

Bring Back the Caliphate

Oct 8, 2009



Articles & Testimony

The reaction in Turkey to the recent death of Ertugrul Osman, heir to the Ottoman throne and successor to the last Caliph, could not be more shocking. Islamists in kaftans and long beards gathered in Istanbul two weeks ago to bury the titular head of the world Muslim community, a scotch-drinking, classical music-listening Western Turk who until recently lived on New York City's Upper East Side.

The Islamists' embrace of Osman, a descendant of the westernized Ottoman sultans, provides a periscope into the Islamist mind: Islamism is not about religion or reality. Rather it is a myth and a subversion of reality intended to promote Islamism, a utopian ideology. Osman, raised by a line of West-leaning caliphs and sultans, loved Ataturk's Turkey, yet the Islamists abused his funeral and the memory of the caliphate, changing it into a symbol for their anti-Western, anti-secular and anti-liberal agenda.

Were Ertugrul Osman alive and were the Ottomans around today, he would be Sultan Osman V and no doubt, he would be going after the fundamentalists who abused his funeral in an attempt to distort his legacy.

Despite what the Islamists want the world to believe, the Ottoman caliphate was not anti-Western. The Ottoman Empire always interacted with the West -- an interaction that goes all the way back to 16th-century Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent, who envisioned himself as the Holy Roman emperor. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Ottoman sultans and caliphs embarked on a program of intense reforms to remake the Ottoman Empire in the Western image to match up with European powers. To this end, the caliphs launched institutions of secular education, and paved the way for women's emancipation by enrolling them in those schools. By the beginning of the 19th century, the sultans and caliphs of the Ottoman Empire embodied Western life and Western values. The last caliph, Abdulmecid Efendi, considered the Ottoman state a Western power with a Western destiny. An enlightened man and avid artist, the caliph's sought-after paintings, including nudes, are on exhibition at various museums, such as Istanbul's new museum of Modern Art.

It is therefore wrong to represent the Ottoman Empire as the antithesis to the secular republic Ataturk founded in 1923. True, when Ataturk turned Turkey into a secular republic in 1923 by abolishing the Ottoman state and the caliphate, Ataturk did not eradicate the sultan-caliphs' legacy. Rather, he fulfilled their dream of making Turkey a full-fledged Western society. Ataturk's reforms are a continuation of the late Ottoman Empire -- he merely pursued Ottoman reforms to their logical conclusion.

Moreover, Ataturk was the product par excellence of the Ottoman Empire. He was raised in Salonika, the hub of cosmopolitanism and Western culture in the reforming empire. He studied in secular Ottoman schools, and he was trained in the Westernized Ottoman military.

The debate over the Ottoman caliphate's legacy has ramifications not only for Turkey, but also for contemporary Muslims and the Western world's desire to counter radical Islamists. Years before emergence of al Qaeda, the caliphs produced an antidote against radical jihadists, a progressive vision for a Western-oriented Muslim society. The sultan-caliphs built the institutional foundations of this society, including the first Ottoman parliament and constitution of 1876, and planted in it seeds of Western values, such as secular education and women's emancipation. Modern Turkey owes its existence as much to Ataturk as to the sultan-caliphs who were among the first to promote liberal and Western values in a Muslim society.

Now, the Islamists want to usurp the caliphate and its legacy. The fundamentalists first distort the caliphate's politics, reimagining it as an anti-Western institution. Then, they portray the revival of this invented caliphate as the ultimate political dream in an anti-Western ideology.

Eighty years ago, the Ottoman caliph-sultans imagined a Turkey that is more akin to modern Turkey than to the Islamist society envisioned by al Qaeda or others who dismiss Ataturk's dream of a Western Turkey and liberal values as anomalies. Ertugrul Osman himself told Turkish journalist Asli Aydintasbas shortly before his death that "the republic has been devastating for our family, but very good for Turkey."

Caliph Osman was Turkish by birth, Muslim by religion, and a Westerner by upbringing. I want my caliph back, and so should all Muslims who want deliverance from the distorted and illiberal world envisioned by the Islamists.

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