The Islamic Caliphate: A Controversial Consensus

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The institution of the caliphate is nearly as old as Islam itself. Its roots lie in the days following the death of Muhammad in 632, when the Muslims convened and chose a "caliph" (literally "successor" or "deputy"). While the Shiites recognize ʿAli b. Abi Talib as the sole legitimate heir of the prophet, the Sunnis recognize the first four "rightly guided" caliphs (*al-Khulafa al-Rashidun*), as well as the principal caliphates that succeeded them – the Umayyad, Abbasid, Mamluk, and Ottoman. The caliphate ruled the Sunni Muslim world for nearly 1,300 years, enjoying relative hegemony until its abolition in 1924 by Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey.

Although Sunni commentators have defined the essence of the caliphate differently in different periods, they tend to agree that the caliphate was founded for the purpose of managing Muslim affairs in accordance with the laws of God and organizing the lives of their people according to the principles of Islamic religious law.[1] In practice, the caliphate has experienced highs and lows over the course of its history. In some periods, it exerted authority over political, administrative, financial, legal, and military affairs; in others, it was reduced to the symbolic and spiritual realm, such as leading mass prayers, much in the manner of the modern Catholic papacy.[2]

The Islamic State's 2014 announcement on the renewal of the caliphate showed that the institution is not only a governmental-religious institution of the past, but also a living and breathing ideal that excites the imagination of present day Muslims. The secret of the caliphate's appeal is twofold: first, it contains a nostalgic promise to correct the modern political order – perceived by many as oppressive and corrupt – and restore the original and just order of Islam. This is accomplished through the unification of Muslims

in a framework that will revive their honor and bring them national and economic prosperity. Second, it is a concept that is embedded in the culture and history of Islam, one that enjoys a broad consensus among scholars from various Sunni sects. Yet alongside the shared belief that the caliphate is an exalted aspiration, the Islamic religious clerics hotly dispute its substance, the proper timing for its renewal, the manner in which its leader should be appointed, and its reciprocal relations with modern Arab nation states. From this perspective, the internal Muslim debate over the caliphate is yet another facet of the struggle for hegemony and religious authority between rival forces in contemporary Sunni Islam.

The Islamic State as the Realization of the Caliphate Vision

On June 29, 2014, Islamic State spokesman Abu Muhammad al-ʿAdnani announced the restoration of the caliphate and the appointment of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph. His announcement aroused enthusiasm among multitudes of Muslims in Arab and Western countries, who began thronging to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq and dedicating – and in many cases sacrificing – their lives for the consolidation and expansion of the newly established caliphate. Suddenly, ninety years after Ataturk abolished the institution, arguing that it was an anachronistic and disastrous system for Muslims in general and Turks in particular, its vitality reemerged. What had symbolized the backwardness and impotence of Islam vis-à-vis the West to the nationalistic forces operating in the Middle East in the early twentieth century now became the wave of the future, while the Arab nation states, which had symbolized the future as well as the realization of independence and modernity to those same secular forces, found themselves on the defensive.

Time, it appears, has made people forget the miserable downfall of the most recent caliphate, the Ottoman Empire. The weakness of the Arab nation states, as well as the failure of the secular ideologies of the twentieth century to fulfill their promises, has thus brought the caliphate back to life. The vision of a union of the faithful under a single leader, who will impose Islamic law upon all, was once again regarded by many Muslims as an alternative that reflects their beliefs and values, and will achieve their goals. In the internal arena, the caliphate will be able to reconstruct the organic legal and political order that prevailed since ancient times. In the international arena, the caliphate will combat the injustices of both the Arab-Muslim regimes that have strayed from the righteous path and the infidel Western

superpowers, and restore Islamic civilization, the Islamic nation, and all Muslims to their rightful place.[3]

At the center of the announcement on the caliphate stands al-Baghdadi, who has become an integral part of the Islamic State brand thanks to his much emphasized kinship with the tribe of Muhammad and his religious education. The Salafi jihad organizations that have recognized the caliphate have sworn personal allegiance to al-Baghdadi, thereby demonstrating the impressive power of the caliph and his enterprise, even though doubts still linger concerning the Islamic State's ability to maintain its unity and choose an heir after his departure. The announcement promises that al-Baghdadi will establish institutions, dissolve oppression, impose justice, and replace the current state of destruction, corruption, oppression, and fear with security. It declares that the time has come for the nation of Muhammad to cast off its disgrace and resume its glory. According to the announcement, the signs of victory are already apparent: the Islamic State flag flies high while the heretical nation states see their flags lowered, their borders breached, and their soldiers killed, taken prisoner, and defeated. Such signals awaken the dream deep in the heart of every Muslim believer as well as the hope of a rejuvenated caliphate that beckons every jihad fighter.[4]

The Debate over the Caliphate in Current Sunni Islam

The announcement of the caliphate prompted a sharp internal debate between the Islamic State and its Muslim enemies, and reflects the struggle between the newly proclaimed entity and traditional forces for hegemony over Islamic religious law. The caliphate does not merely aim to build a new reality; it is at war with everything that preceded it. Al-ʿAdnani made it clear that the reestablishment of the caliphate denies the legitimacy of every other Islamic organization. The duty of all Muslims is to swear allegiance to Caliph al-Baghdadi; those who do not are guilty of dividing the Islamic nation. This divisive pronouncement was aimed above all at Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda branch in Syria and the Islamic State's direct rival representation of the Salafi jihad vision in that territory. It likewise posed a challenge to religious authorities deemed heretical by the Islamic State, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the religious establishments associated with Arab regimes.

Opposition to the caliphate has thus united sworn enemies, who now find themselves on the same side of the fence against the Islamic State. It has

compelled religious clerics of all stripes to tackle the seductive notion of the caliphate among large Muslim audiences, especially youth. At the same time, the counter arguments offered by opponents of the Islamic State vary. The Salafi jihad forces and the Muslim Brotherhood, for whom the caliphate is an ultimate objective, have resorted to convoluted apologetics in order to reconcile their denunciation of the Islamic State with their support (in principle) for the establishment of the caliphate. On the other hand, those Arab regimes that regard the rise of the caliphate as a direct existential threat to their countries have had to explain why, from the perspective of religious law, modern Arab nations are in no way inferior to a rooted Islamic institution such as the caliphate. The religious legal debate on the caliphate has also revealed strategic differences of opinion over the future of the Islamic nation, tactical arguments on the proper and effective means of realizing its goals, and splits regarding the prevalent modern state order in the Middle East.

The announcement of the caliphate reflects the anticipation by the Islamic State of three possible religious critiques of its action, and therefore took pains to provide possible answers: (1) to the argument that the caliphate was established without a Muslim consensus (*ijma*), the Islamic State ridiculed the demand for general agreement among the factions, brigades, divisions, coalitions, armies, fronts, movements, and organizations of the Islamic nation; (2) to the argument that the caliphate was established with no consultation (*shura*) with religious establishments in Arab countries, the Islamic State pointed to the absurdity of demanding that it consult with its enemies, who do not recognize it; (3) and to the argument that circumstances were not ripe for a move of this type, the Islamic State replied that any delay in forming the caliphate once its essential elements are in place – in other words, its possession of large tracts of land in Iraq and Syria – is deemed a sin under religious law.[5]

The response by al-Qaeda, which opposed the declaration and vigorously demanded that the Islamic State retract it, was politically sound but ideologically complex. The organization's founders, Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, had discussed and studied the possibility of a caliphate and cited it as a goal, but had done virtually nothing to bring it about. For al-Qaeda, a caliph able to unite Muslims under the flag of Islam and institute a moral and pious society is described as a desirable ideal, one that the organization uses for propaganda purposes when recruiting Muslims to global jihad against the

United States and its allies. Yet although its leaders regard the Arab nation states as the possible core of a united Islamic entity, they have not directed their immediate struggle at dissolving these countries and eliminating their borders. Instead, they have focused on ousting the heretical governing elite, attacking its supportive external forces, and creating the conditions necessary for promoting the political, religious, and social reforms that they preach.[6] For example, Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, has been engaged in the struggle to overthrow the Assad regime and establish an emirate in Syria, in the belief that the caliphate can be established only at a later stage, after a victory in Syria is achieved.

A positive attitude to a caliphate, along with reservations to its establishment by the Islamic State, was thus reflected in Jabhat al-Nusra's response to Al-ʿAdnani's announcement. In an article in *al-Risalah*, Jabhat al-Nusra acknowledges the hope that the caliphate may offer to a younger generation of Muslims, who live in the discouraging and depressing reality of Western hegemony over the territory of Islam and who are "grasping at any ray of light as if it were the dawn." The article also expresses appreciation for certain aspects of al-Baghdadi's actions in Iraq and Syria, such as his release of prisoners from jail and recruitment of the faithful to the path of jihad. At the same time, it emphatically rejects the declaration of the caliphate on the basis of three reasons. First, the process is unacceptable because al-Baghdadi neither consulted with the sages of Islamic religious law nor was selected by them. Second, the religious education of the appointed caliph is inadequate; he purports to manage the affairs of Muslims without having written a single religious text of any significance. Third, the Islamic State is undermining the Salafi jihad project. The article also alleges that the brutal executions conducted by the organization not only invited an international coalition against it, but also gave Islam the reputation of being a barbaric and merciless religion, and have thus alienated believers from the path of jihad, which has seemingly become a synonym for bloodbath, slaughter, and murder. Thus, instead of uniting Muslims under the flag of Islam, al-Baghdadi has divided them and concentrated on antagonizing the heretics at the expense of true Muslims. The article concludes that al-Baghdadi is not the long hoped-for caliph who will lead the Muslims from darkness to light, but is instead leading the nation toward catastrophe.[7]

The announcement of the caliphate caught the Muslim Brotherhood in a similar apologetic trap. Like the Islamic State, it promotes a revolution,

whose ultimate goal is the establishment of an Islamic caliphate and the nation of Islam as a concrete political framework. Yet whereas the Islamic State regards this as an immediate objective and attempts to achieve it by force wherever possible, the Muslim Brotherhood treats it as an undefined long term goal to be reached gradually, at some unknown point in the future. Furthermore, while the Islamic State rejects nationalism, the Muslim Brotherhood sees no wrong in harboring nationalist feelings for a particular territory, provided that they remain secondary to a profound commitment to the Islamic nation.[8]

Although the Muslim Brotherhood's response to the Islamic State's declaration of the caliphate is notable for its ambivalence, its conclusion is unequivocal: the caliphate of the Islamic State is totally invalid under Islamic law. Indeed, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, today's unofficial spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, published an announcement in the name of the International Union of Muslim Scholars that opened with fundamental ideological support for the idea of a caliphate, but continued with objections to any attempt to realize it before conditions are ripe. In the spirit of the teachings of Hassan al-Banna, the founding father of the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaradawi noted that these conditions included the establishment of countries that would be governed by *sharia*, enjoy reciprocal relations, wield material, spiritual, and human power, and possess an internal unity that would make them immune to external attack. According to al-Qaradawi, al-Baghdadi's declaration of the caliphate also fails to meet other criteria in Islamic law. It was issued unilaterally, without the backing of a general Islamic consensus and with no consultation, as required by the Qur'an (Sura 3: verse 159). It does not advance Muslim goals; it gives the caliphate a bad name and encourages the enemies of Islam to join forces against the rebels fighting for legitimate rights in Syria and Iraq. Finally, it leaves an opening for anarchy in Islamic rulings by creating a situation in which any organization can assume the authority to rule on a key issue such as the caliphate.[9]

The official religious establishment of Egypt, which is headed by al-Azhar University and Dar al-Iftaa al-Misriyyah (the Egyptian House of Fatwa) subject to it, is highly influential at the local level as well as in the Sunni Arab world in general. After the announcement of the caliphate, it began taking vigorous action to delegitimize the Islamic State, as did religious establishments in other Sunni Arab countries. A special body was established to counter the Islamic State's rulings and prevent the spread of its ideas.[10]

Unlike al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood, it expressed substantive doubts – not only about the timing, form, and expectations of the caliphate – but also about the institution itself. The principal challenge facing Egypt vis-à-vis the formation of the Islamic State and the allegiance it has won from the Sinai-based Ansar Bait al-Maqdis organization in November 2014, was how to anchor the legitimacy of the nation state at the expense of the historical institution of the caliphate. Its position reflects a political shift rather than a change in the concept of regular religious law, since until the Islamic State's declaration, Dar al-Iftaa al-Misriyyah was careful to avoid questioning the idea of the caliphate. In a *fatwa* (religious ruling) published in May 2011 it even defined the caliphate as a religious commandment, noting that modern nation states – temporary substitutes for the caliphate at a time of weakness – have not stopped yearning for a caliphate; indeed, the dissolution of the caliphate in 1924 and its division into countries according to the Sykes-Picot agreement was a disaster for Muslims. Nonetheless, as the leaders of modern nation states have prevented anarchy and provided stability for believers, they should therefore be obeyed; rebellion against their rule is thus forbidden.[11]

After the announcement of the caliphate, Dar al-Iftaa al-Misriyyah too modified its views. It now stated that the legitimacy of the nation state was based on more than the mere absence of a caliphate, and provided other reasons for upholding this idea. In November 2014, Shawqi ʿAllam, Grand Mufti of Egypt and head of Dar al-Iftaa al-Misriyyah, published a book in English targeting young Muslims in the West entitled *The Ideological Battle: Egypt's Dar al-Iftaa Combats Radicalization*. Opposing the claim of the Islamic State, he ruled that the caliphate was not a holy institution derived from religious texts, and that the Prophet Muhammad had not commanded it at all; rather it was a governmental framework that had developed out of the political, social, and religious circumstances of the period. According to this narrative, a replacement was needed to help Muslims maintain their unity and spread their views after Muhammad's death. This, however, does not signify that Islam is a static religion that demands the restoration of a fixed form of government and a return to the Middle Ages. Quite the contrary; flexibility is the soul of Islam, and "the *fatwas* represent the bridge between the legal tradition and the contemporary world in which we live. They are the link between the past and the present, the absolute and the relative, the theoretical and the practical."[12] According to ʿAllam, this means that Muslims

are allowed to choose any form of government that serves their interests in any given period, and that there is no religious objection to the definition of Egypt as a modern and democratic nation state.

Conclusion

Although the caliphate is an historic institution, it is also a concept that resonates among many Muslims and continues to affect political, religious, and ideological discourse in contemporary Sunni Islam, all the more since the Islamic State announcement. The debate over the caliphate between the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, and national religious establishments is not exclusively a religious legal dilemma; rather it is a political struggle about who the legitimate interpreter of the holy texts and their significance ought to be. It is a struggle between an entity that is disseminating a radical, subversive, and incendiary message that eradicates the borders of nation states, and forces of a territorially particular nature; between a religious leader with no recognized institutional authority who has appointed himself caliph and attracted masses of believers, and Islamic legal scholars who hold official status and are fighting to preserve their religious hegemony; between an organization that appeals to young Muslims in the language and media tools familiar to them, and older institutions that are being forced to adjust to a dynamic reality and operate beyond their natural comfort zone in order to maintain their influence. The struggle over the status of the caliphate is expected to continue in the coming years and will be decided not only by an overthrow of al-Baghdadi and the defeat of his combatants, rather – and perhaps most of all – in the struggle over the ideology and values in the political and religious fields.

Notes

1 Assad al-Qassam, *The Crisis of the Caliphate and the Imamate and its Modern Consequences* (Beirut: al-Adir, 1997), pp. 21-25; Fauzi M. Najjar, *The Islamic State: A Study in Traditional Politics* (Darien: Monographic Press, 1967), pp. 13-15.
2 "Khalifa," in *Encyclopedia of Islam: New Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), pp. 937-53.
3 Abu Mohammad al-ʿAdnani, "This is God's Promise," Muʾassasat al-Battar al-Iʿlamiyya, http://goo.gl/hfLcFV.
4 Al-ʿAdnani, "This is God's Promise."
5 Ibid.
6 Reza Pankhurst, *The Inevitable Caliphate?* (London: Hurst & Company, 2013), pp. 133-60, 202.

7 Abu Faruq al-Muhajir, "Khilafa One Year On," *al-Risalah* 1 (July 2015): 21-25.
8 Pankhurst, *The Inevitable Caliphate?* pp. 194, 199.
9 ʿAli Muhyi al-Din al-Qurra Daghi and Yusuf al-Qaradawi, "The International Union of Muslim Scholars emphasizes that the declaration of the caliphate by the Islamic State organization in Iraq is illegitimate and unrealistic," International Union of Muslim of Muslim Scholars (July 3, 2014), http://goo.gl/94vCvR.
10 For example, Mirsad al-Iftå, "The pamphlet 'The Takfir of the Arab States' is a new means by the Islamic State to recruit fighters and destabilize the Arab states," Dar al-Iftaa al-Misriyyah, April 10, 2015, http://goo.gl/Kiak4S.
11 The Fatwa Council, "The Caliphate and the Islamic Countries," Dar al-Iftaa al-Misriyyah (May 18, 2015), http://goo.gl/RqTFIs.
12 Shawki Allam, *The Ideological Battle: Egypt's Dar al- Iftaa Combats Radicalization*, 2014, pp. 102-8, http://dar-alifta.org/BIMG/The%20Ideological%20Battle%20(2).pdf.