisî knew that his book could be published neither in Iraq nor in Iran because of the British presence in both countries, due to his hostility to both rulers Reza Khan and Faysal. For this reason, he sent secretly to Iraq all he had written from his

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<sup>2</sup> Shaykh Muhammad al-Khâlisî spent most of his exile in Iran in jails or in places of banishment because of his opposition to Reza Khan and his son Muhammad Reza. The list of the places where he has been condemned to one of these two punishments is long: Tehran, Khvaf, in Khorasan, a second time Tehran, Tûy Serkân, the place where the Pehlevi dynasty used to banish opponents, Nahavand, Qasr-e-Shîrîn, Kermanshah, a second time Nahavand, a second time Nahavand, a second time Tûy Serkân – he was compelled to this place under house arrest during 11 years, Kashan, a third time Tehran, Yazd and a last time in Teheran.

Iranian exile. He succeeded in forwarding a copy of his book to Iraq, asking his family to make several copies in order to preserve it. The original, which just cannot be found these days (the *madrassa* of Imam al-Khalisî in Kâzimayn, where it was kept, have been looted in the second part of the 1980s during the war against Iran. Therefore, the version we were able to find in 1998 is a 1931 transcription of the original. Iraqi pilgrims on their way to Mecca succeeded in eluding the tight controls of the henchmen of the Iraqi regime. Thus, they were able to take the manuscript out of Iraq. It was the final issue of years of efforts to save an irreplaceable source for the History of this crucial period in Iraq.

*Batal al-Islâm* contains two parts. The first deals with Iraq until the arrest of the author in the night of 25/26th June 1923. The second is about Iran and the events which occurred in Iraq consequently to the exile of ayatollah Mahdî al-Khâlisî. In a long letter, written from his jail in the faraway Khvaf, close to the Afghanistan border, Shaykh Muhammad explained to his father what was the prevailing situation in Iran. In this letter, he told his father, who had just come into exile in Iran in his turn, what had happened to him since he had arrived in this country and what his father could expect in Iran.

The fighting of Shaykh Muhammad al-Khâlisî in Iraq and Iran has many common aspects. In both cases, we face two Muslim empires where the old political system legitimated by Islam has concomitantly collapsed under a growing British domination: direct military occupation, then the Mandate in Iraq, partial military occupation and untold protectorate in Iran. Two characters, Faysal in Iraq and Reza Khan in Iran, were put on the throne and founded a new dynasty: Hashimi in Iraq and Pehlevi in Iran. In both cases, it was effected under British patronage, mainly through the protection of Sir Percy Cox in Iraq and Sir Percy Loraine in Iran. Shaykh Muhammad al-Khâlisî saw Faysal and Reza Khan as mere tools of British colonialism. Therefore, Shaykh Muhammad summed up his life and fight: "I have been exiled to Iran under Faysal and in Iran, I have spent 25 years in jails and places of banishment. I have been carried from prison to prison and from place of exile to place of exile. It is obvious to me that neither Faysal nor Reza Khan were those who decided my imprisonment, but that they only executed orders of others. We can say that, during all this long period of time, I have been in the jail and in the exile of the English." Shaykh Muhammad affirms that he has the written proof of the link between Reza Khan and the English. Indeed, *Batal al-Islâm* delivers a version of History which totally refutes the version which prevailed afterwards in Iran as in Iraq. In Shaykh Muhammad's view, Faysal and Reza Khan are both "men of the English", in opposition to the official versions of History for more than one century in both countries in which Faysal and Reza Khan were presented as genuine patriots. The Islamic revolution in Iran put an end to this version, but the myth of a patriotic Faysal is still alive in Iraq. *Batal al-Islâm* unveils the perversion of a political system which claimed to be modern, especially in Iraq, at its beginning, according to European standards.

But this system concealed the most inexpiable discrimination connected with the domination of a western power.

Reading the book over his father's life, what strikes us is the modernity of the stances Shaykh Muhammad al-Khâlisî advocated about the question of government in Islam. In his fight against Reza Khan, Shaykh Muhammad al-Khâlisî did not oppose on principle the republican system in itself. In this matter, he disagreed with the other religious leaders who condemned the Republic as being opposed to Islam. In Shaykh Muhammad's view, no political regime is in itself in conformity or in opposition to Islam. He sees that the Islamic legitimacy of any political system depends on the agreement of the Muslims to it. "The political regime which pleases God is the regime on which all Muslims agree". He saw the attempts of Reza Khan in favour of the institution of the Republican regime a simple way to impose his personal rule, subjecting Iran to the will of a foreign country and putting an end to the parliamentary experience under the Qadjar monarchy. This is the reason why he fought against the Republic.

Shaykh Muhammad al-Khâlisî advocates the state of law, respect of the law, the constitution and Parliament, freedom of the press and right of associations and parties. In the last resort, he commends referral to public opinion. In a country torn by dissensions between the followers of Reza Khan, the supporters of Great Britain or the partisans of the Bolsheviks, and those who used to follow the advice of a conservative Shia clergy, Shaykh Muhammad appears to be the only one in his time to support ideas which clearly express longings for democracy. As an heir of the revolutionary panislamism of Al-Afghânî, Shaykh Muhammad also represents the legacy of the "fighting *marja' iyya*", involved in politics and fighting against the domination western powers tried to impose upon Muslim countries. This is this pro-independence Islamic project which seems to have failed with the isolation and the death of his father in 1925, and the advent of the Hashimi monarchy in Iraq and the Pehlevi in Iran. The circumstances of the foundation of the new nation-state in Iraq, inspired by the European model and imposed by the military force of the British colonizer *versus* the pro-independence project of the Shia religious leadership, is at the root of many conflicts in Iraq and Middle East nowadays. It will not be before the revival of the Shia religious movement in the 1960s, with "political" ulama like Khomeyni in Iran and Muhammad Bâqer al-Sadr in Iraq, that the return of this project will be witnessed, although under different ways. Shaykh Muhammad al-Khâlisî played the part of baton passed from one generation of "fighting ulama" to another.

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