

## Rashīd Riḍā's Efforts in Calling for Muslim Unity and Political Reform

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### ***Abstract***

This paper is an attempt to cover some aspects of Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā's role in political and religious reform during the first half of the twentieth century. It endeavours to answer enquiries regarding the degree of his involvement in political thought as well as in the vital historical transformations that the Islamic world was undergoing during that period. The writer has chosen Riḍā as the subject of the present discussion because he is considered one of those reformers whose call for reform and Muslim unity was envisioned within the framework of the Islamic caliphate under the guidance of the values and goals of the Holy Qur'ān. In addition, in his book *Ṣaḥwat al-Rajul al-Marīd wa al-Sultān 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Thānī wa al-Khilāfah al-Islāmiyyah* (1984), Muwaffaq Banī al-Marjah claimed Rida was influenced by Masonry. This paper proves that he was not influenced by the Masonic and colonialist ideas that were widespread during that period and which were adopted by some reformers. These ideas called for abolishing and dividing the Ottoman caliphate and establishing a new one. In his discussion, the writer shall briefly address Riḍā's educational and political role and his stance toward al-Azhar and the translation of the Holy Qur'ān. Brief discussion shall also be made of Riḍā's role in promoting reform and unity through al-Manār Journal, his stance toward the removal of Sultan 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, political conditions of his era and his stance toward the Ottoman authority (1898-1909) as well as his stance against the nationalists (1911-1912).

### ***Introduction***

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars and thinkers in the Muslim world inherited a burdensome historical legacy. This legacy took the form of ideological disorder, jurisprudential stagnation, ideological fanaticism, scientific and educational backwardness, economic downturn, political corruption and tyranny, and foreign occupation of most Muslim lands.

These scholars and thinkers themselves witnessed some difficult and bloody historical events, which could be characterized as momentous strategic shifts that continued to affect the Muslim *Ummah* till this moment. They saw how the pillars, fundamentals and structure of the then Islamic State (the Ottoman Empire) had fallen due to internal and external factors.

The fall of that state caused the weakening of the Muslim societies that were under its banner. As a result the door was opened further for European powers to continue their occupation of the remaining Muslim

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lands. It also paved the way for the implementation of Zionist plans for the occupation of Palestine and its gradual transformation, in accord with a pre-existing plan, into a national state for Zionists after expelling a sizable proportion of its native population.

Due to these difficult historical circumstances, as well as the dangerous transformations which the *Ummah* underwent, a number of Muslim scholars and thinkers emerged with a mission to reform and renew the structure of the *Ummah*. Their principle aim was to revive the true Islamic spirit and civilized personality of the *Ummah* so as to restore its ability to act effectively. Other aims included repelling foreign occupation and achieving independence and true sovereignty on all levels, so that the *Ummah* could resume its humanitarian role in the world as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

Among the results of the calamities that befell the Muslim world was the division of Muslim thinkers and scholars into three types: the first were those who considered that *Shari'ah* sciences are confined to the books composed by the founders of the different schools of jurisprudence. The second type were those who called for the adoption of Western civilization and contemporary positive laws. They believed the Islamic *Shari'ah* to be unsuitable for this era and, hence, Muslims should imitate the West in everything ranging from science to morals. The third type included moderate Muslim reformers. They believed that the Islamic mission could be renewed through returning to the Qur'an and the Prophetic *Sunnah* as well as the path of the worthy ancestors. They also believed that one could combine Islam and the noblest methods of civilization and order. Among the supporters of this trend was the thinker and reformer Riḍā.

### ***Rashīd Riḍā's Life and Education***

Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā was born in 1865<sup>2</sup> in the village of Qalamawn near the city of Tripoli in northern Lebanon. He came from a well educated family of ancient lineage that acquired a high religious, educational and

<sup>1</sup> Ṭāriq Al-Bashrī, *Al-Malāmiḥ al-ʿĀmmah li al-Fikr al-Siyāsī al-Islāmī fī al-Tārīkh al-Muʿāṣir* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1996), pp. 5-11; See also Ḥāzim Zakariyyā Muḥyī al-Dīn, *al-Iṣlāḥ al-Siyāsīyy ʿinda Mufassirī al-Qurʿān al-Karīm fī al-Niṣf al-Awwal min al-Qarn al-ʿIshrīn* (Ph.D. Dissertation, International Islamic University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2007), p. 3; Emad Eldin Shahin, *Through Muslim eyes: M. Rashīd Riḍā and the West* (Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1993), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Aḥmad Al-Sharabāshī, *Rashīd Riḍā Sāhib al-Manār: ʿAṣruḥ wa Ḥayātuh wa Maṣādir Thaqāfatih*. (Cairo: Al-Majlis al-Aʿlaʾ li al-Shuʿūn al-Islāmiyyah, 1970), p. 102.

social status. Rashīd Riḍā studied various fields of knowledge, including the Arabic language, the *Shari'ah*, logic, mathematics and philosophy, as well as the Turkish and French languages.<sup>3</sup> He pursued his education in Tripoli with a number of eminent scholars, and we find that his interest in intellectual, social and political affairs began at an early stage.

Among the factors that contributed to the enrichment of Riḍā's political and religious thought were certain books that made a major impression upon him. These books provided him with intellectual tools, enriched his outlook, and caused him to occupy himself with issues of morals, intellect, history and legal philosophy. They included Miskaway's (d. 1012 CE) *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq wa Tathīr al-A'rāq*, Ibn Khaldūn's *al-Muqadimah*, and al-Shāṭibī's (d. 1392 CE) *al-I'tisām* and *al-Muwāfaqāt*. At an early stage of his life, especially after his immigration to Egypt, Riḍā benefited from the books of Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328 CE) and Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 1352 CE),<sup>4</sup> which introduced him to philosophical discourse. This was reflected in his thought at a later stage in his life, and became for him an authoritative source that competed with what he obtained from his mentors, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897) and Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905).

The journal *al-Urwah al-Wuthqā* also had a great impact on his thought and goals in life. It caused him to change his way of thinking and pushed him towards reform work. Its impact on him was particularly profound during his youth and the beginning of his educational life in 1884,<sup>5</sup> when he was in Tripoli.<sup>6</sup>

Riḍā concentrated on two main issues for reform at that period of time; these were:

1- Religious reform: meaning reforming the understanding of Islamic belief, as he considered this type of reform to be the main portal for reform of religious thought in general. Riḍā called for this reform to be carried out by reviewing the interpretation of the Holy Qur'ān in a way that reveals the Qur'ānic method for dealing with the historical crises and social problems facing Muslim society in all fields. He also called for reopening the door of jurisprudential exertion (*ijtihād*), and resuming

<sup>3</sup> Sa'ir Abū Ḥamdān, *Al-Shaykh Rashīd Riḍā wa al-Khiṭāb al-Islāmī al-Mu'tadil* (Beirut: Al-Sharikah al-'Ālamiyyah li al-Kitāb, 1992), p. 17; See also Shahin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Sharabāshī, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 284-286; See also Muḥyī al-Dīn, *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Rashīd Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustādh al-Imām al-Shaykh Muḥammad 'Abduh* (Egypt: Maṭba'at al-Manār, 1931), vol. 1, p.303; See also Muḥyī al-Dīn, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Riḍā, *Op.cit.*, vol. 1., pp. 84-85; See also Shahin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 8.

the jurisprudential enterprise as a necessary step towards renewing the practical thought of the *Ummah* as well as facing ever-changing realities.

2- Political reform: meaning the call to get rid of foreign occupation as well as political tyranny by binding the authority to the principles of justice, freedom, consultation (*shūra*) and to a constitution. It further means reforming the political ruling systems and guiding them using the principles and values of Islam. Riḍā also called for establishing a ruling authority that achieves development and prosperity for Muslims and guarantees their sovereignty and independence.

Riḍā decided to go to Egypt to complete his vision of reform work by keeping the company of his role-model, Muḥammad ‘Abduh. Another more immediate cause was the political pressure that the Ottoman State was placing on Syria in response to a group of nationalists and Arab Christians there who were working to get rid of Ottoman control by decrying its tyranny. He also left for Egypt in order to achieve his ambition of issuing an Islamic journal that could be a forum for reform thought.<sup>7</sup>

Riḍā said: “I determined to immigrate to Egypt because of the freedom of work, speech and writing that exists there, and due to the generous sources of knowledge and the various methods of publication.”

He also added:

The most I hoped for was to benefit from Egypt and to learn what Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh gained of wisdom and the reform plan he acquired from his association with Mr. Jamāl al-Dīn. I also hoped to work with him and under his guidance in this free environment.<sup>8</sup>

After reaching Egypt and meeting Muḥammad ‘Abduh on several occasions, Riḍā was able to achieve his dream: the issuance of an Islamic journal concerned with religious, intellectual and social reform.<sup>9</sup> This journal was named *al-Manār* and remained in publication for about 37 years, from 1898 until Riḍā’s death in 1935.<sup>10</sup> ‘Abduh, as well as a

<sup>7</sup> Shakīb Arsalān, *Hādīr al-‘ālam al-Islāmī* (n.c., n. p., 1932), pp. 127-129.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 128; See also Yūsuf Ibīsh, *Riḥālāt al-Imām Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā* (Beirūt: Al-Mu’assasah al-‘Arabīyah li al-Dirāsāt wa al-Nashr, 1979), pp. 211-212.

<sup>9</sup> Fahmī Jad‘ān, *Usus al-Taqaḍdum ‘ind mufakkirī al-Islām fī al-‘Ālam al-‘Arabī al-Hadīth* (‘Ammān: Dār al-Shurūq, 1988), pp. 268-269.

<sup>10</sup> *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Hakīm, al-Shāhīr bi Tafsīr Majallat al-Manār* (Beirūt, n. p., 1900), pp. 15-16.

number of other scholars, thinkers and intellectuals of the period, contributed by writing and editing its articles.<sup>11</sup>

Riḍā explained that the most important aim behind the issuance of *al-Manār* was to spread the reform ideology in all religious, social and educational fields. The aim was also to prove that Islam, with all its rules and legislations, is capable of absorbing change and solving contemporary problems and issues. Riḍā also urged Muslim nations to regain their lost civilizational role by improving educational curricula and spreading accurate and righteous intellectual thought. The intent was to inspire people to change their erroneous understanding of Islam, which would in turn help them change their social and political realities for the better.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Rashīd Riḍā's Educational and Political Role***

Riḍā contributed, during his stay in Egypt, to the call for Muslim unity and reform by spreading relevant ideas either in his journal articles or in his books. He also took practical steps to implement his ideas by actively participating in the establishment and management of a number of associations. These associations carried out general educational, social and religious activities; prominent among them was *Jam'iyat Makārim al-Akhlāq al-Islāmiyyah* (The Association for Noble Islamic Morals).<sup>13</sup>

Such associations called for reform of the Ottoman State while preserving it by establishing the values of consultation, justice, unity and prosperity, as well as increasing people's participation in decision-making. Riḍā considered these values and their strong presence in the political life to be one of the main guarantees for the preservation of the Ottoman Caliphate and the way to regain its strength and sovereignty.<sup>14</sup>

Riḍā expressed his aim by establishing *Madrasat Dār al-Da'wāh wa al-Irshād* (The School for Preaching and Guidance) to be social religious reform. In other words, he aimed for enlightening Muslim minds with beneficial sciences, as well as giving them virtuous education so that they could learn how to live their lives while safeguarding their religion and

<sup>11</sup> Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Marākishī, *Tafkīr Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā min Khilāl Majallat al-Manār, 1898-1935* (Tunisia: n. p., 1985), pp. 55-60.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Sharabāshī, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 21-22; See also, Aḥmad Abū Shawk, *Al-Āthār al-Kāmilah li Majallat al-Manār 'an Janūb Sharq Asyā* (1935) (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Research Management Center, 2006), pp. 2-7; See also Shahin, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Sharabāshī, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 86-88, 161; See also Muḥyī al-Dīn, *Op. Cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

morals. That is in addition to learning whatever is necessary from amongst the arts and occupations of modern civilization.<sup>15</sup>

In early 1913 Riḍā participated with a number of thinkers and politicians in Egypt in establishing a political party named *Ḥizb al-Lā Markaziyyah al-Idāriyyah al-‘Uthmānī* (The Ottoman Decentralized Administration Party). Through this party he called for constitutional reform in the Ottoman State to increase people's participation in self-rule under a unified Ottoman authority. The means for doing so was to be the creation of a decentralized administrative system to replace the centralized administrative system then in place.<sup>16</sup> The system changed, after the removal of Sultan ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd from office in 1909, to a mechanism of tyranny forbidding the Ottoman people from expressing their views and needs.<sup>17</sup>

Riḍā also managed to visit a number of Ottoman State provinces that later became countries, such as Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Turkey, Hijaz, Oman and Kuwait. He also visited India. The aim behind his visits was to get a clearer picture of the realities and issues facing the Muslims. He discussed with the scholars and politicians in these countries the best possible mechanisms for changing people's lives and freeing their societies from occupation and backwardness, as well as achieving Muslim unity.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the above, Riḍā actively participated in a number of religious and political conferences for the purpose of defending the rights of Muslims and Arabs in their countries. He was the chairman of the General Syrian Conference during the rule of the Arab Government in Damascus in 1920 and deputy chairman of the Syrian-Palestinian Conference in Geneva in 1921. He also participated in the Islamic Conferences held in Makkah in 1924 and again in Cairo in 1926 to discuss restoration of the Islamic caliphate after its abolition in Istanbul, the capital city of the Ottoman State, in 1924. In the latter two conferences Riḍā was among those who defended the caliphate system and stressed its importance to Muslims.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Riḍā participated in an Islamic conference held in al-Quds (Jerusalem) in 1931 for the purpose of discussing the Zionist threat to Palestine and for establishing

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 74; See also Muḥyī al-Dīn, *Op. Cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> *Rashīd Riḍā, Tafsīr al-Qu‘rān al-Ḥakīm, al-Shahīr bī-Tafsīr al-Majallat al-Mānār* (Bairūt: Dār al-Ma‘rifah), vol. 16/3, p. 226.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 226-231, 237-239.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Marākishī, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 41-46.

<sup>19</sup> Anīs al-Abyaḍ, *Rashīd Riḍā: Tārīkh wa Sīrah* (Ṭarāblus: Grus Prous, 1993), pp. 79-92.

an Islamic University in Jerusalem bearing the name *Jāmi'at al-Masjid al-Aqṣā* (Al-Aqsa Mosque University). The university was to stand against the Hebrew university which had been established by the Jews in Palestine and which monopolized higher education in that country.<sup>20</sup>

#### ***Rashīd Riḍā's Stance towards al-Azhar***

Riḍā pointed out that al-Azhar was not founded on the basis of piety from the very beginning, for it had been established by the Bāṭiniyyah as a place to spread their thought. However, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī was able to suppress the Bāṭiniyyah (the Fāṭimīs) and transform al-Azhar and other mosques and academies into Sunni institutions. After that al-Azhar had continued developing until it produced eminent scholars. Yet, after a while, al-Azhar fell into decline as its scholars became stagnant and imitative. They also fought all calls for religious reform and incited succeeding governments against the reformers to prevent them from spreading their reform platforms. Riḍā's view was that the *Imām* 'Abduh was the most capable person for reforming al-Azhar. However, Riḍā was mistaken in thinking that it would be possible to reform al-Azhar by simply convincing its leaders of the need for reforms and the direction they should take without having to impose them by external political authority. Riḍā's intent was to reform al-Azhar by widening the scope of knowledge taught there upon a foundation of specialized scholars who would each be an authority in a particular field. He aimed at finding a group of specialists for the *Sharī'ah* judiciary, and another specialised in preaching, etc. He further called for establishing a judicial division in al-Azhar that would prepare students to be judges.

#### ***Rashīd Riḍā's Stance towards the Sunnis and the Shi'ites***

Riḍā emphasised that Allah (S.W.T.) had ordered His worshippers, through His Messengers, to establish the religion and not to be divided. Yet, such division occurs in every religious community, a phenomenon which conflicts with the religion's fundamental goal of unity and harmony. When Islam came, being the final religion, it condemned sectarianism and called for unity; Allah (S.W.T.) revealed: "As for those who divide their religion and break up into sects, you have no part in them in the least; their affair is with Allah. He will in the end tell them the truth of all that they did." (Q: 6:159).

<sup>20</sup>Aḥmad al-Shawābkiḥ, *Rashīd Riḍā wa Dawruh fī al-Ḥayāh al-Fikriyyah wa al-Siyāsiyyah* ('Ammān: Dār 'Ammār, 1989), pp. 349-354.

Despite this warning, conflict and dispute had befallen the Muslim world. Many sects had arisen, and each sect had enlisted supporters in their disagreements with competing sects. Yet, there remained a group that called for harmony and took as a guide Allah's statement: "If you differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to Allah and His Messenger, if you do believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is best and most suitable for final determination." (Q: 4:59).

Riḍā was of the view that Muslims are in dire need of coalitions, harmony and unity due to the backwardness and weakness that had befallen them as a result of sectarian animosity. Hence, Riḍā criticised the fanatics from among all the sects, whether Sunni or Shī'ite, especially those who accused their opponents of disbelief. He accused such fanatics of having divided the unity of the Muslims, making them weak and easy targets for the enemies of Islam.

#### ***Rashīd Riḍā's Stance towards the Translation of the Qur'ān***

Riḍā argued that the translation of the Qur'ān was not lawful under Islamic law. The reason he gave was that the Qur'ān is inimitable in its eloquence. Thus, no one would be capable of translating it unless he had reached that level of eloquence in both the Arabic language and the language to which the Qur'ān is to be translated. Riḍā also emphasised that translating the Qur'ān carried the inherent danger of non-Arab Muslims' dispensing with the Arabic Qur'ān as well as neglecting the books of interpretation and jurisprudence and the remaining Arabic literature. Riḍā recommended that Muslims learn the Arabic language so as to understand the Holy Qur'ān as their ancestors used to do. He further added that had it not been due to political divisions, the Arabic language would definitely have spread among the Muslim nations and become a defensive fence for Islam.

#### ***Rashīd Riḍā's Role in Reform and Unity through "Al-Manār" Journal***

After having settled in Egypt and having convinced Muḥammad 'Abduh of the necessity of establishing *Al-Manār Journal*, Riḍā resolved to convince his mentor, 'Abduh, to write an interpretation of the Holy Qur'ān. The interpretation would reflect his reform program,<sup>21</sup> be limited to the needs of the era, leave whatever was already stated in the old books of interpretation and reveal what they had neglected. Yet this idea was rejected by some scholars including Muḥammad 'Abduh. Riḍā replied to 'Abduh's

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<sup>21</sup> Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 1, p. 12; see also Muḥyī al-Dīn, *Op. Cit.*, p. 28.



rejection by stating: “Time is not devoid of those who appreciate calls for reform, even if they are few, and their number will increase with time; thus writing will be guidance for them in their path; and truth, even if a few accept it, or even know it, must be preserved.”<sup>22</sup> Discussion continued between the two until ‘Abduh came around to Riḍā's point of view. He began to give lessons in Qur’ānic exegesis at al-Azhar from 1899 until shortly before his death in 1905.<sup>23</sup>

We can characterize Riḍā's vision of unity and reform, as reflected in his exegesis in *al-Manār* Journal, within two main frameworks. The first was a criticism of religious quackery and the credulousness that provided it with willing dupes, as well as innovative practices, which were hallmarks of some who fraudulently associated themselves with Sufism. Riḍā fought the spread of superstition, heresy, disgrace, submissiveness and passive fatalism under the rubric of religion and spiritual purification.<sup>24</sup> Such attitudes and their attendant practices were propagated by some who falsely claimed to be scholars and jurists. A major means of securing popular acquiescence to such ideas was by promoting blind imitation and ideological fanaticism in the Muslim mind. This had led to the weakening of creativity and the willingness to think independently. This, in turn, caused the values that prepare people to face reality to disappear and implanted the values of weakness, inferiority and surrender.<sup>25</sup>

His second framework involved a theoretical confrontation with the miserable political reality. That reality was the result of the establishment of unsound values by previous scholars and thinkers, as well as their methods of building the Muslim mentality and personality. This had facilitated the entrenchment of tyranny in the Muslim world<sup>26</sup> and had enabled the West to conquer Muslim lands, steal their resources and control their fate in all educational, social and political fields.

In order to resolve the issues falling within both these two frameworks, Riḍā actively stressed the necessity of returning to the Holy Qur’ān. This is because the Qur’ān is the main source that provided the foundation for the first call for Islam by the Prophet (ﷺ) and his Companions (may Allah be pleased with them). Riḍā demonstrated that the Holy Qur’ān has been the safeguard, throughout history, of every

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.; see also vol. 1, p. 14; Shahin, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>23</sup> Shahin, *Op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār.*, vol. 2, pp. 239-240; vol. 11, pp. 444-451.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 114; vol. 7, pp. 205-210; see also Muḥyī al-Dīn, *Op. Cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār.*, vol. 2, p. 19; vol. 5, pp. 296-297; see also Muḥyī al-Dīn, *Op. Cit.*, p. 42.

efflorescence of Islamic renewal and progress that led to strong and civilized societies, sovereign states and a high status in the world. Consequently, the Holy Qur'ān is the hope now for regaining what we have lost in terms of civilization, sovereignty and prosperity.<sup>27</sup>

After discussing the effect of the Holy Qur'ān through the history of Islamic civilization, Riḍā said:

We believe that Muslims have not weakened and became deprived of their reign except after leaving the guidance of the Qur'ān. They will not regain what they have lost in terms of sovereignty, pride and respect except by returning to its guidance.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the cornerstone of Riḍā's reform vision is a return to the Holy Qur'ān to seek inspiration from its meanings and employ it to achieve the reawakening of the *Ummah*. This will be realized by reforming the *Ummah's* conditions so as to regain its ability to effectively act in a manner that befits its religion, civilization and message in this world.

Riḍā precisely pointed out on several occasions that Muslims could not resume their civilized cultural role unless they gave the revealed norms in the universe their proper position side by side with the other Islamic sciences.<sup>29</sup> Riḍā also stated that the phenomena of backwardness and stagnation which had beset the Muslim world in his era were the result of the Muslims' negligence of the study of those norms the Holy Qur'ān called their attention to.<sup>30</sup> Riḍā also tried to show Muslims the necessity of refraining from anarchy, improvisation and superficial and superstitious thinking. He also argued that Muslims would not achieve progress or prosperity except by following what had been revealed by Allah (S.W.T.) in the Qur'ān and explained in the *Sunnah*.<sup>31</sup>

Hence, Riḍā's reform call was based on a return to the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* and exerting effort to understand them, on the one hand, and studying and deriving benefit from the revealed norms, on the other. He also pointed out that neglecting either aspect would hinder the Muslim *Ummah* and its aspirations for sovereignty, independence and progress.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Abd al-Qādir Ḥāmid al-Tijānī, "Al-Tafsīr wa al-Siyāsah fī al-Shamāl al-Afrīqī: Qirā'ah fī al-Mafhūmiyyah wa al-Ḥarakiyyah al-Islāmiyyah al-Mu'āshirah (1830-1932)," *Majallat al-Muqaddimah* (vol. 1, no. 1, 2005), pp. 29-64.

<sup>28</sup> Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 1, p. 31, vol. 10, p. 461.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, P. 139.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 9, p. 579; vol. 11, p. 317; and vol. 12, p. 242.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, *Op. Cit.* vol. 9, p. 668.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 268; vol. 5, p. 274; vol. 6, p. 136; and vol. 12, p.15.

These were the main pillars of the reform vision that Riḍā strove to disseminate. He utilized all possible means for doing so: issuing a journal, publishing books, establishing schools and associations, organizing trips, participating in conferences, and making ties and discussions with politicians and intellectuals. All that were for the purpose of Muslims' regaining of their historical role on the world stage as leaders of human civilization.

#### ***Notes Regarding Tafṣīr al-Manār***

1. The first part of *Tafṣīr al-Manār* is considered a continuation of Muḥammad 'Abduh's thoughts. Riḍā's role in this part of the *Tafṣīr* was restricted to editing.
2. Riḍā began writing the exegesis from verse 126 of *Sūrat al-Nisā'* and continued until the end of *Sūrat Yūsuf*. Still, he continued to cite many opinions from his mentor, Muḥammad 'Abduh.
3. Riḍā's initial and primary interest was the interpretation of the Qur'ān. Nevertheless, he was also interested in the interpretation of the *Sunnah*, about which he was more learned than his teacher and mentor.
4. Riḍā's aim in exegesis was guiding people towards what benefits them in this world and the Hereafter.
5. Riḍā was well informed about the superstitions which had gained ascendancy among Muslims and which had led them astray from the true Prophetic *Sunnah*.

Among the flaws of the *Tafṣīr* is Riḍā's disagreement with the majority of scholars on a number of issues. Another flaw was his citation from the Bible, even though he was known to deny many of the narrations of the Israelites which had been transmitted by Muslims down through the centuries.

#### ***The Period before the Abolition of the Caliphate***

This refers to the historical period when the Ottoman State was facing the danger of internal dissolution when various provinces started seeking independence. There also were problems of rise of some religious and racial minorities, the issue of foreign privileges and the negative effects of missionary activities. In addition, the State was burdened with an accumulation of external debts, as well as many other political, economic, administrative and social problems.

All these problems coincided with an orchestrated foreign attack aimed at complete destruction of the Ottoman State and its removal from the world's political stage. At that stage the Ottoman State played a vital role in preserving the interests of Muslim societies against Western occupation. The Ottoman State had preserved the caliphate system, which constituted a cultural and religious obstacle to the spread of the Western model in the Muslim world.<sup>33</sup>

Riḍā's stance at that period of time could be summarized as a call for the preservation of the Ottoman State and its protection from the elements of internal collapse and external attack. That is because the Ottoman State was then the symbol for Islamic sovereignty all over the world and safeguarding it meant safeguarding Islam's political existence and international status. At the same time, however, Riḍā was convinced that the best way to preserve that State was to reform it and rationalize its performance to bring it back to the spirit of Islam and its goals. These reforms would have to tackle legal, administrative and political structures.<sup>34</sup> Only then could the hope of preserving Islam and its political structure be realized and the desired progress achieved. That would be essential for parrying the threat posed to the Muslim world by European power, which appeared to be at the pinnacle of scientific, economic, political and military strength.<sup>35</sup>

Riḍā complained that his call for the internal reform of the Ottoman State and for making political activity in the State more compatible with *Sharī'ah* norms of freedom, justice and consultation was met with skepticism. His personal motives were also called into doubt, to the degree that he was accused of being an enemy of the Ottoman State and even Islam. Riḍā made those comments in a study-circle he held to deduce the social norms in the Holy Qur'ān, particularly verses 2:246-252, in which Allah (S.W.T.) revealed:

<sup>33</sup> Aḥmad 'Abd al-Raḥīm Muṣṭafā, *Fī Uṣūl al-Tārīkh al-'Uthmānī* (Beirūt: Dār al-Shurūq, 1982), pp. 236-246; see also, Ismā'īl Aḥmad Yāghī, *Al-Dawlah al-'Uthmāniyyah fī al-Tārīkh al-Islāmī al-Ḥadīth* (Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-'Baykān, 1998), pp. 190-196; and Mehmet Maksudoglu, *Osmanli History 1289-1922 based on Osmanli Sources* (Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University, 1999), pp. 225-231.

<sup>34</sup> Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustādh al-Imām*, vol. 1, pp. 413-415, 909-913; see also Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 2, p. 228.

<sup>35</sup> Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 5, pp. 183-194, vol. 8, p. 228; and vol. 10, pp. 314-315; see also al-Marākishī, *OP. Cit.*, pp. 109-117; al-Shawābkih, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 186-188; Wajīh Kawtharānī, *Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā wa Mas'alat al-Khilāfah* Min Majallat al-Manar" (Bairūt: Dar al-Tali'ah, 1980), p. 122; See also *Al-Taḥdīth wa al-Tajdīd fī 'Asr al-Naḥḍah*, (ed.) Muḥammad Riḍwān al-Ḥasan (Beirūt: Al-Maktab al-'Ālamī li al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nashr, n.d.), pp. 149-151.

Have you not considered the assembly of the Children of Israel after [the time of] Moses when they said to a prophet of theirs, "Set up for us a king and we will fight in Allah's way"?[...]These are the verses of Allah which We recite to you in truth. And indeed, you are from among the messengers.

Riḍā said:

People disagree to imitation or following suit in matters they see as contrary to their social interest....What is strange is that every person thinks he knows what is right in politics and social systems of nations and states,... even though this type of knowledge is superior to all other sciences about which the ignorant [people] admit their ignorance.... A subsidiary of this rule is that the Muslim public in this era maintain that the call to make the (Ottoman) Caliphate compatible with *Shari'ah* rules is against their interests. Many of them consider the one who calls for that to be their enemy and even the enemy of Islam.<sup>36</sup>

Riḍā's call for internally reforming the Ottoman State was a manifestation of his concern for the fate of that state. He believed the State could not be saved from its decline merely by its affiliation to Islam. Rather, there should be an attempt to face and solve the problems besetting it.<sup>37</sup>

We have pointed out earlier that Riḍā saw Ottoman rule as a rule of necessity<sup>38</sup> because the Ottoman caliphs had obtained their power by military means and nationalism and not by being chosen. In addition, they did not fulfill the three main conditions of legitimacy for an Islamic ruler, in Riḍā's view, namely: Qurayshī lineage, the requisite knowledge for *ijtihād* and justice.<sup>39</sup>

Riḍā, as we have seen, considered the rule of necessity as a legitimizing factor provided that the rulers of such a system, with the help of a consultative council, continue striving to reform their rule and change its direction. In other words, legitimation of the system could be achieved through reactivating the principle of *shūra'* (consultation), abiding by the constitution, and activating mechanisms for control and review of the authority's actions.

Hence we find Riḍā congratulating and supporting the return of constitutional life to the Ottoman State. That is when Sultan 'Abd al-Ḥamīd II resumed the application of the constitution in 1908, as a result of

<sup>36</sup> Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 2, p. 493.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 336; 344, 345, vol. 9, pp. 576-580; vol. 12, p. 243

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., vol. 6, p. 409.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., vol. 5, p.198; and vol. 9, p. 19.

the pressures placed on him by *Jam'iyat al-Ittiḥād wa al-Taraqqiy* (The Committee for Union and Progress).<sup>40</sup>

***The Removal of Sultan 'Abd al-Ḥamīd (d. 1918)***

The members of the *Jam'iyat al-Ittiḥād wa al-Taraqqiy* (The Committee for Union and Progress)<sup>41</sup> had forced Sultan 'Abd al-Ḥamīd II to resume the application of the constitution in 1908. After having fully gained control of the parliament, they found that the continued presence of the Sultan—because of his adherence to Islam and enthusiasm about creating a Pan-Islamic nation (*al-Jāmi'ah al-Islāmīah*) free from imperialist domination—created an obstacle to their plans. They intended to gain full control of the Ottoman State and renew it in accordance with their nationalist vision upon a Western secular model. They effected the removal of the Sultan from office by a decree issued by Muḥammad Diyā' al-Dīn Afandī, pursuant to a decision by the parliament on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April, 1909 to depose him and replace him with Crown Prince Muḥammad Rashād Afandī under the title of Sultan Muḥammad V (1909-1918). Thereafter, they exiled Sultan 'Abd al-Ḥamīd from Istanbul and sent him to Salonika, the heartland of the Donma Jews and the center of activity for Masons in the Ottoman State, where they placed him under military surveillance and confiscated his property.<sup>42</sup>

It is apparent that Riḍā was swayed by emotion in his attitude toward the first military coup, and was hasty in judging both the deposed Sultan and the new rulers. Thus, he fell into much contradiction which caused him later to withdraw many judgments expressed during that period, which did not last more than a year.<sup>43</sup>

Among Riḍā's mistakes was his welcoming of the new constitution before examining it in detail. He failed to investigate the degree of its conformity with the texts of the Islamic *Sharī'ah* and to what extent it was adapted from Western constitutions. These issues were spotted by his contemporaries, and he himself became aware of them and criticized them later on.

Notwithstanding the mistakes Riḍā made, we find that he took a firm stand in calling upon the military officers to leave political work and

<sup>40</sup> *Majallat al-Manār*, vol. 6, p. 417.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Muḥafā Tawrān, *Asrār al-Inqilāb al-'Uthmānī* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Salām li al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nashr, 1985), pp. 97-101; See Muḥafā', *Op. Cit.*, pp. 269-273; Maksudoglu, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 234 – 236.

<sup>43</sup> Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 6, pp. 366-368; vol 12., pp. 183-185.

return to their barracks. He also warned members of the triumphant junta of becoming intoxicated by victory and against humiliating Sultan ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd or attempting to take his throne through aggression and oppression, for the Sultan was the leader of the State. Riḍā also argued that the Sultan had an important role and that his experience, intelligence and skill could not be dispensed with in solving the State's political problems, especially with regards to its external relations.<sup>44</sup>

Riḍā blamed the defeat of the Ottoman State in World War One (1918) on the corruption of the central government, the turning away from Islam by the people in power, and their fascination with the West, its thought and way of life.

Verse 6:159 of the Qur’ān states: “As for those who divide their religion and break up into sects, you have nothing to do with them; their affair is with Allah. He will in the end tell them the truth of all that they did,” In discussing the verse, Riḍā explained the cause of the Ottoman defeat in the war. He stated:

The huge Ottoman army was led by arrogant federalists who were influenced by the plots of colonial politics, Masonic deceivers and those who were ignorant of the strength of Islam, its truth and priority. So they spread the call for disbelief, permitted moral depravity, divided the Muslim world, and destroyed the Arab *Ummah*.... How, then, could they triumph or cause their allies to triumph?<sup>45</sup>

After a long life full of activity in the service of Islam, contributing to the progress of Muslim individuals and societies, and reforming their conditions in all fields, Shaykh Riḍā answered his Lord's call, passing away on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August, 1935.<sup>46</sup> May Allah (S.W.T.) have mercy on him, and award him on behalf of Islam and Muslims the best that a reformer of the *Ummah* may be rewarded.

### ***Rashīd Riḍā: Political Conditions***

After the French Revolution in 1789, the coming to power of Napoleon Bonaparte, and the increased vigor of colonialist ventures throughout the world had risen the idea of improving and modernizing the Ottoman army. This idea later flourished in the minds of the Successor leaders of the Ottoman. Thus, Sultan Maḥmūd the Second attempted to develop the army and administration, as well as suppress the influence of the Janissary Army and replace it with a regular army.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, p. 496 ; see also Muṣṭafā, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 274-289; al-Shawābkih, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 189-202.

<sup>45</sup> Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 8, pp. 230-231.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Shawābkih, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 38.

This process was initiated by preamble<sup>47</sup> of the Ottoman constitution promulgated during the reign of Sultan ‘Abd al-‘Azīz in 1876. During that period the Ottoman political stance towards the Arabs, who lived far from the center of the Sultanate in Istanbul, was by and large an arbitrary and military stance. Hence, the Arabs' health, economic, social and intellectual affairs were neglected. In addition, the Arabs' traditional tribal organisations as well as their conventional educational system were left without any noticeable development. The Ottomans were satisfied to merely bestow military and administrative titles upon the Arab elite whenever they allowed their participation in the army.<sup>48</sup>

***Rashīd Riḍā's Stance towards the Ottoman Authority during the Era of Sultan ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd (1898-1909)***

Although his role-model Muḥammad ‘Abduh had discouraged him from intervening in political matters, Rashīd Riḍā displayed a keen interest in politics from the first edition of *al-Manār Journal* ignoring the advice of his role-model Imām Muḥammad ‘Abduh.<sup>49</sup>

It can be observed that Riḍā used his *Journal* to provide unlimited support to the programs of Sultan ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd and his services; he announced them, praised them and defended them against critics. For instance, Riḍā praised the Sultan's encouragement for scientific research and dissemination of knowledge throughout the Ottoman Empire. He also praised the Sultan's monetary aid to all sects in order for them to establish new schools. Riḍā also made positive mention of the Hijaz railway project, built by the Germans to help cement good relations with the Ottomans, who were in the process of becoming their allies. Moreover, Riḍā did not hesitate to extol ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd's generosity towards his staff and other sterling moral traits in order to gain and shore up support for him.

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<sup>47</sup> Ḥārith Suleimān al-Fārūqī, *al-Fārūqī's Law Dictionary* (Beirut: Librarie Du Liban, 2005), p. 541. “**Preamble:** means a preface, an introduction or explanation of what is to follow: that clause at the head of acts of congress or other legislatures which explain the reasons why the act is made. Preambles are also frequently put in contracts to, explain the motives of the contracting parties, A preamble is said to be the key of a statute, to open the minds of the makers as to the mischiefs which are to be remedied, and the objects which are to be accomplished by the provisions of the statutes. It cannot amount, by implication, to enlarge what is expressly given”.

<sup>48</sup> Al-Marākishī, *Op. Cit.* pp 103; See also Shahin, *Op. Cit.*, pp 30-35.

<sup>49</sup> Maksudoglu Mehmet, *Osmanli History 1289- 1922 Based on Osmanli Sources*, Malaysia, International Islamic University, 1999, pp 225-231; See also al-Marākishī, *Op. Cit.* pp 115-121.



***Rashīd Riḍā Turns against the Nationalists Due to their Stance towards the Case of Tripoli (1911-1912)***

Riḍā initially supported The Association for Unity and Development by confirming their claims that they respected and abided by the constitution and were striving to lay the basis for decentralisation of power.

Yet, as time passed, Riḍā learned the truth about these nationalists and their racial policies against Arab citizens of the State. Such policies included the establishment of new commissions throughout the Ottoman provinces to impose a new taxation system under the claim of monetary support for The Association.<sup>50</sup>

These commissions used force in implementing their plans, which resulted in the establishment of Arab political associations to resist such arbitrary governance. Furthermore, the nationalists failed to defend Libya, at that time a province of the Ottoman Empire, from Italian attack. In fact, their neglect of the province had made it a tempting target for colonisation. All of these issues made Riḍā angry at The Association for Unity and Development, whom he came to see as supporters of the Western powers. He further accused them of giving up the Arab coast to English forces, who took advantage of its natural resources.<sup>51</sup>

Riḍā's relationship with the nationalists became increasingly tense. He became an opponent to all Turkish newspaper owners, whom the nationalists were using to attack the Arabs and increase Arab-Turkish ethnic conflict.

Riḍā's disgruntlement with the nationalists increased due to their disregard of his political advice. A key item of his advice included a reform program of the centralised Ottoman system of government, which he had been promoting since the latter part of Sultan 'Abd al-Ḥamīd's era. These items of advice included:<sup>52</sup>

1. protecting the constitution against the frivolity of the military personnel who led the coup; the necessity of ensuring the independence of the civilian government and the parliament from any interference in their authority;

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<sup>50</sup> Al-Marākishī, *Op. Cit.*, pp 122-126; See also Maksudoglu, *Op. Cit.*, pp 234-36; See also McCarthy, *Op. Cit.*, pp 371-375.

<sup>51</sup> Al-Marākishī, *Op. Cit.*, p 124; see also Muḥyī al-Dīn, *Op. Cit.*, p. 196.

<sup>52</sup> See Muḥyī al-Dīn, *Op. Cit.*, p. 205.

2. achieving harmony between all sects and races that inhabited the different provinces of the Ottoman State as well as confronting all forms of fanaticism, whatever their source, in order to protect the Ottoman bond;
3. increased attention to the Arab provinces, being part of the Ottoman State, and protecting them when necessary.
4. safeguarding the Islamic characteristic of the government, the judiciary and education, as well as spreading the Arabic language.

However, these recommendations were not implemented or given the least consideration. This was due to their hatred for the Arabs, who were administered using the army and violence.

### ***Conclusion***

The writer observed that during the early period of his life Riḍā was influenced by the controversial ideas of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī. The latter's relations with the colonial powers resulted in Riḍā's support for the groups that organized a coup against 'Abd al-Ḥamīd II. However, Riḍā's ideas on reform took an increasingly independent direction, which led him to revise his earlier stance and call for supporting the Sultan. That is because the latter was considered a symbol of the Islamic caliphate.

In addition, through *al-Manār Journal* Riḍā was able to establish a reformist institution, which he used to call for political reform and unity between the Islamic nations in accord with the values and goals of the Holy Qur'ān. Those nations were at the time largely under the authority of the Ottoman Caliphate. Hence, Rashīd Riḍā may be considered a reform model who took historical responsibility by undertaking political and religious reform work. Nevertheless, he was not able to formulate a comprehensive theoretical conceptualization of the interaction between the Holy Qur'ān and its interpretation, on the one hand, and history and reality on the other. The practical results of his efforts thus fell far short of his objectives.