The Caliphate as Geopolitical Challenge

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Articles & Testimony

Until ISIS declared its so-called caliphate in 2014, this Islamic theological term barely raised flags for the West.

In June 2014 ISIS announced that it had appointed one Ibrahim Awad al-Badri, today better known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as its caliph -- an announcement that threw the global jihadi movement, and al-Qaeda leadership in particular, into disarray. However, it was also this announcement that caused Muslim communities around the world to issue condemnations of the group, especially in light of its well-publicised brutality in the name of religion. It was, incidentally, also the declaration of a caliphate that, we can now admit, put ISIS, with its so-called Islamic State, at the top of the US counter-terrorism priorities. Indeed, just five months prior, President Barack Obama had famously likened the group to a J.V. basketball team in an interview with the *New Yorker*'s David Remnick. In August -- just days before the group's first beheading of an American citizen -- he used this very declaration as his reason for reassessing the group. As he explained to the *New York Times*' Thomas Friedman, "We do have a strategic interest in pushing back ISIL. We're not going to let them create some caliphate through Syria and Iraq..."

Since then, the religious symbolism and significance of the caliphate has been discussed at length as observers sought to understand why ISIS' announcement made such waves. What is less understandable, perhaps, is why it is this aspect of the group that made the US administration change its assessment and strategy. Indeed, it was the use of an esoteric theological term by a peripheral al-Qaeda offshoot and not Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons against his own civilians that caused the United States to take action.

CALIPHATE ASPIRATION

What is more surprising, and perhaps less discussed as ISIS continues to dominate policy and public discourse, is that the so-called Islamic State is neither the first group to call for establishing a caliphate nor the only one

doing so today. Indeed, writing during the waning years of the Ottoman Empire and the new emergence of European colonial rule in the Middle East, the Islamic reformer Rashid Rida (d. 1935), whose ideas inspired the founding fathers of Islamism in the early twentieth century, advocated for the establishment of the caliphate. His best known work is a treatise on the subject. In 1953, Taqi al-Din al-Nabahani (d. 1977) founded Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (The Islamic Liberation Party) in Jerusalem, with the mission of establishing a caliphate to cure the ills caused by the disappearance of the Ottoman Empire.

Western governments have only recently called to ban Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), including former Prime Minister Tony Blair in 2007, yet these proposals were not related to the movement's call for a caliphate but rather to some HT groups' connections to terrorism and violence. Al-Qaeda had long aspired to create a caliphate, yet, of course, only when the group attacked the United States at home did it become a priority. And today, the Umma Party, a transregional group with bases in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, continues to call for the establishment of a "rightly-guided caliphate" on social media platforms and at group sessions. In March of 2015 Boko Haram in Nigeria pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. A small faction of al-Shabaab did so as well in October, though the group remains affiliated with al-Qaeda.

The idea, or at least the promise, of the caliphate is a central motif in the evolution of all strains of Islamist thought -- perhaps even the single feature that they have in common -- and yet, aside from the case of ISIS, it only raised flags for Western governments when groups vying for a caliphate become connected to violence. Only in the so-called Islamic State's case did the group's caliphal ambitions (and not its violence -- as evidenced by the recent, and overdue, US administration's description of the group's commission of "genocide") prompt Obama to reassess the United States' "strategic interest" in defeating it. Moreover, not only did it change how the president saw the group, but also how he saw the solution to stopping it. More precisely, a year later, Obama anticipated that ISIS would self-destruct precisely because of its failure to build a caliphate. As he put it: "ISIL can talk about setting up the new caliphate, but nobody is under any illusions that they can actually in a sustained way feed people or educate people or organize a society that would work."

UNLIKE ANY OTHER

Why the difference? To be sure, there are circumstantial factors in the case of ISIS that make its call to a caliphate not like the others. Aside from the fact that it occupies territory in which the United States has seen the largest commitment of its soldiers and resources over the last decade, ISIS has alienated itself from many local and regional players in ways that al-Qaeda had not (particularly through its merciless brutality). This has made an international coalition against it more feasible.

But there is also the substance of what ISIS is hoping to achieve. To be more precise, unlike earlier Islamist groups ISIS actually has a substantive vision for its caliphate. Subscribing to the theological orientation of Salafism, which only recognises the example of the Prophet Mohammad and his earliest Sunni followers, the group has an exclusivist Sunni sectarian vision for a caliphate that, quoting the hadith, or sayings of the Prophet Mohammad, it is creating "on the Prophetic methodology." This emphasis on "methodology" and its Salafi orientation means that the group has a blueprint for its next steps. These include purging territory under its control of any other Islamic tradition (Shia, Sufi, even non-Salafi Sunni); drawing on literature and examples from Islamic history to give further definition to its project (namely the apocalyptic themes and records of early Islamic battles); and justifying its brutal methods in the name of this project.

But even more critical, and therefore chaotic, is that the title of the caliph is a claim to lead the global Muslim community. Observers have rightly pointed out that a purely Islamic state never in fact existed. One could take this argument further in explaining that what historically made nominally Islamic governments (from the Umayyad caliphate right up to the Ottoman Empire) functional was their very ability to accommodate the panoply of cultures

and religions, rather than their uncompromising imposition of a normative definition of Islam. It is also this very variety of caliphate experiences, if one could call it that, that has led to the variety (and sometimes contradictions) of Islamic experiences. This debate on definitions has become even more confused with the collapse of local states and the emergence of social media channels -- an expansion of the marketplace of ideas, and a plurality of vendors and buyers.

So what, then, is so important about the Islamic State's caliphate? It would seem not only is the group unique in its opportune moment for claiming to establish a caliphate, but that it does so as a vehicle to impose a particular type of Islam. And this at a time when the definition of Islam is hotly contested as not only a form of governance but also of personal piety. I have written elsewhere about the theological blind spot in US foreign policy (**see "Theology in Foreign Policy: ISIS in Context" (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/theology-in-foreign-policy-isis-in-context)**). What we seem to be doing in the case of ISIS is trying desperately to look at this theological blind spot, but through the wrong pair of glasses. The declaration of a caliphate is an intervention into the definition of Islam at a time when that is hotly contested. Not only that, it is happening in the new sectarian context of Middle East conflicts and the voices on social media that are shaping the narratives that drive them.

However, the so-called Islamic State is also an intervention into the definition of what Middle East governance looks like. What we ought to do is pay attention to the new political norm in which ungoverned territories can be declared Islamic states in the name of second and third-order causes -- whether it is ISIS' expansionist caliphate or the purist Sunni Syrian utopia promoted by groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham.

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