

# The Struggle for Unity and Authority in Islam: Reviving the Caliphate?

(A joint CNA/Wilton Park Conference)

Julia Voelker McQuaid



The Center for Strategic Studies is a division of The CNA Corporation (CNAC). The Center combines in one organizational entity regional analyses, studies of political-military issues, and strategic and force assessment work. Such a center allows CNAC to join the global community of centers for strategic studies, and share perspectives on major security issues that affect nations.

There is a continuing need for analytic and assessment work that goes beyond conventional wisdom. The Center for Strategic Studies is dedicated to providing a deeper level of expertise, and work that considers a full range of plausible possibilities, anticipates a range of outcomes, and does not simply depend on straight-line predictions.

Another important goal of the Center is to attempt to stay ahead of today's headlines by looking at "the problems after next," and not fall into the trap of simply focusing on analyses of current events. The objective is to provide analyses that are actionable, and not merely commentary.

While the Center's charter does not exclude any area of the world, Center analysts have clusters of proven expertise in the following areas:

- The full range of East Asian security issues, especially those that relate to the rise of China
- Russian security issues, based on ten years of strategic dialogue with Russian institutes
- Maritime strategy
- Future national security environment and forces
- Strategic issues related to the Eastern Mediterranean region
- Missile defense
- Latin America, including guerrilla operations
- Operations in the Persian (Arabian) Gulf

The Center is under the direction of Rear Admiral Michael McDevitt, USN (Ret.), who is available at 703-824-2614 and on e-mail at mcdevitm@cna.org. The administrative assistant for the Center is Ms. Kathy Lewis, at 703-824-2519.

Approved for distribution:

September 2007



Eric V. Thompson  
Director  
International Affairs Group

This document represents the best opinion of CNA at the time of issue.  
It does not necessarily represent the opinion of the Department of the Navy.

APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE. DISTRIBUTION UNLIMITED.

Copies of this document can be obtained from the CNA Document Control and Distribution at 703-824-2123.

**Copyright © 2007 The CNA Corporation**

# THE STRUGGLE FOR UNITY AND AUTHORITY IN ISLAM: REVIVING THE CALIPHATE?

## CONFERENCE REPORT

Thursday 3 - Saturday 5 May 2007

### Background

1. This conference brought together experts, scholars, practitioners, and leaders in the Muslim community to discuss unity and authority in the Muslim world today. Specifically, participants considered these issues within the context of the current “caliphate debate” – an ongoing discussion among some members of the Muslim community over the establishment of a modern-day caliphate.<sup>1</sup>

2. It appears that only a small, and mostly extremist, minority is promoting the caliphate as a viable institution for the 21st Century. Furthermore, this small group does not appear to have a unified sense of what a caliphate would look like and how it would function in a modern world context. Still, framing the discussion within the caliphate debate was a useful approach to explore and better understand unity, authority, and other issues of utmost importance to Muslims today. In addition, in bringing perspectives from across the Islamic world

---

<sup>1</sup> Caliphate: 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](#). Alternative spellings include *khilafa*, *khulafa*, *khalifa*, and *khalifat*.

– from Africa to the Middle East to Indonesia - to the table, we were able to more accurately situate extremist views within the very broad spectrum of Islamic thinking on these matters.

### **Unity and authority in early Islam: the *rashidun* and classic caliphates**

3. Today’s struggle for unity and authority in Islam is playing out, to some extent, in a modern caliphate debate. However, when considering the institution of the caliphate today the past must be borne in mind because no aspect of the Islamic faith can be thoroughly understood without considering history.

4. The first four caliphs, Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthaman, and Ali, are known as the “rightly guided caliphs,” or *rashidun*. These were the first leaders of the Muslim community after the death of the Prophet Muhammed in 632 AD. 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. The era of the *rashidun* ended in 661, when Ali was murdered and Mu’awiya ibn Abi Sufyan, seated in Syria, proclaimed himself caliph.

5. At least three factors distinguish the first four caliphs from all the subsequent ones: succession, personal conduct, and authority. Succession, or how one becomes caliph, is the first distinguishing factor. 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 committee.

6. Personal conduct is another 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 ca-

caliphs emulated the simple, pious life of the Prophet, while subsequent caliphs – such as the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir, who held Baghdad in the 10<sup>th</sup> 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 Caliphate were just corrupt, self-serving “sultan-caliphs.”

7. Authority is the third factor. According to some historians, in the classical pattern of caliphs, which lasted well into the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 neighbourhoods, or even families; education was utterly decentralized; and even military service was a matter of personal choice. This self-regulated system is in some ways alien to the modern notions of a centralized state. Even under the reputedly “tyrannical” Ottomans (according to one traveller in the 1890s) citizens rarely, if ever, engaged with representatives of the sultan-caliph. The traveller went on to describe the caliphate as a “charmingly free realm of autonomous neighbourhoods, tribes, and communities, where the ruler had neither the resources nor the desire to intervene in any issues that did not threaten civil war.”

8. This decentralised model of the classic caliphates depicted by some historians has nothing in common with the paradigms favoured by modern-day Islamists. Theocrats in Iran and groups such as Hamas, for example, are centralist and often totalitarian. From the Islamists’ perspective, Islam is an ideology of state-imposed correctness. Even modern-day groups that advocate a caliphate model – most notably Hizb ut-Tahrir – tend not to examine the assumptions implicit in their vision. Some of these assumptions include aspects of the modern, state-centric system that currently exists. Many modern Islamists (including those who pursue peaceful, non-violent approaches to achieve their

goals) believe that a sick society cries out for detailed political solutions and programs, and that, therefore, the state must be highly interventionist.

9. The distinction in modern Muslims' perceptions of the rashidun versus subsequent caliphs today is important in understanding modern-day debates on establishing a "trans-national" Islamic authority. Influential Islamic theologians whose views continue to inspire Muslims world-wide, such as Ibn Tamiyaa (d. 1327), have declared that only the first four rightly guided caliphs were legitimate and that all others were mere kings – corrupt and immoral rulers. Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), another major Islamic thinker, came to the conclusion that after the first four rightly guided caliphs, the caliphate was no longer Islamic in nature because it had been transformed into a form of "kingship." Other beliefs hold that only the first three caliphs were "true" caliphs. They believe that Ali was not a real caliph and that the rulers after the death of Umar were only monarchs. These perspectives about the role and virtues of historical caliphs are significant because modern-days proponents of re-establishing the caliphate point to different historical eras, highlighting whatever elements of that era best support their goals and agenda. While modern-day discussions on the caliphate are historically rooted, it is important to remember that people's reading of history is based on their individual backgrounds and context. Each call for the re-establishment of the caliphate begins with a rereading of Islamic history.

### **Succession and authority in Islamic political systems: theory versus practice**

10. The search for unity and authority is a defining struggle in the historical evolution of any state or nation, and those in the Muslim world are no exception. Since the death of the Prophet, two central politico-religious questions for Muslims have been:

Who can stand in for the Prophet after his death?

What authority should this person have?

11. 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 Qu'ran 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.

12. There have been several main approaches to addressing the question of who should lead the umma (Islamic community) and what his authority should be – the two most prominent today being the Sunni and the Shia. The Sunni approach adopted the practices of the first generation, especially the first four caliphs, as normative. The Shia accepted as the guiding norms the texts and practices of selected members of the Prophet's family. Any current discussions on the caliph today are almost exclusively among Sunnis.

13. Over time, a broad outline of standard political theory has formed in parallel with practice. This was primarily derived from historical readings. Elements of this Islamic "classical theory" included "the Khalifa" as successor to the Prophet, which gave him supreme authority as both spiritual and political head of the community. He symbolised 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."

14. However, this did amount to a political system. Modern thinkers – such as Indian-born Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi and Egyptian-born Sayyed Qutb – try to tease a system out of these fragments. They attempt to bypass history, and claim 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). What unites most of these visions, interestingly, is their authoritarian tendencies. Regimes today that claim to embody Islamic

values – such as those of Saudi Arabia, Iran, 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 recreate the caliphate as it existed after the death of Umar.

15. The caliphate is just one theoretical model 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 an intellectual fixture for Muslims who continuously endeavour to find the proper place for Islam in their daily lives. Part of the *ijtihad* 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 model, according to some theorists, is often more of an ideal than a reality - limited to the perimeters of imagination.

16. There is no unique, prescribed system that provides step-by-step instructions for Islamic governance. Muslims have experimented with many forms of government in their quest to realise the values and core teachings of their religion. If they continue to do so, any system that emerges will be Islamic by definition. However, it will not be in the form of a classic caliphate. History will not repeat itself: it is not possible to bring back a system that existed for just a few decades 15 centuries ago.

### **20<sup>th</sup> century revivalism of the caliphate**

17. Muslim intellectuals and political leaders have reacted to modern-day crises in the Islamic world with a variety of ideas, including restoration of the caliphate. A number of revivalist efforts have been made over the past century, including the Khilafat Movement in India. This pan-Islamic movement began in 1918 and was sparked by a desire to defend the Ottoman caliphate as part of a broader Indian Muslim anti-colonial movement. It was based on a transnational sense of commu-



nity that mobilised Indian Muslims in an unprecedented way. It allowed them to affirm their identity around a strong symbol.

18. 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 lines. 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 towards a religious one based on the belief that the Ottoman Caliph was a universal Caliph to whom all Muslims owed allegiance.

19. The khilafat movement died after Turkish leader Kemal Mustapha Attaturk abolished the caliphate in March 1924. However, the idea of 'khilafat' is still alive among some Indian Muslims today, who idealize it as an anti-colonial concept.

20. 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 theoretician of the Islamic state 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 rejects Western democracy, but remains non-committal on the method by which the caliph would be appointed.

### **Debates on the caliphate today**

21. Some Muslims support the idea of establishing a single council or an individual to lead the Muslim community. The caliphate presents one possible model and 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. At the same time, there are also extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and members of the group Hizb ut-Tahrir, who advocate the idea of reviving the caliphate. It is important to understand, however, that very few Muslims actively seek a return to the ancient, pre-modern political system that existed in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Obstacles to global unity**

22. There are significant obstacles to global Muslim unity, or a modern-day caliphate. Most of these hindrances stem from the existing nation-state system. They include:

23. **Scale:** The Muslim world is vast, spanning from Morocco to Indonesia. Many modern debates on the caliphate invoke the “Medina Model” as the embodiment of the Islamic ideal. The Medina model refers to the period of time during which the Prophet entered a formal peace agreement with the tribes of Yathrib (Medina), ending a period of violent rivalry among competing groups. It is often considered the first Islamic state. According to some historians, one of the primary reasons that the Medina model worked was that the caliph ruled over just a few towns – a small collection of municipalities, with a limited number of tribes. It is difficult to imagine how one would successfully impose this type of system on the expansive modern-day nation state system, made up of thousands of ethnic groups, tribes, sects, etc. – not to mention how this would (or would not) impact clearly-defined national boundaries of sovereign states.

24. Fragmentation and diversity: Each country in the Muslim world has its own unique blend of culture, tradition, and social practices. Some Muslims believe it would be impractical and unrealistic to revive the caliphate under current circumstances. Even in historical times, the vastness and diversity of the Muslim world made it difficult for a single ruler to govern. Muslim empires were often a loose amalgamation of an assortment of different Muslims communities.

25. Today, the Muslim World League, the Islamic Development Bank, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) are organisations that bring together Muslims from across the globe. These institutions have not always been successful in reaching their goals and this is in part related to their diverse memberships. The Organization of the Islamic Conference, for example, was established to promote Muslim unity across the globe, but is often rendered ineffective by member states' divisions over goals and approaches.

26. According to some, fragmentation based on nationality, as well as profound and longstanding tribal, ethnic, regional, and sectarian divisions, are the prevailing forces in the Muslim world today. Muslim unity has not existed for a very long time, if it ever did exist. Violent ethnic and sectarian conflict is the prevailing force in the current Muslim world. It seems impossible that members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, for example, would accept a religious figure from Indonesia as their caliph; nor would an Iranian accept being ruled by a Sudanese.

27. Practical issues: Even if Muslims agreed on the need for a caliph or some other formal leader of the umma, it would likely introduce disputes over such practical issues such as where the caliph would sit, where the "capital" would be, what form the caliph succession would take, and how far caliph authority would extend.

## **Regional perspectives on the caliphate**

28. Support for establishing a unifying Islamic body, perhaps through a modern-day caliphate, varies across the globe. Insights into different regional perspectives on this issue were discussed at the conference.

### *Middle East and North Africa*

29. Many of the regimes in this region face significant legitimacy problems. These governments also fail to address the needs of their people in important ways. As a result, many Arabs explore alternatives to the status quo. For example, some Arabs think that a unified regional system, like the European Union, would be a good idea. A unified Muslim solution has been considered for decades and remains very popular in certain parts of the Middle East today.

30. Muslims in the Middle East are exposed to the concept of the caliphate from a very young age, as it is part of history and therefore an integral part of one's education. For example, textbooks contain images of the early caliphs, who are celebrated for their bravery, justice, and egalitarian governance. These teachings influence how Muslims today think about this institution; often they lead people to see the classic caliphate period as the "golden age" in Muslim history or to feel a certain nostalgia for Ottoman times. The caliphate is mentioned in speeches, debates and at the mosque in this region. Such symbolic use of history is particularly acute during crises in the Arab world.

31. Despite the fact that these nations are relatively young, nationalist feelings are quite strong. One possible implication of establishing a caliphate in this region is that people could be pressed to suppress their national identities, for example, or be forced to accept a form of Islam different from their own. It is very difficult to imagine that a Syrian today, for example, would ever submit to a Saudi caliph and vice-versa.

### *Southeast Asia*

32. One of Indonesia's largest Muslim organisations, Muhammadiyah, does not support the idea of a modern-day caliphate. In fact, the idea of revitalising pre-modern practices is not widely supported in Indonesia in general. The very active Hizb ut-Tahrir is the most notable group to champion the idea of establishing a caliphate in place of Indonesia's current political regime. However, even it is notably vague in terms of both the concept and the practice of this caliphate.

33. One interpretation of Hizb ut-Tahrir's voice in Indonesia is that it is an assault on democracy. The khalifa model (which, according to Hizb ut-Tahrir, is fundamentally at odds with democracy) has been a useful narrative in this effort. It is likely that if democracy survives and thrives in Indonesia, support for Hizb ut-Tahrir and its platforms will dwindle. It appears that Hizb ut-Tahrir supporters are often well educated, middle class men, who struggle to find success. They may find personal satisfaction in being associated with the group and, in their mind, its noble objectives. Notably, in recent years, whilst Hizb ut-Tahrir has apparently gained a foothold in Malaysia and Brunei, it does not, so far, have much support.

### *West Africa*

34. There is no evidence of an operational plan to establish a global caliphate among African Muslims. Significant social and political crises are taking place in many African countries, but the caliphate movement is not an issue per se. Some Hizb ut-Tahrir activities exist in West Africa, but they are not widespread. It is true that there is a genuine yearning for unity and mutual cooperation among African Muslims, but this should not be confused with extremists' calls to repeat history.

35. The Sokoto Caliphate in northern Nigeria has been a successful example of an Islamic authority, primarily because it has distinguished itself from the beginning as a social movement that regards the estab-

lishment of social justice as the primary purpose of governance. It had not imposed illegal taxes or other uncanonical practices upon its people. One distinguishing characteristic of the Sokoto Caliphate has been the considerable intellectual output of the caliphal leaders on a variety of topics, including fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), tafsir (Quranic commentary), medicine, and politics. Different Islamic groups and formations have demonstrated their abilities to appropriate and popularise specific aspects of the system to advance their causes within this system. Salafis, Sufis, traditional ulema, Islamic intellectuals, and social activists have all found ways to exist and prosper within the Sokoto framework.

36. Despite the proliferation of groups that look up to and thrive on the Sokoto caliphal legacy, there is no tangible evidence to link any established organisations associated with it to al-Qaeda or other jihadi groups. One might even venture to argue that one major factor that has ensured some level of civility in Islamic discourse in Nigeria has been the ability of the traditional caliphal institutions to mediate and maintain a broad consensus on Islamic issues. The religious environment in Nigeria is not crisis free, but the crises there are not inspired by external ideology. Rather they are the product of the complex matrices that have characterised Nigerian social, economic, and political life since the country's creation in 1914. In a situation where religion reinforces ethnic and political cleavages, however, the manipulation of religious sentiment could lead to monumental disaster.

### *Europe*

37. Some experts posit that diaspora populations in Europe are more susceptible to the caliphate movement than those dwelling in the Muslim world, due to the array of social and economic frustrations that these populations face when living in foreign lands. A recent Pew poll indicated that 20 to 30 percent of Muslims in diaspora populations look to outside countries – or leaders - for spiritual guidance. As a result, the continent may be a fertile place for discussions of 'imagined' concepts of a caliphate or other global movements. Extremist groups may recognise that the notion of a caliphate offers fellowship and a sense of connection to the outside world, particularly among these di-

aspora populations. This may be why groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir in the UK, find sizable followings and why Egyptian-born cleric Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi's judgments on how Muslims should live in non-Muslim countries resonate in some European Muslims communities.

38. Bosnia presents an interesting case for Europe. The Islamic community, the hierarchy of ulema, does not permit other Muslim groups or associations to operate in Bosnia. It seeks to control all Islamic institutions in the country and actively endeavours to have all foreign ones excluded. Despite the fact that the Islamic community finds it hard to accept a secular state, Bosnian Muslims do not support the idea of the caliph as political leader. Bosnian Muslims rarely discuss the caliphate or a caliph. It is not part of the public discourse. Today, there are no signs that any serious groups advocate this idea, despite Serbian claims to the contrary. The average person probably sees this as an impossibility, partly because it is not easy even to survive as a Muslim in this part of the world, much less to take on broader issues of unity. Furthermore, Bosnians' nationalism would discourage their backing something that is 'supra-nationalist', furthermore, unless it were some kind of organisation that would support them if they were under attack.

39. Bosnia's Islamic community serves as an example of a Muslim religious authority. The Islamic community basically sets the agenda, and very few dispute its legitimacy. For most Bosnians, this well-organised, credible institution benefits society and keeps extremist elements out. The Bosnian case is an instance where Muslims have organised themselves and unified, and the outcome has been positive. Looking at the Bosnian case, the West should hesitate before it condemns Muslim unity. Self-generated Muslim unity might be a more effective way to keep extremists at bay, and ultimately, it is argued, may be the only solution.

*South and Central Asia*

40. Religious parties saw the creation of Pakistan in 1947 as an opportunity to re-establish the original Islamic system of political, economic, and social justice – a system that can be summed up as a caliphate. Today, there are a number of groups in Pakistan that promote a modern-day caliphate. At least 12 out of 244 known Islamist groups do not believe in democracy and desire a caliphate. Most of these groups' message is that establishing an Islamic state in Pakistan is the only way to help beleaguered Muslims worldwide.

41. The average Pakistani, however, is focused on equality, social justice, and access to life's basic amenities. The idea of a central Islamic state that would bind the umma is politically unacceptable in Pakistan today, even among the clergy. People agree that the conduct of the state during the rashidun is to be taken as a model, but in practice, it would mean extreme centralisation: no separation of power and no checks or balances. It served public interest at the time because caliphs themselves were righteous. If the caliphate were revived in Pakistan today most Pakistanis believe it would mean absolute tyranny.

42. In Central Asia, the role of religion has always been in flux. In the 1990s, governments adopted Islam as the state religion, and scholars and practitioners were part of the state. Extremist elements have emerged in recent decades, mainly out of the reformist movement of the 1970s. A few groups, Hizb ut-Tahrir in particular, operate in Central Asia. Most of the extremist groups are underground and are used to operating that way.

43. Support for Hizb ut-Tahrir is quite limited in this region. The level of support that does exist for Hizb ut-Tahrir is most likely connected to its effectiveness at addressing key social issues, such justice, education, and employment. Often, Hizb ut-Tahrir offers solutions and provides answers where central governments have often failed. The group is well known for what it has accomplished on the local level and for standing up to local leaders. Its regional significance is based on



getting local leaders and politicians to do things, rather than on mobilizing people by advocating a global caliphate. Hizb ut-Tahrir, while it may have some small successes at the local level, is not well known regionally for its stand on global issues, such as propagating the caliphate. Also, people in Central Asia want security and stability – not to be like Afghanistan.

### **Overview of the groups promoting the caliphate concept**

44. Many extremist groups evoke the caliphate as part of their rhetoric. However, there are two general groups that support the idea of re-establishing the caliphate: Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Qaeda and its associated groups. Hizb ut-Tahrir is perhaps the group that is best known for its advocacy, partly due to its very effective media and outreach activities.

45. 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 a Muslim generation that inherited the spirit of Muhamed Abduh's salafism and reformism and of 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 mobilisation. The group is not monolithic. Today Hizb ut-Tahrir is fairly autonomous in each country. There is no centralised entity that approves the activities of each branch. The founder of Hizb ut-Tahrir addressed his call for the caliphate to Arabs as a means to reverse the creation of nation-states and the establishment of Israel. Today, however, the entire spectrum of Islamic political thought takes the nation-state system for granted. Yet, some Muslims still find the vision of a unified Muslim world attractive.

46. Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda and similar organisations also seem to support the caliphate concept, at least in their rhetoric. Bin Laden's deputy, 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." The Taliban also advocated the caliphate, and Taliban leader Mullah

Omar was called Amir al-muminin (Commander of the faithful) – a caliphic title. Hizb ut-Tahrir and Al-Qaeda and associated extremist groups have several similarities with regard to the caliphate concept. Both groups:

- Are de-territorialised – they have no geographical base, but are calling for one.
- Call for the caliph as shorthand for the aspiration to re-establish Dar al-Islam (Abode of Islam) as a geographical entity.
- Identify 1924, the year Kemal Mustapha Attaturk dismantled the Ottoman caliphate, as a critical turning point in Islamic history. Interestingly, Osama bin Laden does not refer to the Caliphate under the rashidun, but focuses only on the period since the end of the Ottoman era.

47. Their differences are more significant. Unlike al-Qaeda and its associates, Hizb ut-Tahrir has a stated policy of non-violence and claims to rely on only peaceful means to propagate its views and disseminate its vision. Moreover, al-Qaeda's views on the caliphate – and the reasons they evoke it – are significantly different from those of Hizb ut-Tahrir. Most notably, the caliphate concept was not originally part of al-Qaeda's agenda. For Hizb ut-Tahrir, establishment of a caliphate with pan-Islamic reach has driven its agenda from the outset.

48. Al-Qaeda did not start out with a coherent vision of a pan-Islamic or "global" caliphate, and this vision does not drive 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 to its own banner as the leader of global jihad. Evoking the caliphate is an important aspect of internationalising the jihad and building unity. It also provides a hopeful vision for those involved in the struggle.

49. The landscape of jihadis, in fact, is quite nuanced and complex. There are the transnational, 'global jihadis' such as al-Qaeda, and there are 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 this.

50. Hizb ut-Tahrir appears encouraged by the growing interest in the caliphate, but it blames extremist "sloganeering" for some of the new challenges it faces. For example, Hizb ut-Tahrir leaders have said they do not want their detailed, well thought out vision of the caliphate to be confused with some fanatical utopian fantasy. These sentiments, which reflect a certain level of tension between the Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Qaeda, have been detected in chat rooms and websites that feature discussions on the caliphate concept.

51. There are also numerous Islamist parties in Pakistan that actively support the caliphate concept. An example is Jamiat ul Ansar, whose member Fazlur Rehman Khalil stated: "Our motto is to impose Khilafat-e Rashidun on the whole world to get rid of the cruel and powerful." Lashkar-i Tayyiba is another such group. Its founder, Hafiz Saeed, stated: "In Islam there is a complete system of government based on Khilafat and Amarat. The real objectives for the establishment of Pakistan will be achieved when the original Islamic system which was established in Mecca 1400 years ago will be implemented here." In March 2007, an unknown group distributed a pamphlet that was addressed to the people of "power and influence [in Pakistan]." It said: "Uproot Musharraf and this corrupt system and re-establish khilafat. Only the khilafa will bring you out of this decline and humiliation, grant you political and economic stability and safeguard you from the intellectual and political attacks of Kuffar (unbelievers). For the khilafa is the system [that] solved your problems from the time of khilafat-e rashidun until 1924. Allah has promised the believers peace and security through this system."

### **Thinking through implementation**

52. Al-Qaeda and associated groups: reluctant to depict a future Rhetoric on the caliphate concept comes from far and wide, but there is limited evidence that jihadi theoreticians have thought constructively about implementing this future caliphate. Jihadis are more concerned with freeing Muslim lands from Western influence than they are with establishing Islamic rule – at least that is what their actions imply.

53. The duty of jihad and the rationale for attacking the enemy are well known and clearly stated. Notably, there is little evidence that the question of what happens after liberation and victory has been answered coherently and comprehensively. It seems that the jihadis' position is 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 the fate of the new state if people rejected it, he replied, "Its establishment is the execution of an explicit command from God, and we are not responsible for the results."

54. More recently, a key contributor to al-Qaeda's Sawt-al Jihad web magazine (Abu Bakri Naji) was asked how the caliphate would be run once they were victorious. His reply was that it was not a prerequisite that the mujahidin be prepared to run ministries. Rather, he said, they can pay employees – even those not involved in the movement – to fill these technical positions. The influential religious scholar Abu Muhammed al-Maqdisi has published lengthy critiques of the Kuwaiti, Jordanian, and Saudi system of governments. 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 organ.

55. There are a few reasons why the Al-Qaeda and other like-minded groups do not clearly lay out the post-jihad world. First, the ‘Salafi’ trend in general suffers from significant fragmentation. The world of jihadism is characterised 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.

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

57. Third, a sense of the 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, criticised 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.”

58. Finally, it is possible that most al-Qaeda has no interest in a post-jihadist society. Altruistic aspirations 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 do not necessarily believe they will achieve a utopian society modelled on the caliphate.

#### *The Hizb ut-Tahrir model*

59. Hizb ut-Tahrir lays out a clearer vision of how the caliphate would be structured if it were implemented. In fact, versions of the

group's notional caliphate organisational chart are available on websites. According to the group, they aspire to have an Islamic state led by a caliph who implements Islam. He does not reign but rules. There are only three other ruling positions in the state: the authorised aides (who have the same power as the caliph, but by delegation), and provincial and district governors. There are four other pillars of the state: an executive aide, a jihadi commander, administrative departments, and an elected representative body (majlis al-umma). In this system, the caliph appoints and dismisses all significant posts, determines domestic and foreign policy, leads the army, and declares war and makes peace.

60. There are several reasons why Muslims may find this framework attractive. First, it is contractual, is representative, and seems to present an accountable government (citizens can call the state to account in any of three institutional settings). The judiciary is reasonably independent, but the caliph appoints and dismisses the supreme judge. In this model, elected representatives have no compulsory control of the legislative process. Political participation is encouraged. Second, Muslim minorities are protected. This state does not promote a particular doctrinal expression or legal school. Rather, it accepts all sects and schools that do not deviate from the core Islamic creed. Third, women can serve in the elected body and as judges, although they are barred from government. Finally, social justice is combined with protection of private ownership and wealth acquisition, and there is a strong welfare orientation and free education.

61. This caliph would extend implementation of sharia to cases involving non-Muslims with Muslims and to all political, economic, and criminal matters. It would exclude non-Muslims from certain prerogatives, such as the elected assembly; however, it would permit them to have their own judges and autonomy in their religious and family affairs. Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and Zoroastrians are explicitly accepted.

62. There appears to be little specific guidance in terms of determining who would be caliph. Hizb ut-Tahrir seems theoretically willing to accept any male who agrees to run the state by this paradigm. In the

past, the group has called for such people as Libya's Muammar Qaddafi and Iraq's Saddam Hussein to declare themselves caliph. Allegedly, the group even approached Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to ask that it be adopted into the Iranian constitution. The requirement for the caliph to be from the Qurayshi tribe has been dropped from the group's list of prerequisites.

63. Additionally, the Caliph would take the following measures once he was installed: adopt Arabic as the language of the state; treat all Muslim states as a de facto part of his realm; end diplomatic relations with colonial countries and with those with which there are no treaties; maintain a state of war with hostile countries; withdraw from all international organizations not based on Islam (e.g. the UN, IMF); and convey the call to Islam worldwide.

#### **Iraq – a unique case**

64. Due to the ongoing conflict and the volume of extremist groups active there, Iraq is a unique environment in which to explore the caliphate question.

65. Every jihadi group in Iraq uses caliphal terms to describe its activities and goals. Such words as dawlat al-Islam, Amir al-Muimin, and Imama frequently appear in quotations and literature. All these groups share the goal of establishing an Islamic system and are united in their hatred for the United States and the Western way of life.

66. In the front lines, however, there appears to be no unity in action. For example, there is a dawlat al-Islam (Islamic state), with a leader who holds the title Amir al-Muminnin. It was established in 2006 as an umbrella organisation of several jihadi groups. One could say that this is an established Islamic state, complete with a leader, or Emir. Interestingly, all the local traditions have been adopted into this system. Members of this group are united in whom they are fighting against

and what they are fighting for: their project is their country and is wholly nationalistic. This is different from al-Qaeda in Iraq, which has a different vision and different goals, and which looks beyond Iraq to establish a global caliphate (at least in its rhetoric).

67. An Iraqi Salafi fighting in Fallujah in 2004, for example, said he was fighting for his city and his country. It was a nationalistic fight for him. Arabs from the rest of the world were also fighting in this battle. These foreign fighters said they were fighting for dawlat al-Islam, but they meant it more broadly. It was not a nationalistic, Iraqi cause for them. These non-Iraqi jihadis did not really know what they were fighting for: they talked about dawlat al-Islam, but had no real idea of its meaning. What we learn from the Fallujah experience is that using rhetoric to fight is one thing, but undertaking an effort to implement an Islamic state is another.

#### *The Shia*

68. Most Iraqis are Shia Muslims, and they do not believe in the concept of a caliphate as articulated by the Sunnis. Nevertheless, Muqtada al Sadr has supported the concept of Vilayat al faqih – which in practice means rule by the clergy, as is the case in Iran. Whether this means the Iranians is unclear, but this is unlikely because he does not appear to be very close to the Iranians. It is very doubtful that the Shia in Iraq would ever accept an Iranian ‘caliph’ (or caliph-like leader, which in Shia Islam would mean a cleric). Despite the media attention it is receiving, the ‘Shia crescent’ is a myth; according to some experts, the possibility of the Shia uniting to form some trans-national caliphate-like system across the Middle East is extremely slight, at best.

#### **The Call – media and the message**

##### *The Internet*

69. The Internet has greatly extended the space in which the call for the caliphate can be propagated. The Internet’s magnification ef-



fect has made the caliphate part of popular culture, as evidenced by such things as the emergence of “DJ Caliph.” The Internet also helps Muslims feel like they are part of something bigger – for example, by giving money to a pro-caliphate organisation. However, most observers agree that the caliphate debate is only a minute portion of the much broader discourse about Islam on the web. Muslims can pledge allegiance (bayah) to the caliphate via the Internet. Bayah implies unquestioning loyalty, allegiance, and obedience – the “to hear is to obey” concept. A jihadi wants to inculcate this kind of thinking, which allows him to convince new recruits that the mass murder of civilians is legitimate and sanctioned by religion. The Bayah concept may be particularly effective with new recruits who are “born again” Muslims seeking to Islamicize all aspects of their lives.

70. Some jihadist groups are alarmingly cognizant of the Internet’s potential and appear to be focusing their energies on virtual radicalisation and recruitment. A recent posting by the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) – a page entitled “Pledge of Death in God’s Path” – requested a virtual pledge of allegiance from site visitors, in the hope that they might be prepared to engage actively in jihad and “allegiance to death in the very near future so that Osama bin Laden will have an army in Afghanistan, an army in Iraq, and a huge army on a waiting list on the internet pages.”

71. The anonymity provided by the Internet is a challenge, as it is difficult to determine whether a group, an individual, or a government is responsible for a website. An adept web designer can magnify subjects, and even if he is a lone operator he can attract a significant readership by building an impressive website. However, the number of hits a website receives does not necessarily translate into the number of people that support the ideas or platforms espoused there.

72. Many web communities are discussing the caliphate, in chat rooms and on discussion boards. There are debates over what a caliphate would mean today, where it should be, and why it is a good or bad idea. Some of the chat rooms also contain rebuttals ridiculing the Hizb

ut-Tahrir vision of the caliphate, most likely posted by those who sympathise with the jihadis.

73. The Internet contains a vast amount of data on the caliph. Islamonline.com is a site that features Egyptian Sheikh al-Qaradawi's extensive discussions on the caliphate. Many of the sites dealing with the "Islamic awakening" also feature discussions on the caliphate, including those associated with the Saved Sect.<sup>2</sup> An Islamic State of Iraq has been declared, according to the Global Islamic Media Front website. This posting has generated responses on the legitimacy of a caliphate. Interestingly, Hizb ut-Tahrir has refuted this idea, claiming that there is no caliphate in Iraq. The Hizb ut-Tahrir website Khalifa.com is also very sophisticated, complete with an organisational chart. There is considerable traffic on this site, and it is often quoted in the media. Finally, the "Voice of the Caliphate" is an Internet streaming video news programme dedicated to the leaders of al-Qaeda and the Islamic armies in Chechnya, Kashmir, and the Arabian Peninsula. It consists of brief, highly professional news round-ups by masked news anchors with a Quran and an AK47. Basically, al-Qaeda named its Internet newscast "the voice of the caliphate." These cases are only a few examples of the volumes of caliphate references that exist on the Internet.

*Iraq as a recruiting device*

74. Extremist groups produce a wide array of media products in Iraq to relay their message and recruit followers. These groups rely heavily on religious language and use terminology that must be decoded to be understood. They present themselves as the jihadist movement, not as a national movement. The caliphate concept appears regularly in their propaganda.

---

<sup>2</sup> An Islamic organization that formally operated in the United Kingdom.

75. Sunni groups are quite prolific, regularly releasing political statements, videos, books, press releases, films, and songs. The basic product is the press release describing a recent military operation. These releases often look official or authoritative, mimicking the style of the US military reports in an attempt to appear professional. They are often quite sophisticated, with maps, summaries of operations, and charts. They produce magazines that feature biographies of martyrs and leaders, numerous graphics, and sophisticated depictions of operations. Short videos are also produced, detailing attacks and bombings. These can be very sophisticated, using several camera angles. The films used to be about the Americans, but they are increasingly about the Shia and carry claims that Sunnis will be targeted for genocide. Typically the songs in the videos are not about Iraq, but feature a more global message. The songs and video footage are easily accessible, so anyone can make a film. Many people are producing these, apparently hoping for an amplification effect that will ultimately reach Al-Jazeera.

#### **Other Muslim perspectives**

76. Groups advocating the caliphate today exist on the fringes; their views are not the mainstream. Accordingly, Hizb ut-Tahrir is often thought of as dysfunctional and the members of Al-Qaeda are simply seen as aberrations. In contrast to these fringe elements, there currently are a number of very influential Islamic leaders whose views on politics, leadership, and authority in the faith resonate with significant segments of the Muslim world.

77. Historically, there has been no single, correct form of Islamic governance. Arguably, the most significant classical work on this was written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by Ibn Taymiyaa, who said, “The general and particular features of the various positions of authority ... are not defined in the Shari’ah; they depend on various opinions, circumstances, and custom.” Neither the Qur’an nor the Sunnah gives a name to a form of government but contemporary influential Muslim thinkers are articulating bases for modern forms of Islamic governance.

78. Two scholars who present reform-oriented theories on the relationship between Islam and government were noted. The first is Rachid Ghannouchi, the former leader of Tunisia's Al-Nahda who resides in the UK. He argues that Muslims should participate in non-Muslim governments, and adds, "a concept for an Islamic government [exists] and it is the religious duty of Muslims, both individual and groups, to work for the establishment of such a government. However, such a government is non-existent [now and in the foreseeable future]." Muslims on earth, according to Ghannouchi, are required to continue the effort in order to fulfil God's commandment to establish justice on earth. Essentially, he believes that the ideal would be for Muslims to live under a truly Islamic government. However, since that is not possible today, Muslims should work with what is available – as long as the system is just.

79. The second is Tariq Ramadan, who also resides in Europe and is another important modern-day Islamic thinker. His basic argument goes beyond Ghannouchi's. In his book, *To be a European Muslim*, he argues that "[Muslims] need to separate Islamic principles from their cultures of origin and anchor them in the cultural reality of Western Europe." He rejects the idea that there is an ideal form of Islamic government. The principles of Islam lay out a way of life that must be lived in any and all contexts. This means rejecting the idea that there are Muslim and non-Muslim spaces (Dar al-Islam and Dar al-Harb). Implicit in his argument is that representative governments where Muslims can participate, even as minorities, are far more Islamic than autocratic governments ruled by a Muslim majority.

80. These scholars are popular among the younger generations and, particularly, among the 30 percent of Muslims who live as minorities outside the Muslim world. In the West, where one can voice such views safely, there may be a growing trend toward rethinking classical sources for the purpose of applying them to modern-day circumstances. It is noteworthy that neither of these scholars supports the notion of bringing back the caliphate. Nor did any of the scholars present at this conference.

81. Although there is clearly a lively debate over unity and authority in the Islamic world - with a broad range of perspectives and views - the vast majority of people do not seriously entertain the notion of bringing back the caliphate. This seems true across the spectrum of Islamic voices, from the “average” Muslim on the street in London or Cairo to influential Muslim scholars, such as Tariq Ramadan and Rachid Al-Ghannouchi. Rather, it seems to be primarily extremist groups that are advocating the re-establishment of the caliphate. Although this notion appears regularly in the language, public statements, and publications of Al-Qaeda, there is very limited evidence that they have clearly thought through implementation and operationalisation. Hizb ut-Tahrir, on the other hand, advocating non-violent organisation, has as its main driver to overthrow existing governments establish a caliphate. Although they seem to have a clearly articulated plan for how to operationalise this caliphate, there is little evidence that they are making any progress doing so. Many think that the notion of bringing back the caliphate is a rhetorical device used to recruit, gain sympathy, mobilise followers, irk enemies, and to gain legitimacy.

July 2007

Wilton Park Reports are brief summaries of the main points and conclusions of a conference. The reports reflect rapporteurs’ personal interpretations of the proceedings – as such they do not constitute any institutional policy of Wilton Park nor do they necessarily represent the views of rapporteurs.

This Page left blank



