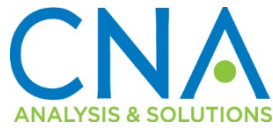# Reviving the Caliphate: Fad, or the Future?

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July 2014

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Photography Credit.   This is an image of the purported leader of The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, delivering a sermon on Mosul, Iraq on July 5, 2014. This picture was taken from a video that was posted on social media. CNA Corporation obtained the image from Thomason Reuters.

Approved by: **July 2014**

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Introduction

A caliphate is an Islamic form of government in which political and religious leadership is united, and the head of state (the caliph) is a successor to the Prophet Muhammad. The first caliphate was established in 632 A.D. after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Caliphates rose and fell in the Muslim world until 1924, when Mustafa Kemal Ataturk abolished the Ottoman caliphate, essentially putting an end to the institution. For nearly one hundred years, although various groups advocated for the restoration of the caliphate, no one has claimed the position of caliph—that is, until June 2014, when the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)[1] declared the creation of a new caliphate, the "Islamic State."

In 2007, CNA hosted a conference on the topic of the caliphate. At that time, there were calls for the re-establishment of the caliphate coming from certain Islamist circles, including groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Qaeda. In the wake of multiple crises throughout the Muslim world, these calls appeared to be gaining in relevance and support. The goal of the conference was to better understand who supported the restoration of the caliphate, why, and ultimately what such an outcome might mean for U.S. policy and interests in the Muslim world. To answer these questions, we convened over 25 experts on Islam from around the world to discuss the caliphate, focusing on what the institution means to Muslims today, its historical significance, and what applicability, if any, it has in the modern era.

Following the conference, CNA published a report that summarized the panelists' presentations and highlighted areas of consensus among the experts. In the wake of the June 2014 emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, we decided to update our report from the 2007 conference. In the following pages, we revisit our conclusions from that event and apply our findings to the current situation in Iraq and Syria to better understand the newly-declared caliphate, examine its significance within the broader Muslim world, and assess what it potentially means for the future of Iraq, Syria, and the broader region, as well as for U.S. interests in this part of the world.

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[1] The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is also variously known in the Western media by its other acronym, ISIS—either the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham ("the Levant" in Arabic). We settled on the first term because of its accepted use among all major research and media organizations and the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD).

Drawing from the 2007 conference report, and adding recent independent research, this document provides an overview of the institution of the caliphate and background information on the history of the caliphate. We also include a discussion on what modern-day calls to restore the institution signify. Finally, we analyze the significance of the Islamic State in hopes of shedding some light on the group's motivations for declaring a caliphate and offer some conclusions on potential implications for U.S. policy.

A Brief History of the Caliphate

A caliphate is an Islamic form of government in which political and religious leadership is united, and the head of state (the caliph) is a successor to the Prophet Muhammad. The first caliphate was established in 632 A.D. after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The first four caliphs (also known as the "rightly guided caliphs," or *Rashidun*) led from Medina, in modern-day Saudi Arabia. In the earliest years of the caliphate, Muhammad's family and disciples ruled the Muslim community—or *ummah*—implementing the same system he had created. The period of the rightly-guided caliphs ended in 661, when Ali, the fourth of the rightly guided caliphs, was killed, and Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan, seated in Syria, proclaimed himself caliph. Some Muslims consider all four of the rightly-guided caliphs to be legitimate successors to the Prophet, whereas others accept only Ali. This disagreement led to a split in Islam and the emergence of its two main branches, Sunni and Shia.

Figure 1.   Age of the Caliphate, 632–750 A.D.

Source: Paul V. Galvin Library Government Documents Depository Website for Government Archives, Illinois Institute of Technology, Accessed July 20, 2014.
https://web.archive.org/web/20060216055534/http://www.gl.iit.edu/govdocs/maps/maps.htm..

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Over the next fifteen centuries, the Muslim world saw the rise and fall of numerous caliphates. At times there were concurrent competing caliphates (with multiple leaders, each claiming to be the legitimate caliph). Different caliphates made claim to different geographical territories, and like other historical empires throughout the world, most actively sought to gain more and more lands over time.

Historically well-known caliphates were the Umayyad dynasty, which ruled from 661 to 750 from Damascus. This caliphate expanded into Central Asia and as far as Africa, eventually conquering most of the Iberian Peninsula. The Umayyad dynasty was conquered by the Abbasids, who ruled from Baghdad until 1258.

The most recent traditional caliphate was the Ottoman Empire, which began in 1453. Ottoman sultans ruled the empire's vast territory, extending from modern-day Turkey into the Middle East, and eventually Africa. The Ottoman Empire lasted until 1924, when Mustafa Kemal Ataturk abolished the institution. While leaders such as the King of Morocco have held caliph-like titles (in his case, Amir el-Mu'minin, or "commander of the faithful"), no one has claimed the title of caliph—or leader of the Islamic community—in the past century.

The Historical Significance of the Caliphate

As a religious ideal

A deep religious significance attaches to the institution of the caliphate across the Islamic community, much of which stems from the first four caliphs—Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthaman, and Ali, also known as the "rightly guided caliphs." Although rulers of subsequent Islamic dynasties, including the Umayyads, Abbasids, and Ottomans, held the title of caliph, many Muslims perceive these later leaders as mere monarchs—something different from the *rightly guided* caliphs, who were virtuous and pure. At least three factors distinguish the first four caliphs from subsequent ones.

First is *succession,* or how one becomes caliph. From Ali on, the position was virtually hereditary. Prior to that, the caliph had assumed the title on more "legitimate" grounds, such as being chosen by popular acclamation or by a small council.

The second factor is the caliph's *authority.* According to some historians, in the classical pattern of caliphs (which lasted well into the 19th century, the caliph was significantly less powerful than modern-day rulers. Claiming to be *khalifa*—the deputy of the Prophet or even God himself—the classic caliph possessed few of the key attributes of modern governance. In general, these leaders were responsible for defending the realm and making sure that the courts were at the disposal of the jurists. Otherwise, society regulated itself. Public order was the responsibility of local neighborhoods or even families. Education was entirely decentralized. Even military service was a matter of personal choice.

Personal conduct is the third distinguishing factor. The *rashidun* are considered by many to have been resolutely devoted to religious life, whereas the image of subsequent caliphs (in the most general sense) is one of individuals pursuing their own self-interests, power, and wealth. For example, many believe that the first four caliphs emulated the simple, pious life of the Prophet, while subsequent caliphs—such as the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir, who held Baghdad in the 10th century—ruled from enormous, elaborate, jewel-encrusted palaces, in order to display their power and influence. Texts indicate that Muslims at the time considered these rulers

"Islamically doubtful." Some modern-day Muslims share the belief that these historical caliphates were just corrupt, self-serving "sultan-caliphs."

As a political model

Historically, the search for unity and authority is a defining struggle in the evolution of any state or nation, and those in the Muslim world are no exception. Since the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the central politico-religious questions for Muslims have been, and continue to be: *Who can stand in for the Prophet after his death? What authority should this person have?*

The answers have not been obvious, and the numerous debates and conflicts over this issue highlight the fact that no specific answers were given in the Quran or left by the Prophet. As a result, the "skeleton theory" of the political system in Islam that has emerged provides nothing more than a partisan reading of early Islamic history, reflecting divergent interpretations of its various episodes over time.

There have been several main "approaches" to addressing the questions of who should lead the *ummah* (Islamic community) and what should be his authority. The two most prominent approaches today are the Sunni and the Shia. The Sunni approach adopted the practices of Islam's first generation—especially the first four caliphs—as normative. The Shia accepted as their guiding norms the texts and practices of selected members of the Prophet's family.

Over time, a broad outline of standard political theory has formed in conjunction with practice. This approach was primarily derived from historical readings. Elements of this Islamic "classical theory" included "the *khalifa*" (caliph) as successor to the Prophet, which gave the caliph supreme authority as both spiritual and political head of the community. He symbolized the unity of the community, which meant that only one caliph could rule at a time. He had to be from the Quraysh tribe—the tribe of the Prophet—and had to have the requisite personal attributes, including being pious, upright, competent, able bodied, and well versed in the law. Finally, he had to be chosen by the "People with the Authority."

However, this did not amount to a political system, at least not in the contemporary sense. Modern thinkers—such as Indian-born Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi and Egyptian-born Sayyed Qutb—tried to tease a system out of these strands of thought. They attempted to bypass history and claimed to go back to basic principles, such as using the notion of *tawhid* (which is often translated as the "unity of Allah," as in one God) to derive such concepts as *hakimiyya* (sovereignty). Interestingly, what unites most of these visions is their authoritarian tendencies. Contemporary political regimes that claim to embody Islamic values—such as those in Saudi Arabia and Sudan—serve as good examples of this variety of authoritarianism. Some argue that there are few differences between the Umayyad leaders and Gulf monarchs today. Like the

Umayyad, today's monarchs use Islam to gain legitimacy—in essence, they attempt to recreate the caliphate as it existed after the death of Umar.

The caliphate is a reified religio-political construct developed by those in previous Muslim generations who were inspired by the Islamic ideal of justice and who defined themselves in terms of religious identity. At the same time, it is a source of identity for Muslims who continuously endeavor to find the proper place for Islam in their daily lives. Part of the *ijtihad* (the process of legal reasoning to derive law; laws based on the Quran and Hadith) of Islam is to find a suitable format for the relationship between religion and politics. Muslims have experimented with Islamic political systems for centuries; the caliphate is just one manifestation. The construct, according to some theorists, is often more of an ideal than a reification—limited to the boundaries of imagination.

There is no unique, prescribed system that provides step-by-step instructions for Islamic governance. Muslims have embraced many forms of government in their quest to realize the values and core teachings of their religion. As they continue to do so, any such popular system will be Islamic by definition. However, it will not be in the form of a classic caliphate. Despite some extremist groups' desire to restore the caliphate in its classic form today, history will not repeat itself: It is not possible to bring back a system that existed for just a few decades fifteen centuries ago.

Caliphate Revivalism

Over the past century, Muslim intellectuals and political leaders have reacted to modern-day crises with a variety of solutions. Multiple voices have proposed restoring the caliphate as a viable solution to modern-day political crises in the Islamic world.

20th century: identity and unity

Among the many revivalist efforts made over the past century, the most prominent was the *Khilafat* movement in India. This pan-Islamic movement began in 1918, sparked by a desire to defend the Ottoman caliphate as part of a broader Indian Muslim anticolonial movement. Based on a transnational sense of community that mobilized Indian Muslims in an unprecedented way, the *Khilafat* movement allowed these Muslims to affirm their identity around a strong symbol.

The *Khilafat* movement was significant for several reasons. First, it united Muslims of the subcontinent on a single issue, regardless of their sectarian and socio-economic divisions. Second, it introduced the concept of the religious idol into the politics of Indian Muslims. Finally, it gave Indian Muslims a new, collective identity, and turned them from a secular understanding of politics toward a religious one based on the belief that the Ottoman Caliph was a universal caliph to whom all Muslims owed allegiance. The *Khilafat* movement died after Turkish leader Mustafa Kemal Ataturk abolished the caliphate in March 1924. However, the idea of *khilafat* is still alive among Indian Muslims today, who idealize it as an anticolonial concept.

For those who desired to return to the *rashidun* period, caliphate revivalism grew stronger after the institution was officially abolished in 1924. These movements were inspired by individuals' or groups' desires to redress modern-day woes facing the Muslim world. For example, Syrian-born Islamic thinker Rashid Rida, whose work focused on reforming the Islamic legal system, supported the idea of restoring an Islamic government (in other words, the caliphate). Rida believed that the position of caliph needed to be given to a senior Muslim scholar, because no modern rulers deserved the honor. Indian-born Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi, who was the chief ideologist/theologian of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and whose ideas have been very influential in Pakistan and throughout the Muslim world, maintains that the caliph is the vice-regent of God whose duty is to enforce the laws of God. He rejected Western democracy, but remained noncommittal on the method by which the caliph would be appointed.

21st century: chaos, crises, and extremism

Ongoing crises across the Middle East and North Africa continue to reflect a struggle to establish acceptable forms of government. Some Muslims support the idea of establishing a single council or an individual to lead the Muslim community, and the caliphate presents one possible model that is sometimes mentioned as part of the broader debate. However, most of these views stem from creative thinking about how to address the variety of challenges currently facing the Muslim world and are not linked to extremist worldviews.

There are extremist groups, nevertheless, that evoke the caliphate as part of their rhetoric. Hizb ut-Tahrir[2] is best known for its advocacy of the caliphate, partly due to its very effective media and outreach activities. The group is not monolithic and is fairly autonomous in each country in which it has a presence. There is no centralized entity that approves the activities of each branch. These groups are essentially "de-territorialized"—they have no geographical base from which to govern. The founder of Hizb ut-Tahrir addressed his call for the caliphate to Arabs as a means to reverse the creation of the nation-state and the establishment of Israel.

Of course, al-Qaeda and similar organizations also seem to support the caliphate concept, at least in their rhetoric. Ayman al-Zawahiri once declared that terror attacks would be nothing more than disturbing acts, regardless of their magnitude, "unless they led to a caliphate in the heart of the Islamic world." Yet al-Qaeda did not start out with a coherent vision of a pan-Islamic or "global" caliphate, and this vision has not driven the group's agenda. Al-Qaeda references reflect a tactical interest that grew out of its activism—the strategy of focusing on the "far" enemy. The notion of a pan-Islamic caliphate enables al-Qaeda to tie the agendas of disparate local and regional *jihadis*[3] to its own banner as the leader of global *jihad*. Evoking the caliphate is an important aspect of internationalizing the jihad and building unity. It also

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2. Hizb ut-Tahrir was founded in 1953 in Jerusalem by Taqiuddin an-Nabhani, a Palestinian religious teacher and graduate of al-Azhar. The founders considered themselves members of a Muslim generation that inherited the spirit of Muhamed Abduh's salafism and reformism and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani's pan-Islamism. After evolving from an underground movement in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, and going through many phases, it has grown into a global movement with various forms of political mobilization.

3. The landscape of *jihadis*, in fact, is quite nuanced and complex. There are the transnational, "global jihadis" such as al-Qaeda, and the more "old guard" nationalist *jihadis*, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. The important difference is that the nationalist *jihadis* explicitly reject a *jihad* that extends beyond the boundaries of their state. The transnational *jihadis*, however, may also ultimately be more interested in their national homelands, but their strategy looks beyond borders.

provides a hopeful vision for those involved in the struggle. Jihadis are more concerned with freeing Muslim lands from Western influence than they are with establishing Islamic rule—or at least this is what their actions imply in the short term.

Notably, there is little evidence that the question of what happens after liberation and victory has been answered coherently and comprehensively among *jihadis*. Their position seems to be that God will decide how the "homeland in the heart of the Muslim world" will run its affairs. For example, Islamic Jihad leader Abd al-Salam Faraj developed a rationale for removing the "apostate" ruler of Egypt, President Anwar Sadat, in order to establish Islamic rule (which he described as the caliphate). When asked about the fate of the new state if people rejected it, he replied that its establishment is the execution of an explicit command from God, and that we are not responsible for the results once it is executed.

The influential religious scholar Abu Muhammed al-Maqdisi, once considered one of Al-Qaeda's spiritual guides, has published lengthy critiques of the Kuwaiti, Jordanian, and Saudi systems of government over the years. He has had many opportunities to present alternative visions of what should replace these regimes, but, when asked, he repeats the mantra that "the rule of God" (*hakm Allah*) must replace the "rule of idols" (*hakm al-taghut*). Finally, in 2005 Ayman al-Zawahiri apparently believed that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's "successes" in parts of Sunni Iraq paved the way for the installation of an Islamic government. The only guidance he offered was to implement the *sharia* and set up a consultative structure, with few additional actionable details.

There are a few reasons why al-Qaeda and its associated groups do not clearly articulate their vision of the post-jihad world. First, the "Salafi" trend in general suffers from significant fragmentation. The world of jihadism is characterized by intense internal strife and rivalries. Concrete statements about the future could lead to more divisions and a loss of sympathy from other Muslims for the entire jihadi enterprise.

Second, the extremist discourse is framed in rhetoric and a narrative that lack clearly articulated details across all issues. Some describe al-Qaeda as being simply "conceptually bankrupt" and lacking the adequate intellectual or creative resources for thinking beyond their jihad.

Third, a sense of remoteness of the jihad goal can be detected among the more "thoughtful" extremists—an acknowledgment that the jihad will go on for many, many years. For example, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, one of al-Qaeda's spiritual leaders, criticized Zarqawi's methods, reminding him that the establishment of God's rule demanded educating a Muslim generation, long-term planning, and participation of all Muslim scholars and sons.

Finally, it is possible that al-Qaeda actually has no interest in a post-jihadist society. Genuine altruism may underlie their gravitation to the jihad—as well as a host of other antecedents, such as political disenfranchisement, socio-economic deprivation, and identity crisis. Once they are embedded in the jihad, it becomes "jihad for jihad's sake" or for the sake of martyrdom. They may not necessarily believe they will achieve a utopian society modeled on the caliphate.

Beyond the Call: The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

The several year old civil war in Syria and the rapid deterioration of Iraq in recent months have created conditions where many different groups are vying to establish control in the absence of a strong central authority capable of governance. On June 24, 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), one of many Sunni militant groups operating in the region, announced the creation of a new caliphate in Iraq and Syria. ISIL is one of many actors with a vision for the future of governance in Syria and Iraq, but it is unique because it is the first among the groups to have "officially" invoked the notion of a caliphate.

ISIL sets itself apart because it now has physical territory that it claims to control—in contrast to groups like Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which are essentially de-territorialized. Upon declaring the establishment of a caliphate, ISIL changed its name to the Islamic State, to reflect that it is no longer just a group, or movement, operating in a certain region, but that it is now an entity.

The territory claimed by the Islamic State expands from Iraq and over the border into Syria, suggesting that this new caliphate negates the traditional boundaries of the nation state established in the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement.[4] Historically, before the existence of modern nation states in the Middle East and North Africa, caliphates grew by conquering communities and territories, forcing inhabitants to pledge allegiance (*bayah*) to the new caliph, and threatening to kill those who refuse—an approach the Islamic State appears to be taking.[5]

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4. Gianluca Mezzofiore, "Iraq ISIS crisis: Is this the end of Skykes-Picot?" International Business Times, June 30, 2014, http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/iraq-isis-crisis-this-end-sykes-picot-1454751.

5. Patrick Goodenough, "Pledge Alliegiance to the new "Caliph," ISIS Demands of World's Muslims in Ramadan Declaration," CNS News, June 29, 2014, http://cnsnews.com/news/article/patrick-goodenough/pledge-allegiance-new-caliph-isis-demands-world-s-muslims-ramadan.

The Islamic State also has a designated caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, now referred to as "Caliph Ibrahim." The self-proclaimed caliph—the first in almost 100 years[6]— officially announced his ascension on July 5, 2014 as part of a sermon he delivered at a mosque in Mosul. Little is known about al-Baghdadi so far, other than that he has served as the leader of ISIL, holds a PhD in education (or law, both have been reported), has a $10 million dollar bounty[7] on his head, and has spent time in the custody of U.S. forces in 2005 but was later released.[8]

The Islamic State also has an existing, albeit nascent, framework for governance. According to documents seized from the house of a former Islamic State member, al-Baghdadi has formed a functioning cabinet around himself, assigning deputies to manage a wide variety of tasks in support of the management of the Islamic State, including finances and military operations.[9]

Recent English-language propaganda distributed by the group suggests that it has made providing effective governance to its people a priority, something that has been absent in the life of many Iraqis and Syrians in recent years.[10] This focus on effective governance stands in sharp contrast to the harsh approach to territorial administration taken by al-Qaeda in Iraq during 2004–2006. ISIL's ability to provide basic services to people under its control will be an important factor in its ability to build support from the local populace. Historical caliphates varied in the degree to which they governed, or contributed to, the daily lives of their subjects. Under the rightly guided caliphs, governance was in many ways decentralized, whereas subsequent caliphs exercised far more power. It remains to be seen what style of governance Caliph Ibrahim will pursue, and what role he will take on personally.

Finally, the Islamic State's following appears to be growing locally. As the group continues to capture territory on its way into Syria, there are reports of other jihadi

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6. Inside Story Team, "ISIL Leader emerges from the shadows. Who is Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi?" Al-Jazeera, July 7, 2014, http://america.aljazeera.com/watch/shows/inside-story/articles/2014/7/7/isil-s-leader-emergesfromtheshadowswhoisabubakralbaghdadi.html.

7. Rewards for Justice. Accessed July 29, 2014.,http://www.rewardsforjustice.net/english/abu_dua.html.

8. Inside Story Team, "ISIL Leader emerges from the shadows."

9. Ruth Sherlock, "Inside the leadership of Islamic State: how the new 'caliphate' is run," *The Telegraph,* July 9, 2014, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10956280/Inside-the-leadership-of-Islamic-State-how-the-new-caliphate-is-run.html.

10. Amzat Khan, "What ISIL'S English-language propaganda tells us about its goals," Al-Jazeera, July 20, 2014, http://america.aljazeera.com/watch/shows/america-tonight/articles/2014/6/19/how-isil-is-remakingitsbrandontheinternet.html.

groups defecting and pledging allegiance to the new caliph.[11] Alliances may also be forming between the Islamic State and influential tribes in Iraq—it has yet to be determined whether these are merely tactical alliances designed to join forces in an effort to overthrow the Maliki government in Baghdad or whether they will result in certain tribes pledging genuine allegiance to the new caliph.[12] On July 11, 2014, Tehreek-e-Khilafat, a jihadi group in Pakistan, also pledged its allegiance to Caliph Ibrahim, marking the first (and only) group outside the Middle East to do so.[13]

Challenges to the future of the Islamic State

In terms of establishing a caliphate, the Islamic State has made advances that are unprecedented. While the U.S. and the international community should certainly be concerned, there are significant challenges to its ability to thrive.

Legitimacy and authority

Caliph Ibrahim suffers from very serious legitimacy challenges. How he was chosen and why he is the "right" person to hold the job of caliph remain unclear. Absent answers to these questions, one can only conclude that he chose himself. On a personal level, next to the rightly guided caliphs—those who are revered in Islam as pure, pious, virtuous, and holding the legitimate right to the position of caliph— Caliph Ibrahim pales by comparison.

Although his rhetoric (and appearance) convey an intention to serve in the 7th century model of the *rashidun*, in practice Caliph Ibrahim's methods depart from those of the original caliphs. For example, in his first sermon in Mosul he was wearing an expensive Rolex wristwatch. This could be an indication that—despite his rhetoric—in practice he is more in line with the "Islamically doubtful" caliphs who sought power and treasure over piety and spiritual purity.

Widespread denunciation and rejection

Muslims around the world have very vocally denounced al-Baghdadi as caliph, and there has been wide rejection of the new caliphate as a legitimate institution. Al-

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11. Bill Roggio, "Islamic State consolidating gains in eastern Syria," The Long War Journal, July 3, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/07/islamic_state_consol.php.

12. Abdullah Dalshad, "Iraqi Tribal Revolutionaries say prepared to accept ISIS caliphate," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 9, 2014, http://www.aawsat.net/2014/07/article55334099.

13. Ankit Panda, "Pakistani Terror Group Declares Allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Caliphate," *The Diplomat*, July 11, 2014, http://thediplomat.com/2014/07/pakistani-terror-group-declares-allegiance-to-abu-bakr-al-baghdadis-caliphate.

Baghdadi has been described by some as an imposter and an apostate.[14] Leading Sunni scholars from the region's pre-eminent Islamic institution, Al-Azhar, have publicly denounced the Islamic State. Yussuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian cleric and spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, also came out against it.[15] Leading Imams in the United Kingdom recently released a video campaign to declare the Islamic State illegitimate, using the terms "corrupt, evil, viscous cowboys and terrorists" to describe the Islamic State's leaders.[16] Finally, Saudi King Abdullah also called ISIL: "nothing more than 'a handful of terrorists' whose aim was to sow discord among Muslims."[17] In sum, Al-Baghdadi's announcement of the Islamic State as the caliphate is far from being widely perceived as legitimate.

Overcoming fragmentation

If Caliph Ibrahim's goals are to establish some type of global caliphate to unify Muslims, the obstacles are countless and almost certainly insurmountable. On a practical level, each country in the Muslim world has its own unique blend of culture, tradition, and social practices that would make it nearly impossible to implement a functioning global caliphate—not to mention that this would erroneously preclude, in theory, the necessity of the nation-state in the region. The history of Islam shows that the vastness and diversity of the Muslim world made it difficult for a single ruler to govern: Muslim empires were typically just a loose amalgamation of different Muslim communities.

Muslim unity has not existed for a very long time, if it ever did. Violent ethnic and sectarian conflict is the prevailing force in many parts of the Muslim world today. As evidenced by al-Qaradawi's denunciation of the Islamic State in July 2014, we know the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt would never accept a religious figure from Iraq as its caliph. A similar animus is likely to manifest itself in other states and regions.

Extending through like-minded groups?

A key question to consider is whether the Islamic State will pursue bringing other like-minded jihadi groups into its fold to expand its influence and authority. Given

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14. Osman Rifat Ibrahim, "Why Abu Baker al-Baghdadi is an imposter," *Al-Jazeera*, July 14, 2014, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/07/baghdadi-impostor-20147991513785260.html.

15. Margaret Coker, "The New Jihad," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 11, 2014, http://online.wsj.com/articles/why-the-new-jihadists-in-iraq-and-syria-see-al-qaeda-as-too-passive-1405096590.

16. "British Imams Warn Against 'Cowboy' ISIS," *Al Arabiya*, July 12, 2014, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/2014/07/12/5-British-Imams-condemn-ISIS-in-highest-terms-via-online-video.html.

17. Goodenough, "Pledge Allegiance to New 'Caliph'."

its stated global reach and influence, an alliance with al-Qaeda and its affiliate groups around the world would seem like an astute strategic maneuver for the Islamic State to expand its reach. Yet, ISIL has already been denounced by al-Qaeda for its actions in Syria, and there are indications to suggest that the trend for the Islamic State is heading strongly in the direction of disintegration, not unification.

Recent developments shed light on some of the operational and command-and-control issues that contributed to the split. In February 2014, al-Qaeda publicly stated in its media outlet al-Sahab that it was not aligned with ISIL and that the group did not represent al-Qaeda.[18] The division began even earlier, in the spring of 2013, after ISIL attempted to expand its influence into Syria by taking over al-Nusrah, al-Qaeda's branch in Syria.[19] Local jihadi groups in Syria also accused ISIL of being more interested in setting up its own emirate in Syria than in defeating the Assad regime,[20] suggesting real doubt about al-Baghdadi's true intentions and goals.

Recent al-Qaeda statements clearly indicate that the group strategically does not support the establishment of a caliphate (at this time), in Iraq and Syria, with al-Baghdadi serving as caliph. On July 1, Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi released a lengthy statement condemning the Islamic State in Iraq as "deviant" and against the principle of Islam and *sharia*. He went on to state that he "was not alarmed by the declaration of the caliphate," calling it a "rush job," and that "whoever hastens something prematurely will be punished by being deprived of that for which he fights."[21] Mohammad Shalabi—or Abu Sayyaf, leader of the Jordanian Jihadi Salafist movement—also declared the Islamic State "illegitimate," stating: "The Islamic State's announcement of a caliphate and the appointment of its leader [Abu Bakr] al Baghdadi as a caliph all require the opinion and approval of the Muslim world…. Until the greater Ummah takes a position, with thorough study, this caliphate is illegitimate and should not be recognized."[22]

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18. Tim Lister, "Al Qaeda 'disowns' affiliate, blaming it for disaster in Syria," CNN, February 3, 2014, http://www.cnn.com/2014/02/03/world/meast/syria-al-qaeda/.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Elisa Oddones, "Jordan jihadist leader condemns ISIS caliphate," Al-monitor, July 7, 2014, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/jordan-maqdisi-jihad-iraq-isis-caliphate-qaeda.html#.

22. Taylor Luck, "Al Qaeda jihadists denounce Islamic State's Caliphate Move," *Jordan Times*, July 1, 2014, http://jordantimes.com/al-qaeda-jihadists-denounce-islamic-states-caliphate-move.

Finally, al-Qaeda's affiliates have also publicly rejected the Islamic State. In July 2014, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) stated that it "confirms that we still adhere to our pledge of allegiance to our sheikh and emir, Ayman al Zawahiri, since it is a Sharia-accorded pledge of allegiance that remains hanging on our necks, and we do not see what requires us to break it."[23]

23. Thomas Joscelyn, "AQIM rejects Islamic State's caliphate, reaffirms allegiance to Zawahiri," The Long War Journal, July 14, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/07/aqim_rejects_islamic.php#ixzz37ee7UFTz.

Conclusions and Implications for U.S. Interests

Having examined the history of the caliphate, past attempts at revivalism, and the Islamic State's declaration of a new caliphate in Iraq and Syria, several conclusions emerge.

First, the Islamic State is not considered a legitimate caliphate by the vast majority of the Muslims around the world. The situation today is much the same as it was in 2007 (and indeed throughout the 20th century): The vast majority of Muslims do not support the restoration of the caliphate, nor do they have any interest in returning to a 7th century model for governance. They simply do not see this as a viable path to solving modern-day problems. **Despite political instability, sectarian conflict, and the emergence of new jihadist groups in the Middle East, calls to restore the caliphate remain relegated largely to extremist groups and their followers.**

Second, the Islamic State is more focused on immediate goals in Iraq and Syria than it is about obtaining legitimacy for its newly declared caliphate within the broader *ummah*. The Islamic State emerged primarily as a result of local conditions as opposed to a coordinated (or realistic) strategy to develop global Muslim unity under the banner of the caliphate (as depicted in this [map](#) and others like it, which are widely posted on news websites and social media)—at least in the short term. For ISIL, applying the model of the caliphate is primarily a tactical move to achieve its goals in Iraq and Syria.

Given that there are no set rules or structure for how a caliphate "should" operate, al-Baghdadi can take those aspects of historical caliphates that best serve his and his group's own purposes and apply them to serve local operational needs. For example, the concept of *bayah*, has been emphasized as part of the Islamic State's operations and messaging—it clearly has been key in the group's strategy to expand and gain territory and influence. At the same time, the caliphate conceptually gives just enough structure to provide a concrete alternative to the status quo. All Muslims are familiar with the caliphate; it has immediate practical application and deep religious significance.

The "caliphate model" essentially provides a framework for a militant group to transform from a fighting force into a political entity in control of physical territory

(assuming it has the military force to do so). It is a recognizable and religiously revered governance structure that can be set up to provide tangible goods, leadership, and services that are otherwise absent. Furthermore, the position of "caliph" is ideal for a local, charismatic, politically astute leader to emerge—one who, like al-Baghdadi, is able to forge alliances, articulate a vision for the future, and resort to unspeakable violence to achieve his goals. With this framework in place, it can become much more difficult for governments (particularly those that are weak to begin with) to uproot and defeat these new "caliphates" than it would be to simply defeat a local militia. **As such, in focusing on local issues and pursuing an Iraq- and Syria-relevant jihad, ISIL's "caliphate model" may prove inspiring in many parts of the region, without actually advancing the creation of a unified caliphate**.

Third, ISIL's declaration of a caliphate appears to be having three important impacts on the "information battlespace." Each raises the prominence of ISIL and its leaders on the regional and global stage, but with some potentially negative secondary effects. **It serves to irk al-Qaeda and other groups claiming to own the legitimate pathway of Islam**. Al-Baghdadi's declaration of the caliphate is particularly troubling for al-Qaeda in Syria because jihadi groups there are now more or less forced to choose sides. Instead of unifying the jihadist movement, the declaration actually serves to divide it. **Declaring the caliphate has been a powerful attention-grabbing tool.** The Islamic State has been in the headlines in virtually every country, and social media around the world have been focusing on the topic. Yet not all of this attention is positive. For example, an analyst in Pakistan reported that chatter in that part of the world is reflecting a heightened interest in the Islamic State—even over al-Qaeda: "All the chatter is about Baghdadi—negative and positive."[24]

It has stoked the debate within the Muslim community—among jihadists and non-jihadists—over the appropriateness of re-establishing the caliphate. The caliph is widely understood to be the head of the world's Islamic community, the successor to the Prophet Muhammad—arguably the most important role a Muslim can hold. As such, by the nature of the position, there should be only one caliph. In being the first to claim the position for himself, al-Baghdadi has essentially made it impossible for anyone else to claim it without the issue devolving into an internecine jihadist argument over who *truly* is the legitimate caliph. This development, of course, would not serve any jihadi leader well.

As such, the U.S. should avoid getting involved in debates over the legitimacy of the caliphate; that is a topic that the *ummah* can work through within itself (as we are already seeing, across the Muslim world leaders are coming out rejecting it—or

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24. Panda, "Pakistani Terror Group Declares Allegiance."

even just ignoring it). The international community can perhaps have much more impact focusing on the physical terrain issues associated with the declaration of this caliphate as discussed below.

Fourth, the U.S. should view ISIL's declaration of a caliphate primarily as a threat to the stability and political viability of Iraq rather than as a broader danger of ISIL's achieving a pan-Islamic caliphate under its banner. Since the U.S. invasion in 2003, Iraq has witnessed the rise and fall of many militant groups. Arguably, however, in ISIL's declaration of the Islamic State, it has evolved beyond a "movement" or "group"—now occupying physical territory, or even a notional homeland. With ample military force to conquer physical territory, the Islamic State is now implementing a physical governance structure that may be difficult to uproot. **Similar to Hizbullah in Lebanon or Hamas in the Palestinian territories, in the absence of a strong central government with the means, resources, and willingness to provide basic services and support to populations throughout the country's territory, the Islamic State has the opportunity to establish itself as the de facto authority and "provider" in large swaths of Iraq.**

It is conceivable that ISIL is applying this "caliphate model" as a pathway for creating an independent Sunni territory in Iraq. The possibility of fragmentation along sectarian/ethnic lines in Iraq continues to loom large in the background, despite international and nationalist efforts to keep the country together. But today, the climate is arguably different than it was while the U.S. was still a presence in the country. The Kurds are making a play at statehood more aggressively than ever before, and while U.S. and regional partners are calling for Iraq to stay unified, how far will the international community have to go to make this happen? **The declaration of the caliphate is a new and potentially powerful development that may not only serve the needs and objectives of ISIL, but also play into the hands of other actors seeking the ultimate dissolution of the state of Iraq.**

Therefore, of prime concern to the U.S should be the implications of the caliphate for the political viability of the current state of Iraq. Even if ISIL appears unlikely to progress much further in terms of expanding the physical realm of its caliphate, what they have already established should be the real focus for the West and to the rest of the Muslim world. Their actions to date, combined with the folding of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Kurdish Peshmerga activity in the north, raise alarming questions about Iraq's future, as well as the potential spillover effects in Syria.

Fifth, while there should be little concern for any current jihadist movement successfully establishing a *global* caliphate under its banner, the "caliphate model" that ISIL proposes may have profound implications on the security environment in many countries. Due to resource and organizational challenges, sectarian differences, competing sources of identify (tribal, ethnic, national, etc.), the resilience of embattled state security institutions, and ideological differences among those sympathetic to the notion of a caliphate, most groups calling for the

restoration of the caliphate to unite the entire *ummah* (ISIL included) simply lack the ability to accomplish this goal. The Muslim world is characterized by such deep divisions ideologically, ethnically, politically, and along sectarian lines that from a practical perspective, establishing unified political and religious supremacy under a single form of Islamic government is highly implausible. Arguably, this could be pursued through unprecedented amounts of brute force and killing — but even using this approach, the effort would almost certainly fail.

However, at the local level and within specific communities across the region, calls for the restoration of the caliphate can have a powerful impact, stoking religious zeal, mobilizing fighters, disrupting fragile political balances, striking fear, undermining state institutions, and raising the visibility and influence of otherwise obscure individuals, organizations, and ideologies.

Looking Ahead

Given the formal declaration of the establishment of the caliphate by ISIL, several outcomes are plausible. The Islamic State could remain largely a local phenomenon, with a focus on maintaining the physical area it has claimed thus far and perhaps gaining additional modest expansion in Iraq and Syria. In this case, it is of particular concern if the group's goal is to break up Iraq and—assuming this happens along sectarian lines—establish dominance within the resulting Sunni "state."

Efforts to achieve this, however, will continue to be met with a significant resistance—including military responses—from other actors both within and from outside Iraq. **Local (or internationally supported) resistance could result in eventual defeat of ISIL. In this event, it is likely that over time, the caliphate as an entity would eventually fizzle out, resulting in a return to the status quo ante** (an outcome that would benefit al-Qaeda by lending credence within the jihadi world to its condemnation of establishing a caliphate in the first place).

The "caliphate model" as applied by ISIL—if deemed successful over time—could be attractive to other radical groups in other conflict zones because it is a vehicle through which to establish physical territories (something al-Qaeda has thus far been reluctant to do). **While the Islamic State has no real hope of unifying the entire Muslim world under Caliph Ibrahim, it is possible that if this "caliphate model" proves successful, we could see the emergence of other groups operating in similar conditions (such as Yemen, Pakistan, Mali, Nigeria, and so forth) applying the same approach.**

The declaration of this caliphate could cause a split between those groups that decide to pledge their support to Caliph Ibrahim and those that pledge their allegiance to al-Qaeda. A franchise-like competition (think "McDonald versus Burger King") could potentially emerge across the Muslim world in areas where jihadi

groups are operating and exercising influence between those that pledge their allegiance to Caliph Ibrahim and those that do so to Al-Qaeda.

Finally, **indigenous jihadist groups could gain control of localized territories in various countries and pledge their allegiance to the Islamic State (much as other extremist "franchises" declared allegiance to al-Qaeda). This could result in a map where there would be small patches of land across the Muslim world that have self-declared to be part of the Islamic State.** This would not be a pan-Islamic caliphate in the classic sense, because the vast majority of Muslims would not be part of it (and it would not be contiguous), but it would be a geographically fragmented jihadi caliphate—swathes of territory across the Muslim world, all ideologically aligned with…and perhaps subordinate to…Caliph Ibrahim.
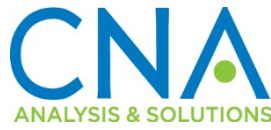
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