

The History of the Caliphate

Question:

Didn't the Muslim caliphate or khilâfah end in 1342 AH/1924 CE, when Turkey abolished the office? Didn't the khilâfah have a continuous existence up to that point?

Answer:

These questions are two-sided, as they deal with fiqh and with history. The fiqh of the khilâfah is important, and perhaps that can be dealt with in a future article. In this article, however, I will be exclusively concerned with the history. In revealing historical facts, it is not my purpose to challenge any point of fiqh regarding the necessity of having a leader. Therefore, I am not disputing here that from the time of the death of the Prophet (SAAS) there was an amîr, and that the amîr had to be obeyed, and that the amîr also had the title of khalîfah. Most of what I would amend concentrates on the idea that the khilâfah was abolished in 1342/1924, which is an event whose significance has often been misconstrued by Muslims.

The early khilâfah had a more or less continuous history from Abu Bakr (RA), despite the civil wars of 35-40/656-661 and 64-73/683-692, until the coup that overthrew al-Walid ibn 'Abd al-Malik in 126/744. That led to the Third Fitnah or Civil War (126-134/744-752), during which the 'Abbâsids came to power in 132/749-750. This history is detailed in my book, *The End of the Jihâd State: The Reign of Hishâm ibn 'Abd al-Malik and the Collapse of the Umayyads*, available from SUNY Press.

Contrary to most popular belief, the 'Abbâsids's position was weak, not strong, because the disorders of the Third Fitnah had undermined the khilâfah. The 'Abbâsids never ruled in Algeria (except briefly in the extreme east of that country), Morocco, and Spain, so that the unity of the state had decisively ended. This actually first happened when the rebelling Berbers of Morocco set up their own khalîfah in 122/740, and it never happened after that year that all the Muslims ever were under one single khalîfah again. Although it has been mentioned that the Umayyads in Spain did not claim the title of khalîfah until the 4th/10th century, they were in a constant state of hostile relations with the 'Abbâsids, who never ruled or even exerted any influence in Spain.

The North African Berbers, whose revolt had actually broken the back of the earlier Umayyad khilâfah in 122/740, had plenty of justification for their

revolt, and it is really unfair merely to treat them as followers of a deviant sect of “Khawârij,” as has often been done. Even though their presence gave rise to the separate sect or madhhab of the Ibâdîs who still exist in the Algerian city of Ghardâyah and also in villages in Jabal Nafûsah in Libya, their initial impetus was purely political. All they did was to rebel against an Umayyad khilâfah which had lost all legitimacy except among the Syrians and which soon collapsed and disappeared. Remember that Sunnis have historically never validated the rule of the khalîfahs apart from the four Râshidûn and, often, ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azîz (99-101/717-720). While Mu‘âwiyah occurs in hadîth and might be defended as a Companion, that does not apply to the later Umayyad rulers. ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwân’s viceroy of the East, al-Hajjâj ibn Yûsuf (d. 95/714), even executed Sa‘îd ibn Jubayr (d. 95/714), the great muhaddith and authority of al-Bukhârî and other hadîth collections, sarcastically berating him for having thrown off his oath of allegiance by joining the ill-fated rebellion of Ibn al-Ash‘ath much earlier and then hiding out. This episode is documented in detail by al-Dhahabî in his huge biographical dictionary, *Siyar a‘lâm al-nubalâ’*, Vol. IV.

From the time of its first proclamation in 132/749, the ‘Abbâsid khilâfah continued to disintegrate through most of its history. It is quite notable that Abû Hanîfah (80-150/699-767), the putative founder of the Hanafî legal school and an outstanding jurist of the Muslim metropolis of al-Kûfah, after he had supported the ‘Alid rebel Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyyah, spent the last four and a half years of his life (145-150/763-767) in the prison of Abu Ja‘far al-Mansûr (ruled 136-158/754-775), the ‘Abbâsid khalîfah. Indeed, Abu Hanifah was imprisoned in Baghdâd in the very year of the founding of that city and thus broke in the new prison. Further undermining the claim of the ‘Abbâsids to universal rule, a separate Fâtimid Shî‘î khilâfah was set up that lasted 297-567/909-1171 in North Africa and Egypt, and the surviving Umayyads in Spain also claimed the title of khalîfah 317-422/929-1031, when they fell. After that, many small princelings in Spain and North Africa claimed to be khalîfahs, so that a poet stated that they would take up big names like al-Mu‘tasim, just like housecats pretending to be lions. The Hafsid dynasty of Tunis claimed the title of khalîfah 651-977/1253-1569 and adopted ‘Abbâsid-sounding reign titles. When Islam spread to West Africa, so did claims to the office of khalîfah or amîr al-mu‘minîn. This became part of the titles of ‘Uthmân ibn Fûdî (or dan Fodio) of Sokoto and his successors in Nigeria to this day. Since the khilâfah of the Ottomans was remote and made little pretense of being a real office, ‘Uthmân ibn Fûdî ignored it. The continuity of the use of such titles in the Muslim West also extends down to the present in Morocco, where Muhammad VI is still to this day amîr al-mu‘minîn, just like ‘Umar ibn al-Khattâb, and that

is taken with deadly seriousness in Morocco. Thus, the Moroccans, having their own continuous succession of the title, do not at all now and never before did recognize the Ottoman Turkish sultâns's claim to the title of khalîfah. Indeed, since the sultâns of Morocco claimed descent from the Prophet (SAAS) and were thus Qurashîs, while the Ottomans were not, it might be held against the Ottomans rather that they did not recognize the Moroccan ruler as khalîfah and submit to him.

Meanwhile, in the East, the 'Abbâsid khalîfahs exercised no personal power in 247-279/861-892 and again 295-334/908-945, when they were under the control of military dictators, and then lost all power completely with the capture of Baghdâd in 334/945 by the Shî'î Bûyids or Buwayhiyyûn, who kept the 'Abbâsid khalîfahs under house arrest until the Bûyids's own downfall in 447/1055, when the Sunnî Saljûq Turks came as "liberators." However, the 'Abbâsid khalîfahs soon found that the Saljûqs were just as intolerable and would allow the khalîfahs no power, although they "respected" them, for example, by seeking to marry their daughters. The Saljûks arrogated to themselves the title of sultân or "authority," which henceforth became the main title of the rulers in Islam until the last century, when malik or "king" began to make a comeback. The 'Abbâsid khalîfahs only became independent again from the Saljûk sultâns in 547-656/1152-1258, after which Baghdad was captured and destroyed by the kâfir Mongols and the last 'Abbâsid khalîfah was slain. The Egyptian Mamlûks set up one of his relatives, but he too was killed by the Mongols trying to go back to Baghdâd. After that, they set up a distant relative in Cairo in 659/1261 as khalîfah, and that line continued until the death of the last one in 950/1543. This was the so-called "Abbâsid khalîfah in Cairo." Although the very far away Muslim Sultanate of Delhi in India used to seek investiture from them, everyone else regarded them as a joke. Usually the Mamlûk sultân would go out and drag the khalîfah along in his baggage just like one of his wives. It was form without content.

At the same time, the Turks of Turkey used the titles of amîr al-mu'minîn and khalîfah occasionally before 905/1500, but their real title was sultân, just like the Saljûks, Ayyûbids, and Mamlûks before them. After that the title khalîfah was not used by them for several centuries, until it was rediscovered at the Treaty of Kuchuk Kanarjli in 1188/1774. At that time, in that treaty with the Russians, the Turkish sultân reserved the title of khalîfah for himself so that he could still be considered the spiritual leader of the Crimean Tatar Muslims who were surrendered at that time to the Russians. Thereafter, it was used very little except from 1293/1876, when the Ottoman ruler 'Abd al-Hamîd II started calling himself the Sultân-khalîfah in order to

threaten the British Empire and thus preserve his rule. In this he was strongly opposed by ‘Abd al-Rahmân al-Kawâkibî (d. 1321/1903), who pointed out that according to Sunnî law, the khalîfah had to be from Quraysh, and the Ottomans were not Qurashîs and had never claimed to be. Long after ‘Abd al-Hamîd was overthrown in 1326-1327/1908-1909, many Muslims started looking back on him as the ideal ruler and his time as the golden age, because his overthrow practically meant the end of the multinational Ottoman Turkish state, but they did not think so at the time. His successors Muhammad V Rashâd (1327-1336/1909-1918) and Muhammad VI Wahîd al-Dîn (1336-1341/1918-1922) continued to use the title, but they were under the control of military dictators. When Muhammad VI surrendered to the British in 1337/1918, he fell under the control of those colonialists, and none mourned his expulsion by the military dictator Mustafâ Kamâl in 1341/1922. Thereafter for two years, Muhammad VI’s cousin ‘Abd al-Majîd II had the title of khalîfah without being sultân, until that was terminated by Kamâl in 1342/1924. That was the end of one khilâfah, but hardly the end of THE khilâfah, because there was nothing legitimate about the Ottoman claim to be khalîfahs to begin with.

After that, various rulers tried to claim to be khalîfah, including the British puppet kings of Egypt and the Hâshimite ex-king of the Hijâz, but no agreeable candidate appeared. The Sa‘ûdî rulers never tried to claim it, maybe because they had fought the Ottoman Turks on and off for nearly two centuries and did not respect their claim to the title, so they did not see that any legitimate title had become vacant.

It would seem to me that any attempt to restore the khilâfah today would have to begin by asking why all Muslims should not swear allegiance to King Muhammad VI of Morocco, who certainly holds this claim and does so through an ancient and venerable lineage that goes back much earlier than the Ottoman claim and is much more authentic. Not that I hold the view that that is what is to be done, but it would seem that classical theory would require allegiance to the existing khalîfah rather than setting up another as rival. The Ottoman state did represent the largest surviving Muslim state in the center of the Muslim world in the thirteenth-fourteenth/nineteenth century, it is true, but it almost went under in 1247-1256/1831-1840 and was only saved by British intervention. Thus, for most of its last century it did not constitute a truly independent Muslim polity but depended on Britain for protection from Russia and from other enemies. Indeed, its destruction after the First World War occurred because it had transferred its political allegiance to Germany, so that Britain no longer wished to preserve it.

Besides these difficulties with idealizing the Ottoman state, there are other problems. The centralizing organization of that state made the religious scholars very subservient, thereby undermining their traditional role as defenders of the people. Ottoman statism cynically used Islam in the thirteenth/nineteenth and early fourteenth/twentieth centuries, not cultivating real spiritual and moral values and already capitulating to the West. Thus, Mustafâ Kamâl, the secularist military dictator, represented more a continuation of Ottoman statism than a revolution against the Ottoman state model. Even if we go back to Muhammad II al-Fâtih (855-886/1451-1481) and Sulaymân I al-Qânûnî (926-974/1520-1566), we find the statist model in full operation. Nor is its derivation even wholly Muslim; in many of its forms and especially its content, it goes straight back to the defunct, authoritarian Roman Empire which it replaced in 857/1453. Of course, there is also some virtue in the Ottoman state as an example of possible Muslim political arrangements, but it can hardly be considered to accord with the classical shar‘î model of a Muslim state, nor can it be wholly defended on moral grounds. It is better to be circumspect about such matters.

The idealization of Sultân ‘Abd al-Hamîd II is also a dubious exercise. While I agree that he has been overly abused by European colonialist writers, his rule, although sometimes clever, was not ideal in an Islamic sense at all. It was rather filled with compromises and a huge intrusion of European influence, including a bankruptcy similar to Egypt’s meltdown of 1293/1876. Most modern defenders of Muslim statism would not have liked ‘Abd al-Hamid’s conservative dependence on the Sufi shaykh Abû al-Hudâ al-Sayyâdî, nor perhaps his personal character, nor would they have been content to live under his rule without protest.

Finally, one should note that it is not usually wise to take a partisan position about every episode in past history, as we were not there, did not experience it, and do not know the details to weigh who was more in the right in the majority of cases. It is true that we have set views received from our tradition regarding respect for the Prophets (AS), in particular our Prophet Muhammad (SAAS), as well as his Companions (RAA), especially the Rightly-guided Khalîfahs or Râshidûn. And even after them one may make some historical criticisms and judgements after careful study. But in most cases it is better to invoke and obey the command of the Prophet (SAAS) in the sahih hadîth from al-Bukhârî, “lâ tasubbû al-amwât, fa-innahum afdaw ilâ mâ qaddamû” = “Do not curse the dead, for they have gone to the reward of what they did” (See al-Bukhârî, *Sabîh*, translated by Muhammad Muhsin Khân, Vol. 2, p. 270, hadîth 476 (kitâb al-janâ’iz, bâb mâ yunhâ min sabb al-amwât), and

Vol. 8, p. 344, hadîth 523 (kitâb al-riqâq, bâb sakarât al-mawt); also reported by al-Nasâ'î, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, and al-Dârimî).

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