Islamic Khilafah (Caliphate) in the History of Muslim Civilization: The Conflict Between Sunni and Shi’i

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Abstract: On the basis of teachings found in the Qur’an and in certain hadiths, many traditional Muslims have claimed that Islam provides guidelines for the formation and propagation of the caliphate (khilafah). This claim, however, remains a matter of some contention and the issue has provoked much argument and debate among Muslim communities. From the beginning of the Islamic khilafah to the present day (excluding the khilafah of the Prophet, which Muslims accept as the most perfect model), Muslims’ understanding and application of the concept has been overshadowed by uncertainty and dispute. This article intends to arrive at a more precise understanding of the historical overview for the caliphate and to present the chronology of the issue from the perspective of several Islamic periods using content analysis approach. However, it does not intend to decide which model of Islamic caliphate is the best or the most suited to the original teaching of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Rather it will investigate the differences and agreements to be found among Sunni and Shi’i Muslims and especially between the Sunni and the Imamiyyah Ithna ashariyyah from the seventh to the fourteenth centuries and in the twentieth century.

Key words: Islamic caliphate • Muslim Society • Civilization • Sunni • Shi’i

INTRODUCTION

The study of Islamic khilafah has a long and respectable history in both the West and the Islamic world. Regarded as one of the essential components in Islamic political thought, it has been extensively debated within Muslim society. They have referred to the divine source (nass), the Prophet’s hadiths and several other valid pieces of evidence in order to prove the fundamental need for a khalifah. Unfortunately, the Muslim society is divided into several sects, of which the Sunnis and the Shi’is are the two most famous and the largest and their separation has caused differences and arguments to arise in justifying the concept of khilafah. The argument includes the question of who is legally entitled to hold the office of khalifah, the possibility of having more than one caliph and the functions of the caliph. All these matters constitute a very wide topic and all are pertinent to the basic concept of khilafah.

Muslim and non-Muslim scholars in both the West and Islamic countries, particularly in the modern period, have examined the various areas relating to the concept of khilafah. Historical description, the divisions of Muslim sectarianism, Qur’anic analysis and its dogmatic and doctrinal theology have all been considered in their discussions. Consequently, works such as The Caliphate by Sir Thomas Arnold (1925), Introduction to the Qur’an by Richard Bell (1953), Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age by Albert Hourani (1962), God’s Caliph by Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds (1986), Qur’anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (1991) and many more have appeared...
The Khilafah in the Early Period of Islam:

The early supporters, however, kept silence; they did not acclaim Muhammad. But the organization of Muslim society under the divine guidance given to the Prophet later period, particularly after the establishment of the Muslim community believed that it benefited from ideal Ali and this resulted in a critical political situation at a civil war. The discussion is divided into four different periods, each of which is significant for a better understanding of the necessary qualities and was also of noble lineage: he became problematic immediately after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 11/632: some Muslims apostatized and others refused to pay zakat (alms tax). However, stability was restored by the appointment of Abu Bakr (11/632-13/634), the first of the four rightly-guided caliphs in 11/632 as the khilafat rasul Allah at a general meeting held in Saqifah Bani Sa'idah [2]. After Abu Bakr’s death, another three caliphs, ‘Umar (13/634-23/644), ‘Uthman (23/644-35/656) and ‘Ali (35/656-40/661) were given the responsibility to lead the Muslim community. The khilafah of these four caliphs was based on several procedures such as designation, shura (consultation) and bay’ah (pledge of allegiance).

Although the majority agreed their appointments, the last two caliphs faced opposition within the Muslim community. Many opposed the way ‘Uthman (35/656), a member of the Umayyad clan, administered the office of khilafah and it was alleged that the genesis of hereditary succession in Islam can be traced to his perpetuation of the khilafah within his family [3]. The next caliph, ‘Ali (d. 40/661) the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, also faced opposition from Muslim groups and civil wars broke out. The strongest challenge came from the governor of Syria, Mu‘awiyah b. Abi Sufyan (d. 60/661), who refused to acknowledge the leadership of ‘Ali; this enmity eventually led to military confrontation and the assassination of ‘Ali in 661 C.E. [4].

From the Shi'i point of view, the right to become the khilafah, after the death of the Prophet, was vested in ‘Ali. They believe that this claim is based on the Prophet’s designation, derived from a divine ordinance (nass) promulgated at Ghadir Khumm and on some other hadiths. Tabataba’i, a modern Iranian Shi'i scholar, supported the validity of the sources and further believed that the designation was the turning point of the dispute between the Sunnis and the Shi’is over the khilafah [5].

Even though the Shi‘is believed that ‘Ali should have been designated as imam and was the best-qualified person for the position, Abu Bakr (d. 13/ 634) was appointed for the sake of public interest (maslahah). Those who took ‘Ali’s part, however, continue to believe that the leadership of the community was the right of ‘Ali and his descendants. Moreover, ‘Ali himself possessed all the necessary qualities and was also of noble lineage: he was of the Hashimite clan, the Prophet’s own clan which was highly respected among the Quraysh (the only tribe to be considered eligible for the khilafah). ‘Ali’s supporters, however, kept silence; they did not acclaim ‘Ali and this resulted in a critical political situation at a later period, particularly after the establishment of the Umayyad and ‘Abbasid dynasties [6].
As the Shi‘is’ claim of the imamah transferred to ‘Ali’s descendants after his death and the number of their supporters increased, they were divided into several divisions, mainly the Imamiiyah and the Isma‘iliyyah or the Seveners. Other divisions were also of great importance, such as a group of more radical Shi‘is, al-Kaysaniyyah and the most moderate and the closest to the Sunni teachings, al-Zaydiyyah. The existence of these divisions was the outcome of disagreement in claiming their own candidate to the imamah and argued over the total number of the appointed imams. Moreover, their dogmatic doctrines, such as the belief in the return of the Mahdi, were also among subjects of their argument [7]. Therefore, it should bear in mind that the analysis of the classical Shi‘i commentaries is mainly drawn from the Imamiiyah, with additional remarks occasionally from other divisions. With all these arguments and differences, Shia, in one perspective, is in agreement with Sunni as Ayatollah Khomeini believes that the nature and character of Islamic law and the divine ordinances prove the necessity for the establishment of an Islamic government [8].

The Development of the Khilafah in the Umayyad Period:
The Umayyad dynasty started with the appointment of Mu‘awiyah b. Abi Sufyan as khalifah 41/661 and ended in 132/750. The followers of ‘Ali attempted to obtain the khilafah for his descendants, starting with his son Hasan (d. 41/662), who, however, renounced his claim. Consequently Mu‘awiyah became the caliph almost without opposition and transferred the capital to Damascus. It is generally accepted that this period was the starting point of the hereditary succession to the khilafah.

However, it is reported that those Companions of the Prophet still living in Medina had opposed Mu‘awiyah’s new and ruthlessly achieved policy of appointing his son, Yazid (d. 64/683) as his successor and they dissociated themselves from it. They knew that the situation under the first two caliphs had been very different from that introduced by Mu‘awiyah, since neither Abu Bakr nor ‘Umar (d. 23/644) had named his kinsman as his successor [9].

With the appointment of Yazid in 60/680 CE, the trend of Islamic political history changed to that of a son succeeding his father, or a dying khalifah being succeeded by his brother, cousins or other members of his family, thus narrowing the khilafah down to a particular family. After Yazid, there were another twelve Umayyad caliphs. The normal pattern was for the ruling caliph to nominate his successor during his lifetime and to have him acclaimed by representatives of the main groups of Muslims, thereby preserving the fiction that he was chosen by consensus [10].

‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz (99/717-101/720) played an important role in the development of Islamic knowledge, its teachings and practices during the Umayyad dynasty. He is generally considered by Sunni historians to have checked most of his predecessors’ excesses. For example, property which was unjustly confiscated was returned to the owners. He is also credited with having compiled the surah of the Qur’an into a single volume. He has been described as the fifth orthodox caliph of Islam [11]. Even the Kharjites, who were notorious for their opposition to the khilafah and the most familiar opponents of Umayyad rule, were reported to have cooperated with him, although they held that the Umayyads had no particular right to the khilafah, which they felt belonged to any righteous Muslim chosen by the community [12].

The Umayyads facilitated the extension of the khilafah’s frontiers. Their conquests, commencing from Mu‘awiyah through his able successors with the aid of their unrivalled lieutenants such as Muhammad b. Amr b. al-‘As (d. 65/684), al-Mughirah b. Shu‘bah (d. 50/670) and others, expanded the Umayyad Empire westwards to incorporate North Africa and Spain and eastwards as far as the Indus valley [13].

The Development of the Khilafah in the ‘Abbasid Period:
The Umayyad dynasty was violently overthrown by another clan of Quraysh, the Hashimites, led by Banu al-‘Abbās, who founded the ‘Abbasid dynasty (750-1258 CE). The overthrow of the Umayyad dynasty came as a result of a revolution that began in Khurasan (Eastern Persia). This was successfully achieved with the help of non-Arab peoples in the conquered territories and the followers of ‘Ali’s descendants [14]. With the overthrow of the Umayyads, the political unity of the Muslim world came to an end and a variety of Muslim empires emerged, such as the Buyids (945-1055), Samanids (261/874-999), Seljuks (1055-1157), Fatimids (969-1171) and the Umayyads of Spain. All these empires had begun to expand their control of various Islamic territories during the decline of the ‘Abbasids. This development was an important factor in the decline and fall of the dynasty [15].

The second ‘Abbasid caliph, al-Mansur (136/754-158/775) moved the capital city of the dynasty from Damascus to Baghdad in 762 [14]. The ‘Abbasid khilafah was renowned for its cultural achievements: learning and
culture were patronized, schools were built and academies were established. Scholars of note in different disciplines were attracted to the courts of these caliphs and were rewarded substantially [16]. This period produced many Qur'anic commentators and Muslim jurists. Sunni scholars such as al-Tabari, al-Zamakhshari and Ibn Kathir, who was born just after the fall of the ‘Abbasids, profited from the development of Islamic knowledge. But, like the Umayyads, the ‘Abbasids also practised hereditary succession, thus establishing the concept of divine kingship. In this regard, the ‘Abbasid caliphs assumed titles such as al-Mahdi (the guided one), al-Mansur (The victorious), al-Amin (the trustworthy) and others [2].

By the middle of the tenth century, political fragmentation and weakening of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate was setting in and the real power was in the hands of others. The impotent caliphs first came under the control of Iranian Shi’i amirs, the Buyids and later, in the eleventh century, their new masters were Turkish Sunni amirs, the Seljuks (431/1040-590/1194). Other territories under the Seljuks’ control were Iran, Mesopotamia and Anatolia. At the same time, the Iranian provinces had broken away from the empire, the Fatimids (297/909-567/1171), a Shi’i and rival of the ‘Abbasid, ruled over Egypt and Syria with their own claims to the caliphate and Spain remained independent under a rival dynasty of Umayyad caliphs. Thus, the caliphate had become an empty shell with no real power and was finally destroyed by the Mongols in 1258. However, the invasion of the Mongols did not entirely put an end to the ‘Abbasids, as the Mamluks (648/1250-922/1517) in Egypt crowned a survivor of the ‘Abbasid family as their caliph [15].

The decline and final phase of the ‘Abbasid caliphate also witnessed the emergence of some other Muslim dynasties. The Buyids, within a few years of 320/932, had risen to greater importance until they managed to conquer Iraq, western Iran and occupied Baghdad in 334/945. Although they managed to install a new caliph, al-Muti’, real Buyid authority existed only under ‘Adud al-Dawla from 366/976 to 372/983. Meanwhile, the Samanids had risen to power as early as 261/874 on the Persian plateau, in eastern Iran and Transoxania, on the break-up of the Tahirids (259/873) and the Saffarids (287/900). They were the descendents of a Zoroastrian priestly family from Saman in the district of Balkh and considered themselves convinced Sunnis. The Samanid state collapsed in the years 389-94/999-1004 and the dynasty perished. Due to the collapse of the Samanids, the Ghaznavid Sunnis, who were descened from a Turkish mercenary leader, took over south of the river Oxus. During that time, the Ghaznavid dynasty was represented by Mahmud of Ghazna (388-421/998-1030). Their provinces include Khurasan (999-1040) and Afghanistan (961-1186).

The Development of the Khilafah in the Ottoman Dynasty, its Abolition and the Contemporary Situation: Another dynasty of the Islamic caliphate came into existence with the establishment of the Ottoman Empire (1281-1924). This was the longest-lasting and most powerful of Muslim empires, as it attained the greatest success in the expansion of Islam and posed the biggest threat to the European powers. The origin of the Ottoman Empire was basically derived from the two great trends of earlier centuries, namely the Turkish migrations and the post-‘Abbasid reconstruction of state and society, which provided the institutional and cultural precedents for latter Ottoman society [17].

In the thirteenth century, during the decline of the Seljuks and the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols, the early Ottomans were forced to move to north-western Anatolia. They managed to strengthen their power and consequently took Bursa from the Byzantines in 1326. Bursa was then made the first capital of the Ottoman Empire. The most significant success for the Ottomans in Europe was the capture of Constantinople, the Byzantine capital, in 1453, after which its name was changed to Istanbul [17]. The Ottomans entered their golden era in the sixteenth century, as they managed to conquer Egypt and Syria from the Mamluks. Their empire also expanded to Hungary and Iraq. In addition, the Ottomans captured many parts of North Africa including Libya, Tunisia and Algeria [18]. At that time, another two great Muslim dynasties came into existence: the Safavids (1501-1732) and the Mughals (1526-1858) [3].

However, the golden age of the Ottoman Empire began to wane in the late sixteenth century, starting with their defeat in the Eastern Mediterranean by a European coalition at Lepanto in 1571 [19]. The Ottoman decline continued from the seventeenth to early twentieth century and culminated in the abolition of the caliphate in 1924. The abolition was the result of two crucial events: the Ottomans’ defeat in the First World War by the European allies and the effort of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), the founder of modern Turkey, to establish a secular state. His effort was successful since he associated himself with the foreign invaders of Turkey and internal reactionary forces [20].
In the modern and contemporary situation, particularly after the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate, there have been many attempts by Muslim countries to re-establish the Islamic state. Muslim revivalists have been in the forefront of these movements, the majority of them being against the ruling governments. In Egypt, the key figures were Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865-1935) and the Muslim Brotherhood’s leaders, Hasan al-Banna’ (1906-1949), ‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Aw dah (d. 1954) and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966). In the Indian sub-continent, this effort was focused partly on creating and establishing their own independent state, Pakistan, in 1947, but subsequently on implementing the Islamic state according to the shari‘ah. The most successful influence was that of the Jama‘at-i Islami’s leader, Abu ‘A‘la Mawdudi (1903-1979) and Pakistan’s Prime Minister, Zia ‘ul-Haq, who, after a military coup, ruled and formed an Islamic state between 1977 and 1988. Another attempt to establish an Islamic state occurred in Sudan: Ja‘far Nimeri’s regime (1969-1985) ruled with the support of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood leader, Hasan al-Turabi. A similar situation exists in Libya, where its leader, Mu‘ammar al-Qaddafi, has reduced the conception of the Islamic system to the simple notion of rule by al-Jamaheeriyah (rule of the masses or command of the people) [21].

The Shi‘is have also attempted to build the Islamic state according to their belief, teaching and practice, eventually succeeding in 1979, when the Iranian Revolution, under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989) drove out the Shah. No Islamic state, however, has managed to become an Islamic superpower. Although many Muslim countries are now ruled by their own independent governments, they are either controlled or dominated by Western superpowers or influenced by secularism. Moreover, it is doubtful that any of these governments rule in full conformity with the real principles of Islamic khilafah.

CONCLUSION

The matter of the Islamic khilafah will probably remain an inexhaustible source of discussion, argument and even controversy. The question whether an ideal Islamic khilafah exists, or is possible, is inevitably a very sensitive matter among Muslims. It is conceded here that there may be no practicable ways to resolve the question on a worldwide basis. Qur’an has laid down numerous verses that promise the continuity of the khilafah system which has been established back in the period of the Prophet Muhammad. According to Muslim belief, these verses constitute the strongest guarantee of the continuation and propagation of the Islamic khilafah. Furthermore, there is the matter of the perpetuation of the existence of Islam and the Muslim community in this world. The spirit of Islamic revivalism and reformation and the awareness of the reinstitution of the khilafah based on the shari‘ah proves that Muslim society have never abandoned or forgotten the essential idea of the Islamic khilafah. Despite all the problems and difficulties associated with the concept, it is a fundamental requirement of Islamic teaching that every Muslim community should maintain a form of khilafah, which can be simply defined as leadership. Bearing this definition in mind, a khilafah, in my opinion, is needed to lead the community. More importantly, the khilafahs must defend, protect and extend the influence of Islam through their leadership and example.

REFERENCES