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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

An Indian Caliphate That Almost Was: The Nizam, the Ottomans and a British Veto

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HISTORY & CULTURE**GS1**

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"If the British had allowed the caliphate to pass to the Nizam's family in the 1930s, what would that have changed about the relationship between Indian Islam and the wider Muslim world, and would it have been good or bad for undivided India?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

For a few years in the early 1930s, the richest man in the world was one wedding away from making the Caliphate an Indian institution. The British said no, and the story disappeared from the textbooks along with the plan.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

This is genuinely obscure material, not because it is unimportant but because it sits at the intersection of three subjects usually taught separately: Ottoman and world history, the Khilafat Movement as covered in the Indian national movement syllabus, and the princely states' relationship with British **paramountcy**. Most GS1 preparation stops the Khilafat story in 1922, with Gandhi's withdrawal from Non-Cooperation. This episode is the movement's less-taught afterlife, run not through mass mobilisation but through princely diplomacy a decade later, and it is exactly the kind of connective, cross-topic material that distinguishes a strong Mains answer from a list of dates.

GS Paper 1: Modern Indian history from about the middle of the eighteenth century until the present, significant events, personalities, issues; the Khilafat Movement; role of princely states in the national movement and their relationship with British paramountcy.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
Khilafat Movement (1919-1922)	Pan-Islamic agitation by Indian Muslims to preserve the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph's temporal authority, allied with Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement	Standard national movement topic; this episode is its lesser-known 1930s sequel
Abolition of the Caliphate (1924)	Turkey's Grand National Assembly, under Ataturk, abolished the Caliphate on 3 March 1924, exiling Abdulmejid II	The event that triggered the Hyderabad succession attempt
Paramountcy	The doctrine under which the British Crown held supreme authority over princely states, including a veto on their external relations	The mechanism that killed the Hyderabad-Caliphate plan
Asaf Jah dynasty	The ruling house of Hyderabad State, whose seventh Nizam, Mir Osman Ali Khan, was reputed the world's wealthiest individual	Connects princely-state wealth to pan-Islamic politics
Pan-Islamism	The political ideology favouring solidarity and unity of Muslims across national boundaries, under a single religious authority	The ideological undercurrent linking the Ali brothers, Abdulmejid and the Nizam

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The **Khilafat Movement of 1919 to 1922** was led by the Ali brothers, **Mohammad Ali and Shaukat Ali**, who mobilised Indian Muslim opinion around preserving the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph's authority after the Ottoman Empire's defeat in the First World War and the **punitive** Treaty of Sevres. Mahatma Gandhi allied the movement with **Non-Cooperation**, seeing in it an opportunity for Hindu-Muslim unity against colonial rule. The alliance collapsed after the **Chauri Chaura incident of February 1922**, when Gandhi withdrew Non-Cooperation, and it was rendered moot in any case by developments in Turkey itself: **Mustafa Kemal Ataturk** abolished the Ottoman Sultanate in 1922 and, more decisively, the **Caliphate itself on 3 March 1924**, through a vote of the Grand National Assembly, as part of his secularising reforms. The last Caliph, **Abdulmejid II**, was exiled that same night, along with more than 230 members of the Ottoman dynasty, and eventually settled in genteel poverty on the French Riviera.

Shaukat Ali, unwilling to treat the cause as closed, discovered Abdulmejid's straitened circumstances and saw in the fabulously wealthy **Nizam of Hyderabad, Mir Osman Ali Khan**, a potential patron and successor institution. He brokered a **marriage alliance** between the two houses: the Nizam's grandson and heir, **Mir Himayat Ali Khan (Prince Azam Jah)**, married Abdulmejid's daughter **Princess Durrushehvar**, while his younger brother, **Mir Shujaat Ali Khan (Prince Moazzam Jah)**, married the Ottoman princess **Niloufer**. The **joint wedding was held on 12 November 1931 at the Palais Carabacel in Nice**, with Abdulmejid personally conducting the ceremony. The intent, per Imran Mulla's research in *The Indian Caliphate: Exiled Ottomans and the Billionaire Prince* (Hurst, 2025), was for the

Caliphate to descend to the eldest son born of the Azam Jah-Durrushehvar marriage, who would be Abdulmejid's own grandson. That child, **Prince Mukarram Jah**, was born in 1933 and later became the titular eighth and last Nizam.

THE ANALYSIS

1. This was the Khilafat Movement's afterlife, not its continuation. By 1931, the original cause, pressuring Britain to preserve Ottoman temporal power, had become irrelevant, since Turkey had already dismantled the office itself in 1924. What Shaukat Ali pursued instead was a rescue operation: relocating a Turkish-abolished institution onto Indian soil. This is a materially different project from the 1919 to 1922 movement, run by different means, for a different purpose, and it is precisely because it does not fit neatly into the standard Khilafat narrative that it has been under-taught.

2. The alliance fused two forms of legitimacy that do not naturally combine. Ottoman dynastic and religious standing supplied the Caliphate's claim to sacred authority; the Nizam's fortune, reputed the largest private wealth in the world at the time and later confirmed by a 1937 *Time* magazine cover naming him the richest man alive, supplied the material means to sustain an impoverished institution. A succession plan engineered so that the office would eventually fall to a specific grandchild is, in effect, a negotiated transaction dressed in the language of dynastic marriage, and Mulla's own finding that an alleged formal deed between the two houses was inauthentic, while both sides nonetheless wanted the outcome it described, underlines how deliberately this was engineered rather than a happy accident of romance.

3. Abdulmejid had rivals, and that raised the stakes of the Hyderabad bid. King Fuad of Egypt also sought the Caliphate title, and a 1926 Cairo caliphate congress had already tried, without success, to settle the succession question for the wider Muslim world. Abdulmejid's willingness to entertain a plan that would move the office to India, rather than keep it within traditional Ottoman or Arab lands, reflects both his desperation and the genuine absence, in the 1920s and 1930s, of any consensus mechanism for who should hold a title stripped of the state power that had once made the question moot.

4. The British veto is the crux of the episode, and it reveals more about colonial anxiety than about religious politics. Under **paramountcy**, the doctrine giving the British Crown supreme authority over the princely states, Hyderabad could not conduct this kind of dynastic and religious diplomacy without London's sanction. The refusal was not a technicality; it reflected a specific fear, that a revived Caliphate seated in Hyderabad, itself a Muslim-ruled state with a majority Hindu population, could re-energise the pan-Islamic mobilisation Britain had only recently weathered during the 1919 to 1922 agitation, this time with a permanent institutional seat inside British India rather than a distant, abstract cause in Anatolia.

5. The unused mausoleum at Khuldabad is the episode's most durable physical evidence. Mir Osman Ali Khan built an **Ottoman-style mausoleum at Khuldabad**, in what was then Hyderabad State and is now in Maharashtra, intending it to house Abdulmejid's remains. Abdulmejid died in Paris on **23 August 1944**; his body was kept at the Grand Mosque of Paris for a decade before being buried in **Medina**

in 1954 on the order of King Saud of Saudi Arabia. The Khuldabad tomb stands empty to this day, a monument to intent rather than outcome, and arguably a more reliable indicator of how seriously the Nizam took the plan than any document that has survived.

6. The episode's afterglow outlived the plan itself. Prince Mukarram Jah, the intended eventual Caliph, became the titular eighth Nizam on his grandfather's death in 1967, a figure later known more for dissipating the family fortune and working as a labourer in Australia than for any religious authority, a coda that underscores how completely the 1931 plan's central premise, transferring sacred office alongside princely wealth, failed to survive contact with the twentieth century.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

Book: *The Indian Caliphate: Exiled Ottomans and the Billionaire Prince*, by Imran Mulla, published by Hurst, 2025

Khilafat Movement: 1919 to 1922; led by Mohammad Ali and Shaukat Ali; allied with Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement; Non-Cooperation withdrawn after Chauri Chaura, February 1922

Abolition of the Ottoman Sultanate: 1922; abolition of the Caliphate: 3 March 1924, by Turkey's Grand National Assembly under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

Last Caliph: Abdulmejid II; exiled to Switzerland, later settled on the French Riviera (Nice)

Nizam of Hyderabad: Mir Osman Ali Khan, seventh Nizam of the Asaf Jah dynasty, reputed the world's wealthiest individual (later on the 1937 *Time* magazine cover)

Marriage alliance: Azam Jah (Nizam's grandson and heir) married Princess Durrushehvar (Abdulmejid's daughter); Moazzam Jah married Princess Niloufer

Wedding date: 12 November 1931, Palais Carabacel, Nice

Intended heir to the Caliphate: eldest son of Azam Jah and Durrushehvar, Prince Mukarram Jah, born 1933, later titular eighth Nizam (from 1967)

Plan blocked by the British, exercising paramountcy over Hyderabad State

Mausoleum built by the Nizam at Khuldabad (present-day Maharashtra) for Abdulmejid, never used

Abdulmejid II died 23 August 1944, Paris; buried in Medina, 1954, on the order of King Saud

Rival claimant to the Caliphate title: King Fuad of Egypt

WATCH THE TRAP: DO NOT WRITE THAT THE NIZAM'S FAMILY "HELD" THE CALIPHATE AT ANY POINT, OR THAT THIS EPISODE WAS PART OF THE 1919 TO 1922 KHILAFAT MOVEMENT ITSELF. THE ABOLITION OF THE CALIPHATE IN 1924 CAME AFTER THE ORIGINAL MOVEMENT HAD ALREADY COLLAPSED IN INDIA; THE HYDERABAD MARRIAGE ALLIANCE OF 1931 WAS A DISTINCT, LATER ATTEMPT TO REVIVE THE ABOLISHED OFFICE, NOT A CONTINUATION OF THE EARLIER MASS MOVEMENT.

THE DEBATE

This is a historiographical debate about method and evidence, not a live political dispute, and it is worth engaging on its own terms rather than forcing an artificial for-and-against.

How much weight should counterfactual “what if” history carry in serious analysis? Critics of counterfactual history argue it substitutes speculation for evidence and risks treating near-misses as equivalent in significance to what actually happened. The stronger defence, and the one this episode illustrates well, is that a documented near-miss is not speculation about an alternate timeline; it is evidence about the real constraints operating on the actual timeline. The interesting historical fact is not “what if the Caliphate had come to Hyderabad”, but that serious, resourced people believed it was achievable and were stopped by an identifiable, documented actor, the British colonial state. That is a claim about 1930s power, not about an imagined future.

What the episode reveals about the entanglement of princely wealth, pan-Islamic politics and colonial policy. The Nizam’s wealth was not incidental to the plan, it was the plan’s engine: an impoverished Ottoman family needed a patron, and a fabulously wealthy Muslim prince, denied any independent foreign policy role by paramountcy, found in a marriage alliance one of the few channels through which his resources could acquire genuine international and religious significance. The British veto then confirms how completely paramountcy could reach into decisions that were, on their face, personal and religious rather than political.

Why this belongs to a distinct, less-taught chapter of Khilafat history. Standard national movement teaching treats the Khilafat Movement as a closed episode of 1919 to 1922, valuable mainly for its role in the Hindu-Muslim unity of Non-Cooperation. Because the Caliphate’s actual abolition came in 1924, after the mass movement had already ended in India, and because the 1931 Hyderabad plan was pursued through elite princely diplomacy rather than public agitation, it fell into a historiographical gap, too late for the Khilafat Movement chapter, too obscure for princely-state chapters focused on 1947 accession. Recovering it corrects an artificial tidiness in how the period is usually taught.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

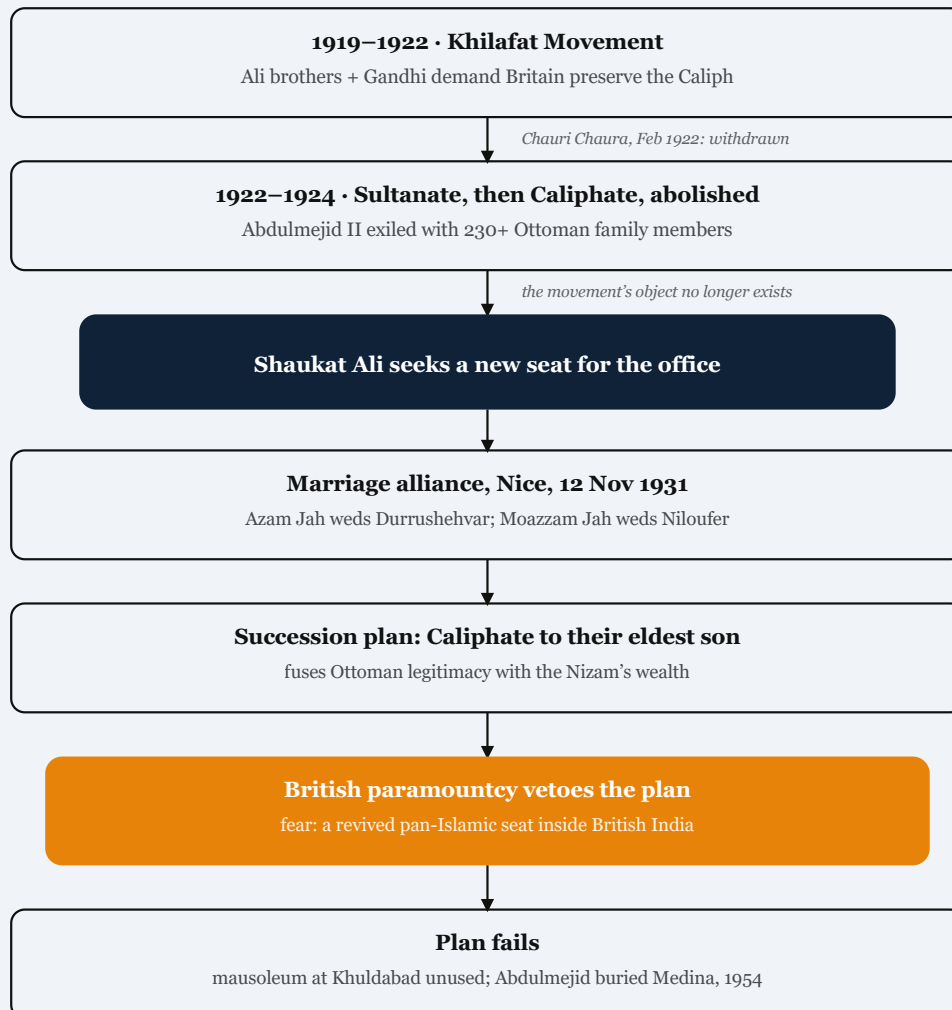
The transferable pattern: **paramountcy was not only a crisis-moment doctrine, invoked at dramatic junctures like the 1947 accession decisions, it was a standing, quiet veto exercised over ordinary-seeming princely decisions whenever those decisions touched matters of colonial anxiety.**

Marriage alliances, religious patronage and dynastic succession look, on their face, like private matters outside the scope of political history. This episode shows that under a colonial paramountcy arrangement, no princely decision with implications for religious or communal mobilisation was actually private. The British did not need to act publicly or dramatically to shape outcomes; a quiet veto, unrecorded in the kind of official correspondence that makes it into standard textbooks, was often enough to end a scheme that had already reached the point of a formal wedding and a planned line of succession.

The same pattern is worth applying wherever a colonial or dominant power's interest was implicit rather than announced: princely states' choice of foreign tutors and advisers, their patronage of religious institutions with cross-border reach, and their control over pilgrimage and religious travel, all areas where paramountcy operated below the threshold of visible political crisis but shaped outcomes just as decisively as it did during accession in 1947.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

From mass movement to princely diplomacy



The Khilafat movement's own leaders, once the office they had agitated for no longer existed, tried to revive it through a Hyderabad-Ottoman marriage alliance funded by the Nizam's wealth. The British read this correctly as a pan-Islamic threat inside their own territory and killed it.

TAKEAWAY BOX

A wedding can carry more geopolitical weight than a treaty when the groom's family controls the money and the bride's family controls the sacred office. The British understood this, which is exactly why they stopped it.

*Khilafat Movement, 1919 to 1922, led by **Mohammad Ali and Shaukat Ali**; Ottoman Caliphate abolished **3 March 1924** by Turkey's Grand National Assembly under **Ataturk**; **Mir Osman Ali Khan**, seventh Nizam of Hyderabad, **Asaf Jah dynasty**; marriage of **Azam Jah to Durrushehvar** and **Moazzam Jah to Niloufer**, Nice, **12 November 1931**; intended heir **Prince Mukarram Jah** (b. 1933); British **paramountcy** vetoed the plan; mausoleum at **Khuldabad**; **Abdulmejid II** died **1944**, buried **Medina, 1954**; book source: **Imran Mulla, The Indian Caliphate: Exiled Ottomans and the Billionaire Prince, 2025**.*

when a colonial power exercises a veto quietly, through private diplomatic pressure rather than a public order, is that a more or less legitimate use of power than an open, announced prohibition, and does the answer depend on whether the affected party had any real avenue of appeal?

UPSC has repeatedly examined the Khilafat Movement, the doctrine of paramountcy, and the integration of princely states; this editorial supplies a specific, lesser-known episode that connects all three to a single, well-documented sequence of events.

"The 1931 attempt to relocate the Ottoman Caliphate to Hyderabad reveals more about British colonial anxieties than about Ottoman or Indian Islamic politics." Critically examine.

Source: An Indian Caliphate That Almost Was: The Nizam, the Ottomans and a British Veto — Ujiyari.com | Free
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• KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

The little-known attempt to pass the Ottoman Caliphate to the family of the Nizam of Hyderabad through the 1931 marriage of Prince Azam Jah to Princess Durrushehvar shows that the Khilafat Movement did not end in 1922 or 1924, it migrated from mass politics into princely diplomacy, and it was ultimately blocked not by any failure of will among its participants but by a British veto rooted in colonial anxiety about pan-Islamic sentiment inside India.



SUPPORTING

- The chronology itself is instructive: Turkey abolished its own Caliphate in March 1924, three years before the mass Khilafat Movement in India had fully wound down, meaning the institution Indian Muslims had mobilised to protect was dismantled by the Turks themselves, and the Hyderabad plan of 1931 is best read as an attempt to rescue the office from that very abolition rather than as a continuation of the original 1919 to 1922 movement.
- The alliance fused two distinct kinds of legitimacy, Ottoman dynastic and religious standing on one side, and the Nizam's globally unmatched personal fortune on the other, with the succession plan designed so that Abdulmejid's own grandson, the child of Azam Jah and Durrushehvar, would eventually hold the title, which made the arrangement transactional in a way that sits uneasily with the sacred character usually attached to the Caliphate.
- The scheme's failure was not accidental or a matter of waning enthusiasm; it was vetoed by the British, whose paramountcy over the princely states gave them an effective veto over any Hyderabad initiative with implications for India's Muslim population, and this veto is the crux of the episode, not a footnote to it.
- The Nizam's construction of an Ottoman-style mausoleum at Khuldabad for a Caliph who would eventually be buried in Medina instead is a physical monument to a plan that failed, and it is a more concrete kind of evidence for the seriousness of the intent than any surviving document, since Imran Mulla's own research found the alleged formal deed between the two houses to be inauthentic.



COUNTER

A sceptic could argue this is an entertaining footnote dressed up as historical significance, a marriage between two declining aristocracies that was never going to survive contact with 1930s geopolitics regardless of British intervention, since the Caliphate had already lost its temporal power in 1924 and rival claimants such as King Fuad of Egypt commanded no more

real authority than Abdulmejid did; on this reading, the episode reveals more about the psychological needs of displaced royalty than about any serious redistribution of religious authority.

**WAY FORWARD**

Treat the episode as what good counterfactual history should be, not a claim about what would have happened, but a diagnostic tool for what the surviving evidence reveals about the real constraints of the period, in this case, the depth of British anxiety about pan-Islamic mobilisation inside India even a decade after the original Khilafat Movement had subsided, and the way princely wealth could still, briefly, make a religious institution portable across the Ottoman-British imperial fault line.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

The 1931 marriage alliance between the Ottoman and Asaf Jah families was reportedly intended to relocate the Caliphate to Hyderabad State. Examine what this episode reveals about the relationship between princely wealth, pan-Islamic politics and British colonial policy toward the princely states in the interwar period. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment aside, not every consequential episode in India's colonial-era history involves mass movements or legislation; some of it happened in marriage negotiations between exiled royals. Imran Mulla's 2025 book, *The Indian Caliphate: Exiled Ottomans and the Billionaire Prince*, recovers one such episode: a serious, near-successful attempt in the early 1930s to relocate the 1,300-year-old Ottoman Caliphate to the family of the Nizam of Hyderabad, and its failure at British hands.

BODY

The background is the Khilafat Movement of 1919 to 1922, in which the Ali brothers, Mohammad Ali and Shaukat Ali, mobilised Indian Muslims, in alliance with Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement, to pressure Britain into preserving the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph's authority after the Ottoman defeat in the First World War. The movement collapsed well before its object was secured: Gandhi withdrew from Non-Cooperation after the Chauri Chaura violence of February 1922, and Turkey itself, under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, abolished the Sultanate in 1922 and the Caliphate outright on 3 March 1924, exiling the last Caliph, Abdulmejid II, and more than 230 members of the Ottoman house.

Shaukat Ali did not accept this as final. Finding Abdulmejid living in genteel poverty on the French Riviera, he brokered a marriage alliance between the Ottoman family and the Asaf Jah dynasty of Hyderabad: Prince Azam Jah, the Nizam Mir Osman Ali Khan's grandson and heir, married Abdulmejid's daughter Durrushehvar, and his brother Moazzam Jah married the Ottoman princess Niloufer, in a joint wedding at Nice on 12 November 1931.

The reported intent was for the Caliphate to pass to the eldest son of the Azam Jah-Durrushehvar union, uniting Ottoman religious legitimacy with the Nizam's fortune, then reputed the largest private wealth in the world, and giving Indian Islam an unprecedented centrality. The plan failed because Britain, exercising its paramountcy over the princely states, would not sanction it, wary of a revived pan-Islamic authority seated inside British India itself.

Mir Osman Ali Khan later built an Ottoman-style mausoleum at Khuldabad to receive Abdulmejid's remains, a gesture that outlived the political plan; Abdulmejid died in Paris in 1944 and was eventually buried in Medina in 1954, and the Khuldabad tomb was never used.

CONCLUSION

The episode is best assessed not as a plausible alternative history in which India briefly hosted the Caliphate, but as evidence of how tightly British colonial policy constrained even the private, dynastic and

religious decisions of princely states whenever those decisions touched pan-Islamic sentiment. The durable lesson for students of the period is that paramountcy was not only a doctrine invoked at moments of formal political crisis, such as accession in 1947, but a standing veto exercised quietly over matters that never became public controversies at the time, which is precisely why an episode of this significance remained obscure until recovered by recent scholarship.

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