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When is a Caliph not a Caliph?

By Paul Michael Hedges

Synopsis

The self-declared Caliph of ISIS has no legitimacy and does not represent Islam. While he heads an armed militia, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's actions are opposed to how a Caliph should behave. The international media should repudiate his claim.

Commentary

THE CLAIMED authority of the (self-proclaimed) Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)/Daesh is tied to its being a new Caliphate. The Caliph, literally the “one who replaces someone [dead or gone]”, is variously understood as the successor or deputy to Islam’s Prophet, or even as God’s regent on earth.

Therefore, some claim that it is the duty of all Muslims to follow the Caliph as successor of the Prophet. In using this motif ISIS/Daesh is investing in a deeply potent symbol. However, this raises questions including: what makes someone a Caliph; do you have to follow a Caliph, and, how do you recognise a Caliph?

Claims to authority

If Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi is the Caliph then is every Muslim duty bound to follow him? Seduced by the claim, many thousands of Muslims do so. However, why do they think they should and what role does the media play in promoting his claim?

To put this in perspective, if I declared myself the Bishop of Rome and Pope of the Catholic Church it could be argued that every Roman Catholic would be obliged to recognise my magisterium or teaching authority. More likely though they would think I was mad, and I doubt the (Western) media would take me seriously. For many Muslims, the self-declared Caliph of ISIS/Daesh is in a similar position – he has no legitimacy to make these claims, is not behaving as a Caliph should, and is not representing Islam.

Of course one big difference is that he heads an armed militia in an area with little governance and so can put his ideas into effect. Another difference is that media reporting is not countering his claims to be the Caliph.

History of the Caliphate

The Caliphate had existed since Islam’s earliest days, and most Muslims recognise four of the

Prophet Muhammad's companions, who followed him as leaders of the Muslim community, referred to as the "Rightly Guided Caliphs", representing a golden age. The dispute over the next Caliph also saw the beginnings of the split between Sunni and Shia, Islam's two main branches, which is far more a political dispute over who should rule than any matter of theological doctrine or teaching, although these have developed.

For the Sunnis, who became the majority, the Caliphate continued through a succession of dynasties, such as the Umayyad and Abassid to the Ottomans. This came to an end when Kemal Atatürk abolished the Sultanate and declared Turkey a secular democracy in 1922. With no Sultan there was no more Caliph as nobody was in a position to take on this role.

Roles of the Caliph

The Caliph was the leader of the Islamic empire, though of course at various times this was disputed and rival Caliphs existed at certain times in history. The Caliph was first and foremost a political leader, not a religious leader as we would understand it. Religious leadership, guidance, and law making was in the hands of the scholars, legal experts (*ulama*) who interpreted Sharia Law and would be in a position to deliver *fatwas* (legal opinions).

As religious leaders they often found themselves at odds with the reigning Caliph, with some dynasties proclaiming their own (theologically suspect) divine mandate to bolster authority. The Caliph's role was in other areas, such as providing military leadership to protect Islam.

Another was to uphold the Pact of 'Umar. 'Umar was one of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and the pact named after him concerns the treatment of the "People of the Book" (*dhimmis*), primarily originally Jews and Christians but later extended to include other religions. Many point out that this was, by today's standards, unfair and demeaning with these groups paying a tax in return for unequal relationships under Muslim rule. However, by medieval standards it was progressive, and it also demanded that the Caliph must be the protector of these groups within his empire.

The actions of ISIS/Daesh are, therefore, the absolute opposite of how a Caliph should behave – what we see is not a demonstration of Islam as taught in the Qur'an or practised by any dynasty.

The Caliph was also the protector of Islam's holy places, primarily Makkah and Madina, but also Jerusalem, which are not in the hands of ISIS/Daesh. The Ottoman Empire conquered Istanbul and thereby established itself as, in some ways, a pre-eminent Islamic dynasty. But it did not claim the Caliphate until it had taken control of Makkah and Madina. This role included various duties and responsibilities. Clearly ISIS/Daesh is in no position to make these claims.

Appointment and authority

The appointment and authority of a Caliph, traditionally, lay with the community, with the Rightly Guided Caliphs seemingly appointed by consensus. Other dynasties tended to hold/ take power by military force; nevertheless, it was held that they must have the consensus of the Muslim community, the *ummah*, who accepted the rule. Some even held that revolt against a false Caliph was permissible.

A Caliph cannot simply appoint himself, and the fact that the majority of Muslims do not recognise ISIS' Caliph means, *ipso facto*, that he is not the Caliph. It is also the Caliph's duty to maintain the rule of law, under Sharia, and the conduct of ISIS' campaign is in violation of much of this. This is one reason that Muslims regard ISIS/Daesh as not holding the Caliphate, and not even being Muslim. Many Muslims today argue that any Caliphate is obsolete, but for those who accept the institution, ISIS/Daesh is not it.

It is also not clear that every Muslim is called to obey a Caliph; when multiple Caliphs existed in the past, or even when just one was recognised, Muslim scholars disputed whether all Muslims were bound to follow them.

Returning to my opening proposition, if I recruited a gang of thugs and then announced myself Pope I do not think any Western news media would report that I and my actions represented those of

Christianity or the Catholic Church. It is therefore curious that the media and other authorities are not doing more to repudiate the claims of ISIS/Daesh to hold the Caliphate.

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