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ISIS' Caliphate Utopia

By Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman

Synopsis

The Islamic Caliphate championed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is an imagined construct that never existed in Islamic history. Muslim scholars and the larger Muslim community should not only reject the ISIS' Caliphate but also debunk it.

Commentary

THE ISLAMIC State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), declared on 29TH June 2014 the formation of a Caliphate and hailed its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as a new Caliph. A number of marginal extremist groups have pledged their support for ISIS which later changed its name to simply 'Islamic State'. Among those who supported the Islamic State were the Pakistani Taliban, Ansar Al-Sharia in Yemen and the Abu Bakar Ba'asyir-led Jamaat Ansarul Sunnah.

While the supporters of the new Caliphate are far flung many Muslim scholars and Islamist groups have rejected the Caliphate call. They include not just moderate Muslim scholars but also many prominent Islamist figures who themselves have sought the restoration of some kind of Caliphate. Yusuf Al-Qardawi, long viewed as a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood declared the Caliphate declaration as void.

The evolving Caliphate

Perhaps more significantly, the pan-Islamic political party Hizb ut-Tahrir, which believes that it is a religious obligation for Muslims to work towards establishing a Caliphate, rejected the ISIS' Caliphate. Osman Bakhach, director of HT's central media office ruled that the resurrection of the Caliphate should not be accomplished through blood, charges of apostasy and explosions.

The era of Muslim caliphates came to a close in 1924, when Mustafa Kemal Ataturk abolished the Ottoman Caliphate. While that was depicted as the beginning of Muslim political disintegration, in actuality, the Muslim political crisis began more than a thousand years earlier. The succession dispute that emerged following the death of Prophet Muhammad saw three of the first four "Rightly Guided Caliphs" assassinated and Islam subsequently splitting into two sects; Shia and Sunni Islam. The Caliphates that emerged thereafter saw numerous claimants to the coveted position of the Caliph. In the eleventh century for instance, there were three different caliphates - Umayyad, Abbasid and Fatimid.

Following the collapse of the Ottoman in 1924, many anti-colonial movements in the Muslim world used the revival of the Caliphate as a theme to rally followers. Likewise, Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood identified the revival of the Caliphate as a key objective. The Taliban's Mullah Omar in Afghanistan and Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran have also styled themselves as leaders of the Muslim world. HT is perhaps the most renowned proponent of the Caliphate. Taqiuddin An-Nabhani, founder of HT, seeks to revive the medieval Caliphate with its traditional accompanying institutions and functionaries.

Key difference in ISIS' Caliphate

Perhaps a key difference in ISIS' version is the fact that Al-Baghdadi explicitly called on all Muslims regardless of geographical location to fight in support of this Caliphate whereas Khomeini and Omar were more focused on neighbouring territories. ISIS' Caliphate also rests on the premise that Muslims the world over were historically part of a single political community.

For HT, no current state in the world is Islamic and all are regarded as *dar al-kufr* (abode of infidels) or *dar al-harb* (abode of war). Only with the establishment of the Caliphate will the first *dar al-Islam* (abode of Muslims) be formed. HT noted that reviving the Caliphate is an obligation for all Muslims. In essence, there have been numerous models of the Caliphate, all of which have differed over the last thousand years. The Caliphate espoused by groups like ISIS or HT has never existed in the form that each group envisioned. ISIS' Caliphate is a modern construct that has little to do with past Caliphates.

Debunking the Caliphate Myth

Proponents of the Caliphate have argued that the abysmal state of Muslims today is the result of the lack of a central Muslim leadership. Groups like HT have even argued that Muslims are in the state of sin as long as the Caliphate has not been revived. In fact, there is little evidence in Islamic history suggesting that there is indeed a particular kind of Islamic political model that must be implemented. Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, one of the leading Muslim luminaries has argued that there is no need for Muslims to work towards the establishment of the Caliphate or an Islamic state.

Islam as a religion prescribed values of governance such as accountability and justice. In fact, even in the realm of jurisprudence, only five principles must be met. These principles include the protection of religious life, lineage, property and intellect. It is clear that there is nothing Islamic about the Caliphate or the regulations implemented by ISIS when all these principles have clearly been transgressed.

Likewise, the vast majority of Muslim countries including those that profess to be Islamic states have an extremely poor record in terms of following the principles defined by Islamic jurisprudence. Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan under the Taliban are examples of how supposed Islamic states are in fact either unjust or underdeveloped and not 'Islamic' by any stretch of the imagination.

It is thus pertinent to note that there is nothing particularly Islamic about reviving the Caliphate. Muslims can continue to live within their respective nation states while fulfilling their responsibilities as Muslims.

Singapore a model 'Islamic' state?

More importantly, there are numerous values espoused by Islam that are currently transgressed in Muslim countries. In a 2014 study by academics from George Washington University, Muslim countries fared the worst in the 'Overall Islamicity Index', a measure that encompasses laws and governance, human and political rights, international relations, and economic factors. Consequently it is perhaps prudent for Muslims to work towards a society where corruption, poverty and violence are eradicated and create a democratic state where Muslims and non-Muslims can co-exist on the basis of equal opportunities and mutual respect.

In this regard, Singapore serves as an example of such a state. Nasruddin Hassan, the former Youth chief of the Pan-Islamic Party of Malaysia, during his visit to Singapore in 2010, had remarked that "Singapore looks exactly like how an Islamic state should look like". It would be wise for Muslims to

take a leaf from his remark and use countries like Singapore as a possible model rather than the ISIS' Caliphate.

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